

# MARRIAGE AND THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD

## Study Seven

### MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

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#### MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN AUSTRALIA

Although ‘Marriage, according to law in Australia, is the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’,<sup>1</sup> the law in Australia also makes provision for divorce or the cessation of a marriage, which then leaves the woman and the man legally able to marry someone else while their former marriage partner is still alive. Since 1975, the sole ground for divorce has been ‘irretrievable breakdown’, measured as a twelve months separation.<sup>2</sup> This replaced former notions of matrimonial fault, which needed to be proved in court—the law of the land no longer recognises any ‘guilty’ or ‘innocent’ parties to a divorce.

We have been seeing that marriage as the union in love of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life—‘until we are parted by death’—is very much in line with the Christian understanding of marriage. How then are we as Christians to view the possibility of divorce and the marrying of another person while a former marriage partner is still alive? In particular, what does the Bible have to say about this, and how should this govern our belief and practice?

All of us will have some emotional involvement with this issue. With over 40% of contemporary marriages at present rates likely to end in divorce,<sup>3</sup> it is probable that each of us know some among our close family members or friends who are divorced and possibly married to someone else while their former marriage partner is still alive. We may be in that situation ourselves. The emotional investment this has required of us may predetermine our approach to this issue. We look to be affirmed in an already-decided course of action, and there will be no shortage of people available to tell us what we want to hear. This may affect our willingness to hear and consider anything in the Bible that may run counter to what we have already decided and approved.

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<sup>1</sup> *Marriage Act 1961–1966*, 46. (1), Commonwealth of Australia, *Handbook for Marriage Celebrants*, Canberra, 1970 (?), p. 71. See also David Phillips, ‘Marriage versus Civil Unions’, Festival of Light Australia Resource Paper, *Light*, August 2006, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Marriage, Divorce and the Family: New Rules for Australians: Questions and Answers on the 1975 Family Law Act*, CCH Australia Limited, 1975, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> See Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia . . . Where?*, Hachette Australia, Sydney, 2007, p. 163.

We are also aware that Australia has a strong tradition of the separation of church and state. In a country like the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, where church and state are related by law, the church in setting its policy must take into account the situation that prevails in the life of the nation, and the state must pay some attention to what the church says.<sup>4</sup> In Australia, that connection has been largely severed. This has the benefit that the church can come to its own position untrammelled by considerations of state policy. But it also means that the community in general is not bound to take any cognisance of what the church might say or do. Whatever conclusions we come to in this study, we need to face the reality that it may make little difference to what people do in their lives. Even within the church, the very Australian characteristic of having no one tell us what we may or may not do could ensure that people mostly will do what people will do anyway, whatever we may say.

Do we then give up the attempt to come to any conclusion? Can we speak and act with firmness, integrity and love in this situation? Is there a way of bearing witness to the goodness of marriage and the truth of the eternal gospel in the midst of marriage breakdown and the alternative reconstituting of relationships? We need to be humble, wise and prayerful in our consideration of these things.

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What experiences have we had personally of grappling with this issue?*
- *What awareness have we had of the difference, and tension, between a Christian position on marriage and divorce, and the position of the law of the land, and general community expectations?*

## **IS THE BIBLE A LAW BOOK?**

Naturally, as those who accept the authority of Scripture, we look to the Bible to determine what we believe and how we should act in this matter. Sometimes we come looking for answers from the Bible as if we can apply them directly to the situations we face. If we approach the Bible that way, we are likely to be disappointed.<sup>5</sup> We find that not every eventuality or outcome is accounted for.<sup>6</sup> Each of Jesus' sayings on divorce, for instance, is differently nuanced, and says something about one thing but not about another. In Matthew 19:9 Jesus says something about a man who divorces his wife and marries another, but nothing about a woman who divorces her husband. In Matthew 5:32 he says something about the consequences for a woman who is so divorced by a man, and for whoever marries her, and this is paralleled somewhat differently in what he says in Luke 16:18. In Mark 10:12 Jesus says something about both a woman who divorces her husband and a husband who divorces his wife, but nothing about whoever may marry the one who has been divorced. Other mentions of divorce and/or remarriage in the Bible are few and far between, and each one appears to be addressing a different set of circumstances. Even so, there are those who

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<sup>4</sup> We see P. T. Forsyth wrestling in this position as he comes to some of his conclusions with regard to the admissibility of divorce and remarriage in his own teaching and practice; see P. T. Forsyth, *Marriage: Its Ethic and Religion* (1912), (NCPI, Blackwood, 1999), especially pp. 37–54.

<sup>5</sup> A setting forth and examination of principles of biblical interpretation can be found in Martin Bleby, *God Speaking: Authority and Interpretation in the Scriptures* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Roberts observes: 'Jesus' phraseology does not resemble precise statute law, where all possible outcomes and eventualities are carefully accounted for' (*Not Under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery and Desertion*, Maschil Press, Ballarat, 2008, p. 101).

seek to put all these in order together, to come up with a comprehensive legal-like scheme of permissions or disallowances pertaining to this area. Depending, often, on where they start from, different people using the same set of texts can come up with opposite conclusions: some in favour of divorcing and marrying again and others quite opposed to both, in varying degrees.<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Bingham comments:

The difficulty in all this is that we are faced with heavy legalism on the one hand which totally opposes a break in marriage and a remarriage. On the other hand, we have a legalism which insists that it is legally permissible to divorce and remarry.<sup>8</sup>

Is it appropriate to use the Bible in this way, virtually as a form of legislation? To do this may be to miss the point. Geoffrey Bingham, under the heading ‘Is Divorce Permissible for Christians?’ says: ‘The question itself is improper’.<sup>9</sup> It could be that an improper question may lead us down improper pathways, whichever fork we choose. He warns:

What we have to recognize is that the Bible is not a handbook on marriage, that it does not contain legislation in regard to the marriages of Christians. It is not written specifically, ‘You shall not divorce!’. It does not say, ‘You shall remain married, whatever’. It does not say, ‘Get divorced’, ‘Don’t get divorced’, ‘Remarry’, or, ‘Don’t remarry’. As we have said it not a law book. People who ask the question stated at the head of this section wish to find out what is permitted and not permitted. This may have an admirable quality to it, but it takes the questioner down the path of legalism.<sup>10</sup>

Nor is this to leave us joining those who have ‘a careless view of grace which says nothing matters anyway—why fuss?’<sup>11</sup>

How then are we to approach the Scriptures on these matters? We recall from the previous study that Paul the apostle, addressing some of these issues in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7, did not approach them piecemeal, by the application of general principles or by laying-down the law, but from a gospel base that rested securely in God’s salvation of us sinners in Jesus Christ, and our belonging to him in the kingdom-rule of God. Central to the interpretation of any passage of Scripture must be its place in the over all saving purpose and action of God in Christ.<sup>12</sup> This must be in the context of a realistic assessment of where people, church and society are with regard to the purpose and will of God.

There are many things that we would like to get neatly sewn up, and then impose on others. Neither of those options is available to us. Where there is the deviousness of human sin, nothing will ever be straightforward—with others, or with ourselves.

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, Barbara Roberts, writing from the point of view of a victim of marital abuse, finds that in serious situations of this nature, both divorce and remarriage are allowable in Scripture (*Not Under Bondage*, pp. 15, 105–113). B. Ward Powers, beginning from an understanding of marriage that sees it as a sharing of lives that meets the needs of both partners, also comes to the conclusion that both divorce and remarriage can be accommodated (*Marriage and Divorce: The New Testament Teaching*, Family Life Movement of Australia, Concord, and Jordan Books, Petersham, 1987, pp. 7–18). Andrew Cornes, as a pastor deeply concerned at the ravages that divorce and remarriage leave in the lives of individuals, families and communities, upholds the unbreakable nature of the marriage bond, strongly encourages reconciliation for those separated or divorced, and sees remarriage to be prohibited by the teaching of Christ, with answers ‘quarried from the Bible’ (*Questions About Divorce and Remarriage*, Monarch Books, London, 1998, pp. 11–32, 14). David J. Engelsma, seeking to impart to God’s people ‘a better knowledge of the Word of God’ in the midst of the ‘rampant godlessness of our society’, concludes that marriage is not dissolvable, such that a divorced person ‘may not remarry’, and those who are already remarried are ‘to stop living in that state’ (*Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History*, revised edition, Reformed Free Publishing Association, Grandville, Michigan, 1998, pp. 9, 13, 227–229).

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Man, Woman and Sexuality*, NCPI, Blackwood, second edition, 1986, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *God’s Glory, Man’s Sexuality*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1988, p. 241

<sup>10</sup> Bingham, *God’s Glory, Man’s Sexuality*, p. 242.

<sup>11</sup> Bingham, *Man, Woman and Sexuality*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> See Bleby, *God Speaking*, especially pp. 37–89.

### **Questions for discussion**

- *How have we sought to use the Bible as a law book to settle these questions? What advantages, or difficulties, have we encountered in this approach?*
- *What difference does it make to be aware of our own need for salvation, and to have experienced the sovereign saving grace of Christ?*

## **DIVORCE HAPPENS**

While the Bible does not legislate for divorce, it recognises that, in a sinful world, there are people married to each other who get divorced, and some who go on to marry another person while their former wife or husband is still alive. Old Testament references are invariably incidental allusions, some of which seek to place some restrictions on this practice. Priests in Israel were not to ‘marry a woman divorced from her husband’ (Leviticus 21:7; see also verse 14, and Ezekiel 44:22). A priest’s daughter who has married someone who is not a priest, and is ‘divorced, without offspring, and returns to her father’s house . . . may eat of her father’s food’ that is reserved for the priest’s family (Leviticus 22:13). A man who falsely accuses his wife of unchastity ‘shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives’ (Deuteronomy 22:19). A man required to marry a woman he has raped ‘shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives’ (Deuteronomy 22:29). A divorced woman who binds herself by a vow is bound by that vow (see Numbers 30:9). These references tell us that divorce happened in Israel, but could scarcely be held as the basis for any legislation on divorce and marriage as such.

There are provisions for releasing a slave-wife or a captive-wife from a marriage relationship if she is not going to be cared for rightly (see Exodus 21:7–11; Deuteronomy 21:10–14). While these relate to particular situations in Israel at that time, which will not necessarily be reproduced elsewhere, they do represent care for those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.

Ezra required the sending away of foreign wives, that Israelites had married in disobedience to God’s law for Israel (see Ezra 9–10; Deuteronomy 7:1–4). This emphasised the priority in family life of God’s express purpose of holiness for His people.

In a passage that denounces faithlessness towards God and each other, Malachi 2:16 is often translated: ‘I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts’ (NRSV). However, the verb for ‘hate’ is not first person (‘I’) but is third person singular (‘he’), and so is more literally translated: ‘the man who hates and divorces, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts’ (ESV).<sup>13</sup> Divorce is an expression of hatred, and a violent wrench.

Of particular interest in the Old Testament, because of its use in the New Testament, is Deuteronomy 24:1–4:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession.

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<sup>13</sup> See Roberts, *Not Under Bondage*, pp. 72–75.

Again, the reference to divorce is incidental, as something that happens. What this passage prohibits is the taking back of a former wife when she has since been married to someone else. Its effect would have been to prevent the use of customary divorce procedures as a form of legalised adultery.

Even though this passage did not legislate for divorce and remarriage as such, some with a legalistic mindset in Jesus' day took it as giving them licence to divorce under the law of God. There was a dispute amongst teachers over what constituted 'something objectionable' as grounds for divorce: was it unfaithfulness only (Shammai), or anything displeasing to the husband, such as the wife burning a meal (Hillel), or that the husband had found another woman more attractive than his wife (Akiba)? It is likely this was the background to the Pharisees' question to Jesus: 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for any cause*?' (Matthew 19:3).<sup>14</sup> Jesus refused to play their game by answering that specific question. Their response showed that they were using Deuteronomy 24:1–4 in a legalistic way as a licence for divorce: 'Why then did Moses *command* us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' (Matthew 19:7). Jesus corrected them: 'Moses *allowed* you to divorce your wives' (Matthew 19:8)—there was, as we have seen, no such command, only a permissive reference to the practice.

Jesus also gave the reason for that allowance in the law of God: 'It was because you were *so hard-hearted* that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives' (Matthew 19:8). It was a recognition of the action of sin. Divorce happens because of hardness of heart. We all know that. If hearts of husbands and wives were always soft towards each other, there would be no such thing as divorce. Divorce is brought on by hard-heartedness on the part of one or both. We should not be surprised—none of us are immune. Jesus said:

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication . . . adultery (Mark 7:21, 22).

But, said Jesus, 'from the beginning it was not so' (Matthew 19:8)—this was never part of God's will or intention for us.

### **Questions for reflection**

- *Why were the Pharisees so intent on wanting to know allowable grounds for divorce?*
- *How is this perverse desire reflected in our own hearts and lives?*

## **MARRIAGE FROM THE BEGINNING**

In responding to the Pharisees' question, Jesus took them back to God's original intention for marriage:

Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh (Matthew 19:4–6).

The implications for divorce follow from this:

Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate (Matthew 19:6).

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<sup>14</sup> The words in italics do not occur in Mark 10:2.

This was how Paul the apostle understood God's law as given through Moses:

... a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress (Romans 7:2–3).<sup>15</sup>

This is also how Paul relayed the teaching of Jesus:

To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife (1 Corinthians 7:10–11).

Paul summarised it as follows:

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:39).

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What is it about God's original intention for marriage that invests it with this life-long character?*

## **ANY EXCEPTIONS?**

Just as an allowance was made in the Old Testament for the action of sin in bringing about divorce, so there is recognition of this also in the New Testament. The very fact that Jesus responded to the Pharisees' question on divorce indicates that he saw it as an issue that needed to be addressed. We have seen above that while Paul said 'the wife should not separate<sup>16</sup> from her husband', he immediately acknowledged that this still might happen: 'but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband' (1 Corinthians 7:10). We saw in the previous study that Paul also envisaged a situation in which, if an unbelieving wife or husband brings about a separation, a believing partner need not contest it (see 1 Corinthians 7:15).

This is not to say that divorce is then legitimate in these situations. It is just to say that it happens.

Jesus appears to be making an exception that offers a legitimate ground for divorce in Matthew 5 and 19:

It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, *except on the ground of unchastity*, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matthew 5:31–32).

I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, *except for unchastity*, and marries another commits adultery (Matthew 19:9).

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<sup>15</sup> Paul is using this in a different context, not in a prescriptive way, but as an illustration of how 'you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God' (Romans 7:4). But it is indicative of Paul's understanding of the law of God as upholding the lifelong character of marriage.

<sup>16</sup> The distinction we may draw between separating and divorcing was not present in this setting: Paul uses the same word here as Jesus used in Matthew 19:6.

The Greek word used for ‘unchastity’ here is *πορνεία* (*porneia*), a general word for sexual immorality. Much writing has been expended on analysis of this so-called exception. Some say that it matches a requirement of Jewish law in New Testament times that compelled a man to divorce his wife ‘when fornication before marriage was discovered . . . or adultery detected’.<sup>17</sup> Joseph’s plan to break his engagement with Mary when she was found to be pregnant is cited as an example (see Matthew 1:18–19). Some say these words were inserted later into Jesus’ teaching, since they are not found in Mark 10:11–12 or Luke 16:18, and so can be disregarded.<sup>18</sup> This has no textual warrant, and appears to be somewhat arbitrary. Others say these words were left out of the gospels of Mark and Luke because they did not apply in the non-Jewish settings for which these gospels were written. They have been seen as giving ‘liberty and relief to the innocent party’ in an abusive marriage relationship.<sup>19</sup> Many take them as one God-given ground for divorce.<sup>20</sup>

It may be, however, that these words were never intended as an exception at all. Robert Banks sees them as a reference to the ‘something objectionable’ in Deuteronomy 24:1, that the Pharisees were using as a ground for divorce, and supports the translation of Matthew 5:32 as ‘quite apart from the matter of *πορνεία*’, with a similar reference in Matthew 19:9:

These sayings may generally be translated: ‘I say to you, whoever dismisses his wife—the permission in Deut. 24:1 notwithstanding—and marries another, commits adultery’.<sup>21</sup>

This would make these words consistent with Jesus’ appeal to marriage as it was ‘in the beginning’, as that which ‘God has joined together’ that is not to be separated (Matthew 19:4–6), and consistent with the parallel sayings in Mark 10:11–12 and Luke 16:18.

### **Questions for discussion**

- *What is the difference between divorce happening and divorce being legitimate?*
- *What is the relationship between the two?*

## **DOES GOD DIVORCE HIS PEOPLE?**

In an earlier study, we found that God in the Old Testament often saw His relationship with Israel in terms of a marriage covenant, and that this culminates in the New Testament with the marriage of the Lamb and his Bride—Christ and his people.<sup>22</sup> If marriage is instituted by God from the beginning to reflect and participate in that greatest marriage of all time, what place might divorce and some alternative marriage relationship have in that scenario?

We pick up the story at the time of Jeremiah the prophet, about 600 years before Christ, when Israel had gone far from God and His ways, and were about to come under judgement for indulging in the worship of other gods:

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<sup>17</sup> D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCBC, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1972) p. 125; quoted in William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: Towards an Evangelical Understanding of New Testament Teaching* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1984), p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> The Archbishop of Adelaide, The Right Rev’d B. P. Robin, M. A., *The Position of the Church of England Regarding Divorce*, North Adelaide, 1952 [p. 2].

<sup>19</sup> Roberts, *Not Under Bondage*, pp. 83–88.

<sup>20</sup> e.g. Engelsma, *Marriage*, pp. 105–106.

<sup>21</sup> R. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, CUP, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 153–159.

<sup>22</sup> See Study Four, ‘The Greatest Marriage of All Time’.

Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband,  
so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel,  
says the LORD (Jeremiah 3:20).

The other gods they were worshipping were human fabrications, idols of wood and stone:

Judah . . . polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree (Jeremiah 3:8, 9).

The northern kingdom of Israel had been defeated and sent into exile over one hundred years earlier in 721 BC, which God describes in these terms:

. . . for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce (Jeremiah 3:8).

Now the time is coming for the same thing to happen to the southern kingdom of Judah. God, no doubt mindful of his law in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, indicates that the break is likely to be irreparable:

If a man divorces his wife  
and she goes from him  
and becomes another man's wife,  
will he return to her?  
Would not such a land be greatly polluted?  
You have played the whore with many lovers;  
and would you return to me? says the LORD (Jeremiah 3:1).

Yet here God asserts His true nature:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you (Jeremiah 31:3).

And so the call goes out from God:

Return, O faithless children, says the LORD,  
for I am your master . . .  
Return, O faithless children,  
I will heal your faithlessness (Jeremiah 3:14, 22).

God, the pure and holy One, in contradistinction to His own law that He gave to sinful Israel, out of His own resources of faithfulness, will do something to heal the faithlessness of His wayward people. And so the promise is made:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

And the response of the people is prepared:

Here we come to you; for you are the LORD our God . . .  
Truly in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel (Jeremiah 3:22, 23).

About one hundred and fifty years earlier, the prophet Hosea had been called upon by God to act this out in his own personal life:

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, ‘Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.’ So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son (Hosea 1:2–3).

Gomer then had two other children who were not his. To these children Hosea is told to say, with a message that applies no less to Israel:

Plead with your mother, plead—  
for she is not my wife,  
and I am not her husband—  
that she put away her whoring from her face,  
and her adultery from between her breasts (Hosea 2:2).

God later speaks of a time when things will change:

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD (Hosea 2:19–20).

So also Hosea is prevailed upon to act accordingly:

The LORD said to me again, ‘Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods’ (Hosea 3:1).

This time, it appears, Hosea has to go and buy Gomer back from slavery that she has got herself into. After a time of abstinence they are to come back together—just as the people of Israel are to return to God:

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,  
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.  
Take words with you  
and return to the LORD;  
say to him,  
‘Take away all guilt;  
accept that which is good,  
and we will offer  
the fruit of our lips . . .  
we will say no more, “Our God,”  
to the work of our hands’ (Hosea 14:1–2, 3).

When Jesus came, he called himself ‘the bridegroom’ (Matthew 9:15). The night before he went to die on the cross, he took a cup of wine in his hands and said:

. . . this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28).

So his faithfulness moved to heal our faithlessness:

. . . God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . while we still were sinners Christ died for us . . . while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Romans 5:5–6, 8, 10).

Reconciliation, then, is what we are about, with all the resources of God available to us:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).

As Jesus stood before the questioning Pharisees, he could well have said: ‘I am the bridegroom, standing before you, who has come to do all that—and you ask *me* about *divorce*?’—!

### **Question for reflection**

- *Have I, in my unfaithfulness, stood before the faithful Bridegroom?*

## **WHAT ABOUT REMARRIAGE?**

The simplest and most comprehensive statement of Jesus on marrying another person after divorce while a former husband or wife is still living is in Mark 10:11–12:

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

In Luke 16:18 Jesus speaks of a man who divorces his wife, and of anyone who marries a woman so divorced:

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

‘Adultery’ is having a husband–wife type relationship with another person when already married to someone else. It was one of the things forbidden to God’s people in the ‘ten commandments’, given by God through Moses about 1,500 years before Christ, as being inconsistent with God’s faithful nature, and not helpful to human beings made in His image. Jesus is saying here, then, that marrying another person after divorce where a former husband or wife is still living is not God’s will for His people.

We have seen that Paul teaches consistently with what Jesus says here (see 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, 39; Romans 7:2–3).

The startlingly radical and counter-cultural nature of this teaching of Jesus is highlighted by his disciples’ reaction on hearing it:

His disciples said to him, ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry’ (Matthew 19:10).

So used were they to the common practice of divorce and remarriage—as we are today—that Jesus’ prohibition of marrying again while a former marriage partner was still alive was almost inconceivable to them, and called the whole matter of marriage into question: ‘If that is the case, surely it would be better not to marry at all!’

## Is This for All?

A common response is that, while lifelong marriage, and Jesus' prohibition of remarriage that goes with it, is the ideal, yet there are those who do not live up to this ideal, and should not be expected to. Appeal is made to Jesus' words following the disciples' incredulous response:

Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given . . . Let anyone accept this who can (Matthew 19:11, 12).<sup>23</sup>

Jesus is not saying here that it is optional but that, as with anything pertaining to the kingdom of heaven, it can be carried through only as we are given to do it by God and are willing to receive what God gives—as the disciples were, in contrast to the Pharisees. A comparison is made with what Jesus says in connection with his parables:

Let anyone with ears listen! . . . To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given . . . But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear (Matthew 13:9, 11, 16).

This is not something that can be figured out or carried through by mere human reasoning or capabilities. It is something given, gladly, by God, to those who will receive it. Greg John writes:

There is a growing number of Christians around the world who are experiencing separation or divorce, but who are remaining faithful to their wedding vows and to their spouses. While they long for reconciliation, they are willing to face singleness for the rest of their lives if necessary.<sup>24</sup>

They have not come to this position just by seeking to apply what Jesus said and gritting their teeth in order to see it through. God has given them a revelation of His own faithfulness, and has been 'bringing them through the turmoil to a place of inner peace, hope, joy and trust in Him'.<sup>25</sup> Greg John adds:

I have been privileged to meet a number of these people, and though they all face many difficulties and trials, they are among the most deeply joyful believers I have ever known.<sup>26</sup>

## Are There Exceptions?

Even those who recognise that 'Jesus' divorce and remarriage teaching was different from anything the disciples had ever encountered'<sup>27</sup> still want to find ways by which it can be said that Jesus permits remarriage after divorce.

When Jesus said, 'whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery' (Matthew 19:9), he did not say, 'But it is not adultery to marry another if unchastity is involved'. Yet there are many who use the exception clause (if that is what it is—see above) to allow the marrying of another as well as the divorcing of a wife, who insist that the text allows this, and on that basis claim exemption under these circumstances.

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<sup>23</sup> This was the position taken by Keith Rayner, Archbishop of Adelaide, in his Pastoral Address to the Diocese on 25th September 1978, Lutheran Publ., Adelaide, n.d., pp. 4–5.

There is dispute over whether 'this teaching' refers to Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, as we take it here, or to the new topic of celibacy or not marrying at all raised by the disciples' words. See Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 53–68; Roberts, *Not Under Bondage*, pp. 93–94.

<sup>24</sup> Greg John (ed.), *Called to Faithfulness: God at Work in Broken Marriages* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2002), p. xi. The book includes contributions from divorced and separated Christians.

<sup>25</sup> John, *Called to Faithfulness*, p. xiii.

<sup>26</sup> John, *Called to Faithfulness*, pp. xi–xii.

<sup>27</sup> Roberts, *Not Under Bondage*, p. 93.

Extensive research has shown that this is not how it was understood in the first five centuries of the Christian church, where remarriage was disallowed even in the case of an ‘innocent’ spouse where divorce had occurred by reason of adultery or fornication on the part of the other partner.<sup>28</sup> Jesus is saying here: whether unchastity is involved or not, divorce and marrying another is the equivalent of adultery.

Recourse is also made to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7:15, when an unbelieving partner separates: ‘in such a case the brother or sister is not bound’. This is taken to be an exception to the general statement in 1 Corinthians 7:39: ‘A wife is bound as long as her husband lives’. In fact, two different words for ‘bound’ are used in these two verses. In verse 15 the word is δεδούλωται (*dedoulōtai*), which means ‘enslaved’ or ‘under bondage’, whereas in verse 39 the word is δέδεταί (*dedetai*) which refers to being linked in a marriage bond. To be ‘enslaved’ to a marriage is not the same as still being bound by it. In verse 15 Paul is making the point that the believing partner can be at peace about letting the unbelieving partner separate if consent to remain living together is not present. Being ‘free’ to remarry is not mentioned, and probably not contemplated.<sup>29</sup>

It is pointed out that the customary certificate of divorce given to the woman in those days included the words ‘you are free to marry any man’; so remarriage after divorce would normally have been assumed by all without needing to say so. We have seen, however, that Jesus was not being normal or customary in saying what he did. Others point out that Paul’s advice to the ‘unmarried’ in 1 Corinthians 7:8–9 includes that ‘they should marry’, and that the ‘unmarried’ in verse 11 includes the divorced—so the divorced also should marry.<sup>30</sup> This hardly seems likely, especially as in verse 11 Paul says ‘let her remain unmarried’.

Nevertheless, on the basis of these two passages, known as the ‘Matthean exception’ and the ‘Pauline privilege’, an ‘evangelical consensus’ has been in place for the last 500 years or so by which it is said:

Divorce and remarriage are permissible (not mandatory) on two grounds. First, an innocent person may divorce his or her partner, if the latter has been guilty of serious sexual immorality. Secondly, a believer may acquiesce in the desertion of his or her unbelieving partner, if the latter refuses to go on living with him or her.<sup>31</sup>

Recent scholarship has shown the Reformers to have been dependent upon a misreading of the texts of these passages introduced by Erasmus in the sixteenth century. A growing body of writers now disallows these interpretations.<sup>32</sup>

## What about Those Already Remarried?

Divorce is not the unforgivable sin. Neither is remarriage. What of those who have remarried already? Should these marriages never have taken place?

Whether they should or not, the fact is they have happened. God knows that. Christ has been to the bottom of all our sins, and forgiveness is full and free for all. What we must do is learn to live in that forgiveness, and not pretend that we don’t need to.

Jesus once spoke to a Samaritan woman and offered her eternal life. He knew her situation. ‘You have had five husbands’, he said, ‘and he whom you now have is not your

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<sup>28</sup> See Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 19–72; Engelsma, *Marriage*, pp. 181–203.

<sup>29</sup> See Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 138–144. Roberts, *Not Under Bondage*, pp. 43, 47, gives ‘not bound’ in verse 15 its force of not being under subservient bondage, but also takes it to mean ‘free to marry’.

<sup>30</sup> Powers, *Marriage and Divorce*, pp. 179–189.

<sup>31</sup> John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Basingstoke, 1984, p. 272.

<sup>32</sup> See Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 73–150, and Engelsma, *Marriage*, pp. 167–180. See also Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage*, pp. 92–119.

husband.’ We are not told how he might have counselled her regarding the tangled web of her marital and other relationships. Should she go back with one of the former five? Or stay with the one she has now? Or become celibate? Jesus does not say. The important thing is that he revealed himself to her as the Messiah from God, and she believed in him as the Saviour of the world (see John 4:1–42).

On another occasion, a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to Jesus. The penalty under God’s law was death. Jesus said to her accusers, ‘Let the one who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her’. They all went away. Then Jesus said to the woman, ‘I do not condemn you. Go, and do not sin again.’ Jesus had not gone soft on God’s law. He knew that on the cross he would suffer the death penalty for her—and for all of us. She was free from her sin (John 8:1–11).

All of us are sinners. We are not in a position to judge anyone. Besides, that is not our job. It is God who is Judge of all, and He is both just and merciful. That is why Jesus said, ‘Judge not, and you will not be judged: condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven’ (Luke 6:37, RSV). One of the difficulties we have, once we try to decide who might ‘qualify’ for remarriage or not, is that we are then attempting to pass judgement on other people’s private lives when we are in no position to do so. Our job is not to judge people, but to love them with the love of the Lord, and leave them in God’s good hands.

## **Loving and Forgiving**

The only true love is the love that comes from God. That love is always in keeping with God’s commandments. In God, obedience and love always go together. Any so-called ‘love’ which goes against God’s commandments ends up not being love at all. When we try to love people with some other self-generated love of our own, we are not really loving them. In fact our ‘love’ ends up being more like hate and harm.

The true love from God is in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, when he took our sins and loved us to the end. This is the love that people need to know—especially any who have been hurt or discouraged by the trauma of divorce. God has given us lifelong marriage as a tangible sign of His everlasting love for us. If we say that marriage is not necessarily for life (which is what we are saying in practice when we remarry in these circumstances), then are we saying also that God’s love has a cut-out point? Are we not then settling for something less than the whole of God’s great love, and letting others do the same? It could be that, as a church, our witness to the truth and fullness of the gospel will be only as strong as our practice regarding divorce and remarriage.

We receive this love only by repenting and believing in the Lord Jesus. This is how we know we are fully acceptable to God, whether we are single, married, divorced, remarried or whatever. The remarriage process in churches can leave people with the false impression that they are now acceptable to God because they have done the right thing by the church, and permission has been given, and the church has approved—not because God loved them so much that He gave His Son to die for them!

Forgiveness, for all who repent and believe, is immediate, total, and free. No question about it, and no going back. But forgiveness and remarriage are two different things. All things are forgivable, but that does not then mean that all things are permissible. Forgiveness does not free us to go against what Jesus says. In fact the opposite—it frees us to be able to carry out His will.

### **Question for discussion**

- *Where have we come to in our consideration of these things?*

## **A PERSONAL STORY**

Before 1979 (in South Australia) remarriage of a divorced person whose former spouse was still living was not permitted in the Anglican Church of Australia (then known as ‘The Church of England in Australia’).

In 1979 it became possible for such a marriage to take place in church, with special permission from the bishop. The bishop needed to be assured that the previous marriage relationship was beyond retrieval, that there was proper provision for the previous spouse and their children, that there was genuine repentance and a Christian intention to enter into lifelong marriage, and an ongoing relationship with the church as shown by regular attendance at church services.

No member of the clergy was compelled to solemnise the marriage of a divorced person. In doing so the clergy person and the bishop needed to be satisfied that the teachings of Holy Scripture or the doctrines and principles of the Anglican Church were not being contravened. If conscience required the clergy person to decline all such requests, the couple was to be referred to some other member of the clergy.

Before 1979, as an Anglican minister in this situation, when people came to me with a request for remarriage after divorce, I simply applied church law. I would say, ‘The church won’t let me do it’, and that was that.

After 1979, I did not have to say ‘No’ straight out. At least we could talk about it. I tried to work within the new guidelines, and I solemnised a number of such marriages with the bishop’s permission.

I did have some misgivings about it, however. Especially when we came to the bits in the marriage service like ‘as long as we both shall live’ and ‘until we are parted by death’ and ‘What God has joined together, let no one separate’. Having to be satisfied that what I was doing did not contravene the teachings of Holy Scripture drove me back to the Bible to be clear about what it actually said. I knew the clear teaching of Jesus, but others had said there were ways around this, and for the time being I took their word for it. I tried to apply the two so-called ‘exceptions’, but I found no case that fitted them exactly. I was unsettled by one or two other ministers who told me that, on the basis of biblical teaching, they now always refrained from remarrying those who were divorced. For a while I put it in the ‘too hard’ basket. Especially after I moved to a church which had an attractive building where many weddings were held, including a number of those who were divorced with a former spouse still living.

At the beginning of 1991, at a New Creation Teaching Ministry Summer School in which I was to teach on Jesus’ ‘sermon on the mount’, including Matthew 5:32, the Lord Jesus made it clear to me, in a gruelling but overwhelming experience of his love, that I was to withdraw from my participation in all such marriages. While still going ahead with marriages in this category that I had already agreed to take, I knew then that I would need to do the necessary study and take the appropriate steps to carry this out. After much detailed study, by the end of the year, after talking with the bishop, the parish council and the congregation (which included some who were remarried after divorce, and some whom I had remarried myself), I was able to move to the position in which I would no longer officiate at the marriage of a divorced person whose former spouse was still living. Such couples who came to me I met with and referred to other Anglican ministers who were willing to apply for the bishop’s permission to solemnise the marriage in our church building.

### **Questions for reflection**

- *How does this personal story resonate, or jar, with my own?*
- *What is God saying to me in that?*

## **YOUR MAKER IS YOUR HUSBAND**

How, then, are we to conduct ourselves in this situation? Can we speak and act with firmness, integrity and love? Can we bear witness to the goodness of marriage and the truth of the eternal gospel in the midst of marriage breakdown and the alternative reconstituting of relationships? Geoffrey Bingham has wisely said:

We need, then, to recognise human sinfulness so that we may live in an imperfect world without rage or frustration which is damaging. God's demands upon the human race are total. Full obedience is required. Even so, rebellious humanity for the most part ignores the demands. The longsuffering, kindness and forbearance of God have not refused to destroy the race, but have provided the way of grace and love so that mankind may be redeemed. The redeemed find their way back to God's true order. Some of them, sadly enough, make it a tyrannous order. They fail to recognise the need of grace for human living. They legislate in the hope of conforming man to true morality. Autonomous human beings are enraged by the imposition of morality, especially where the will does not accept it. Christian and creational forms of sexuality are rejected and hence cannot be imposed. The Christian person perforce must live in the tension of seeing and knowing God's ordered creation whilst rebellious man rejects it. He must be light and salt in society in regard to true morality, yet must live without the police-like imposition of such moral law.

What the Christian must do of course is recognise the fluctuations of his society along with its changing loyalties. This era has been (wrongly) called the 'post-Christian era'. Amos might well have called his age the 'post-Covenant era', but he refused to do so. The rise and fall of morality in human history is a fact to be considered. Western nations once called themselves Christian. Now they need to be recalled to that stance. The Christian then must seek to retain the Christian morality within his culture, and enlarge it through renewal of the past and present proclamation of the grace of God in the Gospel. Basic Christian teaching on the nature of God, creation, true humanity, man's sinfulness and God's redemption should be pursued. Christ's warning of the end-times was not intended to inculcate despair of man but hope of the Gospel. Salt and light are needed penetrative elements within our current society. Hence the teaching of biblical sexuality is an urgent need.<sup>33</sup>

As we observed at the beginning of this study, what we have said here may make very little difference to what people end up doing. On the other hand, God may use what we have said here to speak to some of us and change us. However that may be, whether we are 'single', happily or unhappily married, facing divorce or contemplating remarriage, or already divorced and remarried, all of us can come to the truth of these words:

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted . . .  
Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;  
do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace . . .  
For your Maker is your husband,  
the LORD of hosts is his name;  
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,  
the God of the whole earth he is called.  
For the LORD has called you  
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,  
like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off,  
says your God.  
For a brief moment I abandoned you,

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<sup>33</sup> Bingham, *Man, Woman and Sexuality*, pp. 94–95.

but with great compassion I will gather you.  
In overflowing wrath for a moment  
I hid my face from you,  
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,  
says the LORD, your Redeemer . . .  
For the mountains may depart  
and the hills be removed,  
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,  
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,  
says the LORD, who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54:11, 4, 5–8, 10).

***Question for reflection***

- *How well do we know God as our faithful Husband?*