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Welcome to the New Life Podcast, a 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.newlifethica.org. Now here's this week's sermon.

00:42

text this morning is from First Timothy chapter 2. And it is something of an occasional focus this morning. This is something, the theme of the text has been on my heart because of what's happening in our lives as a community. And I hope that this is a timely reminder for us as we think about how to respond to what is transpiring in our community. So here are these words.

01:12

from the Apostle Paul. If you're able, please stand for the reading of God's word. I urge then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good.

01:41

It pleases God, our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Jesus Christ, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This is God's word. You may be seated. The flower fades. The word of our God stands forever.

02:09

Last week, David, Tim, and I, along with a number of Cornell faculty and department chair, staff, grad students, met for prayer in light of the announcement that the White House would be withholding a billion dollars from funding previously designated research at Cornell. I don't bring this up to get into a discussion about whether this

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reversal is necessary financial housekeeping or whether it's reckless slash and burn cuts. That's for another occasion. But I mention it to express first of all my appreciation to Hannah Eagleson for organizing the prayer meeting.

02:53

But I bring it up so that we could pray with appropriate clarity. David and others at this prayer meeting detailed the impact of the loss of funding, research programs abruptly stopped, graduate student funding terminated, student visa accounts erased. I research programs include studies for Cures for Cancer, AI research for the Navy, oceanographic studies that impact fishing and weather and travel, projects in which members of

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the New Life family are deeply involved. Again, I do not give you these details to provoke debate. But in helping you grasp the enormity of the impact imposed by this loss of funding, I want to affirm the importance of prayer, especially when we pray for something as enormous, complex, conflicted, and significant as the government.

03:55

I raise this, I set this text before you so that each of us can ask, is this how we respond to the things that trouble our lives? I have to confess, it's not my first response.

04:15

scale of the things that are facing us remind us how small we are and how great God must be if we are to live with confidence and hope. And so our text today calls us to pray for the government.

04:32

As important as funding and budgets are to us as in communities like Ithia, they are not the most important things for us to talk about when we gather for worship. Our worship and our

life as followers of Jesus are not driven by the tides of current events. It's the other way around. Indy Crouch in a recent talk urged us as Christians to stay focused on Jesus, not on all the many urgencies that clamor for our attention. The hardships of life.

05:03

are reliable way of revealing our hearts what do we trust what do we love what do we fear

05:11

And so our worship equips us to stand firm and to face these very real and sometimes terrifying challenges so that among other things, we can pray, which is what our text calls us to do, specifically to pray for the king, pray for all of those in authority.

05:32

Now, I assume that if we are a healthy fellowship, we will have diverse political opinions among us. You have thought about these things as we've come through the election this past fall, but there is no one Christian way to vote. There are no divinely favored candidates or parties. You are no doubt aware that there are too many Christians who don't agree with that. And that's why my greatest anguish has been

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the way the name and the cause of Jesus have been co-opted for political advantage. And how many Christians do not seem to know or care. I'm certainly not the first to remind you that if our views or our support for a party or a candidate fracture relationships within our fellowship, we are in sin.

06:24

Yes, it matters what the views of candidates and parties that we support are. But do not lose sight of the fact essential to our Christ-likeness that it is how we hold these views that matters for us as Christians. If we are contributing, even if we think we're on the side of the angels, if we're contributing to division, our attitude and posture are sinful and we must repent and seek forgiveness.

06:53

Now before we consider Paul's call to pray for all those in authority, let's remember the final petition of the Lord's Prayer. Deliver us from evil, from the evil one. And as tempting as it might be sometimes, I'm not implying that government or politicians are evil. The petition is a reminder that God is the great deliverer. Christ is our great champion. He is the one who crushes the head of the serpent and whose final annihilation and destruction of evil is certain because of his resurrection.

07:25

How does he deliver us today?

07:29

Part of that answer comes in the words of Ephesians 6, where Paul tells us that God armors us. He places on our head the helmet of salvation. He gives us the breastplate of righteousness. He gives us the sword of the Spirit, not to wade into combat to win the day. He's already done that.

07:52

He gives us this armor to stand firm. He says it four times in the text, to endure faithfully.

08:03

and then to pray. There is an unmistakable correlation between trials and hardships and temptations and prayer. He mentions prayer five times in the closing of this armor passage. I think it's a clear conclusion. To be equipped by God's protection and provision is to focus our lives and our responses to hardship and difficulties on prayer. Listen.

08:32

the closing verses of Ephesians 6. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayer and requests. Be alert. Always keep on praying for all God's people. Pray also for me that

whenever I speak, words may be given to me that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly as I should.

08:56

I mean, you hear in these closing verses of Ephesians 6 the same expansiveness of prayer that Paul expresses in 1 Timothy 2. All occasions, all kinds of prayer, always praying.

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The focus of the prayer in Ephesians 6, he zeros in on one particular object of prayer for himself that he would be faithful in prison. Here in 1 Timothy 2, he zeros in on one particular focus of prayer, those in political authority, the king, the mayor, the governor, the president, the emperor. And given the fiery ordeal Peter's readers are about to face, the emperor and the heavy hand of the Roman oppressors are

09:44

possibly the last people we might want to pray for.

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Now when we put prayer for political authorities on the table

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Some of you may think, well, prayer for political authorities, yes, that's great. But what about submission to political authorities? What's that all about? Well, it's true, 1 Peter 2, submit yourself for the Lord's sake to every human authority, whether to the emperor, to the supreme authority, to governors who were set by him to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right. Fear God, honor the emperor.

10:23

Titus 3, be subject to rulers and authorities, be obedient to be ready to do whatever is good. Romans 13, let everyone be subject to the governing authorities for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God for the one authority is God's servant for your good.

10:42

Now, God doesn't repeat himself unnecessarily. He's not like me, who's getting forgetful. Perhaps he repeats this command because he knows how hard it is for us to do it.

11:00

to do something I'm really not very inclined to do or have any zeal to do.

11:06

But let's talk about this idea of submission for just a minute. Because if we're hung up on this idea of submission, we'll be distracted in our praying.

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Now while I think this is an important question to consider, I'm not going to do the subject justice. I'm just going to hit a few big ideas on the topic of submission. But it's a very complex topic and much more, there's much more to be said.

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But submission, as Paul tells us in Ephesians five, is the preface, the foundation of his instructions to husbands and wives and kids and employers and employees and citizens. All of our relationships, all of them are informed and framed by our submission to Christ. We are to view all our relationships through the lens of submission to Christ. That means all of our relationships.

12:05

All of our friendships, our marriages, our employer relationships, our citizenship relationships, civic relationships, all of our relationships are foundationally acts of worship. We honor and yield to one another as an act of entrusting our lives to God. We yield absolute and ultimate allegiance to God alone. Christ is the Prince of Peace and the one who was enthroned in the kingdom of God.

12:34

And with the early Christians, our confession is Jesus is Lord, and we may not say Caesar is Lord.

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If you know the novel, the film, made into the film Silence by Shizaku Endo, you may remember that the priests were captured and imprisoned in 17th century Japan. And their greatest torture was being forced to watch Japanese Christians drowned because they would not recant.

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But the captors said to the priest, just step on the Fume. All the suffering will go away if you just put your foot on the face of Christ and declare that he's not God. These people won't die if you just step and say that he is not Lord.

13:26

And if you know the story, you know that in their weakness and humiliation, they do.

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All submission to other humans, including the king, the emperor, or president, all submission is qualified. For us as Christians, submission to fellow humans can never be absolute. As Peter said to the leaders who told him that they couldn't preach, no, we must obey God rather than humans. As Daniel's three friends refused to obey the king, they were willing to suffer the consequences. Daniel prayed when forbidden and was thrown into the lion's den. Submission.

14:02

in any relationship is never unquestioning compliance or obedience. It is always qualified by our submission to God. And we are submit to others as God directs us until we have clear reason not to.

14:17

Christian sisters and brothers who serve in the military face a particularly difficult challenge. The military can't function apart from the chain of command. The consequences of not following a direct order can, in some cases, be fatal. But even when the commander in chief gives an order, even if it violates our loyalty to the one true Lord and King, the reply needs to be, with respect, I cannot carry out that order.

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We've had at least one New Life Cornell alum resign from their government position because of the ethical conflict imposed because of recent executive orders.

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And so we hold intention, our responsibility to honor those in authority to the greatest extent possible, because our greater loyalty to God who calls us to give honor to humans in authority. Now it's tempting to somehow mechanically assume that if those in authority are put there by God, that a winning candidate is God's choice or preference. Follow me carefully here. We fly too high when we try to discern

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how God does His work in the world. Yahweh tells Jeremiah that He's going to raise up Egypt as His right arm and that He was raising up Assyria. He even calls Cyrus my shepherd, Messiah. Now the only way we have this information about what God is doing in the affairs of nations is that He discloses Himself through His prophets. And without that disclosure, we cannot know with certainty how God is at work in specific circumstances.

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consider storms that rip through an area. When we lived in Mississippi, we regularly had to head for cover when the tornadoes came through. The storm that diverts away from one godly praying Christian is the same storm that devastates another godly praying Christian. And we cannot explain how or even why the storm serves God's purpose. And yet, both praying Christians will tell their stories of God's faithfulness.

16:24

At the same time, Yahweh assures Jeremiah that he will hold each of those nations accountable for the evil they commit.

16:32

We say way too much when we try to resolve the mysterious relationship of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Jesus tells Pilate that he would have no power were it not given him from God, yet no amount of hand washing will clean away the blood on Pilate's hands for the murder of Jesus. We say too much when we say this leader, that queen, that governor, that president is particularly anointed by God.

17:00

That person is an irreplaceable cog in the wheel of God's providence.

17:07

Let me suggest that we treat the statements of the New Testament writers reflexively, not prescriptively. It makes no difference which person is in authority. That person is in authority, ultimately, because God is the greater King who holds all things in His hand. It's true that elections have consequences. They matter because the people and creation impacted by elections matter. But at the same time, we realize that with God on His throne, it

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doesn't matter who gets elected in the sense that outcomes may frustrate or advance God's mission better than one way or another. God is still and always holding all things in his hand and we believe that God is at work even when the person in authority is the author of tremendous evil. God has neither condemned that Hitler came to power to the cheering delight of the German people

18:03

Nor is he vindicated because Hitler was defeated by the allied forces.

18:09

God intends government to be a gift for us, an agent of peace and justice. And Paul is not saying that because an authority is appointed by God, every action of that authority is good and just. No, not at all. When Paul speaks in Romans 13 about government being an agent to bring good and to punish evil, he's speaking as a matter of principle. This is what government is for. He's not speaking as a matter of fact, which is obvious, even from a brief study of history. Pilate committed great evil, as did Nero, as do presidents, as

18:39

And we do not honor those in authority by turning a blind eye to the evil things they do and being silent because we think it might hurt our political cause. Daniel told Belshazzar of his sin. Nathan told David, you are the man. John the Baptist told Herod of his sin.

18:59

Nor is Paul saying that we should be passive when we are given political rights and liberties. In Acts, we see Paul calling upon his political rights as a Roman citizen. We may vote for candidates we believe would make a better authority, maybe the candidate we support is elected, maybe not. In either case, God is still at work and is in control in ways we as finite beings simply cannot comprehend.

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But how is it that we know that God holds all the storms and currents and elections of history in His hand? How is it we can say with confidence that our God reigns even when the rulers of this world act unjustly?

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we look to the cross.

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And it is there we see this mysterious providential mashup of religious and political leaders choosing to commit evil on the one hand.

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the Messiah stepping into the world, the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world.

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When we submit to those in authority, don't always have a choice. Laws get passed, taxes get levied, executive orders are decreed.

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And at the heart of what God is teaching us through Paul, Peter, Daniel, Jeremiah, we are not to live as anarchists or rebels. The Spirit of God equips us to endure hardship and the Spirit gifts us to use our opportunities and resources to enact righteousness and justice and peace within the sphere of our influence. Yes, the demands put upon us may be onerous.

20:47

Our friends that we visited in South Africa back in September tell us that they pay 45 % taxes on their income.

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But submission is not passivity. When we have the political liberty to do so, we vote. We may protest the oppressive or unjust actions of those in authority. This is not dishonoring those that we call are called to honor. In fact, protest may to make government better as a way of honoring those in authority and what they've been charged by God to do. submission requires humility, but it's not a mindless compliance. It requires love as we live with a lot of things we don't like or wish were different and cannot change.

21:25

Love is real. A submission is real, sacrificial, but it can never be absolute to anyone but God. Submission is not passivity. We may honor those in authority by working for change. Submission requires courage, especially when we must endure what we cannot change or choose to disobey because of our greater loyalty to God. Now that's a wildly complex matrix that we are not designed to navigate alone.

21:56

Remember, the Bible has been given to we, not me. We are a Covenanted community bound to each other to share in our struggles and the wrestling together of the hard decisions we have to make. as James says, we seek wisdom from God, or as Paul says, having been armored by the Spirit, pray.

22:17

And that brings us back to our text today. What kind of prayer pleases God? Especially prayers for those in authority. Prayers for people whose hands are covered in blood, whose mouths pour out lies. Prayers for those who abuse their power by accumulating wealth, by oppressing the weak and the poor.

22:40

What kind of prayer pleases God for those in authority?

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The first thing that we note from our text is that we pray in exile. There's a little word then that appears at the beginning of our text. I urge then, first of all, that's a pointer back to chapter one. And in chapter one, Paul is,

23:09

charging Timothy to be aware of the divisive influence of the false teachers, the tribalizing influence of false teachers, the false teaching that creates an us-them mentality within the body.

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And if we are to live as exiles, we are to live without these kind of party loyalties. You may remember Paul's words to the church in Corinth, they were very proudly saying, well, I'm of Paul, and I'm of Peter, and I'm of Paulist. Oh, I'm better than that. I'm of Christ. I'm reformed.

23:52

I'm for Yankees. I'm for Mets.

23:58

Tribalism promotes a kind of here and now belonging that makes it hard to value anything greater. And so our prayer for those in authority should be free of party loyalty that we might be free to pray for and against them as the situation warrants. But secondly, we pray with urgency. There is a priority here, first of all.

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Paul is wanting us to relocate our focus.

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If you're like me, most of the time when we pray, I'm praying for stuff that matters to me. I'm the focus. I want stuff in my life to change.

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And it's always appropriate for us to pray those things.

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But if we're to pray as Paul is teaching us to pray with a prayer that pleases God.

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this priority, this urgent refocusing is to shift our gaze from ourselves and our own lives and our happiness.

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and begin focusing on what we love, and that is God and neighbor. It is urgent that we pray for others as a matter of first priority so that our focus is on God, our neighbors, and God's glory and grace being shown and given to them.

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I mean, it's easy for us to pray for those in authority to lead in such a way that I may live a comfortable life. But the priority, Paul says, is for us to pray that those who lead will make better the lives of others.

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You have a portion of the letter to Diognotus printed in your bulletin in which there are these statements, every foreign land is their fatherland and yet for them, speaking of us as Christians, every fatherland is a foreign land.

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There is a kind of realization that we.

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Our lives are not about our own personal existence.

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but we are praying for those around us. Thirdly,

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We pray for everyone.

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I urge you then, first of all, that all petitions, prayers, intercessions be made for everyone, all the people in our lives. We pray for those in authority, regardless of whether they serve us well or not. No one should have to earn our prayers.

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Fourthly, notice too that we pray all kinds of prayer. Petitions, prayers, intercession, thanksgiving. We pray for those in authority, generally what we would pray for many people, wisdom and courage and love. We pray specifically, perhaps because the situation warrants particular provision, we may pray for outcomes because we believe they are good and just. We intercede, we pray for those in authority because they do not pray for themselves.

27:19

We pray against those in authority when what they do or believe will lead to harm and justice.

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few of you have been around long enough to remember that when Putin invaded Ukraine in February of 22, I was convinced that this was a moment of moral clarity.

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mean, in hindsight, Hitler's aggression has a similar moral clarity. It was an act of evil. But in the early days of Hitler's attempt to build the Third Reich, many could not see it, or they were unwilling to admit the evil of his actions. And so taking my cues from the Psalms, I wrote an imprecatory prayer against Vladimir Putin. And somehow, it ended up being read into the congressional record. Go figure. But the prayer began this way.

28:12

Lord, destroy Putin the tyrant.

28:16

Lord have mercy on Putin, the man made in your image.

28:25

We also pray prayers of thanksgiving. Isn't it remarkable and humbling how gratitude flourishes in the lives of people who suffer? Perhaps the wrong and the ugly simply make the good and the beautiful stand out more clearly.

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Fifthly, we pray for the common good. We pray for kings and all those in authority. We pray for everyone that we may live peaceful and quiet lives.

28:54

The prophet Jeremiah tells us how we are to live in the world. are to seek the welfare of the city. We are to rejoice in the flourishing of our neighbors in the place in which we are in exile. This is not our home.

29:10

Those.

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We pray for those things about our life together that help our neighbors flourish. Safety, fairness, equity, freedom, justice, beauty, opportunity. How might those in authority lead in such a way that our neighbors and communities might enjoy the common good, the common grace of God? Often we'll be praying for people who may oppose us or who want the government to silence us, but we pray that they may live fulfilled lives.

29:42

again in the letter to Diagnosis.

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We Christians, they are poor, but they make many rich.

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Sixthly, when we pray.

30:00

in a way that pleases God, we pray that we will live godly and holy lives.

30:09

I urge you.

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that all manner of prayer be made for everyone, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. That is, that prayer will bear fruit in our lives, fruit that is the visible character of God's Spirit, so that people who look at us and know us will say, see, they love each other. See how they love each other. The gospel, the grace of God at work in our lives is an embodied reality. It's about living flesh and blood in this world.

30:43

And so, as Paul will tell Timothy, the beginning of chapter 6, so live that no one speaks evil of us.

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We pray, asking how might those in authority lead in such a way that we might worship freely without hindrance, with integrity, but not primarily so we can have an easy, trouble-free life.

31:09

Many of you know that Angela is a Bible translation consultant for the scriptures being translated in countries that are hostile to Christianity. Her team meets in a nearby relatively safe country to review the work so far. And many of the team live at great risk because of their translation work, because of their faith. So I asked her how the women and men on her team might pray, as Paul directs us, for those in government authority over us. And this is what she said.

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They pray as Matthew 5, 44 directs for those who persecute them. in their context, that is largely one in the same as praying for those in authority. They pray, as we might expect, for that persecution to relent for their own safety, for the safety of those who are currently in prison. But they also pray that God would use these experiences to strengthen them, to strengthen their faith, and through the person, call others to faith in Him.

32:05

They pray that God would call their leaders and authorities to faith in him. They are constantly encouraged by the biblical examples of prophets and church leaders living in exile or persecution of varying degrees in the Old Testament and the New Testament. And there are enough scriptural examples that this comes up pretty often. Recently, several of them expressed the encouragement they felt reading the accounts of Daniel and Nehemiah, who were faithful to God, even while directly serving. And apparently, with the high respect of kings,

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who are not only secular, but even expressly hostile to God's people. One translator on her team is a prominent lawyer, and she asks that we pray for her discernment in how she can be obedient to God in the same way in her country that Nehemiah was, while still submitting to and even working with a legal system that doesn't always obey or acknowledge him. They pray for God to remind them of their identity.

33:03

And lastly, the prayer that pleases God. And this is really where it all is going. We pray for all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. This is the end game. This is why this prayer matters, to refocus our lives, to get our lives off of ourselves.

33:27

and depress us.

33:31

to love our neighbors to the degree that we want them to be saved. want them to come to the knowledge of the true and the living God. They want them to bend their knee to the one true king of heaven and earth. This is the first petition and the prayer that Jesus teaches us to pray. May people everywhere, hallow your name. That is, may people everywhere come

to worship the true and the living God. And this is why we hold all our possessions and all our lives, our health, our families, our work, everything. It's why we hold them lightly.

34:00

that we do not cling to them as idols, that we might live all of life to the praise of His glorious grace. What opportunities will God give us to make His character and kingdom visible? What opportunities will the Spirit give us to speak and love? Many, almost all of these opportunities are so ordinary that we will miss them if we're not looking. Almost all of them are so small that we will devalue them if we're not praying.

34:28

And as Jesus taught us to pray, Father, gather people everywhere to know you, to know you as Father, to know Jesus as King, to know the Spirit as the one who enlarges our heart with love.

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But be careful what you pray for.

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Again, from Angela, one of the pastors on the translation team was arrested for his ministry and escaped death row in his country. The government is actively and aggressively trying to stamp out Christianity. But this pastor says that the current regime...

35:00

This current oppressive regime is the best thing that has ever happened for the church in this country.

35:08

He said people did not care much about Christianity when it was just another option. But now that it is so strongly opposed by the government, it has made the people captivated. What power does this Christianity have that our regime is so obsessed with stamping it out? And you see the effects that our churches have grown much more now than they ever did before this persecution existed. So I praise God for this regime.

35:38

Brothers and sisters, this is good and it pleases God our Savior who wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, there is one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, Himself human, one of us who gave Himself as a ransom for all.

36:00

I can't give myself as a ransom for anyone.

36:04

But I can give myself urgently and sacrificially that those who lead us may know and worship our God.

36:16

that they may know that we as a church family is a place where anyone can come and meet Jesus, meet the one who has brought salvation to all who believe.

36:31

And so we pray, oh Lord, please bring many into our lives that together we might know and love you above all else because you alone are our King and we worship you. 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.

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please visit her website at sandramacracken.com. We'll see you next week.