



Divorce/
Separation

DIVORCE RECOVERY

TOM WHITEMAN

(Deuteronomy 24:1-4)



"I'll never forget the day he told me that he was leaving," said Marcy. "I thought I would die. I just couldn't imagine that God would let this happen to me and to my children. It seems like just yesterday even though it was about eighteen months ago."

Marcy's story is similar to thousands of others. For her, divorce was not an option. She knew that whatever happened, her commitment to God, to her husband, and to her three young children dictated that she would work out the problems in her marriage. She tried to keep her part of the commitment, but unfortunately she could not influence her husband's decision.

Too many times, I meet committed Christians who are getting divorced against their will. How do these families move on? Can anything redemptive come out of such pain?

From my own experience and from having ministered to thousands of separated and divorced people for over fifteen years, let me assure you that God can take the worst events in our lives and use them for good. This transformation requires prayer, time, support from others, and wise decisions.

Here are some key elements that are required for a healthy divorce recovery.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS

During and after a divorce, most people feel as if they are on an emotional roller coaster, vacillating between desperation to get the spouse back no matter what and feelings of anger and revulsion toward the spouse. People who go through a divorce are extremely vulnerable. Many feel a deep emptiness within their soul. One recently divorced woman described it this way, "I felt like I had a huge hole in my chest, like part of me had been ripped away. I walked

around feeling as if people could see right through me. I was embarrassed and ashamed."

This vulnerability can make the divorced person prone to other hurts. For example, it is common for them to feel rejected by family and friends. Others are drawn to anyone who pays attention or strokes the damaged areas of their lives. People who have been recently divorced need to be careful about forming new relationships or making any major changes. They need close accountability with a friend or counselor who will help guard and protect them from making poor choices or from moving forward too quickly into new relationships.

The grieving process takes time—realistically, at least two to five years. People typically go through stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. The final stage is acceptance, when they learn to be satisfied with the changes that God has allowed them to experience and to move forward in a productive new lifestyle.

SOCIAL NEEDS

Divorce ends a primary relationship and often many social relationships as well. After a divorce, people may be very vulnerable to "rebound relationships" and may need friends to help them through the trauma. Divorced people should wait at least two years before involvement in romantic relationships. The emptiness in one's soul after a divorce requires God's

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healing and completeness apart from a romantic relationship. No human can substitute for the work of God in someone's life.

SPIRITUAL NEEDS

Most Christians who go through a divorce feel guilt and shame. Often they feel, "Maybe I should have, or could have, done more." These feelings may be compounded by the reactions of others, who in an effort to discourage divorce are afraid to minister to those who experience this brokenness for fear of appearing to condone divorce. Divorced people need to hear the truth that God loves, forgives, and offers full fellowship with Him. Yes, God hates divorce because He understands, through the life of His Son, the hurt and pain of betrayal, rejection, and abandonment. Divorce has negative consequences, but God can take the worst things in life and use them for good and for the good of others.

THE NEED TO FORGIVE

Another part of spiritual healing comes through divorced people forgiving themselves and those who have hurt them. Without such forgiveness, they can never be truly healed and released. Most divorced people blame themselves, so healing includes confessing those mistakes and then accepting the forgiveness that God offers (1 John 1:9). As long as they wallow in self-pity, guilt, and self-condemnation, those who have been divorced will never realize the blessings that God has in store for them.

Divorced people will also struggle with forgiving others who have wounded them so deeply. True forgiveness means that they are able to rise above the pain from those who have wronged them, pray for them, and wish them well. At some point, they make a decision to forgive—but the process

of forgiveness may take a lifetime. Especially if there are children involved, new issues will continually arise. When that happens, they should take those issues to the Lord one more time and recommit themselves to a lifestyle of forgiveness.

GIVING BACK

The final step of recovery, following the teachings of Christ, is to focus on giving back to others (2 Cor. 1:3-7). Giving to others too early in the process will only lead to new pain. In the proper time, however, comforting with the comfort that has been received can give divorced people purpose, meaning, and fulfillment.

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of divorce/separation include:

- Malachi 2:16
- Matthew 5:31, 32; 19:1-10
- Mark 10:1-12
- Romans 7:2, 3
- 1 Corinthians 7:10-16

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on divorce/separation at Matthew 19:3-8 on page 1261. See also the personality profile of the woman at the well on page 1376. See also the articles on marital problems on pages 1576, 1577 and marital communication on pages 1660, 1661.

men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept *it*, let him accept *it*."

and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." ¹⁵And He laid *His* hands on them and departed from there.

JESUS COUNSELS THE RICH YOUNG RULER

¹⁶Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good^a Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?"

JESUS BLESSES LITTLE CHILDREN

¹³Then little children were brought to Him that He might put *His* hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me,

^{19:16} ^aNU-Text omits *Good*.



Divorce/ Separation

DIVORCE DIFFICULTIES

(19:3-8)

The Pharisees' question was meant to test Jesus' commitment to Moses' law: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" they asked.

Jesus' response emphasized that God has always intended each married couple, one man and one woman, to remain married for life (Gen. 2:24). Moses had indeed permitted divorce (Deut. 24:1) but only because of the "hardness" of human hearts. Jesus knew that the option for divorce was included in Moses' law because of sinful human nature, but He still defended the importance of permanence in marriage.

In this passage we learn that divorce is permissible, but it is not commanded. Marriage vows should not be taken lightly. God would have couples do their best—with His help—to keep their marriage intact. If a divorce occurs, God's compassionate love can heal even the deepest wounds.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about divorce/separation on pages 250, 251. See also the personality profile of the woman at the well on page 1376.



Marriage

KEEPING THE PROMISE

(19:4-6)

"For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." This promise is made by thousands of starry-eyed couples every year as they pledge their love to each other. Why, then, have so many of those promises been broken? Is it possible for marriage to be forever?

When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce, Jesus spoke to them first about marriage. He emphasized that God's plan has always been for marriage to be a covenant relationship—the promises made are to be kept, regardless of the circumstances. God created male and female, joining them together as "one flesh" in marriage. God holds the permanence of the marriage bond in highest regard because it is the essential unit of His plan for the family and for society.

Marriage should never be entered into lightly. The vows made before God are meant to be kept "for better or worse."

To Learn More: Turn to the article about marriage on pages 1296, 1297. See also the personality profile of Mary and Joseph on page 1229.

His journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

⁷A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." ⁸For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

⁹Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

¹⁰Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

¹¹The woman said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? ¹²Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?"

¹³Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever

drinks of this water will thirst again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

¹⁵The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."

¹⁷The woman answered and said, "I have no husband."

Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly."

¹⁹The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. ²⁰Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you *Jews* say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."

²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the



**Divorce/
Separation**

PERSONALITY PROFILE

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL: FOUND AND FORGIVEN

(JOHN 4:16-18)

She came to the well in the heat of the day, most likely to avoid the crowds of women who came to get their water in the cool of the morning. She was a social outcast, and she tried to avoid people as much as possible. One day, however, she could not avoid a Man who would not let her avoid her past!

Jesus sat at the well as she approached. Normally men did not speak to women in public. Jewish men did not speak to Samaritan men, let alone Samaritan women. Jewish men would have nothing to do with a woman known to be living in sin. Yet Jesus broke all these barriers to speak to this woman about eternal life.

Jesus dug down to this woman's heart and brought her sin into the noonday sun. She had been married five times and was currently living with a man who was not her husband. She had experienced love and loss, and it seems she had turned away from marriage completely, preferring to live in sin. But Jesus taught her about Himself, and how His living water could change her life.

Divorce is not an unforgivable sin. As painful as divorce is for all involved, and as heartbreaking as divorce is for those who face it without wanting it, God can touch broken hearts and lives and make them whole again. When possible, couples should seek every option they can to avoid divorce. At times, however, the unthinkable occurs. God is there to help us pick up the pieces. He revealed Himself to this sinful and heartbroken woman at the well, and He does the same for those today who seek Him out of their brokenness. He can put together the pieces of our lives and make us whole again.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about divorce/separation on pages 250, 251. See also the key passage note at Matthew 19:3-8 on page 1261.

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your pleasure, but you shall not put *any* in your container. ²⁵When you come into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not use a sickle on your neighbor's standing grain.

LAW CONCERNING DIVORCE

24 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, ²when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, ³if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, ⁴then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

MISCELLANEOUS LAWS

⁵"When a man has taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, and bring happiness to his wife whom he has taken.

⁶"No man shall take the lower or the upper millstone in pledge, for he takes *one's* living in pledge.

⁷"If a man is found kidnapping any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and mistreats him or sells him, then that kidnapper shall die; and you shall put away the evil from among you.

⁸"Take heed in an outbreak of leprosy, that

you carefully observe and do according to all that the priests, the Levites, shall teach you; just as I commanded them, so you shall be careful to do. ⁹Remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam on the way when you came out of Egypt!

¹⁰"When you lend your brother anything, you shall not go into his house to get his pledge. ¹¹You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you lend shall bring the pledge out to you. ¹²And if the man is poor, you shall not keep his pledge overnight. ¹³You shall in any case return the pledge to him again when the sun goes down, that he may sleep in his own garment and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the LORD your God.

¹⁴"You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, *whether* one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. ¹⁵Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the LORD, and it be sin to you.

¹⁶"Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin.

¹⁷"You shall not pervert justice due the stranger or the fatherless, nor take a widow's garment as a pledge. ¹⁸But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this thing.

¹⁹"When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰When you beat your olive trees, you

SOUL NOTE



Helpless But Not Hopeless (24:1-4) God desires marriages to stay together.

Because sin has infected all relationships, however, some marriages do not survive. Moses' commands regarding divorce were given in a culture where a man could divorce his wife verbally and leave her with no property or rights.

These commandments regulating divorce in Israel protected those left most helpless—the woman and her children. The Bible does not give people an easy way out of their commitments. People are expected to honor their commitments; Jesus later made it clear that Moses's words were not to be taken as promoting easy divorce. Divorce should be the exception, not the rule. **Topic: Divorce/Separation**

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so. And Ezra the priest, *with* certain heads of the fathers' households, were set apart by the fathers' households, each of them by name; and they sat down on the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. ¹⁷By the first day of the first month they finished *question-*ing all the men who had taken pagan wives.

PAGAN WIVES PUT AWAY

¹⁸And among the sons of the priests who had taken pagan wives *the following* were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak,^a and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jerib, and Gedaliah. ¹⁹And they gave their promise that they would put away their wives; and *being* guilty, they presented a ram of the flock as their trespass offering.

²⁰Also of the sons of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah; ²¹of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Eliah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uzziiah; ²²of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Shebanel, Jozabad, and Elasa.

²³Also of the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Keladai (the same is Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer.

²⁴Also of the singers: Eliashib; and of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri.

²⁵And others of Israel: of the sons of Parosh: Parniah, Jeziah, Malchiah, Mijamin, Eleazar,

Malchijah, and Benaiah; ²⁶of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Eliah; ²⁷of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza; ²⁸of the sons of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai; ²⁹of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Ramoth;^a ³⁰of the sons of Pahath-Moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh; ³¹of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Ishijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, ³²Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah; ³³of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei; ³⁴of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, ³⁵Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluh,^a ³⁶Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, ³⁷Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasai,^a ³⁸Bani, Binnui, Shimei, ³⁹Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, ⁴⁰Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, ⁴¹Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, ⁴²Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph; ⁴³of the sons of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai,^a Joel, and Benaiah.

⁴⁴All these had taken pagan wives, and some of them had wives *by whom* they had children.

10:18 ^aSpelled *Jehozadak* in 1 Chronicles

6:14 10:29 ^aOr *Jeremoth* 10:35 ^aOr *Cheluhi*, or *Cheluhu* 10:37 ^aOr *Jaasu* 10:43 ^aOr *Jaddu*

SOUL NOTE



Tough Decisions (10:10, 11) Ezra told the men of Judah to separate from their pagan wives. Ezra's concern was to protect the spiritual integrity of the nation. He knew that if they did not put God first in every area of their lives, eventually they would repeat the errors of their forefathers. While God would not call for divorce today (1 Cor. 7:10-16), the principle is clear that at times we must separate ourselves from things that draw us away from God. **Topic: Divorce/Separation**

she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. ¹³And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. ¹⁶For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

one called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. ¹⁹Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. ²⁰Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. ²¹Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. ²²For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. ²³You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.

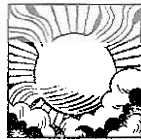
LIVE AS YOU ARE CALLED

¹⁷But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. ¹⁸Was any-

TO THE UNMARRIED AND WIDOWS

²⁵Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment

SOUL NOTE



Don't Go (7:10-16) Divorce was not a part of God's plan but was allowed as a concession to people's sinfulness (Matt. 19:8, 9). When one spouse becomes a Christian and the other doesn't, the believing spouse should stay in the marriage.

Paul explained that the marriage bond is so strong that a believer should not willingly break it. Through that union, the unbeliever may become a Christian. In any event, the believer can have a positive influence on their spouse and children.

Topic: Divorce/Separation

KEY PASSAGE



Singleness

SINGLED OUT

(7:26-35)

Some have understood this passage to mean that all single people should remain that way. But Paul's words must be balanced against both the cultural context

and his mission. Paul, as a single man, understood the need for people to be able to do whatever it took to share the gospel with unbelievers. He knew that persecution could come at any time. His words reveal his total commitment to his call. He encouraged single people not to apologize for their singleness. They should not seek to be married as if that were all that mattered. God has an important calling for single people, since they can "serve the Lord without distraction" (7:35). A married person has many responsibilities, while a single person can be freer to work for the gospel. Neither state is better than the other; different circumstances create different opportunities. Single people can rejoice in their singleness, knowing that God can do great things through them.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about singleness on pages 1262, 1263. See also the personality profile of Paul on page 1502.