

“These Three Things”

Νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα· μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη.
“And now these three remain: **faith, hope and love**. But the greatest of these is love.”
1 Corinthians 13:13; Ephesians 3:14-21; **1 Peter 1:3-9** ¹

I suppose that our text this morning, the final verse of “The Love Chapter,” is one of the best-known verses in the New Testament. Counting this text, this “holy triad” appears ten times in the letters of the New Testament,² and early Christians added faith, hope, and love to the four Platonic virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice to make up the traditional “Seven Cardinal Virtues.”³

We hear quite a bit these days about the “Colony Collapse Disorder” that is affecting bees all over our land,⁴ together with the renewed emphasis on awareness of how dependent our agriculture is on the cross-pollination that bees provide. I suppose it could be said that faith, hope, and love are similarly intertwined in their mutual expression and development.

Love does not grow in isolation, but rather blossoms and bears fruit along with these other graces. This spiritual “cross-pollination” brings about abundant spiritual harvest in God’s own time.⁵ Let’s look at faith, hope, and love in turn, and then try to reap some “so what’s” from our study of 1 Corinthians 13.

FAITH. I’ve enjoyed photography since being on the yearbook staff in high school, and while I’m not a great photographer myself, I do enjoy spectacular photography, and I suspect that in that I have a lot of company in the room.

Craig Larson had a coffee-table book called *America’s Spectacular National Parks*,⁶ which he had open to a spectacular double-page photo of the Grand Tetons. The book had been on the table for a while before Craig realized that the Teton photo was actually a fold-out. When he opened the third panel, he added about sixteen inches to the photograph, and the effect was much more amazing than what could be seen before.

As Craig reflected on that discovery, he wrote that “The Christian life has unfolding moments like that, when we discover there is much more to God, to God’s kingdom, and to God’s purposes than we knew. Abraham made this discovery at age 75, Moses made it at age 80, and Paul discovered it on the road to Damascus. Over and over in the Bible and across the centuries, God has revealed glorious pages of His purpose that had previously been ‘folded.’”⁷

It seems to me that Craig Larson’s experience is really a pretty good metaphor for how faith works in our lives. The writer of Hebrews famously pointed out that “*faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*” (Hebrews 11:1), rather like the folded-over photo on Craig’s coffee table, or like a fantastic vista obscured by fog. Every now and

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 25, 2015.

² Romans 5:1-5; Galatians 5:5-6; Ephesians 4:2-5; Colossians 1:4-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8; Hebrews 6:10-12, 10:22-24; 1 Peter 1:3-9

³ F. F. Bruce, “1 and 2 Corinthians,” *The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 29; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardinal_virtues.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colony_collapse_disorder

⁵ James Renihan, *True Love: 1 Corinthians 13 - Understanding the Real Meaning of Christian Love* (Carlisle, PA: EP Books, 2010), p. 129.

⁶ Letitia Burns O’Connor, Dana Levy, Michael Duchemin, *America’s Spectacular National Parks* (Universe, 1999).

⁷ Craig Brian Larson, Arlington Height, IL; www.preachingtoday.com See Ephesians 3:8-11.

then, the fog clears just long enough for us to glimpse the hidden lands beyond our sight. The good news is that in our present life-as-it-is, God, God's purposes, and the Life Beyond are accessible to us through faith in ways that they are not currently accessible to us through knowledge.⁸

It takes a thorough-going work of grace for God's Spirit to cultivate in our hearts such trust in God's faithfulness that we're willing to move forward into a future that we see now only partially and dimly, as a reflection in a mirror or a vista through a fog (1 Corinthians 13:12). Faith trusts that God is at work in the circumstances of our lives even when—and perhaps especially when—we don't see all the evidence of God's activity that we'd like to see. Peter wrote that it is “*through **faith** [that we] are shielded by God's power until the coming of the **salvation** that is ready to be revealed in the last time*” (1 Peter 1:5).

Thus, our faith and our hope are not in ourselves, or in what we or others might do, but in the God who calls us into a future designed by Love (1 Peter 1:21). Faith holds onto and grips the reality that God's possibilities and God's purposes are always greater than what we can see from where we are . . . and such faith leads us to Hope.

Hope. Paul pointed out that “*hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?*” (Romans 8:24). In a world filled with grief and with horrors on every hand, we need a hope that is larger than what we can see and that pulls us forward into a future better than how things are right now. Something like that happened to Jeremy Begbie when he attended worship in a poor South African township:

“Before the service,” he wrote, “I was told that a tornado had cut through the township the week before, ripping apart fifty homes and killing five people. And just the night before, a gang had attacked a fourteen-year-old member of the church's Sunday school and stabbed him to death.

“The pastor began his opening prayer: ‘Lord! You are our Creator and Sovereign, but why did the wind come like a snake and tear off our roofs? Why did a mob cut short the life of one of our children, when he had everything to live for? Over and over again, Lord, we find ourselves living in the midst of death.’

“As he spoke, the congregation responded with a dreadful sighing and groaning. But then, once the prayer was finished, the whole congregation slowly began to sing, very quietly at first, and then louder. They sang and they sang, song after song of praise—praise to a God who had in Jesus plunged into the very worst life can bring in order to give us a promise of an ending beyond all imagining. The singing gave the congregation a foretaste of that end.

“Christian Hope,” Jeremy wrote, “isn't about looking around at the state of things as they are now and trying to imagine where it's all going. Christian Hope is not about trying to extrapolate the future from the present. It's about breathing even now the fresh air of the Ending, tasting the spices and sipping the wine of the Great Feast that is to come.”⁹

That's what Hope does. It reminds us of the Eternal Purposes and Victory of God. Hope helps us hear the far-off melodies of the New Creation. As Peter reminded us, “*In his great mercy [God] has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade*” (1 Peter 1:3-4). The Bible's

⁸ C. K. Barrett, “The First Epistle to the Corinthians,” *Harper's New Testament Commentaries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 309.

⁹ Jeremy Begbie, “The Sense of an Ending,” in Dallas Willard, editor, *A Place for Truth* (InterVarsity Press, 2010).

answer to the hopelessness of our world is that the Story that began in Bethlehem's manger has rewritten the end of all of our stories. The Manger of Bethlehem, the Cross of Calvary, and the Empty Tomb have opened up a future before us that we hardly dare to let ourselves imagine!

Now if "*faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*" (Hebrews 11:1), and if "*hope that is seen is not hope*" (Romans 8:24), then when the good things we have believed and hoped for have finally arrived, when the New Creation has fully come, faith and hope will cease. But love, being God's very nature (1 John 4:16), will endure forever and ever.¹⁰

Love. The Bible says that the Final Exam awaiting each of us before God's Judgment Seat is going to be all about love, not about doctrine. It's going to be an exam about how well we loved the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit, and proved that love by our obedience to God's commands (John 14:21). It's going to be an exam about how well we loved the poor and the outcasts (Matthew 25:31-46); and it's going to be an exam about how well we loved one another in the Body of Christ, which is the Church (1 Corinthians 1:10; Galatians 6:10; 1 John 4:20).

That's why Paul reminded us in The Love Chapter that ¹*If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.* ²*If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.* ³*If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

⁴*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.* ⁵*It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.* ⁶*Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.* ⁷*It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* ⁸**Love never fails** (1 Corinthians 13:1-8a).

It is the nature of life that doing these things is hardest when they're most needed, and none of us is up to this challenge on our own . . . but we **are** able to do these things through God's Spirit who dwells within us. And when we live out faith, hope, and love in these ways, we experience the wonderful result that Peter told us to anticipate: "*Though you have not seen [Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls*" (1 Peter 1:8-9).

So What? Well, as we come to the end of our study, we should probably remind ourselves that Paul's "hymn of love" was not intended to be lifted out of its context in order to float a few feet above the ground as something magical that we look up to and admire. No, this text was planted in the pungent soil of a conflicted congregation, and Paul was fully aware of the sinful human realities that make it hard for us to love one another.¹¹

At the same time, while Paul described love with a list of well-nigh impossible character qualities, he permitted no excuses and he made no exceptions. God's standard is clear, and Jesus gives us the perfect portrait of the love of God to which we are to aspire (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3).

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *The Love Chapter: The Meaning of First Corinthians 13* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2010), p. 75; Renihan, p. 132.

¹¹ Evan May, *Love Gives Life: A Study of 1 Corinthians 13* (Lexington, KY: Golden Mouth Press, 2012), pp. 61-62.

The Good News that rescues us from despair in the face of such a standard is the fact that you and I don't have to muster up the ability to offer such love on our own. God's own Spirit dwells within us, and this Spirit is a consummate artist who crafts us into the image and the mind of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 2:5).¹²

I'm sure you remember that one of Jesus' final instructions to His disciples was this: "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:34-35). Though we fall far short of the goal more often than not, it is God's purpose for His family—the Church—to be known for its love more than anything else. That's why the first thing Paul wrote after concluding "The Love Chapter" was the admonition to "*pursue love*" (1 Corinthians 14:1).

Olympic athletes develop specific training regimens for every muscle they use in competition. Virtuoso musicians practice for hours every day as they perfect every aspect of performance. And Paul's exhortation is that you and I demonstrate similar devotion and discipline in the development of our love. After all is said and done, only love remains, so what better goal could we ever devote ourselves to achieving?¹³

Chrysostom, the ancient preacher, noted that "Signs and wonders may make others jealous of you, but if you really love them, they will both admire you and love you back. **And if they love, they will also lay hold of the truth of Jesus Christ in due time.**"¹⁴ To say that another way, *Love is Evangelism*. It is love that draws people to Jesus.

It's interesting to me that in the verses we read from 1 Peter 1, Peter developed the themes of faith, hope, and love, but he didn't stop there. Peter's goal is this passage wasn't faith, hope, or love, but *joy*: "*Though you have not seen [Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls*" (1 Peter 1:8-9).

Joy. At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus told His disciples, "*I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*" (John 15:11). When the women ran back into Jerusalem, having discovered the empty tomb, they ran **with joy** (Matthew 28:8). When the two disciples ran back to Jerusalem from Emmaus, having met the risen Christ, they ran **with joy** (Luke 24:52).

And when you and I finally join the glad company of the Eternal City, that, too, will be **with joy** (Jude 1:24). Although "*now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now [we] know in part; then [we] shall know fully, even as [we] are fully known.*"

"*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love*" (1 Corinthians 13:12-13).

Benediction: And now ²⁴ *To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence **without fault and with great joy**—* ²⁵ *to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen* (Jude 1:24-25).

¹² Renihan, p. 128.

¹³ Renihan, p. 134.

¹⁴ Chrysostom, p. 58.