

# **Voices: Abuse is biblical grounds for divorce**

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Recent shelter-in-place orders implemented to slow the spread of coronavirus have carried many consequences. One of the lesser-known consequences has been a rise in both the severity and frequency of domestic abuse.

Tragically, domestic abuse is present even in ostensibly Christian homes. This tragedy is compounded by the fact that many Christians who are victims of spousal abuse—usually but not always women—have been taught divorce is not a biblically permitted response. As a result, many stay trapped in abusive marriages.

While Christians should uphold the integrity of marriage as much as possible, there are circumstances in which divorce, though tragic, is justified. Abuse is one of those circumstances.

## **Two explicit exceptions**

God hates divorce, and it is not part of his original design for marriage (Malachi 2:16; Genesis 2:24). Nevertheless, Scripture presents cases where divorce is permissible.

In the New Testament, the two explicit exceptions to the general rule against divorce are adultery (Matthew 5:32; 19:9) and abandonment by an unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:15). But are these the only exceptions?

Since there is no explicit exception for abuse, many Christians assume abuse must not be legitimate grounds for divorce. But this perspective fails

to consider important cultural background information.

Jesus, Paul and most of the earliest Christians were Jewish. As such, we must read the New Testament's teachings on divorce against the backdrop of contemporary Jewish perspectives in order to gain clarity on what the New Testament teaches.

In the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Rikk Watts says: "The Scriptures assume divorce's reality (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), and all Jews accepted that it was legal; they debated only its grounds. Everyone agreed that adultery and other similarly weighty offenses—e.g., abuse, cruelty, humiliation, persistent refusal to provide requisite food or clothing, willful conjugal or emotional neglect (cf. Exodus 21:10-11)—were clear cause for divorce and required the punishment of the offending party."

## Adultery?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that a man may not divorce his wife for any cause, but only for adultery (*porneia*).

In Jesus' day, there was a fierce debate between two schools of thought within Judaism—the Shammaites and the Hillelites. The latter read Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as giving a man permission to divorce his wife for pretty much any reason. The Shammaites, on the other hand, argued that "indecent" in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 only meant adultery.

However, both schools of thought [affirmed](#) that a woman being neglected or abused by her husband had the right to receive a divorce, and Jewish courts could go so far as to beat the neglectful and/or abusive husband until he agreed to give his wife a certificate of divorce, thus legally freeing her to remarry.

When Jesus says a man may divorce his wife only for *porneia*, he is not

providing a comprehensive manifesto on divorce and remarriage; he is addressing a specific intramural Jewish debate of his day. On the question of “any cause divorce,” Jesus sides with Shammai.

In Jewish culture in Jesus’ time, women could not initiate divorce and had virtually no legal recourse to protect themselves from being divorced. Divorce typically brought shame on a woman and left her economically vulnerable. Jesus’ command actually served to [protect](#) women from selfish husbands who sought to throw away their wives like trash.

Jesus, however, says nothing about Exodus 21:10-11 or Jewish interpretation of that passage, giving us no explicit evidence he interpreted the text differently or sought to overturn its teaching.

## 1 Corinthians 7

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses the subject of divorce. While he strongly urges against divorce in most circumstances, in 7:15, Paul says a believer who has been abandoned by an unbelieving spouse is free to divorce and remarry—the believer is not “under bondage in such cases” (NASB).

However, a close reading reveals Paul parallels Exodus 21:10-11 with his instructions in 1 Corinthians 7. Spouses must not deny one another their conjugal rights (7:2-5), must not abandon or neglect each other (7:10-16) and must provide for each other (7:32-35).

Andrew Naselli [summarizes](#): “Since Paul repeats the requirements of Exodus 21:10 and since Exodus 21:11 allows for divorce when those requirements are not met, the principle still applies: divorce is legitimate when those requirements are not met—that is, when one breaks the marriage covenant.”

Naselli also points out the New Testament's two explicit "grounds for divorce ... come from separate texts. So we cannot interpret either text to mean 'This ground for divorce is the *only* one' without contradicting the other text. Similarly, the texts do not require us to conclude that there are two and only two grounds for divorce."

What then are the biblical grounds for divorce? Considering all of Scripture, we can say divorce is permitted—but not required—following violations of the marriage covenant: adultery, serious neglect, abandonment and abuse.

## Help for the abused

Divorce is always tragic and never God's ideal, but I hope I have shown effectively that it sometimes is justified, particularly in cases of abuse.

If you currently are trapped in an abusive marriage, please know you are not biblically obligated to stay married to your abuser. God sees your suffering, and he does not require you to stay bound to a person who harms you.

I also want to encourage church members and especially church leaders to recognize this truth and apply it in your ministry to victims of abuse. Make clear to victims that divorce is an option, and be prepared to walk with them through the divorce process, which may be protracted and certainly will be painful. In addition, take other steps to protect victims from their abusers and help connect victims with legal and mental health resources.

The [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#), the [Department of Justice](#) and the [Family Abuse Center](#) of Waco are excellent starting places to seek resources for helping victims.

Domestic abuse is an abomination in the eyes of God, and Christians ought

to be at the forefront of the battle against it.

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