

WHEN
THE
VOW
BREAKS

BOUNCING BACK FROM DIVORCE



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When the Vow Breaks

Bouncing Back from Divorce

ABBEY SAT IN MY OFFICE, BROKEN AND DEJECTED. I listened compassionately as she shared with me the deep scars left on her personality by her divorce some ten years earlier. Her husband had had an affair. When she finally got the truth out of him, she was devastated. As bad as the hurt was, she loved him. She wanted their marriage healed. But, he wanted nothing of the same. He promptly told her he had no intention of reconciling their marriage and proceeded over the next few months to push the divorce through as quickly as possible.

Being raised in a strict religious home that frowned on divorce under any and every circumstance, she pretty much decided her marrying days were over. No second chance. In her mind, to remarry would be to live in adultery and out of the will of God. She would have to wear the scarlet letter “D”, living as a marked woman the rest of her life.

The problem was she wanted to remarry. She was young, had her whole life ahead of her and longed for a Christian husband with whom to share her life. But how could she ever get past the guilt and shame of being divorced? Would God ever permit her to remarry and grant her His blessing? These were the questions that filled her mind that day we talked.

She then asked me one of the most heart-breaking questions I've ever been asked. "Can God ever use me for His glory since I've been divorced?"

As I listened intently to her dilemma, sensing her despair, I was so glad that I could give her hope – a way out of her pain. Hope means that God is the God of a second chance, and a third chance, and a fourth chance, and a ...

She couldn't control her husband's decision to have an affair and divorce her for another woman. That wasn't her fault. Furthermore, she was free to remarry. Most importantly,

I reassured her that God would still use her for His glory. She was not disqualified for the prize.

Dealing with the subject of divorce is as delicate as a dentist trying to perform a root canal without the use of Novocain. It's virtually impossible not to hit a nerve. To avoid hitting a nerve, let's establish some ground rules before we delve into our discussion of the divorce dilemma.

Ground rule #1: While couples today need to be challenged to remain faithful to their marriage vows and to avoid divorce at all costs, the grace of God needs to be ministered to those who have been divorced to help them move on with their lives past the guilt and shame which often accompanies divorce.

Ground rule #2: Every effort needs to be made to avoid the extreme positions held by those who *condemn* all situations of divorce, even when the Bible grants it, as well as those who *condone* divorce under any and every circumstance, as seen in our secular times.

A balanced position between legalism on the one hand and license on the other brings “liberty to those who are bruised,” to borrow Jesus’ words.

Ground rule #3: Every Biblical passage needs to be considered in proper context. We then need to ask: How do these passages speak to our times? While the Bible does not deal specifically with every divorce situation, it does give us *timeless truths* which we can apply to situations.

Divorce is not primarily a theological issue; it’s a people issue. Any theological position on divorce that results in a heavy-handed condemnation of divorced people is short of the spirit of Christ. Such a condemnation reflects the spirit of the Pharisees who were ready to stone a woman caught in the act of adultery. As Jesus said to them, He says to us, “He that is without sin, let him cast the first stone.”

PERSONAL PAIN

Counseling centers, pastors' offices, psychiatric services and even happy hours are running over with people trying to find relief for the pain caused by divorce. Now, to be sure, divorce is not as painful for some as it is for others. Some marriages are so dysfunctional and destructive that divorce comes as a pleasant relief. But for most people, divorce leaves a deep, painful wound that takes a long time to heal. Some never fully recover.

I've lost track of the people I've counseled through divorce who have said to me, "There is nothing that can compare with the pain I'm feeling. This is worse than if my spouse had died. It's like a nightmare from which I can't wake up." To compound the emotional pain, many divorced people are faced with being judged as either "adulterous, criminal, neurotic, immature, or at best frivolous and unfortunate."

Psychotherapists have compared the trauma of divorce to the grief experienced at the

death of a loved one. Divorce is “the death of the marriage: the husband and wife together with the children are mourners, the lawyers are the undertakers, the court is the cemetery where the coffin is sealed and the dead marriage is buried.” The primary victims are the children of divorce. Young children, for the most part, interpret their parents’ divorce as personal rejection and often blame themselves, thinking that somehow they caused the divorce.

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES

Sorting out what the Bible teaches on divorce presents a challenging task. We need to carefully consider each passage in its proper context without jumping to premature conclusions. After making such considerations, we are ready to ask: How do these biblical passages speak to our times? While the Bible does not deal specifically with every divorce situation, it does provide us timeless truths which we can apply to real-life situations.

The first observation one can make is that the Bible has very little to say on the subject. That may strike you as odd, but it's true. For example, the Bible contains 500 verses on faith, over 500 verses on prayer but only a handful of verses on divorce. In fact, the word *divorce* only appears 34 times in the Bible.

An endless series of questions have been raised about various marital situations and divorce in an attempt to decide whether or not divorce and remarriage are permissible. Unfortunately, the Bible does not deal directly with many of these situations. This is why we need to extract the timeless truths and then apply them to each situation. What I mean is that the passage that says, "*God is love,*" has as much to say about divorce as does the passage that says, "*I hate divorce.*" You can't simply look at divorce passages alone to understand God's message of hope to people going through the pain of divorce. The entirety of Scripture must be taken into account when weighing these issues.

The following chart provides an overview of every biblical passage on divorce along with a brief summary of each one:

EVERY BIBLICAL PASSAGE ON DIVORCE

Biblical Passage	Summary of Content
A. THE MOSAIC LAW 1. Leviticus 21:7, 14; 22:13; Ezekiel 44:22	Old Testament priests were forbidden to marry divorced or widowed women as a symbol of the purity of the priesthood.
2. Numbers 30:9	Vows taken by a widowed or divorced woman stood on their own merit, while those taken by married women could be fulfilled by their husbands (Numbers 30:6-8).
3. Deuteronomy 24:1-4	When a man divorced his wife, he gave her a "certificate of divorce" which cleared her name and permitted her remarriage.
B. THE OT PROPHETS 1. 1 Chronicles 8:8	Historical reference to a divorce in the lineage of Saul.
2. Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 30:8	Both of these passages provide a play on words referring to God giving the nation of Israel a certificate of divorce due to her spiritual adultery.
3. Malachi 2:16	God emphatically stated, "I hate divorce," and called the men of Israel to be faithful to their wives.
C. JESUS' TEACHING 1. Matthew 1:19	When Joseph learned Mary was pregnant before their marriage he had decided to divorce her privately until God revealed to him that she was carrying the Messiah.
2. Matthew 5:31-32	In His <i>Sermon on the Mount</i> , Jesus confronted the frivolous reasons which men used to divorce their wives, stating that adultery is the only legitimate grounds.
3. Matthew 19:1-9	Jesus reiterated to the Pharisees who questioned Him about divorce that adultery is the only grounds for divorce. He added that the only reason Moses permitted them a "certificate of divorce" was due to the hardness of their hearts.
4. Mark 10:1-9; Luke 16:18	Unjustifiable divorce amounts to adultery in subsequent remarriage. Jesus underscored the permanence of marriage as God's will: " <i>What God has joined together, let man not separate.</i> "

<p>D. PAUL'S TEACHING 1. 1 Corinthians 7:11-13, 27</p>	<p>This is the only apostolic passage on divorce and remarriage recorded in the New Testament. Paul prefixed his remarks by saying, "<i>To the rest I say this, (I, not the Lord).</i>" He spoke as a seasoned apostle by Divine concession not Divine commandment as he did earlier in this passage. His wisdom is, however, inspired by the Holy Spirit.</p> <p><i>Verses 11-14:</i> Believers married to unbelievers are to minister to their unbelieving mates no divorce them</p> <p><i>Verse 27:</i> Paul poignantly states, "<i>Are you married? Do not see a divorce.</i>"</p> <p><i>Verse 39:</i> While the word <i>divorce</i> does not appear in this verse, Paul stated that couples are only bound together in marriage while both are still living. The death of one's mate frees the other to remarry but only "<i>in the Lord.</i>"</p>
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You can see what I mean when I say that the information is limited. This makes it complicated when tackling such problematic marital issues as alcoholism and drug abuse, spousal abuse (verbal, emotional, physical), emotional estrangement, basic temperament incompatibility and abandonment. Since the Bible doesn't deal with each issue specifically, we need to apply its timeless truths to these problems in order to find solutions.

Before we tackle some of these tough questions, let's review the biblical passages on divorce as we look for the timeless truths.

In the Beginning

The creation account of Adam and Eve underscores the permanency of marriage; a truth which is reiterated throughout the Bible. Creation reveals God's ideal plan for married couples: *For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they shall become one flesh* (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 9:5; Ephesians 5:31). It is clear that God's original intention for marriage is a monogamous relationship between a husband and wife for the duration of their lives.

Moses & The Law

Moses emerged on the scene as God's emancipator to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. While in the wilderness, God gave them His law by which they could establish an orderly society. Without law, societies degenerate into lawlessness. The law of God spiritual, civil, and ceremonial was provided to Israel to govern their relationships at home and in society at large.

Divorce was already practiced among the Israelites when they came out of Egypt. Moses' law, then, was given to regulate divorce. Throughout Israel's history, the rabbis have held various interpretation regarding the Mosaic law on divorce. By the time of Jesus several opposing theological positions were held by different rabbinical schools.

Besides certain guidelines given to the Levitical priests, the only Mosaic law regarding divorce appears in Deuteronomy instructing a husband to give his wife a "certificate of divorce" if they divorce them for "indecenty." The Levitical laws concerning divorce are found in Leviticus 21:7, 14; 22:13 and in Ezekiel 44:22. The Deuteronomy passage reads:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she become the wife of another man, and her second husband

dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

Adultery or sexual immorality was regarded as the primary grounds for divorce referred to in this passage by the word *indecency*. This was certainly the prevailing teaching among the rabbis in Jesus’ time. Frivolous and repetitive divorce and remarriage were restrained by this law as well.

The Mosaic law on divorce needs important clarification. Under certain circumstances, adultery was punishable by stoning (Lev 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22-24). This does not mean that every person guilty of adultery was stoned, as seen in the case of King David. The severity of the punishment, stated in the law,

revealed the severity of the sin committed. However, criminal law was never enforced apart from mercy. This is why Jesus saved the woman caught in adultery from being stoned by a handful of religious zealots whose conception of authority as one of condemnation instead of compassion (John 8:1-11). He was simply upholding the perfect balance of the law which condemns the sin but saves the sinner. This balance of justice and mercy is evident in the American jurisprudence system today and is derived from the Judeo-Christian understanding of law. Perhaps George Whitefield expressed it best as he watched a criminal on his way to the gallows and uttered the now famous statement: "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

The Apostle James underscores this truth when he reminds us that, "*Mercy triumphs over judgement*" (James 2:13). This same spirit of mercy needs to prevail among Christians today when ministering to those who have been divorced.

The Prophets Speak

Jeremiah addressed the widespread problem of divorce in his times and reiterated what Moses taught (Jeremiah 3:1). Malachi served as the last Old Testament prophet before John the Baptist. He ministered about 450 years before the time of Jesus. Israel had just returned to their homeland after seventy years of exile in Babylon. Knowing that national restoration rested largely on the renewal of families, he confronted the problems of marital disintegration and divorce head on. Listen to his challenging address to the men of Israel: *“The Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner; the wife of your marriage covenant...So guard yourself and your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth”* (Malachi 2:14-16).

His message reached its climax with God’s declaration: *“I hate divorce.”* This statement needs clarification. When God says, “I hate divorce,” what does He mean? Is God thun-

dering with a voice that shakes the foundations of the earth? A terrifying sound filled with anger and disgust? I'm convinced that's how a lot of people have heard these words. To the contrary, God is speaking compassionately to those who have lived through the trauma of divorce. God hates what divorce does to couples who live through the pain, to children, to families and to society.

God doesn't say He hates divorced people. Such suggestion would be absurd. Furthermore, is there anyone who doesn't hate divorce? The school system hates divorce. Society hates divorce. Divorced people, more than anyone else, hate divorce. Certainly divorce is hated by children who walk into a courtroom and watch innocently as their parents' divorce is finalized. Any way you look at it, divorce is a no-win situation; someone always gets hurt.

This is why Malachi challenged the men of the nation to keep faith with their wives as their covenant partners. The prophet also reveals why the preservation of the family is

so important: God is always concerned about the next generation. He is seeking “godly offspring.” Many people are so caught up living for the moment, they’ve lost sight of the next generation.

God challenges every married couple to commit themselves fully to their children so as to raise them in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). I’ve listened to couples considering divorce say that staying married for the children is not sufficient reason to stay married. I disagree wholeheartedly. Children are the primary reason, along with love for each other, that couples should stay together.

Notice that all the laws and exhortations in both the Mosaic law and the prophets were directed to men. Why? Because the primary responsibility for the preservation of the family lies with husbands and fathers. A study of single parents shows that the majority of single parents are mothers, and many of them shoulder the task of parenting with little or no help from the fathers. This is not to imply

that all fathers who have been divorced are doing a bad job raising their children. Many of them are doing a wonderful job in spite of challenging circumstances. However, the men of America desperately need to heed God's challenge through the prophet: "*do not break faith with the wife of your youth.*"

Unfortunately, situations exist where husbands and fathers are divorced in cases which they neither desired nor could prevent. In the Christian community, there are men who were divorced before they accepted Christ and today live alienated from their family. Many would do anything to travel back in time and undo the past but they can't. What can fathers do who are separated from their children? They can provide financial support, participate in their children's activities, contact them regularly and set an example of the love of God to their kids.

What Would Jesus Do?

Jesus taught that divorce is permissible only on the grounds of adultery. He also

underscored that marriage is permanent, dissolvable only by death. He said, “Haven’t you read, He replied that in the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said: For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

Why then, they asked, did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matthew 19:4-9).

Secondly, he taught that divorce constitutes adultery unless the couple divorces on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness or

adultery. Obviously, a couple is not mandated to divorce under such conditions, but there is divine concession to do so. He also taught that remarriage after an improper divorce constitutes a form of adultery as well since the couple is breaking their marriage vows.

When a group of Pharisees (meaning “pious ones” or “separated ones”) asked Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” Why did he use the phrase, “for any and every reason?” According to Jewish law, a husband could divorce his wife but a wife could not divorce her husband unless she went to the elders or to the court and pleaded her case. The court could then mandate the husband to write his wife a certificate of divorce, which in turn, allowed her to remarry. Divorce was much more difficult for women to obtain than it was for men in ancient times.

We saw earlier that the grounds for divorce according to the law of Moses was *indecency*, which meant sexual unfaithfulness. But during the time of Jesus, rabbis held different

views as to what the word *indecenty* meant. Shammai and his followers, a rather strict, legalistic group, held to the traditional position that the word *indecenty* meant either adultery or gross indecenty (sexual immorality).

Hillel advocated a more lenient approach, extending the meaning of indecenty beyond sinful acts to include real or imagined offenses. They got so extreme in their views that some actually advocated divorce if a man's wife ruined a meal! If that isn't bizarre enough for you, consider the interpretation of Rabbi Akiba. He said that the companion phrase in the law which reads, if she finds no favor in his eyes, meant that if a husband found someone more attractive than his wife, he had the right to divorce her. He would fit in with the philosophy of some people today. So, when the Pharisees used the phrase, "for any and every reason," they were asking if men had the right to divorce their wives on such frivolous grounds.

During the time of Jesus, the teachings of Hillel were held to more widely, which led to

an increased frequency of divorce. The only drawback to divorce was that a man had to return the wife's dowry unless she was a notorious sinner. Divorce was *compulsory* under Jewish law on the grounds of adultery and sterility, since the goal of marriage was procreation. Some, however, took exception to this rigid position. Many defined adultery as perpetual infidelity as opposed to a single act of unfaithfulness. In addition, divorce was not granted in cases of desertion or mental illness.

Jesus was unwilling to take sides with either Shammai or Hillel. While granting divorce on the grounds of adultery, he limited remarriage by saying that certain remarriages are wrong and adulterous. The Matthew account of Jesus' teaching on divorce (Matthew 19:1-9) records Jesus giving what it referred to as the exception clause: "*Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.*" The correlating passages found in Mark and Luke omit the

clause, “except for marital unfaithfulness,” simply because it was widely accepted during Jesus’ time that adultery constituted proper grounds for divorce.

Historically, the Jews have maintained a higher view of marriage than any other culture that has ever existed. Marriage is seen as a sacred duty, a divine covenant, which fulfills God’s intended purpose of creation. Marriage is not to be entered into lightly or carelessly. Ideally, divorce is to be avoided at all costs. As Rabbi Eliezer lamented, “For him who divorces his wife, the very altar sheds tears.” Unfortunately, a wide gulf developed between the ideal and the actual state of affairs so that by the time of Jesus, the frequency of divorce as scandalous even among certain Pharisaic circles.

Jesus’ response to this group of Pharisees that day resonated with the authority of God. His words paled their petty interpretations of the law into insignificance. While they danced around the traditions of men, he declared the truth of God. They were searching

the Scripture to find ways *out* of marriage. The same way people do today. Jesus, however, used the Scripture as an encouragement for couples to remain committed to the marriage covenant.

What a scathing indictment he brought against them that day when he told them, “*Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.*” J. B. Phillips translates this phrase, “Because you knew so little of the meaning of love.” He puts his finger on the real problem. Moses provided the divorce law primarily to protect women from being taken advantage of and abused by husbands with hardened hearts. If a man divorced his wife, she had to be given a certificate of divorce which cleared her name, maintained her dignity and granted her the freedom to be remarried.

The actual formula in those ancient certificates reads: “You are free to marry any man.” It was properly drawn up, signed and served. We can conclude from this that the Mosaic law pertaining to divorce was actually

a divine concession granted for the protection of women, who were often regarded as possessions and were afforded limited rights in the ancient world.

The Early Church

The teachings of the early church on divorce and remarriage are found primarily in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In harmony with the teachings of Christ, the early church granted divorce and remarriage on biblical grounds and underscored the sanctity and permanence of marriage. These teachings are summed up in the writings of the Apostle Paul (see Romans 7:1-4; 1 Corinthians 7:1-24; Ephesians 5:31).

When approaching the subject of divorce, the first counsel Paul gives is to wives who separate from their husbands. They must either remain unmarried or be reconciled to their husbands (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Most importantly, Paul enlarged the grounds for divorce to include abandonment of a believer by an unbelieving mate (1 Corinthians 7:15).

In such cases the believer is free from the marriage bond and permitted to remarry, but only in the Lord.

He instructs Christians to remain married to their unbelieving spouses if their spouses so desire (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). Divorce is not permitted on the grounds that one's spouse is an unbeliever. To the contrary, the Christian husband or wife needs to regard his or her unbelieving mate as their mission field and number one ministry priority. This is why Paul poses the challenging questions, *“How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”* (1 Corinthians 7:16).

TIMELESS TRUTHS

When we put all of this together, several timeless truths emerge which help us sort out the divorce dilemma:

- God wills for married couples to make a life-long commitment in a monogamous

relationship; a principle spelled out clearly in the Bible.

- Due to the hardness of men's hearts and the problem of unfaithfulness, divorce was granted as a divine concession. It provided primarily for the protection and provision of women who suffered from abusive relationships.
- The primary grounds for divorce given in the Mosaic law involved a husband discovering something indecent about his wife, which obviously referred to sexual immorality or adultery.
- Since men often divorced their wives for frivolous reasons, a husband was required to provide his wife a certificate of divorce which allowed her to remarry without shame.
- Jesus taught that adultery constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce while limiting remarriage in order to discourage widespread divorce and remarriage by

those who had lost sight of the sanctity of the marriage covenant.

- The early church expanded the grounds of divorce to include abandonment.

TOUGH QUESTIONS

What is the Christian position on divorce and remarriage? In our day of an epidemic divorce rate, the church needs to stress the permanence of marriage as well as provide resources to help couples enjoy full, rich marriages. As Abraham Lincoln observed, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” The church needs to be part of the solution. The church serves as God’s agent of healing and restoration to the divorced. Divorce is about people who need healing and help to learn what they can from their divorce and put their lives back together.

Is every divorce situation the same? Divorces often involve unique circumstances requiring each case to be considered on its own merit. Giving cookie-cutter, pat answers

results in people feeling condemned and hopeless because of divorce. Jesus sought to help people out of their pain so that they could embrace God's purpose for their lives. It is said of Jesus, "While in the company of sinners, he dreamed of saints." "Neither do I condemn you," he told a woman caught in adultery, "Go and sin no more." He gave her a new lease on life. And so must the church.

What about cases involving abandonment, adultery, abuse, alcoholism or drugs? Is a person required to stay in a marriage traumatized by such destructive behaviors? Does God require a woman to stay in a marriage where she knows her husband is coming home drunk, will fly into a rage and beat her up? Does biblical submission mean a woman or a man is to submit to abuse? Absolutely not! If Jesus put his own life on the line for a woman caught in the act of adultery to protect her from abuse, will he not equally defend the rights of those who suffer from abusive relationships? The question is rhetorical and the answer obvious.

Remember that the spirit of the Mosaic law concerning divorce centered around the protection of wives from abusive husbands. And that principle certainly applies to cases of abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse and other types of destructive behaviors which are destroying marriages today.

While efforts to reconcile can be made by seeking professional help, the abuse victim needs to remove himself or herself from the abusive environment that poses danger and then seek counseling. It is usually best if both parties go to counseling together, if the abuser is agreeable. Oftentimes, this is not the case. The abuse victim needs to go to counseling in order to sort out the best possible strategy to handle the situation, even if the abuser refuses to go. No one should subject themselves to abuse.

Can one person keep a marriage together? It takes two people to have a healthy, vibrant marriage. “Two become one flesh.” It’s impossible for one person to keep a marriage together if the other person acts

irresponsibly, ungodly and destructively. In many cases, one person does everything he or she can possibly do to have a good marriage, while the other person does nothing, leaving no other option but divorce.

Now, let me ask you if that is the case: Is that person marked for the rest of his or her life, and forced to wear the scarlet letter “D” because they were victimized by a destructive relationship they couldn’t prevent and a marriage they couldn’t save? Absolutely not! God gives grace and healing for the scars caused by sin.

When one spouse remarries after a divorce should the other spouse continue to wait for reconciliation with their original partner? The Old Testament forbids such action (Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Jeremiah 3:1). Once a divorced person gets married again, the former spouse needs to move on with his or her life. However, if you happen to be in a situation where you are remarried to your original partner, after having been divorced and remarried, this does

not mean that you need to get divorced again. Nothing would be gained from such action.

What if two Christians get divorced without biblical grounds, can they marry other people? The Bible counsels such couples to either remain single or to remarry each other. If, however, a Christian couple divorces and each remarries, they need to carefully consider the consequences of such actions. Christians aren't perfect. A person's faith doesn't insure that he or she will be a good marriage partner. Married life requires a great deal of maturity, and sometimes Christians haven't cultivated the emotional and relational maturity to make marriage work. That's why even Christians get divorced.

However, in the case that a Christian couple divorces without biblical grounds, and both or one of them has remarried, what are they to do? First, they need to confess their sin to God, if they haven't. That's always the beginning point of recovery. But they cannot undo the past. So, they need to make their

current marriage the best it can be for the glory of God. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. There is hope. Even when we break all the rules, God forgives us. But let us be careful to not take God's forgiveness for granted. The consequences of such divorce can be detrimental, and the scars permanent.

Does the forgiveness of God negate the effects of divorce? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that God's forgiveness minimizes the pain. But, forgiveness does not remove all the scars. We reap what we sow. It's very important to understand the difference between being forgiven and experiencing the consequences. King David was forgiven for his adultery with Bathsheba, but it cost him. God forgave David, showed him favor and sustained him through the ordeal. Nonetheless, David unleashed negative consequences in his life and family. He lamented his affair for the rest of his life.

Is all divorce sin? If we take the Bible seriously, we have to answer No. All divorce is not sin if the divorce is based on bibli-

cal grounds. Would God provide us proper grounds for divorce and then condemn us for exercising our privilege according to His word? Remember, divorce was actually a divine concession to help people out of unfaithful and destructive relationships. If abuse, abandonment or adultery exists and the marriage cannot be saved because one party persists in such destructive behaviors and refuses to change, is the innocent party wrong because he or she gets a divorce? The answer is simply No. People who get divorced on biblical grounds do not need to live the rest of their lives under a cloud of disappointment and failure.

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DIVORCE?

Perhaps you have been divorced. What can you do to get past the past and move on with your life? Or, perhaps you have family members or friends who are divorced. What counsel can you share with them? The key to recovery is embodied in one phrase: *Minimize your pain and maximize your poten-*

tial. How, exactly, is that done? The apostle Paul tells us how: “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it or to have already been made perfect. But this one thing I do: Forgetting those things which are behind and straining toward those things which are ahead, I press on for the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14-14). Here we find a powerful plan for recovery from divorce.

First, forget the past through forgiveness. “Forgetting those things which are behind. “Forgive your former spouse, forgive yourself and move on. I heard about a farmer who had an apple tree that had been blown over by the wind and uprooted. A passer-by asked him, “What are you going to do with the tree?”

The farmer replied, “I am going to gather the fruit and then burn the tree.”

So, it is with our failures. Gather the fruit; learn what you can. Then, burn the tree. Put the past behind you.

Second, *fulfill the present through purpose*. “Reach for those things which are ahead.” Today is all you have. Live it fully for the glory of God without wallowing in the past or worrying about the future. As Saint Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is a human being who is fully alive.” That may mean being single. And there’s nothing wrong with being single. After all, Jesus was single. The Apostle Paul makes the case that single people often are able to devote themselves more fully to Christian ministry than those who have the responsibilities of a family. (1 Corinthians 7:32-35).

On the other hand, fulfilling the present may mean getting married again. Before getting remarried, however, make sure you cover five bases:

1. *Repentance*. To repent simply means to change the way you think and live. Learn from every error and sin that spoiled your marriage. Identify your failures without condemning yourself so that you don’t make the same mistakes again.

2. *Reconciliation.* Make every attempt at reconciliation, if possible. If you feel your divorce was premature, make every effort to reconcile so that you know you've done everything within your power to save your marriage.
3. *Recovery.* Take time to heal. Watch the rebound effect. Learn what you can from the marriage that failed. In the words of Paul Billheimer. "*Don't waste your sorrows.*"
4. *Restoration.* Even though marital reconciliation is out of the question, reconcile your relationship with your former spouse so that you relate on civil terms. Don't live in bitterness or anger for the rest of your life. It is very important for children of divorce that their parents relate well to each other.
5. *Reorientation.* Order your life and relationships according to the will of God. Read carefully what the Bible says about love and marriage. Resolve to have a

Christ-centered marriage; a covenant, not a contract. Avail yourself of resources that are designed to prepare couples for Christian marriage.

Finally, *face your future with hope*. “Press on for the mark.” Don’t look over your shoulder wondering what might have been. Or, waste the potential of today by regretting past mistakes. Fix your gaze on a new horizon and dream of tomorrow. As the great missionary, Adoniram Judson, said after his mission facility had been destroyed by those who opposed him, “Our future is as bright as the promises of God.”

So is yours.

Divorce, perhaps more than any other experience, leaves people with a sense of guilt, shame and disappointment. But God’s grace is sufficient to give you a new beginning! God says, “I am making everything new” (Revelation 21:5).

Some years ago in Scotland two friends spend the day fishing. That evening, they

went to a local inn for dinner. One of them got carried away describing the size of one of the fish he caught. As he flung his hands in the air, he hit the cup of tea the waitress was about to put on the table. The tea cup was dashed against the wall leaving an ugly stain. The fisherman was embarrassed and began apologizing profusely.

Another man got up and came over to their table. “Don’t worry about it,” he said as he pulled a pen from his pocket and began to sketch around the ugly stain. Soon there appeared a majestic royal stag with his antlers spread upward. The artist was Sir Edwin Landseer, England’s foremost painter of animals.

In the same way, God takes His pen of unconditional love, sketches over the ugly stains in our lives and recreates us as His masterpiece.