Marriage, Singleness, and Decisions in Light of Eternity
1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Just consider the time we're living in at the moment, with this crisis surrounding COVID at the moment - should a young couple get married at the moment? I mean, there are restrictions on travel, restrictions on the numbers who can be present for the service, rules regarding face masks and singing. So, should a couple get married, or put it off in the hope things will get easier? And that's not a hypothetical question: couples inside and outside the church have had to grapple with exactly this.

But to answer it you've got to ask some other questions, haven't you. Like, what's the point of the marriage service? In fact, what's the point of marriage? And if you want to really get to the root of it, what's the point of life? Because how and why you make the decisions you do is about something much more than just marriage, isn't it. And it's exactly those issues Paul deals with in this passage.

Decisions in Difficult Times
Look at v25 'Now concerning…' And once again Paul's answering a question the Christians at Corinth have written to him about. And it's about 'the betrothed', literally, 'the virgins', young women who haven't yet married. And the question is, should the men engaged to them go ahead and marry them?

Now, why raise that question? Well, for two reasons. Firstly, as we've seen, sexual immorality was rampant in Corinth, and in response some of the Christians were thinking and teaching that sex itself was wrong, and to really serve God, you needed to stay single, and be celibate.

But secondly, that thinking was intensified by what Paul calls in v26, 'the present distress.' Or as one translation puts it, 'the current pressures on us from all sides.' And we really don't know exactly what Paul means by that. Corinth may have been facing a famine. Or it could just mean the opposition Christians were facing there. Whatever it was, life as a Christian in Corinth was pressured.

And so some in the church were saying, 'young people, you shouldn't get married, because no.1. sex is sinful, and no. 2. life is stressful enough as it is at the moment, without adding the stress of marriage to it all.'

So how should a couple decide - then and now? Is it right to get married? Or would we be sinning if we did? And widen that out, to any key decisions, especially at time when the pressure's on, what should guide your decision making?

Now our current culture would say, 'well, do you want to do. If it makes you happy, and if it doesn't hurt anyone else, you're free to do whatever you want.' And Paul agrees - at least in part. Look at v39. He's dealing with the case of a widow who's deciding should she remarry or not, and Paul says, 'she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.' So, provided she marries a fellow believer, she can decide for herself whether she gets married or not, and to whom. If it feels right and good to her, and she thinks it'll make her happy, get married. But Paul personally thinks, v40, 'She is happier if she remains as she is' - if she stays single. So he's also got her personal happiness in mind.

And yet Paul gets under the superficial 'if it feels good, if it makes you happy, do it' approach to decision making. Because he understands where ultimate happiness and fulfilment come from.

So look how he answers. Verses 26-27: 'I think that in view of the present distress it is good 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 a wife.' So, given the current situation there in Corinth, if a man was bound to a wife, if you're pledged to be married, if you're engaged, don't break the engagement. But if you're not engaged, don't go getting engaged. Because of how things currently are, it's better to stay as you are.

But does that mean the people engaged shouldn't get married? I mean, is Paul basically agreeing with the anti-marriage group in Corinth? That it would be sinful to marry, or even just get engaged? No! Verse 28, 'But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.' In other words, it's best if you don't at the moment, but if you do, that's fine. Whatever those monkish types are telling you, getting married is not a sin.

But, v28, 'Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.'

Now, remember, this is not everything Paul, and the rest of the Bible, has to say on marriage. In fact, in 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul says young widows should remarry and have children. He's addressing a specific situation in Corinth. And in this present distress, he wants to spare people the added difficulties of marriage. And, in Paul's view, in such a situation, staying single is the better option, but it's not the only option. And the other option, marriage, is good, but… you only have to ask an honest married person, are there huge blessings in marriage? Absolutely. But does it have its difficulties? Absolutely.

And Paul calls those difficulties, 'worldly troubles.' Issues around feelings and finances, and food and free time. And you might say, 'sure but single people face those troubles too.' Sure. The difference in marriage is that you've got to work those out with someone else. And that someone else, like you is a sinner. And you're living together, even locked down together! Plus, there are the in-laws. It's about conflict and compromise and… kids! And its time-consuming. And I would spare you that, says Paul.

So does that rule marriage out? Even if it's not sinful, would we be better avoiding it? Well, Paul says, how you view marriage and singleness is all about the goal you're living for.

Living With The End in View

Look at v29: 'This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short.' And v31, 'The present form of this world is passing away.'

And so Paul is saying, it's not just the pressured situation you're currently living in that should shape your thinking. Any more than as Christians, we should base our decision making at the moment solely on the crisis we currently find ourselves in. Something far greater should be influencing you, Paul says.

And that's eternity. It's the end of all things, and the beginning of everything. And for Paul and the other apostles, ever since the resurrection of Christ, we've been living in the Last Days. Because the

death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus has turned time on its head. And now, all of time, all of history, and your life in history, are all progressing to the end, when he will make all things new.

And the present distress in Corinth, and the present distress we're in right now, are just a part of it. They're just signs that tell us this world is passing away. That this life, and marriage and singleness, and your personal freedom and happiness, are not the ultimate reality. So, Paul says, don't live like they are. Don't make them, the joys and sorrows, the highs and lows of life, your ultimate. Instead, live with eternity in view. Live with a sense, as Peter says, 'that the end of all things is at hand' (1 Peter 4:7). Live like those, as Paul says later in chapter 10, 'on whom the end of the ages has come' (1 Cor 10:11). Let the end of all things, and the beginning of everything, be what frames your living, your decision making.

Verse 29-31: '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 who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.'

Now, Paul is not saying, Go live as a hermit. He's not saying that I should pretend Su no longer exists - stop talking to her, leaving for church without her, feel free to chat up other women. And he's not saying 'don't mourn or rejoice, be emotionally numb'!

He's saying, in all these areas of life, in marriage, and in mourning - in times like now of death and sorrow, in times of rejoicing, in your shopping and your business dealings, don't live like these are the ultimate. Because they're only temporary. They're all going to give way to something far better. And let that far better future, let the beauty and glory of Christ through all eternity, shape your life in the now, not the stuff of now. Don't let these things - even good things like marriage and possessions and career; even profound things like sorrow and joy - don't let them be what most shapes you and your thinking. Let it be Christ and eternity.

So, imagine you're on a flight bound for the frozen wastes of Antartica. Would you pull down your hand luggage and bring out your swim suit, and start chatting to your neighbour about whether you'd brought the right colour bikini or board shorts? No! You'd be nuts and they'd think you're nuts. Why? Because your destination, where you are headed, should shape how you live now.

And Paul is saying, 'yes, and this present world is passing away, so don't live as if marriage or sorrow or possessions or career were your final destination.'

And deep down, you know Paul's right. You know that marriage is, or should be, great. You know it's not perfect, but you wish it were, because you long for the perfect, for relationship unstrained by conflict. And deep down you know there could be, must be, something better. You know that grief and sorrow are very real, but you wish they weren't. Why? Because you long for a time, a land, where there are no more good byes. You know joy is real, but sometimes it seems that as soon as it's kindled, it's gone, and you wish it wasn't, that joy could be permanent. You like the thing you've just bought, your latest possession, but if you're honest you know it can't fill the real holes in your life. And besides, it'll break or become obsolete, and that's frustrating, because you want a world that works, a world that's always new and always satisfied and never expires. And you can like, even love your job, but even you know, there's got to be more to life than this?

You see, deep down, you know Paul's right. That to live for this life only is to miss the point of life, because you weren't made for this world only, but for the one to come. So, married or single, Paul says, recalibrate your life around that ultimate reality.

And there's a very practical reason for doing that - stress. It can make life way less stressful.

Anxious Hearts

Anxiety is a huge issue at the moment. There are the usual reasons, like the fear of missing out. And if you're single you can see what your married friends are up to and it leaves you worrying that life is passing you by. But if you're married, you can see what your unattached friends are up to and feel jealous, even resentful. But you can also see the photos and gushy comments other couples post, about how wonderful their other half is you think 'why isn't my marriage like theirs?' And it eats away at you. Married or single, you can be anxious about what other people think of you, about the quality of your work, or how you look, or whether you're socially cool enough. But added to all those are the anxieties linked to *our* 'present crisis': the fear of death, the fear of making others sick. And just by raising these things, you can start feeling anxious about being anxious.

And Paul says, v32, 'I want you to be free from anxieties.' Anxieties are controlling and absorbing, aren't they? They can fill your thinking and lead to poor decision making. And while there are some people who only seem to be happy when they've got something to worry about, for most of us, anxiety is destructive. You feel pulled in multiple different directions.

And Paul's guidance that, married or single, we live as those in the world but not of the world, as those using the world but not engrossed by it, as those whose eyes are fixed on eternity - breaks the hold of these things on our lives. You see, when you don't think this life has to deliver the perfect Instagram life; when you realise you and those around you won't be, can't be, perfect in this life; when how you feel about life and yourself no longer swings with what others think of you, or how they're behaving, you can breath.

But that doesn't mean you're going to sit like the Buddha, detached from the world, smug and smiling in the face of life's pressures. It means you can engage with them effectively. It means you can love God and serve others in the midst of this present distress, in the midst of all the pressures life throws at you.

Verse 32-33: 'The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife.' And the same is true, he says in v34, for women.

So, the single person can have his or her thinking and decision making shaped entirely by wanting to serve God. But the married person is always going to have other stuff competing with that.

You see, from the beginning it was God's intention that a man and a woman, should live to please him *together*. That living to please your spouse was simply a subset of living to please God, that there was no conflict between those two. But we don't live in that perfect world anymore, and so now, with our inherent self-centredness, it can be harder for husband and wife to work this stuff out.

And that can result in tension and anxiety. And if you let your spouse or your marriage or how well your kids are doing become the ultimate thing for you, your sense of well-being, your anxiety levels, are going to rise and fall with their happiness. And being single spares you that, Paul says.

So, v36, 'If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward 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.' In other words, if you haven't been given the gift of singleness, and you want to get married, great, get on and do it, Paul says, but just know the two of you will face this challenge.

But, v37, '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.' In other words, if you have been given the gift of singleness, if you don't feel a great desire to get married, and you're not just saying that because others in the church are pressurising you to, then good, don't get married. Verse 38, 'So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.'

The critical thing, Paul says, is whose pleasure are you ultimately living for? Your spouse, yourself or someone else?

Undivided Hearts

Look at v35, 'I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order *and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord*.'

So, whether you're single or experiencing the extra complexities of marriage, Paul is saying your aim in life, and your aim as a couple, if you're married, should be to have a heart focused upon Christ. So that your priorities, and what you give your time to, the decisions you make and how you live out daily life, - the way you use your money, the films you watch, the career decisions you make, your church involvement, are all being shaped by him.

You see, it's when we get our loves in the right order, and God's our God, not marriage or the personal freedom of singleness, that the joys and the hard things of life begin take their right place. Put your loves, what you're devoted to, in the wrong order, and that thing that takes top spot - the thing whose pleasure you're seeking, will control you. But make God your God, make Christ the object of your ultimate devotion and all these other things begin to fall into place.

And doing that, Paul says, is going to have some very practical outworking, especially in the areas of marriage and singleness.

Verse 39, 'A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives.' So, devotion to Jesus means you're going to be devoted to and sacrificially love your spouse, even when it's hard, till death us do part. But it will also mean that should death part you, and you find yourself single again, you'll only marry a fellow believer: v39, 'But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, *only in the Lord*.' Because why would someone devoted to Jesus marry someone who didn't care about Jesus? And that is as true for marrying for the first time as for the second.

But it will also shape how a Christian behaves if they do get divorced. If they've divorced for a biblically valid reason, because their spouse has committed adultery, or abandoned them, and they want to remarry, like the widow they can do so, but only in the Lord, only to a fellow believer. But

if they've got divorced, and it wasn't for biblically valid reasons, then they'll stay single, because that's what Jesus said. And the person devoted to Jesus will always want to obey Jesus. But if such a person has remarried, they'll stay remarried, and seek to be devoted to Jesus in that marriage, going forward.

So… live for anything else in this life, even good things like happiness and freedom and marriage and singleness, and you'll experience a life out of sync and with it tension and anxiety. But recalibrate your life to one of devotion to Christ, fixe your eyes on the things that last, and you'll find yourself, not free from trouble or pressure or hardship but, married or single, increasingly able to navigate the trouble with growing grace and love, for God and others.