



Divorce and Remarriage



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THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE

The call to be biblically centered and at the same time compassionate and merciful makes any discussion on divorce and remarriage a delicate one. While we can never let compassion keep us from speaking the truth, we must also always speak the truth with love.

No subject in our churches today carries with it such far-reaching emotional and spiritual implications. The rampant nature of divorce has made it a topic that affects nearly everyone. Some church members are children of divorced parents. Others have divorced or are contemplating divorce themselves. Some have married a divorced man or woman. And yet others have friends or relatives who have gone through a divorce.

Yet for something that affects such a large number of

us in one way or another, divorce and remarriage remains the often unacknowledged elephant sitting squarely in the center of the sanctuary. We dance around it, carry on with our praise and worship services next to it, and frequently outright ignore it.

This is dangerous to the body of Christ as a whole and to its members as individuals for a number of reasons. One of those reasons involves the issues of sin, repentance, and restoration. Without addressing the situations of divorce that would not fall within biblical boundaries, many people are left to live their lives experiencing the ongoing consequences of sin while frequently being unaware of the source of those consequences.

Another way this is dangerous to the body of Christ and individuals within it is that often when there has been biblical grounds for divorce, the offended party still lives with undeserved guilt and stigma in his or her life. They might even face social isolation within the church body itself. Likewise, they often fail to seek out or receive the emotional and spiritual healing that they need to become a healthy, functioning individual again after having experienced the trauma of not only what caused the divorce but of the divorce itself. This then frequently leads to further relational difficulties down the road, and a potential increase in future divorces as well.

God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). He makes that point clear in the book of Malachi. In fact, Malachi 2:16 is the prooftext used with regard to divorce throughout most, if not all, of Christendom. But what is frequently

overlooked is that in the very same verse, God says that He also hates "a man covering himself with violence" (NIV).

So what does that mean? Should a woman not divorce a man who beats her? God hates divorce. Or can she divorce him because God also hates him who covers himself with violence?

**THERE ARE OCCASIONS WHEN
DIVORCE CLEARLY IS ONE-SIDED AND
THE OFFENDED PARTY HAS CLEARLY
BEEN TREATED UNJUSTLY.**

Gleaning a biblical understanding of divorce, therefore, includes much more than three words in one verse: God hates divorce. While that is indisputable truth, He also hates violence and hate (Malachi 2:16; 1 John 4:20). Understanding God's viewpoint on divorce includes examining the context of biblical covenants that He established as well as the specific covenant of marriage. God has a high standard for the covenant of marriage. He has specific elements that make up a covenant. God never lowers His standards to accommodate us. Rather, we are

to elevate our standards to accommodate Him. We must do the adjusting, not God.

My purpose in this book is not to provide an easy exit or excuse for divorce. It is clear that God hates divorce, and because of that, we should hate it, too. It is not my purpose to put divorce on the lower shelf where it can be reached quickly. How to get out of marriage is never God's mentality. My purpose is to paint an accurate picture of God's high standard for marriage and place it against the backdrop of the reality of sin. Keep in mind that sin is always present and is always the cause of every divorce.

Now, it might be that it is the sin of both parties that contributes to the dissolution of the marriage. But there are also many times—and this is something I feel we frequently ignore in the body of Christ—when the divorce is primarily the result of the sin of one party. Throwing around comments such as “It takes two to tango” or “There are always two sides to every story” have done an injustice to many who have already suffered an injustice at the hands of either an abusive, neglectful, or abandoning partner. Sin is involved in a murder or in a theft. But it is not manifested by both parties. Likewise, there are occasions when divorce clearly is one-sided and the offended party has clearly been treated unjustly—often-times repeatedly, regularly, and over an extended period of time.

While that may be the exception and not the rule for most of the roughly one million divorces that happen in

America each year, I don't want to belittle the reality that some divorce victims face. Keeping that in mind should also help those who have not gone through or experienced a divorce to relate with those who have, without rushing to judgment.

It just might be that we do not know the entire series of events that led to the destruction of the marriage. How an individual relates to or interacts with friends or co-workers isn't always an indicator of how that person treats his or her spouse. In fact, in many of the divorce situations I have counseled involving a spouse who is physically or emotionally abusive, the individual is charming and well-liked publicly. Public behavior is not always the best indicator of private behavior.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE COVENANT

I'm convinced that most people are confused about divorce because they are confused about marriage. Whenever you embark on a discussion of divorce without having predicated it on God's teaching about marriage, you have reversed the order. So let's try to get the order right.

Before God laid down his definitive statement about divorce in Malachi 2:16, He revealed His attitude more broadly in light of His definition of marriage. Malachi wrote to a people who were bothered that God would not accept their worship. So, through the prophet, the Lord let them know why He would not accept it. In the midst of this indictment we read,

This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. . . . The Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (Malachi 2:13–14, italics added)

There it is. In that one word, *covenant*, God defines marriage for us. The reason divorce is very hard and very narrow in Scripture is that marriage is a divinely covenanted relationship. It is not just a haphazard ceremony where two people stand before a preacher, say "I do," and go on a honeymoon.

Unless you understand that marriage is designed by God and for God's purposes, you will view it on the human level only. One of the reasons we are so quick to discount marriage is that we have kept it earthly. We have forgotten that we are illustrating the nature and purposes of God.

A covenant is a spiritually binding relationship between God and His people. It has legal status in the spiritual realm that includes certain agreements, conditions, benefits, and effects. In other words, God operates by the rule of His covenant.

Whenever God sought to formalize His relationship with His people, He established a covenant. Some of these covenants that you might be familiar with include

the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant.

Keep in mind that a covenant is much more than a contract. A contract involves requirements and expectations that can be fulfilled in the absence of any personal relationship. However, a covenant always includes a relationship as well. It has the legal considerations of a contract yet includes an essential relational component.

The purpose of covenants in the Bible was always to expand God's kingdom. A covenant was never established with the end goal of making people happy. However, frequently, married couples will make the mistake of viewing their relationship as a success or failure based on whether one or both parties are happy.

**WHEN YOU ENTER INTO A
COVENANT, YOU COMMIT YOURSELF
TO A RELATIONSHIP.**

While happiness is the result of a well-functioning covenant, it is never the purpose of it. If you start with the covenant, you will wind up with happiness. But the reverse of that is not true. When you make happiness the

goal, then Satan has you where he wants you because he knows what buttons to push and what strings to pull to make you unhappy.

A covenant is designed to reflect God Himself. The marriage covenant in particular is designed to strengthen the capability of each partner to carry out the plan of God in their lives. God is one God, yet He is also distinct in three persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three are one in essence and unified in purpose. This makes God Himself the greatest demonstration of a covenantal relationship and the most accurate illustration of the marital covenant. A biblical covenant is a divinely ordained contract that is predicated on relational unity of purpose.

A covenant is much more than a modern-day contract because a covenant is predicated on a relationship. You can enter into a business deal and have no real relationship with the other party as long as the deal looks solid. In a marriage, that's not the case, because marriage is a covenant. It's based on relationship.

If you want to be part of the family of God, you must enter into a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ. A covenant is more than a contract even though covenants have contractual elements. When you enter into a covenant, you commit yourself to a relationship.

Our marriages today are crumbling at such a fast pace, not because we no longer get along, but because we have lost sight of the purpose and prosperity of the marriage covenant.

Marriage matters. It matters to God. It matters to the body of Christ. It matters to the generations coming after it. It matters to our culture, and to the advancement of God's kingdom agenda on earth. Since covenants have such unique intentions, they should never be taken lightly.

EVERY SPIRITUAL COVENANT ASSUMES
GOD'S ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT.

This whole concept is so important that I want to look at three truths about covenants before we talk about the specific issues involved in divorce and remarriage. Remember, until we understand God's standard for marriage, we won't know how to address the issue of divorce.

TRANSCENDENCE

First of all, all legitimate covenants in Scripture are established by God. They're His covenants. There is a fancy theological term for that called *transcendence*. Transcendence simply means that covenants are both initiated and ruled by God. God, and not man, is sovereign over what the covenant is and how it should operate.

That may seem like an obvious statement to make, but it is a critical piece of the covenant. In order for a covenant to function with the benefits and blessings tied to it, it has to run according to God's transcendence. In fact, every spiritual covenant assumes God's active involvement over, and in all aspects of, the relationship in order for it to work.

When the practical realities of God are dismissed from the covenant of marriage, Satan walks through an open door to invoke chaos in the home.

Marriage is not your covenant. It's God's covenant. You are a participant in it, but it is God's covenant, and, as such, He makes the rules.

Notice once again that Malachi 2:14 says concerning the marriages of the Israelites, "the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth." The word used for "witness" is *uwd*¹ and means "to testify, bear witness," like a witness taking the stand in a legal court. God is in the heavenly court testifying against the men because they were divorcing their wives and breaking His covenant.

Remember, God's covenants are contractual. They are a legally binding agreement. So God acted as a witness against the Israelites when it came to their violation of the marriage covenant.

Now, most people respect the fact that God has something to do with the covenant of marriage. That's why they get married in church. Marriage is a spiritually legal arrangement. That's why in the Bible, if you had a legitimate ground for a divorce, you had to get what was

called a "certificate of divorce." You could not just go out and get divorced. It had to be legally recognized. In fact, when Jesus spoke about divorce in Matthew 19, he referenced the certificate of divorce that was part of Israelite culture in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 24:1–4).

This is very important because if a covenant is established by God, it can only be ended by God. Now, that is not what people want to hear. They want God to approve the wedding, but they don't want Him involved in the divorce. But that is not how a spiritually binding covenant works, unfortunately for many. I say unfortunately because many people have gotten a divorce that is not permitted under the conditions we will talk about later, and when they have married someone else, God says they are committing adultery. The reason it is adultery is that, in God's eyes, they are not free from the first covenant. God says marriage is His covenant, and He is the only one who can release someone from it.

Most people don't have that view. They view their marriage as theirs alone. God was welcome at the altar. But He was also left there standing. Yet Jesus said, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matthew 19:6). When someone goes before the judge downtown rather than the Judge uptown, they are giving the earthly judge the power to overrule God—yet God does not accept being overruled by man.

God says, "This is My covenant and My institution, so you must function under My guidelines if you want My blessings."

HIERARCHY

A second truth about covenants is that all covenants function under a hierarchy of command. Since covenants are established by God, they must function under a divinely prescribed channel of authority.

In Malachi 2, God says He condemned the Israelite men because they were discarding their legitimate wives. Among their many other spiritual problems, they did not understand a fundamental principle in Scripture: the principle of representation.

If you are a Christian, the reason you are not going to hell is that you have changed representatives. You are no longer in Adam. You are in Christ. He is your new representative. In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul says that Christ is under God, every Christian man is under Christ, and the woman is under the man. In Ephesians 6:1, Paul says children are under their parents. Everybody is linked in God's established hierarchy.

This explains something very important: the methodology of Satan in the garden of Eden. Notice that Satan never bothered Adam when he was single. He had to get married before the devil showed up.

Why didn't Satan tempt Adam while he was in the garden by himself? Satan understood the principle of representation and what would happen if the order got reversed.

So who did the serpent approach, Adam? No. He conversed with Eve. What Satan did was produce a break in the order. Eve became the leader, and Adam became

the follower. Their roles were switched, and as a result, Satan was in charge of them both.

Two major reasons for divorce today are the failure of men to take seriously their divinely ordained roles of provider, protector, and pastor in the home, and the failure of wives to respect the legitimate role of leadership by their husband if and when he is leading underneath Christ's rule.

One often prevalent yet under-discussed contributor to the breakdown of the family is this issue of headship. The submission of the woman is no secret, but the submission of the man is rarely addressed. Yet it is frequently the lack of submission by a man to Christ and Christ's lordship over his life that leads to the lack of submission by a woman. Men routinely want to be the "head" of the home, yet without being underneath their "Head," and the authority of Christ's established rulership on earth, the church.

Men, let me be absolutely clear on this right now because the man is ultimately held responsible, as the leader, for his home. An unchurched man—and I mean a man who does not regularly and intentionally place himself under the guidance, accountability, and leadership of his local church (and not simply pop in for a few hours every Sunday), is a spiritually uncovered man. A spiritually uncovered man is out of alignment and thus jeopardizes the well-being of not only himself but everyone underneath him.

Christ established the church to serve as His governing body on earth and one of the greatest failures of the

church today is its lack of intentional involvement in the lives of men.

YOU CANNOT ENTER GOD'S
COVENANT OF MARRIAGE AND MAKE UP
YOUR OWN RULES AS YOU GO ALONG.

This principle of hierarchy says that as we function in alignment underneath God, we receive the blessings of the covenant because the blessing is free to flow through the established order. However, when one or both parties are out of alignment, chaos is the inevitable result because when a principle of the covenant is broken, the blessing of the covenant becomes a negative consequence instead.

ETHICS

The third element of every covenant, and in particular the marriage covenant, involves ethics. Simply stated, ethics are the rules, sanctions, and continuity attached to the covenant.

First of all, the rules are the governing guidelines by which the covenant runs. Just as anyone living in my house

has to adjust to my rules, anyone living in God's house has to adjust to His rules. You cannot enter God's covenant of marriage and make up your own rules as you go along. Yet many people try, and they do so to their own detriment.

God has clearly prescribed the role that each party in the marriage covenant is to have. In fact, it is fairly simple to state. There are two basic rules to every marriage: love and respect. We read, "Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband" (Ephesians 5:33). In essence, he is to massage her heart while she is to massage his head.

A husband massages his wife's heart by leading in love, spiritually nurturing her, and cherishing his wife. He is to sacrifice whatever is necessary to help her develop into all God has destined her to be.

A wife, on the other hand, is to respect her husband and hold him in high esteem, recognizing his position of leadership in the home. This involves a submission that uses all of her gifts, skills, and abilities under the leadership of her husband to promote God's agenda for the members of the family. Only when husbands and wives fulfill their God-ordained roles can they expect to experience God's blessing and power in the covenant of marriage.

God's complaint against the Israelites in Malachi's day is the same complaint He has against us today: They were not abiding by His rules for marriage.

The next aspect of the ethics of a covenant is the sanctions. This is also a critical part of the covenant in that

it is the blessings or curses attached to the covenant that are applied according to our obedience or disobedience.

"Since you are not following My rules," God was saying in Malachi, "I will not accept your offerings." To put it another way, if you don't follow God's rules, you suffer the consequences. There is a built-in cause and effect relationship.

You may question whether that is only true in the Old Testament, but it is true in the New Testament as well: "You husbands . . . live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker . . . *so that* your prayers will not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7, emphasis added). When you forsake God's rules, you lose God's blessing. If we as husbands and wives are not doing what we know He wants us to do, then we shouldn't be surprised if the good hand of God is not evident in our homes.

To see an example of the sanctions of a covenant spelled out very clearly, all you have to do is read Deuteronomy 28, where the rules of God's covenant with Israel are specified with accompanying cursings and blessings. Sanctions say, if you do this, this is what will happen. If you do that, that is what will happen. There is no question about the sanctions. You choose whether you are going to obey.

How does this apply to marriage? You have to get a marriage license before you can get married. There are also witnesses at the wedding who sign the marriage license, verifying that this wedding did in fact take place

and that the bride and groom made certain promises to each other and to God.

There are also many other witnesses in the audience, and of course the minister is a witness. Now we don't bother with this these days, but these witnesses could be called forth in court to give testimony that a husband and wife did indeed enter into the covenant of marriage. Then, if one or both parties had broken the covenant, the sanctions of that covenant could be invoked by the judge.

Like I said, we don't take marriage seriously enough to go to that much trouble today. But God takes His covenants very seriously. And His sanctions include death, whether that be manifested in a physical death or in a spiritual death, such as was the case with Adam and Eve in the garden. Because when you break God's covenant, a part of you dies. Always.

What do I mean by that? God said to Adam and Eve concerning the forbidden tree, "In the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Adam and Eve did not die for hundreds of years. But God had said they would die the very day they ate from the forbidden tree. Which they did when they were removed from fellowship with God as well as His prescribed blessings in Eden.

It's clear that the biblical meaning of death is separation, not just cessation of physical life. When you break God's covenant, you are immediately separated from God's original, relational plan with you.

The final element in the area of covenantal ethics involves continuity. Continuity means the transfer of an

inheritance—a legacy. Scripture tells us explicitly that the choices of parents have repercussions down to the third and fourth generations (Exodus 20:5). Therefore, the sanctions of the covenant were never intended to terminate with the first generation.

Likewise, the decisions we make today in our homes and with regard to the marriage union will have effects on those who come after us. We are experiencing a number of those consequences in the generation of fatherless and single-parented children that are struggling in our nation today. Most of the societal issues facing us can be directly tied to the devolution of the family. Due to the destruction of the covenant, chaos replaced calm, death replaced life, and pressure replaced peace.

However, continuity can also have positive effects when God transfers through us to others the blessings of the covenant promises. It essentially creates a bond between God and those who come after the immediate participants in the covenant. Just as God committed to keep His covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—passing on the promised blessings through the family line—God has blessings to pass on through marital covenants today. Continuity can create a lasting legacy of good in the lives of those who benefit from the right choices of those who went before them.

When you got married, you made a promise. You promised to love and cherish and honor your partner "till death do us part." In other words, the one thing that can end this relationship is death, either physical or spiritual

death. This is because marriage is a covenantal union designed by God to enable and equip both partners to carry out His prescribed will in their lives. It is not to be taken lightly because God is not to be taken lightly.

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