



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Corinthians 16:13-24

“Last Words”

1 Corinthians

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you, Mark. Well, we are at the last words of Paul to the Corinthians, at least in this book, which is actually the second book that he wrote to the Corinthians. And so he had more to write, because he wrote 2 Corinthians, which was actually 4 Corinthians. But in our study, we come to the last words. 1 Corinthians chapter 16, beginning with verse 13.

“Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

Let all that you do be done in love.

Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints),

that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors.

I rejoice over the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have supplied what was lacking on your part.

For they have refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men.

The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.

All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

The greeting is in my own hand—Paul.

If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word and our study in it together. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do give you thanks for this time together, and give you praise for this great book of the Bible that we have had the privilege of going through the past number of months. It’s a great privilege for us to do that, to have possession of your Word. It is your inerrant Word. It is your revelation to us. We frequently comment on the character of the Bible, that it is unique, that it is inspired.

There is no book in the world that compares to the Bible. We may put it on a shelf in a library, and it blends in with all of the other books there, but it is unique of all books, and it is a book full of power. So we thank you for the blessing that we have received in reading it, studying it, and pray that you would bless our time this morning that we would benefit greatly from what we study.

Teach us. Build us up in the faith. Enrich us. Help us to understand the things that we have read and what we’ll study. Give us an appreciation for it, and see how it applies to us. This is a book, we know, that was written two millennia ago, to an ancient church that’s long gone. And yet the words that Paul penned, some in his own hand, and sent to that church are just as relevant for us today.

It’s to us that the Spirit of God wrote this, and so may we be obedient to it. Bless us and build us up in the faith. Bless us materially, Lord. We are people that depend upon you for every breath of life that we take. It’s a gift from you. We live and we move and we exist in you. We’ve just sung that. It’s a great truth. It’s a reality. We cannot exist one moment apart from you.

And that is true not only of your saints but of those that revile your name. The very breath they take to do that is a gift from you. And yet someday we’ll all give an account of our lives, and so help us to be sober and on the alert, as Paul tells us, and live careful lives.

But Lord, bless us in the material things of life, and we pray that you make provision for those that are sick, and those that are discouraged, and those that are going through various trials. Some are recovering from difficult procedures. Father, we can’t go through all the names, but you know them, and you know their needs, and

we pray your rich blessings upon them to give encouragement and healing and whatever is needed.

We pray that you bless them. Bless our nation. Bless our government. Bless our President and those in authority over us – the Senate, the Congress, all the way to the local level. Father, give these men and women wisdom, and may they govern us well. We thank you for your grace, ultimately, and your providence over this land. We thank you for this time together; may it be profitable for us.

Bless our time in the next moments, and the hymn that we’ll sing, and the special music we’ll enjoy; may it prepare our hearts for our time of study together, we pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] So we come now to the last words of the letter, and the end of our study in 1 Corinthians 15, in which for 15 chapters Paul answered questions and corrected problems in the church. He concludes with some final instructions to the Corinthians, some greetings to them from Christians in Asia, a reminder of Christ’s return, and his own blessing on the church.

And on the face of it, it seems like Paul is stuffing a lot of information in the last few verses, tying together a lot of loose ends as he concludes the letter. But a careful reading of the passage shows that Paul was doing more than that. He was actually summarizing main lessons that he had given the Corinthians, chief among them his love.

At the beginning of the conclusion, Paul encourages them to love one another – verse 14, “Let all that you do be done in love”- and then at the end of this conclusion, he reassures them of his love for them – “My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.” So that tells us something; that tells us that love to Christ, and throughout all of this, throughout our lives, has to be a great theme of our lives.

It seems to be a theme that he is striking here. And so if there is a theme that we can find here, that Paul is making, that he’s leaving with them, it’s that of love. He tells them to love one another, he speaks of his love for them, and then in between, he gives examples of love with the greetings that various churches give to the Corinthians, showing their interest in them, their brotherly love toward them.

So as I say, if there’s one theme that seems to be stitched throughout this, it is that theme of love. But it’s not quite that neat. Paul covers numerous subjects, and we see that at the very beginning, with the five quick, concise commands that he gives in verses 13 and

14. They remind the Corinthians that they are Christian soldiers in an ongoing spiritual battle. They are an army in the field, surrounded by the enemy.

So Paul first urges them to be on the alert; always be watching. That’s a command that has wide application. Just the word that he uses has wide application because it’s also used of Christ’s return. You see that in Matthew 24:42, but also it’s used of watching for the enemy. We watch for the great commander to come back, the captain of our salvation, but we’re to be watching for the enemy that’s around us.

And that was a common way in which that word was used; in fact, there’s an illustration of it in 1 Maccabees, which recounts the Jews’ wars with the Syrians, who were trying to impose Greek paganism on the Jews; the wars of the Maccabees. There we find this same word that’s used. When the sun set and it became dark, the Jewish commander, Jonathan, told his soldiers to watch.

Be alert and be in arms, that all the night long they might be ready to fight, because you never know when the enemy’s going to show. And we’re to do the same thing. We are to be alert. We are to watch. Our enemy is different from Greeks; it is intangible. But nevertheless, we face a real enemy. We face an enemy that’s just as real, and just as deadly as any enemy that is faced on the field of battle.

We fight an invisible war with powers in heavenly places. We struggle with moral temptations and the wiles of the devil. Those are very real, actual temptations that are going on presently; even as you’re sitting there you’re facing temptations of one kind or another. And so we must always be alert to the challenge – the challenge of heretics and heresies, the challenges of all kinds that come our way.

So we need to be alert, watching all the time for the moral and spiritual dangers we face. The Corinthian church is an example of how important it is to do that, because as we’ve seen over the past number of months, that church was flooded with problems. And why was it flooded with problems? Why did they have so many difficulties? Well, I can only conclude based on what Paul says here that they were, to some degree at least, lax and not looking.

Not all of them. We were introduced to some sterling saints here in this final part of the chapter. But for the most part, they were lax; they were not looking. So we’re to be doing that, or be on the alert. We are also to be watching for Christ and his return. In the previous chapter, at the very end of it, in verse 52, Paul speaks of that, and reminds us that Christ is coming, and Christ will come at any moment.

We’re to know that, and as he says, in the twinkling of an eye. So we’re to be prepared; we’re to be prepared in the present and prepared for the present. We’re to be prepared for the future. We’re to be prepared morally, and spiritually, and eschatologically, and all these different ways. So Paul tells them to be ever on guard, be on the alert, and he says, “Stand firm in the faith.”

Standing firm was something the Corinthians obviously were not doing. They had gone wobbly on the apostle. They were being tossed about by every wave and wind of doctrine. So Paul tells them to stand firm and not be moved from the gospel that he had preached to them; the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ, which is the only gospel. That’s a gospel that’s not popular, not popular today. People don’t want to hear about the cross.

But there’s nothing new in that – it was not popular in Paul’s day. He spoke of the shame of the cross, but he boasted in it, because that’s the gospel. And once we move away from that, we’ve moved away from the gospel. We can have a religion, and we can have an ethical religion. We can have a religion of morals. But without the cross, we don’t understand grace, and there’s no salvation.

So he’s telling them here, “Stand firm in the faith. Don’t depart from the gospel.” But it’s broader than that. It means stand firm in the whole counsel of God. He’s speaking of the Word of God here. In chapter 15, when he begins that great lesson on the resurrection, you remember he reminds them at the outset of the doctrines that he had taught them, and he says that they are of first importance.

All of them, he writes, are of importance, and he says that they are all according to the Scriptures. He repeats that – according to the Scriptures. The Scriptures, the Bible – that is our authority. It is the inerrant revelation of God. It is the Word of God. And once we depart from it, we do so at our own peril, and we depart from it to our certain demise. So Paul tells the Corinthians, “Stand firm in the faith. Do not depart from it.”

They’re to be like soldiers holding a bridge or some strategic point; don’t let it go. Now, the first two commands, those two commands, then, are really calls to vigilance. The next two commands are calls to courage. He tells the Corinthians, “Act like men.” The old King James version had, “Quit you like men,” which is an archaic way of saying, “Behave. Do your part.”

It recalls David’s instruction to Solomon. As David is dying, he’s on his deathbed, he has some final words for his son, who’s going to ascend the throne of the great kingdom of Israel. And David says to him, “Show yourself a man.” According to an account, a

tradition, when Polycarp, one of the early church fathers, was led into the arena to be bound and burned, a voice came from heaven, “Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.”

And Paul was telling the Corinthians to do the same – “Play the man. Be brave.” They needed that to stand up to the false teachers among them, who were wreaking havoc on the church. “Be brave.” Then he says, “Be strong.” Be not only manly; be mighty. These are the four imperatives that he gives the Corinthians, mainly to do with guarding the gospel. The fifth that he gives in verse 14 has to do with living the gospel.

It has to do with their relationship with one another. “Let all that you do be done in love. All that I’m telling you to do in these four commands, you’ve got to do that in love.” And that really, as I’ve suggested, governs so much of what he has to say in the rest of this chapter; so much of what he said throughout this book, as he kind of sums things up. “All that you do, do it in love.”

And of course, the love that he’s speaking here is the love that he so eloquently described back in chapter 13, which was the cure for so many of the problems that ailed that church, the party spirit that plagued that church. So he again is telling them not to be divided and quarreling, but be looking out for one another, seeking each other’s highest good. That’s truly what love is. It’s putting others ahead of ourselves.

Not just in any way putting others ahead of ourselves, but putting others ahead of ourselves for their good; doing everything for their good. That is the motive that is to govern everything that we do. Well, think of the problems that we have seen in this church, the problems that have been covered over the past number of weeks and months. The factions with favorite teachers, the lawsuits, brother against brother, divorce, husband against wife.

Abuse at the Lord’s table; the rich taking advantage of the poor – probably more accurate to say the rich taking no thought of the poor, just thinking of themselves – the pride that people took in the gifts that they had, the ministry that they had that lifted them up in their own minds, at least, over other people. The heart of the problem there in regard to all of those issues was lack of love, and that usually is at the heart of the problem with most of us.

We want our own way. The opposite of showing love is selfishness. It’s putting self ahead of others and other things. Love is selfless. Love puts the other person first. It is also wise, and it is also strong. It isn’t wimpish; it isn’t just yielding. It stands firm where it

needs to stand firm. It doesn’t yield to error in order to keep peace at the price of truth. That’s very easy to do, you know.

For many of us, conflicts are not easy; we don’t like it. I know there are some people who tend to gravitate toward that, and they don’t mind being offensive, but most of us don’t like that. We don’t like to be in conflict with friends or others; we want peace. And so there are people that will sacrifice truth for that, for peace. That’s not love; that really is selfishness, is what that is.

Love puts itself on the line for the truth, which is ultimately for the help of others. So it’s wise, it’s strong, but having said all that, sometimes it does accommodate the weaknesses of other people. That’s part of what it is being wise. That’s part of what it is to love others. It’s making us willing to take second place, even when we have to forego something that we have a right to, and that is ours. But we do it for the sake of another person.

That’s a principle. It has to apply in various circumstances. But it is a genuine concern for others that ought to have been seen in that church, and ought to be seen in us, which simply means that what should be seen in us as a church is the image of Christ. That’s what we should reflect to the world. Who lives a selfless life, who emptied himself in order to become a bondservant.

Who emptied himself by becoming a bondservant, and even suffering death, even the most shameful of deaths, death on a cross. That’s what we’re to reflect. And the early church did that. You remember what the pagans said about those early Christians. I’ve quoted it many times, but it certainly applies. “See how they love one another.” The pagan world had never really seen anything like that.

And then here’s this band of Christians, these simple people that were persecuted, and yet they loved one another. And they saw that in them, and they may not understand what they believe, but they were impressed by what they saw, and maybe through that many were brought to know and believe what they taught. But whether they liked them or not, they had to confess that they loved one another, and that was quite a testimony.

And that should be the world’s confession today when they see us. They ought to see us bound together in brotherly love. Now, Paul gives some examples of members of the Corinthian church who would have received such acclaim – he really gives them that kind of acclaim of loving the brethren, and staying steadfast in the truth.

He gives honorable mention to the household of Stephanas, and encourages the Corinthians to be in subjection to them and to people like them. He describes them in verse 15 as the “first fruits of Achaia,” which was the region of Greece where Corinth was located, which gave Paul these first converts of that region. That’s at least how he describes them. Now, Athens was also in the province of Achaia.

And according to Acts 17, there were converts there before Paul arrived in Corinth. Remember, he comes down to Athens, he goes to Mars Hill, and he gives a sermon, and he preaches about Christ, and being raised from the dead. When they hear that, they say, “Oh, we’ve heard enough,” and they dismiss him and scoff at him. But there were some who remained behind who stayed, talked to him, and became Christians.

So these people here, the household of Stephanas, aren’t the first Christians in that region, but I think what Paul means here is when he calls them the first fruits, he means this is the first family that was saved under his ministry in that province. And this is a household that came to faith in Jesus Christ through his ministry, and his point is they have a proven record of stability and growth in the faith.

They’ve been Christians from the beginning, from the first days in which Paul came and began to preach, and they haven’t wobbled in the faith since then. In fact, they have grown since then, and only grown, and become increasingly useful. He says, “They devoted themselves for ministry to the saints.” Now, Paul didn’t devote them to the ministry for the saints, and they weren’t ordained in the ministry by an ecclesiastical body.

They were empowered by God. They were given a gift, and they had the incentive to ministry, so they took it upon themselves to use their spiritual gifts and material possessions to minister to the people of Corinth. Perhaps teaching – we’re not really told what they did, but we look at the different descriptions that are given here, and it very well may be that they opened their house to meetings of the church.

Maybe they worked in the nursery – that’s a good place for people to minister, always needed, and one that the Lord appreciates greatly. But what we see here is ministry from the bottom up, not the top down. They knew their duties to God, they knew their responsibilities to one another, and they didn’t wait for the church to develop some programs for them. They got active in God’s work.

They loved the Lord, they loved his people, so when they saw an opportunity to minister, and the need to do that, and knew that they could meet that need, they did it. They

seized the opportunity, and Paul extols that. Not all the Corinthians, therefore, were misfits or miscreants; some were models to be imitated. The household of Stephanas was.

So Paul tells the Corinthians to be in subjection to people like that, who help in the work of the Lord, who labor for the church, who sacrifice for the saints. Be in subjection. Now, that’s not a statement that we take kindly to in our day and age – subjection, submission – sounds oppressive. It sounds like we’re putting ourselves into bondage or something; not at all. That’s not the meaning, that’s not the sense.

What Paul is saying is voluntarily yield yourself to them in love. Be influenced by them. Take their example to heart, and live like those people. They’re doing the ministry of the Lord. They’re showing you what you ought to be doing. Stephanas had come to Ephesus along with two others that Paul now mentions in verses 17 and 18, Fortunatus and Achaicus. They’d visited Paul there in that city.

And evidently they brought the letter from the church of Corinth with the questions that Paul has been answering throughout 1 Corinthians. And they also informed him about some of the conditions in the church. Not everything that he deals with in this book was an answer to the questions that had been asked in the letter.

There were a lot of bad things going on that weren’t being asked about, but these individuals informed him of when they told him about the circumstances there in the church. Nothing is known about the two who accompanied Stephanas. Fortunatus was likely a Roman. His name is Latin for “lucky,” so he’s Mr. Lucky, and when he was saved, I suppose he probably initially thought he was a pretty lucky guy.

He had found Christ. He’d found the treasures of heaven. He’d found salvation. Well, if so, he learned immediately from the apostle that luck had nothing to do with it; that salvation is all of the Lord. It’s nothing outside of him. It’s all by divine grace. The Father elected him, the Son died for him, the Spirit drew him. In God’s providence, Paul came to Corinth with the gospel just at the right time. It’s all part of God’s perfect plan.

Fortunatus, like every believer in Jesus Christ, was in God’s plan of salvation from all eternity. Chosen from the beginning for salvation – that’s what Paul told the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 2:13. That ought to thrill you. Does that thrill you, to think that you were chosen from the beginning? Doesn’t thrill a lot of people, but it ought to; just think of what that says about our salvation.

God doesn’t look out over this vast array of humanity and say, “I just love them all with a kind of general, indefinite kind of love.” His love is for individuals in particular.

Divine election, unconditional election means your salvation is very personal. God Almighty loved you specifically, not just generally, but he loved you specifically before the world began. And that’s what Paul is telling them when he says, “Chosen from the beginning for salvation.”

Not the beginning of your experience of salvation, not the beginning when you first believed, but from the foundation of the world, as Paul told the Ephesians. Before any either had done good or bad, as he said when Paul spoke of the election of Jacob over Esau. It has nothing to do with what we do. It had nothing to do with anything God foresaw about us, because what if he foresaw about us was a wrecked and ruined race?

It all has to do with him, and his grace, his choice of us, and it means it was all done very personally. From all eternity he had you personally in mind, and when Christ hung on the cross in his deity, his omniscience, he thought of you at that moment. He was dying for you personally, specifically. I think that ought to thrill you. It ought to thrill us – all of us – rejoice in that.

It thrilled Paul, and the visit of these three men thrilled him as well. He says in verse 17 that he rejoiced to see them. They supplied what was lacking on the part of the Corinthians, and Paul loved the Corinthians. He’ll tell them that at the end. If they didn’t know that already, he loved them greatly. Now, these three men represented them. They brought a little bit of Corinth to Paul in Ephesus, and he says that they refreshed his spirit.

There was a lot happening in Corinth to discourage Paul – the divisions and divorces, the pride and the abuse of the spiritual gifts. It hadn’t been that long since Paul had established that church – just a few years had passed, and it looked like everything was falling apart. So there was reason to be very discouraged. These men had come, and they’d told him about all of these problems.

But the loyalty of these three to the gospel and the work that Paul had started was a great encouragement to him. They told him about others who were standing firm in the faith, and were fighting for the truth. And just seeing old friends in the faith was a joy to Paul, as it is to all of us. One thing that encourages us is to see old friends in the faith, and to hear about them, and see how they’re progressing.

So these came to Paul in Ephesus, and they brought some bad news, but they brought good fellowship, and that encouraged him. And the letter they brought him from the church with the questions from these believers in Corinth showed that they still had very much an interest in what Paul had to say. They coveted his counsel and instruction.

So there were many there that were fighting for the faith and standing for the truth, and it encouraged him.

Which is interesting, I think – I find it interesting that Paul needed refreshing. I don’t guess that should be all that surprising, but here it is an apostle who needs refreshing, which tells us we all need to be refreshed in the faith. Young believers can refresh older believers. Non-apostles could refresh spiritually an apostle. These men, who were nowhere nearly as mature, as knowledgeable, and as experienced as the apostle, refreshed his soul.

Everyone has something to contribute to one another. Young believers have something to contribute to older believers, and certainly older believers should have a lot to contribute to younger believers. But this is what Paul says, this is what he acknowledges here about these individuals, and tells the Corinthians to acknowledge them, to honor them.

The letter now ends with a series of greetings, a warning, and a benediction. The first of the greetings is from the churches of Asia; that’s the province of Asia, which is the western part of Asia Minor, and today, modern Turkey. The churches aren’t listed here, but some would’ve been the seven churches of Asia Minor that are listed in Revelation chapter 2 and 3.

Now, all he says is, “The churches of Asia greet you,” but a lot is implied in that simple statement. It wasn’t a mere formality. It was a genuine expression of good will from all of these churches. They had a real concern for the Corinthian church, which illustrates what God has done, having established the church universal.

The Swiss commentator Frédéric Godet – he’s a commentator from the 19th century – commented that when you read greetings like this, you feel, as he put it, “that the history of nations is coming to an end, and a new nation of a different kind is beginning.” Well, there’s truth in that, because the church, the people of God, is made up of all kinds of people from all walks of life, every race, every nation.

So that Christ, in him, the barriers are broken down. He’s broken down the dividing wall. He’s made us all unto one family. Regardless of our backgrounds, regardless of our experiences, regardless of our cultures, in Christ, we’re one. We’re one family, and that’s expressed here. Asian Christians were greeting European Christians in a show of affection and concern.

Then a more personal greeting is given by Aquila and Prisca. We know her as Priscilla from the book of Acts; that’s how Luke identifies her. And what an impressive

couple they were, an amazing couple. They stand out whenever they’re mentioned for their missionary work. These were international Christians. Paul met them in Corinth on his second missionary journey. Luke records that in Acts 18:2.

Aquila was a fellow tentmaker, a Jewish Christian. He was originally from Pontus, on the Black Sea. He and Aquila moved to Rome, but had come to Corinth when the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from the capital. They ministered with Paul in the city of Corinth for a year and a half, and then accompanies him to Ephesus. Paul didn’t stay in Ephesus very long.

He left to conclude his second missionary journey, went to Jerusalem, and then back to Antioch, but they stayed on in Ephesus for some time, and there they met that young preacher named Apollos, and led him to the Lord. Later, when Paul wrote the book of Romans from Corinth, they had moved on. They’d moved back to Rome, and he sends greetings to them in Romans 16:3, so they were always on the move.

Wherever the Spirit led, wherever the opportunities were, wherever doors were open and they knew they had the opportunity to go and minister, they did. Their home and their country were the church. At this time they were in Ephesus with Paul, and the church, or at least part of the church, was meeting in their house. That was their practice. In Rome the church met in their house. They were like Stephanas.

They had devoted themselves for ministry to the saints, and were here warmly greeting the Corinthians. The Corinthians were old friends. They were with Paul when that church was established. They helped him establish and build up that church in Corinth, and so they had a real concern for those people. They knew them. They were friends. So they greet them, and so do the church that met in their house.

Paul adds their greeting to that of Priscilla and Aquila’s. There are probably about 30 of them – that at least is how authorities or scholars who have calculated these things say or have decided the amount of people that could meet in a well-to-do Roman house at that time. Would probably be about 30 people; it could accompany about that many. So that’s about 30 people that send their greetings on to the Corinthians.

Next, Paul gives greetings from all the brethren – probably all of the rest of the members of the church at Ephesus, who were not meeting in Priscilla and Aquila’s house, but other places. They all send their greeting. And then Paul tells the Corinthians to greet one another with a holy kiss. Paul frequently suggested that as the proper way for Christians to greet one another.

It was a sign of love. It was a sign of respect, a sign of honor that was given to others, which is what they needed to have for one another, and what they needed to show to each other in Corinth. So after all of the concern the Christians of Asia showed for the Corinthians, Paul tells the Corinthians to kindle the same kind of concern for each other – for everyone within the church.

“All these Asian Christians are concerned about you and expressing love for you; you express love for one another, and have a concern for one another personally.” So he was actually obligating them to show brotherly love, because, one, it was appropriate to do that, and secondly, because it could be a corrective to all of the problems, a corrective to the cliques within the church. It’s difficult to be hostile towards someone who greets you with kindness.

Now, it can be done. People can be that calloused and uncaring in their human nature. But generally, that’s going to melt people, and it’s a good way to deal with the divisions that were taking place. So he tells them, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Lastly, Paul gives his own greeting in his own hand. Paul typically dictated his letters, and then at the end he would perhaps write his name, or write something.

But we know for example Romans was not written actually by Paul. He dictated it to Tertius, who wrote down the words, and here he has been doing the same, but he takes the pen from his secretary, and he writes his name. At the end of 2 Thessalonians he wrote, “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter. This is the way I write.”

Now, the way he wrote was evidently with large letters, and I say that because at the end of Galatians, in Galatians 6:11, he calls attention to that fact. “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.” Paul very likely – and this is based on Galatians 4:15 – very likely had poor eyesight. What was that thorn in the flesh that he speaks about? Well, we don’t really know, but it may have been bad eyes, an affliction of the eyes.

As a result, he had to write in large letters, a large scrolling hand, and that was a distinctive signature which authenticated his letter. People would read the letters of Paul and they could see that name and that signature, and know this is genuinely one of Paul’s letters. It’s got that distinctive signature. That also made certain that there would be no doubt that what Paul wrote next was from him; that it was his sentiment, his words as an apostle.

And here he wrote, verse 22, “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha.” What a statement. Literally, it is *anathema marana tha* – be cursed, Lord come. Charles Hodge wrote that these words need no explanation, and that may be so, but they certainly do need some expounding and explaining. They take us from the depths to the heights. *Anathema* is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word *cherem*, and it means “a devoted thing.”

And what it means very often in the Old Testament is devoted to destruction. Jericho was devoted to destruction, and ultimately, the picture it gives and the meaning it has is that of eternal destruction – damnation – it’s that strong. And certainly *anathema* is. Paul personally took the pen in his hand so that he could write these words. They’re terrible words. I don’t mean they’re bad words; I mean they’re terribly frightening words.

They should be. They call down a curse on all who do not love Christ. It’s not for a lack of some degree of love. We all have that; we’re all guilty of that. We can never love the triune God, we can never love the person of Jesus Christ enough. This is for a complete lack of love. Jesus Christ is Lord. He is truly God manifest in the flesh, who therefore is to be loved and worshipped. That’s our obligation as his creation, as his creatures, to love him.

Those who do not love him do not know him, and they don’t know him ’cause they’ve never believed in him. Paul was writing this of the false teachers among them. It’s a curse, but it’s also a warning. “Make sure you do love him.” That’s the idea. “That you believe in him, or you will be forever doomed – *anathema*.” Now, that seems harsh and inconsistent with the theme of love in these last verses; it’s really not.

Paul loved God’s people. Paul loved the church, and he wanted to protect the church from false teachers, from ravenous wolves – that’s what those false teachers were – just as you and I want to protect those we love, protect our children, protect our grandchildren from predators. These men were that bad. These men were traitors. They were harming the church, and the people who were Paul’s children in the faith.

So he invoked God’s judgment on them to protect his children, but this is the end of false teachers, and so they needed to hear the words that Paul was giving. There’s love in that, in that he’s giving them a warning as well, that they might hear it, and might understand it, and might repent and be saved. Their judgment might be close at hand. Christ is coming again – that’s the next word and prayer, *marana tha*.

It’s actually two Aramaic words that mean “the Lord comes,” or “our Lord, come.” It must’ve been an early expression of faith that was used in the Palestinian churches. The Hebrew Christians used it, and then it was transferred, literally, into the Greek churches, as they too expressed the hope of the Lord’s return. That is our hope. It’s been the hope of the church down through the ages, because that’s our deliverance.

When Christ comes, we will be delivered. We will enter into the kingdom. It’s the prayer of Revelation 22:20, where Jesus says, “Yes, I am coming quickly,” and John answers that promise, “Amen – come, Lord Jesus.” Those who love him long for his return; that’s a good test of our love for Christ, whether it’s hot or cold, or whether it’s tepid, lukewarm. Do we love his return? Do we look forward to it?

Do we long for that, or do we long for this world? Do we enjoy this place too much? Priscilla and Aquila didn’t. They didn’t care much about this world and accumulating things. They lived and used everything they had for the service of the Lord. Well, if you’re a believer in Jesus Christ, you do love him, and you love his people. Maybe there’s room for improvement, of course – there certainly is for all of us.

But you love him, you love his people, you love the lost. You love your enemies. You do so by the grace of God. Everything we do, everything we have, is by the grace of God. We’re saved by the grace of God. It’s only by the grace of God that we grow spiritually. We grow in knowledge and love. It’s all of grace.

And so in the fashion so typical of Paul, he ends the letter with a prayer for God’s grace for the Corinthians, and then with a reassurance of his love for them – “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.” In spite of all the problems in Corinth, and all of those there that opposed Paul, opposed his ministry, those who’d grown cold toward the apostle, Paul never grew cold in his love for them.

And he ends this book on that statement of his great and genuine affection for them. He loved them all. He prayed that God would give them grace – we all need that, all of us. As I said, we’re saved by grace alone, which is a gift of God. Salvation has been bought at the cross. It’s done, it’s finished. It’s offered to us. There’s nothing we need to do but receive it through faith.

If you’ve never done that, we invite you to do so. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became a man and died in the place of sinners. All who believe in him are saved at that moment. So come to him, believe in him, and for all of us, may God

grants us greater grace, that we’ll grow in love for him and service toward one another.

Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do pray that we would heed the instruction that the apostle gives here. “Be alert,” he says, “be on the alert.” May we be that. May our minds be set upon the things above and not the things below. May the great interest of our heart be to know you, and serve you, and be a blessing to your people, knowing that you are coming again.