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THE FIRST EPISTLE  
OF THE DIVINE AND GLORIOUS  
APOSTLE PAUL  
TO THE CORINTHIANS

EXPLAINED BY  
THE BLESSED THEOPHYLACT  
ARCHBISHOP OF BULGARIA

CHAPTER 13

**1. If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal.**<sup>1</sup> The divine Apostle does not immediately show them this *more excellent way* (1 Cor. 12:31), but first compares it with what seemed to them to be a greater spiritual gift, namely the gift of tongues. He shows them that this *way* of love is incomparably superior to the gift of tongues and, indeed, to all spiritual gifts, thereby demonstrating that love is an object worthy of their desire.

By *tongues of men* he means the languages of the all the nations of the earth. Not content with this, however, he adds yet another hyperbole, saying *the tongues of angels*. He speaks in this way, not because angels have tongues, but because he wants to indicate something better than and superior to human tongues. For the *tongue* of the angels is that power of their understanding by which they communicate one to another divine thoughts.<sup>2</sup> He calls this power their *tongue* after the name of our bodily organ, just as he says, *Every knee shall bow of things in heaven* (cf. Phil. 2:10).<sup>3</sup> For the angels do not have bones and tendons, but by the word *knee* the Apostle is showing their intense and devoted submission.

*I am become*, he says, *sounding brass*, which is to say, “though I emit sound, I speak in vain, and I am an annoyance to others, yet I bring profit to no one, for I am devoid of love.”

**2a. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge.** Not simply prophecy, but the most sublime prophecy, the prophecy which knows all mysteries. Observe how, in the case of tongues, he does not mention any attendant profit, but in the case of prophecy, he speaks of knowing all mysteries and all knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding those otherwise noted, all passages of Holy Scripture herein quoted are taken from the English Revised Version (1881).

<sup>2</sup> The following quotation from St. Basil illustrates this difference between the human and angelic means of communication: “God who has created us has given us the use of language, that we may reveal the plans of our heart to each other and through our shared nature we may each give a share to our neighbor, as if from some treasury, showing forth our intentions from what lies hidden in our heart. For if we spent our lives with naked soul, we would immediately communicate with each other through our thoughts; but since our soul is concealed under veils of flesh as it produces thoughts, words and names are necessary to make public the things lying in the depth.” “Homily on the Words ‘Be Attentive to Yourself,’” in *On the Human Condition*, trans. and ed. Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> *that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth*

<sup>4</sup> That is, if anyone should fail to be impressed by love’s superiority to the gift of tongues, disdain that gift as a mere spectacle, let him marvel that not even the prophetic powers of a Moses or an Elijah are of any spiritual consequence in the absence of love.

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**2b. And if I have all faith.** Lest he seem an annoyance, naming each spiritual gift one by one, he comes to the mother and fountainhead of them all, namely faith, and not simply faith, but *all faith*.

**2c. So as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.** He mentions moving mountains from one place to another because this seemed to men of the cruder sort to be a great feat, not because it is the only thing *all faith* can accomplish. For the Lord taught that even a small portion of faith is enough to move mountains, when he said, *If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed* (Mt. 17:20). Notice how Paul includes under the headings of *prophecy* and *faith* all the spiritual gifts; for all miracles operate either through words or through deeds. As to love, he does not say, “without love, I am little and worthless,” but rather *I am nothing*.

**3a. And if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor.** He does not say “if I give away a part of my substance,” but rather *all my goods*. Nor does he say “if I give away all my goods,” but rather *if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor*, so that to the expenditure of money there is added ministration to the poor with all care and attentiveness.

**3b. And if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profiteth me nothing.** He does not say “if I give myself up to die,” but rather he speaks of what seemed to be the most dreadful punishment of all, namely, to be burned alive. And he says that not even this can profit a man, if he lacks love.

But someone might say, “How is it possible for a man to bestow his goods to feed the poor, if he lacks love?” One could say in response either that the Apostle is speaking here hypothetically, positing as real something which is not real (as when he says, “though we, or an angel, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which ye received” (cf. Gal. 1:8-9), even though neither he nor an angel would ever preach another gospel – indeed, he says things of this sort all throughout his epistles), or one could say that it is possible to give without love, as happens when one gives not from his compassion for those in need but from his desire to please men. It is when one gives out of an ardent compassion for the poor that almsgiving is done with love.

**4a. Love suffereth long, and is kind.** The Apostle now enumerates love's characteristics, and first he introduces longsuffering, the root of all philosophy.<sup>5</sup> For the longsuffering man is he who possesses a patient and forbearing soul. Some people, however, though they exhibit longsuffering, do so for reasons other than the love of wisdom. Rather, they oftentimes laugh at those who are angry with them, and they treat them with sarcasm, supposing themselves to be longsuffering. By acting in this way, they further inflame the wrath of those who are angry at them. It is for this reason that the Apostle says *and is kind*, that is to say, love exhibits a good and innocent character; it is not like those of whom we just spoke, cunning and malicious. The Apostle speaks of love's longsuffering and kindness in order to upbraid those Corinthians who were contentious and cunning.

**4b. Love envieth not.** That is, love does not wish others ill. For it is possible to be longsuffering toward someone and yet to wish him ill; love, however, has escaped this vice too. Paul says this for the sake of the malevolent among them.

**4c. Love vaunteth not itself.** That is, love does not behave rashly, but rather it makes its possessor

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<sup>5</sup> Illustrative of the importance of longsuffering to the philosophical life of the ancients is the following story which St. Basil relates about the Athenian statesman Pericles: “A certain fellow, a market-lounger, kept railing at Pericles, but he paid no attention; and he kept it up all day long, he giving Pericles a merciless dressing of abuse, but he taking no heed of it. Then, when it was already evening and dark, though the man was scarcely desisting, Pericles escorted him home with a light, lest his own schooling in philosophy be utterly brought to naught.” (“To Young Men, On How They Might Derive Profit From Pagan Literature,” in *Loeb Classical Library*, Vol. 270, tr. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), p. 403.

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prudent and steadfast. For the vaunter is he who is pompous, frivolous, stupid. The Apostle addresses these words to the frivolous and those eager for novelty.

**4d. Is not puffed up.** For it is possible to possess all the aforementioned virtues, and yet to be puffed up because of them. Love is not subject to this vice either, but rather, though it possesses the aforementioned virtues, it remains humble-minded. He addresses these words to the braggarts.

**5a. Doth not behave itself unseemly.**<sup>6</sup> That is, not only is love not puffed up, but even if it should suffer things most shameful for the sake of its beloved, it does not consider this something unseemly and inglorious; just as Christ Himself for the sake of His love for us not only accepted the dishonorable cross, but even considered it His peculiar glory.

You should also understand the words *doth not behave itself unseemly* in this way, as though he had said, “love does not behave abusively.” For there is nothing more unseemly than a man who behaves abusively. He addresses these words to those who would not condescend to their neighbor's weakness.

**5b. Seeketh not its own, is not provoked.** Paul explains in what respect love *doth not behave itself unseemly*. Love, he says, does not seek its own advantage, but rather that of its neighbor. Moreover, love reckons it an unseemliness when it fails to free its neighbor from behaving unseemly. The Apostle addresses these words to those who looked down upon the rest of their brethren.

But love *is not provoked* either, since it *doth not behave itself unseemly*. For an irascible man is not seemly. Therefore love *doth not behave itself unseemly*, because it *is not provoked* either, that is, it does not leap to anger.<sup>7</sup> Paul addresses these words to those who had been treated abusively.

**5c. Taketh not account of evil.** Even if it should suffer all evils, love *is not provoked* to anger; and not only does it not repay the evil it has suffered, but it does not even take account of it. Notice how he nowhere says that love is envious, but overcomes its envy, or that it is provoked, but prevails over its anger. Rather, he says, love does not allow any evil whatsoever even to begin to spring up, just as he says here, *taketh not account of evil*. Paul addresses these words to those who had been treated abusively, so that they would not retaliate against those who had wronged them.

**6a. Rejoiceth not in unrighteousness.** That is, love is not gladdened when anyone suffers injustice or abuse or hardship.

**6b. But rejoiceth with the truth.** But what is much more, he says, love rejoices with those who are well-pleasing to God. And when the truth prospers, love considers this its personal glory. Paul addresses these words to the malevolent.

**7a. Beareth all things.** Love bears all things – insults, blows, death – for it is given such endurance by that longsuffering which Paul said belongs to it. The Apostle addresses these words to those who were being plotted against.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> St. Paul's words οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖ can also be understood to mean “does not disgrace itself.” Theophylact's first explanation requires the reader to understand the words in this way, while his second is consonant with the rendering of the RV.

<sup>7</sup> The circularity of reasoning apparent in my translation of this sentence seems altogether too conspicuous for a man of Theophylact's intellect and learning to have overlooked. I suspect, therefore, either that I have failed to understand this passage properly or that the text has suffered some corruption at this point. As the sentence stands in Migne, however, I do not know what else can be done with it.

<sup>8</sup> St. Chrysostom, commenting upon this passage, recounts David's patient endurance of his son Absalom's treachery against him (cf. 2 Kgs./2 Sam. 13-18): “And this again one may perceive from the case of blessed David. For what could be more intolerable than to see a son rising up against him, and aiming at the usurpation, and thirsting for a father's blood? Yet this did that blessed one endure, nor even so could he bear to throw out one bitter expression against

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**7b. Believeth all things.** Love believes everything whatsoever its beloved may say. Love does not itself say anything cunning, nor does it suspect another of cunning speech.

**7c. Hopeth all things, endureth all things.** Love does not despair, he says, over its beloved, but rather has hope that he is always making progress for the better. He addresses these words to the despairing.

If, however, love is disappointed in its hope, and its beloved persists in his wickedness, love endures his failings bravely. For love, says the Apostle, *endureth all things*. He addresses these words to those who were prone to discord.

**8a. Love never faileth.** That is, love never misses its target, but is in all things successful, or – a better interpretation – love is not ended, love is not interrupted, love never ceases, but, on the contrary, love remains even in the age to come, even when all other gifts have ceased (as Paul will say in what follows).

**8b. But whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues, they shall cease.** Having cataloged love's fruits, the great Apostle exalts love yet again and in yet another way, by saying that both prophecy and tongues will have an end, but that love, on the contrary, is enduring and unending. For if it is so that faith might be received that both prophecy and tongues exist, it is natural that, when faith has been everywhere unfolded, prophecy and tongues will be done away with, inasmuch as they will be superfluous. This is so even now, and will be so especially then.

**8c-10. Whether there be knowledge, it shall be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away.** If knowledge is going to be done away, are we then going to spend the age to come in ignorance? God forbid. Rather, the blessed Paul is speaking here of knowledge *in part*, as he himself explains, saying that this partial knowledge will vanish away when that complete knowledge has come, that is, the knowledge that belongs to the life to come. For we shall then know not only so much as we know now, but rather much more. For example, that God is everywhere present, we know now in this present age; but how it is that He is everywhere present, we do not know. Likewise, that a virgin gave birth, we know; but how it is that she gave birth, we do not yet know. In the age to come we shall know something more, something profitable about these things.

**11a. When I was a child.** Having said, *When that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away*, Paul now offers an example by which he shows how great a difference there is between the knowledge of this present age and the knowledge of the age to come. For now we are like children; then, however, we shall be men.

**11b. I spake as a child.** He says *spake* in reference to tongues.

**11c. I felt as a child.** This he says in reference to prophecy.

**11d. I thought as a child.** He says this in reference to knowledge.

**11e. Now that I am become a man, I have put away childish things.** That is, when I shall possess in the age to come that more manlike knowledge, then this little and childlike knowledge we have here shall pass away. And so he adds:

**12a. For now we see in a mirror, darkly.** Explaining the reference he makes to his childhood, the Apostle shows that at present our knowledge is something obscure, but that, in the age to come, it will be clearer. *For now we see in a mirror*, he says. But since a mirror reflects rather distinctly the image

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the parricide; but even when he left all the rest of his captains, gave a strong injunction respecting his safety. For strong was the foundation of his love. Wherefore also it "beareth all things." Philip Schaff, ed., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. XII (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889), p. 198.

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of the object that appears in it,<sup>9</sup> he thereupon adds the word *darkly*,<sup>10</sup> showing with hyperbole that our present knowledge is extremely fragmentary.

**12b. But then face to face.** Paul says this not as though God had a face, but in order to show that the knowledge to come will be clearer and more distinct and fully unveiled.

**12c. Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I have been known.** The divine Apostle tears down their boasting in two ways. First he shows that the knowledge of this present age is but partial. Second, he shows that this knowledge does not come from us (for, he says, I did not know God, but He knew me).

And so, just as in this present age it is He that knew me and ran to me, so in the age to come shall I run to Him more vigorously than I do now. Consider a man sitting in the dark. So long as the sun is not visible to him, he does not run to the beauty of its ray; it is the ray, rather, that shows itself to him, when it shines upon him. Only then, when he receives its radiance, does he himself pursue the light. This, then, is the meaning of *even as also I have been known*: not that we shall know God exactly as He knows us, but that, just as in this present age He ran to us, so shall we cling to Him in the age to come.

To illustrate this point, imagine a man who finds an abandoned baby, a beautiful child of noble parentage. Recognizing the baby's origin, he adopts it for his own, esteeming the child worthy of all his care. Giving the boy a nobleman's upbringing, he at last adorns him with riches and introduces him into the royal palace. The boy, so long as he is a little child, will perceive none of these things, nor will he recognize his adoptive father's extraordinary kindness. It is when he becomes a man that he will recognize his benefactor and love him as he deserves. Behold, dear reader: by this illustration, that which is obscure in this verse has been illuminated.

**13. But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.** There exist, then, tongues and prophecy and knowledge (obscure though it be). But when faith has been poured out upon all (as was said above), these things shall altogether vanish away. Faith, hope, and love, however, are more enduring (for it is to indicate their endurance that he says, *but now abideth*). Of these three, moreover, the greatest is love, since it extends even into the age to come.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The mirrors of antiquity were usually made of bronze (or, less commonly, of silver). Consequently, the images reflected in them were of substantially less clarity than those reflected in our modern glass mirrors; hence Theophylact's ἐκτυπώτερον, "rather distinctly."

<sup>10</sup> Literally, "in a riddle" – ἐν αἰνίγματι. St. Nikodimos adds, "For a riddle is an obscure and dark saying." Certain translators of more recent times have attempted to render ἐν αἰνίγματι more literally. The NJB reads, "Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles." Phillips has, "At present we are men looking at puzzling reflections in a mirror."

<sup>11</sup> That is, faith, being "the assurance of *things* hoped for, the proving of things not seen" (Heb. 11.1), will become superfluous when these things are realized and revealed in the age to come. In like manner will the hope of the blessings and consolations to come be made superfluous, when the righteous will have "inherit[ed] the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34). Of these gifts then – faith, hope, and love – only love "never faileth."

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**About the translation:** This translation was made from the Greek text of Theophylact published in Vol. 124 of Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*. The translator carefully compared his interpretations with those both of the Renaissance Latin version of Philippus Montanus and, especially, of the modern Greek version of St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain.

**About the translator:** Thomas Carroll holds an M.A. in Classical Languages and Literatures from the University of Kentucky. Through a grant from the Fulbright Program he spent nine months in Greece, where he studied Byzantine music with Mr. Lykourgos Angelopoulos. An experienced teacher of Latin, Mr. Carroll is undertaking his first major translation project.

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