



Divorced Christians and Remarriage: What Does the Bible Say?

By Kim Johnson and Karla Downing

One of the leading questions Christians ask most often regarding divorce is: “Will I be able to remarry after a divorce?”

It is significant because the answer matters for many reasons. To someone struggling in a destructive marriage, the prospect of being alone for the rest of their lives could impact their decision to stay. For someone else in the middle of an unwanted divorce, they too may fear they are being forced to be alone forever as the result of their spouse’s choice not theirs. Even for those in a divorce of their choosing, they struggle under the guilt of condemnation, feeling that God will punish them if they ever decide to remarry.

For such an important issue, there is surprisingly little written in the Old and New Testaments. What little there is in the New Testament is found in 1) an answer to a few questions posed to Jesus, which were really an attempt by the Pharisees to trick Jesus into incriminating Himself; and 2) in writings by the Apostle Paul when addressing situations he was facing in the Early Church. It is unfortunate that a whole theology has been pieced together based on these few examples even as the issue has been and continues to be debated by theologians.

There are two things to remember in looking at this subject. Scripture will substantiate Scripture. And, if we are to believe 2 Timothy 3:16, “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*” (KJV), then anything written in the Bible about divorce is authored by God.

Divorce and Remarriage in the Old Testament

To address what is said in the New Testament, we must first look to the initial reference about divorce which is found in the Old Testament. In those times, the practice of “putting away” a wife was rampant. Men were dumping their wives for something termed “indecency” or “uncleanness.” First, this was not adultery, as Deuteronomy 22 indicates adultery was punishable by death. Second, this was not divorce, or a severing of the marriage. The men were merely kicking out their wives, marrying someone else, keeping the deserted wife’s dowry, and getting another. The wife who was sent away had little recourse because she was still married—not divorced—just kicked out. Since her husband was refusing to care for her, her only choices were to return to her family if they would take her (in disgrace) or end up on the streets as a prostitute.

God saw what was happening at that time and gave Moses the authority to do something for those mistreated women. That prescription for this sin is centered in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. If a man wanted to “get rid of his wife,” he had to give her a certificate of divorce. This severed and ended the marriage. The woman was free from an uncaring husband and free to remarry. The only prohibition was that a man couldn’t remarry the wife he divorced after she was married to

someone else. Bottom line, the whole reason for the divorce certificate was to end the marriage so that women and men could remarry afterward. This is further clarified by the fact that the words for “put away” and “certificate of divorce” are different with separate meanings. One means to “kick out” without divorce, the other is the term used for the certificate given which severed the marriage.

Here is a copy of a Jewish divorce bill:

On _ _ _ _ day of the week _ _ _ _ day of the month _ _ _ _ in the year _ _ _ _ I who am also called son of _ _ _ _ of the city of _ _ _ _ by the river of _ _ _ _ do hereby consent with my own will, being under no restraint, and I do hereby release, send away, and put aside thee, my wife _ _ _ _ who is also called daughter of _ _ _ _ _ who is this day in the city of _ _ _ _ by the river of _ _ _ _ who have been my wife for some time past! And thus I do release thee, and send thee away and put thee aside that *thou mayest have permission and control over thyself to go to be married to any man that thou mayest desire*; and that no man shall hinder thee from this day forward, and *thou art permitted to any man*, and this shall be unto thee from me a bill of dismissal, a document of release, and a letter of freedom, *according to the law of Moses and Israel*

_____ the son of _____ Witness

_____ the son of _____ Witness.

(Taken from Edersheim, Alfred. “Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the days of Christ.” Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982.)

The possibility of remarriage is also mentioned in other passages in the Old Testament. When a husband died without a son, his brother was supposed to marry the widow to keep the brother’s name in the family line as well as his inheritance in the family (Deut. 25:5-10). The right or responsibility to marry a widowed family member went to the nearest relative called a kinsmen redeemer. Just as remarriage after the death of a spouse served a functional purpose (it provided for the widow financially and physically, carried on the family line, and kept the inheritance in the family), divorce instituted by God gave jilted women an alternative to life on the streets.

Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament

Jesus in the New Testament does not contradict God who is revealed in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God instituted the bill of divorce to protect the destitute woman from her callous husband. Many, who teach on divorce using only the New Testament, make it seem as though Jesus makes a divorce harder to obtain than it was in the Old Testament. When understanding the grace that Jesus brought when He died on the cross, it does not make sense that He would make the rules for divorce more strict under grace than under the Law. Jesus’ teaching on the subject didn’t destroy the divorce legislation of the Old Testament, but instead reinforced it.

Consistent with Jesus' statement saying that He came to fulfill the Law, we find two distinct words in the New Testament that parallel the two distinct words in the Old Testament for "put away" and "certificate of divorce." This is important to note as they are used synonymously when they are not.

If Luke 16:17-18 (KJV) is translated correctly it reads: "*And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail. Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.*" Jesus reaffirms here what the law taught concerning putting away. He says that if a man or a woman puts away their spouse (without a bill of divorce) and marries another (while still legally married, since there was no bill of divorce), they are guilty of adultery. It makes perfect sense that if you marry another while you are still married, you are not only breaking the law of the land, but you are committing adultery by having sexual relations with someone when you are married to someone else. That is adultery.

Because the fact has been ignored that there is a definite difference between the words for "divorce" and being "put away," many have come to believe that remarriage causes adultery. However, if the Scriptures in question are translated properly, there is no doubt of the intent that ultimately removes any concern when it comes to remarriage as written below:

- A woman who puts away her husband and marries another man commits adultery (Mark 10:12).
- A man who puts away his wife and marries another woman commits adultery (Mark 10:11).
- A man who puts away his wife for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness causes her and the man she marries to commit adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).
- A man who puts away his wife for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness and marries another woman commits adultery (Matthew 19:9).

In all the verses above the issue is not divorce or severing the marriage but that the spouse has been "put away," kicked out, or discarded, WITHOUT the certificate of divorce. The only way God and Jesus would view a remarriage as adultery is if the prior marriage wasn't legitimately ended. In Mark 10:2-4, the Pharisees asked Jesus if it were lawful for a man to "put away" his wife. Jesus simply said, "This has already been answered in the Law of Moses." Jesus asks the Pharisees what the Mosaic legislation was concerning their question. They replied, "Give her a bill of divorce, and [then] put her away." Jesus affirms what was taught in the Old Testament Law. Jesus did not make it harder to get a divorce. He did not say that you could not divorce your spouse and remarry. Jesus points out to the Pharisees that if a man does put away his wife and he remarries, he will be committing adultery, as will the wife. Why? There has been no certificate of divorce ending the marriage. Adultery occurs when a married person has sexual relations with someone other than the spouse to whom they are legally married. Jesus upholds the Old Testament, and shows that even in the New Testament, divorce and putting away are two separate and distinct words and actions. And thus, divorce does not prevent remarriage.

Through the Apostle Paul's writing we find the same God inspired teaching. In 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 (KJV) we find:

“Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you.”

Clearly Paul says that it is not a sin to remarry. So who is he talking to? The word here used for “loosed” is the Greek word *luo* which means to break up, destroy, or dissolve. So, he first says not to do things that would destroy your marriage. And of course this would be what God intends. Then he asks if you are “loosed” from a wife using the Greek word *luisis* which means loosening or divorce. He says not to seek a wife – but he does not say it is a sin to do so, which is confirmed by the next statement: “But and if you marry . . .” In verses 28-35, Paul does discourage remarriage, but only because of the circumstances of the time, not because it is sin. Another confirming practical point from that time in history is the fact that it was illegal in Roman law for a Roman citizen to remain unmarried for more than 18 months. If Paul was teaching remarriage was a sin (and thus that they could not remarry) then he was telling the people to knowingly break the law. That would have been completely against the teaching of God through Paul in Romans 13 which indicates we are to obey governing authorities.

In 1 Corinthians 7, we find that Paul also teaches that one could choose to remarry for a few other reasons. In 7:8-9 it indicates if a spouse died or if they were single (didn't specify single never married or single divorced in 7:8-9), remarriage was permitted. In verse 15, Paul teaches that if an unbelieving spouse leaves a believer, the believer is not bound to the marriage and is free to remarry. Some have even recognized this as emotional desertion. If a spouse is so mistreated by their mate making it impossible to live with them, it is the equivalent of desertion thus permitting divorce and remarriage. Lastly, we find that it is better to marry than to burn in lust (1 Corinthians 7:8-9; 32-40). Just as God saw that Adam was alone and created a partner for him, God in mercy understands the social, spiritual, emotional, sexual, and financial need for a spouse after death and yes, after divorce.

There is one important note to make here. When Paul says, “seek not to be loosed,” he is giving important instruction for marriages by emphasizing the importance of faithfulness to the marriage vows. Paul wants the commitment to the marriage to be kept intact if possible and instructs the Corinthians to try to preserve their marriages. However, if it does dissolve, Paul confirms that the divorcees have the right to remarry.

The Purpose of Marriage

Marriage was created by God and noted when He created woman in Genesis 2:22. However, the real reason for it is stated in Genesis 2:18. “*The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him"* (NIV). Then in verses 19-20 we are told that God created the animals but there still was not a suitable partner for Adam. And so He formed Eve. Thus, the first reason for marriage was to alleviate aloneness. Adam had no other human being like him. Now, this is not a decree that you can't be single. Even though God did create us for

relationship with Him and each other, we now live in a world full of humans ...so being single has nothing to do with being alone as Adam was alone. It is important to note the Hebrew word in this verse means companion – not servant.

So – from this Scripture in Genesis -- God's BEST for marriage was:

- Between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:22)
- Alleviate aloneness and have a partner (Genesis 2:18)
- To have unity (become one – Genesis 2:24)
- To have children (Gen. 1:28)

That was God's intention at the beginning – nothing about divorce. But then what happened? Sin disrupted God's perfect plan. Sin distorted God's best for us, especially in the marriage relationship. We live no longer in the Garden of Eden, but in a broken world. Yet God with His mercy has given hope. He has not condemned those in difficult marriages to remain in anguish, nor has He sentenced those who do leave a marriage (whether by their own choice or their spouse's) to a life alone. In Jesus' entire NT teaching he never prohibited remarriage or labeled it as adultery. His teaching centered on what He hated: putting away a wife without a certificate of divorce.

Issues with Remarriage

This is not to say that there are no issues with remarriage. Statistics clearly show that the divorce rate is significantly higher for second and subsequent marriages. Even in the best case scenario, divorce is devastating and injures you in many ways. Any injury takes time to heal and it is even more important when we are hurt emotionally. If you date and remarry before dealing with the wounds, you can end up in a rebound relationship or make the same, unhealthy choice in a mate.

Here are a few of the things that can make remarriage so difficult:

- The husband/wife can bring emotional baggage from the prior marriage into the new marriage if they do not heal properly. This can have an immense impact;
- The emotional healing of children is often ignored when parents separate/divorce. So when they are thrust into a step-parent relationship it often adds difficult dimensions with divided loyalties, discipline struggles, and adjusting to step-siblings. All of these and more ultimately affect the new marriage relationship.
- Ex-spouses are still in the background, often causing major, additional conflict; and
- Finances typically impacted by the devastation of divorce are additionally manipulated if child and spousal support are mandated, adding frustration and distress.

It is typical for people to marry someone with similar problems and patterns if they have not identified what contributed to prior unhealthy choices. Before choosing to remarry, you have to work through the loss, the grief, the adjustment, your part in the marriage failure (whether it is 1% or 50%), and develop a new you — all before picking a new mate. It is also imperative that the emotional healing of any children involved be addressed in the healing process for the benefit of their future relationships and as well as yours. An emotionally healthy you will go far in creating a healthy new relationship.

In Conclusion

Divorce is never something to be carelessly advocated with a cavalier attitude. However, we live in a broken world and there are times when it is the only option even if it is not our choice. And when it comes to remarriage after divorce, we can draw the following conclusions from God's Word:

- The first priority in a difficult marriage would be to determine if it can be saved and then do what can be done to save it. That would not be, however, at the sacrifice of the emotional, physical and mental health of the hurting spouse and the children. If it cannot be salvaged, then divorce and remarriage is permitted.
- Remarriage is always permissible after the death of a partner.
- The Certificate of Divorce was instituted by God (2 Timothy 3:16) under Mosaic Law as a way to provide for women who were victims of a spouse's callousness by giving them the freedom to remarry.
- Remarriage is not an issue once the marriage is legally severed. The most common reason a marriage ends is due to the adultery of one of the spouses. However, remarriage is not adultery.
- If your partner deserts you physically or emotionally and has no intention of returning to the marriage, you may divorce and remarry. A believer isn't required to stay unmarried because the believing or unbelieving spouse left the marriage.
- God would rather you marry than "to burn" in lust.

God is in the business of redemption. He doesn't hold sin over us forever or without options. God created the institution of marriage for partnership, provision, and procreation, and He understands our need to be with a spouse. A redeemed life is not meant to be spent in penance and punishment or guilt and fear but as a new beginning in which God uses all the mistakes and pain of the past for His glory and our good (Romans 8:28). Just as with a first marriage, a second or subsequent marriage can be wonderful if the partners take time to heal prior to marrying, keep a close relationship with God, and continue to keep working on any issues that come up.

If you are feeling guilty that your divorce and/or remarriage were not "approved" by God, do what you would do about anything else: go before the Lord and pray for wisdom. Look at all the circumstances of the divorce and/or remarriage and determine what you need to bring to the Lord – carrying only what is truly your part. Too many times we feel guilty for decisions we make due to situations out of our control or for the choices of others. You are only responsible to pinpoint and confess your sins and ask His forgiveness for those. Once you do that, accept God's forgiveness and allow Him to help you heal and restore peace and joy in your life without guilt.

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As much as God's Word clearly allows remarriage for those who have been divorced, there is still much diversity among the teachings in the church at large on this subject. It is essential that you prayerfully ask for God's leading and will in your particular situation. Study God's Word for yourself and seek His peace and guidance before making your decision.

Kim Johnson was a pastor's wife, married for 21 years when her husband left her for their church secretary. Divorced with two teenage daughters, she worked to heal and kept her eyes on the Lord. She is now remarried (for 16 years) with a blended family of four adult children and seven grandchildren. She and her husband lead the divorce recovery ministry at Friends Church Yorba Linda.

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