

This passage is probably a response to a letter Paul received from the Corinthians asking about single believers. While the Greek and Jewish cultures put an emphasis on marriage and having children, Corinth was a city in which everyone strove to be the best in their field and being single made that effort easier. The Corinthians were pulled both ways and had the added temptation of all the immorality of that city. Should they marry? Should married couples separate and live only for the Lord? What was the appropriate response to what was happening in the culture and best for each individual's walk with the Lord? Paul has already said it is better to marry than to burn with passion (7:8,9ⁱ). How he addresses single people is particularly relevant in our day. For the first time in history, the majority of Americans are single. That is partly because we live longer, and the culture has made it easier for women to survive on their own. But it is in many cases due to a selfish desire to live for oneself.

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. 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 There is no command in Scripture or word from the Holy Spirit regarding their current marital situation. Generally speaking, the command is for people to multiply and have children and bring them up in the Lord (Genesis 1:28ⁱⁱ). As we see in the next verse, conditions in the culture of Corinth had added some new factors to consider, so Paul gives his opinion to singles and those who are promised in marriage to one another. However, he says the Lord's mercy has made him a trustworthy source. He ends this passage saying he has the Spirit of God.

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. 1 Corinthians 7:26,27 The temple would be destroyed within a little over a decade and the Jews and Christians would be scattered. Most Christians would head toward Pella and may have lived in caves on the wadi that runs to the Jordan from Pella. It was a difficult time and persecution would become severe under the emperors Nero and Domitian. To be caring for a spouse or to have children to protect would make it even more difficult. In fact, Jesus said it would be difficult for those with small children when those persecutions came (Matthew 24:19ⁱⁱⁱ).

Remain as you are. In other words, if you are married, don't desert your wife or husband. If you are single, don't seek a wife or husband. In Iran, Christian couples must decide how they will respond when the secret police burst through their door. The secret police will probably rape the wife in front of her husband. I met a man who made the decision with his wife that their bodies belonged to Jesus so if they suffered for their faith, it was a sacrifice to God. They determined that they would only respond with the love of Christ. That might help us understand what Paul meant by, "in view of the present distress."

When there is persecution, which is the common response to Christians' love and message of salvation, there will be suffering and intimidation (2 Timothy 3:12^{iv}). Better to face it alone and not be worrying about a spouse and children. Consider what the Ukrainians are going through. I have seen so many interviews of women worrying about their husbands and men worried if their wives and children made it out safely.

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. 1 Corinthians 1:28 It would be easier to be single, but it isn't a sin to marry. It just gives you more things in this world to be concerned about. That generation was going to be very difficult for families. But in any age, marriage has its difficulties. In every decision, a married person must consider their spouse (Ephesians 5:21^v).

Even when all is calm, think of what Sunday morning is like for a church going family. The husband wants to get to church on time, but the wife has slept in, or vice versa. The kids must be fed get ready, and they are fighting. You try to get them in the car and can't find one of them. Once you finally get to church, the kids must behave until they are dismissed for children's church, and on and on. But the single person can get up, pray, go early to Bible study, and decide who they want to fellowship with after the service. And that is just Sunday morning. Then there are the teenage years. Yikes! Don't get me wrong, it is worth it to raise up children in the Lord and see the grandchildren come to know the Lord, but it does have worldly concerns (Psalm 127:3^{vi}).

²⁹ This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 Many Christians would die in the coming persecution. Life is short whether the Lord returns, or we live a full life. Compared to eternity life is extremely brief. Focus on what matters eternally. Only one life will soon be past, only what is done *through* Christ will last. Eternity is forever. Think about it. Where should we be investing our moment of time here (2 Corinthians 4:17,18^{vii})? What should be our priority in our various occupations? Is our priority to make money or to glorify God?

Maintain the mindset of the brevity of life and the importance of investing in our eternal future is commended to us often in Scripture. In Colossians 3:1-4 Paul tells us *¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.* And James tells us James 4:14 *¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*

Jesus warned us that where our treasure is, there will our heart be also (Matthew 6:20,21^{viii}). If the things of this world are our treasure: money, possessions, the esteem of man, then our heart will be in the world. If our treasure is Jesus, our heart will be set on eternity with Him. When I hear people say that there is so much more they want to experience in this world before they die, I know they need a greater revelation of the lover of their soul. Only then can they say, "Come Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20^{ix})!

In these verses Paul is recommending a very radical mindset. It is to live with Jesus first in everything we do. Instead of putting spouse first, put Jesus first. That doesn't mean not to love and meet one another's needs, for Paul has already insisted we should do so (7:3^x; Ephesians 5:33^{xi}), but rather that God's will be our priority in all

circumstances. There is a time to mourn and rejoice, but even those deep emotions should be overridden by the will of God in the present moment. Our possessions belong to God. Our dealings with the world can't take first place (Ephesians 5:16^{xii}). Why? Because the present form of this world is passing away (1 Chronicles 29:15^{xiii}).

We live in such a time of peace here in the USA. But for most of the history of the world, people lived with an understanding that their circumstances could change in a moment. Their crops could be destroyed by weather or marauders. Illness could disable you or wipe out your village. With Russia putting their nuclear forces on high alert that uncertainty of tomorrow should be real to us. And yet if we are in Christ, what should matter is if we are being faithful to God in every moment. For the present form of this world is passing away (Romans 13:11,12^{xiv}).

The expression "present form" is the Greek word *schema*. We get our word *schematics* from it. Greeks used it as a word for a stage set or a mask an actor wore. It went up before the play began and went down when it is over. That is the other mindset we need. Everything in this world other than the souls of men and women are only a temporary stage set (Galatians 6:14^{xv}). Imagine one of the actors falling in love with the set and wanting to live the rest of their life on that set. You would say they lost their mind. So it is with those who live for this passing present form (1 John 2:15-17^{xvi}). I am thankful for my home, these beautiful mountains, the forests, the magnificent thunder showers, but I know they are all here for but a moment in time. There is a new heaven and new earth coming, wherein dwells righteousness (2 Peter 3:13^{xvii}). There is a humorous phrase I like to use to reinforce this mindset. You will never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul. Many cultures bury goods with their departed. They end up in a museum, not in heaven.

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. 1 Corinthians 7:32-34 "I want you to be free from anxieties." What a great expression. Paul is bringing us a reality check. When we fall in love or think we are, we get starry eyed and can only think of how wonderful it will be to be married to our dream mate. But what Paul is warning us of is a matter of divided focus (1 Timothy 5:8^{xviii}). A single person in Christ can have a more complete focus on the Lord and His will and a love relationship with Him (Psalm 86:11^{xix}). The married person will have to divide his or her focus between the Lord and the needs of his or her spouse.

However, Paul also tells us in Ephesians 5 that marriage is a picture of our relationship with the Lord (Ephesians 5:31,32^{xx}). We can learn so much about our relationship with Jesus through the things we experience in marriage. And as he wrote earlier, it is better to marry than to burn. Some people have the gift of singleness, but it is rare. This was an unusual stance Paul was teaching, for the Greek and Jewish idea was that marriage was best. Like Jesus, Paul was free from the traditions of man. He could see that since the Messiah had come, the most important thing was a relationship with Him and telling others about Him. Everything adjusts in priority when Jesus comes into our

lives. It is not that we don't have a job or pleasures, but just that they decrease in priority when we let Jesus take first place.

The phrase "holy in body and spirit" does not mean that a single woman is holier than a married person because she does not have sex. That idea comes from our twisted culture thinking all sex is dirty when it is really a gift from God when it is within the bounds of marriage. "Body and spirit" simply meant in every area of life.^{xxi}

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.* 1 Corinthians 7:35 Paul was not laying a law upon them but rather suggesting these things so that those so gifted could be solely devoted to the Lord and not have anxiety about their spouse during the persecution that was coming. But it is also for the benefit of those who have the gift of being single under all conditions. Undivided devotion to the Lord is a wonderful thing and more easily attained when single (Philippians 3:7,8^{xxii}). He is warning them to think soberly and honestly about how life will change when a person marries.

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.* 1 Corinthians 7:36 Paul recognizes that the power of hormones is real, and for most people it is better to avoid temptation by going ahead with marriage (Genesis 2:18^{xxiii}). It is not wrong to marry. Marriage should not be discouraged; nor should it be encouraged without soberly thinking through how one's life will change. This is why premarital counselling is so important. Paul is trying to strike a balance. While he sees celibacy has more opportunities to be fully devoted to the Lord, marriage is God's design and even one of His first commands.

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.* 1 Corinthians 7:37 Even though betrothed, which is similar to being engaged but more of a commitment, the couple could remain single if they were able to act appropriately. I wonder if this was a specific question from the Corinthians as it seems so strange to our ears today. I have never witnessed this, but that is probably because of our culture. The only example I can think of is Francis of Assisi and Claire. Both had a great passion for Christ and respect for the other's walk with God, so they worked together for God's glory rather than to marry.

³⁸ *So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.* 1 Corinthians 7:38 Marriage is good. The gift of celibacy is even better if one has been given that gift and is passionate about devoting their life entirely to the Lord. Keep in mind that the Catholic Church making this a rule for all their priests ignored the fact that the person had to have their desire under control and be called to that lifestyle. The result has been all the abuse scandals that have been revealed.

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.* 1 Corinthians 7:39,40 Widows had no way to earn a living. That is why it would be natural to seek a new spouse. But Paul says that if that is the case, she must marry a Christian brother (only in the Lord), but he believes she will be happier if she can stay single (Romans 7:2^{xxiv}).

Paul believes this was the instruction of the Holy Spirit. He surely prayed over his answers to the church. The whole passage is nuanced by three phrases: in view of the present distress (26); the appointed time has grown very short (29); the present form of this world is passing away (31). In some ways those phrases seem to apply to a specific time, and yet in other ways it applies to any age. We can say for certain that what Paul was implying is that it is better to be single to devote yourself entirely to the Lord if you have the gift of celibacy, that is those who have their desires under control. But it is also better to marry than to live with smoldering passion. It is better to marry to avoid sexual immorality (7:2^{xxv}). **Married or single, the focus of our lives should not be this passing stage set. It should be on that which is eternal.**

We tend to denigrate single people as if somehow not marrying is a failure in life. On the other hand, our culture also puts down marriage as if it were enslavement to be liberated from. Paul has shown us that both married life and being single are good and either can glorify God. **When we make either the answer to our need, we miss the real answer, Jesus!**

As I grow older the list of my loved ones already in heaven grows. So many dear friends, fellow elders, parents and grandparents are already home with Jesus. Some seem to have died before their time, and yet we know that our times are in God's hands (Psalm 31:15^{xxvi}). Life seems so long and yet in other ways so short. These 69 years have quite a story of God's faithfulness and love despite my many failings. But I know that Jesus went to prepare a place for us (John 14:1,2^{xxvii}). I know those who have gone before me are already there and will be greeting me when my graduation comes. I hope you have that same assurance based on what Jesus has done for you. And I know that bright land to which I go will have no sin, no misunderstandings, no vile persons with hidden agendas. All will be light and love. So lay up your treasures there my friends. There is no better investment, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. My heart is with my Groom (Song of Songs 6:3^{xxviii}). He is the only One who can satisfy the longings of our hearts.

Questions:

- 1 Why would Paul say remain as you are?
- 2 Why would it be easier to be single?
- 3 Why is it important to keep the brevity of life in mind?
- 4 Are verse 29-31 telling us to drop out of the world?
- 5 What should be our mindset toward this world?
- 6 What does "holy in body and spirit" mean?
- 7 How can a celibate life be better than marriage?
- 8 When is it permissible for a person to remarry?
- 9 Review the phrases that give nuances to the passage.
- 10 What is the ultimate answer to our need?

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 (ESV)

⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

ii **Genesis 1:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And 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 heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

iii **Matthew 24:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!

iv **2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)**

¹² Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

v **Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)**

²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

vi **Psalms 127:3 (ESV)**

³ Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.

vii **2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (ESV)**

¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,
¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

viii **Matthew 6:20-21 (ESV)**

²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

ix **Revelation 22:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

x **1 Corinthians 7:3 (ESV)**

³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.

xi **Ephesians 5:33 (ESV)**

³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

xii **Ephesians 5:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

xiii **1 Chronicles 29:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.

xiv **Romans 13:11-12 (ESV)**

¹¹ Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

xv **Galatians 6:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

xvi **1 John 2:15-17 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.
¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

xvii **2 Peter 3:13 (ESV)**

¹³ But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

xviii **1 Timothy 5:8 (ESV)**

⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

xix **Psalms 86:11 (NIV)**

¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.

xx **Ephesians 5:31-32 (NIV)**

³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

xxi See Garland, *1 Corinthians*, pg 335

^{xxii} **Philippians 3:7-8 (NIV)**

⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ

^{xxiii} **Genesis 2:18 (KJV)**

¹⁸ And the LORD God said, *It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*

^{xxiv} **Romans 7:2 (ESV)**

² For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage.

^{xxv} **1 Corinthians 7:2 (ESV)**

² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

^{xxvi} **Psalms 31:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!

^{xxvii} **John 14:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.

² In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

^{xxviii} **Song of Songs 6:3 (ESV)**

³ I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine; he grazes among the lilies.