

## WHAT MATTERS 100 YEARS FROM NOW

### 1 Corinthians 13:8–13

**Dr. George O. Wood**

The theme of our Scripture today is “The Abiding Love of God.”

“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:8–13, NIV).

We had the joy, this past week, of having our family together again. This was the first time we’d all been together without Mom. Each of us did our own reminisces. One of the things that struck me was what my mom used to say—it’s what gave rise to this sermon title this morning.

Whenever some dispute or petty disagreement would emerge among members of the family, mom would always dismiss it with, “It won’t matter a hundred years from now, anyway.” That was sort of her response to most things that were argumentative in nature. It won’t matter a hundred years from now, anyway. I realize how right she is.

Within these next hundred years, all of us are going to be swept away and swept up. Hopefully, we’ll be swept up rather than swept away. What is happening in your life that’s going to matter a hundred years from now? What’s happening today that’s going to matter a hundred years from now? George Eldon Ladd, from Fuller seminary, has written a book *The Presence of The Future*.

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While his book on the kingdom of God relates the theme of knowing what is in the future, it helps us rearrange the present. If in 1970 you knew what you know today, how different would your life be? I know ours would be considerably different in terms of material possessions. I would have listened to my wife a few more times than I did. If we only knew what was down the road.

Paul says to us in this Scripture, “Here’s what’s coming down the road.” In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul has shared the priority of love (verses 1–3), the practice of love (verses 4–7), and the permanence of love (verses 8–13). What is going to matter a hundred years from now? Love is going to matter. Love is going to matter because it’s permanent rather than passing. Paul says, “Love never fails.” Or, “Love lasts.”

The phrase “Love never fails” is really logical after what he says in verse 7, that it covers all things, it believes all things, it hopes all things, it endures all things. Therefore, love never fails.

The literal word employed, that is translated “never fails,” is from the common verb “to fall.”

Paul is saying here, “love never falls.” What he means is that love doesn’t collapse. Love doesn’t disintegrate into ruin. Love doesn’t lose its strength. Love never leaves its place. Love never falls.

Phillips, in his translation, puts it this way, “Love can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.” Love never falls.

You may be listening to me and saying, “But I’ve got an experience that contradicts Paul’s.” You can think of someone whose relationship you once enjoyed, a relationship that is now broken, a relationship where love may have been present but now it has gone away. You may look at this and say, “But while it is poetically true that love never fails, it is true, in reality, that love does not last.”

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As I ponder that, I realized that some may be here today with that on their heart, and I said to the Lord, “How would You answer this? If someone said to You, it may be poetically true that love never fails but as for me, love did not last. How would you answer that?” The Lord may not answer everyone in the same way, and certainly I don’t think He would answer in a threatening way or condemnatory way. But I had a feeling that this is what He would say to some people here today. If you would allow this, as a word of prophecy, to maybe only a few, but a very direct word, it seemed like the Lord shared with my spirit. His response to the question “But, Lord, love didn’t last. Why?” was this, “I need to live more greatly in you.”

How does Jesus feel toward the person we are alienated from? How would Jesus demonstrate His love to that person? Has this person used up their last chance with the Lord? Compatibility is the key word we hear today in regards to relationships and in the delusions of relationships.

There’s really no compatibility, though, between Jesus of Nazareth and Saul of Tarsus. There couldn’t be two more unlike people in the world. Yet love won through incompatibility. Love breaks through incompatibility. The love of Jesus does not fail. It is His character to love. One of the things that the Lord wants to communicate to us as His people—one of the ways we grow into it—I don’t think we’re threatened into it. I don’t think we’re beat into it. I think we grow into it because of the love of the Lord. We begin to share something of the character of Jesus Christ. It’s His eternal nature to love. Love never falls out. Love never loses its place.

Paul says, “While this is true of love and it’s certainly true of the love of God, something doesn’t last, and that’s the charismatic gifts. Charismatic gifts do not last.” Paul could have used any of the nine charismatic gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 to demonstrate the passing nature of charismatic gifts. For example, in heaven there will be no need for healings, for no one will be sick. There will be no need for miracles, for there won’t be the need for miracles. There will be no need for

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discernment, because there won't be any evil spirits and I don't think there will be any carnal spirits. There will be nothing to discern. He chooses, however, to focus in on three of the charismatic gifts which were the most prominent at Corinth, which they prized the most—knowledge, prophecy, and tongues. Over and over again in the letter, starting with the word “knowledge” these gifts have been emphasized by the Corinthians. Paul says to a church that has put love on the back burner, “The things you've put on the front burner—knowledge, prophecy, and tongues—don't last.” And what you've put on the back burner is something that's going to last.

An interesting question arises here. In view of the fact that tongues, prophecy and knowledge aren't going to last, we must ask the question, “How long will they last?” I'm going to take a side trip for a moment. Pretend that you're on a shopping trip with me and I have just found, in a secret place somewhere, a little hallway that leads to a whole shopping area that's covered, all by itself. I'm going to leave the main path for just a moment and browse around in there and then come back out. How long will the charismatic gifts last? There are basically four responses to that question.

One response comes from our noncharismatic brothers and sisters in Christ. They've said that the charismatic gifts were intended to last until the New Testament was written. When the New Testament was written and the last thing was done, then the charismatic gifts pass out of existence. The assumption behind this viewpoint is that the New Testament gifts of prophecy and knowledge were substitutes for the Scripture in the Early Church. Instead of having the written Scripture, they had a word of prophecy and a word of knowledge, and that guided them until the written Scripture was completed. Such a position fails to understand what these gifts—knowledge and prophecy—were all about. Knowledge is simply an insight into God's Word and

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it's knowledge that's supernaturally disclosed by the Spirit which is not knowable through other means. Prophecy is not the writing of Scripture. In fact, Paul tells the Corinthians that they're to judge the prophets and are never to judge the written Scripture. That's clear from that statement alone that there's a great difference between prophesying in the Early Church and the written Scripture, which we cannot judge. It judges us. Prophecy was meant to encourage, to build up, to console. Are those ministries still going on through the spoken word in the body of Christ? Yes, obviously they are.

One writer has said, "When the Scripture is completed with the writing of the last book in the Bible, then that which was in part shall be seen to have its place in the life of the believer. It is the end of special signs, given during the infancy of the church. The imperfect must give way to the perfect. Tongues belong to spiritual childhood." Paul would have been amazed at that statement. Inasmuch as in his spiritual maturity, he exercised this gift rather continually. The New Testament canon's completion doesn't close the charismatic gifts. It's obvious they go on flowing in the church. Knowledge and prophecy were never simply intended to substitute the written Scripture, and they never had that place in the Early Church. The apostles were given the task by the Spirit of writing the Scripture.

A second kind of response in regard to how long the charismatic gifts will last. They'll last until maturity displaces immaturity. The assumption behind this is that a charismatic gift-oriented church is immature. And a mature church is one in which there is no longer any need for the charismatic gifts, because it is now a loving church. The gifts, therefore, have fallen away because the gifts have come. Because they've come to love more perfectly. Therefore, there's no longer any need for the gifts. This, by the way, is a paradox, because many of the charismatic churches with the flow of the gifts are actually more loving and alive in human warmth and

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caring than some of those who say the more mature church will not have the gifts. There's kind of a built-in tension there.

But again, if tongues are for the spiritually immature only, why does Paul continually speak in tongues? And also, we must remember that Paul never set the gifts against love. He never said, on the one hand, gifts are immature and love is mature. What was wrong at Corinth was that the gifts were being handled immaturely. There's a great deal of difference between the gifts being immature and their being handled immaturely.

A third response given of how long the charismatic gifts will last is “until someone explains them away.” I say that on the basis of reading other people, many of whom I really respect, but who seemingly have an unreasoning bias against charismatic gifts, and especially the gift of tongues. I've read people whom I dearly revere who are fellow pastors—noncharismatic—whose ministry I profit tremendously from, whose fan I am, but it seems like every time they come to a critically charismatic passage, they just throw away all the skill of interpreting Scripture they use elsewhere, and suddenly jettison it and are blindly irrational. Then they turn around and accuse people who believe in the gifts of being irrational. It's an incredible phenomenon I still haven't figured out.

I remember, years ago, 1 Corinthians 13:8 was used to prove that tongues ceased with the apostolic age. Tongues ceased. We simply pointed out, rather forcibly, that if tongues ceased, so does knowledge cease, since it's going to pass away. Therefore, that's not legitimate. Finally that view got through. So a fallback position was adopted, that there are two different Greek words used as verbs for “ceasing.” One Greek verb is used to describe knowledge and prophecy passing away. And another Greek verb is used to describe the passing away of tongues. It was thought that there was a subtle difference between these two words. The first, meaning that knowledge

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and prophecy will gradually cease, but tongues will just stop suddenly. Of course, they are going to stop at the close of the apostolic age.

It's marvelous what people can do with the Greek language when they speak to a non-Greek speaking group. I have found it is the way to solve more arguments—when I'm contesting with people about Scripture, I just have to say, "It says in the Greek..." And you can fool them 90 percent of the time. The only time you can't fool them is when other people know Greek.

We simply respond to that by saying that these two verbs are really synonyms. They're both describing the same thing. They're stylistic. We use synonyms when we don't want to be overly repetitive. There's not that great of a distinction between these two words.

So another fallback position says that the word describing the "passing away" of knowledge and prophecy is in the passive voice, and the other is in the middle voice. Passive voice in the future tense in the Greek language takes the action. Therefore, the idea is that something is going to bring about the end of knowledge and prophecy and that is the perfect. So when the perfect of the eternal age has come, prophecy and knowledge are going to be done away with. But in the middle voice, the implication is that tongues will cease by themselves. They're going to go away before the perfect has come to pass.

Several quick things...

Even if tongues are to cease on their own, Paul never says when they will cease. That's critical. Those who say that tongues will cease in the apostolic age must bear in mind the fact that Paul never said when.

Secondly, the whole argument on the passive and middle voice is sort of putting more weight on the text than it can bear. It is making a distinction that is really not there. Paul is not making a distinction between prophecy, knowledge and tongues in this passage. Rather, he is

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distinguishing between prophecy, knowledge, tongues and love. It's love that's going to abide, the others will pass away.

Finally, I think it should be noted that Paul doesn't know anything about the close of the apostolic age. Paul doesn't see two thousand years of Christian history. Paul, writing under the guidance of the Spirit, is waiting for the Lord to return. He is seeing the gifts lasting as long as the church is on earth, until the Lord returns. Paul's not saying, "Now, Corinthians, remember tongues are going to last until John gets done writing Revelation. As soon as John gets done writing Revelation, the charismatic gifts are going to cease." He doesn't say that at all.

How long will the charismatic gifts last then?

They will last until we've entered the eternal state. Verse 12 says, "Now I know in part but then I shall know fully even as I am fully known." When am I going to know fully? When I'm with the Lord. A lot of things I know only in part now. "Now we see a poor reflection, then we shall see face to face. When perfection comes the imperfect disappears." (1 Corinthians 13:10). "Now we know in part and we prophecy in part" (1 Corinthians 13:9). All these refer to the now, and then refer to the eternal state.

How long will the charismatic gifts last? Until we are with the Lord.

I hope this detailed examination has been of interest to you. I realize it may not have been of great interest to you. The reason why I did it, and took the time to go on that side street, was that we share together a concern for the truth. Love rejoices in the truth. There are perhaps some who look at the charismatic experience and have legitimate objections from the Scripture. Others have strong psychological objections on their own and simply use the Scripture wrongly to attempt to deny people the experience that God wants them to have. What I've always believed, as a practicing charismatic, is the fact that whatever our experience is, we don't have to unscrew our

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head in order to enjoy the experience. We can keep our head on our shoulders, if the experience is real and valid and from God, it must be built upon the Word of God, and I'm not going to suffer while persons come along and make the Word of God appear to be saying something that it doesn't say at all. I think, therefore, there is room for us to make, from time to time, a ringing defense of a false position that attempts to get persons who enjoy the charismatic gifts to feel somehow like second-rate citizens because they don't understand the Greek.

Love rejoices in the truth. Love is going to last because it's permanent rather than passing.

Charismatic gifts will pass. Love isn't going to. Love is going to last a hundred years from now.

It's important a hundred years from now, because it's complete rather than incomplete. Paul uses two illustrations here to speak of the completeness of love. He used the illustration of growing maturity. Then he uses the illustration of looking through a glass, darkly.

In regard to growing maturity he says "When I was a child I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child. When I became a man I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11). Paul, as a man, did not put off the gifts. He had not said, "They're something that belonged to spiritual immaturity, to spiritual childhood." Rather, he is saying to the Corinthians, "Your way of handling the gifts is spiritually immature."

Let me illustrate. When I was a child of about eleven or twelve years of age, I was thrust into teaching a Sunday School class. Mom and dad were pioneering a church in Jeffersonville, Indiana. We had one of these churches where most of the Sunday School classes were in the sanctuary, because there weren't any Sunday School rooms. My Sunday School class was the four and five year-old one. It was held in the back of the sanctuary. There were two benches in the back. We flipped, so they faced each other. I started with about three or four kids and gradually the class built up to about twenty-six four and five year-olds. I had them almost an

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hour. There was no play activity, no little things for them to do. They just had to sit there for the whole hour, while other Sunday School classes were going on. I had a flannel graph. I told stories. Every week, the highlight of the week was the “peek” box. What was important to me then was having the biggest class in Sunday School. I had the biggest class in that whole Sunday School. I got the award banner. Every Sunday, it was given to the largest class.

I was a child. I thought as a child. I spoke as a child. I reasoned as a child. When I became a man, if I was teaching that same class today, there are lots of other things that would be more important. I’d be concerned about the impact that that experience was having upon those children. I’d be concerned about reaching their parents. I’d be concerned about their home situation. I’d be concerned about ways I could demonstrate love to them. I’d be concerned about them wanting to grow up to be a Christian. I’d be so concerned about so much more. Because when you become more mature, you see things differently.

That’s exactly what Paul is saying here to the Corinthians who were all wrapped up in the gifts and saying, “We need to speak more in tongues in public, have a more spiritual worship service,” or “You haven’t prophesied in the last three months, therefore, you must not be spiritual.” All these things. But what’s really important is love. When you become more mature in the Lord, you’ll see that. Loving people is more important than wearing spirituality as a badge.

Then he uses a second illustration. That is the illustration of seeing through a glass darkly. “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then we shall see face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). What does he mean by “looking through a glass darkly”? “Looking at a glass in an enigma” is the literal rendering that’s involved there. The enigma comes from this—“looking in a glass darkly.” In those days, they did not have glass mirrors. When you got up, you had the chance of looking in a glass mirror and seeing your reflection back. And you came anyway! But in those days,

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mirrors were made out of a metallic substance. It was not a clear vision projected back to you. It was more like looking at your reflection in a pool of water—it was hazy. Paul's saying this about the Christian life. That to the people who prize knowledge, no matter how much you prize knowledge, look at the fact that you'll always see through the glass darkly. There are some things we know for sure. We know that God loves us. We know that Jesus died for us. We know that Jesus is coming for us. But there are so many things we don't know.

My knowledge of God compared to the reality of God is like my being able to plumb 3 feet of the Pacific ocean floor at it's deepest point, when it sinks over 5 miles down. There's still over 5 miles of the knowledge of God to go, and I've just got to the 3 foot level. I can spend all my life and I might get as deep as 10 feet, but I still only know in part. Because I see through a glass darkly.

Therefore, Paul is not saying, "Despise knowledge." He's not saying, "Quit learning." He's not saying, "Quit seeking this gift." But he's saying, "Just keep it in the proper perspective." If you really want to know God, the best way to know God in the here and now is not knowing intellectual things about Him or having access to intellectual mysteries and doctrine. The best way to know God is to act on the knowledge you have and, most of all, love, love, love. Love God. Love people. Love your family. Love yourself. Love the lost. Love the lonely. Love the hurting. Love those who are not cared for. If you want to know God, love. Now we know in part. Love is going to matter a hundred years from now, because it is permanent rather than passing. Because it is complete rather than incomplete. Since our knowledge is incomplete, humility should rule us and love should be our goal. Love is important a hundred years from now because it is supreme, even among other eternalities. Paul's already shown, in 1 Corinthians 13, that love is superior to the spiritual gifts because they're temporary, whereas love will endure. But now

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Paul takes two other eternalities and compares them with love and says, “Even when compared to other eternalities, love is supreme.”

Many times, the last verses of 1 Corinthians 13 have been misunderstood to convey the idea that faith is going to pass away and hope is going to pass away and only love will be left. Paul’s point is not that faith and hope are going to pass away, but rather, three things abide—three things remain—faith, hope, and love. Why does faith abide? In the eternal faith, in our being with God, why will faith abide? It’ll abide because we’ll never be robots. We’re redeemed people. Always, our relationship with God will be in trust. We will trust Him. Why will hope not pass away? Hope is the expectancy of the good that is coming. We will have continual expectancy of the good that is coming with the Lord forever.

As great as faith is and as great as hope is, love is even more. Faith and hope are simply attributes of love—qualities of love. For, as we have seen in verse 7, love believes all things, hopes all things. Belief and hope are simply attributes of love. The Scriptures do not say to us, “God is faith,” or “God is hope,” but “God is love.” And out of love spring faith and hope.

From the earliest church tradition, this story is told of the apostle John, known as “the apostle of love,” who gave us the great statement which the Spirit inspired, “God is love.” In the evening of his long life, John, it is said by Early Church tradition, would sit for hours with younger disciples gathered at His feet. One day, one of his disciples complained, “Why don’t you tell us something else besides love?” John replied, “Because there is nothing else. Just love. Love.”

What matters a hundred years from now? When all is said and done, when you evaluate the priorities of today in light of a hundred years—love matters, love remains, love is permanent.

A few weeks ago, I had a dream. I dreamed that we were in the new church sanctuary. It was dedication day. We all, at one point in the service, began to raise our hands and praise the Lord.

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There was such a sense of victory. We had fought through a lot of things and overcome a lot of obstacles. It was a marvelous feeling.

As I was praising the Lord, I felt the Lord saying to me, “You’re glad because the building is done. Did I get done in your life, over these last couple of years, what I wanted to get done?”

That was like being shot with a dart in my heart. I realized, as I looked at this whole building project, that the Lord was far more concerned with some things He wants to get done in my own life than with the externality I can be involved in. The Lord is far more concerned with who we are than what we do. What does it matter if we put up a new edifice? It matters in the sense that we’re going to be able to reach more people with the love of the Lord. That’s how it matters.

That’s the only reason it counts. But if we put our emphasis and our priority on brick and mortar and steel, we have tragically erred. God is far more concerned with what He’s building in us personally and what He’s building in this church. He has dreams, and maybe sometime, with our preoccupation with external things in our life, we don’t see what He may want to do internally in us.

What’s put up or how it’s done is not so critical, unless it is done unscripturally. It is most critical of all that we love, because that’s what’s going to matter a hundred years from now. It isn’t going to be the new building that’s built. It’s going to be how we relate to and care for one another and the world and the community in which God has called us to. That’s what’s going to last.

Love abides. In your own life, is love at the top of the heap of priorities? As you look at the inventory of your life and the day-to-day objectives you have, where does love fit? Is there time to love? Re-evaluate and look at your life with eternal values in view.

### **Closing Prayer**

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Our Lord, we thank You for these moments we've shared together today. We've had moments together when we've simply looked at data, at scriptural argumentation, attempting to handle the Scripture as worthy stewards and servants and scribes who are honest and careful. Forgive us, Lord, if all that's been projected is a spirit of contentiousness. Lord, we want that to be the furthest removed from us. Help us to be able to contend for what we understand to be the scriptural truth, without being contending people. Lord, we value the truth. We value Your gifts in our midst. We covet the gifts which You would have for this body. We pray that all the gifts of ministry that You want for us, personally and as a church, will be in focus and display, because they're the arms and the eyes and the legs of love, reaching out to Your body and to the world. We pray, Lord, that love will be preeminent in our lives. That our love for You would be our very first concern. Our top goal. To love You with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength. That we will love those about us, our families. Those who are very close to us. That You will help us, Lord, to love with Your love, to see with Your eyes, to speak with Your lips. To heal with Your hands. Then, Lord, we pray that we'll also learn what it is to properly love ourselves. To see ourselves as You see us. To see that in You we have been made anew and we're worthwhile to You. Help us, as an entire church, to love You and to love one another. Let love be preeminent among us. Help us, Lord, to care for one another. Help us to care for the stranger. Help us to care of the person we don't know that is far removed from us. Help us to care for the poor. To care for the hurting and the suffering, the miserable, the rejected. Help us to love those whom it is difficult to love. Help us to love with Your love. Fill us, Lord. Baptize us with love. We pray for a baptism of love among us. Lord, nothing could please Your heart more than seeing Yourself living in us—in our lifestyle and our thinking style and in our approach to

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You and to others. Lord, You do want to love and live in us more greatly. That is our prayer.

Lord, live in us more today. In Your name. Amen.