

Through a Glass Darkly

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 13; Numbers 12:1-13

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Lord, help me with all my limitations of body and mind. Lord, I pray for the infilling of your Spirit, so that when I speak it may be Jesus himself speaking to us from Holy Scripture, speaking to each of our hearts, calling us one more time to come to him and find rest. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

I want us to look particularly at verse 12 on page 1,787 where he says,

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.”

And I want us to keep our hands there and turn back to Numbers 12 which really does give us something of an explanation of this. Numbers 12 and we will be looking here at the bottom of the page where God has summoned Aaron and Miriam, Moses' big brother and big sister, and they got upset because, remember, Moses was 40 years old when he left Egypt and married Zipporah, and now at least another 40 years have passed, and that is when his wife was still alive when he was 80 and he left to go to Egypt. Now if you sandwich the chronology of the book of Numbers, a number of more years have passed and so evidently Zipporah is dead, and he has taken another wife, and if you look at verse 1, Numbers 12:1,

“Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite.”

He had married an Ethiopian. He had married a black woman (Cushite, Nubian, Αἰθίοψ, כּוּשִׁי), and they weren't happy. I think back to my childhood. They were not happy about that marriage. This is before *Loving v the State of Virginia* (388 U.S.) So, he had married a Cushite, and they complained, and they said this in verse 2,

“‘Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?’ they asked. ‘Hasn’t he also spoken through us?’”

“Who does he think that he is? He’s our little brother. Who does he think he is?”

Now, never forget this: Behind every complaint is a hidden deal. Behind every complaint, there’s always a hidden deal. There’s something below the surface that’s not manifest immediately, and so what happens is look at what he says in the next sentence.

“And the LORD heard this.”

Now look at verse 3; it’s a pretty remarkable verse.

“(Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)”

Did Moses write that? I don’t know. The five books of Moses were written by Moses, but it’s very obvious as you analyze the text, that as the books were put in their final form that editors came along. For example, the city where the Jewish people were enslaved is called Rameses, but at the time that they labored there, it wasn’t called Rameses, so editors came along and altered—and they were inspired by the Holy Spirit—altered the text. So, I’m not sure that Moses wrote that, but if he did, it’s okay, and that gives us a lesson in humility.

Do you know that a person can be extremely humble and yet very bold? A person can be very humble and very bold.

Who was the most humble person ever to walk on our earth? The Lord Jesus Christ himself, and yet Jesus was very bold. Remember when he drove the moneychangers out of the temple? (John 2:13-16) He was very bold, very decisive, very outspoken, but the Lord Jesus was the most humble of all people.

So, Moses was very humble, and God decided to handle the problem. Moses didn’t argue with him. He didn’t go and say, “Well, look, there’s nothing wrong with me marrying a black woman, a younger woman, much younger than Zipporah who has died.” But the Lord handled it. Look at verse 4,

“At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, ‘Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you.’ So the three of them came out. (5) Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the

Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward, (6) he said, ‘Listen to my words: ‘When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. (7) But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. (8) With him I speak face to face’”

Let that sink in. That should remind of us of what we just read in 1 Corinthians 13.

“(8) With him I speak face to face clearly and not in riddles”

Clearly and not in riddles. Now when the Jewish rabbis who lived before the time of Jesus translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, they used a particular Greek word translated there as “riddles,” and that is the Greek word “enigma” (*ainigma*, αἰνίγμα). He says, “I don’t speak to Moses in enigmas, I speak to him face to face.” And so that makes Moses very unique. And you may want to ponder this whole thing, I’d like to preach on the whole passage, but I don’t want to do that this morning, and so he goes on and he says,

“He sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?’ (9) The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them.”

And Miriam who was so obsessed with not being black—look at that in verse 10,

“When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam—leprous, like snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had leprosy; (11) and he said to Moses, ‘Please, my lord [and he’s not addressing God there, he’s addressing his little brother], do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. (12) Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother’s womb with its flesh half eaten away.’ (13) So Moses cried out to the LORD [that’s to Yahweh], ‘O God, please heal her!’”

And God did heal her. God wanted to make a point and God defended Moses. The thing that we want to see with Moses is this: God did not communicate to Moses the way he did to all the other prophets. In all the other prophets he communicated through dreams, through visions, and through riddles, *through enigmas*, through things that were obscure and hard to figure out. With Moses he spoke face to face.

Now if we turn back to 1 Corinthians 13, we discover something in verse 12. 1 Corinthians 13:12 and he says there on page 1,787,

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.”

The word that’s translated “poor reflection as in a mirror” is that same Greek word “enigma” (*ainigma*, αἴνιγμα). “Now we see,” he says, “in an enigma as looking in a mirror.”

Now, you have to know this about Corinth: Corinth was very famous for making wonderful, high-quality mirrors. They were made out of copper and so people could look at themselves.

Have you ever seen your reflection in a very smooth piece of metal like copper? You can see yourself, but what about an imperfection on your face? What about a blemish? What about a spot? And everybody in the ancient world who used the finest quality mirrors that were made, realized that they weren’t the real thing—realized that you didn’t get a full picture. And it’s like yourself—you look at yourself in a mirror and, of course, our mirrors today are incredibly good by comparison, but it’s nothing like the real thing.

Do you ever wonder about that? I wonder how do I appear to you still struggling with the Bell’s palsy? But I do my best to make myself look presentable. But I don’t know how I really look to you, and you don’t know how you really look to me.

But what we see here in 1 Corinthians 13:12 is he’s speaking of the way it is in life in this world, and until Jesus comes again, what we’re confronted with are enigmas, riddles, mysteries.

What is going to happen in 2023? It’s an enigma. I don’t know, but there are things in this text that help us to know.

So, he says, “Now we see an enigmatic image of ourselves in a mirror.” He said, “But then we’ll see face to face.”

What’s he talking about? Hold your hand there, and let’s turn over to 1 John 3 because he’ll explain to us here. 1 John 3, page 1,900. What he says in verse 1, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

Now look at verse 2,

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be, has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”

Now I want you to see something here, and it's very important that we understand that 1 Corinthians 13, talking about perfection, is not talking about the completion of the New Testament. That isn't in that text at all.

He's not saying that when we finally have the Bible, then we'll really have it all. That's not what he's saying. In fact, to think that way flies in the face of what Jesus himself said to the Pharisees, “You search the scriptures because you imagine that in them you have eternal life, but you won't come to me.” (John 5:39-40)

What I want us to understand is that the Bible is very important. It's God's own holy, infallible, and inerrant word, and it's very powerful but it's only powerful to the degree that it brings us into contact with the Word of God himself who's Jesus. In other words, the Bible both as its read and especially as its preached, is a means of grace.

What does it mean to say it's a means of grace?

It means it is a tool to help us become more like Jesus. That's important. We have the Lord's Supper this morning. What is the Lord's Supper? It's a means of grace.

Does it mean it's some kind of magic deal that the bread and the wine, somehow or other if you take it, you've got a spiritual vitamin pill that will last you for three months, or one month, or until we do it again? Is that what it means? Not at all.

What is the Lord's Supper's purpose? The purpose of the Lord's Supper is to have us commune with the Lord Jesus Christ. Holy Communion. It is to draw near to Jesus. If we don't find Jesus in the bread and in the wine, we've missed the whole point.

And how do we find him there? By sniffing it? Tasting it? Eating it? No, it is by the power of the Holy Spirit who uses these humble things of bread and wine to connect us one more time with Jesus. Jesus is the source of it all. Jesus is the object and goal of life. Without Jesus life is not worth living. And so, we think of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, not spiritual vitamins, but a means to draw us close to Jesus, because Jesus is the fountain of life.

And so then again looking there at 1 John 3:2,

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

What is that saying? He’s saying that perfection is when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth; perfection is when he comes and takes us to himself. That’s perfection. That’s the goal of life because without Jesus, life isn’t worth living, but with Jesus, no matter where we are, life is worth living. Life is worth living.

So, he says we don’t know what we’re going to be like. Now John saw the risen Christ and he knew something of what it was like to be glorified, because Jesus appeared in the same body he was crucified in, buried in, and rose from the dead in, but his body was transformed; he could do things that he could not do physically when he was in an unglorified state.

One day, you and I will be like that. We will be glorious creatures, and we will be amazingly beautiful and amazingly perfect, and he’s saying we don’t know what we’re going to be like, but we do know when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.

So, turning back to 1 Corinthians 13:12, page 1,787, he says, “Now we see but a poor reflection,” that is, “now we see an enigmatic view of ourselves in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.” One day we’re going to have a privilege greater than Moses, we’ll be able to see the Lord Jesus himself face to face, and we’ll be just like him. That’s the perfection that’s in view, and so we want to reflect for a moment on this and what is it that he’s really saying?

Well, he’s saying if we turn over to 2 Corinthians, again he uses the mirror analogy, 2 Corinthians, the end of chapter 3 he uses this analogy. Again, if you understand that Corinth was famous for its wonderful mirrors. Corinth was famous for its wonderful mirrors, and he uses that analogy in verse 17, 2 Corinthians 3:17, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” And then he says, “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

So, there is a progressive change. I want to challenge you in 2023: Pray, read your Bible, but use prayer and use reading the Bible as a means of connecting with the Lord Jesus. He is the role model. He is the goal of our life.

What does God want of you and of me in 2023? He wants us to be more like Jesus. Not just to know the Bible better. Knowing the Bible better isn't going to do you a bit of good.

Who knew the Bible better than almost anybody on our planet when he came and talked to Jesus? Satan. Satan could go toe to toe and head-to-head in quoting scripture (Matthew 4:6). Quoting scripture isn't where it's at. Drawing near to Jesus, crying out to him, and saying,

“Lord, what I want in 2023 is to be more like you. I want you to transform my heart so that I have your heart, so that I weep over things you weep over, and I rejoice over the things you rejoice over, and I deal with human beings the way you deal with human beings, even the vile, even the terrible and wicked. Lord, I want to love my enemies the way you loved your enemies. Lord, give me a loving heart, not as an end in itself, but as becoming more like Jesus.” And you see that transformation as we have an unveiled face and we become more like Jesus.

And we can turn over to chapter 4 for a moment and he says this, verse 16. So, what lies ahead in 2023? What did Tennessee Ernie Ford sing? “Another day older and deeper in debt. St. Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go. I owe my soul to the company store.” And look at verse 16, 2 Corinthians 4:16. What is 2023 going to mean for you and me? Another year older. But look at what he says, verse 16,

“Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” A day-by-day renewal.

Whatever happens in your life, begin to look at it and think about it, “God has ordained this for my good.” And what is good? When you look at Romans 8 and verses 28 and 29 where he says, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

Something bad is probably going to happen to one of us, at least, this coming week. When it happens, pause before you cuss, before you murmur, before you repine, before you complain, before you say, “Why me, Lord!”

Say, “Lord, thank you that you have ordained this thing for your glory and for my good.” For your glory and my good. And when we do that, when we begin to praise God and have a “hallelujah anyhow attitude,” we're transformed by the event.

We mentioned, of course, this event that happened Friday a week ago when Sandy woke me up. I was taking a nap in my 23-year-old La-Z-Boy recliner, really feeling like a lazy boy, and she said, “I have some terrible news.” And I wondered, “What in the world?”

One of my children was flying with his family back from Europe. One of my children had seen his sister and had gone and gotten stranded in the Atlanta airport and had to rent a car to drive back to Memphis. I immediately thought of my children. And then she told me, and I saw the water just coming down. That’s the apartment that our oldest grandson who teaches math in Alexandria lives in, and two copper pipes burst as we didn’t let them drip.

And when I think about that, did I like it? Not really, because it’s an inconvenience. And yet it’s working out. And I began to ponder, “God, why did you ordain that?”

“Well, one thing, Bob, is to let you know just how stupid you are because you should have had the good sense to go in there and let the water drip, particularly the hot water because it goes in and comes back.”

And the other thing is this: Will I have a Christian witness with all of the people I deal with, with this? And do you know what happened to me?

I met a clean-up crew that came that night after the plumber left, we had something called Servpro, and they met us at 11:22, and I prayed with them. The next day, another group came—I didn’t get to see them, but when I returned home on Christmas afternoon, I met the next group, and they said to me, “We understand that you prayed with the people that came Friday night. Would you pray with us?”

What does that mean? What does that mean? What’s the meaning of your life? It’s to know Christ and make him known. If I’d been a sourpuss, if I’d been grumbling and complaining, if I’d said, “O Lord, what am I gonna do? Why did this happen?”

But—and I’m not bragging, that was just grace. Sandy was praying before she woke me up.

Now notice when you have that, look at verse 17, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

When you turn your eyes towards Jesus, when you say, “Hallelujah anyhow.” When you say, “Lord, I know this is part of your plan drawn up

for my good and for the good of others,” then what happens inside you? You can look at it and say, “‘Momentary, light.’ I’ve got a big deductible on my homeowner’s insurance, but I’m counting on their paying off pretty well.”

What if they don’t? How will I deal with it? Will I praise the Lord anyhow? I pray I will. As we do that, we are being renewed day by day and in verse 17, we look at life with all its troubles, financial problems, sickness, family problems, and we can say they’re light by comparison with eternity.

Compare the worst thing that anybody can have in this life with burning in hell, and what do you say? “This is nothing. This is nothing and it’s momentary. It isn’t going to last forever.”

And he says they’re achieving that eternal weight of glory. Then he says in verse 18, “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary.”

This whole building is temporary. What’s the church? The church is the people of God, not a building. “For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

Now I have to think about one thing, and I want you to turn with me to two passages, and we’re done.

The first is found in Proverbs 4 and look at this amazing scripture. He says on page 990 and verse 18, Proverbs 4:18, “The path of the righteous,” Who are the righteous? That’s the Lord’s own people. “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.”

Isn’t that a picture of becoming like Jesus, shining ever brighter till the full light of day? What’s the full light of day? That’s when the Lord Jesus sounds the trumpet, and the archangel shouts, and we’re caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and it’s achieving for us this amazing “weight of glory.” “Shining ever brighter till the full light of day.”

But look at the next verse, “But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble.” And that is a very important truth as you turn with me to the gospel of Luke 21.

For the believer, 2023 is a year of growing in grace: That means growing to become more like Jesus. For the believer who really seeks the Lord’s face, it’ll be a happy year because every day with Jesus is better than the day before, if your focus is on the inner man that is becoming like Jesus.

But what is it going to be like, 2023 corresponding to Proverbs 4:19? Turn with me to Luke 21, page 1,636 and looking at verse 25. Now remember as

we've studied "Last Things," last year, and hope to continue on sometime in the coming year, you see there's this thing that happens in Bible prophecy. Luke 21 is about the destruction of the earthly city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but that doesn't mean it has nothing else to say to us today. I want to tell you what lies ahead for those that don't know Jesus, that don't draw near to Jesus, that don't love Jesus, and here it is.

Luke 21:25, and some of this, of course, was completely fulfilled in the first century, but part of it continues on today. "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars." And the Jewish historian Josephus documents all that happening then. But notice what he says in the next sentence,

"On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea." The sea is a picture of lost humanity and the nations of this world. What is 2023 going to bring to the nations of this world?

Here it is, verse 26, "Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

What is that? Well, if we understand that there are good and evil angels, fallen angels and good angels that oversee the affairs of nations, we're going to see a shake-up of the nations. He says, "Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

And then he speaks about the return of Christ. Christ returned in A.D. 70 to deal with Jerusalem, but that doesn't complete that, for Christ will come again and that is still future.

So, what do I have to say for 2023, as we move now from the preaching to the Lord's Supper? 2023 is an enigma. It's a riddle. It's obscure. Anybody that tells you exactly what's going to happen is simply spouting nonsense.

Will the stock market crash? I don't know: I hope not. Will Social Security stop paying? I don't think so, they'll just print more money like my basic rate at the hotel went from \$84 to \$99 this morning because that's what they charge the state of Texas and CHRISTUS St. Michael Hospital. Inflation. Print more money. Weimer Republic.

Will there be war? I think so.

How would you react to this scripture living in Ukraine? Terror. Horrible things. People's hearts failing with fear.

And yet even in the Ukraine and even in Russia, there are believers who are looking to Christ and sharing Christ with others, and in the middle of all the

chaos, the war and the tumult, the perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea of the nations, you see men's hearts and women's hearts and children's hearts are experiencing peace and joy, because the peace that Christ came to give is only experienced by those who draw near to him.

My! 2023—an enigma!

Yet for those that know Jesus, it's a year of drawing near to him. For those who know Jesus, it's a year of becoming more like him. For those who know Jesus, it's a year of increasing joy and peace to the degree that we draw near to him.

But for relatives and friends and neighbors, I can't describe for you what 2023 is likely to be for them.

Men's hearts failing them with fear. "Go not quietly into that good night. Rage, rage, against the dying of the light!"

That's what lost friends and neighbors and relatives have to look forward to in 2023.

Aren't you glad that the Lord Jesus Christ himself came into this world that we would know him and experience the peace of God and the power of God as we face another year, as we draw near to the time of the consummation of the ages?

May we pray.

Lord, we lift this bread and this wine to you, pray that you would set them apart from an ordinary use that they may be for us a means of grace, a tool to make us more like Jesus, an instrument of true communion with him through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.