

Warnings About Remarriage

Dear friend,

Thank you for considering what Jesus says about remarriage. For many, this can be a distressing topic full of practical concern about daily needs, children or losing the support of loved ones. Please know that God cares about us so much and promises to provide our food, clothing, and social support.

Matthew 6.31-33

Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Mark 10.29-31

Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last, first.”

Others may be distressed about the ultimate destination of those who have been misled or who might ignore Jesus’ words. Thankfully God is merciful and patient with us and desires that all repent.

1 Timothy 1.12-15

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

2 Peter 3.9

The Lord is ... patient with you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

Ezekiel 18.30-32

“Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord God. “Therefore, repent and live.”

Although obeying Jesus may seem difficult, he promises to ease our burdens.

Matthew 11.28-30

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

What are some of the main things God says about divorce and remarriage?

Genesis 2.20-24

The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man 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.”

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

Malachi 2.13-16

This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. “For I hate divorce,” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says the Lord of hosts. “So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.”

Mark 10.2-12

Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife. And He answered and said to them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined (*literally, yoked*) together, let no man separate.”

In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. And He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.”

Luke 16.1-18

He said to his disciples ... The law and the prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the law to fail. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.

Romans 7.1-3

Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.

1 Corinthians 7.39

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 7.10-11

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave (*literally, be separated from*) her husband (but if she does leave (*literally, is separated from*), she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

Does God allow remarriage in certain cases?

When God compares his way of thinking about things to ours, he says:

Isaiah 55.1-9

“... Every one who thirsts, come to the waters;
And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without cost.

Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
And your wages for what does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
And delight yourself in abundance.

Incline your ear and come to Me.
Listen, that you may live;
And I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
According to the faithful mercies shown to David.

Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples,
A leader and commander for the peoples.

...

Seek the Lord while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the Lord,
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.

For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.

How can we change our thinking to be like God's? By asking:

How do the bible passages harmoniously fit together while retaining their own meaning?

Some passages provide very little wiggle room. Others have multiple ways of being interpreted. Is there a way they could all fit together without causing any passage to lose its own meaning?

Christians most often cite three scripture passages to show that God allows remarriage while a spouse lives. Yet the passages quoted above indicate this is not possible. So let's consider some interpretations of each of the three passages which fit harmoniously with the passages above.

The first passage often used to justify remarriage is in Matthew 5.

Matthew 5.27-32

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.

It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce’; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The phrase “except for the reason of unchastity” in Greek is “παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας” (parektos logou porneias). Parektos means either *an exception from a whole* such as at the end of Acts 26.29 “except for these chains” or *an exclusion from a whole*. Logou literally means *a word* and in context *an accusation* or *a matter* or *a reason*. Porneia(s) in general refers to *unlawful sexual activity* and can have a specific meaning based on context that describes some limited set of unlawful activity such as *visiting a prostitute*, *sex outside of marriage* or *incest*. The King James version of the bible translates it here as *fornication*. So taken all together this phrase could be translated “except/apart from an accusation or matter of unlawful sexual activity”.

1. The meaning could be “Everyone who divorces his wife, apart from a word of unlawful sexual activity (in the current marriage), causes her to commit adultery ...” if the marriage is unlawful because either a spouse is still living or it is within a prohibited degree of consanguinity.
2. The meaning could be “Everyone who divorces his wife, apart from a word of (her) unlawful sexual activity (by which she caused herself to commit adultery), makes her commit adultery ...” if parektos means *an exception from a whole* where the whole is *everyone divorcing*. Allen R. Guenther thoroughly demonstrates this meaning for parektos from comparable Greek literature in his article “The Exception Phrases: Except πορνεία, Including πορνεία or Excluding πορνεία?”, Tyndale Bulletin 53.1 (2002) pp. 83-96.
3. The meaning could be “Everyone who divorces his wife, apart from a word of unlawful sexual activity (that she has already committed), makes her commit adultery ...” if parektos means *an exception from a whole* where the whole is *all of the adultery*.
4. The meaning could be “Everyone who divorces his wife, apart from a word of unlawful sexual activity (which I am not discussing), makes her commit adultery ...” if parektos means *an exclusion from a whole*. Jesus may not have wanted to address this issue because of some reason specific to Jewish society such as being under the law of Moses, not permitting wives to divorce their husbands or requiring divorce to end even a betrothal, which was as binding as marriage. (The books of Mark and Luke were addressed to non-Jewish audiences.) However Guenther discounts this meaning of parektos in his article.
5. The meaning could be “Everyone who divorces his wife, apart from a word of unlawful sexual activity (before the wedding), makes her commit adultery ...”. As noted above, in Jewish society a man would have to divorce a woman to cancel a wedding because betrothal was different than in Roman and Greek society. Jesus could be explaining that he was not talking about the kind of

divorce that was due to unfaithfulness before the wedding. The word porneia would be used instead of moicheia (μοιχεία), i.e. adultery, for this kind of unfaithfulness as demonstrated in the Septuagint translation in Deuteronomy 22.21 of the corresponding Hebrew word נָדָו, which refers to a woman accused of not being a virgin on the wedding day.

Deuteronomy 22.13-21

If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then turns against her, and charges her with shameful deeds and publicly defames her, and says, 'I took this woman, but when I came near her, I did not find her a virgin,' then the girl's father and her mother shall take and bring out the evidence of the girl's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate ... But if this charge is true, that the girl was not found a virgin, then they shall bring out the girl to the doorway of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death because she has committed an act of folly in Israel by playing the harlot in her father's house; thus you shall purge the evil from among you.

This is the same situation described in Matthew 1.18-20. Matthew may have recorded the "exception" clause in the teaching of Jesus about remarriage in order to show that Joseph could still be righteous even though contemplating putting Mary away.

Matthew 1.18-20

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

Some Jews may have also used the word porneia (or its equivalent) with this meaning if they insinuated that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock to an unknown, non-Jewish father.

John 8.37-42

They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God." The Jews answered and said to Him, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?"

The second passage often used to justify remarriage is in Matthew 19.

Matthew 19:3-19

Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?” And He answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created them from 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 they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.¹”

The disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” But He said to them, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.”

The phrase “except for immorality” in Greek is “μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ” (*me epi porneia*). *Me* means *not*. *Epi* in the dative case could mean *during*, *over*, *for* or “*on account of*”. *Porneia* has the same meaning as defined above in the discussion of Matthew 5. So this phrase could be translated “not during/over/for/on account of unlawful sexual activity”.

1. The meaning could be “Whoever divorces his wife, not over unlawful sexual activity (in the current marriage), and marries another woman commits adultery ...” if the marriage is unlawful because either a spouse is still living or it is within a prohibited degree of consanguinity.
2. The meaning could be “Whoever divorces his wife, excluding unlawful sexual activity (which I am not discussing), and marries another woman commits adultery ...” if *me epi* has an exclusionary meaning. See #4 in the discussion of Matthew 5 above. Guenther advocates this reading of *me epi*, but only provides limited evidence from comparable Greek literature.
3. The meaning could be “Whoever divorces his wife, even over unlawful sexual activity, and marries another woman commits adultery ...”. While the popular author David Instone-Brewer teaches that Jesus allowed for remarriage, even he admits this reading in “Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition”, p. 215:

The clause in Matthew 19:9 could indicate either an exception or an exclusion. If it is an exclusion, it means “Anyone who divorced his wife, even for immorality [which is not a permissible ground for divorce], and ...”.
4. The meaning could be “Whoever divorces his wife, not over unlawful sexual activity (before the wedding), and marries another woman commits adultery ...”. See #5 in the discussion of Matthew 5 above.

¹ Matthew 19:9 from the New American Standard Bible ends at the semicolon. The remainder has been restored from the New King James Version, as it is in 99.5% of manuscripts including Codex Vaticanus.

The third passage often used to justify remarriage is in 1 Corinthians 7.

1 Corinthians 7.10-11

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

1 Corinthians 7.12-16

But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

‘under bondage’ from the Greek “douloo” means roughly *enslaved*. Contrast this with the Greek “deo” which means *tied, chained or bound by a law* used by Paul in Romans 7.2 and 1 Corinthians 7.39 when writing that a wife is bound by law until a husband’s death. Deo is comparable to the English idiom “tie the knot”.

“not under bondage” probably does not refer to the marriage bond because he wrote in verse 7.11 that a wife who was separated (note the verb χωρίζω used in both verses) must remain unmarried or be reconciled, and also because he specified that verses 7.10-11 were (directly? explicitly?) from the Lord unlike 7.12-16.

1. The meaning could be “... the brother or the sister is not under bondage (to fulfill the marital obligations described in 7.3-4) in such cases”.

1 Corinthians 7.3-4

The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

2. The meaning could be “... the brother or the sister is not under bondage (to stay together as described in 7.10-11) in such cases” the obligation in 7.10-11 not to be separated from a spouse (which is nevertheless acknowledged as a possibility). Here in 7.15 we find an explanation for one way such a separation might occur, namely if the unbelieving spouse decides to leave. In which case instructions in 7.11 would come into effect, that the believer remain unmarried or be reconciled. Paul explains that “God has called us to peace” so there is no need to fight the separation.

3. “not under bondage” could be referring to an overall theme in 1 Corinthians 7 that if a believer is unmarried, they are free to spend their time and energy pleasing God instead of their spouse, which is to their benefit if they can accept this way of life. When making this point, he uses wording related to slavery and freedom.

How long have Christians taught that God allows remarriage?

Remarriage while a spouse lives seems to almost universally be called adultery among early Christian writers. For a brief historical outline, see “The History of Christian Thought Upon Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage” and “Are Bible Translations Progressively Softening God’s Words on Divorce?” by Daniel R. Jennings. Recent editions of the NIV and ESV bibles further soften God’s words.

Why is this topic so important?

Anger or lack of forgiveness during divorce may have eternal consequences.

Romans 12.14-21

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 5.21-24

You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

Mark 11.25-26

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.

Those continuing in adultery will not have eternal life.

Matthew 19.16-19

And someone came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” And He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” Then he said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not commit murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and mother; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

1 Corinthians 6.9-10

Or 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 effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

Should unlawful marriages be abandoned?

Genesis 20.1-7

Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married." Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, will You slay a nation, even though blameless? "Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this." Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. "Now therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours."

Another example would be the marriage of Herod Antipas to Herodias. According to the historian Josephus, Herodias' first husband was Herod Philip, son of Herod the Great and Miriamne II of Jerusalem. She divorced him and married Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and Malthace the Samaritan. Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great and Miriamne I, so both of these husbands were half-uncles and half-brothers to each other with the same degree of consanguinity to Herodias.

Mark 6.17-18

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

A final example would be the unlawful marriages of the Israelites to the surrounding peoples, as reported to Ezra when he returned from captivity in Babylon.

Ezra 7.1-6

Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra son of Seraiah ... from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him.

Ezra 8.35-10.5

The exiles who had come from the captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel... . Then they delivered the king's edicts to the king's satraps and to the governors in the provinces beyond the River, and they supported the people and the house of God.

Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness." When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.

But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the Lord my God; and I said, “O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens. Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day. But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the Lord our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage. For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

“Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity. ‘So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.’ After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped remnant as this, shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape? O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this.”

Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly. Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act.”

Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath.

Why didn't Nehemiah also command the Israelites to divorce?

... their foreign wives as Ezra did, if that was the right thing to do?

Nehemiah 13.23-27

In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people. So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin. Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?"

Ezra did not initially command the Israelites to divorce, he only made them swear to do so after they themselves saw their sin and volunteered to divorce. Later he commanded them to divorce in order to fulfill this vow. The rest of the book of Ezra reports how the vow was fulfilled.

Nehemiah then came to Jerusalem thirteen years after Ezra arrived. Sometime during his twelve year stay the people voluntarily swore to follow God's laws (Nehemiah 10.28-31). Nehemiah then returned to the king. Later, he came again and found that some people had intermarried with foreigners (in the Nehemiah passage quoted above). However, the offenders were not repentant in attitude, only swearing not to make matters worse after he fought with them. Nor did they volunteer to divorce their foreign wives as when Ezra first arrived.

Summary from cited scripture

God witnesses the marriage vows of a man and woman and joins them together. What God has joined together, no man should separate. They are bound by law as long as they both are living. A separated spouse should remain unmarried or be reconciled. If a separated spouse remarries, they are an adulterer or adulteress. Adulterers will not inherit the kingdom of God. As with other sins, forgiveness is possible by confessing the sin to God and turning away from it.

Isaiah 55.7

Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the Lord,
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.

John 8.3-11

The scribes and Pharisees, however, brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before them and said, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. So what do You say?”

They said this to test Him, in order to have a basis for accusing Him. But Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with His finger. When they continued to question Him, He straightened up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her.” And again He bent down and wrote on the ground.

When they heard this, they began to go away one by one, beginning with the older ones, until only Jesus was left, with the woman standing there. Then Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, Lord,” she answered.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Now go and sin no more.”

