



# The Era is Limited Part 4



I am acquainted with a man in Christ, fourteen years before this, (whether in a body I am not aware, or outside of the body, I am not aware—God is aware) such a one was snatched away to the third heaven. And I am acquainted with such a man (whether in a body or outside of the body I am not aware—God is aware) that he was snatched away into paradise and hears ineffable declarations, which it is not allowed a man to speak. Over such a one I shall be boasting; yet over myself I shall not be boasting, except in my infirmities. —2 Corinthians 12:2

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians around 57 A.D. 14 years before that was 43 AD. No one know what Paul was doing in 43 AD. Paul might not even have known. Ellicott’s Commentary says that 43 AD “coincides with the period of unrecorded activity between St. Paul’s departure from Jerusalem (Acts 9:30) and his arrival at Antioch (Acts 11:26).” Paul was “in the seam.” He was secreted away in a room or in a wilderness away from the prying pen of Ellicott or anyone else. He dares everyone to find him. Not even A.E. Knoch can find him. Peter cannot find him. His ex-wife cannot find him. Bullinger cannot find him. Luther cannot find him. The only people savvy to his whereabouts then were the grocer and his barber. Possibly the coffee shop staff. To history, Paul is in a seam. He has disappeared. No one can link any event to “fourteen years before this,” not even our most brilliant, prying minds. That’s because there was no event. It was nothing. That’s the event.

Now is where I come in. Since no one knows anything, I can know nothing better than anyone. Paul had just returned home from the grocery store just mentioned. The grocer knew where he lived, possibly including even his address. Paul bought figs and bananas and chocolate and coconut water this day He had to walk uphill to get back to his place. He lived by himself. The furniture in his apartment consisted of a table, a chair, and a large cabinet. That’s it. There was lots of empty space where Paul could stare. Inside the cabinet were some clothes, four dishes (a plate, a bowl, a spoon, a cup; yes, Paul kept his clothes with his dishes), his scrolls, his groceries, his writing supplies; basically, everything he owned was in the cabinet. Barnabas had built the cabinet. In one corner of the room was a mat where Paul slept. At each end of the mat was a folded blanket; one of them served as Paul’s pillow. Paul slept in the same room



where he worked in the same room where he ate in the same room where he stared at the lit dust at noon suspended and lit by the sun coming through his one window cut roughly through the room at chin-height.

He was tired. He dropped the groceries onto the table. He could sort them later or leave them there. It didn't matter. It wasn't many groceries, anyway. What was there to sort? That word should not even have come to him. All he wanted now anyway was the coconut water. He poured some in his cup and took it to his mat. His mat was under the window. Some cool air because of the evening came in and fell on him. It felt good. He decided to feel it, and nothing but it. It hit him on his legs. It was fine. Now it was dusk and the sun was just going away. No one would come see him. He sighed. Where was his cat? It didn't matter. He barely knew where he was. It didn't matter. It was somewhere on earth. All that mattered was the coconut water and that cool air sinks, and that the cool air coming through the rough-cut window sank and fell on his naked legs. But now he needed to be completely naked.

He didn't want to get up, so he rolled out of his clothes and threw them aside. Now it was better. The

mat was rough-hewn and he usually put something on top of it unless he was naked, ironically, because he liked how the texture felt on his bare back and massaged his injuries. He could scratch himself on the mat and it felt good to his injuries behind him.

He looked down at himself without raising his head much. He put one arm underneath his head for this. This was enough to allow him to look down his body at his stomach. He ran his left hand over his stomach muscles. He liked that he could see and feel his stomach muscles through his skin. He tensed briefly to make the stomach muscles come out more. The dying light was such that he could see the striations of his leg muscles, especially the great muscle of work. He could not reach it where he wanted to feel the muscle that looked like a plantain, so he put the bottom on his smooth hand in the smoothness without hair between the middle of himself and his leg, then rubbed that area in the coolness of the air still falling from the window as gently as he could so that it were as though something alive and apart from him had landed there. These were the simple pleasures that made Paul smile in awareness of his vessel. Sometimes he was so aware of the Deity of God and sometimes he just lived. Now

he was aware and living at the same time and it felt to him as good as the smoothness beside his stomach and his legs and the great muscles of the legs rising in undulations from his great legs, which had taken him so many places.

It was in this peace of being nowhere and everywhere at the same time that the fatigue settled upon him like a bird in a busy tree, a tree busy with leaves. Paul could also hear leaves outside from a palm frond because maybe a storm was coming. Then he heard thunder and knew that the storm was coming, but that it would miss his house and even his city. He did not know how he knew it would skirt the city, he just knew. It sometimes happened. This knowledge disappointed him because he so enjoyed the storms. This must have been where the cold air was coming from.

Every breath he knew was from God. Every thought was from God. The decision to feel the smooth place was of God, and how he had situated himself upon his mat and where the builders had decided to put the window, it was all of God. He looked over at his table at the bananas. He knew that the history of the bananas was of God. He stared at one banana. He felt as though the banana could speak to him. How absurd. Yet in this he smiled. He knew that somehow his leg was connected

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to his hip, probably by means of a socket of some kind. The banana reminded him of this, which made no sense on the surface of things. In the next moment, it was him living. In the next moment, it was God making him move and breathe. These moments, though different, were the same to him. He liked this. He tried to explain it to people, but couldn't. Not even Peter could grasp how easily he could change the mind from the absolute thinking that God did everything, to the relative thinking that he did everything. Why was it so easy for him? Maybe he was a genius. But he didn't think so. But then he thought that maybe he was. He knew he had gifts. He was aware of how God had organized him to be who he was and that there was no combination

like him anywhere on earth. Of course that could be said of anyone. But still. He knew he was protected in this because it was such a rare and impossible combination for his particular use and God's use of him. Now he smoothed the hair mat above his pubic bone over and over as though petting a cat and breathed so that his belly rose, but not his chest. Now he closed his eyes and felt the top of the bone that seemed to link his hips on top of him—and that may have been when it happened, although it may not have been that moment at all. He thought about the last time he was whipped.

He never knew if he had fallen asleep or if he was awake. He did not even know if he took his body with him or if it was only his spirit that went while his body stayed on the mat in the precise position and attitude where he left it, including his right arm beneath his head. Jesus came for him. He had met the Jesus Who had arms and legs before in the Arabian desert. He later called it “being snatched away.” He himself now writes:

**W**hen Christ first came to me it was the brightness of light that blinded me. I had also seen Him as a regular person. Now it was a different thing, a third thing. I could do nothing but see, yet this had nothing to do with my eyes, if even I had them; I was not aware of it. God is aware. I rose up in a rapture. I remember the ceiling of my room, that I passed through it. I passed through it as though it were nothing. When “I” passed through it, what is “I”? Now I was looking down at my place and my body and I saw that I was in the same position. This makes me think that I was outside of my body and if I had to say, it would be that. As I am not certain, I will not say either way. I don't know how anyone can feel or sense anything outside the body. I still do not know this. Even you do not know it because the knowledge of all time came upon me and this is where I “went.” God has given humanity much knowledge, but much more He has withheld. This is why I will not say either way but if you press me I have the sense that I left my body here and that He gave me a new body to experience where He was taking me. I may say that the new body was a loan to me and that I gave it up—or it was taken from me—when the travel was finished and He returned me to my mat.

From this time on (that is, going through the ceiling) there is no memory of “there” and “here.” The only thing I remember was my ceiling and that it

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became no hindrance. Then I was ahead in time. There was no passage, understand. I did not travel through stars or see celestial bodies as some would and have assumed with great erring. They do not know. I, myself, barely know, but I do know that it was not that, for I came to be ahead in time to the third heaven. I was only aware of going out and above my house to see my body in that way. This I believe was so that I would know that this was a journey not of space but of time. It was only, then, the briefest of space travels to make me aware that I was being removed. After that, the travel aspects went black.

I heard voices and music. The voices were deep and comforting. The words, I did not know while at the same time I grasped the meaning. I was to be given a glimpse of the body of Christ completed. As this began happening, the voices increased in volume. This I account to the number of voices adding to the previous chorus and not to the volume of individual voices. More beings spoke and sang as I “went.” The music was deep and wide and high and low all at the same time. It crashed like cymbals crashing. I knew the words. I began singing. This is when the rapture began—when I knew the songs and I sang them—but all the songs came from somewhere besides my memory and they came out from somewhere besides my mouth, for I did not even know if I had a mouth. I joined in the chorus. But then I knew that it was all about me, and I stopped. Utter silence had come at the same time I stopped, and I knew that everything had been prepared for me.

It was as though I were being shown a home, a treasure, a sea, a magnificent painting or possession of some great personage that no one else had ever seen. There was such anticipation of it all around me that the silence was the loudest thing I had ever heard. Then I heard a voice in my own language that said, “Come, come and see.” Then, my God, my God, my God! I saw it. I saw everyone. I saw them all perfected. The only one I remember distinctly was Chloe. She had taken my letter from Corinth to Rome, but I knew that they were all there. And then everyone. I saw everyone who would ever be called. They all gazed at me. It was every member of the body of Christ ever created, ever called, ever glorified. The old humanity was so long past. The history of it was long ago dimmed to every eye there. All that mattered was now—that moment. I knew that I was far into the future, even thousands of years after the snatching away of the body of Christ. I knew that those I gazed upon and who gazed upon me had already witnessed the great white throne judgment. I sensed that the great white throne judgment was thou-

sands of years in the past. I was aware of the second death. I was aware of it as real as a sound, though it were silent. How could I see them except they had bodies—speaking now of the members of His precious body? They all knew me. I knew them. Only one was of the past, Chloe, but all others were of a time beyond mine, for how many years I do not know. I do not know when they came, or from whence, for that was not shown me. What was shown me, and of what I was aware, was that they all stared at me and loved me with an unfathomable and indescribable love.

I heard them say my name then, as in a chorus. I heard, “Paul,” but it was as though that sound traveled in the long chord of a song that begins in the mists of the past and travels along a tight line in which there is no bend or turn until what I would have called “the future” came, but that now had no meaning except I was aware of how far away I was from all that I had ever known, both in time and in space, although my most pressing reality, as I have said, was time.

And then it happened again, but a far different thing. My God, my God, and my God! We were all, all of us, then taken by the presence of Christ, by Christ Himself, to Paradise. Now it was as though I were sworn to secrecy. I know every detail of it. I do. I know it. I saw it. It beat in and out of me like the blood pushing through my body out of my heart. It still feels this way, though I know nothing. Then I knew that I would forget every detail, but not the experience. I knew that the details would be erased from me, but not the experience. I knew this during the experience. It was the most wonderful, the most beautiful, the most sublime of all things I had ever experienced and seen. This much I am allowed to remember. We were all there, every member of the body of Christ. I heard names that I had never heard before. I heard every name. Every name was disclosed and announced to me, at the same time as the faces appeared, each one. The names were as strange as the voices that now rose above us all, all the members. But the faces I knew, though I had never seen them before.

Now I was aware of great and spiritual beings, numerous beyond measure, flying above us all, then below us, then circling us. We were at the center of everything. But now where was Christ? He was in the center of where we stood. And yet at the same time we were in the center of Him. The beings flew around us, countless beings, great beings, voices I had never heard at volumes I could

never have imagined in all of life, or any life. Then I heard the words, “Say nothing now,” and at these words, everything faded. I did not know how terrible it was and I still do not know to this day because the terror of this ending was kept from me, the most of it besides the trailing edges of it which remain with me, though I know it is but a fragment, a remnant of the disappointment of leaving that most blessed time and place to return to my room and to the new storm ... and there was the banana, in my hand, I was eating it, and how I came to be eating it I do not know, for I do not remember getting it. I will swear to you that I did not get it, but that it was brought to me. The storm that I thought would not come had now come, but the rains blew westward and away from my window so that I did not move except to eat, and now the peel of the

banana was on my stomach and I watched it rise and fall, and how it got there I do not know, and for the first time in many months I laughed. I laughed until the tears came. When the tears came, I began crying. Then the wind shifted suddenly and the rain did come on

me then, but I did not care for it.

It was all sealed then. What before was a “mere” spiritual intuition, was now the most obvious fact. I had not been shown it, I had seen it. It was done. Not even the banana peel rising with my breathing was more real. Now I could risk everything. Now I could laugh, finally. I could finally laugh at life, this life, with its petty arguments and dust and trees and bantering and things rolling on wheels through the markets and the peoples struggling to adorn themselves in fronds, frocks, feathers—none of it mattered. The fowls of the air knew more of it than the people, and I had a stranger and deeper understanding of the animal kingdom after this. It no longer mattered then how many more times I was whipped—and it would be three more times. I would never feel another lash. I would never feel another rock. I felt them, but not as before. I disagreed with my brethren, but not as before. I was dead now, still dead. But I lived. I was not dead then, but I may as well have been for that is what the world had then become to me, and I to the world. For I lived from then to the end in accord with what I had seen before in the Paradise: the body of Christ completed. I wrote it to the saints in Corinth. Now I knew it was safe to part ways, safe to live, safe to risk

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everything. What I had seen and experienced could not be lost. This was a great gift.

I never could bring myself to even say it was me. “I know of a man,” is how I put it. Learn from that, if you learn anything. Learn from that. The new man is not me. The new creation is not me. Yet I live. No, living in me is Christ, the One dying and being roused for my sake and Who took me to see the completing of the One completing the all in all, even Him. I saw every detail too of the new home, of the kingdom, of the structures and even the buildings beyond, but it was all erased. My only memory is that I saw it and that the glory was superexcessive and impossible for me to contain, even in the body given me then. God knew what would come to humble me, but I already do know. The universe surrounded me, and you surrounded me. Whoever is reading now surrounded me; you were there. I saw you. I know your name. They were all flying about us, myriads. You do not know. The center of the universe, the center of everything. It is not enough to say, “It will happen.” That was the past. That is the point of it all. It has already happened. I went to a time when it had already happened, millennia before. I saw you and if only I could convey the texture of that and the accompanying feelings; as real as cold rain through a window was it. The snatching away was millennia in the past—millennia.

They stoned me in Lystra shortly after than when I had healed a lame man. The Jews became jealous. I felt the rocks, but in another way than I otherwise would have. This is how it would be. The mental sadness was always more for me after that, and not the physical. For a brief time, I believe I inhabited my new body. That is the only thing I can think. Coming back to this body that now rots in the grave is what made me laugh. You would not think it so, but that is what happened. This was a mercy of God. The trials after that were heavy but not worthy to be compared with what I saw and heard. When I say I saw you it is true and cannot be otherwise, even though you fail to grasp the significance. As you read this, I am long dead. I do not exist. I wrote this from the third heaven, after my resurrection to immortality. For a brief time I existed far ahead of you, thousands of years ahead of you, yet at the same time not ahead of you because you were there. You *are* there. I am there with you, in spirit. We are the center of everything. I know this. I will rise to see you and together we shall rise to be presented. I know what will happen then, for I was there before. For me, this part will be familiar. You will surround me, and say my name. Then I will know all of you. He chose me for that, and for this. You say my name then. I already know you. Now you will know me. I want you to be without worry, therefore comfort ye one another with these words.



### THE ERA IS LIMITED

**Now this I am averring, brethren, the era is limited; that, furthermore, those also having wives may be as not having them, and those lamenting as not lamenting, and those rejoicing as not rejoicing, and those buying as not retaining, and those using this world as not using it up. For the fashion of this world is passing by. Now I want you to be without worry.**

—1 Corinthians 7:29-32

Paul uses the phrase, “the era is limited” in 1 Corinthians 7:29, “Now this I am averring, brethren, the era is limited.” For one thing, he is “averring” it, and not just saying it. Thanks to the *Concordant Literal New Testament* for distinguishing “averring” from mere “saying.” To say, is to say. You mention something. Words come from your mouth. To “aver” is, according to the Greek-English Keyword Concordance, “to declare forcefully and confidently.” It means, “I really mean this, and were I not writing, I would be shouting.”

That the era is limited means that the era is wrapping up. The Greek word here is *sunstello*, whose English elements are “TOGETHER-PUT.” This word appears only one other time in the Greek Scriptures, in Acts 5:6, when young men enshroud the body of Ananias, who

has just embezzled a significant percentage of a land sale intended for the apostles ahead of the kingdom. The holy spirit struck the man dead and some burial guys enshrouded (*sunstello*) his body. This is the Concordant translation of the same word translated “limited” in 1 Corinthians 7:29, to describe the era.

“Now rising, the younger men enshroud him (*sunstello*), and carrying him out, they entomb him” —Acts 5:6.

A dead body must be enshrouded to keep the limbs from falling askew. The body is “wrapped up.” Likewise, the era is being wrapped up. Loose ends are being tied. God is preparing the era for imminent entombment.

### WHICH ERA?

Which era is Paul talking about when he says, “The era is limited”? Some would limit this to the era in which the Corinthians lived; in verse 26, Paul mentions “the present necessity.” King James calls it, “the present distress.” It is thought that the Corinthians occupied a hard place of persecution requiring as untrammelled a life as possible, whereas we of the present day enjoy such wonderful, joyous, trouble-free times—and so void of persecution—that we should relegate Paul’s words to the past and plunge right ahead into all manner of complicated, worldly care. I reject this view. “The present necessity” is always the lot of believers living devoutly. Paul makes it timeless with his final statement of verse 26, “for it is ideal for humanity to be this.” What is ideal for *humanity*, that is, for the physical and soulish body, is ideal in any era. If the Corinthians had it bad, then we have it worse. This same Paul writes years later to Timothy in his second letter: “Now this know, that in the last days perilous periods will be present” (3:1), “wicked men and swindlers shall wax worse and worse” (3:13), “now you fully follow me in my teaching, motive, purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, and persecutions (3:10-11), and “all who are wanting to live devoutly in Christ Jesus shall be persecuted” (3:12).

If the Corinthians lived in “the present necessity,” then we live in the present insanity.

Again concerning the phrase, “the era is limited,” Paul presents this truth as the reason for the Corinthians to unburden themselves of worldly concern. If we limit “the era” to the era of distress suffered by the Corinthians, then “the era is limited” would come as good news to them (i.e. “the end of your persecution draws nigh”) and would make them relax and sink back full

time into their worldly delights. This is not Paul’s intention with the phrase. But if “the era” here is the greater era of the time of the nations during Israel’s apostasy—as I believe it is—then its transient nature in every subsequent century drives us to consider what lies beyond this world (this is *always* Paul’s intention), which will in turn drive us to consider and re-consider our dillying and dallying in this same world.

In Paul’s gospel, the era is always limited, that is, the time is always short because the coming of Christ must always occupy the forefront of our thinking. Paul believed he would be snatched away in his lifetime: “*we*, the living, who are surviving to the presence of the Lord”—1 Thessalonians 4:15. Later, when he wrote Timothy from prison, he said, “the period of my dissolution is imminent” (2 Timothy 4:6). There is nothing here about the snatching away now being

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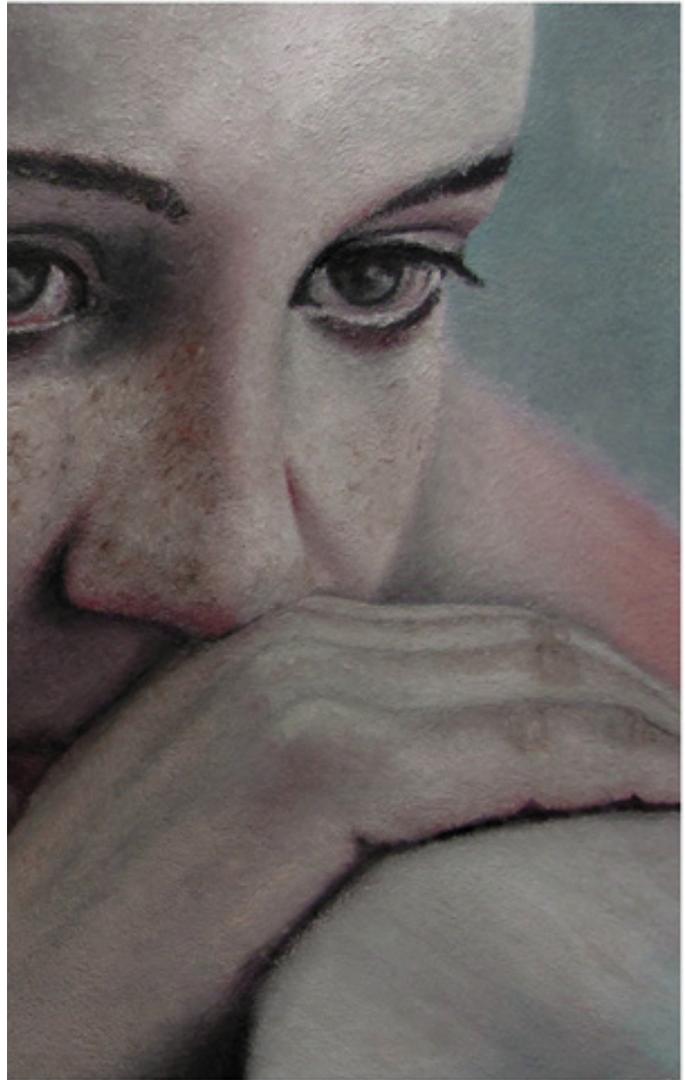


centuries or even decades away, as some have supposed. None of Paul's words imply this. I believe Paul still expected the snatching away in that generation. Even with the phrase "in the last days perilous periods will be present" in 2 Timothy 3:1, Paul equips Timothy, personally, to deal with it, writing, "Now you fully follow me in my teaching" (verse 10) and "Now you be remaining in what you learned and verified" (verse 14). In 3:6, he tells Timothy to shun the wicked people of "the last days" (3:6). This would be difficult for Timothy to do without occupying the last days. Thus, Timothy would live to see the last days. We are still in the last days. Every day since then has been a last day. The peril increases.

### OLD AND DOOMED

Walk to your window and gaze at your world. Everything is old. Even new things are decrepit. Everything you see is doomed to expire and is even now en route to oblivion. To Paul, the expiration had already occurred, or so he treated it. After being snatched away into Paradise, Paul returned to a gray-haired, debilitated planet. How could he have ever considered it otherwise? (The disciples had pointed out the temple to Christ, Who shrugged and prophesied its doom. To Him, it was already as good as gone. This steadied His heartbeat and eliminated all possibility of exclamation marks. Jesus saw past the deceptive present; His disciples could not.) Paul's trip to the future removed much of his physical pain—not the pain itself but its relative importance. Much of Paul's emotional pain remained on board to torment and humble him. I believe that Paul saw Christ completed. From then on he would no longer consider anyone according to the flesh, not even himself. The world was decrepit, and so was he. He held these truths in reserve until the writing of 2 Corinthians, chapter five. Here, he formally unveiled the new creation. Now all things were new except existing things. "The fashion of this world is passing by," Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Lucky Corinthians. Lucky us to eavesdrop onto the letter and assume its truths.

What you see out your window is the fashion of this world. It appears to be in place, but no. We know that while matter seems to be solid and stationary, it is anything but. Rather, its molecular structure hums with great but invisible movement. Electrons whiz around protons and neutrons in a sub-cosmic blur. So much space exists between the electrons and the inner atomic structure that, were we able to perceive it and possess the



wisdom to pierce it, could thrust a hand through anything "solid." Jesus did just this in His resurrected body, walking through an apparently solid door. He manipulated the molecular structure, or at least worked with it.

Fail to be over-awed by the visible. This is positive failure. Even as a chair deep down moves, thus also everything in your vision moves along a line of extinction. Even the chiefs of this eon are being discarded (1 Corinthians 2:6). Say good-bye to the movie stars, to the recording artists, and to the political leaders of this present cosmos. They appear established, but no; it is an optical illusion. As a preview into the coming dissolution, great personages regularly fall before our gaze. This is the general course of things. Even if our eyes deceive us and time tarries, the chiefs fall, for God is discarding them. They are on the descendency. In the meantime, you and I travel upward by the day, anticipating the ultimate Upward Trip. Everything outside your window descends. Remember when John said, "I must

decrease, He must increase” (John 3:30). The earth is decreasing now, along with its chiefs. For us, reverse the poles. They must decrease and we must increase. Instead of waiting for this along linear time, Paul invites us to consider it to have come. Thus, we anticipate it by realizing it, and subsequently looking at everything and everyone—including ourselves—through a new mental prism, grasping just how doomed everything *here* is, and how everything *there* is coming to get us and start the party.

“So that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: the primitive passed by, Lo! there has come new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Accompanying and assisting this manner of thinking is the figure of speech “prolepsis,” discussed in a previous edition.

## WITHOUT WORRY

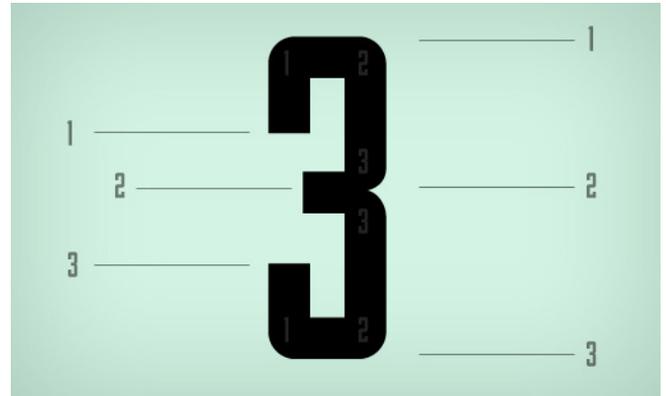
Paul wants the believers to be without worry (1 Corinthians 7:32), or as the *English Standard Version* puts it, “free from anxieties.” In this section, Paul lists things that could cause anxiety. One of them is marriage. Nearly the whole of chapter seven concerns marriage. As a simple question concerning resurrection launched Paul into the truth of the salvation of all in chapter fifteen of this letter, thus also do questions concerning marriage launch him into the truths of the limited era. My thanks to marriage and its myriad concerns for this. Paul is sufficiently irritated to stomp out the fires and launch us all into greener, wider fields. I love it when Paul gets irritated. He calls his scribe Tertius and new truths fly from his mouth.

Paul writes that married ones become more concerned about each other than the things of Christ (32-34). One would assume the only alternative to be the single life. Surprisingly, that’s only one alternative. There is another way. This other way is the revelation of the passage. It mirrors the revelation of the new creation of 2 Corinthians, chapter five. It is clear that Paul recommends singlehood (8, 27). He wishes that everyone were like himself, that is, unattached (7). Just when you think there is no other alternative to marriage other than singlehood (okay, perhaps death), Paul stuns the room by presenting a third option.

Poor Paul. He does not relish the world of husbands and wives caring more for one another than for Christ. He wishes it weren’t so, but it is. It must be. Though he feels so detached from it, it is the world in which he lives. If it were up to him, the sexes would already be abolished. But wait. What if the sexes, in a sense, already

*are* abolished? Is not this the secret of the new creation? God had given Paul a bright truth so new that no brain had ever entertained it, let alone learned its secrets from the glorified Christ. There was a way out of every distress *now*, even while remaining, physically, a part of the distresses. There was a way out of both marital woes *and* joys (both distractions, in Paul’s mind) without the heartbreak of divorce or the discarding of divine love.

People take hallucinogenic drugs to achieve the state that our dear apostle is about to describe. The motivation behind drug-taking is to escape the present world for a better one. If only this “better world” were better defined by the drug-takers. Those who “go there” return with vague descriptions of “something else” out



there besides the “else” of the body and society’s obvious demise. To the hippies, the new, drug-inspired universe was only a vague something larger than here, “like, wow,” but sometimes we just couldn’t “know what they [meant], man.” No modern thinker has, in my opinion, improved upon “like, wow,” including that celebrated moron Stephen Hawking and his application of math rather than meth to arrive at absurdities.

We know what the “something else” is: it is Christ. All humans will one day come to this realization. In the meantime, may they be spared the Stephen Hawkings of the world and take aspirin instead. By the grace of God, we have come to the “something else.” This realization is not just Christ, but Christ as Head of the universe, joined to His body—immortalized human beings—some taken alive from the dying earth, many more snatched from graves. Then, the far greater “something else” becomes the revealing of the love of God to a blighted, ignorant universe. Every being ever created—celestial, terrestrial and subterranean—must be saved. We know the promise of God through the cross: to deliver all of humanity as well as every created thing

into the glorious liberty now enjoyed only by us (Colossians 1:16-20; Romans 8:20-25).

In the meantime—what? How do we live? We still occupy the old creation as to our bodies, and this is the problem. This is the problem of the Corinthians to whom Paul wrote such truth. A perfect bunch for the revelation, those idiots on the isthmus. Their problems were many; wagonloads of worries, familial ties, epic responsibilities, sparkling stupidities—and worse, their fortunes dug deep into old world firmament. How could such scalawags possibly live new creation truth? I say to Paul: It appears as though your friends are stuck, sir. They own stuff, they're married, children run amok; concerning money, they owe banks, rich relatives and the tax man. How to help them, Paul? Should they quit their jobs, sell their furniture and appliances, ditch their spouses? Should they climb mountains and sit under trees until pure mental raptures usher them to the presence of Christ?

Hey, that last thought was pretty good. I'm glad I said it. "Pure mental rapture" approaches the practical truth of how those of us still stuck bodily in this era might implement the new creation. Bodily escape is not always possible, but this is. The body cannot go far, but the mind can go everywhere. No one need quit anything, then. *God will quit things for us.* We can *live* quit. Get it? We can now loosen our grip on *everything*, anticipating the day when everything gets permanently loosed from us, for us. In other words, we can give God and Christ a head start. They want us to.

### WHAT STILL MATTERS

"Now this I am averring, brethren, the era is limited, that, furthermore, those also having wives may be as not having them ..."

This is the first and most shocking entry in a hit list of hits. Everything after this follows logically and is easily grasped. Once one grasps the hard thing—how you can be married but in some way not really married at the same time—the rest falls like a fat cat into the lap.

Does Paul contradict himself? May it not be coming to that. In Ephesians chapter five he tells husband to love wives. He never rescinds it. I have written about it extensively. The love forwarded by Paul is not Hallmark sentiments of the soul, but a man protecting, feeding, and clothing his wife—nourishing her flesh and heart rather than destroying them. Woman-abuse is as old as man. A man is to love his wife as he

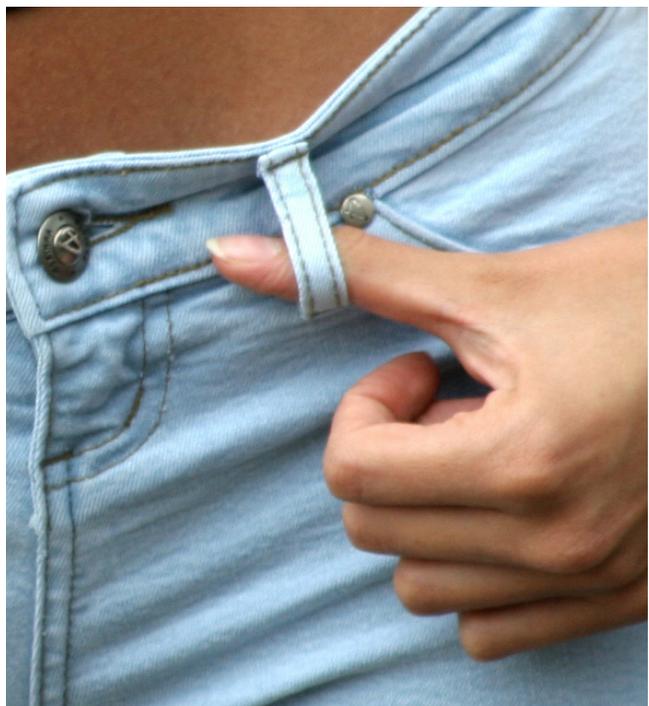
cherishes his own body; nothing has changed here.

In the context of 1 Corinthians 7:29-32, does Paul infer that marriage doesn't matter? Does he recommend that we should relegate weeping and rejoicing to an ash heap of emotional history? Should we destroy all emotion, along with every earthly purchase? No. Paul speaks of these things only in the context of the era being limited, that is, that our time on this planet is short and in light of this truth we ought to loosen our grip upon everything; *everything*. Even relationships. Christ alone should know the squeeze of our death-grip.

### PAUL HAS "HAD IT"

In First Corinthians, Paul is forced to deal with many troubling situations. It is as though the believers of Corinth have gone mad. They contradict themselves. They behave as worldly people. Some are denying the resurrection. There is backfighting, frontfighting, infighting, even sidefighting. They spend entire days thinking about marriage. Some believers take other believers to court before worldly magistrates. They are worried and in a tumult about many things. They barely have any fingernails left for chewing.

In chapter seven, Paul broaches the topic of marriage and its graphic "in your face" and "in your pants" insinuations. This is not Paul's forte. It is as though, in verse 29, Paul has finally reached the breaking point



and cannot possibly sustain another problem or another insistence upon the irresistibility of females. Though Paul is perhaps not so overt, he feels that the Corinthians waste valuable time with that which is passing and near disappearance. Paul will now attack all problems using his patented “tough love” procedure (call now, operators are standing by) combined with a new way of living.

Call it a cry protest, this section. Call it Paul banging a sandal on the podium to bring all proceedings to a halt “as we break now for this important word from our sponsor.” He will now launch upon something *he* wants to talk about. Why should these soulish believers keep derailing *him*, when what he wants to do is derail *them* and shock their sandals off? He must relate to them another way of living besides that which keeps them glued to earth. If he introduces them to it now, then maybe, just maybe, they will start living it and remember it next time Paul either visits or writes, and then maybe they can all talk about Jesus Christ for a change.

911

Paul rightly sees the Corinthian case as an emergency. Paul can sniff spiritual emergency from a hundred cubits, an intuition lacking in the Corinthian assembly. Spiritual forces of wickedness then, as now, gunned to distract and even kill the saints, if possible. Then as now, dark forces scoured the air to disturb those breathing it. These forces worked behind the scenes and in the scenes to corrupt Corinthian saints from the pure and single devotion to Christ, to which Paul himself would officially devote them in his second letter (2 Corinthians 11:2).

Paul alone could smell the airborne forces conspiring to kill them all or to at least marginalize Christ. Someday, these very forces would kill Paul, succeeded through Jewish antagonists to whisk him to Rome where people of Italian descent would chop his head off. This was big stuff to think about—bigger than who to marry, how much sex to have, and whether or not to sue someone for a barking dog. Such was the immensity of Paul’s world and the height, breadth and depth of his perception.

Paul could not care less where things were in his cabinet at home, or whether he even still had a cabinet. The cabinet could go to hades. He could not care less in which corner of which room in which country on which planet he slept. Corinthian cares lay a world from his, yet he would submerge himself in their waters to rescue them. He would assume their burdens in the inter-

est of extricating them out from under them. He did love them. Love motivated every Pauline deed, even that thing called “tough love,” exhibited throughout this letter. Paul was the spiritual paramedic of his day. Ever seen a paramedic? Hopefully not close up. Paramedics are not too careful, or even kind. They are fast, focused, brilliant. At the scene, they will generally eschew reading you poetry or inquiring as to the quality of your day. Obviously, your day is sucking. They will,

**“Paul alone could smell  
the airborne forces  
conspiring to kill them all  
or to at least marginalize  
Christ.”**

however, save your life. Here were these fine yet soulish Corinthian saints (well, perhaps not fine) going down to hades in boxcars of their own myopic vision; the fast track to hell, as it were: oblivion via distraction. So limited, their vision. Ah, but the era was even more limited. Paul will make them see that.

They must “get their house in order,” and for this, Paul would have pointed to their heads. An orderly “house” begins with the thinking and the realization that the fashion of the world goes its way. The Corinthians must banish the nit and grit blinding them to the Gibraltar-like truths of Paul. Paul saw both the hordes of malevolent beings and the stockpile of spiritual wealth awaiting his friends at the dais of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10)—if ever they should elude the craftiness of Satan and race for the calling above in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14). Earthly bonds could be loosened without being severed. That was the trick. He *wanted* to tell them to break their own “banks” of concern—financial, relational, legal, professional—in totality to purchase every possibility of heralding Christ. But He could not go that far. They would accuse Paul of asceticism. He would accuse himself of it.

#### THE TROUBLED STATE

Marriage! Paul could wish that none of them were married, but this wasn’t the world’s reality and still isn’t. Not yet. Paul warned them of the many troubles

of that state (1 Corinthians 7:28), but who can hear it in the clamor of sexual heat? With this, the majority seemed consumed. Paul longed for the abolition of such things and it would happen soon enough, for in Christ there was neither male nor female—and Christ was nigh. How he longed for *that* era. That era being then deferred, Paul scanned a debris-field, “the detritus of human desire,” he wanted to call it. He couldn’t very well articulate that. Perhaps he should not even have thought it. What had to be, had to be. Where some Corinthians would have banished marriage altogether ahead of Christ, others made marriage the “be all, end all” of a man’s existence, as though marriage were a calling unto itself until all life served the marriage, rather than the marriage serving all life. Some, he knew, were so unbalanced as to promote marriage as a career, as though nothing else mattered *other than* pleasing one’s spouse. Surely this was as much a perversion as that which would promote unilateral divorce in the interest of “serving God.” Far from being either a sacrament or vocation, marriage was, and is, another worldly desire. That’s where Paul lumps it here.

## NOW US

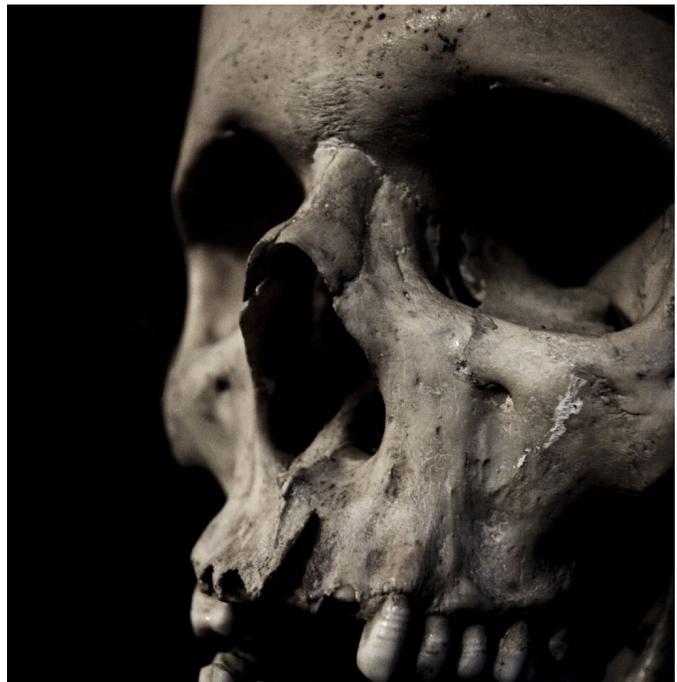
Have we any fewer problems than the Corinthian ecclesia? Have we any fewer moral, marital, or avocational clashes? If we were to rate our concerns, where would they fall? Let us rate them *before* we learn of the new creation, and then after. Let’s use a scale of—to be original here—1 to 10. Were we to literally behold the third heaven, as did Paul, many things now scoring high on such a scale would precipitously drop. “8’s” would become “1’s” or even “0’s.” Things rated “10” would fall to “2,” if that. What *are* the consequential things here? Are they not those things Paul lists? What emotional or physical entity escapes Paul’s purview, apart perhaps from parenthood? We have marriage, sorrow, joy, buying, selling, and gazing out one’s window at one’s kingdom. Again, it was not that any of these were wrong or evil of themselves, but that they would readily sideswipe any man’s ship as that nasty iceberg sideswiping the Titanic.

T. Austin-Sparks writes:

Even marriage, the sorrows and joys of life, possessions, fashions, earthly interests—it is not that they are wrong but they provide a subtle snare to distract us from the real business of our Christian living. Nothing, from the inner circle of our domes-

tic relationship to the widest circle of world events, must ever be allowed to interfere with our testimony for Christ. Those blessed with wives must not allow them so to fill their lives that the happy domestic circle becomes a preoccupation which absorbs all their time. There are some that weep, but they must not let their sorrow paralyze them with regard to the Lord’s interests. There are those who can rightly rejoice, but they must watch that their delight does not subvert them, so that they give it priority and find themselves turned aside from their main concern which should have been for the glory of Christ. There is much in the world which can rightly interest. The Corinthians had already been told that “All things are yours; whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world...” (1 Corinthians 3:22). But Paul also told them that they must not abuse this gift, not use it to the full, not let it be their prime concern. Brethren, the time is short, and we must not allow anything in any department of our lives to encroach upon the interests of the Lord.

What vision is Paul’s! More than all, he realizes that the necessary course of life follows—not leads—the new creation truth. Paul knows the future as no one else. Why shouldn’t he—he went there. Oh, but then there is the past. Who among the Corinthians suffered such a past as his? Whose closet had more skeletons? How easy for Paul’s past to creep from yesterday’s faraway calendar to throttle him with a supposedly long-forgotten guilt. Surely Paul felt it. But when it came, he killed it.



He must kill the past as easily as he killed people then. Paul used far too much of the world then. Certainly, however, the old man occasionally entertained the devil. He slapped himself to reality with one deep breath of the limited era. He could not waste such time. There was too much to say, too much truth to broadcast, too many enemies. Not strange, then, for Paul to warn these saints of doomed things, of things passing into the night like specters. Why be choked by a corpse? Yet here it came; Paul's past *would* revisit him with fangs, I believe. As a Pharisee, he had such aspirations. One might be tempted to consider Corinthian concerns more noble than those occupying the Pharisee Saul. No. Distractions are distractions. The result is the same: a compromised attention to Christ, a tightening rather than a loosening of the earthly grip. To a great extent, Paul's hands had been loosed from both joys and evils, present and past. In like manner he wished to loosen the Corinthian grip upon all things temporary. What were these temporary things if not everything apparent to the eye? Yes, Paul was extreme. But so was the crucifixion of Christ. So was the new creation. So was the next cosmos.

We, too, live in a state of emergency. If only our olfactory senses were as sharpened as Paul's. Evil spiritual forces seek to destroy us, our testimonies, our aspirations for Christ. Do not look for dark beings in black cloaks. Satan disguises himself as light within churches, in offices, at the mall, even in some marriages, and in every practically useless field of knowledge (2 Corinthians 12:13-15; read all of Stephen Hawking's theories). Why doesn't the world appear fading to us? Perhaps we cannot yet see it with anointed eyes. As He did with Elijah's servant Elisha, God must grant us a vision not only of the enemies opposing us, but the spiritual helps available to us. I pray also that we see the limited era. What saves the world? Knowledge. From whence or from whom does it come? From Christ. From Paul. From those heralding Paul. The world perishes for the lack of the knowledge of God (Hosea 4:6). How can more be reached? This is Paul's thinking.

### PIERCING THE DARKNESS

"The god of this eon blinds the apprehensions of the unbelieving" Paul later wrote to these same people (2 Corinthians 4:4). We are all living in this darkness. Now, we reach for the light. Whoever would know Paul would bring with them a constant expectation of Christ's return. Those who would rob us of this are unwitting criminals, perhaps witting ones. They may say



"You have no evidence that it is close," to which I reply, "You have no evidence that it is far." I have a better idea than these that it is close, for Paul presents the truth of the snatching away of the body of Christ as an ever-present consolation to those embracing it (1 Thessalonians 4:18). How can this truth function to its full capacity if ever it should be known that centuries or even decades separate us from such a glad, delivering event? Such is God's genius in withholding from us a date and time. It must always be "now." This is God's idea, not mine. It is Paul's. It is that with which he engages us. In light of this, what *shouldn't* fall into relative insignificance?

Albert Barnes writes:

The idea of the apostle here is that the plans of life should all be formed in view of this truth, that time is short. No plan should be adopted which does not contemplate this; no engagement of life made when it will not be appropriate to think of it; no connection entered into when the thought "time is short," would be an unwelcome intruder.

Concerning marriage, and husbands "having wives as though not having them," the same Albert Barnes writes:

This does not mean that [husbands] are to treat [their wives] with unkindness or neglect, or fail in the duties of love and fidelity. It is to be taken in a general sense, that they were to live above the world; that they were not to be unduly attached to

them that they were to be ready to part with them; and that they should not suffer attachment to them to interfere with any duty which they owed to God.

Someone objects: “But Albert, Paul says that he who marries is solicitous about the things of the world, how he should be pleasing his wife, and is parted. And the same with the wives” (1 Corinthians 7:32-34).

If I may speak for Mr. Barnes, since deceased: I know Paul says this, but see how he prefaces this section in verse 32: “I want you to be without worry: The unmarried one is solicitous ...” and so forth. Paul readies himself to set forth a prime, pertinent example of how to worry aplenty in this life: marry. Yet still he wants the Corinthians to be without it. How to make that



“Paul sets forth a prime, pertinent example of how to worry aplenty in this life: marry.”

happen? Simply by not worrying. The Corinthians can be married and free from worry simultaneously. That is, they can be married and “as though not married” synchronically. Yes, it sounds like the trick of a magician. It is, if we consider the mind to be a doer of magic.

The *Concordant Version* upsets me here. It is not very concordant. The word translated “solicitous” here is *merimnao*, which the CV translates “worry” in thirteen other places. Six times it renders it, “solicitous.” Why “solicitous” *ever*? The compiler of the version suggests the need to translate *merimnao* differently when referring to others. In other words, I worry about myself, but am solicitous over you. I don’t like it.

What if I *do* worry over you? Perhaps I shouldn’t. Perhaps translators ought to stick to translating rather than interpreting. Perhaps they should consistently translate the Greek word *merimnao* as “worry” and stand out of the way to see what happens. Let the chips fall. Within one verse, the so-called *Concordant Version* translates the same word “solicitous” and “worry.” Here is how the verse should read:

“Now I want you to be without worry: The unmarried one is worried about the things of the Lord ... yet he who marries is worried about the things of the world.”

Paul won’t mind that married couples worry over the Lord, for here “worry” becomes a figure of speech known as Retention, where the term most recently applied to the world and its cares is retained in the new context, i.e. “worried about Christ.” Paul wants no one literally worrying about Christ or about the world. He would rather we pay closer attention to Christ and worry about nothing (Philippians 4:6). The second biggest point of this chapter is: “I want you to be without worry.” Anyone can do it, even married people.

Matthew Henry writes:

As to relations; [the Corinthians] must not set their hearts on the comforts of the state [of matrimony]. As to afflictions; they must not indulge the sorrow of the world: even in sorrow the heart may be joyful. As to worldly enjoyments; here is not their rest. As to worldly employment; those that prosper in trade, and increase in wealth, should hold their possessions as though they held them not. As to all worldly concerns; they must keep the world out of their hearts, that they may not abuse it when they have it in their hands. All worldly things are show; nothing solid. All will be quickly gone. Wise concern about worldly interests is a duty; but to be full of care, to have anxious and perplexing care, is a sin. By this maxim the apostle solves the case whether it were advisable to marry. That condition of life is best for every man, which is best for his soul, and keeps him most clear of the cares and snares of the world. Let us reflect on the advantages and snares of our own condition in life; that we may improve the one, and escape as far as possible all injury from the other. And whatever cares press upon the mind, let time still be kept for the things of the Lord.

A.E. Knoch writes in his *Concordant Commentary on the New Testament*:

The transient, fleeting character of all of this world's relationships and experiences should warn us not to let them take an undue hold upon our hearts. We cannot but use the world to a limited extent. Its joys and sorrows affect us, whether we will or no. If it were a permanent system instead of a temporary stage in the process of God's plan, our attitude would be different. In the semi-permanent millennial system, the saints will not be restrained from the full use of the world of that day. But the present system is distinctly hostile to God and occupation with it is calculated to interfere with our fellowship with God and the enjoyment of His permanent purpose.

### “CUT SLACK”

“Cut slack” is my pat answer to all of this. Here it is without the quotation marks: cut slack. Stop the strangehold upon one another and upon things. Use the world—use all of it—but don't use it up. Did Paul not just tell these same people, “all is yours” (1 Corinthians 3:21)? All is given us for our use, but we are not to exhaust life's resources as a starving man exhausts food. Buy things, then live as though you've bought and own nothing, else these things may soon own you. Nothing is truly owned. Everything is on loan to us from God: jobs, cars, bank accounts, retirement funds, children, spouses. None of it truly belongs to us. Why live as though it does? To do so avails us only of frustration, disappointment and heartbreak.

As for lamenting, we snivel into Kleenexes as the rest, but without exhausting the store's supply of tissue. Abraham poised a dagger over his dear son's heart, knowing that the God Who raises the dead and calls what is not as though it were could resurrect the boy even before he withdrew the instrument. That's faith. That's belief in the limited era. Death is the chief characteristic of the era. Thus, death is limited. That is good news. Again: death is limited.

We miss our loved ones, yes, but only for a short time; the era is limited. Death is limited. All graves shall be emptied.

As for rejoicing, we throw confetti and toast to more prosperity with the rest, with the difference being our knowledge of the passing nature of these things. We wave good-bye to these things, even while imbibing of them, and vice-versa. We retain nothing from this planet but memories and the experiences tailor-made by God to humble and educate us. God trains us to inhabit and educate a celestial world we will soon occupy.

I own nothing, not my sorrow, not my joy, not stuff, not other people. I use everything, but never abuse it. My tears come, but they dry. My laughter comes, but soon enough turns to sorrow. What do I care?



JOHN: I watched a girl walking down Madison Avenue the other day. Her hair was done in a lovely flip, like one of those 1960's Marlo Thomas flips from “That Girl.” I couldn't take my eyes off it. I watched that wonderful flip do its flip thing as the girl walked. Martin, it was mesmerizing. It was so feminine. It made my day. I thanked God for it.

ZENDER: Did you then stalk the woman, seduce her, rape her, or otherwise take insensitive and terrible advantage of her and her mesmerizing flip?

JOHN: Of course not!

ZENDER: Very good, then. You used the world, but did not use it up. In fact, you used this woman, but did not use her up.

JOHN: Did I really use that woman? I feel terrible.

ZENDER: Why? She used you as well. God has given us all things for our use—1 Corinthians 3:22. Everyone uses one another. It's what we're here for. The important thing is that you did not use her up—oh, look who's here. Hello Sally.

SALLY: I bought a new blouse the other day.

ZENDER: Is it the red one you're wearing?

SALLY: Yes!

ZENDER: I like it.

SALLY: There were about ten other blouses there that I wanted.

ZENDER: Did you buy them?

SALLY: No. But I may go back and buy a couple more.

ZENDER: Fine, fine.

SALLY: But I realized something. I could give up this blouse in a heartbeat. It's not that important to me.

ZENDER: Is that silk?

SALLY: I'll say! \$150. I like how it feels and looks on me. It makes me feel pretty.

ZENDER: But this is not the sum and total of you.

SALLY: Oh, no. I know who I am in Christ. My true beauty is within. I do not pin my hope upon a blouse.

ZENDER: What about a broach?

SALLY: I may pin a broach there, yes.

ZENDER: Congratulations. You are buying but not retaining.

SALLY: I might give it to Goodwill someday, just for fun. I'm not like Imelda Marcos.

ZENDER: Ah, the shoe-hoarding widow of the former Philippine president.

SALLY: I think she would take those shoes to heaven with her if she could.

ZENDER: Here comes Leonard.

LEONARD: Hi, Martin. My brother just died.

ZENDER: Leonard, that's terrible. I'm sorry to hear it.

LEONARD: It's terrible, but I know I'll see him again.

ZENDER: That's a happy expectation.

LEONARD: Still, it's been hard to eat anything.

ZENDER: That's to be expected. You're mourning.

LEONARD: I am kind of finally feeling like a hamburger, though.

ZENDER: Why not? Your brother is asleep and there will be no passage of time for him. Next thing you know, there he will be and you'll be having a hamburger with him.

LEONARD: I think I'll head over to Burger King. See you. Here comes Mary.

ZENDER: Hello Mary.



MARY: I'm sorry to hear about Leonard. It's the opposite with me.

ZENDER: How?

MARY: I just won the lottery.

ZENDER: Really? That's amazing. How much did you win?

MARY: It was the mega jackpot. 36 million dollars after taxes.

ZENDER: Fantastic.

MARY: I noticed you're not very excited. No exclamation points or anything.

ZENDER: You caught me red-handed.

MARY: Don't worry; it's the same with me. I thought I was the only crazy person. Family members are already calling me for money—people I haven't even heard of.

ZENDER: What a hassle.

MARY: Don't get me wrong. I'm gonna take a long-needed vacation and pay off my credit card. But after that—

ZENDER: How the heck do you spend that much money?

MARY: You can't take it with you.

ZENDER: Yes, First Timothy 6:7. Paul says to be content with food and clothing (1 Timothy 6:8).

MARY: I have treasure in Christ than no amount of money on earth can buy. Funny, but I don't see any of my family bugging me for *that*.

ZENDER: Great point.

MARY: Don't look now, but here comes Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice.

BOB: My wife is a pain in the ass.

CAROL: My husband is a louse.

TED: My husband is a dream.

ALICE: My wife is the sexiest woman on earth.

ZENDER: What brings you all here?



CAROL: We have all come to see the truth of 1 Corinthians 7:29:32.

ZENDER: Glad to hear it.

BOB: Martin, I never get enough sex from my wife. Everyone here knows that. But now I realize I won't need sex in the resurrection.

ZENDER: Don't forget that the era is limited.

CAROL: Bob stopped pressuring me. Maybe he's fooling around on the Internet, I don't know.

BOB: Good guess.

CAROL: I don't even care any more. He's a prick, but I still like him.

BOB: Everyone knows that Carol is my favorite pain in the ass.

CAROL: (laughing) I never could have laughed at that before. Christ.

BOB: You're right; it *is* Christ. I never could have tolerated this before Christ.

TED: I don't want to brag, but—

CAROL: Yes, we know, Ted. Alice has told us. Your sex life is "the best."

ALICE: Ted is a lover's lover.

BOB: Not that again.

ALICE: But this perishes, as well as that.

TED: We can take advantage of it while we can. In the resurrection, there is neither male nor female.

BOB: Thank God.

TED: In light of this truth, we hold loosely to everything now.

CAROL: You guys hold loosely to what you have, just as we do to what we *don't* have.

ALICE: The fashion of this world is passing by.

BOB: Speaking of fashion, I love those shoes you're wearing, Alice.

ALICE: Thanks, Bob.

CAROL: That would have made me crazy jealous before. But I agree. Those are damn fine shoes.

ALICE: I think that shoes are going to pass away with the era. What do you guys think?

TED: Don't tell Imelda Marcos.

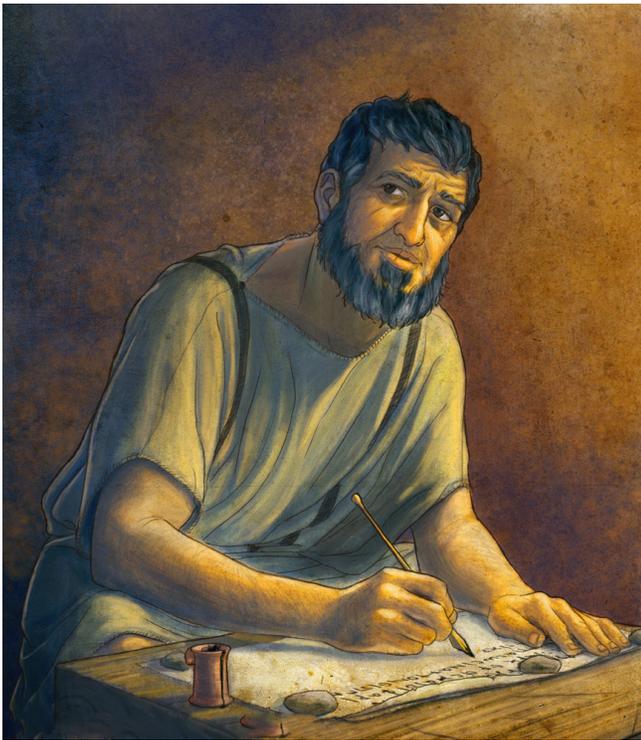
## THE WORLD

Now may it not be mine to be boasting, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

—Galatians 6:14

A realization of the cross of Christ sent the old Paul to the tomb. Paul entered the new creation the day he appreciated Christ's resurrection from the dead. The practical and wonderful results are as follows: The world was crucified to Paul, and Paul to the world.

Like us, Paul gazed out his window to consider his world. It was the same as ours in most respects. What was once a stage on which Paul could perform was now a charnel house, a home to the dead burying their own dead. How could he love the system (Greek, *kosmos*) that had killed his Savior? The crucifixion of Jesus Christ—the condemnation of the Son of God—was the best the world could offer. “The world through wisdom knew not God” (1 Corinthians 1:21). Paul could easily turn away from such “wisdom.”



“Where once the system had accounted him an upcoming, promising young star, Paul had now tied his fortunes to a crucified king Who said, ‘Love your enemies.’”

The world returned the favor. It had no use for a man who saw in the cross the wisdom of God. “Yet we are heralding Christ crucified, to Jews, indeed, a snare, yet to the nations stupidity” (1 Corinthians 1:23). They hated Paul in Jerusalem. They booed him in Athens. They whipped him in Philippi. They stoned him in Lystra. In Rome, they beheaded him. This was the world's opinion of Paul. Where once the system had accounted him an upcoming, promising young star, he had now tied his fortunes to a crucified king Who said, “Love your enemies.” The world marched ahead in its proud parade, leaving Paul in its wake like a trampled bird. Yet the least would become the greatest. The bird would not only fly again, but reach supernal heights far above all.

The childlike simplicity of Christ was now his. The world had abandoned him; the feeling was mutual. Now Paul was his own man. There was no one left to impress, save Christ. In days past, one harsh look from a “chief” of the eon would wither him. He lived then for the good opinion of others. When others complied, life was fine. When they didn't, shadows fell. But now, deliverance. The world had ditched him, and he them. Good riddance. He could say anything now, be anything, do anything. One who lives by the system dies by the system. To be discarded by the system is to finally be free of it.

Being discarded by this system may be the most precious gift handed one in this life.

#### OUTWARD/INWARD

“Wherefore we are not despondent, but even if our outward man is decaying, nevertheless that within us is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Speak for yourself, Paul. I do get despondent. I'm sorry to suddenly be turning on you like this, especially in light of the previous section. At the same time, I do see your point that despondency can only descend when I focus on that which is decaying rather than the renewed thing. If I may say so, I consider the outward/inward dichotomy somewhat cruel. At what point do the opposing processes of decay and renewal cross paths? Is there a median when the outward man meets the inner, wishes him luck, then descends alone and friendless to the grave? I hope so.

The outward man begins its decay at birth. This is not generally noticed until midlife, thus the treacherous term, “over the hill,” describing the downward side of life culminating in a horizontal hearse ride. On the grave side of the hill, the outward man literally decays.



The decay spoken of here, however, is not only physical but emotional. Life disappoints. The once juicy oyster withers and rots. So much for possibilities. This was outward. Our attentions and dreams went outward once. Everyone wants to put up a fair face in the flesh (Galatians 6:12). The world loves beauty and strength, and so do we unless we can stop ourselves. Even the men and women of Scripture—body of Christ members—get tricked here. Certainly Israel fell beneath the spell of the outward man. Samuel shopped among the pick of Jesse’s litter (the tallest sons, the darkest ones, the most handsome) for Israel’s future king. God’s man, however, was still in the field, a boy then, the smallest, frailest, and perhaps most uncomely of Jesse’s lot. The attraction of “the outward man” made Israel choose Saul for king, “a choice and handsome man, taller than any of the people” (1 Samuel 9:2)—the Burt Reynolds of the Benjamites.

All of this is decaying. Any choice based on such things also decays. When offered a choice between the fertile valleys of the plain or the wastes of Sinai, Lot turned from Abram and chose the plain (“Boss, de plain! De plain!”)—to his near destruction. Abram thrived in the desert.

We ultimately thrive in deserts, not plains. We must re-define “thrive.” That our outward man decays is another way for Paul to say, “the fashion of this world is passing by.” Every Wal-Mart magazine cover forwards the world’s fashion: beautiful women, toned men, impeccable homes, perfect desserts, doomed celebrities. It all passes away. See it closely with spiritual eyes and in the molecular structure you will perceive the deathward trend.

The spirit is another matter. The world cannot see the very small measure of God Himself dwelling with-

in us. A thimbleful of spirit trumps a hopper full of that which delights outward men. A transcendently transcendent eonian burden of glory awaits those handling loosely that which passes away, at the same time grasping with all strength that which endures throughout the eons. This workable miracle occurs “at our not noting what is being observed, but what is not being observed, for what is being observed is temporary, yet what is not being observed is eonian” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

### STRANGELY DIM

I’m not much into hymns, but I do appreciate the lyrics of “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.” The hymn begins:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus  
 Look full in His wonderful face  
 And the things of Earth will grow strangely dim  
 In the light of His glory and grace

I want the things of the earth to grow dim. The things of the earth are mean and cruel. This earth hates God and killed His Christ. I do not like such a world. I hate it. My dissatisfaction with the current cosmos parallels the decay of my outward man. I want it this way. May my dissatisfaction move at the speed of the decay as I note the invisible, at the same time mentally discarding that which is. Such is the road to peace. By the grace of God, may this be my continual place of being, and yours. —MZ

(This concludes the series.)