

# HELP FOR A HURTING MARRIAGE

*SERIES: BELOVED EXILES: STUDIES IN 1 PETER*



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1 Peter 3:1-7  
5th Message  
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We are entering the holiday season, with the attention on our families and the good and bad that comes with it. A Thanksgiving celebration can be tense if there is disagreement about honoring the One to who thanks is being offered. Such a disagreement about faith in Christ, between husband and wife, is the backdrop for 1 Peter 3:1-7.

1 Peter 3:1-7

**<sup>1</sup>Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, <sup>2</sup>when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. <sup>3</sup>Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. <sup>4</sup>Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. <sup>5</sup>For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, <sup>6</sup>like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear. <sup>7</sup>Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.**

It is important to read this paragraph in the context of the preceding word on submission to unjust authority (1 Peter 2:13-17). In other New Testament passages, human marriage is discussed as analogous to “the marriage of Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:21-27, Rev. 19:7). Like Paul, Peter surely believed (and taught) that “the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is also the head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23a). The apostles upheld the essential goodness of submission in a Christ-centered marriage. But not all submission is good in itself. Some-

times, as with Jesus on the cross, it is a way to disarm evil (1 Peter 2:22-25).

In this passage, Peter is writing to wives who are threatened because of the power wielded by their unbelieving husbands. Verse 1 begins, “wives in the same way,” harkening back to slaves in the previous section who were instructed to submit to harsh treatment—unjust harsh treatment (1 Peter 2:18-21). In our passage today, he counsels submission for wives facing selfish dominance by husbands—not because this type of submission is good in itself, but because it makes way for Christ to bring about change.

The phrase “weaker partner,” in verse 7, is instructive. Reflecting on the creation accounts in Genesis, we find that the man and woman are made for God and each other; different, complementary, and equal—neither is weaker than the other. We are created in the image of God, male and female. “Weaker partner” is a reference to fallen patriarchy; a reference to a marriage in which power and authority are held in one hand and not in the other.

Such fallen patriarchy has its stamp on most human history, including the world Peter was dealing with. Given this context, we are learning how a believer married to an unbeliever should act (in this case a Christian woman married to an unbelieving husband). “Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words...” (1 Peter 3:1).

21st century Americans do not live in a culture with kings, slaves, or unchallenged male dominance in marriage. Our world is different than that, yet these verses have important lessons to teach us. Let's go back to verses 1 and 2 and see what we discover and how we can apply it to ourselves.

1 Peter 3:1-2

**<sup>1</sup>Wives, in the same way be submissive to your**

**husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, <sup>2</sup>when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.**

A couple of observations: First, the unbelieving husband has heard the Gospel. No one would advocate keeping the good news of salvation in Christ (“without words”) from someone who has never been told. We should assume the husband has heard the gospel message clearly, perhaps raised questions that have been answered, but is not persuaded. He has heard and doesn’t want to hear any more.

Second, the wife to whom Peter is writing wants the best for her husband. She does not use her life in Christ as a pretext for ending her marriage or withdrawing emotionally. She seeks to serve God in winning her husband to faith.

Repetitive speech (cajoling, pouting, insinuating, and nagging) is not witness. Peter directs believers in these circumstances not to look for one more way to have a conversation about Christ, but to let beauty of a changed life make its case. That is, a “pure and reverent” life. A Christian wife reveres and obeys the Lord, not her husband. As his wife grows more respectful of Jesus, more shaped by Jesus’ priorities, the husband will be faced with powerful testimony to the truth of the Gospel.

Imagine this husband in conversation with a friend, “You know my wife used to be bored all the time, now she’s interested in everything. She used to be grumpy, not so much any more. She has stopped being fascinated with celebrity gossip. She never used to sing. She has new friends. She’s less driven and more hopeful. She is no less my wife, but she is not the same person. I’m not sure what to make of it.”

Proclamation and explanation come first, but they have limited value by themselves. A life changed by the love of Christ is powerful. Therefore, without a word, by your behavior, do good to your husband who does not yet believe.

Before moving on, let me make an observation. Sometimes an unbelieving spouse chooses hypocrisy to achieve peace in the home—attending church and appearing to agree when inwardly nothing has changed. This person is probably further from real faith than the one who openly

resists.

After noting the limits of words in verse 3, Peter identifies a second option that a wife has, to alter the behavior of her husband.

1 Peter 3:3-6

**<sup>3</sup>Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. <sup>4</sup>Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. <sup>5</sup>For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, <sup>6</sup>like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.**

Men are visual creatures, for good or ill. And a wife can use appearance to sway her husband’s behavior—either directly or by attracting other men and making him jealous. Peter argues for beauty that proceeds from the inside, rather than being pasted on from the outside—for healthy self-worth and not cunning beguilement.

The most recent edition of the General Social Survey<sup>1</sup> was published in September. It surprised many with the revelation that American women in 2009 are not as happy as they were in 1972, as measured by the same survey. One commentator observed that, despite the successes of feminism, women today are more enslaved to the opinion of others about their appearance than they were forty years ago. Little girls are sexualized, teens starve themselves, adult women undergo painful surgeries, and aging is considered a disease. None of these choices will lead to wholeness. Attention to one’s outward appearance, as the source of meaning or influence, is foolish and is especially foolish for servants of God.

The story of Sarah and Abraham is one of the most fully drawn accounts of a marriage in the Bible. Abraham was called to trust God’s remarkable promises on a journey of faith. Sarah followed her husband; her life shaped by his calling (in this sense she “called him master,” though that precise phrase is not found in Genesis). And she did

so without fear.

Sarah was feisty and a vocal participant in the best and worst choices Abraham made. She was also beautiful and for that reason fits into Peter's instruction at this point. Twice, Abraham grew afraid that her attractiveness would cause problems and engaged in dangerous lies as a result. But Sarah never attempted to use her beauty to control her husband. Their partnership was tested often (with periods of failure) but in the end Sarah trusted God to mold Abraham.

Confidence in God was the antidote to her fears. A woman with a "gentle and quiet spirit" is not fear-driven or anxious. To be clear, these qualities describe faith, not a soft-spoken personality. Certainly there was nothing demure about Sarah.

In summary, Peter's instruction for wives with unbelieving husbands who have no incentive to see their worth or treat them as equals, is to invite the presence of Christ into the marriage. Christ is apparent in a wife's behavior, in her faith, not in excessive speech, and not through the manipulations of outward beauty.

1 Peter 3:7

**7Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.**

It would have been unusual for Christian husbands to have unbelieving wives in the churches Peter wrote to. However, having raised the subject of marriage, the apostle decides to remind husbands to act in faith ("in the same way") and overcome the habits of disrespect that were common in patriarchal societies.

Simply put, if someone must do what you tell them, it is easy to be unconcerned about what they think and find them unworthy of respect. But such disrespect, especially

in marriage, is an affront to God and a hindrance to prayer.

Modern Californians don't live in circumstances where wives are routinely denied a voice and publicly devalued. However, husbands can always benefit from the call to respect their wives, to celebrate equal enjoyment of the gift of life, and to actively understand the complementary nature of gender differences. Husbands who work on understanding, and spend themselves to respect their wives, will find freedom in their prayers.

Every marriage has unique dynamics. Our first and lasting responsibility is to put God first rather than give way to fear, manipulation, or selfish inattentiveness. May our homes be places where He is honored, and those who don't believe are drawn to His love.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*General Social Survey 2009.* <http://www.norc.org/GSS+Website/>