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Prepared for you by

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1 Corinthians 7:29–31

²⁹Brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, ³⁰and 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 possessions, ³¹and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

It is amazing to me, as one who has recently signed up for a workshop discussing long-term financial planning for pastors, that such a workshop can exist in a church which reads this passage as the Word of God. Nothing in that workshop has anything to do with the radical disregard Paul has for planning for the future. What is the point of a pension, or investments, or leaving behind an inheritance for our children, if we genuinely believe that “the appointed time has grown short?” If the “present form of this world is passing away,” then there is no logical reason to make any plans that involve the present order of things. As short as this passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church may be, its message should shake the reader to the core.

Paul’s vision of the future is an apocalyptic one, and he considers all the time after the ascension of Jesus Christ to be borrowed time. The kingdom of heaven that Jesus spoke of is coming soon, and so we ought to order our lives around that fact. Such was the attitude of the Jerusalem church in Acts, in those first heady days, and so they did share all things in common, sure that Jesus’ return was immediately immanent. Consider, then, that Paul is writing to the generation after them, the Greek Christians who were not part of that first group of believers – it’s likely that some might already be doubting the return of Jesus, and it’s clear from the rest of the letter that divisions based on class and wealth were already forming in the Corinthian church. Notice, too, that the rest of I Corinthians 7 concerns the questions the community has about marriage, and whether or not they should stay married or all be celibate or ever marry in the first place. In answer to those specific questions, Paul gives very specific and practical advice, telling them to act honorably and respectfully in their relations, and to avoid sin in the way that seems best to them.

Still, though, even after assuring the people that they ought to take care of one another with the future in mind, Paul insists that such practical matters are of secondary importance. Marriage, and money, and politics are all secondary to our knowledge that Jesus is coming, and we are supposed to be busy getting ready for that coming. This is not advice that says we should retreat from the world, but rather be engaged in the activities of our lives while keeping our eyes firmly fixed on the cross of Christ. By doing so, we are able to relax our grip on the things of this life (even if they are good things), and so are freed to live in the present and in love for one another.