

Prayer

Touch us, Jesus; touch our needy mortal frames;
Touch us where we need divine assistance;
Touch us in those places where it hurts;
Touch us so we rise above our troubles;
Touch us with a vision of Your glory;
And make the difference: AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray for the country of North Korea. Pray about the ingrained mistrust between North Korea and other countries, and pray for a peaceful end to oppression and dictatorship.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those people who produce and market oil*
- *Give thanks to God for parents*
- *Pray for Afghanistan; its peoples and government*

Meditation

Feel the breath of God, the Holy Spirit.
Feel the rush of air which comes afresh,
And breathe more deeply of the things of God.
Accept His unconditional peace and love,
Which sweeps away your troubles and your fears.
Rejoice in the challenge of the Spirit's power,
To achieve the things of life which seem impossible.
Receive His loving, unconditional gifts,
The guarantee of faith and means of ministry.
Be comforted by His awe-inspiring presence,
And know the power of His healing deep within.
Wonder at the mysteries of the Spirit's touch
Be caught up in what is greater than yourself.
Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Bible Study - 1 Peter 3:5-7

⁵ *For the holy women of the past put their hope in God in this way, and made themselves beautiful by submitting to their husbands.* ⁶ *Sarah obeyed Abraham in this way and called him 'lord', and you are her daughters when you do what is right and refuse to be intimidated by fear.* ⁷ *So, husbands, honour and respect the wives with whom you live, and show an understanding of the weaker female frame, since you are joint heirs of the gift of life and so that nothing may hinder your prayers.*

Review

Today's passage follows on directly from the first four verses of chapter 3, in which Peter emphasised that the submission of women to men was a social norm of his day. He told Christian wives to submit to their (non-Christian) husbands in order to maintain the peace of marriage and so that a husband could be won for Christ by his wife's spiritual beauty and love (3:1,4). If they did not do this, it would be a double tragedy. In the world of the Roman Empire not only would the marriage be over but the opportunity of salvation for the non-Christian husband would also be lost. It was hard advice for Peter to give, but like his advice to slaves to be obedient to their masters (5:18f.) it was a suffering which had to be born, and a suffering like the redemptive suffering of Christ on the Cross (2:20,21f.).

I emphasise this because it is easy to let go of this powerful word, and the background I have described is crucial to our passage today. Without it, it is possible to read these verses and assume that Peter was simply reinforcing the idea of women as weaker beings who had to submit to their husbands, and even find their own identity and faith through him and his prayers. Nothing could be further from the truth, both in this passage and in scripture as a whole. However, we need to look at this passage carefully to understand that it does not give unqualified support to male domination within marriage.

The example given in this passage is that of Sarah, who according to Peter, 'made [herself] beautiful by submitting to [her] husband' (3:5). This sounds very 'male dominating', which is reinforced by the next verse which says; 'Sarah obeyed Abraham in this way and called him "lord" ...' However, as soon as we go further, we are forced to consider that Peter was saying something different, because immediately after this, he encouraged the women he was addressing not to be intimidated by 'fear' (3:6), and there is no doubt that Peter was trying to encourage women not to fear their husbands! But why, and what did this have to do with Sarah?

In the story of Abraham, this great man of God refused to accept God's will that Isaac should be his heir, and he stood against God's will because he loved Ishmael. This, of course, was contrary to what God had revealed to Abraham, and yet Abraham would not hear of anything different (Gen 17:18, 21:11). In the end, Sarah had to confront her husband and tell him to accept Isaac as his son and heir, and God told Abraham that he had to listen to his wife (Gen 21:12). It is a sorry tale of male disobedience to God, and one of divine wisdom imparted to a man through his wife. The story was well known to Israelites of Jesus' day, and was clearly in Peter's mind as he spoke. The point is this; Peter was not attempting to give a watertight case for the absolute submission of women to husbands, rather, he upheld the social norm of the submissive role of women because he knew that if women remained peaceful and beautiful in a godly sense then they had nothing to fear and could to win their husbands for Christ.

In verse 7, Peter turned to the responsibility of husbands. He made it very clear that in response to the submission of their wives, they had a divine obligation to show them love and respect, especially because of their generally weaker physical frame. Such a relationship of mutual trust was one which would enable a husband and wife to pray together (5:7), and so grow together in their relationship with God and with each other. Peter's ultimate objective was to see a man and woman share in prayer and be united in love for each other and for God.

Going Deeper

It remains the objective of God to encourage and support godly marriage in which the relationship of a man and a woman is one of peace, respect and love. The Lord also longs to see couples praying together without fear of each other or any other distress. Peter's words were designed to encourage this amongst couples in the days of a powerfully male dominated society, and it is difficult to make sense of them today when different attitudes

prevail. However, as we go deeper, we will see how Peter's words do in fact make real sense for us. In fact they carry an important message.

Notes on the text and translation

- V6 *My translation '... and refuse to be intimidated by fear' is my way of explaining a Greek sentence which says more literally 'do not be frightened by what makes you afraid'. There can be much for a woman to fear in a male dominated world, and the scriptures are not specific. This is general advice about intimidation, by implication, from men.*
- V7 *This is a complicated verse in Greek. The Greek itself says 'the one with whom you live' but this clearly means the wife. Later on, the Greek talks about the 'weaker object of the female' which sounds quote uncharitable and overpowering in English, so I have translated this 'the weaker female frame'*
- V7 *One further issue which is not obvious in English is the position and meaning of the phrase 'so that nothing may hinder your prayers'. In some translations, this is transferred to the beginning to give 'husbands, so that nothing may hinder your prayers ...'. However, in the Greek text, this phrase is last, and because the word 'yours' is plural and it comes after a reference to the sharing together of God's blessings, it is important to note that the prayers are those shared by husband and wife who share faith. The translation I have given is punctuated and positioned carefully to try and make this point in English, whilst keeping close to the Greek.*

The example of Sarah

The story of Abraham in the Old Testament is a long one lasting from at least chapters 12 to 22, and if you read it you will find that Abraham was far from perfect, despite being God's chosen. He made basic errors in life and in listening to God, but he learned from them and grew stronger in faith as a consequence. His constant companion was Sarah, and the story of Sarah is one of the most powerful stories of a woman in scripture. Perhaps only Esther stands out as more significant. There is no doubt at all that although Abraham lived in a male dominated world, his relationship with Sarah was close, and the Covenant God made with Abraham was shared with Sarah. We know this because the story tells us that her name was changed from Sarai to Sarah, just as Abram was renamed Abraham (Gen 17:5,15f.) when the full promise of the Covenant was revealed (Gen 17).

The famous incident I have referred to above is important and well known in the Old Testament because God's instruction to Abraham to stop being disobedient and listen to his wife is one which has been used for centuries to justify the considerable authority which Jewish women wield in the home. True, a Jewish woman would call her husband her 'lord' because she would accept his authority, but she could always speak her mind and tell her husband what she thought if he was wrong, and quote scripture in support of her right so to do. It sounds a little paradoxical to us, but this was the basis of a balanced, respectful and loving marriage and this is what Peter was illustrating.

Peter would have been horrified if he knew that people might use his words to justify the silent subservience of women in some levels of Victorian society, for example; a subservience which left vast numbers of women no more than second class citizens of their countries. We should not make the same mistake. The powerful advice given by Peter is that following the example of Sarah, a woman should not just honour her husband and call him 'lord', but 'refuse to be intimidated by fear' (5:6). The balance of any particular relationship between a man and a woman today is something which perhaps only they can sort out, but it can never be based on a subservience of women which renders them as anything less than equal in God's sight with their husbands, or on any demands on their life

and behaviour which places them in a position of living in fear of their husbands or of any men.

The duties of husbands

The last verse is fascinating, and you will discover that if you read different versions of the Bible, it is translated very differently, reflecting the different theological opinions of the people who have translated it! The translation I have given specifically follows the Hebrew grammar to make what I believe are the critical points about men's behaviour towards their wives.

The first two commands of Peter are that a man should 'honour and respect' his wife. Some might say that a man can do that by enforcing the submission of women, but that would be to subvert scripture. The founding principle of creation is that men and women are equal in the sight of God, and more scriptures affirm this (e.g. Gen 1:27, Matt 19:4-6, Acts 2:18, Gal 3:28 etc.) than it is possible to quote in a small study; and all other texts should be read in the light of this. In addition, honour and respect are qualities which the Bible holds very highly. This is because by declaring that there is something of God in each person, whether male or female, the Bible requires us to respect and honour all people as children of God who bear His image. Frankly, this command of Peter's means that a man must fully accept the image of God in any woman, especially his wife, and it is inconceivable that a man should hold either his wife or any woman in abject submission and attempt to argue that he was being obedient to God by doing so. This would be dishonouring and disrespectful.

Peter talks in this passage about the 'weaker physical frame' of women. This has caused some debate today, and some would wish to say that women are not weaker than men, they are 'different'. I reckon that it is possible to become too sensitive about this issue for cultural reasons, because the Bible here merely reflects the general fact that the physical abilities of women, whilst spectacular and impressive in their own ways (see any woman gymnast for example!), women cannot run as fast or lift such heavy weights as men. If this was not so, the Olympic games would not have separate categories for women's and men's events in virtually every sport. Fortunately, we live in a world which increasingly values the true strengths of women, but we cannot re-write the genetic make-up of male and female. They are different, and the physical strength of the human frame is generally different between the two.

Peter goes on to observe that in a married relationship, a man and a woman share one of the greatest of blessings; he says 'you are joint heirs of the gift of life', and goes on to urge that 'nothing may hinder your prayers'. There are two intriguing things about this last part of the passage. Firstly, 'the gift of life' is a strange phrase in this context, and it is not entirely clear what it means. It could mean that a man and a woman share the life of God between them, or it could mean that together, they are able to create life, that is, to produce children! Whilst it is impossible to be clear which Peter may have meant, it is best to remember that each is a possible interpretation, and each of them is a blessing.

Finally, the phrase 'so that nothing may hinder your prayers' is placed in some translations at the beginning of the sentence after 'husbands' as if the matter of praying was something which husbands were responsible for, over and above the women. This is an unhelpful interpretation which is not supported by the Greek text (see above). The privilege of prayer in a marriage is to reflect God-given unity in prayer together. A couple who pray together will know the abiding and unifying quality of this gift. It is a truly holy blessing.

Application

The nature of this study has been strongly suggestive of proper conduct of men and women in marriage, and there are only a few things left to be said. We must remember

that Peter spoke initially to women who were Christians whose husbands were not converted, and he spoke to encourage them to live in such a way that did not alienate them, but rather helped the prospects that the man would hear the Gospel through his Christian wife. This is still good advice today. There are many women in this situation in many churches today; indeed, I know some churches where the opposite is true because the men are committed and come to church, but their wives are less so, and do not come to church! Whichever way round it is, God's highest hope for the two is that they come together in unity of love and faith. The personal stories of some men and women I know who live with this tension is difficult and in some cases very unhappy. However, the duty of the Christian spouse is to maintain faith, love, respect, honour and all godliness so that their loved one will see Christ in them, whatever they do or do not decide to do about faith. I strongly suggest that any of God's people who live in happy marriages should make it their business to pray for those they know whose marriages are separated by faith, and where one partner believes, and one does not. This issue is very important.

In addition, this passage today requires all men to honour and respect their wives, bearing in mind any natural physical weaknesses they may have. I put it like this because although we can make general statements about the weakness of women in comparison to men, individual circumstances vary, and it is right for all to account for the weaknesses of the other. That is how true marriage works; along with the important advice of Peter to pray together!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Is it right that men within the church should actively encourage and practice the idea that in some way, women must 'submit' to men?
2. Why is it that the church has kept women in submission to men within the church for so long in its history?
3. What is the importance of prayer within marriage, and what prayers should be said by a husband and wife that are pleasing to God?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

As with the previous text, I find it hard to write about these things knowing that they cause controversy. Yet they are as clear as a bell to me. If you have read this and wonder what I will make of other texts which appear to advocate the subservience of women, then you will have to wait until I cover them in this series! In the mean time, I hope you will read each text for what it is in God's Word.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If you have come across people in your church who have an issue about the subordination of women in the life of the church or the home, then do your best to try and discuss this issue with them, and share your thoughts about this text.*
- *Seek the Lord and ask Him whether there is anything in the advice of this text which should affect your own personal relationships.*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You rule in heavenly places and are worshipped and adored by angels. May our worship of You reflect Your rule over our lives, and may Your church here on earth offer You the praise that is Your due. How can we ever praise You enough for the great gift of Salvation! Thank You Lord! AMEN