

Back in ancient times there was a popular philosophical school of thought that derived from the Greeks called *Stoicism*. It was widely known throughout the region around the Mediterranean Sea. And most likely Jesus and the Apostle Paul were familiar with it too. There still is ongoing attention given to Stoicism—but mostly among academics, along with some popular forms of a resurgence of Stoicism. (There is even a website called “Modern Stoicism”.) But these days all that tends to remain of Stoicism is the common use of the word “stoic” to describe a person *who can be calm and almost without any emotion regardless of what is happening*.

But, as I understand it, *the idea of Stoicism is not actually to try to be unfeeling...but, to keep trying to focus on what is believed makes life truly meaningful—living a life of virtue. And so, while the Stoic will necessarily experience both fortune and misfortune in life, it is important to them to not be so distracted by either such as to lose their focus on living a virtuous life*. In that sense, there is a ring of Stoicism in Jesus’ words when he said: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). And the excerpt today from Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church also has a ring of Stoicism in it, as he says: “let even...those who mourn be as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice be as though they were not rejoicing.” Paul did not mean that we should not mourn nor rejoice, but not to lose sight of a larger reality in the midst of mourning and rejoicing.

But this is a challenging way of thinking about life. And it is easy to get it wrong. Take for example, the first thing Paul mentioned in this passage today, which is marriage: “...From now on,” Paul wrote, “let even those who have wives be as though they had none.” Now, is easy to get wrong. It would not be a good idea to go home to your wife, who missed church that day, and start a conversation like this: “Well, dear, I’ve really been thinking about what the Apostle has written to us, and I think we should try...to start being married together in such a way as if we weren’t married.” That would just lead to the question: “So what you are really saying is that you’ve met someone else?” But Paul is not talking about being unfeeling or undedicated in marriage. He is calling those who are married to not lose sight, within a marriage, of yet a larger reality that in fact holds it.

The closest experience to *such a reorientation of your sense of reality* which I can compare this to is an experience which I think every person has had at least once, if not several times, in their lifetime. And it can follow upon a very significant life event that just shakes you to your core: a serious illness or injury, the death of someone close to you, or the birth of your first child or grandchild. Can you remember such a time in your life...when afterwards...the familiar parts of your life seemed different to you? *And it felt like you needed to somehow live within your life differently than before?* But that sensibility can be hard to sustain very long, and it can fade away. So that is what the Apostle Paul is getting at...to intentionally develop a sense of reality, that does not involve turning away from a life of marriage, if that is your time in life...or turning away from mourning or rejoicing...or commerce and dealings with the world...*but to live with it all with some sensibility that there is a larger reality that embraces all of that and which should not be forgotten*.

The Stoics believed that that larger reality was seeking to live *virtuously*. And that is a point at which Christians and persons of a true stoic sensibility can definitely share some common ground. But for Christians, that larger reality that is so compelling to us also includes *the reality of God, which invites us to live by faith, within all the fortunes and misfortunes of our lives*. And also, as the Apostle said, there is a larger reality of God that “the present form of this world is passing away” *which invites us to live by hope in the future where God will yet do something wonderful, on the other side of death, and within our history, and at its end*.

*Whether we are married or single...whether we are mourning or rejoicing...whether we are thick into all kinds of dealings with the world or more withdrawn as life has become slower and quieter—that is not all there is...or will be.*

*We may cherish much that is...as we are also hurt by much that is...but this still is not all there is...or will be.*