

The Rupture of Marriage

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Date: 01 June 2014

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- [0 : 00] Turning to 1 Corinthians chapter 7, and we're going to read this morning some verses from Paul's letter there in 1 Corinthians 7. It's page 955, page 955 in our church Bibles.
- A chapter where Paul is concerned with issues to do with marriage, and particularly in the first half of the chapter as we're going to be looking at where there is rupture within the relationship of marriage.
- So we're going to read verses 1 to 16, and perhaps during the offering time that will follow immediately, you might like to read the rest of the chapter.
- But 1 Corinthians chapter 7 at verse 1. Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, it's good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.
- Well, because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.
- [1 : 23] For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.
- Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. But then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.
- Now as a concession, not as a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. I take it that he means free from burning passion.
- But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it's good for them to remain single as I am.
- But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it's better to marry than to be aflame with passion. To the married, I give this charge.
- [2 : 29] Not I, but the Lord. He's quoting from Jesus. The wife should not separate from her husband. If she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.
- And the husband should not divorce, should not leave his wife. To the rest, I say, I, not the Lord, he just means he's not quoting from Jesus here.
- I say that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her, not leave her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with her, he should not divorce him.
- For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife. And the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean.
- But as it is, they're holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases, the brother or the sister, the Christian brother or sister, is not enslaved.
- [3 : 35] God has called you to peace. Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, if you turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 7, page 955 in the church Bibles, we come this morning in our series on love and marriage to a rather sobering subject of the rupture of marriage.

Now, the Bible doesn't hide the truth that ours is a fallen world. And the essence of that fallenness is seen in the ruptured relationships that dominate our world.

The rupture of mankind's covenant bond of faithfulness to God leads to rupture in every other kind of human relationship that there is. There's national relationships, international relationships, as well as ethnic ones, social ones, and personal ones.

And the deepest and most personal rupture we know is that at the heart of the family, the rupture of the marriage bond itself. I don't need to rehearse the statistics.

[5 : 05] We all know that marriage and family breakdown is a very great scourge in our own society. And very sadly, it's also a reality in the church too.

And so we do have to face up to this and we have to seek the Bible's guidance on it. But let me say one or two things by way of introduction.

First of all, it is a very complex and difficult issue. And to deal with it really properly and comprehensively would require a number of studies, quite a lot.

And I don't propose to do that. Our focus on this series is on love and marriage as it should properly be. And so I don't want it to become unbalanced by speaking disproportionately about divorce and marital rupture and so on.

Nor do I want to go beyond what I think really is essential for us to study together as a congregation. Of course, we do all need to be clear on the Bible's basic and very clear teaching about this.

[6 : 17] But there are some discussions just because of the very personal nature of all of this that really are much better suited to private dialogue. And that's not least because, I suppose secondly, it's also a very painful issue for many and for some of you here this morning.

That's so, and I know that. And so believe me, it's also a hard thing for me to speak about these things like this. And especially because we can only touch upon these issues and not really do adequate justice to them, as I've said.

And so that leaves room, I'm aware, it leaves room for anxiety and distress perhaps because of something that I don't say and don't cover. Or because of something perhaps that I do say, but I'm not able to go into fully enough for you.

And because of that, it may leave you feeling burdened. And so I do want to say right at the outset, please do come and speak to me or to speak to one of the other elders or staff if that is so.

I do mean that. It's one of the purposes of this series to try and open up some of the things that people do want to speak about and need to speak about, but find very difficult to speak about and often feel unable to do so with others in the church.

[7 : 39] And certainly my prayer is that in looking at some of these things, we will all be able to much more honestly seek help from one another and give help to one another in a biblically caring way.

Well, with that by way of introduction, let's turn to our subject then, the sad subject of the rupture of marriage and specifically to some of the Bible's teaching about divorce and remarriage.

As I've said, we can't possibly cover the whole of the Bible's material on this today. So I want to focus on these verses we read in 1 Corinthians 7, which I think do at least give succinct clarity to the main issues involved.

But do remember when we come to a passage like this, this is not a treatise on marriage that Paul is writing. This is a specific letter to a particular church at a particular time and place.

And it was part of an ongoing correspondence that he was having with them. That's clear from verse 1, isn't it? Now concerning the matters you wrote about. He's responding to their letter. And this was a troubled church.

[8 : 50] This was a very mixed-up church on a whole host of issues. And one of the manifestations of that confusion was a great deal of confusion and, in fact, wrong thinking and behavior in this whole area of sex and marriage.

And that shouldn't surprise us because confused thinking will lead to confused living. And wrong living is very often expressed in terms of the misuse of some of God's very best gifts for us as human beings, including the gift of the sexual relationship, that is, the relationship of marriage.

Now we can't go into the whole context of what's going on at Corinth, but I do want to say two important things that will help illuminate this chapter for us. First of all, as I've mentioned, the major sexual confusion and corruption that was taking place in Corinth.

They were in a pretty bad way. Chapter 5 of this letter tells us that incest was going on in the church. A man has his father's wife, probably his stepmother.

And yet the church seemed to be quite accepting of that. Chapter 6 tells us that others were frequently using prostitutes. And they were apparently justifying that by saying, well, it's just a bodily matter.

[10 : 09] It's not something that could ever taint us spiritually. And Paul also tells us that men were practicing homosexuality. So all in all, this was a church very confused and in a very dysfunctional state sexually.

But chapter 7 begins here by telling us that others had gone, it seems, to the very opposite extreme, perhaps because of a reaction to all that was going on.

And they had written to Paul and said, sure, it's a good thing that people have no sexual relationships at all, even between husbands and wives. Literally, in verse 1, it says, it's good for a man not to touch a woman.

And it's a euphemism for sexual relations. And our ESV translates it correctly. In other words, some people are saying, that's the higher and better way for real Christians. According to the Corinthian elite, perhaps, this was the way.

Absolute celibacy. And, of course, down in the history of the church, there have been many who have advocated that. That's why there are convents and monasteries and so on. But Paul, the apostle in this chapter, is having none of that.

[11 : 21] No, he says, a man should have, that is, should have sexually, should go on having sexual relationships with his own wife. And vice versa. Not prostitutes.

Not with someone else's wife. Certainly not your father's wife. And certainly not with other men. Now, he says, marriage is the answer. And marriage needs sex.

Don't shrink back from your marital responsibilities. The only possible reason, Paul says, for doing that, for fasting, if you like, from sexual relations, is for a time of prayer.

But even that, he says in verse 5, must be short. And in verse 6, he says, it's a concession. It's not a command. So, it's extraordinary, isn't it? The apostle Paul, who is so often derided for being anti-sex, it's quite the opposite.

Real piety for a Christian couple in marriage, says Paul, is a proper sex life. Not extended pious prayer times. That's what he means.

[12 : 24] He's being blunt. But it's important for us to note that. It's often said today, isn't it, that society has changed so greatly from the time of the Bible.

The world has changed. And so, the church must change in all of these areas like sex and marriage. The traditional ideas of marriage no longer work. But, friends, that just does not hold up when we think of the context of Corinth.

Corinth was, even by our standards today, a very sexually progressive society. It was very freely promiscuous, very liberated, as some would say.

And the problem was that the church had imbibed a lot of that sexual confusion. But Paul's message, spoken to a context not at all dissimilar to our world today, was very clear.

No, you are not to be as the pagan world round about you. You are to be holy. You are to use God's gifts as he commands them, not just as you please.

[13 : 30] I think that's very important for us to realize today. The second thing about the context is to remember that Paul writes in a very specific situation, in a time which, in verse 26, you'll see, he calls this present distress.

Now, what is that? Well, almost certainly, he is talking about a grave time of famine that had taken over much of the ancient world at that time, and certainly in Greece.

That was true. Secular history backs that up. And people were in great fear and distress, and there was social disharmony because of it. There was a great deal of uncertainty.

And therefore, it was quite understandable in a time of crisis like that that many Christians would be saying, well, what should we be doing? And in verse 25 and following, he's speaking about those who are engaged, who are betrothed to be married.

Well, should we go ahead and get married or not? And if we are married, well, should we be having children and so on? There'll be more mouths to feed. How will we cope in this time of crisis?

[14 : 33] And these are the issues that Paul is dealing with in this context here. And I think it explains that much of what he says, particularly in the second half of the chapter, he says by way of giving advice, not command.

So when he's talking about the betrothed here in verse 25, he says, this is my judgment. I'm not commanding you on this, but verse 26, I think this is what's going to be best.

And yet equally, he goes on to say in verse 28, well, if you do differently, you're not sinning. See, he's talking about matters of pragmatic wisdom in the present situation of crisis, whether you do this or that or the other.

They're not absolute commands. So if you're betrothed, whether you marry or not is not a matter of sin, but of wisdom. Nor are these commands that Paul is giving for all time, forever, for all Christians.

He's giving specific advice for those people in that time, in that crisis. And Paul's focus, if you read through the rest of the chapters that you'll see, is that he is focusing their minds on the bigger issues, all the way through the bigger issue of eternity.

[15 : 42] That's what verses 17 to 24 are all about. And verse 29, what I mean, brothers, is the appointed time has grown very short.

Verse 31, the present form of this world is passing away. And so especially in times of crisis, all believers, what they really need is perspective, detachment from all the things of this world, which one day will all pass away, even marriages.

Even marriages. But what matters is the eternal kingdom of Christ that is everlasting. And so Paul wants them to be wise about all the matters of this world.

He wants them, he says in verse 32, to be free from anxiety about all these lesser things. He wants them to be secure about what really matters, the greater things. That's his point in verse 35.

What I really want is your undivided devotion to the Lord. And therefore, there can be real pragmatism on many issues. If you marry, if you're betrothed, that's fine.

[16 : 49] If you choose not to, well, that's fine too. So a lot of it is not commands, but is advice for a particular situation.

But, and this is very important, even in the midst of this focus on pragmatism in a time of crisis, even in the midst of his emphasis on wisdom and not on law, commands in this matter, on the issue of rupturing marriages which are already in existence, on the issue of separation and abandoning marriages, Paul is exceptionally clear.

And it's not just wise advice that he gives. It's clear commands that make it abundantly evident that the sanctity of the marriage bond must not ever, even in difficult circumstances, must not ever be diminished or downplayed for Christian people.

So with that in mind, let's look carefully at verses 10 to 16 in particular. First of all, in verses 10 and 11, he addresses married Christians. And his message is simple.

When troubles come, don't think rupture. Think reconciliation. Believers must not contemplate marriage breakup, but rather they must seek God's grace for reconciliation.

[18 : 20] Verse 10, the wife should not separate from her husband. Verse 11, the husband should not leave his wife. There's no real significance in the difference of words there.

They're certainly not anything like our use of the word trial, separation as being different from divorce. Separation, leaving just means decisive leaving. It means the rupture of the marriage, whether it's legalized or not.

And he is just saying very simply that neither party should ever countenance rupture of the marriage bond. And this is a charge.

This is a clear command. Don't contemplate that. Ever. Ever. And that's what Paul means. Don't quickly leap to that little parenthesis in brackets in verse 11.

He's not giving an exception there. He's not saying, oh, accept if you want to do this. No, he's saying his command is very clear. The parenthesis there is simply recognizing that this is a fallen world and that Christians are also sinful people.

[19 : 24] And that there may be situations where that rupture does happen wrongly, sinfully. But when that does happen, he is merely providing there for the regulation of a situation that has happened but shouldn't have happened.

He's not giving release as a way out for somebody who wants that to happen. So this is the clear Bible's command. No Christian couple should ever, ever enter marriage thinking that separation and divorce will be a potential way out for them if things go wrong.

And no Christian married couple should pursue divorce thinking that that is a sin-free option for ending things. Certainly, there's to be no thought of remarriage.

Paul is very clear. If the worst does happen, then there's still no release. The only options he gives here are reconciliation or remaining unmarried. That is, seeking no further marriage union in the future.

That is Paul's authoritative apostolic charge. But it's not only his. It's the direct teaching of Jesus also.

[20 : 38] That's what Paul says. He is giving something specifically from the Lord Jesus himself. Look back, if you would, with me to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5, verse 31. This is what Paul is alluding to.

Matthew 5, 31 says, It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. Jesus is quoting Moses. But I say to you, But I say to you, That everyone who divorces his wife, Except on the ground of sexual immorality, Makes her commit adultery.

And whoever marries a divorced woman, Commits adultery. That is quite clear, isn't it? The only possible grounds of divorce and remarriage is sexual immorality.

A pornea, which means any gross sexual infidelity against a spouse. So no Christian can ever imagine, can they, That, well, that's a way out of our marriage.

I want out of my marriage, so let's commit adultery. No Christian couple could ever think of that as a way out.

[21 : 54] And notice, by the way, in Matthew 5 here, That divorce and remarriage go together. Divorce, divorce in the Bible, implies remarriage. And it must be so here, mustn't it?

Because divorce alone cannot make someone an adulterer. It's the subsequent remarriage that does that. Jesus is assuming that that takes place here. We'll come back to that.

But it's very clear, isn't it? Paul is just passing on what Jesus says. No divorce. Turn over to Matthew chapter 19. We looked at this a few weeks ago. Here again, Jesus repeats his clear teaching, his stark teaching.

And he explains why. He takes it right back to creation. Matthew 19, verse 6. God made the husband and wife one flesh. And so what God has joined, man has no authority to separate.

And notice here that the marriage bond is not seen as impossible to break. That is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. The view is that the marriage bond is impossible to break.

[23 : 01] It's like the bond between a brother and a sister. But that cannot be so. Because for one thing, death does break the bond. As does indeed adultery. When God breaks the bond. And man can sinfully break it.

Which is precisely why Jesus warns us not to. He can't warn us to do something if that's impossible. But Jesus is plain. I think we have to agree. No divorce.

Well, his opponents say, what about Moses? He commanded it, verse 7. No, he didn't, said Jesus. Moses allowed it. And he made processes to regulate it.

Something that shouldn't ever have been. He did it because of your sin. Because of your hard hearts. But it wasn't so from the beginning. The reference here to Deuteronomy 24 is to one thing in amongst a raft of laws forbidding all kinds of sexual relationships that were improper.

You see, the Pharisees are so typical of human beings, aren't they? Immediately, we want to look for the loopholes. We're like accountants by nature. That's what you do as soon as there's a tax law.

[24 : 12] You look for the loophole. And we look for the loopholes. So, what way can you get a divorce, Jesus, and still feel very self-righteous about yourself? Jesus says, no, no, no.

Let's get right back to the real issue, which is the sanctity of marriage. And we need to be careful that we're not being like the Pharisees, seeking those loopholes just to justify what we might want.

Jesus says, from the beginning, it was not so. And the implication is, in what he goes on to say, it must not be so in my kingdom. Followers of Jesus are to think marriage, not divorce.

And reconciliation, not rupture. Now, it's true that Jesus, again, does here give an exception, that of adultery. And he explicitly seems to say what was implied in Matthew 5, that remarriage is implied by divorce.

And that remarriage after adultery, therefore, is not an adulterous union, because adultery has already broken the marriage covenant that was in existence. But to think of that as an excuse, to think of that as a way out of marriage for any believer is utterly unthinkable.

[25 : 28] So there can be no question, I think, we have to agree about the clarity, about the absoluteness of Jesus' teaching here.

And even the disciples are very sober by it. You'll see in verse 10, they say, well, surely then it's better never to marry at all. And indeed, Jesus says, well, many cannot receive this. But those who have been given this teaching can receive it.

That is, his followers. It's those that he has already said earlier in Matthew's gospel. To you has been given the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. And marriage, remember, is one of the things that serves the kingdoms of heaven.

Christian marriage displays the recreation harmony of the new world, of the kingdom, which is what Jesus goes on to talk about in chapter 19.

So there is Jesus quoted by Paul. Let's come back to 1 Corinthians chapter 7. So, of course, Paul here isn't dealing with the question where adultery has taken place.

[26 : 34] That's assumed. But he's dealing with other normal situations. And he is saying for Christians, there should be no separation, no abandoning marriage, and no harboring ways of finding an easy way out.

No rupture. Now, instead, verse 11, you are to seek God's grace for reconciliation. That must always be the aim of any Christian couple.

And difficulties. That must always be the aim of the church who are seeking to help. And there is grace. There is grace that works through you if you are seeking God's kingdom.

Grace to reconcile problems long before the issue of separation becomes an issue. And even afterwards, Paul says here, if it's already happened, there can still be reconciliation.

That is possible. So, I think to a Christian couple, Paul's words simply cannot be avoided, can they? You must not contemplate breaking up and rupturing your marriage.

[27 : 45] Not rupture, but seeking reconciliation. But then in verse 12, Paul goes on to address another group that he calls the rest.

That is, a believer who's married to an unbeliever. Which in a context is almost certainly to be likely to be somebody who has become a Christian, but whose spouse hasn't become a Christian.

And he says in that situation, don't think rupture, think redemption. A believer, even in a difficult marriage with an unbeliever, mustn't seek breakup either, according to Paul.

Rather, they are to seek God's grace for the redemption of their spouse. Look at verse 16. Wife, how do you know whether you'll save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you'll save your wife?

Again, this just shows, doesn't it, how sacred and how powerful the marriage bond really is. Even in these circumstances where you have become a Christian and your spouse hasn't become a Christian, even these circumstances don't justify a new start.

[28 : 58] Remember, Paul is still speaking authoritatively here. This is not advice. This is a command. He doesn't have a direct quote from Jesus, he says in verse 12, because it's just not an issue that Jesus addressed.

It's an issue that arises from mission. Because pagans got converted and then this issue arose. And by the way, that's a point worth noting, isn't it? That mission creates problems, many problems, when people are converted out of pagan life.

There's an awful lot of mess to sort out, isn't there, in people's lives? And some Christians can't cope with mess, and some churches can't cope with mess. They want to protect their consciences from defilement.

And so it's no surprise, is it, that there are rarely people who are up to their eyeballs in evangelism. Because a holy huddle is much more comfortable, isn't it, than a very messy church that's engaged in mission.

But mission creates many situations that are just like that. All sorts of baggage from people's backgrounds. So what are you to do? What do we do? Maybe some over-pious Corinthians were very worried about defilement, about being a believer, but somehow attached in this intimate bond with someone who's a pagan.

[30 : 15] Maybe they've been reading in the Old Testament about Ezra and Nehemiah, and how the mixed marriages caused such disaster among the people of God. Maybe they were feeling, well, surely Ambers break this marriage.

Or maybe it was just a real struggle to be married now as a Christian to a non-Christian spouse. That's very understandable. And there are people here this morning who know the struggles of that.

I think, perhaps, wouldn't it be just easier to have a fresh start with a real Christian? But no, says Paul. The marriage bond is sacred. Don't divorce on these grounds alone.

Verse 12. But in verse 14, do you see what a wonderfully positive aspect he brings to this?

It's not that you are going to be defiled by your pagan spouse. It's the reverse. They're being made holy by you, he says. It doesn't mean, of course, automatically they'll be saved.

[31 : 28] Otherwise, verse 16 wouldn't make any sense. That's still an unknown. But what he does mean is that they're brought into the orbit of God's special grace at work through his church.

They're brought in with their believing spouse to all the privileged opportunities that that brings. That's the case for the children of even one believer, he says in verse 14.

None of them dispute that. That's why he mentioned it. It's a given to them all that their children are holy. Their children are set apart. They're part of the visible church. They're heirs to the privileges of God's covenant.

They're to be raised for a future of faith. Now, that's so with your children, which none of you dispute, Paul says. So it is in a way for your spouse.

And in a marriage like this, God's spirit has already invaded the household, as it were. He's already at work in grace in your family. And your spouse may thus be one for the Lord Jesus in just that way, too.

[32 : 39] It's not a guarantee. It's not magic. God is sovereign. But verse 16 certainly is a word of hope, isn't it? Your spouse may indeed be saved precisely this way.

It may be God's very plan for them. God works in families, and often it's that way. You know it. Some of you here today can testify to precisely that having happened.

It's what Peter spoke about, remember, in 1 Peter chapter 3 also. So not only is there reason to preserve marriage just because it is God's sacred covenant, a part of his creation, part of his common grace, and therefore sacred, but also there is grace at work in God's redemption.

To someone who becomes a Christian in the marriage. And that should always be your goal, even in the struggles that there inevitably will be in such a mixed marriage.

And it may be very hard at times. I know that. Some of you do. But friend, if that's where you are this morning, then cling on to this good news. This is a word for you. See the eternal perspective of God in your marriage.

[33 : 52] Not just the nitty-gritty of today. It's good news. God is at work. And who knows how far that might go. Who knows just how deep that influence of grace might be in your beloved husband or your beloved wife.

So don't think rupture. Think redemption. That's Paul's message. There is grace to be found. Both for reconciliation and redemption when the Spirit of God is at work.

But there is also reality. And that's there, isn't it, in verse 15. Sometimes it just doesn't turn out like that. And when an unbelieving spouse does separate, when a believer is abandoned by an unbeliever, Paul's message is you mustn't be preoccupied, but you must be at peace.

If that happens, says Paul in verse 15, let it be so. That's a very decisive word. A decisive end has come. And that must be accepted and not resented.

Why? Because God has called you to peace. Not to preoccupation. Not to anxiety. Not to guilt. Not for an ongoing feeling of responsibility in those circumstances.

[35 : 17] You, as the believer, are not to seek the definitive breakup of a marriage like that. But if your unbelieving spouse does, well, you're to accept it and to be at peace.

You're not to burden yourself with responsibility. It's a very common thing, isn't it? To feel a burden of responsibility for them, for their salvation, to lose your influence, and so on.

And Paul says, no, you must entrust that to God and be at peace. And that may be a word also that somebody here needs to hear today.

I think the same would also hold for what is, in fact, a de facto marriage, where somebody has been living in a sexual relationship with somebody else, and one becomes a Christian, or where one drifts away and really is abandoning their Christian faith, and it leads to rupture.

Let it be so. For God has called you to peace. And notice that he says here, the abandoned spouse is not enslaved.

[36 : 28] It's very different from what he says in verse 11, isn't it? There, they must remain unmarried, but here they're not enslaved. I believe that means that there has been, in God's eyes, a legitimate divorce, a decisive end to that marriage.

Let him go. Let it be. And therefore, the implication of divorce is that remarriage is possible. And in this situation, for this specific issue of a believer whose marriage is ruptured by an unbelieving spouse, very probably largely to do with their faith, not just any old divorce, not just the divorce brought by the believer, but in this circumstance, Paul is saying there is not binding.

There is grace to allow a new beginning, perhaps in remarriage, but only in the Lord. Verse 39, he speaks about later, must surely apply here, mustn't it?

There's no question of a Christian having been once in a marriage with an unbeliever to be free to go and marry another unbeliever. That would be willful sin. That would be clearly against God's command. And 2 Corinthians chapter 6 also makes that very clear.

Well, let me draw some conclusions. There are many more things that could be said, but in fact, we actually do, I think, have the basic essence of the Bible's position here, very clearly, very plainly, even though it may not be easy at times.

[37 : 55] Are you married? Are you a married Christian? Well, I'm a married Christian. What am I supposed to think? What I'm supposed to think, according to Apostle Paul, is that divorce is just not an option for me to think about.

And that's that. Now, in some situations, that might be very hard. There may be a lot of help needed.

But the Apostle's command is very clear. It's Jesus' command. And if it is Jesus' command, don't you trust the Lord Jesus to know what is best for you, for your life, for your marriage?

There can be no such thing, according to the Bible, as a no-fault divorce for a believer, except for that situation of adultery.

And we mustn't think that way. And yet, the truth is, we are where we are, aren't we? We can't turn the clock back, and it may well be that things have broken down in our Christian marriage or our breaking down.

[38 : 59] Well, there is good news in this passage. Paul says there is grace available for believers. Reconciliation is possible.

If both are willing to humble themselves and to ask for Jesus' help and the help of Jesus' people, nothing is impossible with God.

And if you are married as a Christian, you must believe that. But sometimes that doesn't happen. Or it seems that things are just far too far gone, and separation does have to be, is the lesser of two evils.

Sometimes that just has to be the case. If there's been abuse in a relationship, particularly, this real danger has to be. But it seems to me, at least in this passage here, that Paul doesn't just give remarriage as an option in that case.

There may be grace for reconciliation. That's what we're to pray for, surely. But if not, Paul seems to say to us that there must be grace for contentment.

[40 : 09] Contentment without a new beginning and remarriage. What about the converted Christian spouse and the non-Christian husband or wife? Well, there is hope also.

Hope for grace for redemption. Who knows what God's wonderful love can do? So work at your marriage. Pray. Trust God. Who knows what God will do in your unbelieving spouse's wife?

And often today, obviously, it's not an actual marriage partner, but it's a cohabiting partner who's converted. And I think these verses here apply in just the same way. You don't have to depart just because you become a Christian and your partner hasn't.

Effectively, you are living as man and wife. Now, you'll want to regularize that marriage and make it proper in God's eyes, of course. And it may be, actually, your desire to do that that forces a crisis.

And it may be that at that point, your unbelieving partner walks out on you. That can happen. But alternatively, it might be the path to faith, to salvation, to redemption.

[41 : 15] But in those circumstances, if you are abandoned, Paul says you're not bound. There is grace for a new start, for remarriage, or for the first real and proper marriage.

Just as there is for you if you're a Christian, if your marriage has been destroyed by adultery, whether your spouse was Christian or not, there's grace for you also, says Paul.

There is opportunity for a new start there. It's not demanded. Not even divorce is demanded. There's grace for reconciliation, surely even there.

And that is, isn't it, a wonderful mirror of God's reconciling love for humanity, for those who have broken their marriage covenant with him. It will require great grace, deep forgiveness.

But there is grace for forgiveness and reconciliation, even in these situations, and God can work wonders. But if not, Jesus and Paul, I think, are clear that remarriage, following adultery, is a possibility.

[42 : 26] And there is grace, surely, also for those who have come to faith in Christ, despite all kinds of wrong relationships in the past, all kinds of breakdown and mess, adultery, whatever it might be.

We've seen that in these verses, Paul does treat Christians differently from non-Christians, as does Jesus. It's kingdom people who can live with kingdom holiness, not others.

We can't undo the past, can we? But the past is gone. And forgiveness does mean a real, fresh start. And if you have been married and divorced and remarried before coming to faith in Christ, but have now come to the Lord Jesus, it's your marriage now that matters.

You want to seek to honor God in that, with all your heart and your soul. You can't rewrite the past. You can't rewrite history. Maybe you were divorced in the past before you were a Christian, and you become a Christian, but you're still not remarried.

What about you? Well, it's rather difficult. These verses don't explicitly deal with that situation. Some scholars take verse 27 as applying here.

[43 : 36] You're free from a wife. Literally, have you been loosed from a wife? In other words, that applies to somebody unmarried or somebody divorced. I think that's possible, but my view is that in the context there, he's actually talking about freedom from an obligation to marry, somebody who's betrothed.

But even if that does apply here, Paul goes immediately on to say, don't seek a wife. And only then does he say, but if you do marry, you've not sinned. I'm less sure of that, as I say, but I do think that the general implications of verses 12 to 16 imply that such a person for whom all of that happened while they were an unbeliever is now not enslaved.

They are free to remarry as a believer, but again, only in the Lord, certainly not to another unbeliever. But I do also think, and I say this, not I, not the Lord, not Paul, but I, I think I understand rightly Paul's teaching when he would urge great caution upon us in that situation.

I think if you've been through a marriage rupture, and in many ways the advice, do not seek a wife, and certainly do not seek a wife quickly, is very good advice.

It's not a spouse that you really need. It's a new walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. The appointed time is short, says Paul. That's what really matters.

[45 : 03] That's the priority, the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, that which is eternal. Seek that, and all that you need will be added to you. What about more complex situations, more messy relationships?

People have been married, and divorced, and now are living with somebody else, perhaps living with somebody else's wife. Well, friends, as I said, mission creates an awful lot of mess, or it exposes mess, rather.

But praise God that people are being lifted out of all kinds of mess into the light of the glorious kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, and into new life. And when people come to Christ, what happens is they recognize the mess, they recognize their sins, they want to put it right, they're repentant.

We have to do a lot of clearing up of mess. We can't always sort everything out as cleanly as we would like to. But we can always repent.

We must never seek to justify ourselves, but we can repent. We can seek to put right everything we can from as much mess to as much God-honoring relationship as is possible.

[46 : 18] It might involve regularizing a divorce and arranging a proper marriage, whatever it might be, but there is grace for repentance. And there is grace for regeneration, for a new start.

And finally, there is also grace, grace for restorations for Christians who have made a mess long after they are Christians and trusted Christ.

For Christians who have sinned and acted wrongly and ended marriages wrongly against the teaching of Paul and of Christ. And if that's you, if you've heard hard things this morning that make you feel very uncomfortable, then please also hear this.

The gospel is good news. The gospel is not just good advice or good morality. It's good news. There is restoring grace for every sin.

And sin in this area of your life is not the unforgivable sin. We mustn't treat it as such. There's no cheap grace. There is no room for presumption.

[47 : 30] There's no room for self-justifying or loophole seeking. Don't misunderstand me. But there is real grace. Grace for the poor in spirit.

It's the grace and truth that we see in the Lord Jesus, isn't it? We've seen the fire of his passion, his clarity, his absolute stern and rigid commands about the sanctity of marriage and about the real sin of rupturing that marriage.

Unmistakable. And yet, as the hymn says, to those who fall, how kind thou art. How good to those who seek.

He knows our frame. He remembers that we're dust. And even in our calamity caused by our own sin, he is the one a bruised reed will not break.

He is a high priest who is near us and for us. To the woman at the well with her five husbands and now living with a man who is not her husband.

[48 : 40] How gentle, how kind, how dignified he was in his dealing with her. although absolutely true, convicting of her sin, but how he did it.

Other women taken in adultery, the same. Neither do I condemn you. Sheer grace to forgive, but also to impart that new life of holy living and of truthfulness and beauty.

Go and sin no more. there is a fresh start even for the fallen shamed Christian believer, especially for the fallen believer.

If he can forgive his enemies, how much more those who are his friends, his children. Not for the self-justifying.

You can't do that. But for the sinner who repents, there is all the grace of a Savior. There is grace for restoration, for a new beginning with our Savior.

[49 : 49] And so surely also there must be grace for a new beginning among our Savior's people. Is that not so? Lord, Lord, God, help us to be such a people of grace and truth.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, how we thank you for your truth and your grace, your gracious truth, and your truthful grace.

Help us, we pray, to heed you and help us to be like you. For Jesus' sake.

Amen.