

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 318

Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament

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Episode Summary

This episode follows the previous discussion on divorce and remarriage and the Old Testament with Dr. David Instone-Brewer. Divorce and remarriage are obviously sensitive and difficult subjects. Not surprisingly, the Bible has something to say about both. In this episode we chat with Dr. Instone-Brewer about what how the New Testament handles Old Testament teaching about divorce and remarriage. Specifically, the discussion focuses on the response of Jesus to his Jewish rivals on the question of divorce and Paul's subsequent teaching in 1 Corinthians 7. Dr. Instone-Brewer is also a pastor, and so the episode includes pastoral advice to the divorced and remarried.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 318: Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament with Dr. David Instone-Brewer. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How are you doing this week?

MH: Good. Busy as usual. But the good kind of busy. I'd rather have that than be bored.

TS: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I enjoyed the conversation we had about divorce and remarriage in the Old Testament. So I'm interested to hear what David has to say about it in the New Testament.

MH: Yeah, it was a good setup. So it's nice to have two parts on this. And I agree. I think the last episode was a good one. So I think that'll carry over into this one.

TS: Yeah, absolutely. Hopefully people can refer back to this now. We have a resource about divorce and remarriage. And I'm looking forward to it.

MH: Well, we're excited to have David Instone-Brewer back on the podcast. He was on a previous episode. We were talking about divorce and remarriage and we focused on the Old Testament. So if you have not listened to that episode prior to this one, you really need to do that. So go back and listen to the previous episode with David. And we're going to jump into the New Testament in this episode. We're applying a number of things that we talked about in that first episode. So by all means, please go back and listen to that. But for people who might be new that are not going to listen to what I just said, David, can you introduce yourself a little bit again for our audience?

DIB: Yep. I'm David Instone-Brewer. Forgive the long surname. I inherited it. [MH laughs] I come from Cambridge in England, where I'm a Research Fellow at Tyndale House. That's absolutely the best place to do biblical research because we've got all the books that you could need. And if we don't *actually* have the book you need, there's a library around the corner with another eight million. [MH laughs] So yep, come to Tyndale House. Come and meet me. Come and have coffee.

MH: Yeah, if you can't find what you're looking for with those resources, it's probably not important enough to be spending any time on. [laughs] It'd be a little too esoteric.

DIB: Yeah. The best thing, though, is the coffee time. Because then everyone leaves their desks and they go and talk to each other, and all these Bible nerds are all on hand. You've got an Akkadian phrase you can't make heads or tail of, there'll be someone there who can turn it upside down and read it for you.

MH: Okay, I have to ask you a tea question though. I actually don't drink coffee. I drink tea. You have to have tea there, right?

DIB: Of course we have tea. [laughter] We tend to have coffee... We call it "coffee" in the morning and "tea" in the afternoon. One time someone from Time Magazine phoned and wanted to interview me. Amazing! But the front office said, "I'm very sorry. Dr. Instone-Brewer is drinking tea. He can't talk to you now."

MH: [laughs] Well, to me, that's an acceptable excuse. [laughs] I'm a tea addict, so that's what I'd be angling for right away. And I love... I don't want to get into the tea thing, but English Breakfast tea and Scottish and Irish. Man, I'm into all of it. So yeah, I just wanted to make sure. If I'm ever over there, I don't want to be disappointed with coffee. I want *tea*. That's what I'm there for. Tea and books. I mean, what could be better?

Well, let's jump in to our second episode here. We've got... For those of you who didn't listen to the first one, David has spent *a lot* of time, a lot of effort, and done a lot of writing. And again, I highly recommend his book, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, and also the similar title, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*.

5:00

These are great resources, because they focus... especially *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, which is going to be the more academic of the two. That doesn't mean the other one's not, but the title I'm zeroing in on here is a major resource that gets us into primary sources and, of course, good secondary peer-reviewed literature. And this is what we care about here—really focusing on Scripture, taking Scripture in its own context, and paying close attention to the text. So we talked about Old Testament a lot. We talked about Deuteronomy 24. We talked about marriage as a contract and how Deuteronomy 24 was really significant because it allowed women to divorce or to get divorced. If they were divorced by their husband, they have a certificate that says that they can remarry. We talked a little bit about how God and his relationship with Israel factors into this. And we ended that hour by going back to Deuteronomy 24 with the Hillel and Shammai difference of opinion on Deuteronomy 24. And it's actually really simple. You had the Hillel school (essentially the no-fault divorcers) take the two-word phrase that in our English Bibles in Deuteronomy 24 often gets translated “indecency” as being the cause. Let me go back and actually read that verse.

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house...

There are two Hebrew words behind the ESV there for “some indecency.” One is the “indecency.” It's related to the word for nakedness. So the Hillel school said, “That part, that one, that word of those two refers to adultery. But then the other word there is *davar* (thing). It's just a thing. It can be anything.” So David pointed out that this school took those two words and went two different directions. So the causes for divorce could be adultery and really anything else. And then the Shammai school said, “No, we have to keep those terms together. It's one phrase.” And they interpreted that as marital infidelity. So this is what takes us into the Gospels. The authorities there, the teachers, asked Jesus which side he is on.

So David, take us into that scene in the Gospels where we have this situation. And what does this controversy contribute to our understanding of the Gospels and Jesus' response? Actually, he responds in more than one way. But take us into this scene. When they confront Jesus with this question, what are they trying to do and how does Jesus initially respond?

DIB: Well I guess everyone in Israel had to take an opinion on this, because there would be people in their families who were divorced or who were getting a divorce. And when you do that, you have to pick your lawyer carefully. On a case like that, you have three lawyers. Three rabbis make up a court. And there'll be one from each school and another one. [laughter] And if you don't pick them

carefully, you're going to get the wrong decision. So everyone knew about this difference on divorce, that the Hillelites let you get divorced for anything at all and the Shammaites said, "No, you can only get divorced for these four things, which are actually stipulated in Scripture: indecency, lack of food, lack of clothing, lack of conjugal rights."

MH: Yeah. And those three (other than the infidelity) come from Exodus 21, correct?

DIB: Yes. The Jewish...

MH: That's what everybody agreed on. It's just that Deuteronomy 24 is where they split off.

DIB: Yeah. We think of it as coming from Exodus 21. But any Jewish woman would think of it as coming from that piece of paper which she hoards so carefully called her marriage contract, because it's written out there in black and white, quoting Exodus 21. So this was a really important text for them, along with Deuteronomy 24. But the difficulty was Deuteronomy 24. That's where the dispute lay. "Do you accept that it also talks about divorce for *any thing (any cause)?*" So they come to Jesus and they actually ask him that. They say, "Is it lawful to get divorced for *Any Cause?*" Now of course, in Mark, it doesn't say that. In Mark it just says, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Now that's a weird phrase. Because they could just answer that and say, "Duh. Yes." [MH laughs] Because it says in the law that you could divorce your wife.

MH: Right.

DIB: I think it's similar to when we say, "Is it lawful for an 18-year-old to drink?" And we all know what it means. If an 18-year-old doesn't drink, they're going to die from dehydration.

MH: Right. So we mentally... Because of our familiarity with that example, we know what it means and what it doesn't mean. Our brain is going to fill in the gaps, because we just *know*. And so what you're saying is the same thing in the New Testament period (1st century), that even though Mark words it differently, people are going to fill it in the way it needs to be filled in.

10:00

DIB: And Matthew does it for us. I suspect that in the original question to Jesus, they didn't bother to fill it in because everyone knew the question. But by the time Matthew is writing his Gospel, things have already moved on and this is becoming the only form of divorce in the house (divorce for Any Cause). They don't realize that it's a question anymore. It's been settled.

MH: Right. And this is an important observation. This isn't really a trivial thing. Because what David is suggesting (and I think it's really self-evident)... The

original hearers and readers of this are going to just *know* what the real question is. They're going to have had experience. They're going to have this really certifiable intuition as to really what's going on here. So we should not today take the difference in wording and try to either create a contradiction or have some sort of self-styled interpretation that pits these things against each other. That would be really an incorrect method. It would be a very poor hermeneutic.

DIB: And it's kind of confirmed by the fact that without that extra clause, the question is as meaningless as, "Is it lawful for an 18-year-old to drink?" It just doesn't make sense without mentally adding "for Any Cause" or "alcoholic beverages."

MH: So what does Jesus do with it? What does he do with the question?

DIB: [laughs] He avoids it. [MH laughs] He's not interested in talking about divorce at all. Because he goes off on this long digression. He talks about how marriage is made for male and female (one male and one female). And, "I didn't ask you about that."

MH: Right. They get a lecture on what marriage should be instead of an answer to the question. Yeah.

DIB: And "You should be leaving and cleaving to your wife, and becoming one flesh. And you shouldn't be getting divorced." "Yeah, we know we *shouldn't* be getting divorced, but Moses said we could. Come on. Get back to it." And he's going through a whole host of issues there. He's contradicting the Jewish teaching on polygamy. He contradicts the Jewish teaching that "you *should* get divorced if there's adultery." And he says, "No. God only said that you *could*." And he later contradicts the idea that you *have* to get married. Because the first law in Scripture is "Go forth and multiply." And Jesus says, "No, you can be like the eunuchs. You don't have to marry."

MH: Yeah. So he's contradicting pretty much everything in sight. But Jesus spent some time on it, so we should spend some time on it, too. [laughs] So tell us how Jesus' rabbit trail contradicts what (I guess it's fair to say) a number of people of his time would have thought about polygamy. So how does it do that?

DIB: It doesn't make sense until you're familiar with the way in which the Jews were already talking about this. At Qumran in the Damascus document, you've got a series of prooftexts to show that polygamy is wrong. They thought (the people who went off to live at Qumran and separated themselves from other Jews) that you should only have one wife. Of course, you have to have a wife, if only for a short period. But only have one. And they said, "Here's the proof. Adam and Eve get married. "Male and female," it says. And then when you look at exactly that same phrase later in the story of the Flood, it says, 'They went into the ark two by two, male and female.' Therefore, male and female, only two

involved. One man, one wife. Not lots of wives.” And Jesus quotes two of those prooftexts that they come up with (about the male and female) and one can put in the third one. They know this is the general argument against polygamy.

MH: Right. So when Jesus does this, basically sounding like some of these Qumran verdicts (these opinions), people are going to know what he’s thinking here.

DIB: Yeah. He also uses an argument that’s used by the Diaspora Jews. All the translations of the Old Testament from Hebrew (the one into Syriac and into old Greek and the early ones into Latin)—all the old translations, they all add a word to the Genesis quote. When Jesus quotes, “And the two shall become one flesh,” he’s added a word to the text. “Therefore a man will leave his mother and father and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” Now you probably know which word he’s added.

MH: Mm hmm.

15:00

DIB: That’s the word “two.” *Two* isn’t in any Hebrew manuscripts. And no Jew is going to be fooled by that. But they know that this is the normal way. In the Targum, when they read out of the Aramaic version of the Old Testament, they will add that word *two*. They always add the word *two*. Because the Diaspora Jews were very keen to say, “Hey. We shouldn’t really be having more than one wife. There’s only two people who become one flesh.” So Jesus is fully onboard with other Jews who were saying that there shouldn’t be polygamy.

MH: So his rabbit trail, how does that address the other two things that you brought up, that you... I’m trying to remember exactly how you worded this. I’ll let you fill in the blank. There were two other things that it contradicts.

DIB: The Jews also believed that you *had* to divorce someone if there’s adultery. If your wife commits adultery, you *have* to divorce her.

MH: It’s an obligation.

DIB: Obligation of decency. And that’s why in Matthew, you have, “Why did Moses *command* one to give a divorce certificate and send her away?” But Jesus says, “No, no, no. Hang on. He *allowed* you to divorce your wives.” Allowed, not commanded. And the other thing is just divorce itself. It was so easy. It was so normal. And it was regarded as the decent thing to do in lots of circumstances. But Jesus didn’t like the idea of divorce at all. So he says, “There’s only divorce if there’s hardness of heart. Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives.” Hardness of heart is *cardioscleroma*. [laughs] That describes rather like our blood vessels which get hard. But it was an invented word in the Septuagint. And it only occurs once, and that’s in the context of

divorce. That's in Jeremiah 4:4, where God is divorcing Israel for her hardness of heart.

MH: So that would be directed at her persistence in infidelity to the other gods. So do you think that's what Jesus was angling for? Like, when he said "it's because of the hardness of your hearts," was he referring to just the women or the men or everybody? What do you think he's thinking there?

DIB: I think he's pointing out how much God will put up with sin in a marriage before he got divorced. Israel was such a terrible wife, committing adultery with so many other lovers. And yet God delayed and delayed and delayed a divorce, and then eventually did divorce her. And as Jesus said, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives." Sometimes it just gets so terrible, so bad, there is no other way forward. It just has to end in divorce.

MH: Right. So it's not like siding with one party or the other. It's just sort of a general statement that sometimes it's just so bad that this happens.

DIB: We are a sinful species. And God knew that there had to be some way in which to end a marriage. Because hey, you get these abusive marriages, which are just dangerous to be in. And there has to be an exit door, not because God wants us to sin and not because God wants us to end marriages, but because we do sin and we do kill marriages and there has to be a way in which to end it because of our own sin.

MH: Do you think that when Jesus gets into this... Let's just do it this way. You have this Hillel and Shammai debate. And basically Jesus has side-stepped that initially. And then he gets drawn back into, as you outlined there, "Well, we don't want a lecture on marriage. We want to know what side of this you're on." Has what you said to this point, do you think, is that the best way that you would put what Jesus does, where he lands? Or does he land more firmly on one side or the other?

20:00

DIB: He lands on one side in terms of Hillel and Shammaite. But clearly, he's not that interested in divorce. He's more interested in marriage. I have this friend...

MH: Right. He's not going to parse all the causes, "and these are non-causes, and this is legit. That's not legit." He's not getting into the... He's not playing the lawyer game.

DIB: He wants to say, "Look. You're supposed to stay together forever. God is one of your witnesses at the wedding. Come on. And okay, but there are some bad things in your marriage. But it's only when there's real hardness of heart that that's why Moses allowed a divorce certificate. You don't divorce for small things. It's got to be a big thing." And he's *for* marriage. He's for keeping people

together. But he recognizes, “Yep. There are times when that hardened spot is so terrible. You just need that divorce.”

MH: Where else does the conversation go? Because you’ve got this... Jesus finally comes around to telegraphing where he’s at, just as you summarized there. What about the remarriage question? That becomes part of this discussion. So can you set that up for us? How does this become part of the conversation and what does Jesus do with it?

DIB: We have a certain problem in the way in which Jesus summarizes his teaching. He’s been asked about this “Any Cause” in Deuteronomy 24. And as you know, Matthew also adds another phrase which you don’t find in Mark, which is “except for adultery.” “Getting divorced for Any Cause” was the slogan that the Hillelites had. “Yeah, from Deuteronomy 24, you can get divorced for Any Cause.” And the Shammaites answered, “No, that verse is talking about nothing except adultery. It isn’t talking about adultery *and* Any Cause. It’s only talking about adultery.” And that’s what Jesus answers with. “The only way you can get divorced under Deuteronomy 24 is for adultery. And if you’ve done it for anything else (Any Cause), and then you remarry someone else, you’re *committing* adultery.” That sounds a bit strange at first, as you think, “Well, how can you be committing adultery by remarrying?” But of course, you’re still married to the first person you were married to. It’s an invalid divorce if you’re using the Hillelite interpretation. So you’re still married to the first person. If you get remarried, you’re committing adultery against your first wife or your first husband. That’s where the adultery comes in. He’s not saying, “Remarriage is wrong.” He’s saying, “Remarriage after a divorce for Any Cause is wrong, because you’re not properly divorced. You haven’t gotten divorced on biblical grounds.”

MH: How do you think that that... How would that work out... For those who went ahead and did what I asked them to do (they listened to the first part), or are taking these consecutively anyway, you’re a pastor as well. You’re not just a scholar. You’ve had plenty of church experience. How do you take that information... And we haven’t even gotten to Paul yet. But I’ll ask it here. If you want to defer it to Paul, we can wait. But on a practical level, how do you talk to people who are in this situation where, “Okay, I was in this marriage and we got divorced really for Any Cause. It was something stupid or one of these No-Fault things. And now I’m remarried. So what do I do now?” So how do you apply the spirit of the law or the letter of the law? How do you do that here?

DIB: I think I am going to have to drag you into Paul for that.

MH: Okay. Let’s go with Paul.

DIB: In 1 Corinthians 7, he deals with a couple exactly like that. Throughout 1 Corinthians 7, he deals with men and women equally, and he says, “A man does this, and woman does that...” But in verse 10 and 11, suddenly we’re talking

about a man and a woman separately. And I think we're talking about an actual case which happened there, where a woman left her husband. And that means in Roman terms that you're divorced. A divorce was enacted as soon as you left your spouse with the intention of divorcing. That was it. So she's divorced her husband, effectively, by walking out. And Paul says to her that she must not do that. And since she has done it, she's got to remain unmarried and try to be reconciled to her husband. So she's walked out for no good reason, and he says, "Well, you've got to try for reconciliation."

25:00 **MH:** What do you think... Because if we look at 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, it is kind of obvious that this is a divorce. "The wife should not separate from her husband, but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband." The term "unmarried" there, I believe, occurs four times in the passage. And I don't think it occurs anywhere else, other than this discussion of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. So do you think... This is just kind of out of left field, but it's something I've wondered. One of these situations... When you get to later in the letter he says around verse 25:

²⁵ Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

Can we say the status of being free from a wife is *unmarried*? In other words, "free from a wife" can be never married at all. If you're divorced, are you free from a wife because you're no longer married? And the reason the question is important is because of the next verse.

²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.

So on and so forth. So how do you get Paul to be consistent here? How do you navigate the *unmarried* terminology in light of verses 10 and 11?

DIB: I don't think we can make conclusions that the unmarried in verse 34 therefore means that they had been married and this is an unmarried person getting remarried. That's one way in which people try to argue, "Yes, Paul is okay with getting remarried." It's not necessary to argue that way, and it's certainly not safe to argue that way. Because, as you say, the term's only being used four times and it's difficult to make a definition from four occurrences—especially broad, different contexts. But yeah, I would agree that Paul does allow people to remarry, but just not from that verse.

MH: Why don't you unpack that a little bit about Paul's thoughts on remarriage?

DIB: The reason he's telling her not to remarry in verse 11 (the woman has walked out) is because as soon as she does, then their reconciliation isn't possible. She can't be reconciled with her husband, having married someone else. So that's the importance in not getting married to someone else in the meantime. It's not as though eternally you can't get remarried. It's that you're not getting remarried in order to attempt reconciliation. Of course, her husband might turn around and say, "You left me. Clearly you don't want to be with me. You've abandoned me in Jewish biblical terms. You're not providing food, clothing, love. The marriage is over." And it's up to him to say that, because he's the victim. Only the victim can say, "Yes. I'm going to go for that divorce."

MH: It sounds like what you're saying here is that... And I think this is consistent with a couple of things you said in the Old Testament treatment, that let's say that the wife is the victim. You have a scenario where you have someone who didn't want a divorce and then their spouse divorces them, and it's not for infidelity. It's one of these No-Fault things. But here you have the innocent party. So Paul isn't telling that person that from here to eternity, you can't get remarried. Is that what I'm hearing?

DIB: Yes. You're staying unmarried so that you can be reconciled. He doesn't say how long you have to stay unmarried. But presumably, if the husband says, "There's no way," then there isn't any barrier to her getting remarried.

MH: So really the guts of verses 10 and 11 as you're reading them is that Paul is saying, "Give it a chance." It's kind of like a hierarchy of preferences here, "All things being equal, be reconciled."

DIB: Well, it's also not her decision, because...

MH: Yeah, in that case, yeah, it wouldn't be her decision.

DIB: It's his decision. And he has to say, "No, the reconciliation isn't happening." And then it really is over. But until that happens, she's supposed to try to get back together again.

30:00

MH: Do you think Paul and Jesus... There's obviously a big discussion that goes a lot of different directions. Are Paul and Jesus on the same page, the same paragraph, different pages? How do you look at the relationship between what Jesus is saying and what Paul is saying?

DIB: Well, it is very difficult by the traditional interpretation, which doesn't take into account this legal terminology. Because if Jesus is saying, "There's only one ground for divorce and that's adultery," and then Paul comes along and says,

“Oh, no, no, there’s only one ground for divorce and that’s abandonment,” well, they’re just plain contradicting each other.

MH: So you would think that there probably (just for lack of a better way of putting it)... They have something really specific in their heads at the time they’re talking about this. Do you think that’s fair?

DIB: Well Jesus has something very specific in his mind because he’s being asked about it. He’s being asked about this Any Cause divorce and being asked, “Do you agree with it?” And he says, “No. If you get divorced on that ground, you’re not properly divorced. And if you think you’re getting remarried, actually you’re committing adultery, because that isn’t a biblical ground.”

MH: Is he speaking to the decision-maker (the one doing the divorcing) or both parties?

DIB: Well, whoever is getting remarried. Both partners are still married to each other because there’s an invalid divorce.

MH: And they would still be married, yeah. So why do you think Paul goes the direction he does? Is he just trying to do the best he can with the situation at hand or is there something else going on here?

DIB: Paul is sticking to Old Testament law. By Old Testament law, the only grounds for divorce are adultery, not providing food and clothing, and not providing love. And in 1 Corinthians 7, he’s says in verses 3 and 4 about the obligations to have marital love, to allow for marital love, and then in verse 35 or whatever, he’s saying about the concerns (worldly concerns as we often think about it, but the very practical concerns in marriage) that there is an obligation to look after your husband, look after your wife, which of course in the four grounds for divorce is food and clothing. So he’s recognizing all those three obligations. He’s not talking about them as grounds for divorce. He’s recognizing them as obligations within marriage. So he seems to be basing his theology on the Old Testament, like Jesus does.

MH: And since he wants those things to happen, that’s why he’s arguing for reconciliation.

DIB: Well, the reconciliation... (because there hasn’t been a biblical ground for divorce)... There’s been no biblical ground for divorce, so you shouldn’t be walking away. You’ve got no grounds compact. But when he talks in verse 15 to the people who actually have been left, he says, “Well, yeah. You’ve been left. This person isn’t going to come back. They’re certainly not going to come back because *I’m* going to tell them to come back. Because they’re not believers. And so you are now free.” When he says they’re free, he doesn’t mean they’re free to get divorced, because they already *are* divorced. If someone’s walked out on

you, you *are* divorced in Roman law. So the freedom there is the freedom to remarry.

MH: The way you said that, that really does (this is maybe going to sound a little odd) have the flavoring of Deuteronomy 24 to my ear, that there is this taking it for what it is. Granted, there's no exchange of a bill of divorcement here, but it seems like the spirit is kind of the same. Is that fair to say?

DIB: It's legalistic... We're not being nice in these marriages anymore, so now we're looking at the law. Yeah, so Deuteronomy 24 in that sense. But we also have to bear in mind the sort of world that they're living in. In the Roman world, the law said you had to be married, effectively, if you're a Roman citizen. The *Aes Iulia* came, I think, in 40 B.C., which was to try to get more Roman citizens by making Roman citizens have babies. And they said, "Look, if you're not married you should get married. If you get divorced, you've got to get remarried within 12 months" I think it was. And if you're a widow or a widower, you have to get remarried within 18 months. It was a pretty strict law.

MH: Wow.

35:00

DIB: And the Christians lived under this like the Romans did. If you didn't follow it, then your neighbor can snoop on you and can take you to court and say, "This person has been divorced for over a year and they haven't remarried yet." And he would be rewarded with half their goods. [MH laughs] So you...

MH: I didn't know that. That's crazy.

DIB: But it was almost the same in Judaism. Because the very first law was that you should go forth and multiply; if you got divorced, you should remarry and have children. And the rabbis actually asked themselves, "Well, how many children do we *need* to have before we're released from this?" And one rabbi says, "Well, you've got to have two children." Another one says, "Well, you've got to have two boys." And then he says, "It's because Moses had two boys, so we obviously have to have two boys." But the other rabbi said, "No, no, no. A boy and a girl will do, because that's what God had."

MH: [laughs] Oh, boy.

DIB: They argued about this. Because...

MH: That should be a skit. [laughs] That really should be a skit. [laughs]

DIB: And Ben Azzai (he was presumably already married but his wife died or they divorced or something)... They kept asking him, "When are you going to get remarried? Because the law says you've got to marry." And he eventually answers, "Well, I'm married to Torah." [laughter] He had a "get out" clause.

MH: Right, right.

DIB: But the expectation was, if you got divorced you remarried. Because you had to make sure you had these children, in both Judaism and in Roman society. So now imagine that Paul wanted to teach that Christians could not remarry. He would have to say it very clearly. He'd have to say, "I know you're risking litigation. I know you're risking being looked down on by all your fellow Jews. But you must not remarry." He could have said that. But he would have had to say it very clearly, because everything else said, "You *have* to remarry."

MH: So your point is that he doesn't say it with that kind of force? Is that what I'm hearing?

DIB: He didn't say it with any force at all. He just doesn't talk about it. He doesn't say remarriage is permitted. He doesn't say it's not allowed.

MH: It's really interesting. Because Paul... This is the same guy who in Romans 13 said, "The powers that be are ordained of God," and "living peaceably under the law," and all that sort of stuff. That would be a delicate thing, a delicate dance.

DIB: Yeah, but on this issue he doesn't have to be against the law with it. In the Old Testament, remarriage is clearly allowed if you've got a proper divorce. Jesus didn't say remarriage wasn't allowed with a proper divorce. He said it wasn't allowed with an *improper* divorce. So there's no problem that he's facing. The only problem that *we* have is that when we read Jesus, we don't know the legal terminology, and we think he's disallowing *all* divorces. And therefore we think it says no remarriage.

MH: Well the last two chapters in your books deal with modern discussions of divorce and remarriage and pastoral concerns. The modern discussions chapter is sort of a rundown on different ways that the subject matter has been approached within the church—different traditions and whatnot. And then the whole chapter on pastoral concerns.

So what I'd like to do is take what you've talked about in both the last episode and this episode and get your take on how you would address certain things as a pastor, just talking to people—the advice you might give them or the direction. The example I'll use... I guess I'll start with this one. I've gotten this question four or five times in email. And I think in all but one case, the person, when they were divorced they were not a believer and then they became a believer later. But they were already remarried. And so they don't believe that they were divorced for a biblically allowable reason. So the question in all these cases is, "Am I living in perpetual adultery? What should I do?" So I'm sure you've gotten that in the past.

So how do you try to address that? What's the conversation that you might have with somebody who is in that situation?

DIB: Yeah, there seems to be a belief that the wrongful divorce is The Unforgivable Sin.

MH: Yeah, the sin that keeps on taking.

40:00

DIB: Yeah. But it really isn't. Because God takes our contrition and turns it into forgiveness. And therefore anything. But...

MH: Are you suggesting it's a matter of the heart? [laughs]

DIB: No, no. I'm thinking, "What should be the practical approach?"

MH: Okay.

DIB: If they then turn to their second spouse and say, "I'm going to divorce you in order to remarry my first spouse," (who perhaps has gotten married in the meantime anyway, so they have to divorce their spouse), you're multiplying sin in order to make something right in the past. And as our grandmothers will have told us, "Two wrongs don't make a right." Breaking your vows to your present spouse in order to make up for the vows that you broke to your former spouse, that doesn't make right anything. It just makes more victims.

MH: And you couldn't withhold conjugal relations either, because that would also be breaking your vow.

DIB: Correct. So you have to say, "Well, that was in the past. Please, God, forgive me, and help me not to do that again. Help me not to break my marriage vows again."

MH: Yeah. And honestly, I hate to say it, but there are going to be some out there that this sounds too simplistic for them. And oh well. But you have to trust God. Honestly, you have to trust that God knows the situation and that he does forgive you.

DIB: Yeah. This should never have happened, but then nor should the Fall have happened. There are many things that should never have happened. So God, fortunately, is a forgiving God, unlike all the others in the Old Testament. God actually forgives us when we repent to him. And we shouldn't lose sight of that.

MH: Now I'll ask you this. I think you did hint at this already (actually more than hint). Because I think you did say this when we talked about Jesus and I also think you might have said something about it in the first episode. But this question. So this'll be a little bit repetitive. But someone comes into your office

(you being a pastor) saying, “My spouse is committing adultery and I believe I *must* divorce them.” Your answer to them?

DIB: How many times did God forgive Israel? One reason for the seven times seventy that Jesus brought up (the number of times you have to forgive someone who sins against you) is that’s how many times Israel didn’t keep the laws of the Sabbath year and the number of years that she rebelled against God. Seven times seventy. And God still didn’t divorce her until that seven times seventy times. So no one from the outside of a marriage can say when something is too bad. But the role of the pastor is always to say, “Can I help you? Can I help support your marriage? And can the church help you, to give support to you?” And the role of the pastor is never to say, “Yeah. Obviously now. Now is the time that you’ve got to divorce her. Now is the time you’ve got to end the marriage to him.” That’s the wrong message. The right message is always to support. But when it is too far (and the person in the marriage will know that), then you have to say, “Yeah, I’m going to support you in that, too.”

MH: Mm hmm. Another one. And I’ve gotten one or two of these. I’m sure as a pastor you’ve gotten this more often. “I’m in an abusive relationship. I’m fearful. My husband beats me or hits me. I’m a Christian and he’s not.” Or even if he claims to be, or even if he is, “I’m really afraid that he could kill me or really do serious damage to me. What should I do?” How would you approach that person?

DIB: Yeah, I would always go for safety. Physical abuse is a big no-no. When the rabbis talked about abuse, they weren’t talking about anything like that. In the law, it’s just simple neglect. Even if he’s not giving you enough food or enough clothing, then that’s a ground for divorce. Physical abuse is so far down the road away from that. Divorce probably should have been considered long before that. And unfortunately, people get into this relationship where they just take it and take it. There’s a guy from New Zealand who came over to film me and to find out about what I was saying in the *Divorce* book. He’s the one who made the Playmabile YouTube channel presentation of the *Divorce* book (a wonderful thing on the internet).

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(<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcBWsEjWchY6bLit7f7UG2w>)

But he started because in his church, there was a couple and she was saying, “Look, he beats me and I should divorce him, surely.” And the elder said, “No, no, no. You’ve got to go back to him.” And one day, she was hanging up washing and he came out with his gun and just shot her. And... [pause] I would work on safety. If it’s gotten to the point of physical abuse, you really shouldn’t be in the same house.

MH: Mm hmm. And I would certainly agree with that. Last question. In your experience... I guess we’ll make this two questions. What is the most rewarding thing that someone has come to you with or has said about your work in this area? And also, what’s the most grievous thing? Where you just heard what a

person said and had to think to yourself or maybe you said it out loud, “You’re just making the whole situation worse.” What’s your experience been? Polar opposites there.

DIB: I’ve had almost nothing but good experiences. When I was first thinking of writing on this subject, I seriously considered writing under a pseudonym because I knew that I was going against what *everyone* else was saying. And I was reading the Bible through the eyes of the rabbis, because I had just done a PhD where I’d read pretty much everything the rabbis had said. And I could see the New Testament was talking in their language. And I could see it made sense. But I seriously considered not putting my head above the parapet, so to speak, because I was going to get shot at. And yet, I’ve been received very well. And the two other main voices on divorce in the Protestant world, that’s Bill Heth and Craig Keener, they both are saying the same thing now, based on the same evidence I’ve brought up. So it’s been very well-received. But any time I go to a conference (I went to a Baptist ministers’ conference just a couple of days ago), someone has come up to say, “I must thank you. In my family, my mother was able to go to my sister’s marriage. Because she was divorced and my mother wasn’t going to go because she believed that no Christian can get remarried. And thanks to your book, they were able to go and we brought the family together. Thank you so much.” And I get that pretty much any time I meet people. [laughs] It’s really affirming. So I’m so glad that I’ve put my name on the book.

MH: [laughter] Any really... Over here we would call them facepalm moments, like I can’t believe I’m hearing this. If you don’t have any, that’s great. It’s just that when you are a scholar and you write something and you write intentionally for the average person in the pew (and this is certainly a subject that is going to go that direction, and intentionally so), sometimes you get really misunderstood. Have you had any of that happen?

DIB: Okay, yes. There was a thing when I was very badly misunderstood—when I wrote for *Christianity Today*. I had to write such a short article covering this huge, huge area. And I used some bad terminology. And I got slated by people. And I just had to answer them gracefully. I said, “You know I didn’t mean that. You’ve read my book.” [laughs] And yeah, that sort of misunderstanding is bad. But hey, these are very minor things. And I’ve been dealt such an easy hand. It’s great. And I was looking around at my own family a few months ago when we had a christening. (I’m a Baptist, but not everyone in my family is a Baptist, so they were getting their baby done.) [laughs] So everyone in the family was there. They were filling this big sports club. And there was no one there who was divorced. I think we must be the last family on earth without a divorce in the family. [laughter] The point is, I didn’t do this because of a member in my family’s divorce. I wasn’t trying to, “Oh, got to find the evidence to make it okay.” I was just looking at it because I was a Baptist minister and people kept knocking on my door and saying, “Can I get married in your church, because this church down the road won’t marry me.” And so I had to look at it. And I did in a

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dispassionate way. It wasn't to fix anything. And I pray that we will never have to face divorce in our family ever.

MH: Well, thank you again for being with us. I highly recommend the books. They're very good to get, to read something that really not only makes an effort, but is quite successful at orienting a scriptural topic or discussion in its wider context. We value the primary sources here and the enterprise of reading Scripture in its own ancient contexts. So this is a tough subject. It's really difficult. I got enough email about it (even though I have no pastoral role at all) that I thought, "You know, we need to do something. We need to devote some time on the podcast to this." So I'm really thankful that it worked out to have you on. And I hope that people will avail themselves of your work. So thanks for being with us.

DIB: Yeah, it's been great here. And by the way, if you go to divorceremarriage.com, you'll find all my material there and you can read the pastoral book for free.

MH: Oh, good. Well we will put a link to that on both episode pages on the website. That'll be a great resource. That's for mentioning it. Alright, David, well thanks again for being with us and have a wonderful weekend.

DIB: Great to be with you!

MH: Alright, thank you.

TS: Alright, Mike. Interesting topic that I know you probably get questioned about all the time. So here we have two episodes now that we can refer back to about this question. So that was invaluable.

MH: Yeah, it's tough. I thought it was interesting there at the end about his church where he's at being the one that will marry people if they've been divorced. I thought that was kind of a nice way to land. That it's not that he doesn't take a firm position. But realizing pastorally that... Like when I asked him about the perpetual adultery question, "Things are in the past. God forgives. And so we move on." So yeah, I thought that was a good ending to it.

TS: Yeah, and I liked the fact that we went Old Testament and then New Testament. So that was interesting, to get both...

MH: Yeah, not all topics... There are topics that don't break down nicely like that, but I'm glad it did, too.

TS: Yeah, absolutely. And what was that book again he mentioned at the very end?

MH: I believe it's the *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* book. If you go to divorceremarriage.com, you can get the content of that book for free.

TS: Yeah, and also, what is the STEP Bible.org website about? That was pretty interesting. I went there and I had never heard of it.

MH: Yeah, it's kind of like... People are more familiar with sites like BibleGateway, where you can get the whole Bible in lots of different languages and even Interlinear tools. But David has his own—STEP Bible—that is quite good. He's been doing this for a long time, trying to create resources that can get you not only in the translation you like but also in Greek and Hebrew material. So that's what it is: translations and then being able to do research online for free for word studies and things like that.

TS: That's awesome. Looks good. Perfect. Alright, Mike. Well, we want to thank David for coming on and talking about divorce and marriage. And with that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.