



What the Bible Says about

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE



Wayne Grudem

“Fresh contributions to the longstanding debate over divorce and remarriage are rare. The relevant biblical texts have been picked over for centuries, and the lines of debate have hardened. And yet, somehow, Wayne Grudem has given us that rare, fresh insight into the Bible that changes everything. Grudem affirms the traditional Erasmian view, which allows for divorce and remarriage in cases of sexual immorality and desertion. But he also shows—based on new research on 1 Corinthians 7:15—that divorce and remarriage are permitted in cases of abuse as well. Grudem offers compassionate, biblical advice to those wrestling with the ethics of divorce. Anyone who wishes to understand what the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage must reckon with this book.”

Denny Burk, President, The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood; Professor of Biblical Studies, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Future generations will thank God for Wayne Grudem’s groundbreaking research on the text of 1 Corinthians 7:15 and his broad pastoral wisdom on the Bible’s teaching on divorce and remarriage.”

R. Kent Hughes, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage

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What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage

Wayne Grudem

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Bible, what are the legitimate grounds for divorce, if any?

Is divorce morally acceptable in a case of physical abuse or neglect?

If a divorce is granted for biblically legitimate reasons, is remarriage always allowed?

Can a divorced person become a church officer?

What reasons are given for the “no remarriage” view?

In marriage, a man and woman commit to live with each other as husband and wife for life. In order for them to keep this commitment, *both parties* have to remain in the marriage. But when one party decides to leave the marriage, either to be with another partner or simply to end the existing relationship, it becomes impossible for the remaining spouse to faithfully fulfill his or her commitment (a husband, for example, cannot *live with* and *act as a husband* to a wife who is living with another man). Therefore, the question of divorce arises.¹

1. Some portions of this book were adapted from the essay “Divorce and Remarriage” in the *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2545–47, with permission of the publisher. (I was the primary author of this article.)

Under what circumstances, if any, is it morally right to obtain a divorce and thereby dissolve a marriage? And if divorce occurs, is it morally right for a divorced person to marry someone else? These and other questions will be addressed in this book.

A. DIVORCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

1. The Divorce Rate Is Higher, but Not As High As Is Sometimes Said. Divorce has now become more common than it was in previous generations. In the early part of the twentieth century, the divorce rate in the United States was approximately 0.9 per 1,000 total population.² Throughout the twentieth century the divorce rate slowly increased, then rose rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s as many states passed no-fault divorce laws.³ The divorce rate peaked in the early 1980s at approximately 5.0 per 1,000 total population (approximately 1.2 million divorces).⁴ After 1985, the divorce rate gradually declined, so that in 2018 there were approximately 782,038 divorces or annulments in America, or 2.9 per 1,000 total population.⁵ But the

2. “Marriages and Divorces, 1900–2012,” Information Please, citing information from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005044.html>.

3. No-fault divorce laws allow for a divorce to be granted without any requirement to show that one party to the marriage has committed some wrongdoing (such as adultery, desertion, or cruelty) that makes the marriage unworkable. In a no-fault divorce proceeding, one of the parties simply has to show that the marriage is no longer viable and is beyond repair (for example, because of “irreconcilable differences”) without having to prove that the other party is responsible. Specific requirements vary from state to state.

4. “Marriages and Divorces, 1900–2012.”

5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Marriage and Divorce Trends, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss>

number of divorces per 1,000 population has gone down primarily because many couples are now living together instead of getting married and more people are remaining single. (There were approximately 10.6 marriages per 1,000 people in the early 1980s, but only 6.8 marriages per 1,000 people in 2009–2013 and 6.5 per 1,000 people in 2018.⁶)

However, it is not true that 50 percent of marriages end in divorce today (a statistic that is sometimes repeated in popular media reports). After extensive statistical analysis, social researcher Shaunti Feldhahn reported in 2014, “According to one of the most recent Census Bureau surveys, 72 percent of people who have ever been married are still married to their first spouse”—and the remaining 28 percent are not all divorced persons, because the total also includes those who have been widowed through the death of a spouse, a category that accounts for perhaps as many as 8 percent.⁷ That suggests that “somewhere around 20 to 25 percent of first marriages end in divorce.”⁸ Feldhahn concludes, “Imagine the difference to our collective consciousness if we say ‘Most marriages last a lifetime’ rather than ‘Half of marriages end in divorce.’”⁹

/marriage_divorce_tables.htm. “National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends,” table linked at <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm>. Note: The CDC’s statistics exclude data for California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, and Minnesota.

6. “National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends.”

7. Shaunti Feldhahn, *The Good News about Marriage: Debunking Discouraging Myths about Marriage and Divorce* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2014), 21–22.

8. Feldhahn, *The Good News about Marriage*, 22.

9. Feldhahn, *The Good News about Marriage*, 25.

The divorce rate is even lower for those who attend church regularly. Feldhahn says:

Weekly church attendance alone lowers the divorce rate significantly—roughly 25 to 50 percent, depending on the study. The popular belief that the rate of divorce is the same inside and outside the church is based on a deeply entrenched *misunderstanding* about the results of several George Barna surveys over the past decades. A misunderstanding that, Mr. Barna told me, he would love to correct in the public's mind.¹⁰

Speaking personally, I have long been skeptical of the claims that 50 percent of marriages end in divorce and that the divorce rate among evangelical Christians is the same as in the general society. I have been skeptical because such claims seemed to be wildly inaccurate in terms of the people we have known. Margaret and I have come to know many hundreds and probably thousands of actual married couples over our 51 years of marriage. We have lived in six different states and two countries (we spent over four years in the UK); we have been active members of nine different churches; and I have taught for 43 years in three different educational institutions with hundreds of students, and the number of divorces that we are aware of is absolutely tiny, certainly less than 5 percent of the married couples we have known and probably closer to 1 percent.

10. Feldhahn, *The Good News about Marriage*, 66.

Marriage counselors Jan and David Stoop report similar anecdotal evidence:

One couple, who work together in a marriage ministry involving many couples, shared in their response to our questionnaire that they had found only one couple in 1500 who pray together on a regular basis ever gets divorced.¹¹

Feldhahn includes other encouraging statistics about marriage, tabulating sociological research from multiple sources. She reports, “The median number of those who say they are in happy marriages is around 90 percent,” and, after discounting for some statistical variability, she concludes, “The actual percentage of happy marriages could be a bit lower or higher, but 80 percent seems like a very safe—in some ways, even conservative—number.”¹²

However, it is still the case that millions of couples in the United States and other countries, including Christian couples, get divorced every year. And therefore it is important that we understand the teaching of God’s Word on this issue, and that we understand more fully the consequences of divorce as well.

2. The Tragic Consequences of Divorce. Because divorce is more common today than in previous generations, some people might assume that it is less harmful in people’s lives

11. Jan Stoop and David Stoop, *When Couples Pray Together: Creating Intimacy and Spiritual Wholeness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 2000), 31.

12. Feldhahn, *The Good News about Marriage*, 66.

than it used to be. But the most thorough long-term study of the consequences of divorce does not confirm that assumption. The study was headed by Judith Wallerstein, founder and executive director of the Center for the Family in Transition in Corte Madera, California. The results of this study have been published in a number of books stretching over many years.¹³

The results of Wallerstein's study are heartbreaking, and I can only mention a few points. She and her colleagues interviewed 60 families (120 parents with 131 children) who were going through divorces in 1971. They then interviewed the same people at intervals of one year, five years, and 10 years after the divorces in order to ascertain the results on people's lives. No other study of this magnitude has ever been done on the long-term consequences of divorce.¹⁴

Here are some of the notable conclusions from the study:

Men and women tell us very clearly at the 10-year mark that the stress of being a single parent never lightens

13. The material that I cite below is taken from the study published 10 years after divorces had occurred: Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade after Divorce* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989). Supplemental material that does not contradict but largely affirms the earlier study is found in Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: The 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

14. Wallerstein explains that the researchers chose a homogeneous population group for their study, in which the majority of the men were highly educated professionals or were owners of or in management positions in businesses, and 75 percent of the women had at least some college education. Half of the families belonged to churches or synagogues. Wallerstein says, "This, then, is divorce under the best of circumstances." Wallerstein and Blakeslee, *Second Chances*, xv.

and that the fear of being alone never ceases. (*Second Chances*, p. 10)

Incredibly, one-half of the women and one-third of the men are still intensely angry at their former spouses despite the passage of 10 years. Because their feelings have not changed, anger has become an ongoing, and sometimes dominant, presence in their children's lives as well. (p. 29)

In only one in seven of the former couples did the former wife and husband experience stable second marriages. (p. 41)

Some men and women seem to be held together by marriage; it brings order and security to their lives, and the structure itself provides their *raison d'être* and their highest level of adult adjustment. For both men and women, marriage in middle or later life has an additional and very important function: it provides an internal buffer against the anxieties of aging, of being old and alone, and of facing the inevitability of death. It also provides external supports to cope with the increasing disabilities and infirmities of old age. When the structure is removed, they are left feeling extremely vulnerable, and the external symptoms of physical deterioration are symbolic of the internal conflict and emotional distress. (p. 53)

People like to think that because there are so many divorced families, adults and children will find divorce

easier or even easy. But neither parents nor children find comfort in numbers. Divorce is not a more “normal” experience simply because so many people have been touched by it. Our findings revealed that all children suffer from divorce, no matter how many of their friends have gone through it. . . . Each and every child cries out, “Why me?” (p. 303)

Children of all ages feel intensely rejected when their parents divorce. . . . Some keep their anger hidden for years out of fear of upsetting parents or for fear of retribution and punishment; others show it. (p. 12)

Children feel intense loneliness. . . . Even when children are encouraged not to take sides, they often feel that they must. However, when they do take sides to feel more protected, they also feel despair because they are betraying one parent over the other. If they do not take sides, they feel isolated and disloyal to both parents. There is no solution to their dilemma. (p. 13)

[After 10 and sometimes 15 years,] even though they no longer have any illusions that their parents could ever remarry their sense of loss and wistful yearning persists, and their emotions run deep and strong. They feel less protected, less cared for, less comforted. . . . These children share vivid, gut-wrenching memories of their parents’ separation. (p. 23)

[Nearly one-third of the children] between the ages of 19 and 29 have little or no ambition 10 years after their

parents' divorce. They are drifting through life with no set goals, limited educations, and a sense of helplessness. . . . They don't make long-term plans and are aiming below the intellectual and educational achievements of their fathers and mothers. (pp. 148–49)

One of the great tragedies of divorce is that many fathers have absolutely no idea that their children feel rejected. . . . Without the continued support of their fathers, these boys lack self-confidence and pride in their own masculinity. . . . [The girls] too feel hurt, unsure of their femininity, and insecure in their relationships with men. . . . Many young people, especially boys, cannot express the anger they feel toward the parent who is rejecting them. (pp. 150–51)

I am not quoting this material to say that such destructive consequences are inevitable, for statistics and probabilities do not imply certain results for any one individual. In addition, Christians who go through divorce and Christians who provide support to those going through divorce have the additional factor of the power of the Holy Spirit to heal people's lives. Sometimes longstanding anger or fear can be changed by the Holy Spirit's transforming power working within people in answer to prayer. And well-functioning churches can often provide the effective "family" that will make up in some measure for what is lost in divorce. Still, these sobering findings help us understand why God established a wonderful moral standard of lifelong marriage between one man

and one woman as the pattern for marriages in the human race (see the next section).

One verse that is commonly understood to reveal God's own sorrow regarding the painful consequences of divorce is found in the last book of the Old Testament. According to several translations, Malachi says this:

“For I hate divorce,” says the LORD, the God of Israel,
“and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says
the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 2:16 NASB)¹⁵

If this is the correct translation, it does not mean that God considers all divorces to be morally wrong (for other passages of Scripture must be considered), but only that God is deeply grieved to see the painful consequences that flow from divorces.

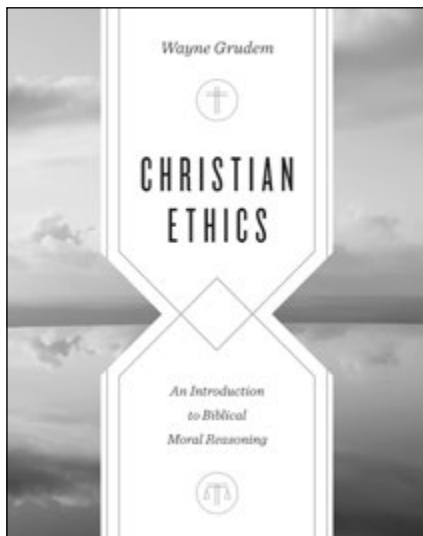
Whatever view one takes of Malachi 2:16, interpreters who have differing views of this verse still agree that the consistent emphasis of both the Old and New Testaments is on the importance of preserving marriage and avoiding divorce in all but a few very narrowly defined circumstances.

B. GOD'S ORIGINAL PLAN IS FOR LIFELONG MONOGAMOUS MARRIAGE

God's original plan for the human race, as indicated in his creation of Adam and Eve as husband and wife (Gen.

15. The RSV, NRSV, NET, NIV 1984, and NLT all translate this as God saying, “I hate divorce.” The ESV translates this sentence as “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts.” See the appendix (p. 88) for a discussion of the translation issues involved in this difficult verse.

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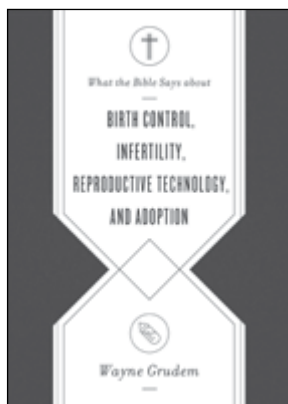
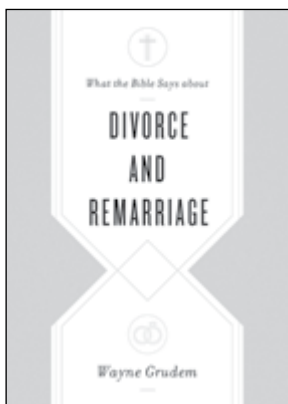
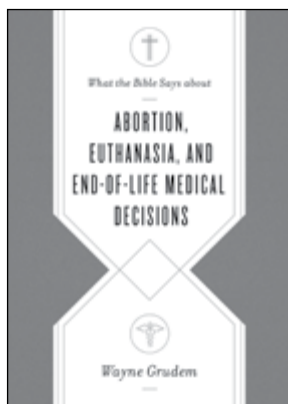
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The topic of divorce is a complicated one, even among Christians. The Bible provides some clear answers, but gray areas remain. In this short booklet, theologian Wayne Grudem offers a thought-provoking analysis of what the Bible says—and doesn't say—about divorce and remarriage.

“Future generations will thank God for Wayne Grudem’s groundbreaking research on the text of 1 Corinthians 7:15 and his broad pastoral wisdom on the Bible’s teaching on divorce and remarriage.”

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“Fresh contributions to the longstanding debate over divorce and remarriage are rare. The relevant biblical texts have been picked over for centuries. And yet, somehow, Wayne Grudem has given us that rare, fresh insight into the Bible that changes everything. Grudem allows for divorce and remarriage in cases of sexual immorality and desertion. But he also shows—based on new research on 1 Corinthians 7:15—that divorce and remarriage are permitted in cases of abuse as well. Anyone who wishes to understand what the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage must reckon with this book.”

DENNY BURK, author, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?*

The What the Bible Says About series was adapted from Wayne Grudem's *Christian Ethics* in order to equip Christians with biblical answers to common ethical dilemmas.

WAYNE GRUDEM (PhD, University of Cambridge; DD, Westminster Theological Seminary) is Distinguished Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies at Phoenix Seminary.