

“Knowing and Being Known”

1 Corinthians 13:8-12 ¹

We’re heading into the final stretch in our study of “The Love Chapter,” and it might be good to remind ourselves about where we are and where we’ve been. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, Greece, about a number of problems that have surfaced in their fellowship. Chief among these problems is confusion surrounding the proper place of spiritual gifts in the life of the Church, and one of the main sources of both confusion and misbehavior is the obvious lack of love for one another evidenced in the membership.

What we know as “The Love Chapter” is that section of the letter in which Paul does three things: (1) he emphasizes that, no matter how spectacular one’s abilities and gifts might be, those gifts have no value at all without love; (2) he mentions fifteen characteristics of godly love; and (3) he tries to put spiritual gifts and love in the context of God’s eternal purposes. It is to this third concern that we now turn. We’ll look at verses 8-12 today, and verse 13 next week.

Having just listed the characteristics of godly love, Paul writes that ⁸ *Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.* ⁹ *For we know in part and we prophesy in part,* ¹⁰ *but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.*

¹¹ *When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.* ¹² *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known* (1 Corinthians 13:8-12).

Paul continues to emphasize that while spiritual gifts are essential for the health of the Church, they are still of relative unimportance when compared to that which is ultimately important. That is to say, when God creates the New Heaven and the New Earth, there will be no need for teachers and the gift of teaching, because we will know fully even as we are fully known. There will be no need for healers and the gift of healing, because we will live in bodies that are unable to experience illness. There will be no need for hospitality or for those who provide it, because we will always be at home. There will be no need for acts of mercy or other acts of benevolence, because all of our needs will be provided for. And there will be no more need for faith that believes where we cannot see, because we will see God as He is.

Paul reminds us that when God brings in the New Creation, everything partial will be removed as eternal perfection renews every surface of the renovated cosmos; and even as this happens, God’s Love will shine brightly from every hill of the New Jerusalem. Paul’s desire is for the Corinthians to understand every aspect of their lives, individually and together, in the light of this eternal perspective.²

Another way to make Paul’s point is to say that spiritual gifts have an “expiration date.” Spiritual gifts will cease when the cosmos is made New, when what is partial yields to what is perfect. The biblical view is that history—HisStory—is heading toward a goal, and there is going to be a grand conclusion to it all. Biblical history is not cyclical, as some worldviews are, but linear. Biblical history is goal-directed. It is ramping up toward something. The Bible testifies confidently that the Day *will come* when Jesus will break through the clouds with a loud shout and will summon His people to Himself, after which we will enter a Glorious Creation redeemed

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 18, 2015.

² Evan May, *Love Gives Life: A Study of 1 Corinthians 13* (Lexington, KY: Golden Mouth Press, 2012), p. 55.

and renewed and in perfect communion with God forever. This is what Titus called “our Blessed Hope” (Titus 2:13). These things are not yet, but they *will be*.³

Not only does Paul describe this transformation in terms of “partial” vs. “complete,” but also in terms of “childhood” and “adulthood.” I imagine that we all have experienced the need to explain something to a child differently from how we would explain it to a teen or to a young adult. And that same reality might be explained still differently to someone in their fifties or to someone in their seventies or eighties.

One of the wonders of life is that the transformations that come with the wisdom of years and experience often enable us to see things from a very different perspective, and Paul suggests that this is true with spiritual things as well. Corinth was known for the manufacture of metal mirrors,⁴ and Paul used that familiar image as another angle of vision on the transformation that will occur between this reality and the next.

Paul doesn’t seem to be speaking of the quality of the mirror so much as about the fact that what one sees in a mirror is only a reflection of reality and not the reality itself. He’s referring to something like the difference we experience between seeing a photograph of a person and meeting that person face-to-face. He’s telling the Corinthians—and us with them—that while we can know some very important things about God from looking at Creation, and while we can know much more important things about God from looking at Jesus, “God, with us,” the time will come when we will see God in all of heaven’s splendor, with nothing to mediate between.⁵

Rob Nash has pointed out that the partial nature of even the best of our knowledge should inject humility into every theological discussion and proclamation. “We neither know nor tell the whole truth,” Rob noted, “because the whole truth is not ours to possess.”⁶ And while it is most certainly true that our knowledge is very, very partial, it is *not* the case that just because we don’t know *everything*, we therefore do not know *anything*. I want to think with you for a little while about some of the things I believe we *can* know about the perfection that is to come.

Remember, if you will, that Paul’s point in our text is to try to put our present life in the context of eternity. That’s what I’m going to try to do, too, beginning . . . at the beginning.

I met a fellow a couple of weeks ago who works at Goddard⁷ studying cosmic background radiation, that infinitesimal hint that confirmed the Big Bang. When I showed a modicum of understanding of the subject—a very tiny bit, to be sure—he launched energetically into a brief description of what we know about the first thousandth of a billionth of a trillionth of a nanosecond of the universe. One author described it like this:

In a blinding moment of glory too swift for words, the universe moved from literally nothing to a size beyond any imagination. In that first lively second, gravity and the other forces that govern the universe were created. In less than a minute, the universe grew from nothing to a million billion miles across. The baby universe was quite warm—ten billion degrees or so—enough to begin the nuclear reactions that created the lighter

³ May, p. 51.

⁴ William Barclay, “Letters to the Corinthians,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), p. 139.

⁵ David E. Garland, “1 Corinthians,” *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), pp. 624-625.

⁶ Robert S. Nash, “1 Corinthians,” *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2009), pp. 370-371.

⁷ NASA’s Goddard Spaceflight Center, not far from here.

elements such as hydrogen and helium, with just a dash (about one atom in a hundred million) of lithium. In just three minutes, 98 percent of all the matter there is or will ever be was already produced. We now know that the universe we see around us was created out of nothing in about the same time as it might take to make a sandwich.⁸

Fast forward now about fifteen billion years, to a time far beyond our own (at least we think it will be). Paul wrote in our text about knowing God and about being known by God. The Bible says that *a time will come when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea”* (Isaiah 11:9), and that time has surely not yet come.

In another letter, Paul encouraged the Colossians to “*set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God*” (Colossians 3:1), and Jesus told us to look forward to “*the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne*” (Matthew 19:28). Peter reminded us that “*in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells*” (2 Peter 3:13). What these verses are talking about, of course, is what it will be like when “*we see face to face*” and “*know fully, even as [we are] fully known*” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

So what do you think about when you think about the life to come, when you try to imagine the New Creation? I don’t know about you, but “harp and clouds” don’t do much for me, and Randy Alcorn has somewhat surprisingly suggested that this image most likely comes from Satan. It certainly doesn’t come from the Bible.

Here’s how Alcorn put it: “Satan need not convince us that Heaven doesn’t exist. He need only convince us that Heaven is a place of boring, unearthly existence. If we believe that lie, we’ll be robbed of our joy and anticipation, we’ll set our minds on this life and not the next, and we won’t be motivated to share our faith. Why should we share the ‘good news’ that people can spend eternity in a boring, ghostly place that even *we* are not looking forward to?”⁹

In his book, *Heaven*—which is worthy of your study—Alcorn notes that “We can’t anticipate or desire what we can’t imagine. That’s why, I believe, God has given us glimpses of heaven in the Bible—to fire up our imagination and kindle a desire for Heaven in our hearts. . . . Scripture provides us with a substantial amount of information, direct and indirect, about the world to come, with enough detail to help us envision it, but no so much as to make us think we can completely wrap our minds around it. . . . If God didn’t want us to imagine what Heaven will be like, He wouldn’t have told us as much about it as He has.”¹⁰

“What God made us to desire,” Alcorn continues, “and therefore what we *do* desire if we admit it, is exactly what God promises to those who follow Jesus Christ: a resurrected life in a resurrected body, with the resurrected Christ on a resurrected Earth. Our desires correspond precisely to God’s plans. It’s not that we want something, so we engage in wishful thinking that what we want exists. It’s the opposite—the reason we want it is precisely because God has planned for it to exist. Resurrected people living in a resurrected universe is not our idea – it’s God’s.”¹¹

You and I long for a perfect world, without the corruption of sin, where God walks with us and talks with us in the cool of the day. Because we’re human beings, we desire something tangible and physical, something that will not fade away. We long for something similar to what the Bible describes in the Garden of Eden. And that is exactly what God promises us—a home

⁸ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (Broadway Books, 2003).

⁹ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2004), p. 11.

¹⁰ Alcorn, p. 16.

¹¹ Alcorn, pp. 7-8.

that will not be destroyed, a kingdom that will not fade, a city with unshakable foundations, an inheritance eternal and incorruptible.¹²

The Bible describes Heaven as a “city” (Hebrews 11:10, 13:14), and we understand cities. Cities have buildings, culture, art, music, athletics, goods and services, events of all kinds. And, of course, cities have people engaged in activities, gatherings, conversations, and various kinds of work.

The Bible also describes Heaven as a “country” (Hebrews 11:16), and we know about countries, too. They have territories, rulers, national interests, pride in their identity, and citizens who are both diverse and unified.¹³

If you and I can’t imagine our present Earth without rivers, mountains, trees, and flowers, then why would we try to imagine the New Earth without these features? We wouldn’t expect a non-Earth to have mountains and rivers, but God doesn’t promise us a non-Earth. God promises us a *New Earth*.

If the word *Earth* in this phrase has any meaning at all, it surely means that we can expect to find earthly things there—including atmosphere, mountains, water, trees, people, houses—even cities, buildings, and streets. (These familiar features are specifically mentioned in Revelation 21–22.) Our problem is not that the Bible doesn’t tell us much about Heaven. Our problem is that we don’t pay attention to the many things that the Bible does tell us.¹⁴

In Genesis, God plants the Garden of Eden on Earth; in Revelation, God brings down the New Jerusalem, with a garden at its center, to the New Earth. In Eden, there’s no sin, death, or Curse; on the New Earth, there’s no *more* sin, death, or Curse. In Genesis, the Redeemer is promised; in Revelation, the Redeemer returns. Genesis tells the story of Paradise lost; Revelation tells the story of Paradise regained. In Genesis, humanity’s stewardship is squandered; in Revelation, humanity’s stewardship is triumphant, empowered by the human-and-divine King Jesus.

These parallels seem too remarkable to be anything but deliberate. These mirror-image bookends demonstrate the perfect symmetry of God’s plan. We live today in the in-between time, hearing both the ancient echoes of Eden and the approaching sounds of the New Earth.¹⁵

God has never given up on the original creation. Yet somehow we’ve managed to overlook an entire biblical vocabulary that makes this point clear: *Reconcile. Redeem. Restore. Recover. Return. Renew. Regenerate. Resurrect*. Each of these biblical words begins with the *re-* prefix, suggesting a return to an original condition that was ruined or lost. That’s why Jesus referred to what’s coming as “*the renewal of all things*” (Matthew 19:28).

Another book that’s worth your time to read is Don Piper’s *90 Minutes in Heaven*.¹⁶ I don’t put much stock in many of the tales we hear about those who experience the Beyond and return to tell about it, but this story rings true, and Piper gives the clearest description of Heaven that I’ve ever read outside the Bible itself. I’ll post a few excerpts with the online version of this sermon.

¹² Alcorn, p. 78.

¹³ Alcorn, p. 78.

¹⁴ Alcorn, p. 79.

¹⁵ Alcorn, p. 85.

¹⁶ Don Piper, *90 Minutes in Heaven: a True Story of Death & Life* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2004).

As wonderful as all this is, there's one more thing I really must tell you. **Being known by God is infinitely important than anything you and I might know about God or about the world to come.** Jesus told us to “*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*” (Matthew 7:13-14).

Jesus went on to tell us that “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*” (Matthew 7:21-23).

My friends, as wonderful as the New Creation is going to be, Jesus warned us that many—indeed, *most*—people are going to get to Heaven's gate only to hear the four most dreadful words that could ever be spoken: “**I NEVER KNEW YOU.**” Such an end was never God's plan, desire, or purpose, and the Story of Jesus is the story of God's rescue operation to save us from ourselves and our bent and wayward ways. My friends, the Bible tells us that God loves you so much that “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for [you], so that in him [you] might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Whether we like it or not, and no matter what we may think about the matter, God loves us enough to tell us the truth—that there are two eternal destinations, not one, and **all roads do not lead to Heaven.** Only one path takes us there, and it is the path that begins with a narrow Gate. Jesus told us, “***I am the gate, and whoever enters through me will be saved***” (John 10:9). It was Jesus Himself who told us, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6).

Sometimes—indeed, it may be most of the time—you and I “miss the forest for the trees.” We make up our own rules about righteousness, holiness, and the life to come, and we expect God to make adjustments.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson were on a camping trip when Holmes awakened Watson in the middle of the night. “Watson,” he said, “look up at the stars and tell me what you deduce.”

“Well, I see millions of stars, and if even a few of those have planets, it's likely that there are some planets like Earth, and so there might be life out there.”

“Watson, you idiot, somebody stole our tent!”¹⁷

That's how Satan works, too. He distracts us with lesser matters so that we arrive at Heaven's gate uncovered, dressed only in those deeds we thought would get us in, but that we now see as the filthy rags they are, rather than clothed in the radiant righteousness that can only be found in Jesus.¹⁸ Remember, “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

All of what we've considered about the Narrow Path and about the New Creation lies behind, underneath, and woven throughout Paul's words in our text: *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known* (1 Corinthians 13:12). **And the only question that will matter then is whether our Lord knows you to be His own.**

¹⁷ Tom Kuntz, “The World's Funniest Jokes,” *New York Times*, 1.27.02.

¹⁸ Isaiah 64:6, 61:10, Revelation 3:5

90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death & Life

Don Piper, with Cecil Murphey
Grand Rapids: Revell, 2004

“I have no recollection of the impact or anything that happened afterward. In one powerful, overwhelming second, I died.

“When I died, I didn’t flow through a long, dark tunnel. I had no sense of fading away or of coming back. I never felt my body being transported into the light. I heard no voices calling to me or anything else. Simultaneous with my last recollection of seeing the bridge and the rain, a light enveloped me, with a brilliance beyond earthly comprehension or description. Only that.

“In my next moment of awareness, I was standing in heaven. Joy pulsed through me as I looked around, and at that moment I became aware of a large crowd of people. They stood in front of a brilliant, ornate gate. I have no idea how far away they were; such things as distance didn’t matter. As the crowd rushed toward me, I didn’t see Jesus, but I did see people I had known. As they surged toward me, I knew instantly that all of them had died during my lifetime. Their presence seemed absolutely natural.

“They rushed toward me, and every person was smiling, shouting, and praising God. Although no one said so, intuitively I knew they were my celestial welcoming committee. It was as if they had all gathered just outside heaven’s gate, waiting for me. . . .

“More and more people reached for me and called me by name. I felt overwhelmed by the number of people who had come to welcome me to heaven. There were so many of them, and I had never imagined anyone being as happy as they all were. Their faces radiated a serenity I had never seen on earth. All were full of life and expressed radiant joy. . . .

“Everything I experienced was like a first-class buffet for the senses. I had never felt such powerful embraces or feasted my eyes on such beauty. Heaven’s light and texture defy earthly eyes or explanation. Warm, radiant light engulfed me. As I looked around, I could hardly grasp the vivid, dazzling colors. Every hue and tone surpassed anything I had ever seen.

“With all the heightened awareness of my senses, I felt as if I had never seen, heard, or felt anything so real before. . . . The best way I can explain it is to say that I felt as if I were in another dimension. Never, even in my happiest moments, had I ever felt so fully alive. . . .

“I felt loved—more loved than ever before in my life. . . . Everything was brilliantly intense. Coming out from the gate—a short distance ahead—was a brilliance that was brighter than the light that surrounded us, utterly luminous. . . .

“Everything I saw glowed with intense brightness. The best I can describe it is that we began to move toward that light. . . . As I stared ahead, everything seemed to grow taller—like a gentle hill that kept going upward and never stopped. . . . The powerful light I had encountered when I met my friends and loved ones paled into darkness as the radiance and iridescence in front of me increased. . . . The farther I walked, the brighter the light. The light engulfed me, and I had the sense that I was being ushered into the presence of God. . . .

“Then I heard the music.

“My most vivid memory of heaven is what I heard. I can only describe it as a holy swoosh of wings. But I’d have to magnify that thousands of times to explain the effect of the sound in heaven.

“It was the most beautiful and pleasant sound I’ve ever heard, and it didn’t stop. It was like a song that goes on forever. . . . I didn’t just hear music. It seemed as if I were part of the music—and it played in and through my body. I stood still, and yet I felt embraced by the sounds. . . .

“I never saw anything that produced the sound. . . . Myriads of sounds so filled my mind and heart that it’s difficult to explain them. The most amazing one, however, was the angels’ wings. I didn’t see them, but the sound was a beautiful, holy melody with a cadence that seemed never to stop. The swishing resounded as if it was a form of never-ending praise. . . .

“A second sound remains, even today, the single, most vivid memory I have of my entire heavenly experience. I call it music, but it differed from anything I had ever heard or ever expect to hear on earth. The melodies of praise filled the atmosphere. The nonstop intensity and endless variety overwhelmed me.

“The praise was unending, but the most remarkable thing to me was that hundreds of songs were being sung at the same time—all of them worshipping God. . . . If we played three CDs of praise at the same time, we’d have a cacophony of noise that would drive us crazy. This was totally different. Every sound blended, and each voice or instrument enhanced the others.

“As strange as it may seem, I could clearly distinguish each song. . . . Many of the old hymns and choruses I had sung at various times in my life were part of the music—along with hundreds of songs I had never heard before. Hymns of praise, modern-sounding choruses, and ancient chants filled my ears and brought not only a deep peace but the greatest feeling of joy I’ve ever experienced. . . .

“Later I realized that I didn’t hear such songs as “The Old Rugged Cross” or “The Nail-Scarred Hand.” None of the hymns that filled the air were about Jesus’ sacrifice or death. I heard no sad songs and instinctively knew that there are no sad songs in heaven. Why would there be? All were praises about Christ’s reign as King of Kings and our joyful worship for all he has done for us and how wonderful he is.

“The celestial tunes surpassed any I had ever heard. I couldn’t calculate the number of songs—perhaps thousands—offered up simultaneously, and yet there was no chaos, because I had the capacity to hear each one and discern the lyrics and melody. . . . Even now, back on earth, sometimes I still hear faint echoes of that music” (pp. 20-32).