

Numbers 5:29-31

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Numbers 5:29-31 provide a summary of the principles in this section (verses 11-28) concerning a husband's suspicion and jealousy of his wife's adultery.

This law was called *the law of jealousy* (v. 29). It was applied when one of the following things happened:

- First, *when a wife, being under the authority of her husband, goes astray and defiles herself*. That is, this was the case of a wife who has committed adultery.
- Or, it applied *when a spirit of jealousy comes over a man and he is jealous of his wife* (v. 30), implying that the husband suspects his wife of unfaithfulness but has no evidence to prove it.

If either situation occurred, the husband was to *make the woman stand before the Lord, and the priest shall apply all this law to her* as described in verses 11-28.

The last stipulation of the law of jealousy was that *the man will be free from guilt, but that woman shall bear her guilt* (v. 31). Whether the wife was guilty in adultery or not, the husband was not to be held liable for anything. If his wife was guilty, however, she will suffer the consequences.

The “law of jealousy” presented here was designed to protect the woman from being injured or killed by her enraged husband. It was the LORD’s task to judge her if she was guilty or protect her if she was innocent.

Was there a similar law when the husband was unfaithful? If a man had intercourse with a virgin, he was required to pay restitution and marry the woman as his wife (Deuteronomy 22:28). During this era, God allowed men to marry multiple wives. This was not God’s design, as Jesus noted (Matthew 19:3-12). But God makes some accommodations for sinfulness, and hardened hearts (Matthew 19:8). God is merciful, and appears to help people grow as they are able, so long as they are trying. It is encouraging to note that Abraham only partially obeyed God for many years. It was only after he parted company from Lot that he finally had followed fully God’s admonition to leave his home as well as his family (Acts 7:2-3; Genesis 13:14).

It also might be the case that because the man was directly under the authority of the LORD, then if he was unfaithful, the LORD would deal with him directly. The men were expected to deal faithfully with God, as well as with women. Adultery is an affront to the self-governing community commanded by God, and therefore to the holiness of God no matter who commits it.

It appears that God suspended this law of jealousy due to the unfaithfulness and lack of leadership of the men. We can see evidence of this in Hosea, where God says:

“I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot
Or your brides when they commit adultery,
For the men themselves go apart with harlots
And offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes;
So the people without understanding are ruined”
(Hosea 4:14)

This verse might indicate that God was revoking the consequence for unfaithfulness by women under this provision. The men were guilty of leading their communities into pagan worship, and pagan worship is full of sexual exploitation. Therefore, God is no longer holding the women accountable—they are only following the customs set up by the men.

As set forth in Hosea, since Israel was unfaithful to Him, as their husband, God gave them over to invaders. Both Israel and Judah were taken into exile, as a consequence of their unfaithfulness (1 Chronicles 9:1). Perhaps this “law of jealousy” was a picture of how God would deal with Israel if they committed adultery against Him. The book of Hosea and chapter 16 of Ezekiel both apply the illustration of God as husband to an adulterous wife.

Though not under this law, the New Testament believer is commanded not to commit adultery at the risk of being judged and losing God’s blessing, which is the reward of faithfulness (Heb. 13:4; 1 Pet. 3:7; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 2 John 1:8; Colossians 2:18). In addition to losing rewards from God, sin also creates adverse consequences in this life (Romans 1:24,26,28; Galatians 6:8). Paul tells us that sexual sin has a greater adverse consequence, as it is a sin against our own bodies (1 Corinthians 6:18).

Biblical Text

²⁹ ‘**This is the law of jealousy: when a wife, *being under the authority of her husband*, goes astray and defiles herself,³⁰ or when a spirit of jealousy comes over a man and he is jealous of his wife, he shall then make the woman stand before the Lord, and the priest shall apply all this law to her.³¹ Moreover, the man will be free from guilt, but that woman shall bear her guilt.**”