

The Book of 1 Peter Study Guide

Chapter 3

In verse 12 of the previous chapter, Peter began a section of his letter with an exhortation for believers to “keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles.” Remember, his great concern is for the great suffering that was about to come on them in the Roman empire. He began a series of practical ways of doing that in verse 13 by addressing the need for submission to rulers and government institutions. Then, in verse 18, he did the same regarding servants/slaves and masters, followed by comments in verses 21-25 on how Yeshua is our great example of enduring suffering under authorities when He hadn’t done anything wrong.

Now, as chapter 3 begins, he addresses marriage in the same manner. But this passage must be understood within that particular context.

3:1-6

v 1 Peter addresses wives by using the term *homoiōs* (“in the same way”), which points back to the previous chapter regarding practical ways of keeping their behavior excellent. He also uses the same word, *hupotassō* (“submit”) regarding wives to husbands as he did previously with common people to authorities and slaves to masters. And it is the same word that Paul uses regarding wives in Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians 3:18. Peter further emphasizes that this instruction applies to unbelieving husbands. There are two main interpretations of this instruction:

1. The Complementarian Interpretation argues that God established distinct, complementary roles for men and women in the home and in the believing community. It reflects a creative structure, similar to how Yeshua submitted to God the Father. Since it is functional, submission implies role differentiation in a marriage, not spiritual or personal inferiority. Thus, men and women remain completely equal co-heirs before God.

2. The Egalitarian Interpretation views it as a strategy for survival rather than a permanent mandate. In the Greco-Roman world, a wife was legally expected to worship her husband’s gods. So, a Christian woman converting independently was seen as subverting the household order. Peter’s instruction was a pragmatic way to protect these women from severe societal and marital backlash. By calling on women to “win over” their husbands through exemplary behavior, Peter elevated their moral autonomy beyond what Roman law granted. This view further contextualizes this verse alongside broader New Testament themes of mutual submission among all believers (e.g., Ephesians 5:21).

v 2-5 Peter shifts the focus from a wife’s outward actions to her internal character, which adds three crucial dimensions to his teaching:

1. It replaces status symbols with spiritual substance (v. 3).

In the Greco-Roman world, wealthy women used elaborate, braided hairstyles (often interwoven with gold, pearls, or expensive fabrics) and lavish clothing to flaunt their high social and economic status. So, by telling believing women not to rely on these external status symbols, Peter strips away the class divisions of Roman society. He elevates the poor woman who has nothing but a godly character over the wealthy elite. He contrasts physical clothes that rot and wear out with an “unfading” internal beauty.

2. It redefines “gentle and quiet” as strength, not weakness (v. 4).

In modern ears, a “gentle and quiet spirit” can sound like an instruction to be passive, silent, or a doormat. In the original Greek context, it meant the exact opposite. The Greek word *praus*, translated as “gentle,” was used to describe a wild stallion that had been trained and brought under control. It does not mean weakness; it means power under control.

Likewise, *hesuchios*, translated as “quiet,” refers to tranquility and peace. It describes someone who is not easily agitated, frantic, or driven by anxiety. So, in the context of unbelieving husbands, Peter is telling these women that their power does not come from screaming, arguing, or manipulating. It comes from an internal, unshakeable calm that a hostile environment cannot break.

3. It shifts the wife’s focus from her husband to God (v. 5).

Peter notes that the holy women of the past adorned themselves this way because they “put their hope in God.” So, a wife’s submission and gentle spirit are not dependent on whether her husband is a good man, a believer, or treating her well. For, if her hope is in her husband, a bad marriage will crush her. But by putting her hope in God, her security is completely detached from her husband’s behavior. She can remain calm, dignified, and respectful because she knows God is her ultimate protector and validator. Peter explicitly notes that this internal character is “of great worth in God’s sight,” assuring these women that even if their earthly husbands ignore or mistreat them, the King of the Universe sees and prizes them.

v 6 Peter cites Sarah as an exemplary model.

But instead of using the nuanced word for “submission” (*hupotasso*) he switched to a word that explicitly means “obey” (*hupakouo*). If submission isn’t blind obedience, why did Peter look back at the Old Testament and say that “Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord”? The answer lies in the unique Greek etymology of the verb *hupakouo*, which literally means “to listen under.” In the ancient world, it didn’t imply mindless, robotic subjugation; it described a posture of respectful, attentive listening that leads to cooperative action.

To understand what Peter means, we have to look at the only time in the Old Testament where Sarah calls Abraham “lord” (*kurios*). It happened in Genesis 18:12, when three divine visitors told Abraham that Sarah would have a baby in her old age. Sarah laughed to herself and said, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?” Notice that it was internal: Sarah didn’t say this out loud to bow down to Abraham; she said it to herself in her own thoughts. It reflected her internal respect for him, not a public display of groveling.

Throughout Genesis, Sarah is far from a silent, passive bystander. In Genesis 16, she initiates the plan involving Hagar. In Genesis 21, she demands that Abraham cast Hagar and Ishmael out—and God explicitly tells Abraham, “Listen to whatever Sarah tells you.” (Genesis 21:12). By using Sarah as his example, Peter is pointing to a matriarch who was vocal, independent, and fiercely protective of her family, yet maintained an underlying attitude of deep respect and cooperative alignment with her husband.

The final phrase of this verse is a radical statement given the historical context. Peter writes: “You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.” As established, Peter is primarily addressing believing women married to unbelieving, pagan husbands.

In Roman society, if a wife rejected her husband's gods to worship Yeshua, the husband had the legal right to punish her severely, divorce her, or cut her off. If Peter meant "blind obedience," he would have told these wives to worship their husbands' pagan idols to keep the peace. Instead, he tells them to do what is right according to God and refuse to be intimidated or terrified by their husbands' threats.

Peter uses *hupakouo* to ground submission in practical, everyday cooperation. However, by pairing it with her ultimate allegiance belonging to God, the call to "obedience" is a voluntary choice of respectful partnership—but it stops the moment it asks her to compromise her faith or give in to abuse and intimidation.

The common thread to chapters 2 and this first part of 3 is that in the Roman Empire, believers were constantly accused of being subversives, political rebels and even atheists because they rejected Roman gods. So, if Christian citizens refused to pay taxes, Christian slaves revolted, and Christian wives openly defied their pagan husbands, the Roman state would have crushed the early faith as a dangerous political cult. Peter addresses these various relationships described in chapters 2 and 3 to defuse that threat. He essentially argues: "Give the Roman culture no legitimate reason to criticize you. Obey their laws, respect their social structures, and let your superior moral behavior be the thing that confuses and ultimately converts them."

Read 3:7-12

- v 7 Once again, Peter uses *homoiōs* ("in the same way"), to link his instruction for husbands back to the series of practical ways of keeping their behavior excellent. That means it includes linking husbands to the self-sacrificing example of Messiah. Specifically, he commands husbands to live with their wives in an understanding and considerate manner. His instruction includes a call to understand physical differences as well as a recognition of them being "heirs with you of the grace of life." Then he adds a critical warning that if a husband fails to treat his wife with love and respect, his prayers will be hindered.
- v 8 Peter transitions to the entire body, commanding all believers to be like-minded, sympathetic, and to love one another with compassion and humility.
- v 9 Believers are explicitly told not to seek revenge or return insults for insults. Instead, they are called to bless others, knowing that God will bless them in return.
- v 10-12 He, then, describes the path to a blessed life. Quoting directly from Psalm 34, Peter explains that those who want to "love life and see good days" must control their speech (avoiding evil and deceit), turn away from sin, and actively pursue peace. He concludes by assuring believers that the Lord watches over the righteous and hears their prayers, but opposes those who do evil.

3:13-17

- v 13 Peter poses a rhetorical question that describes a lesser likelihood of harm if a person does good. This establishes a general principle that moral excellence often disarms hostility.
- v 14 Even if believers do suffer for doing what is right, Peter declares that they are "blessed." He is talking about a spiritual, eternal, and relational blessing rather than a material or physical

one. This statement explicitly echoes Yeshua's teaching in Matthew 5:10, which promises the kingdom of heaven to those who are persecuted for righteousness. It shifts the focus away from temporary physical safety and anchors it in an unbreakable eternity with God. Then, he commands them not to fear the threats of their persecutors or to be troubled by them, quoting the words of Isaiah 8:12.

- v 15-16 Instead of fearing critics, Peter shows that believers must dedicate their hearts entirely to Messiah as Lord. A major way of doing that is by always being ready to give a reasoned defense to anyone who asks for the reason for their hope. The Greek word translated as "defense," is *apologia*, from which we get the English word apology. But its original meaning was entirely different from saying "I'm sorry."

In the ancient Greek world, an *apologia* was a formal, reasoned defense used in a court of law. In that cultural context, if a person was formally accused of a crime, the prosecution gave an accusation (*kategoria*). The defendant then stood before the judge or jury to give a speech in reply. This formal, legal defense speech to clear one's name was called an *apologia*.

When Peter uses the word in verse 15, he expands it beyond official legal trials. The trigger for this *apologia*/defense is not a formal arrest warrant, but an everyday question sparked by the visible "hope that is in you." The implication is that believers must be intellectually prepared to give a logical, reasonable explanation for why they believe in Yeshua to neighbors, coworkers, or critics who question their lifestyle. This is also why formal efforts to defend the validity of the Bible are called apologetics.

Peter pairs this powerful, legal-sounding word with an unexpected constraint. The *apologia* must be delivered with "gentleness and respect."

- That means It is not a license to win arguments at all costs.
- It is not an intellectual assault or a shouting match.
- The goal is to win the person, not just the debate, by combining solid reasons with genuine humility.

- v 17 Peter asserts that if it is God's will for a believer to suffer, it is far better to suffer for doing what is right than for doing what is wrong.

3:18-22

- v 18 He shows how a believer's suffering is connected to that of Yeshua. He was completely righteous but died "once for all" for the unrighteous (humanity). His goal was to bring us to God. Though His physical body was put to death, He was made alive in the Spirit.

- v 19-20 While in His spiritual state, we are told that Messiah went and made a proclamation to the "spirits in prison." Peter identifies these spirits as those who were disobedient long ago during the days of Noah, while God waited patiently as the ark was being built.

The phrase "spirits in prison" is widely considered by biblical scholars to be one of the most debated puzzles in the entire New Testament. Historically, theologians have categorized the identity of these spirits and Messiah's proclamation into three main theories:

Fallen angels / demonic spirits

These are the rebellious angels (or “Watchers”) mentioned in Genesis 6:1–4, 2 Peter 2:4, and Jude 6, whose rebellion triggered the corruption of the pre-flood world. This took place between Yeshua’s death and His resurrection, or during His ascension. He traveled to the spiritual abyss where these entities are bound. But instead of offering them salvation, He proclaimed His ultimate victory over cosmic evil, sealing their doom.

Dead humans in Hades

This theory suggests that the “spirits” are the disembodied souls of the human beings who rejected Noah’s warnings and drowned in the great flood. Proponents claim that during the three days Messiah’s body lay in the tomb, He descended into the realm of the dead (Hades/Sheol) to preach the Gospel (*evangelion*), offering a second chance at salvation to those who perished under Noah’s judgment. This theory attempts to explain the traditional phrase in the Apostles’ Creed: “*He descended into hell.*”

The people of Noah’s day

This view argues that Yeshua did not physically or spiritually descend anywhere after His death. Instead, it claims Messiah, acting “in the Spirit,” was preaching *through* Noah during the historical days of Noah, while the ark was being built. Because they rejected the message, those people are *now* “spirits in prison,” held in Hades awaiting final judgment.

The key to understanding this passage is found in the meaning of the Greek words translated as “preached” and “spirits.” In the New Testament, there are two primary words used for speaking or preaching:

- *Evangelizō* means to “preach the Gospel” or bring good news of salvation.
- *Kērussō* means to herald a public announcement, or to officially proclaim a royal decree. A herald in the ancient world was representative of the king who would enter a conquered city to announce the king’s victory and laws.

The implication is that because Peter intentionally used *kērussō*, not *evangelizō*. Yeshua did not go to the prison to offer an invitation to be saved. He went as a conquering King to announce His ultimate triumph over the powers of darkness.

The Greek language also differentiates between human and supernatural spirits.

- *Psuchē* usually refers to the human soul or life force. When the New Testament speaks of dead human beings existing in the afterlife, it overwhelmingly calls them “souls” (*psuchai*). Peter even uses this exact word just one verse later (1 Peter 3:20) when he mentions the “eight souls (*psuchai*)” saved on the ark.
- *Pneuma* (plural: *pneumata*): Refers to spirit. In the vast majority of New Testament contexts, when *pneumata* is used without qualifiers like “of the righteous,” it refers exclusively to supernatural, angelic, or demonic beings (“unclean spirits”).

The implication is that by shifting from *pneumata* (spirits) in verse 19 to *psychai* (human souls) in verse 20, Peter makes a deliberate distinction. The “spirits in prison” are likely the fallen angels or demonic spirits of Noah’s day, while the humans on the ark are distinctly identified as human souls.

v 21-22 See the article, “*Peter’s Teaching on Baptism and Salvation.*”

Verse 22 provides the ultimate source of comfort and confidence for suffering believers. Yeshua is not a tragic martyr; He is the active, supreme Ruler of the universe, wielding the full authority of God the Father over all things, including the spiritual realm (similar to Paul’s language in Ephesians 6:12).

The believers reading this letter were terrified of Roman authorities, hostile neighbors, and spiritual opposition. So, Peter was reminding them that the very kings, governors, and spiritual darkness threatening them were completely subordinate to Yeshua, the Lord they served. Peter is telling his readers: “Your story will look exactly like His. If you suffer for doing good, do not fear, because you are united to the One who holds absolute dominion over the universe and you are on the winning side of cosmic history.”