

Transcript 100-1

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast and continuing our series of going through the top 20 questions of all time. Going to be covering a tough one today and this is a question where it's not always asked exactly the same way. We'll be talking about divorce and remarriage today. So there is no one question that makes a top 20, but you combine all of them together. All of the can I get divorced for this reason? What about this? Is what are the different grounds for divorce and or remarriage? What's the exception clause? All those together we get a lot of questions about divorce and remarriage. So today is our special guest lecture of Sarah Van Baale. She's been a writer with GotQuestions.org for over a decade. So Sarah, welcome to the show today.

Sarah Van Baale

Thank you very much.

Shea Houdmann

So Sarah tell our listeners this a little bit about yourself and why this is an issue you are both well informed about and also very passionate about.

Sarah Van Baale

Sure so well. I think that this is a really important topic to me and it has been even before I was married. For some reason God put it in me to be really passionate about having a good marriage. I always wanted to be a mom and have a family and so even from the time I was in high school I was studying divorce and remarriage because when I was younger, you really saw the number of divorces kind of tick up. Even in the church.

Sarah Van Baale

And so for about I would say 25 years or so I have been digging into the Bible and see what does God really say about this, and unfortunately my first marriage did end in divorce and by the time I had to make that decision, I did have some biblical background and it wasn't easy. It was very difficult. My husband at that time was actually serving as a pastor. And when you get to the point where you think what are my options here, when you've exhausted lots of different resources and paths, and you finally get to that moment about should I get divorced and is this what God wants me to do?

Sarah Van Baale

And as a Christian, it it's extremely troubling because you're so passionate about wanting to do the right thing and wanting to make God happy. But you're also extremely conflicted because you know there are times in a marriage where you think I am not sure that I can really go on with the way things are going. Sometimes people hearts turn so hard that you are stuck with a really tough decision and so I am divorced but I am also remarried and so I come at this for both from a biblical standpoint and also full of experience, which there's a lot of emotions involved in that and I understand the struggle that people have to work through in order to come to these decisions.

Shea Houdmann

For sure, many times someone will submit a question to us in describing their marital situation, which is leading them to consider getting a divorce. And it's interesting. Usually we're only hearing one side of the perspective and we even had a few P times. Where the spouse will intercept that email and say well. I don't like your answer because you're not what about this and this and this and look all we can do is go by what the people are telling us we can't. They will before I can answer your question I need to speak with your spouse. But no, it's it's hard for us to answer these questions, but seeing all the the pain that people are in, whether it's the pain from they're the ones who've made the tragic mistake or they're the ones who are suffering from the tragic mistake that their spouses made or whether it's abuse or infidelity or whole range of things. Divorce is terrible. No one goes into a marriage wanting to be divorced.

Shea Houdmann

And so when people are coming to us and asking these questions, we try to focus on compassion. Obviously we're ministry that answers Bible questions and we believe God's word is authoritative and inspired, inerrant. So we come from that perspective. We have to tell people here's what the Bible says, but we also strive to understand these people are in pain. These people are hurting. They don't want to be where they're at. That was never part of the plan, and yet they're in the situation. How do we speak truth into that situation?

Shea Houdmann

So Sarah, let me just lead off with the very basic questions. I know you've been researching this thoroughly in preparation for this. So what does the Bible say about divorce?

Sarah Van Baale

Well, the Bible has an awful lot to say. I mean, there's passages kind of strewn throughout, but I like to focus on 2 main passages and two things that we really think about when we start to ask the question about divorce. What does God have to say? And he says two very big things. First of all, divorce was never part of the original plan when God created Adam and Eve. And he created the Institution of marriage he didn't insert divorce in there. It wasn't like, hey, when you get sick of each other, you can pick somebody new that was never the idea it was supposed to be for the eternity of their life, their lifetime, and we get that out of Matthew 19 eight through 9.

Sarah Van Baale

I actually wrote these down so I could cook them correctly, but in the NIV it starts in Chapter 8. It says Jesus replied, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard, but it was not that way from the beginning, and so we clearly see there that this is not the intention God had for marriage. It wasn't supposed to end this way. And then we also know that God is not for divorce. We hear we often hear quoted God hates divorce and that comes from Malachi 2:16.

Sarah Van Baale

And I'm going to read out of the ESV because it's worded a little bit differently here and it says for the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel covers his garment with violence. And so there's nothing in there that indicates that divorce is going to be positive.

Sarah Van Baale

In fact, this really indicates that a lot of negative consequences come from divorce. A lot of pain. It's not part of God's original plan. And when we choose to pursue that route, we would be extremely naive to think that things are going to go well, like we're going to be suddenly filled with positive emotion, we're going to have relief from the negative situation that the suffering will be over. It's far from true. Divorce is always a very difficult path to walk. God is not for it, and while he allows it in certain circumstances. This it's not really something that we should be pursuing first. I mean, it's almost like a very last resort.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, it's some that passage in Deuteronomy and the passages in Matthew make it very clear that divorce is tragic. It's not God's intent, it is the disruption of God's plan. That going back to Genesis 2 where a man leaves his father or mother and cleave to his wife, this cleaving is supposed to be permanent it is what God has joined together let man not separate. So divorce is definitely not God's intent. But at the same time, like when the Bible says that Moses allowed you divorce because your hearts were hard and Jesus does not rescind that thing. God recognizing the humanity. We're all sinners. We all make mistakes. Some small mistakes. Some huge mistake. Some terrible sins which destroy marriages. That divorce is going to happen. So God, in a sense allows for divorce to happen. But in your study of Scripture, what are these situations where God allows for divorce?

Sarah Van Baale

I think I probably have a more narrow view than that a lot of people. But I like to look at it this way and this is my interpretation and what I believe that the Bible teaches us is that when God joined two people together, he joined them together in a monogamist relationship. That relationship talks about keeping the marriage bed pure, and so when a spouse no longer commits to a monogamous relationship but brings somebody else into the marriage bed, they commit sexual infidelity. Then God opens a pathway to say. All right, this is this is not a monogamous relationship anymore. You are not necessarily bound to stay married to this person, but he also does not command you to leave either.

Sarah Van Baale

So it's not an all or nothing proposition. There are a lot of other options in there before you decide to exit out of that marriage. So there are people who you know talk about many different difficult situations, but for me and my understanding I've mostly limited to when monogamous relationship becomes polygamous.

Shea Houdmann

So I agree with you, but that seems the the main sin that can destroy the bonds of marriage. When you think of marriage being a one flesh relationship once that one flesh union becomes broken or stained or distorted? That's a devastating blow to marriage and I like how you emphasize that. That doesn't mean you have to get a divorce when that happens, there still can be forgiveness.

Shea Houdmann

There still can be restoration I've I've known of marriages where infidelity occurred, and yet there was forgiveness, restoration and the marriage was it took some time for healing to occur, but they're marriage it ended up stronger than ever afterwards. But some of the other situations that people ask about, well, probably the most common is abandonment.

Shea Houdmann

Specifically, if a say a believer is married to an unbeliever, and the unbeliever decides to leave the marriage to depart or even a marriage between two believers if one person completely abandons the marriage and goes off. They may not have had an affair, but they're no longer in the marriage. How do you deal with those those issues specifically? 1st Corinthians 7 that talks about a lot about that.

Sarah Van Baale

Sure, so I want to read that verse to you so that we know exactly what we're talking about here. But in first Corinthians 7:15 and this is out of the NIV, it says what if the unbeliever leads that ESV uses the word separate there. Let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances. God has called us to live in peace. And so this word that they use here is a little bit different than the word that they use for divorce, but so I'm hesitant to really define that extremely clearly. I think that we have to be extremely careful when saying. Well, if they abandon me, I can leave because people define abandonment in many different ways. I've had women say, well, my husband emotionally abandoned me. He's not available anymore or he's financially abandoned me. I can't support myself.

Sarah Van Baale

There are numerous difficult situations where it seems that one person has completely abdicated their responsibility. And they are no longer fulfilling one of their roles in marriage. But I don't believe that that necessarily means that you can have a sinless divorce. This is kind of how I talk about it, when somebody decides to separate or to leave for whatever reason. Rarely does that union stay in the same state all the time when when you're in the same household and you are participating in the same marriage there's a certain set of circumstances when some person leaves the person who left typically, if they are the offender of some sort has a couple options before them, they may have what we might call a come to Jesus moment where they all of a sudden realize the error of their ways. They're very repetitive about what they've done, and then they reconcile to their spouse and honestly, that's ideal. Reconciliation is always the ideal, but if somebody does leave and they set up maybe their own household, or they they physically are gone or they start some type of relationship with somebody else, even if it's a friendship, that person who left really stays in that same state. They are either going to turn more to sin or reconcile, there's always movement, so I think that we have to always give it time and set biblical boundaries in our homes and in our marriages for what we're going to allow because honestly the world is full of sexual sin.

Sarah Van Baale

And when somebody leaves one relationship, they're they're rarely there's really fidelity in that marriage. Typically they're pursuing a different type of relationship, and as soon as that infidelity enters in, you actually have as a person who has remained or has been faithful, a new set of circumstances to

work with. So I know of a couple of situations that have, one almost a 100 years ago, where a man actually physically left his five daughters and his wife and disappeared forever. And I think that that type of abandonment is very similar to death. I mean, they're just gone, but that's not necessarily the situations we deal with a lot today. They can happen, but typically it's you're not meeting my needs the way I want you to meet them, and so I'm going to divorce you so that I can get what I want, and I think it's really not such a good way of looking at it. This word requires a process, and when somebody leaves that that relationship doesn't stay the same, it's changing, and so we need to. I counsel people that you need to wait and set boundaries and kind of see what happens in those instances.

Shea Houdmann

Well that's it's very good, Sarah. We also want to remind our our listeners that this is actually going to be a two part episode, and this one we're going to be discussing primarily divorce on Part 2 we're going to be discussing primarily remarriage, but there's going to be a lot of overlap because we get questions on are these various issues? Are these grounds for divorce? And then other people are they are the grounds for divorce and remarriage so while this issue is primarily focused on divorce or also going to cover remarriage so don't don't think if you're listening to this so they're not talking about remarriage at all. 'cause, trust me, we're very aware that most people who are asking about divorce are also asking about remarriage, can I? Yes, I know I can divorce, but can I get remarried so? But don't worry, we will cover that as well, but so one of the things that frequent question we get about divorce, something that, as far as I've been able to find, the Bible nowhere specifically mentions it is abuse.

Shea Houdmann

So whether that abuse is physical abuse or mental emotional abuse, which would also be spiritual abuse or sexual abuse, for example, a wife who said her husband actually raped her is that grounds for divorce. Have you found anything in Scripture that addresses the issue of abuse, and whether that would be grounds for divorce?

Sarah Van Baale

Well, we know that God doesn't like violence in marriage. I mean we know that right out of Malachi he equates divorce with violence and he's completely against it. So because the marriage is supposed to reflect Christ in the church, there really is no place for abusive marriage now people are imperfect, and we're all going to make mistakes, and I often would say to one of my children who would get very upset playing baseball and the umpire would call something wrong like you can't demand perfection of the umpire if you're not going to demand out of yourself, and that's how we are in a marriage too.

Sarah Van Baale

Sometimes we demand perfection of our spouses, but we're incredibly imperfect, so there has to be a huge amount of grace in these areas. But there definitely is a line crossed when it comes to abuse and God does not call anybody to subject themselves to abuse day after day, after day after day. I mean this habitual sin really impacts not only the marriage but it impacts the home and impacts of children and especially where children are involved. If you are intentionally allowing your children to see abuse to be abused themselves. You have a responsibility as the parent to get out of that situation, and so I never promote abuse in those situations if it is extreme enough, or if it's serious enough in any way, I always counsel people that you need to remove yourself from the situation.

Sarah Van Baale

Even though God may not say hey get divorced. There is nothing to say that you cannot separate. That is absolutely fine, and in certain situations you need to separate. Sometimes you even need to pursue legal paths, depending on what exactly is going on, because holding biblical boundaries in your home if you're a Christian is something that we're actually called to do. And a lot of women in the church are very hesitant to do so. They they feel embarrassed because to be very honest. I mean I was married to a pastor and people look at you and think oh, you must have a wonderful life and we we have Instagram and we have Facebook and we we have all these different things that paint people lives as though they're wonderful and great, but what goes on behind those closed doors really only you and your spouse and your family know and there is a lot of hurt and a lot of pain everywhere. And so if you are in a situation that is abusive you should be setting biblical boundaries that say no more. This isn't going to happen.

Sarah Van Baale

For instance, if you are married to an alcoholic who comes home and is violent and is causing problems, you should not be exposing yourself or your children to that. It is perfectly fine as a wife to say no, we're not going to live in the same home, as long as this is going on. And either the spouse is an alcoholic is removed from the situation or you remove yourself and so you have to set those boundaries.

Sarah Van Baale

And when people start to cross those boundaries then you take different actions and and I think the other thing that's really important. And this is kind of why I speak about my situation a lot. Is because it's important to get support. If you don't. If you can't get support from your family, you should be able to get support from your church and it may be embarrassing to say, hey, this is going on in my home, but there should be someone at church whether it's a pastor or a leader or even a woman's leader or Bible study Leader of some sort that you can go to and you can confide because one of the biggest problems we have is when we cover up sin, it festers. It allows it to grow. When we do expose that sin then the likelihood of that sin continuing on and on and on with everybody knowing about it and holding people accountable, is a lot less likely and so I really advocate when we hit these these crisis situations that you don't pretend it's not going on. You don't try to hide it, you don't enable it that you actually find trusted Christian sources and you go and you get help.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, now that, that's a much needed message. Many times we've had people come to us and say my husband or even a few times my wife is physically assaulting me and they sometimes will interpret us saying, well, that's not necessarily the biblical grounds for divorce is saying you have to remain the situation. Please hear us. That is absolutely not the view we take and please, we're an Internet ministry. There's only so much we can do. Please speak to a Pastor, Christian Counselor, or even someone in law enforcement if there is physical abuse going on. 'cause in no sense do we advocate you remaining in that situation and hopefully our hope would be that repentance in the abuser and forgiveness and restoration healing can occur, but as long as the abuse is actually happening. I mean, please remove yourself from that situation.

Shea Houdmann

Maybe to close part one I'd like to ask you Sarah, I know even your second marriage hasn't been perfect. And also it's not that there is a perfect marriage but uhm, forgiveness in a marriage when trust has been betrayed, when extreme sin from one person has happened, how do you as a spouse forgive something like that? And how can you have hope in the midst of situation like that, that God can actually bring healing and bring the marriage back to something that both honors him and is a blessing to the two people spouses involved in the marriage?

Sarah Van Baale

Sure, so I'll show you a little bit more of my story so people can kind of understand where I'm coming from. So I've been married twice. And my first spouse was, we got married, he wasn't a pastor, but he became one kind of along the way and he was kind of a serial cheater. Unfortunately, he still struggles with those things today and I got to the point after setting biblical boundary after biblical boundary knowing that his heart was going to continue to be hardened, and that repentance it wasn't ever going to come of that, so I opted to take the path of divorce in that situation.

Sarah Van Baale

I've been remarried now for over 15 years and unfortunately I also experienced infidelity in my current marriage and it's utterly devastating it. It's I don't even know how to describe it. It's probably the worst feeling that you could ever go through as a spouse. I thought it was actually worse than my divorce the first go around if that could be the case, but what I did it was very similar to what I did before is I really cried out to God and I said, God, what do you want me to do here? And so in this situation I decided to actually take my husband's advice and he always says give people the opportunity to do the right thing. And so I thought I need to give my husband space and the opportunity to repent, and I think it's very foolish when you're in a difficult situation to think that somebody the next day is suddenly just going to change their behavior and come back to Christ and do the right thing. You actually have to give them the space and the time that they need and so.

Sarah Van Baale

So I focused instead of trying to please my husband or change my husband. I really focused on making God happy. I knew that God could do anything and I decided I purposed in my heart that though the situation seemed incredibly bleak I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I knew that God sat on the other side. He already knew what was going to happen at the very end of this. I felt like I was in the valley. It was dark. I didn't know I was going. Sometimes I didn't know how to pray. But I knew that God knew and I always trusted that God was going to do what's best for me. I mean he talks about how he has our best interests at heart. He's never going to leave us a forsake us. I don't think he wastes our pain or our suffering, and so while it's horrible to suffer, we can suffer well and we can know that God didn't create us just to punish us or just allow us to suffer. But there's so much more that he has for us, and so when we are patient and we give God the opportunity to work before we react and we prayed for our spouse.

Sarah Van Baale

I'm not saying that your marriage will just suddenly turn around, but I am saying that we really have to not sell God short that there's so much more that he can do, and so my husband and I were after a couple of years able to work through that entire debacle and we got Christian counseling. We had

support from our church. We really work through a marriage was actually very good before that there are some things that happened in his life which caused him to make some bad choices and we worked through that and I can say today that I am extremely happy to be married. I'm so glad I didn't get divorced, whereas my first husband had a hard heart. My second husband heart softened and he repented and there was reconciliation, and so in those times of emotion when you just don't know what to do and you're not sure who to turn to, you could always turn to God. He knows exactly what's happening. He's not wondering what to do next. He knows he knows every path that you need to take, and so I just really encourage people to set biblical boundaries to stay really close to God. I know that nothing is too big for him. He's not surprised by any of this, and he knows exactly what he's doing, and you could always trust him. There's always hope.

Sarah Van Baale

Divorce does not bring hope, so when the Devil and society sell you like, well, divorce is the only hope you have. It's your only way to feel better. It's the only way out of the situation. That's just foolishness. It's not the only way. There's plenty of other ways. God knows exactly what he's doing. And it's good to be patient and stay close to him.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely, Sarah. Thank you for your vulnerability and honesty there. I know that you shared a little bit of that as you're going through it and so we had the privilege of praying for you during that. And we're thrilled to see that you were able to reconcile with your husband and your marriage is strong and God honoring once again. So praise God for that. So let's conclude this part one where part one is going to be what does the Bible say about divorce and Part 2 is going to focus more on what does the Bible say about remarriage after divorce so Sarah in your study of Scripture what are the biblical grounds for divorce?

Sarah Van Baale

So I would say that the biblical grounds for divorce, first and foremost are are infidelity. So when you actually have a monogamous relationship and it turns polygamous, now I know that people ask about pornography and it's probably a discussion for another day, but if they're isn't if the type of pornography you're involved in does not change the nature of your monogamous relationship then I think that we have to really talk about keeping that marriage bed pure. So when it comes to abandonment, I'm a little bit more hesitant on that, especially with how it is framed. But if somebody completely walks away and disappears. And it is like that they are dead. I do not believe that God holds a spouse in that situation for all eternity until they can get answers that they need.

Sarah Van Baale

But I think that when somebody completely exits that relationship. That you are no longer bound, just like it would be for death. But I do understand there's a lot of debate on that topic, and so it's very nuanced, so I always I always am careful not to draw a real hard line on abandonment just because it's not entirely clear exactly how abandonment is defined.

Shea Houdmann

That's for sure. And when we talk about what does the Bible say about divorce the Bible, I would agree with you is very narrow in describing specific situations in which divorce is the right decision to make it. Even then, it's not necessarily the only decision, but it's an allowable decision that does not involve sin on your part by taking that step. Could there be other situations beyond adultery, yes, but our goal at Got Questions is to never go beyond what is written, so we're very careful in saying yes, you can divorce and it's not a sin when I can't really say that biblically.

Shea Houdmann

So I think that's we're not saying that there are absolutely no never anything other than adultery is grounds for divorce, but that's really the only thing we can definitely say Biblically speaking is a ground for divorce, so this has been part one of our discussion with Sarah Van Baale, a longtime GotQuestions.org volunteer writer.

Shea Houdmann

We're going to be discussing remarriage in Part 2, so stay tuned for that. So, Sarah, thank you for joining me for the conversation today.

Sarah Van Baale

Thank you for having me. It was good to be here.

Shea Houdmann

This has been the Got Questions podcast. Got Questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.