

Healing a Hurting Marriage

by David H. Roper

As you recall, the theme of this book is that it is God's will that we learn to suffer injustice patiently. It is one thing to be reprimanded or fined or fired or grounded or benched when you deserve it; it is quite another to be chastened when you do not deserve it. When you have tried your very best, have done what you think is right, and still are misunderstood or overlooked or blamed--that is difficult to bear.

A number of years ago I was with my family at a conference center. Carolyn and I were seated in the lodge waiting for dinner to be served. Right behind the lodge was an embankment which recently had been seeded. There were signs posted which said, KEEP OFF THE BANK. Two of our sons, who then were quite young, were playing at the top of the embankment. Suddenly the director of the conference, who was seated with us, jumped to his feet and shouted, "Stay off the bank!" and ran out the door. To my horror, as I looked out the window, there was one of our boys poised right at the top of the bank. The director was shouting, "Get off! Get off the bank!" but down the boy slid, right into his arms. The director shook him, "Son, didn't you hear me say, 'Stay off the bank'?" Of course, I was mortified. I took him around behind the building, got out a little switch and worked him over. I kept saying, "Son, didn't you hear the man say, 'Stay off the bank'?" As we were walking back he looked up at me with tear-stained eyes and said, "Daddy, what's a 'bank'?"

I think of that so frequently when I have done what I think is right, and then am misunderstood. I walk away and ask the Lord, "Father, what's a 'bank'?" We have all gone through that sort of experience, and this is what Peter is referring to. It is perhaps the most difficult type of suffering to endure. But Peter reminds us in the opening verses of the book that this is what we are called to, because even Christ was called to this. Perhaps the theme of the book may best be summed up in Peter's words to slaves:

For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.

He came not to secure his rights but to be wronged. Therefore we should not be surprised when people wrong us. The principle which undergirds everything Peter has to say is that God, who is the Righteous Judge, will ultimately give us what is right, but we do not necessarily expect that in the here-and-now. It is only when Jesus comes back to set everything right, that we will receive what is right. Therefore we can endure injustice-not when it is directed toward someone else; it is not to go unreprieved when someone else is the object of oppression-but when it is directed toward us.

In chapters one and two Peter gathers these ideas together, and then he begins to specify certain areas of life where this attitude of subjection, even under unjust authority, is to be lived out. The first is with respect to an unjust government. And the Roman empire was anything but just at this time. Then he refers to the relationship of slaves to harsh, cruel, despotic masters. In terms of our experience today, this refers to employers who exhibit these characteristics.

Then in chapter three he turns to the home, and begins with the response of the wife to a cruel and unjust husband, because this situation was prevalent in Peter's day. Many women had found Christ to be their Lord, but were married to men who were still pagan, unjust, cruel, and vicious. How should they respond in circumstances like these? In this chapter Peter gives us a revelation of the way to heal a hurting marriage.

We need to remember that this is indeed a revelation, a divine disclosure of principles which will work. It does not matter how hopeless your marriage seems to be. I am convinced that if individuals will follow the pattern Peter lays down in these verses, any home can be set right. Perhaps right now you are feeling hopeless about your own marriage, and from a human standpoint there seems to be no way to correct it. But may I say that it has been my experience, and the experience of many others, that the procedure laid out for us here will correct any aspect of a troubled marriage.

This is a revelation, and it runs contrary to much of what you hear today in the secular world. I seldom read Ann Landers' column, but last week it included a letter from a lady asking about her evidently very troubled marriage:

My husband spends money like it's going out of style. He buys anything he wants no matter what the cost. If it's another gun for \$250, fine and dandy. A third camera for \$150 is okay, too. He thinks nothing of paying \$40 for a pair of shoes. I won't tell you what his suits cost. His closets are jammed, yet he keeps buying, buying. This man makes \$20,000 a year, and he's no kid; he's 52 years old. We're always broke, and the bills are stacked all over the place. The doctor says that's why I have week-long headaches and high blood pressure. Do you think I can change him, or should I just give up? We've been married five years.

Busted in Illinois

That is a troubled marriage! This is a very immature man. What should she do? Here is Ann Landers' counsel:

Dear Busted:

You say he's no kid. Well, I have news for you. He is a kid! Forget about changing him. No way! Now that you have an opinion from your doctor, I suggest that you get one from your lawyer. This I can tell you: no man is worth week-long headaches and high blood pressure.

Now, that is amazing counsel! I do not know Miss Landers. I don't know anything about her. I don't know what she believes, and I don't know anyone who does. It is one of the phenomena of our age that we will take counsel from someone whose basic presuppositions we know nothing about. She counsels many people, and some of her counsel no doubt is good. But this particular counsel is ungodly, because it is directly contrary to what Scripture has to say. "Forget about changing him. No way. Leave him; he's not worth suffering over." That is contrary to Peter's counsel in chapter 3. Peter says,

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives...

The word translated "disobedient" means "unpersuasive." It is not that such men have never heard the gospel; it is that they have heard it and repudiated it. They are hardened, obstinate, unpersuasive. Peter says the unpersuasive man who has rejected the Word may be won by the behavior of his wife. The key, Peter says, is the submissive spirit of the wife.

That is not popular counsel today. At this particular point in history it usually is rejected out of hand. And it does seem difficult to follow, in the face of all the gains made by the women's movements of our day--particularly the overthrowing of some of the domestic tyranny and job discrimination that women have endured.

There are a number of things we need to know about the submission Peter is talking about. The Greek term means "standing under the authority of" someone else. There have been attempts to retranslate it, but there really is no legitimate way. It is a military term used both in biblical and classical Greek to refer to someone's being placed under the authority of someone else. It means to "rank in order," or to "place under the leadership" of someone else. So the term does mean what our English word means.

But we need to realize first of all that it is not only women who are to submit. Very often this passage is taught as

though wives are to submit to their husbands, yet the husbands can trip through life totally unsubmitive to anyone and do as they please. But Peter repeatedly has underscored the fact that submission is demanded of all believers, whether they be male or female. It is just as much a requirement of men as of women to be submissive to authority, and Peter has spelled out a number of areas where they are to be submissive—to government, to their employers, to the needs of others around them, and ultimately, to God. God knows that we have authority only when we place ourselves under authority. It is the worst kind of slavery to rebel against all authority. A very wise centurion once said to Jesus, "I am a man under authority, and I can say to this man, 'Come', and to this man, 'Go.'" He recognized that we have authority only when we ourselves are under authority. So Peter is very quick to point out that it is not only women who must submit to authority, but men also.

Secondly, Peter points out that the submission of women to their husbands is parallel to Jesus' submission to authority. The chapter begins with the words, "In the same way". In the Greek it is just one word: "Likewise."

This refers back to the previous context, which is a reference to Christ:

...who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously...

Jesus was cruelly and unjustly treated, and he submitted to it. Yet there is no indignity attached to that. There was poise and dignity in Jesus' submission to authority. So submission is ennobling, not demeaning.

And thirdly, Peter says in this passage that the submission is to be to the woman's own husband, not to men in general. I see no indication anywhere in Scripture that women are to be submissive to the leadership of men in general. There are two areas of submission only, and they are clearly spelled out in Scripture: submission to your husband and, within the church, submission to men in authority there. But outside those two spheres women can legitimately exercise leadership. The Bible says nothing in this regard about politics or education or industry. The Old Testament is replete with examples of women who are outstanding leaders: Deborah, Jael, Huldah the prophetess. So this is not an attempt to repress women. But within the home there is to be an order of authority, an order which is ennobling. The man is to be submissive to his Lord, and the wife is to be submissive to her husband.

In the passage there are a number of characteristics which describe this submission, a submission which Peter says may result in the husband's being "won," or "gained." These are basically descriptions of the behavior of the wife. This is how she is to work out her submission:

"...even if any of them are disobedient to the word they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. And let not your adornment be external only—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, and putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God."

He begins by saying that her witness to her husband is to be nonverbal "without a word." He uses a very interesting play on words in this first verse. He says, "...though they may be disobedient to the word [i.e., the Scriptures] they may be won without a word..." This is one of the few cases in Scripture where we are told to give some sort of nonverbal witness. Ordinarily the witness of our mouth is to accompany the witness of our life. But here he says, "without a word".

That would be strange—except that God understands the nature of women and the nature of men. He knows that women by nature love to communicate, and they communicate well! And he is not saying here that it is wrong for women to communicate, to talk. It is not wrong for the believing wife to share the gospel with her unbelieving husband. But there comes a time when communication ceases and it becomes nagging. The husband sees it as a subtle attempt to overthrow his leadership, a way of subtly insinuating her will into the direction of the home. She may not stamp her foot and insist on her way. But by continually, repeatedly bringing up the same issues over and

over again, by correcting the way he dresses, the way he acts, the way he talks, the way he eats, the way he thinks, and by continually bringing up the gospel--slipping tracts into his cheerios, etc.--she will alienate him even though she thinks she will win him. Her goal is right, but her method is wrong.

All men resent and reject nagging. They will do one of two things: They will give in, and live with a smoldering resentment. Or they will become stubborn, obstinately refusing to act, even though they might know it is in their best interest to do so, because they will not be pushed. So with uncanny insight the Lord directs Peter to write, "without a word". "Be quiet. He knows the facts, now just live them before him." A wife's response might be, "But how will he know unless I tell him?" Peter says, "He will know by your behavior."

Then he proceeds to spell out what that behavior entails: verse 2, "chaste and respectful behavior"; verse 4, "a gentle and quiet spirit". That covers the inner and the outer woman.

I am convinced that by nature women have a yearning for purity, for chastity. It is their men who drive them to be unchaste. Throughout Scripture, whenever women were unfaithful and unchaste, invariably it was the men who were admonished, because God knows that basically women are monogamous and chaste, and they find their sense of fulfillment and joy in the love of one man. When that man provides the security and strength she looks for, she has no need to look elsewhere. But when the foundations are shaky and she is uncertain, when she does not feel loved and secure, then she begins to look elsewhere for fulfillment. She will become unchaste because her man has not fulfilled his responsibility toward her.

Yet Peter begins right at this point: "Be chaste." But how can a woman do that when everything within her yearns for fulfillment--not for sex, primarily, but for love, appreciation, and understanding? How can she be fulfilled when her husband is failing her in this regard? Well, the Lord himself becomes her partner. She can be chaste, she can be faithful. Paul says, "My God shall supply all your needs, according to his riches in Christ Jesus." God becomes her husband; therefore she can be chaste.

There is a story in the Old Testament that deeply touches most women--the story of Rachel and Leah. Both were the wives of Jacob. Rachel was loved by Jacob, Leah was hated. Rachel was a beautiful girl, Leah was unattractive. So it would appear that Jacob was motivated by selfishness. Though she was rejected, the Lord, for her sake, gave Leah four sons. She thought that these sons would bring the heart of her husband to her, but they did not. The names she assigned her sons indicate something of her thinking during this time. The first son was Reuben. The name comes from the Hebrew word "to see." She said, "I have called him Reuben because now the Lord has seen my affliction, and now my husband will love me." But he did not love her. She had another son and named him Simeon, akin to a Hebrew word, "to hear". She said, "The Lord has heard me, and now my husband will love me." But he did not. She had another son and named him Levi, from a Hebrew word meaning "to attach oneself", and she thought, "Now my husband will attach himself to me," but he did not. To the end of his days he loved Rachel.

She had a fourth son and she named him Judah. The word means "to praise." She said, "Now, this time, I will praise the Lord." She saw that she would never receive from Jacob what she longed for, but that she could find her sense of rest and security in God, the God of Jacob, who would care for her and give her the love her heart cried out for. That is where Peter begins. That ought to be the behavior of the wife, even though the clamant needs of her heart are not being met by her husband. God can meet those needs.

Then Peter says, "Give respect and honor to the husband, even though he is undeserving of it." You say, "Well, you don't know my husband. The lout sits around the house in a dirty tee shirt, watches TV, and drinks beer! That is all he ever does! He takes no leadership with the children, and doesn't care a hoot about me--how can I respect someone like that?" You are to respect him, not because he is qualified, nor because there is anything in him that deserves respect, but merely because God has appointed him as the authority in your life. You can, by God's grace, give him the respect he is entitled to as head of the home. Therefore you are not to diminish his stature, to deride him, to ridicule him, poke fun at him, or put him down, but you are to give him the honor and respect he should have, because he is God's appointee. He is there by God's authority.

Finally, Peter says, "Be characterized by a gentle and quiet spirit--a non-argumentative, non-hostile, non-aggressive, non-domineering spirit. The word translated "quiet" is not the word for "silent". It is not that the wife cannot talk about things that bother her. Rather, she is to have a spirit of quietness, of rest--a quietness that comes not from trusting in her husband, but from quietly trusting in God, who is able to exceed her expectations. It is this gentle and quiet spirit which Peter says, literally, is "priceless" in God's sight--and also priceless in the heart of a man. It is this that wins his heart. This gentle spirit --the love and consideration and respect and purity in her life--will draw his attention and appeal to him, and bring him to the truth.

It is interesting that Peter would liken this to adornment, because adornment is something of interest to every woman. A woman wants to look beautiful. She wants to dress well. And that is right and proper. Peter is not saying that women should not adorn themselves, but that apparel should not be their only adornment. There is another adornment which is inward, in the inner woman--the gentle and quiet spirit that comes from within, which is the indwelling Christ. This adornment never fades. The other will perish. The outward beauty, though it may attract and hold your man for a period of time, does not endure; it fades. The only enduring quality is a gentle and quiet spirit.

Peter says, "If this is your character, you have joined a very elite corps--the holy women in former times who used to hope in God. Verses 5 and 6:

For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.

These holy women of old are not a special class of women. They are like other women, except that they have learned this principle. The word "holy" means "separated"--"those who can be distinguished from others". They are distinguished from the anxious and uptight women around them who are trying to drive their husbands and to secure what they think is right by means other than God's ways. Peter says these holy women of old hoped in God, and that set them apart from every one else around them. And you can join this elite group, Peter says, if your character is like theirs.

Out of all this group, Sarah is perhaps exhibit "A" of a woman who submitted to injustice. Abraham may have been the father of the faithful, but as a husband he was a total dud! It took him one hundred and seventy-five years to grow up. Twice he jeopardized Sarah's life by having her lie about their relationship, having her tell the authorities both in Egypt and in Philistia that she was his sister, when in actuality she was his wife. And she obeyed him.

Now, we need to keep in mind that she did not have all the revelation we have, and so concerning the specific issue, she did not know any better. The sovereignty of husbands is not absolute. God is the ultimate authority, and every woman's ultimate obedience must be to him. If her husband asks her to do something that is illegal or immoral or contrary to Scripture, then she must courteously and lovingly disobey. But in every other area, where the husband's demands do not contravene Scripture, then she is to obey him.

And that is what Sarah did. She put herself under Abraham's authority and called him lord. I have a friend who says that his wife calls him "lord", but she pronounces it "lard"! That is not exactly the same thing. "Lord" means "sir". It is a title used of kings, emperors, and the Lord himself. Sarah put herself under Abraham's authority, and God saved her. She was not trusting Abraham. She trusted God. You may not be able to put any trust in your husband. He may be utterly untrustworthy. But God will be faithful, and God will protect you.

Peter says, "You are Sarah's daughters if you do what is right and are not terrified." It is fear that causes women to give way under pressure and to begin to nag and push and dominate, to become anxious and hostile and uptight. Peter says, "If you hope in God, if you rely on him, he will be faithful, and you will not have to give way to this fear. He will protect you." You say, "Well, you don't know my husband." No, but I know your Lord, and I know

how faithful he is. He is trustworthy.

Most people know who Augustine was, but not many know of his mother, Monica. She was as outstanding as he, and I question whether there ever would have been an Augustine, in terms of his spiritual life and impact, if it had not been for his mother. She was an amazing person, married to a heavy-handed Roman pagan who was absolutely careless about spiritual things, who ran roughshod over her and the children, and abused her physically and sexually. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes something of their early home life, and the response of Monica to his father. Addressing the Lord, he says,

As soon as she was of marriageable age, being bestowed upon a husband, she served him as her lord, and did her diligence to win him unto thee, preaching thee unto him by her behavior, by which you have ornamented her, making her reverent and amiable and admirable unto her husband. And she so endured her wronging as never to have any quarrel with her husband. For she looked for thy mercy upon him, that, believing in thee, he might be made chaste. And beside this, he was fervid--not only in his affection but also in his anger. But she had learned not to resist his anger--not in deed only, but not even in word.

Augustine writes that toward the end of his life, her husband was won.

Her husband at the end, at the very end of his earthly life, did she gain unto thee. Nor had she to complain of that in him as a believer which before he was a believer she had borne from him.

That is, not only was he gained to the Lord; he was gained to her. He became in every way the husband she had looked for. Every abuse was set right, though they had only a few months together. It had taken years, but she had operated on the basis of the truth, and God set that home free. And he can do the same thing for you.

Now, this is not an absolute promise. When Peter says, "he may be won," he uses a verb tense which implies some uncertainty. It is not absolutely certain because, even given the right approach on the part of the wife, the man still has his own will, and he may reject the truth. But what Peter is saying is that there is no other way. If he is to be won at all, this is the only way. Submission is not demeaning; it is intended to be ennobling, because it is the means by which you can bring another person into a relationship with Christ, and the result will be a change in his life.

Peter goes on in verse 7 to refer to the responsibilities of husbands. Do you notice that there is six times as much information given to wives here as there is to husbands--perhaps because it is six times more difficult for wives to live with their husbands than for husbands to live with their wives! He says,

You husbands likewise [Same conjunction. It is required of men too that they be submissive--not that they give in to the will of their wives, but that they give themselves up to their wives, which is the counterpart required of us as husbands--serving our wives], **live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman; and grant her honor as a fellow-heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.**

Two commands are given along with the reasons for them. The first is to live with your wife according to understanding, or, as it actually is stated in the Greek, "according to knowledge"--because she is the weaker vessel. The second is to honor her because you are joint-heirs of the grace of life. What does Peter mean, "Live with your wife according to knowledge?" I believe he is referring to the knowledge of the Scriptures, the knowledge of the truth. Because the measure of a man's manhood is the degree to which he gives himself to knowing and obeying the Word of God. Most of us men, at one time or another, question our manhood. That is what drives us to take up underwater demolition when we are fifty, or something of that nature! There is probably nothing wrong with being a fifty-year-old frogman, but that in itself is never going to prove anything to you. It will not make a man of you. The measure of a man is the degree to which he knows and obeys the Word. That is true manhood.

If you want to see a man, look at Christ. There is One who acted in every situation as a man should act. He was

compassionate when he should have been compassionate, firm when he should have been firm. He was in every circumstance a man--"a man for all seasons"--because he acted according to the will of God. That is what will make us a man-if we will act according to the truth. The thing which is most impressive to your wife is not that you can press a two-hundred-pound barbell, but that you act according to the truth. It shakes her more than anything else when you do not act according to the truth. That is what is wrong with the man in verse 1 who is disobedient to the Word. His wife is frightened: "What will he do to me and my family?" But the man of the Word will act as he should act in every circumstance. He will be wise, discerning, strong, compassionate; he will be all that she could ever desire.

Peter says he is to act according to knowledge because his wife is the weaker vessel--not weaker intellectually, nor even physically, necessarily. I am convinced that women are much better able to withstand pain, that they live longer, and have fewer heart attacks. They cannot run quite as fast as men, yet, but they are getting there! No, women are weaker vessels in the sense that they are more easily broken, more fragile. The pressures and responsibilities of life more easily crush them and drive them away from a place of confidence in God. Therefore a man who lives according to knowledge, instead of reacting in anger or hostility or bewilderment to his wife, will direct her back to the Word. He will, as Paul says, "wash her with the water of the Word." Now, if you do not have a husband who does this, then God himself takes this place in your life. You need not get frightened. But the word addressed to us, men, is that we must take this responsibility in the home.

Secondly, the husband is to honor his wife as a fellow-heir of the grace of life. Honor has to do with courtesy, respect, politeness, kindness. These give security to wives--things we did almost instinctively when we were courting them, but which we have long since abandoned--the quiet acts of courtesy and love. Somerset Maugham's mother was a very beautiful woman, and she was married to a little, ugly, gnome-like man. No one could understand why she ever married him. In one of his books Maugham quotes her as saying she did so because "he would never hurt me." He was courteous and kind, and she responded to that.

I am reading a history of medieval Europe. I have always been fascinated by the concept of knighthood. Knights, of course, were chivalrous, which means they were valorous and courteous. It was the injection of Christianity into medieval life which made chivalry possible. As badly as Christianity was practiced in medieval Europe, the light of the truth was still there. And that is what made men chivalrous. Wherever the gospel has not been received, women are treated as chattel, even as animals. But wherever the Gospel is received, women become joint-heirs; they are equal-different, yes--but equal in every way. Therefore they are to be honored, treated with courtesy, never insulted, but respected.

Peter says, "Do this in order that your prayers not be hindered." The relationship between husband and wife is so fundamental that if it is ignored, it will destroy our relationship with God. Prayer is the lifeline between us and God. And if we do not live with our wives according to knowledge, and if we do not honor them, then the very lifeline to God is interrupted. The Greek term actually means that it is "cut". We cannot sustain our relationship with the Lord, we cannot say we are in fellowship with him, if we are not acting according to the truth.

Now, these are good words. They may be a bit frustrating, but they work. It does not matter how difficult your home situation is, or how hopeless it seems to be. God can set it right if you will determine, by the grace of God, to act according to these principles. Any home can be set right. You say, "Well, you don't know how bad things are. You don't know how difficult my husband or my wife is." But God does not hold you responsible for your husband or your wife, primarily; he holds you accountable for yourself. And that is where you must start. C. S. Lewis said, "Of all the awkward people in my home and in my office, there is only one I can do very much about." We start with ourselves, with a commitment that, by God's grace, we will be what God has called us to be in our homes. And we can rest in God to accomplish what he has in mind for that relationship.

Father, we are grateful that we do not have to listen to the counsel of despair that surrounds us today in the world. We thank you that your counsel is one of hope, one that will change our homes. And we know that it is your indwelling presence which makes possible obedience to these terms. So we pray, as we go back into our homes and face whatever circumstances are there, that

according to your promise in Isaiah, we might mount up on wings as eagles, run and not be weary,
and walk and not faint. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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