

INTRODUCTION

When I was living in New Jersey, a Chinese pastor and his wife came and lived with us for a while. They had been living in Indonesia, but the Muslims in that area had turned violent against the Christians, and they had to flee. They ended up in port of Newark in NJ –not the most inviting place. As they were seeking to find a home in China town in NYC they lived with our family. One day, Paul (that was the husband’s name) said to me that at every service I hold I should have singing of praises to God. Why? I asked him. He said, “Because everything else you do during the service you will stop doing one day, but you will never stop praising God.” Preaching, he pointed out, was for now, not forever, for one day, all will know the Lord and no one will have to say to his brother, “Know the Lord.” Also, prayer will be replaced with face to face conversation. But singing of praises to God will go on and on.”

Now, I don’t know if I’m ready to give singing of praises the primary place in all my meetings, but I never forgot his advice, for his point of view was heavenly, not earthly. He presented the idea: “listen, not everything you do on earth will you ever do again, but there are some things you do on earth that you will do forever.” That fascinated me. In our text today, another guy named Paul says the same thing.

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

8 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. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. 13 But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Wisdom says, “Our priorities in this life should be determined based on a view of what lasts beyond this life.” Paul is saying, “there are three things in your life right now that will never cease to exist: faith, hope, and love. Focus on these first, because they are all that will last.” Let’s examine this scripture closely so that I can show you an interpretation of verses 8 to 10 that I’d like to refute, and also so that we can consider what to expect in our own future regarding our own transformation, and the cause of that transformation.

THE REBUTTAL

First of all, let’s look at 8 to 10 again.

8 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. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

If God gives you a prophetic message to share with others, or if you can speak in a tongue so that you can pray to God in the Spirit, or if God gives you knowledge that builds up others, these things will be done away with. Why? Because they are not good things? No, because they will not be needed. When you have full knowledge of God, you don't need a few words of knowledge. When you see the plan of God fully, at the end of time, you don't need a prophetic word giving you a small insight. When you are one with Jesus, fully, in His presence, you won't need the Holy Spirit praying through you in a foreign tongue.

It's like a Movie preview. The preview shows you a couple scenes from the movie, so that you will know that the movie has much more. But once you've seen the movie, you don't need to preview. In fact, if you go to the movie and buy your ticket, and instead of showing you the full feature, they said, "Let's just watch the preview again," you'd be angry. You don't want the preview, you want the whole movie. The same is true with spiritual gifts. You might think they are delightful here on earth, but it would be silly to want them in heaven, for then you will have the full message, the full relationship. It is like reading the back of a book to see what is in it. You read the cover and learn about the story and you read the few lines about the author and you read a blurb from someone else telling how great the book is. This helps you decide about the book. But once you've read the book, you don't need the information on the back cover. That is what Paul is saying here. You guys, on earth, want to hear great preaching, great teaching and prophetic words, have spiritual knowledge and gifts, but one day, these things will be useless to you because the real thing will be here.

Now, I want to introduce you to an argument of cessationists that is based on this text. Cessationists believe that God has ceased to give all sign gifts, like tongues, knowledge, miracles, and the like. They argue this: These signs verified the message of the Apostles as being the true gospel. This is correct. A great deal of signs and miracles were done by the apostles so that everyone would know that their message was true. They also point out that tongues was often given to confirm outwardly the inward presence of the Holy Spirit. This is also correct. They then say that since the Apostles are gone and they have left their writings in the Scripture, and their lives as a witness, God no longer uses such sign gifts to confirm the gospel, nor does He use tongues to confirm the coming of the Holy Spirit.

This argument has some compelling points that we should not ignore. It is true that the signs done in great numbers by the apostles confirmed their gospel and it would be surprising to see repeated, and we certainly should not take such gifting to be the norm for all Christians. We also can see from the Bible that speaking in another tongue is not necessary to prove the coming of the Holy Spirit, as all who believe have the Spirit of God. In these things, I can easily agree with them. Where we must be careful in agreeing with the cessationist argument, though, is to claim that God will not do sign gifts or miracles in our time because the Bible is complete. What the cessationist would say is this: "look at verse 10 and 1 Corinthians 13." There it says that when the perfect comes, then the partial is done away with. The perfect is the Bible, which is perfect. The partial is the manifestations that Paul said would be done away with: tongues, prophesy, knowledge and the like."

As logical as that might sound, the problem is that verse 10 is not referring to the Bible when it says, "When the perfect comes." Instead it is talking about the time when we see Jesus face to face. That time has not yet come. Therefore, we cannot say that God will or will not do miracles or give sign gifts if He so chooses to. He will do what He will and the Bible never claims otherwise.

IMMATURITY

Having said that, Paul puts these sign gifts into a category that he calls childhood, not maturity. What are we to make of that? Let's look at verses 11 to 12 again and try to figure that out.

11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

Paul is not really saying that manifestations of the Spirit are childish in a negative sense. What he is saying is that they reflect the age of pre-adulthood that we are in spiritually. Children say goo-goo ga-ga, but adults don't. Children think concretely like, "If I do my chore, I get to play" where adults see the bigger picture. He says it is normal to grow up physically. Likewise, he points out that it we should expect to move from childhood to adult hood spiritually. But that move doesn't happen until we see Him face to face. In other words, we are not going to be fully grown up spiritually until the Lord returns or until we go to Him. We live in the state where we must deal with the "partial." We know in part. That's all we get for now. It is like knowing that a great holiday meal is in the other room, but we can't see it, eat it or have it. We sit in the living room and smell it. That's all we get. But when we move to the other room, we get the fullness of it. In the same way, we on this earth, if we know our Bible backwards and forwards, have many great experiences with God and His Holy Spirit, and love Jesus and our neighbor as hard as we can, we will still only know in part and be known in part. The fullness doesn't come until we see Him fully. We all want it all right now. But we can't have it. There will always be unanswered questions on this side of life. There will always be more hunger than satisfaction in Christ. But that is only for a little while.

John explains this truth like this:

1 John 3:2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.

John points out that we live in this spiritual immaturity, that won't be complete until He appears. We don't know yet what we will be. Amazing. We have never seen a spiritual adult! We are all spiritually adolescent! What will we become? We will know when we see Him face to face.

Look how Paul explains this transformation in Romans 8:

Romans 8: 18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.

It is called the "revealing of the sons of God." There will be an event where we are changed, going from this fallen flesh and blood, this limited mind, these broken emotions, and these incomplete spirits, to being revealed as glorious, whole, fully known and knowing God fully. This is what is coming.

CONCLUSION

But it is the last line of this text that has the true wisdom in it. Let's look at verse 13 again:

13 But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Lots of things will cease when Jesus comes back. Preaching will cease. Prophecy will cease. The need to read your Bible will cease, for you will know and be known fully by the subject of the Bible, Jesus. The need to pray will cease, for you can talk to Jesus face to face. Miracles will give way to miraculous existence. Many things will cease. But three things will not cease: faith, hope, and love.

Faith, the ability to trust God's word and His goodness, this will never fade. In fact, it will be stronger than ever. You and I will have no doubts about our God. His Word will be forever trusted for its veracity and its goodness. We will declare His faithfulness to all heaven and earth.

Hope, the ability to look forward with confidence that good always wins and that things get better forever and not worse, hope which never disappoints, will be in our hearts always. Hope on earth is the foe of depression and despair, for it is power from heaven that never ends. And then there is love. The pleasure and delight that one person takes in another. This will be forever. These three things are eternal. Love is the greatest of the three. And here's the part Paul doesn't want us to miss: all three are available right here on earth, even before eternity arrives.

I loved the movie gladiator. The line in the movie that set the tone for the entire story comes at the beginning, when Maximus tells his troops before they enter into battle: "What we do in life echoes in eternity." This connection between our earthly behavior and our eternity is one missed on modern society. For us today, everything is about right now. We are immature and foolish, always asking first, "What about right now?" instead of looking forward to the consequences and rewards of the future. Think about this: today, you can set your mind and your will on that which will effect eternity. You can love. You can plan to love. Do you like making plans? You can make plans, long and detailed, that are expressions of love –gaining pleasure in others, benefiting them, enjoying them, enjoying their joy. There are two kinds of people in this life: people who will have joy in eternity for how they lived on earth, and people who won't. To touch eternity, reach out to another person on earth.