

Keeping God's Big Picture in Mind When Power Threatens Relationships: A Sermon on 1 Peter 2:18–3:7

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When I visit this congregation with which I've had a long relationship,¹ there are always two things in my mind—the big picture and the little picture. The big picture, for me, is my family's fifty-plus-year relationship with this congregation. The little picture is what's going on that particular day. For example, a few years ago I played the piano at their Christmas Eve services. That event, for me, was a snapshot within the big picture.

When I played for that Christmas Eve service, I wasn't able to think about, let alone bask in, the big picture very much. Why? Because of the little picture—the task at hand. Because the songs had notes, chords, rhythm, and tempo. Imagine if I had played the wrong Christmas carol, in the wrong key, at the wrong tempo. And then, after the service, when people asked me what had happened, I simply said, “Hey, I was basking in the big picture, soaking in how cool it is to be here at my home church.”

This big-picture/little-picture scenario is an illustration for what we're doing when we read and apply the Bible to our lives.

To put it plainly: In the Christian life we should try to be aware of the big trajectory that we're on, and also aware of the small parts we play in it. And when we read the Bible, we read both to find out what their specific situation was, and also how they fit in with God's big plan.

A Chosen People

The key to what 1 Peter means and how it applies to our lives is to figure out how it fits into the big picture.

So, let's back up and find out a bit about that big picture. Then we'll spend some time on the specifics of our 1 Peter text for today.

A couple weeks ago, the sermon text was 1 Peter 2:9, which begins, “You are a chosen people.” This “chosen” language helps us identify what parts of the Bible story Peter has in mind. It makes me think, first, of Abram and Sarai.

Back in Genesis 12, God spoke to Abram.

The LORD said to Abram, “Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you.” (Gen 12:1–3 CEB, italics added)

I took us back this far, all the way back to Genesis, because it's important to remember why Abram and Sarai were chosen. Their

status as called was never intended to make everyone else feel unchosen. No, Abram and Sarai were chosen to be the first of many. They were blessed first so that others could also be blessed later. They were chosen first so that others would also be chosen later.

And when Peter used this “chosen” language about 2000 years later, he was reminding the first-century Christians that they are on that same trajectory. They are among those whom Genesis calls “all the families of the earth.” Now it's another 2000 years later, and we too are among the chosen. Abram and Sarai were blessed so that others could also be blessed. They expanded to a family, to a people group, to a nation; they were spread out far beyond their own land; then, after Christ, ethnic barriers were set aside, and in the 60s AD Peter is writing to the multi-national ethnically diverse chosen church . . . and he wants them to remember *why* they were chosen: They were blessed so that others could also be blessed.

That's the big picture, the overarching trajectory. Now let's shift to today's sermon text, which is the small picture. But make no mistake, the small picture is not unimportant, and it almost always feels like it's the big one.

In fact, in the case of 1 Peter, the small picture is of a challenging situation—that of persecution. Persecution was real back then, as it is in many places today. That's why the topic of suffering keeps coming up in the sermons you've been hearing on 1 Peter. Simon Peter himself was killed for being a Christian leader within a few years of writing this letter.

Slavery

The specific text for today comes in two parts; it starts in 2:18 and continues into chapter 3. The first part is about slavery, the second is about marriage. Let's read the first four verses:

Household slaves, submit by accepting the authority of your masters with all respect. Do this not only to good and kind masters but also to those who are harsh. Now, it is commendable if, because of one's understanding of God, someone should endure pain through suffering unjustly. But what praise comes from enduring patiently when you have sinned and are beaten for it? But if you endure steadfastly when you've done good and suffer for it, this is commendable before God.

You were called to this kind of endurance, because Christ suffered on your behalf. He left you an example so that you might follow in his footsteps. (1 Pet 2:18–21 CEB)

As we get into this text, we're looking at what is commonly called a “household code.” It's a set of instructions for the various members of a household. The key to understanding a household code is to notice how it differs from the norm—first-century Roman culture.

Here's a quick illustration using a different genre: Instead of a household code, think about a recipe. When you eat something that tastes amazing, you might wonder, "What's the secret ingredient?" If you ask for the recipe, it's because you want to know what's making it so different. You already know what's the same—what's typical.

Household codes were common in the ancient Greek and Roman world. So, we want to know how Peter's code differs from the ones widely known in his generation. What are its secret ingredients?

The first difference to notice is that Peter addresses slaves, but not masters. This was not common; it is the opposite of the norm. This difference, of not addressing slave owners, would have caught the attention of Peter's early readers.

Reminding you again of earlier sermons in this series, this letter has a lot to say about suffering. I'm sure you'll agree, slaves suffer much more than their masters do. Think of it this way: When the stock market crashed between 1929 and 1932, about 4,000 US banks failed. There was a lot of suffering, and thousands of sermons addressed that suffering from various angles. But I'm sure no one preached about how failing banks were causing hardship for bank robbers. Just like preachers didn't give bank robbers advice about how to handle the economic crash, Peter doesn't give slave owners advice about how to handle the hardship of slavery.

The text we've read thus far ends, "follow in his footsteps." Peter has used the suffering of Christ as motivation for enduring suffering as Christians. But Christ not only endured the suffering, he also acted for the good of those who caused his suffering! You remember his words: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34 KJV). That takes us back to the big picture. For Christ, in that moment, the snapshot was enduring the pain of the cross and the big picture was remembering his purpose for going to the cross. The big picture was about saving humanity, so his actions in the moment reflected that.

For the slaves Peter is addressing, the snapshot is enduring the suffering, the indignity of slavery. But they are not only slaves; they are Christians too, so the big picture for them is what we already talked about: the trajectory of chosen-ness and blessing. We are blessed to be a blessing, so we strive not only to endure oppression but also to act in the best interest of our oppressors.

Marriage

In chapter 3, the text shifts from slavery to marriage:

Wives, likewise, submit to your own husbands. Do this so that even if some of them refuse to believe the word, they may be won without a word by their wives' way of life. After all, they will have observed the reverent and holy manner of your lives. Don't try to make yourselves beautiful on the outside, with stylish hair or by wearing gold jewelry or fine clothes. Instead, make yourselves beautiful on the inside, in your hearts, with the enduring quality of a gentle, peaceful spirit. This type of beauty is very precious in God's eyes. For it was in this way that holy women who trusted in God used to make themselves beautiful, accepting the authority of their own husbands. For example, Sarah accepted Abraham's authority when she called

him *master*. You have become her children when you do good and don't respond to threats with fear. (1 Pet 3:1–6 CEB)

This paragraph connects to the previous one with the word "likewise." Some translations say "in the same way." Peter uses this transition to indicate that the two topics, slavery and marriage, are two applications of the same principle.

This connection of slavery and marriage, which may not be obvious to us, prompts me to bring up an important aspect of understanding and applying the Bible. The Bible frequently addresses issues that we are not currently facing. But that doesn't mean no one is facing those issues, or that such Bible passages are irrelevant. In situations like this, we are to discern and apply the principle behind the text. We need to know *what* Jesus and the Bible authors said, but we also need to know *why* they said it.

That matters here because Peter is applying the same principle to two different situations—slavery and marriage. That principle is to live out your Christian calling in light of the big picture of God's plan, even when you're suffering, when you're powerless or oppressed.

So why does Peter address wives as if they are powerless and oppressed? The broad reason is that wives in his day were essentially always under the authority of their husbands. The more specific, more pressing reason is that Peter is talking to Christian women *who are married to non-Christian men*. That's a very specific challenge. He's not talking about marriage in general; he's talking about Christian wives married to non-Christian husbands.

I hope you now see the connection between slavery and marriage: *In this context*, they are related because Peter is talking to Christian slaves under the authority of non-Christian masters and Christian wives under the authority of non-Christian husbands.

A household in the Greco-Roman world worshipped the gods that the husband and father did. He had the authority to govern the household's worship practices. That raised a particular problem for these Christian wives:

- Do I worship pagan gods because my husband says to? No.
- Do I demand that my husband worship Christ? No.
- Do I leave my husband? No.
- Do I argue with him about it? . . . No. Instead, what does the text say? Win them over *with your conduct, without a word*. Not by making demands. Not by debate. But by your conduct.

Now, is Peter saying it's never acceptable to use words? Of course not! He himself is writing the letter, using words! But Peter is in position of authority, and the wives he has in mind are not. People paid respectful attention to Peter. But back then, husbands tended not to pay respectful attention to wives. The context matters. He's not saying that no wife in any century on any continent in any circumstance should explain the gospel to her husband. No, he's giving savvy advice to women in a unique and difficult situation.

A principle behind his advice is to act for the good of others—in this case an unbelieving husband—so that they too will come to

faith in Christ. Another principle at work here is to use what you can for the gospel. If you're in a situation where words work best, then speak up. If you're in a situation where actions work best, then jump into action. If you're a writer, write. If you're a singer, sing. If you have stage fright, then work behind the scenes.

And if you were a first-century woman living in a harshly patriarchal world and you had come to Christ but remained married to a non-Christian husband, and your whole culture was telling you to worship his gods instead of Christ, then Peter would be speaking directly to you.

He wasn't speaking directly to you, or to us, was he? He didn't know about us. But because his words are inspired Scripture, they apply to us. My point in this part of the sermon is that *the principle behind the words always applies*, even when the words themselves don't seem to.

That's a terribly important distinction here in this text. So please hear this: *If Simon Peter knew that this text has often been used to keep abused wives from seeking safety, he would be devastated.* So, before we go on to the next part of the sermon text, I need to say that neither I, nor the leaders of this congregation, would advise an abused wife to stay in her situation in hopes of converting her husband to Christ. Some preachers do say that, *and they are wrong.* We don't help bank robbers by letting them hang out at the bank. And we don't help abusive husbands by telling their wives to hang in there. In fact, such a husband will much more likely be converted to Christ if he is confronted with his sin and helped to reform his life, than if he is allowed to continue in sin unchecked.

Peter now turns to the husbands:

Husbands, likewise, submit by living with your wife in ways that honor her, knowing that she is the weaker partner. Honor her all the more, as she is also a coheir of the gracious care of life. Do this so that your prayers won't be hindered. (1 Pet 3:7 CEB)

Let's unpack this verse phrase by phrase: First, notice the "likewise" toward the beginning. Peter is still on the same topic. This suggests that he has in mind Christian husbands married to non-Christian wives. He's still addressing the imbalance of a marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian.

His first instruction is to "submit by living with your wife." That is, don't separate from your wife because she isn't a Christian. That would ignore the big picture! We are blessed to be Christians in order to spread that blessing to others. So don't miss the opportunity to spread that blessing to the person closest to you—which in this paragraph is a non-Christian wife, and in the previous paragraph was a non-Christian husband.

The next phrase in the verse is "in ways that honor her, knowing she is the weaker partner." The Greek word translated "partner" is often translated as "vessel." It can refer to various household items, but usually to a bowl or dish. Here, of course, it's a metaphor for a wife. So, what does Peter mean by "weaker vessel"? I admit that it's hard to know for sure.² Here are two options:

One possibility is that Peter is referring—not to the physical or emotional weakness of individual women—but to the vulnerability of wives in

general in that society. Women had fewer rights and fewer freedoms than men. Marriage was harder on women than on men. Marriage was more dangerous for women than for men. So, Peter may be referring to their vulnerable status in society and in most households.

Another possibility is that Peter is referring, not only to the male/female distinction, but to the Christian/non-Christian distinction. He's saying to these husbands: You are the Christian in this relationship, so recognize that your non-Christian wife is in a vulnerable spot. She may fear that you'll leave her because of your new faith. She may fear that you'll force her to convert, maybe even physically force her.

Conclusion

Let's take a couple minutes to recap. There are three big take-aways:

First, when we seek to apply the Bible to our lives, we are looking for the principle—the why—behind the text. At face value, today's text is for slaves and for Christians married to non-Christians. But the principles that Peter depended on have lessons for all of us—including those of us who are not slaves and are unmarried. How do we find those principles? By diving into the biblical text, reading it carefully and prayerfully, by comparing translations, by reading high-quality Bible study materials, by interacting with mature teachers and mentors.

Second, ask how you and the text you're reading fit into God's big picture. And the one that helps us here is God's calling to Abram and Sarai, which established them as chosen and blessed. Peter calls his readers "a chosen people." We, like Abram and Sarai, have been called, chosen—not to make other people feel un-chosen, but to work for their good. And doing so—keeping that big picture in mind—is most difficult when you're in relationship with a non-Christian who has power over you.

There's a third principle. It's an overarching principle that applies to a lot more than our sermon text today or to the other sermons in this series. Here's the principle: Jesus is Lord. When someone has power over you, even to the point that they think they are your master, remember that *Jesus* is your master and theirs. And, vice versa, when you have power over someone, don't lord it over them. Christ is Lord of *both* of you. Jesus is Lord of all.

Notes

1. When first preached, the sermon introduction established that I (Jeff Miller) was preaching at my home congregation, which I have long since left but where I still have many meaningful connections.
2. CBE's resources on this difficult text include Michal Beth Dinkler, "Sarah's Submission: Peter's Analogy in 1 Peter 3:5–6," *Priscilla Papers* 21/3 (Summer 2007) 9–15 and John C. Nugent, "The 'Weaker Sex' or a Weak Translation? Strengthening our Interpretation of 1 Peter 3:7," *Priscilla Papers* 32/3 (Summer 2018) 8–11.



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