

## Prayers

### To God

*Find a position to worship the Lord in which you feel comfortable, and focus your prayers on His love and guidance through the years. Praise Him.*

### For myself

*Seek the Lord's forgiveness for those things in which you have been disobedient to Him. If you are unsure about this and cannot think of anything, ask Him to reveal these things to you.*

### For others

**Thank You Father, for the paths You have led me on and the various people I have met and worked with. I commit to Your hands with thanksgiving those who have helped me and blessed me; and I bless those who have made my life difficult even though I find it hard to do so. I confess I do not find it easy to be generous to some people, Father, but I accept that Jesus has told me to love my enemies, and I seek to do this. I therefore bless them all in Your name, and I seek Your redemption for their souls as well as mine: AMEN**

## Meditation

Where can I find true faith in God?  
I will find it in readiness for the Saviours call,  
Giving of myself to journey with Him,  
And yielding to Him who always gives me His love.

Where can I find the peace of God?  
I will find it in others whose lives are whole  
The giving and receiving of forgiveness  
And the Saviour's selflessness which is all to me.

Where can I find the word of God?  
I will find it the writings of people of faith  
When listening to those who prophesy  
And supremely, in the Bible, God's Word for me.

Where can I find the love of God?  
I will find it in a stranger who turns to help  
A loved one who cares without question  
and the touch of Jesus who has given me His all.

So when my soul stops its searching,  
I will be found in my Lord.

# Bible Passage

## 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

<sup>8</sup> Love never ends.

- Where there are prophecies, they will be set aside;
- Where there are tongues, they will cease;
- Where there is knowledge, it will come to nothing;

<sup>9</sup> for now, we know things only in part and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when perfection comes, what is partial will come to an end.

<sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child; but when I became a man, I put aside childish things.

<sup>12</sup> We see things now as if in a mirror, like a reflection, but at that time we will see face to face. The things I now know are only partial, but at that time I will come to understand completely, just as I have been understood.

<sup>13</sup> For now, faith, hope, and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

## Review

1 Corinthians 13 is a majestic hymn of praise not just to love, but to God. The chapter does not mention God or Jesus, so it can be used in secular ceremonies or quoted to people of other faiths without causing offence. But for believers, Paul's magnificent words here reflect the truth about God and His love, as found in the life and death of Jesus. Our passage here begins and ends with the one word that dominates it, and is in truth its whole theme. This word is 'love', not merely as we experience it, 'in part' (13:9,10), but in its eternal qualities as found in God (13:13).

### **Love abides**

So when we understand that in speaking of love we speak of God, then this great chapter comes alive. Paul uses different examples here to describe the supreme quality of love, comparing our experience of it in this life with what may be known of it in eternity (13:9-12); but the first and the last phrase bind it all together. The passage begins with the famous words, 'love never ends' (13:8), but Paul is not saying merely that true love persists throughout the course of life, but as he explains, love is something special and it means something more. Each verse of our passage appeals to us to look beyond the finite world, and consider what can survive beyond it (13:9-12), ultimately to 'remain', or as older Bible versions say, 'abide', in heaven. Paul concludes that only one thing survives the transition between this earth and heaven, and this is one thing is 'love' (13:13).

Towards the end of our study we will look carefully at what it means for only love to 'remain' or 'abide' (13:13), and therefore able to survive from earth to heaven. But to prepare for this we will look at the four pictures Paul uses as examples to prepare us for this revelation, and try to understand what he says about the differences between earthly and heavenly experience. He builds up what he has to say, first making the radical but true statement that the great 'gifts of the Spirit' will all be useless in heaven (13:8); they are not part of a perfect life with God! He then explains how in a fallen world, everything we experience on earth is fundamentally flawed, so we naturally look forward to its perfection in heaven (13:9,10). His third example in verse 11 reminds us we are all on a journey towards maturity, and we cannot grasp this without letting go of 'childish things'; but we will have to work out what this says about heaven. The last example is of a mirror which reflects the truth imperfectly (13:12), but then, first century mirrors were different to modern ones. His point is that we will only find things perfectly in heaven, and of all things, only love lasts that far (13:13)!

### **The limited value of the gifts of the spirit, compared to love**

Altogether, this is a staggering passage with immensely powerful truths. In verse eight, Paul dismisses the influential gifts of the Spirit, which he has just eulogised in chapter 12, as of limited value compared to love; he

mentions prophesy, tongues and knowledge. Those Paul was writing to valued these gifts highly, so much so that with the evidence of chapter 14, they appear to have characterised worship at Corinth. Was Paul trying to insult the church? No, he was telling them the truth. These gifts would be useless in heaven, for example, no one will need His Word delivered by prophesy when in His perfect presence! What value *'tongues'* then? This mysterious gift cannot normally be understood on earth unless combined with interpretation, when it delivers prophecy (14:6f.). So if *'tongues'* cease in heaven (13:8), we will surely be in perfect communication with God! The same can be said for *'knowledge'*, for will we not have access to all things when in His presence? It can be quite shocking to be reminded that spiritual things we value highly will not be necessary in heaven! Yet we feel this because we have little idea of what heaven will be like.

### ***Partial worldly experience made complete in heaven***

Paul now dwells for a moment on the basic difference between earth and heaven in verses 9 and 10, *'for we know things only in part ... but when perfection comes, what is partial will come to an end'*. It all seems very logical, but we may not quite get Paul's point. We might think this is stating the obvious, which is that life's experiences are incomplete until we get to heaven, and we only now have *'part'* of what will be *'complete'* in heaven. In the language of the first century, however, the words *'in part'* did not mean merely incomplete, but something more like *'second best'*, which is lost in most translations. So Paul urges God's people to look beyond the imperfections of earthly experience to put their hope in the perfect things of God, and ultimately in love, which survives into heaven.

### ***Growing up into the things of God ... growing up into heaven.***

The third phrase is again well known, *'When I was a child, I spoke as a child ... but when I became a man, I put aside childish things'*. Paul is clearly using growing up as an analogy; is he asking his readers to 'grow up' and face his message with the maturity of adulthood? It is possible, but it does not fit the flow of Paul's theme. Alternatively Paul could be using adulthood to represent being in God's perfect presence in heaven, with childhood as the earthly experience of growing up. If this is what he means, we should think about it carefully, because it reminds us that all God's people, saved sinners, are in this life, growing in maturity. No one has 'made it' to an experience of faith beyond that of others, and it would be good if we could remember such truths. All of us must be ready to cast aside the things of this world, our childish props to life and religion in particular, if we are to grow in grace and aspire to the things of heaven.

### ***The famous illustration of the mirror***

Lastly, Paul uses the illustration of a mirror to paint his final picture of the difference between earth and heaven. A mirror in the first century, however, was but a shadow of the perfectly reflecting device we can now buy cheaply in any shop. In those days, a mirror was a polished piece of flat metal offering varying degrees of reflective image, mostly very poor. So Paul is saying here that no earthly experience of faith can match up to the face to face experience of heaven. His last phrase though adds a fascinating insight; *'at that time I will come to understand completely, just as I have been understood'* (13:12). People have often wondered what this means, but I reckon it is simple enough. In heaven, we will realise that God has always understood us and everything that happened to us, and while this may be mysterious from an earthly viewpoint, God has always had our best interests at heart even though this may not be obvious from an earthly point of view. Pure and simple, this is the godly hope that *'all things'* will ultimately *'work for good'* for those who love Christ (see Romans 8:28).

### ***Love remains***

The last verse eulogising eternal love stands out as a Biblical classic. But surely, if faith is a supreme human quality does this not last forever in heaven? Paul says no, for faith is an earthly response to Christ, and once we are in heaven no faith will be required for us believe, for we will see God with our own eyes! Moreover, faith's saving purpose will have been fulfilled once we are in the Father's presence. Similarly with hope. This is surely of great value while we live on this earth, but this is because by faith we anticipate our future with God; so what reason will we have for this when in His presence?

For a chapter of Scripture that does not mention God and mentions 'love' only twice, it says more about 'God' and 'love' than we can imagine. This last part of 1 Corinthians 13 puts us in our place and belittles all human religiosity, worship, experience and ways of working at faith to try and get near God. Love alone lasts beyond life to eternity, just as Christ is risen and survives death. It lasts out of everything we do or experience; at least, love of family, love of Christian fellowship, love of life, love of others and love of God. We gain our salvation by faith in Jesus, but His whole ministry as well as the letters of Paul urge us to live by guiding light of

love, for only this supreme property of God will remain once we are with God in heaven, when we die. Nothing else will come, because love will be enough for our salvation.

## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***Scriptural support for the importance of love***

This passage must surely be added to others, urging God's people to focus their efforts on love; '*love one another ...*' (John 13:13:34, 15:12,17), '*love your neighbour as yourself ...*' (Matt 22:39), '*we know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another ...*' (1 John 3:14). What other Scriptures do we need to persuade us that love is the supreme quality of Christian life, and the only characteristic by which we ask to be measured by the world, let alone ourselves.

#### ***Putting love into action***

Yet how hard it is! I have for example heard people be incredibly insistent about declaring faith in certain ways, perhaps to receive healing, or to be a member of a fellowship. Faith is an essential part of the human response to God, but as Paul says here, there is a human emotion attached to faith, and without it, faith remains ill-nurtured and isolated as a religious ideal. Love provides the outward and generous hearted motive for effective faith (James 2:8) which grows through discipleship and seeks holiness.

Knowing that the love we put into action lasts through life to eternity should surely be a motive for placing love on the top of the list for the living of Christian life. Certainly, if we take all Paul says here in 1 Cor. 13, we have guidelines for a life of faith now and eternal life with the Lord.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- *Look through the doctrinal basis of the church you attend and find out if and where it mentions love, either as a motive for Christian action or as part of saving faith.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to love because their love has been abused.*

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. *How can we demonstrate love that transcends this life and points to heaven?*
2. *Given what Paul says here, what point is there in exercising the spiritual gifts?*
3. *Can we achieve Christian maturity in this life - and what might this mean?*

## Final Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for the love we receive from others, even when we do not know it. Help us to respond well when people help us or show us love; and give us the grace to show love in return. In so doing, may we fulfil your call, to 'love one another' both practically and spiritually. In Your name we ask this, Lord Jesus: **AMEN**