

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 30 – Divorce and Remarriage

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Introduction

According to a 2008 Barna group study, 33% of all U.S. adults have been divorced at least once. Also, 33% of adults who are classified as “born again” Christians (those who say they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior) have experienced at least one divorce and 26% of evangelical Christians have experienced a divorce. These statistics only put numbers to what we already know, that divorce impacts the U.S. church. Therefore, we need to know what the Bible says regarding divorce and remarriage.

The important task for believers when dealing with divorce and remarriage is to take the biblical precepts and principles given and prayerfully apply them to many different situations. Every believer dealing with these difficult situations must search the Scriptures to see what God would have us to do. Today, first we will look at Scripture’s teaching on divorce and remarriage, then we will look at the Scriptures hope for those who have (or are) experiencing divorce.

Marriage Review

The Bible teaches that God established marriage as a life-long covenant – a life-long contract or promise between a man and woman publically entered into before God as witness. It is a primary, public, permanent, exclusive commitment of a man and woman to each other as husband and wife. When a man and woman get married, God is joining them together regardless if they acknowledge it.

❖ Do you view marriage as a life-long covenant?

The Bible is clear that Christians must only marry Christians (2 Cor 6:14). God gives believers freedom in choosing whether to marry and who to marry with one restriction, believers must marry “in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39) meaning a fellow believer in Christ.

❖ Regardless of who you may be in “love” with, are you committed to obey God in this area?

The Spouse of Your Youth

An often stated passage on divorce is Malachi 3:16 which quotes God as saying “I hate divorce”. Yet, what is the divorce God hates? Not all marriages are the same. It appears that God views some marriages as covenant marriages and some “marriages” as not covenant marriages. God views the “spouse of your youth” as the covenant marriage. This would be the current righteous or biblical marriage. Divorce from this marriage is the divorce that God hates.

¹³“This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts *it with* favor from your hand.

¹⁴Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ Because the Lord has been a witness between you and **the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.** ¹⁵But not one has done *so* who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did *that* one *do* while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. ¹⁶**For I hate divorce,**” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says the Lord of hosts. **“So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.”** Malachi 2:13-16

¹¹Discretion will guard you, Understanding will watch over you, ... ¹⁶To deliver you from the strange woman, From the adulteress who flatters with her words; ¹⁷**That leaves the companion of her youth And forgets the covenant of her God;** Prov 2:11-17

❖ Do you view the spouse of your youth as your covenant marriage?

Since marriage was intended by God to be for as long as both people are alive (Rom 7:2-3; 1 Cor 7:39), divorce should never be encouraged. Since God hates divorce from the spouse of one's youth, so should we. Dealing treacherously with the spouse of your youth is a sin, but we should always remember that it is not an unpardonable sin.

²**For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband.** ³So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. Rom 7:2-3

³⁹A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but **if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes**, only in the Lord. 1 Cor 7:39

Permitted (Biblical) Divorce

Every divorce is the byproduct of sin, but not every divorce is sin. There is a difference between what God intends (life-long marriage) and what God allows. The range of opinion on biblically permissible divorce and remarriage is wide and opinions run deep.

	Range of Opinion on Divorce and Remarriage			
Divorce	Never	Limited	Limited	Any
Remarriage	n/a	Never	Limited with biblical divorce	Any

There are two passages that teach “exception clauses” that allow for divorce under certain circumstances. It is important to view these two “exception clauses” as an exception to the permanence of marriage instead of providing a grounds for divorce. In both cases, divorce is permitted, but not required. These two “exception clauses” to the permanence of marriage are the only reasons permitted (but not required) by God to break the life-long marriage covenant.

Reconciliation is always the preferred course. In the midst of marriage difficulty which has brought a couple to view divorce as a permitted option, it is important to be mindful of the Bible's teaching on the permanence of marriage, forgiveness, and relationship reconciliation.

1. Sexual Immorality

³*Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?”* ⁴And He answered and said, **“Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female,** ⁵**and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’** ⁶**So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”** ⁷They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” ⁸He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but **from the beginning it has not been this way.** ⁹**And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”** Matt 19:3-9

When asked about divorce, Jesus began by restating that God's intent is that marriage be a permanent union between a man and woman as they are joined together by God. What God has joined together then should not be separated by people's sin.

Jesus allowed (permitted, but not required) divorce when a spouse commits immorality. Immorality [porneia] is a general term referring to sexual sin acts like adultery, homosexuality, and incest. However, we must be careful. The immorality must be known for a fact, not be a suspicion or merely assumed.

Also, the issue here is acts of immorality. Lust is a sin and considered by Jesus as adultery in the heart (Matt 5:28), but it is not an act of “porneia”. For example, while sins of lust stemming from pornography are hurtful to a spouse, it is not what is being given here by Jesus as a permitted exception to the permanence of marriage.

❖ **Are you actively protecting your marriage from adultery (shielding and building)?**

If a spouse has indeed broken the sexual bond, the other partner is free to seek a divorce, though this is still not the ideal. Divorce is only permitted, it is not required. The sinned against spouse is called to forgive even this hurtful sin. If the sinned against spouse is not able to reenter the marriage, divorce is permitted. In such cases, the sinned against spouse is still required by God to extend forgiveness to the adulterer.

In the ideal, the adulterer would repent and bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance and the sinned against spouse would extend heart-level forgiveness. By God’s grace, there could be reconciliation and the marriage could become God glorifying.

❖ **Are you willing to do whatever it takes in working out repentance?**

2. Abandonment by an unbelieving spouse

¹²But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that **if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her.** ¹³And a woman who has an **unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.** ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵Yet **if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.** ¹⁶For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? 1 Cor 7:12-16

This section by the Holy Spirit through Paul addresses the situation of a mixed marriage (believer married to an unbeliever). There are several ways a believer may find himself/herself married to an unbeliever: salvation after marriage, marrying a professor who later denies Christ, or being immature or rebellious and marrying an unbeliever.

The Lord’s expectation is that a married believer (to a believer or unbeliever) will strive in the power of the Spirit to fulfill Scripture’s commands within marriage. A believer must never simply “endure” marriage, but must strive on his/her part to glorify God in the marriage.

❖ **Are you striving to excel still more at glorifying God in your marriage?**

If a believer is married to an unbeliever and the unbeliever consents to stay married to the believer, the believer is to not divorce. The believer is a primary vessel through which God can bring the gospel to the unbeliever and their children. The believer should love Christ and desire to demonstrate and share the gospel with their unbelieving mate.

❖ **Do you love Christ enough to be a sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in your marriage (2 Cor 2:14-16)?**

If the unbeliever leaves, the believer is not under bondage. “Not under bondage” indicates that divorce is allowed in this situation. 1 Corinthians 7:15 allows for divorce when a spouse who is not a Christian abandons their Christian spouse. If the unbeliever refuses to remain married with the believer, the believer should allow them to leave, for God has called believers to peace. It is important to note that reconciliation is still the ideal.

A minority view with no Scriptural basis is to regard some sins as representative of or equivalent to desertion by an unbeliever (e.g. physical or emotional abuse, attempted murder, marital rape, sexual abuse, etc.). Since there is no Scriptural basis for divorce due to abuse, for those in physical danger separation is recommended rather than divorce. This separation is with the hope of one day seeing the restoration, through God's grace, of what God joined together.

Separation within marriage except to protect a spouse and/or children from physical/sexual abuse is wrong because it prevents the spouses from obeying God in fulfilling their biblical roles (1 Pet 3:1-7; Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-19; 1 Cor 7:2-5).

Unbiblical Divorce and Remarriage

Any divorce except as permitted under the two "exception clauses" to the permanence of marriage is an unbiblical divorce. An unbiblical divorce is called "dealing treacherously with the spouse of your youth" and is hated by God. It is sin.

A believer must never initiate an unbiblical divorce.

Not only is the divorce sin, a subsequent remarriage after an unbiblical divorce is also sin. Why? Because unbiblically breaking the permanence of marriage does not dissolve what God has joined together. The "divorce" should not have happened in the first place. The husband and wife should still be married so having sexual relations with someone else is adultery. This is why Paul states that someone who divorces unbiblically must remain unmarried or be reconciled to their spouse.

¹⁰In the house the disciples *began* questioning Him about this again. ¹¹And He said to them, **"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; ¹²and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery."** Mark 10:10-12

¹⁰But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband ¹¹(**but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband**), and that **the husband should not divorce his wife.** 1 Cor 7:10-11

If a believer is divorced by their spouse and the divorcing spouse is sexually immoral (including remarriage) or proves to be an unbeliever, then the believer is free to remarry in the Lord. This is because the covenant marriage has been broken.

If a spouse repents of an unbiblical divorce, true repentance would seek to right all wrongs (2 Cor 7:9-11) and be reconciled with the former spouse (Matt 5:23-24) if at all possible (the faithful spouse is alive or not remarried).

¹⁰For the sorrow that is according to *the will of God* produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. ¹¹For behold **what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong!** In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. 2 Cor 7:10-11

²³Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your offering there before the altar and go; **first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.** Matt 5:23-24

There are those (like at Corinth) that had many "marriages" while an unbeliever or an untaught, immature, or rebellious believer. In those cases, if God brings salvation and/or conviction of sin in regard to divorce, the believer must repent. True repentance would seek to right all wrongs (2 Cor 7:9-11). Paul appears to address this by saying that God providentially was at work prior to salvation and therefore believers should not try to go back and change all of those situations.

¹⁷Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches. ... ²⁰Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called. ... ²⁴Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that *condition* in which he was called. ... ²⁷Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 1 Cor 7:17, 20, 24, 27

Biblical Remarriage

Whenever the marriage covenant is broken biblically (through death, sexual immorality, or abandonment), remarriage is always permitted and sometimes encouraged (1 Tim 5:14).

Remarriage in the Lord is permitted in the case when a spouse dies in a faithful marriage.

³⁹A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but **if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes**, only in the Lord. 1 Cor 7:39 (see also Rom 7:2)

Remarriage in the Lord (Rom 7:1-3; 1 Cor 7:39) by the faithful believer (in the case of sexual immorality) or the believer (in the case of the abandoned believer) is permitted only because the divorce was biblically permitted and, therefore, the marriage covenant is broken in both cases.

- In the case of sexual immorality, divorce and remarriage are both linked in the exception clause and therefore remarriage is permitted.

⁹And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Matt 19:9

- In the case of abandonment by an unbelieving spouse, the believer is not “under bondage” and therefore remarriage is permitted.

¹⁵Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such *cases*, but God has called us to peace. 1 Cor 7:15

Biblical Hope

There are many who have experienced divorce. A divorce is a hurtful event in the lives of families. Yet, God is there and able to bring repentance, comfort, and grace to hurting souls.

1. If you initiated an unbiblical divorce or caused a biblical divorce, these are not unpardonable sins. Repent! But be careful. Being “sorry” and true repentance are not the same thing.
2. If you are the recipient of a divorce, you are not a second class Christian.

- Understand that God will use all things for His glory and your good. Use this time to understand how you can grow in your relationship with Christ and glorify God.

²⁸And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. Rom 8:28

- Come before the throne of grace to receive help in this time of need.

⁹And He has said to me, “**My grace is sufficient for you**, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 2 Cor 12:9

¹⁶Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Heb 4:16

⁶Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, ⁷**casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.** 1 Pet 5:6-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! ⁵Let your gentle *spirit* be known to all men. The Lord is near. ⁶Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. ⁹The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. Phil 4:4-9

- Approach godly brothers/sisters for spiritual and physical support.

¹⁴We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 1 Thess 5:14

¹⁴What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? ¹⁷Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, *being* by itself. James 2:14-16

Concluding Thoughts

If you are married... Determine to glorify God now, in this moment. Stay married. Excel in your walk with God in your marriage. Guard your marriage.

To the biblically divorced... Determine to glorify God now, in this moment. Be open to glorifying God by reconciling with your spouse.

To the sinfully divorced... Repent. Turn to God. Work out true repentance which may mean pursuing reconciliation with your spouse.

Real Life Scenarios

Yourself #1: You and your spouse fight constantly. There is no peace, no affection, no happiness in your marriage. You have a friend who tells you, "God wants you to be happy." and "For the sake of the children, you should leave the marriage." What should you do?

Yourself #2: Your spouse divorced you on unbiblical grounds. He/she professes Christ and has not been sexually immoral. You had not been pursuing a relationship, but find yourself attracted to another divorcee at church. What should you do?

Yourself #3: You left your spouse and initiated a divorce for "irreconcilable differences". Since then God has been changing your heart, you have been growing in your relationship with Christ and God has convicted you that what you did was sin. What should you do?

Yourself #4: You and your spouse think you married too young. You are "friends", but just can't be married so you divorced. God has since convicted you that divorce is sin. What should you do?

Yourself #5: You and your spouse divorced unbiblically several years ago. You each are remarried and have children with your new spouse. Recently, you have become convicted that what you did was sin. What should you do?

Someone Else #1: A church friend confided in you that their spouse has committed adultery and is in the process of leaving the home. In thinking about bringing biblical care to your hurting friend, what is the first thing you need to know? What is the next thing you might share with him/her? What would you recommend to him/her in regard to divorce?

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues
Topic 30 – Divorce and Remarriage – Additional Study

What is your highest purpose? How is that purpose worked out in your life by the time, energy, and resources you expend on it?

Read Exodus 33:17-23; Isaiah 43:7; Ephesians 4:1-3; and Philippians 1:27.

What should be your highest purpose?

How would your life look if this was your highest purpose? List some ways this purpose could be observed in your marriage?

Reread the passages in this study on divorce.

Are you convinced that divorce is not an option for a believer?

What activities would strengthen your marriage against divorce?

Read 2 Corinthians 12:9, Hebrews 4:16, 1 Peter 5:6-7, Philippians 4:4-9 and Psalm 46. Pray through each of these passages by reading a small section and talking to God about His precepts, promises, and principles that you find.

How is God encouraging to you?

What does God require of you when in need of encouragement?