

An analysis of Genesis 3:16

By Bob Young

3:16

To the woman he said, I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception, in sorrow you will bring forth children,
and for your husband will be your longing,
and he shall have power/rule/dominion over you.

4:7

If you do well, won't you be lifted up?
And if you do not do well, sin is sitting and waiting at the door.
And for you is his longing,
And you will have power/rule/dominion.

The parallel construction which is found in 3:16 and 4:7 provides helpful understanding of the difficulty in translation.

In direct response to the serpent's deception and Adam's and Eve's disobedience, God pronounces curses on them as well as on generations to follow. When God speaks to the woman who was deceived and willfully ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he describes her future relationships and family life. Having children may bring her great joy, but bearing and giving birth to them will require severe pain. More children will always bring more pain.

The marriage relationship will now be strained instead of simply being the source of love, comfort, and belonging the woman desires. In some sense the equal partnership has been damaged. It's unclear exactly how the second part of the curse about husbands and wives should be read. Scholars have offered various interpretations of this subtle Hebrew phrasing.

Most interpret this to mean that the woman would desire to be in control of her husband, but he would be the master.

Others see this as implying that the woman's desire for her husband would be frustrated by his role as an authority in her life.

Male headship in the marriage relationship is not part of the curse and this idea is not implied here. On the contrary, God's response to this incident proves that Adam's role as leader and protector was intended before sin entered the world (cf. 2:24). The New Testament makes clear that God's design for human marriage, with husband as the self-sacrificing head, is meant to be a beautiful picture of Christ and the church. Paul even quotes Genesis 2:24 when he paints that picture in Ephesians 5:22–33. See also Matt. 19:1ff.

This curse involves conflict over the God-given roles. Adam and Eve both failed to uphold God's intended pattern of spiritual leadership, and it caused the greatest disaster in history. This is especially felt in our individual lives as each spouse fails to live up to God's design for selfless love and respect between husbands and wives.