

1 CORINTHIANS 7:29

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In verses 1–24 we saw that Paul was focused on the theme of marriage. And now in verses 25–40 we’re seeing that he was focused on the topic of virgins. So he started the chapter by talking about people who had experienced sexual intimacy. And then he ended the chapter by talking about people who had never experienced sexual intimacy. And more specifically he was focused on female virgins in this passage. That’s how the Greek word for virgins is normally used in the New Testament. So in verse 25 Paul said that he had no command from the Lord about virgins. In other words, Jesus never taught specifically about virgins during his earthly ministry. But Paul wanted to give us his opinion about this issue. He wasn’t giving any commands, but he was writing under divine inspiration as someone who was faithful by the Lord’s mercy.

Then in verse 26 Paul began to give his inspired opinion about virgins. He said, “Because of the present distress, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is.” So Paul said that a man should consider remaining single instead of getting married to a virgin. And he held this opinion “because of the present distress.” Now 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. But Paul was talking about something that was already happening when he wrote this letter. We can’t be certain what exactly he was talking about, but it seems likely that he was referring to 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. In Acts 11:28 Agabus even “predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world.”

So Paul’s advice in 1 Corinthians 7:26 was based on this difficult situation that the people were experiencing. That’s why he recommended singleness so strongly here. But then in verse 27 he seemed to give some commands about this matter. He said, “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife.” So in the first half of the verse it sounds like Paul was talking to men who were already married. And apparently he was telling them not to get divorced. Then in the second half of the verse it sounds like he was talking to men who were divorced. And apparently he told them not to get married.

Now this approach to the verse was popular for many years. But most recent Bible commentators have rejected this view because it doesn’t fit the context. Paul clearly said in verse 25 that he was talking about virgins in this section. So why would he have started addressing married and divorced men just two verses later? That makes no sense. So the standard approach that most recent commentators take with

verse 27 is that Paul was talking about engagement. And during biblical times engaged people were viewed as though they were already married. They had the status of marriage without the privileges of marriage. And if they wanted to terminate the engagement, they needed to get a divorce. So the subject of engagement makes good sense in verse 27, because it fits perfectly with the theme of virgins.

But why did Paul use commands here in this verse? After all, in verse 25 he said that he was only giving his opinion. And in verse 26 he said that it's good for a man to remain as he is, not that it's required. So it seems pretty clear that Paul was not giving a normal command at the end of verse 27. Instead he was just giving strongly-worded advice. And this interpretation is confirmed in the next verse. In verse 28 Paul said, "However, if you do get married, you have not sinned, and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But such people will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you." So in this verse Paul gave some important clarification about what he just wrote. He was basically saying that there's nothing wrong with disobeying his commands in verse 27. Unmarried men don't have to stay single; they can get married without sinning. And Paul said the same thing about single women as well.

But at the end of verse 28 he returned to his opinion about staying single, and he gave people a reason to follow his advice. He said that married people will have trouble in this life. But the Greek word for life more literally means "flesh." And this word often refers to the part of our body that covers our blood vessels. But it can also represent our bodies as a whole, and that seems to be the meaning here. So Paul was referring to trouble that we experience in our body. And this conclusion is confirmed by the Greek word for trouble. It's normally translated with the word "affliction," and it usually just refers to some kind of physical pain or suffering. So Paul was most likely pointing back to the present distress that he mentioned in verse 26. In other words, he was probably still talking about the severe famine that was causing problems throughout the Roman Empire.

But how would a famine create more trouble for married people than for single people? After all, can't a husband and wife help each other through a famine? That's true, but during ancient times a marriage normally would have produced a good number of children. And the average husband and wife would have had a lot of difficulty providing food for themselves and their kids during a famine. So Paul recommended that single people stay unmarried because he was trying to spare them. The Greek word for spare just means "to help someone avoid loss or discomfort." Paul didn't want single believers to suffer discomfort and difficulty needlessly.

But we need to make sure that we don't overreact and try to avoid all physical discomfort. Paul certainly didn't overreact in this area. In Romans 8:35 he said that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, even affliction. So we don't need to be afraid of affliction. Instead Paul said in Romans 5:3 that we should "rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance." In Romans 12:12 Paul said that we need to be "patient in affliction." So if we're married, we're probably going to experience additional physical hardship if we haven't already. But God can use that difficulty for good in our lives. He will use our afflictions to help us grow in patience and endurance.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:29. We're ready to cover some new material. But verse 29 flows di-

rectly into verses 30–31, so let's read all three verses. Look at what Paul wrote in verses 29–31: "This is what I mean, brothers and sisters: The time is limited, so from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they didn't own anything, and those who use the world as though they did not make full use of it. For this world in its current form is passing away." Paul started verse 29 with the phrase "this is what I mean." This phrase is found in English Standard Version as well as the Christian Standard Bible. But these translations are not very literal at this point. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible are better here. They have the phrase "but this I say."

So in verses 29–31 Paul was not explaining what he talked about in the previous verses. That's what the Christian Standard Bible and the English Standard Version are implying. So the word "this" is not pointing backward; instead it's pointing forward. Paul was still talking about virgins of course, but he was just adding a new thought to his previous discussion. So actually the word "but" in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible is not the best translation. The Greek conjunction here can also be translated with the word "and." The NET Bible has the best translation here; it has the phrase "and I say this." Paul was not making a contrast with what he just said. He was just adding another argument for his opinion that it's good for single people to remain unmarried.

But before Paul presented this argument, he addressed his readers with the phrase "brothers and sisters." We just saw this phrase in verse 24, where it came at the end of Paul's paragraph in verses 17–24. But now we're seeing it at the beginning of a new paragraph here in verse 29. And this is how Paul normally used this phrase in the letter. He used it in chapter 1 and verse 10, where he started the first major section in the book on the need for unity in the church. He also used it in chapter 1 and verse 26, where he started the last paragraph in chapter 1. Then he used it in the first verse of chapter 2 as well as the first verse of chapter 3, and both of those chapter breaks mark the beginning of a new paragraph. He also used it in chapter 4 and verse 6, which is the start of another paragraph.

So Paul used the phrase "brothers and sisters" over and over in this letter when he began a new paragraph. This phrase actually comes from just one word in the original Greek. And sometimes this term can be translated simply with the word "brothers." For example, in 1 Timothy 5:1 Paul told Timothy to exhort "younger men as brothers." So Paul was clearly talking only about males in that verse. But when this Greek word is in the plural, like it is in 1 Corinthians 7:29, it usually refers to a mixed group that includes both men and women. And I think that's what Paul intended here. It seems pretty obvious that he expected women as well as men to hear what he wrote in this letter. After all, in this chapter he was giving instructions to both men and women about singleness and marriage. And in chapter 11 he talked about the need for women to wear head coverings.

So I believe that the phrase "brothers and sisters" is an appropriate and helpful translation here. The English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible just have the word "brothers," which I think is misleading. Now thankfully the English Standard Version has a footnote with the phrase "brothers and sisters" as an alternate translation, but unfortunately most readers don't look at the footnotes. The older editions of the New American Standard Bible have the word "brethren," which is just an archaic word that

means “brothers.” But the 2020 revision of the New American Standard Bible has the phrase “brothers and sisters” just like the Christian Standard Bible. I don’t like everything about this revision, but I do like this change.

Now let’s talk about the meaning of the Greek word translated “brothers and sisters.” Obviously Paul wasn’t talking about a physical relationship here. He wasn’t saying that he was related to his readers by blood. Instead he was talking about a spiritual relationship. He was emphasizing the fact that as Christians we’re brothers and sisters in God’s family. This is a point that Jesus stressed during his earthly ministry. Listen to what we read about Jesus in Mark 3:31–35: “His mother and brothers came, and standing outside, they sent word to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him and told him, ‘Look, your mother, your brothers, and your sisters are outside asking for you.’ He replied to them, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ Looking at those sitting in a circle around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”

So what Jesus was saying here is that his followers make up his true family. In other words, our heavenly family takes priority over our earthly family. It’s a wonderful blessing when our earthly family members are part of our heavenly family as well. But that is often not the case. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 10:34–37: “Don’t assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household. The one who loves a father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” So the point here is that whether our earthly family members are believers or not, we must ultimately be loyal to Jesus. No one should be more important to us than him.

Now Jesus wasn’t implying in these passages that we don’t have any responsibilities to our blood relatives. Paul taught us earlier in 1 Corinthians 7 that a Christian should not pursue a divorce from an unbelieving spouse. And in 1 Timothy 5:8 Paul said that a Christian man must provide for the members of his family. That even includes his parents if they need support. This is part of what it means to honor our parents, as Jesus taught clearly in Matthew 15:4–6. But life can be difficult when we have family members who aren’t saved. The closeness that we have with them is limited, because our bond is only physical and not spiritual. But as Christians we have the common bond of being adopted into God’s family. We share a heavenly Father and an eternal destiny. We submit to the same Lord and read the same Scripture.

This is why it’s so important for us to be part of a good church. If we’re going to be together forever, then we should get started during this life! We should enjoy regular fellowship with our Christian brothers and sisters. We should pray together about our needs and concerns. And we should study God’s Word together and encourage each other to obey it. Those are all things that we do in this class! And they’re just some of the reasons that gathering together for church is essential. We need to stay connected, especially as we face increasing opposition in this world. Paul told us in 2 Timothy 3:1 that “hard times will come in the last days.” We need to keep encouraging each other to stand firm on God’s Word.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:29 Paul referred to his readers as his brothers and sisters. In other words, he wasn’t

just writing to them as an apostle with authority over them. He also wanted them to understand that ultimately he was a fellow Christian. They were not his personal slaves but his spiritual siblings. Many of them were immature spiritually, but he expressed confidence that they were part of God's family. They had been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. And in verse 29 Paul had something important that he wanted to say to his spiritual brothers and sisters. He said, "The time is limited." The Greek word for limited is used only one other time in the New Testament. It's found in Acts 5:6 where it describes what happened to the body of Ananias after he dropped dead for lying to the Holy Spirit. This verse says that some young men wrapped his body before they carried him out and buried him.

Now most of us have wrapped things before. It was only a few months ago that we were wrapping Christmas gifts. What you're basically doing is taking something large and making it smaller. A sheet of wrapping paper starts out big, but when you wrap a gift, you're folding the paper so that it's not as long. That's basically what would have happened to the cloth that was used to wrap the body of Ananias. It was stretched out at first, but after the body was put on it, then it became smaller when it was folded and wrapped around the body. Now in 1 Corinthians 7:29 we're not talking about paper or a cloth, but we're still talking about something that became smaller. We're just talking about time instead of space. Paul said that the time was limited. So in other words, it became smaller in the sense that it was shortened. That's exactly the word used in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible.

This Greek word for limited or shortened is actually a verb in the perfect tense and the passive voice. The perfect tense basically has two nuances. It means that the action was completed in the past and has ongoing results in the present. So the time was shortened before Paul wrote this statement, and this shortening had ongoing ramifications for the Christians in Corinth and all other believers as well. The passive voice just means that the subject of the verb receives the action instead of doing the action. So the time did not do the shortening. Instead the time was the thing that was shortened. The action of shortening was done to the time. So we don't know for sure who did the shortening, because Paul didn't tell us here. But often when the person doing the action of a verb is left unstated, that person is God. This is what Bible scholars call a divine passive. And I think that view makes the most sense here. So God was probably the one who shortened the time.

But what time was Paul talking about here? To answer that question we need to look at the next sentence. We read it earlier; it's found at the end of verse 31. Paul said "this world in its current form is passing away." We'll cover this statement in more detail in a week or two, but it seems that Paul was talking about the future time when the heavens and the earth will be destroyed. We're told in 2 Peter 3:7 that "the present heavens and earth are being stored up for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and the destruction of the ungodly." And the book of Revelation tells us that this day of judgment will take place after Jesus returns and reigns on the earth for a thousand years. Then Satan will lead a final rebellion, and after he's defeated, the heavens and the earth will be destroyed.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:29 Paul was probably talking about the time remaining until the destruction of the heavens and the earth. This is the time that was shortened. But we need to make sure that we don't misunderstand this statement. Paul was not saying that Jesus was going to return immediately. Otherwise he

would have been wrong, because Jesus still hasn't come back almost two thousand years later! And if Paul was wrong here, then Scripture has an error, and we can no longer trust the Bible. But thankfully there's a much better way to interpret this statement. Most likely Paul just meant that after Jesus ascended to heaven, he could return at any time and launch the events that lead to the destruction of the heavens and the earth. So the first coming of Jesus brought us one big step closer to the end of the world.

Let me give you an illustration of how this works. Let's say that you have the misfortune of needing to go to the DMV for some reason. I had to get a new driver's license a year or two ago, and unfortunately I couldn't apply for it online. So I had to go to the DMV and wait in a long line. Now when you first get in line, you might be the twentieth or thirtieth person in the line. But eventually after an hour or two you finally get to the front of the line, and now you're the next person to be called. At that point your long wait is almost over! You know that you could be called to one of the counters at any moment. There's no one who will be called before you.

So when God sent his only Son to earth to die on the cross for our sins, he was shortening the time remaining until Jesus returns to judge the world. Now we could say that this time is constantly being shortened as every second passes. But I think Paul's focus was broader than that. He was just saying that once Jesus ascended to heaven, he can return at any moment. This is the ongoing result that flows from the completed action of Jesus coming to die on the cross. And because this time has been shortened, there are some ramifications for how we live right now during the church age. In verse 29 Paul stressed this point by using the phrase "so from now on." And then he made five parallel statements that show how this shortened time has an impact on our lives. The first one is in verse 29, the next three are in verse 30, and the last one is in verse 31. We'll cover the first one today, and then we'll try to cover the rest of them next week.

So at the end of verse 29 Paul said that "from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none." Now this statement seems pretty clear on the surface. Paul was basically saying that married men should live as though they aren't married. But what did Paul mean by that statement? Well, he certainly didn't mean that married men should get divorced. Paul made it very clear earlier in this chapter that believers should not pursue divorce. There are only two exceptions: one that Jesus covered in Matthew and one that Paul covered here. Jesus said that divorce is permitted for unrepentant sexual immorality, and Paul said that divorce is permitted if the unbeliever in a mixed marriage wants to leave. So Paul definitely wasn't talking about divorce here.

We can also be certain that Paul was not talking about abstaining from sexual relations in marriage. After all, he dealt with that issue very thoroughly in the beginning of this chapter. He actually commanded husbands and wives to have sexual relations with each other. They were not allowed to deprive each other in this area except for the purpose of being devoted to prayer. And in Ephesians 5:25 Paul went even further and said that husbands are to love their wives like Christ loves the church. Paul didn't say here that husbands are to make love to their wives. He was talking about love in a much broader sense. He wanted husbands to selflessly care for their wives and lead them into greater holiness. Husbands are to put their wives first and do what's best for them.

So when Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:29 that married men should live as though they're not married, I think it's safe to say that he was using hyperbole. In other words, he was exaggerating to make a point. Jesus did the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount when he said that if our eye causes us to sin, we should gouge it out, and if our hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off. But removing various body parts won't actually solve our sin problem! The root goes much deeper within us. So Jesus was just using hyperbole or exaggeration. His point was that we need to treat sin very seriously and take extreme measures to overcome it. And in 1 Corinthians 7:29 the point of Paul's hyperbole is that we should not find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in marriage. In fact, marriage itself points us to what really matters. It's a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. So we should find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in our relationship with the Lord. Nothing should matter more to us than pleasing him.

You see, marriage was never intended to be something that lasts forever. In Mark 12:25 Jesus said that when people "rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven." So human marriage is temporary and ends at death. Then our temporary marriages will be replaced by our marriage to Jesus. So the point here is that believers who are single should not become consumed with getting married. Now we know that there's nothing inherently wrong with getting married. But being single or married is not central to our identity as Christians. Our highest priority should be on serving the Lord regardless of our marital status. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to live in obedience to him, whether we're single or married.