



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

## **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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### **Conflicted Marriages**

Shortly before Christ was crucified, He gave this warning:

John 15:18-20b, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you..."

In fulfillment of this promise, there came a time in the life of the early church when the entire world turned against the people of God. Five New Testament epistles were written during

this time<sup>1</sup>... each containing pointed exhortations on how we must live when the world is hostile toward us. And 1 Peter is one of them.

1 Peter was written around 63/64 BC on the cusp of the Neronian persecution. Soon Christians everywhere in the Roman Empire would be threatened. Most would be attacked and publicly ridiculed. A significant portion would be arrested, tortured, and even killed! In fact, in the latter group would be the Apostle Paul as well as the Apostle Peter. Yet before he was crucified upside down, Peter penned this epistle to encourage, comfort, and equip God's people that they might endure the persecution that was upon them.

In 1 Peter 1-2:10, Peter devotes himself to explaining what we are in Christ and what is ours as a result. We could summarize this section with Paul's words in 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18, "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

The first section of Peter is a description of those "unseen" things and so a call for God's people to live in light of the glorious future that awaits them in Christ! In 1 Peter 2:11-4:11, Peter transitions to application, addressing what it means to live as Christians in a hostile world:

- First as Citizens of an Ungodly Nation, 2:13-17.
- Then as Servants in a household, 2:18-20.
- Then as ones arrested and tortured, 2:21-25.

And now in the text before us, he turns to what Godly living means when it comes to living with a rebellious spouse, 3:1-7. In this regard it is important to note that this is NOT a discourse on *Christian* marriage. It is a discourse on a *Conflicted* Marriage where one partner either is NOT saved or is in gross rebellion. In this regard, notice the stakes were a lot higher when a Christian woman was married to a rebellious spouse. John MacArthur, speaking of the first-century world, said this:

...when a wife became a Christian the potential for difficulty in the marriage was much greater than when a husband became a Christian because a husband was already in charge... And in that society if a husband became a Christian, the wife would dutifully accept that since 'she had no mind of her own', at least that she was not allowed to have one. So the potential for conflict was greatly lessened. But when a woman (who was viewed as a slave or an animal, and not much more) became a Christian independently of her husband, the potential for conflict and embarrassment and difficulty was much greater and that is why Peter gives much more attention to that particular problem [six verses to the call of the woman; one verse to the call of the man]. (MacArthur, *How to Win Your Unbelieving Spouse*, 1989)

Truly, in Peter's day women had the same legal protection and value... as livestock. They were viewed as inferior to men<sup>2</sup> and their opinion was considered to be irrelevant. In religious matters, wives had very little say. Whatever or whomever her husband worshipped, she was expected to follow.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Rome practiced what is known as *Patria Potestas* (~the father's power) which gave ultimate power to a woman's father or her husband. That "power" extended even to execution if the father/husband so desired. In this context, imagine what would happen if a woman became a Christian! See unlike the feminists today who think that Christianity shackled women in the first century, it radically freed them! Christian women now were governed NOT by their father or husband, BUT by the Lord! Accordingly, what God said and the life He ordained was most important! And what did God say? "There is neither male nor female; for you are all one [and therefore equal] in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28c)! This simple declaration transformed the woman from identifying herself as the property of a man to being a "co-heir of grace"!

This raised a tricky question: How ought a Christian wife live with this new perspective? Ought she to press her God-given rights? Ought she actively to evangelize her husband... change his thinking? What ought she to do? Peter answered that question in the first six verses of our passage. He begins with the call of the wife.

1 Peter 3:1, "In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands..."

Peter's instruction to the woman of God with an unsaved husband was to remind her of her God-given calling to "submit". The word *submit* is one and the same as in Ephesians 5:22, ὑποτάσσω (*hypotassō*) which was a military term used of the call of a lower ranking soldier in the presence of a higher-ranking soldier. The idea is that of "ranking yourself beneath another individual." And lest you think that is degrading, that is the call we all have in Christ.

Ephesians 5:21, "Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ."

When it comes to our interaction with one another, we are called to rank our wants, desires, and needs beneath any and all in our presence. And so, the focus with this word is NOT degradation, BUT the willing, giving up of our wants, desires, and needs to another. It is in this way that Christ submitted Himself to God (1 Corinthians 15:28)!<sup>4</sup> And that was how the woman was to relate to her husband — NOT lecturing, confronting, or criticizing him. BUT serving Him — subjecting her wants, desires, and needs before that of her husband's!

In this regard, notice that this calling is pretty much unconditional when it comes to the Christian woman. Unless the husband places upon the wife a demand which would be sinful, the woman is called to submit — regardless of her husband's character or motive! In fact, Peter has already established the precedence for this in what he previously wrote.

In 1 Peter 2:13, Peter addresses the believers call to submit to civil authority.

1 Peter 2:13-14, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.”

Amazing! At this time these “kings” and “governors” were rounding up Christians, submitting them to mock trials, torturing them, and in some cases killing them. And yet, they were called to submit?

In 1 Peter 2:18, Peter addresses the believer’s call to submit to their “bosses” at work.

1 Peter 2:18-19, “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.”

In each of these cases the operative word is “submit” regardless of the character or conduct of the one in charge. And so — “in the same way” — the call of the Christian woman in a mixed marriage was to rank her wants, desires, and needs beneath that of her husband! In this regard, notice the power behind our submission.

1 Peter 3:1a, “In the same way...”

Our text constitutes the third time Peter called upon his persecuted brethren to submit. And so, just as God’s people were to submit to the governing authorities (1 Peter 2:13-17), their bosses in their workplace (1 Peter 2:18-25), Christian women likewise are called to submit in their marriage!

Yet it is bigger than this. For notice that the immediate context of the expression, “In the same way...” is the example of Christ who in the midst of hardship and turmoil, proved Himself faithful to the Lord (cf. vv. 21-24). How did He do it?

1 Peter 2:23, “...while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously.”

This is how Christ submitted... and this is how the Christian wife is to submit to her unsaved husband! In all that she does, she must “entrust herself unto the Lord”! Whether God’s people suffer under a wicked king, an oppressive boss, or an ungodly husband... all that we do must be driven out of love, devotion, and reverence for the Lord!<sup>5</sup> It has and always will be “the love of Christ” that must “control us”! That is the power behind submission — which brings us to the object in our submission.

1 Peter 3:1b, “In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands...”

While the immediate context calls the woman to be “submissive to their own husbands” we must see that ultimately it is NOT their husbands to whom a Christian woman is called to

submit, BUT the Lord!

Underlining every call of “submission” in the Bible is A PRINCIPLE upon which rests civil, ecclesiastical, and familial authority. That principle is the delegation of God’s authority to man.

Romans 13:1-2a, “Let every person be in subjection [same word, ὑποτάσσω (*hypotassō*)] to the governing authorities. [In this regard, notice...] For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God...”

This text tells us three things about lawful authority. Any and all earthly authority is derivative. It is an extension of the authority that God holds as the King of the universe. This is what is behind what God says when He speaks of the judges and civil leaders of the day:

Psalm 82:6, “I said, ‘You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High.’”

Mormons quote this as a proof text for the divinity of man. Yet that is gross misunderstanding of this verse. Insofar as a judge rules in the office of judge, they need to know that they are exercising the authority of God! That is what is “the chair of Moses” was all about (cf. Matthew 23:2). And that is the power vested with parents, church leaders, politicians, and husbands!

Any and all earthly authority is derivative and so an extension of God’s authority. In this regard, the woman ultimately does NOT submit to her husband, BUT to the Lord!

Those offices of authority that exist in this world — civil, ecclesiastical, or familiar — have been established by God- speaking of authority, Paul said at the end of v. 1, “those which exist are established by God”! Recall when Paul cursed a wicked individual who turned out to be the High Priest:

Acts 23:4-5, “But the bystanders said, ‘Do you revile God’s high priest?’ And Paul said, ‘I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, “You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.””

Why is that? Because any office of rule has been set up by God to execute God’s authority on the earth — that includes the authority of a husband. And from the wife’s perspective, the fact that she is married to this particular man is NOT an accident. Her husband has been hand selected by God to facilitate God’s authority in her life!

That having been said, this in no way intimates that a woman in an abusive marriage — whether that be physical, emotional, or psychological — should remain in the house. The call here is to submission, NOT self-harm! Because her ultimate authority is God, she is bound to protect and so uphold her physical safety, emotional health, and spiritual well-being. That having been said, notice a third principle concerning lawful authority.

### Third Principle Concerning Lawful Authority

If you and I resist, oppose, or rebel against any lawful authority, we literally are rebelling against God regardless of the character — or lack thereof — of the individual in authority over us,

Romans 13:2, “...therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God”!

This is why God uses such strong language when it comes to a child’s relationship with their parent in the fifth commandment.

Exodus 20:12, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you.”

Do you know the word for “honor”? It is the same word used of God in the context of worship (cf. Leviticus 10:3; Haggai 1:8). That is why when a child disobeys their parent the stakes are so high. They actually are disobeying God!

In this regard, what is behind the word for “submission” in the Bible when used of a lawful authority? It is ranking yourself beneath NOT a sinful being, BUT the authority and will of God which is operative through the sinful being! Godly women throughout Redemptive History understood this...

1 Peter 3:5, “For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands.”

What is it that enabled these “holy women of old” to submit to their husbands even though they were sinners, made poor decisions, and generally abused the authority they had from God? That which moved them... that which drove them was their trust and so reliance upon God. That is what is behind the expression, “who hoped in God.”

Think of Hannah. She was one of two wives of Elkanah and she was barren. Her counterpart, Peninnah, seemed to have no problem bearing children, a fact that Peninnah frequently paraded before Hannah to Hannah’s bitter grief. In this context, Hannah’s husband proved to be quite the shepherd of her soul! When she was struggling with bitter grief over her barrenness, this is what he told her in 1 Samuel 1.

1 Samuel 1:8b, “...‘Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?’”

Yet Hannah didn’t respond with anger... she didn’t strike out or ridicule him. Rather she entrusted her soul to God.

1 Samuel 2:1a, “Then Hannah prayed and said, ‘My heart exults in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord...’”

Hannah “hoped in God” and so was able to submit to Elkanah! She knew that it was NOT her husband who called the shots in her life, BUT the Lord working through Elkanah. And so, she was able to take everything he gave to her as from the hand of the Lord.

We see it also in the life of Sarah!

1 Peter 3:6a, “Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord...”

Modern women read this and laugh, “*I’m not calling my husband lord, he’s a poor leader who makes foolish decisions!*” And so, it was with Abraham. On one occasion he convinced Sarah to pretend to be his sister while they were in Egypt, where the Pharaoh temporarily took Sarah as his wife!! (Genesis 12:10–20) Then, he surrendered the best grazing land in Palestine to his nephew, Lot!! (Genesis 13:1–11) Later he tried to pass Sarah off as his sister, this time attracting the attention of Abimelech who took Sarah as his wife!! (Genesis 20:1–18)

Sarah had all the reason to think of Abraham as an unpredictable, devious, and foolish man. Yet she knew that behind the righteous and unrighteous acts/decisions of her husband was the Lord! And so, Sarah submitted to God by submitting to her husband, “...calling Him lord.”

That ultimately is the Submission to which a godly woman is called in her marriage! It is driven NOT by the character of her husband, BUT by the character and will of the Lord — who still controls the wind and waves of life- which brings us to the consequences of submission.

1 Peter 3:6b, “Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right [that is, ‘submit’] without being frightened by any fear.”

Without the preceding five verses, this is a rather odd statement in the context of a woman’s call in marriage. Yet as Peter has just established that the call of the woman is to “submit unto the Lord” (vv. 5-6), the reference here therefore is taken in light of God’s providence and will for her life. As long as she remains steadfast in her trust of God, she most certainly will embody the faith of the women of old who trusted in God and so were NOT “frightened by any fear”! Wayne Grudem wrote of this text:

A woman with ‘a gentle and quiet spirit’ who ‘continues hoping in God’ will not be terrified by circumstances or by an unbelieving or disobedient husband (cf. Genesis 20:6). (Grudem, 2009, p. 150)

In fact, in this context it is a present participle which points to a characteristic of life. A godly wife does NOT indulge her freedoms BUT her trust in God! As she does this, she is able to live in a bad marriage “without being frightened by any fear.” Learn to trust the Lord, and a bad marriage can “become a spring” (Psalm 84:6a)!

Such was Peter's call and exhortation to the women of his day whose husbands either were NOT saved OR were in rebellion against God. Their hope and comfort in life was NOT bound or in any way related to their husband. RATHER, it was inseparably bound to God! And as such, the Christian wife is able to "rank themselves beneath their husbands" because ultimately, they knew their husbands were NOT calling the shots... GOD WAS/IS!

Now as she lives accordingly, she sets herself up for an important ministry.

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## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy, Hebrew, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude.

<sup>2</sup> "Dominant among the elite was the notion that the woman was by nature inferior to the man. Because she lacked the capacity for reason that the male had, she was ruled rather by her emotions, and was as a result given to poor judgment, immorality, intemperance, wickedness, avarice; she was untrustworthy, contentious, and as a result, it was her place to obey." (Achtemeier, Fortress Press, p. 206)

<sup>3</sup> Peter Davids wrote, "In that society women were expected to follow the religion of their husbands; they might have their own cult on the side, but the family religion was that of the husband." (Davids, 1990, p. 115)

<sup>4</sup> "Submission does not imply any moral, intellectual, or spiritual inferiority in the family, workplace, or society in general. But it is God's design for roles necessary to mankind's well-being. Along the same lines, a commanding officer is not necessarily superior in character to the troops under him, but his authority is vital to the proper functioning of the unit." (MacArthur, 1 Peter MacArthur New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series), 2004, p. 178)

<sup>5</sup> "But stepping out of this call to imitate Christ, we see the theme of faithful citizenship (2:13) and faithful service (2:18). In other words, just as we are called to be faithful to the institutions of government and servanthood, so we should also be faithful to the institution of marriage." (Swindol, 2014, p. 186)