

He Shall Rule Over You

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The blaming of women for the entrance of sin into the world, and the sentiments behind the phrase *he shall rule over you* in Genesis 3:16 have possibly led to more oppression of women in marriages than any other in the Bible. Throughout history, women have often been seen as the cause of all the evil that has flowed from the Fall. Tertullian wrote regarding women:

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert — that is, death — even the Son of God had to die. (Roberts & Donaldson 1997, p. 25)

Chrysostom declared, on the basis of Genesis 3:16, that God 'gives to the husband abundant precedence.' And Calvin described women as

... more guilty than the man, because she was seduced by Satan, and so diverted her husband from obedience to God that she was an instrument of death leading all to perdition. It is necessary that woman recognise this, and that she learn to what she is subjected; and not only against her husband. This is reason enough why today she is placed below and that she bears within her ignominy and shame. (cited in Brown 1991, p. 113)

This view is also shared by many modern writers. For example, Francis Schaeffer, writing on *God's Judgment on Man and Nature*, argues that

In regard to the relationship to her husband, he [God] says, "And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." This one sentence puts an end to any unstructured democracy. In a fallen world, unstructured democracy is not possible. Rather, God brings structure into the primary relationship of man — the man-woman relationship. In a fallen world (in every kind of society — big and small — and in every relationship) structure is needed for order. God Himself here imposes it on the basic human relationship. Form is given, and without such form freedom would only be chaos. It is not simply because man is stronger that he is to have dominion (that's the argument of the Marquis de Sade). But rather he is to have dominion because God gives this as structure in the midst of a fallen world. (1985)

Cassuto (1961) is even more direct:

Measure for measure: you influenced your husband and caused him to do what you wished; henceforth, you and your female descendants will be subservient to your husbands. You will yearn for them, but they will be heads of the families, and will rule over you. (p. 165f.)

Many more examples could be cited of writers who argue that, following the fall of Adam and Eve, the curses that God proclaimed constitute God's intentions for the future of humanity. From this point on, the relationship between male and female, as described in Genesis 3:16, was God's solution to the inevitable interpersonal conflict that would result from the Fall. Someone had to be in charge, and *that someone* is to be the man.

But is it God's intention? If it is, then women should submit to their husbands and allow them to rule over them. If it is not the way God intended it to be, then we should do all we can to reverse this "order" and return marriage to the relationship of equality that God *originally* intended.

The consequences

When Adam and Eve sinned, God found them and the serpent in the Garden, and declared consequences for each of them as a result of their disobedience:

1. The serpent was destined to travel on its belly and eat the dust of the ground. There would be enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent's descendants and that of the woman's. Embedded in the curse was the promise of *the* Seed who would ultimately bruise the head of the serpent.
2. The woman would experience increased sorrow and conception, would suffer pain as part of childbirth, would desire her husband, and her husband would rule over her.
3. The man was to toil with the earth which was cursed with thorns and thistles—a perpetual war with the land to harvest it for food. Sweat would characterise the man's relationship to the earth and, ultimately, he would return to the earth from where he came.

Three possible perspectives

There are three possible ways to understand the consequences of the Fall described in Genesis 3. First, they could be considered as God's *commands* — that God imposes these conditions on humanity. This would mean the consequences should be accepted and submitted to in the same way we should obey any of God's other commands.

Secondly, the consequences could be the natural effects of Adam and Eve's sin rippling through reality. God might be merely stating the reality that would naturally follow — the distortion of all that is good. In other words, God is *describing* what will follow Adam and Eve's choices. As Efrid (In Achtemier, c. 1985) expresses it:

Because of the Fall, the positive relationship the humans had with God was broken, and all evil and tragedy in the created order were explained as a result of this rebellion and disobedience. The Fall resulted in humanity being trapped in its sinful state, which issued in death, not simply (or primarily) physical death but rather spiritual separation from God.

This spiritual separation from God has also resulted in the fracturing of all our relationships with each other and the creation.

Thirdly, it may not be necessary to see the consequences as *all* command or *all* natural results. It may be that the consequences are a combination of these. As we shall see, this third option is the one that deals most accurately with the biblical text.

Responses to the consequences

In all but one of the consequences concerning Adam and Eve, most people — including those who argue that the woman being ruled by her husband is the way God commands things to be — do all they can to reverse their effects. We use poison to eradicate weeds in our gardens and do all we can to control their growth. During labour, midwives do all they can to reduce pain during childbirth. In both of these cases, we assume that the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin are an *intrusion* into the perfect world that God has made and that we need to minimise the effects of those consequences.

If this is the case, why is it argued that the relationship between the husband and wife portrayed in Genesis 3 is the way God intended it to be? Shouldn't we treat this consequence in the same way we treat weeds and pain in childbirth? Shouldn't we do all we can to minimise this consequence of sin? Shouldn't we counteract the tendency of the husband to rule over his wife?

The change

There are good reasons for saying *Yes* to these questions. First, it must be noted that neither Adam nor Eve are said to be cursed in this passage. Only the serpent and the ground are explicitly cursed. When God speaks to Adam and Eve, the text describes God as *saying* something, not cursing them. This is important to observe, because it means that God does not necessarily intend these consequences, nor is God necessarily happy with them. In addition to this, the only consequence in the narrative that God is described as actively being involved with is the increase in Eve's 'pains and pregnancies' (Wenham 1987, p.45).

Both of these observations add weight to the view that God is describing the natural consequences of sin rather than prescribing a moral order that humans are meant to obey. Swartley (1983) cites Paul Jewett's comments on this phrase which argue that the narrative '... describes—"it does not prescribe; it protests; it does not condone" [Jewett 1974]. This tyranny of man over woman is a perversion of his humanity' (p. 157). 'The hardship is that the sexual relation which should have been one of co-operation and complementarity has become primarily one of conflict and competition' (Evans 1983, p. 20). The actual punishment of Adam and Eve is their expulsion from the garden—the disruption of their relationship is one of the consequences of this expulsion and separation from God.

It may be argued that the curses on the serpent and the ground cannot result from naturally occurring processes, so they must be considered commands of God. If this is true, then we should also see the consequences to Adam and Eve's relationship as being commands. However, it is not necessary to see the snake crawling on the ground and eating dust as a literal consequence. 'Phrases like "crawl on your belly" and "eat dust" may be understood as metaphorical expressions denoting the serpent's submission. He is now himself a servant. True, snakes do "crawl on their belly" as a means of locomotion, but they do not eat dust' (Elwell, 1989). However, even if these expressions were to be taken literally and a result of God's command, the fact that only the serpent and the ground are cursed means that we are not required to understand these consequences in the same way as Adam and Eve's.

... [T]o see either of these disruptions [Adam and Eve's relationship and the relationship of Adam to the ground] as the permanent will of God for Man and to treat their results as abiding law is surely to misunderstand the purpose of the text. It must always be recognized that Man's sin has effects which go far beyond the sinner; as for example the effect on the families of imprisoned criminals. These effects are inevitable, but it cannot be assumed that it is wrong to offset them. (Evans 1983, p. 19)

So it is not necessary to understand God to be commanding these consequences. They are a prediction of what will happen given that Adam and Eve have disobeyed God and will be expelled from the Garden.

Second, we need to go back *before* these consequences to find the ideal for relationships. As Hayter (1987) makes clear:

... in Genesis 3 *female subordination is shown to be a consequence of sexual polarization and a result of sin*. It is Genesis 2, not 3.16, which represents the Creator's intention. God designed male and female to be suitable partners, peers, for each other; that woman was often the object of man's arbitrary dominance is here ascribed to human interference with a higher design... (p. 113)

A careful reading of the accounts of the creation of male and female reveals a relationship of mutual interdependence (Gen. 2:18). Both the man *and* the woman are to have dominion over the earth and populate it (Gen. 1:26). Male and female, *together*, are made in God's image (Gen. 1:27). Further evidence that the woman was never intended to be subordinate to man is found in the description of her as an *ezer*, usually translated as 'helper'. This term is used elsewhere of God. For example, in Ps 54:4 (NLT), David exclaims, '... God is my helper./The Lord is the one who keeps me alive!' Surely none would argue that, because God is called a 'helper', that God is subordinate or submissive to David! Giles (1985) summarises the overall message of Genesis 1-3:

... nothing at all in Genesis 1-3 is intended to teach that God set man over woman as the ideal. Before sin came into the world the subordination of woman ontologically or functionally is never considered. The rule of the man and the distortion in the equal and complementary relationship of the sexes is given as one of the sad consequences of the fall. Men dominate women and women acquiesce not because God made things that way in creation but because sin has disrupted life as it was intended by God. The order of creation depicts man and woman as standing side by side: only after the fall does the man set himself above the woman. (p. 22)

Third, the description in this passage of the future relationship between Adam and Eve is about 'alienation and conflict' (Woolvard & Zuck, c. 1983-c. 1985). 'The marriage ordinance continues, but is

frustrated by the battle of the sexes.' (Whitlock & Sproul, 1997) The whole message of the New Testament is one of reconciliation and unity, including those of the marriage relationship. To understand the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin, in respect to their relationship with each other, as a command of God, would mean that this dimension of human relationships would be excluded from the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Richards (1997) points out, 'Male dominance in the family is a consequence of sin. Why perpetuate it in the Christian home?' Perry Yoder (1975) makes a similar point:

... while [Genesis] chapter 3 serves as an explanation for the less than ideal state of affairs that may now exist, it does not condone or pardon it. On the contrary, concessions or inadequate realizations of God's will in terms of creation are to be challenged. (pp. 10-11 cited in Swartley 1983, p. 157)

If we persist in perpetuating these distorted types of relationships which are the result of the Fall, it is a clear message that we want to avoid allowing the gospel to teach us the proper Christian relationship between men and women.

Fourth, even if it is insisted by some that all of these are curses imposed by God, God immediately institutes a plan to reverse these curses. Apart from the implicit promises of a Saviour in verse 15, Abram is promised that all the nations of the earth will be blessed (the opposite of a curse!) through him (12:3).

We see the ultimate fulfilment and reversal of these consequence with the arrival of Christ. In Romans 5:21, Paul celebrates God's wonderful kindness which rules instead of sin and the death it brought. As a result, sin's power is broken (Rom. 6:1ff.) and the consequences of sin that we suffer begin to be undermined until they are completely eradicated at the Second Coming of Christ.

Whereas Genesis speaks of the husband ruling the wife, Paul commands *mutual submission* as the principle of all relationships in the Christian community, including marriage: '...you will submit to one another out of reverence for Christ' (Eph. 5:21, NLT). Some argue that, in the following verses, Paul explicitly requires women to submit to their husbands and that the man is to rule her. However, it is essential to read the subsequent verses within the framework of the mutual submission of verse 21. In this verse, Paul makes a principle *explicit* using the term '*mutual submission*'. If we go on and make the specific applications that Paul makes deny this explicit principle, then we are twisting the Scripture to suit our own agendas. Whatever Paul has advised in the following verses *must* be seen as the application of the principle of mutual submission in the context of Paul's time.

The contrast between the old and the new is clearly articulated by Redmacher (1997):

The word **desire** [in Genesis 3:16] can also mean "an attempt to usurp or control" as in [Genesis] 4:7. We can paraphrase the last two lines of this verse this way: "You will now have a tendency to dominate your husband, and he will have the tendency to act as a tyrant over you." The battle of the sexes has begun. Each strives for control and neither lives in the best interest of the other (see Phil. 2:3, 4). The antidote is in the restoration of mutual respect and dignity through Jesus Christ (see Eph. 5:21-33).

The motivation for this mutual respect is reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21). Christ makes all the difference in relationships, including those between male and female, because '[t]here is no longer ... male or female. For you are all Christians—you are one in Christ Jesus.' (Gal. 3:28, nlt) The fact that Paul makes reverence for Christ the centre of relationships, resulting in mutual submission, means the evil of the husband ruling the wife is reversed. Evans (1983) summarises the centrality of Christ in restoring our broken relationships: 'It is only 'in Christ' that the broken relationship between man and woman, as that between God and Man, can fully and permanently be restored' (p. 21).

The model for Christian relationships is most clearly and extensively articulated in Ephesians 5-6. We need to listen carefully to these passages of Scripture, for they help us to keep the consequences of Genesis in perspective. Fraser & Fraser (1975) summarise the difference that Jesus' message makes to the relationship between husband and wife:

What was lost in the fall, expressed in Genesis 3:16 as the wife's loss of equality in a functional subordination to her husband, Jesus intends to restore. The curse is rescinded by grace, and she is placed on the same level as her husband that she might be joint-heir with him in the responsibilities and grace of life (1 Peter 3:7).... The husband and wife are to be one in love and mutual subjection to each other. It would be difficult to find any norm for marriage as permanently threatening to all traditional marriage structures as that! (p. 18 cited in Swartley 1983, p. 265)

Christ came to reverse the consequences of the Fall. This means that we must stop using Genesis 3:16 to legitimate male dominance and tyranny over women, even if this is legitimised by saying that it is done in love. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free! Women should not allow men to place them back under the yoke that Christ has come to remove (Galatians 5:1).

The heart of the matter

Surely it has to be asked: Why is it that men (in particular) are so keen to argue that women should be submissive? If God has identified the tendency to rule as part of the consequences of sin, then we surely should ask ourselves whether, at the heart of the traditional interpretations of the Genesis story is a lust for power and domination. Power is seductive and easy to legitimate with religious arguments. But if Christ is our model for all of life, then we have no greater reason for an attitude of service and submission by both people in a marriage. It is in this way that marriages can witness to the radical change that has come with the arrival of Jesus Christ.

<http://www.quodlibet.net/articles/parker-women.shtml>