

Divorce and Remarriage: Does God Permit It?

Question

I am considering and praying about divorcing my husband, and the thought is SCAREY. I still love my husband, but he is ignoring me as if I was a piece of trash. I can't reason with him whatsoever, and I believe God is asking me to let go of him!

What do you believe is God's heart on divorce and re-marriage for an innocent partner?

Can I have the blessing of God on my life if I close the door on my previous marriage and begin afresh?

I wish I could sit down and talk about these heavy decisions in my life! I have five children and NO support from my husband; he's living off the government! Please pray for me that I can find God's will, and not just my own desires! I would NOT want to do something that grieves our Precious Lord; I'd rather be single the rest of my life!

Thank you for taking the time to care and helping me find my way! Sincerely, I. Miller

Joe's Response

Regarding your question on divorce and remarriage, I will do my best to give you my personal understanding of the Scriptures. Like so many who were born and raised Amish, I was taught by parents and leaders in the church that divorce and remarriage are one and the same thing. Anyone who committed the act of divorce would immediately lose their chance of entering heaven. However, as I studied the Scriptures, it became quite clear to me that divorce and remarriage are different issues. The Lord has some clear instructions regarding each of them.

Before we get into the issues of divorce and remarriage, let's first understand why God established marriage.

1. God established marriage so that children could be raised in a stable and secure environment. Genesis 1:28a tells us that *"God blessed them (Adam and Eve), and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it..."*
2. God established marriage because He did not want man to be alone. In Genesis 2:18, we read: *"And the LORD God said, it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him."*
3. The third reason for marriage is probably the most profound of all. Jesus says in Mark 10:8 that when a man and woman marry, *"they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh."* This union of husband and wife is also a picture of Christ and the believer. Let me illustrate: when an unsaved person, separated from God, is born again, he or she is instantly united with God through Christ. Just like husband and wife are one flesh, so the believer and

Christ are one flesh—one body. Ephesians 5:30 says, “*For we (believers) are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones.*” (See also 1 Cor. 12:12-27.)

For these reasons, it makes God angry when people shack up and have sex together before they become one flesh in marriage. The act of sex before marriage, or fornication as the Bible calls it, distorts and ruins God’s eternal plan. It ruins families and marriages, painting a black mark on the beautiful picture of being reconciled into one body with Christ. Having sex outside of marriage, committing adultery, and living a homosexual lifestyle are so hideous and evil that God tells us clearly: those who do such things “*will not inherit the kingdom of heaven.*” (Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 1:18-32) We are also told in Colossians 3:6 that God’s wrath will come upon those who live such a lifestyle.

It is important to note that living in fornication (sex before marriage), in a homosexual lifestyle (men having sex with men and women having sex with women), and committing adultery (married partners having sex with someone other than their married spouse) are all equally offensive to God. They are serious and wicked in the eyes of God. No one will escape the coming judgment of God. You can be as certain of God’s judgment as of the sun’s rising in the morning.

With that background in mind, let’s take a closer look at what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage.

Jesus taught that marriage was intended to be permanent.

Mark 10:9: *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*

Jesus’ words are clear. God is the One who does the joining, not the church, nor the one who marries them. Because God joins them, He also commands, “*let not man put asunder.*”

Consider the following biblical statements on the subject:

Jesus said in Mark 10:11-12: *And He saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.*

Paul writes in Romans 7:2-3: *For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.*

So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.

Again, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 7:

10-13: *And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.*

But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him.

27: *Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife.*

39: *The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.*

These Scriptures seem to support those who oppose divorce and remarriage. Indeed, God's ideal plan for every married couple is that they stay together in marriage. However, there are some very specific instances in both the New and Old Testaments when God Himself seems to give someone the right to divorce and remarry.

To establish certain things as truth, the Bible requires the evidence of two or three witnesses. This is seen in the Old Testament Law (Deuteronomy 17:6), as well as in the writings of the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 13:1). So we are looking for at least two, if not more, places in the Bible where God gives exceptions to His prevailing rule against divorce and remarriage.

I will quote seven passages in the discussion that follows showing these two unique cases in which God permits divorce and remarriage for Christian believers:

1. If a born again believer discovers that his/her mate has been sexually unfaithful, the innocent spouse is permitted to divorce and to remarry after divorce.
2. If a Christian's unbelieving spouse leaves the Christian (not vice versa!), then the Christian who has been divorced in this way is free to remarry. The former marriage has been dissolved.

Let's look at the specific biblical texts supporting these grounds for divorce and remarriage.

First we will examine the Old Testament divorce-and-remarriage Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 21:10-14 says: *When thou goest forth to war against thine enemies, and the LORD thy God hath delivered them into thine hands, and thou hast taken them captive, And seest among the captives a beautiful woman, and hast a desire unto her, that thou wouldest have her to thy wife; then thou shalt bring her home to thine house; and she shall shave her head, and pare her nails; and she shall put the raiment of her captivity from off her, and shall remain*

in thine house, and bewail her father and her mother a full month: and after that thou shalt go in unto her, and be her husband, and she shall be thy wife.

And it shall be, if (later on in marriage) thou have no delight in her, then thou shalt let her go whither she will; but thou shalt not sell her at all for money, thou shalt not make merchandise of her, because thou hast humbled her.

Here is how I understand the passage we just read: Israel goes to war against another nation. During the war, Israeli soldiers capture the women and bring them home to their own nation. One of the soldiers falls in love with a certain captured woman and wants to marry her. After taking the proper steps, they have a wedding and the two become one flesh. In time, however, he has “no delight in her.” When that occurs, God in His Word says, “then thou shalt let her go whither she will.”

This might seem like a rather loose permission for divorce, but for that biblical era, this was God’s Word! Deuteronomy 21:10-14 shows that God is not absolutely against divorce in all circumstances. However, I am not saying that God is permissive concerning divorce! To the contrary, Malachi 2:16 declares: “*I hate divorce, says the LORD God of Israel.*”

Let’s look at another of Moses’ writings in the Law:

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 says: *When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man’s wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.*

Under the Law of Moses, if a man found “no delight in her, because [of] some uncleanness in her,” God permitted divorce, which in the Hebrew means “a cutting off.” It was not simple separation, but a complete severing of the marriage bond.

If a biblical divorce and remarriage occurred under these scriptural conditions (of some uncleanness being found in the wife and a “bill of divorcement” having been given her by her husband), notice that the Bible labels this man as “her former husband.” Thus God seems to recognize a person’s right to remarry after divorce, if the divorce leading up to the remarriage was for biblical reasons.

Here again is another Scripture that shows divorcing was consistent with God’s Law:

Ezra 10:2-3 says: *And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing. Now therefore let us*

make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

The men of Israel had taken wives from other nations and, now, were under conviction to divorce them. The Scripture says that they were careful to “*put away*” those wives “*according to the counsel of my lord*”...and... “*according to the law*.”

Some might say that was in the Old Testament; we live in the New Testament. That is true. We do live under a New Covenant. But Deuteronomy chapters 21, 24 and Ezra 10 help us see how the Lord God looked at marriage, divorce, and remarriage under the Old Covenant.

Now we will journey into the New Testament and see further what God says about divorce and remarriage.

In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus says: *It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving (except) for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.*

Most people understand that the New Testament was originally written in Greek, not German or English. The Greek word *apoluo*, translated as “divorce(s)(d)” means to “let loose from” or “let go free.” According to W.E. Vine, this is in line with Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and it suggests a dissolving of the bond of marriage. It is important to see that the main emphasis here is against divorce, but an exception is given.

The passage from Matthew chapter 5 suggests this message: If you divorce your wife for any reason except marital unfaithfulness and she remarries, you have placed both her and her new mate into a position of adultery, for before God she is still your wife. The phrase “marital unfaithfulness” here is a translation of the Greek word *porneia*, which translates as “sexual immorality, unfaithfulness.”

In the next passage of Scripture, Christ spoke up and taught about the issue of divorce and remarriage. Please understand, the issue was as divisive in His day as it has been in all the generations following. In this passage of Scripture, the religious crowd was hoping to trap the Lord and destroy His ministry. Let’s look at it:

Matthew 19:3-9: *The Pharisees also came unto Him, tempting Him, and saying unto Him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?*

And He answered and said unto them, 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 not man put asunder.

They say unto Him, why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?

He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. 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.

Remember that Moses' Law indicated that a biblical divorce (putting away) dissolved the marriage. Here in Matthew 19, Jesus goes back to the Old Testament and quotes Moses. Notice carefully that Jesus narrowed Moses' permission to divorce to "*except it be for fornication.*" Unless there was an adulterous affair, Christians have no right to divorce.

It is obvious from reading verse 3 that the Pharisees interpreted Moses as permitting divorce, as they said, "*for every cause*"—a liberal and wide open interpretation that Jesus immediately rejected. Jesus' answer was specific and to the point: to divorce your wife for any reason, except for sexual immorality, is adultery. In addition, if another man comes along and marries the woman, divorced under any other circumstances "*except it be for fornication,*" he commits adultery with her.

In other words, Jesus did not go along with divorce and remarriage "*for every cause.*" He rejected the broad permission to divorce given to Israel by Moses "*because of the hardness of your hearts.*" Again, Jesus did leave one exception—"*except it be for fornication*"—meaning if one's spouse is unfaithful, one has permission to divorce and remarry, for the unfaithfulness has destroyed the one-flesh marriage bond in the eyes of God.

It is important to point out: to simply divorce one's wife cannot be interpreted as committing adultery. In this case it is the putting away and marrying another that becomes adultery. In the case of divorcing one's spouse for fornication, the one-flesh relationship has been violated, and the marriage bond is dissolved. The innocent one is permitted to enter into another marriage.

In order to avoid confusion over the words fornication and adultery, I must point something out. At the beginning of our study, I mentioned that fornication is the word used for those who have a sexual relationship before they're married, whereas adultery is used when a married spouse has been unfaithful to his/her mate. You may ask the question then, why did Jesus use the word fornication instead of adultery in Matthew 19? I'm glad you asked that question.

When the translators of the King James Version interpreted the original Greek word *porneia* as "fornication," they were wrong. It would have been better if they had interpreted *porneia* as "*sexual immorality*" or "*adultery.*" Why do I say this? For this reason:

Jesus, in Matthew 19:3-9, was clearly speaking about people who were *already* married. Let's look at the passage again.

Matthew 19:3-9: *The Pharisees also came unto Him, tempting Him, and saying unto Him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?*

And He (Jesus) answered and said unto them, 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 not man put asunder.

They say unto Him, why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her (wife) away?

*He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. 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.*

The word *porneia* (fornication) can be understood correctly as “sexual unfaithfulness of married people,” as well as single persons having sex outside of marriage. The root word is still *porneia*, which speaks of a broad range of sexual immorality—unmarried sexual activity, adultery, or even incest.

The word *porneia* is also used in two other New Testament verses, and, in both cases, refers specifically to married persons who have been sexually unfaithful:

1. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5:1: *It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife.*

2. Later, Paul uses the word again in 1 Corinthians 10:8: *Neither let us commit fornication, as some [Israelites] of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand.*

Note: It would be ridiculous to assume that all Israelites referred to in 1 Corinthians 10:8 were unmarried.

I hope this study was helpful. I'm sure there are some who will read this and ask questions, such as:

1. What do I do when my husband continually abuses me physically and/or verbally?
2. What do I do when my spouse is an alcoholic and refuses to give up drinking?
3. What do I do if my spouse leaves me, for whatever reason, and does not return?

I don't have an answer to those questions, because the Lord did not give us specific answers. My goal from the beginning was to study what God's Word does say about divorce and remarriage. What Jesus didn't say, we cannot add.

At this point, I would like to caution the reader on the following: If you have already divorced or are in the process of going through a biblical divorce, be very careful before you enter into another marriage.

So often, divorcees are hurting beyond words and need someone to talk to and share their painful feelings with. Before they know it, they are in another relationship that quickly leads to a second marriage. Statistically, it has been proven that second and third marriages fail more often than first marriages do.

Here are three important reasons for this caution:

1. The innocent spouse may not have been part of the sexual unfaithfulness; however, it is possible that he or she contributed to the breakdown of the marriage. If this is the case, the divorced person should seriously consider receiving Christian counseling before entering another marriage. Without it, chances are greater that the second marriage will not work out either.
2. The Bible speaks much on forgiveness. As believers, we must do everything we possibly can to work things out and give spouses another chance. If this has not been done, God will not bless future relationships. The Word of God says clearly:

And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32)

Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. (Colossians 3:13)

3. Every spouse must go the extra mile to try to reconcile a broken marriage. Consider the passage in Jeremiah 3:8-20, where God Himself said, “*Israel committed adultery [and] I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce.*” Yet God cried out to Israel to repent and turn back to Him and declared that He would receive her back. Yes! It is possible for at least some marriages, shattered by sexual immorality to be brought to a place of repentance, forgiveness and restoration.

Now let us move on to the second New Testament case for divorce and remarriage.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 says: *And unto the married I command, **yet not I, but the Lord**, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.*

Note the three commands that are given to Christians couples. These are not the counselor’s suggestions, but the Lord’s commands:

1. The Christian wife was not to divorce her Christian husband. However, it appears as if it was happening anyway; the wife was departing from her husband. If she had already departed, than the next command kicked in.

2. The Christian wife had to make a choice: stay single or be reconciled to her Christian husband.
3. To the husband, Jesus taught: do not divorce your Christian wife.

Some may wonder what these couples struggled over, but the text does not say. My guess is their struggles were similar to what many Christian couples experience today. They either believed their lives were unfulfilled, or they saw someone they thought was more desirable. Whatever the reason was, they were not to walk away from the marriage and call it quits.

It is important to point out: Paul obviously was not discussing divorce based on adultery, for which the Lord had specifically provided in Matthew 5:32 and 19:8-9.

The passage continues in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, with Paul saying: this time, it's me speaking, not the Lord.

Verses 12-14: *But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.* --1 Corinthians 7:12-14

In this passage of Scripture, it is quite obvious that the church at Corinth had a situation, maybe several, where one spouse was a believer and the other one was not. This still happens today. Two unbelievers marry, and, along the way, one is saved; immediately his/her desire is to join a Christian fellowship where he/she can grow in the Lord. What should the believing spouse do?

Paul states that a *believing spouse* should not divorce his or her *unbelieving mate*.

But what if you as a *believer* have already left your *unbelieving* spouse? In fact, you might be reading this and say, "I have already divorced my spouse. What should I do now?"

The answer is "*remain unmarried, or be reconciled to [your] husband.*"

The Apostle Paul continues in verse 15 of 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

*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.* (1 Corinthians 7:15)

If the unbelieving spouse refuses to work things out and begins the process of divorce, Paul says: let the unbeliever proceed, and then he adds: the believing spouse is NOT under bondage in such a case.

What did he mean, "The believer is not under bondage in such cases?"

In this particular instance, the word **bondage** is taken from the Greek word *dou-lo-o* and means: he or she is not *enslaved* to the unbelieving spouse. In other words, believer, you are not disobeying God if you let the unbeliever separate and go his or her own way. The point is that God has called us to peace; not fighting, turmoil, bickering, criticism, and frustration.

Does this passage mean that the believer can remarry after the separation has taken place?

The answer to that question might be better answered by reading Romans 7:2-3 and Matthew 19:9. In God's sight, the marriage bond can only be dissolved in two ways:

1. By death

Romans 7:2-3: *For the woman which hath an husband is **bound** by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.*

So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.

2. By adultery

Matthew 19:9: *And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away (divorce) his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.*

The word **bound** in verse Romans 7:2 (above) has a different Greek meaning than the word **bondage** in 1 Corinthians 7:15 (a passage we studied previously). In this case, the Greek meaning for **bound** is spelled deh-o and means bind, tie or knit. When the bond or bondage of marriage is broken by death or adultery, the believer is free to divorce and remarry.

In conclusion, it is my personal conviction that any divorce and remarriage from one's unsaved past is forgiven at the time of salvation. Why? Because Jesus was clear and to the point when He said:

Mark 3:28-29: *Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation:*

The Word of God also says:

2 Corinthians 5:17, *"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."*

At the time of salvation, all things become new, meaning that when a person is saved, he or she begins a brand new life. All sin has been forgiven – washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. It makes no difference if that person murdered someone, divorced and remarried someone, or lived a most ungodly life. The Bible says in Psalm 103:12, *"As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He [God] removed our transgressions (sins) from us."*