

Almost everyone has experienced divorced either personally or has a family member or friend who is divorced. In fact, research reveals that of adults who self-identify as Christians but rarely attend church, 60 percent have been divorced. And among those who regularly attend church, 38 percent have been divorced.

Even though the national divorce rate has fallen to its lowest point in decades, the percentage of people who believe it is acceptable is at an all-time high. According to Gallup, 73% of Americans believe divorce is morally acceptable. What do Christians believe about divorce? In the same Gallup poll, for the first time a majority (51%) of those describing themselves as “very religious” view divorce as morally acceptable.

For those who believe the Bible is God’s word and the final authority in all matters of faith and lifestyle, beliefs about divorce cannot ride the tides of current cultural beliefs but must be formed by Scripture. So, what does the Bible say about divorce? And is it ever permissible for Christians?

In the next few pages, we will highlight the biblical teaching on divorce so you can answer these questions for yourself. We will look at what the Old Testament and New Testament teach and then draw several conclusions.

### **What Does the Old Testament Teach?**

Divorce is mentioned 16 times in the Old Testament, but only Deuteronomy 24:1-4 discusses the grounds or procedures for divorce. Moses writes:

*<sup>1</sup>If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, <sup>2</sup>and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, <sup>3</sup>and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, <sup>4</sup>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, <sup>4</sup>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 the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.*

Several important points can be gleaned from this paragraph. First, the primary purpose of this passage is not divorce itself or the need for a certificate of divorce. The central point is to forbid a man from remarrying a former wife who had married and divorced a second husband. Doing so, according to Moses, “*would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord.*” Second, the ground for divorce is the husband found something “indecent” about his wife. Even though commentators debate what this word means, it cannot refer to adultery since that was punishable by death. Third, and most important for our purposes, the passage presupposes the woman was free to remarry even though her husband found her guilty of something shameful or indecent and divorced her.

So, what can we learn from this passage? First, after a second marriage ends in divorce, God forbids remarriage to the first spouse. Many argue this was a cultural concern to protect single women who would be in a vulnerable position. Second, the passage does not explicitly prohibit remarriage after divorce.

### **What Did Jesus Say About Divorce?**

Divorce was common in Jesus' day and the Rabbinic schools, the Shammai and Hillel, vigorously debated when it was acceptable. Of particular focus was the meaning of the word "indecent" in Deuteronomy 24:1. The Shammai believed "indecent" described unfaithfulness, so they taught divorce was acceptable only in cases of adultery. The Hillel taught that "indecent" could refer to something as minor as the wife burning dinner. So, Jesus' teachings on divorce were, to say the least, culturally relevant. Whether out of curiosity or to theologically trap him, people wanted to know Jesus' opinion.

The first record of Jesus teaching on divorce is found in Matthew 5:31-32, in his Sermon on the Mount. In this passage, he first references Deuteronomy 24:1, then goes on to say, *But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery* (Matthew 5:32).

What can we learn from these two verses? Jesus' words in verse 32, "except for sexual immorality" are known as the *exceptive clause* (also see Matthew 19:9). So, Jesus taught that divorce and remarriage are forbidden *except* in cases of immorality.

Matthew 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12 are longer passages on divorce. Since they are very similar, we will only look at Matthew's account. In this passage Jesus is teaching publicly when some Pharisees "came to him to test him" with a question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (19:3).

Jesus' immediate response is to push the conversation back to Genesis to reinforce that divorce was not a part of God's original plan or intent. He then shifted the conversation to Moses' teaching and said divorce was a concession "because their hearts were hard" (Matthew 19:8). Jesus repeated Moses' teaching but added one exception -- "*anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.*" The Greek word Matthew used for sexual immorality is *porneia* and is where we get our English word porn or pornography. It is a generic word for sexual infidelity or marital unfaithfulness.

As he did in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught in Matthew 19 that divorce is not God's will. However, in the case of adultery, divorce is permissible but not mandatory.

### **The Apostle Paul's Teaching**

The Apostle Paul brings another exception to the question of divorce in his letter to the Corinthian church. He writes,

<sup>10</sup> *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. <sup>11</sup> But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

<sup>12</sup> *To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. <sup>14</sup> For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.*

<sup>15</sup> *But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. <sup>16</sup> 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 7:10-16)

In this passage, Paul addresses what to do when a married man or woman responds to the gospel, yet their spouse remains an unbeliever. Some in the Corinthian church wanted to know if this opened the door for divorce. Here is what Paul said.

First, He affirms Jesus' prohibition of divorce, "*A wife must not separate from her husband... And a husband must not divorce his wife.*" And then he adds if a wife "separates" from her husband, her two options are to remain unmarried or reconciliation with her husband. The word for separate is *chorizo* (lit. *be separated*) not the expected word for divorce. However, many commentators believe the context indicates Paul is referring to divorce. Also, we can assume that the separation did not involve immorality.

Second, if the unbelieving spouse agrees to remain with their believing partner, then divorce is not an option.

Last, if the unbelieving spouse refuses to stay, the believer is not "bound" (literally *enslaved*) to the marriage. The two reasons Paul gives are, "*God has called us to live in peace,*" and there is no guarantee the unbeliever will be saved. This seems to have been Paul's own life situation. As a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5) he was required to be married, yet when he wrote to the church at Corinth he was not married (1 Corinthians 7:8). So, either his wife died, or he was divorced. In Philippians 3:8 he writes that he "lost all things" when he gave his life to Christ. Many commentators believe he lost his wife when he became a Christian. In Paul's day, Jews who converted to Christianity were considered dead by their family. Resultingly, his wife would be a widow and free to remarry.

Third, Paul does not address the question of remarriage.

### **A Few Summary Thoughts**

In these passages, the Bible's clear teaching on divorce includes:

- God’s original plan was for a man and woman to be married for life.
- The Bible nowhere encourages divorce. In fact, Malachi 2:16 states that “God hates divorce.”
- The only times in Scripture where divorce is permitted are in cases of adultery and the abandonment of an unbelieving spouse.
- Remarriage is neither condemned nor condoned.

There are several other situations that the Bible does not directly address yet are important to our discussion. What if a Christian spouse refuses to stay in their marriage? We can safely say this person has misused the freedoms and gifts given to them by God. Yes, the Bible forbids divorce; however, the Bible also teaches that we are not responsible for the sins of others.

Abuse is another important consideration. Is it permissible for an abused spouse to get divorced? According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV):

- More than 10 million adults experience domestic violence annually.
- On a typical day, domestic violence hotlines nationwide receive over 19,000 calls.
- 1 in 2 female murder victims and 1 in 13 male murder victims are killed by intimate partners.
- Intimate partner victimization is correlated with a higher rate of depression and suicidal behavior.

Many more disturbing facts could be listed regarding physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. The Bible does not address abuse and divorce, however there are biblical truths that inform our beliefs.

First, abuse is always wrong. Paul writes in Ephesians 5 that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. And wives are to be just as loving, supportive, and sacrificial toward their husbands. Second, the Bible teaches that human life is sacred (Exodus 20:13) and must be protected. It is biblical to protect ourselves and our children from abuse. Yes, divorce is not God’s will, but neither is abuse. This is not a question of right or wrong, and divorce is the lesser of two evils.

### **What if my divorce was for unbiblical reasons?**

What if, after a careful reading of the relevant passages in the Bible you discover that your divorce was not for biblical reasons? Perhaps you carry guilt or shame for your decisions. First, and most important, divorce is not an unforgiveable sin. God forgives all who come to him and grants them healing and wholeness. The Bible tells us, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

Second, God still has a plan for your life. Jeremiah writes, *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you”* (Jeremiah 29:11).

As mentioned earlier, apparently Paul was divorced yet God used him to write half the New Testament. ***What can God do through you?***

## What is Faithbridge's position on divorce?

We believe God loves every divorced person wholly and fully, as do we. We recognize that divorce is a reality, as evidenced by sin and brokenness. Because “God hates divorce” (Malachi 2:16) for the pain and division it so often causes, we strongly encourage biblical reconciliation and restoration within marriage (presuming neither person has remarried and/or that there is no threat to someone’s health or safety), and accordingly, we offer a range of marriage-strengthening ministries in hopes that no marriage ends in divorce. We recognize that the high frequency of divorce affects numerous persons in the church, and thus we also offer and encourage involvement in our divorce-recovery ministries. Neither divorce nor remarriage serves as a single qualifying or disqualifying issue for leadership in the church. We work to understand the fuller picture of a person’s story, while guiding individuals into a lifestyle consistent with God’s Word (Matthew 5:27–32; Matthew 19:3–9; 1 Corinthians 7:10–16).

See: <https://faithbridge.org/about/socialissues>



**Faithbridge Cares**

## *How Can We Help You?*

Contact our Pastoral Care office for help with your marriage or dealing with your divorce.

If you’re struggling with your marriage and the possibility of divorce, we can help you find appropriate counseling and provide marriage classes to improve and heal your marriage.

If you are struggling with the pain of a previous divorce, we offer help and hope through DivorceCare.

[www.faithbridge.org/pastoral-care](http://www.faithbridge.org/pastoral-care)

281-320-7588

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