



## The Role of the Wife in Marriage

I feel somewhat uncomfortable preparing this *Bit to Read*. Writing as a man to men about the role of the man in marriage comes somewhat naturally to me. But writing as a woman to women does not come naturally to me; in his wisdom, the Lord has not included me among those belonging to the fairer gender. The tempting course for me is to defer this *Bit to Read* to a woman....

Yet I call to mind that the Author of all wisdom concerning the role of the wife in marriage is portrayed in Holy Scripture with the use of masculine terms and pronouns. Further, of the 66 books forming the library of the Bible, not a single one is known to be written by a woman. As I seek to do nothing more than share with my sisters in the faith what the Inventor of marriage has determined the role of the wife to be, I dare to put pen to paper on the topic, praying for tact and heavenly sensitivity.

### Equality

We need to note upfront that there is, in God's providence, an essential equality between men and women. God created both genders in the beginning to image accurately what God was like (Gen 1:26,27). Both genders –husband and wife, to be sure– fell into sin. Both men and women have become “dead in sin” (Eph 2:1), both “worthless; no one does good” (Rom 3:12). Again, for both man and woman the Lord God sent his Son into the world. Through the work of Jesus Christ, both may be restored to God so that “on my male servants and female servants ... I will pour out my Spirit” (Acts 2:18). That is why Paul could insist that “there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

This basic equality, though, does not exclude the fact that men and women have been assigned different roles in God's world and kingdom. This pertains also to marriage.

### For the man

The apostle Paul, student of Scripture as he was, summed up what he learned from the Old Testament about the role of the woman with these words, “Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (1 Cor 11:9). His conclusion, “woman for

man”, captures God’s revelation in Genesis 2. The Lord God initially created the man alone (2:7), and placed him alone in the Garden with the command to “work it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). God himself determined, though, that “it is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18). He was to image God’s love and justice and holiness and kindness and faithfulness, and that can best (and only) be done through relationships. So God created a second person from Adam’s rib, one who could be “a helper fit for him” (2:18) in his fundamental task of imaging God, also in how he cared for the Garden. In the way each loved the other, and were kind to each other and faithful to each other, etc, they both would reflect God’s characteristics. Yet Eve’s role was not identical to Adam’s; she was specifically appointed to be “helper” to Adam (2:18). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul summarizes this material with the statement that “woman [was created] for man” (1 Cor 11:9).

Her purpose, and hence her focus, is (to be) her husband.

With our western ears we hear something very demeaning in the term “helper”, let alone that she is “for” her man. Is your “helper” not the boy you hire to be your gopher; you tell him to “go for” this or “go for” that – and all he does is “for” you? If that’s what the Bible means with the woman’s role as “helper”, that would indeed be demeaning. That, however, is not how the Bible loads the word “helper”. In his affliction the psalmist testifies that God almighty was “the helper of the fatherless” (Ps 10:14). Elsewhere, in the face of enemies, he declares, “the LORD is on my side as my helper” (Ps 118:7). In her role as “helper” a wife may image God to her husband! Truly, she is “for” her man!

## How?

Does the Bible help us color in how a wife is to be helper to her man? Yes, the Lord does show the way. I think first of all of the well-known passage in Proverbs 31 about “the excellent wife”.

### Proverbs 31

The excellent wife of Prov 31 is truly “for” her man, as God intended it in Gen 2 and as Paul described it in 1 Cor 11:9. The poem opens with the declaration that “the heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain” (vs 11). The poem immediately explains why that’s so; “She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life” (vs 12). Notice her husband-centered focus. Seeking the good of her man drives her to seek wool and flax, bring in food from afar, consider a field for purchase, and so much more – yet none of her activities revolve around herself, but all are pitched to what is beneficial for her man. As a result of her devotion, “her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land” (vs 23). He’s esteemed, and has the time to involve himself in community affairs, because his wife is “for” her man – and so grabs whatever options are available to her in the economic realities of her day. As a result of her husband-centric labors, her husband praises her, “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all” (vs 29). *He* prospers in his leadership role because *she* is diligently “for” her man, devoted to his success.

## Paul

Many centuries later, the apostle Paul puts to paper the will of the Lord with these words, “I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander” (1 Timothy 5:14). It is remarkable that the apostle would have these widows-become-wives “manage” their households, simply because the *man* is charged to give leadership in the home (see previous *Bit to Read*). What the apostle wants these newly-married wives to do, though, is function as the “excellent wife” of Prov 31; like her, these wives are to be “for” their man, husband-focused in their daily activities, including specifically what drives them in their activities in the home. That, after all, gets to the core of what God intended the “helper” to do.

In his letter to Titus, Paul gave a parallel instruction. Titus was to instruct the older women to “train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled” (Titus 2:4,5). We note that this passage too is distinctly husband-centric, with echoes of the pattern set by the godly wife of Prov 31.

## Respect

This role of being “for” her husband receives sharper color through another word Scripture uses elsewhere to describe the task of the wife. She is, Paul says, to “respect” her husband (Eph 5:33). The term translated as “respect” is the same word used in Scripture for the “fear” we are to feel towards God. For the unrepentant sinner, of course, that fear is the terrifying, knee-knocking sort that ought to characterize those destined for the eternal anguish of hell. But for those washed in Jesus’ blood, the fear the sinner may experience toward God is awe, reverence, respect. That same word describes how Paul, under the guidance of the Spirit, would have the wife feel toward her husband. She is to esteem him, revere him, respect him.

Peter gives us an example of what the wife’s esteem for her man ought to look like in practice. He first tells the Christian wife that an unbelieving husband should “see your *respectful* and pure behavior” (1 Peter 3:2 – and yes, in Greek that’s the word “fear” again), and then draws attention to the example of “the holy women” of the Old Testament. Specifically, he singles out Sarah; she “obeyed Abraham, calling him lord” (3:6). The only time in Scripture we hear her calling Abraham “lord” is the time when she overheard the angel tell her husband that she’d bear a child. In disbelief she said within herself, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” (Gen 18:12). That’s hardly a fitting example of what “respect” might look like. I think a better reference to Sarah’s obedience appears in Gen 12:10-20, when Abraham responds to the famine in the land with the decision to sojourn in Egypt. He was very aware that his wife was a beautiful lady bound to catch Pharaoh’s eye, but decided to move there anyway – and told Sarah to tell Pharaoh that she was his sister, lest Pharaoh kill Abraham to get at Sarah. We’re not told what Sarah thought of his decision to take his family to Egypt, but the prospect of becoming Pharaoh’s

toy will surely not have excited her, and the thought that her husband was willing to put her in that position will not have endeared him to her. Yet she went along with her husband to Egypt, and so in her deeds she effectively called him 'lord'. That action demonstrated respect for her husband, wrong though it was for Abraham to put his wife in danger. Here was an example the wives Peter addressed were to be mindful of as they faced the challenges of marriage to an unbelieving man.

### How?

Showing respect for a sinful husband (as every husband is) can be difficult. The wife may well be smarter, more visionary, and even more godly. The husband may have made a mess of things, and even be a fool. The temptation can then be enormous to belittle him in thought or word or deed. Yet given God's command to "respect" him, belittling him would obviously be sin. How can she then respect him? Let me suggest the following for consideration:

- The husband you received is actually God's choice for you. He knew you and knew how the man he gave you would turn out. Yet he put you side by side, with the intent that you should mold each other for greater service to him. The man you received is no mistake.
- Your sense of self-worth and purpose cannot depend of what you think of your husband, or on what others think of him, or what (you think) he thinks of you. It cannot depend either on your personal history – where the danger is that in your mind those who conceivably hurt you in the past receive a new face in your husband. Your identity lies in what Jesus Christ did for you on the cross of Calvary. God loved you enough to give his only Son for your sins; Jesus Christ loved you enough to die for you. Since you are precious in his eyes, you may not look down on yourself. Instead, you may gratefully cultivate an active and trusting relation with God. This requires persistent and regular Bible reading and meditation on God's word. With your identity secure in the Lord, you can from a position of strength and confidence devote yourself to building up your man.
- You cannot change your husband, yet need to respect him. So it is essential to ask the Lord for grace to think positively of your man, to speak positively to him as well as about him, and to find ways to encourage him to fulfill his leadership role in marriage in a way pleasing to the Lord. That includes finding ways to affirm him, whether that be through words, touch, deeds (a favorite dish), dress, etc.
- It may even be helpful to ask him how you could, in his opinion, do the instruction of Prov 31:12 better. Who knows what an open conversation can draw out....

## Two dangers

In her effort to respect her husband, the wife could become silent and compliant, always submissively doing what (she thinks) her husband would prefer. At bottom, he has become her idol – and then her role has morphed from being a helper to being an enabler. She’s forgotten that her husband invariably is a sinner, and so in its time most certainly in need of resistance, correction and even admonition. Here the wife needs to repent of becoming a servant.

In her zeal to be a good helper to her husband, the wife could also become contentious, ever nagging her man to improve in this or do better in that – as if her constant criticism will ‘fix’ him. The Holy Spirit warns us of the futility of such conduct; “it is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife” (Prov 21:9). Persistent nagging, belittling remarks, a verbal fist will demoralize your man and render him incapable of leading the family. Far better is the conduct of the excellent wife of Prov 31: “she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue” (vs 26). Such words indeed make a man grow.

## A job?

In the previous *Bit to Read* concerning the role of the husband in marriage, I mentioned that the Lord has assigned specifically to the husband the privileged responsibility to provide for the financial needs of his family. I would refer the reader to that *Bit* for the arguments. What’s interesting now is that the excellent wife of Prov 31 also (apparently) earned an income, for she “considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard” (vs 16). Doesn’t that imply that she was in the workforce?

We must not forget that this “excellent wife” was fully husband-centered in what she did – and that would include how she used the opportunities available to her in the economic realities of her day. No, she did not have a job outside the home in the way our modern culture understands that concept. Rather, she worked next to her man, using the opportunities available to her, to enhance her man. This is the example for today’s wives still. If in the process there is a way to bring in some extra income for the family, good and well. It’s about *him*, and not about an added purchase.

## In sum

I write this as a man of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is a part of me that wants to insist that the woman should be her own person, also in marriage. To do that, though, I’d have to stomp upon the authority of Scripture. Since I can’t do that, I need to accept that God created the “woman for the man”. That drives me back to the previous *Bit to Read*, and the mandate I have to cherish and protect and love the woman God created “for” me. Then I ensure that she has the space and the incentive to operate “for” my benefit.

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