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Welcome to the New Life Podcast in Ministry of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, York. Join us for worship each week at 10 o'clock at 950 Danby Road, Ithaca, New York. You can also visit us on our website, www.newlifeithaca.org. Now here's this week's sermon.

00:43

glad to be back with you to worship with you and Cheryl and I are always delighted when we can have an occasion to be to be here with you. Our text this morning is from 1st Corinthians 13. Now next to the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm, 1st Corinthians 13 may be the most famous often quoted text in Scripture and many of us as soon as we hear the text are

01:13

We think, you know, where are the bridesmaids and where's the bride and the groom? And that's not the occasion for that this morning. But let's read this text together and then consider what God might have for us.

01:31

If I speak in human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give my body to be burned that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love suffers long.

02:00

Love is kind. Love is not jealous. Love is not boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not seek its own. It is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in evil, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

02:26

But where there are prophecies, they will cease. Where there are tongues, they will be stilled. Where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part, we prophesy in part. But when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, I put away the ways of childhood. For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror.

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then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully even as I am fully known." Now these three remain, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love. This is God's

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know, Christians and non-Christians alike cite 1 Corinthians 13 as a classic hymn of love. As I said, you probably have heard it read at weddings. You may even have it hanging as a piece of artwork in your home. But if we think of it as a standalone statement, if we read it as a classic definition of love that can be pulled out to inspire us to live a better life, we don't really understand.

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how Paul meant for it to be read and we likely will miss what he is trying to teach us. So before we begin to look at this famous chapter we need to put it in context. We need to appreciate the situation in which it was written because it makes all the difference in the world to how we hear and understand what Paul is saying about love. And also as we start to look at this chapter I want to acknowledge my appreciation to Tim Keller for some of his insights into this text.

04:18

So we're look first at the situation, the context. Second, we're going to look at the problem, the problem motivating Paul's remarks about love. And then third, we're going to look at the solution to the problem. So we begin with the situation. It would be difficult to exaggerate the significance of Corinth in the Roman world. After Roman Alexandria, it had become the third largest city in the empire.

04:46

And it had a long history. It was a thriving city during the Greek Empire, but Rome reduced it to rubble. And then Julius Caesar, recognizing its strategic location, resurrected it. Corinth is located on a narrow isthmus, to practice to say that, ships coming from Italy.

05:11

could avoid the treacherous winds around the southern tip of Greece and portage their cargo just four miles overland to the Aegean Sea. You may remember in Acts 27 that Paul, when he was being transported to Rome, his ship tried to sail around the southern tip of Greece and was blown off course to Crete. So when Julius Caesar revived the city, he sent a large group of manumitted slaves, that is,

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people who had earned or been granted freedom and now had citizenship in this Roman colony. Caesar also sent a large group of entrepreneurial trade people who could use this opportunity to create wealth and elevate their status, trade to be taxed to fill the coffers of Rome. But few residents of Corinth viewed the city as their homeland. It was a place of opportunity to make it in the world. Newly minted Roman citizens could pursue wealth.

06:09

and status with the legal protection of the empire. No aristocracy, no tradition, no native population. It was diverse and multi-ethnic. So to help us understand the situation, consider the Corinthians and their newfound privileges as Roman citizens. I find it interesting that in Acts 18, we read of the founding of the church in Corinth. In that short account,

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Jewish citizens hauled Paul before Galio, the proconsul of the region, because this man they charged as persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.

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Galio said to them, if you guys are making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names of your own law, settle the matter yourselves. I'm not going to be a judge of such things. And he drove them off. But the Jewish leaders were doing exactly the same thing as some Christians in Corinth. In chapter 6, Paul addresses the zeal of some of the Corinthian Christians to had to sue one another in engaging in civil lawsuits.

07:17

And these new colonists who now have the right to own property could also engage in the privilege of citizenship. Behind Paul's rebuke is this tension that we still face between the freedom we have to exercise civil liberties and the freedom we have as Christians to be ruled by love. Paul is reminding us about easily we are corrupted when we grasp for political power and influence. That's true not just in the culture but it's also

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true of people's quest for power and influence within the church. One New Testament historian described Corinth as a city where social advancement was a major preoccupation. People were making money and climbing the ladder. Corinth was a city where public boasting and self-promotion had become an art form. Paul doesn't make it out of chapter 1 without mentioning boasting twice.

08:16

Public recognition was often more important than facts. A kind of public association like, I'm part of Paul's group. Oh, no, no, I'm an associate of a Paulist.

08:29

There is also the Roman love of sport and competition that factors into our understanding of the Corinthians and Roman culture. Paul was a tent maker, as were Priscilla and Aquila, whose leadership and teaching were foundational for the new church in Corinth. They even disciplined Apollos. What does tent making have to do with sports? Let me tell you. Tent making was a thriving business serving people who visited Corinth for the Isthmian games.

08:58

which were second only in fame. See, this is a tongue-tangler of a sermon. They were second only in fame and popularity to the Olympic Games in Athens.

09:11

Another example of the influence of Roman culture appears in chapter 11, the wearing of hoods by women in public, especially in public worship, as well as the issue of head coverings and hair for men. For married women in Roman society to appear in public without a hood sent out signals of sexual availability or, at very least, a lack of concern for respectability. And when Paul says that the nature of things teaches us about our behavior and cultural choices, he's talking about

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what is obviously understood in the culture of the time, not what is universally or ontologically true for all human beings. Everyone in Corinth and Roman culture knows what these matters of dress and presentation mean. In our culture, everyone knows what a ring worn on the fourth finger of the left hand means. Also, Roman architecture and eating customs help us to understand Paul's concern related to meals and the sacraments. This is in chapter 11.

10:06

First class people are reclining on couches, eating the best food. Second class people are standing in the hallway, getting leftovers and inferior wine. So churches meeting in homes could easily embody these class distinctions and economic prejudice, even in partaking of

the sacrament. Love requires that the table be set on level ground. It's a young church. It's a growing church in a boom town.

10:33

The new believers were among many who would come to Corinth to make their fortune. They are talented, they're educated, ambitious. However, you don't have to know much about Corinth to know that it's a church with a lot of problems. They're like us. But notice something incredibly important about how we grow and change and mature. How we tackle these problems that are a part of our life.

11:02

Before Paul addresses these problems, he reminds his brothers and sisters of who they are. And it's important for us to remember who we are. That is, it's important to remember what God has accomplished in us by loving us. The gift of His grace precedes and is the foundation for any change that unfolds in our lives. Listen to Paul's opening reminders of what God has already accomplished.

11:30

in the lives of the Corinthians and in our lives if we are followers of Jesus. Paul begins, always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus for in him you have been enriched in every way with all kinds of speech with all knowledge you do not lack any spiritual gift you are eagerly awaiting our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed he will sustain you to the end

11:56

so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God who is faithful has called you into fellowship with his son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

12:06

place, a necessary place for us to begin as we think about change in our lives. The question now becomes one of stewardship. What will we do with what has been entrusted to us?

So it's a talented, gifted, visionary, and energetic bunch, but they are immature. Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit, but as people who are worldly, mere infants in Christ.

12:36

I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. Indeed, you're still not ready. You're still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Stop boasting about human leaders." All of that in 1 Corinthians 3. Boasting. Paul mentions it a dozen times in this letter and even more in his second letter. Arrogance and pride get a noticeable amount of ink.

13:02

This fellowship was marked by a prideful self-confidence. So when considering the consent, understanding the context, consider also the Corinthians and their newly established Christian community. The life and the worship of the Corinthian church was marked by miracles and learning, chapter 12, tongues and revelation and healing, they're all great things. Paul does not forbid them. But he has to set some boundaries.

13:29

And as you know, we as Presbyterians often double down on doing things decently and in order, sometimes in ways that go beyond what is written. As Paul cautions them, do not go beyond what is written. That's in chapter four. Paul is not against learning or education or knowledge. He's not opposed to earnestness and zeal.

13:55

but he warns us about our bent toward idolatry of knowledge and performance, the hubris, self-reliance, and independence that diminishes our dependence on grace and which minimizes the centrality of the cross in every area of our life together, and independence which is the enemy of love. And so Paul is pushing back on their self-reliance, a denial of the same love and grace that has been lavished upon us. He asks in chapter 4, what do you have that you did not receive?

14:27

The answer is nothing. And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

14:36

Their pride and self-reliance lead to autonomy. Paul quotes back to them what they have said. says, I have the right to do anything, you say, chapter 10. And as they were ignoring the poor, as they came to the Lord's table, they were living with indifference to the spiritually weak. He says, when you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

14:59

This is an important part of what Paul means when he calls us to discern the body as we come to the table. We're to see and honor the members of the body, poor and rich, educated, uneducated, women and men, slave and free. These are my brothers and sisters united in one body, this by what this table of love declares.

15:18

Also, in understanding the context, consider the Corinthians and their moral behavior. Corinth was a city renowned for its sexual promiscuity. The temple to Aphrodite was on the hill right above Corinth. And the temple priests and priestesses, a more polite reference to hetero and homosexual prostitutes, would come down into the city to ply their trades.

15:45

But again, before we hear Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians for their sexual sins, remember that he has commended them for the profound transformation that has occurred among them. Chapter 6, do not be deceived. And here it's very important to note how he addresses the full breadth of the sexual spectrum, everyone, and that unlike lust, he does not imply that sexual sin deserves greater judgment than any other sin.

16:10

He says, not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, or adulterers, nor male prostitutes, or practicing homosexuals, nor thieves, nor greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the spirit of our God. Paul is celebrating the reality that God's grace in the gospel can rescue and transform anyone.

16:39

However, remember that even real and profound transformation is always incomplete in this life. The best any of us can realize in this life is to be moving toward Jesus. Nevertheless, Paul continues, even though there has been remarkable, wonderful transformation in your lives, there is sexual immorality among you, Paul writes, of a kind that even pagans don't tolerate. A man has his father's wife, and you're so proud of yourselves, but you should be mourning in sorrow and shame.

17:09

And you should remove this man from your fellowship. And the reputation of Corinth was such that the name Corinth had been turned into a verb.

17:22

As a friend of mine once quipped, it's really never a good thing for your name to be turned into a verb. To Steve.

17:33

But the verb of Corinth was to Corinthianize, to live with moral depravity without rules. The term reflects the cultural context of Corinth as a place known for its moral corruption. Or as another historian has written, Corinth had the reputation of being one of the most success-oriented and dog-eat-dog, sex-obsessed cities in the world.

17:55

Sounds like life in cities and commercial centers in our country. Some things never change. So with that background, that tenor of the whole letter, we come to this famous text. And perhaps with that background, you may begin to realize that we can't read this chapter on its own. Why would we think that Paul just kind of switches gears to rhapsodize and merely wax poetic about the ideals of love?

18:23

I mean, chapter 13 is not a meme. Oh, here's a cool riff on love to post on your fridge or turn into a screensaver. It's not a Hallmark moment. Yes, it is absolutely a magnificent discourse on love. And it's not wrong for us to celebrate it on its own, but it's critical for us to remember its context. The occasion for it is like everything else Paul is saying to them and to us. This famous chapter is a rebuke. It is a correction.

18:53

You have mistaken knowledge for wisdom, tolerance for pride, self-reliance for humility, and so too you do not understand what love is. In fact, what you call love is actually nothing more substantial than vapor. It is nothing.

19:12

Listen again to the beginning of this chapter. I speak in human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give my body to be burned that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

19:36

Now when Paul uses the word if, we might think he's being a kind of theoretical or hyperbolic, but he's not. mean, look at what he has just said a few verses earlier in chapter 12. To each one of you, the manifestation of the Spirit has been given for the common good. To one has been given through the Spirit a message of wisdom. To another, a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit. To another, faith by the same Spirit. To another, gifts of healing.

20:05

by that one spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same spirit and he distributes them to each one just as he determines.

20:28

This is a church in which many of the men and women spoke eloquently. Many speak in tongues. Women and men prophesying in public worship. Many are amazing teachers, even of mysteries, which is Paul's word for the person and work of Jesus, the gospel. Many are leaders, great visionaries. The phrase, faith to move mountains, is not a reference to saving faith. It means that they are visionary leaders of organizations, people who found nonprofits, who mobilize people to do amazing things.

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and many are wildly generous with their wealth, their possessions and their influence. The men and women of this church are doing all of these things.

21:08

But are they doing it in

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And that brings us to the probe.

21:21

We see it at the end of verse 3. I give away all my possessions. I sacrifice everything, even my life. That I may boast. We see it at the end of verse 1.

21:35

If I do not have love, I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. Paul means more than just contrasting the magnificence of love to rambunctious noise making. I remember when I was a kid, there be these little wind up monkeys. You crank them up and they have little cymbals and they crash you.

21:57

It's not that. It's very possible that the sound of gongs and cymbals could be heard on the streets, even as this letter was being read in the home of Priscilla and Aquila. In the pagan temples, worshippers would announce their arrival by a kind of parade. The greater the wealth, more elaborate and the noisier the procession. Crashing of cymbals, sounding of a gong.

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would announce the arrival of one who is given great money, one who is considered worthy of honor, one worthy of the attention of the gods. It was the noise of boasting, saying, look at who I am. Look at what I've done.

22:41

Great sermons are being preached. People are coming to Christ. The church is growing. People have great insights and wisdom, deep understanding of the scriptures. Miracles are happening. The sick are being healed. Perhaps even the dead are being raised. There is tremendous sacrifice and generosity. Housing and food, medical care and protection for the poor, civic service to the cause of justice, righteousness, and peace. There are people living lives of denial and deprivation, sacrifice strict obedience and worldly detachment, willing even to lay down their lives, surely.

23:12

Surely this is God's affirmation that we are a great church and that we are killing it as Christians

23:24

Maybe.

23:28

Hear what Paul says. You can be doing all of these things, many of which are good and noble things. But if you do not have love, if you are not doing them in love, you gain nothing. You are nothing.

23:55

What might the apostle Paul say to New Life Church? You volunteer at the pregnancy center. You work on the weekends at Second Wind, helping people get off the streets. You tie 30%. You sponsor 10 kids through compassion. You can quote the Westminster Confession backwards. If all you want for Christmas is for everything to be done decently and in order.

24:21

If you wake up at 4.30 every morning for three hours of prayer and Bible reading and you witness to the Uber Eats driver every time she delivers pizza.

24:31

Paul would say to us as he did the Corinthians, may do all of these things and more, but without love you gain nothing. You are nothing.

24:41

And this news should hit us like a ton of bricks. As it hit the Corinthians, it is a shock. And there are at least three implications to what Paul is saying.

24:57

The first implication is alarming.

25:02

It is possible for us to have amazing gifts and accomplish amazing feats in our life. It is possible for us to preach and have people come to faith. It's possible for us to do miracles and be nothing. That is to not be a Christian. That is for your heart never to have been changed by the grace of God. How is that possible, you may ask?

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Well, it is what the Bible teaches us.

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You can read about Balaam in Numbers 22 and 23.

25:36

What was in his heart was not what came out of his mouth. He wanted to curse Israel, but God made only blessing come out of his mouth.

25:48

King Saul was empowered by the Spirit to lead, even to prophesy, but his heart was never given to the Lord.

25:56

and most dramatically Judas, who spent three years as one of Jesus'

26:03

In Matthew 10, Jesus empowers all 12 of his disciples, including Judas, to preach the gospel, to declare the good news of the kingdom, to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Judas did all of these things.

26:21

that would have made the church in Corinth proud.

26:26

Jesus teaches us in Matthew 7 about the last day when we will all stand before him. He says, everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven. Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?

26:57

The gifts of God while real, good, and great are not proof that we possess the life of God.

27:06

Without love, I am nothing.

27:12

The second implication is humbling.

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It's humbling but should bring us hope and deep gratitude for the wideness of God's mercy.

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you realize the Spirit gives gifts to whomever and whenever he pleases. And we give great thanks that God gifts through people who do not know or worship him, give thanks that God gifts through those people who do not know or worship him can be his generous and lavish grace upon the world. Each of us every day receives good gifts ultimately from God through people who are not Christians.

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who are gifted with skill and wisdom, doctors and farmers and mechanics and counselors and musicians and teachers and engineers. We learn so much from people who do not follow Jesus. We learn about the world and our bodies and every aspect of life. Thanks be to God. On multiple occasions, Paul quotes the Greek poet, philosopher Epimenides, and uses his words to teach us about God and the Gospel.

28:20

In Daniel, Yahweh addresses the pagan Emperor Cyrus as Messiah, my shepherd, my anointed one. The idea that God's grace and goodness can come to us only through Christians is unbiblical, and it is unloving. It is condescending toward ones who bring us God's mercy, help, and provision.

28:46

Several years ago, Cheryl and I had the privilege of going to Nepal to speak and to serve. It was a trip arranged by Sarah, one of our Cornell grad students, who was doing her field work in Nepal. On the plane with us into Kathmandu was Sarah's Cornell PhD advisor, who's not a believer, but who regularly was willing to travel to impoverished areas

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sleep on bug-infested dirt floors for weeks and months to help malnourished people have more food, drink clean water, live healthier lives.

29:28

And while she does not yet know it, she is the grace of God's reign falling indiscriminately upon the lives of people who bear his image.

29:41

Without love, I am nothing.

29:46

The third implication is clarifying.

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Paul wants us to be crystal clear. Gifts must not be confused with fruit.

30:00

Gifts do not depend upon the presence of spiritual life, but fruit cannot exist without spiritual life.

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The middle part of this chapter begins to unpack the fruit of God's Spirit, the overflow of God's presence and life in and among us.

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Too often we are too easily distracted and impressed by performance. In our reform tradition, we must be wary of idolizing theological performance. We're prone to pride in a kind of reformed scholasticism and overconfidence that we understand more than we actually do.

30:46

The intellectual heritage of the reformed tradition has been a huge blessing and gift to the church over the centuries, but it easily becomes the performance we love more than the fruit we bear in love.

31:00

So what's the solution?

31:05

We are not called to a life of power or performance. A life animated by the love and the life of Christ is not about the presentation of gifts or proof that we are contributing to the mission of God and to the kingdom of God.

31:25

love begins with grace. We love as John tells us, because he loved us first. God poured out his love upon us freely with no because. In the kingdom of God, in the family of God, we love having first been loved by him. Look at how Paul concludes chapter 13, verse 8. Love never fails. There's a tell-us, there's a purpose for love.

31:55

Love is a participation in the eternal life of God and in the completion of all that he's doing in the world. We live, as Paul says, in incompleteness, and we also live

32:09

As Paul says, both to the Corinthians and to us, live with immaturity. We never fully either outgrow either incompleteness or immaturity in this life. But as love brought creation into existence, as love brought the Savior into the fallen world, so love will greet us at the end if we have new life in Christ. Love is not performance. Love is a person.

32:37

12, for now we see only as a reflection in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

32:53

Face to face.

32:57

Paul is describing what John tells us in John 1 about Jesus coming into the world. In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God, the Word was God. The Word was with God. The Greek word there is pros, which means toward. The Son was face to face with the Father in the eternal embrace of God, each overflowing with the joy of giving the other glory. The love of God in Christ is to bring us

33:24

Into the eternal face-to-face love that Jesus has enjoyed for all eternity in John 17 Jesus prays to the Father I have given them that's his brothers and sisters and us who have believed in him I have given them the glory you have given me that they may be one That the world may know that you have loved them even as you have loved me before the foundation of the world

33:52

You and I are bit by bit learning about him, but he already fully knows us. Even as I am fully known, it is present tense. And to know in biblical language is the relational description of face-to-face intimacy. He knows us fully, that is, he loves us, and in drawing us to himself, we begin to live our lives here upon the earth face-to-face. That's why I love that we read from Psalm 16. Peter uses this

34:21

text at Pentecost, interestingly enough, I am always beholding him in my presence.

34:32

Yes, we see through a glass darkly. live with the anticipation of the promised completeness of his unveiled presence. But we will not live in love unless we live before his face.

34:46

This is the beatific vision, all of life before the face of the one who loves us most. And so here's the good news. If in Christ you and I are fully known, God sees us as we are in Christ the beloved, and our reception of His love changes us. We are not driven by performance or pride, nor are we driven by fear that we can never be or do enough.

35:12

For us, by grace, our life of love begins with his loving us completely, thoroughly, unconditionally, eternally.

35:23

How can we live with this confidence?

35:27

Because Jesus in loving us, who for the joy set before him, that's all who are his brothers and sisters, for the joy set before him enduring the cross, Jesus in loving us gave up what he loves most in all his eternal existence, the face of the Father. He cries in anguish from the cross, my God, why have you forsaken me?

35:57

This is the utter abandonment, the true torment of hell. To not just hear the words, never knew you, but to be cast into the utter blackness of God-forsakenness.

36:11

Brothers and sisters, he endured the utter absence of the love of the Father so that you and I might experience only the fully knownness of the Father, that we may never escape the presence of the one who loves us most, that we may know that we stand before him

36:39

and he stands before us knowing us fully.

36:48

How many times have we as children or friends or as spouses tried so desperately to be seen by the ones whose love or attention we crave? We could be driven to madness or foolishness just to be seen. Or we drown in despair because we believe that we are invisible.

37:14

But Jesus says, I see you now.

37:18

I see you today.

37:21

He knows you fully, even though we are simply scratching at the surface in our feeble yet true knowledge of Him. He knows us. He has eternally longed for intimate face-to-face love with us. He has come that He might love us, to place His life in us, that we might see His glory reflected in our faces, that we might be changed by His love, so that His love in us would compel us not to be enamored with gifts, but to have hearts that are patient.

37:49

and kind that suffer long, that are never rude or boastful when speaking the truth, are not envious but which rejoice in grace given to others, that do not seek its own but find joy when others are made whole by God's mercy and kindness, that find great joy when we are spared from sin and others are rescued from the death of self-destruction.

38:17

Now these three remain, faith, hope, and love.

38:23

greatest of this. Thank you for listening to this week's podcast. Please rate and review us on your podcast service and share with anyone who may be interested. The intro and outro music for the New Life podcast is provided by Sandra McCracken with her permission. Please visit her website at sandramcracken.com. We'll see you next week.