

# Best of All

*1 Corinthians 13*

*Second Week of Advent 2018*

**Week 14 in Our  
Weekly Study**

*of*

**Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians**

Orchard Park Wesleyan Church

Week of December 16, 2018

## **Introduction**

1 Corinthians 13 is probably one of the most quoted passages of scripture. Regardless of the faith of a bride and groom, it is often read at wedding ceremonies—and rightly so! Where else can we find such a perfect description of the kind of selfless, unconditional love that perfectly binds two people together? This is what every marriage sets out to be—and ultimately, it is what only our marriage to the Lamb will be able to fully attain. He is the only One who loves perfectly because He *is* perfect love.

Since this chapter is fairly short and it's hard to separate one part from another, we'll be reading it several times this week. We'll also be using key elements within this chapter to lead us into a few other passages of scripture that speak deeply about God's love—namely 1 John 4 and a few of the Psalms. I think it would be hard to study God's love without spending some time studying the man who had a heart like God's—and who experienced the fullness of God's forgiveness, redemption, and unmerited favor.

Writing this week's study was both daunting and exciting to me. To study the love of God can't *not* be exciting; that's just the nature of it! But to consider the vastness of God's love and try to pare it down to a

one-week devotional is impossible. His love is so great that even if we were to read the entire Bible multiple times from cover-to-cover, we would still not grasp the height, depth, and breadth of His love in Christ Jesus. God's love has to be experienced in a lifetime of relationship with Him, and even then, we're only "seeing dimly." Everything here is but a shadow of what is to come. So our job this week is to concentrate on just a few aspects and attributes that characterize God's love.

We could spend plenty of time on *how* to love like God, and I would love to do that. We all need reminders of practical ways to show God's love to others. However, as I prayed for God's leading with this week's topic, I think He would have us take some time to enjoy the fullness of His gift to us this week—to just take our time resting in His love, understanding His heart and how He shows us His love. So that's what we'll do. We will have one day this week in which we'll talk about how we are to love like God, but we will devote the other four days to understanding God's heart for us.

I am praying this week that we all—even if we already know much of what we study together—will be reminded of the magnitude of God's love; that He'll pour it out on you with a heavy intensity that overwhelms your heart and your spirit and draws you deeper with Him. I am praying that He delights you with reminders and special moments that let you enjoy and experience the gift of His perfect love in Christ. *Do it, Lord. Pour Your love out freshly on every one of us this week. Thank You. In the Name of Your most precious Gift, Jesus. Amen.*

## Day 1

### God is Love

*"We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love.*

*God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them."*

1 John 4:16

*God is love.* This is so fundamental to our faith that many of us probably learned it early in childhood. Like so many things we learned about God and Christ early in our faith, though, this is one of those truths that begs for more attention and understanding as we grow and mature. Lest we take it for granted and miss the staggering reality that yes, our God actually *is* love, let's start this week on that very topic.

**Please read 1 John 4:7-5:5.**

- Underline, highlight, or otherwise note how many times the words "love," "loved," or "loves" appears within this text.

I'm finding that I have a lot of favorite passages of scripture these days, and this is definitely one of them. This particular passage is so beautiful because each truth or command is perfectly woven into the others in almost a circular way. Even from the circular nature of the writing itself, we see evidence of God's perfect and unending love. John, the "disciple Jesus loved" (John 13:23), had a deep understanding of God's love, and it permeates all of John's writing—and these verses in particular. He basks in it and wanted his readers to do the same. So let's concentrate our efforts into breaking this passage down in order to enjoy the fullness of love that *is* God.

- List each unique command to love or truth about love that you can find in this section. If you find that some statements or commands are repeated, tally how many times. (Hint: There are more than a few; you may want to use the "Notes" pages at the end of this devotional!)

We all see things differently, so your list will look different from

mine. However, you should have a healthy amount of descriptions about love written down. Let's take a closer look at a few of the most prominent ones.

**God is love.** There is no love apart from God because He *is* love. Love cannot be separated from God and assigned to any other source; he is its origin, foundation, and source. I remember contemplating this around Christmas-time one year while driving in some particularly beautiful snow. While there are certainly exceptions in individuals, Christmas brings out love and generosity in people like no other season does. I came near tears when I considered the probable reason for this: Christmas is the celebration of the Gift of God's love being sent to earth. Love cannot be separated from God—even from among those who don't yet know Him. His love sent down in Christ permeates even the unsaved world at Christmas because it is that powerful, and it is inseparable from who He is.

Sometimes our understanding of God being love can bring with it the notion that because God is love, He has no choice but to love, and His love is obligatory or stiff. I have been trapped in this thought before. I probably couldn't have defined my feelings so well at the time, but what a defeating lie that was for me. It can still creep up on any of us at times. But your God doesn't love you with a cold, obligatory affection. He loves you with an active and demonstrative love, with fervor and zeal. You are His cherished one. If you want to be reminded of God's passion for His people, read a little extra today in **Isaiah 42:13-16**.

**God loved us first.** Because God is love and God is also eternal, He is also the originator of all love. There was no way we could love Him first. Not one of us could muster up enough on our own to call love because it all comes *from* God. Any love you have for Him is because He loved you first; doesn't that just take away every pressure-filled feeling of striving you have? You *cannot* beat God to it and love Him first; you *cannot* love Him more; you *cannot* love Him at all unless He enables you to do so. It all comes from Him, and beloved, He loved you from before you were.

**God's love is wrapped up in Christ.** We'll see this breathtakingly illustrated on Days 3 and 4 this

week, but for now, let's just absorb what John says. According to 1 John 4:9, God "showed" or "manifested" His love to us by sending "his one and only Son into the world." The word for "showed" or "manifested" in this verse is *ephanerōthē*, and it is derived from the word *phaneros*. *Phaneros* means "to render apparent (literally or figuratively)—appear, manifestly declare, (make) manifest (forth), shew (self)." This lends a little new understanding to Christ as the manifestation of God's love, doesn't it? God's love was literally made apparent—made known and visible—in the person of Christ Jesus. As God the Son, Jesus is fully God, and therefore, He *is* love. So when Jesus came to Earth as a man, He was literally the sending down of God's love to us. He was the tangible, touchable, physical representation of God's love.

**God's love abides in us.** When we "declare that Jesus is the Son of God," God lives in us and we in Him. There is a state of mutual "abiding" or "remaining in" each other. How do we know this? Because we have His Spirit in us as evidence that God Himself is in us. I love the translation of this word as "remain[ing]." It reminds us that God is perpetually and forever in us; He doesn't live in us sporadically; it's not temporal. He is in us permanently and ongoing. So even when we don't *feel* His presence, we know that He is indeed there. And as a result, we have His power and His love always with us.

**God's love is agape.** We'll be referring to this throughout the rest of this week, so in order to fully understand the type of love that God *is* and how it compares to other expressions of love, we have to understand the Greek word for God's love—the only word for "love" used in this section of 1 John 4.

*Agápē* is God's supernatural love. It is used approximately 320 times in the New Testament and is rarely used outside of Biblical writing. According to Strong's, *agápē* is "affection or benevolence; specially, in the plural, a love-feast." It is a "(feast of) charity, dear, love." So, when John writes that "God is *agápē*," he is writing about a perfect and abundant love. It originates with God and is supplied by Him alone. It is not friendly love (*phileo*), romantic love (*érōs*), or even the natural affection like that of a parent toward children (*storgē*). God's love is solely based on and driven by Himself; it is self-sustaining and eternal; it is perfect and complete. It is more than we can ever imagine.

**Love one another.** We'll close today with the one command that is repeated three times in our reading. John drives home the point that no one can claim to love God if he or she does not love God's people. Lest I write too much today and encroach upon tomorrow's study, let's end here by simply letting all that we've been reminded about God and His love settle in our hearts; and let's consider that He calls each one of us to love as He does.

**Consider:** From all that you read and studied in 1 John 4 (and perhaps even Isaiah 42) today, what touches you most deeply about God being love? How have you typically thought of His love toward you in the past? Take some time to really reflect upon God's "sending down" of His love in Jesus. Christ is God's love sent for you. Yes, He was sent into the world, but He was also sent *for* you—"to seek and to save" you because He loves you.

**Pray:** Thank God that He loves you so much that He chose to show you by sending "His one and only Son so that [you] would have eternal life" (John 3:16) Thank Him that His love isn't just a feeling; it is full of zeal and demonstration.

## Day 2

### Without Love....

*"If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."*

1 Corinthians 13:1

We'll continue in our discussion of love today with 1 Corinthians 13 as our main text. While Paul's writing about love certainly applies in a general sense to love as it comes from God--and as it should therefore be displayed in God's people--this part of the letter in between chapters 12 and 14 that talk about the spiritual gifts. In order to get the most out of Paul's description of love, we need to understand it within this context. If we don't take context into account, we'll miss out on a very important truth about God's love.

**Please read 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:3.**

- Toward what had Paul just finished exhorting the Corinthian church?

If you'll remember from last week, the Corinthian church was so focused on the public manifestation of the Spirit's gifts that the gifts themselves gained an undue amount of importance, and the real purpose of the gifts was shoved to the background.

- What is the main purpose of the spiritual gifts?

Paul had just instructed the Corinthian church to seek out and desire the "most helpful gifts." As we learned last week, all spiritual gifts are given for the express purpose of building up a vibrant and healthy Body of Christ. Christ loves and cares for His church; He sacrificed Himself for us in love so that we would not just be saved but radiantly pure and beautiful for Him. So, our gifts meant to serve each other so that the Body of Christ is built up in spiritual, emotional, and physical health in order to continue to minister to the lost; but they are also a beautiful display of Christ's love for us and a means by which we are perfected in

God's love through the opportunity to shower it on each other. This is the context for what Paul will say in the remainder of chapter 13. Love supersedes even the highest of the spiritual gifts.

- List what Paul says any spiritual gift is like without love:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Let's notice that although the Corinthian church as a whole was neither pursuing holiness nor treating each other with genuine love, they were still able to use their spiritual gifts. This is important to our understanding of 13:1-3 because, as Paul tells the church that love is more important than any powerful, Spirit-enabled gift of God, he says that unless we use those gifts for the benefit of each other *because* we love each other, they will be useless. We simply cannot separate love from the use of our spiritual gifts because to take love out is to take God out. Every effort of ours is just an empty shell without Him; the meaning and effectiveness and power can only come from the love that is God through His Holy Spirit.

Now, what if we *do* serve each other in love with our gifts?

**Please review 1 John 4:7-5:5 and the list of commands/descriptions you made yesterday. Please also read John 13:34-35 and John 15:10-12.**

- What is the one command that John repeats three times in this passage?

**We are obedient to Christ.** John commands the same thing three times in 1 John 4-5; Jesus says it in John 13:34 and 15:12: "*Love each other.*" We often take these commands to love each other and apply them generally to loving everyone. That's certainly not wrong. However, within the context of all three of these passages, John and Christ are telling believers to love *other believers* as God does. This is a specific command for the family of God to show love to brothers and sisters within the same family. Friends, if we don't genuinely love each other with the same love that God has for each one of us, we're not obeying Christ. As we've seen over and over in our study of 1 Corinthians, we cannot have a healthy church without selflessly loving each other; we cannot argue and quarrel;

we cannot be divided, arrogant, and competitive. We have to make every effort to love each other with the same love God has shown to each one of us. We'll see more about what God's love looks like over the next few days.

**We glorify Christ.** In John 13:35, Jesus says that everyone will know that we are His disciples when

we love each other. Not by what we say; not by how much we give; not by how hard we work; but by loving each other, we ultimately draw attention to Jesus. Why? Because unconditional love is *the* distinguishing characteristic of a relationship with Christ. Only with His Spirit in us can we love deeply, selflessly, unconditionally--even when another person is unlovable by all human standards. We'll have differences within the church; some will be related to our faith; some will simply be because our personalities are a tough match! That's OK. We can still love each other with God's love because true agápē is nothing we can muster on our own anyway. It is divinely sourced and cannot be achieved without God giving it as He abides in us. As a result, when we can show this type of love from one believer to another no matter what, the glory will go to Christ.

### **We abide in God and His love.**

• Answer the following according to John 15:10-12:

\* Christ kept God's \_\_\_\_\_ and so \_\_\_\_\_ in His love.

\* If we keep Christ's \_\_\_\_\_, we will also \_\_\_\_\_ in His love.

\* Christ's command is to \_\_\_\_\_.

It's so simple when we read it or say it, but it's so hard to remember and to consistently do, isn't it? Who among us doesn't want to spend every moment wrapped up and remaining in Christ's love? Loving each other is the key to this; it's how we stay in Christ!

God set this up so beautifully for us. Instead of requiring that we stay alone with Him in order to abide in His love; instead of designing regular tasks and relationships as an interruption of our worship and intimacy; God designed all of *these* as important *parts of* our worship and intimacy with Christ. Consistently loving other believers keeps us in Christ's love. Intimacy with Him hinges upon our relationships with other people. By loving each other "in the same way" that Christ has loved us, we stay steeped in His love for us. It's not easy to love each other the same way Christ loves us, but if it means that we remain in His love even more, it's worth everything to do so.

**We have Christ's joy.** When we abide in Christ by loving each other, we experience a flood of agápē . Really, could our joy be anything *but* full?

**Consider:** Loving each other is an important part of our faith; it is intimately connected to the fullness of our joy and to remaining in Christ's love. How important have you considered your love for others within the Body of Christ? How do you purposely show that love? Is there someone who is particularly difficult for you to love? To whom do you need to reach out in reconciliation or a tangible effort to show love? What makes it hard for you to love your brothers and sisters? We all have trouble sometimes; let's commit our toughest people and situations to God together.

**Pray:** Lord, You loved me unto death when I was utterly unlovable. Thank You. You know every

difficult relationship I have, and You know every one of my weaknesses. Thank You that You not only love me through all of this, but You also supply me, through Your Spirit, with Your love for others. Please grow my love for You and for every single one of Your people. We may not always agree; we may not have the closest friendship; but we can still love each other like You love me. Please help me. Increase Your Spirit and Your love in me. Help me love others and remain in You. Thank You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

### **Day 3**

#### **God's Love Is....**

*"Love is patient and kind."*

1 Corinthians 13:4a

I am so excited for today's and tomorrow's devotionals. I already mentioned that I had a tough time putting together our study for this week because God's love is so utterly amazing; how does one choose which attributes to study? After several attempts at an outline for the week, God started to open my eyes to the obvious: His love always centers around His Son. Jesus is God's love made manifest; He *is* agápē . So we're going to study the same small section of 1 Corinthians 13 today and tomorrow with that in mind. We'll study it alongside other sections of scripture that show how each characteristic of love was exemplified in the life of God's One and Only Son.

**Please read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.**

- List everything that Paul says God's love *is*. You should have about 5-7, depending on your Bible translation. Don't worry; whatever we don't cover today, we will study tomorrow.

**Love is patient. Please read John 7:1-9; then look up Mark 6:3, Acts 1:14, and James 1:1.**

- Who were Jesus' brothers, according to Mark 6:3?
- Why did Jesus' brothers tell Him to go into Judea (John 7:3-4)?
- Who was present and praying in Jerusalem after Christ's ascension (Acts 1:14)?



- How does James identify himself in James 1:1?

Jesus' own brothers challenged Him to go up into Judea so that He could perform the same works He was doing around Galilee. As John 7:5 makes clear, Christ's brothers were not encouraging Him to go work in Judea because they were excited for Him to make His identity as the Messiah well-known. They didn't believe in Him! We only have this little bit of scripture that shows us how Jesus' brothers felt about His ministry during that time, but verse 4 gives us a little insight into their motivation and attitude: "If you can do such wonderful things, show yourself to the world!" This was a challenge from four unbelieving little brothers.

How did Christ respond? Let's note first that He didn't get angry or frustrated by their unbelief. He just answered them honestly and told them He wasn't going yet. Secondly, He told them twice that the timing wasn't right for Him to go. Christ's patience here is two-fold: it is with people and with circumstance. He understands where His brothers are spiritually, and He patiently waits for them to understand who He really is. Also, He is patient with the Father's timing for His ministry; He completely trusts that God has the timing for His ministry to come into fullness, and He won't work outside of that timing.

In Acts 1:14 and James 1:1, we see that Jesus' brothers did come to believe that He was the Son of God and their Messiah. They were a part of the 120 devoted to prayer in the upper room in Jerusalem after Christ ascended to His Father. James in particular identifies himself as Christ's "slave" or "bondservant" in James 1:1 and carried out his ministry as an apostle of Christ (Gal. 1:19). James wasn't spiritually ready or capable of accepting His brother as the Messiah when Christ started His ministry, but he did get there. He fully believed, ministered, and worked on behalf of the Gospel of Jesus. Christ's patience gave him time and freedom to grow and believe—and realize the love of the Son of God and his own brother.

**Love is kind. Please read John 4:1-30.**

- Describe Jesus' condition, according to verse 6.
- Why was the woman surprised that Christ asked her for a drink (v. 9)?
- What is Christ's response to her (v. 10)?
- Why do you think Christ chose to ask the woman to bring her husband to the well in verses 16-18?

The journey from Judea to Sychar was more than 30 miles across rough terrain, and many scholars believe that Christ and His disciples were traveling in the heat of summer. Hot and tired, Christ arrived at the well around noon and sat to rest. What I love most about this is that Jesus, as full deity, would not have been surprised to see the Samaritan woman. Her visitation was likely part of the reason that He took the route through Samaria in the first place. Jesus knew she was coming, and although wearied from the journey, I can only imagine His anticipation for the conversation to come.

He asks this scorned woman for a drink. She responds by asking why He, a Jew, would speak with her. Christ then responds not with an answer but with an offer. He asked the woman for a drink; then He offered her living water. Not only was He willing to talk to a woman that Jews typically hated, but He immediately gave her tenderness and love by offering to give to *her*.

As they continued their conversation, Christ tenderly convicted her of her sin by asking her to bring her husband to the well. He gently asked her to do so with the sole intention of convicting her of her current state. But He did it the way He does with us: He shed light on her situation so that *she* could see her need for repentance. He did not guilt or shame her. He simply helped her realize her own need. Then, He invited her into full participation in worship of the Father and revealed to this broken woman that He indeed was the anticipated Messiah. He heaped His kindness on her with tenderness and with the honor of confiding in her the truth that many longed to know.

**Love rejoices when truth wins. Please read Luke 15:7, 10, and 31-32; then read John 14:6.**

We're using quite a few verses here to make one big point: Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. When we believe in Him, we don't just believe a truth; we believe *the* Truth—and it is that Truth that sets us free from sin and death (John 8:32, 1 Cor. 15:57). Christ is victorious. Truth wins. And when even one sinner repents and returns to Him by believing in Him as the Truth, all of heaven rejoices. Amen!

**Love is hopeful. Please read Matthew 16:13-20 and Luke 22:31-34.**

Again, we need to remember the omnipotence of Christ as the Son of God as we read these two passages together. As Jesus talked to Peter and told him that he would be the rock on which Christ would build His Church, He knew who Peter would become. He saw this zealous disciple as the strong leader who would build the foundations of the Church that lasts to this day—and will last until Christ comes to redeem it as His bride. He also knew the conversation that He would have with Peter just before His arrest; He knew the temptation that Peter would face and the heartbreaking denial Peter would make. But Christ loved Peter with such hope that He knew He could build His Church on His beloved rock. God's love hopes all things and sees us for what He will make us—not for what we are on our own.

**Love endures every circumstance. Please read Mark 15:16-39 and Hebrews 12:2.**

The cross. The hatred, the mocking, the shame and humiliation, the pain and exhaustion. The abandonment and darkness. What more could anyone endure deservedly? Yet Christ endured it undeservedly. He endured it on my behalf and yours—because He loves us. He loves us so much that He left the glory of Heaven, full of unending praise and worship to Him and perfect, intimate love with His Father. He left that for the express purpose of giving His life as a ransom for ours. He left just so that He could endure the cross because His love for you and me is so powerful. No matter how hard it is for us to lovingly endure

for the sake of another, Christ has endured more. He endured so that an entire world of people who were enemies with God—past, present, and future—could be tenderly welcomed back into the arms of the Father that loves us.

**Consider:** God gave His Son to show us what His love is. How does 1 Corinthians 13 help you understand just how great and real and intentional God's love is for you? Take a moment and ponder this love deep in your heart. Take it in, and let it pour back out on the One who so freely gives it.

**Pray:** Thank You, God, for how much You really and truly love me. Will You help me to grow to understand, accept, and trust Your love always? I love you, too.

## Day 4

### Love is Not...

*"Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged."*

1 Corinthians 13:4b-5 NLT

Yesterday we talked about all that love is and saw real examples of it in Christ's life. Today, we're going to look at the inverse because, just as important as what love is, is what love is not. Again, the practical application of all that we'll discuss is important and good, but it's not our main study goal this week. Let's let what Paul wrote to the Corinthians about love deepen our understanding of God's love for us. Let's glory in Christ as the complete and perfect display of God's love.

**Please review 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.**

**Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Please read Matthew 11:28-29 and Philippians 2:6-8.** At first glance, I wondered why jealousy would be listed right alongside rudeness, boasting, and pride. Of course, these are all negative attributes, but jealousy seemed to be in a class of its own. But as I studied more of Christ's lack of these characteristics—specifically, His deep humility and meekness that replaced pride and rudeness—I began to think about jealousy on a slightly different level. Jealousy is selfish to the core; it is driven by one's desire to have what someone else has in order to be as good as or better than that other person. So jealousy, when we really think about it, has its roots in pride and self-aggrandizement. It—along with the other qualities listed above—are the opposite of self-sacrificial agápē. Christ had none of this.

Jesus was (and is) fully God, yet He still didn't consider equality with God something to attain. He humbled Himself fully in obedience to His Father—and also in servanthood to every person to whom He ministered. Instead of proclaiming Himself the Almighty and commanding His disciples to worship Him, Christ washed their feet. Instead of telling a group of eager listeners to bow down before the Creator of the universe, He offered rest and companionship. He served by healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons, teaching when He was exhausted, and making relationships with society's outcasts. He didn't yearn for the glory He had with the Father; He freely forfeited it for the joy of seeking, saving, and serving the world He loved.

**It does not demand its own way. Please read Luke 22:39-46.**

- What did Christ ask the Father to do?
- Jesus immediately followed that request by saying, “Yet I want \_\_\_\_\_ will to be done, \_\_\_\_\_.”  
Luke 22:42 NLT

Christ prayed with such intensity that His sweat turned to drops of blood. He agonized in prayer to His Father because He knew what lay ahead of Him that night. He didn't try to hide His feelings from His Father. I've agonized in prayer before; I've cried and yelled and had a consuming knot in my stomach as I poured out my heart to God. Yet as intense as that felt, I've never prayed with the intensity and anguish that Christ did in the garden that night. Yet even in the visceral reality of such a prayer, Jesus never grabbed for His own way; even as He finished asking God for another way, His will was already fully given over to His Father's way so that the fullness of His Father's love might be completely realized in the love and sacrifice of the Son.

**It is not irritable.** We could practically pick any Gospel story to illustrate that Christ was not irritable. Time after time, circumstances presented perfect occasion for an irritable response; time after time—like when He fed the 5,000 in Mark 6 —Christ displayed patience, tenderness, and compassion instead. In Luke 22:24-30, Christ's disciples broke out into an argument about who was the greatest. Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion were just hours away and likely at the forefront of His thoughts, but instead of Christ becoming irritated with this band of men who so often just didn't seem to get it, He reminded them that He came to serve (this was right about when Christ washed His disciples' feet in John 13), commended them for sticking with Him to the end, and promised them all places of honor in His Father's kingdom.

We'll be reading Psalm 103 tomorrow, and in this Psalm, David rejoices in the fact that our God is “slow to anger.” Other Bible translations render “love is not irritable” from 1 Corinthians 13 as love not being “easily provoked” or “easily angered.” If you're like me, you probably haven't considered irritability to be as serious a reaction as anger—but they're interchangeable here. I am convicted of my own tendency to give in to irritation, but I am so comforted and thankful to know that our God—as He displayed it over and over in His Son—is not that way. He is not irritated but is patient and compassionate toward His children.

**It keeps no record of being wronged.**

- What does Romans 8:1 say about our forgiveness in Christ?

**Please read Luke 23:32-43.**

Christ is our complete and total forgiveness. As He hung on the cross between two criminals, Christ looked on the crowd of people that put Him there and asked His Father to forgive. One of the criminals next to Him mocked Him, but the other chose to believe that Jesus was indeed the King. He asked Christ to remember him in His kingdom. That's it. That moment, a convicted criminal, condemned to die, was forgiven

for every sin he ever committed; he would be welcomed into Christ's eternal kingdom as though he had never sinned.

Our forgiveness in Christ is also complete; there is no longer any blot or stain or remnant of guilt left on the one who is covered by Jesus' blood. Instead, you are holy, righteous, and pure—whiter than snow.

God impressed this on my heart in a new way this week. Even though we know and trust that Christ's blood sufficiently paid for every sin anyone ever committed—and that when we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness—we can still struggle with guilt sometimes. But freedom from sin means more than just freedom from committing sin. Yes, we are victorious over sin because we are released from slavery to it—but we are also victorious because we are released from the guilt that lingers from it. Christ died not just so that we would be able to overcome committing sin but also so that we can live in freedom from guilt and condemnation when we mess up. So the next time that you struggle with guilt even after confessing your sin, remember that God keeps no record of your wrong when you believe in His Son. Christ is complete forgiveness and freedom—from the sin and the guilt it leaves in its wake.

**Love does not rejoice about injustice. Please read Matthew 12:15-21 and Luke 4:18-21.**

I get chills when I read these prophecies about Christ from Isaiah. No wonder the people of Jesus' day looked for their warrior Messiah, and many had trouble believing that He could have come as a poor and humble servant instead. But Jesus came to serve in power and strength that only comes from the Spirit of God. He was mighty in His surrender; He was mighty in His service; He was mighty in His death and resurrection. He came to set the captives—you and me—free from the power of sin and death. He came to bring hope and justice to a hopelessly fallen world. Although He came as a servant, He triumphed over every enemy. When He returns, He will defeat the final enemy—death—and reign in justice and peace forever. And then He—and all of Heaven and Earth—will rejoice.

**Love never gives up. Please read Genesis 3:17-19, Luke 24:1-12 and Acts 2:24.**

To us, death often seems so final, but it is nothing to our God. He never gives up. Even when we chose our own way and brought death into the world through sinful rebellion, God had His Plan in place. Through His Son, death would lose all finality; sin would lose all its power; the enemy would lose the war. God sent Christ to die and be resurrected in triumph over death because He never gave up on the ones He created in love.

**Love never loses faith.** This is often translated as love "believes all things," and it's closely related to the statement we studied yesterday that love "is always hopeful." As with hope, believing—or never losing faith—"probably refer[s] to relationships between people rather than to faith and hope in God.<sup>1</sup> As such, let's use one of the same examples we studied yesterday: Peter.

In Luke 22:31-34, Christ told Peter what would soon happen. The disciple would deny that he ever knew Jesus three times. Yet, Jesus never lost faith in Peter as the rock on which He would build His Church. Instead, Jesus told Peter that He was praying for Peter's faith in Him. Though Peter was approaching a crucial moment in his life where he would fall away from Christ, Christ never lost hope or faith in him. He believed what could not be seen and knew the reality of that for which He hoped (Heb. 11:1)—that Peter would return to Him, be restored and strengthened, and go strengthen his brothers as the rock of the Christian Church.

God always sees us for what He knows we are—not for what we might look like at that moment.

**Consider:** Christ is the active and full display of God’s perfect love. He lived as the tangible, touchable, relatable manifestation of agape. He continues to live as the One through whom we all have access to God’s infinite love. If you know Him as your Savior, take a moment to reflect on the personal and real ways He has displayed God’s love to you recently. If you have never accepted this Gift of God’s love that was given for you, make today that day. Ask Him for a relationship like the criminal on the cross next to Him did. He will answer you with a resounding yes because He lived, died, and rose again *for you*. *You* are the object of His affection and the reason for everything He did; He wants you to accept and receive that love.

**Pray:** Thank God that He chose to send His love down for you. Tell Him that you want and will freely receive every bit of it through His Son.

## Day 5

### Steadfast and Eternal

*“Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.”*

1 Corinthians 13:13 NLT

Nothing quite compares to understanding God’s love in the light of His Son as we have been privileged to see over the past two days, but today’s study will come very close. We’re studying two of the most reassuring, undeserved, and overwhelming characteristics of God’s love: that it is steadfast and eternal. God uses these qualities to define Himself and His love over and over in the Old Testament, and today, we’ll see Paul define those same qualities as inherent to God’s love in 1 Corinthians 13.

**Please read 1 Corinthians 13:7-13.**

- According to verse 7, love

“Bears \_\_\_\_\_.”

Believes \_\_\_\_\_.

Hopes \_\_\_\_\_.

Endures \_\_\_\_\_.”

“Steadfast” is used often in the Old Testament, and it is often written as “unfailing” depending on the Bible translation. According to an online dictionary, steadfast is defined as “resolutely or dutifully firm and unwavering.” Its synonyms are “loyal, faithful, committed, devoted, dedicated, dependable, reliable, steady, true, constant, staunch, solid, trusty; firm, determined, resolute, relentless, implacable, single-minded; unchanging, unwavering, unhesitating, unfaltering, unswerving, unyielding, unflinching, uncompromising.” Even the definition and synonyms leave little room for hesitation about the meaning of the word!

This word “steadfast” in particular is not used in 1 Corinthians 13, but it is still there. Paul says that love bears...believes ...hopes...endures *all* things.” That’s pretty comprehensive and unwavering.

- What does verse 8 say about love?
  
- What does verse 8 say about other Spirit-given gifts?

God’s love will never end. It will never fail. It is eternal and steadfast. There is *nothing* we can do to stop His love for us because, if we consider it, our God held fast to His beloved when we were at our worst. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s only prohibition. He gave it for their protection—and He gave it in love so that His people had the freedom to choose to love Him in return. But Adam and Eve rejected the authority and love of their Creator; they chose selfish ambition and raised that above the Most High in their hearts; they withdrew affection from the lover of their souls.

God knew that all of this would happen. He knew that the world would turn from Him—yet He still loved us through our rebellion and already had our redemption and restoration planned. He sent His mighty Restorer while we were still steeped in sin and rebellion.

**Please read Psalm 103:2-14.**

- The LORD is:

- \*
- \*
- \*
- \*

- Fill in your name for verse 11.

“For his unfailing love toward \_\_\_\_\_...is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth.”

- According to verse 12, how completely are *all* of your sins removed?

- Fill in the blanks with “me” and “I:”

“The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and \_\_\_\_\_ compassionate to \_\_\_\_\_ .... For He knows how weak \_\_\_\_\_ am; He remembers that \_\_\_\_\_ am only dust.”

Friends, every one of us goes through times when we struggle to feel God’s love. The reasons may differ, but while we’re on this earth, we will have times when God seems far away. Even David, the one God called a man after His own heart, had times of deep anguish and suffering when he felt that the Lord’s gaze and affection were far from him (Psalm 10:1, 22:1-2). But like David, we need to remember that God’s love is forever. He is steadfast, and His love is immovable. He knows who you are because He created you; He understands your weaknesses and limitations; and He loves you in His strength.

Only when we understand the permanence of God’s love can we stand strong and show this love to others. I’m not saying that when you understand that God loves you, you’ll be able to pour that love out on everyone all the time. No, you are human, and you will still have times when you don’t measure up. But when you understand how immovable and rock-solid God’s love for you is; when you understand that He gave Himself up so that you would be made beautiful and perfect for Him; then you’ll be able to stand up again after you fall. Sin can no longer hold you down in defeat.

The enemy of your soul would like nothing more than to convince you otherwise. With you broken and defeated in guilt and shame, you’re no threat. But when you *believe* that God’s love for you is unbreakable and steadfast, you can run *to* Him when you’ve fallen. He will forgive *everything*, *every time*. He will pour out His love on you freshly. He will take you by His righteous right hand and lift you up in His love and strength because *He* makes you victorious. He has things for you to do; He has good things planned for you!

- Look at Psalm 103:2-5 again. List the actions your God has in store and that He does for *you*, His beloved.

Let’s briefly discuss one last thing before we close. As Paul wraps up this brief section on love, he mentions that only three things will remain eternal: faith, hope, and love. I have often wondered why he chose these three, and after all we’ve studied this week, I am convinced that these three are those qualities that cannot end because they are wrapped up in Christ Himself. He is:

\* the “champion who initiates and perfects our faith” (Heb. 12:2)



\* our “blessed hope” (Ti. 2:13)

\* God’s love “made manifest among us” (1 John 4:9)

He is the Eternal One in whom the fullness of God’s love is poured out on every person for all time. He remains forever. So cling to the unfailing and unending love of your Savior. Don’t let anyone or anything convince you that His love for you could dwindle even slightly.

**Consider:** God cannot fail you, and He will always love you. As we quickly approach Christmas—the celebration of the day that God sent His One and Only greatest Gift to you—rest in His love. Enjoy Him as He enjoys you. He takes great delight in you.

**Pray:** Thank God that there is nothing that can ever stop His love for you. Thank Him that He fought to win you back and that He continues to work on your behalf. Take a few moments to respond to Him in whatever way you choose.

*By Jennifer Skinner*