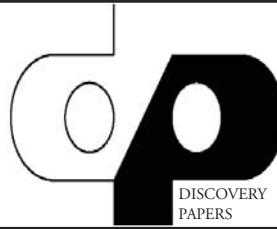


# THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

*SERIES: THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE*



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1 Corinthians 13:12-13  
5th Message  
Steve Zeisler  
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There's a famous remark by a respected theologian, sometimes attributed to Karl Barth and sometimes to others. This theologian was asked, "What is the most important truth you have learned?" His answer: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."<sup>1</sup> What I love best about that song is its oft-repeated refrain, "Yes! [with emphasis] Jesus loves me!"

We're at the end of an extended study of the well-loved chapter 1 Corinthians 13. In its historical context, it was a challenge to first-century Christians who proclaimed Christ, but glorified themselves. They had turned away from love's indispensable strength and beauty. The pattern of proclaiming one thing and living something else has, of course, been reproduced over and over throughout the centuries—living for ourselves, even though we speak of Another.

Three months ago I had my left knee replaced. Changing a body part gives you an interesting perspective on your life. A replacement part has a predicted lifespan (say twelve to fifteen years). Of course that leads to questions about the rest of me. When are other joints and organs going to give out? How can I best manage bodily deterioration?

Love is not like that. The accomplishments of sacrificial love will be remembered and honored after this heaven and earth have passed away. It is the opposite of managed deterioration. 1 Corinthians 13:8-10: "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." That which is partial now will adorn the completed work—a righteous kingdom in a cleansed creation. The person I will be forever is shaped by love.

Our focus here is the final two verses of the chapter.

1 Corinthians 13:12-13:

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

## Face to face

Our future is not only about the establishment of new lives in a new world. Love has promised that one day the long journey will be over, and we will be embraced by the One we love the most. There is, in the future, a Person whom we have not yet clearly seen, whom we know, but not completely. The center of the Christian gospel is Jesus, and before us lays the greatest experience of intimacy with Him.

You might remember that the night He died, the Lord met with His friends for a last meal. The Gospel of John says their hearts were troubled—they were sick at heart. The darkness was descending. He had said that He would die, and there was no avoiding His death. They were terrified and hurt. Jesus wanted to tell them truth that would help them: "I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2b-3).

The King James Bible speaks of God's house as having many mansions (John 14:2a), and that's misleading in modern parlance. We think of mansions as opulent, beautiful homes as if the place being prepared were the central idea. But, what would have met the needs of the hearts of His friends at that moment was the promise not of a place, but that they would be reunited with Him. What was tearing them apart was losing Him, and His promise was that they would not lose Him. He would return for them; gather them to Himself.

Tim Stafford wrote a wonderful book called *Knowing the Face of God*. He says this:

*"Full intimacy comes between people 'face to face.' It is no wonder then that when the Bible speaks of longing for God, it speaks in terms of his face. The*

*psalmist pleads with God, 'Make your face to shine upon us,' or, 'Do not hide your face from us.' David's heart urges him to 'seek God's face.' And ultimately, 'in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness' (Ps. 17:15).*

*"Such language came effortlessly to the authors of Scripture when they spoke of God, despite the fact that they believed making any image of God's face to be blasphemy. The Jews longed not merely to get along with God and be blessed by him. They were hungry for him, not just for his favor. And at primitive, urgent level, 'him' was his face."*

The promise of God's love is that the day is coming when we will see Him face to face. But, as we read in verse 12, there is an experience now and an experience then, a condition that obtains to the moment and another that has not yet arrived. What are we taught about "then" and "now"?

The condition now is like an image that is indistinct, obscured, or blurred. Someone is there, but we can't see him very well. We struggle to be sure of that which we can't yet see clearly.

Most of the people I know who have fallen away from a vital walk with Jesus Christ, have fallen at this point: they stopped being sure there was a Person there, that the Christian enterprise had, at its core, the heart of a living, personal God who cared for them. Christian-living became a matter of going through the motions, and the evangelical subculture finally wasn't enough to satisfy them. If there's really no one there, why keep doing all this? The good advice on how to live one's life and make one's choices can only go so far; good advice is not enough when the storm is raging. The blurriness of the image raises the questions: Am I making this up? Is there Someone there?

We might imagine a soldier deployed in Iraq. His fiancée is back at home. They've made wonderful promises to one another, imagined a future together. They have profound feelings for one another. He carries with him a picture of his beloved, and he looks at it every day. But his tour has lasted many months; the picture is grimy, torn in one corner, scratched. Some days he can almost hear her voice, and her beauty comes through so clearly. Other days the picture is just a piece of paper with colors on it, now scratched so that it doesn't represent anything. Is there someone at home who loves him or not?

I believe Paul is saying something like that about our relationship with God. Sometimes it is beautiful. Sometimes we are sure of His presence, so sure it's as if we've crossed completely out of this world and are in the next one. Other times it's as if we're in an echo chamber and everything we say sounds hollow; it feels as if our faith is a fiction.

Someday we'll see Him face to face. We're also promised that He is our companion on the journey home. He knows when adversity will make us grow strong, and when we need special protection and the comfort of the Spirit. He goes through the valley of the shadow of death with us, our shepherd and companion on the journey (Psalm 23); He is the goal of the journey we're on.

## Fully known

There's another idea here that is captured by the imagery of a mirror. The face you usually see in a mirror is your own. One of the questions that the dark glass raises is whether God is really there, but the other question regards what is true of us. Is there anything about me that's worth knowing? Do I amount to anything?

I'm a puzzle to myself. I imagine you are as well. Some days I find myself basking in my own glorious beauty to such an extent that I wonder why traffic doesn't stop, but moments later I'm humiliated, looking for the deepest hole to crawl into. What causes such ups and downs?

Macbeth heard that the queen had died, and he spoke this famous line:

"Life...is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing."<sup>3</sup>

In Romans, Paul thinks about the struggle of living and says, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:18b-19 NIV). We don't make sense to ourselves. On the day when Jesus' face is made clear, how will our face appear?

There is Someone who knows me, to whom I am not a mystery, a tossed salad of foolishness and immaturity, making no sense of anything. He knows me and is making

Himself known to me.

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Worshipful obedience, beholding Jesus with the eyes of our heart and bowing before Him in love, transforms us. We see Him and our countenance is made like Him. On the coming day when the mist and distortion are removed, His face will be glorious and ours beautiful.

## The one we long for

The chapter ends with probably its most famous lines. “But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.” Tying together faith, hope, and love is common in the New Testament. So it’s not surprising that Paul, having been talking about love, draws in the other two. He makes the case that they all are eternal.

But then he does a curious thing: he ranks love above the others. Of course scholars and commentators have always wondered why love is the greatest. I believe it’s because love flows from the heart of a person. We can have faith in good planning, hope for future events. But if you speak of love, you will encounter a Lover. Though faith and hope are marvelous, and not to be denigrated in any regard, love is the greatest. The thing we long for most in life is to see Him, to have every barrier and every dark mist that stands between us and our Savior done away.

Consider the beginning and the end of the Bible. Both draw attention to the face of God. In the beginning God took clay and made a human figure, and later He took bone and formed it into another human figure; and what He had formed, He breathed into (Genesis 2:7, 21-22). His mouth to their mouths, face to face. Later we read of Adam and Eve walking in the cool of the garden with the Lord (Genesis 3:8)—a picture of intimacy and nearness, in conversation face to face.

At the end of the Bible we read this: “Now the dwelling of God is with men [humankind], and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from

their eyes” (Revelation 21:3-4 NIV). God doesn’t shout from a distance, He draws near, His face close, His touch loving, wiping away the tears of those who remember sorrow. The Bible begins and ends with the best of visions—the tender nearness of God to His children.

Let me suggest the words of Jesus as marching orders for us: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’ . . . ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30-31, Matthew 22:37-39).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Anna B. Warner, *Jesus Loves Me*.

<sup>2</sup>Tim Stafford, *Knowing the Face of God* (Grand Rapids, MI, © Zondervan Press, 1986), 36.

<sup>3</sup>William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.