

OPEN YOUR BIBLE

Study Companion

What Does “Wives, Submit to Your Husbands” Actually Mean?

Ephesians 5:21–33 • Study Companion

A printable companion for reading Ephesians 5:21–33 as one argument: trace the grammar, compare submit and obey, examine head/body language, test the major interpretations, and build your conclusion from the passage.

Use this packet with your Bible open. Write what the text actually says before deciding which marriage system explains it best.

Before You Study

PASSAGE-STUDY RULE

Before we build marriage doctrine from one line, read the paragraph. Then the chapter. Then ask why the author put those words there.

What have you been taught “wives, submit” means?

What have you been taught “husband is the head” means?

What practical marriage rule have you assumed Ephesians 5 teaches most clearly?

Map the Passage

Read Ephesians 5:15–6:9 before answering.

Passage	Speaker / Group Addressed	Main Instruction
5:18–21	Whole assembly	Be filled with Spirit; speak, sing, give thanks, submit
5:22–24	Wives	Submit to own husbands in relation to Messiah
5:25–33	Husbands	Love as Messiah loved; nourish; cherish; love as own body
6:1–4	Children / fathers	Obey / do not provoke; nurture
6:5–9	Enslaved people / masters	Obey sincerely / stop threatening; same Master in heaven

What does the household section look like when you begin at 5:18 instead of 5:22?

Verses 21–22: Follow the Grammar

In the earliest Greek textual form reflected in modern critical editions, verse 22 does not repeat the verb “submit.” It borrows the action from verse 21.

Rewrite the flow of verses 21–22 in your own words without inserting a section heading between them.

Does the grammatical connection erase the wife-specific instruction? Why or why not?

Who Is Being Addressed?

Does Paul say women should submit to men generally, or wives to their own husbands?

What theological claims would go beyond the actual scope of this wording?

Greek Observation

Greek	Basic Range	Observation Here
ὑποτάσσω — hypotassō	submit / be subject / order under	Used in 5:21; wife instruction depends on it in v.22
ὑπακούω — hypakouō	obey / heed	Used for children (6:1) and slaves (6:5), not wives
κεφαλῇ — kephalē	head; metaphorical uses debated	Husband called head; local passage defines his pattern through Messiah
φοβέω — phobeō	fear / revere / respect	v.33 commonly understood as respect/reverence, not intimidation

What can the vocabulary itself prove? What still requires interpretation?

What Does the Husband Actually Get Told to Do?

Read Ephesians 5:25–30.

List every action associated with Messiah’s love for the assembly.

List every explicit command Paul gives the husband.

Does the passage explicitly use “rule,” “lead,” “exercise authority,” “final say,” or “tie-breaking vote” for the husband?

Who Sanctifies Whom?

In verses 25–27, who gives himself, sanctifies, cleanses, and presents the assembly?

Does Paul command the husband to become the wife’s priest, mediator, or sanctifier?

One Flesh

Read Genesis 2:18–25 and Ephesians 5:28–32.

Why does Paul say the husband who loves his wife loves himself?

What does the one-flesh logic do to claims that justify contempt, coercion, degradation, or violence?

Which Genesis verse does Paul quote? What marriage theme does it emphasize?

Test the Major Readings

Reading	Evidence I See	Questions / Difficulties
Complementarian / husband leadership		
Egalitarian / mutual submission		
Cruciform asymmetry without detailed authority chart		

Which reading currently explains the most evidence with the fewest ignored details?

Test Common Claims

“Every woman should submit to male authority.” Does Ephesians 5 say this?

“The husband is the final decision-maker.” Is that explicit text or an inference?

“A wife must obey her husband in everything.” Compare 5:22–24 with 6:1 and 6:5.

“A husband is responsible to sanctify his wife.” Who does the sanctifying in the paragraph?

“Submission means a wife should stay quiet about mistreatment.” How does that fit love, nourishment, cherishing, and one flesh?

Coffee Break Reflection

Which part of the paragraph have you personally heard emphasized most: wife submission or husband self-giving love?

Which part have you heard emphasized least?

What would it look like for a marriage to tell the truth about Messiah rather than simply advertise “biblical roles”?

Build Your Conclusion

Complete each sentence from the evidence.

Ephesians 5 clearly says a wife should...

Ephesians 5 clearly says a husband should...

Ephesians 5 does NOT explicitly say...

The word “head” may imply..., but the paragraph definitely defines the husband’s behavior as...

The relationship between verse 21 and verse 22 shows...

My Working Interpretation

What does “wives, submit to your husbands” mean in this passage?

What does “husband is the head of the wife” mean in this passage?

What practical application am I confident the passage supports?

What application do I think requires more biblical evidence before I claim “the Bible says”?

Prayer + Application

Yehovah, where do I need to become more teachable about marriage, submission, love, power, respect, or self-giving?

What is one concrete way I can seek another person’s good this week without using Scripture to control them?
