

Bible Study Notes

A SERIES OF ESSAYS ON SUBJECTS THAT AFFECT YOUR LIFE

Is There Life After Divorce?

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“Let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord the God of Israel.”

Divorce is painful. If you have been through a divorce, you need no one to tell you that. Not only do the children get hurt, there are the grandparents, the family, the friends. And who can tell of the pain, of the anger that comes in the middle of the night to the two people who once loved each other above all others?

Once this wreckage is strewn across the lives of a family, how can it all be cleaned up? How can the pain, the hurt, be healed? How can the guilt go away? Can a person be forgiven for the sins that lead to divorce? Can their lives ever be made right again?

The heart and core of Christianity is forgiveness and healing, and yet divorce, for some, has been tantamount to the unpardonable sin. Whatever the penalties, whatever the pain, some preachers conclude that the sinner who has been divorced just has to bear it. Jesus could heal a withered arm. He could give sight to the blind. He could make the crippled walk. He could make the deaf to hear. But according to some teachers, He could not heal the broken lives of the victims of divorce.

Of course Jesus *could* heal them, but some preachers have said that He *would* not. In some cases, men who have never been married have constructed mechanistic rules governing the lives of married couples. They have forbidden divorce and remarriage for the victims of divorce. In other cases, men who are married and have never experienced the heartache of divorce have decided that divorced people have to live alone the rest of their lives. They will not allow them to build a new life in a new marriage.

Human beings are not machines. When they are cut they bleed. When they are divorced they hurt. Did Jesus have anything at all to say to the victims of divorce? Fortunately for us He did.

“Is it lawful,” the Pharisees asked Him, “for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” There were two major schools of thought at that time. One believed that

a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason; the other held that some form of unchastity was the only ground. The Pharisees wanted to know where Jesus stood on the question.

He gave them an answer, though it was not what they expected or wanted. He allowed that men should not divorce their wives *at all*: “Have ye not read,” He replied, “that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they twain shall be one flesh?’ Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder” (Matthew 19:4-6).

Jesus’ answer was unequivocal and clear, and the Pharisees understood it well enough. Marriage was in the design of God from the beginning and it was permanent. Man was commanded not to “put asunder” what God had joined together. Not only was Jesus opposed to divorce for every cause, He was opposed to divorce for *any* cause.

The Pharisees were shocked at his reply, and they challenged it immediately: “Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?” They felt they were on firm ground, because the Law of Moses plainly permitted divorce, and Jesus knew it. He could only acknowledge the truth of what they said: “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put away your wives: *but from the beginning it was not so.*”

This statement of Jesus is crucial. With it He establishes what may be the single most important fact in the entire discussion: There was a law “from the beginning,” an *original* law, if you will, and it differed in significant ways from the Law of Moses.

How could this be true? And more important, why?

The specific law in question is found in Deuteronomy 24: “When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness [Hebrew: “matter of nakedness”] in her; then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house” (verse 1).

Jesus said this law was given, “because of the hardness of your hearts.” In other words, the law was

given in response to a set of conditions, existing at the time. Jesus established beyond question that the law stated in Deuteronomy 24 was a *judgment*—that is, an application of the law to a set of circumstances.

Moses specified a case where a man had found some “uncleanness” in his wife. The Hebrew is “matter of nakedness.” The same expression is used extensively in Leviticus 18 and 20 and refers to illicit sexual relationships. In other words, if a man’s wife has an affair, he can put her away.

It is sometimes objected that “uncleanness” in this passage cannot mean adultery, because Leviticus 20:10 required the death penalty for adultery. The fact is that the death penalty was *authorized* but not always carried out. When Joseph found Mary with child, he assumed it was the result of an illicit affair. Since he was a “just man”—not afflicted with hardness of heart—he was minded to “put her away” (divorce her) privately (Matthew 1:18-19). On another occasion, Jesus declined to authorize the stoning of a woman taken in the very act of adultery (John 8:3).

The question Moses faced was simple. When sin had entered the picture and destroyed the very foundation of marriage, when a man’s wife has slept with another man and he can no longer trust her or live with her, yet does not want to stone her, what should he do? The answer, given with all the authority of God’s law, is found in Deuteronomy 24. The man was to make a written document of divorce, give it to the woman, and send her away. *She was then free to marry another man.*

One primary purpose of this judgment was to protect the rights of the divorced woman. This was not an age when women could readily enter the work force and there was no welfare as we know it. When her husband put her away, her right to remarry was a right to food, shelter, and clothing. It is not often realized that in the ancient world, women were largely treated as chattel. This law not only gave the woman the right to remarry if she were divorced, it prevented the first husband from taking her back against her will. The second marriage took away the first husband’s “property rights” (verse 4).

This underlines one other effect of this judgment. There is no case for breaking up a second marriage on the pretext that a woman is somehow bound to the first husband. The second marriage, whether it was right or wrong, ended the first husband’s rights. She was not deemed to still be married to the first husband.

Divorce was not a part of the original intent of God’s constitution for man. Even under Moses, it was a “necessary evil,” a step taken to alleviate the damage of failed marriages, and keep some semblance of order in the home for the sake of the children and for society at large.

When Jesus restated the original intent of marriage, did He reject the law of Moses on this subject? Not at all. When His statement was challenged by the Pharisees, and when He had acknowledged that Moses had indeed given them a law regulating divorce, He went on, “And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery” (Matthew 19:9).

The original word for “fornication” is *porneia*, and it means “illicit sexual intercourse in general” (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament). Fornication is generally thought of as premarital sexual intercourse, but that is not all it means. *Porneia* includes premarital sex, homosexuality and adultery. In other words, *porneia* in Jesus’ statement corresponds to “some uncleanness” in Deuteronomy 24.

This means that Jesus accepted the judgment of the law of Moses on divorce and rejected the rabbinical idea of “divorce for every cause.”

But why make an exception at all? After all, the law is the law. Why compromise it with judgments and exceptions? The disciples still did not understand. Their conclusion was, “If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.” What they said doesn’t seem to follow, but at least it prompted Jesus to explain further. In the process, He gave us the reason for the exception clause.

“All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which are made eunuchs of men; and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it” (Matthew 19:11-12).

The idea Jesus advances is a little obscure at first, but it is firmly based in God’s original intent—“And the Lord God said, it is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). Man was a good piece of work, but what was included in the design of man was what Freud called the libido (the sexual urge, to you and me). Actually it is not just sex drive, but the drive to love, to be close, to

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touch, to be intimate with another human being. Most human beings cannot survive without it.

Jesus' disciples, then, seem to have missed the point entirely when they conclude that it was good for a man not to marry (unless they were saying that it was good for *the man who was divorced* not to marry).

What Jesus is saying in His curious discussion about "eunuchs" is that some men and women cannot remain celibate. Thus, Jesus and Moses both conclude that when a marriage is broken by sexual sin by one of the partners, it is not necessary for the offended party to live alone for the rest of his or her life. But, at least as far as this judgment goes, if a man and a woman divorce for any other reason, they must not marry another. If they do, it is adultery. As Paul puts it, "And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband; and let not the husband put away his wife" (I Corinthians 7:10-11).

A couple who are divorced do not have to live celibate lives. They have an option—they can be reconciled. In this case, the sexual urge can serve to bring two people back together. But it does not require a lot of imagination to realize that there are problems with this. In fact, Paul has to deal with a problem that Jesus did not address—the problem of marriages divided, not by infidelity, but by religion.

The Corinthians had written Paul about several questions, and he was systematically addressing them. Unfortunately, we do not have the letter from the Corinthians to Paul. It would be of enormous value in understanding the Corinthian letters, but we can draw some inferences from what we read.

The subject of divorce and remarriage is addressed in the seventh chapter and is introduced by the curious statement, "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman." Since we know that it is not wrong for a man to touch a woman (Hebrews 13:4), we must assume he is referring to something in their letters. Indeed, later in this chapter, he will acknowledge that much of what he is saying is said only because of the "present distress" (verse 26).

Having made this statement, he goes on to say: "Nevertheless, *to avoid fornication*, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband." Like Jesus, Paul acknowledges the physical needs of men and women. He knew that an attempt to impose celibacy would lead to fornication. In verses 3

through 6, he outlines the intimate responsibilities of husbands and wives to one another.

Paul, like Jesus, knew that the ability to remain celibate was a gift that some had and some did not have: "For I would that all men were even as myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. But *if they cannot contain, let them marry*; for it is better to marry than to burn" (verses 7-9). Note that the same word "unmarried" is the same word used in verse 11 for divorced women. The "unmarried and widows" in this passage are two categories of formerly married women. Paul says, if they cannot control themselves, "let them marry."

But Paul stands opposed to divorce: "And unto the married I command: yet not I, but the Lord, Let the wife not depart from her husband: But and if she departs, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband; and let not the husband put away his wife" (verses 10-11).

Having said all this, he is still left with a problem—not a few of the Greek converts were married to "unbelieving" mates. These were not Christian husbands with different doctrinal beliefs, but pagans who did not believe in Jesus Christ at all. What was a woman to do if she was abandoned by such a man?

Paul begins by saying, "But to the rest speak I, not the Lord" (verses 12). He is rendering a judgment, and Paul's judgment can be just as binding as the Law of Moses. His judgment in this matter follows: "If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And a woman who hath a husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him...But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases; but God hath called us to peace" (verses 12-15).

Is Paul adding another "exception clause" for divorce? In the first place, he declares that religious differences are no excuse for breaking up a marriage. Marriage is just as binding for Christian/pagan marriages as it is for marriages between converted mates.

However, this is not the case if the unbelieving mate abandons the marriage. When that happens, a brother or sister is not "under bondage." In other words, they are free—loosed from the marriage bond. Paul speaks of marriage in terms of "binding and loosing" twice more in the chapter. Once in verse 27, "Art thou bound unto

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a wife? Seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife,” and again in verse 39, “The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth.” Paul is plainly saying that a woman deserted by an unbeliving mate is not bound to her husband—she is free to remarry.

Then it would seem that Paul is indeed adding another exception to the one given by Moses and Jesus. Did he have the right to do that? There are some things to consider. First is Jesus’ statement to all the apostles that they had the power to make “binding and loosing” decisions (Matthew 16:19 and 18:18). Nowhere is this wording more appropriate than in matters of marriage and divorce. Second, there is a strong presumption that a pagan mate who abandons his Christian wife will not remain celibate—that he will commit sexual sins and thus invalidate marriage. Just because the wife cannot prove it should not condemn her to a life of celibacy, or worse, to a life of sin because she cannot remain celibate.

Perhaps the most important thing to understand is that Moses, Jesus and Paul were not creating “exception clauses.” They were rendering judgments. Jesus was addressing essentially the same people Moses addressed. Paul was not. Had Jesus addressed the Corinthian church directly there is no reason to think He would have said anything different from Paul.

But Paul had one more difficulty to address; that of the divorce and the remarriage that is already an established fact. One or both of a married couple had divorced a previous mate without legitimate grounds. Paul addressed the problem this way: “Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God. Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord; yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say that it is good for a man so to be. Art thou bound unto a wife? Seek not to be loosened. Art thou loosed from a wife (divorced)? Seek not a wife. But and *if thou marry, thou hast not sinned*” (verses 24-28). This passage speaks to the newly converted at the time of his calling. It assumes that reconciliation with the former mate is out of the question.

The time of a person’s calling is pivotal. One’s whole life turns on the point of baptism, because at baptism we die to the past. This is just as true of divorce as it is of any other sin. In another letter, Paul says: “Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law), how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband” (Romans 7:1-2).

Compare this with what he says in an earlier chapter: “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we should also walk in newness of life. Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For He that is dead is free from sin” (Romans 6:3-7).

There is no requirement for the man or woman who is baptized to go back and try to make up for all the sins of the past. As far as the law is concerned, they are dead. The penalty has been exacted. No former obligations, including the penalty for divorce, can be enforced. They are free to walk in a new life. *There is never a case for splitting up an existing marriage and home to try to right some past wrong.* God hates divorce, and He hates second and third ones as He does the first.

There will always be questions about divorce and remarriage that will require judgment. What about a woman who learns she has married an alcoholic, or a child abuser? What if she fears her life is in danger? Naturally she can flee to a crisis center, but can she divorce such a man? Almost certainly. This is the reason God established a set of judges under Moses (Deuteronomy 17:8-13), and under Christ (Matthew 16:19 and 18:18).

Those who judge righteous judgment will always take the high ground of Jesus’ statement first: “Have ye not read, that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.”

But if they remember Jesus’ caution, “I will have mercy and not sacrifice,” they will also work to bind up the brokenhearted and to heal the spirit wounded by divorce. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. The ravages of divorce can be forgiven and healed like any other wound.

This paper is presented, not to make the judgment for people considering divorce or remarriage, but to give them the knowledge to make that judgment for themselves. In the end, those who have to live with the decision should be the ones to make it.

For the rest of us, it is not our decision to make, and we should not attempt to influence the outcome. Those who make the decision will answer to God and God alone. And they have enough pain without the rest of us adding to it.