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IT'S HARD TO BE HUMBLE

King Ahasuerus had insomnia. That day one of his wives, Esther, had invited him and one of his most trusted advisors to a banquet. Not a big banquet; just a private party for the three of them. Maybe that was why he couldn't sleep. He could not figure out what she wanted with just the two of them. Like many who can't sleep, he decided to read something really boring. And what could be more boring than government documents? To make it even more boring, he had someone else read him the daily diary of events in the palace. Imagine listening to some minor clerk reading a list of goods brought in through the king's gate, what the king ate for dinner, and who ate with him. King Ahasuerus must have been on the verge of sleep when the clerk read that one Mordechai, who sat daily at the king's gate, had reported a plot against the king's life.

"I remember that," said King A. "What reward does it say we gave him?"

When the clerk looked through the log he could find nothing more. The king was awake again. What to do; what to do? Might as well use this time to come up with some appropriate reward. But lack of sleep dulls the brain. Maybe somebody else could think of something. (Obviously someone other than the clerk, who might have been invisible to the king.) But who else, of standing, would be awake at this hour? Did somebody happen to come early for an audience? Who was waiting in the court?

Evil deeds keep evil hours. The one man in the court was "he who shall remain nameless" (henceforth to be called "Hwsrn"). (No, not Voldemort. The original nameless one—the one whose name is obliterated with noisemakers during the Purim reading. If I must say it, I must—it was Haman.) "Hwsrn" was also thinking about Mordechai. But he had no intention of reward. He wanted the king's permission to hang Mordechai on a gallows he had specially constructed for that purpose. So when he was called before the king, what could fit his plans more perfectly? (In truth, not this.)

"Hwsrn" was barely through the door when King Ahasuerus asked, "What shall be done for the one I want to honor?" Not exactly what "Hwsrn" expected to hear. But of whom could the king be speaking except him?

There is a little problem with excessive pride; it can be blinding. If everything is about me, then everyone around me must be thinking only of me. As Mac Davis sang, "It's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way." The problem is, nobody's perfect. (Although some of us are more nearly so than everyone else.)

Since "Hwsrn" thought the king must be planning to honor him, of course he came up with the best plan for honoring a man. Dress the man in the king's garments, put him on the king's horse, and (most importantly) let one of the most noble princes act as herald before the man.

Sure it was lack of sleep affecting him. "Hwsrn" thought he heard the king designate him as the noble prince. Not the honoree, but the herald? Surely this was wrong. Who was the honoree? Surely not Mordechai, the hated one! But it was so.

How humiliating! To go before your enemy and proclaim, "See how the king rewards those who deserve it." The roles should be reversed.

Why is it that some people can be shown a lesson and never get it? Haman (oops! Sorry, that slipped) would not learn humility, even if you beat it into his head with a cricket bat. Overweening pride can do that. Besides blinding you to those around you, it prevents learning. Even when being hanged on his own gallows, "Hwsrn" must have been thinking how wrong it was that one as great as he should be subjected to such humiliation. Humiliation and humility are two different things, but sometimes they may be two sides of one coin. Which side is yours just depends on your attitude. Haman or hangman?

(Based on Esther 6.)

(Purim is March 4th in 2007.)

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WHAT DOES IT REALLY SAY?

There is an issue that may have done more harm than good in the church. Not that it is not an important issue, but so many people have made it into a greater issue than it should be. That is the issue of divorce. Along with that issue ride such questions as marriage, eldership, and even qualification to teach others. Disputes and misunderstandings abound to our hurt, even dividing congregations. An analysis of the scriptures shows that we have added much that is not in the Bible. A practical look shows that we have, in some cases, made divorce into an issue of salvation where none should exist.

I don't believe that divorce is proper in most instances. My personal belief is that I find it difficult to trust any person that initiates a divorce, because that person has a history of breaking promises. The reason God "hateth putting away" (Mal 2:16) is because it is dealing treacherously with the wife. It is a form of lying.

The Bible often speaks of a man "putting away" or divorcing the wife. Under Jewish law, a wife cannot divorce a husband. (If she asks for a divorce, however, the husband is obligated to give it to her.) In many countries now it is possible for either spouse to initiate divorce proceedings. Perhaps in the analysis of what the scriptures

question comes up about who is the "guilty party." That is, was there infidelity involved, and who was the unfaithful person? If there was no infidelity, then the divorcer is assumed to be guilty.

There is some question about the meaning of "for fornications" (the word is plural in the Greek) in these passages. Some believe that it refers to the bride not being a virgin (or misrepresenting her virginity) at the time of the marriage. Others say that it means any unfaithfulness in marriage (although Jesus should have used "adulteries" rather than "fornications" if that is what he meant). Still others say that a person must be unfaithful more than once before the spouse can divorce him or her. While I lean toward the first or the third, I admit that it is not crystal clear what Jesus meant.

Since most of what Jesus says about divorce comes down to a question of somebody committing adultery (sometimes only if they marry someone else) as a result of the divorce, after each scripture I will include a table showing who it is that becomes the adulterer/adulteress. These tables will show that we often get things backwards in our view of divorce. In these tables, a "yes" indicates that the person is called an adulterer. A "no" indicates they are clearly absolved of adultery. A question mark indicates that no conclusion can be made from that scripture.

But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery. (Matt 5:32)

	Divorcer	Divorced	Marries Divorced
Not for fornications	?	Yes	Yes
For fornications	?	?	?

And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery. (Mk 10:11-12)

	Divorcer	Divorced	Marries Divorced
Any reason	Yes, if marries	?	?

And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry

Sometimes we get things backward from what the scriptures really say about divorce.

say about divorce it doesn't matter who is the divorcer and who the divorcee.

Jesus on Divorce

After the book of Malachi, Jesus and Paul are the only ones in scripture to say anything about divorce. This may show how truly minor an issue it should be. In the overall scheme of things, divorce is right down there with foot washing as an issue for the church. More is written about how the church treasury should be spent or about church discipline, and not much is written about either of those topics.

Jesus makes three statements in response to questions about divorce. Since some of these statements tie divorce to "fornications," most of the time when we talk about divorce in the church the

another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery. (Matt 19:9)

	Divorcer	Divorced	Marries Divorced
Not for fornications	Yes, if marries	Yes*	Yes
For fornications	No	?	?

*Only because one party cannot commit adultery and the other not do so.

Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery; and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery. (Lk 16:18)

	Divorcer	Divorced	Marries Divorced
Covetousness (see below)	Yes, if marries	Yes*	Yes

*Only because one party cannot commit adultery and the other not do so.

A careful look at these scriptures shows some interesting things. The most obvious is that our legalistic views of divorce and “remarriage” (technically not remarriage but instead marrying another) do not necessarily square with what Jesus said. We talk about the “innocent party,” the one who did not commit fornication, being able to marry but the guilty party not. In reality, no conclusion can be reached about the status of a person divorced “for fornications.” Can the so-called “guilty party” marry another, or would doing so be adultery? The scriptures are totally silent. On the other hand, a person who was divorced for any other reason, who marries another, commits adultery. The person who divorced that person also commits adultery if they marry another. It seems that if a man really wants to make life difficult for his wife he should divorce her for reasons other than “for fornications.” Moreover, the person who divorces the other may become an adulterer regardless of the reason for the divorce, but only if the passages in Mark and Luke can be considered independently from the others. Otherwise, both are free to marry if the divorce was for fornications.

The really interesting thing about the passages in Matthew and Luke is that a person who had no part of the divorce itself may, especially if fornication was not a reason for the divorce, become guilty of adultery by marrying the divorced person. Perhaps the reason for this is that it takes two people to commit adultery. If the divorced person becomes an adulterer/adulteress when they marry again, the new partner must necessarily become guilty. The same thing applies even more so if they marry the one who initiated the divorce.

One may also ask why the passage in Luke is placed where it is. The context of the entire chapter is concerning rich people. The immediate context is the covetousness of the Pharisees. The verse is immediately followed by the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Why does he mention “putting away” a wife in this context? Perhaps Jesus is limiting the reasons for divorce in that context to the person who divorces another for covetous reasons. These might include so that he can marry another that he desires. It might include that the person who subsequently marries her paid the man to divorce her. Whatever it includes, the context limits the reason for divorce to covetousness and not every reason.

Paul on Divorce

And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not,

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and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. ... But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. (1 Cor 7:10-15)

Paul’s discussion of divorce reveals some things that contradict the traditional view of divorce. First of all, he says that a couple in which both are Christians should not divorce for any reason. Secondly, he says that a person who becomes a Christian and is divorced because of that can marry another. Thirdly, he indicates that a divorce, for whatever reason, truly dissolves a marriage. That is, a person who is divorced cannot be considered as still married to the original spouse, even if it was not “for the right reason.”

Divorce violates God's intent for marriage. God wants man and woman to "cleave to" one another, not "cleave from" each other. Nevertheless, there may be reasons (fornications, religious incompatibility) for divorce. In any case, many people have been guilty of teaching their own views on divorce, wrongly thinking that they squared with what the Bible says about it.

The point of this discussion, ultimately, is not about divorce. Paul used his own name and those of Peter and Apollos to make a point to the Corinthians about division. I have used our misconceptions about the biblical statements on divorce to, I hope, make a point about the need to study with an open mind. We need to read what God says, not what we think God should have said.

Side Issues

Several issues may hinge on the scriptures concerning divorce. Actually, several issues hinge on interpretations of these scriptures, but in some cases should not be issues at all.

Can a man who has been divorced be an elder? Would divorce, in and of itself, be grounds for denying a man that office? The qualities of an elder in 1 Timothy 3 say that he must be "the husband of one wife." A man who is divorced and not married again is clearly ineligible, because he is no longer the husband of a wife. (Or, he is eligible, though living single, under the traditional view that his divorce was not valid.) If he has married again, Paul says that divorce ends the former marriage. Therefore, he is still the husband of only one wife, even if it is not the same wife as at some time past. It would be up to the congregation to decide whether the divorce, and the events leading up to it, would be sufficient to disqualify the man. The issue is really the same if one

asks whether a widow who marries again can be an elder. The only possible difference might be the motivation for the divorce.

Similarly, can a divorced person be a Bible class teacher? Since the Bible says nothing about formal Bible classes, it puts no restrictions on who can be a teacher in such classes. As with any other issue, who we have teaching our children should be viewed on the whole person concept, rather than on a single issue.

Another side issue that often comes up is whether an abused person can divorce an abuser. Jesus acknowledged it was possible to divorce someone for reasons other than fornications. The question was never the possibility, but rather the consequences. If neither party married again there could be no adultery (because adultery requires two people). Furthermore, if saving a life is more important than a Jew keeping Sabbath, surely it is more important than some legalistic interpretation concerning divorce.

There is at least one brother in the church who takes the position that everything that Jesus said before his crucifixion is part of the Old Testament, and relates only to the Jews of his day. It appears that his adamant stance on this is primarily so that he does not have to deal with what Jesus said about divorce. What this position shows is that some people will go to great lengths to try to make the Bible say what they want it to say about divorce. This may be the most vital side issue to the question. When people want what they want, and are willing to "wrest, unto their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16) the scriptures to justify themselves, then scripture loses its value and authority. This is the real danger in disputes over divorce; that people are forced to take sides in splitting the church. When the scriptures are essentially vague, is it all really worth the damage?

IN THEIR OWN WAY

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Thus begins Lev Tolstoy’s marvelous novel, Anna Karenina. You might also think the writer of Psalm 107 thought along similar lines. Righteous people are all righteous alike, because they follow God’s way; every unrighteous and disbelieving person is unrighteous and disbelieving in his own way. The psalmist begins this psalm looking at several different ways that people failed to trust in God. Perhaps his analysis may be of benefit to us as well.

The Wanderers

Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy; And gathered them out of the lands, from the east, and from the west, from the north, and from the south. They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them.

These people are not really unrighteous; at least not blatantly so. Like all men, they no doubt were guilty of sin. They did not brazenly act in a sinful way, however. They were just lost. They had no guide, and knew not how

Those who truly seek
God will find deliverance.
God will bring them into
the right way.

to follow God. As a result, they had wandered all over the map. Without a guide they missed the oases, and became hungry and thirsty.

These people could find no city to dwell in. Contrast with them their Father Abraham. Although he did not know where he was going, he was following a guide. Rather than wandering aimlessly, he had a goal.

He went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Heb 11:8-10)

Many today wander aimlessly through life. They know they are hungry because they cannot find the food that satisfies. They long to drink of the water that will cause them to thirst no more (Jn 4:14). But

they do not know how to find the water or the bread. They don’t have a map to Abraham’s city.

These people will be blessed, because they hunger and thirst after righteousness. (Matt 5:6) As the psalmist here says, “Then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses. And he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.” People ask, often to justify their own disbelief, whether God will condemn those who never had the opportunity to hear the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. This passage seems to answer, at least partially, that question. Those who truly seek God will find deliverance. God will bring them into the right way. How will he do it? That is entirely up to him. He may choose someone to travel thousands of miles, just to give that one person a chance to hear the gospel. He may invent an Internet, so that the gospel can reach places it may be otherwise prohibited from going. He may cause a person to write a letter that says just what this one person needs to hear. He has thousands of ways to get his word to people. For Cornelius it was a fisherman. For Lydia it was a tentmaking rabbi. For the Laodiceans it was probably that Lydia who was taught by the tentmaker. When someone cries to the Lord, he will deliver, and lead them to his city; he will satisfy the longing soul, and fill the hungry soul with goodness.

The Rebellious

Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron; Because they rebelled against the words of God, and contemned the counsel of the most High: Therefore he brought down their heart with labour; they fell down, and there was none to help.

Some people have accepted that God exists. They have even accepted that he will punish for eternity. Their problem is that none of this matters to them. They choose to rebel against God. This is no longer a passive, “I didn’t know” kind of sin. This is an “I know but I don’t care” kind of sin.

There are probably several variations of the rebellious person. Frequently, though, they fall into one of two categories.

The first says that it doesn’t matter if they sin or not, because God is a loving and merciful God who would never let anybody be punished forever. Everyone will be saved. Therefore, they don’t need to worry about sin. This is one of several variations on second century Gnosticism. The writer of Hebrews knew about this kind of person, and shuddered.

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. (Heb 10:26-27)

The other group just can't, or won't, see beyond the present. One characteristic of career criminals is that they do not see beyond the here and now. They want something now, and they never consider the consequences if they get caught. Many who rebel against God are like this. Unlike Moses, they would rather "enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." (Heb 11:25) Peter called them "scuffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." (2 Pet 3:3-4) He goes on to call them "willingly ignorant." They may know of judgement to come, but they choose to worry about that later.

The psalmist says that these people will, in many cases, receive punishment now, as well as later. God may bring them low so that they will finally recognize his power and call upon him. When this sort of person has cried to him, "he saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder." Yes, God is a merciful God, but to those who seek his mercy.

The Fool

Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near unto the gates of death.

Sometimes the Bible talks about the "simple" man. This is a person who has not been taught. Other times it talks about a different kind of person—the fool. The foolish man has opportunities to learn; he just refuses to see them. Rather than rebelling against God, "the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." (Ps 14:1; 53:1) This is the sort of person that lets you study with him for weeks, and then says, "If the Bible is true, then I recognize that I should be baptized for forgiveness of sins; but I just don't accept the Bible is true." Because of a self-constructed wall of indifference, the fool cannot see the truth if he runs into it face first.

The thing about the fool is that when he does lose his foolishness, he has a willing heart. "He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions." It may take a while to convince them, but when they become convinced they stay there. In this the fool may be better than the rebellious man.

The Fearful

They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; These see the works of the

LORD, and his wonders in the deep. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end.

I understand this person, because I have been there. Not just fearful. I've been at sea in the storm, and staggered like a drunken man. When your stomach won't stay down and your body won't stay up it is easy to get discouraged. When you can't sleep for fear of being rolled out of your bunk it is easy for your soul to melt.

This kind of person is not necessarily unrighteous. He just loses sight of God, and his faith wavers, like the rolling waves. He has not had the experience of God's strong hand. If he survives the first storms, then he will not lose heart during the next ones. This is the sort of person that needs to see the faith of people who have been through the very storms he is facing. God puts recovering alcoholics, former abusers, reformed adulterers, parents of handicapped children, cancer survivors, and many others

Because of a self-constructed wall of indifference, the fool cannot see the truth if he runs into it face first.

in the church so that those to come who will face such storms can see them, and not lose heart. "He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven."

God can, and does, save all of these kinds of unrighteous or wavering people. The psalmist throughout uses the same style: the problem, the salvation when they cry out, the praise. He has no doubt that God will save when these people cry out to him. He knows God's nature. God does not vary. He will save those who ask him.

After describing each of these kinds of people, and their salvation, the psalmist sums it all up with the same line. This is the attitude of those who have been saved. This is the attitude of those who want to see others saved. "Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!"

HATING THE PROPHET

And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, There is yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the LORD: but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. (1 Kings 22:8)

Tell me truly; are most of us any different than Ahab? He hated the prophet, Micaiah, because he told the word of God truly. With many this might not be a problem; but the king of Israel was not following the will of God. Therefore, anything Micaiah spoke became a word of evil.

Those who deal regularly with people, trying to teach the truth of God's word, know that some people are just like the king of Israel. They ask about the Bible, hoping to justify what they have already decided in their minds to do. It's like a sign some people used to see hanging in offices. "My mind's made up. Don't confuse me with facts."

Now some people are probably saying, he is talking about those who want to justify sin, and won't listen when the Bible calls it sin. Well, yes. That is included. There are people who want to drive as close to the edge of the cliff of sin as possible without falling off. Then when they are going too fast to make a curve, and they do plummet to the depths of sin they can't understand what went wrong. These are the people concerned with, "Is it a sin to do such and so?" They justify themselves with statements along the lines of, "I did not have sex with that woman." The thing is, though, that most people don't try to determine right from wrong. They are going to do what they want, and ignore what the Bible says entirely.

No, most of today's Ahabs are religious people, who think they are following what is written in the Bible. They believe what they have been taught,

and when someone disagrees they can even pull out all the old arguments that their teachers have been using for years. They are sincere, God-loving, misguided people. They just don't want to hear anything that might show them they have been taught wrongly.

They might not want to talk to somebody because he teaches the necessity of baptism for forgiveness of sins. (Acts 2:38; Acts 26:16; etc.) They might not want to listen to someone who says there can be saved people who are outside their particular religious clique. They are afraid that "if I change, that means Mama was wrong." Whatever our tradition, belief or hang-up may be, we hate someone because "he doth not prophesy good of me, but evil." Face it; it is not always the other guy who is wrong.

On the other hand, may we be like David rather than Ahab. When Nathan the prophet came to him and prophesied evil against him because of the matter with Uriah, David did not say, "I hate him because he does not prophesy good for me." Instead, David responded, "I have sinned against the Lord." (2 Samuel 12:13)

Paul faced persecution from Jews in Asia Minor because he taught Gentiles. He proved from the scriptures (what we sometimes call the Old Testament) that Jesus was the Messiah, and that he offered salvation outside the children of Abraham. Therefore some hated him. The Jews in parts of Europe were different. Of the Jews in Berea, Luke wrote, "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." (Acts 17:11) May we, like they, love the word, and the people who bring it. Even if we don't agree.

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