



To the woman he said,  
“I will make your pregnancy very painful;  
in pain you will bear children.  
You will desire your husband,  
but he will rule over you.”

# DEFINING DESIRE

How should we understand Eve’s “desire” in Genesis 3:16?

By Allison Quient

In many Christian circles, women are taught that their supreme calling in life is to be a good wife, complying with a God-ordained order where women joyfully submit to the servant leadership of their husbands. Where does this idea come from?

It comes from many places, but one that is often overlooked is Genesis 3:16. Specifically, how we understand the woman’s “desire.” How we interpret and translate this word impacts how we perceive the nature of women and the nature of male-female relationships. Are women driven by sexual desire that enables their oppression? Do they have an innate

desire to submit to man? Has sin plagued women with the desire to manipulate and dominate men?

The word translated as “desire” is the Hebrew word *teshuqa*. Unfortunately, its meaning is uncertain, largely because there are only three examples of *teshuqa* in the Bible (Gen. 3:16 and 4:7, Song 7:10). Yet, it has long informed Christian beliefs about women and their place in the world. The three most common understandings have been that “desire” refers to:

1. A sexual desire
2. A desire to be subjugated or to be overly dependent
3. The desire to dominate her husband

However, an often-dismissed fourth option has gained more attention as more evidence has been uncovered, and I argue that this is the best option. But first, a brief overview of the three most common perspectives.

## Sexual Desire

**The view:** Eve’s desire is a sexual desire. According to this view, women are so driven by their sexual desires that it impairs their independence and moral agency: “Women often allow themselves to be exploited in this way because of their urge toward their husband: their sexual appetite may sometimes make them submit to quite unreasonable male demands” (Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*).

**Strengths:** This interpretation of “desire” fits with the word’s use in Song of Songs, where the desire is of a sexual nature. Whether or not most would actually concur that female sexuality is the culprit behind falling for unreasonable male demands, this view does take into account the setting of this verse in context of the fall and draws from one of the other Old Testament uses of (a form of) the word.

**Weaknesses:** This view relies heavily on speculation and generalizations about women—which many might contest.

**Implications:** As a result of the fall, women have become slaves to their sexual urges to the point where they are not thinking for themselves. Women need men to guide them, and certainly should not be in positions of authority.

## Desire to be Subject

**The view:** The woman’s desire is to be dependent on the man or subject to him. Some see this as a product of the fall. Others see it as a corruption of the God-ordained servant leadership of males. How the latter option works is murky. Presumably, the verse is a reminder that the woman must “desire” her husband’s leadership and live out her intended role as a subordinate even though her sin nature will resist his leadership. This could be either a blessing (if her husband is kind) or a curse (if he treats her poorly).

## LANGUAGE MATTERS - EVE THE “HELPER”

In Genesis, as in all of the Bible, a lot can hinge on how we understand key words and phrases.

The Hebrew phrase *ezer kenegdo* (often translated “suitable helper” or “helpmeet”) appears in Genesis 2:18 and is widely misunderstood.

Genesis 2:18:

The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

The Hebrew phrase translated “helper suitable for him” (often translated “helpmeet”) is *ezer kenegdo*.

The word *ezer* is translated “help” or “helper” in English. English speakers might assume “help” means something like “assistant,” but this is not how *ezer* is used elsewhere in the Old Testament. *Ezer* is used three times to describe a military protector and sixteen times to describe God as a rescuer. Perhaps the best known is Psalm 121:1–2:

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

*Ezer* signifies the help of a strong rescuer, or a deliverer, not a subordinate. Eve rescues him from his state of being alone, which God had proclaimed “not good.”

The second part of the phrase, *kenegdo*, often translated “suitable for” means “as in front of” or, in natural English, “corresponding to.”

*Ezer kenegdo* does not indicate that Eve was Adam’s subordinate assistant. Quite the contrary, it describes Eve as a strong help corresponding to Adam.

*Ezer kenegdo* suggests not hierarchy, but mutuality.

Looking for more? Try these resources:

- Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*
- Joy Fleming, *Man and Woman in Biblical Unity*
- Katharine Bushnell, *God’s Word to Women*
- Carolyn Custis James, *Half the Church*

**Strengths:** This interpretation has little in its favor. When coming from a patriarchal perspective, it fits with the idea that male leadership is implied (though not stated) in the creation account. The stronger position is that the desire to be subject is a result of the fall. This does not rely on preconceptions about male leadership, but recognizes that both man and woman were told to rule together before the fall and this relationship was undermined afterwards (by a desire for exclusively male leadership).

**Weaknesses:** There is no explicit evidence to support either sub-view. There is no particular reason from the context to think Eve was ruled over by her husband before the fall, or that she wanted to be after the fall.

**Implications:** There are at least two possible implications for this view. If the desire predates the fall, then women ought to pursue subjugation to men in order to fulfill their created nature. If the desire is a result of the fall, then women should resist their natural desire for male authority. Either way, women naturally want to be ruled by men, an idea that many would contest. This stereotype also becomes a fundamental assumption underlying male-female relationships.

### Desire to Dominate

**The view:** Eve’s desire is to dominate her husband. Egalitarians and complementarians agree that the desire to dominate is a product of the fall.

**Strengths:** This proposed meaning is more prevalent because it is consistent with a similar passage in Genesis 4:7 where sin’s desire is for Cain, but he must master it. The same word meaning “to rule” is used in both Genesis passages and both are set in negative contexts. The parallel wording might suggest that in both, “desire” is the desire to possess and control.

**Weaknesses:** There is little evidence to support this view. While the meaning “to dominate” may fit with Genesis 4:7, it does not match Song of Songs, where *teshuqa* does not carry negative connotations.

**Implications:** To those who affirm patriarchy, the desire to dominate is an indication that God’s ordained gender hierarchy is being threatened. To egalitarians, the desire to dominate is counter to God’s desire for mutual submission. Either way, this view paints women as relationally domineering, a stereotype that stands in the way of mutually uplifting relationships.

### Not “Desire” but “to Return”?

What if *teshuqa* should not be translated “desire” at all, but should be “to return” or “to turn”? This is an ancient view (this is how the Greek Old Testament was translated), but until recent evidence came to light, has been dismissed by most modern scholars.

A 2011 study on *teshuqa* (Joel Lohr, “Sexual Desire?” *Journal of Biblical Literature*) drew from instances of the word in the non-biblical portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls (famous

ancient Hebrew texts). These texts provide seven examples of the word *teshuqa*. In each, “turning” or “returning” is a better fit than “desire.”

Below are two of the seven examples, and for each I provide two translation options: one translating *teshuqa* as “desire” and the other as “return.”

1. “At what shall one born of woman be considered in your presence? Shaped from dust has he been, maggots’ food shall be his dwelling; he is spat saliva, moulded clay, and 1) *for dust is his longing* 2) *to dust is his return...*”

The first option makes little sense, while the second adds clarity. The one made of saliva and clay will again become dust.

2. “Do not fear or be discoura[ged, may y]our heart not be faint. . . do not turn back or [flee from the]m. For they are a wicked congregation; all their deeds are in darkness and to it 1) *go [their] desires* 2) *they will return...*”

In isolation, either option makes sense. However, in context, the congregation is told not to be afraid. Telling the congregation not to fear because those who do dark deeds will return to darkness gives a reason for their courage: the enemy will return to darkness, not to threaten again.

“Return” makes sense in all three biblical passages as well. In Song of Songs, the woman waits for her lover to return to her. In Genesis 4, Cain is warned that sin will return to him if he does not master it. In accordance with this understanding of *teshuqa*, the Orthodox Study Bible translates Genesis 3:16b, “Your recourse will be to your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Eve will return to her source, her equal, Adam, for help, but he will rule over her.

It is also worth noting that translating *teshuqa* as “return” reveals a Hebrew parallelism: Just as *Adam* will return to *adama*, (earth) so *isha* (woman) will return to *ish* (man), from whom she was taken. Each returns to their place of origin. This mirrors language used earlier in Genesis to describe the relationship between Adam and Eve as one of mutuality and interdependence. The woman was a “strength corresponding” to the man (translated “helper” in English) and he declared she was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.

But after the fall, things become tragically different. The woman who came from man will return to him, only now instead of declaring she is flesh of his flesh and a strength corresponding to him, he will rule over her. We see this reality all over the world: though it is well-documented that the equality of women benefits society, women are continually oppressed.

God, the source of life, desires for humankind to live interdependently with each other in worshipful connection to him. This is the picture painted by Genesis 3:16. Gender hierarchy is a result of the fall, when a man and woman who once faced one another as equals become separated from God. Without a savior, their relationship with God and one another will continue to be one of separation.



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## eflect with us...

by Jo Ellen Heil

## In the Beginning. . . Choices and Changes

Genesis is filled with beginnings, choices and changes. During creation, God said, “And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. God created them male and female and blessed them. . . God looked at everything God had made and was very pleased” (Gen. 1:26–27, 31, 2:1).

We all know what happened after that. Human beings decided that they knew best, tried to manage their own destiny and blamed each other when it didn’t work out the way they planned. It was a pattern that repeated itself all too often. Abram allowed his wife Sarai to be endangered by foreign rulers in both Egypt and Shur to save his own skin (Gen. 12 & 20). Esau’s two foreign wives made life miserable for his parents Isaac and Rebecca (Gen. 26). Dinah’s brothers slaughtered the inhabitants of Shechem after discovering she had been raped by a young pillar of the community.

And yet a thread of creation’s original kindness remained. God provided clothing for Adam and Eve to protect them from their harsh, new environment outside the Garden of Eden. Male and female needed each other to repopulate the earth after the flood. Cut out of his own inheritance when Isaac was born, Abraham’s male servant put his own feelings aside to diligently seek out the best possible bride for the heir—a woman who comforted Isaac after his mother’s death (Gen. 24). Judah publically acknowledged his legal obligations to his daughter-in-law Tamar. And Asenath, the daughter of Egypt’s high priest and wife to a young Hebrew named Joseph, helped solidify his social status and provided him with a family to cherish in his new land.

In the beginning, there were life-changing choices. They remain with us today. Will we put our own interests first, endanger and exploit others, or seek revenge? Or will we instead clothe those who need it, connect with others to create a healthy community, comfort those who mourn and give a leg up to those we work with? If we choose the latter, our lives will echo Joseph’s ancient, grace-filled words to his fearful brothers: “You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good” and in doing so, “reassured them with kind words that touched their hearts” (Gen. 50:20–21).

*Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations from the Good News Bible.*