

**Genesis 3:16 and Ephesians 5:24:
A Woman's Desire, A Man's Rule, and A Wife's Submission**

by **Charis R. Hart**

DESCRIPTION NOT PRESCRIPTION!

*“your [the wife's] desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you” Genesis 3:16
(God describing to the first woman what marriage will be like for her)*

Is Genesis 3:16 a “command”? Or is it a description of how marriage is going to be for the woman outside the Garden of Eden in a broken world?

Is Genesis 3:18 a “command” for men to sweat and face thorns and thistles in their work? Or is it a description of what they will now deal with outside the Garden of Eden in a broken world?

Neither Genesis 3:16 nor Genesis 3:18 are commands (prescriptions). They are **descriptions**.

God's original plan for marriage is seen in Genesis 2:24 and Genesis 1:26-28 without any retraction. In 3:16, God is not speaking to the man, commanding him to rule over his wife. His statement to the woman should **not** be taken as a **prescription/command** of His perfect will and way for biblical marriage. Genesis 3:16 is a prophetic **description** of what life and marriage will be like outside the Garden.

The assumption that God **cursed** the man and woman in Genesis 3 is common, however, it is not in the text. Only the serpent and the ground are cursed. The judgment for eating the fruit was death, and we all remain under that judgment. But Jesus has brought hope, the promise of resurrection, and the exchange of our toilsome heavy burdens for His light and easy yoke. We do not err when we attempt to alleviate the Genesis 3 consequences via tractors, epidurals, and equality for women.

That the woman would desire to continue to do the very act which created a child and so much pain has long been an interpretation of the Gen 3:16 DESIRE. Though complementarians ([Grudem, 33](#)) and egalitarians alike ([Kaiser of CBE](#)) dismiss the idea of a sexual component to the Genesis 3:16 desire, the textual support for it is compelling.

*“Unto the woman HE [God]said,
I will greatly **multiply** thy sorrow and **thy conception**;
in sorrow thou shalt **bring forth children**;
and thy desire [shall be] to thy husband,
and he shall rule over thee.” Genesis 3:16*

This one verse speaks of conception (increased!) and pregnancy TWICE in the immediate context of the “**desire**” in question. Conception does not happen without sex (with only one exception- the conception of Jesus). Therefore, I do not see how we can deny the possibility that

the increased sexual drive of human females is a component of this Genesis 3:16 “**desire**”. Additional support for this comes from Song of Solomon 7:10 which uses the same Hebrew word for desire- *teshuquah*- of sexual desire.¹

Upon eating the fruit, physical changes occurred in the man and woman which began the dying process (and compensate for the mortality of the couple and their offspring). I wonder if among these changes were hormonal changes which brought woman a monthly cycle, PMS, menopause, increased fertility, and increased sexual desire for her husband; and men a testosterone surge which feeds aggressiveness (“he will rule over you”) and polygamy? Contrast human sexuality with that of animals among which the vast majority of females mate rarely, only during fertile seasons, and not face to face (as far as I know). Sexual intimacy- as expressed in human marriage- is a consolation to the couple who have lost the ultimate delight, satisfaction, and ecstasy of Garden intimacy with one another and with God, against which human sexual intimacy is to “*see in a mirror, dimly*” (1 Cor 13:12 NKJV).

Contra church fathers whose writings paint the sexuality of the human female in a negative light, I see her increased sexual desire as one of the redemptive aspects of the Genesis 3 consequences. Desire, just like increased conception and childbirth can be understood as a BLESSING! ([Don Johnson](#)) Nothing in the passage indicates that they must be interpreted as negative, or “curses”. Let me hasten to add that an increased sexual desire of human women is only one facet of her desire/turning/*teshuquah* toward her husband. There is also the aspect of her emotional craving/longing which becomes such a painful ball and chain for some of us wives.

Even the pain/toil of the Genesis 3 consequences- prophesied in childbirth and marriage for the woman, and work for the man- has redemptive intent. Pain can bring us to our knees! When a woman’s DESIRE turns into idolatry (husbandolatry), where her husband controls and rules her instead of Jesus, her DESIRE will bring pain and suffering which may drive her to forsake her idolatry and seek the real God and likewise, when a man makes an idol of his work/career.

WHEN “DESIRE” BECOMES IDOLATRY

In my personal experience, DESIRE encompassed the desire to please, to satisfy, a DESIRE for approval. Based on historical patterns of male oppression, control, and abuse of women without much effective resistance, this tendency toward people pleasing conformity bears out as common to women, including unmarried women. For a modern day example, consider women shrouded from head to toe in burkas. I cannot think of a parallel passively accepted wide scale humiliation of males. The belief that a wife’s desires should be subdued to her husband’s will is practiced widely across history and cultures suggesting that it is as natural as “the thorns and the thistles”.

Genesis 3:16 is the reason women wear burkas! In so doing, they suppress their own identity, individuality, and freedom and passively accept male rule. In the flesh, women are inclined to surrender their God given co-dominion of Genesis 1:26-28.

Just like a man can make his job into an Idol ([Casting Crowns](#)) which he allows to determine his self-worth and to consume disproportional amounts of time, devotion, and energy, a woman’s DESIRE for her husband can become idolatrous. Katharine Bushnell’s writing of some 100

years ago has been a source of many insights for me ([God's Word to Women](#)). She writes, "Eve is 'turning' from God, and He warns her that if she does this, she will fall under the dominion of Adam." In a thorough study of *teshuqah* ([Lesson 17ff](#)) she makes the case that "desire"/teshuqah in Genesis 3:16 means "turning" and Eve brought upon herself a world of pain when she "turned" to her husband (away from God) and followed Adam out of the garden of intimacy and fellowship with God ([Hart](#)).

Waneta Dawn simply expresses a woman's Genesis 3:16 DESIRE:

God "prophesied to Eve in Genesis 3:16 'thy desire to thy husband...' ... [This] indicates that **Eve would crave the cherishing she at one time got from Adam**" ([Dawn](#))

Consideration of a wife's desire for "cherishing" is a good lead in to the Genesis 3:16-Ephesians 5:24 connection. Paul describes to the church at Ephesus a husband's responsibility in marriage. "*For no one ever hated his own flesh, but **nourishes and cherishes** it, just as the Lord does the church.*" (Ephesians 5:29 NKJV).

EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING!!!!

*"wives are subject to their own husbands in **everything**" Ephesians 5:24*
(Paul describing marriage to the Ephesians)

Paul reiterates the Genesis 3:16 description in Ephesians 5:24. Paul is not giving the Ephesians a **prescription** but a **description**.

We are used to hearing **prescription/command** in Ephesians 5:24. Wives "must be submissive", "let them be subject", "must submit", "should be entirely submissive", "ought to submit" IN EVERYTHING.

Both complementarians and egalitarians have come up with ways to tap dance around the harsh implications of hearing **prescription** in Ephesians 5:24 rather than **description**. Some complementarians attempt to soften the impact of Ephesians 5:24 by isolating the exercise of wifely submission to occasions of conflict where the husband is said to have "final say" ([Piper](#)) or attempting to establish an "exception clause" cancelling the wife's obligation to obey the presumed command of Ephesians 5:24 if a husband is requiring "something in direct violation of God's Word" ([Patterson](#)). Some egalitarians attempt to soften the impact by emphasizing a "**voluntary** attitude of giving in" ([Preato](#)). However, being "subject in **everything**" has no limit, no exceptions, nor is it voluntary. Everything means everything!

So where have I gotten this idea that Ephesians 5:24 is not a prescription/command? It comes from the grammar of the Greek. In my study of Ephesians 5:24, I discovered that many translations, add extra words which change the grammar.

In various English Bible versions, the words of Ephesians 5:24 are rendered ([Bible.cc](#)):

- "wives should submit" (NIV, NLT, ESV,)

- “wives ought to be [subject to]” (NASB)
- “wives must be submissive” (ISV)
- “wives are under their husbands’ authority in everything.” (GW)
- “Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so [let] the wives [be] to their own husbands in every thing. (KJV)
- “so let the wives be” (AKJV, WBT)
- “so let the wives also be” (ERV, ASV, WEB)
- **married women should be entirely submissive to their husbands.** (WNT)
- And as the church is under Christ’s authority, **so let wives be under the rule** of their husbands in all things. (Bible in Basic English)

The latter rendition of the Bible in Basic English is noteworthy for how visibly we can see the parallel of Ephesians 5:24 with Genesis 3:16. However, BiBE and all of the above translations add words and grammar which are not there in the Greek. The KJV at least brackets the added words so we realize they are additions. If we take out the “let” and “be” from the 6 translations above where they have been added, then they are more accurate. The grammar of the Greek verb *hupotasso*, translated “to submit” or “to be subject” is not imperativeⁱⁱ: it is not a command! The grammar of the Greek verb is passive indicative.ⁱⁱⁱ The following two translations reflect this accurately:

Young’s Literal Translation

“but even as the assembly is subject to Christ, so also are the wives to their own husbands in everything.”

Darby Bible Translation

“But even as the assembly is subjected to the Christ, so also wives to their own husbands in everything.”

WIVES ARE SUBJECT [not "must be submissive", not "let them be subject", not "must submit", not "should be entirely submissive", not "ought to submit"] IN EVERYTHING.

So, what does this mean?

You ARE SUBJECT to your husband IN EVERYTHING like you are subject to gravity. Though you made a choice to marry him, you have neither control nor volition regarding your state of subjection; it’s a state of being.

The context of Ephesians 5 speaks of a HEAD and a BODY which metaphor is a remarkable fit with a passive voice understanding of “is subject” in Ephesians 5:24. The body “is subject” to the head, but there is neither volition nor even consciousness involved on the part of the body, nor is there agency involved on the part of the head. It is a description of a state of being, not a command for a certain behavior. Thus the head/body metaphor is a perfect illustration and object lesson of connectedness and “being subject” in the passive voice. Contextually, Ephesians 5:24 is a continuation of the thought started in Ephesians 5:21 and clarifies the nature and extent of the *hupotasso* Paul has in mind. Furthermore, Paul’s two uses of *hupotasso* in this context (21

and 24) are a sandwich around his introduction of the head/body metaphor (23). This head/body metaphor is key to understanding Paul's intent. In the immediate context of Ephesians 5, Paul maps the husband to the head and the wife to the body and refers to the couple thus organically connected as "one flesh" which harks back to the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:24).

For a Christian wife, being "subject to her husband in everything" may or may not resemble her experience being "subject to Christ in everything" depending on how much her husband reflects Christlikeness in the manner in which he treats her (which is the thrust of Paul's teaching directed to husbands in Ephesians 5).

You might argue that in this sense the husband is subject to the wife too and I would agree with you and point to Ephesians 5:21. However, Ephesians 5:24 clarifies that a wife has a unique and greater vulnerability to her husband which extends to EVERYTHING with no "vice versa" claim in scripture regarding the husband.

Once a wife says "I do" (any wife in any culture of any religion, past, present, and future), she becomes vulnerable to her husband in a way which she is to no other person on earth. The anatomy is a picture of this. The wife opens herself up to receive from her husband, and she will tend to internalize harsh things that he says ([Hart](#))! That is why Paul repeats 5 times in Ephesians 5 employing imperative grammar ("command" verbs) that a husband needs to AGAPE/LOVE his wife.

CONCLUSION

Paul's statement in Ephesians 5:24 is a repetition of "the facts of life" first reported in Genesis 3:16:

"your [the wife's] desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you" Genesis 3:16
(God describing to the first woman what marriage will be like for her)

*"wives are subject to their own husbands in **everything**" Ephesians 5:24*
(Paul describing marriage to the Ephesians)

Wives "are subject" to our husbands like we "are subject" to gravity. Just like men still sweat and have thorns, a woman still desires her husband and he still rules. Ephesians 5:24 is not a **prescription** for a certain wifely behavior. Rather, it is a **description** of a state of being which involves no conscious decision on the wife's part any more than a body being connected to a head involves a conscious decision on the body's (or head's) part. Evidence for this understanding is provided by the head/body metaphor in the immediate context, the passive indicative grammar of the *hupotasso* verb in verse 24, and the parallel with the Genesis 3:16 description of marriage outside of the Garden of Eden.

Does Paul give any hope that marriage can move back to the "Garden of Eden" experience of Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:24? The Genesis 2:24 refrain is quoted in Ephesians 5:31, though Paul clarifies that he speaks "concerning Christ and the church". Throughout the marriage discourse,

Paul repeatedly urges husbands to agape love (using grammatical imperatives). Perhaps, like tractors and epidurals, this manner of love in marriage would serve alleviate the Genesis 3 consequences? I don't know? This manner of love in marriage is a such a lofty standard, unrealistic, impossible... I had to lay down such expectations within my own marriage and take my desires/longing to the Lord. But I have Good News for those like me who have/had a troubled and painful marriage. My longing to be loved, nurtured, and cherished is profoundly met by God as I press in to Him through Jesus Christ my Lord and enter the precious and delightful Garden of intimacy and fellowship with Him. You can meet Him there too.

Works Cited

- Bible.cc. Parallel Bible. [Web](#). 9 July 2011.
- Busenitz, Irvin. "Woman's Desire For Man: Genesis 3:16 Reconsidered." *Grace Theological Journal* 7.2 (1986) 203-12. [Web](#). 10 July 2011.
- Bushnell, Katharine. God's Word To Women. 1943. Web ([pdf](#), [html](#)). 10 July 2011.
- Casting Crowns. "American Dream". YouTube. [Web](#). 9 July 2011
- Dawn, Waneta. "Respect of Persons." *Submission Tyranny*, in *Church and Society*. June 2011. [Web](#). 10 July 2011.
- Grudem, Wayne. "The Key Issues in the Manhood-Womanhood Controversy and the Way Forward." Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood. Ed. Wayne Grudem. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002: pg. 33. [Web](#). 4 July 2011.
- Hess, Richard. "Evidence for Equality in Genesis 1-3." *E-Quality* 7.3 (Autumn 2008) 8-11. [Web](#). 10 July 2011.
- Johnson, Don. "Gen 3:16 Analysis by Don Johnson." [Web](#). 4 July 2011.
- Hart, Charis. "What if Eve Had not Followed Adam out of the Garden?" *God's Word to Women*. 15 Feb. 2008. [Web](#). 9 July 2011.
- Hart, Charis. "Men and Women are Different #3." *A Wife's Submission*. 18 March 2010. [Web](#). 9 July 2011.
- Kaiser, Walter. "Correcting Caricatures: The Biblical Teaching on Women." *Priscilla Papers* 19.2 (Spring 2005) 5-11. [Web](#). 10 July 2011.
- McCarthy, Suzanne. "A Complementarian Genesis 3:16." *Suzanne's Bookshelf*. 29 June 2008. [Web](#). 4 July 2011.
- Patterson, Dorothy. "Lies Vs. Truth: A Review of 10 Lies the Church Tells Women by J. Lee Grady." *CBMW*. [Web](#). 10 July 2011.
- Piper, John. Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006: pg. 40. [Web](#). 10 July 2011.
- Preato, Dennis. "Empirical Data in Support of Egalitarian Marriages and A Fresh Perspective on Submission and Authority." *Priscilla Papers* 17. 2 (Spring 2003). [Web](#). 10 July 2011.
- Wallace and Mounce. www.bcb.com Greek Grammar. "Passive Voice". [Web](#). 4 July 2011.
- Ware, Bruce. "Summaries of the Egalitarian and Complementarian Positions on the Role of Women in the Home and in Christian Ministry." *CBMW*. [Web](#). 10 July 2011.

Endnotes

ⁱ Contra [Grudem, et al](#), Busenitz-in [“Woman’s Desire for Man Reconsidered”](#) - argues **against** Gen 4:7 as a mediating passage in interpreting Gen 3:16 and **for** Song of Solomon 7:10. In the interest of brevity, I have left my analysis of the popular assumption among complementarians ([Ware, CBMW](#)) and egalitarians alike ([Hess, CBE](#)) that the Genesis 3:16 desire is about a wife’s desire to control her husband (see [“Is Genesis 3:16 About A Wife’s Desire To Control Her Husband?”](#))

ⁱⁱ Imperative is a Greek verb “mood” which is identified by its distinctive form. “The imperative mood is a command or instruction given to the hearer, charging the hearer to carry out or perform a certain action.” The *hupotasso* (submit) verb of Ephesians 5:24 is NOT in the imperative, although many English translations (mistakenly) add imperative language. Greek verbs change form based upon the subject of the verb and the kind of action indicated. There are five basic parts (or aspects) that are clearly defined or indicated by every Greek verb form: Person, Number, Tense, Voice, and Mood. ([ntgreek.org](#)). The aspects relevant to my thesis are voice and mood.

ⁱⁱⁱ You can verify the passive indicative parsing for yourself by looking above the *hupotasso* verb in Ephesians 5:24 at <http://interlinearbible.org/ephesians/5.htm>. Guidelines for understanding the implications of voice and mood can be found at <http://ntgreek.org/> and Wallace and Mounce. Greek Grammar. “Passive Voice”. [Web](#). 5 July 2011.