

# **DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE: A BIBLICAL SUMMARY STATEMENT**

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While God intends for the marital union to endure for the life of the participants, and while God opposes unjust divorces (Malachi 2:13-16), divorce was permitted for just cause in both the OT and NT. Not only did God explicitly allow divorce for an indecent matter (Deuteronomy 24:1) and deprivation of basic necessities (Exodus 21:10-11), but He implicitly allowed for divorce more broadly by only prohibiting it in certain, limited circumstances (Deuteronomy 22:13-19,28-29). Even more telling is the fact that God instructed Abraham to divorce Hagar (Genesis 21:12) and personally divorced Israel for her covenant unfaithfulness (Hosea 2:2; Jeremiah 3:8). Ezra even commanded divorce as a form of repentance for contracting immoral marriages with pagan wives (Ezra 10:2-12).

The NT teaching is less permissive. Jesus called on God's people to follow God's ideal for marriage found in Genesis rather than God's concession for divorce found in the Mosaic Law (Matthew 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-9). Jesus' only stated justification for divorce is sexual sin (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). Paul also taught that Christians should not divorce each other, but recognized that some will do so nonetheless. If they do, they must remain single or reconcile to their spouse (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). If a non-Christian divorces their Christian spouse because of their faith, the Christian is not held morally responsible for the divorce or obligated to try to reconcile the marriage (1 Corinthians 7:12-16).

What about remarriage? The OT does not explicitly allow for remarriage following divorce, but implicitly affirms the morality of remarriage by not condemning a woman's remarriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) and by only prohibiting priests from marrying a divorced woman (Ezekiel 44:22). In cases involving adultery, the innocent spouse was permitted to remarry because the adulterer would be stoned to death (Leviticus 20:10). Even after the Jews stopped practicing capital punishment for adultery, it was still understood that adultery justified both divorce and remarriage.

The NT teaching is more restrictive than the OT teaching because it represents God's original ideal for marriage (Matthew 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-9). Widows are given explicit permission to remarry (Romans 7:3; 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 39; 1 Timothy 5:14). Jesus forbade remarriage except in cases where the divorce was caused by sexual immorality (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). In such cases, the innocent spouse is free to remarry (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). Arguably, the innocent spouse who was victimized by an unjust divorce can also remarry after their ex-spouse has committed sexual sin or remarried. For everyone else, it is wrong to divorce and wrong to remarry – except, perhaps, in a few other extenuating and abnormal circumstances.

Jesus' teachings apply to everyone, including the repentant and new converts. God will forgive those who wrongly divorced, but that forgiveness does not give them moral permission to commit the additional sin of remarriage. They must remain single or reconcile to their spouse. Those who have committed both the sin of divorce and remarriage must confess both sins to God, but can and should remain married. They were morally wrong to contract the second marriage, but once contracted, it is a real marriage and it would be morally wrong to end it in divorce.

Paul echoed Jesus' teaching, requiring wrongly divorced Christians to remain single or be reconciled to their spouse (1 Corinthians 7:10-16). Remarriage is not an option. If a wrongly divorced Christian does remarry, they must acknowledge their sin and repent. Some think Paul also allowed Christians to remarry when they are unjustly divorced for their faith by their unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:12-16). However, Paul appears to be freeing the believer from any moral obligation to preserve the marriage and convert their spouse to the faith, not providing moral permission to remarry following an unjust divorce.

While the Bible acknowledges legitimate justifications for divorce in both testaments, divorce is always a tragedy and should be avoided if possible. Jesus called us back to God's ideal for marriage: one woman and one man becoming one flesh for one lifetime. If God joins us together in marriage, we should be looking for ways to preserve the marriage rather than looking for reasons to end it. Even where grounds for divorce exist, divorce is permissible rather than required. We should hope for repentance and work toward restoration rather than seek a divorce.