

HER DESIRE WILL BE FOR HUSBAND?

WHAT GENESIS 3:16 MEANS FOR MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT: When the first couple sinned, God told the woman, “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” Contrary desire and corrupted rule are now the norm for marriages under the curse: instead of submitting to their husbands, wives desire to control them; instead of lovingly leading their wives, husbands seek to oppress them, or just give up and give in. But both “desire” and “rule” are redeemed in Christ. Wives learn to align their desires with God’s design, and husbands learn to rule their households with Christlike self-sacrifice. And as they do, they display the glory of Christ and the church to a world still under the curse.

Following the first couple’s rebellion, God says to the woman,

I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be contrary to your husband,
but he shall rule over you. (Genesis 3:16)

Her desire shall be contrary to her husband, and he will rule over her? What does that mean? In this short essay, I want to reflect on the meaning of the second half of Genesis 3:16 and offer some vital help for maintaining godly marriages after two redeemed sinners say, “I do.”

LOGIC OF HER PUNISHMENT

Differing in some ways from the ESV, I translate Genesis 3:16 as follows:

I will surely expand your pain and your pregnancy:
in pain you will bear children,
and against your husband will be your desire,
but he should rule over you.

The verse includes four clauses, and my understanding of the structure is as follows. The first clause identifies two overlapping spheres that God promises to increase for the woman in the age of curse: (A) pain and (B) pregnancy. The first of the next two conjoined clauses begins without a conjunction, which likely signals that the two clauses clarify God’s action with respect to the two spheres. But they do this in reverse order: the period from conception to birth will be toilsome (B’), and the wife’s tendency to stand against her husband will become more frequent (A’). The fourth clause (C) then counters the third by identifying the husband’s proper response to the wife’s action (A’). We might draw out the logic like this:

God will expand the wife’s pain (A) and pregnancy (B), which means
that her time from conception to birth will be toilsome (B’)
and that she will have desire against her husband (A’),
but he must respond to this evil desire by ruling her (C).

What does it mean that amid the curse a wife’s “painful” (A) and sinful “desire” will be “against her husband” (A’)? And what is the proper form of “rule” by which a husband is to respond?

Help from Genesis 4:7

The Hebrew term rendered “desire” occurs only three times in Scripture: a wife’s “desire” toward her husband (Genesis 3:16), sin’s “desire” toward Cain (Genesis 4:7), and a beloved husband’s “desire” unto his bride (Song of Solomon 7:10). The proximity of the initial two instances, and the fact that the terms and word order of Genesis 3:16 match identically the parallel clauses in 4:7, establish that the two passages relate in some way and can help interpret each other.

To Cain, God declared, “Is it not the case that, if you do well, then there will be a lifting [of your face in light of God’s acceptance]? But if you will not do well, sin is crouching at the opening, *and against you is its desire, but you should rule over it*” (Genesis 4:7; my translation).

Sin’s “desire” toward Cain was evil. Like a thief, sin sought “to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10) — to overpower, humble, and subvert. In response, however, Cain needed to “rule over it,” countering its attempt to reign in his mortal body by living for righteousness (Romans 6:12–14). The parallels between Genesis 3:16 and 4:7 are clear.

	Gen 3:16 (to Eve)	Gen 4:7 (to Cain)
A'	And against your husband will be your desire, but he	And against you is [sin’s] desire, but you
C	should rule over you.	should rule over it.

Just as Genesis 4:7 identifies sin’s destructive work, 3:16 details God’s judgment against sin manifest in the wife’s destructive work (A'). Just as sin sought to overpower and subvert Cain, the woman’s “desire against” her husband means that, in the cursed world, the wife will seek to overpower and subvert her husband’s God-given authority. Thus, the ESV’s “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband” in 3:16 captures the sense by rightly identifying what *will* happen but not what *should* happen in a cursed world.

Next, because the narrative clarifies that Cain failed to turn from sin, we know that the C clause in 4:7 (“but you should rule over it”) is not a prediction of what Cain *will* do but a declaration of what he *should* do when faced with sin’s negative attempt to usurp: Cain should “rule over it.” Following the parallelism, 3:16 notes that when a wife attacks a husband’s God-given headship, he should still “rule over” his wife in an appropriately gentle, God-honoring way. The Lord desires beautiful complementarity, even after the fall.

So, what is such complementarity supposed to look like? More specifically, might there be signs that a wife is attempting to usurp her husband’s authority, and what is her proper role in a family surrendered to God’s kingdom? Furthermore, what are the nature and limits of God’s call for a husband to “rule” his home? Answering these questions biblically is vital in order for marital love to flourish (Ephesians 5:33) and in order to faithfully display the distinctions between Christ and his church, which every true marriage between one man and one woman makes known (Ephesians 5:22–32).

GOD’S CALL TO WIVES

Genesis 3 already identifies the type of destructive patterns evident when a wife’s desire is contrary to her husband’s authority. Paul stresses that “Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Timothy 2:14). The apostle is referring to how the woman, when the serpent tempted her, took and ate of the forbidden tree and then “also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6).

Proverbs 31 in Reverse

God had taken and formed the woman “out of Man” (Genesis 2:22–23) in order to make the man “a helper fit for him” (2:18). Her principal vocation related to aiding the one from whom God shaped her. But rather than helping her husband “subdue” the earth and “have dominion” over such beasts as the serpent (1:28), she gave into temptation toward evil and then led

her husband in the same (3:6). The text implies that a wife should know God's will and desire to heed it; otherwise, her desires are contrary to her husband and the good of the family.

Opposite of the excellent wife in Proverbs 31:10–31, the wife who follows in the pattern of the curse has a husband who can't trust her (31:11), for she continually works him harm (31:12). She begrudges her work (31:13), fails to supply her part for the household due to her idleness (31:15, 27), and operates in weakness rather than strength (31:17, 25). She takes rather than gives (31:20), fears rather than trusts (31:21, 25), and speaks foolishly and harshly rather than wisely and gently (31:26). Such persistent patterns move children to curse, rather than bless, and lead husbands to failure, rather than success (31:23), and to displeasure, rather than praise (31:28).¹

Helper Fit for Him

Yet the true “helper” (Genesis 2:18) supports and complements her husband as God himself empowers (Psalms 115:9–11; 121:1–2). Her strengths balance both his strengths and weaknesses (Proverbs 31:10–11), and her fear of the Lord is to be praised (31:30). Her wisdom counters foolishness (19:14), her respect for her husband enlivens his confidence (Ephesians 5:33; 1 Peter 3:2, 6), and her partnership supplies him with joy (Proverbs 5:18; 12:4; 18:22). As she and her man jointly depend on God's blessing, they together seek to fulfill God's calling to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion” (Genesis 1:28).

In corporate worship, she faithfully participates (1 Corinthians 11:5; Colossians 3:16) and shows propriety (1 Corinthians 14:33–34; 1 Timothy 2:9–12), and she increasingly becomes a woman of the word who is capable of instructing in appropriate contexts (Acts 18:26; 2 Timothy 1:5 with 3:15; Titus 2:3–4). She hopes in God (1 Peter 3:5) with conduct that is “respectful and pure” (3:2), as she nurtures “the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit” (3:4), respects her husband (Ephesians 5:33; 1 Peter 3:2, 6), and submits to him, as to the Lord (1 Peter 3:1, 5; Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18).

In God's kingdom, she is the princess next to her prince who seeks “to love” her husband and children, “to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive” to her husband, “that the word of God may not be reviled” (Titus 2:4–5). God considers desires that run counter to these to be those that are “contrary to your husband,” and wives seeking “first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33) will flee from such tendencies, no matter how pervasive in society, and embrace their beautiful calling as “helper” (Genesis 2:18).²

GOD'S CALL TO HUSBANDS

In response to a wife's destructive “desire,” God emphasizes that the husband “shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16). Elsewhere with the same construction, slaves manage the property of their master (Genesis 24:2), Joseph oversees Egypt (Genesis 45:8, 26), and women scandalously govern God's people (Isaiah 3:12). There is nothing in the nature of the “rule” that implies abuse, but the term plainly denotes authority. In light of the parallel with Cain's need to have control *over sin* in Genesis 4:7, the call for the husband to “rule” concerns a positive alignment with God's ideal of headship elevated in Genesis 2 and clarified by its converse in Genesis 3.

Eve's Fallen Head

That “Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Timothy 2:13) set a lasting precedent for right order in marriage and community. As Paul asserts, “the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Corinthians 11:3).

After God “formed the man of dust from the ground” and gave him life (Genesis 2:7), “God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (2:15). The grammatical gender of the pronoun “it” identifies the “ground” as the object of the man's “working” and “keeping.” That is, just as the wife's primary vocation (2:18) and curse (3:16) relates directly to the man from whom God created her (2:22–23), so too the husband's primary sphere of responsibility (2:15) and punishment (3:17–19) relates specifically to the ground from which he came (2:7).

To “work . . . and keep” identifies that the man's primary calling was to “serve” and “guard” the ground and, by extension, all that would fill it, including his family and the broader community (compare the rare use of the same combination of verbs in 3:23–24). As household head, he stands as the principal provider and protector. He is to supply spiritual and physical food, and to ward off any spiritual or physical obstacles to the glory-filled global mission to which God called his family (1:28).

As Adam would cultivate that which was uncultivated, God's garden sanctuary would grow until “the knowledge of the glory of the Lord” filled the earth “as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14; cf. Isaiah 11:9). And he would do this with the

“help” of his companion, whom he would love as his own body (Genesis 2:23; Ephesians 5:28) and to whom he would cleave in covenantal commitment (Genesis 2:24; cf. 34:3). By this he would display the nourishing and cherishing servant-leadership and love that Christ has for the church (Ephesians 5:25, 29).

But Adam abandoned his calling, acting in sin, first by passively following his wife into rebellion, and then by aggressively seeking her destruction. By not standing against the evil serpent, who was using role reversal to encroach on the very turf God called the man to guard, Adam failed to protect his wife and the garden sanctuary: “And she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6). Next, when the Lord confronted him, he justified himself and abusively and selfishly put the blame on his wife, thus declaring her guilty, and sentencing her to death (3:12; cf. 2:17). Such actions do *not* define godly headship.

Christlike ‘Rule’

The proper “rule” of the husband is manifest in strong, committed, sacrificial leadership, and not self-exalting supremacy. A God-honoring head keeps his vows, and guards his wife and children from making foolish ones (Numbers 30). He seeks to please his wife (1 Corinthians 7:33) and loves her as his own body, supplying for her both spiritually and physically, just as Christ does the church (Ephesians 5:25–30, 33).

He honors her by understanding her needs and her frame, by never being harsh with her, and by treating her as a coheir of the grace of life (Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7). In the pattern set in the Ten Words of Exodus 20, now fulfilled through Christ and by the Spirit (Matthew 5:17–19; Ephesians 5:18), household heads elevate God, and not self, as king (Deuteronomy 5:7–10), represent him faithfully (5:11), serve those under their care (5:12–15), honor their authorities (5:16), and respect others’ lives (5:17), sexual purity (5:18), property (5:19), right to honest and truthful testimony (5:20), marriages (5:21a), and enjoyment without fear of retaliation (5:21b).

GODLY MARRIAGE IN A CURSED WORLD

According to the paradigm that Genesis 1–3 sets forth, the wife is the helper who is not domineering, manipulative, coercive, passive, or destructive. Instead, she is characterized by honoring and respecting her husband with a heart of service and by a genuine contribution to the two-person team that complements the husband’s strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, God calls the husband to lead his home, serving as the primary provider and protector both physically and spiritually. He should lead by convictional, sacrificial love, not in a way that is domineering, manipulative, coercive, passive, or destructive.

In Ephesians 5:22–33, Paul identifies that the distinct callings that husbands and wives have in marriage display the distinct callings within the relationship of Christ and his church. Christ’s glory is at stake in how husbands and wives relate!

Significantly, the calls for wives to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22) and for husbands to love their wives (5:25) directly grow out of the participle phrase “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21), which itself is part of what characterizes a life that fulfills the charge, “Be filled with the Spirit” (5:18).

This means that a wife’s proper “desire” and a husband’s faithful “rule” are possible only where the Spirit of Christ reigns, fills, and empowers. “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. . . . Be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:15–18). Spirit-filled wives learn to curb misguided “desire,” and Spirit-filled husbands learn to take the sacrificial initiative of Christlike leadership. And God himself empowers husbands and wives together to maintain godly marriages in this cursed world.

1. Proverbs 31:10–31 reflects on an excellence reached over a whole lifetime, not a young superwoman’s daily practice. See Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 196–99.

2. God calls a wife to nurture domesticity (“working at home,” Titus 2:5) and portrays her *primary* calling to be helping her husband (Genesis 2:18) flourish in his vocation (Proverbs 31:23) by creating a context that encourages and supports. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that she cannot herself serve in other vocational tasks in or outside the home in her and her husband’s shared calling together as man and wife.