

The Weaker Vessel

... ye husbands, dwell with [your wife] according to knowledge, giving honour unto [her], as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.

1 Peter 3: 7, KJV

Scripture citations are to the KJV, unless noted in the text

Q Why is one's wife described as 'the weaker vessel'?

A The Greek word translated 'weaker' is *asthenenia*, and its use in this particular context denotes *degree*. That is, a woman has less physical (muscular) strength compared with a man's. This being almost universally true, the passage is interpreted this way in most translations. However, the word as used in this passage may also have a wider meaning.

The great variety of social circumstances in which both women and men participate, offers scope in the definition of feminine 'weakness'. Needless to say, along history women and men have toiled together in many difficult situations, from the climatic, to rough terrain, to industrial labour, around the house, or in running a marathon, situations in which women have shown themselves capable of considerable physical exertion and endurance. The fact that a male might complete a marathon in less time than a woman, would not justify labelling her as 'weaker' in the context of 1 Peter 3: 7, for the marriage relationship is not a contest of physical strength.

Examples

Asthenenia can carry the idea of *illness*, *frailty*, *anxiety* (versus peace of mind), and *doubt* (versus certainty):

Matt. 10: 8:- 'Heal the *sick*, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.'

Matt. 26: 41:- 'Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing [eager – complete Jewish Bible], but the flesh is *weak* [frail – Wycliffe Bible].

Rom. 8: 26:- '... the Spirit also helpeth our *infirmities* ['present limitations' – J.B. Phillips]: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.'

1 Cor. 8: 7:- '... there is not in every man [the same] knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being *weak* [fragile, immature] is defiled [damaged].'

1 Cor. 1: 25:- '... the foolishness of God [in sending Christ to die] is wiser than men; and the *weakness* of God [an act viewed with contempt] is stronger than men.'

2 Cor. 12: 9, 10:- '[The Lord] said unto [Paul], "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in [your] *weakness*." Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my *infirmities* [afflictions], that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in *infirmities*, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses [calamities – ESV] for Christ's sake: for when I am *weak* [most oppressed – Clarke], then am I strong [powerful – Rotherham].'

The Genesis Effect

Gen. 3: 16 comes in here, for background:

Unto [Eve] the woman [God] said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; *and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.*

From this passage we conclude that the intended equality of the woman with the man ('husband') was diverted to that of *subservience*, a consequence of Eve's role in the curse pronounced upon Adam (vs. 17-19):

And unto Adam [God] said, *Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.*

Eve was penalised because Adam deferred to her estimation the risk attendant on disobedience. Consequently, a tension has run through the relations between women and men ever since, the net effect being that, for most of history, the female has been dominated by the male.

Submission

In 1 Peter 2, the Apostle encourages the fellowship to obey the civil authorities:

13 *Submit yourselves* to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; **14** Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. **15** For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: **16** As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. **17** *Honour all men.* Love the brotherhood. Fear God. *Honour the king.* **18** *Servants, be subject* to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward [*perverse*]. **19** For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. **20** For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. **21** For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, *that ye should follow his steps:* **22** Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: **23** Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but *committed himself* to him that judgeth righteously: . . .

Chapter 3 begins with an exhortation specific to wives:

1 Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands [harking back to Gen. 3: 16]; that, if any [other married women] obey not the word [of God], they also may without the word be won by the conversation [conduct] of the wives; **2** While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear. **3** Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; **4** But let it be the hidden man [*anthropos* – human, person] of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. **5** For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, *being in subjection unto their own husbands*: **6** Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: *whose daughters ye are*, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement [anxiety].

In sanctifying the union between a husband and wife, Jesus declares (Mark 10: 8):

‘. . . a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’. So that in body they are no longer two people but one. That is why [another] must never separate what God has joined together. – *J.B. Phillips trans.*]

After the Nuptials

Verse 7 becomes clear, viewed in the light of a Christian marriage, in which both husband and wife are in the faith:

Likewise ye husbands [a parallel to v. 1, ‘Likewise, ye wives’], dwell with [her] according to knowledge, giving honour unto [your] wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and *as being heirs together* of the grace of life [*equally*]; that your prayers be not hindered [‘otherwise you cannot pray effectively’ – *The Amplified New Testament*].

Summing Up

Because the woman has put herself into a position of (relative) *weakness*, thus rendering herself *vulnerable* by submitting voluntarily to her husband, *that she might fulfil the exhortation of Scripture*, he is *duty-bound* to treat her with great love and respect – *as equal to himself*. He must bind himself to be utterly faithful to her, if he expects God to pay attention to *his* prayers.[*]

Notes

[*] Consider the allegory of the Church, or Bride of Christ (the wife), as submitting to Christ Jesus, her Head (the husband). The reference in 1 Pet. 3: 6 to Sara, the ‘free woman’, the wife of Abraham, calls to mind that *she* represents the covenanted Church – the new Jerusalem – as adumbrated by the Apostle Paul in Gal. 4: 21-31.

1. See Adam Clarke’s commentary on 1 Pet. 3: 7:

‘Dwell with them according to knowledge – Give your wives, by no species of unkind carriage [deportment], any excuse for delinquency [on your part]. How can a man expect his wife to be

faithful to him, if he be unfaithful to her? and vice versa.'

Giving honour unto the wife – Using your superior strength and experience in her behalf, and thus honouring her by becoming her protector and support. But the word τιμή *honour*, signifies *maintenance* as well as *respect*; - *maintain, provide for* the wife.

As the weaker vessel – Being more delicately, and consequently more slenderly, constructed. *Roughness* and *strength* go hand in hand; so likewise do *beauty* and *frailty*. The female has what the man wants – beauty and delicacy. The male has what the female wants – courage and strength. The one is as good in its place as the other: and by these things God has made an equality between the man and the woman, so that there is properly very little superiority on either side. (1 Thess. 4: 4)

Being heirs together – Both the man and woman being equally called to eternal glory: and as *prayer* is one great means of obtaining a meetness for it, it is necessary that they should live together in such a manner as to prevent all family contentions, that they may not be prevented, by disputes or misunderstandings, from uniting daily in this most important duty – family and social prayer.'

2. For an overview of the role of women in the church and society at large, see the article, *The Distaff*, on our site [here](#), or the eight-parter, *Woman in Society and Church*, beginning [here](#) (available as .pdf downloads).