

1 Corinthians 13:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Analysis

For now we see through a glass, darkly (βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, blepomen gar arti di' esoptrou en ainigmati)—Esoptron is a mirror, typically polished bronze in antiquity, providing a dim, imperfect reflection (unlike modern glass mirrors). En ainigmati means "in a riddle" or "obscurely"—we see reality as if it were a cryptic puzzle. Our current perception of God, even through Scripture and Spirit-illumination, is indirect and incomplete. We see reflections, not Reality itself.

But then face to face (τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον, tote de prosōpon pros prosōpon)—This phrase echoes Numbers 12:8 (LXX), where God speaks to Moses "mouth to mouth" (stoma kata stoma), and Exodus 33:11, "The LORD spoke to Moses face to face." It also anticipates 1 John 3:2, "We shall see him as he is." The beatific vision—seeing God unveiled—is the Christian's ultimate hope. No more mediation, no more obscurity, direct sight of Christ in His glory.

Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known (ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην, arti ginōskō ek merous, tote de epignōsmai kathōs kai epegnōsthēn)—The shift from *ginōskō* (know) to *epiginōskō* (know fully, recognize completely) is significant. Our current knowledge is partial (ek merous); our future knowledge will be comprehensive, matching the way God has always fully known us. Not that we'll be omniscient, but that our knowledge will be complete, unobstructed, perfected.

Historical Context

Ancient mirrors were polished metal (bronze, silver), not clear glass, providing distorted reflections. Corinthian bronze was especially famous, but even the best mirrors gave imperfect images. Paul uses this everyday object to illustrate spiritual reality: our best current understanding of God and truth is like seeing a distorted reflection. Only in glory will we see clearly. This confronts the Corinthians' pride in their knowledge and gifts as if they had arrived at perfect understanding.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How should the 'mirror dimly' reality of your current theological knowledge produce epistemic humility in debates with other believers?
2. What does it mean that your future knowledge will match the way God has always 'fully known' you—not omniscience, but perfect, unobstructed comprehension?
3. How does the promise of seeing Christ 'face to face' reframe your current frustrations with unanswered questions and theological mysteries?

Interlinear Text

βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι τότε

we see For now through a glass darkly then
G991 G1063 G737 G1223 G2072 G1722 G135 G5119

δὲ πρόσωπον· πρὸς πρόσωπον· ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ

but face to face now I know in
G1161 G4383 G4314 G4383 G737 G1097 G1537

μέρους τότε δὲ ἐπεγνώσθην καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην

part then but I am known even as also I am known
G3313 G5119 G1161 G1921 G2531 G2532 G1921

Additional Cross-References

1 John 3:2 (Parallel theme): Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

2 Corinthians 3:18 (Parallel theme): But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Philippians 3:12 (Parallel theme): Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.

2 Corinthians 5:7 (Parallel theme): (For we walk by faith, not by sight:)

James 1:23 (Parallel theme): For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:

Revelation 22:4 (Parallel theme): And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads.

Matthew 5:8 (Parallel theme): Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

1 Corinthians 8:3 (Parallel theme): But if any man love God, the same is known of him.

Romans 8:18 (Parallel theme): For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Numbers 12:8 (Darkness): With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the LORD shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

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