

# ADULTERY: DOES IT BREAK THE MARRIAGE BOND? (3)

---

*John Hooper*

## Death is More Than Separation

Even in more conventional Reformed circles attempts are sometimes made to avoid the clear meaning of these “death” texts.<sup>1</sup> The claim is sometimes made that death in the Scriptures does not always mean physical death but can simply imply a separation or the ending of a relationship, as in the parable of the prodigal son. The father welcomes his son home with the words “this my son was *dead*” (Luke 15:24). Similarly, in the mind of Jacob, Joseph was dead (Gen. 42:38; 44:20). In each case a separation had taken place and on the basis of all the evidence available to them both fathers thought their sons were dead.

Following this line of reasoning, a separation can develop in a marriage where there is persistent, unrepented-of sexual infidelity. It can reach the point at which the guilty party is considered to be dead, and with him, or her, the marriage too has died.

However, no one reading the parable of the prodigal son or the history of Joseph can miss the point that those two were *alive*. In other words, by reading Luke 15:24 and the Genesis texts in their wider context, we gain an accurate understanding of what they are actually teaching us. The *context* tells us that the two boys were alive.

While it may be true that “death” has different meanings in different biblical passages, it is *always* the context that makes the meaning clear. There is nothing in the context of I Corinthians 7:39 or Romans 7:2 to suggest to the reader that the word “dead” used there indicates anything other than death in its fullest and literal sense, at least including, if not exclusively, the death of the physical body.

But there is more, for both accounts of “dead” sons go on to describe, in the most touching of terms, glorious reunions. Not only are the sons alive,

---

<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:2 and I Corinthians 7:39, as referred to in the previous instalment.

but the relationships they have with their fathers are also brought back to life. Indeed, it is seriously open to question whether from the fathers' points of view the relationships were ever broken. They continued to love their sons even though long absent, and when the boys returned they were restored to a measure of strength and unity they had never experienced before. The prodigal son is not only reunited with his father physically but also spiritually, for now the two are at one in the gospel.

Apply this to marriage. A married woman hears the gospel and is wonderfully converted but her husband reacts badly to the situation. He is intolerant of her faith and new way of life, and she discovers after some time that he has taken a mistress whom he sees on a regular basis, with no intention of giving her up. The marriage relationship has broken down so she leaves him on the basis of I Corinthians 7:11, "But and if she depart ..."

She regards the marriage, together with her husband, as "dead" according to the interpretation of I Corinthians 7:39 we are reviewing, and on the basis of that verse she believes she is at liberty to remarry. So she finds a new man in her life, a believer, and marries him despite the apostle's clear command: "But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband" (v. 11).

Subsequently, her original husband repents of his sin, believes the gospel, and begins to search out the wife of his youth. He is not dead but alive and now has more in common with her than ever before, so he seeks her out to be reconciled to her and to restore the marital relationship. As far as he is concerned it is a marriage that has come back to life. But what about his wife? What is she going to say when he arrives on her doorstep? Will there be a gloriously happy reunion, not only as man and wife long separated, but also now as two believers united together in Christ?

Following the argument we have been considering, all she can say is, "You're too late. I've married another husband. You had better go." The door of reconciliation is closed. Repentance, the very essence of which is to *return*, is denied the opportunity to give full expression to its sincerity. The spirit of Christian forgiveness is quenched.

## *Adultery: Does It Break the Marriage Bond?*

### Why Stop at Adultery?

The Christian Reconstructionist works from the basic principle that “God demands the death penalty for breaking the terms of the covenant.”<sup>2</sup> But under the law, the terms of the covenant could be broken in many more ways than by adultery, hence there were many more capital offences:

#### A. Sexual sins

- Incest (Lev. 20:14)
- Homosexuality (Lev. 20:13)
- Bestiality (Ex. 22:19; Lev. 20:15-16)
- Rape (Deut. 22:25)

#### B. Non-sexual sins

- Murder (Lev. 24:17)
- Child-sacrifice (Lev. 20:2)
- Blasphemy (Lev. 24:14, 16, 23)
- Idolatry (Deut. 13:6-9; 17:2-7)
- Witchcraft (Lev. 20:27)
- Kidnapping (Ex. 21:16)
- Hitting or reviling one’s parent (Ex. 21:15,17; Deut. 21:18-21)
- Defiling the Sabbath (Ex. 31:14; 35:2; Num. 15:32-35)

Sutton goes on to draw from this the following quite startling, albeit logical, conclusion: “Because of the relationship of the offenses between God and man, and husband and wife, the capital offenses of the Biblical covenant are the divorceable offenses of the marital covenant.”<sup>3</sup>

Since every sin listed above incurred the death penalty, so every one of them is made a legitimate ground for divorce.

It is beyond dispute that when a person guilty of any one of those sins was married, the punishment had the additional effect of ending their marriage and freeing the remaining spouse to marry again. But Reconstructionists prefer to call it a divorce. According to Rushdoony the death sentence “divorced the culprit from life, society and spouse.” It was a “divorce by death” which, he

---

<sup>2</sup> Sutton, *Second Chance*, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

says, “made remarriage possible, and freed the innocent partner from bondage to a guilty and unclean person.”<sup>4</sup>

Apart from murder, and that only in some countries, the crimes on the list are usually no longer punishable by death, so how is an innocent partner now to be set free from the bondage of a guilty and unclean spouse? The Reconstructionist answer is, by means of divorce. Says Sutton, “*divorce* itself is a means of applying the death penalty.”<sup>5</sup> The grounds for a valid divorce are no longer limited to one or two forms of infidelity but suddenly become varied and numerous, extending to every one of the offences on the list.

But it is time to bring biblical truth to bear on the subject.

### The Laws of the Marriage Covenant

Let us remind ourselves and take note of what Sutton says about the marriage covenant. A husband and wife are “alive” to one another in the marriage “as long as they live according to the laws of the marriage covenant. If they break those laws, then they covenantally die to one another.” Or again, “If the moral performance of one of the marriage partners fails,” it has become “a *morally broken marriage*. The sinful act in essence morally *destroyed the marriage covenant* ... If the covenant is broken by a specified act or moral rebellion, the covenant dies.”

What are “the laws of the marriage covenant”? Surely they include the following:

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord ... Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing (Eph. 5:22, 24).

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord (Col. 3:18).

That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste,

---

<sup>4</sup> Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 403.

<sup>5</sup> Sutton, *Second Chance*, p. 78. See also Sandy Fiedler, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage – a Covenantal Model* (<http://reformed-theology.org/html/issue07/divorce.htm>).

## *Adultery: Does It Break the Marriage Bond?*

keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed (Titus 2:4-5).

Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands ... Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price (I Peter 3:1, 3-4).

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it ... So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies (Eph. 5:25, 28).

Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them (Col. 3:19).

Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered (I Peter 3:7).

To which we must add,

Thou shalt not commit adultery (Ex. 20:14).

In these and other passages, we see how a marriage is to be ordered according to the will of God. We see how the covenant relationship between husband and wife is to be worked out; we see the respective responsibilities of love and faithfulness each are to have toward the other; and we see a distinct structure in the home: the headship and authority of the husband, the reverence and submission of the wife. These too are commands. These too are “laws.”

But we see too how easy it is for these marriage laws to be broken. The Lord Himself teaches us this in His sermon on the mount: “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:27-28). Again He says, “*out of the heart* proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications ...” (Matt. 15:19). The law is broken in the very thought, the sin is committed even in the desire.

According to the Spirit's teaching in I John, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8). How easy it is for adultery to be committed. How easy it is for a husband to fail in his calling to love his wife, or for the wife in her calling to reverence her husband, when even the thought is transgression of the law. Such is the condition of the human heart that every day they fall short in word, thought and deed. Never a day goes by when they have not lived perfectly "according to the laws of the marriage covenant."

But does this mean that their marriage is now "morally broken"? Is their marriage covenant "destroyed"? Is it dead, even before the wedding day is over? If we apply the logic of Christian Reconstructionism, the answer must be yes, because its idea of the marriage covenant is of a conditional covenant, and as immediately as the covenant is broken by one of the spouses, the other has a legal entitlement to divorce.

Sin is transgression of the law of God, which means that when any of His laws concerning marriage is transgressed, sin is committed (I John 3:4). Maybe it is the husband's wandering eye and lustful thoughts, or his loveless, tyrannical attitude toward his wife, or his weakness in failing to live as her head and thereby becoming a curse rather than a blessing to her. Perhaps it is the wife's lack of sobriety, her refusal to submit to her husband and do him good, or a love of career and ambition above love of husband, home and children. All are transgressions against God. Not only are they breaches of the marriage covenant with our earthly spouse, they are also breaches of the marriage covenant with our heavenly spouse, our covenant God.

When we sin in our marriages, as we do every day, it is against the righteous God of heaven. This explains David's prayer of confession after his adultery with Bathsheba: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Ps. 51:4). And because we sin against God there is only one penalty for us to bear and that is the penalty He has imposed: death. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Eze. 18:20). To live, our sin must be put away. To live, we need mercy and forgiveness from the God against whom we have sinned.

This forgiveness comes to us through the atoning death of the covenant mediator, our Lord Jesus Christ. His is the death we need for in His death *we* have died. In His death, all our sin has been dealt with once and for all. In His

## *Adultery: Does It Break the Marriage Bond?*

death, He bore the punishment that is due to us for all our transgressions of His holy law. David found forgiveness because God had “put away” his sin (II Sam. 12:13). The sins of marriage, the adulteries of the heart, the inadequacy of our love, the rebellion in our spirit, and every other death-deserving transgression, are all put away for ever. Little wonder David can write elsewhere, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile” (Ps. 32:1-2).

When we sin in our marriages, as in every other area of life, we sin too against the living and loving covenant relationship that God has established with us in Christ. According to Scripture, when we remember and obey God’s commandments we are keeping his covenant (Ps. 103:17-18), but when we ignore and disobey them we are breaking that covenant. Unfaithfulness to our wife or husband, in whatever form it takes, is breaking one of the “words of the covenant” (Ex. 34:28). It is unfaithfulness to God and we dare not underestimate the seriousness of it.

But regardless of our unfaithfulness the relationship does not die. This is the wonder of the longsuffering and mercy of our God and His everlasting covenant of grace. The covenant is never broken. If we confess our sins, we are told in I John, God “is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). And if God’s covenant with us is not broken, much less broken is our earthly covenant relationship with our earthly spouse.

Only with this in mind are we in a proper position to deal with the earthly relationship. Adultery and all other sins of marriage are offences against the other partner and violations of the marriage covenant. So what is to be the response of the offended one? The Bible answers that we are to remember what God has done for us, “forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32). We are to forgive “until seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22). This means we are to forgive even when an adulterous spouse persists in sin and leaves the marital home. The opportunity for reconciliation must always remain.

Contrary to Sutton and the Christian Reconstructionists, marriage partners do not “covenantally die” to one another when they sin, any more than the believer “covenantally dies” to the Lord when he sins. Neither does the mar-

riage itself die, any more than does the covenant between the believer and the Lord Christ.

But what of a marriage between unbelievers? Surely these high biblical standards cannot apply to them? The answer is that they can and they do. Marriage is a creation ordinance and is therefore instituted for all peoples, at all times and in all places. It is for unbelievers as well as for believers. And it is because marriage is the institution of the one true and living God that the rules He has ordained for the ordering of marriage are the same for all peoples, whether Christian or pagan, at all times and in all places. Marriage *as an institution*, not just the marriage of believers, is a picture of the covenant between God and His people.

Finally, it is because marriage is the institution of God that it is under attack today, as never before. It is under attack by secularists, by the homosexual lobby, by politicians, *and by the church*. Yes, even by the church. It is fair to say that through her liberal doctrine of divorce and her acceptance of remarriage after divorce, she has done more to destroy the institution of marriage than any secular organisation or lobby group. We have noted something of this in the course of this paper. Such betrayal of truth will not go un-noticed by the Judge of all the earth, and it should never be forgotten that judgment begins at the house of God.