

ALONE BUT NOT LONELY

by Ray C. Stedman

In this section of First Corinthians, the Apostle Paul has already discussed the place of sex in marriage and the right and wrong of divorce. Now, beginning with Verse 25 of Chapter 7, we come to a section addressed to the unmarried that sets forth both the advantages and the pressures of single life:

- Verses 26-35 set forth three advantages of singleness; and then
- Verses 36-40 give us the pressures of single life.

Paul begins with an explanatory word that looks over the whole subject. Verse 25:

Now concerning the unmarried, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy [or faithful]. {1 Cor 7:25 RSV}

He means by that this matter of single life does not have a moral issue connected with it. He has already talked about the handling of sex drives and sexual immorality for either married or single. He gave certain commands of the Lord about them, and also about divorce, because there were moral problems connected with them. But here there is no moral issue, and the Lord has not spoken to this either publicly during his ministry or in private in the revelations he gave to the apostle. Therefore, Paul says he does not speak with a command of the Lord. But he suggests that he is given this as a subject to be settled by apostolic guidance. He is one who "has been found faithful"; he understands all the great issues that touch upon a question like this. So he wants us to understand that he speaks as one who by the Lord's mercy has been found faithful, and gives an apostolic word of counsel on this matter of single life.

In Verses 26-28 we have the first advantage that he sees in single life:

I think that in view of the impending distress it is well for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. But if you marry you do not sin, and if a girl marries she does not sin. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. {1 Cor 7:26-28 RSV}

That does sound as though Paul had been married, doesn't it? Some, in fact, think that he had. But here he is clearly stating for us what he sees to be a great advantage in unmarried life, i.e., it helps to handle the pressures that may come in a time of crisis. Everything in that paragraph hangs upon the statement in Verse 26, "I think that in view of the present distress..." He is not talking about life in general, but about times of crisis, and evidently these Corinthians were facing such a time.

The commentators are at odds as to what this crisis was. Some of them suggest that there was a local crisis in Corinth that he is referring to -- perhaps some financial pressures, or a famine, or an economic situation of some kind. Others see in this a reference to Paul's hope of the coming of the Lord. Some have suggested that perhaps he is referring to the approaching crisis that was making its presence felt. In 70 A. D., as we now know, the Roman armies would have to come into Judea and quell a terrible disturbance among the Jews. This resulted in the capture of the city of Jerusalem, the overthrow of the Temple, and the dispersing of the Jewish population throughout all the nations of the earth. This letter was written about 57 A.D., just 10 or 12 years before crisis would come, and perhaps there were foreviews of it beginning to develop already and that is what Paul is talking about.

My own view is that because the apostle is aware of the fact that he is writing Scripture -- that it is for all Christians in all times, as he infers in some of his letters -- that he is not talking about any particular, immediate crisis then, but he is referring to the returning crisis that every generation of Christians have to face. Remember

in Second Timothy the apostle says to his son in the faith, "that in the last days perilous times shall come," {2 Tim 3:1 KJV}. I think it is a mistake to read that as though he meant "in these last days," or "in the last days" as a reference only to the time preceding the return of Christ. Actually the church is always living in "these last days." They stretch from the first coming of Christ to his second return, as Hebrews 1 makes clear where it says, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son," {Heb 1:1-2a KJV}. Therefore, this is a reference to what Paul thinks of as continuing, returning cycles of trouble.

You can look back through history and see how true that is. Every generation of Christians has faced a time when they thought the Lord was about to return, when events were so terrible, in their view, that they were leading up to the crisis of the great tribulation that would precipitate the end times and the Second Coming of Christ. We are no exception. We are facing this kind of a crisis right in our own time, in our own day. Many today are saying, "Well, surely these are the days in which our Lord will return." But I believe God intended every generation of Christians to feel that. In fact, I think the Lord could have returned at any of those times of crisis of the past, as he could return now, but, as Jesus himself said, no one knows for sure. No one knows the day nor the hour of his return.

Perhaps Paul is referring to that. Therefore, this is a word that has application to Christians no matter when they have lived. It surely has application to us today as we face the terrible crisis of our own day and time, and it is a terrible time. Perhaps this condition has been true clear back through all of human history, back to the very beginning. Somebody has suggested that when Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden that he turned to her, and said, "My dear, we must understand that we live in a time of transition." This has been true ever since. I was in Washington, D. C., a week or so ago, and one of the speakers who was addressing us about the state of the nation and of the world responded to his introduction with these words, "Mr. Chairman and fellow passengers aboard the Titanic..." That indicates the kind of a crisis we live in.

Now, in times of crisis, Paul says, single life has an advantage: you can be more flexible; you can adapt more quickly to certain, sudden catastrophic actions or events; you can pick up and move if necessary; there is less concern for handling all the affairs of others for whom you may be responsible. Paul is simply listing the advantages. He is not trying to put down marriage throughout this section at all. He is trying to lift up singleness as a perfectly proper way of life. Those who choose it are not secondary citizens, he is saying. They are exercising a degree of wisdom that perhaps is superior to those who have simply gone along and gotten married without weighing the advantages or disadvantages involved. So he is setting forth very plainly for us what might be the better course.

He makes clear, of course, that there is nothing wrong with getting married in a time of crisis, either. It may be unwise, he says, but it is not a sin, and if anybody marries he is not committing any terrible kind of misjudgment. Now, we laugh at that, but actually that was too often the view of the church in the past. There were whole periods of time in the past history of the church when it actually looked down on marriage. People were taught that to be single and to live by yourself was a superior state of spiritual progress, and that actually the married people were the second-rate citizens. It is hard for us to understand that in these times, but nevertheless that was once true.

Then Paul adds this statement, "those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that." That is a practical recognition that marriage increases responsibility.

(Some of you may have seen the cartoon in the paper recently of two men who were discussing marriage. One of them said, "Well, I'm still single thanks to Marriage Anonymous." The other man said, "What's that?" "Well," said the first, "when you get to feeling that you want to get married you call this number and they send over an ugly woman in cold cream and curlers and she nags you until the feeling disappears!")

Paul may have had something like that in mind. I do not know, though I doubt it. It seems more likely that he was thinking of more mundane matters such as taxes, in-laws, children, schooling, flimsy things in the bathroom, and other problems that marriage presents. At any rate he is saying that those who get married take on greater responsibility. That is a wise, practical word. Anyone who lives in a time of crisis ought to weigh those advantages and disadvantages carefully before marriage.

Paul gives us a second advantage to remaining single, beginning with Verse 29:

I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. [The King James Version puts it better: "And they that use this world as not abusing it"] For the form of the world is passing away. {1 Cor 7:29-31 RSV}

Paul is saying here that single life makes it easier to maintain the proper priorities of life. These priorities apply to all, whether you are married or single, if you are Christian. You ought to face life differently as a Christian than you would as a non-Christian. You ought to see things differently; you ought to have different value standards. Whether you are married or single that should be true simply because you are a Christian.

But there is the clear implication in all of this that it is easier to do that if you remain single. Once again Paul hangs this on a phrase marking the tensions of life: "the appointed time," he says, "has grown very short."

Here again many of the commentators disagree. Some say this is a reference to the Second Coming of Christ -- that Paul expected the Lord to return. It is true that he did look forward to that event occurring in his lifetime, and some think that is what he means here by, "the time before his return is very short." But I tend to reject that because nowhere do I find the Scriptures exhorting us to busyness and increased activity because the Lord is coming. We are exhorted to faithfulness and to soberness, but not necessarily to increased frenzy because the Lord is coming.

I would rather view this as a reference to the general brevity of life. Paul is thinking, perhaps, of the patriarchs. You read in Genesis that they lived 600, 700, 800, 900 years. You can spend a very leisurely lunch if you know that you have got 750 more years before you have to leave this earth! Life undoubtedly was very slow and sedentary during the time of the patriarchs, and perhaps the apostle is thinking of that as he says, "the appointed time has grown very short." Moses lived 120 years and he did not even start his major work until he was 80 years old. But when you get to the Psalms, you find that David sings of human life as consisting of 70 years, or at the most 80, if perchance you are very strong.

It is remarkable that, in the 3,000 years since that time, man has never increased or even come up to that length of life. I read the other day that the average length of life for a man in this country is 62 years. (It's a little longer for women because they do not wear neckties).

But time goes by very fast. Two weeks ago I turned 61, and I want you to know that, as the years go by, they seem to go much faster. I am increasingly aware of the shortness of time and how few years we have on earth to do the things that God desires, the exciting adventures he sets before us. How one would want to pursue them more and more. The longer we live the more we are aware of how time seems to fly. As someone has said, "About the time your face clears up, your mind begins to go." This is the way life seems to be.

But it does not take a Christian to see that; non-Christians can as well. They speak of the shortness of time and their reactions to it is, "Well, if we've only got this short a time, then let's grab all we can get of it. Let's live life with gusto. There is nothing beyond, and therefore we've got to get all we can." Their philosophy seems to be: "If you are going to be a passenger on the Titanic you might as well go first class. Live it up. Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we shall die." But that is not to be the philosophy of the Christian, as Paul brings out.

Clearly the Christian reaction is: "Use this short time for eternal purposes. Be sure that the aim and center of your life is not just making a living, but making a life." That is what he is saying, and that is why he says, "let those who have wives live as though they had none." He is not encouraging you to neglect your wife and not fulfill your responsibilities to your children and your home; it is not that at all. What he is saying, of course, is that we are to keep things in proper focus. Do not let maintaining your home be the major reason for your existence. Do not give all your time to enjoying this present life. There are higher demands and higher

challenges to life than that. Marriages are only for this life. They are not for eternity.

Therefore, even marriage, God-given as it is, beautiful as it is, is not necessarily the highest choice an individual can make. That is what Paul means throughout this whole passage. If some people here choose not to get married in order that they might pursue other standards, especially spiritual dimensions of involvement, then they might to be honored for that, the apostle is suggesting. They are making a choice that is right and good and proper and no one should put them down because of it. So his word to us is, "Do not let all these things the world around lives for become the center of your life." Joys and sorrows are going to be seen quite differently from the viewpoint of eternity. Success in business is not the greatest aim of life and should never be allowed to be so for a believer, for all in the world is passing away, even its fame and its glory.

A few years ago, I was in Norfolk, Virginia, speaking to a luncheon group. I noticed a building with a little dome on it that looked somewhat like a church, and I asked my companion what it was. He told me it was the tomb of General Douglas MacArthur. I was immediately interested because I had been an admirer of General MacArthur, having lived during that era when he was the great American hero. I admired his military prowess and his conduct as the virtual ruler of Japan. I remembered the welcome he received here in San Francisco when he finally returned to these shores after World War II, and the ticker tape parades he received both here and in New York.

I went over to the tomb and wandered around by myself. I saw the cabinets with his medals and his memorabilia, the letters he had written at various stages of his life, and some of the uniforms he had worn, and various things that were associated with him. They were all gathering dust, and the paint was beginning to peel from the ceiling. As I wandered around I suddenly had a deep sense of the fading glory of earth. I began to compare it mentally with what the Scriptures say is awaiting the believer in Jesus Christ: that "exceeding weight of glory" {cf, 2 Cor 4:17} which Paul says is beyond all comparison which is waiting. It is something so fantastic, so mind-blowing, so unbelievable that nothing we know of on earth can remotely be compared to what's waiting for those who have found God's purposes and realized God's fullness in this life. How tawdry all this seemed to me in this tomb: How the glory of MacArthur was as nothing compared with the glory of the simplest believer in Christ. How important therefore it is to pursue that kind of glory rather than the empty baubles that would gather dust in the museums of the world. This is what Paul is talking about here -- "the form of this world is passing away."

When I was a new Christian, one of the most powerful influences on my life was the life and story of D. L. Moody. I remember reading that his favorite verses were found in First John 2:15-17, where he says.

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not in the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. {1 Jn 2:15-17 KJV}

This is what Paul is calling us to.

What are you living for?

Surely it has got to be more than to have a pleasant home and a retirement plan and cram your sunset years with a few activities you were unable to get in before you die. Christians are not to live that way because they have opportunity for fulfillment far beyond this life.

If you do not have time to get in all the pleasures and enjoyments here you will have lots of time beyond. That is what the apostle is saying. We do not have to try and cram it all into one brief episode. What awaits is so exceedingly fantastic and beyond description that to give oneself fully to the pursuit of the things of God here is a much wiser choice than to waste one's whole existence on secondary levels of activity and involvement. It is easier, he suggests, to do that if you remain single, and many people have made that choice.

There is still a third advantage here and it is set forth in Verses 32-35:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please your husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint on you, [the word actually is *lasso* -- not "to lasso you," not to tie you down] but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. {1 Cor 7:32-35 RSV}

That is the climax of what Paul has to say about the single life. He says it makes possible a degree of dedication and devotion, of commitment to the work of Christ that married life does not allow. Now he does not mean there is anything wrong with a husband trying to please his wife, or a wife trying to please her husband. God has said elsewhere that is what marriage is for. What Paul is saying here is that if you have the gift of celibacy, of singleness, then for you it is better not to be married. For others it is better to be married, but for you it is not. Your highest fulfillment with respect to the things of God can be discovered if you remain single instead.

How much the world owes to men and women who have chosen to remain single for the Lord's sake rather than to be married. I think of men like John R. W. Stott. I never hear that great English preacher without rejoicing at the godliness, the sheer saintliness of his life. When he tells, as I have heard him say, that he spends two or three hours every morning in Bible study and prayer and worship of the Lord you can see where much of that godly spirit comes from.

I find that very difficult to do as a married man. Certain demands, certain requirements and responsibilities of the household, make it difficult to fulfill that kind of a schedule. I frankly do not do it, but I am very grateful that there are men like Stott who can, and who do. How he has enriched the entire evangelical world by his writing and his preaching that has that deep spiritual element to it that grows out of the time he can give to the pursuit of the things of God.

I think of Henrietta Mears, that remarkable woman for so long on the staff of the Hollywood Presbyterian Church. I think of the scores, if not hundreds, of young men who are in the ministry today because she captured their imaginations and taught them the Scriptures. She chose never to be married so that she might have the time to give to the study and the teaching of the Word of God with such remarkable power and effect.

I think of C. S. Lewis who never married until his 60's. He gave to the world a brilliant array of philosophic probing of the depths of Christian truth for which it ought to be eternally grateful.

If you look further back in history you see men like Robert Murray McChayne of Scotland, the saintly young man who shook the British Isles by his godliness. Even though he died at around the age of 30 he was a remarkable influence, and still is in many areas of the church today, because of his saintliness.

In this last issue of *Decision Magazine* there is an article by Margaret Clarkson. She is a prolific hymn writer, a single woman, and her hymns have been a tremendous blessing to me. (One of my favorites is her hymn, *We Come O Christ To Thee* .) She wrote an article entitled, *Single But Not Alone* , and this is her opening paragraph:

To know God, to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that he is sovereign and that my life is in his care: this is the unshakable foundation on which I stay my soul. Such knowledge has deep significance for the single Christian.

Then she goes on to tell of her struggles, how she did not accept singleness for a long time. But she finally came to understand that this was God's choice for her, and how grateful she ultimately became that he led her along these lines, and how profound was her experience of discovering that he could meet the loneliness of her life. She would never be alone because of his presence. That is what Paul has in mind.

He himself is an example of this. We owe the Herculean labors of this mighty apostle to the fact that he was

free of the encumbrances of marriage. He was able to travel up and down the whole length and breadth of the Roman Empire. Out of that dedication of spirit, and devotion of heart, he lived in complete moral purity, and, by the grace and power of God, there come these remarkable letters that have changed the history of the world. All he is saying, of course, is that the single life is OK. If anyone desires to choose it, it is a high and a holy calling and one that is perfectly appropriate.

He now turns to the pressures of singleness. Paul is a realist, and he knows that it is not easy to be single. One of the pressures every single person faces is sexual pressure, and so Paul brings that up. Verse 36:

If any one thinks that he is not behaving properly towards his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry -- it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better. {1 Cor 7:36-38 RSV}

This is a bit harder to translate because it is somewhat difficult to understand just who the apostle is referring to here when he talks about someone and his "betrothed."

Some commentators feel he is referring to a father and his virgin daughter, because in the culture of that day it was up to the father to arrange the marriage. Others feel, as this and other versions seem to indicate, that he is talking about an engaged couple, a betrothed couple, as this language implies. He says, in effect, if they find it difficult to keep their passions under control, if they tend toward the dangerous area of giving way to sexual immorality, then it is far better for them to marry: "Let them marry -- it is no sin," he says. But if they have the gift of continence, though their passions are strong, nevertheless they keep them under control and they decide that it is better not to marry to pursue other certain advantages that he has already listed, then, he says, it is better for them not to marry. In fact, it would be a weakness for them to do so.

Paul suggests that it is very possible to control these sexual drives. The key is this phrase, "whoever is firmly established in his heart" What he is talking about there is someone who has learned to be secure in his identity as being one with the Lord. He has learned the secret of strength, and that is the affirmation of significance and meaning which he must have in order to function; he knows who he is before God. He draws deeply upon the love and strength and affirmation of Christ himself, and therefore, he is able to handle even the pressures of sex. Now, if that is the case, Paul says, then he will do well not to marry because he has opened to him doors of opportunity he can enter into that marriage would not permit.

Finally Paul takes up the matter of emotional pressure. Verse 39:

A wife is bound to her husband as long he lives. If the husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I have the Spirit of God. {1 Cor 7:39-40 RSV}

He is obviously thinking of an older woman, a widow whose husband has died, who is left alone, and facing the declining years of her life. She misses the companionship, she misses the fellowship of her mate, and, in the emptiness of her life, she is tempted to plunge back into marriage just for companionship alone. "Now," Paul says, "be careful there." That is an emotional pressure and many succumb to it without any thought about what the alternatives might be. But, he says, if she does succumb it is all right; it is not a sin to remarry as long as it is to a Christian, someone "in the Lord" -- whom she can share her faith and life with -- "But in my judgment she is happier if she remains unmarried."

Notice the ground he chooses. Her own happiness is involved in this. Why? Because she has learned a lot of secrets about life, and now has an opportunity to put them into practice in a way she never had when she was married. Now may be the golden opportunity of her life, and she may find a renewed sense of adventure and excitement that she has never felt before. So, "In my judgment," Paul says, "and I think that I have the Spirit of God" (which is probably the understatement of the century), "I think she would be happier if she remained unmarried."

All that he is saying is that married life is good and proper and right, but so is single life. The thrust of this whole passage is against those who tend to look down upon and make jokes about single people. They look upon them as odd, or strange, or even perverted, and make disparaging remarks about when they are going to get married, and what is wrong with them that nobody has chosen them, etc.

We Christians ought, above all others, to face the facts as Paul lays them out here, and see that single life is a perfectly appropriate style of life, and approve of it, and encourage it if some desire to choose and fulfill that. What a wholesome view life this is, whether married or single. The great thing is that we keep our priorities in focus.

We live not for this passing world scene, but for that greater life that lies waiting for us in that unbelievable world of opportunity that awaits beyond.

That is where the Christian's hopes ought to be.

Prayer

Again we thank you, Father, for the practicality of your Word, this counsel from the wise and loving heart of the Apostle Paul. We pray for all the single people in this congregation this morning, some who are going on to marriage soon and look forward to it with anticipation and delight; others to whom you are already suggesting that perhaps you have another style of life for them. May they accept that with gladness and joy, and look forward to an increasing adventure of delight along other paths than some of their friends have chosen, but nevertheless filled with the possibility of fulfillment and satisfaction. We ask in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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