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## **Divorce in 1 Corinthians and in the Bible**

### ***Old Testament***

Despite a generic disapproval of divorce, the Mosaic law did permit divorce to be initiated by the husband (though, apparently, not by the wife). The acceptable grounds for divorce are not stated (cf. Deut. 24:1, “because he finds something objectionable about her”) and may have varied over time. The practice was also regulated, such that the husband had to provide the wife with a written bill of divorce that would permit her to remarry (Deut. 24:1–2).

Certain other restrictions were in place as well: divorce was excluded as an option for a man who claimed his bride had not been a virgin when it could be proven that she had been, or for a man who had been forced to marry a woman because he raped her (Deut. 22:19, 29). There were also some legal restrictions placed on those who had been divorced: a divorced woman could not marry a priest (Lev. 21:7, 14; Ezek. 44:22), nor could she remarry a previous husband after having been married to someone else (Deut. 24:3–4).

These practices and policies sometimes provided context for prophets to speak of God’s troubled relationship with Israel (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:1, 8). The insistence in Malachi 2:16 that God “hates divorce” occurs in such a context (God hates for the relationship between God and a nation to be terminated) but this obviously

assumes literal application as well. Thus divorce appears to have been widely, and perhaps consistently, regarded as an unfortunate occurrence contrary to God's ideal plan for humanity.

### ***New Testament***

Jesus states the latter point above explicitly in the New Testament by distinguishing between allowance for divorce and fulfillment of God's will (Mark 10:2–12; cf. Matt. 5:31–32; 19:3–12; Luke 16:18). His view is that God's plan for humanity was revealed at creation (people were made male and female and joined together by God) and that the subsequent Torah legislation that permits and regulates divorce was given as a necessary concession due to the hardness of human hearts. Therefore, divorce and remarriage should be viewed as tantamount to adultery.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus's words include an "exception clause": remarriage following divorce on the grounds of unchastity (in Greek, *porneia*) does not qualify as adultery (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). The meaning of this exception clause is disputed: it might refer to marital unfaithfulness on the part of the spouse (which is what the NRSV's "unchastity" suggests) or it might refer to an illicit or unlawful union (such as incestuous marriage or some other union forbidden by Torah).

### ***1 Corinthians***

The apostle Paul reiterates as teaching from the Lord that believers should not divorce and if they do they should not remarry (1 Cor. 7:10–11). He recognizes, however, that divorces might occur when only one member of a married couple becomes a Christian (1 Cor. 7:15). Even so, the believer should not seek a divorce if the unbelieving spouse consents to live with him or her (1 Cor. 7:13). Though not ideal, such a relationship allows the believing spouse to sanctify (1 Cor. 7:14) and possibly to save (1 Cor. 7:16) the unbelieving partner.

### ***Some Special Circumstances***

In some instances, the Bible recommends, or even requires, divorce. Thus Ezra required returning exiles who had married non-Israelite wives in Babylon to “send away” those wives and any children born to them (Ezra 10:1–19). Joseph intends to divorce Mary when he discovers she is pregnant even though he has not yet had sexual relations with her, and Mathew’s Gospel indicates that this is what a “righteous man” would normally do (Matt. 1:18–19). John the Baptist insists that Herod Antipas divorce his wife Herodias, who had formerly been married to his half-brother Philip (Mark 6:17–18). All of these instances seem to assume situations in which the “marriage” to be terminated is viewed as an illegitimate union. Sirach 7:26, by contrast, seems to recommend divorce from a wife whom one detests.