

The World Is Passing Away

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

The world is full of wars and rumors of wars.
There is famine.
There is disease.
Sickness and death are all around us.

And for some who think that these are increasing, they conclude world is coming to an end.

Maybe so. I believe Jesus could return at any moment. But I also believe that he could tarry another thousand years.

Wars and famine and disease are signs that this world is passing away. But there is another historical event that has made the passing away of this world far more certain and far more real than any disaster of the world. It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Nothing has sealed the fate of this world like the bursting forth of Jesus Christ from the tomb some 2,000 years ago.

Today we are finishing Paul's discussion on issues related to marriage. But what does marriage have to do with the end of the world?

Read I Corinthians 7:25-40.

ESV **1 Corinthians 7:25**

Now concerning the betrothed,
I have no command from the Lord,
but
I give my judgment
as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

Paul has been answering the issues that the Corinthians have raised. When it came to their question regarding divorce between believers, Paul simply reiterated what Jesus had already taught on that matter. When it came to the question of divorce between a believer and an unbeliever, since it was a new situation that Jesus had not spoken directly about, Paul gives new instruction. This instruction was entirely consistent with Jesus' instruction. It simply applied the principles in a new situation. In both of these cases, what Paul taught could be considered "a command from the Lord."

But now, Paul deals with the issue of whether it is better to marry or to remain single. Concerning this question, Paul states up front that there is not a clear cut command to be followed. But that does not mean that Paul does not have wise counsel on the

matter. That's what it means by "I give my judgment." And Paul believes that it is worth listening to his counsel.

As we discussed last week, Paul's counsel flows out of biblical truth that can be applied to far more than the question of whether or not we should get married. And that truth is centered in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is so life-altering that Paul cannot think about any issue except as it is filtered in some way through this lens.

And so, whether or not you are asking the specific question: To marry or not to marry. You will want to understand Paul's rationale so that you can apply it in other areas of your life.

26 I think
that in view of the present distress
it is good for a person to remain as he is.
27 Are you bound to a wife?
Do not seek to be free.
Are you free from a wife?
Do not seek a wife.

The first advice that Paul gives is that "as a general rule" people should "remain where they are."

Paul drove this point home in the previous verses. I summarized it as, "God is far more concerned with what comes out of you, than he is with changing the circumstances around you."

So, Paul applies that to the issue of whether or not to be married. Remain as you are. Are you single? Stay single. Are you married? Stay married.

Now, if you are single and hoping to get married, your first thought is probably: Paul is crazy. He has no idea what he is talking about.

Paul's counsel may be wise, but it is certainly challenging to accept, and even understand at times.

What is "the present distress"?

Was Paul referring to some form of persecution from the Romans, or a growing threat of persecution?

Or was Paul referring to the famine that was affecting the whole Mediterranean world at the time?

Or, was Paul referring to the prophecies concerning the End Times - that predicted times of famine and darkness and sword connected with the Day of the Lord?

I am not sure what Paul had in mind. Probably all three.

But it is important to recognize that in referring to the “present distress” Paul is not basing his wisdom based upon some moral law. Neither marriage, nor singleness offers a “higher form of spirituality.” Paul will base his wisdom on practical matters. Paul understands that life is hard, and in some seasons, really hard, and that being married may actually complicate life’s difficulties.

So, practically speaking, remaining single can actually be a good thing, at times, even a better thing, than getting married.

It is probably best right now to admit my bias on this issue. We all have biases. And those biases affect how we react to the Word of God. Depending on how you feel about marriage, you will react differently to Paul’s words.

If you love marriage and see its countless benefits, you will have a hard time accepting what Paul is saying.

If you have been jaded by marriage, you may leap at the chance to honor singleness. You may even see Paul’s statements in these verses as a ray of hope in an otherwise oppressive biblical view that marriage is the only ideal of life.

I don’t know where you are. But I do know that our personal biases affect how we approach the text.

I approach this text with a strong bias as to the benefits of married life. Some of my bias comes from the rest of Scripture. Some comes from my own experience. Not only is marriage portrayed in Genesis as the completion of man’s creation. It is that which brings husband and wife into oneness with one another. And oneness, flowing out of true selfless and sacrificial love, is the Bible’s highest ideal for humanity - in this life.

And, in my own experience, not only has marriage brought me countless joys, the responsibilities of marriage have been the means by which God has chiseled away at my selfishness and worked to make me more like himself. Not to forget, children have also been an incredible blessing.

So, my bias, both from the Bible, and from my own experiences, is to have a very positive and very high view of marriage. In many ways, it provides the best that this life has to offer.

My bias makes it challenging for me to accept what Paul says. But that does not mean that I am free to ignore what he says. In a very real way, I am called to “adjust” my biases. I am called to submit to God’s Word in such a way that I bring my biases into conformity with those of Paul, and the Word of God as a whole.

But for those who have a negative bias towards marriage, be careful that you don't take Paul's words here and throw out the rest of what the Bible has to say regarding marriage.

I often speak of truth as a ridge line. And, the Bible is full of truths that must be held in tension.

That is true today.

Paul's main point here: If certain criteria are met, singleness is not only a good option, but the preferred option!

The clear teaching of the whole of Scripture: The oneness of a good marriage is the best that this life has to offer.

You don't understand the ridge line that Paul is walking unless you have each of these firmly fixed in your mind.

Even Paul's choice of words would get most husbands in trouble. If a husband spoke of his relationship with his wife as if it were bondage, that would not go over too well.

28 But
 if you do marry,
 you have not sinned,
 and
 if a betrothed woman marries,
 she has not sinned.
 Yet
 those who marry
 will have worldly troubles,
 and I would spare you that.

Now, Paul makes the married life sound like something you enter into because you have to.

BUT if you do marry, you have not sinned!

Thanks Paul!

I don't know about you, but I want marriage to be an ideal that inspires me to reach higher heights. Paul's allowance that marriage is not sin is not very inspiring.

It sounds like Paul is saying: Getting married is OK, but staying single is where the true action is. Why would Paul think this way?

I am convinced that it is Paul's proximity to the resurrection of Jesus Christ that drives his thinking.

For Paul, the resurrection was not some distant event that occurred 2,000 years ago. It was not a nice memory to be celebrated once a year at Easter. For Paul, the resurrection impacted how he thought about life in this world and it even, in some ways, altered its highest ideals.

In this case, the resurrection does not negate the value of marriage in this life. Marriage remains a creation ordinance of the highest importance. But the resurrection reduces the ultimacy of this life altogether.

Death is no longer an entrance into some unknown “afterlife” or some “ethereal underworld.” Death is the doorway into life as God fully intended: a bodily existence in a new creation ruled by Jesus Christ in perfect righteousness.

The resurrection was real for Paul. It was palpable, meaning Paul could feel its reality in his mind. And so, even though marriage remains an ideal in this life, this life is not the ideal. It is only the means by which God prepares us for the ideal.

This is what I will call “The Resurrection Principle.” We must learn to fill our minds with its reality like it filled the mind of Paul.

those who marry
will have worldly troubles,
and I would spare you that

Paul does NOT say, “You know, marriage is not really all its cracked up to be. I think that it really is no longer God’s solution to loneliness in this life. Singleness is the new ideal.” Instead, he understands that with marriage in this life comes “worldly troubles.” If in verse 26, it sounded like those troubles were connected to the “present distress”, here it sounds like no matter what situation you find yourself, you will have “worldly troubles.”

Paul’s focus is on wanting to make life “easier” for the Corinthian believers. He wants to spare them of personal hardships. And in particular those hardships connected to married life. (Not the hardship of marriage itself.)

It would have been nice had Paul given us a list of those hardships. It might also be nice to know if Paul was speaking from personal experience, of his previous married life, or if he is simply speaking as someone who has watched others go through hardship. But he does not give us such a list. I think he thinks the Corinthians were well aware of the hardships.

Instead, Paul launches into a fuller discussion of the Resurrection Principle.

Look at your Bible at verse 29 and then verse 31.

²⁹ This is what I mean, brothers:
the appointed time has grown very short.

31 For the present form of this world is passing away.

Compare these two comments.

Verse 29 literally reads: The season (appointed time) is shortened, the remaining.
And verse 31 reads: The form of this world is passing away.

Paul does not know exactly when Jesus will return. But he knows that the time of this present world has been shortened by the revelation of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not simply rise from the dead “back into this present world.”

Jesus bodily rose from the dead into the New Creation.

When Jesus rose from the dead, he no longer was a part of this present world.

He had received his immortal body and incorruptible body.

Pain and suffering and death could no longer touch him.

He was forever joined to the New Creation.

And it is the New Creation, one that has not been subjected to the curse, one that is able to fulfill all of God’s dreams and expectations for true life, to which he belongs.

And so, in the resurrection of Jesus, we must hear the death toll ringing on this present creation, this present world. This is what I believe Paul means when he says, “The appointed time, the time remaining, has been shortened.”

He is not saying that he knows precisely how much time this world has. He does not. But he knows that to go on living as if this world will just keep going on and on and on goes against the message of the Resurrection.

Think for a moment about the mindset of Jesus Christ. He was offered all of the kingdoms of the world by Satan in the wilderness. Jesus was not interested. Instead, he was willing to submit himself to mocking and suffering and shame in this life, why? Because of the joy that was set before him. What does that mean? It means that Jesus was looking forward to something better. A world in which all of His dreams and expectations would finally be met in full. He would not settle for what this world had to offer.

And Paul understands that if anyone truly places their faith in Jesus Christ, they too now belong to the New Creation. We have not yet received our resurrection body. But we have received a new heart - a heart that belongs to the New Creation.

2 Corinthians 5:17 ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

As Christians, you have not received a new heart simply so you could live a better life in this world. Your new heart is part of the new creation. You have received it to begin preparing you for the day when you will live in the New Creation.

It is when we grasp this basic Resurrection principle that we can better understand Paul's next statements.

31
 and
 those who buy
 as though they had no goods,
 and
 those who deal with the world
 as though they had no dealings with it.

Paul is not denying private ownership. Neither is he making an argument that God's people are to give up all their worldly possessions.

Paul is reminding the Corinthians that this world is not your home. The things that you buy, not only will they wear out, you cannot take them with you into your eternal home.

How should we think about our possessions? Well, it is not wrong to value them. It is certainly right to take care of them. We are called to be generous with them to others. It is even right to receive them with thanksgiving and to enjoy them.

But, we must continually remind ourselves that there is no present possession that can provide the lasting happiness of which our soul so much craves.

Paul is really only saying in different words, "Be in the world but not of it."
This world really is passing away.
The Resurrection makes that abundantly clear.

You may have to do business in this world. You may have to try to plan for your retirement. But don't believe the advertisements that tell you that if you will only do (and you fill in the blank) then (your life will be transformed and utopia will be at your beckon call.)

Many a sin is committed because one first believes that something in this world is necessary to one's happiness.

I could say much more. But maybe this is good application for you. Talk to your loved ones.

Ask each other this question: In what way are you tempted to squeeze out of this world, the joy that God has determined will only be met in the next?

And, what can you do to help remind yourself that this world is passing away?

OK, now that Paul has laid out the Resurrection principle that drives all of his thinking, he returns to the issues of marriage and singleness.

Remember Paul's first point: Given the right criteria, it is better to remain single.

32 I want you to be free from anxieties.
The unmarried man is anxious
about the things of the Lord,
how to please the Lord.

33 But
the married man is anxious
about worldly things,
how to please his wife,

34 and
his interests are divided.
And
the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious
about the things of the Lord,
how to be holy in body and spirit.

But
the married woman is anxious
about worldly things,
how to please her husband.

Paul makes it sound like the person who is single does not have a care in the world, and the person who is married is loaded down with burdens every day of his or her life. Of course, that is not true. Everyone has cares and burdens. And the Bible makes a case that having a spouse to go through life's challenges together can even make them more bearable.

Paul also makes it sound like caring for one's spouse is of lesser importance than caring for the Lord. Again, the rest of Scripture makes clear that one of the best ways to love God is to love the people around us. Just read I John if you doubt that this is true.

I am convinced that the point that Paul is making is that the marriage bond joins you to another person, and with this bond a person intertwines himself with the anxieties of their spouse. The married person must always consider the welfare of their spouse in every decision that they make.

Paul knows that the single person is "free" to be consumed with obedience to Christ. Paul does not say that single people can simply "do what they want with their lives." He is not encouraging selfishness. He is simply making the point that if you are able, you have a greater freedom to do whatever God may call you to do.

As I was preparing for this sermon, one name flooded into my mind. Jane Armstrong. Jane was the assistant campus director at Miami of Ohio. Our ministry at Wright State was sort of a daughter ministry to that of Miami. Over the course of my four years at Wright State and later my three years on staff with Cru, I was able to observe Jane fairly often.

Jane was single. She was content in her singleness. She was at that time probably in her forties. She had been on staff for most of her adult life. She was certainly a model of love and kindness and godly character. And she gave herself to countless young ladies to disciple them and teach them how to walk with God in this life. Her singleness freed her up to minister to many more women than she could have otherwise if she were married.

She is a model to me of what Paul was envisioning when he spoke of singleness being better.

But what about missing out on the oneness of marriage. Does that not matter anymore? Yes, and no.

Yes, it certainly matters. Paul has already qualified his comments by saying that only those who have the gift of celibacy should consider singleness as a life pursuit. If you do not have the gift of celibacy, you should not be striving for singleness.

Look at verse 35. Paul is actually concerned that the Corinthians would take his comments in such a way that those who do not have the gift of celibacy would try to remain single anyway.

³⁵ I say this for your own benefit,
not to lay any restraint upon you,
but
to promote good order
and
to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

The word for “restraint” is *brocon*. It is a word used for a snare or a noose. Paul wants to be sure that his advice does not trap someone. He is only thinking about helping people to be freer to be devoted to the Lord, not to make them miserable because they do not have the gift of celibacy.

But if oneness still is important in this life and people without the gift of celibacy should get married, it is also true that marriage is not absolutely necessary for your happiness.

The resurrection principle tells us that if we do go through this life without ever enjoying the oneness of a good marriage, we have not lost out eternally. The Resurrection helps us to see that marriage in this life is really only a foreshadow of the marriage of Jesus to the Church.

It is possible to miss out on something wonderful in this life, because the true bliss awaits us in glory.

I know that this is not easy to imagine, but it is absolutely true.

These next verses I will only deal with using the ESV.

If you read these verses in some translations it sounds like Paul is giving advice to the father a lady engaged to be married rather than to the engaged man himself. After looking at the text for some time, I can see it both ways. But, the context seems to lead me to believe that Paul is still talking to the engaged couple themselves.

36 If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly
toward his betrothed,
if his passions are strong,
and
it has to be,
let him do as he wishes:
let them marry-
it is no sin.

37 But
whoever is firmly established in his heart,
being under no necessity
but
having his desire under control,
and
has determined this in his heart,
to keep her as his betrothed,
he will do well.

38 So then
he who marries his betrothed does well,
and
he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

The bottom line in these verses is that Paul leaves the decision up to the couple. He does not bind their consciences. There are still plenty of questions.

Is Paul only dealing with engaged couples? If you are already betrothed, does that not mean that you don't have the gift of celibacy?

Does Paul envision an engaged couple remaining single indefinitely, or only until a more appropriate time?

39 A wife is bound to her husband
as long as he lives.
But
if her husband dies,
she is free to be married to whom she wishes,
only in the Lord.

40 Yet
in my judgment
she is happier
if she remains as she is.

And

I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Paul deals with the widow. And he simply applies his Resurrection Principle to her as well.

First, he explains that marriage is for life. The Resurrection Principle does not change that. But, if in God's providence, her husband dies, the widow is absolutely free to find another husband, as long as he is a fellow believer. But, if she is able, all things being equal, (which of course they never are) it would even be better for her to remain a widow.

Again, the point is that she is in practical matters, freed up to serve the Lord.

Summary points:

1. The Resurrection should alter the way you think about this world. This world is passing away and its time is short. The Resurrection does not dismantle the institutions of this world. It only makes them not ultimate. We are to fix our eyes on the New Heavens and the New Earth that we will enjoy fully for all eternity.
2. The gift of celibacy is a real gift from the Spirit of God. To purposely seek a life of singleness without it is dangerous and not recommended. But if you do have this gift, then the single life may actually be more advantageous than the married life. Marriage in this life is NOT the only path to the good life. Singleness may even be better and result in greater happiness, because we will enjoy an eternal marriage to Jesus Christ.
3. When thinking about marriage, it is not a simple decision. You should sincerely ask whether God might give you the gift of celibacy. But if you are not given this gift, you should accept that God does not want you to remain single. And, when you do enter into the bonds of marriage, you should take them very seriously. Your devotion to Jesus, does not release you from your bonds to marriage. I would not presume to judge such a godly man as George Whitefield. His passion and devotion to Christ surely puts mine to shame. But if there was one thing that always troubled me was that he got married, but hardly spent any time with his wife. He was away on ministry sometimes for a year at a time. I am convinced that if we enter into the covenant of marriage, it is our duty to take on the responsibilities of marriage.

Take some time today. Think about the world around you. What does it mean for you that the time of this world is short?

How have you bought into the deception that the path to life in this world is to embrace this world as your home?

Enjoy the good things in this world as much as you are able.

But hold them loosely. Attach your soul to another world, for it has been created for another world, a world where Jesus Christ will dwell with his people for all eternity.

Be thankful that Jesus died to take away your sin.

He knows that attachment to this world is not easy to throw off.

Confess the ways that you have loved this world more than the next.

Commit yourself to live every day in light of the Resurrection.
Let the blood and the Spirit wash over your soul.

Find peace and joy in knowing his smiling face towards you.
And then, rather than fear that this world is passing away, you can look forward to it
as the day when you will finally be able to live as God fully intended when he died for
you on the cross. Amen.