

How Can We Maintain Our Marriage In The Midst Of Suffering?

by Ron R. Ritchie

Early next year, my wife and I are scheduled to speak at a Christian college in a week-long seminar on Christian marriage. We are looking forward to speaking there, as we know many of the students and know that their hearts are open to the truth. We are experiencing a degree of tension about this seminar, however, because a number of the faculty are "evangelical feminists." It's going to be interesting for Anne-Marie and I to come with the Word of God, with our own 28 years of experience with Christian marriage, and teach what the Scriptures have to say about marriage.

In an article in the recent book, "Walvoord--A Tribute," A. Duane Litfin defines feminism in this way:

The term feminist denotes those who wish to eliminate all gender-based roles in society, up to and often including roles that are purely biological in nature. ("Anatomy is not destiny," goes the slogan)...

...A traditionalist, on the other hand, is one who wishes to maintain gender-based roles in society. The traditionalist argues that gender is a valid basis for defining social (not to mention biological) roles, that males and females are not "equal" in the sense of being interchangeable, and that society can and must observe gender differences.

Three major subgroups must be distinguished among the feminists. First, there are the secular feminists who come to their feminism via a straightforward humanism that disallows any voice in the matter of God, revelation, or religion. Feminism represents a crucial aspect of their humanistic vision of what the world should be, and they advocate it with great enthusiasm. Second, there are the liberal religious feminists who maintain various ties with the Judeo-Christian religious establishment and who view themselves as moving somehow within that tradition... Finally there are evangelical feminists who hold to conservative views of the Bible and theology but who nevertheless embrace the feminist proposals to abolish gender-based roles in society, church and home. Evangelical feminists believe that the Bible, which they consider authoritative, is congenial to feminist ideas when rightly understood, and they use it constantly to buttress their feminist proposals.

In other words, evangelical feminists have a pick-and-choose theology. They use Scripture verses out of context to forward their viewpoint.

I can see why such viewpoints as we have just read are so appealing, even to Christian men and women. Ever since the fall, right up to this moment in time, women have been treated harshly and unjustly at the hands of men. The television movie, "The Burning Bed," opened the eyes of many about what's going on in marriage today in our society. After the first service this morning, I talked to a young mother in this congregation who trembled as she told me that she and her children had been beaten by her husband

(they are now separated). Is it any wonder feminism is a popular philosophy in our day? Feminism has made deep inroads into seminaries, Christian colleges, churches and homes. It is being taught not as theory, but as truth, resulting in confusion in the home. Wives are discontent, husbands are frustrated, and children are confused because the functions of men and women, and husbands and wives are no longer clear. When there is no gender base, husbands don't know how to act as husbands and fathers--they don't know what it means to be a man. Wives don't know what their responsibilities are before the Lord. Caught in the middle of all this confusion are the children, growing up in what amounts to a unisex society, without any clear teaching in the area of male and female relationships which they can impart to the yet unborn next generation.

The church of Jesus Christ needs to continue teaching and living out the truth as it is set down in the inspired Word of God. The church must continue to submit its theology to the Scriptures. It must not develop its own theology and then try to fit that around the Word of God, as some Christian feminists are trying to do. The Scripture is so clear: in the beginning God created man and woman, equal in personhood, diverse in expression. We must keep that truth clearly before our own hearts and minds, and before our children. "In the beginning God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). Sin has distorted that truth, but Christians must grasp and hold on to God's original intention as it is clearly defined in the Scriptures. Christians must not allow our fallen and frustrated world to dictate by pick-and-choose theology anything contrary to what the Word of God declares. If Jesus is our Lord, if we are living by the power of the Holy Spirit, and if we will accept these truths concerning our responsibilities within Christian marriage as defined by the Scripture, the result will be that we will have no need for feminist theology or philosophy regarding these matters.

Today we will look at the opening verses of chapter 3 of Peter's first letter, where the apostle is addressing Christian men and women. We will seek answers to the question, "How can we maintain our marriage in the midst of suffering?" First, Peter will deal with the issue of Christian women who are married to unreasonable, non-believing husbands who cause their wives great suffering even when they seek to do right (vs. 1-6). Secondly, Peter will go on to deal with Christian husbands who have Christian wives but who don't know how to live with their wives in an understanding way.

Addressing the question, therefore, "How can we maintain our marriage in the midst of suffering?", Peter first turns to Christian wives and says,

1. Wives, be submissive

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. And let not your adornment be external only--braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, and putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. 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. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him Lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.

Peter is writing in 64 A.D., at a time when the climate for women was nothing short of tragic. The Roman culture was geared for the suppression of women, resulting in the ruination of the Roman family. Seneca (65 A.D.), the Roman philosopher, political leader and writer of tragedies (first century soap operas!) wrote in 64 A.D., "Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married." Thus the

apostle was writing during a time when the whole of society was adulterous.

Greek society was even more perverse. The concept of home and family was nearing extinction; faithfulness was out of vogue. Prostitution was an essential part of religion and society. Speaking of that society, one philosopher of the day wrote, "We have prostitutes for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation, and wives to have legitimate children." Respectable Greek women led secluded lives. They had no part in public life, and no opportunity to express themselves or appear at public events. They lived in private apartments which could only be entered by their husbands. This lifestyle of Greek women of that day, 64 A.D., was designed so that they might see, hear and ask as little as possible. That philosophy was aptly summed up by Socrates (407-399 B.C.), in the words, "Is there anyone to whom you entrust more serious matters than your wives, and is there anyone to whom you talk less?"

The Jews, however, held a very high view of women, of marriage and of children--but only on paper, as it were. In reality, they regarded women not as people, but as things who had no legal rights. The hardness of heart of Jewish men toward women was summed up in one prayer that said, "Thank you God that you did not make me a gentile, a slave, or a woman."

Given these three views of women that prevailed in that day, it is easy to see why the classic scholar, A. W. Verrall, wrote of the collapse of that society, "The chief disease of which ancient civilization died was a low view of women." Apart from the women of aristocratic society, women from each of these cultures were viewed as the "second sex." They were held in low esteem having no public rights or influences, and were held entirely under the protection of their fathers or husbands. Into the middle of this darkness came a man named Jesus. He was the "light of the world," and His message was that God valued men, women and children equally. That is why so many women were attracted to Him: He held them in high esteem, He treated them with love, respect, dignity and mercy. Those responses in turn flowed through the early church so that Christian women played a major role in the spread of Christianity.

As we have seen in verses 1-6, Peter is addressing Christian wives of unbelieving husbands, many of whom caused their wives to suffer unjustly even when they sought to do good. These Christian women knew from the teaching of Jesus, the apostles and the prophets the truth of the command, "What God has joined together let no man put asunder." Thus they knew that incompatibility in religion did not justify the dissolution of their marriages. What these wives needed to do, therefore, was find a way to communicate the truth of the gospel to their husbands so that they would come out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Then their husbands would experience the righteousness, peace and joy that their wives had in their lives.

To help them win over their husbands to Christ, Peter suggests three steps: godly behavior, godly adornment and godly models. Let's look at the first step, godly behavior, found in verses 1 and 2:

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.

Part of this godly behavior that Peter impresses upon Christian wives is that they be submissive to their husbands. Jesus submitted to unjust suffering and died so that others could live. In 2:22-23, Peter described Him in these words: "He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting

Himself to Him who judges righteously." We hate that word, "submit," don't we? But we hate it because we really don't understand it. "Submit" is a military word--the word an officer gives to his men. It means "to rank under," "to come into order." It has the idea of soldiers who are resting, standing around in disarray but then they are suddenly called to order and they immediately line up, ranking under their officer and surrendering their own rights so that order is restored. Peter is saying that marriage in that day was, in a sense, out of order. We would agree that that is true of marriage in our own day.

The correct order, of course, is clearly revealed in Scripture: "Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman, and God is the head of Christ." Yesterday on this very spot from which I'm speaking to you, a couple stood before me in a marriage ceremony. I said to the young woman, "Listen carefully, I'm about to say you must be submissive to this man. But you really don't have to do it--I can cancel the wedding! This is your last chance. Do you voluntarily, willingly want to marry this man and therefore agree to fall in line with God's principles and 'rank under him?' Do you want to do that?" She looked at me and hesitated just for a split second and said, "Yes." I don't expect to hear any complaints from her for the rest of her marriage!

Peter says that Christian wives who are married to non-Christian husbands should voluntarily get back in order by submitting, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to their husbands, as unto the Lord (unless, of course, their husbands make demands upon them which violate their spiritual walk). Thus wives could fulfill their godly role within marriage and so give God room to express Himself through them toward the possible salvation of their unbelieving husbands. The issues involved in these marriages were much more profound than the personal rights of the women involved. The main issue was the salvation of the husbands. Further, Peter says, be submissive only to your own husband, not everybody else's. It's possible that some of the wives whom Peter was addressing were bypassing the advice of their husbands in favor of what they were being told by elders and teachers in their churches.

So Peter's first word to wives is, "Be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word (i.e., they are not persuaded by the gospel), they may be won without a word..." Now don't get the idea that that's saying a wife can't talk to her husband. What it means is, don't nag him with the gospel, don't preach at him all the time. Stop nagging and start living the gospel. There is a possibility, not an absolute promise, that he may be won "without a word" if you are living the word, living a lifestyle that is Christlike.

A Christian woman told me she had recently lost her unbelieving husband. She had become a Christian after her marriage and she so wanted her husband to come to faith in Christ that she filled the house with Bibles, Christian books, wall plaques, records and tapes. I had once prayed with her for her husband in these words, "Dear Lord, may he find no rest until he rests in You," and she had gone home and told her husband that he was going to be restless until he became a Christian! "And now he's left me," she told me, "what do I do?" I suggested that she write him a letter of apology for her zeal, but not for her love of the Lord; then put away all the things she had spread around the house; and then go before the Lord and pray, "Lord, would you please preach your good news through me as I love my husband..."

Peter continues, "As they observe your chaste and respectful behavior." The word "observe" could be used in the sense of watching a sporting event, when the eyes are glued to what is happening. Husbands may act deaf at times, but they don't go blind! These wives to whom Peter was writing were living in an impure society, one that was filled with drunkenness, sensuality, lust and idolatry, but as Christians they chose to keep themselves pure from such defilement. That purity, as well as the respect they showed

toward their husbands and toward their families, was readily observable. They respected their husbands because they knew they were created in the image of God and they wanted them to be saved by the hand of God. Speaking of such a woman, Proverbs 31:12 says "She does him good and not evil all the days of her life;" while Proverbs 12:4 says, "An excellent wife is the crown of her husband; but she who shames him is a rotteness in his bones."

Peter then moves to encourage these Christian wives that God cannot only use their godly behavior to reach their unbelieving husbands, but He may also use their godly adornment. Verses 3-4:

And let not your adornment be external only--braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, and putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.

"Adornment" comes from the Greek word "cosmos." It means "to put in order, to arrange." Every woman here this morning is well arranged in her adornment. You have taken time to "arrange" yourself. That is one of the gifts God has given you, so that we men can behold your beauty. Peter doesn't want these Christian wives to whom he is writing to appear gaudy in their dress. That is how the temple prostitutes dressed. The very rich also dressed in that way, spending hours and days arranging what they wore. Peter is saying, "Don't spend an eternity getting yourself ready externally. That would be insensitive to the poor among them." Cato (95-46 B.C.), the Roman historian, insisted on simplicity in women's dress. One of his friends took issue with him, saying, "Why should we grudge women their adornments and dresses? Women cannot hold public office or priesthood or gain triumphs. They have no public occupations. What can they do but devote their time to adornment and dress?" Let them do it; in other words, that's all they have to do. A friend of mine told me about his 65-year-old mother who is very beautiful, but she is so empty, it makes him weep. Her whole life has been dedicated to grooming her body, not her mind. I am reminded of Proverbs 11:22: "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion." She is precious in the sight of the world, but not precious in the sight of God. Her adornment is temporal and decaying.

Peter now moves from the external to the internal adornment of wives, from the temporal to the eternal. Speaking of the internal man, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "We do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." The Lord said to Samuel, "...God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (2 Sam. 16:7). God is Spirit; thus He deals with the spiritual qualities of men and women. In this context, Peter is dealing with the question, "How can godly women penetrate the unpersuaded hearts of their unbelieving and unreasonable husbands?" The answer suggested by the apostle is that wives should allow the Lord to work through the hidden person of the heart, the new creature in Christ, the spiritual person who now possesses "the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit."

Gentleness is strength under control, pictured by the Holy Spirit working in and through us. Jesus was the most gentle man who ever lived. In Matthew 11:29, He said of Himself, "I am gentle and humble in heart..." Gentleness is a spirit that says, "God, You are in charge. My husband will not listen to my words, so I will trust You for his salvation. I will pray for him, I will submit to him, preparing myself outwardly and inwardly, but I will rest in You and trust You for the outcome. I will not try to manipulate his salvation, but I will wait with a quiet spirit." In the same way that Peter commanded Christian slaves who were laboring under unreasonable masters to work in the sight of God, the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-loving God, so Christian wives should remember that they were living in the sight of that same God and that a gentle and quiet spirit was precious in His sight. That was more important than immediate

justice; what was in view was their husbands' potential salvation.

Peter must surely have anticipated that some Christian wives would respond to his words by saying, "Who can live like that? It's too idealistic. You don't know my husband." So the apostle dips into the pages of Israel's history and shares the example of Sarah, a godly women from the past. Verses 5-6:

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. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.

Here Peter makes a general statement and then moves into a specific illustration. "Holy women" were set apart for God, not to follow the philosophy of this world. Esther married a pagan king and yet lived her life in obedience before God and before her husband. Likewise, Abigail, before she became David's wife, was married to a bitter, unreasonable husband, yet she submitted to him and to her Lord.

These holy women of old had three godly attributes, which are listed in verse 5. First, they placed their hope in God. They did not regard their immediate circumstances of difficult marriage situations; rather they placed their hope in the God who would meet them at the deepest level of their need. Secondly, these holy women adorned themselves with the pearls of a gentle and quiet spirit; and thirdly, they were "submissive to their own husbands," willingly ranking under them, as unto the Lord.

Peter now comes to his illustration, his exhibit A, who is Sarah, the wife of Abraham, the father of Israel. This couple grew together in their marriage and in their relationship with God. Their walk of faith included some stumbling, but Sarah exhibited the quality of submission that Peter is talking about by obeying Abraham in the most difficult situations. She called him "lord," which was a term of respect and honor, and by faith she submitted to him. In Genesis 18, the story is related of how Abraham entertained in his tent three angels. One, who was the Lord, told him, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son." Sarah, who was listening to this conversation, laughed to herself, saying, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" Yet as a godly woman, Sarah was willing to submit to Abraham in sexual union, in what looked like an impossible situation. Abraham also had to walk by faith in this instance, as he regarded his sexual powers as being as good as dead. In Hebrews 11:11, we read how Sarah responded, "By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive (life out of death), even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him (God) faithful who had promised." Sarah placed her hope and her faith in God in what appeared on the surface to be ridiculous circumstances. Isaac was born as a result of their union and he went on to found the nation of Israel.

"And you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear," Peter continues. You Christian wives who are living in difficult and troubled circumstances become Sarah's spiritual children if you do what is "right." That is a Greek word that means "if the whole course of your life is in the doing of good." And what is "right" in God's sight? Peter has given wives these three things: godly behavior, godly adornment and godly models. If you do this, you will have a life that is "without fear." In other words, terror will not take over your life because you will have placed your hope in God, the Shepherd and Guardian of your soul. As Christian wives submit to the Lord, as they exhibit the three qualities Peter has listed, they will be participating in God's plan of salvation in which He is calling out a people from among the gentiles for His namesake.

So we find that Peter advises Christian wives who are married to non-Christian husbands to submit to their husbands as unto the Lord, despite the suffering they are experiencing.

The apostle now turns his attention to Christian husbands who have Christian wives, addressing husbands who are having difficulty maintaining their marriages in the midst of social, political and personal suffering.

2. Husbands, be understanding

You husbands likewise, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman; and grant her honor as a fellow-heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

"You husbands likewise...." Peter picks up the concepts of honor and respect in verses 2 and 6, and that perhaps includes the thought, "Husbands, as I have directed Christian wives to remember the model of Jesus' submission, you too are instructed to regard your wives in the way that Jesus, the apostles and the prophets instructed us."

The apostle addresses two things to husbands: "live with your wives in an understanding way," and secondly, "so that your prayers may not be hindered." To "live with your wives in an understanding way" means to live with them according to knowledge, not according to fantasy. It means to investigate, to seek to know wives in a godly way, and to seek to live that way at all times.

Husbands are to seek to understand and think through a number of biblical concepts regarding God, man himself, woman and marriage. First, the nature of God. God is both male and female. He created both of the sexes so that we would have a balanced view of who He is. Then, God's view of man. Man is a physical, emotional and spiritual being, created in the image of God. God demonstrates His maleness through man as the Almighty but kindly Father, representing leadership, authority and objective truth. Husbands also need to understand God's view of women. Woman also is a physical, emotional and spiritual being, created in the image of God. God demonstrates His femaleness as the God of all wisdom and kindly mother who represents the nurture of life as seen and expressed in subjective truth, love, compassion and submission. Then there is God's view of marriage. The command to "leave, cleave and become one" has not only a physical application, but it also has spiritual and emotional applications. Also, husbands must understand God's view of man as a husband. That is demonstrated for us by Christ, as described in Ephesians 5: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the church and gave Himself up for her." What in the world does that mean? Further, husbands must understand God's view of women, of wives. That was demonstrated by Jesus in His earthly relationship with His Father: "Not My will but thine be done." Jesus did nothing without checking first with the Father. "My will is to do Your will," Jesus said. Thus Jesus is the perfect model for how a wife should function. Finally, there is God's view of equality of personhood and diversity of function, and God's view of headship and submission. First Corinthians 11:3 says, "Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of woman, and God is the head of Christ." Verse 11 of the same chapter says, "In the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God."

Peter then goes on to encourage husbands to investigate the physical, emotional and spiritual nature of their wives. First, with regard to her physical nature, Peter says woman is "a weaker vessel." Now let me finish! We know that many times in Scripture, God describes Himself as a potter, and men and women as clay; and that mankind has been designed by Him as clay pots made to contain Him. Second Corinthians 4:7 says, "We have this treasure (Christ) in earthen vessels that the surpassing power may be of God and not of ourselves." Husbands are clay pots; wives are clay pots. Both are temporal, they are fragile, they

will return to clay and dust again one day. But while they are alive in the marriage relationship, of the two clay pots, the wife is the weaker vessel. Why is that? Well, man has a certain hormone, called testosterone, which makes his bone structure grow larger than a woman's so that more fiber and muscle grow around his bones than a woman's--up to 40% of his body, in fact, is muscle. (A woman's body, in contrast, has 23% muscle.) The man's larger bone structure results in his being, on the average, about 10% bigger than a woman. I don't think Peter knew of these medical facts, but by simple observation, he proceeded to make the point that even though woman was housed in a weaker vessel, that did not make her any less equal in God's sight. Therefore, man was not to take physical advantage of that weakness. Rather, man's function was to protect woman, the weaker vessel. I was raised in a society that dictated that a man was to take advantage of that weakness if his wife talked back or disobeyed. That had only to be done once or twice before the woman got the point.

Secondly, husbands are to seek to understand their wives' emotional nature--"since she is a woman," Peter says. When God brought Eve to Adam after taking the rib from Adam's side, Adam realized immediately what had happened: "This is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man." Eve was not a man, but a woman. She was equal in personhood, but different in her expression of the female characteristics of God, her Creator. Woman is never less than man; rather she is the glory of man. She is a woman, one who fits, who corresponds to man. She eliminates his loneliness; she is his supporter; she is the nurturer of all of life. Woman is the one who brings subjective truth expressed in terms of tenderness and compassion. She is a woman, not a man, so don't treat her like a man and don't ignore her like a man. Rather, man should give himself up, open his heart and share his deepest needs with his wife so that she can fulfill her God-given role as his partner. A husband must watch his wife and listen to her, he must love her, encourage her and support her. As a result, a husband will see God in her as she responds to a faithful, loving man, for she desires to be a one-man woman.

Further, a husband must understand his wife's spiritual makeup. He must grant her honor as a fellow-heir of the grace of God. God gave them both an equal inheritance, which is the gift of eternal life. As far as salvation is concerned, it is true that there is neither male nor female, for all are one in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:28). But here in this physical world, there is male and female. Female is not to be considered "less than" in any way, but very much "equal with" man. Woman was "chosen before the foundation of the world" just as much as man was so chosen. She too has been "born again to a living hope." She too is of the "royal priesthood." She is part of the "chosen nation," part of "God's own possession."

What do you think would happen if husbands lived with their wives in an investigative, loving, searching way, constantly investigating them physically, emotionally and spiritually? Scripture says you must do that, in Peter's words, "so that your prayers may not be hindered." The key to communicating with God depends on how you are functioning with your wife in these areas. Then your prayers will not be cut off, hindered from God. If you are arguing with your wife, you don't feel like praying. I know I never do; I'm too busy pouting. And it's very hard for a grown man to pray while he has his thumb in his mouth! Another way a husband's prayers are hindered is that God will refuse to answer his requests until he makes things right with his wife.

I talked to a woman last week who came to my office (accompanied by a woman friend of hers) wanting to discuss her divorce. As I was teaching her this passage, the woman listened intently. I turned to her and asked her, "If your husband had treated you in the way Peter describes in verse 7, how would you have responded to him?" Tears came to her eyes. I watched her as her mind flashed over the pages of her

14 years of marriage that were now lying in ashes. She replied, "I would have been a loving, supporting and submissive wife." A little later that afternoon, he accepted Jesus Christ into his life.

How can we maintain our marriage in the midst of suffering? Wives, submit to your husbands; husbands, be understanding of your wives. Peter sums up this whole area of Christian relationship--believers and gentiles, believers and civil government, Christian slaves and unreasonable masters, wives with husbands who are unbelievers, and Christian husbands and their wives--in verses 8-12 of this chapter:

To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. For let him who means to love life and see good days refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile. And let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

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1 Peter3:1-12

Ninth message

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