

PREFACE

As we leave the “illustrative interlude” (vv17-24) and Paul resumes addressing the issues sent him from the Corinthian church, the apostle is still thinking and counseling from an eschatological perspective. Not only does Paul speak as if the “end times” may be imminent, but he understands better than most that believers are to be living even now with an eschatological worldview—*not* in the perverse sense of some in Corinth who thought they were already living on the other side of the resurrection, but that, who Christians are and how they live *right now*, is informed by what they will one day be when Christ returns.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:25-28.

The passage before us contains a number of points where the attentive reader will ask, *What does Paul mean by...*

- What does Paul mean by “virgin”? (v25)
- What does he mean by “present distress”? (v26)
- Does he mean “virgins” of both sexes, because he immediately addresses men? Or, if he means just female virgins, *why* does he address the man immediately after referencing virgins? (v26)
- What does Paul mean by “bound to a wife,” and “released from a wife”?
- What sort of “trouble in this life” does he have in mind that those who are married will experience? (v28)

These we will answer as we dig into the text. There is one more question to answer before the ones we have listed: Why is Paul addressing this topic? Answer: He is still on the same topic. Prominent in the letter sent to him from Corinth was the maxim “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” The apostle does not totally disagree with this; what he disagrees with is the *reason* those in the Corinthian church were espousing this philosophy. Paul has already stated the case for celibacy (when one has been granted that gift from God, as he has). We have seen that, everything being equal, he sees this as preferable.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:7-8.

As Gordon Fee puts it, Paul finds himself “on the horns of a dilemma.” He favors celibacy, but he emphatically disagrees with their ascetic reasons for such a position. He wants to affirm celibacy without affirming their misguided asceticism. So far he has addressed this regarding those who are already married (vv1-7), those who are single or widowed (vv8-9), and in the context of divorce (vv10-16). His counsel throughout has been the same: It is best to remain as you are. And now he applies this to “virgins.”

v25

Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.

A direct command from Christ Jesus always has precedence, but in this case there is none. So Paul must answer by his apostolic authority. I am personally uncomfortable with the NASB's "opinion," which sounds a little too soft and squishy. On the other hand, "judgment" in the other popular translations sounds too firm, too unwavering. On this topic Paul is not commanding but advising; referring to himself as "one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy," he extends this mercy to the church. What we hear in the extended passage to the end of the chapter is *not* the voice of ruling authority, but of a concerned pastor wishing the best for the flock. Just take note of how he peppers the text with phrases such as

- "I think" (v26)
- "I am trying to spare you" (v28)
- "I want you to..." (v32)
- "This I say for your own benefit" (v35)
- "let him do as he wishes" (v36)
- "he will do well" (v37)

"In short, Paul is being cautious" (Margaret Y. MacDonald) as he broaches the topic at hand, which is "virgins." Not everyone agrees on what he means by this, but the most logical conclusion, based on the context, is that he refers to *betrothed women*. That is, virgin women "engaged" to be married. Remember that at least for the Jews, the betrothal period was a solemn and permanent state that could be broken only by divorce. The only difference between betrothal and marriage was that the woman remained a virgin, as the two were not yet sharing a home and bed. But what Paul writes would also apply to betrothal more akin to our time—one that could be easily ended by agreement, or even by just one of the two parties calling the whole thing off.

v26

I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

The NASB and KJVs do their best to be faithful to the admittedly awkward Greek of this verse. (In my opinion the NIV and ESV, while more legible, trim away a little bit too much.)

I think then that this is good

There are two "is good"s in this verse. The first "this is good" probably points back tacitly to the maxim stated (by the Corinthians in their letter to Paul) that "...it is good for a man not to touch a woman" (v1). Again, Paul agrees with this *in principle*, but not for the reasons they have cited. "Good" here means functionally beneficial.

in view of the present distress,

Just what is this “present distress” (or “crisis” in the NIV)? This is one of those extended passages—v25-40—in which one would prefer to address it as one contiguous thought, rather than its component parts, but that would have its own difficulties. So consider the answer to this in v26 to be a partial answer that will be fleshed out further as we proceed through the passage.

Because of v29, which seems to have a clear eschatological reference (“the time has been shortened”), and the end of v31 (“the form of this world is passing away”), many have interpreted “present distress” in v26 as eschatological as well. The problem with this is that the grammar, along with Paul’s customary usage, means that this refers to “something they are already experiencing” (Garland).

Read 1 Corinthians 3:22.

“Things present” translates the same word used in v26 (*enistemi*) and in Chapter Three is in contrast to “things to come”—that is, in the future.

So whatever Paul refers to here is something the Corinthians are experiencing right now. Nevertheless we cannot deny that this extended passage has about it an end-times flavor. Paul does not specify what this “distress” is, but his perspective on the end-times is that they have *effectively* already begun (v29-31). Let me offer an admittedly pitiful illustration for how this can be true; how even before the eschatological events begin, believers live—and may suffer—as if they already have.

Imagine a small village nestled in a valley surrounded by small mountains. For generations the village families have remained in their village, never having the courage or even curiosity to climb the peaks to see what lies on the other side. They can hear a rhythmic roar, but don’t know what it is; they can smell salt in the air, but don’t know why. But one day a young man *is* curious about what lies beyond, and works up the courage to scale one of the peaks. Once he reaches the top, he discovers a vast ocean lying before him, and immediately he knows the reason for the sound and the salt in the air. There is nothing he can do about it, but now he knows the answer, and even as he descends to his valley home his thoughts return to the image and memory of the sea, and just as he was curious about what lay beyond the surrounding mountains, he is now curious about what might lie beyond the seemingly endless ocean.

Those who have placed their faith in Christ Jesus remain here on earth, dwelling in a fallen and sometimes hostile environment. But they have, as it were, “been to the mountain.”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., April 3, 1968, Memphis, Tennessee (the last paragraph from his last sermon before being assassinated): Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

In my illustration, when that courageous young man returned to his village there were probably many who called him a liar, or maybe a gullible idiot. As a result he experienced a measure of “distress” because of what he had seen. But he *had* seen it, and that knowledge forever changed his life. He suffered for it, but it also changed his perspective—even as he continued living in that isolated village.

Christians, as Dr. King explained, have been to the mountain top and looked over to the the other side. We've seen the promised land. Because of that experience—and, not least, because of the indwelling Spirit—even though we may suffer for our faith, we live in the knowledge and the hope of what is to come. It is far more than just something we look forward to; it is something *that has forever changed the way we live in the here and now.*

that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

Here Paul repeats his maxim—but now we are left wondering why he says “it is good for a *man*” (ESV: “a person”) since we thought he was talking about virgin *women*. For the answer we must once again return to the first century. Garland explains, “The focus throughout is on the decision of the male, since in this culture males would have been the ones who took the primary initiative in such matters.” In that time and place the “virgin” did not decide that she wanted to get married, and so went on a quest to find a husband. Her parents and a prospective husband would be the ones to decide and do this.

Gordon Fee paraphrases this verse nicely: “In light of the troubles believers are already experiencing, who needs the additional burden of marriage as well?” More on this when we get to v32f.

*Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife?
Do not seek a wife.*

Opinions vary on who is being addressed in this verse, but the most logical conclusion seems to be—especially considering the unusual word translated “released” (loosed or free = *lysis*)—that Paul speaks first to those betrothed, then to those not betrothed.

There are several pieces of evidence that point to this position:

- *lysis* (“released,” “loosed”) is not a common word for divorce, but is more often a technical term for discharging someone from the obligations of a contract.
- The word translated “wife” *can* mean that, but it is also the general term for “woman” (*gyne*).
- Paul has already stated that he has no command from the Lord concerning the topic at hand; Jesus *did* speak on divorce.
- We have already concluded that “virgins” refers to betrothed women—that is, women not married in the fullest sense, but just “engaged.”

So the first half of the verse speaks to men—again, the ones in control of such agreements in the first century—who are betrothed to virgins. Paul’s counsel is for them not to break the marriage contract. The second half of the verse would then speak to singles *not* betrothed; if that is the case, do not seek to be.

The updated NIV captures this well:

Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife.

Verse 28 follows seamlessly from v27, and this is where we will pick it up in our next session.