

1 CORINTHIANS 7:31

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In verses 1–24 Paul was focused on the theme of marriage. Then in verses 25–40 he switched to the related topic of virgins and more specifically female virgins. In verse 25 he started by saying 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 inspired opinion about this issue. So in verse 26 he said that it's good for a man to remain single because of the present distress. Now we can't be certain exactly what distress he was talking about. But it seems likely that he was referring to a severe famine based on extrabiblical evidence about grain shortages in the Roman Empire around that time.

So Paul's advice here was based on this difficult situation that the people were experiencing. But then in verse 27 he gave some commands about this matter. He told those who were bound to a wife not to seek to be released. And he told those who were released from a wife not to seek a wife. Now at first glance it seems that Paul was telling married men not to get divorced and divorced men not to get married. But this view doesn't fit the context, because Paul was focused on virgins in this section. So it's more likely that he was talking about engagement here. 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 give commands in this verse after he said in verse 25 that he was just giving his opinion? I think the answer must be that he was not giving normal commands in verse 27. Instead he was just giving strongly-worded advice. And this interpretation is confirmed in the next verse, where Paul said that those who do get married have not sinned. But Paul ended verse 28 by giving people a reason to follow his advice about remaining single. He said that married people will have trouble in this life. I think he was basically saying that it's harder to survive a famine when you're married with kids compared to when you're single. So he recommended that single people stay unmarried because he wanted to spare them from needless hardship during that difficult time.

Then in verse 29 Paul began a new paragraph in this section, and it runs through the end of verse 31. Look at what Paul wrote in these verses: "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.” So in this passage Paul was giving another argument for his opinion that it’s good for single people to remain unmarried. And he started by saying that “the time is limited” or more literally that “the time has been shortened.” I think he just meant that once Jesus ascended to heaven, he could return at any moment. So the first coming of Jesus brought us one big step closer to the end of the world.

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. We’ve already looked at the first four statements in verses 29–30. The first one is in verse 29, and there 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. Now obviously this doesn’t mean that married men should get divorced or that they should abstain from sexual relations with their wives. Paul already dealt with those issues very clearly in the beginning of this chapter.

So I think it’s safe to say that Paul was using hyperbole in verse 29. In other words, he was exaggerating to make a point. And his point is that we should not find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in marriage. After all, human marriage is temporary and ends at death. Then our temporary marriages will be replaced by our permanent marriage to Jesus. So we should find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in our relationship with the Lord. Nothing should matter more to us than pleasing him. There’s nothing inherently wrong with getting married, it’s not something that single believers should become consumed with. Our marital status is not central to our identity as Christians. Our highest priority should be on serving the Lord and living in obedience to him, whether we’re single or married.

Then in verse 30 Paul gave us three more statements, and the next two form a pair. Paul said, “Those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice.” So it sounds like Paul was saying that those who weep should stop weeping and that those who rejoice should stop rejoicing. In other words, Paul apparently didn’t want us to experience any joy or sorrow at all. Perhaps he just wanted us to live our lives without experiencing any emotion at all. But of course we know from other Scripture passages that this conclusion can’t possibly be true. Paul himself told us in Romans 12:15 to “rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.” So there are appropriate times to rejoice and appropriate times to weep. We should empathize with our fellow Christians, whether they’re going through good times or bad times.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:30 Paul wasn’t saying that there’s anything inherently wrong with weeping and rejoicing. He was using hyperbole or exaggeration to make a point, just like he did in verse 29 with marriage. And I think his point here was that our sorrow and our joy should be different as believers compared to unbelievers. We need to live in light of the fact that Jesus could come back at any moment. So when a fellow believer dies, we shouldn’t grieve like those who have no hope, because we know that we’re going to be reunited with them someday. And while we can find joy in many things, ultimately our joy should be in the Lord and what he has done for us. So single Christians shouldn’t be filled with sorrow

over being unmarried. Both singleness and marriage are good gifts from God. We should rejoice in the Lord regardless of our marital status.

Then at the end of verse 30 Paul gave another statement about how the shortened time has an impact on our lives. He said that “those who buy [should be] as though they didn’t own anything.” So it almost sounds like Paul was saying that we should just get rid of all our possessions. But that view does not fit with the rest of Scripture. In 1 Timothy 6:17–19 Paul told Titus to give some instructions to believers who were rich. And he certainly said that they needed to be generous and willing to share, but he never said that they had to share everything. In fact, he said that God richly provides us with all things to enjoy. So there’s nothing wrong with enjoying our wealth if God has made us rich, as long as we don’t fall into the trap of loving money.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:30 I believe that Paul was once again using hyperbole or exaggeration to make a point. And his point was that we shouldn’t get consumed with obtaining money and possessions. Our lives should not be focused on money but on the Lord. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus said that “No one can serve two masters, since either he will hate one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” Now of course there’s nothing wrong with having a job and making money. But we should not get so busy making money and getting stuff that we neglect to store up treasures in heaven. You see, we can’t take our money and possessions with us to heaven. We need to use our money wisely so that it can have an eternal impact.

Now let’s move on to 1 Corinthians 7:31. We’re ready to cover some new material. In the beginning of this verse Paul gave us his fifth and final statement about how the shortened time has an impact on our lives. He said, “And those who use the world as though they did not make full use of it.” So in the fourth statement Paul talked about possessions, and here in the fifth statement he talked about the world. The Greek word for world is very common; it’s used almost 200 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 47 of them. But 21 of them are in this letter, and we’ve already seen 14 of them.

Now this Greek word can be used in three major ways. The first one is the physical world. For example, John 1:10 says that Jesus “was in the world, and the world was created through him.” The second nuance for this word is the world of humanity. This is how the word is used in John 3:16, which says that “God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” The third meaning for this word is the evil world system. So the first one is a place, the second one refers to people, and the third one is basically a set of principles. Now certainly these principles are believed by many people who live on the earth. But the main focus with this third nuance is on a system of values that are opposed to God. For example, James 4:4 tells us “that friendship with the world is hostility toward God.” In other words, as Christians we shouldn’t align ourselves with principles and values that are opposed to God.

Now many occurrences of this Greek word earlier in the letter have this meaning. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:19 Paul told us that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” So in that verse Paul was pretty clearly talking about the wisdom of this evil world system. But here in chapter 7 and verse 31

he was not using this word quite so negatively. And so I think it's likely that he was just referring to the physical world. He talked about "those who use the world." The Greek word for use is found 11 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote nine of them, and four of them are in this letter. We already saw the first one back in verse 21 of this chapter, where Paul told Christian slaves, "If you can become free, by all means take the opportunity." So Paul was basically telling believing slaves who could become free to use that ability.

Then in chapter 9 we see the other two uses of this Greek word in the letter. In chapter 9 Paul was talking about his right to receive financial support from the believers he ministered to. In verse 12 he said, "If others have this right to receive benefits from you, don't we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right; instead, we endure everything so that we will not hinder the gospel of Christ." Then in verse 15 Paul said, "For my part I have used none of these rights, nor have I written these things that they may be applied in my case." So in both of those verses Paul said that he didn't use his right to receive financial support. In other words, he didn't take advantage of a benefit that was available to him.

Paul also used this Greek verb in 1 Timothy 5:23. In that verse he told Timothy, "Don't continue drinking only water, but use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses." I can identify with Timothy here. I pretty much drink only water almost all the time. Occasionally I'll have some apple juice or some orange juice. But I never drink wine or beer, and I hardly ever drink soda. I like water because it's good for you and it's very cheap. Now of course Paul was telling Timothy to drink wine for medicinal purposes. But I don't even like to take medicine. I usually take medicine only if I'm desperate. But unless I'm feeling terrible, I like to let my body take care of itself. We keep a variety of medicines in our home. But as a general rule I don't use them. I don't take advantage of this benefit that's available to me, just like Paul didn't take advantage of the financial support that was available to him.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:31 we have this same Greek word for use. Paul was referring to "those who use the world," and I think he was just talking about taking advantage of a wide variety of benefits that come from living in the physical world. So Paul seemed to be ending his list here with a summary statement that included the four things he already mentioned. But it could also include many other things that he didn't mention, like drinking wine for example. Now in light of the previous four statements, we would expect Paul to tell us that those who use the world should be as though they did not use it. That's how he spoke in the first few statements, and we concluded that he was using hyperbole or exaggeration. But here he did not resort to hyperbole. Instead he said that those who use the world should be as though they did not make full use of it.

The phrase "make full use" comes from one word in the original Greek, and it comes from the same root as the Greek word for use that we just saw earlier in the verse. But this word adds a prefix to the beginning of the root that intensifies its meaning. So it doesn't just mean "to use something"; it means "to make full use of something." This Greek word is used only twice in the New Testament, and both of them are in this letter. The other one is found in chapter 9 and verse 18. Earlier we looked at verses 12 and 15 in this chapter. Now let's look at verse 18: "What then is my reward? To preach the gospel and offer it free of charge and not make full use of my rights in the gospel."

So Paul said in verses 12 and 15 that he didn't use his right to receive financial support. But here he clarified and said that he didn't make full use of his rights in the gospel. It's not like he never took any money from the believers he ministered to. We know that he did according to Philippians 4. He didn't ask for money for himself, but if people offered him a gift, he certainly took it. So in 1 Corinthians 7:31 Paul stated clearly that there was nothing wrong with using the world. It's impossible to live in the world without making use of it in some way. We all need to eat and drink and wear clothes, and we need to make money to buy those things. But Paul didn't want us to live as those who make full use of the world. In other words, we shouldn't be consumed with earthly things. Our lives shouldn't be filled with everything that this world has to offer.

Now I'm not saying that we should never take any vacations or do any sightseeing. It's a good thing to get out and enjoy God's creation. But many people just go from one vacation to another once they retire. And before they retire they're consumed with working or with getting their kids involved in sports. Now these things aren't inherently wrong, but they can distract us from serving the Lord and being involved at church. And I think that's what Paul was warning us against here. He didn't want us to be absorbed in the things of this world. We need to remember that we're strangers and exiles on this earth, as Peter said in 1 Peter 2:11. Instead of being engrossed in this world, we need to store up treasures in heaven and stay focused on what matters for eternity.

So we've now looked at Paul's five statements about how the shortened time has an impact on our lives in 1 Corinthians 7:29–31. But there's one more sentence at the end of verse 31 that we still need to cover. Paul ended this paragraph by saying, "For this world in its current form is passing away." The word "for" introduces an explanation for what comes before it. Paul was giving us the reason that we should live according to the five statements that we just saw. He already laid the foundation for these five statements in the beginning of verse 29 when he said that "the time is limited." Now he was coming full circle and elaborating on that brief statement. What he meant when he said that "the time is limited" is that "this world in its current form is passing away."

Here Paul used the same Greek word for world that we just saw earlier in verse 31. And once again it seems clear that he was talking about the physical world. But this time he added a phrase to go with this word. He referred to "this world in its current form." But the Christian Standard Bible is not very literal here. The Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible give us a more literal translation. They say that "the form of this world is passing away." The Greek word for form is used only twice in the New Testament, and Paul wrote both of them. The other one is found in Philippians 2:7. In verses 7–8 Paul said that Jesus "emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross."

Now in the beginning of verse 7 the Christian Standard Bible has the word "form," but it comes from a different Greek word from the one that we have in our passage. Our Greek word for form is used at the end of verse 7, but the Christian Standard Bible doesn't translate it. This translation just says that "he had come as a man." But other translations give us the word "appearance." The Legacy Standard Bible and the

New American Standard Bible have the phrase “being found in appearance as a man.” So this Greek word basically refers to the outward appearance of someone or something. Now this doesn’t mean that Jesus only appeared to be a man. This is a heresy called Docetism, and it’s been around for a long time. But Scripture teaches clearly that Jesus was truly a man. And Paul was stressing his outward appearance as a man in Philippians 2:7.

But in 1 Corinthians 7:31 Paul was stressing the outward appearance of the physical world. And I think he’s including the whole social and economic infrastructure that goes with this world. This infrastructure is what those five statements in verses 29–31 are based on. And Paul said in verse 31 that the outward appearance of this world is passing away. The Greek word for passing away is used 10 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote only this one. But it’s used in a similar passage in 1 John 2. In verse 15 John told us not to “love the world or the things in the world.” And in verse 17 he gave us the reason: “The world with its lust is passing away.” Now in that passage John was talking about the evil world system. But the evil world system is certainly connected to the physical world. And Scripture teaches that both of them are going to pass away.

But in both of these passages the Greek verb for passing away is in the present tense, not the future tense. And so apparently Paul was saying that the earth would cease to exist right away. Now Scripture certainly teaches that eventually 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 to reign 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. In Revelation 21:1 John said that he “saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”

But none of those things have happened yet! It’s been almost 2,000 years since Paul lived, and we’re still living on the same earth. So why did Paul use the present tense in 1 Corinthians 7:31? I think he was just emphasizing the fact that this world is doomed. It’s like God has put a time bomb in the center of the earth, and it’s just a matter of time before it goes off. Once Jesus died on the cross, rose again, and ascended to heaven, we took one giant step closer to the end of the world. Now Jesus can return at any moment to bring us to heaven, and that event will launch the end times. Next there will be a seven-year period of tribulation on the earth, and that’s when Jesus will return to set up his millennial kingdom. Then the earth will be destroyed after Satan’s final rebellion.

So we need to live in light of these future events. It makes no sense for us to get consumed with this world, because it’s not going to last. It would be like investing in the stock market in 1929 right before the Great Depression or investing in the housing market in 2007 right before we had that big crash. Now we couldn’t know for certain that those things were going to happen. But God has told us in his Word that this world is going to pass away. That’s a promise we can take to the bank! God hasn’t told us exactly when he’s going to fulfill that promise, but we know that the end times can be launched at any moment.

So we need to be ready for the return of Christ. Do we really believe that Jesus is preparing a place for us

and that he's going to come again and take us to himself? That's what he promised to his disciples in John 14:2–3. Do we really believe that Jesus is going to raise people from the dead and give us new bodies? That's what he promised to his disciples in John 5:28–29. If we don't believe that the dead are going to be raised, then we should join the unbelievers and do what Paul talked about in 1 Corinthians 15:32: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Let's just party and have a good time on this earth if there's nothing after this life. But if we really believe what the Bible tells us about the future, then we need to live accordingly. We shouldn't be consumed with the things of this world. Instead we need to stay focused on pleasing the Lord and living in obedience to him. Let's make sure that we're busy serving the Lord when he returns. Let's close in prayer.