

What does the Bible teach about divorce?

By Dr. Jim Denison

When is divorce permissible biblically? When is it not? What does the Lord say about such a difficult subject?

This is unfortunately a very common question. America has five percent of the world's population, but 50% of its divorces. Web sites, magazines, and support groups on the subject of divorce abound.

In all the cacophony of voices speaking to this issue, it's vital that we hear God's. That's my only job in this essay—to give you what the word of God says, and what it means for us. Every one of us has experienced divorce or known someone affected directly by it. Let's ask the Lord our most common questions about this painful subject, and listen to him as he offers us hope for hurting hearts.

What did Jesus teach?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses our issue: "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce'" (Matthew 5:31). "Anyone who divorces his wife" points to an extremely common practice in Jesus' day.

The Jews typically allowed divorce for any reason whatsoever. A man could divorce his wife if she spoiled his dinner by putting too much salt in his food; if she went into public with her head uncovered; if she talked with men in the streets; if she burned the toast. Rabbi Akiba said that a man could divorce his wife if he found someone more attractive. Divorce was so common in Jesus' day that many women refused to get married.

To divorce his wife, the husband presented her with a "certificate of divorcement." The most common form: "Let this be from me your writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that you may marry whatever man you will." If he handed this document to his wife in the presence of two witnesses, she stood divorced, with no legal proceedings or protection whatsoever.

So Jesus speaks to an extremely common situation, in which the structure of family life is collapsing and national morals are disintegrating. His words are significant and radical: "anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery" (v. 32). "Marital unfaithfulness" means adultery, sexual relations between a wife and a person not her husband. Such an act breaks the marriage union, rendering it null and void. Divorce otherwise "causes her to become an adulteress," since she will have to remarry to support herself but is still bound to her first husband in the eyes of God. And he adds, "Anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Jesus repeats the very same words in Matthew 19:9. Divorce except for adultery is outside the word and will of God. This is the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What constitutes a biblical divorce?

What is the larger teaching of Scripture on our subject? In addition to Jesus' clear statement, the Bible also says, "If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15). If a believer is married to a non-Christian, and the unbeliever deserts the marriage, the believer is innocent.

Abandonment by a believer must be considered as well. What if your spouse is a Christian but refuses to stay in your marriage? What if you want to work, to seek help and restoration, but he or she will not? This person has misused the freedom of will given by God. The Bible forbids this divorce, but the laws of our land do not. And the Bible clearly teaches that we are not responsible for the sins of others, but only our own.

Abuse is a third area we must discuss. Physical, emotional, verbal, and substance abuse are epidemic in marriages today. While the Bible nowhere addresses abuse specifically with regard to divorce, we can draw two conclusions from biblical truth.

First, abuse is always wrong: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). And wives are to just as loving, supportive, and sacrificial with their husbands.

Second, life must be protected: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). You must protect yourself and your children from abuse.

So biblical counselors recommend that an abused person separate from the spouse immediately. Get yourself and your children to safety. Seek intensive counseling. But don't give up—God can heal any marriage if both partners will surrender fully to him. I've seen abusers repent and be restored. Consider divorce only as the lesser of two evils, in order to protect the abused, and only if there are no other options.

As I understand Scripture, these are the conditions under which divorce is permissible biblically: adultery, abandonment, and abuse. Note that the Bible does not prescribe divorce even in these painful circumstances, but only permits it.

If you're considering divorce

Now we come to the hope God offers hurting hearts today. Hope for those who are considering divorce, and for those who have experienced one. We'll find both in God's word and grace.

First, if you're considering a divorce, please know that God can heal any marriage whose partners are fully yielded to him. He doesn't want you to have a better marriage, but a

new marriage. I know of pastors and staff members who have committed the horrible sin of adultery, but through their repentance and God's grace their marriage is restored and renewed today. I have seen abuse healed, and abandoners return. God is still the Great Physician of bodies, souls, and homes as well.

And he wants to heal every marriage, to prevent the tragic consequences which so often accompany divorce. Divorce seldom solves the problem it was meant to solve. Financial pressures are enormous: the woman's standard of living drops 73% in the first year, while men who remarry find themselves supporting two families on the same income. And while you can divorce your spouse, you cannot divorce your child's parent.

There is great hope today, for divorce is never inevitable. We hear constantly that half of all marriages end in divorce. That's simply not true. Pollster Louis Harris explains: several years ago, the Census Bureau noted that during that particular year, there were 2.4 million marriages performed and 1.2 million divorces granted. Someone did the math without considering the 54 million marriages already in existence, and announced that half of all marriages divorce. The fact is, only one out of eight marriages will ever end in divorce. Any given year, only two percent of existing marriages will break up.

If your marriage is struggling:

- Remember God's plan: one man and one woman joined for life (Genesis 2:24). He wants to help and heal your home.
- Seek help. If you've gone to biblical counseling without success, try someone else. Try again. If your spouse won't go, go alone. To work on your marriage, work on yourself.
- Don't wait for your spouse to make you happy—find ways to make yourself happier. Seek new activities, work, ministries, friendships.
- And seek God together. It is a fact that couples who attend worship together have the lowest risk of divorce. Those who are in church regularly are 2.5 times less likely to have been divorced than those who do not attend. Seek God's strength and help. Ask his family to help you, to pray for you. Ask him to guide you to those who can help you most. Your Father wants to give you a new life together. There is wonderful hope for you today.

If you have done all that you can to heal your marriage, but the abuse continues or your partner is unwilling to help, divorce may be the only option available to you. But go there only if you know that you have done all you can with God's help. And read the next section of our discussion.

If you've been divorced

What if you've already experienced divorce, as a result of adultery, abandonment, or abuse? You are the innocent party. You will need counseling, healing, and help. But you must reject the guilt you may feel, and move forward into God's grace and hope.

What if your divorce was not for biblical reasons? Here I must speak very carefully. I want to do nothing which will encourage someone considering a divorce to do so. The consequences of divorce are very real, and those of you who have experienced them know their pain better than anyone else.

But at the same time, know that divorce is not the "unpardonable sin." God can forgive any person who repents and returns to his word and will. Scripture is clear: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). "All" includes divorce.

God wants to help you and heal you. He plans to prosper you and not harm you, to give you hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). The Bible is clear: "The Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion" (Isaiah 30:18). God grieves with you, cries with you, walks with you, and accepts and loves you, just as you are, right now.

As I understand Scripture, remarriage is a biblical option for you. With counsel and help, restoration and healing, I believe God can lead you into another marriage. I am so grateful when every ministry in a church is open to those who have experienced divorce. There are those among many church ministry staffs, deacons, Sunday school teachers, and choir members who have experienced the pain of divorce. And God is using them in wonderful ways.

Billy Graham said: "I am opposed to divorce and regard the increase in divorces today as one of the most alarming problems in society. However, I know that the Lord can forgive and heal." He is right.

Conclusion

We've discussed a very large and very hard subject in this essay. To summarize:

- Biblical conditions for divorce would include adultery, abandonment, and abuse.
- God does not want any couple to divorce. He stands ready to give hope, help, and healing.
- God loves those who have experienced the pain of divorce. He still has a wonderful plan and purpose for their lives and ministries. Would any good father still love a child who experiences the pain of divorce? Your perfect Father in heaven does.

The Apostle Paul is proof. He was a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5), and was thus required to be married. By the time he wrote 1 Corinthians he was no longer married (1 Cor. 7:8), so that he was either a widower or a divorcee. He states in Philippians 3:8 that he "lost all things" when he gave his life to Christ; most scholars believe that he lost his wife when he became a Christian.

In Paul's day, a Jew who converted to Christianity was considered dead by his family and wife. She was a widow, free to marry another Jew. We would say she divorced him. And he wrote half of the New Testament.

What will God do with your life?