

What the Bible teaches about divorce

Based on Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 19:1-9, Mark 10:1-12, 1 Corinthians 7:1-40.

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Biblical meaning of the word 'divorce'

When the word "divorce" is used in both the Old and New Testament it has a very different meaning to how the word is used today.

Hebrew: *shalach* – to send away, cut off, let go

Greek: *apoluo* – to send away, set free, release, dismiss

These words are widely used in a general sense (e.g. Jesus sending a crowd away). When they are applied to marriage they describe a religious approach and a cultural situation that is very different to the current meaning of the word 'divorce'. (In New Zealand today, for example, divorce is the legal dissolution of a registered marriage. Unlike most countries in the world NZ has a 'no fault' system for divorce. All that is required is two years of separation and payment of a fee).

Whenever you read the word 'divorce' in the Old or New Testament it is describing the system of divorce applicable in the nation of Israel over 2000 years ago. Taking Bible verses out of this context and applying them to our modern context has caused (and still causes) all sorts of legalistic religious bondage that has harmed countless people, and caused immeasurable hurt to the cause of Christ.

Divorce in the Old Testament

In Old Testament times women were seen as being inferior, subordinate and as the property of a husband. A man could have many wives and if one of them became displeasing to him, he could write a Bill of Divorce and send her away. See Deuteronomy 24:1-4. (Jesus referred to this Bill of Divorce (Greek *apostasion*) in Matthew 5:31, Mark 10:4).

The wording for the Bill of Divorce includes:

But now I have dismissed thee ____ the daughter of ____ by whatever name thou art called, of the town of ____ so as to be free at thy own disposal, to marry whomsoever thou pleasest, without hindrance from anyone, from this day for ever.

Using this system it was easy for men to get rid of wives that displeased them. Women had no rights in the matter, including not being able to divorce their husbands.

Right from the beginning, God's desire, however, has always been for strong, stable and loving covenant marriages. See Genesis 2:18-25. One of the results of the fall, though, was a breakdown in human relationships and, of course, this included marriage. See Genesis Chapter 3 and Matthew 19:3-12

God "hates divorce" and consistently calls us all to be faithful within our marriages. Yet, He recognises that there will always be arguments, breakups, reconciliations, tensions and divorces in our relationships (as there were in His tempestuous relationship with the nation of Israel). See Malachi 2:10-16. The system of divorce developed from Deuteronomy 24:1-4 allowed for this and is an expression of the grace of God towards His fallen people. One flesh marriage is God's design and His ideal, but His compassion towards sinful people enabled them to divorce and remarry, and hopefully, find happiness in this new relationship.

Divorce in the New Testament

In New Testament times the system of divorce in Israel was well established. There had been lots of input regarding the system while the written Law (the Tanakh – or Jewish Old Testament) had been assembled, and as the Oral Law and the commentaries of the Mishnah had been developed in the Talmud (Books of the Law). Thus, in the time of Jesus divorce was an integral part of the Halakha, the Jewish religious law.

In Matthew 19 and Mark 10 Jesus was dealing with a trick question from the Pharisees regarding this.

At the time two opposing schools of thought had developed among the Rabbis, based on Deuteronomy 24:1:
If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her ...

- The powerful Hillel rabbinic school focused on the word *something* rather than the word *indecent*. They said Moses added that word in order to allow husbands to define what indecency meant. The result of this interpretation was that in the time of Jesus any man could divorce his wife for any reason.
- The Shammai rabbinic school said the words *something indecent* indicate that divorce can only take place due to marital infidelity.

Debate between the two schools was very politically charged. No matter how Jesus answered He would have incurred the wrath of followers of the liberal Hillel school or the conservative Shammai school. This was very significant because John the Baptist had recently lost his life over the question of divorce and remarriage. Mark 8:14-29.

(The debate between the two schools of thought was significant in the ongoing development of the Oral Law and the practice of Judaism even today).

Divorce in modern day Israel

- Divorce is permitted in Civil law and also in Halakha (Jewish law). In the religious divorce ceremony the husband places the Bill of Divorce (termed a *get*) into the hand of the wife or her agent.
- Since around the 12th century Judaism has recognized the right to a divorce of a wife abused physically or psychologically. These days a wife may sue in a rabbinical court to initiate a divorce. In such a case, a husband may be compelled to give the *get*, if he has violated any of his numerous obligations. Compliance may require beating and or monetary coercion, which is supported by the community.
- Conservative Judaism follows Halakha, while Orthodox Judaism generally does not issue Jewish divorces, seeing a civil divorce as both necessary and sufficient. This can lead to situations where a couple may be considered divorced by the Reform Jewish community, but still married by the Conservative community. (Orthodox Judaism usually does not recognize Reform weddings).

Jesus' response to the Pharisees Matthew 19:1-9, Mark 10:1-12

Jesus referred the Pharisees back to God's original design which was for a man and wife to be *one flesh*: "What God has joined together, let not man separate". Even so, Moses had allowed divorce because their *hearts were hard*. Jesus then explained that *anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery*. Matthew 19:9.

- The Greek word *porneia* translated "marital unfaithfulness" is a word which can mean any form of sexual immorality: fornication, prostitution, adultery, etc. Jesus was saying that divorce is permissible if sexual immorality is involved. This is because sexual relations are an integral part of marriage, "the two will become one flesh." Any relations outside of marriage break this unity and are permissible grounds for divorce, but not a necessary requirement for it. Even when unfaithfulness occurs a couple can, through God's grace, learn to forgive and begin rebuilding their marriage. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16) and the gospel is all about forgiveness of sins, right relationships and living in the Kingdom of God. We are all sinners and need to repent of our sins. (Luke 11:4; Ephesians 4:32). Sexual sin and divorce don't prevent someone from entering their inheritance in Christ! Romans 8:1,2. God's grace is much too big for that.
- The phrase "and marries another" (Matthew 19:9) indicates that after divorce remarriage is also permissible. This is another part of God's recognition that divorce will occur, even among His children, and of His mercy towards sinful people.

Paul's comments on divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:1-40

There are lots of situations not covered in the Biblical passages, which may be affected by current sociological practices and customs, and/or by relevant legislation: eg. When marriage has been forced or arranged; when abuse is involved; when one partner is a believer, and the other isn't; when separation is unavoidable; when one partner is repentant and the other isn't; when a divorce/remarriage takes place and then repentance or conversion occurs; distribution of property; caring for children

Paul was dealing with one of these situations when he wrote 1 Corinthians 7:1-40.

New believers in Corinth were from a Greco-Roman background which was very permissive sexually and morally. When they became Christians they had questions on how their new faith should be worked out in their marriages.

Paul's response was to suggest (but not command):

- A husband and wife should be fully committed to each other, even if one was an unbeliever when the partner became a Christian.
- Christians should make their marriage a priority and not seek separation or divorce when faced with difficulties.
- The unmarried and widows are better off not to marry because marriage is complex and distracts from serving the Lord.
- If one partner dies, the remaining partner is free to marry.
- Regardless of their current state all should seek to be fully devoted to the Lord.

Conclusion

Divorce and remarriage is an intensely personal and situational issue, which many Christians face. Sadly there is much legalistic, invalid and/or unkind interpretations of portions of Scripture (typically taken out of context) which has brought many into great condemnation. This study shows that the meaning and practice of divorce described in the Bible is very different to the meaning and practice of legal divorce as carried out today. Rather than being judgemental and harsh towards those who are going through divorce, or who have been divorced we should all remember Jesus approach to the woman caught in adultery. Rather than stoning her to death (as was required by the Jewish Law) He said *Let any one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.* When no one stepped forward to condemn the woman Jesus said *Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.* John 8:2-11.

No matter what our marital situation the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from all sin. 1 John 1:7, and we can have a relationship with God in which Jesus is Lord. John 10:10; Romans 6:8-23.

A divorced and/or remarried believer is no less loved by God, than anyone else.