



# *Devotional Study Guide Journal*



*March 22<sup>nd</sup>*

## ***Surprised by Love***

### ***John 13:34***

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

The moment I entered those church doors, I felt the love among them. It was in stark contrast to the bonds I had previously formed "in the world." This went on for years. It seemed everyone loved everyone there. It didn't matter how beautiful you were or wealthy or powerful. Everyone was friends with each other. There was a sense of acceptance and belonging.

But as the years went by and our church became more focused on religious expectations, the love seemed to fade. Factions formed. There were the super-spiritual, the seat warmers, and those who barely even came to church anymore. There were the "intellectuals," the "cool kids," and the rest who were neither.

Another thing that happened which I did not notice at the time is we stopped singing songs about loving each other. Yes, we still believed in loving God with all we had and our neighbor as ourselves, but each other? Not as much. That didn't seem as important as focusing all our attention on loving God.

There was quite a bit of territorial bickering. If you stepped on someone's toes unknowingly, anger was the response, not a loving conversation about how to improve the relationship. If someone got offended by your theology, they might tell you to never communicate with them again.

Disagreeing with the pastors became one of the worst things one could do. "Touch not God's anointed," far from its original contextual significance, came to mean that no one could disagree with the pastors about anything they taught or did. Those who were brave enough to do so were not-so-politely sidelined in leadership. Those who completely supported the pastors were rewarded with positions of leadership. But even between the

leadership, subordinates were treated as such and there was no love relationship between them.

Some got tired of going to church on Sunday and only seeing the back of someone's head. We'd say, "Let's get together something," but then wouldn't. Some became the walking wounded. Others were completely unaware because it was the norm for them.

When we left that fellowship, there was that sense of what we'd observed before, that leaving the church would result in falling away from Jesus. People treated us like we no longer belonged. Rumors swirled that we were "backslidden" because we couldn't find a church home (though we tried most Sundays). There was a silent shunning.

Where was the love between us we once knew?

Fast forward to the beginning of Studies in Grace and Faith. We had already seen the power of the gospel of grace change people so wonderfully, so we were not surprised that God did it again in the lives of those who attended meetings of Studies in Grace and Faith in Chico. What did surprise us was the love.

We never imagined when we started SGF that simply by focusing on the gospel of God's grace and spending time in fellowship with each other, we would come to love so many people—and to be loved by them. It had been so long that it almost felt foreign to us. It's a love that Jesus commanded but that can't be manufactured. It can't be feigned. The love of God between us became one of the most wonderful and real things we have experienced.

God is love. He showed His love by giving His Son to die for us. Jesus showed His love by His willingness to give Himself. Jesus commanded His disciples to love one another in the same way. When we focus on Jesus' love for us, that love between each other flows and grows.

But Jesus commanded that we love each other for a reason. He knew all of the factors that can get in the way of love. The worst culprits are false religious expectations. They divide. They separate. They wound.

### **1 John 4:7-11**

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*