

**“Trusting God Where You Are”**  
**1 Corinthians 7:1-24**  
**October 15, 2006**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

I was with some pastor friends several months ago, and we were talking about times in our lives when we thought we might die. I remember one story in particular. One pastor told about a time when he was young and single, and he went rock climbing with a friend in a remote area. At one narrow ledge, high off the ground, he got stuck. He couldn't go forward and he couldn't go back. On the face of this cliff, he had only a small ledge on which to stand, and he also had to hold on with his hands. It was not a position he would be able to hold for long. But he was stuck in a position where the height was such that he probably would have died had he fallen. What's more, it was getting dark outside. When it became clear that he really was stuck, his friend went for help and was gone for several hours before finally returning with a rescue squad.

I thought about that story when I was studying this chapter this week, because it also describes the situation of being stuck. Paul describes people who are stuck in bad marriages, in singleness, in marriages with non-Christians and in servitude to others. What is it like to trust God when you are stuck in a bad place in your life? And you're really stuck. You've tried to extricate yourself, but you've only succeeded in getting more deeply stuck. Perhaps you're stuck in a bad job. You have to provide for yourself and others, and this job pays pretty well, but you hate your work and find yourself completely drained by it. You've been to Monster.com everyday in search of something better, but nothing has turned up. Or perhaps you're stuck with an illness that is becoming more and more of a problem. Again, you've done all you know to do in order to be free of it, but nothing has changed and you feel stuck.

Paul addresses these types of situations in our passage. He helps us see what it looks like to trust God when you're stuck. His basic point is made in verse 17, and then stated twice more in the next few verses. Verse 17 says, **“Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.”** In other words, trusting God takes the form of contentment even when you're stuck. In a quote I've written on the sermon outline, Dallas Willard says it like this: “God has yet to bless anyone except where they actually are, and if we faithlessly discard situation after situation, moment after moment, as not being ‘right,’ we will simply have no place to receive his kingdom into our life. For those situations and moments *are* our life” (*The Divine Conspiracy*). Note three things Paul says in this chapter about trusting God where you are.

**I. Examples of Trusting God**

This whole topic of trusting God when you feel stuck came about because of a question the Corinthians wrote to Paul. It is clear that much of this letter consists of Paul's answers to some questions asked of him by the Corinthians. Paul summarizes the first of these questions in verse 1: **"It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."** I think a better translation here would be "wife" instead of "woman." It seems by Paul's answer in the following verses that the Corinthians were asking Paul whether it would be best for them to abstain from sexual relations within marriage. The question is why they would suggest such a thing. Bruce Winter has offered an explanation that makes sense of this confusing passage. He says that this chapter must be understood in light of the "present crisis" Paul mentions in verse 26. Winter has discovered in historical documents that there was a severe, empire-wide grain shortage at this time. So the Corinthians were asking Paul about whether it would be better for married people to refrain from having relations producing children, because of the real possibility of famine. Paul's answer, contained in verses 2-5, is essentially that married couples should not refrain from such relations, with one exception. If they should mutually agree in order to devote themselves to prayer, then sexual abstinence would be appropriate. But even in this case, it should only be for a short and limited period of time. So trusting God when you're stuck in a famine means to carry on with normal activities even when you don't know what the future will bring.

Paul goes on to discuss several areas the Corinthians had not asked him about, but which come to his mind as fitting in this same area of trusting God when stuck in various situations. His general rule is going to be that **"each one should remain in the condition in which he was called"** (v. 20). He's going to apply it to being single, being in a bad marriage with another Christian, and being married to an unbeliever. So his next topic is an area where many people in our day feel stuck—in the single, unmarried state. Again, in light of this famine, Paul says that he wishes all were as he was, possessing the gift of singleness. I don't think his words should be interpreted to elevate the single state beyond the married, but rather simply to point out that it is easier to be single in a time of crisis. So his words are essentially that single people should remain so unless doing so becomes a temptation to them that would lead to sin.

He then addresses Christians in bad marriages with other Christians. I am inferring from his words that he is talking about bad marriages because he is counseling the husband and the wife not to separate or divorce. There would be no need for such counsel in a good marriage. And I think he is talking about marriages between two Christians because he moves next to address a group he calls "the rest" and discusses a mixed marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian. I don't believe Paul's counsel should be understood to mean that a wife is supposed to stay around and let her husband beat her. She should call the police and have him arrested in such a case. And there are lots of gray areas around the edges of these commands, but the basic command is clear. Instead of bailing out when either marital life or the single life gets tough, Paul says to

remain in that situation and trust God there. Paul spells that out clearly in the section that begins with verse 17. He also expands it to other areas of life. For example, he talks about Christians who are slaves and tells them to gain their freedom if they are able to do so. But if not, they are to remain as slaves and to take comfort in the fact that they have been freed by the Lord.

In all of these situations, Paul's direction is to remain in the situation you were in when you became a follower of Christ. Even if a person feels stuck in singleness, in a bad marriage or in a bad job as a slave, this was still his advice. He does allow for the attempt to make changes when they can be done lawfully. In other words, he is not an advocate of fatalism, which emphasizes God's sovereignty to the point that it denies the role of human will. But when a change cannot be lawfully made, Paul's counsel is to stay in the undesirable situation in which you find yourself and to trust that God can meet you there.

## **II. The Alternative to Trusting God**

If you're stuck in a bad situation—and in a fallen world such situations are inevitable—there is an alternative to trusting God. You can trust yourself, which usually takes the form of seizing control of your own life. These are really the only two options. Do you believe that God is up to the task of running your life, even when the road he has laid out for you becomes bumpy and difficult, or do you insist on seizing control yourself? So the alternative to trusting God when you feel stuck in life is to trust yourself.

This self-trust will itself lead to two different things, depending on your resources. If you have the resources to deliver yourself from a bad situation that God is calling you to stay in, then the result will be restlessness. For example, you find yourself in a bad marriage, but you have a good job and are able economically to make a divorce work and still support the children. Using the common and self-deceived reasoning pastors hear all the time, you tell yourself that surely God wants you to be happy. He loves you and wants nothing more than your happiness. And he knows you've been unhappy in this marriage, so seeking a divorce must be the right and even the godly thing to do. So you do it. The result ends up being a restlessness and emptiness in your life.

There is another possibility too. Sometimes we confront the bad situations in which we're stuck and we don't have the resources to extricate ourselves. We're still trusting in ourselves and believe that we know best how our lives ought to work. But the situation is beyond us. Perhaps it's an illness, or perhaps it's a bad marriage and there aren't the financial resources to do anything other than stay married. If we trust ourselves, then the result is either despair or a deep anger against God and others. We feel backed into a corner, and it's God's fault.

## **III. The Benefits of Trusting God**

It's a frightening thing to feel stuck in a bad situation, not unlike my friend who found himself clinging to the side of that cliff wondering if the rescuers were going to show up before his strength gave out and he fell to his death. It's frightening to be in a bad marriage and not know what's going to happen in the future. It's frightening to be single and to fear the prospect of having to endure the difficulties of aging all alone. Trusting God is the only effective way to deal with these fears.

**Illustration:** I heard an advertisement this week in which the announcer was talking about breast cancer and said, "The best way to deal with fear is with good information." Is that true? Let's say you are a single woman who's stuck in a single state you consider undesirable and you are growing more fearful with each passing year that you won't ever get married. Will good information help you deal with this fear? Here's some information. I read this week some Barna polling results that found that there are 12 million more single women in the evangelical church than single men. Does that information help you deal with your fear? Only learning to trust God will really help us.

God helps us trust him by giving us promises, and I want to point out two of them that are contained in these verses. First, God promises that when we trust him and stay in the difficult circumstances of our lives, that he will use us in the lives of others. We see that clearly in the section where Paul talks about a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. He tells the believer not to leave such a marriage, **"for the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy"** (v. 14). Paul's point is that there is some spiritual benefit that comes to an unbelieving spouse of a believer and to their children that would not be the case were there to be a divorce. The believing spouse who remains in this difficult situation brings great benefit to others. So the situation in which you are stuck has more at stake than how you feel about it. The Joseph story of the Old Testament is one of the best illustrations of this I can think of. Due to the sin of his brothers in selling him into slavery, he found himself stuck in two very difficult circumstances that lasted for years. First, he was a slave in Potiphar's house where he was tormented and abused by Potiphar's wife. Second, he was unjustly accused by her and ended up in prison as a result. But in the clarity that is revealed in last chapters, Joseph said during the final chapter of his earthly life that God meant these things for good, **"to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today"** (Genesis 50:20). It wasn't just the descendants of Jacob who were kept alive as a result of Joseph's troubles that led him to his position of power in Egypt, but the people from all over that region. Joseph had been the one to preserve the world through the seven years of famine. But Joseph didn't know these things during the time in which he was stuck.

There is another benefit of trusting God where you are, even in the times when you feel stuck. Not only will God use you to benefit others, as he did with

Joseph, but he will also use the difficulty to do his good work in your life as well. Notice what Paul says to Christian slaves. After telling them to seek their freedom if they are able to do so, he realizes that most will not be able to do so. His counsel to them is to remain as slaves, and he gives this reason: **“For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord”** (v. 22). Imagine yourself a Christian slave, and you are hearing Paul remind you of your status of freedom in Christ. Don't you think a slave will find that a far more precious truth than those not enslaved? It won't remove the difficulties of being a slave, but the condition of slavery will become a unique opportunity to find Jesus far more precious. God's blessing will come to the slave not in spite of his status of enslavement but because of it.

**Illustration:** A single lady I know was recently quoted in *byFaith* magazine. After her engagement came to a painful and heart-wrenching end, Liz Kimberlin said, “I have been really watered and cared for by the church. There has been a deep sense of knowing God as a husband.”

Let's move to apply this. Is there some area of your life where you feel stuck, some difficult circumstance you would like to see changed? You have attempted to change it, but so far to no effect. Your need is to see God's hand at work in this and to trust him where you are. You need the same thing Jacob needed. When Jacob viewed the same circumstances viewed by Joseph in the story I referred to earlier, Jacob said to his remaining sons, **“You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me”** (Genesis 42:36). But we the readers of that story know that Jacob had it wrong. Since he didn't view these things with eyes of faith, the very things that he saw as *against* him were actually the hand of God *for* him.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Jesus also shows us the way. He trusted God where he was even while on the cross. Even when abandoned by the Father, he cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus does more than show us the way. By his act of trusting God even in the greatest difficulty ever faced as he hung on the cross, he has secured for us the blessing of God in all of life. So that even when we're stuck, God is blessing us. So let's return again to the quote from Willard with which we began. “God has yet to bless anyone except where they actually are, and if we faithlessly discard situation after situation, moment after moment, as not being ‘right,’ we will simply have no place to receive his kingdom into our life. For those situations and moments *are* our life.” God is in the middle of your life seeking to bless you. Don't discard the situation he has designed for that good purpose.

Winter (After Paul Left Corinth):

There was a consensus in the first century that “adultery by a man was not wrong unless it infringed Augustus law, viz., where adultery involved a woman of high status.” p. 227

According to this law, the husband had “authority over the wife so that any breach of sexuality fidelity on her part was an indictable criminal offence once he had divorced her for it.” p. 227-28

“However, what runs counter to much first-century practice is that fact that the Christian husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does. He therefore cannot indulge his sexual passions outside marriage, however much this may have been accepted in first-century society.” p. 228

“While Paul countenanced prayer and fasting, given the gravity of personal or wider circumstances, he teaches the temporary nature of sexual abstention.” p. 231.

“However, what is being sought in Corinth is not abstinence from sexual intercourse for the ‘leisure’ of prayer, but, as has been argued here, abstinence in order to pray because of ‘the present troubles’ (7:26).” p. 232

“They were in uncharted waters as a young Christian community facing this social distress, and they needed Paul’s apostolic ruling on whether this was the right response to this external problem.” p. 232

“What, then, is the place of 7:7 in the subsequent discussion? It appears to operate as the overarching reality in which the implications of those two callings represented by two different gifts of God for Christians are subsequently worked out.” p. 239

“He himself is raising three related issues: ‘I am saying’ (7:8) [in which he will deal with singleness and marriage in relation to widows and the unmarried]; ‘I am commanding, not I but the Lord’ (7:10) [in which he will deal with the topic of separation and reconciliation (7:9-10)]; and ‘to the rest I am saying’ (7:12) [in which he will deal with the marriage ordinance and divorce for those whose marriage partners are not Christians in 7:11-16]. p. 239

So the overall structure of this passage is for Paul to deal with their question in 7:2-5, after which he will treat three different related issues that they had not asked about.

“Ethnicity and social identity were the results of the providential oversight of God (7:18,21,23).” p. 239

“Just as the gifts of singleness or marriedness is personally given by the Lord, so too, Paul seems to be implying, were these ethnic and social ‘markers’.” p. 239

Heidelberg Catechism, question 1 asks, “What is thy only comfort in life and in death?” The answer is, “That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the

power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head.”

**Application:** Read again verse 17 and meditate on these words from Dallas Willard. “God has yet to bless anyone except where they actually are, and if we faithlessly discard situation after situation, moment after moment, as not being ‘right,’ we will simply have no place to receive his kingdom into our life. For those situations and moments *are* our life” (*The Divine Conspiracy*).

How can you resist their attempts and all the others that bombard our lives?

I want to answer that question by referring to one verse out of a small Psalm. Psalm 131 is a portrayal of a contented life, one that is free from this sin of covetousness. It says this in verse 2: **“But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.”** This is a striking image for contentment. Just before a child is weaned, nearness to its mother stirs very strong and natural desires for the mother’s milk. During weaning, the child will cry and insist that he simply must have this milk in order to live. But now that he is weaned, he can sit near his mother, near the source of that which he used to think he had to have or he would die, and he can be satisfied without the milk. God wants to bring us to the place where we can be near that which we used to think we just had to have, and still be content in him. How can that happen?

The psalmist answers in the next verse. **“O Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore.”** Hope is essentially the same as faith. Faith says, “God, you are enough; you are all I need. Since you have given yourself to me and promise to be with me always, I can rest content no matter what else happens.” Perhaps you are thinking to yourself today, “I wish I had that kind of faith, but I just don’t.” Have you ever had someone who is not a follower of Jesus say something like that to you? They say that they wish they could have your faith, but they simply don’t. Well, they can’t get off the hook that easily. The reason they don’t have the kind of faith you do is because they have deliberately decided to trust in themselves. It’s like someone saying to you, “I really wish I could watch the Super Bowl this evening.” When you ask them why they can’t, they say, “O, I will be watching the movie on HBO instead.” They could watch the Super Bowl, but they must first turn off HBO. You can have faith that brings contentment, but you must first stop trusting in yourself. Covetousness is essentially a trusting in yourself. It says, “What I really need for happiness is this relationship, possession or accomplishment. If I can get it, then all will be well.” The implication is that God has nothing to do with happiness. I must get it for myself, because God certainly will not help me.

So what’s wrong with a little wanting? I have had people who claim to be Christians tell me that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be rich because it motivates you to work hard. Isn’t it okay to want things really desperately as long as you don’t acquire them illicitly? No, I don’t believe it is, for two reasons.

First, your life is destroyed by ever growing and unsatisfied desires. Only two things can happen when you begin wanting something, and both of them are bad. Either the search for it will monopolize your life, or you will find it and discover it to be empty. There is a verse in Ecclesiastes that talks about these two possibilities: **“Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income”** (5:10). Anything that becomes the object of your coveting could be substituted for money. Whatever it is you covet and think that you simply must have, you will never have enough of it. Some have attributed the following statement to Nelson Rockefeller and others to Andrew Carnegie. I’m not sure who said it, but some rich guy was asked how much money it takes to be happy? His answer: “Just a little bit more.”

**Illustration:** When I grew up, we had three horses. A horse can graze in the pasture all day long, or nibble on hay hour after hour with no ill effects. But when taking care of a horse, you have to be careful not to let him near a large bin of oats, because no matter how much he eats of the oats, he will always want more. Eventually, he will eat himself to death. Our wanting is just as self-destructive as that. No matter how much we have, we want still more, until we kill ourselves.

But it is just as destructive to get the object of your coveting. Have you ever noticed how many celebrities fall apart just after reaching the apex of their career? They get the money and the fame they have striven for for so long and

then proceed to throw it away through a drug addiction or depression or some other significant problem. Is it the case that celebrities are just more foolish than the rest of us? No, I believe the breakdown occurs because they are allowed to reach their goals and find them incredibly empty.