

1 Corinthians 7:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?

Analysis

For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband?—the interrogative suggests uncertainty: *ti gar oidas* (τί γὰρ οἴδας, "for what do you know?"). The verb *sōseis* (σώσεις, "you will save") refers to spiritual salvation through the husband's conversion. Paul asks a rhetorical question that can be read two ways:

1. as encouragement—"you might save your spouse!" or
2. as caution—"you cannot be certain."

Context suggests interpretation (2): Paul has just permitted separation when the unbeliever departs (v. 15).

This verse provides rationale—the believer should not feel obligated to endure an abusive or intolerable situation hoping to convert the spouse, since conversion is uncertain. The reciprocal question **or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?** applies the principle equally.

Paul's pastoral wisdom balances hope (the believer's presence does sanctify, v. 14) with realism (conversion cannot be guaranteed). Believers in mixed marriages should not remain solely from evangelistic obligation if the unbeliever chooses to leave. Salvation belongs to God's sovereign work, not the believing spouse's endurance.

Historical Context

Early Christians faced pressure from two directions: pagans might demand divorce from Christian spouses, while some Christians felt obligated to remain in destructive marriages for evangelistic purposes. Paul protects believers from false guilt while acknowledging the possibility of conversion through godly witness (1 Peter 3:1-2).

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How should believers in mixed marriages balance evangelistic hope with the reality that conversion is uncertain?
2. What does it look like to witness faithfully to an unbelieving spouse without manipulation or obligation?
3. How does Paul's teaching protect believers from remaining in destructive situations out of false guilt?

Interlinear Text

τί	γὰρ	οἴδας	γυναῖκα	εἰ	τὸν	ἄνερ	σώσεις
how	For	knowest thou	O wife	whether	G3588	O man	thou shalt save
G5101	G1063	G1492	G1135	G1487		G435	G4982
ἢ	τί	οἴδας	ἄνερ	εἰ	τὴν	γυναῖκα	σώσεις
or	how	knowest thou	O man	whether	G3588	O wife	thou shalt save
G2228	G5101	G1492	G435	G1487		G1135	G4982

Additional Cross-References

Romans 11:14 (Salvation): If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.

1 Corinthians 9:22 (Salvation): To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

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