

“But Then, Face to Face” (1 Cor. 13:8–13)

By Jacob Gerber

The final paragraph of 1 Corinthians 13 is extraordinary, not only for its breath-taking hope for the future of the people of God, but also for its literary quality. The entirety of 1 Corinthians 13 is written beautifully, and Paul ends this chapter on a high note. Paul writes this passage as a *chiasm*, a literary structure where the outline looks as though the author traced down the left side of the Greek letter *chi* (X). So, the first elements correspond with the last elements, and the middle elements correspond with each other. Here is how the chiasm looks in 1 Corinthians 13:8–13:

- A) Love never ends (1 Cor. 13:8a)
- B) Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will pass away (1 Cor. 13:8b)
- C) Partial knowledge/prophecy now vs. the perfect then (1 Cor. 13:9–10)
- D) Ways of a child vs. ways of a man (1 Cor. 13:11)
- D') Indirect vision now vs. face-to-face vision then (1 Cor. 13:12a)
- C') Partial knowledge now vs. full knowledge then (1 Cor. 13:12b)
- B') Faith, hope, and love abide (1 Cor. 13:13a)
- A') The greatest is love (1 Cor. 13:13b)

At the beginning and the end (A), Paul bookends this section with statements about the enduring value of love: Love never ends, and the greatest of the virtues is love. Next, in the first interior section (B), Paul contrasts the temporary value of the *gifts* (prophecies, tongues, and knowledge) against the enduring value of the three *graces* (faith, hope, and love). This point will become important when we try to understand how faith and hope are both similar to and different from love. Then, in the third interior section (C), Paul contrasts the partial with the perfect, especially in the area of knowledge. Finally, in the fourth interior section (D), Paul illustrates this contrast between the partial and the perfect, first by comparing a child with a man, and second by comparing indirect sight in a mirror with face to face sight. As a whole, this structure enhances Paul's stark contrast between the temporary significance of spiritual gifts and the eternal, enduring value of love.

The Partial: Seeing in a Mirror Dimly

Our translation has, “Love never ends” (1 Cor. 13:8a); however, the word “ends” is a word that most often means “falls.” We might bring out Paul's imagery better by translating this, “Love never collapses.”¹ This is foundational idea on which the whole passage rests. In contrast to the enduring

¹ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 179.

character of love, Paul states that the extraordinary gifts of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge “will pass away” (1 Cor. 13:8b). Certainly, God’s truth will endure forever, as it has been revealed by the gifts of prophecy and tongues, and understood by the gift of knowledge.² The exercise of these gifts, however, must pass away: “In contrast to love, the spiritual gifts have a built-in obsolescence. They are not permanent and do not get perfected. Prophecy and knowledge will be brought to an end. These gifts are only partial and must give way to something beyond themselves.”³

The word translated here as “pass away” is particularly important in Paul’s theology of redemptive history. Paul regularly uses this word to describe the way that God abolishes/does away with/brings to nothing/causes to pass away *both* the enemies that oppose him (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:28) as well as his own, righteous works whose temporary purpose has come to an end.⁴ Perhaps the most important parallel passage to use this verb “pass away” is in 2 Corinthians 3. There, Paul uses this word four times to contrast the passing away of the glory of the old covenant ministry (2 Cor. 3:7, 11, 13, 14). We should note two other strong points of connection from that passage to our passage. First, in contrast to the temporary glory of the old covenant, Paul describes the glory of the new covenant as “permanent” (*to menon*; lit: *abiding/remaining*; 2 Cor. 3:11), using the same word that appears in 1 Corinthians 13:13: “So now faith, hope, and love *abide...*” (*menei*). Second, Paul contrasts the fading glory of Moses’s face (2 Cor. 3:7–8) with the enduring and increasing glory that we experience as “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18a). In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul makes precisely this type of comparison as he speaks of our indirect vision of God now, compared to our future vision of God “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12).

But, as we notice the strong overlap of themes within these two passages, we should notice just as strong of a difference in their respective messages. In 1 Corinthians 13:8–13, Paul is clearly contrasting our temporary experience now with our permanent experience in glory, when Christ returns. In 2 Corinthians 3, however, Paul is contrasting the temporary experience of the old covenant with the permanent experience of the new covenant—that is, our experience *now*, after Christ’s first coming, but before Christ’s second coming. Do we really see the glory of the Lord with unveiled face *now* (2 Cor. 3:18), or will we not see him *face to face* until the future (1 Cor. 13:12)? How do we resolve this tension?

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 562.

³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 621.

⁴ “On the other hand, prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will all be brought to nothing eschatologically. The verb that Paul uses in verse 8 of prophecy and knowledge (*katargein*) is a favorite word of his; it consistently refers to God’s nullification or abolition of everything that is ephemeral or—in some cases—opposed to him. For example, in 1:28 Paul declares that God has chosen lowly and despised nonentities ‘to reduce to nothing [*katargēsē*] things that are’ (cf. 2:6; 6:13; 15:24–26; Rom. 6:6). In verse 8, to be sure, the gifts listed are not allied with powers hostile to God; rather, they will be abolished simply because they will no longer be necessary when the Lord returns and the fullness of his kingdom is present. These gifts of revelation are suited to the time between the times, when the church must walk by faith; prophecy and *gnōsis* [knowledge] are only ‘partial’ (v. 9), giving believers a real but imperfect glimpse of God’s future truth. When that which is complete comes, however, these partial instruments of knowledge will no longer have any purpose, and so they will be discarded by God (v. 10).” (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 228–29.)

To answer this question, it is important to see that this same tension appears in the story of Moses' vision of God that Paul alludes to in 2 Corinthians 3. In Exodus 33:11, we read, "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses *face to face*, as a man speaks to his friend." How, though, can this be? If 2 Corinthians 3 is correct that we have a *better* vision of the Lord, to see him with *unveiled face* now, and if 1 Corinthians 13 is correct that even we in the new covenant will see him *face to face*, then how can Exodus 33:11 be correct? In fact, Exodus 33 adds to the tension when only a few verses later Moses asks to see the glory of the Lord: "Please show me your glory" (Ex. 33:18). In response the Lord promises to show Moses something of his glory, but the Lord then adds, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Ex. 33:20).

Also, Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 13:10 of seeing "in a mirror dimly" is language that originally described *Moses's* face to face experience with the Lord. The word "dimly" translates the phrase "*en ainigmati*," or "in a riddle," a phrase God used to describe the "mouth to mouth" (cf., "face to face") relationship that he had with Moses: "With [Moses] I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in *riddles* [LXX: *di' ainigmatōn*], but he beholds the form of the LORD" (Num. 12:8). But, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3 that *we* are the ones who behold God face to face in the enduring glory of the new covenant, in a way that Moses was unable to enjoy due to the facing glory of the old covenant. So, which is it? Did Moses see God face to face and mouth to mouth, or not? The answer seems to be, *both*. Moses did *see* the Lord face to face, but he didn't see him *fully*.

The Perfect: Seeing Face to Face

Beyond the example of Moses, this tension appears several times throughout the Bible. First, we read that Jacob sees God "face to face" when he wrestles with him (Gen. 32:30). Nevertheless, the text of Genesis 32:22–32 goes out of its way to show that this vision was only *partial*. Three times, the text emphasizes the dark, shadowy nature of this vision. So, Jacob only saw his wrestling opponent before "the breaking of the day" (Gen. 32:24), until the point when "the day has broken" (Gen. 32:26), so that the sun did not rise until God was long gone (Gen. 32:31). Jacob indeed saw God "face to face"; however, the text goes to great lengths to show us that Jacob did not have a clear vision of God's face, but only in the shadows of the night.⁵ Furthermore, this vision *pointed away* from itself. Jacob did not force God to stay until he could *see* his face better, but until he could *hear* a blessing from God: "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen. 32:26). The vision pointed away from *seeing* God to *hearing* from God.

Second, Exodus 24 tells us that Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went halfway up Mount Sinai to feast in communion fellowship with the Lord. While they were there, "they saw the God of Israel" (Ex. 24:10). But how well did they see him? Immediately, the text tells us that something obscured their vision: "There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness." The text does not tell us anything about God's appearance, but only what they saw *near* God.⁶ They saw God, but they could really only see the

⁵ Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1B (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 556.

⁶ Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 506.

pavement under his feet.

This tension comes to its ultimate expression in the New Testament, and especially in the Gospels. In the New Testament, we read that God himself walked among his people, so that they *saw* him: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, *and we have seen his glory*, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In the opening lines of 1 John, the Apostle can’t get over the extraordinary privilege he had to *see* the glory of God in the person of Christ, mentioning six times in three verses that they saw him, looked upon him, and that he was made manifest (i.e., visible) in their midst (1 John 1:1–3). Nevertheless, while people *saw* God in Jesus Christ, they did not recognize him: “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him” (John 1:10). They were blind, unable to see the light of his glory (John 12:36–43). Even Jesus’ own disciples could not really understand the identity of their Master. So, on the one hand, Peter confessed that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). On the other hand, though, when Jesus was transfigured to reveal his glory clearly to Peter, Peter thought he honored Jesus by putting the Lord on the same level as Moses and Elijah (Matt. 17:4). Indeed, when Peter later reflected on the privilege of being “eyewitnesses of the majesty” on the mount of transfiguration, he judged that we in the church now have something better: “we have the prophetic word *more fully confirmed*” (2 Pet. 1:16, 19). So, the disciples *saw* Jesus, but they didn’t really *see* him. We see him better now, by faith, in the Word, through the Holy Spirit.

The Bible openly acknowledges this tension. In Isaiah 6, we read that Isaiah’s mission was to help the people *see* that they didn’t *see*: “Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; *keep on seeing, but do not perceive.*’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and *blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes*, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Isa. 6:9–10). Paul described his own ministry with the same language earlier in 1 Corinthians: “But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him’— these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:9–10). Where we cannot see Christ on our own because of our blindness from sin, the Holy Spirit gives us eyes to see him by faith. The ability to behold the permanent glory of the Lord with unveiled face comes only “from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18b). Where the god of this world (Satan) has blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the glory of Christ (the image of God), our God has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:4, 6).

The Pathway: Seeing Christ in the Word, by Faith, through the Holy Spirit

What, though, does all this have to do with 1 Corinthians 13:8–13? First, this background helps us to recognize that when Paul contrasts our current, in-a-riddle vision of God in a mirror *now*, with our face to face vision of him in the *future*, this isn’t an all or nothing proposition. That is, we should recognize that we *do* have a face to face vision of the Lord now, *by faith*, and *through his Word*. Throughout redemptive history, whenever God gave a face-to-face vision of himself to his people, the vision was always *progressive*, but always *partial*. So, Jacob saw God face to face, receiving a *progressively* better vision of God than his father, Isaac, or his grandfather Abraham had received. Nevertheless, this vision was only *partial*, in shadows. Then, the elders of Israel had

a *progressively* better vision of God, but again, the vision was only *partial*, through a pavement of sapphire stone.

As for Moses, he had the *progressively* best vision of all, since he spoke with God face to face, mouth to mouth. Nevertheless, even this was *partial*, as Moses was not permitted to see the Lord's face and live. Peter saw the transfigured glory of Christ, the Son of the living God, but did not fully grasp the significance of the confession of faith he had made only six days earlier. His vision was *progressively* the best, but still only *partial*, due to his lack of understanding. As for us, then, we *do* behold the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces (2 Cor. 3:18). Progressively speaking, we have a better vision of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ than *anyone* in redemptive history (2 Cor. 4:6). Nevertheless, we acknowledge that our current privileges are *partial*, so that they will pale in comparison to the face to face encounter we will have with the Lord throughout eternity. Like believers in every other stage of redemptive history, we are given exquisite privileges, and yet those privileges are only temporary. When the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

Second, this background helps us to understand *how* we see the Lord face to face *now*, in contrast to how we will see him face to face *in the future*. *Now*, we see the Lord in his Word, and by his Spirit. Not only is each subsequent face-to-face vision of God *progressive* and *partial*, but we also see how each one *points away* from itself. While Jacob could only see the face of God in shadows, he demanded to *hear* a blessing from God (Gen. 32:26). Then, when Moses asked to see the Lord's glory, the Lord gave him not so much a *vision* as a *message*, passing by Moses to "[proclaim] the name of the LORD" in Moses' hearing (Ex. 34:5–7). Then, when Peter asked to make tabernacles for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, on the Mount of Transfiguration, God spoke from heaven to redirect Peter's attention from what Peter *saw* to what Peter would *hear*: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; *listen to him*" (Matt. 17:5). Later, Peter reflected back on his experience and stated that the privileges of God's word were greater than his privileges in seeing the glory of Christ on the mountain: "And we have the prophetic word *more fully confirmed*, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19). Then in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul insisted that we behold the glory of the Lord in the *Scriptures*, when the Holy Spirit removes the veil by faith: "For to this day, when they *read* the old covenant, that same veil remains unlisted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever *Moses is read* a veil lies over their heart. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now *the Lord is the Spirit*, and *where the Spirit of the Lord is*, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into this are image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:14–18).

In the Bible, we read of two kinds of seeing that are different, but related. John Owen writes:

There are, therefore, two ways or degrees of beholding the glory of Christ, which are constantly distinguished in the Scripture. The one is by faith in this world, which is 'the evidence of things not seen'; the other is by sight, or immediate vision in eternity, 'We walk by faith, and not by sight....For here we 'behold him darkly in a glass' (that is, by faith); 'but we shall see him face to face' (by immediate vision)....No man shall ever behold the glory of Christ by sight hereafter, who does not in some measure behold it by faith here in this

world.⁷

We do *see* Christ now, albeit “darkly”—i.e., indirectly, in a riddle. The vision that we have of him is *true*, even if it is *partial*. We enjoy the vision of God as children, seeing him in ways that will ultimately pass away when we enter into the fullness of maturity, to gaze upon him face to face throughout all eternity. We *do* see him now by faith, in his Word, but only partially. When he appears, we will see him fully as he is, face to face (cf. 1 John 3:2). When we live forever in the New Jerusalem, “the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. *They will see his face*, and his name will be on his foreheads” (Rev. 22:3–4).

Third, this background helps us to understand the different place in redemptive history where the *Corinthians* lived, as compared to the place in redemptive history where *we* live. There is, of course, no difference in our relationship to Christ by faith through the enduring glory of the new covenant. Instead, the difference lies in our *clarity* of seeing him in the completed Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Jacob, Moses, and Jesus’ own disciples *saw* God face to face, and the vision of God became increasingly clear through history. None of these people, however, really *saw* him. Each time they saw some glimpse of God’s face, the Lord redirected them away from seeing him by *sight* toward seeing him *by faith*, in his *word*. If we understand the way the Bible (1) consistently discusses the face to face relationship that God has with his people throughout redemptive history as *both* already *and* not yet, and (2) we see how the not-yet aspect of this relationship is in his word, then we can see the difference between the Corinthians and us. Namely, we have the completed canon of Scripture, and they did not.

The word of the Lord comes to us in its complete form, bearing full witness to the final revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The earliest church had the final revelation of God in Jesus Christ, but they did not have the *complete* form of the *full* witness to Christ. Rather, the word of the Lord came to the earliest church in bits and pieces, through the preaching and teaching of the apostles and the prophets. To be sure, those would have been exciting days as the first hearers of the gospel were taught directly by Christ’s apostles to understand the mystery of Christ for the first time. But we see Christ even more clearly in the complete canon of Scripture, where we can study God’s word for ourselves, comparing each passage with the others.

Therefore, this background helps us to understand that Paul has two ideas in mind as he describes the cessation of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge. In the shorter term, Paul knew that these gifts would be exercised in their early church manifestation until the completion of the New Testament canon. In the longer term, Paul knew that any form of these gifts whatsoever will become irrelevant once the *perfect* comes, at Christ’s return. The great theologian Jonathan Edwards wisely comments on this twofold interpretation:

There is a twofold failing or ceasing of those miraculous and other common gifts of the Spirit, both of which the apostle has doubtless respect to: one is their failing at the end of the present state of probation, or the present imperfect state of God’s people in time, with respect to particular persons that have common gifts, at death, and with respect to the church of God

⁷ John Owen, *Meditations on the Glory of Christ* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 43.

collectively considered, at the end of the world; and the other is the failing of miraculous gifts in the church of Christ, even while yet remaining in its temporary and militant state, as they failed at or about the end of the apostolic age, that first and more imperfect, and less settled and established state of the Christian church, before it was wholly brought out from under the Mosaic dispensation, wherein it was under tutors and governors, and before the canon of the Scripture was fully completed, and all parts of it thoroughly collected and established. Miraculous, and other common gifts of the Spirit, cease at the end of the imperfect state of the church: wherein the church knows in part, and is in a state of childhood in comparison of the more perfect state that follows.⁸

Many good commentators react with surprising hostility to the idea that the cessation of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge refers to the finalization of the New Testament canon.⁹ Nevertheless, these commentators seem to be evaluating this position as though we must choose *either* the cessation of sign gifts at the close of the apostolic age *or* the complete cessation of spiritual gifts at the return of Christ. As I have attempted to show, the biblical background consistently speaks of our “face to face” relationship with God not as *either/or*, but as *both/and*. This broader biblical background lines up perfectly with Paul’s point in this passage, that what we have a true knowledge of God, albeit a partial one. Certainly, Paul is primarily contrasting our vision of God now, by faith, with our vision of God in eternity, by sight. This does not exclude, however, a more immediate contrast between the vision of God enjoyed by the earliest church, where the word of the Lord came in pieces through the apostles and prophets (cf. Eph. 2:20; 3:5), and the vision of God the rest of the church has enjoyed since the completion of the New Testament canon. Jonathan Edwards helpfully identifies that there is a twofold cessation of the sign gifts in redemptive history.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the Bible describe each new face-to-face vision of the Lord throughout redemptive history as *progressive*? That is, how was each subsequent vision better than what God had given his people before? How was this true for Jacob, for the Israelites, for Moses, for the disciples (especially Peter), and now, for us? What do we learn about the *progressive* nature of God’s revelation of his face? How does that point to the future, when we will see him “face to face” (1 Cor. 12:12a)?
2. How does the Bible describe each face-to-face vision of the Lord as always only *partial*? That is, how does the text inform us that God did indeed give his people a vision of his face; however, it was never full or complete? How was this true for Jacob, for the Israelites, for Moses, for the disciples

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, “Notes on the Bible,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (First published 1834; Reprint: Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 800. Available online: <<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works2.xiv.xxii.html>>

⁹ E.g., Richard Hays, “This interpretation is simply nonsense.” (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 229.) Even Thomas Schreiner, a cessationist, evaluates interpretations of 1 Corinthians 13 related to the close of the New Testament canon as “unconvincing.” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 279–80.)

(especially Peter), and now, for us? What do we learn about the *partial* revelation of God's face? What does this teach us about our indirect, in-a-mirror-dimly vision of Christ now (1 Cor. 12:12a)?

3. How does the Bible describe each face-to-face vision of the Lord as always *pointing away* from *seeing* God to *hearing* God? In this life, why does God point us away from *seeing* him to *hearing* his word? How was this true for Jacob, for the Israelites, for Moses, for the disciples (especially Peter), and now, for us? What does this teach us about how to live now, as we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ by faith, in the Scriptures, through the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 4:1–6)?

4. In this light, how might we understand the *gospel gifts* of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge as giving a vision of God's glory in the face of Christ to the church? What function did those gifts serve before the completion of the New Testament? Why might the *progressive* nature of the New Testament suggest that these gifts would "pass away" and "cease" at the close of the apostolic age (1 Cor. 13:8)? Even so, how is the New Testament still only a *partial* vision, *pointing us* (as in a mirror) toward the perfect person of Christ himself? How does the New Testament give us a face-to-face vision of Christ now, while also building our anticipation for our final, complete, and satisfying vision of Christ face-to-face in eternity?