

Their Souls Did Magnify the Lord (4/5)

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Catherine: Some of the most difficult material in I Peter has to do with the passages concerning wives. A little over a century ago it probably would have been the related passage on slaves that would have presented the same difficulty. Precisely because this passage will need very careful interpretation, we wish to spend considerable time on it.

The section that begins in I Peter 2:11 and goes through 3:17 must be seen in the light of all that has been said so far in this epistle, and cannot be taken out of that context.

So that we can have in mind all that this passage says, we will read it now:

Justo: 1 Peter 2:11-3:17 (NRSV) (mention that servants = slaves)

2:11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. 12 Conduct yourselves honorably among the gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

13 For the Lord's sake be subject to every human authority, whether to the emperor as supreme 14 or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. 16 As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. 17 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

18 Slaves, be subject to your masters with all respect,[e] not only those who are good and gentle but also those who are dishonest. 19 For it is a commendable thing if, being aware of God, a person endures pain while suffering unjustly. 20 If you endure when you

are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do good and suffer for it, this is a commendable thing before God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

22 “He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

23 When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,[f] so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds[g] you have been healed. 25 For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

3:1 Wives, in the same way, be subject to your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct, 2 when they see the purity and respect of your conduct. 3 Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; 4 rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight. 5 It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by being subject to their husbands. 6 Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

7 Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman—though the weaker vessel, they are joint heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.

8 Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. 9 Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. 10 For

“Those who desire to love life
and to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit;
11 let them turn away from evil and do good;
let them seek peace and pursue it.
12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? 14 But even if you do

suffer for doing what is right,[j] you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear,[k] and do not be intimidated, 15 but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, 16 yet do it with gentleness and respect. Maintain a good conscience so that, when you are maligned,[l] those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

Catherine: The easy way to deal with such material is to say that it relates to a different culture, and therefore is no concern of ours. However, that really is not a helpful response. All of Scripture bears the marks of the culture in which it was given. It is not possible to make neat distinctions in Scripture and say: "This verse is the Word of God for all time, but that verse is simply an element of an ancient culture." All Scripture is the Word of God and all Scripture comes to us clothed in the culture in which it was first given. Just as we believe the Word of God Incarnate—Jesus of Nazareth—is both fully God and fully human, so also the Word of God in Scripture is fully God's Word and at the same time a word that comes in human history and clothed in human culture.

Furthermore, were we to attempt to divide Scripture between verses that are culturally conditioned and those that are revelation, there would be no agreement as to which is which when we look at any particular verse. And so, were we to decide that these verses about wives are irrelevant to us because they belong to a different cultural situation, we would discover other Christians—and there are those—who would say these verses are clear revelation, and that a Christian wife ought always to stay with an abusive husband: the Bible says so! One person's "culture" is another's "revelation." The problem is not so easily solved.

Nor can we look at the verses about slaves and say they are irrelevant for us now, since we do not have slavery. We need to deal with the whole text as it is given to us, in order to see what these words meant to that ancient church which first received this letter. Only then can we begin to understand what the God who spoke these words to those congregations may be saying to us through the same passage.

The passage speaks of three specific relationships in which Christians need to consider how they should relate to others, specifically to those who are not part of the Christian community. First is the government of the Roman Empire. Most of the early Christians did not hold Roman citizenship, but were subjects of the Empire. Their rights were limited in regard to the government, and the government was beginning to persecute those reported to it as Christians.

Justo: Secondly, the passage deals with slaves whose masters were not Christians. (Paul's Letter to Philemon is the only clear case we have in the New Testament where both slave and master are Christians, a letter that assumes that the relationship of slave and master would have to be altered drastically, since the two were now brothers in Christ.)

In order to understand the situation of Christian slaves, and even of Christian masters, at that time, it is important to understand the nature of slavery in the Roman Empire, and how it functioned. At the time when this letter was written, slavery was in the decline in the Roman Empire. Not that there was a great moral awakening, and people decided that slavery was

wrong. It was rather that economic changes were making it unprofitable to have slaves.

Especially in the large farms of the wealthy, it was cheaper to hire poorly paid laborers than to

keep slaves. For that reason, slavery was becoming more and more an urban phenomenon.

People kept slaves as personal servants, as cooks, porters, gardeners and the like. Many slaves

were also employed in metalworking and other crafts where skills were important, and so it was

worthwhile for a master to invest in training and keeping a slave.

The decline of slavery, and the fact that it was becoming unprofitable, led many masters to try

to free their slaves. Since such freed slaves would then be a burden, laws had been passed that

made it very difficult to free a slave—especially one with no means of support. In order to free a

slave, one had to go before a magistrate and prove that this particular slave had somehow

earned freedom, and was able to support himself or herself.

Even then, a freed slave did not attain the status of a person born free. A freed slave was a

freedman or freedwoman, and it was only their children that could ever enjoy full freedom. A

freedman or a freedwoman still owed certain duties to the former master, and there was no

legal way to avoid this arrangement.

What this means is that the question we often ask is, why did Christian masters not free their

slaves? It has a simple answer. One reason why they did not free them was that they couldn't.

Slavery was not easy, even though it was in decline. In most circumstances, masters had the right of life and death over slaves. The most common punishment for misbehavior was physical punishment, especially severe whipping.

Slaves could not marry—or, more precisely, their marriages had no legal status. If they had children, they were not considered their own, and it was the master's decision whether they should live or not.

Since slavery had become particularly unprofitable in agriculture, it also became more and more an urban phenomenon. And, since Christianity was at first mostly an urban religion, there were many among its members who were slaves. It is to these people that the Epistle addressed its exhortations.

The Epistle is not saying that slavery is a good thing. Nor is it saying that it ought to be defended. It is addressing slaves who belong to a religion that is a very small minority, and who have no chance of changing the laws regarding slavery, and it is trying to give them some guidance in the midst of their situation. Slaves are reminded that, if they must suffer because they have an overbearing master, this suffering is similar to that which the Master of the Universe endured for them. Just as martyrs were told, not that they should seek persecution, but that, should it come, they must be ready to see the redemptive power of suffering, so are slaves told, not that slavery is good nor that they ought to defend it, but that if there is suffering

in their condition they are to find ways to make it redemptive suffering. If at all possible, they should avoid suffering. They do this by being submissive. But, as the Epistle says, “if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God’s approval.”

Catherine: The wives addressed here are those whose husbands most likely are not Christians. Especially in the eastern portion of the Empire, where these churches are located, wives had few rights over against their husbands. Since the marriages had been the bride and groom, arranged by the fathers of the families of the bride and groom, and a dowry had been given, the bride’s family would not be likely to take her back, since that would entail considerable penalty—and her husband’s family might still have rights concerning her. Going back home was probably not a good possibility. Especially for wealthy families, marriages had little or nothing to do with love and everything to do with property and inheritance rights. The children of a marriage were the father’s property, and therefore would not go with the mother, were she to find any place to which she could go. All this had to do with property laws that may seem alien to us. In a family, only one person could own property. This was the paterfamilias—the “father” of the whole family. Wives, just as children, even grown children, could not own property. Nor did they have any social standing apart from their husbands. If their husbands died, they derived their social standing, as well as any property rights, from their children’s inheritance, if any.

For all these reasons, simply leaving home was not an option for an abused wife. Her options were not good at all. Nor was there much protection for her from a husband's abuse. He could not kill her—except for specific crimes—but he could beat and abuse her. The situation was definitely not good, if one had an abusive husband. That is clear. Neither the law nor her family could be of much assistance to her in that culture.

Justo: Earlier this week we said that the early church had in its membership more slaves than masters, and more wives than husbands, especially from the upper classes. Given the social conditions just described, perhaps we can hazard some guesses as to why this was true.

First of all, there were reasons that made it more difficult for the husbands and the masters to be part of the church. They would be more likely to be called to perform duties that were incompatible with the Christian faith. Citizens were expected to participate in civic activities, and most of these took place in the context of the worship of idols. For instance, only citizens could be legionnaires. Free men who were not citizens could join the auxiliary units of the army. It was expected of some citizens, and of some free men who were not citizens, that they would join the military. In the military, it was very difficult to avoid idolatry. But such service was not expected of slaves—nor of wives either!

The paterfamilias was in charge of the family shrine, where the deities of the family was worshipped. Christian, his entire household—his wife, his children, his slaves, his freedmen and

women, and all who depended on him—all of them would immediately notice and talk. A wife or a slave, on the other hand, were not called upon to perform the family sacrifices, and therefore their conversion was more likely to go unnoticed, at least at first.

For these reasons, and for many others like them, it was more difficult for husbands and for masters to join the church than it was for slaves and wives.

Then, there were reasons why the new faith was particularly attractive to wives and slaves. This was a faith that affirmed that Jesus Christ, who was in the form of God, did not take being in the form of God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, and took the form of a slave! This was a faith that affirmed that even the slavemaster had a master! This was a faith that declared that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female! This was a faith that declared that even husbands, if they joined the church, would be part of the bride of Christ! In other words, masters have a master, and husbands have a husband.

Clearly, the message which I Peter proclaims is one in which people such as wives and slaves, people who were often put down or ignored, found a new sense of dignity and self-worth. They were a royal priesthood! They who could not inherit were heirs of God almighty!

For these reasons, and for many others, the ranks of the church tended to include more wives than husbands, more slaves than masters.

Catherine: Membership in the Church gave people a new sense of significance, but if you were a non-citizen subject of the mighty Roman Empire, if you were a slave of a non-Christian or the wife of a non-Christian, your Christian identity made persecution, either by the state or by the master or husband, a real possibility. It took great courage for the slave or the wife in such a situation to seek baptism. We do not know if their decision was accepted or even known by their households. Many of them would be walking a very thin line between acceptance of their membership and demands that they leave the church because membership was unacceptable.

In addition, the church assumed that once people were part of the church, their behavior had to be Christian in all of their relationships. They could not be Christians in everything but that which their master or husband commanded. Imagine the kinds of situations they might meet: the wife whose husband decides she really must dress in a fashion that the church considered immodest, or who felt she really must participate in the devotion to the traditional family gods at the household shrine. Or the slave who was commanded to beat or kill another slave for some deed that had angered the master. What will these Christians do in that case? We have already said that the church did not seek to create martyrs, and that if they had alternatives of going elsewhere, or avoiding the conflict they should take them. But what alternatives did these slaves and wives have?

Nor did the church assume that their obedience to masters or husbands was more important than their obedience to Christ. In fact, part of their new-found sense of self-worth and identity

had to do with the fact that in Christ they had discovered a lordship that took precedence over all human lordships, including those of masters and husbands. For these new Christians, the authority of these human lords had been seriously limited by the authority of their new divine Lord. Earthly lords had been seriously limited in their power. The new Lord—Jesus Christ—treated them as brothers and sisters, not as slaves, and this new relationship had a strong effect upon their subservience in their old relationships.

It was clear that, should these Christians be forced to choose between faithfulness to Christ and obedience to the human lord, it was Christ who must be followed, even if it led to suffering and death. The issue of this Epistle is how such a show-down. Part of the advice is to allow one's Christian behavior to be so attractive and winning that the choice will not have to be made. That will not always work, but it may.

If it works, then the master or husband may inquire as to the cause of this new life that is filled with love and hope. Then witness can be made to the life-transforming gospel. Who knows? Perhaps the earthly lord will also be won by the divine Lord. But if not, and if suffering is the only possibility, then the Christian should remember the sufferings of Christ, and live out faithfully the Suffering Servant role, which is in itself redemptive.

Justo: Although there were not as many husbands in the church as there were wives, the Epistle does address a word to them. This is in 3:7—a very brief word, but one full of meaning given the

context in which it is written.

The first word of that verse is “likewise, you husbands.” Husbands too have an obligation towards their wives. To us today that sounds like a common platitude. But to Roman society in the first century it was a very strange word indeed. Husbands are to “bestow honor on the woman as the weaker sex.” Exactly what this means may be debated. Perhaps the Epistle means that wives are not as strong as physically as their husbands. Some interpreters have even argued on the basis of this text that women are morally inferior, weaker, than men. Probably what the Epistle actually means is that women are the less powerful sex, those whom society grants little or no power, those whom society does not honor, and that for that reason husbands are to be particularly careful to honor them.

But, no matter what may be meant by the phrase “the weaker are to sex,” the next phrase is crystal clear. Men who believe are to honor their wives, because they are “joint heirs of the grace of life.” Remember, these women could not be anybody’s heirs. Perhaps the husband, if he was the eldest son of the one who held the family property, could be an heir. But never a wife. And yet, here husbands are reminded that the imperishable inheritance, that which makes Christians a royal priesthood, belongs to both men and women, both to them and to their wives. And therefore wives must be honored, because they are royal heirs.

Given all that we have already said, it is most likely that, if the husband is a Christian, so is his wife. In that case, she is clearly and without any doubt his joint heir. But, if she is not a Christian, she is called to be one. Christ died for her. Her husband must try to bring her to the Christian faith by his example. She is therefore a potential heir of the kingdom, and must be treated as such. Therefore, no matter whether the wife is a Christian or not, she is to be honored as one who either shares or is called to share in the imperishable inheritance of the royal priesthood. The last phrase of the verse addressed to husbands is somewhat obscure. Husbands are to do all this “in order that your prayers may not be hindered.” A possible interpretation of these words is that, if the husband does not honor the wife, she will nag him, and he will be hindered in his life of prayer (ex.: Wesley). A more likely interpretation, however, is that a husband who does not acknowledge the royal inheritance of another—in this case his wife—undercuts his own access to the heavenly throne.

Catherine: Many Christians were persecuted because of their faith. Many potential adversaries were won to the faith by the actions of Christians in the privacy of relationships between husbands and wives and slaves and masters. As the church grew, and especially when it became the dominant religion of the Empire, supported even by the Emperor, some two hundred and fifty years after this letter was written, the situation began to change. The church had some leverage over the relationships in slavery and in family. It did not always have great effect, and sometimes the church seemed more dominated by the culture than the other way around, but we can see changes occurring slowly. It took centuries, but the gospel is sometimes like the

leaven in the lump, and only slowly does it have its effect. Yet eventually, it became clear to Christian consciences that slavery was not permissible. It also became clear that husbands could not have total power over wives. These changes have been hard-won, but they are here. The law now does offer protection, though often such protection is not carried out in effective ways.

We still deal with these issues—issues of work situations and marital relationships that are dehumanizing and dangerous to health and life. More recently the issue of child abuse has come to the fore, and the abuse of the elderly. What advice and counsel does the church provide in these situations? Does it simply say, “Stay and suffer?” That is hardly what I Peter is recommending. Are there alternatives to staying? Does the church help provide them? Are there shelters and similar services? Are there legal guarantees? Does the church support their enforcement so that abused people have real alternatives? Do you know in your community what the law enforcement and legal structures do in cases of domestic violence? Do they take them seriously? What role does the church take in giving real options to those who suffer exploitative employers because they fear losing the only job they can find? There are women working under such conditions in the Philippines, in South Africa and other countries. In our country, the situation of some among the undocumented is similar. In such situations, Christians who, on the basis of their faith, challenge conditions for themselves or other workers, are likely to face some form of persecution.

I Peter is urging Christians to avoid suffering, if possible while still being faithful. We need to make sure that the gains that have been won over the centuries are kept and strengthened so that there are no more martyrs in home and workplace. No church should use this passage to tell wives and children to remain in abusive situations when that is not their only option. Even worse—the church should not allow work—masters and husbands to believe that God has given them abusive rights over those who work for them or over their wives and children. There are Christians who do use the text in this way, but such an interpretation must be challenged at every opportunity. The Bible does not permit such attitudes.

Justo: However, we still live in an unredeemed world. In spite of our best efforts, Christians may find themselves in a situation where they cannot avoid persecution, except at the expense of denying Christ. It is at that point that these verses of the Epistle become relevant.

As we read this Epistle, it is important for us to remember that we are part of a world-wide church. We may not be threatened by physical persecution in the same manner in which the first readers of this Epistle were threatened. But let us not hasten to conclude that there are no Christians today who are threatened in a similar way. Our century is not as enlightened as we would like to think. Indeed, it has been estimated that in the twentieth century more Christians have died for their faith than were killed in all the persecutions under the Roman Empire.

In a country in South America fairly recently, I met a Christian family. They showed me around the city. As we rode around, the son, who must have been about eighteen years old, was telling me about a radio program he has, in which he airs interviews with people in the slums of his city. Many of the things he says are quite controversial. These people are talking about realities that according to the government do not exist. The boy tells me, "I am a Christian. I must be a servant of Truth." When the boy is away for a moment, the father tells me, with tears in his eyes: "I know that he will be killed for that. But I dare not stop him. I raised him a Christian."

How dare we think, even for a moment, that the message of this Epistle is no longer valid for our day?

Catherine: Even without the dramatic possibility of martyrdom, surely there are ways in which we are tempted to compromise the faith we profess in order to "fit in" better. The persecution we face may be no more than the silent disapproval of friends and colleagues, yet such experiences prepare us for more serious encounters in settings we cannot yet imagine. But when we hear such a thing, most of us probably have the negative image of the person who is always "holier than thou." That is not what is meant. In fact, the passage specifically says that we are to be gentle, loving, and humble, even when we are challenging expected behavior.

From beginning to end, the message of this Epistle has a clear unity. Christians have been born into a new life. The character of that new life, above all, is love. Within the community of faith,

the requirement is to love one another. When Christians deal with those outside the community, the requirement is the same—to love even those who are opposed to our faith. Christians cannot be loving to some, and then not love others, without ceasing to be the new creatures they are called to be. Life cannot be divided up in that fashion.

However, though Christians are to be loving, they are also to be “wise as serpents.” They are not to provoke the antagonism of others, but rather prevent it as far as possible. The limit of possible, however, is the abandoning of the faith, either in word or in deed. This is the advice to Christians almost two thousand years ago. It is equally good advice now.

