

Through a glass darkly

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[0 : 00] Would you turn with me this evening to the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians chapter 13 and reading from verse 8 to the end of the chapter.

The first letter of Paul to the Corinthians chapter 13 reading verses 8 to 13. Charity or love never faileth but whether there be prophecies they shall fail, whether there be tongues they shall cease, whether there be knowledge it shall vanish away.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things.

For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face, now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, love these three, but the greatest of these is love. These verses from 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

[1 : 22] Now in this 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul is giving us a corrective to a misunderstanding and a misuse of the spiritual gifts with which the church at Corinth was so richly endowed.

We read in the first chapter how the Apostle says that they came behind in no spiritual gift. But as you probably know, there was a tremendous upheaval at Corinth through the abuse and the misunderstanding of the use of these spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues, the ability to prophesy and so on.

And in chapters 12 and 14 of this epistle, the Apostle is explaining at great length the function and the proper use of these apostolic spiritual gifts.

And it appears that these Corinthians, they were imagining that because they had this abundance of spiritual gifts, that thereby they imagined that they were somehow rather superior Christians and that they had neglected to pay a proper regard to the Christian virtue of love.

And in this 13th chapter, the Apostle is emphasizing that the great mark of the Christian is not at all that he can speak in tongues or that he can prophesy, but that he is a man who is supremely to be characterized by love.

[3 : 21] Now Paul does not say that these spiritual gifts were of no value. There are two things I want to mention very, very briefly by way of introduction with regards to these spiritual gifts.

The first is this, that these gifts, they were beneficial, they were useful. That is to say, they were useful for breaking down the linguistic and other barriers in the early spread of the Christian gospel.

The New Testament era was an era of tremendous transition. The Lord Jesus Christ had come. He had fulfilled all the prophetic teachings of the Old Testament.

He had left a mandate with his church to go into all the world and to preach the gospel. And in order to fulfill that mandate, they needed, in that particular era, the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit.

And Paul is not at all in chapters 12 and 14 saying that spiritual gifts are of no value. He is saying they are of no value.

[4 : 39] But they must be kept always in a subordinate position to the superiority of love. And the second thing I want to say with regards to these Christian gifts, these spiritual gifts, is this.

That they were temporary gifts. These were the signs of the apostles. These were the signs of the apostles. These were the signs of the apostles. These extraordinary gifts were manifestations of the apostolic age.

And we do not need today these same gifts. Because to a large extent the Christian church still is ministered to by the apostles in that we have the apostolic teaching recorded in the New Testament.

Now the abuse of these gifts was something that was almost to be expected because every privilege, every blessing that comes to us from God is something that we misuse, we mishandle and we abuse it.

Now in this passage that we have before us from verse 8 to the end of this 13th chapter the apostle is in a sense explaining why it is that the Christian church can have such serious aberrations and have such misconceptions with the good blessings of God.

[6 : 16] It is because of the kind of situation that we find ourselves in. There is in this present age always the aspect of imperfection, of incompleteness.

And Paul in this great passage that we have before us he draws a contrast between the present imperfection that we see in the world around us and that we see in the Christian church around us and that future perfection which is yet to be revealed.

In other words everything that we do in this life will be characterized by imperfection. But it is not always going to be like that.

There is a day coming, says Paul, when that which is perfect it shall come. And I want this evening very briefly to look at these two main points with you.

On the one hand the situation as it is at present and on the other hand in contrast to that the perfection that is yet to come.

[7 : 33] Now when we are speaking of this present imperfect age Paul is saying we know in part, we prophesy in part.

And it is important for us to grasp that in making this contrast the Apostle Paul is addressing himself to Christian men and women because the teaching that he has here does not apply to all men.

There is no age of perfection for a man or a woman who is not a Christian. And Paul here is addressing himself to those whom he designates as called to be saints.

They are those who are in Christ Jesus. They are those whom God has called and set apart. They are men and women who have been radically changed by the gospel.

They are men and women who have been definitively and decisively called out of darkness and into God's marvelous light. There is a new life implanted within their hearts.

[8 : 48] And this is the great presupposition that lies behind the mind of the Apostle as he gives them this glorious teaching. Because Paul is assuming that because they are saints in Christ Jesus that they are able to appreciate and that they are able to appropriate to themselves the teaching that he is giving to them.

In other words, he is assuming that they are able to respond positively to the fact that there is an age of perfection that is coming for them.

Paul is assuming that because they are saints in Christ that they are no longer dead in their trespasses and in their sins. He is assuming that they are no longer totally blind to the things of God.

The God who commanded the light to shine out of the darkness have shone in their hearts and he has given there the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And Paul is assuming that these Christians can see something perhaps dimly, perhaps darkly but at least they see and he is assuming that they can hear and they can respond perhaps inadequately perhaps almost blasphemously at times but still they respond to the things of God.

[10 : 28] They are no longer dead they are no longer blind but they are not yet made perfect in holiness and this means that they cannot see as clearly as they will see they cannot respond as positively and as adequately in this present imperfect state as they will respond positively and adequately at some future date in their experience.

In other words, although they are saints in Christ Jesus they are babes in Christ. And I think that all of us as Christian believers tonight we should realize that however far we may go in the Christian life and however much understanding we may have till the end of our days we will be characterized by this that we are still babies in Christ Jesus.

But at least there is a new life and at least we see and in order that we might grow up to our mature manhood in Christ Jesus in order that we might make progress in the Christian life God has given us a mirror God has given us a looking glass into which his people can look and they can analyze their experiences they can see delineated there for them those things that are happening to them and that left to themselves they would never begin to understand.

You remember how for example the Apostle James in his first chapter of his epistle he likens the law of God like the looking glass and he says that when man looks into this perfect law of liberty and when he actually sees himself as he is then he goes and does it then James says that man will receive blessing.

In other words what I am saying is this that God has given us a standard God has given us this glass this mirror into which we can look and into which we can see reflected our experiences it is a glass that tells me what I am it is a glass that tells me what is happening to me it is a glass that tells me the way that I am to walk in order to attain the salvation of God.

[13 : 17] Now Paul is saying that the Christian man or woman they are people they look into this glass but what happens when they look into the glass?

They don't see clearly they see something but what they see is shadows and riddles and enigmas when Paul says here for example for now we see through a glass darkly the word there that is used is the word from which we get our word enigma and the enigma is something that is mysterious it is a riddle it is a problem it is a puzzle and Paul is saying to us here that in this imperfect state we look into the word of God and we see movements and hazy shadows we see puzzles there are many things that perplex us because our minds and our understanding is not yet made perfect in holiness now at least we see but we see through a glass a dark I want to give for example some of the problems that we as Christian believers experience as we look into this word of God and where do we begin?

well what does the word tell us? what is the great fact of the scripture? what is the great content of the word of God? it is God himself it is not simply that we have here a dogmatic revelation it is that we have a personal revelation the revelation of the living and the true God and the most fundamental experience and belief of every Christian soul is that he has a conviction as to the real existence of the living and true God and he reads the word and he sees God revealed there and he sees God revealed in all his attributes and in all his glory and he knows that there is only one living and true God and yet to his mind there is an almost insuperable problem as soon as we come to the being of God because we find that the Father is God we find that the Son is God we find that the Holy Spirit is God we find that these three persons equal in power and glory share all the essence of the Godhead and yet they are not three gods they are not even three indivisible individuals they are three modes or three centers of life within the one Godhead but yet one God and the Christian church has had down through the centuries has had to maintain in the face of various forms of error in this regard has had to maintain the mystery of the Trinity of God and the Christian church tonight does not understand the Trinity the Christian textbooks of theology and what have you they don't there delineate for us in detail the relationships one to the other and all the intricacies of that the Christian church has spoken simply not to simply not to be silent and the Christian church has spoken not in order to expressly declare what we do mean but to simply declare what we do not mean when we speak of the Trinity now this is the kind of thing we look through a glass dark and every Christian believes emphatically in the Trinity within the Godhead and yet that is something that we can never even begin to understand how can these things be

I don't know because we look through a glass darkly we can never fathom the being of God in himself or we can look at a fact like this and we can look at the other mystery the mystery of piety God manifest in the flesh God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him bodily and Jesus could say without embarrassment and without any apology he that has seen me has seen the Father and there is a man in real flesh and blood making the most astounding claims and again this is something that is writ large in the pages of the Gospels and the Epistles of the New Testament it is that Jesus is God and everything that God is

Jesus is he shares the divine names he shares the divine attributes he shares the divine prerogatives he shares the divine activities he is God and I don't understand how this man how this person can have two natures and yet one person and I don't even begin to understand how tonight the one who sits equal with God on his throne is one who is still incarnate one who still has the flesh and the bone of his earthly manhood the great mystery of godliness and yet that again is the great conviction of every Christian heart here it is that our Lord Jesus Christ is not simply a great man not simply the greatest of men but that he is God to become man he is in fact the creator of the ends of this world he is the one through whom the vastness of this universe takes his being he is the one who upholds all things by the word of his power or we can look at it again like this and we can say there is another enigma that we find in the word of God and that is the mystery of iniquity the origin of evil and in Genesis chapter 3 we have there the description as to how sin entered into the human race but that does not get back to the origin of evil because fundamental to our knowledge of God is this great statement that God is good and that God is totally in control of everything that comes to pass he foreordains it all and that means that he foreordains the fall he foreordains the entry of sin he is not the author of that sin we are not told in the scriptures as to how sin could find its way into the heart of a sinless glorious angel and we are not told where sin ultimately came from all we are told is it is a reality it is something that is not ultimately outwith the sovereignty of God but we are told it is something that God himself is not ultimately responsible for and these are almost contradictions and yet they are writ large we see through our glass darkly the reality of sin in the face of the goodness of God and we as

[21 : 10] Christian men and women we are going to have to face the world with that that the world is out the world it is going to ask us questions for which we have no answer there are men and women and they are going to scream at us almost in their despair when they hear us preaching of a good God and an absolutely sovereign God and they point to all the sins and the suffering and the injustice of this world and they have a right to ask the question how can you maintain that and I have no answer in the face of such a question all I know is God is good and despite all the appearances to the contrary despite all the injustice that we see in the world God is not responsible for the evil that we see around us and we have no answer and we can only look into the world and say the word of God says this and there take our stand we can do no other than that or we can look at it like this and we can say that there is another mystery the mystery of providence how is it that some men and women their whole lives seems to be one glorious adventure and there are other poor souls and their life is one long pain and again is God capricious does God deliberately seek to destroy through adversity men and women whom he has made does God deal unjustly with men and again the world may ask the question why why why and we have no answer there are things in our lives which we would gladly do without there are things tonight in my life that I would not have if I was the master of my own destiny and yet

I am to remember always that the sovereignty of God can only be responded to adequately in one way and that is this is the day that the Lord hath made let us rejoice and be glad in it and that means the good days and the bad days it means days that are going to be filled with pain and sorrow and heartache God has made that day for me and I don't understand it all I know is it is a reality it is revealed in the scripture and as I look into the scripture out of my own desperate experience I say with the apostle that we simply see through a glass dark or then we can put it like this you remember the question that was asked of Jesus are there few that be saved what a question our God is good and our God is a God who invites all men sincerely without any reservation or qualification he invites men and women to come unto him and live and there is not a soul here tonight that God could not touch and change there is not a barrier in your heart that this good God could not break down in a moment and yet tonight we are still faced with this that the vast mass of our fellow men they seem to be on the broad road to destruction you remember the vision of John and Patmos a great number that no man could number out of every nation and kindred and tongue and that is on the one hand and yet on the other hand there is also this that Jesus speaks of his church as a little flock and I wonder tonight even in the privileged town of

Inverness what percentage are even attending church and out of that percentage what percentage again are saved are there more lost than saved are there more saved than lost God is good God would will that you all would come and to him and live and there is a great mystery and closely attached to that question of the few that be saved there is also this other mystery of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man because you remember how Jesus responded to that question he didn't even answer the question he said you strive to enter in at the narrow gate never mind asking how many are going to be saved there is one thing that is of utmost importance and that is that you are saved and my great concern tonight ought not to be are there going to be more in heaven than in hell but my great concern ought to be where am I going to be am I going to be saved and that is what Jesus says and God is inviting and God is all powerful and yet

God places a man's destiny fair and square on his own shoulder and that is the responsibility the unescapable responsibility that sits upon everyone who listens to the gospel your destiny is upon your own shoulder faith is a gift the Holy Spirit is a gift and God gives the gift and God gives the Holy Spirit to all that ask and God is offering to men and women tonight in this church he's offering you the right hand of fellowship and friendship he's offering you forgiveness of sin he's offering you justification the adoption of sons he's offering you an eternity of unimaginable glory and he's saying it's all up to you to respond a mystery we see through a glass dark now one could go on but our time is passing in all this there are two extremes that we must always be wary of and there are the two opposites on the one hand we must beware of intellectual because there are many men and women and they look into the word of God and they see what appears to them to be direct contradictory statements they can't reconcile these various tensions and so they say I won't believe what

I can't understand and there are many people and this is the great barrier between them and their souls salvation it is that they don't understand the gospel and you see what we have to reckon with is that we never understand the gospel I don't understand the gospel in its entirety and we must never ever imagine that in order to believe we must understand every teaching of the word of God you see there's a very interesting sequence we must all stand where Anselm the great archbishop of Canterbury of the 12th century stood you may remember what he said I believe in order to understand and always it is this order faith comes first and then comes the understanding and if we try to put the understanding first we will never believe because we will never understand these things unless we experience these things in other words to understand or even to catch a glimmer of these things however darkly we must have faith that this is a revelation from God and then the other opposite extreme of that is that we are to avoid emotionalism let's not approach the

[29 : 07] Bible coldly and intellectually and let us never on the other hand approach it from the purely emotional subjective and I say that because there seems to be a tremendous temptation in our free church to gauge our standing before God as to how we feel at any given moment and very often if I were to gauge my standing before God by my providence or by my understanding of his world or how I feel at any given moment then I would always have to come to the conclusion that there are times when I'm not a Christian and we must be aware of this and I am convinced that this is the plague and the great mistake of so many of our Christian hearts we're assessing ourselves not by the teaching of God's word but we're assessing ourselves by how we respond at a given moment to that word and it may be that I feel miserable it may be that my whole life is one of darkness that has nothing to do with my standing before God if I have faith in

Christ I am a saint in Christ Jesus now that's the present situation in which we find ourselves now you see it's always going to be like that is the whole of our life and the whole of our whole existence going to be characterized by a failing to understand and a failing to respond appropriately no Paul says but when that which is perfect is come then that which is in part shall be done away there is a day coming when that which is in part or that which is imperfect shall be done away and Paul uses a word that means the completion of things everything summed up as they ought to be when that which is perfect is come and what is that which is perfect well let us put it like this it is going to be something that ultimately redounds to the glory of God because all that I've been speaking of the sovereignty of God and so on ultimately everything is going to be seen in the light of the glory of God everything that happens all the pain all the injustice somehow or other it is all to the glory of God and it is all to the glory of the good

God the loving God the merciful God he is in no way capricious he bears no ill will towards us and everything ultimately is going to fall out and to be seen to be conducive to the promotion of the glory of this good God now what is Paul speaking about here specifically he is speaking first of all of the barrier of the removal of the barrier of everything that stands between us and seeing the glory of God why is it that I don't understand God's word as I ought it is because of sin and there will be no more sin and all the results and all the ravages of sin will be gone there will be no more pain there will be no nightmare there will be no more death for the former things of imperfection are passed away there will be a new heaven and a new earth in which there will be no room for imperfection and in which everything that has been a marring of

God's creation and his glory shall be done away you remember how Peter writes in his second epistle chapter 3 verse 13 that according to his promise we wait for a new heaven and a new earth in which dwelleth righteousness in other words when that which is perfect has come there is the establishment of righteousness on this new heaven and this new earth and God's will will be done on earth as it is done in heaven when he recreates this glorious universe to its pristine innocence and glory as reflecting the goodness and the glory of God but Paul is speaking more specifically not in abstractions he is speaking of something that is actually going to take place in his own experience when that which is perfect is coming then I shall know even as also

I am known now when is the perfection going to come for the Christian believer that is why I read Hebrews chapter 12 you know how the catechism puts it the souls of believers or the death made perfect in holiness they do immediately pass into into glory you recall how in Hebrews chapter 12 that we read where the apostle was directing these Hebrew saints to the new era to which they had come and to the spirits of just men made perfect now there is a sense in which a Christian is made perfect at his death but it is not a total perfection it is only his spirit that is made perfect in holiness and their bodies still being united to Christ do rest in the graves until the resurrection in other words a man to be perfect needs more than the perfection of his soul or his spirit because a man is not a spirit a man is body and spirit and that perfection that the apostle is speaking of here is not a perfection that the saints experience at their death it is an experience that is to await the return of Christ and the resurrection of these bodies to meet the returning

[35 : 30] Christ it is a perfection of body reunited with spirit the perfection of the whole man it is that we will be made perfect in the sense that when we shall see him we shall see him as he is and we shall be like him in other words we are going to see Jesus Christ not as he was not as we imagined him to be we are going to see him as he really is with all the attendant glory of the God man we are going to be like him we are going to have bodies that are spiritual sinless immortal bodies bodies that are bodies that are suitable for that eternal existence in the presence of God because Paul here is saying that we will not be looking through a glass dark but then face to face in other words we won't need to look simply through another in order to see the glory of God in the face of Christ because we will be looking at the face of Jesus

Christ who is the image and the glory of God and we will see there displayed all the glory of God and in that vision of God in that light do we see light and in that vision we see understanding we shall know even as also I am known because what is man man is made in the image of God that means many things but it certainly does mean this that man is made to know God man is made to know what he is before God and man is made to know what God is in relation to him and that is what Paul is saying we shall know even as also we are known we will understand what God is to us the knowledge that we have now it's not false knowledge when I look into the word of God I don't see a false God but I don't understand the full implication of this revelation of the true God but then I won't be looking into a word

I will be looking into the faith of God and I will know God I will know God the Father God the Son and God the Holy Spirit I will know God the Father as my Father I will know God the Son in a way that I have never known him before I will know I will know the Holy Spirit as my Comforter my Advocate my Enlightener my Teacher I will understand the whole relationship of the Trinity to me I will understand what each person of the Trinity has done individually and specifically for me I will know God's grace I will know what it is and I will understand why it was that he led me in that particular way I will know the wisdom of God in other words I will know that there was no other possible way that God could have taken me I rebel I don't want very often the way that God is dealing with me but God does not act capricious he doesn't act foolishly it is always after the counsel of his own will and that means that there is only one way the wisest way and it may seem to me to be a hard road but God disciplines every son whom he receives and no chastisement for the moment seems pleasant but later on it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to them that have been disciplined thereby and that is the great principle and I will look back upon my history and I will thank

God for the way that he has taken me and I will thank God for every moment of pain and every misunderstanding I will thank God that he took me that way and there is something else that I will know in this connection also I will know even as I am known I will know why I have been saved are there few that be saved why am I saved when so many of our fellow men seem to be lost why me what's the difference I don't know all I know is that he has chosen me he has loved me called me engrafted me into Christ of him are you in Christ Jesus I don't know why all I know is that there is a purpose and there is a purpose not simply why he has chosen us but there is a purpose as to why he has chosen us as individuals he has a purpose for me there is a specific reason as to why

I am a Christian I am not saying that the reason is to be found in me all I am saying is that there is a reason and it is a good reason for God to save me and I will know that I will know what my function is to be in that eternity of God do you remember how there are various dispensations various services in the kingdom of God one rules over five cities one over ten so on I will know that I will also know what it is to glorify and enjoy God without the interposition of sin that is the commandment that God has given to me I am to do everything to his glory and I am not to do it reluctantly I am to enjoy doing it I am to enjoy my religion I am to enjoy God I am to rejoice in God and very often I don't enjoy my religion very often I don't enjoy God very often I live a life that is the complete opposite of glorifying to God but I will be able to do that in other words why do I exist

[41 : 45] I exist in order to glorify God and I exist in order to enjoy glorifying God and I am called to that I will know that one could go on but our time has really passed I just want to say this that there are certain things in glory that the Christian will never know first of all the Christian will never know God in his entirety we will know how the Father stands to us the Son and the Spirit but God is the infinite God and the knowledge that we have in glory will still be finite knowledge even although it will be perfect knowledge only God can know God and you and I as Christians as we stand before the presence of this God the whole of eternity will never exhaust the fresh revelations of his infinite being we have here an accurate revelation of God in the scriptures but this is not a total revelation we don't have in this book we have encapsulated the whole of God we are simply touching the fringes of his garments we are on the outskirts of his ways there remain vast infinite vistas of the glory of this

God and we will always stand amazed at the fresh and the never ending glory upon glory of God throughout all eternity we will never know God in his entirety he will always be to us in some measure the unknown God and we will never know secondly the cost of our redemption what I wonder do you think it cost Jesus the son my God my God why hast thou forsaken me that is something that we will never understand we know it's a reality we look into the word and we see it there and I don't even begin to grasp what that means that God should have abandoned his son for me I have been redeemed we have all been redeemed at an infinite cost and that also is something that is known only to God the pain and the degradation and the shame is something that is known only by God and the third thing that the

Christian will never know is this he will never know what it is to be cast off forever by God you see there is not a soul here tonight who has ever known what it is to be cast off by God you have rejected God perhaps but God has never ever rejected you God has never disappointed you God has never abandoned you but there is a day coming when God will abandon you and if you are out of Christ depart from me ye curse it but that is something that the Christian he will never know it in this life and he will never know it in the next life I will never know what it is to experience a Christless and a lost and a hellish eternity and all this Paul is saying try to grasp it he's giving all that sort of teaching in order that these Corinthians won't go over balanced with regards to spiritual gifts he says the most important thing is love ta can you