

GOD'S DESIGN FOR MARRIAGE: CELEBRATING THE BEAUTY OF GENDER ROLES IN 1 PETER 3:1-7

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Historians have often said that Jonathan Edwards was the greatest American philosopher-theologian of the eighteenth-century.¹ However, what sometimes goes unnoticed is that we can only say this about him because behind this man was a remarkable woman, Sarah Edwards. Certainly the title of Noël Piper's book captures the character and life of *Sarah Edwards: Faithful Women and Their Extraordinary God*.²

Though brilliant and godly, Jonathan could be a difficult man to live with. He was often deep in thought; his moods could be intense as he sometimes became discouraged by his own sinfulness, and because of his pastoral responsibilities he needed to spend the majority of his day studying. Sarah, however, did everything in her power to make sure their home was a happy one for Jonathan. Over time, Sarah gained quite a reputation for just how well she raised her children in the things of the Lord. Her responsibilities were innumerable. Not only did she bear the weight of raising eleven children, but she was also responsible for the upkeep of the household and the family's land, not to mention the care of interns and other guests who sometimes lived in their house in order to visit with and learn from Jonathan.

George Whitefield, arguably the most famous preacher of the Great Awakening, said this after staying at their home:

Felt wonderful satisfaction in being at the house of Mr. Edwards. He is a Son himself, and hath also a Daughter of Abraham for his wife. A sweeter couple I have not yet

¹ This article has been adapted from a sermon preached on August 24, 2014 at Fellowship Baptist Church in Riverside, CA.

² For the section that follows on Sarah Edwards, including quotations, see Noël Piper, *Faithful Women and Their Extraordinary God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 15–40.

seen. Their children were dressed not in silks and satins, but plain, as becomes the children of those who, in all things ought to be examples of Christian simplicity. She is a woman adorned with a meek and quiet spirit, talked feelingly and solidly of the Things of God, and seemed to be such a help meet for her husband, that she caused me to renew those prayers, which, for many months, I have put up to God, that he would be pleased to send me a daughter of Abraham to be my wife.³

Sarah was a wife who stood by her husband through thick and thin. There were times when finances were incredibly tight and the church did not provide their family with the income they desired. When Jonathan was fired from his church as pastor, Sarah willingly followed her husband as he relocated their family from Northampton, Massachusetts, to the wilderness of Stockbridge in order to minister to the Native Americans. Just imagine what this must have entailed for a family in the eighteenth-century!

Sarah submitted herself to Jonathan's lead and trusted God in the process. She was a redwood of a Christian wife, and her love and submission to her husband was so faithful that the Lord raised up generations after her that would call her blessed. Just listen to the legacy that this marriage produced by the end of 1900. From their line came 13 college presidents, 65 professors, 100 lawyers, 30 judges, 66 physicians, and 80 holders of public office, including 3 US Senators, 3 mayors, 3 governors, a vice president of the United States, and a controller of the US Treasury, not to mention countless pastors and missionaries.⁴ All of this came from a woman who faithfully served her husband. Certainly Sarah was a 1 Peter 3 woman.

With examples like Sarah Edwards in mind, in what follows we will turn our attention to 1 Peter 3 not only to better understand gender roles in Scripture but to celebrate God's design for marriage. Before we do so, however, we cannot neglect the context. In chapter 2 Peter instructs his readers that as elect exiles and sojourners they are to keep their conduct honorable in front of an on looking world. Peter gave two ways Christians do this: (1) by submitting to the governing authorities (2:13–17), and (2) by servants submitting to their masters (2:18–25). In 1 Peter 3:1–7, Peter is going to press into a third way, namely, wives submitting to their husbands, as seen in the first word he uses to open chapter 3, "Likewise."

1. Wives are to submit to their husbands (1 Peter 3:1–2)

There are few statements more counter-cultural than 1 Peter 3:1–2: "Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct." Many Christians today reject this biblical teaching. But here it is in the text and without apology: *wives are to be subject to their husbands*.

It is important to clarify what Peter is and is not saying. Peter in verse 1a is not assuming that the wife is less of a person or a Christian than her husband. This would have been the assumption in the culture of Peter's day, namely, that women were inferior in their nature to men and more prone to wickedness. But Peter nowhere teaches this. In fact, he assumes the exact opposite when he later says wives are coheirs with their husbands of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7). So the wife is equal to her husband in personhood and as a believer in Jesus Christ. She has just as much share in the riches of the gospel as the husband does. It appears, then, that Peter was being counter-cultural in his assumption that the

³ Ibid., 27.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

wife is a co-heir with her husband in salvation.⁵ Undoubtedly, such a teaching would have caught the attention of those in society.⁶

Yet, while there may be equality in personhood and in salvation, there is a hierarchy in roles. By calling upon wives to submit to their husbands (1 Pet 3:1), Peter reveals to the reader where authority resides in marriage, as well as how the marriage relationship is to function. Paul does the same in Ephesians 5:22–33. The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church (v. 23), and as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit in everything to their husbands (v. 24).

For Peter and Paul, the apostolic vision of men and women’s roles in marriage is the same—and goes back to the beginning. While both Adam and Eve were made in God’s image, and therefore equal in personhood and human dignity, they were given very different roles. For example, in 1 Timothy 2 Paul says that women are not to teach or exercise authority over men in the church. And why? Paul supports his command by appealing to God’s design in creation: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (v. 13).

If we return to 1 Peter 3, we cannot bypass a key question: who is Peter addressing when he gives this command to wives? Certainly he is addressing all women, but he especially has in mind wives who are married to unbelieving husbands. Peter says in verse 1, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, *so that even if some do not obey the word*, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct.”⁷ When Peter says of these husbands that they do not obey the word, he means that they do not obey the gospel. There may have been a number of wives in this position in the early church. Remember, the gospel was being preached for the first time by the apostles and many were saved. But not all were saved. As the gospel was proclaimed, a wife might believe while her husband did not. The gospel, in other words, divided families. How heartbreaking this must have been for believing wives.

What are Christian wives to do if they find themselves in such a circumstance? How are they to treat their husbands? Like every other Christian woman, they are to submit to their husbands. But Peter gives further instruction: win your unbelieving husband over to the faith not by word but by deed. Peter doesn’t mean wives are never to *verbally* share the gospel with their husbands. Peter assumes this much. Instead, Peter is warning wives against pestering, nagging, begging, and badgering their husbands to convert. The result of such an approach is that the husband is only further alienated, pushed away, irritated, and annoyed.

Perhaps the situation Peter envisions might be described this way: As a believing wife, you have already shared the gospel with your unbelieving husband on several occasions, but he has not believed, and your words are getting you nowhere. So, says Peter, stop. Instead, attract him to the beauty of the gospel by how you behave. Live out the implications of the gospel in front of him, not in a teasing in-your-face kind of way, but in a gentle, respectful way. Peter says in 3:2, may husbands be won when they “see your respectful and pure conduct.” Actually, we could better translate this phrase: “as they observe your pure conduct with fear.” By “fear” Peter is not referring to the wife fearing her husband,

⁵ Egalitarians have argued that Peter is merely accommodating himself to the patriarchy that was inescapable in the culture. For a helpful response to this argument, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 149–151.

⁶ For the first-century background, see Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter* (The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 129.

⁷ Emphasis added.

but fearing God. In other words, the husband will see the purity of his wife and her reverent fear of God, and believe.⁸

Notice, Peter is once again radically counter-cultural. In the culture it was expected that when a woman married she would adopt and submit to the morals and religion of her husband.⁹ His gods now became her gods. But Peter is assuming just the opposite. These women have become Christians while their husbands have not! Peter, therefore, is not teaching *absolute* submission. Wives are to submit to their husbands, but should the husband tell his wife to sin or to worship a false god, she must refuse. At the same time, *it is by her submission* and her quiet purity that Peter says she is to win her husband over. So while there may not be absolute submission, submission is key *as a means* to the husband's salvation.

2. Wives are to seek internal rather than external beauty (1 Peter 3:3–6)

Not only does Peter instruct wives to submit to their husbands, but he also reminds wives what God values in a woman. In 1 Peter 3:3–4 we read, “Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.” When God looks upon a woman, *where* does he look? He is not concerned about the external, but the internal.

Peter uses the examples of braided hair, gold jewelry, and clothing (as does Paul in 1 Tim 2:9–10). What is his point? Peter is not forbidding women to wear jewelry or nice clothing, or make their hair look nice. Actually, the verse literally reads: “Let not your adorning be . . . putting on clothing.”¹⁰ If Peter was teaching that they could not braid their hair or wear jewelry he would have to be teaching they could not wear clothes too! To the contrary, what Peter is warning against is placing one's identity in external things like these, making them her source of beauty.¹¹

If you are a woman—whether a teenager or a wife and mother—the world is going to tell you the opposite of what Peter is saying. In countless ways, the world uses a megaphone to tell you appearance is everything. When you are in the checkout line at the supermarket, what magazines stare at you? Scantily-clad supermodels in dozens of magazines crave your attention. When you turn on the television, what commercials accost you? Commercials about lotions, hair products, and stylish clothes cry out to you. We laugh, but it's true: It doesn't matter what the product is, commercials will try to sell you just about anything by making it look sexy. If you are a teenager, you may have it the worst. When you go to school, who are the cool kids? They are typically those who wear the trendiest clothes and drive the sportiest cars.

⁸ “When Peter spoke of the ‘reverence of [the wives] lives,’ it should be noted that the word translated ‘reverence’ is not actually an adjective, but in the Greek we have a prepositional phrase ‘in fear’ (*en phobō*), so that a literal translation would be ‘as they observe your pure conduct in fear.’ What should be emphasized here is that the fear is not directed to the husband, but as we saw in 2:18 (see commentary) ‘fear’ in 1 Peter is always directed toward God. Peter was not suggesting, therefore, that wives should fear their husbands (though Paul commended such in Eph 5:33). Instead, Peter's point was that the good conduct of wives should stem from their relationship with God.” Schreiner, *1, 2, Peter, Jude*, 152.

⁹ See Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 129; Schreiner, *1, 2, Peter, Jude*, 152–53.

¹⁰ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter* (TNTC; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 148.

¹¹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 154, believes Peter may specifically be prohibiting women “from spending an excessive amount of money on their outward adornment or from wearing clothing that is seductive.” It is hard to tell if Schreiner is right as the text just doesn't get that specific. Nevertheless, it would still support the overall thrust of Peter's point, which encourages women not to be consumed with the external (physical), but the internal (spiritual).

God, on the other hand, has a very different message. While you should take care of your external appearance, God is most concerned with the state of your heart. This is why Peter says in 3:4, “but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.” External beauty will perish, but internal beauty is eternal, and it is what God considers most valuable.

What does this shift in focus look like for women? It means that your source of authority and validation is not *People* magazine but the Bible. It means that your heroes are Ruth, Rahab, and Lydia, not Miley Cyrus, Beyoncé, or Katie Perry. Isn’t this exactly what Peter does? He takes us to a biblical woman, Sarah, the wife of Abraham.

Still, before spotlighting Sarah’s beauty, Peter paints a picture of what this internal beauty looks like. Peter says imperishable beauty consists of a “gentle and quiet spirit” (3:4). Have you ever noticed that the women who place their identity in external appearances tend to be loud? By their actions they scream for attention—“Look at me, I am beautiful!” Not so with the godly woman. Her beauty is within; she possesses a quiet and gentle spirit. It is not that she never speaks her mind or voices her opinion in public. But when she does, people listen because they know that this is a woman of godly character.

Quietness and gentleness are traits that characterize all believers (Matt. 5:5; 11:29; 1 Thess 4:11; 1 Tim 2:9–12; 1 Pet 3:16), but in a wife they are especially notable.¹² It is through these traits she exhibits her godliness and her trust in God, particularly if she is married to an unbelieving husband. Rather than beating him down with her words—“Why don’t you behave?” “Stop acting like that.” “Life would be easier if you were a Christian!”—she wins him by her gentle and quiet spirit.

For a model of gentleness, Peter puts forth Sarah. He writes, “For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord” (1 Pet 3:5–6). Peter’s reference to Sarah probably indicates that by “holy women” he is referring to Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. These holy women hoped in God. What set these women apart? It was the fact that they adorned themselves with a gentle and quiet spirit, *by submitting to their husbands*.¹³ “By submitting” they demonstrated that they were actually submitting to God himself, trusting him and his promises.

But Peter draws our attention particularly to Sarah and her obedience to Abraham by calling him “lord.”¹⁴ Peter is referring to Genesis 18:1–21, where the Lord tells Abraham that Sarah will have a son in her old age. What is so fascinating about Peter quoting this passage is that in the story Sarah is listening at the tent door to God’s conversation with Abraham. When she hears God’s announcement she laughs, saying to herself, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” (v. 12). But the Lord exposes her, saying to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh . . . Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (vv. 13–14). Even in this very embarrassing moment, Peter draws our attention to Sarah’s godly

¹² For these qualities as displayed in Christ, see Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 128–129.

¹³ Verse 5 is “wrongly translated by the NIV as an independent clause, ‘They were submissive to their own husbands.’ The NRSV rightly sees that the participle is instrumental, explaining how the women adorned themselves, ‘by accepting the authority of their husbands.’ A better translation would be ‘by submitting [hypotassomenai] to their own husbands.’ Peter meant, of course, that they submitted to their husbands with the gentle and quiet spirit extolled in v. 4” (Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 155–156). So Grudem, *1 Peter*, 143.

¹⁴ Clowney (*The Message of 1 Peter*, 133) shows that this title does not indicate that Sarah’s submission was slavish, but freely given.

submission. Certainly Sarah respected her husband, but this episode reminds us that submission is characterized by obedience.¹⁵

The conclusion Peter draws from this episode is remarkable: “And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening” (1 Pet 3:6b). What could be so frightening that would lead a wife to fear? Peter doesn’t tell us, but perhaps it is being married to an unbelieving husband; maybe one who is harsh with his wife because she is a believer.¹⁶ Yet Peter says, do not give in to fear. Do not fear man, but fear God (cf. Matt 10:28). Certainly, the temptation of the wife is to please her husband even if it means giving up her faith.¹⁷ Peter says, “No.” Persevere, for if you do, you will receive that final salvation, being called one of Sarah’s children. It would not be surprising if one day, when the saints are gathered together before the Lord, there is a large group of women standing next to Sarah, for in the midst of their marital hardships they trusted that the Lord would vindicate them.

3. Husbands are to live with their wives in an understanding way (1 Peter 3:7)

Peter has something to say to husbands as well. Many translations read something like this: “Be considerate as you live with your wives” (NIV). But the verse more literally reads: “according to knowledge.” In other words, husbands are to live with their wives informed by the knowledge of the will of God.¹⁸ They are to live *knowledgeably* with their wives. Or as the ESV says, they are to live in an *understanding way*.¹⁹

Peter then says husbands are to show honor to the woman as the “weaker vessel.” Peter doesn’t mean the woman is inferior in personhood, or that she is inferior spiritually or intellectually. Peter is merely pointing out the obvious: Physically, women are not typically as big and strong as men. (Such an interpretation may be hinted at in the fact that Peter does not use the word “wife” but “female” or “woman.”)²⁰ Peter’s purpose in pointing out the obvious is to instruct husbands not to be harsh with their wives, but to honor, respect, and cherish them as God has commanded.²¹ Peter grounds his command in the fact that women are “heirs with you of the grace of life.”

Peter’s conclusion in verse 7 (“so that your prayers may not be hindered”) is a stern and serious warning to husbands. If you do not listen to God’s command to live with your wife in an understanding way and show her honor, recognizing that she is a coheir with you in the kingdom of God, but instead are harsh, brutal, and mean to her with your words or actions, God will not listen to your prayers. Husband, how dare you think you can come before God in prayer when you have not loved your wife as Christ has loved the church! God will shut the door in your face if you abuse your authority or fail to lead your wife in an understanding way.²²

¹⁵ Some have argued that obedience is not an example of submission. For a response, see Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 156.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁷ Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 128.

¹⁸ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 160.

¹⁹ On what this looks like, see Grudem, *1 Peter*, 151.

²⁰ γυναικεῖω; lexical form: γυναικεῖος. See Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 160.

²¹ “Respect is not strong enough. Peter uses the word translated ‘precious’ in 2:7; literally it means ‘preciousness’. The honour or preciousness that the husband must bestow on his wife is not only the recognition of her place in God’s ordinance of marriage; it is the honour that is hers as one of God’s precious and holy people” (Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 135–36).

²² Grudem captures the force of Peter’s warning: “So concerned is God that Christian husbands live in an understanding and loving way with their wives, that he ‘interrupts’ his relationship with them when they are not doing so. No Christian

Now that husbands have been warned, a word of practical encouragement and instruction is also in order. If you are frustrated with your wife and do not feel that she is submitting to your leadership as you would like, the place to begin is by first asking yourself whether or not you have been gracious, kind, considerate, tender, and loving toward her. If not, you need to repent. Go to the Lord, confess your sin, and then go to your wife and ask her for forgiveness. Should your leadership change in this way, and should you be married to one of those holy women that Peter speaks of, you will be shocked to discover that your wife will follow you through hell and back if you ask her too. You will also be pleasantly refreshed to find the Lord with an open ear to your prayers once again.

Conclusion: The Beauty of True Manhood and Womanhood

Jonathan Edwards was away from his wife, Sarah, when he died from a smallpox inoculation. He had not seen her in almost three months when he laid on his deathbed. Just before he died he whispered to one of his daughters,

It seems to me to be the will of God, that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue for ever: I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God.²³

A week and a half later Sarah wrote to their daughter Esther (who had just lost her husband six months earlier):

My very dear child, What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands upon our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him [Jonathan] so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be.²⁴

Wives, submit to your husbands. Husbands, honor your wives.

husband should presume to think that any spiritual good will be accomplished by his life without an effective ministry of prayer. And no husband may expect an effective prayer life unless he lives with his wife 'in an understanding way, bestowing honour' on her. To take the time to develop and maintain a good marriage is God's will; it is serving God; it is a spiritual activity pleasing in his sight." Grudem, *1 Peter*, 154.

²³ Piper, *Faithful Women and Their Extraordinary God*, 35.

²⁴ Ibid