

The Wreckage and the Fire Pt 14

Wherever You Are!

God Has Already Moved In

1 Corinthians 7:17 (NLT) - *Each of you should continue to live in whatever situation the Lord has placed you, and remain as you were when God **first called you**. This is my rule for all the churches.*

1 Corinthians 7:24 (NKJV) - *Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state **in which he was called**.*

Introduction:

There is a letter that no longer exists. Somewhere between the ancient city of Corinth and the hands of time, **a document was lost that we will never read this side of eternity.** We know it existed. We can prove it existed. Paul himself tells us it existed when he opens chapter 7 with six words that change the entire tone of this letter: "**Now concerning the matters you wrote about.**"

- The church wrote to Paul. They sent him a letter. And that letter is gone.

Think about that for a moment, because what grips me is not what was in that letter. **What grips me is who wrote it.**

The people who picked up that pen and wrote to their pastor were the same people we have been preaching about for six weeks.

- They were the divided church.
- The arrogant church.
- The church that tolerated sexual immorality in its own house and called it grace.
- The church that dragged brothers before pagan judges over property disputes.
- The church that had been using its freedom as a license and its body as a playground.

These people. These specific, broken, complicated, spiritually gifted, morally inconsistent, Spirit-filled, flesh-driven people. They stopped in the middle of all of it and wrote to Paul.

The most powerful thing a broken person can do is still reach toward the one who has the answers.

We can actually reconstruct what was in that lost letter because Paul quotes their questions back throughout the chapter.

- Some of them were asking about marriage.
- Some about singleness.
- Some about whether a believer should stay with an unbelieving spouse.
- Some about whether to marry at all given the pressure of the times.

Their lives were complicated. Their questions were real. Their confusion was legitimate.

Paul does not open his answer with condemnation. He does not begin with a list of failures and violations. He opens with the pastoral instinct of a man who has been waiting to hear from his people. He says: you wrote about these matters. Let me answer you.

IN TIMES OF GREAT CONFUSION, GOD IS NEVER IRRITATED BY YOUR QUESTIONS.

But before Paul gets to any specific situation, before he addresses marriage or singleness or divorce or calling, he establishes the theological ground that everything else stands on. And he buries that ground in a phrase so compact that most readers walk right past it.

- It is two words at the end of **verse 24**.

After eight verses of the most theologically dense pastoral counsel in the letter, Paul lands the entire argument here: **1 Corinthians 7:24 (NKJV)**

"Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called."

- **With God.** Not with better circumstances. Not with a different station. Not with a resolved situation. **With God.**
- Wherever you are – **“With God”** - those two words are the answer to every question in this chapter. **They are the answer to every question about your life.**

WHEREVER YOU ARE IS NOT AN ACCIDENT. IT IS AN ADDRESS AND THE GOOD NEWS IS GOD HAS ALREADY MOVED IN.

Three movements unfold in Paul's answer to that lost letter.

- Each one speaks to a different station in life.
- Each one carries the same theological weight.
- Every one of them is pointing toward the same two words.

Write these three words down somewhere in your Bible or notes: **Covenant, Calling and Contentment.**

One conclusion: wherever you are — with God.

The Battle on Two Fronts

Before we enter the text, there is something that must be understood about what Paul is navigating in this chapter. Because without it, you will read chapter seven as a contradiction.

- For six chapters, Paul has been fighting one enemy inside the Corinthian church: libertinism.
- **Libertinism: The theology that the body does not matter, that grace covers all conduct, that freedom from the law means freedom from all moral accountability.**
- That is the enemy of chapters one through six.

But when Paul opens chapter seven, he turns around and begins fighting the opposite error. Because inside the same congregation, running alongside the libertines, there was another group with a completely different problem. These were the ascetics.

Asceticism – The body was evil, that physical pleasure was spiritually inferior, and that the truly holy person abstained from as much of the physical world as possible.

- **They were pressuring married couples to stop having sex.**

- They were telling believers to divorce their unbelieving spouses.
- They were insisting that marriage itself was a spiritually lesser station than celibacy.

Paul is fighting on two fronts simultaneously.

- In chapters five and six, he fought people who thought the body was morally irrelevant.
- In chapter seven, he fights people who thought the body was spiritually contaminating.

The enemy does not always come as excess, he also comes dressed as holiness.

- Both errors had the same root: a failure to understand what the gospel actually does to a person's life and station.
- Both groups had made the same mistake from opposite directions.

They had decided that God's calling required a **CHANGE OF CIRCUMSTANCE** rather than a **TRANSFORMATION OF PRESENCE**.

- **THE GOSPEL IS NOT A RELOCATION PROGRAM. IT IS A RESURRECTION.**

- **GOD DOES NOT MOVE YOU OUT OF YOUR LIFE. HE MOVES INTO IT.**

That is the operating principle Paul brings to every situation in chapter seven.

1. *The Sanctity of the Covenant*

1 Corinthians 7:1-6 (NKJV) - *Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

The opening line of this chapter is almost certainly a quotation from the Corinthian letter. "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

That was their slogan. **That was the ascetic faction making their theological argument in writing to their pastor.**

- Paul does not throw it out. He qualifies it.
- He says: yes, singleness has its advantages — and we will get there. But you cannot use a theology of spiritual purity to abandon your covenant obligations.
- The person you married has a claim on you. That claim is not a concession to weakness. That claim is a reflection of the nature of God.

Christian marriage is not two people who fell in love. IT IS TWO PEOPLE WHO MADE A COVENANT.

- **covenants in Scripture always carry the weight of the God who witnesses them.**
- The word Paul uses for conjugal rights in verse three is
- ***opheile* — a debt, an obligation, something owed.** He is not describing romance.
 - He is describing responsibility.

The marriage covenant creates a mutual obligation that cannot be abandoned in the name of spiritual advancement.

Then Paul moves to something that is one of the most remarkable pastoral statements in the entire New Testament. He addresses the situation of a believer married to an

unbeliever. And what he says should stop everyone in the room cold.

1 Corinthians 7:14 (NKJV) - *For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.*

- The ascetics had argued that an unbelieving spouse contaminated a believer.
- That the holy person would be dragged down by proximity to the unholy one.
- Paul reverses the entire argument. He says holiness does not work that way.

Holiness is not a contamination that moves from the unholy to the holy. Holiness is a presence that moves from the holy outward.

HOLINESS IS NOT FRAGILE - HOLINESS IS CONTAGIOUS.

A COVENANT-KEEPING BELIEVER DOES NOT GET DRAGGED DOWN BY AN UNBELIEVING SPOUSE. THAT SPOUSE GETS PULLED TOWARD THE LIGHT.

- Your faithfulness in a difficult marriage is not a spiritual liability. It is a missionary assignment.

- The most powerful sermon your unbelieving spouse may ever hear is the one preached by your consistent, covenant-keeping presence in their daily life.

Your marriage is not just about you and your spouse. It is a testimony to a watching world about the nature of a God who keeps His covenant even when the other party does not.

Now Paul turns to divorce, and here is where pastoral honesty requires the most careful handling. Because there are people in this room whose marriages did not survive. And they need to hear what Paul actually says, not what the church has sometimes told them he says.

1 Corinthians 7:10-15 (NKJV) - Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her...But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.

Notice what Paul does here that is extraordinary. He distinguishes between two different levels of authority in his own counsel.

- Some things he says with the full weight of the Lord's command.
- Other things he says as his own Spirit-guided judgment.
- He is not hedging. He is being scrupulously honest about the nature of his instruction.

For the person who was abandoned by an unbelieving spouse, Paul's word is one of the most liberating sentences in the letter: you are not enslaved.

- The Greek word is *dedoulotai* — to be bound as a slave, to be held in bondage.
- Paul says: that bondage has been broken. The person who left ended the covenant by leaving.

You are not condemned for their choice.

For every divorced person in this room who has carried shame as though the failure of your marriage is the defining verdict on your life: Paul does not condemn you. The same apostle who handled the sexually immoral man in chapter five with both truth and mercy looks at the abandoned believer and says: you are not in chains.

GOD DOES NOT DEFINE YOU BY WHAT SOMEONE ELSE CHOSE TO DO TO YOUR COVENANT. HE DEFINES YOU BY WHAT HIS SON CHOSE TO DO ON YOUR BEHALF.

Tertullian — To His Wife, c. 200 A.D.

How shall we ever be able adequately to describe the happiness of that marriage which the Church arranges, the oblation confirms, upon which the blessing sets a seal, at which angels are present as witnesses, and to which the Father gives His consent? How beautiful is the marriage of two believers, one hope, one desire, one discipline, one and the same service. They are truly two in one flesh. Where the flesh is one, one is the spirit.

Tertullian understood something the ascetics in Corinth had missed entirely. **The covenant of Christian marriage is not a spiritual compromise it is a spiritual showcase.** It puts the faithfulness of God on display in the most intimate theater of human life.

My covenant is not a cage - My covenant is a calling.

But Paul does not stop with the married. He turns to those who are uncircumcised and circumcised, slave and free — because the principle underneath the covenant applies to every station of life. And this is where the sermon reaches its theological center of gravity.

2. The Dignity of the Calling

1 Corinthians 7:17, 20, 24 (NLT / NKJV) - Each of you should continue to live in whatever situation the Lord has placed you and remain as you were when God first **called you. This is my**

rule for all the churches... Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called... Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.

- Paul says the same thing three times in eight verses. That is not redundancy.
- In the ancient rhetorical world, **triple repetition was the signal that you have reached the load-bearing wall of the argument. Everything in this chapter is hanging on what Paul says here.**
- The word at the center of this section is **klesis** — calling.
- It appears in 1 Corinthians 7:20 in one of its most theologically loaded uses in the entire New Testament.
- It carries the sense of divine invitation, of a summons that comes from outside yourself, of a purpose that was assigned before you understood it.

Paul illustrates the principle with two examples that seem to have nothing to do with marriage. He talks about circumcision and uncircumcision. He talks about slaves and free men. Why? **Because he is expanding the argument beyond relationships to encompass the entire posture of a life.** He is saying: **The calling of God does not require you to become someone else**

or inhabit a different circumstance before it becomes operative.

- The Corinthians had a theology of spiritual advancement that required a change of address.
- You had to leave your old life behind, abandon your old station, shed your old identity to become truly holy. Paul dismantles that theology with a single repeated phrase.

You have been searching for the will of God as if it is somewhere other than where you are standing. It is not somewhere else. It is right here — in the condition you are already in.

- God did not call you out of your life. He called you into it.
- The gospel is not a helicopter that lifts you above your circumstances. It is a presence that walks down into them with you.

Paul addresses the slave directly in verse twenty-one. He says: if you can gain your freedom, by all means do so. He is not romanticizing servitude.

- He is not saying stay in bondage if you can get out of it.
- He is saying that **YOUR CURRENT CONDITION DOES NOT DISQUALIFY YOUR CALLING.**

- The slave who is called is not a second-class citizen of the kingdom while waiting for manumission.
- The slave is fully called. Fully present. Fully with God.

And the reason Paul can say this is buried in verse twenty-two:

"For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a slave of Christ."

- Every external distinction gets relativized by the Lordship of Christ.

In Christ, the slave has a freedom no earthly document can give. In Christ, the free man has a servitude no earthly authority can impose.

The most liberated person in any room is not the one with the most options. It is the one who has surrendered every option to the Lordship of Christ.

Now the two most important words in the chapter. Paul ends verse twenty-four with a phrase that is so small most commentaries barely pause on it. But these two words are the theological hinge on which the entire chapter swings. "...there let him remain — ***with God.***"

- Not with better circumstances.

- Not after the situation changes.
- Not once things get resolved.
- Right here. Right now. In this condition. In this station. In this season - **With God.**

WHEREVER YOU ARE IS NOT A MISTAKE, IT IS A MEETING PLACE. GOD CHOSE YOUR ADDRESS BEFORE YOU DID.

The Reformers understood this and built an entire theology of vocation around it.

- **Martin Luther said that God does not only dwell in cathedrals. He dwells in the workshop of the cobbler, in the kitchen of the peasant, in the daily faithfulness of ordinary life.**
- Every station, every condition, every circumstance **that is surrendered to Christ becomes holy ground.**

N.T. Wright — Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians

Paul's point is not that outward circumstances do not matter, nor that one should be passive in the face of injustice. His point is that the calling of God is so profound, so total, so transforming, that it relativizes everything else. It is not that your circumstances disappear; it is that they no longer define you. What defines you is the One who called you.

Every person in this room has a current condition. Some of you are in a season you chose. Some of you are in a season that chose you. Some of you are in the middle of something you would leave tomorrow if you could. And every single one of you is standing on the same ground Paul is describing in verse twenty-four.

Wherever I am — I am with God. And that changes everything.

*But Paul has one more move - One more station to address. **The one that has been sitting quietly in the room this entire sermon, wondering if there is a word for them.***

- ***The single person.***
- ***The widow.***
- ***The one who is unmarried and unsure whether that is a gift or a grief.***

3. The Freedom of Contentment

1 Corinthians 7:29–32, 35 (NLT)

But let me say this, dear brothers and sisters: The time that remains is very short. So from now on, those with wives should not focus only on their marriage. Those who weep or who rejoice or who buy things should not be absorbed by their weeping or

their joy or their possessions. Those who use the things of the world should not become attached to them. For this world as we know it will soon pass away...I am saying this for your benefit, not to place restrictions on you. I want you to do whatever will help you serve the Lord best, with as few distractions as possible.

Paul has been building toward this.

- He has addressed the married.
- He has addressed the divorced and the abandoned.
- He has addressed every social station from circumcised to slave.

Now he pulls back the lens to the widest possible angle and shows every person in every station the eschatological reality that reframes all of it.

- He says the appointed time has grown very short.
- He says the present form of this world is passing away.

These are not pessimistic statements. They are clarifying ones.

When you understand that the age you are living in is not the final age, you stop gripping it so tightly. You stop spending your primary energy trying to arrange your circumstances into something permanent when permanence was never the offer.

Paul is not telling people to be indifferent to their lives. He is telling them not to be consumed by them. There is a difference between living fully present in your circumstances and being enslaved to them.

The person who knows time is short stops spending it on the wrong things.

And now Paul turns directly to the single person. The unmarried man. The widow. The virgin. And he says something that the church has either ignored or distorted in almost every generation since he said it.

- He says singleness is a gift. Not a deficiency. Not a waiting room. Not a consolation prize for people who have not yet found the right person.
- **A gift.** The Greek word in verse seven is *charisma* — the same word used for spiritual gifts.
- The gift of singleness and the gift of tongues come from the same Greek word. That is not an accident.

charisma — gift of grace — the same word used for spiritual gifts; singleness and marriage are both charismatic endowments

**THE CHURCH HAS SPENT TWO THOUSAND YEARS
TREATING SINGLENES LIKE A PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED.
PAUL TREATS IT LIKE A GIFT TO BE RECEIVED.**

- Paul explains why in verses 32-35. He introduces two Greek words that are the theological heart of this final movement.

The first is *merimna* — divided attention, anxious distraction, the occupation of the mind with competing concerns. Its root word is *merizo* — to divide, to split. *Merimna* is a divided heart.

It is what happens when legitimate love for a spouse competes with devotion to God. Paul is not saying that tension is sinful. He is saying it is real.

***merimna* — divided attention, anxious distraction — from *merizo*, to divide or split; a heart pulled in two directions**

The second word is *aperispaston* — undistracted, undivided, without being pulled away. It appears only once in the entire New Testament, right here in verse 35.

- Paul coins it for this moment. And what he is describing is the unique capacity of the single person for a quality of focused, *aperispaston* devotion to God that the married person, by the nature of their covenant obligations, simply cannot have in the same way.

aperispaston — undistracted, undivided devotion — appears only once in the NT; coined by Paul to describe the singular focus available to the unmarried

- Paul is not grading marriage and singleness on a hierarchy. He is saying they carry different capacities.
- The married person carries the unique capacity to put the covenant-keeping God on display in human relationship.
- The single person carries the unique capacity for an undivided, unencumbered, aperispaston devotion to the Lord.

Single person — you are not incomplete. You are undivided and there is an assignment that only undivided devotion can carry.

Abraham Heschel wrote in his landmark work on the Sabbath that time can be as sacred as space.

- God does not only dwell in holy places. He dwells in holy moments.
- Paul is saying something remarkably similar here: the season you are in right now — **however it looks, however long it lasts, however you arrived at it — is sacred space. Not because of its circumstances but because of its Occupant.**

Abraham Heschel — The Sabbath, 1951

The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals. Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time. The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments. Technical civilization is man's conquest of space, but it is a poor substitute for what we have lost — the ability to sanctify time.

- Heschel was writing about the Sabbath. But his theology of time is the theology Paul is operating from in this chapter.
- Paul is not asking the Corinthians to rearrange their circumstances. **He is asking them to sanctify the time they are already in.**
- To make holy the season they are already standing in. To meet God in the present moment rather than waiting for a future arrangement.

Some of you are waiting for your life to begin, but your life is the assignment God gave you this moment.

THE PRESENT FORM OF THIS WORLD IS PASSING AWAY. WHICH MEANS THE ONLY MOMENT THAT WILL NEVER PASS IS THE ONE WHERE YOU ARE STANDING BEFORE GOD RIGHT NOW.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer — Letters and Papers from Prison, 1943

I am still discovering right up to this moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman, a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God.

Bonhoeffer wrote those words from a Nazi prison cell while awaiting execution. He was not speaking abstractly.

- He had found that the assignment of God does not require an ideal circumstance. It requires a surrendered presence.
- Wherever you are — throw yourself completely into the arms of God.

Contentment is not the absence of desire. It is the presence of God in the middle of it.

I am not waiting for a better season. I am meeting God in this one.

Conclusion:

This entire chapter could be easily preached in one statement:

YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES ARE NOT THE POINT. THE PRESENCE INSIDE YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES IS THE POINT.

- Wherever you are — god has assigned it. Wherever you are — god has called you to it. Wherever you are — that is where he is waiting to be with you.
- You are not between chapters of your real life. You are not in a holding pattern waiting to land. You are not in a prologue. You are in the chapter God has written for this moment.