

Divorce and Remarriage: Does God Permit It?

By Joe Keim

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 share my personal understanding of the Scriptures.

Like many who were born and raised Amish, I was taught by parents and church leaders that divorce and remarriage were the same issue. I was also taught that anyone who committed the act of divorce would immediately lose their chance of entering heaven.

However, as I studied the Scriptures, it became clear to me that divorce and remarriage are two different issues. The Lord gives clear instructions regarding each of them.

Before we look at divorce and remarriage, let's first understand why God established marriage.

1. God established marriage so children could be raised in a stable and secure environment. Genesis 1:28a says, *"God blessed them (Adam and Eve), and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it..."*
2. God also established marriage because He did not want man to be alone. Genesis 2:18 says, *"And the LORD God said, it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him."*
3. The third reason for marriage may be the most profound of all. Jesus said 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. When an unsaved person is born again, he or she is united with God through Christ. Just as a husband and wife become one flesh, the believer becomes part of the body of Christ. Ephesians 5:30 says, *"For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones."* See also 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

For these reasons, it angers God when people live together and have sexual relations before marriage. The Bible calls this fornication. Sex before marriage distorts God's plan. It damages families, weakens marriages, and leaves a black mark on the beautiful picture of being reconciled to Christ.

Sex outside of marriage, adultery, and a homosexual lifestyle are serious sins before God. Scripture warns that those who live in such sins *"shall not inherit the kingdom of God."* See Galatians 5:19-21 and Romans 1:18-32. Colossians 3:6 also tells us that God's wrath will come upon those who live in these sins.

It is important to understand:

- **fornication** (sex before marriage)
- **adultery** (married partners having sex with someone other than their married spouse)
- **homosexuality** (men having sex with men and women having sex with women) are all offensive to God.

These are serious and wicked in His sight. No one who continues in such a lifestyle will escape the coming judgment of God.

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 says, *"What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."*

Jesus' words are clear. God is the One who joins a husband and wife together, not the church or the person performing the marriage ceremony. Because God joins them together, 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 7:

Verses 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 departs, 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."

Verse 27:

"Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife."

Verse 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. God's ideal plan for every married couple is that they stay together in marriage. However, there are very specific instances in both the Old and New Testaments where God seems to give someone the right to divorce and remarry.

To establish something as truth, the Bible requires the evidence of two or three witnesses. We see this in the Old Testament Law, Deuteronomy 17:6, and also in the writings of the apostle Paul, 2 Corinthians 13:1. Therefore, we are looking for at least two, if not more, places in the Bible where God gives exceptions to His general rule against divorce and remarriage.

In the discussion that follows, I will quote seven passages that point to two unique cases in which God permits divorce and remarriage for Christian believers.

1. First, if a born-again believer discovers that his or her spouse has been sexually unfaithful, the innocent spouse is permitted to divorce and remarry.
2. Second, if a Christian's unbelieving spouse leaves the Christian, not the other way around, 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 that support these grounds for divorce and remarriage.

First, we will examine the Old Testament Scriptures on divorce and remarriage.

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 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, Israelite soldiers capture women and bring them home. One of the soldiers desires a certain captive woman and wants to marry her. After taking the proper steps, they are married, and the two become one flesh.

In time, however, he has *"no delight in her."* When that happens, God says, *"then thou shalt let her go whither she will."*

This may seem like a 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 every circumstance. However, I am not saying God is permissive about divorce. To the contrary, Malachi 2:16 declares: *"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel."*

Let's look at another writing of Moses 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 "some uncleanness" in his wife, God permitted divorce. This was not merely separation, but a complete severing of the marriage bond.

If a biblical divorce and remarriage occurred under these scriptural conditions, namely, that some uncleanness was found in the wife and her husband gave her a bill of divorcement, notice that the Bible refers to the first man as **"her former husband."** This wording suggests that God recognized the dissolution of the marriage and the validity of the subsequent marriage. In other words, when the divorce was for biblical reasons, God appears to recognize the right to remarry.

Here is another passage that shows divorce was, in certain circumstances, 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 married women from the surrounding pagan nations. After coming under conviction, they agreed to divorce these wives. Scripture says they were careful to "put away" their wives **"according to the counsel of my lord"** and **"according to the law."**

Some may object by saying, "That was under the Old Testament. We live under the New Testament."

That is true. We now live under the New Covenant. However, Deuteronomy 21, Deuteronomy 24, and Ezra 10 help us understand how God viewed marriage, divorce, and remarriage under the Old

Covenant. Those passages provide important background as we examine what Jesus and the apostles taught under the New Covenant.

Now let us turn to the New Testament to see what God says about divorce and remarriage.

In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus said:

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 "put away" or "divorce," means **to release, send away, or let go free**. According to W. E. Vine, its use here corresponds to the divorce described in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and carries the idea of dissolving the marriage bond.

It is important to recognize that Jesus' primary emphasis is not to encourage divorce but to uphold the permanence of marriage. At the same time, He gives one clear exception. That exception becomes central to understanding His teaching on divorce and remarriage.

The passage from Matthew 5 suggests this message: If a man divorces his wife for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness, and she remarries, he has placed both her and her new husband in a position of adultery. Before God, she is still his wife. The phrase "marital unfaithfulness" comes from the Greek word *porneia*, which refers to sexual immorality or unfaithfulness.

In the next passage, Christ speaks directly about divorce and remarriage.

This issue was as divisive in His day as it has been in every generation since. In this passage, the religious leaders were trying to trap the Lord and destroy His ministry.

Matthew 19:3-9 says:

"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.”

Moses’ Law showed that a biblical divorce, or “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 for divorce to one exception, “*except it be for fornication.*” Unless there has been sexual unfaithfulness, Christians have no right to divorce.

Verse 3 shows that the Pharisees interpreted Moses as permitting divorce “*for every cause.*” This was a broad and liberal interpretation, and Jesus rejected it. His answer was clear. To divorce your wife for any reason other than sexual immorality, and then marry another, is adultery. Also, if another man marries the woman who was divorced for an unbiblical reason, he commits adultery with her.

In other words, Jesus did not accept divorce and remarriage “*for every cause.*” He rejected the broad permission Moses had allowed Israel “*because of the hardness of your hearts.*” However, Jesus did leave one exception, “*except it be for fornication.*” This means that if a spouse is sexually unfaithful, the innocent spouse has permission to divorce and remarry, because the unfaithfulness has destroyed the one-flesh marriage bond in the eyes of God.

It is important to point out that simply divorcing one’s wife is not the same as committing adultery. In this passage, it is putting away one’s spouse and marrying another that becomes adultery. However, when the divorce is because of fornication, the one-flesh relationship has been violated, and the marriage bond is dissolved. The innocent spouse is permitted to enter another marriage.

To avoid confusion over the words *fornication* and *adultery*, we need to clarify something. Earlier in this study, I mentioned that *fornication* is often used for sexual relations before marriage, while *adultery* is used when a married person is unfaithful to his or her spouse. So, someone may ask, “Why did Jesus use the word fornication instead of adultery in Matthew 19?”

The answer is found in the Greek word *porneia*. In Matthew 19, Jesus was clearly speaking about married people. Therefore, *porneia* should be understood as sexual immorality or sexual unfaithfulness. It can refer to unmarried sexual activity, adultery, incest, or other forms of sexual sin.

The word *porneia* is also used in other New Testament passages where married people are involved.

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.”

Paul also writes in 1 Corinthians 10:8:

“Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand.”

It would be unreasonable to assume that all the Israelites referred to in 1 Corinthians 10:8 were unmarried. This shows that *porneia* can refer broadly to sexual immorality, including sexual unfaithfulness among married people.

I hope this study has been helpful.

I realize some readers may still have difficult questions, such as:

1. What should I do if my husband continually abuses me physically or verbally?
2. What should I do if my spouse is an alcoholic and refuses to stop drinking?
3. What should I do if my spouse leaves me and does not return?

I do not have clear answers to every situation because the Lord did not give us specific answers for every circumstance. My goal from the beginning has been to study what God's Word does say about divorce and remarriage. What Jesus did not say, we must be careful not to add.

At this point, I would like to offer a word of caution. If you have already divorced, or if you are in the process of going through a biblical divorce, be very careful before entering another marriage.

Many divorced people are hurting deeply. They need someone to talk to and someone to help them carry the pain. Before long, that friendship can turn into a relationship, and that relationship can quickly lead to a second marriage.

Statistics have shown that second and third marriages often fail more frequently than first marriages.

Here are three important reasons for this caution.

1. First, the innocent spouse may not have been involved in the sexual unfaithfulness, but it is still possible that he or she contributed to the breakdown of the marriage. If this is the case, the divorced person should seriously consider Christian counseling before entering another marriage. Without help and healing, the second marriage may struggle with the same unresolved issues.
2. Second, the Bible speaks much about forgiveness. As believers, we must do everything we can to work things out and give our spouse another chance. If this has not been done, we should not expect God to bless future relationships.

The Word of God says:

"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. Third, every spouse should go the extra mile to try to reconcile a broken marriage. Consider Jeremiah 3:8-20, where God Himself said that Israel committed adultery and that He had put her away and given her a bill of divorce. Yet God still cried out for Israel to repent and return to Him, and He declared that He would receive her back.

Yes, it is possible for 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 departs, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband, and let not the husband put away his wife.”

Notice the three commands given to Christian couples. These are not a counselor’s suggestions. They are the Lord’s commands.

1. The Christian wife is not to divorce her Christian husband. However, it appears this was already happening. If she had already departed from her husband, the next command applied.
2. The Christian wife had to make a choice. She was to remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.
3. The Christian husband was also commanded not to divorce his wife.

Some may wonder what these couples were struggling with, but the text does not say. My guess is that their struggles were similar to what many Christian couples face today. Perhaps they felt unfulfilled, or perhaps they saw someone else they thought was more desirable. Whatever the reason, they were not to walk away from the marriage and call it quits.

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

The passage continues in 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul says that he is now speaking to another situation.

1 Corinthians 7:12-14 says:

“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.”

In this passage, it is clear that the church at Corinth had situations where one spouse was a believer and the other was not. This still happens today. Two unbelievers marry, and later one of them gets saved. The believing spouse then desires to follow the Lord, join a Christian fellowship, and grow spiritually.

What should the believing spouse do?

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

But what if the believer has already left the unbelieving spouse? Someone may say, “I have already divorced my spouse. What should I do now?”

The answer is, *“remain unmarried, or be reconciled.”*

Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 7:15:

“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.”

If the unbelieving spouse refuses to work things out and begins the process of leaving or divorce, Paul says to let the unbeliever depart. He then adds that the believing spouse is *“not under bondage”* in such a case.

What does it mean that the believer is not under bondage?

The word bondage comes from the Greek word *douloo*, which means to be enslaved or bound as a servant. In other words, the believer is not disobeying God by allowing the unbelieving spouse to separate and go his or her own way. God has called us to peace, not constant fighting, turmoil, bickering, criticism, and frustration.

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

That question is better answered by comparing Romans 7:2-3 and Matthew 19:9. In God’s sight, the marriage bond can only be dissolved in two ways.

1. First, by death.

Romans 7:2-3 says:

“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. Second, by adultery.

Matthew 19:9 says:

“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 **bound** in Romans 7:2 has a different Greek meaning than the word **bondage** in 1 Corinthians 7:15. In Romans 7:2, the Greek word means to bind, tie, or knit together. When the marriage bond 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 a person’s unsaved past is forgiven at the time of salvation.

Why? Because Jesus was clear when He said:

Mark 3:28-29 says:

“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 says:

“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. When a person is saved, he or she begins a brand-new life. All sin has been forgiven and washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ.

It makes no difference if that person murdered someone, divorced and remarried, or lived a very ungodly life. The Bible says in Psalm 103:12:

“As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.”

A Final Word

If you are wrestling with divorce, remarriage, or a painful marriage situation, do not make a quick decision. Spend time in prayer. Search the Scriptures. Seek godly counsel from mature believers who will point you to the Word of God, not simply tell you what your heart wants to hear.

Marriage is serious because God created it. Divorce is serious because God hates it. Remarriage is serious because Jesus gave clear warnings about it. At the same time, God is full of mercy, forgiveness, and grace for those who come to Him with a humble and repentant heart.

The goal of this study is not to condemn the broken, but to bring clarity from Scripture. If sin has taken place, repent. If forgiveness is needed, forgive. If reconciliation is possible, pursue it. If your past has been washed in the blood of Christ, do not live under condemnation. Walk forward in truth, humility, and obedience to God.