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**Bonds Place in a Bull Market**

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As the markets sit today, investors find themselves in uncharted waters. For over three decades, bonds have been an integral part to any well diversified investment portfolio, enjoying one of the longest secular bull markets in market history. This run has benefitted immensely from Fed actions and quantitative easing; but now, that accomodative environment is changing. The Federal Reserve looks to unwind their balance sheet and move US interest rates back to a more normalized level. Should investors maintain their position in fixed income with the prospect of rising interest rates?

In December 2015, the Fed began the process of raising the Federal Funds Rate, which has resulted in 4 rate hikes, raising the target from 0.25% to 1.25%. It is anticipated there will be an additional hike in December 2017 and three more for 2018. Most investors fear negative returns from bonds if rates rise, but what is the actual downside if they do? Right now the Bloomberg Barclay’s Aggregate Bond Index (BBAG Index), the most widely used bond benchmark, has a duration of 6.1 years and an average coupon of 3.03%. That means if rates were to rise by 100 basis points (1.00%) you would expect a total return of roughly -3.0% from the index. The logical follow up questions are: “what is the worst case scenario for bonds?” and “how does that compare to the potential downside risk associated with equities?”.



Historically, bonds have allowed investors to preserve capital with significantly less down side risk compared to stocks. The three worst drawdowns for bonds (BBAG Index) since 1980 were drops of -8.99% (6/1980-9/1981), -5.15% (1/994-6/1994), and -4.89% (2/1987-9/1987). To put that into perspective, over the same time period US Equities (S&P 500 Index) have averaged intra-year drops of -14.1% (JPMorgan Market Insights), including drops of -50.95% (10/2007-2/2009), -44.73% (8/2000-9/2002), and -29.58% (8/1987-11/1987).

Complementing an equity portfolio with bonds helps generate alpha while reducing volatility, as illustrated above. Adding just 25% bonds to a portfolio reduces standard deviation by 23% and beta by 24% while only sacrificing 0.7% in total return. Adding 50% bonds reduces standard deviation by 44% and beta by 47% while only sacrificing 1.6% in total return.

US stocks are in the second longest equity bull market, at 103 months and counting. Considering that historical bull markets have averaged a length of only 54 months, seeing a correction of 10% or more would not be out of the question. With that in mind, bonds still belong as a capital preserver and income producer in a well diversified investment portfolio.

Source: JPMorgan: Market Insights, September 2017. PSN.