

1 Peter 3:1-6, Part A

1Pe 3:1 (NKJV) Wives, likewise, *be* submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, ² when they observe your chaste conduct *accompanied* by fear. ³ Do not let your adornment be *merely* outward--arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on *fine* apparel-- ⁴ rather *let it be* the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible *beauty* of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. ⁵ For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, ⁶ as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.

In reality, [1 Peter 3:1-6](#) is still a continuation of Peter's discussion on the issue of biblical submission. The reason that we know that is because Peter uses the word "likewise" in v1. This progression began at [1 Peter 2:13](#) about submission to the government, and then continued at [1 Peter 2:18](#) with submission in the workplace, or to what Peter called "masters". The primary thrust of the idea of submission was then highlighted with Christ and His submission to His Father's will beginning in [1 Peter 2:21](#). Peter stated in v21 that we as believers were "called" to maintaining the same attitude, and then he stated that Christ was our "example". So, in [1 Peter 3:1-6](#), Peter begins his teaching on submission in the home environment.

As we begin this portion of the study, it is important to appreciate that this will just be a kind of introduction into what I hope will become a great source of encouragement to all of us to genuinely trust in God's divine order for marriage. In beginning this passage of Scripture, it is also important to appreciate that it is often a very volatile subject, especially for those precious women who have been involved in a very abusive marriage. My heart goes out to these women for the amount of hurt and pain, both physical and emotional, that they suffer at the hands of a very abusive husband. Then to make it worse, when a woman is abused, the children are inevitably dragged into the emotion and tension that the conflict creates. If you are a woman who has suffered through this, this passage in [1 Peter](#) has the potential to make you somewhat uncomfortable at times if you read it without some understanding of what it actually means, and to whom it is addressed. We will get to the men and their role in v7, as well as other Scriptural mandates for them, and I will be much firmer with the men than with the women. They have the greater responsibility and we will clearly see that when we get to v7.

Over the years, I have counselled with women who had an abusive husband, not just physically, but emotionally, verbally, relationally, and financially. It is not that the wife is the only one impacted by the incredibly hurtful, cruel, and heartless words that a husband can say to her, but the children hear it all and they are just as deeply impacted. In all of those counselling scenarios I have never one time encouraged a woman to stay in an abusive relationship, and especially if children were involved. I see no biblical value or mandate to stay in a marriage that is simply a violent crime scene that just because it is a marriage is seemingly immune from protective measures being implemented. In fact, for a woman to remain in that condition for an extended period of time just seems to strengthen the negative abusive qualities of the man. It is almost as if he enjoys what he is doing. There are plenty of passages in Proverbs that speak to the issue of anger. For instance, [Proverbs 22:24](#) and [Proverbs 29:22](#) state,

Pr 22:24 (NKJV) Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go,

Pr 29:22 (NKJV) **An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression.**

Men, and especially those who are not following Christ, often seem to have great difficulty in controlling their anger, and because of that they end up abusing their families in multiple ways. My counsel to women living under these conditions has always been to legally separate from their husbands for as long as it takes for him to get some help and recover from his anger and abusive tendencies. If he is not willing to get any help and make the necessary adjustments required for a meaningful marriage, then at that point there is a verse that we will read in just a moment that says that God has called the woman to peace and that she is not under bondage in that situation. In fact, I have counselled wives to go to their father and to let him protect them and their children. However, and this is important for me personally, I also have never counselled a woman to get a divorce unless there were legitimate biblical grounds for divorce such as adultery. The goal has always been restoration, and in many cases salvation, both of which may never happen. If after exhausting all potential avenues for meaningful reconciliation, divorce may be the only reasonable option left.

Now, before proceeding, we also want to at least look at the other places in the New Testament that address this same issue. This is not a teaching on divorce, so I am not going to address that to any degree. This still remains a passage on biblical submission and how it is to be practically worked out in a potentially volatile, unpredictable, and explosive home environment. The first passage is [1 Corinthians 7:1-5](#),

1Co 7:1 (NKJV) **Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: *It is good for a man not to touch a woman.* ² Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. ³ Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband *does*. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife *does*. ⁵ Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.**

The second passage is [1 Corinthians 7:10-16](#) which reads,

1Co 7:10 (NKJV) **Now to the married I command, *yet not I but the Lord*: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband. ¹¹ But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And a husband is not to divorce *his* wife. ¹² But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. ¹³ And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵ **But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.** ¹⁶ For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save *your* husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save *your* wife?**

If the abusive husband is an unbeliever and the wife because of his physical abuse separates from him, at that point v15 clearly states to let him depart. Why is that? It is because God has called that believer

to peace, and she does not know if she will be able to influence him in the area of salvation. [Ephesians 5:22-24](#) says,

Eph 5:22 (NKJV) **Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.** ²³ **For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.** ²⁴ **Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.**

[Ephesians 5:33](#) says,

Eph 5:33 (NKJV) **Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.**

[Colossians 3:18](#) says,

Col 3:18 (NKJV) **Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.**

Now, except for the passages on divorce, those are the primary supporting New Testament verses associated with how a godly wife is to “submit” to her husband.

Now, in the [1 Peter 3:1-6](#) passage, there is nothing that intimates that the husband is abusive, so we do not want to read that into the passage. What it says, and this is all that it says, is that the husband may “not obey the word”. Even the example in v6 of Sarah is that of her submission to Abraham and it is never intimated that he was an abusive husband. Therefore, what we want to do is to realize that this passage in [1 Peter 3](#) is simply dealing with the relationship of a godly wife who may be married to someone who is not living an obedient and godly life to Christ. That is all that we can read into this passage, and nothing more. Some of the commentaries seem to think that the primary thrust of the passage is that it is dealing with wives who have lost husbands, and they do that on the basis of the phrase “do not obey the word”. However, that is not hermeneutically acceptable. Why is that? Well, for two reasons. First, that phrase does not limit its impact to just lost people. We cannot read that into that phrase. Secondly, it is because there are plenty of Christian husbands who “do not obey the word”. In fact, right or wrong, for me personally it seems to be much more directed to the wife who has a believing husband that is not obedient to the word that he knows. Lost people have no inclination to obey the word of God, and we should not really expect them to even be able to do so.

One of the reasons that some commentators try to limit this to primarily lost husbands is because of the phrase “may be won”. However, it does not say “may be saved”. If a godly wife has a Christian husband who is not living an obedient life, certainly what she would desire is that he be “won over” to obedience. The NIV and NRSV actually translate it as “won over”. However, the NIV translates the phrase “do not obey” as “do not believe”, and that is simply an incorrect translation. In that case they are interpreting and not translating. As we will see later, the word “won” means to gain, and even though it can mean to win someone over to Christ, that is not its primary meaning. There is not one translation that I found that said “saved” instead of “won”. Therefore, we do not want to read salvation into that word unnecessarily.

In addition, we will not be properly handling this passage hermeneutically if we try and interject the abusive element into it. It does not appear by the tone of this passage that Peter has a physically and verbally abusive husband in mind. It actually seems that this is addressed to the woman who simply has a husband who is not a very biblically minded husband. What it does appear to provide us, though, is

the picture of a very godly woman who is willing to make adjustments in both her personal life and her spiritual life to help her Christian husband become a more committed follower of Christ, or possibly to win her lost husband to Christ if that is the case. In fact, if we read v1 again, it seems to set the tone for this when it says,

1Pe 3:1 (NKJV) Wives, likewise, *be* submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives,

There is nothing violent or abusive that is intimated in the idea of “**do not obey the word**”. There are a lot of non-abusive Christian husbands who fit that bill. The abusive element simply is not there grammatically and cannot be read into the passage.

So, what we are confronted with in this passage are the two primary issues raised in these six verses. The first is the idea of being “**submissive**” and the second has to do with the “**conduct**” of the wife. Please appreciate that a biblical attitude of submission will invariably lead to a certain kind of biblical conduct. The two are actually inseparable. In my mind, 1 Peter 3:2-6 is simply a commentary on v1. The idea of submission is only mentioned once in v1 and the idea of “**conduct**” is only mentioned twice in v1-2. What [1 Peter 3:2-6](#) seems to do is to provide a model of how the actual “**conduct**” is to be worked out in the wife’s life.

We have to appreciate that at every level of life that order is necessary to prevent total chaos and disruption. The less order, the less peace. The less order, the more violent things become. So, at every level of our lives, God has created various levels of order to help provide a legitimate basis for meaningful and peaceful living. We have divinely ordained government, we have divinely ordained servant-leaders in the church, and we have a biblical order in the home, both between the husband and wife, as well as parents and the children. If we violate that God-ordained order, then the consequences can often become tragic.

The first word that we want to address is the word “**submissive**”. We have looked at this word in some detail earlier, so I will not rehearse too much of it again, but it is the Greek word “*hypotasso*”, and in this context it is a present tense verb that has what is called an “imperative sense” to it. What that means is that because of this imperatival sense, the word “**submissive**” becomes the governing idea of the passage. It is also in the middle voice which can be translated as “**Wives, you yourselves be submissive...**” It is the idea that it is a voluntary submission, not one where God is trying to force a wife into submission just because it is an imperative command. It is the same exact Greek word “*hypotasso*” that is used in [James 4:7](#) that encourages us all.

Jas 4:7 (NKJV) Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

It is the same word that is used in 1 Peter 5:5,

1Pe 5:5 (NKJV) Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to *your* elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "*God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.*"

In fact, this word for “**submit**” is used proportionately more in [1 Peter](#) than any other book of the Bible. Only [1 Corinthians](#) uses it more (9X) vs. 7X in 1 Peter.

What we know doctrinally is that every wife is a spiritual equal to her husband, so the difference that is being articulated here is not a spiritual difference, but simply a functional difference. There are functional, as well as physical and emotional differences, between a husband and a wife that will not change simply because God has ordained them to be so. However, the woman is in no way inferior to a man. She is simply different physically and functionally by God's design. If a man thinks that he is stronger than a woman is, then just let him stay at home with the small children, and then we will decide who is the strongest. As husband and wife we are different, but simply because that is what God has ordained. We have different God ordained functions and different God ordained responsibilities. In reality that is a great thing and God knew that when He created us the way that He did.

Obviously, the closer that we live to God's ordained order, the more spiritually successful our life will become. However, the more that we try and circumvent God's order, the greater negative impacts, emptiness, and frustrations that will create for the individual.¹ I have said it often, whether in a marriage setting or any other setting for that matter, but we can win the battle, but lose the war if we migrate outside of God's ordained boundaries. That is the spiritual consequence. I have counselled with individuals in marriage who simply were set in how they were going to respond to something difficult, and even though they eventually got their way, they destroyed any possibility for reconciliation in their marriage. They won the battle, but they lost the war. Most couples simply do not recognize that once the spirit of a marriage dies, it is almost impossible to raise it back up again. Those that do are few and far between, so it is really important to decide what hill we are willing to die on.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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¹ Zodhiates, 1428.