# THE FAMILY

The family is the most important group of people mentioned in the Bible. Mish-paw-khaw` is the phonetic spelling of the Hebrew word found in the Old Testament and means tribe. The New Testament counterpart is pat-ree-ah` and means lineage. The family unit is so important that the first chapter of Matthew lists all the generations in the lineage of Jesus. Modern families would translate this into family reunions, where all the relatives, and in-laws connected by marriage, are included as part of a family. So, in the Bible, when you read that a family was blessed by the Lord, more than just husband, wife and children are blessed.

Blended families are becoming more common as situations in life bring couples together who already have children. Deuteronomy 25:5 offers some instruction concerning this type of family; directing the his example, the only type of family described in the Bible is the traditional husband, wife and children.

**THE FUNCTION:** The main function of a family in the Bible was to build strong relationships with each other. This was substantiated by the way members of a family treated their neighbors and the strangers that they met. Within the family unit, there is protection and nurturing. 1 Timothy 5:4 tells about the family being the place where spiritual nurturing is to begin. The parents have the responsibility of showing their children the importance of a spiritual life.

**THE SIGNIFICANCE:** When something happens to one family member, all are affected. This can have positive and negative impacts. The significance of family relationships is often revealed in biblical passages. For example, the Bible tells a story about a young man who demands his inheritance and blows it through partying and loose living. When he initially leaves, his father is saddened, but when the boy returns broke and destitute, his father is ecstatic to see his son again.

**THE BENEFITS:** Family members share a special relationship. They offer unconditional love, honor and respect to each other. Early on the Bible shows the benefits of a family, with God recognizing anyone associated with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Even remotely belonging to this family brought blessings. These blessings still apply to family members today as their strong bonds are enjoyed.

**BIBLICAL TRUTHS:** What does the bible say about family? It states through scripture, that the concept of family is extremely important both in a physical sense and in a theological sense. Let's look at each of these aspects in turn.

The concept of family was introduced in the very beginning as we see in Genesis 1:28 — "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" God's plan for creation was for man and woman to "be fruitful and multiply" — i.e., to have children. A man and a woman would form a "one flesh" union through marriage (Genesis 2:24), and they with their children become a family; and the family is to be the essential building block of human society.

We also see early on that family was to look after and care for one another. When God asks Cain "Where is Abel your brother," Cain's response is the flippant "am I my brother's keeper?" The implication is that "yes" Cain was expected to be Abel's keeper and vice versa. Not only was Cain's

murder of his brother Abel an offense against humanity in general, but it was especially egregious because it was the first recorded case of fratricide, which  meaning  (murder of one's sibling).

The bible has a more communal sense of people and family than we do in our Western civilization. We are more individualized than people in the Middle East are today and definitely more so than the people of the ancient near East. When God saved Noah from the flood, it wasn't an individual case salvation, but a salvation for him, his wife, his sons and his sons wives; in other words his family was saved (Genesis 6:18). When God calls Abraham out of Haran, he calls him and his family (Genesis 12:4-5). The sign of the Abrahamic covenant (circumcision) was to applied to all males within one's household whether they were born into the family or are part of the household servant staff ( Genesis 17:12-13). In other words, God's covenant with Abraham was familial, not individual.

The importance of family can be easily seen in the provisions of the Mosaic covenant. For example, in the Decalogue, two of the ten commandments deal with maintaining the cohesiveness of the family. The fifth commandment regarding the honoring of one's parents is meant to preserve the authority of parents in family matters, and the seventh commandment prohibiting adultery protects the sanctity of marriage. From these two commandments flow all of the various other stipulations in the Mosaic Law which seek to protect marriage and the family. The health of the family was so important to God that it was codified in the national covenant of Israel.

This is not solely an OT phenomenon. The NT makes many of the same commands and prohibitions. Jesus speaks on the sanctity of marriage and against frivolous divorce in Matthew 19. The Apostle Paul talks about what Christian homes should look like when he gives the twin commands of "children obey your parents" and "parents don't provoke your children" in Ephesians 6:1-4 (see parallel passage in Colossians 3:20-21).

Furthermore, we see similar NT concepts regarding familial 'salvation' in the book of Acts when on two separate occasions during Paul's second missionary journey, we see entire households being baptized at the conversion of one individual. There is the conversion of Lydia in Acts 16:11-15 where we read: "One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.' And she prevailed upon us." A little later on in the chapter is the story of the Philippian jailer: "And [Paul and Silas] said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family"(Acts 16:31-33). I don't mention this to necessarily condone infant baptism or baptismal regeneration (i.e., that baptism confers salvation), but it is interesting to note that just as the OT sign of the covenant (circumcision) was applied to whole families, so also the NT sign of the covenant (baptism) was applied to entire households. Clearly, God's desire isn't just to save isolated individuals, but entire households.

That's a brief look at the concept of family from a physical perspective. Let's now turn our attention to the concept of family in a theological sense. During his three year ministry, Jesus shattered some typical notions of what it meant to be part of a family when we read, "While [Jesus] was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother'"(Matthew 12:46-50). Now we must clear up some misconceptions with this passage. Jesus is not saying that biological family isn't important; in other words, he is not dismissing his mother and brothers. What he is doing is making a clear theological point: In the Kingdom of Heaven, the most important family connection is spiritual, not physical. This is a truth made explicitly clear in John's gospel, when the evangelist says, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13).

The parallels are quite clear: When one is born physically, they're born into a physical family; but when one is "born again," one is born into a spiritual family. To use Paul's language, we are adopted into God's family (Romans 8:15). When we are adopted into God's spiritual family, the Church, God becomes our Father and Jesus our Brother. This spiritual family is not bound by ethnicity, gender or social standing. As Paul says, "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."(Galatians 3:26-29).

So what does the bible say about family? The physical family is the most important building block to human society. As such, it should be nurtured and protected. But more important than that is the New Creation that God is making in Christ, which is comprised of a spiritual family, the Church, made up of all people who call upon the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. This is a family made up of "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9); and the defining characteristic of this spiritual family is love for one another: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).