

*A Biblical Understanding  
of  
Marriage and Divorce*



# Marriage

*Are you contemplating marriage?  
Are you wanting a better marriage?  
Are you recovering from a separation?*

*The Bible has some important things to say to you.*

## Marriage

Our beliefs set the course of our life. They are the gatekeepers to our experience. If you believe lies you will be disempowered, conformed and oppressed. Believe truth and you will be empowered transformed and liberated.

This is especially true in marriage. Your beliefs about the “what, how and when of marriage” is, crucial to your experience of marriage.

## What is Biblical Marriage?

Marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman. It is more than just a sexual relationship and more than a legal arrangement. It is an unselfish giving of each partner to the other (Malachi 2:14). The bible calls such a relationship both covenantal and sacramental. A covenant is a formal relationship or agreement defined by clearly articulated terms. In the case of marriage, the terms are stated in the form of vows or promises. It is also sacramental in that God has built into people a desire to marry and He Himself witnesses the promises couples make to one another. Furthermore, as couples come together in marriage God blesses them with a spiritual bond, a closeness, a connection that surpasses all other relationships. Consider the words in Malachi 2:15: *“Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his”*.

## God's ideal marriage

God's ideal is that a husband and wife find marriage to be a life long, loving fellowship which brings a sense of wholeness and completion to one's being. Marriage is the creation of oneness in heart and mind, oneness in body and oneness in God.

Oneness in heart and mind includes sharing of interests, activities, purposes and goals. Of course, partners may and should have interests and activities independent of one another, but their oneness of purpose and identity calls for open verbal sharing and heartfelt support of all aspects of life.

Oneness in heart and mind is also a commitment to fidelity and loyalty which encompasses much more than just sexual fidelity it means not giving your heart to another, it means not speaking ill of your spouse, It means being faithful, true and honest in all aspects of life.

Oneness in Body means mutually satisfying one another sexually. If the satisfaction is not mutual, if one partner selfishly insists on his or her own pleasure at the expense of their spouse, the law of love is violated.

God also intends that the relationship of husband and wife is to be completed in their oneness with Him. The relationship between Adam and Eve began to deteriorate when they chose alienation from God. And so it is that when God is the centre of a marriage where both husband and wife journey with God, the pleasure of marriage is enhanced, it is protected and God extends blessing upon blessing.

A biblical marriage is covenantal then, a commitment to one another in heart, mind, in body and in God. A failure in any of these areas by one of the partners is a breaking of the marriage covenant. Marriage is also sacramental in that there is a spiritual bond and connection and it is a place where God can extend his grace.

## How and when does marriage occur?

Once again there are misconceptions here. Many people believe you “get married” on your wedding day. While that is true in the legal sense, it is also misleading. Most couples define the terms of their marriage and make their promises to one another long before their wedding day. The wedding ceremony is really only the public celebration and legal acknowledgement of the intent to live in a marriage relationship. Furthermore the act of marriage is not a ceremony but an ongoing relationship. The marriage itself occurs and is sustained purely on the basis of the couples commitment to and enactment of the covenant vows they have made.

## The Implications

The implications of this are profound and what I am saying is this: every time a married person acts according to their vows they engage in an act of marriage, or put another way; they uphold and strengthen the covenant they have made with their partner.

Conversely, every time a married person breaks their vows they are engaging in an action of divorce, or, put another way, they violate or do violence to the covenant they have made with their partner. Sooner or later that covenant will become irreconcilably breached.

## Concluding Remarks

A correct understanding of marriage will help people in the following ways:

1. For those of you preparing for marriage you will see the importance of the vows. Vows express the intention of both parties and define what your marriage will be. Give careful thought when constructing those vows, discuss with each other what you want from your marriage. These are the terms you will abide by for the rest of your lives.
2. For those already married you will become far more proactive in your marriage. You will recognise that the fact you enjoyed a wedding ceremony all those years ago is not the crucial ingredient as to your current marital status. You are married because you engage in ongoing marriage choices. Those who do this are the ones with happy marriages.
3. For those who are no longer in a marriage relationship. Many of you have lived with the guilt that you walked out on your marriage? Perhaps in foolishness or selfishness some of you did, and for you there is forgiveness. However, I am convinced that for many of you the truth is not that you walked out on a marriage, but that you walked out on living with divorce. Like you, God hates divorce. And while His marriage to Israel may have ended in separation, his commitment to love, faithfulness and intimacy has not waned. It is my prayer you learn from your mistakes and live without bitterness or cynicism. Love again.

I pray this short paper is of help to you.

Rev. Dean Moore

Special thanks to Rev. Bil Ghali

Thus the state of a marriage is not something, which is best defined legally. It is better defined relationally. In the Biblical sense a marriage is really only as strong or as real as the covenant which defines it is upheld or breached. This is the pattern of God's metaphorical marriage with Israel. There came a point where Israel had so violated the marriage vows (the Law) that God recognised the marriage was over and so issued Israel a certificate of divorce. (Isa 50:1, Jer 3:8)

## So what of divorce?

The Bible is clear God hates divorce (Mal 2:16). But don't think for a minute its talking about legal proceedings to annul a marriage. Divorce does not occur when a couple receives the piece of paper which says you are divorced. The divorce paper is the legal ratification of that which has already taken place at a relational level. Divorce occurs when one or both are no longer living and relating to one another in accordance to the vows or covenant they made in their wedding ceremony.

God hates divorce - the termination of a marriage relationship, but equally He hates the daily actions of divorce which ultimately lead to the termination of that relationship. What God hates are the daily hurtful acts of violence and neglect that men and women perpetrate on their marriage and each other! Why? Because His intention for people is that they may thrive in a lifelong relationship of love and faithfulness. However, this is threatened and eventually destroyed when continual acts of divorce are perpetrated. Hence it is written that God allowed divorce in Moses day because of the hardness of people's hearts in continually breaching their marriage covenants (Matt 19:8).

As we look at what the Old Testament has to say about divorce we must note that this "hardness of heart" amongst the Israelites of Moses' time, was so bad and sin so entrenched in the society and marriage disorders had become so widespread, that Moses was forced to set out special laws designed to deal with the problem. In particular he wanted to stop easy divorce and protect women who were most prone to abuse from the men. The behavior of men in the Ancient Near East seemed to be; use, abuse and cast out and a woman that was 'cast out' became a pariah of society. So the laws pertaining to divorce forced the community to give women rights. A husband, bent on 'casting out' his wife, was forced to give his wife a certificate thereby enabling her to hold her head up high and start her life again.

Nevertheless it must be noted that the status of women was still much lower than God's ideal. People observe this and draw the conclusion that God approved of this abuse of women but God did not, He worked with it because the society was so entrenched in sin they were incapable of embracing God's ideal.

In Old Testament times a girl was considered owned by her father. At marriage her ownership was transferred to her new husband.

Deuteronomy 21:10-14 says a soldier could kidnap an enemy woman, forcibly make her his wife and then divorce her. Other nations just slept with them and discarded them when they were finished, so here we see something that is far from ideal but a great improvement on what was the common practice.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 tells us that men could divorce their wives for a variety of reasons but it needed to be valid and Deut 22:13 tells us if it wasn't valid, he was fined for falsely accusing his wife. But interestingly women could never divorce their husbands. That would have been far too fair and society wasn't quite ready for that.

Ezra and Nehemiah called for Israelite men to divorce their foreign wives. A tragic call but faced with the total corruption of the nation it was the lesser of two evils.

The laws we read of in the Old Testament though inadequate today were quite progressive but lest we think we have arrived today let's remember we are still far from God's ideal.

When the Pharisees asked the question "*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?*" (Matt. 19:3) Essentially they were asking when is a marriage covenant so breached that divorce becomes lawful? To this Jesus responded that divorce must not happen but then acknowledges that concession was given because of "their hardness of heart". When pressed to detail that concession, Jesus said "except on the grounds of unfaithfulness". Some people argue that this means unfaithfulness to the covenant of marriage but the word is (porneias). Which means any form of sexual unfaithfulness, so such an argument is difficult to sustain.

Are there other exceptions? Well yes quite possibly. Paul seems to give another exception in 1 Corinthians 7.

Here, Paul reaffirms the general principle: no divorce but then goes on to say if an unconverted spouse wants to leave the marriage don't coerce, let him or her go free. Though extensively debated the majority opinion in Protestant circles has been that this is a second exception, a ground for legitimate divorce and remarriage: permanent desertion. The term "is not bound" (v15 is considered by many to be a technical term for divorce).

So what is the point of this bible study? The point is to show the bible was never meant to be read as a book of rules, that is, we can do this but we can't do that. That's what the Pharisees did and look what happened to them. The scriptures clearly show that since the time Adam and Eve sinned, there has often been no clear-cut solution to the complications that develop in relationships. In some cases, no matter what is done some ideal will be broken. Moses accepted less than the best because of the people's hardness of heart which suggests that the right course of action may sometimes mean choosing the lesser of two evils. And Jesus showed us very clearly that God's standard and ideal can be promoted, even attained by many, but for those who are unable to attain it, for those who stray from his ideal and divorce, his loving arms are always open.

Forgiveness, healing, and a new beginning is available through Jesus.

*"Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ... Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say?" ... "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."*  
**John 8:1-11**

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