

## **THE HEALING WIFE**

### **1 Peter 3:1–6**

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We return to 1 Peter today—chapter 3, verses 1–6. We’ve entitled this series “Help for Struggling Christians.” The apostle Peter is writing to people who are in adverse circumstances. Especially several weeks ago in our last look, 1 Peter 2, we saw how Peter shows us how to survive in difficult places. Hostility from the world, hostility from the government, hostility from our employer. We are pointed to the example of Christ who met undeserved suffering and yet did not retaliate against that suffering nor let the suffering undo Him on the inside. Today’s passage falls again within that context of coping with difficult personal relationships.

Our society is replete with examples of how difficult it really is to live successfully in a marriage relationship. Those of you who are married, on a scale of 1 to 10 what number would you choose to describe your marriage? And if you had it to do all over again, would you marry the same person?

The wives Peter is addressing in 1 Peter 3 are for the most part married to non-Christian husbands. You will notice in this section, which is seven verses long, he devotes six verses to the wife and one verse to the husband. Not because women are six times as difficult as men, but because he’s writing primarily in these six verses to wives who are Christians living with non-Christian husbands and their situation is far more socially difficult than that of the Christian husbands addressed in verse 7.

1 Peter 3:1-6, NIV

“Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the

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purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear."

Peter is talking about the healing wife in a difficult situation. He gives in these six verses three primary characteristics of the healing wife.

#### **I. The healing wife is submissive.**

First is the word "submissive." The healing wife is submissive (verses 1,5,6). Nowhere in the contemporary discussion of the role of women or marriage, no word is more maligned or misunderstood than this word—"submission."

What is submission? We really have no problem with the word if we look right to Peter because he's already used it twice. He has used it in chapter 2 to describe other relationships. "Submit yourself for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men" (2:13). And verse 18: "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect." Then he talks about the Lord who suffered. Then he talks about "wives in the same way be submissive"—that is, as the Lord was submissive, as slaves to their owners, as citizens are to the emperor.

What is being meant by "submission" is literally "to place oneself under the authority of." It has nothing at all to do with the person's worth. In saying to the citizens, "Submit to the emperor," Peter is not saying the emperor is worth more than the citizen. Nero was the emperor at the time,

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but in terms of human integrity and dignity he was a louse. Christians at the time had to be better than Nero.

It was not a matter of worth. There were Christians slaves working for non-Christian owners. It wasn't that submission meant the owner was more valuable than the slave. It has nothing to do with human value. It has to do with the relationship within a societal context. What is being admonished by Peter is that submission is the opposite of doing your own thing. It the opposite of resorting to escapism. For the slave, it's not resorting to just taking off like Onesimus. But it is returning. It is the matter of being true to one's responsibility. It is saying, like the Lord, "Not my will but Thine be done." That's the basis of it.

**A.** Some quick things about what submission does not involve.

Submission for the wife does not mean doing what is morally wrong. If the husband asks you to cheat on the income tax and to sign them, you're not obligated to do that. Sapphira went along with Ananias' scam game, and the Lord struck her just like He struck Ananias in Acts 5. Don't let anybody tell you that if your husband does moral wrong you're obligated to go along with him in it and he is the priest before God and he takes the responsibility. Every one of us is a priest before God, and that's where the whole submission doctrine gets off track with that kind of nonsense. You're not obligated to do moral wrong or sin in order to submit.

Secondly, submission does not involve giving up your sanity. A fine line here. There are some abusive kinds of situations where, for the preservation of life and limb and children, submission would have to be guarded with certain safeguards.

Submission does not involve becoming a doormat or a cowering pacifist. How do I know submission doesn't involve that? I know it because Jesus was the most submitted person who ever walked this earth and He was not a cowering, passively shaking, fearing person.

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**B.** What is submission? What does it involve? It involves at least three things.

It involves an attitude. That's what Peter picks at here in talking about Sarah. She called her husband "lord." That word sounds a little high-sounding to us. But it's the equivalent of "sir." It shows respect in attitude toward Abraham. Many people look at this and say, "Why in the world does the Holy Spirit have Peter select Sarah as an example?" Sarah and Abraham's marriage is not the exact example of what a good marriage can be all about. Abraham may have been a wonderful man of faith, but he was a lousy husband. I don't think I'm destroying Abraham at all by saying that. Scriptures bear witness to the fact that he was a lousy husband. But she went ahead and called him lord. What was she doing? She was not demeaning him even when he deserved it. That may be why she's selected as an example. She had such a difficult man to live with, and yet she coped so well.

Showing respect in a marriage is a tremendous foundation. If you denigrate and pull down and demean your marriage spouse you're in for problems. You know that as well as I. Submission involves an attitude of respect.

Submission involves action. With Sarah it was in this case obeying Abraham. For me that probably means that Sarah did the most difficult thing that a wife can do. She stayed with a man who changed locations frequently, who pulled up his tent, and who treated her badly on occasion. And Abraham treated Sarah badly on a number of occasions. But she remained in her actions loyal to him.

She made some mistakes herself. No marriage and no person is perfect. She gave Abraham Hagar and then blamed him when she mistreated Hagar. She lied to an angel of God. The angel said, "You were laughing." And she said, "No, I wasn't." She let Abraham twice pass her off to other men as his sister. She even once gave Abraham orders. People use Sarah as a doormat kind

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of personality. One time she gave Abraham orders, and he obeyed them. She told him to kick Hagar out, and he did. Her motives were not right on that occasion. She was not a perfect person. But the bottom line is, when all is said and done and written about their marriage, she comes off as a person who in her actions remains loyal and committed to her husband.

The third thing I would say that submission involves is affection. We don't specifically read that between Sarah and Abraham, but we know that that is an ingredient which follows attitude and action. We change nothing through cursing it. We only change everything by blessing it. If you try to change your husband by downing him, by nagging him, by criticizing him, I will guarantee you no results. And vice versa. Praise and approval for the things that can be approved and affection even when it's not deserved are a means of healing.

Three critical words in looking at the whole arena of submission—submitted in attitude, submitted in action, and submitted in affection.

### **II. The healing wife is virtuous and respectful.**

Second characteristic of the healing wife as Peter outlines it for us is that she is virtuous and respectful. First Peter 3:2: "They will see the purity and reverence of your life without your having to say a word of witness." Peter is saying the healing wife lives a life of purity. A wife longs for love and appreciation and for understanding. Every wife wants to be loved by her husband, to be special to her husband, to be understood by her husband. When she does not get that love and appreciation from her husband she may be tempted not to be pure.

Any wife not getting the affection and the love and understanding she feels she deserves from her husband is especially vulnerable to the attention of another man. Especially with the amount of women in the marketplace today. You will not heal the problems of your marriage if you go on fantasizing about what it would be like to be married to another man. Christian wives are to

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avoid the subtle danger of criticizing their own husbands for not being spiritual and using that as a pretext of looking for a more spiritual companionship with another man. I've known of good Christian women who were on the verge of leaving their husbands because they were able to have a better prayer partner with another man and saw nothing wrong in that and didn't realize until almost too late that they were being sucked into a relationship out of their longing for spiritual partnership.

A friend of mine declined to attend the wedding of a Christian author who had divorced his wife and was now marrying a woman with whom he'd had a romantic relationship with over the years. He didn't have grounds for divorce and remarriage. He was just in love with another woman. My friend confronted him, and this leading author replied, "I can't understand why God wouldn't want me to be happy." That attitude is not only in leadership circles in the evangelical world today. It is increasingly in the body of Christ. God is interested in more things than our happiness.

I find that so critical. It's as though sometimes we think that all God wants is for us to be happy. That's not all God wants. The phrase "God has a wonderful plan for your life" is true but it's only part of the truth. If Jesus were to have appeared to Simon Peter the first day He met him and walked up alongside, put His arm around his shoulder and said, "Simon Peter, I have a wonderful plan for your life," Simon Peter would have said, "What's that? What's the bottom line?" And the Lord would have said, "It will involve your dying on a cross upside down in Rome." Peter could have said, "Some wonderful plan!"

I think the time has come in the Christian community where we demand accountability from television stations and from publishing houses that are Christian that continue to put persons in a leadership and speaking position who have recently committed adultery and remarried. It's not a

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matter of having a biblical reason. The Bible allows divorce and remarriage for the cause of unfaithfulness or an unbeliever refusing to live with a believer. But this matter of finding someone else more attractive and then divorcing to marry the person you find more attractive and then passing yourself off as a continued teacher in the body of Christ is simply not acceptable. I think that we as a church have got to guard the church of Jesus Christ against the entrepreneurs who need the money of God's people to stay on the air and think that in order to stay on the air they've got to have these kinds of people on their programs. I say it's time to call a halt.

You cannot work through the problems of your own marriage and carry on an affair, even a mental affair. God wants the wife—and this would apply to the husband as well—to be virtuous and respectful.

### **III. The healing wife is inwardly beautiful.**

The third characteristic of the healing wife is that she is inwardly beautiful. Verses 3 and 4: "Beauty should not be outward adornment but should be on the inside of the spirit." I need to take a moment to clarify what this text does not say. Many preachers have gotten into trouble picking on this text and really picking at women. I find it somewhat inconsistent that preachers with flashy suits told women to look ugly while they wore expensive suits. That never matched up. People have really abused this text about not braiding the hair and the like. Peter was referring to a particular hairdo style of the day which involved an endless amount of time piling the hair on in various layers. And putting around of gold and the putting on of garments does not say that Christian women cannot look nice.

But what the apostle is doing is saying that the beauty of a Christian woman is more than an exterior thing. It must be interior. If all of her time is spent on the exterior she is not a beautiful

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person. Here the gospel affirms the dignity of the individual woman. Peter is speaking like the writer of Proverbs in 11:22 where he says, “Like a gold ring in a swine’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.” Outward beauty, if not matched by an inward response, is useless.

God approves wives looking good. How do I know? From Revelation 21:2 where the apostle says, “And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” Think of that. God, when He wants to describe the beauty of heaven, describes it in what a wife looks like to her husband. I can’t think of any better simile. Inwardly beautiful.

Why does Peter pick on this matter of being inwardly beautiful? Because Christian wives then and Christian wives now who have difficult husbands may develop an argumentative, hostile, aggressive, and domineering spirit. Their attempts to change their husbands are seen as nagging. Peter is saying replace that with a gentle and quiet spirit. Quiet, by the way, does not mean silent. Quiet means simply a spirit that is at rest. In this way Sarah and her daughters do what is right and do not give way to fear. So often it is fear that causes a wife to give way under pressure. Fear that life is slipping away. Fear that the children will be grown and the husband will never change. Fear about what the future may bring. Fear that causes the wife to give way to pressure and begin to nag or become a doormat. To become anxious or hostile or uptight. Peter says don’t give way to fear. Have a gentle and restful spirit.

I want to close with another example from the Old Testament of a woman who did not have the best of husbands—Leah. She was married to a man who, again, was a man of faith but a lousy husband. She did everything she could to gain Jacob’s approval, but to the end Jacob loved

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Leah's younger sister, Rachel. The story of Leah's search for meaning is found in the names she gave her sons. She had six of them (see Genesis 29-30).

The first son, Reuben, means "See? A son." She said, "It's because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now. I've had a child. Maybe I can win his love." That was what women did back then to win their husband's love.

But he didn't respond to her love so she had a second son, Simeon. She called him "One who hears." She said, "Because the LORD heard I am not loved he gave me this one too." But Jacob didn't even love her then.

So she had a third son and called him Levi, which means "Attached." She said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me because I have borne him three sons." But again Jacob showed her no regard.

She had a fourth son named Judah. His name was "Praise." She said, "This time I will praise the LORD."

The first three sons were given names designed to let her husband know what a good woman she was, and maybe he'd return to loving her. The fourth son she reflects the attitude of a quiet and gentle spirit by simply saying, "This time I will praise the LORD." She leaves off having children for a long time. I wish we could stop with the fourth child because she later reverted to the pattern of sons 1, 2, and 3. Son five she called "Reward." "God has rewarded me ["Issachar" was his name] for giving my maidservant to my husband." The last son Zebulun, "honor." "God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor because I have borne him six sons."

Through five of her six sons Leah was reaching out for the love of her husband. Only one, the fourth son, Judah, or Praise, involved naming her son a name not designed on manipulating her

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husband into loving her. Interestingly enough, that fourth son was the one God worked with the most. That fourth son became the kingly line, and the Lion of the tribe of Judah is Jesus Christ. Look at what God is able to do in Leah's life when she breaks free from striving and for a moment rests in God.

If every time we would face a difficult matter in our interpersonal relationships we would say simply, "This time I will praise the Lord," and attempt to cease manipulating events and persons to our own end. I say this very deeply, with love and with a sense of authority—not only from Scripture but from personal experience—I realize that the Christian home is being tested in a way today that perhaps is unparalleled in the whole history of the Christian church. It has become a common thing among the body of Christ for persons to divorce and remarry as Christians without scriptural grounds. No other grounds than simply incompatibility or "We didn't get along" or "We were not in love anymore." On that God does not look upon lightly, I would say, when a marriage is in difficulty, when a Christian marriage is in difficulty and there has not been these things like adultery and an unbeliever putting a believer out but a matter of compatibility.

The real problem in the home is not the relationship of a wife to the husband or the husband to the wife. But the real problem in the home is that there is a loss of contact with Jesus Christ.

When we reorder our spiritual commitments, God is able to reorder our human commitments. If we feel like we have no more feelings toward our spouse, I'd submit to you, surrender your life wholly, unreservedly unto God. Tell Him that you will do exactly what His Word tells you to do. Tell Him with tears that you will obey Him no matter what. That you will pick up your cross and follow Him. I'll tell you that when you're submitted to God, your feelings will return. I have a sense about life that we can never as Christians order our lives by our feelings. Something else

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has got to be in first place. I call that commitment. When you try to operate your marriage, your home, your Christian commitment, your discipleship on the basis of your feelings, you will crack upon the rocks. But if you will order your life on commitment and obedience to Jesus Christ, God will give you feelings. It's that simple. I believe with all my heart that the Word of God stands underneath as the authority.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, there are young people here today who have not married. Young men and women who are excited and eager about what the future may hold. I pray that in their searching for You will for their life that they would take into account that what You treasure most is a beautiful spirit, a life deeply committed to You. And that You will spare them from the kinds of choices that are made on grounds other than those which are right and wholesome. I pray, Lord, for persons here who have come out of broken relationships who have been broken themselves. Lord, we're not here to judge people's motives. Only You know what is in our heart. And to all who are hungry and to all who come for Your healing hand, You are available. I thank You for that. My burden today is especially for those marriages within our church fellowship, which probably for the most part are unknown to me or others here, but who live in that sort of gray twilight of it neither being a good marriage or a necessarily awful marriage but somewhere in between. Sort of settled down with getting along with each other. Lord, bring Your healing power into our marriages to make the good marriages the best. To make broken marriages whole. To bring husband and wife together after days and weeks of hatred and hurt. Spread Your healing oil over waters. Keep us, Lord, from the seductive temptations of the evil one who tempts us with a philosophy of the world. That treats marriage as though it were some sort of towel that when you had used it you were done with it and it was to be discarded. Teach us, Lord, out of Your own heart the depth of loyalty and

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commitment that You have for us. That we are then to treasure one another. Thank You, Lord, for Your Word to us which is indeed a light to our path. We bless Your name today. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.