

# Singleness in the Last Days

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[ 0 : 00 ] Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. 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.

But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on, those who have wives should live as if they do not. Those who mourn as if they did not. Those who are happy as if they were not.

Those who buy something as if it were not theirs to keep. Those who use the things of the world as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs, how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world, how he can please his wife.

[ 1 : 02 ] And his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs. Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world, how she can please her husband.

I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably towards the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants.

He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin, this man also does the right thing.

So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better. A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives, but if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.

In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is, and I think that I too have the Spirit of God. Amen. My name is Martin Ayers.

[ 2 : 21 ] I'm the lead pastor here. Thanks, Bethany, for reading that for us. If you could keep your Bibles open at 1 Corinthians 7, that would be really helpful. We're in a series working through this book of the Bible, taking it section at a time.

We'll take a break from it next week, because we do have the baptism, but then we'll be back in it. And we're in chapter 7, it's page 1149 in the church Bibles.

Just picking things up at verse 25 there. So let's pray, let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Heavenly Father, we praise you for your revelation to us that makes sense of the world you have made and of who we are.

Father, we ask that you would help us this morning, especially where we find your teaching challenging, that we would see the goodness of your word, that your Spirit will move us to understand your word and to be willing to follow the Lord Jesus more deeply.

For we ask in his name. Amen. So one of the new films being talked about at the moment is Ticket to Paradise. It's being described as a movie proving that the rom-com genre is not over for Hollywood.

[ 3 : 46 ] The two main actors, it follows a very familiar pattern. Two main actors are George Clooney, of course, and Julia Roberts, of course. And they play David and Georgia, who were married and had a daughter, Lily, but they've separated and can't stand each other.

And then they find out that Lily, their daughter, has gone traveling to Bali and she's met a seaweed farmer and fallen in love and she's getting married. So David and Georgia head to Bali, bickering on the plane, with the shared mission to urge their daughter that she's rushing into things and that marriage is a terrible idea.

I wonder if you can predict what might happen in a film like that. What if Lily and Mr. Seaweed Farmer would really make each other complete?

What if on the way to kill off Lily's romance, David and Georgia were to find that their love for one another is rekindled and that their trip to Bali is their very own ticket to Paradise?

I haven't even seen the film. I know that's what's going to happen in the film, okay? It doesn't count as a spoiler if you haven't actually even seen it. The thing is, that's the narrative, isn't it, of Hollywood, that there's someone out there who can set you free.

[ 5 : 03 ] Guys, you just have to find the girl and get over the hurdles and she'll set you free. Girls, there's a guy out there who will complete you. And the thing is, we have a similar fairytale narrative in church.

That's the problem. It goes, nice Christian boy finds a church and gets stuck in and then one day, nice Christian girl walks in and they meet and they go on some nice dates and they have a nice relationship and they have a nice big wedding and they have a nice marriage and they live on a nice street in a nice house and after a few years they get nice kids and then they grow old together and they have a nice life.

Happily ever after. So what the Apostle Paul says in chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians is very counter-cultural for us, not just for the world out there but for the church today, our Christian subculture.

For the Apostle Paul, an official spokesman for Jesus, he says marriage is good, singleness is better. Let's just see where that comes in the chapter.

We had a little trailer for it last week in verse 7. Paul, single, perhaps widowed, but we know he was single. Verse 7, he says, I wish that all of you were as I am but each of you has your own gift from God.

[ 6 : 26 ] One has this gift, another has that. Then in verse 38, he's speaking in the passage today, he says, So then he who marries the virgin does right but he who does not marry her does better.

And in verse 40, speaking to widows, In my judgment she is happier if she stays as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God. And I think most of us need to ask ourselves, How can the Apostle Paul say that?

Is that really what we believe? If it's not, then what is it about Paul's values that we need to hear rubbing up against our values so that we correct the way that we think?

And that shapes how we think about marriage and singleness. So the Apostle Paul gives us some guiding principles. And our first one, they're on the sheets for you if you find that helpful. The first one is, Appreciate your freedom in Christ.

So let's pick things up again at verse 25. He starts by saying, Now about virgins. So he's speaking here to the unmarried. And the word that we have translated as virgins, I take it must have been a cultural word at that time for women who were unmarried who were not widowed.

[ 7 : 41 ] So it's about single people, in effect. He sometimes calls the man the unmarried man and the woman the virgin. But I think there's cultural language there just for the unmarried, for the single.

And we've already seen that Corinth, this church in Corinth has a lot of questions. When he says now about virgins, he's referring to questions that they've raised with him that he's answering.

So the topic is singleness. They're asking him about it. And he goes on, verse 25, I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who, by the Lord's mercy, is trustworthy.

In other words, for lots of our decisions about relationships, God gives us freedom. We have no command from the Lord. So look at how that freedom to choose comes across in verse 36.

Paul is very careful to make sure that we don't hear what he's saying as black and white moral commands. Verse 36, if anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably towards the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants.

[ 8 : 52 ] He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion, but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin, this man also does the right thing.

God doesn't tie down for us these questions. And we have those questions, don't we? We sometimes wish we'd have more guidance. Who should I marry? How do I find them? The Apostle Paul is saying that there is freedom from God on these questions. And that is a liberating thing, that God doesn't tie those things down for us. But the Lord also gives us wisdom, and so Paul draws alongside the church, and he offers them, and he offers us good wisdom for this kind of decision.

So that comes in verse 26. Have a look. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. So then he gives the examples either way.

Are you pledged to a woman? In other words, are you engaged already? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife.

[10:05] Then he emphasizes the freedom again. But if you do marry, you have not sinned. And if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. So what is the present crisis that means that they'd be unwise not even to look for a husband or a wife?

We don't know the answer to that question. It could be that Paul is simply describing the times that we live in now, and they lived in then, between the resurrection of Jesus and his return.

Certainly, from the point in the chapter that we're about to get to, verse 29, he's speaking generally about life in those times. So it may be that he's just describing that as the present crisis.

I think that it's more likely he's talking about something specific in Corinth. It could be about, there was a famine in the 50s in that region, and we know from chapter 16 of this letter that Paul is, when he visits Corinth, he's going to take a collection to take money for poverty relief to other churches. So it may be that he's saying, in the present crisis of a regional famine, let's not be distracted by looking for a spouse. Or it could be that he's just describing the spiritual crisis in Corinth.

[11:20] This is a church with a lot of problems. It's a church where he's having to tell them that if you're a Christian, you shouldn't go and visit prostitutes at the temple. It's a church where there's sexual immorality, but then there are other people saying that if you're married, you shouldn't have sex.

It's a church that some people don't believe in the resurrection. When we get to chapter 15, there's lots of confusion about what it means to be a mature Christian in the church. And it may be that Paul simply saying, this is a crisis.

And until I visited and helped straighten out some of this, my judgment is, kind of take a breather from the speed dating just now. Let's sort out the issues in Corinth.

Whichever way it is, the principle is from Paul, there are good reasons to stay single, not to get married. But you are free if you want to get married.

And that's our first principle, appreciate your freedom in Christ. But we're still left with the question, aren't we? What could lead Paul to the judgment that generally, singleness is better than being married?

[12:27] And the next principle he gives us is key. It's this, it's live as though the world is passing away. Live as though this world is passing away. So look with me again at verse 29.

What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. And he comes back to that at the end of verse 31. For this world, in its present form, is passing away.

Now how does knowing that, knowing that this world is passing away, reshape our values, our perspective on the world? Well he gives us some examples. If you have a look at verse 29.

The time is short. From now on, those who have wives should live as if they did not. Those who mourn as if they did not. Those who are happy as if they were not.

Those who buy something as if it were not theirs to keep. Those who use the things of this world as if not engrossed in them. For this world, in its present form, is passing away.

[13:29] Now when he says those who have wives should live as if they did not. His point is not that if you're married you should ignore your spouse and ignore being married. Clearly that would go against what he's just been saying that we looked at last week.

What's going on there is he's saying we shouldn't seek fulfillment from our marriage. You don't get married to live happily ever after. You don't get married to build heaven on earth.

One day soon, Jesus is going to return and he will build heaven on earth. And that day is described by the scriptures as the ultimate wedding day. The one that every wedding day here can only foreshadow because it's the wedding feast for the union between Jesus, the bridegroom, and us, his people, the church.

And that means that for everything in this world the time is short. We're just passing through on the way to that day. And we've been given a mission from the king. Matthew tells us in Matthew chapter 11 about the day that Jesus was going into Capernaum and the Roman centurion came to see him and he begs him, falls on his feet, this man with great authority and he pleads for help from Jesus because his servant who he respects and loves is paralyzed and he longs for help.

And he says to Jesus with great faith, I'm not worthy for you to come under my roof but just say the word and my servant will be healed. And Jesus is amazed in the face of Israel rejecting him and not showing faith.

[15:04] Here is a Roman soldier with great faith and he turns to the centurion and he says, go, let it be done just as you believed it would. And when he gets home he finds that his servant was healed at that very moment.

Picture what that must have been like in the house when the servant was suddenly better and the centurion got home and said it was when I spoke to Jesus and he gave me the assurance.

And it's just a picture of how lives are turned around by the goodness of Jesus and the power of Jesus and that's what his kingdom will be like. But then Jesus turns to his followers and he says something else.

He says, I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. These are the words of Jesus.

[16:04] In other words, when we look around us at everyone we meet today for all the diversity, all the rich color that we see all around us in people's lives, there are just two kinds of people awaiting one of two eternal destinies.

One group are on their way to the feast which is a picture of the reality of the eternal glory with Jesus in his restored new world.

Fullness of joy. We're all invited to the feast. Everyone else is heading for everlasting condemnation and Jesus warns us that it will be a place of deep misery and regret.

A place of weeping. And the difference between the two groups, the two destinations, the two kinds of people is what you make of Jesus Christ. So the Apostle Paul is saying here in 1 Corinthians 7, the time is short.

Live now as though the time is short because it is short. So he gives examples in verse 30. When you're happy, live as though you're not happy.

[17:11] In other words, when we're happy about something, that's good, but we know it's not the ultimate thing. It's not a lasting thing. And when we mourn, live as though we weren't mourning.

Of course there is still sadness and the Lord knows that. But never without hope. Never without an eternal perspective on the sadness of this world.

Did you notice the phrase that Paul used in verse 31 there? It's such a helpful phrase. He says, those who use the things of this world as if not engrossed in them. So he's not ascetic.

He's not saying you're not allowed to enjoy the world. It's God's good world. Use the things of this world, but don't be engrossed by them. All around us, people are engrossed in the things of this world.

They think there's no eternity. They are engrossed with the world. So what do we look like when that's our culture? What do we sound like in our conversations with each other?

[18:08] A lot of the time, are we not engrossed as well? I think I often am engrossed with the world. Looking at the lives of the Christians and non-Christians in Scotland today, apart from church on a Sunday, what else marks out our lives as distinctive and demonstrates that we're not engrossed by the world?

Are our Christmas gift lists really that different? Do our lives look as though the time is short? We know the present world is passing away.

It makes you think, doesn't it, why do we spend so much time in B&Q; or IKEA or looking at colour schemes in Farrow and Ball to decorate your home perfectly?

It's passing away. It won't last. Why do I let my emotions be so affected every weekend by sports results? It's passing away.

What would it look like for our attitude to all these things to be, I'm keen to use those things, but I'm not engrossed by them? The time is short.

[ 19 : 14 ] The time is short, folks. And on the other hand, how then should we use our time positively? Well, surely the call on Christians is invest in people, isn't it?

Invest generously in people. People are eternal. They're going to last. Let's invest in each other generously. Invest in the church family, in spiritual conversations where we talk about the struggles that we're going through in life and we talk about them in a Christian way.

So we look to point one another to the truth and encourage each other to endure and keep our eyes on the feast that's coming. And we're to invest in relationships with not yet believers around us because we long for them to see who Jesus is and be at the feast with us.

So that's our second principle from Paul and it's much more far-reaching, do you see, than what we think about marriage. But this is the key to Paul's judgment that singleness is better.

He wants us to think about singleness and marriage in light of that reality. So we turn to the third principle. Get real about the concerns of marriage. Get real about marriage.

[ 20 : 27 ] So have a look at verse 32. He says, not to restrict you but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

So when you get married it's not saying that looking after your spouse is wrong. He's just saying that's a concern you didn't have before that the Lord has given you.

The Lord calls you if you're married to invest wisely in your marriage. And Paul is so realistic about that. In verse 28 he says, those who marry will face many troubles in this life and I want to spare you this.

He wants to spare us trouble. And that's just from being married. If the Lord blesses you with children either naturally or through adoption children are a great gift.

But there is a whole stack of concerns when it comes to children. In the early years there's the sleepless nights. The limitations on getting out to see other people.

[ 21 : 57 ] We had a friend came to see us who didn't have children when we had three children at home. She spent a couple of hours with Kathy. She said, is it always like this? Kathy said, yes.

She said, this is hideous. It's difficult having little children. And then they get bigger. The parents' nights, the Christmas shows, the Saturdays spent trekking to get their shoes measured, the birthday parties, the days when the schools go on strike and you have to stay at home and look after them.

And God calls us to prioritize the well-being of our spouse spiritually and the well-being of our children spiritually. And the reality is that takes time. It takes time to sit down with your children every evening and read the Bible with them.

It takes time. It takes time to invest in them, to be there for them, to pray with them and for them.

And the single person is spared that. And it means they can do so much else for the Lord in this passing world.

And that's just not the picture we often portray of marriage, is it? That it's not happy ever after. And we don't want to swing the other way. The Bible is so balanced about this. Marriage is a really good thing.

[ 23 : 14 ] It's a really good gift. Children are a gift from the Lord. Spouses are a gift from the Lord. They are great ways to serve Jesus. But marriage and family bring with them trouble and concerns.

That's the reality. And Paul wants us, wants particularly those of us who are single, to have our eyes open about that. To consider being spared that because the time is short.

That takes us to our fourth point, which is rejoice in the opportunities of singleness. So it's the other side of the contrast that Paul makes in verses 33 and 34.

So he says, a married man, a woman has concerns. But in verse 32, he says, an unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs, how he can please the Lord. And then in verse 34, he makes the same point about the unmarried woman, that she's concerned about the Lord's affairs.

Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. So Paul says, marriage is good. It's good. Singleness is better. It's best. And we're only going to get that if we understand the times.

[ 24 : 24 ] Just think of the implications for those of us who are married here. How do we view our friend's singleness? How do we view our own grown-up son or daughter's singleness?

Or how would we view that if our son or daughter is not grown up yet? Do we contribute in the things that we say to a culture of seeing it as just a waiting game?

Do we make it feel as though we're disappointed for our single friends? Or even disappointed with our single son or daughter?

Or that we're really anxious about it? I was speaking to a friend this week who is single, not at St. Silas, and she said, sometimes married people act as though singleness is impossible and that's really unhelpful because singleness is possible and there really is more than that.

There is genuine real freedom to being single, a freedom you can use to serve the Lord and she gets that she is using her singleness to serve the Lord in a way she wouldn't be able to do if she was married.

[ 25 : 35 ] But she also said sometimes married friends make the opposite mistake and they act as though singleness is really easy and it's not easy to be single long term. It's not easy when you think about holidays and how you'll spend them or when you think that you won't be a mum or a dad yourself or you feel that your friends are moving on through the stages of life that our culture has set and you're not moving through them.

Your life stays the same. So let's not think it's impossible, let's not think it's easy to be single. How could we do better to model it as a church family?

Especially those of us who are married. Let's think about that for a minute. One way is not to be engrossed with married life, isn't it? Especially not the worldly things about it.

I spoke to another single friend who said that she went to a wedding where there were married couples round her table at the dinner and she was single and they spent half the dinner talking about Denby crockery.

Well, we've got to do better than that. It's not just that that's really boring. That is really boring. But it communicates, doesn't it, that making your marital home just right is what life's all about now you're married.

[ 26 : 57 ] Another opportunity to help our single adults is by involving them in family life. I was struck last year when I was meeting a single guy from our church and we were meeting kind of early and he came early to our home so the kids were still kind of getting ready for school when he was around and it was chaos, just carnage.

So there's mess everywhere, there's panic about lost uniform items, lost toothpaste, lost jotters and as the kids left I assessed the trail of destruction through the ground floor of the house and I turned to him and I apologised and he said I loved it, it's normal life, I loved it.

There are single people who want to spend time with our families. If you've got a family you find that hard to believe but it's true, they just want to be involved in normal family life.

Another single friend of mine he has a set day every week, he knows he always goes round for dinner with a particular family and it's low key, the family just they don't do anything different, they do their normal routines, there's just an extra portion of food and a chance to involve their single friend in family life.

Another way those of us who are married could help our single friends is by showing more appreciation for the many things that our single friends do to serve Christ.

[ 28 : 24 ] When we speak to them, could we encourage them? I mean, maybe not, I'm so glad you're single, but instead, just honouring them, by saying, I want you to know that we thank God for what you do in the church.

It makes such a difference to us. When you think about it, if everyone in our church was married, we would sink as a church. We'd be gone, absolutely sunk.

Just think about who's leading in children's work and youth work right now. The work the Holy Spirit is doing around us as a church, lots of it, is through single people using their singleness for Christ. That's the reality. humanity. You just think about the adults in our church who give up their Friday nights to do youth work, the adults who serve on Sundays, the people in our church who are meeting up with friends to read the Bible one-to-one, the people in our church who are the best friends, just have time to be really good friends with other people.

Think about those involved serving our vestry, serving on our finance team. Lots of them are single. And instead of spending all their singleness looking for a spouse, they're using their singleness to serve Jesus because they're living for God and looking forward to the feast.

[ 29 : 42 ] Let's encourage them and thank God for them. They're using their singleness well. What about for those among us who are single? I hope this chapter is encouraging.

encouraging. It's encouraging to see the Lord has good plans to use singleness when we're faithful to him. But it is a challenge as well, isn't it, to ask yourself, how am I using my singleness as a gift from God?

It is possible to take the gift of time God has given you by you being single and just throw it into something else. being a perfectionist at work, getting your identity and your value from what a great job you do at work, or you can spend all your time as a single person just trying to get married, or just throwing yourself into a hobby, getting up mountains, surfing, traveling, going on holidays. Those are good things so long as we do them, knowing that we live in a time of missional emergency. Scotland is in missional emergency. And we hold the things of this world lightly because we're just passing through on the way to heaven.

So single or married, we're going to come to the Lord's table as a church this morning. Why not use the gift of bread and wine together to reflect on how we use our short time now in light of Jesus' death for us and that the time is short until we feast with him forever in his kingdom?

[ 31 : 21 ] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we praise you and thank you for the gift of the power and wisdom of the cross, that Jesus is our righteousness and holiness and redemption, and that you have raised him from death, that we might have living hope of the day soon when you will gather us with people from the east and the west to his great wedding feast.

By the power of your spirit, would you help us not to be engrossed with the things of this world? We pray for those in our church for whom singleness is something they find a source of sadness and pain.

And we ask, Heavenly Father, that you will encourage them and comfort them, that they may see the goodness of your gifts to them, and that you'd help us as a church family to encourage one another in that goodness.

We thank you for the many ways single people in our church are using their singleness faithfully and effectively to know Jesus better and to make him known. For the model they are to us of living with that great future hope of being with Christ forever.

We pray you will bless them, and may we as a church appreciate our freedom in Christ and each of us in whatever you've called us to, to live wisely in light of his coming return.

[ 33 : 02 ] For Jesus' name's sake. Amen. Amen.