

CHAPTER 7

DOES GOD REALLY HATE DIVORCE?

Does God really hate divorce? That's a good question and the Bible accommodates us with what seems to be a very direct answer:

For the LORD, the God of Israel, says that he hates divorce. . . (Malachi 2:16)

But what does that really mean? How literally are we to take this statement?

Does God hate divorce absolutely? Is it to be banned forever?

Or

Does God hate divorce like we hate bad days? We don't like them, try to avoid them as much as possible but accept them as inevitable.

There are several reasons to believe that "hating" divorce, as the above passage says, is not the same as "disallowing" it absolutely and the first one involves a look into how this wording became so popular. Is it really accurate?

Translation Issues

Very little is said about it but it is well worth noting that the translation of Malachi 2:16 is a point of contention among scholars. Not all versions read the same.

The New International Version follows the standard approach:

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty.

But the English Standard Version changes the entire dynamic of the verse.

For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts.

Instead of “I (God) hate divorce” it is changed to “the MAN who does not love his wife.” The husband is the subject not God. In other words, the husband is doing the “hating” and in this case he hates his wife. Hate is the motivation behind the divorce and the hate along with the divorce are described as forms of violence. That little translation tweak puts an entirely different spin on how God views divorce.

Admittedly, most translations agree with the NIV but there is a reason for this other than pure academics.

The first English translation to be widely circulated and to showcase the “I hate divorce reading” was the King James Bible and it was translated in an era and by clerics dominated by anti-divorce sentiment. Consider the following facts:

1. The first official printing of the KJV was in 1611 which means most of the translation work was done within 50 years of England breaking with the Church of Rome.
2. The break came because King Henry insisted on an annulment (Catholic divorce) of his marriage to Catharine of Aragon in the hopes of finding a wife with whom he could sire a male heir.
3. Many of the translators, though protestant, were still influenced by Romanish sentiments toward marriage-divorce-remarriage.

It is no surprise, then, that they opted for a very anti-divorce reading of the text.

It is also no surprise that most English translations followed suit.

Ever since those days, protestant attitudes toward marriage have been heavily influenced, unwittingly, by Catholic teachings and most of the new English translations have “kept the faith” so to speak. It always “feels” safe to stay with what you know.

But, even if the “God hates divorce” translation is accurate there are still reasons to reject extreme interpretations.

Divorce, When Abusive, Creates More Pain Than It Was Intended To Relieve

Through Moses, God placed one limitation on divorce, which wasn't seriously restrictive. All a man needed do was write out and give to his spouse a document declaring his intent to end the marriage. Apart from this, no other procedures or reasons for allowing/disallowing divorce were mentioned.

What is “assumed” by the brevity of this legislation is that divorce would be based on reasonable grounds but whatever the grounds, reasonable or not, it had to be better than being thrown out or stoned.

Remember that stoning or any other kind of execution was regulated not instituted by the Bible. Divorce was instituted to soften the cultural trends of the day, which allowed stoning for less minor crimes.

So, the picture is this. Divorce was the compassionate answer to all the popular ways a man could get rid of his wife.

Joseph is a good example. Thinking Mary had committed adultery, he chose divorce over stoning. The Bible even says Joseph chose this course of action because he was a good man, meaning considerate, decent and kind, suggesting, of course, that divorce was intended to relieve pressure in a more humane way.

What was understood, but not restated in Moses' divorce regulation, was the nature of a marriage relationship. God described it in Genesis 2 as a man and woman becoming one.

Based on this brief description we understand that marriage involves an invisible but personal connection between the marriage partners on every level and such connections are not easily broken. They were originally intended to last forever. Let me say that a little differently.

Marriage partners, in their original untainted state, were designed to live forever, meaning they would never die. In their original state they would never age, suffer disease, become weak or become a burden to bear. They lived and stayed together, not just for a sin shortened life, but forever.

It's hard to visualize that since we live with a very different set of circumstances today but that was the plan. When you compare the original plan to today's reality it isn't so difficult to see why at least a certain number of divorces is reasonable.

Assuming that the connections God intended to exist between saintly partners in an almost heavenly environment could easily survive human imperfections is enormously illogical. The resulting flaws in human nature following the fall placed pressures on the marriage, which it was not designed to bear. In other words, what God designed for our good – marriage – could potentially become intolerable and in such cases divorce offered a degree of relief.

So God instituted the bill of divorce not to stop partners from breaking up but to bring a little civility to the process.

Before Moses, divorce was initiated with nothing more than, "I don't like you anymore, you're out." The "bill of divorcement" - a written statement officially declaring the marriage ended - was introduced to bring a degree of order to this unhappy transaction, making it a little more tolerable. Instead of seeing it for what it was, a decent way to part, opportunistic teachers turned it into a get out of jail free card, with the option to play it at the first disenchanting moment.

That is, when you get tired of the old gal just use any complaint no matter how minor and send her packing.

Two Abusive Schools of Thought

There were two prominent rabbinic leaders in Jesus' day that represented the two most popular opinions on divorce. One was Shammai and the other Hillel. These two men taught what is referred to as oral tradition. Don't get confused by that term. Today "oral tradition" is called interpretations. The primary difference between oral tradition in the time of Jesus and interpretation today has to do with two things: The manner in which it was passed along and the number of people who promote different teachings.

In Jesus' day these teachings were transferred from one generation to the next verbally. They didn't have printing presses or Bible bookstores.

Also, in Jesus' day there were only two primary schools of thought but today there are many more differing traditions. The differences are demarcated mostly along denominational lines but two things need to be said. One, they aren't as different as you might think and, two, each domination can have sub schools of thought also.

It sounds confusing, I know, but the differences are really more semantics than anything else. When you compare all the systems you still have primarily two schools of thought very much like the two in Jesus' day.

First School of Thought: Shammai

Shammai believed divorce was only allowed when a serious breach of the marriage vows occurred, "serious" being defined by the leaders but, generally speaking, the breach had to be equivalent to a capital crime. His approach was legalistic, "We'll allow it only if you can prove to our satisfaction that some really bad thing justifies it!" and even then the divorced individual was branded for the rest of life."

Shammai's approach had the potential of turning a marriage into a prison.

Second School of Thought: Hillel

Hillel believed a man could divorce his wife even for something as trivial as burning a meal. The frivolous approach.

What people don't readily see or admit is that either approach could be abusive, one by making it near impossible to get a divorce and the other by encouraging it for any shallow excuse.

Hillel's teaching, the frivolous approach, was the more popular teaching in the time of Jesus. Men got married thinking divorce was inevitable. Can you imagine a woman getting married to the love of her life but living every minute in the kitchen with divorce hanging over her head?

Anyway, what God hated was not the institution of divorce but the extent to which it had become abusive. It had degraded from "an occasional experience" to "the craze" culturally. Hillel's teaching made women nothing more than temporary fixtures.

The response of the disciples illustrates this truth.

When Jesus challenged the Pharisees' free-license approach to divorce, the disciples were incredulous. Essentially their response was, if we are not free to get rid of a wife for any reason whenever, "it is better not to marry" (Matthew 19:10).

I hope none of their wives heard them say that.

This attitude prevailed in spite of the laudatory ways in which women were characterized in various books of the Old Testament, Ruth, Proverbs and Song of Solomon to name a few.

Unfortunately, women were much more abused by these transactions in Bible days than today. They could not easily initiate or counter divorce proceedings and were vulnerable for the following reasons:

1. There were no alimony laws.
2. Women had very limited occupational options.
3. Childlessness, one reason for divorce, meant there were no children to take care of an elderly divorcee.
4. Unscrupulous businessmen could easily take advantage of these castaways.
5. The unbounded license with which men exercised their right to divorce was cruel in the extreme.

It's easy to see why God hated this!

The Figurative Use Of The Word "Hate"

"Hate" is one of those words we often use figuratively to emphasize the intensity of our feelings and we claim to hate all kinds of things: the way we look, the way we feel, the weather (too cold, hot or wet), different foods, styles, jobs, music, traffic, books, movies, inconveniences, etc.

We also express hate toward people: neighbors, co-workers, school mates, celebrities, politicians, parents, police, teachers, siblings, children, the doctor, the dentist, the preacher and so on.

Some hates, loudly proclaimed, become social movements: prohibition, anti-war, abolition, oppression of women, etc.

Fortunately, in most cases it is nothing more than hyperbole. We exaggerate the point just to make sure people hear us or believe us. Kids don't really hate their parents or want them to die. When the circumstance passes and tempers cool, love returns.

Unfortunately, humans easily get caught up in “I hate you” moments and when left unchecked the hate sometimes escalates to violence. In some cases lethal violence. There are many degrees of human hate but when we read the word “hate” in the Bible, especially when attributed to God, we must resist the temptation to humanize the interpretation.

God is love not hate. He isn't vindictive or spiteful and He doesn't change. He uses the word to make a literary point not to institute a rule and He did this more than once.

God also said He hates the Sabbath. He used the word “hate” and then capitalized it by adding the word “despise!”

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies, Amos 5:21.

How shall we interpret this statement? Turn it into a hard fast rule or see it in context?

He stated that same sentiment in Isaiah 1:14:

Your new moons and your appointed feasts (both of which were Sabbaths) my soul hates: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them.

But here is the question. Did God hate the Sabbath or the misuse of it?

The Sabbath was an original part of creation. It was the first principle God instituted and was to be observed in perpetuity. How could God use such strong language against a most favored observance? And the answer is He was expressing distaste for the way it was distorted not for the institution itself.

Using the same logic we understand that God didn't hate the legal mechanism of divorce but only the way in which it was abused. God recognized the fact that some marriages can become seriously troubled, damagingly so, and made provision for a decent way to bring relief, divorce.

Truthfully, it is just as abusive to disallow divorce on any grounds – along with remarriage – as it is to encourage divorce just for any passing whim.

Help In The Time Of Trouble

The saddest truth of all is the fact that taking a hard line on divorce and remarriage means you can't help when marriages are in trouble other than to insist "you can't get divorced." People who experience divorce still need encouragement to find normalcy afterward but they get very little support from people whose mantra is, "God hates divorce."

Conclusion

Divorce is an unfortunate reality. The only way to eradicate it is to make all humans perfect and that won't happen this side of heaven. As long as imperfection reigns divorce is one possible outcome and it is missing the point to suggest God does not understand this.