

When He Will Not Lead

Suggestions for Christian Wives in a Difficult Situation

A woman called our ministry looking for help, and I could hear the anguish in her voice. She'd tried everything she could think of to get her Christian husband



to shoulder the responsibility of spiritual leadership in their family, but nothing worked. In fact, things were getting worse, and she was so angry that she struggled just to be civil to him. She considered taking their children and leaving, but first she called us hoping that maybe we had the secret—something she could say or do that would fix what she felt was an intolerable marriage.

There's no question that this caller was in a complicated situation. I don't want to minimize her difficulty by suggesting that *anyone* could answer all her questions or solve her problems in a few easy steps. But there are some biblical principles that apply and might give her, and other women in her situation, hope. This is what I wish I would have told her:

You have not been forgotten. When we are chafing under a difficult situation, it's tempting to feel abandoned by God. We probably won't understand why He doesn't immediately answer our prayers, and why He doesn't bless our attempts to wiggle out of the circumstance.

It's vital to remember that every aspect of your life is under God's control. He has not forsaken you (Heb. 13:5b). This difficult circumstance comes from God's hand and is specifically designed for your good (Romans 8:28). Your husband may change, but he may not. Are you willing to humble yourself under the mighty hand of God (1 Peter 5:6) and accept *whatever* He ordains?

Evaluate your own attitudes. Here's a hard truth: No matter what your husband is or is not doing, all the commands of the Bible still apply to *you*. You are still required to respect your husband (1 Peter 3:1-2), to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show courtesy (Titus 3:2). You must put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, and evil speaking, both *to* him and *about* him (Eph. 4:31).

But just changing your behavior—gritting your teeth and biting your tongue—is not enough. If your anger toward your husband remains unchanged, your unspoken bitterness will be evident to him. He will hear disrespect in your sighs, see it in your rolled eyes, and feel it even when it's not being actively expressed. Your attitude will encourage him to be your adversary, not your leader. And you'll find it impossible to keep *doing* the right things unless you *believe* the right things. Your speech, actions, attitude and emotions toward your husband are a natural outflow of how you see the situation in which you find yourself.

Instead of just hanging on by grit and determination, look at your reactions in this difficult situation as an indicator of your own relationship with God. Are you tenderhearted and forgiving (Eph. 4:32)? Your husband's lack of leadership

is no more (or less) awful than your own bitterness and pride. As we are humbled by seeing our own sinfulness, we are moved to forgive even as the Lord has forgiven us (Col. 3:13).

Be honest. It's okay to tell your husband what you want, and your duty to him as his sister in Christ is to gently, and privately, show him where he might be in error (Matt. 18:15). Make an appointment to talk with your husband at a time when you are both calm, and approach him in a non-threatening manner. Let your husband know that you will support his leadership and that your love for him is not dependent on him conforming to your will.

Watch your speech carefully. It's easy to slip into nagging and criticism, and it sometimes takes a real effort to be supportive and positive. That's why we have to be intentional in our speech, especially if we're trying to overcome bad habits in communication. You don't need to mention his every error or point out every shortcoming (1 Pet. 4:8)—you don't need to be his mother or the Holy Spirit. Instead, try to convey the idea that you see yourself and your husband as a team.

Ask for your husband's input often, and then heed it. For example, instead of nagging when we see something that needs attention, you might gently point it out to your husband and ask, "Would you like to do this or would you like for me to handle it?"

Do the right things. There's a school of thought that says a woman should never take up the slack in a family where the man is not acting as a leader. That is a method to manipulate, and, I think, an especially dangerous one. Even if your husband does not attend church regularly or misses for trivial reasons, *you* need to attend church faithfully. If he neglects to lead family worship, *you* need to make sure the children are taught.¹ Ask yourself, "What if this situation never changes?" You don't want to look back on a lifetime wasted in disobedience, waiting for something that might not happen.

Look to God. What you really want from and *for* your husband is change from the inside. You want him to *want* to fill the role that God has designed for husbands and fathers, for his own good and for God's glory. No amount of nagging or manipulation can bring about that kind of change.

But there is hope. God does answer prayer. If I could talk to our caller again, I'd urge her to continue to pray for her husband and to ask God for this supernatural gift of grace. And as she makes her request known to God and submits to His perfect will, she can experience the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, that will guard her heart and her mind in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6-7), no matter what happens next.

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¹ I suggest finding a regular time, if possible, when your husband isn't home to read the Bible and pray with your children. It'll be less obvious to them that dad isn't participating if he isn't home.