

“The Hillary Step”

1 Corinthians 16

Hymns: # 25 Praise to the Lord #541 Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah

Reading: 1 Corinthians 16

In 1924, two climbers were part of an expedition that set out to conquer Mount Everest. As far as is known, they never reached the summit; and they never returned. Somewhere on that gigantic mountain they were overpowered by the elements and died. After the failure of the expedition, the rest of the party returned home. Addressing a meeting in London, one of those who returned described the ill-fated adventure. He then turned to a huge photograph of Mount Everest, mounted on the wall behind him. “Everest,” he cried, “we tried to conquer you once, but you overpowered us. We tried to conquer you a second time, but again you were too much for us. But, Everest, I want you to know that we are going to conquer you, for you can’t grow any bigger, but we can!”¹

As we look back over the past 15 chapters of this mountain of a book called 1 Corinthians we may feel like our first attempt to attain and embody its many truths has been a failure. At some of the lower elevations we may have been victorious, but at others we may have been knocked back, perhaps time and time again. But take heart, though 1 Corinthians isn’t growing any bigger, but you certainly can...and by God’s grace you will. And each attempt we make to reach its peak, we gain wisdom and strength. But today, this year’s expedition will make its final push to the summit of 1 Corinthians, and like Mount Everest, will face perhaps its most difficult and dangerous stage.

You see, about twenty minutes short of the summit of Mount Everest there is a section of the climb known as the Hillary Step. It’s named after Sir Edmund Hillary, who was the first known person, along with Tenzing Norgay, to scale it on the way to the summit on the 29th of May 1953. The Hillary Step is (or was) a nearly vertical rock face about 40 feet high and is known by climbers as the most technically difficult part of the typical Nepal-side Everest climb. Climbing the Hillary Step has the danger of a 10,000-foot drop on the right (when going up) and an 8,000-foot drop on the left.

Today, we come to the Hilary Step of 1 Corinthians, the final chapter. Though not very big, it does present perhaps the most technically difficult aspects compared with all the previous fifteen chapters. Having come this far, and with the summit in sight, we must gather all our courage and fully commit to making it to the top. A loss of nerve at this point or a careless move means all the previous effort was in vain or even worse a death fall of 10,000 feet. It’s not for the faint hearted to be sure.

The Hillary Step of this chapter is Stewardship. Stewardship of money (v. 1-4); Stewardship of Opportunities (v.5-9) and finally Stewardship of People (v.10-24). These are the last three technically difficult moves we must make our way through before we complete our climb of 1 Corinthians and stand upon its summit.

1. Stewardship of Money (v. 1-4) *“Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. 2On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. 3Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. 4If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.”*

The Corinthians had heard about the special collection that Paul was taking for the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem and they included a question about it in the letter they sent to Paul in

¹ Gene Getz, *Doing Your Part, Regal, 1984, pp. 152-3*

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Ephesus. So Paul is answering this last on their list of questions carried by their delegates to him. So what was this collection for? You will remember that at Pentecost a great number of people from outside of Jerusalem became believers and ended up staying, forming the first church there. This put enormous pressure on the local population to care for them and their physical needs. You may also recall that there had also been a famine as Agabus prophesied about in Acts 11:27-30. We also read in Gal. 2:10 about the concern for the poor which the Jerusalem elders asked Paul to remember. And so he did. On his third missionary journey, Paul gave specific instructions to the gentile churches he founded about this collection he planned to take back to Jerusalem. Paul said in Romans 15:27 “Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. 26For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. 27They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.” This motivation seems to have been universal along with the actual practice of how to store it up, which we see in v. 2 of this chapter and which he clearly told the Galatian churches to practice.

While Paul does not use the word “tithe” here, nor does the NT specifically use the word “tithe” as a legally binding requirement upon believers, nevertheless “tithing” is clearly in view here. In fact “tithing, that is giving back to God 10% of one’s gross income, is simply the “baby step” of a toddler Christian’s stewardship upon the “Hillary Step”. Under the Old Covenant, the Jewish people were required by LAW to “tithe”, but that wasn’t just one tithe, it was actually three. One supported the Priests and Levites (Num. 18:21; 24); one supported a sacred festival (Deut. 12:17-18; 14:23); and the third was given to support the poor, orphans and widows (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:12-13). The first two tithes were annual, while the poor, orphan and widow tithe was every three years. This meant that the Israelites actually “tithed” 23% of their income.² And it was not an option, it was the LAW.

Randy Alcorn writes, “There is no indications the early church ever retreated from the concept that the tithe was the basic minimum to be given to the Lord. That this was still the case within the first few hundred years of the church is demonstrated in the words of the influential church father Irenaeus: “The Jews were constrained to a regular payment of tithes; Christians, who have liberty, assign ALL their possessions to the Lord, bestowing NOT the LESSER portions of their property, since they have the hope of greater things” Note the key phrase, “not the lesser portions.” This is a direct indication that the tithe was considered a minimal standard in the early Christian community. A few hundred years later the tithe was still a basic standard, as evidenced in the words of Augustine: “...let him render tithes, and out of the nine parts seek to give alms.” Note the clear distinction between the mandatory tithe and the voluntary offering of giving alms.”³

Back in the late 1960’s, on the wall of President Lyndon Johnson’s White House office, there hung a framed letter written by General Sam Houston to Johnson’s great-grandfather Baines more than a hundred years earlier. Sam Houston was the military commander in chief that declared Texas independence from Mexico in 1836 and later that year won that independence by defeating the Mexican General Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinta. Sam Houston’s signature makes the letter valuable, but the storey behind it is much more significant. Baines had led Sam Houston to Christ. Houston was a changed man, no longer course and belligerent, but peaceful and content. The day came for Sam Houston to be baptised- at 61, just 9 years before his death- it was an incredible event in the eyes of those who knew his previous lifestyle and attitude. After his baptism, Houston stated

² Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*; Tyndale House; 1989; p. 207

³ *Ibid.* p. 216

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he would like to pay half the local minister’s salary. When someone asked him why, his simple response was, “My pocketbook was baptised too.”⁴

But alas, it is often our pocketbook that is the last thing to be baptised. As we approach this first critical part of the Hillary Step in our climb to the summit, let me offer some technical help from those who been here before:

1. Give Generously
 - Like Mary who broke the neck of her alabaster jar in anointing Jesus at Bethany.
2. Give Regularly and Systematically
 - “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income...”
 - Our tithe should go to where we are being fed, and ideally that is the local assembly of believers where you gather, but sadly that is sometimes not the case.
 - “We are to plan or giving in advance- not simply give if we happen to be present, or happen to feel moved by the offertory, or happen to have remembered our check book...It is very rare that people give substantially unless they give systematically.”⁵
3. Give Voluntarily
 - “The principle is not “give voluntarily or don’t give at all,” but “as your heart is moved give voluntarily above and beyond your regular giving.”⁶
4. Give Joyfully
 - God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7)
 - “Giving is not God’s way of raising money- it’s His way of raising children”⁷
5. Give Worshipfully
 - “Giving does not boarder on worship. It IS worship, every bit as much as praying or singing.”⁸
6. Give Proportionally
 - When Jesus spoke of the widow and her the giving of her mite, he “was saying that the amount we give is important to God only in relation to the amount we keep. One person can give \$25 in an act of great sacrifice, another can give \$100,000 and not sacrifice at all. If someone makes \$10,000,000 a year, gives away \$9,000,000 and spends “only” the other million on himself, we may be deeply impressed, but God is not.”⁹
7. Give Sacrificially
 - 2 Cor. 8:1-4 “And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 205-6

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 231

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 234

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 236

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 237

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8. Give Quietly

- Matt. 6:1-4 ““Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2”So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 3But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Stewardship of God’s money is the first stage. The second stage of the Hillary Step is navigating the stewardship of opportunities, and it involves three technical climbing moves that far too many have yet to master.

2. Stewardship of Opportunities (v.5-9) *“After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you--for I will be going through Macedonia. 6Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. 7I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. 8But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, 9because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.”*

- **Flexibility:** Notice Paul’s language here...perhaps; awhile; wherever; hope; if the Lord permits. This is the Apostle Paul for goodness sake. Does he not know what he is on about? Isn’t he free just to make a plan, set in concrete and go for it come hell or high water? Well apparently not. Unfortunately though, far too many us have either lost this flexibility or have never had it. We think our life and our decisions are just that...OURS. Now of course they are ours, God has not made nor does he desire preprogramed zombie robots. But He has called us to follow His lead. He is the Lead Climber on this section of the Hillary Step, and if you don’t submit your climbing route plan to His you are going to expose yourself to serious, serious danger and you are going to squander the opportunities He is entrusting to you to steward.

Paul knew this well. He learned it on his Second Missionary Journey in Acts 16. Paul thought he was going into Asia, but was kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching there. He then tried to go north and enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them. It was then in a dream that he received the lead and call to go to Macedonia, upon which he acted immediately. (Just a side note here: When you are sure you have been given direction by God and His timing is clear...act on it immediately. Procrastination is not a fruit of the Spirit...it is the flesh leaving the back door open for the devil to come in with fear, confusion, doubt and rob you blind of the opportunity God has given you. It was this same Paul who wrote: “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rom. 8:14) and Jesus Himself who said: “but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.”

Flexibility is not wishy-washy, “yes” one minute “no” the next; it’s not doublemindedness or indecisiveness. It is learning to surrender our will to God’s will and learning to hear His voice. James sums up this kind of opportunity stewardship saying “Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” 14Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15Instead, you ought to say, “If it

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is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." 16As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. 17Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. (James 4:13-17)

- **Open Doors:** The second technical climbing move here is about “Open Doors” and notice how the tone in Paul shifts to definitiveness “8But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, 9because a great door for effective work has opened to me.” Paul recognized that God had opened a door of opportunity for him in Ephesus and he wasn’t treating it lightly. In fact, he stayed there for two full years on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10). In his correspondence with the Corinthians he made it clear that he wanted to visit them, and even though his plans to see them had to change a couple of time, and though he knew this disappointed the Corinthians, he was not going to allow emotions or people pleasing to deter him from the clear God given open door for effective ministry. This technical move is the counter balance to flexibly. To be good stewards of the opportunities God gives us there is no room for rash and selfish decision making, nor is there any room to prematurely abandon an effective work where God is blessing. Even here we must be vigilant, for satan is the father of lies and will whisper “stay” when the pillar of cloud and fire has moved on or he will whisper “go” while there is still much fruitfulness to be gleaned.
- **Opposition:** The third technical climbing move here is that of recognizing opposition for what it is. Paul says in v.9 “...and there are many who oppose me.” “It says something about Paul’s perception of his ministry that the presence of opposition was a sign to him of the viability of his labor and a reason for pressing on, not running away.”¹⁰ For you and I to be good stewards of the opportunities God has given us, we must recognize that we will be opposed. If you are a Christian you will be opposed; you have a deadly enemy who has come to steal from you, to kill you and to destroy you (John 10:10). Do you believe that? The reality is you and I were born into a world at war; a cosmic battle with a fallen angelic being who is dead set on taking you out. He’s an expert assassin; an expert liar; and expert robber and he has innumerable mercenary spirits who have been at this war for a very, very long time. If this enemy does not in fact really steal from YOU, really kill YOU, really destroy YOU...why did Jesus warn us of him?

Sadly, many Christians saunter through life like “The Girl from Ipanema”. You know the song? “...Tall and tan and young and lovely, the girl from Ipanema goes walking and when she passes, each one she passes goes...Ahhh. When she walks, she's like a samba, that swings so cool and sways so gentle that, when she passes, each one she passes goes...Ahhh”. Now place that tall and tan young and lovely Brazilian bikini babe in the middle of Normandy Beach on June 6, 1945 and you have a perfect illustration of why so many Christians are taken out by the enemy. Our present context is D-Day not Rio de Janeiro, and we all need to trade in our bikinis and speedos for spiritual armour and make dash to a defensive and strategic position.

I hope to do some teaching on this in the coming weeks and the reality of our long ignored spiritual warfare, but for now I want us to notice that opposition is not a sign that we have

¹⁰ David K. Lowry; 1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.547)

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done something wrong or that God is not in it or perceive it as a shut door. Paul saw it exactly the opposite. God WAS in it; and it WAS an open door, and the opposition only proved it, and therefore Paul was able to be a good steward of the opportunity for two years, and then God moved him on. This is where listening is so important. A once open door does not mean it never closes.

We are now come to the last section of the Hillary Step and the Stewardship of People.

3. Stewardship of People (v.10-24) *“If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. 11No one, then, should refuse to accept him. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers.12Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity. 13Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. 14Do everything in love. 15You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you, brothers, 16to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it. 17I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. 18For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.19The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house. 20All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. 21I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. 22If anyone does not love the Lord--a curse be on him. Come, O Lord! 23The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. 24My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.”*

In this last section we see Paul model the value he placed on relationships and we see how important different ones are to the ministry...they are in fact our climbing partners. And perhaps in the final analysis, what makes any attempt on Mount Everest a success often comes down to the individual people on the team and the trust they have in each other. On this ascent of 1 Corinthians Paul, as a good steward, values individuals; he values whole families; and he values married couples.

- **Individuals:**

- **Timothy-** “The advice Paul gave the Corinthians about Timothy in v. 10 would suggest that the young man had some physical and emotional problems. He needed all the encouragement he could get.”¹¹ We recall how Paul encouraged Timothy to “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.” (1 Tim. 5:23) and “Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. 5I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. 6For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. 7For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Tim 1:4-7)

Timothy was young and sensitive, lacking in Paul’s robustness, nevertheless, he tells the Corinthians that Timothy was carrying on the same work as the Apostle Paul and they were to accept him, look after him, and send him on his way in a worthy manner.

¹¹ Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise- 1 Corinthians*; Victor Books; 1983; p. 168-169

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- **Apollos**- In stark contrast to Timothy we find Apollos another valued member of Paul’s climbing team. Apollos was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor, speaking boldly in the Synagogue where he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ (Act 18:24-28). He clearly had a strong sense of personal calling as seen in his refusal to go to Corinth at Paul’s request, but would go when he had the opportunity. I cannot help but sense something of a bit of stropiness and perhaps unbridledness in Apollos. He clearly had a bit of a cult following in Corinth that made him appear in opposition to Paul. In spite of this Paul still valued him and refused to “Lord it over Apollos” or order him to do as he was told. Perhaps Paul knew, as I have come to appreciate over the years, that sometimes the force required to restrain the flesh in someone else is more than enough to quench the spirit in them.

I can’t help but see Paul like a Navy Seal instructor in regards to Apollos. You see when Navy Seal’s complete their gruelling training to become the elite special ops force they are known for, the final assessment comes down to a simple question posed and answered around the table of their instructors: “Would you go into battle with this man?” If the answer is No, because of some character flaw or “gut check” the instructor saw, they are not selected to become an elite Navy Seal...no matter how well they completed their training. I think of this illustration regarding Apollos. Individualistic? Perhaps. Stropy or unbridled? Perhaps. But would I go into battle with him. No question...yes. Would I want him on my climbing team to make and assault on Everest? Unquestionably...yes.

- **Whole Families:**

- **Stephanas and his household**- This is the same Stephanus and his family who Paul had personally baptised back in 1 Cor. 1:16. Paul normally left baptism to one of his companions, but Stephanus and his family were the first converts in Achaia and as such I think Paul took a special interest in their baptisms. They must have been quite a family. “They became important leaders in the church at Corinth, for they “devoted themselves” to Christ’s service. The verb means “they appointed themselves”, but it doesn’t mean they pushed their way into leadership. Rather whenever they saw a need, they went to work to meet it without being asked.”¹² “Sometimes Paul appointed elders (Acts 14:23) but in this instance members of Stephanas’ household took on the responsibility. And Paul recognized their position as ordained by God and thus urged others to submit to them.”¹³

I’m reminded of the 17th century family of Nicholas Ferrar and their property of Little Gidding. Little Gidding was the home of a small Anglican religious community established in 1626 by Nicholas Ferrar, two of his siblings and their extended families. It was founded around strict adherence to Christian worship in accordance the Book of Common Prayer and the liturgical heritage of the Church of England. The

¹² *Ibid.* p. 169

¹³ David K. Lowry; *1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty; 1983; SP Publications (p.548)*

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extended Ferrar family transformed their holdings at Little Gidding into a humble Anglican religious community. When they purchased it, the property consisted of a decayed manor house and the village's medieval parish church of St John. The Ferrars began repairing the site. Nicholas Ferrar was joined by his brother John Ferrar and his family, and their sister Susanna (Ferrar) Collett and her family. The community was never a formal religious community, as with a monastery or convent. They did not have an official Rule (such as the Rule of Saint Benedict), no vows were required, and no enclosure. The Ferrar household lived a Christian life according to liturgical practices and the Book of Common Prayer. They engaged in tending to the health and education of local children, and in bookbinding. But in the end the Ferrar family was criticised by Puritans and denounced as nothing but a "Protestant Nunnery".¹⁴

In the 20th century, the poet T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) was inspired by the legacy of the religious community at Little Gidding. He incorporated historical elements and symbols of it into his long poem, *Little Gidding*, as part of his collection *Four Quartets* (1945). That poem has resonated within my soul years, particularly these lines:

**“With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”**

What a blessed privilege it is when God gives an entire and extended biological family the opportunity of “appointing themselves” to His stewardship for the service of the saints. And what grievousness it is when the opportunity is ignored, squandered and lost. To have fought so hard to make it to the Hillary Step at an elevation of 28,839...a mere 190 feet from the summit of Everest...and to turn back...there just aren't words for it.

- **Married Couples:**

- Aquila and Priscilla- This is one couple I cannot wait to meet and linger in long discussion with over a glass of Kingdom Red. This Jewish couple had been ordered out of Rome by the Emperor Claudia around 50 AD along with all the Jews. They travelled to Corinth where they met the Apostle Paul and co-laboured for a season with him as tent-makers in Corinth. (Acts 18:2-5) Later they accompanied Paul when he left Corinth and travelled to Ephesus where he left them while he returned to Antioch (Acts 18:18-22). While in Ephesus Priscilla and Aquila formed a “house church” in their own home (1 Cor. 16:19). It was into this home and “house church” that they invited the eloquent but as yet unsaved Apollos and there explained to him the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:26). They later returned to Rome after some apparently life risking events for which the Apostle Paul was personally grateful as were all the Gentile churches. We don't know what it was they did, but it must have been a big deal to warrant Paul's mention. Once back in Rome,

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Gidding

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they again had the Church in their home (Rom. 16:5). They were a significant couple and wherever they went the Church was either formed or gathered in their home. Though they are not called “apostles”, they were nevertheless highly mobile, foundational to the forming and gathering of the church and were teachers. This is illustrated again as we find them back in Ephesus for a second time at the end of Paul’s life. They appear to have gone back there to support the young apostolic delegate Timothy and his ministry. Paul greets them specifically in 2 Tim. 4:19; the last few words he ever spoke/wrote to us. This is surely an indication of just how much Paul valued them.

Stewardship of Money, Opportunities and People.

We’re there folks! We made it! The Hillary Step is behind us. Look ahead...there’s the summit just feet away. I can see Paul there now with his arms raised and his fists pumping the air. What’s that he yelling over the entire world?

- V. 22 “If anyone does not love the Lord--a curse be on him.” Indeed, let us join Paul in this the first of our own victory shouts. It is only the Love of Jesus that had brought here safely. And from this vantage point, high above the entire world, having been raised and seated with Him in the heavenlies, we take our place with Him and in His authority and yell defiantly at every foul spirit of accusation and attack: “If anyone does not love the Lord--a curse be on him.”
- And let us continually shout and pray this the shortest prayer in the Bible: Maranatha! Maranatha! Aramaic for Come, O Lord! Yes, Lord Jesus come. We love you. We long for your appearing. Maranatha!

Our gracious Triune God of grace, thank you for leading us to the summit of this book of 1 Corinthians and for all the lessons you have shown us and for all of you we have come to see and love more dearly. We ask you Holy Spirit to bring to our remembrance all that Jesus has said in these chapters and to the personal applications you are calling each of us to make. We’re grateful for the time and supply that you have given us. We do love you Jesus. Thank you again. Maranatha! Maranatha!