

HOW MANY CHRISTIAN BOOKS about marriage would you say you have purchased and read? How many of them included solid biblical teaching, if any teaching, about the issue of in-law relationships? Over the years I have purchased and read hundreds of books on marriage and family issues. Surprisingly, a perusal of these books indicates that very little has been written on this subject. It's virtually an untouched area.

The truth is that this subject, in general, is largely neglected, and specific teaching on in-law difficulties from a biblical perspective is rare, indeed. On the numerous occasions when I have taught on this problem from a biblical perspective, I have had people tell me, time and again, that they had never heard, read, or even thought about a biblical approach to godly in-law relations. Yet, after counseling hundreds of troubled marriages during the past forty years or so, I have become increasingly convinced that in-law relationships pose serious problems to many marriages.

While doing a web search on the subject of in-law relationships, I came across a number of articles (written by experts on marriage and family issues according to the world) that discussed the relationship between in-law relations and success in a marriage. *All* of these articles agreed that in-law relations can cause serious problems in a marriage relationship. For example, one article reported the results of a study done in 2001 by Iowa University that assessed the connection between in-law relations and the future success of marriage. The researchers examined all four of the in-law relationships individually.

From this study the researchers drew many insightful conclusions. One was that each of the in-law combinations, not just the mother-in-law relationship as is sometimes assumed, played a significant role in the marriage. Fathers-in-law can affect the quality of a marriage just as much as mothers-in-law. Interestingly, the investigation also revealed that in-law relations can create problems not just for the recently married, but also for people who have been married for a long time. They found that in-laws can create hostility and stress between spouses even after many years of marriage. This, they noted, is significant because “it implies that the influence of in-laws continues far beyond the early years of marriage, when couples are probably most vulnerable to social influences on their marriage. Perhaps,” they concluded, “that vulnerability to the opinions and behaviors of those who are close to them *never ends*.”¹

Since non-Christians probably conducted this research, the likelihood exists that most of the people being surveyed were also non-Christians. Therefore, the ultimate reliability of the results of such a study is somewhat suspect for Christians. We would certainly hope and expect that the percentage of Christians who are having serious in-law problems would be much lower than that of unbelievers. But those of us who are involved in biblical marriage counseling will freely admit that this can be a serious problem for Christians and non-Christians alike.

Biblical Examples of In-Law Problems

It shouldn't surprise us that this is so. This is not a new thing! When we turn to the Bible we see frequent examples of God's people struggling with in-law relationships.

In the book of Genesis, we find that Isaac and Rebekah, for example, had some problems with the wives of Esau. The Bible

1. Gina Stepp, “The Effect of In-Laws on Marriage Success,” *Family Matters*, December 20, 2007, <http://familymatters.vision.org/public/item/192944> (emphasis added).

says they brought much grief to their hearts (Gen. 26:34–35). The Bible tells us of the in-law problem that Jacob had with Laban, his father-in-law. In Genesis 31 they parted company—it was not a very happy parting. Jacob went one way and Laban went the other. You no doubt remember that “nice” benediction where Laban says, “LORD watch between me and thee when we are absent one from another” (Gen. 31:49 KJV). And we say, “Wasn’t that lovely?” Not when you consider that what Laban was really saying was, “You’d better not ever come back here again because if you do the only deliverance you are going to have is from God.” He didn’t like his son-in-law and it appears the favor was returned. So they agreed to part ways. As far as we know, they never got back together again.

The book of Judges reveals that mighty Samson also had in-law problems (Judg. 15:1–8). King David had in-law problems. His own father-in-law wanted to kill him, and seeking some way to destroy him, chased him for years (1 Sam. 18:20–30). So it shouldn’t surprise us that God’s people still have in-law problems because they are present very early in the biblical account.

Hope for You and Those You Love

Maybe you’re presently facing tensions with in-law relationships. Whatever your problems are in this area, I pray that perhaps something you’ll read here today will prove helpful in solving your specific in-law problems. Maybe you are aware of these problems in the lives of a friend or a family member. I pray that you might find helpful information here with which you may minister to that troubled one in your life. The Bible says, “You who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1–2 NKJV). As Christians, we bear a responsibility to help other people.