

# Deuteronomy 24:1-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-24/deuteronomy-241-4/>

*Moses discusses the issue of marriage, divorce, and remarriage in ancient Israel. The first three verses present the problem and the last verse provides the correct action.*

The law now turns to the subject of divorce.

Starting in [Deuteronomy 23:19](#) and extending to [Deuteronomy 24:7](#), Moses discussed laws generally flavored with the eighth commandment (“You shall not steal”—[Deuteronomy 5:19](#)). God’s law creates a structure in which people can be self-governing. It is based on three pillars:

- Rule of Law. God created cause-effect that is always in play. Self-governance is founded upon recognizing the reality that God made things the way they are. In His law, God tells humanity directly what will lead communities and individuals to thrive.
- Consent of the governed. God delegated to humans to a) keep the laws and b) judge one another in enforcing the laws ([Deuteronomy 16:18](#)).
- Private property. Respecting someone’s property ownership is respecting them. It honors their human dignity, acknowledging that they have sovereignty over their own possessions.

Stealing someone’s property robs them of human dignity by stripping them of agency. If they cannot make decisions over their own property, then their ability to make choices is diminished, thus diminishing being made in the likeness of God. The ability to make choices comes with a great responsibility. In order to advance the life-giving culture of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, God expands the concept of private property to protect other ways in which people make choices, preventing them from exploitation.

The situation addressed beginning in [Deuteronomy 24:1](#) is *when a man takes a wife and marries her* (v. 1). The problem occurs when, at some point in the marriage, *it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes*. To *find favor* (Hebrew “*ḥēn*,” “grace”) is to be granted a special benefit when in a relationship with that person. That *favor* could be an active kindness or some sort of generosity

one person shows to another person. The same phrase is used by Abraham in requesting to receive the blessing of the LORD if Abraham has found *favor* in His sight ([Genesis 18:1-3](#)).

What caused the wife to lose the favor of her husband was that he *found some indecency in her*. The word *indecency* (Heb. "ervah") is normally translated "nakedness," but the exact nature of this woman's *indecency* is not stated here. It probably was something other than adultery, because adultery was punishable by death ([Leviticus 20:10](#); [Deuteronomy 22:22-27](#)). Perhaps she committed something that could be called "indecent exposure."

The husband's response to his wife's *indecency* was threefold:

- He wrote *her a certificate of divorce*. A *certificate of divorce* was an official or formal document which served to cut off the marital bond.
- He put *it in her hand*.
- He sent *her out from his house*.

In response to the husband's actions, Moses envisioned the case where the woman *leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife* (v. 2). The case was further complicated when *the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife* (v. 3). Here, the second *husband* also found something that displeased him in the woman and decided to divorce her and send her away. If this happened or the second husband died, *then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife* (v. 4).

The reason given was that the wife had *been defiled*. The term *defiled* (Heb. "tāme") also means "unclean." It was used of adultery in [Leviticus 18:20](#) and [Numbers 5:13-20](#). The idea here seems to be that remarrying the first husband might be considered an act of legal adultery, something that would be *an abomination before the LORD*.

The LORD then said that to tolerate this type of behavior would *bring sin on the land which the Lord God was giving the Israelites as an inheritance*. To *bring sin on the land* would be to put their peace and prosperity in the Promised Land in jeopardy. When Israel broke the self-governing principles, they would suffer as a result. Part of this suffering would be the practical result of the realities of

cause-effect God placed into the world. When the strong exploit the weak, society decays.

This law addresses the case of a woman who has been married, divorced, married with another man, and either divorced again or became widowed. The main point of this law is that the first husband, once he had divorced his wife, could not take her back after she had been married to a second husband.

Jewish tradition observed that this prohibition prevented “wife swapping.” If a man could divorce and take back, then the process could be repeated often, thus turning the wife into a property to exploit. Therefore, as always, the law was intended to propagate God’s covenant communal structure of love and care for others, by shaming practices that were exploitative.

Thus this law protects the divorced woman’s ability to choose to enter another marriage, and protects women from exploitation, elevating their human dignity. In doing so, it honors the general principle underlying private property, that of human dignity to retain agency to make choices. Forbidding the first husband from taking a woman back after divorcing her prevents a man from effectively turning his wife into a property to exploit.

Jesus’s disciples asked Him about this passage, and Jesus said Moses allowed divorce due to the hardness of men’s hearts. But Jesus commanded His disciples not to divorce, except in the case of sexual immorality ([Matthew 19:7-9](#)). Paul also taught Christians about the issue of divorce and remarriage in [I Corinthians 7:10-16](#), instructing them not to seek divorce, but telling them they were free if the other partner terminated the marriage. In this way, Paul’s teaching would mirror this passage in Deuteronomy, in that the woman was free to remarry once her husband had terminated the marriage.

### **Biblical Text:**

**When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that 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 from his house, <sup>2</sup>and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man’s *wife*, <sup>3</sup>and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts *it* in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, <sup>4</sup>*then* her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife,**

**since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance**