

Episode 228

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Jeff, Kevin, and I are continuing our series of difficult passages of the Bible. Today has obviously all been different from each other because they're different topics, but today it's not so focused on one passage in the Bible, but it's a topic that occurs multiple times in the Bible. And so that topic is polygamy. Why does the Bible mention it so many times? Why did God seemingly allow it? Why didn't God condemn it? But we're going to use Solomon as a jumping off point, because when people think of polygamy in the Bible, that's the one that their minds jump to, and for a good reason. Because 1 Kings 11:3 says, speaking of Solomon, he had 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines. And then, just finish the verse, and his wives led him astray. So Kevin, why don't you start us off with some of the other passages in the Bible that talk about polygamy, and maybe a little bit of background of what was actually going on here with Solomon.

Kevin Stone

Well, Solomon, as a king, did what kings often did, and that is they had collections of things, and Solomon collected wives, even though he had been told in the law, Book of Deuteronomy, do not let your kings amass for themselves horses or wives. So Solomon breaks that command, and as you pointed out, Shea, there was a price to pay. It was Solomon's fall into idolatry that is directly linked to his polygamy and his multiplying of wives.

Kevin Stone

There are several other places in Scripture where we see men presented as polygamists. The Bible gives the history and shows what happens as well in each of these cases. So I'll just mention four of them here, Lamech and Abraham, Jacob and David. All these men were polygamists, and their stories reveal that there were some problems associated with polygamy. Lamech is the very first person that the Bible identifies as having more than one wife. We go back to Genesis chapter four, and have the line of Cain being presented here. So Cain knew his wife, she conceived, bore Enoch. It goes on, finally, that we get to Methuselah, father's Lamech, Lamech took two wives. First time we read that, the name of the one was Ada, the other was Zillah. And Lamech said to his wives, Ada and Zillah, hear my voice, you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is 77 fold. So Lamech was in the line of Cain, and that's significant because he actually boasts of following in Cain's footsteps. He kills a man, and he boasts about

it. He also takes two wives, which breaks God's design for marriage and family. In fact, there's nothing commendable about Lamech in scripture at all. Lamech was a man who was trying to out-Cain Cain, he's trying to be more Cain-like than Cain was, which is not a good thing.

Kevin Stone

Abram was also a polygamist. We read here in Genesis chapter 16, reading out of the ESV. Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. Sarai said to Abram, behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant, that it may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So after Abram had lived 10 years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar, the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram, her husband, as a wife. So we're talking polygamy now. Hagar is a wife. And he went into Hagar, she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress, and things just go downhill from there. This story continues.

Kevin Stone

So Abram takes Hagar as a wife, in addition to Sarai, to raise up an heir. And we hear a lot about how this was common practice back in the day, and he was just following the customs of the day. But was Abram really supposed to be following pagan customs at this point? I think the answer is no. He's supposed to be walking with God. And I think that this taking of Sarai's maid, Hagar, it represents a lack of faith on Abram's part at this point in time. And what's the result? As you go through the rest of the story, we see division, infighting, unrest in the family, people being kicked out of the home. Nothing good comes from this arrangement.

Kevin Stone

Jacob, one of the patriarchs, also had two wives, Leah and Rachel. And then he took two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah. And again, many problems arise in the story of Jacob, due to these many children that are being born by different wives. We see bitterness, jealousy, a lot of sorrow, sibling rivalry, favoritism, division, incest even, and attempted murder even all work into this story. Of course, God makes something good come out of all of this, the 12 tribes of Israel and Joseph and his salvation of so many. But the fact remains that Jacob deviated from the biblical norm for marriage and family, and there was a price to pay. It was not an easy road.

Kevin Stone

And then David was a polygamist. Biblical historian notes as much as we have lists of David's wives. And what was the result of David's having all these

children from many different wives? Well, violence, sexual crimes, murder, rebellion, rebellion even against David himself by one of his sons.

Kevin Stone

So again, polygamy is not presented as optimal by any stretch of the imagination in Scripture. In fact, in Scripture, it is always associated with problems of some kind. I could go on and talk about Elkanah, Samuel's father. There was division and strife within his family. Solomon, as we've been talking about too, many wives and concubines led him into idolatry. So we have polygamy described in Scripture, but never polygamy prescribed in Scripture and never endorsed either.

Kevin Stone

One of the basic rules of biblical interpretation is that description does not equal prescription. So we can describe something, we can talk about it, talk about what it was and look at examples of it, but that does not equal prescription. We're never commanded to take more than one wife. We are never, and that is never blessed and never endorsed in Scripture. So we should view these men that I've just mentioned, Jacob and David and Abraham, they are men of great faith and God commended them for their faith, but they're never commended for their morality. And so they're examples to us of faith, not examples of morality. God did, in his grace, choose to work in and through these men and brought about his good purpose, even despite their sin.

Jeff Laird

It's worth noticing that, that all these instances that we see of polygamy, we never see somewhere in the Bible where it says, and because so-and-so had two wives or three wives or 700 wives, that everything turned out good. There's always some sort of problem or complication that comes along with it. I mean, for me, Jacob is one of the prime examples of that.

Now, in Jacob's defense-ish, he didn't really intend to have two wives in the first place, kind of, he got a little trick into that, but having two wives who were rival sisters of each other, they basically started a breeding war. They were so against each other and that caused all those problems and all those issues. Solomon, we know, Solomon got dragged into idolatry and all sorts of things because of the influence of these wives.

Jeff Laird

So it's complicated when we talk about it because we don't have anything in Scripture that says something like, do not do this. You may not do that. This is not allowed. And the question of why exactly there isn't something that specific or that explicit, that raises that question. Is it something that God actually prohibits or is it just something that we look at and say, well, it's just

not ideal, it's not a good idea. And we can see things about the original creation and all these problems that come with those arrangements with multiple wives and concubines are actually a whole nother story in that sense.

Jeff Laird

But it's also helpful for us to remember that the perception of marriage that we were seeing in biblical times, particularly in the Old Testament, is very, very different from what we perceive with marriage today. You know, in the modern world, we think of marriage as being this very deeply personal, intimate, one-on-one thing that's based in love and so on and so forth. And it's not that love is never factored into marriage. But in the ancient world, it was very, very much more transactional. It was much more of a contractual sort of a relationship where a man is doing certain things. That's his contribution to this contract. The woman is doing certain things. That's her contribution to the contract. So in that sense, polygamy now becomes a means that women can have access to resources that they would not necessarily have had if polygamy was not allowed.

Jeff Laird

I've heard some secular people describe that as a defense of polygamy. And obviously, we're not defending polygamy. We're just trying to understand where people come from on it. But the argument for that would be, if you're living in a culture where men are significantly more likely to die because of war and dangerous work and so on and so forth, now you wind up with a situation where you have many more marriage-eligible women than marriage-eligible men. And if you need to have a male presence in order for some things in a family or society to function without polygamy, now you have women who are completely cut off from those opportunities. They have no opportunity for children. They don't have opportunity for protection. They don't have opportunity for provision. So the argument would go that in situations like that, that in some sense, polygamy is actually good for the women in that culture because it provides that safety net and that protection. Well, you transfer that up to the modern world. That's really not something that happens. That's not really the case. So if that was somehow an argument in favor, it doesn't really apply very well to the modern world. So there's things about that we have to remember that are not the same.

Jeff Laird

Also, even when we try to look for the negatives, we have to remember that some of those things just were not the way we think of. Solomon, for example, all of these wives, all these concubines, we have to remember again, his relationship with those wives and concubines would not have been exactly like a modern day marriage is. He's not having daily conversations 300 times

or 700 times about what did you do today? What are we going to have for dinner? Where do you want to eat? I don't know. Where do you want to eat? None of those conversations are going to happen that way. Some of these wives and concubines, kings like Solomon, might have seen once or maybe never because it's just an official legal type of thing. He may have been intimate with some of them once or never. They're just sort of there for access. Like you said, Kevin, it's almost like a collection. Sort of a thing, you know, he's collecting these things because of the prestige that it brings and the political power that it involves. Exactly how his interactions were with them, we don't know.

Jeff Laird

But we do know that for Solomon it caused problems. For David, it caused problems. For Jacob, it caused problems. For Abram and Abraham, same guy, it caused problems. So at the very least, we have this pattern in scripture that tells us that if God is not overtly prohibiting this, if he's somehow leaving this open for emergency cultural circumstances, he is absolutely not suggesting that this is something that we should be aiming towards as a goal. This is not what we should be trying to do. It maybe kind of might be something we can do, but not something we want to do.

Shea Houdmann

I think that's exactly right. Polygamy is not the ideal. If you look at Genesis chapter two, where it talks about Adam and Eve, it says that man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, singular, and the two will become one flesh. That communicates God's ideal right there. Jesus repeats this in the New Testament and the Gospels when people are talking about marriage and divorce. It's like, no, he's referring to divorce. Basically, he says, God allowed you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. I think that's very similar here with the polygamy thing. That's not God's ideal. Like Jeff was talking about cultural situations, maybe it provides a better solution than any of the other bad solutions out there. God allowed it, but that does not talk about an endorsement.

Shea Houdmann

And then the only other person I could think of in the Old Testament that specifically refers to polygamy is Rehoboam, Solomon's son. And I believe it says over here, Rehoboam had 18 wives and 60 concubines. And again, Rehoboam is definitely not known as someone in the Bible known for wisdom. Probably the biggest, stupidest decision made of all the kings. He could have kept the kingdom together with a very simple decision and went the other direction. So Rehoboam is not exactly a pillar of wisdom.

Shea Houdmann

And then the closest I can find in Scripture to a condemnation of polygamy would be in 1 Timothy and Titus when Paul's giving the qualifications for deacons and elders. Understood, pastors as well. It says, must be the husband of one wife. So there's a lot of debate about what exactly that means, how it relates to divorce. But one thing we know for sure, it means it cannot be a polygamist. It must be a one-woman man. And so while those are specifically qualifications for deacons and elders, everything else in that list is elsewhere described as all followers of Christ need to have these qualities, need to be seeking after these types of things. So not limiting it to just pastors and elders. Husband of one wife, wife of one husband is something that we should all be striving for and living out in our lives as Christians, as followers of Christ.

Shea Houdmann

So yeah, while there's no thou shalt not level command against polygamy, where it talks about the original ideal for marriage, the consistent teaching of scripture, go to Ephesians 5 where it talks about marriage, clear the idea there is also one man, one woman in marriage, and then the disastrous consequences of polygamy. Every time it's mentioned, bad things are happening as a result. So I think while scripture does not explicitly say polygamy is forbidden, it also gives multiple, multiple reasons why polygamy is not something we should be participating in or seeking after. So I think that's the right balance.

Shea Houdmann

I mean, it would be way easier if we could point to a thou shalt not level command against it, but there is none in scripture. So then you have to look at what does scripture say about marriage? I think scripture, I think God through scripture comes very, very close to forbidding polygamy based on what he does say about marriage, falling short of actually doing that because like maybe as Jeff was saying, in some cultural situations, perhaps polygamy is the best of all the bad options that are out there.

Kevin Stone

I think we should make the point here that not everybody was a polygamist in the old test of it. In fact, I think it was probably pretty rare because you'd have to have quite a bit of wealth to maintain a large household. The more wives you're bringing in, the more it's going to cost just the logistics there would force that. So we're not talking about a, you know, a huge thing. Kings, of course, you know, they had the wealth and they wanted the prestige and all of that. A lot of the wives, I think too, on the king's part were just made to create alliances with other nations and help form allies, things like that. And so we're

not talking about something that was, you know, commonplace. We are talking about something though, that was a deviation from the biblical model.

Kevin Stone

And I think Shea, you mentioned the New Testament passage where Jesus is talking about marriage and divorce because he was asked a question about it. And I think that that is actually a really key passage. I'm looking at Mark chapter 10 where the Pharisees come and they ask him the question about divorce. Is it lawful or not? They had this legal question. And so Jesus' answer, I think, is brilliant and it really helps to inform this issue. And so Jesus says, Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce to send her away because of your hardness of heart. He wrote that commandment. From the beginning, it was not so. And then Jesus quotes from Genesis chapter 2, God created male and female and man shall leave his father and mother, cling to his wife. There'll be one flesh and what therefore God has joined together. Let not man separate. So Jesus' answer is divorce is a deviation from God's plan.

Kevin Stone

And I think it's really important what Jesus says here. Not so much what he says as it is how he says it. Both are important. But how he answers the question is quite significant because the Pharisees were asking a legal question. They were talking about the law of Moses and Jesus comments on that law. But then he goes back further than the law. He goes all the way back to creation. And he says, what is the ethical principle that God laid down at the very beginning? God created Adam. Then he created Eve and brought her to the man and that is the establishing of the family, marriage, the building block of society. It was right there. One man, one woman for a lifetime. And so Jesus points back to that, the ethical principle that was established by God. That's the pattern that God intended and that pattern through history was corrupted later on. Scripture describes its corruption. It gives examples of people who were involved in that corrupting of the pattern that God gave. But that corruption of the pattern is never promoted. It is never endorsed in Scripture. In fact, there's a lot of description of exactly the troubles that it caused.

Jeff Laird

Original creation is really helpful there too. There's a principle that I've heard people talk about when it comes to the creation of Eve. And you know, we always talk about rib and a lot of translations say that God took a rib from Adam. I've heard it argued from some lingual scholars that the word that's translated rib, it can be translated different ways and it is translated different ways. The Old Testament can be something a little bigger. It can mean like a side or a large part or a portion. The suggestion that when God created that

you could argue that he took a side of Adam and created Eve. So you have this, again, this one-to-one sort of a thing that's going on here where it's created. His intention was that he did not take many ribs from Adam and make many wives. He made one and all the complications that we have with the relationship that come after that are all the result of the fall. It's not that God created situations where he said, yes, I want polygamy. So I'm going to make things a certain way.

Jeff Laird

The reason things are the way they are between men and women in the world is because of the sin that we committed and that we're here. So if there's situations where polygamy sort of kind of maybe is a cultural backstop, then that's exactly what it is. So, I mean, nobody wants your airbag to go off. If it does, I guess it's doing its job, but that's certainly not the ideal. You know, you don't want to park by feel. You want to avoid having that thing go off. So whenever we have these conversations, there's always examples that we can point to and we can look at. And I can't think of one where somebody points to it and says that actually turned out really good.

Jeff Laird

There's a modern television show that's all about a attempted polygamist family and it's just hot chaos all over the place, which is kind of exactly what you would expect. You wouldn't expect that sort of thing to work. It's hard enough for a one man and one woman to become one flesh to get to know each other, to understand each other, to have all of that trust and intimacy and all the things that come with it, even in a transactional kind of environment. I would think that would still be really hard.

Jeff Laird

So it's good that you mentioned the idea, Kevin, that polygamy is not something that would have been common in the sense of it was happening in a large proportion of relationships, partly because math, that's just not the way it works. If there were 10 times as many women as men, maybe that would be the case, but that's not. Even in a situation where there's a lot more marriageable women, it's going to require more wealth because again, if it's transactional, the man has to have something that makes it worth having those different wives.

Jeff Laird

So complicated, interesting, weird. It's strange to have something like this in scripture where we can give tons and tons and tons of reasons not to, but we have to pull up short of saying you can never. That's really complicated for some people because there's some people who live in cultures where polygamy is normal and it's practiced and you get questions like what

happens if somebody in that circumstance winds up coming to faith, you know, what is that person supposed to do? Shea, I know that we've had a lot of questions about that in the past. What's been your take on that?

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, that's a tough one because it's completely foreign. Well, you say it's completely foreign to our culture and yet there's TV shows about it. I live in the state right next to Utah where there still are some Mormons subgroups openly practice polygamy, even though it's illegal. So where it's foreign to us, but yet we recognize that it's going on. I found it very common that often in cults, when you get a cult leader, one of the first things he often does is begin taking more women for himself, taking other men's wives for himself. So in scripture and in society, it is a simple observation. Polygamy doesn't work well. It just doesn't work. And I think ultimately it reveals something ungodly in a person's heart.

Shea Houdmann

To the question that you've raised, Jeff, what to do in a situation where someone who's polygamous, multiple wives, becomes a Christian. What is he to do? And literally, we've received questions. I believe the biggest one we received was someone in Africa saying, if I were to divorce all my wives but one, the other women would have really no choice other than to become prostitutes. That'd be the only way they could make a living. So what do I do? And some people say, okay, well, you need to divorce all of them but one, but you still need to provide for your former wives and any children you had with them, but you just can't have sex with them anymore. It's like, well, it's not what they signed up for either. So if you can avoid polygamy altogether, that is the ideal.

Shea Houdmann

You find yourself in a situation. I don't know that scripture says it clearly. I think my advice would be to establish the one man, one woman, one flesh relationship with one of the wives and provide for the others. But I can't say that's an explicitly biblical command because there are multiple instances in scripture where men were polygamous and nowhere are they told to get rid of all of your wives except one. So I don't know that we have, I have what I think would be the wise thing to do, but I can't, I wouldn't go to level of God is commanding or God's word commands you to do this.

Jeff Laird

Another point that should be thrown out there is when we say polygamy, that word literally means multiple women. There is such a thing as polyandry, which is one woman with multiple husbands that tends to be even more rare for semi-obvious reasons. If you thought that the rivalry between Rachel and

Leah with Jacob was bad, I can only imagine what it would be like if you had one woman and dozens of men in that circumstance, that would be terrible. There's also the biological side is from the growing of the species standpoint, that's a little backwards for how things go. But these questions all sort of would apply to that as well. It's just not, it's not common enough either in culture or in history that it's something that comes up a whole lot. But basically all the same conversations about this would apply to somebody in a culture where for some reason they have multiple husbands. You get the same thing. Is it right? Is it wrong? What do we do? What do we not do? So just because we're using the term polygamy, which technically means multiple women doesn't mean it doesn't apply to those circumstances. They're just not very common.

Shea Houdmann

So we started this conversation today about Solomon. I thought it'd be good to finish there as well in Song of Solomon chapter 6 in verse 8. So this is earlier in Solomon's life. Song of Solomon, of course, is basically the love story between Solomon and what many people saying is his one true love and says in Song of Solomon 6:8, 60 queens there may be and 80 concubines and virgins beyond number. But my dove, my perfect one is unique. So even Solomon in the midst of at that point 60-80 wives and concubines there was one woman that he had a unique relationship with.

Shea Houdmann

So even in the midst of massive polygamy with all of its problems that eventually completely turned him away, not that he denied faith, but he Solomon at the end of his life was not the same man as earlier in his life. His wives turned his heart astray from God. He so many things don't have time to go into but

Jeff Laird

Too many birthdays anniversaries to remember, you know.

Shea Houdmann

Solomon was he had a wife that was his passion that was his this was the sort of the one flesh relationship with that he strove for. What happened later in life, the Bible doesn't say, you know, by the end it was a gigantic mess with the total of 1,000 wives and concubines and that turned his heart astray.

Shea Houdmann

But again, if I were to try to summarize all of this the Bible presents one man and one woman is God's ideal for marriage. The New Testament teaches that being a one-woman man is a qualification for church leadership and we believe that that qualification is for something all Christians should strive for. So we do not think polygamy honors God. We do not think it is God's

ideal. We think it causes problems many many problems which scriptures replete with examples of. Can we say there's absolutely never a time when God would allow polygamy today. I don't think we can say that but the same time I don't think I could ever describe it as anything other than the best of a bunch of bad solutions. So why doesn't the Bible condemn polygamy like we like we prefer it would? Ultimately that's God's call. I think scripture is very clear that polygamy is not God's ideal and in scripture universally results in horrible consequences some worse than others, but there's not a single example of polygamy that's praised or that has a good outcome. So I think that speaks volumes right there.

Shea Houdmann

Hope our conversation today has been helpful to you and we understanding what the Bible says about polygamy and why it doesn't say some of the things we kind of wish it would say about polygamy. So Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me today. Great conversation as always. Got questions? The Bible is answers and we'll help you find them.