

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 **“What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.”**

Dear Followers of Jesus who gives you “peace at all times and in every way”:

Do you recognize these words? **“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances...”** These were penned by William Shakespeare in *“As You Like It”* (1599). There’s a lot of truth in these words. The world is much like a stage -- temporary and collapsible. In 1 Cor., Paul is encouraging us to play out our lives carefully because soon the earthly stage we’re on will be gone, and the reality of an unending life in eternity will stare us squarely in the face.

Our Christian faith calls on us to look at our place on the stage in a whole different way from the rest of the world. The Lord encourages us to **Be Jesus’ Firm Disciples in a Shaky World**. (1) *You know the world is falling apart*, (2) *Consider your life in it accordingly*.

1

“What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short.... this world in its present form is passing away.” We all know the signs of the end of the age: wars & rumors of wars (we have plenty of that going on); famines and earthquakes (we have plenty of those going on); people being selfish lovers of themselves (we have plenty of that going on). Yes, the check-list is full. Anytime the *stage* on which we play could come to an abrupt halt. A few weeks ago we read from Peter: **“The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare”** (2 Pt. 3:10). By God’s command, the world had its entrance and by God’s command it will have its exit.

But so will we. Even if this earth lasts for a while, we are not here much longer. Just the other day I saw on the news that a healthy 21-year-old died of the flu. The flu! -- something we all get. And there are car/train/plane accidents, fires, mudslides, even frigid weather deaths. We are weak, frail, fallible creatures who have an expiration date on this planet. It’s a shaky place to live. We’re never on solid footing. I remember a guy on TV saying that he always thought the one solid thing in life was the ground he was standing on. And then he experienced an earthquake and realized at that moment that even the ground and rocks can turn to jello. He said he never again felt secure after that.

I don’t want to get too scientific-y here, but I read that physicists are trying to prove, by using lasers, that there is a 4th dimension. I know. I don’t get it either. It hurts my head. How can anything have more than 3 dimensions: height, depth, width? We live in a 3-dimensional world! And yet, you Christians think even more radically than those physicists! You and I *know* there’s another dimension to things. You believe the Bible, and the Bible tells us that right now Jesus is with you, and his angels are all around you -- we just can’t see them. It goes beyond the *known* dimensions of nature. And yet for God, the universe-Creator, it’s child’s play.

So, the things we consider to be real right now will be gone tomorrow and what we do not yet see will become our new reality. Topsy-turvy! God turns reality on its ear. How, then, do we use and apply this truth?

2

Paul tells us: **“From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them.”** In short, while we live in this temporary, 3-dimensional world, what we expect to be a blessing may actually bring trouble, and what troubles we have may actually become blessings. One again, topsy-turvy! Conventional, earthly wisdom out the window!

I'd like to read a short section of a commentary on 1st Corinthians by Dr. Richard Lenski, a Lutheran seminary professor who actually taught my grandfather 91 years ago, way back in 1927, in Columbus, OH. Prof. Lenski puts these verses into perspective in this way:

“What does Paul really say? Marriage, tears, joys, purchases, the whole world of earthly things -- we Christians may have them all, use them all, and experience them all. How? For what they are: as belonging to this present world. As soon as we go beyond this limit and permit any of these things to interfere with our spiritual life and the life to come, a false power reaches into our lives and begins to ruin them.” Lenski then directs the reader to **Luke 12**, where Jesus tells the Parable of the Rich Fool -- the guy who said he had so much he'd just keep building bigger barns to store it all, and then he'd **“Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.”** But then God said to him, **“You fool. This very night your life will be demanded from you...”** Woops. Forgot to factor that into his plans.

Paul, then, is **not** saying don't get married or don't be happy or don't cry, he is saying don't value the things, the relationships, the days, and the emotions of this world more than they are worth. Keep them in proper perspective. Paul's term is don't be **“engrossed”** in them. Keep in mind that the stage we play on is collapsible. So think radically.

In our gospel lesson today Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John to be his disciples. They were in the middle of earning their livings and putting fish on their tables. That's fine! But when Jesus called them, they went. Oh, they still fished on the Sea of Galilee from time-to-time, but being with Jesus convinced them that they had bigger fish to catch: human souls. That's radical thinking! That's remembering that eternity lasts a whole lot longer than 75 or 80 or even 100 years.

Perhaps Martin Luther in his famous hymn *A Mighty Fortress* captures the essence of Paul's teaching here today as well as anything else. From stanza 4: **“And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won; the Kingdom ours remaineth.”**

And a final thought: what is true of us individually needs also to be true of us congregationally - keep our priorities straight. How blessed we are that the leaders of our church recognize that in order to remain faithful to the Lord and his Word, we need always to be less earthly-minded and more spiritual-minded. As God's people, we are not driven by social or political agendas, we are guided by one agenda: the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to go and make eternal disciples by baptizing and teaching his pure Word and wonderful message of forgiveness of sins that leads to eternal life.

That's how we live as and remain Jesus' firm disciples in a shaky world.

Amen.