



Conducted by
Frank Worgan

This month the question we are to consider concerns the subject of divorce.

The brother who sent in the question wonders if, perhaps, we are not sometimes a little too severe with those whose marriages have broken down and who are '*lost to the church*,' because of its attitude towards those involved in divorce.

If I have correctly understood his letter, I think he is suggesting that, as she applies the teaching of the New Testament, the Church is less tolerant than God is shown to be in the Old Testament scriptures. But, I would say at the outset, that we should always be careful to avoid any view, which suggests there are any inconsistencies in the law of God, or that God Himself is anything less than even-handed in His dealings with men and women.

However, since we are limited in the space available in the 'S.S.' and since his comments are rather lengthy, our brother has kindly allowed me to summarise them, and, in essence, here are the points he makes.

DAVID'S DISOBEDIENCE

First, he reminds us that in **Acts 13:22**, Paul declares that David was described by God, as "**a man after my own heart, who shall fulfil all My will,**" and yet, according to the historical books of the Old Testament, it is clear he had many '**wives and concubines**' **1 Chron. 3:1-9**.

There is no doubt that in this matter David sinned, because the law of God, as laid down in **Deut 17:17**, states that the king "**must not multiply wives for himself, lest his heart be turned away,**" (from God). Yet, again, although he must certainly have been aware of this law, **2 Sam 5:13** records that when he became king, "**David took more wives and concubines from Jerusalem.**"

Whilst we cannot justify his conduct, I think it is important to bear in mind that nowhere in the scriptures is David declared to be perfect. Indeed, they do not attempt to hide his imperfections! After the sins be committed against Uriah the Hittite, and, against Bathsheba herself, the last sentence in **2 Sam. 11** reads, "**But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.**"

We must ask, therefore, in what sense may it be said that David '**fulfilled**' all God's will?

Well, Paul's quotation takes us back to **1 Sam. 13**, where we read about God's rejection of the disobedient Saul as king of Israel. The **14th** verse records what the prophet Samuel said to Saul, and these are the words to which Paul refers in **Acts 13:22**. They simply mean that in contrast with the disobedient king Saul, the man whom God had chosen to succeed him as Israel's king would be the sort of king whom God desired. In other words, the statement relates only to David's role as king. As God's chosen ruler, and with His help, David would succeed where Saul had failed. This is why later, in the same chapter, at **verse 36**, Paul was able to say, "**David after he had in his own generation served the counsel of God, fell asleep.**"

Clearly, then, **Acts 13:22** must not be taken as an unqualified expression of Divine approval of David's entire life and conduct.

WIVES AND CONCUBINES

Consider the matter of David's many wives and concubines - an aspect of his life

which, it seems, was tolerated by God. In looking at this, I suggest that, although we cannot justify it, we should first clarify our understanding of the place that 'Concubinage' occupied in Old Testament society, and recognise that it was a widely accepted practice among many of the nations of that age. There are references to it, in at least nine Old Testament books, beginning as early as the book of Genesis and continuing to the time of Daniel, and it was practised by at least 13 named and prominent Old Testament personalities.

Furthermore, the Hebrew word, *'pilegish'* has the literal meaning of *'half-wife'* so that a concubine was a woman legally taken in marriage, but occupying a position in the household inferior to that of the first wife.

It has been reliably established that, in those days when to have a male heir was considered of vital importance, there were widely-accepted legal codes - (for instance, the Nuzu laws of the time of Genesis) - which decreed that if a wife was unable to bear a child, she must provide her husband with a serving maid, who would be expected to bear a son in her place.

This is why Abraham accepted Sarah's proposal, and took Hagar her maid *'as a wife'* (Gen. 16: 1-3), who gave birth to Ishmael. And since that same law decreed that a concubine must be regarded as a member of the household and provided for, we find that Abraham objected when Sarah determined to send Hagar and Ishmael away (Gen. 21:9-ff).

When, at the demand of the people, God allowed Israel to have a king it was considered, among the nations of that time, a symbol of royal magnificence and greatness for a king to possess many wives and concubines, and such 'marriages' were frequently arranged as a method of sealing political alliances between kingdoms. Hence, the reference, in 1 Kings 11:3, to Solomon's 700 *'wives, princesses'* and 300 *'concubines.'* Incidentally, these figures are drastically reduced in the Song of Solomon 6:8).

The pity is that David fell in with the spirit of the age, even though he should have known that in so doing he was disobeying God. The fact is, that, although David had many fine qualities, he was capable of serious sin and grave errors of judgment. But what should also be said for him is that when he was made aware of his sins, he repented. Psalm 51 is a prime example of this. Furthermore, we should never forget that he was a man of a dispensation very different from our own, and we should not judge him in the light of the fuller revelation which we possess today in the New Testament.

WHAT ABOUT DIVORCE?

As to the matter of divorce, there is no doubt that it certainly was permitted among God's ancient people, but only for a very specific reason.

Deut. 24:1, states that if, after marriage, a man discovered in his new wife what the A.V. renders, *'some uncleanness'* - (modern versions render this *'some indecency'*) - about which he had no prior knowledge, he could exercise the right to give her a *'certificate of divorce'* and send her away. He would do this in the presence of witnesses, saying three times, *'I divorce thee.'*

But he must have this very serious reason for doing so - and *marital infidelity was not the reason!*

Divorce on the grounds of sexual misconduct is not found in the Old Testament, because, according to the Law, when adultery was committed, both parties to the act were sentenced to death, usually by 'Lapidation' - which is the fancy word for 'Stoning' which was regarded as the severest method of execution. Lev.20:10 lists six offences which were punished by death, and the first on the list is adultery.

MISUSE OF DEUTERONOMY 24:1

Although Deut. 24:1 is quite specific, in the course of time the people ignored the '*uncleanness' stipulation of the law, and seized on the words 'if she finds no favour in his eyes.'*

Husbands began to divorce their wives for the most trivial reasons.

If a man's wife did not cook his food the way he liked it, or even if he saw some other woman whom he found more attractive, he would declare that his poor wife '*found no favour in his eyes,*' and he claimed the right to divorce her.

It was this passage, and what had been made of it, that the Pharisees had in mind when, according to Matt. 19:3, they came to test the Lord Jesus. They asked, '*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife on any and every ground?*'"

In His reply Jesus reminded them of what their scriptures taught, taking them back to Gen. 2, and quoting verse 24, which reveals that marriage is meant by God to be a life-long union between a man and his wife. This was something that His questioners could not accept and they asked Him why it was that Moses had permitted them to give their wives 'certificates of divorce' and '*put them away*' - i.e. divorce them. The Lord bluntly told them that it was because of '*the hardness of their hearts.*' That phrase means that they were 'unteachable' and had failed to appreciate the sacred nature of marriage. He then proceeded to enunciate the law by which we are to live today.

In contrast with what was permitted in Old Testament times, He said, "*But I say to you whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery.*"

MARRIAGE - FOR LIFE

The abiding nature of the marital relationship is also stressed by Paul in Rom.7:2-3, where he tells us that a married woman is '*bound to her husband*' as long as they both live. Only if he dies, is she free to marry someone else, because only then is she '*discharged from the law concerning her husband,*' Paul even goes so far as to declare that if she leaves him in order to live with another man, '*she will be called an adulteress.*'

We are all aware that our present-day secular society denigrates marriage and has adopted 'easy divorce' because our civil law now permits divorce for very trivial reasons. In such an environment the danger exists that familiarity with the world's life-style may gradually cause Christians to lower their own standards. But the law laid down by the Lord Jesus in Matt.19:9 has never been rescinded or revised, so that it remains the clear teaching of the scriptures that only two conditions dissolve a marriage - marital infidelity and death.

One of the inevitable consequences of failure to uphold and sanctity of marriage has been the disintegration of the family and the disappearance of those family values which make a nation great.

If it is true that, '*as the family goes, so goes the nation*' where is our nation heading?

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