

## What God Teaches Us About Broken Marriage Vows<sup>1</sup>

Many divorced Christians have felt they step into church wearing a scarlet *D*. Author Elisabeth Corcoran was one of these. After [her marriage of almost 19 years unraveled](#), Corcoran grappled with pain, confusion, and shame. Those feelings were compounded when she was politely asked to step down from speaking at a church women's Christmas event soon after her divorce. Hush-hush, of course.

Following the recent release of her book, *Unraveling: The End of a Christian Marriage*, she moderates an online Facebook group for divorcees. She has heard hundreds of similar stories. Divorcees often hear the words "God hates divorce" from others. "I know," one woman wrote. "I'm not such a fan myself."

While [research shows](#) that marriages between actively practicing believers fare significantly better than others, the divorce rate within the church is still alarmingly high. Sadly, rather than experiencing the church as a place of comfort and restoration, divorcees often face a guilt-tripping response.

Differences in interpretation about when the Bible allows divorce (if ever) leaves some Christians feeling our hands are tied when we long to extend them in compassion. Plus, our [deeply held belief that "it takes two"](#) to make a marriage work mistakenly translates into a belief that "it takes two" to break a marriage up. We subconsciously assign blame accordingly.

However, the truth is that it only takes one to wreck a covenant, as we can learn from God's own relationship with the northern kingdom of Israel.

Our own understanding of marriage is modeled on the very covenant God made with his people. As David Instone-Brewer explains in *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, God was Israel's husband (Isa. 54:5), who took her to be his own and vowed to feed, clothe, cherish, and be faithful to her (Ezek. 16). In stark contrast to God's faithfulness and care, Israel and Judah shamelessly disregarded the covenant: neglecting, abusing and betraying him. The prophets repeatedly called their behavior out as the violation of the covenant it was: adultery (Ezek. 23:37, Jer. 5:7).

God's marital covenant with the northern kingdom of Israel had been wrecked by her hardhearted behavior, and in Jeremiah 3:8 we hear these words: "for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce." In Isaiah 50:1, he asks, "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away?"

God warns adulterous and apostate Judah to learn a lesson from Israel's example. Both sister states had been unfaithful and broken their covenants with God, but while God had divorced Israel, he offered Judah a second (and third, and fourth) chance at mercy. His offer of restoration was beautifully enacted by Hosea in his marriage to unfaithful Gomer, and ultimately realized in the unbreakable marriage covenant between Christ and the church.

I had often noted God's patient forgiveness and covenant renewal in Hosea, but God's description of his own divorce with the northern kingdom of Israel shocked me. I had unquestioningly internalized the phrase "the sin of divorce." Regardless of how I interpreted the debate about Jesus' words on the topic, if God himself had experienced this unfaithfulness, I needed to rethink my understanding of sin and divorce.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2014/february/what-god-teaches-us-about-broken-marriage-vows.html>

Let me be clear: Marriage covenants are meant to be permanent, and sin is always to blame when a marriage ends in divorce. We commit sin when we break our vows, and marriage requires the regular practice of confession and forgiveness for the failures and oversights between spouses. There is a difference, though, between minor, unintentional mistakes and willful violations of covenant vows. In the former, we are to forgive and "bear with one another in love." In the latter, [God allowed the victim a choice](#): to remain and forgive as he did with Judah, or to divorce where a covenant has been broken by "hardness of heart," as happened with Israel.

The sin in divorce lies in the breaking of marriage vows, not necessarily in the divorce itself. God's own divorce was entirely due to Israel's hardhearted sin. God was the blameless victim of divorce. When God says "I hate divorce" (Mal. 2:16), he says so not with the furious pointed finger of a judge, but with the broken-heartedness of One who has experienced the devastation of rejection and betrayal at the hands of his beloved.

Divorce is not God's will or desire for us. Even where [divorce is allowed, it is not commanded](#), and then it is still a tragedy. Divorce leaves behind devastation and victims in its wake.

That God himself is a divorcee, despite his faultless covenant faithfulness, calls us to a more nuanced understanding of marriage and divorce. In our own marriages, God calls us to follow his example of covenant faithfulness, and has demonstrated how much grace and forgiveness is needed to maintain a relationship in the face of human sinfulness. God's example give us a framework to talk meaningfully about commitment and grace, and yet also to say that in situations of hard-hearted and deliberate covenant violation, divorce was allowed as God's way of officially declaring a broken covenant "broken."

We find wisdom when we view hot topics within the larger framework of Scripture. A [discussion on purity](#) should not just be about whether a person is a virgin when they marry (even if they've done "everything but"), but about how they steward their sexuality throughout their lives. Similarly, the litmus test for covenant faithfulness in marriage should not just be about whether or not someone got divorced (even if they did "everything but"), but about how we steward our marriages and make daily attempts to model God's faithfulness to our spouses.

God calls us to covenant faithfulness. We need to mourn the sins we commit when we fail to keep our vows to our spouses before we lament the "sin of divorce." Upholding and honoring marriage is not going to be accomplished by shaming and opposing divorce as much as it is by our gracious and firm commitment to upholding wedding-day vows of love, nurture, care, and faithfulness. We are called to consider covenant faithfulness long before we consider divorce, and we are called to grace in the tragic event that divorce does happen.

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