

# “Love’s Four Corners”

[Love] *always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*  
Ruth 1:16-17; 1 Corinthians 13:7-8a <sup>1</sup>

I expect that a number of us have been to Four Corners, that spot in the American Southwest where Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah meet. It’s kind of a desolate, desert spot, yet it is certainly worth visiting . . . but that’s not really my point this morning. It’s just an image that may help us remember our text.

As we make our way through Paul’s comments about love in 1 Corinthians 13, we’ve come to verse 7, which I’ve called “Love’s Four Corners,” because Paul mentions four positive characteristics of love in this one verse: “*Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*” And then he adds, “*Love never fails.*” There are a number of ways in which these four words might be translated, and I’ll mention some of the major ones as we consider each in turn.

It’s important to note that while some of Paul’s descriptions of love in verses 4-7 are translated in English in passive voice with an adjective—“is patient,” “is kind”—Paul actually used active verbs for each one. It doesn’t work in English to say that “love patiences” or “love kinds,” but that’s closer to what Paul actually wrote.

What we have in the original text is fifteen active verbs stating what love does. Paul wanted his readers to see that love is on the move. Love is in forward motion.

It’s also important to see that none of these verbs are primarily about emotion. Paul was not telling the Corinthians—or us—to wait until we *feel* like loving others before we express love to them. Paul was affirming what we know today to be a psychological reality: behavior leads feelings. You and I don’t feel our way into new ways of behaving. We behave our way into new ways of feeling. These things Paul lists are things that we *do*.<sup>2</sup>

It’s also interesting to notice that the two verbs in the middle of verse 7—“faith” and “hope” in Greek—come back together in verse 13 to form what is sometimes called “The Abiding Triad.” The love to which we are called never loses faith, and it never loses hope.<sup>3</sup> So here we go . . . .

**1. Love always protects.** The literal translation of Paul’s verb here is “bears” or “suffers.” Some of the many ways this has been translated include “beareth all things,” “can overlook faults,” “has unquenchable faith,” “slow to expose, eager to believe the best,” and “bears up under anything.” The New International Version, which I use most of the time, chose to translate this verb as “protects,” and it is in this sense that I want to focus on it this morning, because it is in this sense that I think we most often misunderstand it.

I suspect that when you and I think about the protection afforded us by God’s love, we tend to think about it something like this: “God is going to protect me and those I care about from ever having anything bad, painful, or evil happen to us.” Now while I certainly understand

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 11, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Evan May, *Love Gives Life: A Study of 1 Corinthians 13* (Lexington, KY: Golden Mouth Press, 2012), pp. 43-44.

<sup>3</sup> Hope can refer to the Christian hope in the eternal blessings of future resurrection (15:19) and is sometimes equivalent to trust in God’s care and protection (2 Corinthians 1:10). Paul also uses it as an expression of confidence in others (2 Corinthians 1:7, 10:15; David E. Garland, “1 Corinthians,” *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], p. 620).

such feelings, I don't believe that they're true in the way that we usually expect . . . although they are most certainly and absolutely true in a deeper sense.

When you and I casually think about God's protection, we tend to think that if we are followers of Jesus, then all of our sicknesses are going to be healed, that our homes will never be flooded, burned down, or broken into, that our cars will never be wrecked or stolen, that we'll never be persecuted or killed for our faith, and other things like that. But let's think about this.

Based on such presuppositions, what do we tell those who suffered and are suffering flooding and death in South Carolina? What do we tell those who suffered and are suffering from the fires in California? What do we tell those who suffered and are suffering from hurricane Joaquin in the Bahamas? What do we tell those believers who have suffered and are suffering from persecution in dozens of nations around our world today?

More than this, I have friends who lost their thirty-something daughter to breast cancer this week. I have a friend who lost his wife to pancreatic cancer last week. You have friends like that, too. What do we tell them about God's protection?

I think you'd agree that, unless Jesus returns in our lifetimes, every single one of us is going to physically die, and there obviously has to be some mechanism by which death comes. For most of us, that mechanism will be some sort of physical illness. That fact alone tells me that it is not God's purpose for every illness to be healed in the way that we might desire . . . but there's a deeper sense in which every illness experienced by a believer is healed: Death is our Final Healing. It is the only door to the Eternal City, until Jesus comes.

Steve Hayner, the former President of InterVarsity and then the President of Columbia Theological Seminary, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in early summer last year. Here's what he wrote about that in July 2014:

"The cancer continues to have the upper hand. What now seems clear from a purely physical perspective is that in all probability the remainder of my life on this earth is now to be counted in weeks and months.

"Many are praying for one of God's 'big' miracles. We are as well. But it is not how God answers prayer that determines our response to God. God is committed to my ultimate healing. But being cured of my cancer may or may not be a part of that healing work. . . . One person told me how disturbing it is to her to watch so many thousands of prayers on my behalf and yet to see a minimal of physical evidence of healing.

"Does God really heal? . . . Does the amount of prayer have any special impact? Honestly, while I understand the importance and logic of questions like this . . . most of these questions are not ones that are important to me.

"I truly don't know what God has planned. . . . I could receive 'healing' through whatever means, or I could continue to deteriorate. But life is about a lot more than physical health. It is measured by a lot more than medical tests and vital signs. More important than the more particular aspects of God's work with us . . . is God's overall presence with us, nourishing, equipping, transforming, empowering, and sustaining us for whatever might be God's call to my life today.

"TODAY, my call might be to learn something new about rest. TODAY, my call might be to encourage another person in some very tangible way. TODAY, my call might be to learn something new about patience, endurance, and the identification with those who suffer.

TODAY, my call might be to mull through a new insight about God's truth or character. I thank you God for most this amazing day."<sup>4</sup>

Steve Hayner experienced resurrection on January 31 of this year. Did God's protection fail in his case? No, I think not. Steve Hayner experienced the same victory that my friends Nikki and Diana experienced, as expressed in some other words from Paul: "*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8:38-39).

And, as Paul wrote shortly before his own death, "*The time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing*" (2 Timothy 4:6b-8).

My own prayer as it relates to God's protection is being shaped these days by two passages of Scripture in addition to those I've mentioned. The first is found in Daniel 3. I expect that you'll recognize these words from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: "*King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. **But even if he does not,** we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up*" (Daniel 3:16-18).

The second is more important, since it comes from the lips of our Lord as His crucifixion drew near: "*Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. **Father, glorify your name!***" (John 12:27-28a).

I submit to you that these two statements, "*but even if He does not,*" and "*Father, glorify your name!*" are what faith looks like even as we earnestly pray for and trust in God's protection. You and I may suffer, and we will certainly die if the Lord tarries; but in the Deep Places, we are absolutely and eternally safe. *Love always protects.*

**2. Love always trusts.** Paul's second "corner" of love in verse 7 is "Love always trusts." The word he used literally means "believes," and it comes from the same root as the word "faith." Some of the ways it has been translated are these: "believeth all things," "exercises faith in everything," "there is nothing love cannot face," "there is no limit to its faith," "no limit to its endurance," and "no end to its trust." Since there is a lot of overlap between this idea and the trust in God's protection about which I've been speaking, I want to illustrate "trust" and "protection" by using an example of how this might look on a human-to-human level . . . .

Bettye Tucker is a follower of Jesus who works as a cook at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago. She's done this work for forty-three years, twenty-eight of them on the night shift. *The Chicago Tribune* did a story on Bettye several years ago, in which Bettye said, "**I pray every night, for every room and every person in the hospital.** I start with the basement, and I go up, floor by floor, room by room. I pray for the children, I pray for the families, I pray for the nurses and the doctors. . . . I say, every night while I'm driving in on the expressway, 'Oh, Lord, I don't know what I'll face tonight, but I pray you'll guide me through.'"

"When I ask somebody, 'How you doin' today?' and they say it's not a good day, I say, 'Don't lose hope.' When the nurses tell me it's a bad night, I say, 'I understand it's a bad night. But guess what? I am here for you. I'm going to get you through the night.'"

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie Scanlon, "Columbia president affirms faith despite spreading cancer," *The Presbyterian Outlook* (7-29-14).

Barbara Mahany, the reporter behind the article, noted that “It just might be that ‘divine helping on the side’ is the most essential item on Ms. Bettye’s menu. She stirs it into every broth, and into every meal. It’s the ingredient that makes her the perpetual light shining in the all-night kitchen.”<sup>5</sup> *That’s the kind of protection we can offer to one another. And it’s the kind of trust we can have in God, because love always protects.*

**3. Love always hopes.** Some of the translations offered for “always hopes” include “hopeth all things,” “hopes under all circumstances,” “keeps up hope in everything,” and “ever patient.” Hope really needs a whole sermon, but let me try to capture it with a story . . .

In the fall of 1991, a car driven by a drunk driver jumped its lane and smashed headfirst into a minivan driven by Jerry Sittser. Jerry and three of his children survived, but his wife, their four-year-old child, and his mother died in the crash. Sometime later, Jerry and his then eight-year-old son, David, were driving to a soccer match when David asked his Dad, “Do you think Mom sees us right now?”

“I don’t know, David. I think maybe she does see us. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t see how she could, Dad. I thought Heaven was full of happiness. How could she bear to see us so sad?”

After a long silence, Jerry answered, “I think she does see us . . . *but she sees the whole story, including how it all turns out, which is beautiful to her. It’s going to be a good story, David.*”

And later, Jerry wrote, “I would not hazard to estimate the number of times I’ve been asked, ‘How does Christianity address the problem of suffering?’ . . . The Christian answer to suffering is Christ’s suffering and Christ’s resurrection. . . . God knows pain within Himself; God knows joy within Himself. He knows the whole story as one, including how it all turns out, which is glorious indeed.”<sup>6</sup> And that, my friends, is the kind of Hope that Love gives, the kind of Hope that keeps us going, no matter what, Hope that keeps us headed toward Resurrection and the Kingdom of Light, even through our tears. *Love always hopes.* Finally,

**4. Love always perseveres.** The literal translation of the word Paul used is “endures,” and other translations include “endureth all things,” “endures without limit,” and “power to endure everything.” And the first three words of verse 8 actually belong with verse 7: **Love never fails.**<sup>7</sup> Here’s a story for that, too:

Jill Severensen’s parents got married when they were nineteen, and at the time of this story, they had been married for sixty-two years. Jill’s Mom struggled with both Alzheimer’s disease and a dimension of the disease known as “Sundowner’s Syndrome.” A common experience for folks with Alzheimer’s, “Sundowner’s” involves an even greater level of confusion that awakens as the sun sets.

As a result, on most evenings Jill’s Mom became even more disoriented and demanded to be taken “home” from their apartment in a retirement facility. On one of these occasions, Jill was with her parents when her Mom began to plead, “I’m tired. Can someone please get my coat and take me home?” Jill’s Mom’s frustration generally focuses on her husband of these many years: Why won’t *he* take her home?

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Mahany, “Cooking Up Compassion,” *Chicago Tribune*, 9.20.09, section 6.

<sup>6</sup> Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Revealed* (Zondervan, 2012), pp. 138-139.

<sup>7</sup> Other translations include “will never come to an end,” “never disappears,” and “shall never pass away.”

Complicating matters was the fact that Jill's Dad had had his voice box removed two years earlier, so he couldn't answer her pleading. Since Jill's Mom doesn't remember that surgery, she typically becomes angry and demands, "Why won't you talk to me?" On this night, as her husband shook his head and tried to communicate, her anger grew. "He just shakes his head and never talks to me!" she shouted, to no one in particular.

Then she began to call him "selfish," "uncaring," and a host of other hurtful words and names. Jill's Dad began to tear up. A tough, retired Norwegian contractor, he knew that she was really saying, "I'm scared and confused," and it broke his heart.

Finally, Jill's Mom decided that they could "spend the night here," which was really their home. Now as sweet as she had been horrid, she turned to her husband and said, "You poor man. Swede, you are a good man. We can stay here, can't we? We'll be fine for tonight." As she began to get ready for bed, Jill's Mom turned to her husband, with her face close to his, and asked "Do you have something to say to me?"

His lips shaped the words, "I love you."

"I love you, too," she said, and went off to bed.<sup>8</sup>

My friends, real love *always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. Real love keeps promises, "because I said I would."*

And that's what the background of this PowerPoint has been saying all morning, although you may not have realized it. These rays of light are the colors of the rainbow, and the rainbow is the sign of one of the first promises God made in the Bible: "*This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. . . . Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life*" (Genesis 9:12-15).

But it's not just that promise that gives us Hope. The Bible tells us that "*no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ*" (2 Corinthians 1:20). The answer is "Yes!" to all of them. And we say "Thank You, Thank You, Thank You, God!"

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<sup>8</sup> Jill Severenson (with Lane Severenson), "Love to Last a Lifetime," *The Guilty Conscience* blog, 2.5.13.