

The Passing of the World

^{CEB} **Jonah 3:1** The LORD's word came to Jonah a second time: ² "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you." ³ And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD's word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city; a three days' walk across.) ⁴ Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, "Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 ²⁹ This is what I'm saying, brothers and sisters: The time has drawn short. From now on, those who have wives should be like people who don't have them. ³⁰ Those who are sad should be like people who aren't crying. Those who are happy should be like people who aren't happy. Those who buy something should be like people who don't have possessions. ³¹ Those who use the world should be like people who aren't preoccupied with it, because this world in its present form is passing away.

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The apostle Paul expected Christ to return soon and his anticipation of an impending Day of Judgment frames the whole letter that we call First Corinthians. In chapter seven Paul discusses marriage and other relationships. He makes a clear point on multiple occasions that he is giving his considered opinion and not speaking a direct revelation from God. In verse twelve Paul writes, "I'm telling everyone else (the Lord didn't say this specifically): If a believer has a wife who doesn't believe, and she agrees to live with him, then he shouldn't divorce her." (1Corinthians 7:12 CEB) A few verses later, he says, "I don't have a command from the Lord about people who have never been married, but I'll give you my opinion as someone you can trust . . ." (1Corinthians 7:25 CEB) Then in verse twenty-nine, at the beginning of today's passage, he says, "This is what I'm saying, brothers and sisters" as he begins a summary of his thoughts and advice. In effect, Paul is saying, "It's just me talking here." It would be a wonderful thing if today's preachers were more careful to admit what is just their own opinion and what is clearly God's will.

Paul's advice about marriage is partly influenced by Roman law. Those who were unmarried paid higher taxes, and people under 50 who were divorced or widowed were required to remarry within a year. The tax structure could push people into marrying for economic reasons. The requirement to remarry within a year could force people into bad relationships while they were still emotionally strained from the loss of a partner. So, part of Paul's pessimistic view of marriage is his reaction against laws that forced people into unsuitable marriages.

On top of that, all of Paul's advice is given from his expectation that Christ would return very soon. Therefore, for instance, there's little sense in starting a family.

Two approaches to this text are common – try to prove it literally true, or ignore it as a relic of a worldview no longer possible. Proving it to be literally true seems impossible and certainly not necessary when we realize that Paul is giving his opinion, not preaching divine revelation. More often, since Paul's expectation of the imminent return of Jesus didn't come to pass, we tend to disregard this text.

Trying to predict the date of the Lord's return seems senseless to many people, especially considering the batting average of all the people who have made predictions in

the past. On the other hand, many of us give Christ's second coming little if any thought, assuming that it is unlikely to occur in our lifetime. Who is more foolish, those who can think of little but the soon return of the Lord, or those who think of nothing but our own time and place as if it were eternal? Are there only two choices, or is there a third approach to this text that is pertinent to us today?

Paul presents his own understanding of the appropriate way to deal with the world. In his culture where women were completely dependent on their husbands, Paul says, "let even those who have wives be as though they had none." Paul, as a bachelor and itinerant preacher, knew that having a wife would divide his attention and energy. But he isn't saying that husbands should ignore or abandon their wives. He goes on to say that "those who buy [should live] as though they had no possessions,"³¹ 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." Paul is speaking in hyperbole here. By using exaggeration, he is pointing out that one's relationship with God is even more important than their relationship with their spouse, and that things, possessions, are less important than living a faithful life. He isn't proposing monastic life or life as a hermit when he says that "those who deal with the world [should live] as though they had no dealings with it. He doesn't say shun all dealings with the world. He says live as though you have no dealings with the world. Live the life of faith in the world but detached or disengaged from the world's values. We are to still live in the world but not be captive or conformed to the values and structures of the world.

Paul's key point is simply that we belong completely to God. He emphasizes that all else is secondary by noting that the present form, the structure, the scheme of this world is passing away. The "scheme" of the world is "the way things are," the configuration of the current world, the social, historical, cultural, economic, and political order of the then-contemporary world. Though no one could see it, imperial Rome was sick unto death. The subversive words of Jesus were undercutting the monolithic world of Rome, just like a seed bursting through a crack in the sidewalk.

But that isn't unique to Paul's time and the Roman Empire. Every empire, every political power in history, has come into prominence and then passed away. The Ottoman Empire, the British Empire, the domination of South America by Portugal and Spain, the Moors, and every royal house of Europe have all vanished or become a shadow of their former glory.

Individually, all of our dealings, all of our possessions, are among those things that are passing away. When we realize that, our relationship with things changes. Today our things are less permanent and quicker to pass away than ever before. Yesterday's book is today's Kindle file. The telephone has come un-tethered from the wire and has become a multi-purpose tool that connects you by voice, text, and photo to others. It can guide you in your travels, look up information, and provide entertainment and news. The computers that I have owned have "passed away" at an ever quicker rate. Houses become technically obsolete in a matter of decades. Automobiles become safer and more comfortable with the rapid changes in technology. Our possessions seldom add to our happiness for long. In our ever more mobile society, friendships, jobs, location, alliances, and even marriages come and go with ever increasing frequency. Today's world is constantly passing away.

Paul tells us to live and act as if the world and our other relationships didn't provide life with its value and meaning, because our defining relationship and values come from our relationship with God. We should actually have a healthy dissatisfaction with those structures of the world that hinder God's reign. The message of Jesus was that the

kingdom of God has arrived among us. For over a century, we Presbyterians have declared that one of the goals of the church is the exhibition of the Kingdom of God to the world. We are to show others what God's Kingdom looks like through our actions. We should not accept the world as it is. We pray, "your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." That task of showing forth the kingdom, and building the kingdom, needs to put other aspects of our life in proper perspective.

Not only are the governments of the world and our possessions temporary, but the other side of the coin is that we are temporary. Life for humans is compressed into a limited life span, and the time can seem very short, especially as we grow older. Death is almost always closer than we imagine. Even though we feel invincible and immortal as youngsters, youth, and young adults, the truth is that we are fragile and our life can quickly be lost through accidents, disease, and disasters. Not only are the structures of the world passing away, but so are we. The wise course of action is to concentrate on following God's will whatever our circumstances. When I was young, the message I constantly heard was "Don't sin, because you might get hit by a bus on the way home and your sin will damn you to Hell." The supposition seemed to be that only fear and guilt could keep me from doing terrible things.

But I've learned that there is a better way. Sometimes our closing blessing in worship is: "Life is short and we have too little time to gladden the hearts of those who walk the way with us. Oh, be quick to love. Make haste to be kind." Our time is limited, and the older we get, the more we are aware that our time here is short. But the question isn't just about where do you want to spend eternity. It's important to think about how we want to spend our life! Why would we want to live a life frustrated by greed, unsatisfied by shallowness, and corrupted by hate and anger? Our Lord offers us a life of love, unselfishness, inner peace, worth, and meaning. Paul urged the Corinthians to not be distracted by the values and temptations of their culture. That is advice that is still valuable beyond measure for us today. Amen.

Governments, cultures, and possessions are temporary.
But if we live as citizens of God's kingdom,
We will live out eternal values and goodness.
Consider how you want to spend your time.

Life is short and we have too little time
to gladden the hearts of those who walk the way with us.
Oh, be quick to love.
Make haste to be kind.