

1 CORINTHIANS 7:26

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In this chapter Paul started responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. In verses 1 he made a reference to the matters that they wrote about. And in the rest of this letter he addressed a variety of topics that they asked him about in their letter. The first one that he focused on was the theme of marriage in verses 1–24. Then in verses 25–40 he addressed a second theme. In the beginning of verse 25 he said, “Now about virgins.” So in the rest of the chapter Paul switched topics from marriage to virgins. He started by focusing on people who had experienced sexual intimacy. But then he talked about people who had never experienced sexual intimacy. These people were not married but single.

Now we use the English word “virgin” to refer to both men and women. But the Greek word for virgin normally refers only to women. And that’s how Paul was using the word in this passage. In verse 28 he said, “If you do get married, you have not sinned, and if a virgin gets married, she has not sinned.” So Paul was addressing unmarried men in this verse, and then he talked about unmarried women using the word “virgin.” Then in verse 36 Paul talked about a man who thought that he was acting inappropriately toward his virgin. It’s hard to know for sure whether Paul was talking about the woman’s father or her fiancé in that verse. We’ll talk more about that issue when we get to that verse. But either way the word “virgin” clearly refers to a woman there.

So when Paul used the Greek word for virgins in verse 25, I believe that he was talking only about female virgins. And that view fits well with the historical context. Paul was writing to a church in a large Greek city in the Roman Empire. Now if he had been writing only to Jewish Christians, then it would have made sense for him to refer to both male and female virgins. After all, the Jews believed that all sex outside of marriage was sin based on the Old Testament. But in Greek and Roman societies there was no expectation that a single man would have been a virgin. Now single women were expected to remain virgins until they got married, and they usually got married at a young age anyway. But single men normally didn’t get married until they were older, and most of them would have indulged in sex with prostitutes on a regular basis. This is why Paul had to teach so strongly against that practice at the end of chapter 6.

So in chapter 7 and verse 25 Paul began responding to what the Corinthian believers wrote about female virgins in their letter to him. And he started by setting the table for them. Everyone knows that you’re supposed to set the table before you eat. Most of my kids have learned that principle by experience. Once they’re old enough to carry dishes, they’re old enough to set the table in our house. That’s one of the jobs they have when they’re younger. And if they’re lazy and don’t do their job when they’re supposed to, then

the meal gets delayed, and we have to wait longer to eat. Now Paul didn't make the Corinthian believers wait too long to start eating in verses 25–40. He started to give them instructions about virgins in verse 26. But first he wanted to set the table in verse 25 and prepare them for what he was about to teach them.

So in verse 25 he wrote, “Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I do give an opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is faithful.” When Paul said that he had no command from the Lord, he was saying that Jesus never taught specifically about virgins during his earthly ministry. He didn't give any commands about virgins that Paul could point the Corinthian believers to. But Paul was an apostle, and so he was an official representative of Jesus and carried his authority. And he wasn't limited to simply quoting commands from Jesus. He wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and gave new revelation that came directly from God. So he was qualified to give the Corinthian believers some authoritative teaching about virgins.

But Paul did not say that he was giving the Corinthian believers a command about virgins at the end of chapter 7. So he was not talking about what we have to do. Instead he said that he was giving them an opinion. But this opinion was inspired by God, and so we need to consider it very carefully. And at the end of verse 25 Paul focused on why we should give careful consideration to his opinion about virgins. He described himself “as one who by the Lord's mercy is faithful.” So Paul boldly asserted under divine inspiration that he was faithful. Back in chapter 1 and verse 9 he said that God is faithful, and he knew that we need to imitate God's faithfulness. Genuine believers should be reliable and trustworthy servants of God.

But Paul knew that being faithful to God is not something that we can do in our own strength. That's why Paul described himself in chapter 7 and verse 25 “as one who by the Lord's mercy is faithful.” So Paul could only be faithful to God because Jesus showed mercy to him and enabled him to be faithful. And Scripture teaches that God has showed mercy to all his children. In Titus 3:5 Paul said that God saved us according to his mercy. He showed compassion on us when we were in need. We deserved to be punished for our sins, but Jesus showed us mercy when he died in our place. And he continues to show us mercy every day by giving us the strength to serve him faithfully. Both our salvation and our service to the Lord depend on God's mercy. We may not be apostles like Paul was, but we need God's mercy to serve the Lord just like Paul did. And God will help us to be faithful if we depend on him.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:26. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “Because of the present distress, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is.” So in this verse we begin to see what Paul's inspired opinion was about virgins. But the Christian Standard Bible is missing an important word at the beginning of this verse. In the original Greek text there's a conjunction that links this verse with the previous verse. In the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible it's translated with the word “then.” But this word suggests a temporal sequence, which doesn't make any sense in this passage. Paul was not saying that verse 26 took place after verse 25.

But we can find a different translation for this Greek conjunction in the King James Version and the New King James Version. These translations have the word “therefore,” and so does the old Holman Christian

Standard Bible. This word is the more common way to translate this Greek conjunction, and it makes better sense in this passage. Paul was drawing a conclusion in verse 26 that was based on what he said in verse 25. He mentioned at the end of verse 25 that he was giving an opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy was faithful. So because he was a reliable servant of the Lord, the Corinthian believers could trust his opinion. He was not going to lead them astray and give them poor advice.

So let's take a closer look at the opinion that Paul expressed in verse 26. But the Christian Standard Bible does not give us a very literal translation here. First of all, it rearranges the sentence pretty significantly. It starts with the phrase "because of the present distress." But in the Greek text this phrase is actually found in the middle of the verse. So it's not as emphatic as it seems in the Christian Standard Bible. But there's a second way that this Bible translation is not very literal in verse 26. There are some words in the Greek text that are not translated here. We already saw that the word "therefore" is missing, but there are other words that are missing as well. Let me read the Legacy Standard Bible for you: "I think then that this is good because of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is."

So you can hear that there's a bit of repetition in this more literal translation. The word "good" is actually here twice, but the Christian Standard Bible only has it once, and so do other translations like the English Standard Version and the New International Version. They're just simplifying the verse to make it smoother and more readable. But they're missing the emphasis that Paul was communicating here. He used the Greek word for good twice to stress his point. He was emphasizing his opinion that it is good for a man to remain as he is. The Greek word for good is the same one that we saw back in verse 8. In that verse Paul said, "I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am."

So Paul was making it clear that he was not married at the time he wrote this letter. And he recommended that widows and widowers follow his example and remain single. But he didn't give them a command to do that. He just said that it was a good idea. It was worth considering, but it wasn't a matter of right and wrong. And in verse 26 Paul was saying the same thing. He wasn't giving a command here; instead he was simply giving his opinion, just like he said in verse 25. He was talking about an option that's worth considering. It wasn't required, but it was beneficial. He said that it was good for a man to remain as he is.

But what did Paul mean when he used the phrase "to remain as he is"? Almost every Bible translation has this phrase or something very similar to it. But this phrase is not a very literal translation of the original Greek. The King James Version is the only one I found that gives a more literal translation. It says, "It is good for a man so to be." The New American Standard Bible has a footnote that gives us confirmation on this point. It says that the end of the verse is literally translated "so to be." The Greek word for so just means "in this way." It's used in John 3:16, which is a very familiar verse. It says, "For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." Most translations say that God so loved the world, but that makes it sound like God loved the world so much. And that's not what the verse is saying. It's telling us how God showed his love to the world. It's pointing forward to the rest of the verse and the fact that God sent his Son to die for us so that we can have eternal life.

Now if that word points forward in 1 Corinthians 7:26, then it's referring to verse 27 and the questions and answers that Paul gave there. And that view is a possibility, but more often this word actually points backward to what comes before it. And so I think Paul was probably referring to the general rule that he gave three times in verses 17–24. In verse 24 he said, "Brothers and sisters, each person is to remain with God in the situation in which he was called." So the general rule that Paul gave in verses 17–24 was for people to remain in the situation that they were in when God saved them. And in that passage Paul gave two illustrations of this principle: circumcision and slavery. But his main point was to apply this principle to mixed marriages. A believer was not to initiate a divorce with an unbeliever but to remain married.

But in verse 26 I think that Paul was applying this general rule to his teaching about virgins as well. He seemed to be saying that virgins should consider remaining single. But earlier we concluded that Paul was talking only about females when he referred to virgins in this passage. So why did he say in verse 26 that it's good for a man to be in this way or to remain single? I think the natural conclusion here is that Paul was talking about the people who would marry those virgins. We won't have time to take a close look at the next verse today, but a quick peek at it shows that Paul went on to talk about being bound to or released from a wife. So in verse 26 I think Paul was talking about single men who were considering the possibility of getting married.

But we need to remember that Paul was not giving a command here. He did not say, "I command a man to remain as he is." Instead he said, "I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is." The Greek word for think is used 15 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote three of them. We're going to see it again in verse 36 of this chapter, and he also used it in 1 Timothy 6:5. But a more memorable occurrence of this word is used is found in Luke 2. In that chapter we learn that Mary and Joseph took their family to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival when Jesus was 12 years old. But when they returned to their home in Nazareth, they didn't realize that Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. Verses 44–45 say, "Assuming he was in the traveling party, they went a day's journey. They began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him."

So Mary and Joseph just assumed that Jesus was in their group when they left Jerusalem. That Greek word for assuming is the same word that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 7:26. It refers to forming an opinion about something tentatively but not definitively. But we use the word "think" in that way as well. If someone asks us whether it's going to snow this week, we might say, "I think so." But we wouldn't be saying that we know for certain. We're just giving our tentative opinion. And I think that's what Paul was saying in verse 26. He was giving his tentative opinion that it's good for a man to remain as he is. He was encouraging single men to consider remaining unmarried instead of getting married to a virgin. And he said that he held this opinion "because of the present distress."

Here is the key phrase in this verse, and it's not easy to interpret. What did Paul mean when he used the phrase "present distress"? Let's take a closer look at the two Greek words that Paul used here. The first one is the Greek word for present. It's used only seven times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote six of them. It's used one other time in this letter, and we already saw it back in chapter 3. In verse 22 Paul referred to "things present or things to come." That phrase is very similar to what Paul said in Romans 8:38

when he said that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, whether things present or things to come. So in those two verses Paul made a clear distinction between the present and the future, and he used our Greek word to refer to the present.

So when Paul talked about the present distress in 1 Corinthians 7:26, I don't think he was referring to something in the future or even something that was about to happen. Instead I think he had to be referring to something that was already happening when he wrote this letter. But what thing in the present was he talking about? Let's talk about the second word in our key phrase. It's the word "distress." The Greek word for distress is used 17 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote nine of them. Three of these occurrences are found in this letter, and we're looking at the first one. The second one shows up a little later in verse 37, and the third one is found in chapter 9 and verse 16. In both places Paul was talking about a compulsion. In chapter 9 he said that he was compelled to preach the gospel.

But there's another nuance for this Greek word, and we see it several times in 2 Corinthians. In chapter 6 and verse 4 Paul said, "As God's ministers, we commend ourselves in everything: by great endurance, by afflictions, by hardships, by difficulties." Then Paul went on in the following verses to continue his list. But our Greek word is the third one in that list, and it's translated "hardships." This Greek word is also found in chapter 12 and verse 10, which is the familiar passage where Paul talked about his thorn in the flesh. He asked the Lord to take it away, but instead the Lord said in verse 9, "My grace is sufficient for you." So in verse 10 Paul said, "I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Once again our Greek word is the third one in the list, and it's translated with the word "hardships" again as well.

So the other nuance for this Greek word is to be in a state of distress or trouble. And this nuance is clearly what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 7:26. But we still don't know exactly what he was talking about. What specifically was this present distress that he was referring to? Well, many Bible scholars think that Paul was talking about the future time of tribulation that God will bring on the earth just before Jesus returns. And they point to Luke 21 as a parallel passage. In verse 23 Jesus said, "Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days, for there will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people." The Greek word for distress in that verse is the same word that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 7:26.

So many Bible scholars think that Paul was talking about the same time of distress that Jesus was talking about in Luke 21. And this view is supported by the fact that Paul and Luke traveled and served together. So it makes sense that they would have been talking about the same concept when they used this word. Luke probably wrote his gospel just a few years after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Another reason to take this view is that Paul seemed to be referring to the end times just a little later in verses 29–31. And so it makes sense that he would be talking about the same topic in verse 26. This connection is a strong contextual argument, and it has persuaded many Bible scholars that Paul was talking about the future time of tribulation here in verse 26.

But there are some problems with this view that are difficult to overcome. The first and biggest one is that Paul used the word "present" in verse 26. So he was not talking about something that would happen in

the future. He was talking about something that was already happening when he wrote this letter. And so if Paul was talking about the tribulation in this verse, then he was saying that he was living in it! In other words, the time of tribulation had already started. But in that case Paul was wrong, because we're still here almost 2,000 years later! Jesus has not returned yet, and so clearly the time of tribulation did not take place during Paul's lifetime.

Another reason to reject this view is that Paul never used the Greek word for distress anywhere else to refer to the future time of tribulation on the earth. He certainly talked about the tribulation in several places like 1 and 2 Thessalonians, but he never referred to it using this word that we have here in 1 Corinthians 7:26. Instead he used other words to describe the tribulation. Whenever he used this Greek word to refer to hardship or distress, he was always talking about the normal hardships that he faced in his ministry and not the hardships of the future tribulation. But how should we respond to the strong contextual argument for the view that Paul was talking about the tribulation in this verse? The answer is simply that Paul started a new paragraph in verse 29, and it's marked by the phrase "brothers and sisters," which he often used at the beginning of a new paragraph. So most likely Paul was moving on to a different subject in that paragraph. He was talking about something different from what he was referring to in verse 26.

But we're still left with the question about what exactly Paul was talking about when he referred to the present distress. We can't be certain, but I think a strong case can be made that he was talking about a severe famine. There's plenty of extrabiblical evidence to support the idea that there were major grain shortages in the Roman Empire just before the time that Paul wrote this letter. And this view is also supported by Scripture. In Acts 11:28 Agabus "predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world." So it makes a lot of sense that Paul was talking about this severe famine in 1 Corinthians 7:26. Now we can't know for certain because Paul didn't clearly state what he was referring to. But certainly the Corinthian believers would have understood what Paul was talking about, because they were living in it!

So when Paul encouraged the single men in the Corinthian church to consider remaining unmarried, he was basing his advice on this present distress, whether it was a severe famine or some other hardship that they were experiencing. And what this means is that his opinion was based on this difficult situation. That's why we don't see him encouraging people to remain single this strongly in any of his other letters. But even in this passage there is no command to remain single, and Paul made it clear that it was not a sin to get married, even in this difficult situation. So Paul maintained a proper balance in his teaching on singleness and marriage here. Both of them are good gifts from God that we should appreciate. We can serve the Lord faithfully in either situation.

But most single Christians don't give much consideration to remaining single. And these days it's very important not to ignore this possibility. Life is becoming increasingly difficult for believers as our world becomes more hostile to Christianity. We could be facing many hardships in the future. And lately I've been seeing more talk in the news about the likelihood of food shortages in the near future. So while we're certainly not experiencing the exact situation that the Corinthian believers faced when Paul wrote

this letter, we can't say that our situation is totally different. Paul's teaching in this passage definitely has relevance for us today. We should not ignore it or think that it's irrelevant. We should give careful consideration to the inspired and trustworthy opinion that he was giving us here. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to do that.