

# Divorce and Remarriage - The Significance of Union

By David Sheats

Published by NTChurchSource.com

The subject of divorce and remarriage is one of the most critical questions that the church must face in our day. There is much disagreement on what the Bible teaches and what God's will is in these areas. Books abound on the subject, coming from various viewpoints. Some use a detailed examination of scripture with an emphasis on proper translation from the original. Some teaching points out the low moral condition and hardness of heart of the professing church today, resulting in the unwillingness of men and women to face what the scripture says. Another approach begins with human reasoning—what men perceive God would want—then seeks to justify this position in scripture.

I would like to address this subject from a somewhat different direction, seeking to examine it in light of the overall purpose of God. There is no doubt that God views purity in the man-woman relationship to be of great importance, but why? Is God just trying to make the way hard? Does He delight in breaking hearts and destroying relationships? Is God against us? I think in our minds we would answer "no" to these questions, but when we read all the straight and strong statements pertaining to marriage in the scriptures, we may somehow feel that God's way is too difficult, and begin to look for a way out. This is deadly. We must look for a way *into* the perfect will of God, not a way out in order to do what we want to do.

Consider the following scriptures that speak of God's ultimate purpose.

*"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; **that they also may be one in Us**, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; **that they may be made perfect in one**, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me" (John 17:20-23).*

*"Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, **that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1:2-4).*

*"For **we are members of His body**, of His flesh and of His bones. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband" (Ephesians 5:30-33).*

These scriptures all speak of relationships in a much higher way than we normally do. Jesus speaks about a "glory" He has given to us so that we may be "one even as God is one," Peter speaks about "exceedingly great and precious promises," and Paul speaks about a "mystery." These words are high and lofty. Have we carefully considered the riches that are open to us? What are our concepts of God's ultimate purpose in salvation, marriage, and the church? Do we see a connection among these three? God's plan for mankind down through the ages is not disjointed. Marriage is not an afterthought, and His design for the church is not optional. Everything in God's plan is perfectly designed and connected.

It is all one plan. This means that seeing clearly in one area will help us to see clearly in another area.

Our purpose here is to take a "bird's eye view" of these three areas—our personal relationship with God, the marriage relationship, and the present working of both within the body of Christ—so that we may better see the relation among all three. They are all meant to work together. God's plan and purpose for mankind is perfect in every way, and He has made full provision for us to enter into all that He has in mind. Let us not let lesser concepts keep us from God's ultimate purpose.

## **Salvation Is By Union With God**

A question often asked in our day is "Are you saved?" Men may mean different things by that question, but if we compare the way (and the number of times) the word "salvation" is used today with how it is used in the Bible, I believe we will see that a wrong emphasis is being held before us. Usually when someone asks this question, the thought is, "If you were to die today, would you be saved from eternal judgment and go to be with Jesus in heaven?" We should be able to answer that question with full assurance, but my question is this: Is this really the main thrust of the teaching of the New Testament? Is it all about "a ticket to heaven" or is the purpose of God much higher?

Let us draw upon the marriage relationship. What is more important—the wedding day or the relationship that follows? I think we would all agree that the wedding is important, as a day when the relationship is made formal and two become one in the eyes of God and man. But the wedding day is only one day, and now life is before the couple. Each day is now devoted to living out the reality that was announced on the wedding day. For the marriage to last, concentration must now be on the *relationship*. This relationship was proclaimed on the wedding day, but now it must be a real and ongoing experience.

Is not our relationship with Jesus the same? It must have a starting point, but the reality is in the union that is lived out day by day. The command of Jesus was, "Abide in Me and I in you" (John 15:4). "Abiding" has the main thought of continuing in an unending (and deepening) relationship. Thus I believe a better question would be, "Are you abiding in Jesus?" That is a question of present experience, not a past decision. If the relationship is present today, there must have been a beginning. If the relationship is absent today, does it make any difference what happened in the past? Can a decision save us?

Let us go back to the scripture quoted from 2 Peter 1:2-4. Peter tells us that we escape the corruption that is in the world (we are "saved") by being partakers of the divine nature. How do we do this? Peter says it is through the "exceeding great and precious promises." What are these promises? We may think of many things, but I believe we can trace all of God's promises back to two: the promise of a Savior and the promise of the Holy Spirit. All other promises are contained within these two, and both promises are God Himself.

The promise of a coming Savior is deep in the scriptures from the beginning of time. "*From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus—*" (Acts 13:23). This Savior was to bring deliverance to Israel and to all mankind. However, the kind of deliverance He was to bring was not clearly understood, for when Jesus presented Himself, He was rejected. Men wanted an earthly deliverance, but God had something higher in mind. The Savior was rejected according to the plan and foreknowledge of God (Jesus was the Lamb "slain from the foundation of the world"), but through the price He paid at Calvary the door was opened for us to the second promise. "*Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear*" (Acts 2:33). In much of the gospel that is proclaimed today, the

difference between the provision of God in Jesus and that which is in the Holy Spirit is not clear; thus, many believers have fallen short of God's intention.

The work of Jesus was to pay the price of sin so that we could be reconciled to God. *"For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation"* (Romans 5:10-11). When a person comes to Jesus, he comes as a sinner asking to be forgiven. Jesus forgives sin based on the price He paid at Calvary. A true transaction with God results in deeds of repentance. Experiencing the reconciliation with God is the result. The weight of sin and guilt that held him down rolls off and he is a free man. This experience is wonderful, more than can be put into words. The enmity is gone, and he can now draw near to God with full assurance. But unfortunately, this is where many stop. They are told that they are now "saved," and then instructed in the ways they should grow up and serve the Lord. The problem is, too often they have only experienced the benefit of one promise. They have not yet partaken of the divine nature because they have not yet received *life* from God. ***"...having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."***

The scriptures are very clear that partaking of the Holy Spirit is a distinct act of faith separate from forgiveness of sin. One such scripture says, *"Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 8:14-17). There are many today who teach that when one believes in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin, the Holy Spirit is automatically given. This teaching has left many short of God's provision and purpose. I will not attempt to amplify on this here, but simply point out that there are two promises, and we need both.

What happens when the Holy Spirit comes to abide within? God comes to take possession of that which is rightfully His. *"Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?"* (1 Corinthians 6:19). When God comes to abide within, in the words of Peter, we become "partakers of the divine nature." A union is formed between the spirit of man and the spirit of God. *"But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him"* (1 Corinthians 6:17). It is this *union*, this "marriage" to God, that forms the basis of our great salvation. In the words of Paul: *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new"* (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are "in Christ" (in union with Christ) because we have been joined to God through the indwelling of God the Spirit.

God's plan of salvation is union: union with Himself by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Sin brought death, but Jesus came to give us life (John 10:10). He saves us through His life (Romans 5:10). He gives us life not as a gift separate from Himself, but by bringing us into union with God. God's life is eternal by its very nature, and the only way we can have that eternal life is by being brought into this union with God.

All of the teaching given to the churches in the New Testament is with the assumption that this union with God has taken place. This was the gospel at the beginning. The door was now open for God to come to abide within His temple. It was no longer trying to follow the commandments of God written on tablets of stone, but "Christ in you, the hope of glory." While most would agree that this is the concept of New Testament Christianity, the bigger question is whether this relationship actually exists in individuals. To admonish believers to live out of this new relationship—God dwelling within—if in

fact He is not, is a setup for failure. The root problem for so many believers lies just here. They have been told that they are "a new creation in Christ Jesus" and that they are "partakers of the divine nature" but in experience they have only known forgiveness of sin. They still need to be baptized by Jesus with the Holy Spirit—brought into union with God. Only then can they live in the power of His endless life.

## **Marriage: Two Becoming One By Union**

From the beginning of the human race, God has proclaimed the concept of union through the relationship of a man and woman. *"And Adam said: 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"* (Genesis 2:23-24). Here in the very first marriage nothing is said about a covenant or ceremony or vows, but we find an amazing statement of union. The two (man and woman) became *one* in God's eyes. I believe this statement by God should form the foundation for how we think about marriage.

In the Ephesians 5 passage quoted at the beginning, Paul speaks about the marriage relationship and the union of Christ with the church with exactly the same words used in Genesis. Paul says we are members of Christ, of His flesh and of His bones. The relationship is comparable, and both may be referred to as a mystery. I believe we must see the connection between these two in the mind of God as we think about either relationship.

The significance of this may not be obvious at first, but I believe it will become more so as we continue. In the marriage relationship God holds a picture before us at all times, of the relationship that exists between His bride (the church) and Himself. The example is first for the man and woman, then for the children, but also for all of mankind as they look on. The heavenly relationship goes beyond the earthly relationship, but both cooperate to reveal the mind of God to us. His thought in both is *union*. If we accept a lower idea about either relationship, our concept of the other will suffer as well.

What are some of the usual concepts about what creates the marriage relationship? Some would say marriage is primarily a covenant: that the relationship is established as two people commit to each other in a binding covenant before God. A husband and wife are admonished not to break the covenant, or may be taught that before God it cannot be broken except by death. While I agree that both should have this covenant commitment in their hearts as they enter into marriage, the flesh is weak and the reality is that one or both may break the covenant.

Consider these words of Jesus: *"And He answered and said to them, 'Have you not read that He 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 then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate'"* (Matthew 19:4-6). What does this passage say makes two one? Is it a covenant? A ceremony? Vows in a public setting? The scripture does not say so. Rather it says that there is a "leaving" and a "cleaving." Then Jesus says: *"What God has joined, let not man separate."* The *union* made by God based on the couple's actions cannot be broken. Man may choose to break a covenant, but only death can break the union that was created by God. This is the only definition of marriage that I can find in the scriptures. I believe there will be a binding covenant in the hearts of those who enter into marriage seriously before God, and this is right and good, but again, it is the act of God which makes them one, as seen in Malachi 2:14-15: *"...Yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring..."*

What does it mean to "leave and cleave"? My own answer is that a man openly leaves his father's house (authority) and joins himself to his wife as they set up another household. It is not a secret thing, but something done before men and God. They live openly as husband and wife. Based on this, God declares them one. It is not what they say that makes them one in God's eyes, but what they do.

With the looseness of relationships in our day, a frequent question that arises is: when is this marriage "authentic" in God's eyes? Men have struggled over this question for centuries and tried to make rules to cover every situation. Personally, I doubt that we can come up with rules that answer every question. For a normal wedding where the announcement is made at a public ceremony and the marriage consummated through physical union, I think the answer is clear. But if a couple sets up a household privately, we may have questions. If this is the case, I can only encourage a couple that is serious with God to go to Him for the answer. He is the One we will stand before someday, and I believe He will be faithful to answer an honest heart. Remember, He is for us, not against us.

Many (or perhaps most) would say that the social law of their country determines whether a couple is married or not. By this concept, even if two live openly as a couple, if they do not follow the laws of the land and execute a marriage license (or whatever is customary), they are not married and are not one in God's eyes. Those who hold this view would say that the couple is living in fornication during this time. But I would ask: where do we see man's laws in the Genesis account? Where do we see them in the story of Isaac and Rebecca? Were these two not married (one) in God's eyes? After a couple lives together for a period of time, even most governments recognize this as a "common law" marriage.

I am *not* making a case for ignoring the laws of the land, for we are admonished to keep them for testimony's sake. But I do not see a basis in scripture to say that obeying the laws of the land is what makes a couple one in God's eyes. What I do see is that if a man and woman "leave and cleave," God says they are one, whether they obey the laws or not. Obeying the laws makes the marriage clear in man's eyes and gives a good testimony, but it does not make them more "one." God is the one who joins, not man. In addition to this, the danger I see in this view is that it opens the door for man to separate the couple. In other words, "What man has joined, he may dissolve."

Another group would say it is the church that joins a couple. Some religious groups go so far as to say that the only marriages God recognizes are the ones their group performs, and all the rest of the world is living in sin. There are many variations of this viewpoint, but where do we see any example or teaching in scripture that gives the church (or any religious group) authority to make a man and woman one in God's eyes? I cannot find it. Again, if a religious group had the authority to make a couple one, it would open the door for them also to dissolve the relationship.

I believe it is extremely important to see that the *union* created when a couple "leaves and cleaves" is the foundation of a marriage. Union is what makes a man and woman married in God's eyes, and only death can break this union. *"Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband" (Romans 7:1-2). "A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39).*

## The Church is the Bride of Christ By Union

*"For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:30-32).* Paul here likens the relationship of Christ to the church to that of a husband to his wife. However, he continues and speaks not just about an illustration but a spiritual reality. He calls this relationship "a great mystery." He says that we actually *are* "members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones." What makes the church the bride of Christ in reality—more than just an analogy?

*"For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many" (1 Corinthians 12:12-14).*

Paul tells us that each member being "made to drink into one Spirit" baptizes us into one body. We have been joined together by receiving a common life: the eternal life of God. Each one is made a member of the one body by our connection to Christ by the Spirit. This *union* is not just a symbol or illustration, but a spiritual reality.

As in the marriage relationship, the union is formed in one day, the day Christ baptizes us into the body by the Spirit. Now the rest of our life is to be lived in the reality of that union. We cannot live out the union if it does not exist, but once the union is made, our responsibility is to live out that union with other members of the body. All instruction to the church is on the basis of this union. For example, we are admonished to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). We do not create the unity (God has done it by bringing each member into union with Himself) but we maintain that unity by how we conduct ourselves.

What is our part in entering into this new relationship? Is it not very similar to that of the bride? God comes to us and bids us respond to His invitation. Our response is to forsake all other relationships and give ourselves to Him. But even though we may be very sincere in wanting this new relationship with God, we cannot bring it about. The work is of God, not of man. All we can do is yield ourselves to Him. He is the One who creates the relationship by coming to dwell within. The *union* is created by God, not by us. This is the New Covenant. It is a relationship that depends on God, and our place is to yield and respond to Him in faith.

We read in the book of Revelation that this marriage with Jesus will be consummated at the end of the ages at the great wedding supper of the Lamb. *"And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, 'Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, 'Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!'" And he said to me, 'These are the true sayings of God'" (Revelation 19:6-9).*

If this is true, what is our relationship with God now? In the terms of the Jewish wedding practices, we have been betrothed to Christ. *"For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2).* In the Jewish culture the betrothal was binding, and the bride was referred to as the wife of her husband even before the marriage was consummated through physical union. The betrothal period was a time of preparation,

and at the appointed time the bridegroom came and took his "wife" to the house he had prepared.

So it is with our relationship with Christ now. This is a time of preparation for our marriage to Christ. To accomplish this preparation, God has given us a "guarantee" that He is serious about this commitment, namely the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. *"In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory"* (Ephesians 1:13-14). Thus God (by the indwelling Holy Spirit) is the One who is preparing us for our full union with Christ on that great wedding day. Only He can prepare us for such a high calling. It must be the work of God, not of man.

If we see all of this clearly, it should give great urgency to our response to the ongoing discipline of the Holy Spirit. *"Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it"* (Hebrews 12:9-11).

If we can see this *master plan* of God in some measure, it should help to remove lesser concepts of the church from our vision and direct our pathway into the fullness of God's purpose. The church is not about meetings and activities but about *union*—spiritual union with God and with each other. It is about answering the prayer of our Lord Jesus just before He went to Calvary: *"...that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."* This is not something only to be realized in heaven, but something that is taking place now. Every part of God's plan for us works out from this basis: that we are one just as He is one. When we are experiencing oneness with God and with each other, God can show forth the testimony of who He is and use that testimony to draw men to Himself. God is love, and love is expressed in union.

## **Divorce (Breaking a God-Ordained Union)**

*"For the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence," says the Lord of hosts. Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously"* (Malachi 2:16).

God hates divorce! What is divorce? Divorce is an attempt to separate a union that was made by God. It is evil and destructive in every way, and it brings violence at every turn. It affects in countless ways, and leaves a path of pain and bitterness from beginning to end. It is the plague of our age and may well be a root cause of the crumbling of nations. The church is called to stand as salt and light, and if we are to fulfill that calling we must stand with God against divorce in every way God enables us to do so.

*"So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate"* (Matthew 19:6). Jesus tells us that when two join themselves together as husband and wife, they are one in reality. This oneness goes far beyond the physical union and enters into other realms, some of which we may understand to some degree and others we may not. Paul says it is a mystery, so I question whether we can explain everything about this oneness. Divorce seeks to break that union. Jesus made it very clear that God has never approved of divorce. *"The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?' And He answered and said to them, 'Have you not read that He 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 then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.' They said to Him, 'Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?' He said to them, 'Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery'" (Matthew 19:3-9).*

If we look back to the Old Testament mentions of divorce, we will see that God always viewed it as a very serious offense. Among the instructions for priests who minister to the Lord we find this: *"They shall not take a wife who is a harlot or a defiled woman, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God"* (Leviticus 21:7). Why is divorce so serious in God's eyes? Is it not because it represents everything that is contrary to the nature and purpose of God? God is a God of love, and love brings oneness. Divorce comes when love has failed, and separation is the result. The devil always works to divide what God has brought together. Divorce brings shame to those who are involved and an open triumph for the enemy of our souls. The pain that follows divorce, not only in the husband and wife but also in children, family, and friends, is far-reaching. The effects of the damage often last for a lifetime. Apart from the miracle working of God's grace, men and women seldom completely recover. Statistics tell us that children of divorced parents are much more likely to experience the same failure in their marriage. No wonder God hates divorce.

Our purpose here is not to dwell on these things, but to emphasize that divorce is not to be taken lightly. It is a very serious expression of sin in God's eyes. The rampant divorce rate in our society today is having a devastating effect on so many. As children of light we need to take God's mind as our mind and exercise a holy hatred towards divorce. We need to stand against this flow of sin, so that lives might be rescued from this destruction and saved from the damage that is sure to come.

One minister used this illustration: "Imagine if this room had no windows, and only one door. If a fire broke out over here, what would your first reaction be? You would run to the door. You would get out as fast as you could. But what if there were no door? Or it was locked and dead-bolted from the outside? If a fire broke out, and there was truly no way out, what would you do? Your focus would be on putting out the fire, not on running from the flame. We should view our marriages as barred shut, with no exit. Then our focus would not be on running out, but on restoring the fellowship, squelching the flames of anger and fanning the flames of love."

## **Adultery (A Sinful Union)**

After divorce, a person who has known the joys of union in marriage now finds himself alone and longing for companionship again. This is not easy to deal with, because memories do not go away easily. Often a major contributing factor to divorce is a very weak (or absent) relationship with God. Now a person is struggling with loneliness in the same weak spiritual condition, and it takes drastic steps in God to see the direction changed. One of the serious consequences of divorce is that it opens the door for adultery, and God views adultery as an even greater sin than divorce. (Divorce may not be sin if it is forced upon a partner who desires to keep the marriage unbroken, but often it is the outcome of unforgiveness and bitterness—which is sin—destroying the relationship.)

The scripture never tells us that there will be no divorced people in heaven, but it does say that there will be no adulterers there. *"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor*



*sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4).*

What is adultery? Jesus is very clear about this. *"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery" (Luke 16:18). "In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. So He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery'" (Mark 10:10-12). "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery" (Matthew 19:9).*

I quote these scriptures from three gospels to emphasize the veracity of the statements of Jesus. Paul reinforces the matter while writing to the Romans: *"Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man" (Romans 7:1-3).*

God did not leave the area to be unclear. Very simply put, adultery (or an adulterous relationship) is a man or woman joining themselves to another person's husband or wife. All of the scriptures above speak about not just an act of adultery, but an adulterous relationship: a second "marriage" (leaving and cleaving) that takes place after one or both parties has been married previously and their first mate still lives.

I will not try to address all the widespread ways of reasoning that arise when looking at this matter, but just mention a few. One is based on Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 where Jesus says *"except for sexual immorality."* These scriptures are often used to justify a divorce (and usually remarriage) if one of the partners has been unfaithful. There are many opinions about what is meant by "except for sexual immorality," often called "the exception clause." I believe it is a reference to the Jewish marriage customs. Bible scholars tell us that the Gospel of Matthew was written to Jews, and in the Jewish custom, the bride and groom were considered man and wife from the beginning of the betrothal period. The commitment was binding, but there was a year of preparation before the marriage was consummated and the two came together to live as one. If unfaithfulness (sexual immorality) was discovered during betrothal, the man was free to divorce his wife without further consequences. An example of this in scripture is Joseph and Mary (see Matthew 1:18-25). If a person does not accept the view that this exception applied only to the Jewish betrothal period, may I point out that while some may use this scripture to justify divorce on the basis of unfaithfulness, I do not believe there is any foundation for remarriage if we consider the scriptures as a whole.

Another common justification is the statement by Paul regarding all things becoming new in Christ. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).* This is interpreted by some to mean that if a person is in an adulterous relationship (a second "marriage") when they come to the Lord, "all things are new" and the one they are with is their legitimate wife or husband from this point forward. If marriage were a Christian institution, perhaps this argument could have some validity. However, in the passages pertaining to marriage, there is no mention of faith before God being a factor. If a man and woman "leave and cleave," God considers them one whether they are Christians or not.

The Amplified Bible translation of this passage may help us: *"Therefore if any person is [engrafted] in Christ (the Messiah) he is a new creation (a new creature altogether); the old [previous moral and spiritual condition] has passed away. Behold, the fresh and new has come!"* (2 Corinthians 5:17, Amplified Bible) This brings out the truth that the "new creation" refers to the interior of a person, not his exterior circumstances, such as his marital situation.

Becoming a Christian is not an opportunity to get a new wife or husband, nor does a couple need to be married again because they were not Christians at their original ceremony. If a couple is in adultery when either or both turn to the Lord, the only way to be free from this sin is to repent and forsake the adulterous relationship. Yes, all things are new in the sense that *I* am now a new creation in Christ Jesus, but this does not make another person my wife or husband if they were not before.

## **Repentance From Adultery**

The one question that is extremely critical at this point is this: on what basis does God forgive sin? I believe the scriptures are clear that God forgives sin on the basis of the death of Christ at Calvary. We experience the benefit of Calvary when we come to Jesus in faith, acknowledging our need, and asking Him to forgive us for our sin. The results of faith will be evident by obedience (or deeds of repentance), for faith without works is dead. If it is only a "sorrow of the world," it leaves us still in our sin. In speaking to the Corinthians about this subject, Paul commended them for their "godly sorrow" that leads to salvation and explained that his commendation was based upon the fruit of obedience that he saw in their lives:

*"For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter"* (2 Corinthians 7:10-11).

The next question is this: what is repentance from adultery? If a second marriage after divorce is indeed adultery, as Jesus says it is, can the adultery be forgiven if we do not break the wrong relationship? Most find this very difficult to accept because of emotional ties, children, and the desire for companionship. But can we let our natural reasoning or desires direct our choices if they contradict God's written word?

Being absolute with truth is foreign to many in our age. Even those who agree that the second marriage was "wrong" commonly conclude that another divorce is certainly not the answer. Again, I believe this conclusion must be based on reasoning, emotions and desires, as I see nothing in the scriptures to back it up. If the second relationship is wrong (being joined to another person's mate), this is not marriage in God's sight, but an adulterous relationship. Breaking an adulterous relationship may be called "divorce" by the laws of the land, but in God's eyes it is repentance if it is done in faith. God only acknowledges the original relationship, and "divorce" only refers to the breaking of a union that God recognizes as valid.

Some may feel this view is too harsh or absolute. But before rejecting it, consider some other expressions of sin. If a man were an alcoholic when he came to the Lord, would we not expect him to stop drinking? Or what about a liar, a thief, or a fornicator (an unmarried person who engages in sexual activity)? Could the former behavior continue after repentance unto salvation? When we come into union with God, He gives us the power to change our sinful behavior. If we expect these things to change, why would we think differently about adulterers? Maybe some would claim ignorance of

God's laws, but does scripture allow ignorance as a valid excuse for sin? Is the Holy Spirit not present at all times, convicting of sin and trying to stop us from entering into wrong relationships? God is faithful, but He does not force us to obey Him, and if we press past that conviction, we must bear the consequences of our actions.

If this view seems unsympathetic and inconsiderate of the potential consequences of breaking a wrong relationship, remember that we are dealing with a God who is holy and who also is completely *good*. He never fails us when we cast ourselves upon Him. I strongly encourage the reader to search the scriptures with an open heart, ready to *do* the will of God. God has designed marriage to be beautiful and right, but it is only for this lifetime. Our relationship with God is for eternity. If we look at marriage from an earthly viewpoint, we may allow things to affect us that God does not consider. But when we look from the perspective of a holy God, with a concern for His testimony and eternity in view, our conclusion must be different. The supernatural grace of God that is realized through faith will lift us to an entirely new level, and God will be experienced and glorified in ways we never dreamed were possible.

### **Adultery Defiles the Body of Christ**

Adultery in the marriage relationship is a great expression of sin in the eyes of God. It defiles all it touches and brings a rottenness that grows and spreads. God hates it and will not dwell where it is *tolerated*. It is not just a personal offense, but an offense to God in the midst of His bride.

*"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, 'These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass: 'I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works''"* (Revelation 2:18-23).

The church is the bride of Christ, and the Holy Spirit is preparing the bride to be married to Christ for all eternity. Purity is of the utmost importance. Thus the Holy Spirit will not tolerate any kind of impurity in the midst of God's people. If God is dwelling in the midst, and defilement of some kind begins to enter in, we can expect the strong movement of the Holy Spirit to cleanse—either through repentance or removal. God will not dwell with sin.

*"But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's"* (1 Corinthians 6:17-20).

*"Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.' 'I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.' Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God"* (2 Corinthians 6:17-7:1).

Many seem to know very little about the purity and separation required of God's people. Many groups tolerate adultery in their midst and would question or dismiss the statements I am making. But so often

men do not even know what it means to have God dwelling in the midst. They have interpreted religious activity (such as music, teaching, and meetings) for God's presence. God may not be in any of these things, but people may not know it. Brothers and sisters, we must be ruthlessly honest. What are the scriptural evidences that God is in our midst? Are we able to sense by the Spirit? Do we know what we should be looking for?

## **Union With God For Eternity**

God's ultimate purpose is that we may be one with Him for all eternity. Everything He is doing now is preparing us for that union. The union will be consummated at the marriage supper of the Lamb. God's ultimate purpose must guide us in every other part of His working. The perfection we need for that final marriage can only be accomplished by the grace of God. Grace is brought to us by Christ Jesus as He pours out the Holy Spirit in our hearts and brings us into union now. Grace is ability that comes from God to enable us to do what we cannot do in our own strength. Any of our efforts to bring about this perfection are as filthy rags in God's sight. His perfection is realized only by grace, and that grace comes to us through faith as we believe God and walk in the word that He speaks to our hearts.

Often the reason we fall short of God's ultimate purpose is that we do not see what it is. If we saw it clearly and let that revelation control everything else, we would stay on track and not go off into a ditch. But sometimes "we can't see the forest for the trees." We take a magnifying glass and focus in on some particular question or doctrine, but we do not stand back and fit it into the bigger picture. If we would step back and see how it all fits in, the correct answers to our questions may be much more obvious.

The question of divorce is made much clearer when we see that God's ultimate purpose in all things is oneness, or union. We should not need to go off into "ditches" of natural thinking, trying to justify various situations by a study of the Greek, by applying natural ideas about the love and compassion of God, or by any other type of reasoning that does not have its foundation in God's simple and eternal purpose for mankind in Christ. How could the destruction of a union that *God* creates between a man and woman ever be His will? How could deviation from His perfect plan not be sinful? And how could a holy God overlook sin and be true to His ultimate eternal purpose in Christ for mankind?

Another extremely important issue is our vision (or revelation) of the church. Many view the church as the place we meet together to worship God. Others see it as a place where the gospel is preached so that men might be saved. Others see the church mainly as an organization through which the gospel is taken to the ends of the earth. I do not question that all of these fit into the outworking of the church in some manner, but I do not believe any of them is the foundational controlling vision.

The church is the bride of Christ, the body of Christ, and the household of God. It is a place where God dwells, and where we may enter into union with God in the Spirit together. It is a place where sin is not allowed, and where every member is alive unto God. It is where God communes with man and man with God. It is where we are built together a habitation of God in the Spirit, and where we are being prepared for our final union with God on that great wedding day. Union is the central vision: union with God and union with each other. This spiritual union is real, visible, and practical. The church is a visible expression of this union. "Behold, how they love one another." When we see God's love in expression, with Christ as the head and the Holy Spirit filling His temple, we know we are seeing a true expression of the church.

Some have the concept that the body of Christ is worldwide, so they seek to work out the function of the church on that level. I agree that every believer who has been baptized by Christ in the Spirit is part

of the worldwide body of Christ, but practically, I cannot dwell together with believers in every part of the world. The body of Christ is universal in scope, but local in expression. Each body of believers that functions together in faith locally is an expression of Christ's one body. The union that God has made is expressed on a continual basis in a locality. One day we will be in His presence, and the limitations of time and distance will be no more. But now, in these bodies of clay, we are limited by both. However, this is not a hindrance to God, for He wants an expression of His body in every locality. As each body of believers gathers in faith unto Christ, submitting to His authority, He is the head of that expression of the one body. Our place is to submit to Him as Lord and allow Him to direct each expression of God's life.

From each family God will send forth members as He chooses. Some may have a small amount of grace, some great, but all God asks is that we be responsible with the grace He has given. With a larger portion of grace comes a greater responsibility to invest it for the glory of God and His purpose. Each member is responsible to move under the authority of Christ and in union with the rest of the body. This is not easy. It cannot be done separate from a living relationship with God. I do not see this as a "simple" working; it is demanding in every way. For Christ to be expressed means death to every expression of self. It requires total abandonment to God and His purpose, and a relationship of love that is worked out every day with God and with our brothers and sisters. All of these things and more must be working in a beginning and increasing way if we are to fulfill God's high and holy calling.

## **A Personal Word of Encouragement**

When truth comes to us, it finds each of us at a different place in life. This is true of all people and all truth, but some sins have more far-reaching consequences than others. For example, some turn to Jesus after they are in prison for committing a serious crime. Turning to Jesus does not necessarily mean they will be delivered from prison or from the judgment of man, but the blood of Jesus means a person can be forgiven by God even if they must die for their crime.

Perhaps the best time in life for the truth about divorce and remarriage to be established is in the hearts of young people who have not yet entered into any relationships. Our goal should be to reach every person at that age, that they may see the seriousness of relationships and avoid the crushing pain that comes from transgression of God's moral laws. Another place would be those who are in a proper relationship as husband and wife, but who are not yet convinced of the truth we are speaking about. (Some might think themselves unhappy in their marriage and even be considering divorce.) My encouragement to these is to search the scriptures and see if these things be so. Our lives touch many, and God wants us to be salt and light to the world around. If we give approval to sin, either by open agreement or passive avoidance of the issue, we have turned aside from our calling, often because we are not willing to take the persecution. John the Baptist lost his head for standing in truth over the issue of Herod entering into an unlawful relationship (see Mark 6:17-29). May God strengthen us that we may stand with Jesus in all things and commit to building our own marriages for His honor and glory.

Others have already gone through a divorce. Some might be contemplating a second relationship. This is often the time when believers consider what the scriptures say about divorce and remarriage. Unfortunately, by the time they begin to reflect on God's truth in this area, another person (and their own emotions and desires) may be already providing strong enticement toward a sinful relationship. If you find yourself here, I only plead from the depth of my heart: go back to the scriptures with a heart that is willing to do the will of God, and let God reveal His way. One mistake often made at this point is to go to someone else instead of to God and the scriptures. We can almost always find somebody we respect who will agree with us and tell us what we want to hear. When we stand before Jesus, will that

person be there to defend us? I do not ask you to just take my word either. We will all give an account directly to Jesus. What does He say? What is the Holy Spirit saying to your heart? He is faithful.

Probably the most difficult pathway of all is for those who are already in that second relationship. Perhaps they were not believers when they married, and gave no thought to the matter. Perhaps they were believers, but a pastor or trusted friend told them it was all right. Whatever the case, I feel deeply for these—yet there is still a way. I cannot say I understand, for I have never been that way, but Jesus does understand and nothing is too hard for Him. All the power of heaven is available to those who will come to Him and obey what He is speaking to their hearts. He will guide each step and not fail those who trust and obey.

Our natural thinking often cannot get us beyond one day. But this is where we must let God be God. He is working with eternity in mind. Israel left Egypt in a day as God drove them out, and they soon found themselves in a desert. The way to the promised land was not long if they would trust God, but through unbelief and disobedience it became 40 years, and an entire generation missed out on what God had for them. Let there not be any among us with a heart of unbelief, but let us be those who obey God and leave all consequences in His hands. As we do, He will be glorified and we will reign with Him for eternity.

Brothers and sisters, I trust these few words can encourage us to carefully consider the *union* that God has called us into. It is vast in scope but very practical in application. Jesus paid a great price for us to enter into union with God. He gave all. We have no excuse, for God has made every provision for us to live in this *union of love*. How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? May the Lord open our eyes to see, and direct our paths this day for His glory.

## **Scriptures About Divorce**

*Malachi 2:13-17*

*Matthew 5:27-32*

*Matthew 19:3-12*

*Mark 10:2-12*

*Luke 16:18*

*Romans 7: 1-3*

*I Corinthians 6:9-11*

*I Corinthians 7:10-16*

*I Corinthians 7:39*

*Hebrews 13:4*