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I Corinthians 13
III. Love Never Ends
I Corinthians 13:8-13

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"Love never ends." Paul has saved the best news for last. He began his chapter on love by telling us that love is the most important thing in a human life – that the priority above all other priorities in life is that we seek to love God and to love others. Last week, he defined love for us – perfect love, which is God's love for you and for me and for all His children. And Paul told us that the more we let God's perfect love for us enter our hearts, the more our hearts will be able to fulfill life's great priority of love – the more our hearts will become able to love God, as well as to love others as ourselves. All good news – all the very Good News of the Gospel in Jesus Christ.

But now Paul gives us the best good news of all: love never ends. Everything else comes to an end, says Paul to the Corinthians. All those things you Corinthians are fighting over right now, obsessed and worried over right now – prophecies, speaking in tongues, and so on – all of that will come to an end. Love, however, never ends. It is Paul saying to them, yet again, that love is the priority – seeking to love one another is far better than being right in an argument over something which in the end isn't worth all that much anyway. *"As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease."* Love never ends. Even knowledge, says Paul, even knowledge will away – only love never ends.

Even knowledge will pass away. With that thought Paul then launches into what seems like a digression away from his theme of love never ends. But it is not a digression – Paul is setting up his main point about love never ending. Two pictures follow concerning how limited our knowledge really is – how partial our understanding of anything and everything, including the elements and events of our own lives, really is.

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I become a man, I gave up childish ways." Reading those words, I started thinking about something I remember from my own childhood in Florida. I started thinking about how, as a child, I loved it when a thunderstorm would come around at night while I was safely tucked in to my bed. The sound of the rain on the roof, the flashes of lightning and booms of thunder – rather than being scared, I remember feeling very safe, very cozy, and very happy under the covers. After all, I was safe at home with my mom and dad. But then I became an adult. And now I know something I didn't know then – how my mom and dad must have felt during those very same thunderstorms. They, like me now, no doubt heard the rain on the roof, saw the lightning and felt the thunder – and felt not comfort but anxiety, not cozy but worried. Worried that the roof might leak, that the gutters would fail, that the wind would topple over a tree onto our home. But the point Paul is

making here is not literally that when you are a child you have no idea about adult worries. What Paul is saying is that you and I, for all the things we do know about life in the world, that you and I are still nothing but children in our understanding of what is really happening. Children in our capacity to truly know and rightly make sense of the elements and events of our lives.

He makes the same point with his next picture: *"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."* "Fully known" – God knows us right now infinitely better than we know ourselves. We know ourselves, understand ourselves – know life and understand life – only partly. There is so much we don't know; so much, truly, that we really don't understand fully. Not only is so much of what we experience – especially the bad stuff we experience – still such a mystery to us, but even our own deepest thoughts and feelings and motivations and fears are a mystery we do not fully comprehend, only partly comprehend.

For example, when something bad happens, we are quick to try to get a handle on it, try to label it, try to assign a cause or a culprit to blame. But we don't really know – rarely do we fully know. Most of the time we don't really, truly and completely, understand why, for example, the cancer comes or the car crashes or the marriage fails. At best we see as in a mirror dimly, says Paul – mirrors back then were made of polished brass. You could see yourselves in them, but not really very clearly, not in fine detail. So, says Paul, with our knowledge and understanding of life. We see enough to make partial sense of it – as in a brass mirror somewhat dimly. But there is so much we cannot see, so much we cannot comprehend. We are children (the first picture) staring into a brass mirror (the second picture). Or, as Alfred Lord Tennyson once put it – combining both of these images of Paul:

> *. . . but what am I?*
> *An infant crying in the night:*
> *An infant crying for the light;*
> *And with no language but a cry.*[1]

But love never ends – in the meantime everything else will, says Paul. And – were that not enough – Paul says also that we go through life with the comprehension of children looking dimly into a brass mirror. So how is this good news again – this last part of chapter thirteen? Because I'm starting to get depressed! But Paul is just setting us up for the good news to come – the best possible good news. Setting us up so we will hear it aright.

We go through life with the comprehension of children looking dimly into a brass mirror – <u>but</u> love never ends. Which means that despite our partial, childish knowledge, we go through life loved by God. And like the way I felt safe in my bed on those stormy nights because of my trust in the love of my parents to protect me, so we can feel safe because we can trust that the love of God will carry us through everything life can bring upon us – the good and the bad, that which we partially understand as well as that which we do not understand at all. We can trust that the love of God for us, never-ending, is there to sustain us through even the storms, bringing us into each new day. This love of God for us, which is never ending, is nearer to us, more life giving to us, than even the air that we breathe. From cradle to grave, says Paul, we live our lives – our childish comprehending staring into a brass mirror lives – under the watchful, powerful, loving care of the

One who made us, has redeemed us, and is even now preparing a place for us in heaven. Love that never ends. We are safely held, even and especially in the midst of that which we do not fully comprehend, by God's love for us, which never ends.

And that truth, that reality of God's never-ending love for us, that is what Paul is pointing us toward when he speaks of faith, hope, and love: *"So now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three."* Faith is the unfailing assurance we are given that what God has done for us in Jesus Christ is real, is true, and avails for us personally in every moment. Faith is the assurance that our sins, our failures, our wounds have all been taken up into His cross and are forgiven, and shall be healed. That whatever lies behind us God has entered into and dealt with by His love. Faith is the *"assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,"* says the Letter to the Hebrews.[2]

And speaking of hope – faith, hope, and love – hope is the assurance that God's love will do the same with our future. Hope is the assurance that God will keep all His promises to us. Hope is the assurance that all things really shall be brought round to good for us in the end. Hope is the assurance that whatever lies ahead of us, God will be there with us and for us – *"I am with you always, even to the close of the age,"* said our loving Savior. Faith and hope are how we live in the midst of our lack of understanding, how we live in assurance and peace even as children staring dimly into a brass mirror. We may not comprehend all things, but God's love meets in all things – and we may rest our bruised hearts and anxious spirits in that love every day of our lives. *"Faith, hope, and love abide, these three."*

One of the greats from an earlier age, the preacher Robert Luccock, offers us this wonderful picture of life lived under God's love, life lived out in the faith and hope given to us by God's love:

> *Could we see it best in a picture? The Golden Gate is the inlet from the Pacific Ocean to San Francisco Bay. By wind, storm, and tide this passage of water can be turned to a dangerous turbulence, churning in from the ocean. On the ebb tide, especially under a blanket of fog and darkness, small powerless boats may be carried out into trackless seas. Two decades ago engineers built a bridge across the Golden Gate. Down into solid rock beneath the bay they drove the pilings upon which the towers rose. From these towers they flung cables across the Gate, anchored in the rock on either side. From these cables they hung the bridge. For all practical purpose that bridge was built with an infinite margin of safety for stress, tension, and load. It can carry all the traffic that could be sent over it. Today people can walk unafraid across the Golden Gate through storm and darkness, because their support is anchored in the rock. Those who lives are anchored for support in the love of God can walk without fear above the seas of anxiety across any Golden Gate to which life may lead them.*[3]

"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." And now we are back to where Paul began – *"Love never ends."* Faith and hope, based in the love of God for us, can and will anchor and secure us in this life – but love never ends means that our lives

shall extend beyond this life. That our lives shall never end. *"The greatest of these is love"* – because God's love for each one of us is deeper than the ocean, broader than the expanse of the sky. The central fact of our existence is simply this: that we are loved by God with a love that will never let us go. And there is not a thing we can do that would cause God to cease loving us. *"The greatest of these is love"* – and God's love will never end. And because God's love shall never end, we – who are God's beloved – we also shall never end.

As Frederick Buechner writes:

> *We are above all things loved—that is the good news of the gospel—and loved not just the way we turn up on Sundays in our best clothes and on our best behavior and with our best feet forward, but loved as we alone know ourselves to be, the weakest and shabbiest of what we are along with the strongest and gladdest.*[4]

"The greatest of these is love." Because *"Love never ends."* God's love for us will never end. Which means that we will never end. Oh, we shall die – we shall all die. But our deaths will not be the end. Because God's love for us never ends, death will not be allowed to be our end. God will lead us through that valley of the shadow of death into life anew, life renewed, life made whole and perfect and never-ending. Because God loves us too much to ever let death get in the way of His being able to continue loving us, even into eternity. Robert Luccock again:

> *Our daughter Susan at the age of four had a favorite expression that evokes still the wonder of her childhood. Every night when I left her before she went to sleep these would be her words: "I'm going to wake up in the morning." It was a kind of orientation away from the closing day to the day which was to dawn, on which we often looked forward to some exciting adventure or family occasion for fun. In her childlike wisdom she perceived a truth: beyond the shadows of this day was a sleep, but beyond the sleep was a new morning to which she would wake . . . So a little child led her father to a yet greater truth. Beyond the closing chapter of this life lies a sleep. But beyond the sleep there is a waking in a glad new morning with God. As Susan lay down to sleep in the comfort of knowing she would sleep guarded by our love and wake in the morning, so you and I can lie down to sleep at the last and, loving God and being guarded by His love, wake to Him in the morning.*[5]

When this life is over, I'm going to wake up, you're going to wake up, we all in Christ are going to wake up in the morning. So we can fall asleep in death with complete peace in our hearts and minds – because God's love is going to wake us up in the morning.

"The greatest of these is love" – because *"Love never ends."* And because God's love for us never ends, so shall it be for us: we shall never end, but will live with Him in the fullness of His love for us forevermore. Good news? Good news.

But there is one thing more. Because the greatest of these is love, and because love never ends, not only shall we never be separated from God's love for us, but also we shall never be separated from those whom we have loved in this world, those whom we have loved in Christ. The communion of the saints, which we lift up and celebrate this morning, is something which shall be forever. Because love never ends. God's love for us never ends. And so our love for one another in Christ shall never end. Love shall never end. And so the communion of the saints together in heaven shall never end.

A pastor tells of being approached by an elderly member of his congregation after worship. *"Preacher,"* said the man, *"I want you to correct my thinking."*

> *"Last week, during communion, I had a strange feeling, a funny notion, and I want you to set me straight about it."*
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> *"What happened?"*
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> *"It was when the little pieces of bread were being passed around. You had said something about this being a feast for God's family, and when I took the bread I began to think that we weren't the only ones here. I felt that my mother and father were here, too. In my mind I saw my brother, Sam, and my grandparents, and all those who've gone before me. Preacher, I know all those people are dead and gone, and I'll see them in heaven someday, but I couldn't get them out of my mind. I felt they were right there at that table last Sunday with us. It was a good feeling, preacher, but I know I need you to straighten me out."*
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> *"No, I don't need to straighten you out," said [the preacher] slowly. "What you felt is true."*[6]

Because love never ends, the communion of the saints will never end. We will be with each other forever.

"When we all get to heaven," says the old gospel hymn, *"When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be."* What a day of rejoicing that will be. Because love never ends. Because love never shall end, but shall last forevermore.

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[1] Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H.," Canto 54. On-line at In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII: 54 | The Poetry Foundation.

[2] Hebrews 11:1.

[3] Robert E. Luccock, "No Fear of Tomorrow," in The Power of His Name (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1960), p. 52.

[4] Frederick Buechner, "The Great Dance," in Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 241.

[5] Luccock, "Love Stands at the Heart of Death," in The Power of His Name, pp. 110-111.

[6] Thomas G. Long, Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 64.