

# Genesis as the Basis for Biblical Gender Equality

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Based on the first four lessons in *New Man, New Woman, New Life*  
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“What burdens are there on women in your culture?” At Empower International Ministries, we begin our seminars with questions such as this to help the seminar participants identify gender-related issues in their own cultures. Their answers give us a context within which to better view the teachings of Scripture that help us address those problems.

Here are some answers to this question that we have received at recent seminars we have held:

- Widow inheritance
- Women exclusively responsible for food, household labor, and child care
- Domestic violence
- No say on land issues (they cannot own land)
- Restricted to stay home (their movement outside the home is restricted)
- Problems with children are blamed on the mother
- Sexual abuse

These “burdens” were identified by both men and women attending our seminar as something they had seen in their own culture. The issue with this is that many of these “burdens” – as well as others – are reinforced by traditional misunderstandings of the accounts of creation and the fall in the first three chapters of Genesis. Biblical authority is thus claimed for beliefs which actually come from the culture! This, in turn, reinforces those beliefs and makes it more difficult to challenge them.

## Traditional Misunderstandings of Genesis

Here are some of the misunderstandings of Genesis that we have encountered in our ministry:

- Women were not created fully in God’s image – as men were
- Women were created for a subordinate role to men – to be a “worker” – understood in a subordinate sense, like a servant:
  - Women’s “role” is to serve men
  - Her purpose is to provide children, food and sex for men (this is typically the answer we receive when, in our seminars, we ask, “when a man pays dowry price for a wife, what is he buying?)
- Women were cursed by God (and the implication that the difficulties of women’s lives are a justly deserved punishment from God)

These traditional beliefs – misunderstandings of Genesis 1-3 – then reinforce the harmful beliefs and practices that are often found in traditional African culture.

## Challenging Traditional Misunderstandings

The purpose of this presentation is to challenge these traditional misunderstandings, and – in so doing – to replace them with accurate understandings of the biblical text. As our basis, we will use the Bible study guide used by Empower International Ministries: *New Man, New Woman, New Life*. The author is Dr. Carrie Miles, who is also the founder and director of Empower.<sup>1</sup>

Our Bible-based strategy is simple: First, we examine together what the biblical text *says* and second, we invite participants to evaluate what it *means*.

## The Bible's Story of Redemption

We do need to start with the “big picture” – the Biblical framework of the story of redemption. This is the biblical framework that shows where the human race began, what happened to it, and how God – through Jesus Christ – brings us back to where he originally intended us to be.

This biblical framework has the following simple outline:

- Creation (Genesis 1-2)
- The Fall (Genesis 3)
- Redemption
  - The Teachings of Jesus Christ
  - The Writings of the Apostle Paul

This outline, however, has a focus that is different from what we usually think of in the “story of redemption.” We usually think of the plan to provide us with eternal salvation – to enable us to live with God for eternity. Redemption, however, is not just for the next life, but to enable us to live with one another in our lives right now as God originally intended. To put it another way, we take the values of Heaven and make them a reality in our lives with one another today.

Or, to put it yet another way, Jesus came to teach us how to live.

## The Foundation for Biblical Gender Equality

So what did God intend for human relationships – particularly between men and women? That is the question that the Creation stories in Genesis 1-2 address. Genesis 3, commonly referred to as “the Fall,” addresses the question of “What went wrong?” What did sin do to human relationships?

Here is an outline of what we will see in Genesis 1-3.

- Creation: Genesis 1-2 (God's ideal for human relationships)
  - Man and Woman in the Beginning (Genesis 1)
  - The Ideal Relationship (Genesis 2)
- The Fall: Genesis 3 (What Went Wrong?)
  - Man and Woman's Position with God (Who or what gets cursed?)
  - The End of Unity (and why?)

## Study 1: Man and Woman in the Beginning

We will begin with Jesus:

Matthew 19:3-8<sup>2</sup>

Some Pharisees came to [Jesus], and to test him they asked “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female’, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”

### Start with Jesus!

It is significant that we begin our discussion of Genesis as the basis of gender equality with Jesus. Jesus Christ Himself directs our attention to the creation account. When approached by some Pharisees on the subject of divorce, he calls their attention to the creation accounts in both Genesis 1 and 2 and what these passages say about marriage. When the Pharisees shift back to the permission for divorce that Moses gave, Jesus again refers them to the creation account and calls their attention to the fact that, “. . . from the beginning it was not so.”

What is God’s ideal for the relationship between man and woman in marriage? What is God’s intent? Jesus says that it is the “one flesh” spoken of by the Creator himself in Genesis 2. In speaking to the Pharisees, he made it clear that their culture – and the Law of Moses that they appealed to for permission for divorce – contradicted God’s ideal.

The portion of the Law of Moses that permitted divorce was there, Jesus said, due to the hard hearts of people. These hard hearts prevented God’s ideal from being realized. He then points to Genesis one and two as giving us God’s ideal, and then giving us the reason we do not attain to God’s ideal – hard hearts. Now, when we ask where hard hearts come from (as we will do in detail later in this paper), we would see that they are from the Fall, described in chapter three of Genesis.

In this passage, Jesus also implies that He came to address the problem of hard hearts, which places this entire discussion in the larger context of the Bible’s story of redemption – the redemption of human relationships.

Let’s continue by taking a closer look at what Genesis teaches us about God’s ideal.

## Genesis 1:26-29

26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

27 So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

29 God said, "See, I have given you [the form of "you" is plural] every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you [plural] shall have them for food."

### Back to the Beginning

So – what do we learn about God's original intent – God's ideal – from this passage in Genesis 1 about the creation of humankind – man and women? What do we see if we go back to the beginning – all the way back?

- *Both* men and women are created in God's image. "Male and female he created them."
- *Both* men and women are given the blessing and responsibility for dominion over the earth. The responsibility of having "dominion over the fish of the sea," etc., is given to both of them.
- *Both* men and women are given the blessing and responsibility for filling the earth – that is, children. First, this is a blessing to enjoy, not a command to obey. Second, the blessing to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" was given to both male and female.
- *Both* men and women are given every form of food. God Himself says explicitly that "every form of food" is given to both male and female. This presents a very specific challenge in many of the cultures where we minister, as we learn of various food taboos that typically restrict women from eating certain forms of protein.

### Study 1 / Genesis 1 – Implications

Of course, as with any Bible study, at some point we must ask, "So what?" What lessons can we draw out of this? Here are some of the main implications that have stood out in this first study during our seminars:

- The message of Jesus is that God's plan for the sexes – for men and women, male and female – is found in creation, not culture. Certainly not in cultures that are formed around human hard hearts, which are not part of God's creation ideal. And not even in the Law of Moses itself, which gives exceptions to God's creation ideal due to human hard hearts.
- Both men and women are created in God's image.
- Children are a blessing from God, not a commandment.
- Children and property belong to women together with men.
- Food taboos are abolished. As one man said during this part of our seminar, "My wife eats what I eat, when I eat it!"

## Study 2: The Ideal Relationship

Now we turn to Study 2, “The Ideal Relationship.” In this case, the text is Genesis chapter 2, where we read of the creation of the first man and the first woman – Adam and Eve. The primary text we will look at in this presentation is verses 7 and 18 through 25. Again we will take our direction from Jesus and ask what is God’s creation ideal or intent, as we look at the specifics of the relationship between them.

Genesis 2:7, 18-25

7 Then the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.

[Verses 8-17 describe the setting in the Garden of Eden, and God’s command to the human to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.]

18 Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the human should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner [KJV: a help meet for him].” 19 So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the human to see what he would call them; and whatever the human called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The human gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the human there was not found a helper as his partner. 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the human, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the human he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

23 Then the man said,  
“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;  
This one shall be called Woman,  
For out of Man this one was taken.”

24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.  
25 And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

### Study 2 – Main points (so far)

Before we look at this in detail, let’s identify the main points so far in this text.

First, God creates Adam. In the original Hebrew, however, this is “Ha ‘Adam” (“ha” being the Hebrew word – or prefix for – “the”). “Adam,” in turn, is a play on words, taken from the word for the red earth, or “Ha Adamah.” So “Adam” is literally “the Earth Creature,” or, more simply, “the Human.” At this point there is no indication of gender.

Second, the reason for the creation of “the woman” is given by God himself: “It is not good that the Human should be alone” (vs. 18). This is followed by the creation of the animals, who are brought to the Human for naming. But a suitable “helper as his partner” was not found for the Human among them. This is then followed by the creation of the woman from the side of the Human as a suitable “helper” as the man’s partner.

Finally, a major lesson that is drawn from this passage is given in verse 24, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” – which speaks of the one-flesh relationship

between husband and wife. The significance of this statement is that it is quoted by both Jesus and Paul – Jesus, in Matthew 19:5 – which he states was said by the Creator himself, and Paul, in Ephesians 5:31 – where he calls it a profound mystery that reflects the relationship between Christ and the church.

## **The Issue of Authority**

Now that we have identified some of the key points of this passage, we are ready to take a closer look at the detail. It is here that a major issue comes to our attention: that of authority. Specifically, the authority of the man over the woman.

In the first chapter of Genesis human authority over the rest of creation is explicitly stated: They (both male and female) are to “have dominion” over the fish, the animals and the birds, and so on. However, there is no such statement in Genesis 2 that explicitly gives the husband authority over his wife, so evidence is assumed or inferred by many traditionalists to support this claim. This is typically argued from three events in this chapter:

1. God Himself calls the woman man’s “helper,” which is seen to be a subordinate role – equivalent to “worker;”
2. Adam names the woman, which is seen as an expression of his authority; and
3. Adam was created first, which is seen as giving him a position of authority over the woman.

We will examine each of these perspectives and evaluate them based on what the text actually says.

### **Authority: A “Helper” or “Worker”?**

First, we look at the concept of “helper,” beginning with a return to verses 7 and 18.

Genesis 2:7, 18

7 Then the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.

18 Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the human should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

When many people read this they see “helper” as meaning the same thing as “worker:” God will make the man “a worker as his partner.”

Our understanding of this text really depends upon the meaning of the term, “helper.” What did the word “helper” mean in its original language and culture? The word translated “helper” in Genesis 2:7 and 18 is the Hebrew “*Ezer*.” In our own language and culture – whether English or African languages – we usually think of a subordinate, and thus interpret the word to mean that women have subordinate roles to men and men’s authority.

Actually, this term, *‘ezer*, is used in the Hebrew in a very different way: *‘ezer* is used for God - a superior! It is also used in a military sense for a king or army that comes to the aid of another king in battle. In neither of these cases is there any indication of authority over the *‘ezer*.

Here are a few examples of the term being used for God:

1 Samuel 7:12 (this one is the most obvious)

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, which means “stone of help” (*eben* for stone and *‘ezer* for help [didn’t I say this one would be obvious?]), saying, “Thus far has the LORD helped (*‘ezer*) us.

Psalm 30:10

Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me; O LORD, be my helper (*‘ezer*).

Psalm 46:1

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help (*‘ezer*) in trouble.

Psalm 54.4

Behold, God is my helper (*‘ezer*); the Lord is the upholder of my life.

The Hebrew term “helper” is also used in a military context, for a king or army who comes to the aid of another king in battle. In this case the implications are that the term is used for one who is equal in strength or power. Here are a couple of examples:

Joshua 1:14 (Joshua to the Israelites that settled east of the Jordan)

Your wives, your children and your livestock may stay in the land that Moses gave you east of the Jordan, but all your fighting men, fully armed, must cross over ahead of your brothers. You are to help (*‘ezer*) your brothers.

2 Samuel 8:5

When the Arameans of Damascus came to help (*‘ezer*) Hadadezer king of Zobah, David struck down twenty-two thousands of them.

In each of these cases – *‘ezer* used for God and used for another army who comes to your aid – it identifies the weakness or need of the one being helped, not his authority. Thus, the implication of the term is that woman is to be a power or strength equal to the man – a helper like God is our helper. How else could she give him the help he needs?

This important point is further reinforced by the way the term, “*‘ezer*,” is used in combination with another term, the Hebrew “*kenegdo*,” which is typically translated by “suitable” or “like,” indicating a role of “partner.” So the “*‘Ezer Kenegdo*” is a “strong partner” for the man, not like the animals. Some translations use the expression, “help meet” for both terms, which should not be confused with a popular corruption of “help mate” – which loses the sense of partner.

One aspect of the term’s meaning is that of “facing” – to meet face to face. The implications of this are significant, since in many cultures this is exactly what women are not allowed to do: to meet a man face to face, or eye to eye – actions which would reinforce woman’s equal position with man.

In Genesis 2 woman is called a “strong helper” or “suitable partner” for man. Once the original meaning of these terms is fully understood, it is clear that there is no indication of hierarchy – of man’s authority over woman – expressed in any way.

### **Authority: “Naming the Woman”?**

A second way in which man’s authority over woman is inferred from the account of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 is the claim that Adam names the woman, thus indicating his authority over her. Let’s examine this claim, which is based on verse 23.

Genesis 2:23

The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called ‘woman,’  
for she was taken out of man.”

So, does Adam name the woman? When we examine this verse, what we see is that this is not a “naming convention” for a proper name at all, and “woman” is not even a proper name! “Woman” is just the feminine form of “man” in this verse. We see this clearly if we include the Hebrew words used in the original:

The man (ha adam) said, “. . . She shall be called ‘woman’ (Hebrew “*ishshah*”), for she was taken out of man (Hebrew “*ish*”).”

This statement simply reinforces the first part of the verse, Adam’s statement that “this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” Man and woman share a name – and identity – as well as bones and flesh. There is no indication whatsoever of authority in this statement.

In addition, Genesis 2:23 should be compared with Genesis 3:20, where – *after* the Fall – a proper name *is* involved (“Adam named his wife Eve. . .”). It should also be compared with other passages such as Genesis 16:13, where Sarah’s maid, Hagar, gives a name to God and Ruth 4:17, where the women of Bethlehem name the newly-born son of Boaz and Ruth. All three passages support the view that, in Hebrew culture, giving a name indicates wisdom and insight, not authority.

### **Authority: “Creation Order?”**

A third way in which male authority over women is defended from Genesis 2 is that of the creation order: the view that, since man was created first, he therefore has authority over the woman. A careful examination of the text’s explanation of why woman was created should be adequate to refute this claim. We start with God’s own statement:

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 reason given for the creation of woman was man's need. It is not good for the man to be alone; as we just saw, he needs an "*ezer kenegdo*" – a strong partner as his helper. A face-to-face helper to walk with him. There is no indication of authority in this statement or in the narrative that follows.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, one needs to ask whether Genesis (as a whole) even supports the importance of creation (or birth [as the closest analogy]) order in assigning responsibility, authority, or other forms of primacy. For example, consider Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, etc.; none of them were born first! For that matter, not even Moses – through whom God gave the law – was born first!

## **Study 2 / Genesis 2 - Summary**

We wrap up Study 2 by looking at the main lessons that we have drawn from this chapter.

First, woman was created to be a strong partner to man, not a housemaid or subordinate. She is the "*Ezer Kenegdo*," the "Strong Partner" for man. She is to be a "face to face" or, better yet, a "side to side" help for man, not a "worker" who reports to – or is owned by the man. God's intent for the husband and wife relationship is made clear: "One flesh, naked and unashamed," as the biblical text states. The "one flesh" relationship spoken of points to the unity and mutuality of husband and wife.

Second, the emphasis on the creation of the woman is the man's need – not his authority. She is created by God as a strength equal to him and corresponding to his need. He recognizes that she shares his "flesh and bone," as well as his name: "*Ish*" and "*Ish-shah*," "Man" and "wo-man." This is the real emphasis of the creation order as described in the text.

Third, God's intent for the husband and wife relationship is stated at the conclusion of this narrative. They are intended to be one flesh, naked and unashamed before each other. The husband leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife. Their primary loyalty is to be to each other, not their parents or clan.

The final lesson from Genesis 2 is that there is no authority indicated in the relationship between husband and wife. As we have seen, this is seen in a correct understanding of three issues: (1) the term, "*Ezer Kenegdo*," – the "Strong Helper" or "Suitable Partner;" (2) while Adam recognizes the significance of the sexes – man (*ish*) and woman ("*ishshah*"), he does not give the woman a name; and (3) the creation order of man and woman does not indicate subordination.

## **Study 3: Man and Woman's Position with God**

The third study is the first of two that focus the event called "the Fall" and its impact. This is the temptation of Eve and Adam, their fall into sin, and the judgment pronounced by God. The biblical text is Genesis 3:1-20. What we will see is a change in the position of man and woman with God. This has its beginning in human rebellion, followed by what is usually understood as God's judgment but – as we shall see – what is actually God's explanation of the consequences of their rebellion.

Let's begin by reviewing the biblical text. Since we want to focus on the man and woman, we will skip past the discussion between the serpent and the woman. Pay close attention to the details in the text, since we will come back to this.

Genesis 3:6-13

[Vss. 6-7] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

[In verse 8, they hear the sound of the Lord God, and they hide among the trees of the Garden of Eden.]

[Vss. 9-13] “But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

A couple of questions will help us to understand the significance of this passage of Scripture.

First, who is present when the serpent tempts Eve? This is important because Eve is often given the sole blame for bringing sin into the world. And one might get that impression since the conversation is just between the serpent and Eve. But notice the statement in verse 6: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, *who was with her*, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6; emphasis mine).

It is interesting to see how people resist the obvious conclusion when we study this passage in our seminars. They discuss – even argue – among one another, compare their different translations and challenge the facilitators. But finally they accept the clear truth.

Yes – the man was there with the woman during the temptation, first as a silent witness to the conversation between the serpent and the woman, and then as a willing participant – taking the fruit from the woman and eating it. So both man and woman bear responsibility for the entrance of sin into the world.

The second question is, what happens to the relationship between the man and woman as a result of their sin? In verse 7 we learn the immediate impact: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. . . .” This is a description of shame, which is experienced by both the man and the woman. Then in verse 12, when God asks the man about what he has done, he replies, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” In other words, he blames the woman.

As we read along in Genesis 3 the next thing we see is a description of the more long-term impacts of sin – not just the hiding and blaming that occurred in the Garden of Eden, but the long-term effects beyond what happened that day. Remember, the focus of this entire paper is not the impact of sin on our relationship with God, which is important and usually gets most of the attention, but the impact of sin on the relationships between men and women.

There are several ways the Bible defines sin, but – for our purposes – we will use the basic definition, “sin is replacing God’s will with our own.” So – what happens when we do that? Let’s look at the consequences of sin as described in Genesis 3. First, God pronounces judgment.

Genesis 3:14, 17

<sup>14</sup> So the Lord God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life."

<sup>17</sup> Then to [the man] He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil (Hebrew *'itsabon* – or sorrow) you shall eat of it all the days of your life."

To address the consequences of sin we will get right to the point: Who or what is cursed? This is important to ask because many popular interpretations of Genesis 3 assume that the man and the woman were cursed, or that the woman alone was cursed by God. In fact, we have now come to the heart of the traditional misunderstandings of Genesis 3: That Eve – and through her all women – have been cursed by God.

So – what does the text of Genesis 3 actually say? There are only two curses explicitly mentioned – and the verses we just read tell us both of them. First, the serpent is cursed. In verse 14, God tells the serpent, ““Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals. . . .”” Second, the ground is cursed. In verse 17, God tells Adam, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and ate from the tree of which I commanded you, 'you must not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you.”

Now, if we stick to what the text actually says – that only the serpent and the ground were cursed – how does that affect our understanding of the impact of sin? As we will see as we proceed to our fourth and final study, we will understand Genesis 3:16-19 as the consequences of the sinful actions of the man and the woman.

### **Study 3: Summary**

But first, a quick review of the main application points of Study 3, “Man and Woman’s Position with God.”

First, the fall – the entry of sin into the human race – is the fault of both Adam and Eve. As we saw, Adam was with Eve throughout the entire event, first as a silent witness, then as an active participant.

Second, God did not curse the people but the serpent and the ground. Only these two curses are mentioned in the text and – as we will see – are fully adequate to explain the rest of the passage.

Finally, Genesis 3:16-19 describes the consequences of living outside of faith in God.

Now, on to the fourth and final study.

### **Study 4: The End of Unity**

The focus of this study is to expand our understanding of the impact of the fall on people – men and women – and their relationships. We will examine more closely Genesis 3:16-19, which explains the impact – the consequences – of the fall. What we will learn is that the curse on the ground affects both men and women.

That the curse on the ground affects men is clear from the text, since they are explicitly tied together, but – when we examine carefully what God says to the woman – we will see that this is also the consequence of the curse on the ground.

The conclusion that we will emerge see will answer the question regarding “patriarchy” – the rule by men: Does it result from Creation – from God’s original ideal for humanity, or does it result from the Fall – from human sin?

The ground was cursed. We have already seen this stated clearly by God in Genesis 3:17. What, then, is the consequence for men of the ground being cursed? This is stated in the very next phrase. What we will see is that, just like a key is essential to unlock a door, what we are about to see is essential to unlock the meaning of the consequences of the Fall.

Genesis 3:17(b)-18(a) – God speaks to Adam

“Cursed is the ground for your sake;  
In toil [or sorrow] you shall eat of it  
all the days of your life.  
Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. . . .”

The thorns and thistles, of course, are the reason for the man experiencing painful toil as he grows his food. What we have here is a picture of scarcity, the lack of what is needed to support life. This is the key to understanding the consequences of the fall.

So what does scarcity mean? Instead of God’s abundance to live – which Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden, we encounter scarcity, the challenge to survive in a world of want and lack. Difficult choices will need to be made. Not the choices of Eden – “shall we eat from this mango tree here or that watermelon plant over there?” but “Who gets to eat?” And even, “Will we have enough to eat at all?”

These kinds of choices will impact people and their relationships.

Just as God addressed Adam and Eve separately, we will look at the impact of scarcity on each separately. We will continue with an examination of what God says to Adam first.

Genesis 3:17-19 – The impact of scarcity on man:

Then to [the man] He said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’:  
Cursed is the ground for your sake;  
in toil (Hebrew, *‘itsabon* [or sorrow]) you shall eat of it  
all the days of your life.  
Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you,  
and you shall eat the herb of the field.  
In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
for dust you are,  
and to dust you shall return” (NKJV).

The impact of scarcity – the consequences of the cursed ground – on man are fairly straightforward.

First, man will suffer painful (or sorrowful) toil (vs. 17). The Hebrew word here is *'itsabon,'* meaning “sorrowful toil.” Man must work hard to survive. And it will be hard. Genesis 3:17-19 pictures the life of a subsistence farmer, struggling to make a living out of the resistant ground.

Second, “man eats by the sweat of his brow.” This points to several things, including anxiety and shame. Where does this come from? As the human population grows, man must not only compete with the ground, he must compete with other men. Scarcity breeds uncertainty: Will he be master or slave? The conqueror or the conquered?<sup>4</sup> This leads to deep concern about competition for limited resources, the pressure to be the best, even to dominate others in his struggle to survive. Along with all this, the man must not show weakness, for to show weakness is to open yourself up to being taken advantage of and dominated by other men.

Finally, the man will return to the dust – that is, the final stage of this struggle to survive is death.

Next, we examine the impact of scarcity on women. To do this, we go back to verse 16. Since this occurs before the mention of the curse on the ground in verse 17, it is not obvious that there is a cause-and-effect relationship from the scarcity resulting from the curse on the ground to the description of the impact on women. But, as we will see, this is where the evidence points.

Genesis 3:16 – The impact of scarcity on women:

To the woman [God] said: “I will greatly multiply your sorrow (in Hebrew, *'itsabon'*; this word could also be translated “sorrowful or painful toil”) and your conception; in pain (*'itsabon'* or sorrow again) you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (NKJV).

Depending on the translation of the Bible that you usually use, this may sound quite a bit different to you. There is an important issue of the accuracy of the translation of this verse that needs to be addressed. Many popular English translations read, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing.” There is a significant question that deserves an answer, however – that is, how did God do this? How did God implement this change in women’s bodies? Of course, if we were to accept this translation and look carefully at the implications, we would see that it is one of the sources of the belief that God cursed women.

We propose another translation – essentially using the King James or New King James English versions – that we believe the evidence supports as more accurate: “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conceptions.” This is more consistent with the original Hebrew, the impact of the curse on the ground, and the experience of women throughout human history, that is, in the pre-industrial world of subsistence farming, characterized by scarcity.<sup>5</sup>

We need to periodically reassess our translations – for accuracy, for consistency, for the way in which they are understood. Verse 16 – the description of the impact of the fall on women – is a good example of this. The central question is this, what did God actually multiply? This is what we will take a careful look at.

In the original Hebrew, the first thing God says he will increase is the woman’s “*'itsabon'*.” Does this word sound familiar? It should, since – as we learned just a bit ago – it was also used for man in verse 17, when God said that he would increase the man’s “sorrowful toil”! Just like man, woman must work hard to survive; she,

too, will experience “sorrowful toil.” This can be traced back directly to the curse on the ground and the resulting scarcity in the pre-industrial world.

The second thing mentioned that God will increase is woman’s conceptions or pregnancies (the word can mean the entire process – from conception, through pregnancy, to birth). In the world of subsistence farming, a couple’s most important resource is children. So – guess what woman’s most important job in this world becomes: The bearing and raising of children! Rather than children being the blessing as pictured in Genesis 1, children become an important and essential necessity. Plus, a woman’s life is now defined by this role! A woman’s work is now defined as whatever she can do while pregnant, nursing, or raising children, which will characterize her entire life.

We should also add that this need for children also results in polygamy and dowry price for a wife, as women become valued for their ability to bear children, and a man’s wealth increases as his children increase. In addition, we see how infertility – the inability of a woman to bear children – was not just a personal heartbreak but an economic disaster. One of the worst judgments about a woman in this world was that she was barren. Like a field that could produce no crops, she could produce no children.

The next phrase in the verse is this, “. . . in sorrow you shall bring forth children.” Although this is often translated as “pain” (that is, pain in childbirth), the Hebrew root of this word is the same as the root for *’itsabon*, which you will remember as “sorrowful toil.” In fact, this particular form of this root is always used for grief or distress in Genesis: for emotional – not physical – pain. (We will take a look at a few of these occurrences shortly.)

What would account for this type of sorrow in bringing children into the world? There are several things we could point to: A world where children are valued as resources rather than as individuals; a world of high infant and childhood mortality; and a world of conflict between the woman’s children – as we see in the conflict between Cain and Abel in the very next chapter of Genesis!<sup>6</sup>

We mentioned that this word we translated as sorrow is translated this way throughout its occurrences in Genesis. Here are a few passages for comparison:

Genesis 6:6 (in the introduction to the story of the flood)

And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was *grieved* in His heart.

Genesis 34:7 (The response of the sons of Israel to the rape of their sister, Dinah)

And the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard it; and the men were *grieved* and very angry, because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, a thing which ought not to be done.

Genesis 45:5 (Joseph to his brothers who, years earlier, had sold him into slavery)

But now, do not therefore be *grieved* or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

Please note that in each case the same word – translated as “grief” or “grieved,” is used as we find in Genesis 3:16 where God tells the woman, “. . . in sorrow (or grief) you will bear children . . . .”

We now turn our attention to the final phrase in Genesis 3:16 – the impact of the fall on women, “. . . your desire (or turning) shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over you.” As we shall see, understanding this as the consequence of the cursed ground and the resulting scarcity makes perfect sense.

First, God tells Eve that her desire shall be for her husband. While debates have raged over what is meant by this phrase, the insight that seeing it as the consequence of scarcity is that women become dependent upon their husbands financially, for their social status, and ultimately for survival itself. Not only this, a woman’s living conditions rise or fall in relation to the successfulness of the man she is married to, leading women to desire to marry a dominant man, one whom she can fully depend upon.<sup>7</sup>

Next, God tells Eve that her husband will rule over her. Women are restricted to the domestic sphere due to their economic and cultural mandate to bear children while their husbands are free to be more active outside the home, leading men to have more power in social institutions, as well as in the home. As a consequence, men have more power in the marital relationship. (For example, in the gospels, men come to Jesus asking about permission to divorce their wives; the women don’t do this because being without a husband puts them in a precarious position socially and economically.) Thus we see the ultimate outcome, that of the subordination of women to men.

We can summarize this study in two ways. First, we can look at the impact of scarcity on relationships under the heading of “hard hearts.” As we recall, this was the diagnosis of the human condition offered by Jesus in Matthew 19, where we started this discussion with the Pharisees coming to Jesus to ask about divorce. What – in addition to what we’ve already discussed, characterizes hard hearts?

First, relationships become transactional. To understand this, think of yourself at a store; you have obtained some desired items and, before you leave the store, you pay for them. We call this a transaction. In the same way, marriage becomes a transaction: The husband obtains sex, children and food while the wife obtains a home and protection. Essentially we use others to serve ourselves – to meet our own needs.

Second, hierarchy determines our treatment of one-another. We find ourselves in a power and status hierarchy, and so we treat people above us in the hierarchy with appropriate respect (whether we feel it or not), and those below us as subordinate, often unworthy of our respect, and quite possibly expendable. (This is implied in the Pharisees’ interest in divorcing their wives as reported in Matthew 19.)

Third, sexuality becomes expressed in a double-standard. For men, it becomes a marker of personal worth and achievement, rather than a tool of relationship. In other words, men are always under pressure to prove their masculinity through conquests – particularly sexual ones. On the other hand, women’s sexuality becomes something to be protected: Not for the woman’s sake, but for her husband’s and family’s, lest she bring shame on them.

So what is missing in this description of hard hearts? Biblical love, often called “agape” love, based on the Greek word for a selfless, caring attitude and behavior toward others. If we were to proceed to the rest of our Bible study guide, we would see that this is where the redemption of relationships brought by Jesus Christ leads us.

The second way in which we can summarize this study is to return to the subject of patriarchy, which, we can now see, is yet one more consequence of the fall – of the curse on the ground and scarcity: that of the rule of men. If we remember back to when we discussed the pressure on men to be competitive that comes with

scarcity, we are prepared for a significant insight: While patriarchy is usually thought of as the rule of men over women, it is actually the rule of a few men over everyone else – both men and women. We see this – not only from an analysis of scarcity on people – but by observing human cultures around the world, including those described in the Bible. Even the disciples of Jesus repeatedly argue over who is the greatest, who gets to sit at Jesus’ right and left hands, with all the status and power that goes with that position!<sup>8</sup>

To emphasize this point, we need to observe that men’s drive to dominate each other and women comes from the fall – from sin and scarcity, *not* from God’s original intent. This behavior can be traced back to the fall, to the curse on the ground and the scarcity that results from it.

The corresponding truth that needs to be emphasized is that women have not been cursed by God. That their lives are filled with such hardship, of subordination to men and their rule, of the demand to bear children, as well as provide food and sex for men, is the consequence of scarcity and not a curse. The consequences of the fall, therefore, can be addressed and redeemed!

### **Conclusion: The Rest of the Story**

Genesis – particularly chapters 1-3 – is truly the basis for gender equality! But it is also the foundation for what we might call “the rest of the story.”

We began this study with a list of “burdens on women.” We could add an equally long list of “burdens on men,” since the world of scarcity is equally hard on men! Indeed, as we have seen in our seminars, men begin to be open to the equality of women with men when they come to understand the equality of men with each other!

Genesis is only the first part of the story. In creation we see God’s original intent for us. In the Fall we learn how scarcity has impacted men and women and their relationships.

This puts us in a position to see more clearly how the teachings of Jesus and Paul remove the impact of the curse on the ground and restore man and woman to the relationship God intended. As Dr. Carrie Miles says, “What redeemed lovers want is not authority over each other but to be of one heart and mind.”<sup>9</sup>

This story of creation, fall and redemption is described in detail in the Bible study guide published by Empower International Ministries, “New Man, New Woman, New Life,” which I encourage you to read and study. It can be downloaded for free from our ministry’s web site at <http://empowerinternational.org/> (click on Programs and Resources and from there select Free Study Guides).



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This Bible study guide reflects the same biblical analysis that is used in Dr. Miles book, *The Redemption of Love: Rescuing Marriage and Sexuality from the Economics of a Fallen World*, Brazos: 2006,

<sup>2</sup> Biblical texts are taken from New Man, New Woman, New Life, where they are the translation by the author, Dr. Carrie A. Miles, unless otherwise noted – such as “NKJV,” the New King James Version.

<sup>3</sup> The clear meaning of Genesis 2 should be kept in mind when interpreting 1 Timothy 2:12-13, where Paul appears to be limiting women’s activities due to the creation order. There are other explanations for his statement; for example, he may be simply stating a fact in the face of a false teaching. The clear meaning of Genesis should guide our interpretation of 1 Timothy – not the other way around.

<sup>4</sup> *The Redemption of Love*, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> This, of course, raises the question, so where does “pain in pregnancy/childbirth” come from? Carrie Miles offers this explanation: “Childbirth pain is a consequence of the uterine muscles putting the cervix open. A small opening to expel a large object. One might argue that humans are unique in experiencing pain in childbirth, but we are also the only mammal that walks upright and that has a birth canal vertical to the ground. My response to that question (which I think I have been asked twice) is, “If those muscles were not strong enough to hurt when contracted, they would not be strong enough to hold the baby in.” (Email from Dr. Miles dated January 4, 2020.)

<sup>6</sup> For more details on this perspective, see *The Redemption of Love*, particularly chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> Another interpretation of the woman’s desire in Genesis 3:16 is that it refers to “the woman’s desire to dominate or control” her husband. This has been popularized by the English Standard Version (2016 edition – “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you”) and the New Living Translation (2nd edition – “you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you”). This interpretation is based primarily on a comparison with Genesis 4:7, where a parallel expression refers to sin’s desire for (or contrary to) Cain, and that Cain, in response, must seek to rule over sin. There is a concern that this interpretation may inadvertently reinforce husbands’ suspicion of their wives and, like Cain’s action to rule over sin, a husband’s need to rule over his wife – which has the potential to also justify the non-biblical practice, not uncommon in Africa, of wife-beating.

While a full analysis of this interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper, we can make a basic observation from the three uses of the word in the Hebrew Old Testament. In Song of Solomon 4:7 the bride speaks of the groom’s “desire” for her, where the word is used in a positive sense. It is used in Genesis 4:7 for sin’s desire for Cain, where the metaphor is that of a wild beast “crouching at the door,” reinforcing the translation of “desire for” in the sense of an appetite for, rather than “desire contrary to” or “desire to control.” Once we add the third usage in Genesis 3:16, we see that there is no reason to translate the term in any other way than “desire for.”

The biggest concerns, however, are the two questions central to the approach taken in this paper. First, how did God accomplish this? It makes it all too easy to see this as resulting from a curse by God upon the woman – and, by implication, on all women, which – as we have seen – is not the message of the Genesis text. Second, if this is the character of sin, then where or how is redemption to occur? The comparison with Cain in Genesis 4:7 – where he is told that he must rule over sin – makes it easy to see this as reinforcing male rule over women as a sort of corrective action to the female desire to control men. The answers to both questions only reinforce a situation in Africa that many are trying to bring healing to.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 20:20-21; Mark 10:36-37

<sup>9</sup> *The Redemption of Love* p. 16.