

# The Teaching of First Corinthians 13:8b-12

Lest I be criticized for overlooking Paul's main point in the text under consideration in this study, permit me to state most plainly at the outset that the emphasis of the apostle here is the import of that which is eternal, viz. "love"; their love for one another (i.e. how they treated each other), is that on which they were to focus far over and above any supernatural abilities they possessed.

Now what's interesting is that things haven't changed all that much in nearly 2000 years; i.e., just as Paul indicated that those brethren at Corinth had placed an emphasis upon miraculous abilities that they shouldn't have, so today (as is constantly seen on television) the same is sadly true. Due to this and other related issues, our focus in this study will be on verses 8b-12.

**Verses 8-9: Where there are prophecies, they will be rendered obsolete. Where there are tongues, they will terminate. Where there's knowledge, it will be rendered obsolete. For we know imperfectly, and we prophesy imperfectly.**

"Tongues" here is based in the Greek *glōssai* from which we get "glossitis," referring to inflammation of the tongue; of course you and I know that "tongues" is just another word for "languages" and that here Paul was specifically referring to the supernatural ability to speak in languages unfamiliar to the speaker; and, alluding to how it fulfilled a prophecy in Isaiah 28, the main purpose for this ability was that, according to Paul in the following chapter, it was a sign to draw in last remnant of Israel (1 Cor. 14:21-22, cf. Rom. 11:5).

"Knowledge" here is based in the Greek *gnosis* from which we get "gnosticism," essentially the belief that salvation comes through special information received in some spiritual manner (which, if the gnostics left it at that, it would fit well into this passage); but what's important to note is that this is a contrast term to the Greek *epignosis* that Paul employed later (v. 12), a word that intensifies *gnosis*, making it refer to a much clearer and precise understanding, which is why Paul said "we know imperfectly," emphasizing that *gnosis* alone doesn't imply completeness.

"Prophecies" here is actually a Greek word, and thus (like baptism) called a "transliteration." Even though a biblical prophecy (something a prophet of God conveyed to His people) didn't necessarily have to be a prediction, because Paul also referred to "knowledge" in this verse most scholars feel confident in assuming that predictory prophecy is what he had in mind. (An important realization is that Paul picked these three gifts as a representation of all the spiritual gifts listed in the previous chapter [12:1-11].)

"Imperfectly" here is based in the Greek *meros* which is variously translated as "partially," "in part," "incompletely," and (as I chose to be consistent throughout this text) "imperfectly."

"Terminate" here is based in the Greek *pauo*, and, unlike *telos* (which we'll talk about in the next verse), means nothing more than "to cease"; i.e. it has no accomplished goal in mind.

"Rendered obsolete" here is based in the Greek *katargeo* (I found multiple places online in which *katargeo* is translated like this [e.g. [InTheSaltShaker.com/drills/article2.htm](http://InTheSaltShaker.com/drills/article2.htm)]); this is reminiscent of Hebrews 8:13 in which Paul said of the Old Covenant that it was—at the time he was writing Hebrews—"becoming obsolete." (No, not the same Greek word, but it is synonymous.) See, here's what's interesting:

As Paul said in Hebrews 1:1, "God spoke through the prophets ... in many parts," he and all others during that lengthy eon between the first and last Adams (or at least between Moses & Jesus) were receiving (as Moffatt's version of 1 Cor. 13:9 indicates) bits and pieces of the whole. So...

The commonsense principle is this: Once all the bits and pieces of a whole have been meted out and therefore become a unit, then the meting out of chunks of prophecy and portions of knowledge logically become obsolete; thus Paul was saying something like this: "What has been prophesied and what has been made known are merely bits/pieces of the whole, thus merely types/shadows of the actual thing." **But...**

**Verse 10: When the perfect has arrived, then the imperfect will be made obsolete.**

"Perfect" here is from the Greek *telios*, a word directly related to two other significant words: {1} it's related to *teleioo* which refers to "fulfillment," and thus logically {2} it's related to *telos*, the Greek term that (unlike *pauo* in verse 8 which refers to mere "cessation" or "termination") refers to "a goal that has been attained or 'fulfilled'." Essentially, then, *perfection is the fulfillment of a goal*; we just need to determine what goal Paul had in mind in this text, and (as we'll soon see) he didn't disappoint us in this respect. So...

To repeat what I said earlier, Paul was basically saying, "When all the parts necessary to achieve the fulfilled creation of its intended whole have been provided, or when the finished product or goal for those parts has been attained, then any more doling out of chunks of prophecy and portions of knowledge will have become obsolete or pointless." By the way...

The exact Greek phrase, *to teleion* for "the perfect" here, isn't found anywhere else in the entirety of Greek Scripture (old or new testaments); the only other place at all in the New Testament in which *teleion* is found in a parallel context is Ephesians 4:13 (and it was due to just finishing up a study on Ephesians 4:7-13 that I decided to go ahead and tackle this passage again after many years). Interestingly, not only did the same writer employ this term there, but he even employed the same illustration that we find here (v. 11), utilizing the same terminology (viz. *aner* for an adult male); because of this, I'll touch on Ephesians 4 in the next verse. {My notes on Eph. 4 are found here: [ASiteForTheLord.com/id15.html](http://ASiteForTheLord.com/id15.html); *please* consider them.}

And, yes, in contradistinction to the endurance of love, Paul chose *katargeo* for the third time in verses 8-10: i.e., while love will never become obsolete, miraculous gifts would.

**Verse 11: 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 away childish things.**

There's probably no way for me to *prove* this, but I believe Paul was equating the three things he listed here with the three things he listed in verse 8. Consider: In verse 8 he mentioned speaking in tongues, while here he mentioned speaking as a child; in verse 8 he mentioned prophecy (which is just general information provided to someone), while here he mentioned thought from the Greek word *phroneo* (which, incidentally, carries the idea, as Thayer says, of "directing one's mind to a thing," and of course to have the mind of a child [as Anderson's version renders it] involves how parents *direct their child's mind*); and, lastly, while in verse 8 he mentioned knowledge, here he mentioned reasoning which of course is what culminates in knowledge. Whether this comparison is what Paul meant or not, this does correspond, as I think you will soon see, to the point of this passage. Anyway...

A little bit ago I mentioned how that this same apostle wrote to the Ephesians about this same topic in 4:7ff, specifically employing not only the term *teleion* for perfect there, but also the term *aner* for adult male; here in verse 11 we have Paul obviously contrasting himself as a child and a man with the church moving from childhood to manhood, the same as he did in Ephesians 4 when he spoke of the supernatural gifts of verses 7, 8, & 11 as being an aid bringing the church from childhood to the state of a perfect man (vv. 13-15). Now, especially since I brought up Hebrews 8:13 earlier, I find that this is the perfect spot to bring up another relevant passage by Paul:

In the midst of Paul's dealing with God's true people leaving the Old Covenant mode of existence behind and moving into the New Covenant mode of existence, he wrote the following in Galatians 4:3-5: "We, when we were children, were in bondage [to the Law, 3:22-25].... But when ... the time had come, God sent forth His Son ... born under the Law, to redeem those ... under the Law that we might receive the adoption as sons," which fits well with Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians to move away from the childishness of tongue-speaking and into the manhood of understanding (1 Cor. 14:20). (If we don't see a connection between Gal. 4 and 1 Cor. 13, perhaps we will as we head more toward home plate.)

**Verse 12: Right now, by means of a mirror, we are seeing the obscure, but then face to face; right now I know imperfectly, but then I shall know perfectly even as I have also been known perfectly.**

If we want to know what Paul had in mind when he wrote in verse 10 about the gifts of the Spirit (listed in 12:1-11) finding their cessation and obsolescence when "the perfect" arrived, then it's obvious we must figure out what he meant in this verse, for the "face to face" phrase is equivalent to "the perfect" and vice versa. So let's dive in. ☺

The first thing to realize is that mirrors in those days (which, btw, W. E. Vine says Corinth was famous for making) were merely sheets of steel or metal, which (as you've likely experienced at some point in your life such as in a roadside bathroom) aren't very detailed in their clarity when you peer into them; so, if it were one's purpose to see every tiny wrinkle on his face, well, he would have been out of luck.

The Greek term for "obscure" here is the word from which we get "enigma," and it's very evident that Paul was alluding to Numbers 12:6-8 in which the Lord, when scolding Aaron and Miriam for speaking against their brother Moses, said, "If there's a prophet among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision or dream, but not so with My servant Moses: he is faithful in all My house, so I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark [*enigmatic*] sayings [or, per the margin, riddles]." See...

While Yahweh communicated in obscure fashion to the prophets, He spoke directly and plainly to Moses. So Paul took the minds of his audience back to that occasion, not only echoing the concept of *enigmatic* sayings, but also the concept of "face to face" (which we'll get to more momentarily), and his main point had to do with *clarity versus obscurity*; while, due to receiving bits and pieces of the puzzle, these first-generation Christians were seeing mere types and shadows (cf. Heb. 10:1), they were on the verge of seeing it all come together. Really? Why did I make that last assertion? Well, just a few paragraphs earlier...

In 10:11 he—using the Greek term *telos*—told them that they were privileged to have "the ends of the ages" fall upon them. Besides that statement, at the very outset of the letter (in 1:4-8) he wrote about how their spiritual gifts would confirm them "until the *telos*." We'll come back to that passage when we conclude. Right now...

Having the incident in Numbers 12 and our text combined in our minds, this would be a good time to consider the meaning behind the very significant phrase "face to face."

From an all-Greek-Scripture perspective, there are only five other instances of this phrase: Genesis 32:30, Judges 6:22, Deuteronomy 5:4, 34:10, and Ezekiel 20:35. (Besides those there are also two synonymous phrases found: "eye to eye" in Exodus 33:11, Numbers 14:14, & Isaiah 52:8, then "mouth to mouth" in Numbers 12:8, Jeremiah 32:4, & 34:3; these are so synonymous that they're most often translated as "face to face.")

The only passage I have time to deal with is another one in relation to Moses: the one in Exodus 33:11 (and its relation to 33:17-23). Essentially saying the same thing as Numbers 12:8, Exodus 33:11 says that "The Lord spoke to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend," but then in verses 17-23 when Moses asked for Yahweh to allow him to see His *glory* (keep that word in mind), Yah's response to him was No, "you cannot see My face," indicating that God understood that Moses wanted the Lord to show Himself, to show His face, and would thereby be showing Himself in all His *glory*, but the Lord denied him that privilege. See...

The difference between Exodus 33 and Numbers 12 is this: Recalling that figurative language such as an idiom is based in non-figurative language, we have God denying Moses' request to see His actual face, but, because He had such a great affinity for Moses, Yahweh *figuratively* spoke to Moses face to face. How? By speaking to him plainly instead in enigmas like visions and dreams. As Jesus spoke to His disciples as friends in plain speech (Luke 8:9-10 & John 15:15), so His Father spoke to Moses as a friend in plain speech (Exo. 33:11). But here's a very interesting result of that:

After Moses spent time with God in this manner while receiving the Law, Exodus 34:29-35 relate the well-known story of how Moses' face shined so brightly that they couldn't look upon him; i.e., they couldn't "see" for the *glory* of God reflecting in his face, for it was blinding. So to keep from blinding the people literally, Moses placed a veil over his face, an incident which in itself was employed as a figurative lesson in Second Corinthians 3-4, a passage we cannot ignore; but before we get to it, I simply must bring up one other combination of passages: Genesis 2:7 and Psalm 104:29-30.

As many, perhaps even most, agree, God covenanted with Adam, giving him life; in fact, instead of "nostrils," several versions of Genesis 2:7 actually read "face": "God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his face the breath of *life*, and man became a *living* being." So there's covenant life between Yah and man; but of course Adam broke covenant, hid himself from the *face* of God (3:8), after which God expelled him from His Edenic Garden Presence (3:24). Now, with that story in mind...

Listen to some of Psalm 104:29-30 in which David said in a prayer to Yahweh about His people Israel, "You hide Your face..., You take away their breath, they die...; You send forth Your Spirit, they are created." You know, it seems hard to *not* see the (may I say 'covenantal') connection between life to or life in God in relation to the "face to face" motif and therefore of course death outside of that motif! OK, so...

Now we have the terms "face," "glory," and "life" all directly connected: To see God face to face then is to experience His glory by being provided with the life that radiates from Him, a life that He, in His holiness, can only supply to the sinless (something which of course would only be possible following the finished work of Christ), because, as God's prophet wrote, "your sins have hidden God's face from you..." (Isa. 59:2; check out Isa. 52:8). So let's watch how all this comes together in a covenant context penned by Paul in Second Corinthians (thus to the same group of people) 3:6-4:6; let's read all these verses, emphasizing key words, phrases, and clauses as we do so.

... After reading this great passage, how can anyone fail to see Paul bringing together all that we have talked about so far? Here (as also to a degree in Hebrews 12) we find his making use of the Old Covenant incidents on which I touched in Exodus in an attempt to illustrate to our first generation Christian brethren that they (present tense) were living through a period of transition from the time of partial glory in Moses to a fulfilled or fully expressed glory in Christ (or the face of Christ, as Paul put it).

Another way to look at it is like this: During this time of transformation, the Spirit of God was (metaphorically, of course) breathing (spirit = breath) life into the lifeless body (of the remnant) of the Old Covenant spouse (in large part by virtue of His miraculous gifts), thereby creating the lively New Covenant spouse, a woman (if you will) who would find fulfillment (or as we say today, "find herself") in her marriage to her Groom. Speaking of marriage...

As most of us know, the word "know" in biblical times carried a sexual connotation as when Adam "knew" Eve and she conceived (Gen. 4:1). In Paul's context here we have the intimation of knowing in part as in existing in a betrothal period, but then a knowing fully as in a marriage consummation (a word, btw, used to define *telos*).

This marriage motif is as significant as the "face to face" motif, and we will bring them together in our conclusion momentarily. So...

Back to First Corinthians 13:12..., **Now I know imperfectly (*gnosis*), but then I shall know perfectly (*epignosis*) even as I have also been known perfectly** (viz. because he was a lover of God [cf. 1 Cor. 8:3]); so what Paul was saying is that the miracles of direct revelation (as well as all other spiritual gifts) were for and during the childhood stage of God's creation of His eternal New Covenant people, meaning that those in Paul's time were not yet seeing or experiencing the adulthood stage of Christ's completed work, but they would soon. When? Let's go back to First Corinthians 1:4-8.

Earlier I stopped short by referring to Paul as saying that the spiritual gifts would confirm them "until the *telos*" or the consummation. But Paul didn't leave it there: he went on to identify when that "end" would arrive by saying at "the day of the Lord," the clear implication being of course that the supernatural gifts would find their cessation and obsolescence when the Lord returned, and His return would occur before those Corinthian brethren to whom Paul was writing had died. {For a ton more information concerning the Lord's return as transpiring in the first century, see many other articles on my webpage where this one is found: [ASiteForTheLord.com/id15.html](http://ASiteForTheLord.com/id15.html). }

Now notice how Revelation 21:2-7, speaking of events that were fulfilled around the time of the demise of Judaism and its temple, bring all this together: "I John saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of [not our going up into] heaven ..., prepared as a bride ... for her husband. [Verses 9-11 add, "'Come, John, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife.' And he ... showed me the great city, holy Jerusalem, descending ... from God, having the glory of God." Back to verses 3-4...] I heard a loud voice ... saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them [not the other way around], and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them [not the other way around]. [Why?] ... For the former things have passed away.' [Now to verses 6-7...] And He [the One who sat on the throne, v. 5] said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts; he who is overcoming shall inherit all things, and I will be his God, and he shall be My son.'" Hence, all necessary-for-childhood miracles from God ceased and became obsolete.