

## The Greatest Gift – Part 4

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1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Join me in taking your Bibles and turning to 1 Corinthians chapter 13. This is the fourth and final part of a series that I have been bringing to you on the greatest gift, referring to the gift of love.

In 1965 a popular song was released and recorded and since that date it has been sung and performed by over 100 artists. The name of the song is *What the World Needs Now is Love*. Some of you my age will remember that song.

It goes like this.

What the world needs now is love, sweet love.  
It is the only thing there is just too little of.  
What the world needs now is love, sweet love,  
Not just for some, but for everyone.

And then later on after some of the choruses there is this statement.

So listen, Lord, if you want to know,  
What the world needs now is love, sweet love.

And on it goes.

Well, while the sentiment is true, what people do not understand is that the enemy of love is sin. And unless you deal with sin, love will never be able to really manifest itself because people are in bondage to self and bondage to pride; and the self sacrificing, self humiliating, self controlled love of Christ that he would have us emulate will never manifest itself in people who have not embraced Christ as Savior. Genuine, persevering, selfless love only happens when a person is born again.

So the world has to understand that. And obviously, it doesn't. In fact, we read in 1 John 4:7, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."<sup>1</sup> You see, this kind of love is impossible if a person loves the world. It is only possible for those who hate the world and the things of the world and find their greatest delight, their greatest joy in Christ. In fact, we read in 1 John 2:15, "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."<sup>2</sup>

And thus far in our series on this topic of love we have learned that permanent selfless love is a fruit of the indwelling Spirit of God. It is a fruit that grows on the vine of Christian obedience. We read in 1 John two and verse five, "But whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:7.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:15.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 2:5.

In fact, the Word of God tells us that this kind of love is what distinguishes true believers from those who do not belong to God, those who belong to Satan. 1 John 3:10, “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”<sup>4</sup>

You see, the only kind of love that the world knows is a short lived self centered sentimental kind of love and naturally this is the kind of love that shows up in marriages, in families, in communities, in churches. It is the kind of love that shows itself as long as the object of that love is reciprocating. But as soon as that object ceases to do so, the love is gone.

Well, this was the kind of selfish love that was in the Church at Corinth. This was the problem there. Rather than manifesting the fruit of the Spirit they were at each other’s throats. You will recall that they were seeking the showy gifts, the showy spiritual gifts, trying to out do each other spiritually. They were factious and parochial. They were living under various banners of their favorite teacher. They had formed angry cliques.

In fact, if you examine 1 Corinthians you will find this. They bragged about sexual immorality. They refused to practice Church discipline. They took each other to court and lawsuits. They used sex as weapons in their marriages. There was rampant divorce. They abused their liberty in Christ by causing weaker brothers to stumble. They distorted the understanding of the role of women in the Church and they had turned the Lord’s table into a gluttonous and factious carnival. They had problems.

And sadly they were unable to distinguish counterfeit spiritual gifts, so they were operating in the power of the flesh, not in the Spirit. Satan fully exploited their wickedness by turning their services and the use of these gifts into nothing more than an emotional frenzy like the pagans of that region in that day.

In fact, their character could be summarized by the very opposite of the virtues of love that the apostle described in verses four through seven. If you will notice there, let me reverse them for you; they were, in verse four, impatient, unkind, jealous, braggarts filled with arrogance. In verse five they were rude, lacking in manners. They were self seeking, easily provoked, hot heads that kept a running record of wrongs on those who offended them. In verse six they rejoiced in unrighteousness, but not in the truth of Scripture. Verse seven, instead of trying to cover and conceal the sins of others to protect them from slander and ridicule, they would broadcast them. They chose to believe the worst, never the best about people. They refused to trust God to bring about righteous change in others, but instead chose to give up quickly on those who sinned. Rather than bravely and calmly enduring mistreatment and keep loving come what may, they were quick to retreat into the territory of resentment and revenge.

So the inspired apostle comes along to confront these dear saints in the strongest of terms and called them to repentance.

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<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:10.

As a footnote, as we study the Corinthian epistles we see that there is no mention of elders, no mention of a lead shepherd, so evidently they were without qualified, formal leadership. And that is a recipe for chaos. I would imagine that everybody was trying to ascend to that level. They were all trying to be in charge and when everybody is in charge no one is in charge and so it was chaos. In fact, in chapter 14 he appeals to them to just have some order in their worship. In verse 33 he says, “For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.”<sup>5</sup>

So remember the context here. In chapter 12 Paul confronts the misuse of spiritual gifts, explaining their source and their interrelatedness, how there should be unity even in diversity in one body, the body of Christ. And then if you jump to chapter 14 he explains the proper exercise of the gifts, especially the gift of tongues, that miraculous ability to speak lucidly in a language entirely foreign to the speaker.

But here, sandwiched between chapter 12 and chapter 14 you have chapter 13 where Paul emphasizes the supremacy of the gift of love. I have divided chapter 13, as you know, into four sections. First, the absence of love; secondly, the attributes of love; that covers verses one through seven that we have studied thus far. And now, today, we will finish this up by looking at, thirdly, the assurance of love and the ascendancy of love.

Follow along as I read the text we will examine here this morning beginning in verse eight.

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.<sup>6</sup>

So let's look closely at the assurance of love that the apostle speaks of here in verses eight through 12. First he says, in verse eight, “Love never fails.”<sup>7</sup> That is a fascinating statement. Love never fails?

These three words, dear friends, are really the theme of the rest of the chapter. In fact, everything else between this phrase and the final phrase in verse 13 really explains what he is saying here, that love never fails.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:33.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:8.

Now, what does this mean? In the original language the term “fail” means to drop away or fall away or to be driven out of its course. And literally what he is saying here is, “Love will never cease to exist.” It will never perish. In fact, grammatically in the original language it says, “At no time will love ever cease to exist.” In other words, love is eternal. It is a fascinating thought.

One day in the eternal glory of heaven there will be no more need for any of the spiritual gifts to promote the purposes of God because they will be at that time perfectly fulfilled, no more need for faith, no more need for hope, because faith will become sight, hope will be accomplished; no more need for any of the spiritual gifts, only the infinite gift of love will remain, the love of God.

And think about it. Because we are perfected in glory, fully conformed to the image of Christ who is the supreme example of love, the very essence of love, we, too, will at that time love perfectly forever. 1 John 4:16, “God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”<sup>8</sup> So, indeed, love never fails. It will never be abolished.

But then Paul goes on to explain this by way of contrast which will also help correct their misunderstanding and their misuse of spiritual gifts that he will get into once again even more in the next chapter. In other words, what he is saying here is something like this. “You all are so obsessed with spiritual gifts, spiritual gifts that are temporary and, therefore, secondary. But what I want you to become obsessed with, what I want you to begin to pursue is the gift of love that is eternal, you see, your priorities are all wrong.”

That is the idea. You will recall in chapter 12 verse 31 they were desiring the showy, highly prized gifts, but he says, “But I will show you a still more excellent way.” And that more excellent way is what we see in verse 13 of chapter 13, the greatest gift of love.

So back to verse eight. He says, “Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.”<sup>9</sup> Now as we study Paul’s illustration here inspired by the Spirit of God, we see that there are three distinct spiritual gifts that will each come to an end, unlike the gift of love. Those three gifts are prophecy, tongues—which is languages—and knowledge, three very public, very impressive, highly prized gifts that the Corinthians sought after, gifts that, unfortunately were easily counterfeited and, instead of pursuing love, they were pursuing these.

Let’s look at them closely. First notice “gifts of prophecy.” “If there are gifts of prophecy,”<sup>10</sup> he says. Notice it is in the plural, many prophecies. He is referring here to the vast sum of public proclamation of the purposes of God, for the purpose of edifying the saints, exhorting the saint as well as comforting those of the body of Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:16.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

He speaks of another gift, the gifts of tongues, **GLOSSA** (gloce-sah) in the original language, that miraculous ability to speak lucidly in a language that was entirely foreign to the speaker. Once again, quite an impressive gift, making it, therefore, vulnerable to abuse, vulnerable to counterfeit.

And then the third gift, knowledge, **GNOSIS** (gno'-sis) in the original language, another speaking gift. This is the unique ability that God gives some to systematically grasp the truth of Scripture and apply it to the Christian life.

Again, all three of these were highly prized gifts and they are all going to cease. But what is fascinating—and you will not see this in English, but you will see it in the original language—the Holy Spirit makes it clear that this will not all happen at the same time.

Notice, prophecy and knowledge will both be “done away,” **KATARGEO** (kat-arg-eh'-o) in the original language. It means to abolish. It means to render inactive, to vanish away.

It is interesting. This verb translated to be “done away” is used both here in verse eight and again in verse 10. And in both cases—and I know this is a bit technical, but you need to understand it. It is really not that complicated—in both cases this verb is in what we call the passive voice meaning that something will cause them to be done away. Something will act upon them and cause them to be abolished.

Well, what will that be? Well, the answer is in verse 10. It says, “When the perfect comes.”<sup>11</sup> What is that? Well, I will explain that in a moment.

But the Holy Spirit uses a very different verb with a totally different grammatical voice with respect to tongues. He says in verse eight, “If there are tongues, they will cease,”<sup>12</sup> **PAUO** (pow'-o) in the original language. It means to stop, to come to an end, to cease. In fact, this verb is used 15 times in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament and every time it means the same thing.

But the key here in understanding this is that this is in what we call the reflexive middle voice in Greek grammar. This is not in the passive voice which means something very different. It literally means that tongues will stop by themselves. Their ceasing will be caused by something inside, not something bringing pressure from the outside. In other words, they are going to stop by themselves, like a toy with a battery and the battery just runs out.

Unlike the gifts of prophecy and knowledge that are going to be abolished by something—in other words, they are going to continue until the perfect thing comes to stop them—the gifts of tongues, he is saying, has a limited lifetime and it will come to an end on its own. It will cease to exist on its own.

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:10.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:8.

But notice Paul continues his argument. And, again, his argument here, keep in mind, very simple, “love is permanent; that is what I want you to pursue.” Verse nine he says, “For we know in part.”<sup>13</sup> There he is speaking of the gift of knowledge, “you know,” today we “know partially”, we know some things. We know a lot of things. We don’t know everything.

“For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.”<sup>14</sup> There, again, referring to the gift of prophecy. We speak truthfully about all that we know to speak. But it is not complete. It is not perfect. But then in verse 10 he says, “But when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.”<sup>15</sup> It is interesting. “Done away” here is the same verb, **KATARGEO** (kat-arg-eh’-o). And it is in the passive voice. So the subject again receives the action. So he is saying the perfect is going to act upon the partial. In other words, the gifts of knowledge and of prophecy and cause them to be done away, cause them to be abolished.

Now I want you to notice, the gift of tongues is not mentioned in verses nine and 10. That is for good reason because they are going to stop on their own. They are not going to be stopped by the perfect thing.

Now it is important for me to digress here for a few minutes to explain something that sometimes can be misunderstood. This is very important in understanding the debate about the issue of tongues, the gift of tongues which, again, biblically, is the miraculous ability to be able to speak in a foreign language that a person has not known.

The question is: Are they operative today? Have they ceased on their own by now?

By word of clarification, when I speak of tongues—and I am not going to spend a lot of time on this—but I am not referring to the counterfeit tongues that we often hear about in the Pentecostal movement that began around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nor of the counterfeit types of jabber that you hear about that started with the charismatic movement that began in about 1960. That is just ecstatic gibberish, a counterfeit of the original gift which Paul makes very clear in chapter 14 which is beyond the purview of our examination. So when I am talking about tongues here, I am talking about the biblical definition of tongues, that ability to speak in a foreign language.

Now to fully grasp what the Holy Spirit is saying here through the inspired apostle, I think it is helpful to first of all understand the issue of the gift of tongues stopping on their own. Again, the issue is: Has this already happened? And I am convinced on the basis of Scripture that that miraculous gift has ceased on its own and that it did so sometime around the end of the apostolic era.

Again, this is a necessary digression that I believe will help you understand the permanence of love, which is Paul’s argument, as well as some of the debate that is out there today.

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:10.

Let me clarify the terminology for you a bit. There are two terms used in the New Testament to refer to tongues, the term **GLOSSA** (gloce-sah') which is a Greek word referring to the normal and common word for language. You see it in Acts 2, Acts 10, Acts 19; and **DIALEKTOS** (dee-al'-ek-tos), which is a synonym for **GLOSSA** (gloce-sah') and that refers to the tongue or the language of a particular people as we would see in Acts chapter two verse six, verses eight and so forth.

Now both of these terms denote a real syntactical language composed of parts of speech, things like nouns and verbs, et cetera, with grammatical structure spoken by certain people and unknown and indiscernible to peoples who have never studied that language.

Now, the key here is understanding that the New Testament gift of tongues was a miracle. There are three words in the New Testament used to refer to a miracle. The first one is **DUNAMIS** (doo'-nam-is), it means power. And the focus there is on the strength or the might of God demonstrated in the miracle. A second term is **TERAS**. It is translated "wonder" and the focus there is on the amazement produced in the one who sees the miracle. And the third term is **SEMEION** (say-mi'-on) which is translated "sign" and the focus there is on the vindicating force of the miracle, the purpose of the miracle.

So what was the purpose of miracles according to Scripture? Why did God give them?

Well, if you study the Word of God you will quickly discover three things about the purpose of miracles. Number one, while God continues to perform miracles today—we see that from time to time in various things that will happen—there were only three notable periods of history when he gifted specific men with the ability to perform miracles. We see that in the period of Moses and then later on in the period of Elijah and Elisha and then later on in the period of Jesus and the apostles.

And it is interesting. Each of those periods lasted approximately 70 years or so, the last miracle performed by a human is recorded in Acts 28 verse eight. You will remember that there the apostle Paul is on the island of Malta and he healed a man that had a recurrent fever and dysentery and so forth. That was about 58 AD. But from that time through the completion of the book of Revelation in 96 AD there is not one single miracle of that sort that is recorded.

A second thing about miracles that we must understand is that God is not dependent upon miracles—that is, that extraordinary, immediate, visibly supernatural intervention in the world—he is not dependent upon that in governing history. The ordinary means by which God governs history is through his providence, through secondary causation—theologians would help us understand—secondary causation where he orders certain events to accomplish his purposes. And he does it in such a way that an unbeliever can mistake the outworking of God's purposes as pure coincidence. But those of us who know and love Christ will see those things through the eyes of faith and recognize very quickly that it is the hand of God through providence accomplishing his purposes.

And a third thing about miracles that we must keep in mind is that miracles have always been employed by God in connection with revelatory activity, when he is revealing divine truth, namely his Word. When God is pouring out new revelation to mankind, that is when he used men as the agents of that revelation.

Moreover, it is important for us to remember that men needed to be able to distinguish between genuine divine spokesmen, versus false prophets and false apostles. And the primary positive means by which God demonstrates the validity of a man's claim as being, in fact, from a divine spokesman, is through miracles.

We see this, for example, in Acts 2:22. There Peter says, "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst."<sup>16</sup> Likewise in Hebrews chapter two and verse four, "God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will."<sup>17</sup> Another text, 2 Corinthians 12 and verse 12, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles."<sup>18</sup> And, ultimately we see that one of those miracles included the miracle of tongues.

Dear friends, tongues biblically were never an evidence of a second blessing, that is, some spiritual experience of victory or enlightenment that a believer is supposed to wait for or to plead for. Biblically tongues were never a part of what people call the "baptism of the Spirit." They were never an angelic or spiritual language as some would have us believe. Tongues were never one kind of language, human languages, in Acts but then an entirely distinct kind of angelic language here in 1 Corinthians. Tongues were never a special or a superior prayer language. We never see that. They were never a primary medium of special revelation where suddenly you get into this ecstatic speech and God begins to communicate to you.

Tongues, interestingly enough, were really, as we look at Scripture, not even a means of evangelizing people who do not speak a language in common with the evangelist. The tongues as you look at them biblically were, rather, a means of exalting God. And tongues were never an existential experience to be sought after on their own merit. But tongues were a genuine bonafide miracle involving the immediate and unlearned capacity given by the Holy Spirit to a person to speak lucidly in a language entirely foreign to the speaker. They were a miracle intended to function—and I want you to catch this—as a sign. They pointed to something. Positively, they pointed to the transition between the old to the new covenant and, secondly, more negatively, a sign that pointed to the judicial hardness of national Israel.

Think of the extraordinary way the Lord revealed himself in the book of Acts for a moment. The nation of Israel is being temporarily displaced, set aside as God's national custodians of divine truth and in their place he is raising up the Church, the body of

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<sup>16</sup> Acts 2:22.

<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 2:4.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:12.



Christ as his new witness people. And for millennia, the only way people could ever approach God was through the people and the nation of Israel, more specifically through the Levitical priesthood, through that system administered by them in the old covenant.

But after the transition in Acts we see that man approaches God through a new and living way provided by Christ, namely the new covenant with no reference any more to Israel or to the Levitical system. That is over. And during that transition, before the completion of the New Testament, God used these sign gifts including the gift of tongues to confirm what he was doing, to confirm both the message and the messenger, and to confirm his judgment upon Israel.

In 1 Corinthians 14 verse 21 where Paul deals with this issue he quotes Isaiah 28:11-12 to further clarify that tongues were, in fact, a judicial sign of Israel's judgment for rejecting their Messiah. There he says, "In the Law it is written, 'BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,' says the Lord."<sup>19</sup> And if you go back and study it you will see that God used Isaiah to warn Israel that if you refuse to hear the truth in your own language, in plain language, there is going to come a day when it will be spoken in a language that you will not understand and that will be a sign of judgment upon you. Hence, tongues in the New Testament.

Well, the point with all of this, dear friends, is to say that when the purposes were accomplished, all of these purposes of tongues were accomplished, tongues ceased on their own. They stopped on their own just as the Holy Spirit says they will do in verse eight of chapter 13.

Plus I want to add, as you study Scripture you will see that tongues were never intended to be a primary medium of revelation. They were always inferior to prophecy which was considered to be the superior way if you study 1 Corinthians 14. And certainly it was inferior to the gift of love. But, as you can imagine, tongue were a showy gift. They were highly prized. If you wanted to be spiritual you had to be able to do it. And sadly I fear that we see that even today.

In fact, in Greece in those days there were men called soothsayers. They were held in very high esteem by the people of that culture and they would speak forth various forms of gibberish in a wild, frenzied state and get all carried away. And then they would have someone supposedly interpret all of that "woulda, shoulda, coulda bought a Yamaha" type of stuff that they are saying. And, of course, nobody knew what the guy said and nobody would dare argue with the guy that was interpreting it, so they just assumed that it was of God.

Well, unfortunately, the Corinthian believers tried to fabricate this same type of experience and fabricate this gift so they bring it into the church. And don't we always tend to do that in our culture? Whatever is going on in the culture, we have just got to bring it into the church. And we are always having to square that against Scripture and

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<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:21.

say, “No, no, no, no, no, time out. Some of these things are inappropriate.” So, again, in chapters 12 and 14 Paul is trying to correct all of this chaos.

So like Paul said, “Tongues will cease on their own.” The age of men working confirmatory and revelatory miracles ceased when the New Testament canon was completed. There is nothing else that is to be said, to be added or to be subtracted. We studied that in Revelation chapter 22, remember, verses 18 and 19. After Acts 19:6 it is never again mentioned, nor is it mentioned again after Paul’s letter, not by James, not by Peter, not by John, not by Jude, never mentioned again. Why? Because they ceased on their own. Their purpose was fulfilled.

But not so the gifts of the prophecy and knowledge that will be abolished. Unlike the gift of tongues, these gifts extended on. In fact, they were occurring before and they continue on to this day after the apostles.

Verse 10. “But when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.”<sup>20</sup> All right, so what is the perfect? **TELEION** (tel’-i-on) in the original language. It means that which is perfect or complete. It can also be translated that which is mature or fully grown. But as we look at the language we see that it says, “When the perfect comes,” **ERCOMAI** (er’-khom-ah-ee) which means when it arrives, when it comes into being, when it is established.

Now, in order to interpret this you have got to be careful and, in fact, whenever you interpret the Word of God you have got to be so careful. You have to interpret it not only consistent with what the language and the context is saying, but certainly consistent with what the people of that day would have understood this to mean, especially in light of Paul’s further explanation in verse 12 where he is going to give an example that will help demonstrate the temporary nature of the gifts versus the eternal nature of love. And this is going to help us understand the perfect.

Notice verse 12 for a moment. He says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known.”<sup>21</sup> So what he is saying here is when the perfect comes we are going to see things more clearly, even face to face. What could this be?

Now, the Corinthians would have understood Paul’s illustration very easily because they lived in a trade city and guess what one of the things they made? They made mirrors. But their mirrors were not made out of glass that would give us a perfect reflection like we see today. Instead, theirs were made of molten bronze or copper that they would then shine to a high gloss. But even as archaeological finds reveal to us, those mirrors were far from perfect. They would have waves in them and give a bit of a distorted reflection. Your reflection would be rather vague.

Well, this is Paul’s analogy here with the gifts of prophecy and knowledge. Those gifts

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<sup>20</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:10.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12.

only offer a limited picture of divine truth. Even the most gifted preacher, the most gifted teacher is subject to error, is subject to distortion and vagueness. And, beloved, even the Scriptures, the Word of God, do not provide for us an absolute, perfect, complete picture of all that God has for us. We all know that. Certainly it doesn't give us a face to face vision of God, but the perfect thing will.

So what is it? Well, some say it refers to the Second Coming of Christ. Well, first of all, I can't imagine the Corinthians understanding it in that way, but I also see that in the original language, the perfect, **TELEION** (tel'-i-on), is neuter. It is not masculine. So we look at the Greek grammar. We see that it can't refer to a person.

Plus we know that prophecy and knowledge will exist during the time of the kingdom, after the Second Coming of Christ. So if it stops then, we have got a real problem. What does it say in Joel two and as well as in Acts two? "YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY."<sup>22</sup> All that is going to happen in the millennial kingdom. He talks about how that, "I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT And they shall prophesy."<sup>23</sup>

You see, the Greek tells us that they are going to be done away with. They are going to be abolished. Something is going to happen to them and that is the end of it. It doesn't say they are going to stop and then they are going to start up again. You see, that would defeat Paul's whole argument of the permanence of love versus the temporary nature of the gifts.

Others say, "Well, I think it is referring to... perfect refers to the rapture of the Church." Well, again, the Corinthians would have never understood that. And you have got the same problem. You have got prophecy and knowledge occurring all over the place during the time of the tribulation and during the millennial kingdom. There are preachers and teachers everywhere.

Well, others argue the view that it refers to the Church when it finally matures, that is the completion of the Church. Well, once again, I can't imagine the Corinthians saying, "Ok, yeah, I get that." Moreover, this is basically the same argument as with the rapture. Once the Church is completed it is snatched away, but then you have got prophecy and knowledge once again being manifested during the time of the tribulation in the millennial kingdom. So you have got a real problem if you are going to say that the perfect refers to when the Church finally matures.

Other people say, "Well, it is referring to the completion of Scripture." And, again, I can't imagine the Corinthians having any, even a remote thought that that might be what the apostle is referring to.

And, if so, think about it. If at the time of the completion of Scripture the perfect is done away, then you would think at that point we would have face to face clarity of the things

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<sup>22</sup> Acts 2:17.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 2:18.

of God, but we don't have that today. And also, again, prophecy and knowledge it says are going to be done away with. They are going to be abolished. They are going to be rendered. That is going to be the end of it. At the completion of Scripture are you going to tell me that all the gifts of forth telling the Word of God and grasping the truths of Scripture and applying them to the body of Christ that all of those were done away with and now during the Church age we don't have any of that going on?

Moreover you have got the same problem that during the time of the tribulation and the kingdom, you have got that pesky little issue. Is there going to be prophecy? Is there going to be the gift of knowledge once again? So all of that would defeat, once again, Paul's argument of the permanence of love versus the temporary nature of all of the gifts.

So when will there be no need for prophecy, dear friends? When will there never again be a need for the gift of knowledge that God gives certain people to help them grasp the truths of Scripture and impart them practically to his people? When will we be able to see with absolute perfect clarity the things of God? When will we be able to understand truth completely and perfectly? When will we, according to verse 12, know fully just as we also have been fully known?

Beloved, I believe the answer is in the eternal state of heaven when according to Revelation 21 verse three, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them."<sup>24</sup> And in verse four we read that, "The first things have passed away."<sup>25</sup> You see, I think that is what he is referring to. That is the perfect. No more preaching, no more teaching, only love will endure. That is his whole argument.

So to paraphrase what I believe the apostle is communicating, he was saying something like this. "Stop pursuing all of the temporary gifts. You are just doing that to be show offs. After all, when the purposes of tongues are finished, that gift is just going to peter out on its own. Even the gifts of prophecy and knowledge only give us a partial picture today and they, too, are only temporary. They are going to be abolished forever when the perfect, eternal state permanently renders them inoperative. We won't need them anymore." So he is saying, "Beloved, the only thing that really matters, the only gift that will last is the gift of love. Pursue that." That is his point.

Notice verse 11. "When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things."<sup>26</sup> My, what a powerful illustration of what happens when the perfect comes, when the eternal state arrives or comes into being.

You see, Paul speaks here of his own childish immaturity that he, verse 11, did away with. Interesting, it is the same word as used in verses eight and 10, **KATARGEO** (kat-arg-eh'-o). And it was abolished, put away when he becomes a man. The only difference is

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<sup>24</sup> Revelation 21:3.

<sup>25</sup> Revelation 21:4.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

there it is—for you Greek students—it is in the perfect active rather than the future passive. But it is the same verb. So he is saying that when I was a child I had immature speech. I had a vague understanding and immature reasoning. But all of that was abandoned when I became mature as a man.

And so he is saying, in essence, “Likewise, dear brothers and sisters here in Corinth, likewise as we try to speak and as we try to understand and reason about divine truths through these temporary gifts of prophecy and knowledge, we are much like immature children, in need of something to make it all perfect, in need of something to make it all complete so that we can know fully just as we have also been fully known by the one who knows us perfectly. But this will not happen until the perfections of heaven are established, the eternal state. Only when we enjoy the glories of heaven will the partial be done away.”

Well, regardless of your position on what Paul means as the perfect, I think we can all agree that it is abundantly clear that all of the gifts are temporary and, therefore, inferior to the primary gift of love that is eternal. Beloved, this is the assurance of love.

As I think about it, you remember the old hymn that we have sung so many times:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine,  
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine.

What we have now is just a foretaste of the perfect that will one day come, including the perfection of love.

So Paul here in chapter 13 speaks of the absence of love, the attributes of love, the assurance of love and, finally, the ascendancy of love. And by that I mean the superiority of love, the absolute preeminence of love. Verse 13. “But now abide faith, hope, love, these three.”<sup>27</sup>

To say it a little bit different, he is saying that “because the perfect has not yet arrived, because we are not yet in the perfected glory of the eternal state and in the presence of our holy God, you need to remain steadfast in your faith, continue in your faith, continue in your hope, be determined in your love.” But he closes by saying, “But the greatest of these is love.”<sup>28</sup>

Beloved, this is the ascendancy of love, the superiority of love. Love has the most powerful position of all of the gifts. It is the greatest gift of them all. And for this reason I could say, “This is what the world needs now, the gift of love.” This is what we must show the world.

Well, this must have been a sobering letter to the Corinthian saints as it should be to us and I believe it has been. But in closing may I remind you that the Spirit of God didn’t

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<sup>27</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

stop here with chapter 13 as if, “Well, that is all I need to say about that issue of love. You have got it now.”

No, no, no, no, no, no. You go on through the New Testament and you have example after example after example of what it means to practically love one another, to practically practice this most supreme gift that will be perfected in heaven.”

I want to remind you of those “one anothering” passages that beginning next week we are going to start examining.

Here is what love truly looks like. We are to accept one another, admonish one another, bear one another’s burdens of sin, bear with one another, build up one another, care for one another, comfort one another, confess our sins to one another. Pray for one another, be devoted to one another, encourage one another, be kind, tender hearted and forgive one another, be honest with one another, prefer one another in honor, be hospitable to one another, pay our financial obligations to one another, celebrate the unified diversity of being members of one another, be of the same mind with one another, serve one another, show regard for one another, stimulate and encourage one another to love and good deeds and corporate worship and, finally, submit to one another.

It is a tall order, isn’t it? But by God’s grace, by the power of the indwelling Spirit we can manifest these things. Otherwise he would never ask us to do them. So I trust that you will all continue to examine your heart and ask the Lord to help you as I have had to ask the same, to help you in those areas where you are not really loving, you are just being selfish or you are just being sentimental. And as we continue our study together, by God’s grace we will all be more conformed to the image of Christ who is the supreme example of eternal love.

Let’s pray together.

*Father, we are all humbled by these truths because we see ourselves falling so short. We thank you for your Word that brings to us clarity with respect to the eternal nature of love. Lord, we thank you that the love that we struggle with today will one day be perfected in the perfections of a holy heaven. Lord, we long for that day. But until we are face to face with you, we pray that by the power of your Spirit we would learn what it means to love the lord our God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I pray all of this in Jesus’ name, the lover of our souls. Amen.*

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## The Greatest Gift – Part 4

15

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

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