

It's OK to NOT be OK

Loneliness

We are continuing in our series *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*. This week we're looking at a reality that will touch all of our lives at some point, and that is the reality of loneliness.

Loneliness is not a word any of us really like to openly identify with, especially in the culture we live in. These days we are hyper-connected. To admit loneliness -- even to ourselves -- is to sort of feel like having a personality defect. Still, for all of us, the fact is at some point, we will experience loneliness whether we want to or not. Loneliness is a normal part of life on this earth. This was not God's original plan for people, but it is normal for everyone now. The story of Genesis, in the beginning, God created people, and He said, **"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."** Notice the pronouns used in the text here are plural. If you think about it, this is sort of a funny way for God to talk about Himself, and the reason God does it is God actually exists in community. The fancy word we use for that is *Trinity*. We talk about God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is this perfect community, so perfect that God is three separate persons and one being at the same time. And this God makes people -- made you -- in His image. To be made in the image of God is to be made as a people who long for perfect connection -- to be distinct as individuals, but to simultaneously long to exist in perfect union with God and others. It's just the way we're wired up.

This was God's intent for that kind of unity to exist, but then came reality. Then came the big disconnection moment when the man and woman ate from the only tree God had commanded them, **"Do not eat from this tree."** It wasn't about that meal itself. It was about breaking that relationship with God. It was about refusing to love and follow Him.

It turned out to be a really catastrophic thing to do because it also shattered human relationships. Immediately following that act of disobedience, Adam and Eve experience rejection -- that kind of gut-wrenching feeling of being on the outside of something when we long to be on the inside. Immediately they began to experience this thing we call *loneliness*.

There is a classic movie that is now 20 years old called "Castaway." The story shows the power of loneliness. Tom Hanks plays the part of Chuck Noland, a FedEx executive, who is on an airplane trip to Malaysia when the plane goes down over the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He is the only survivor. He finds himself all alone on a small deserted island for 4 years. Do you remember how powerful his loneliness becomes? He makes a face on a volleyball, names it "Wilson," and he talks to it, sleeps with it, argues with it, and when he loses it at sea, he even considers losing his own life just to go be with it. Loneliness is a *powerful* emotion!

Loneliness is a bit elusive. It's a bit hard to define until we experience it, and then there is no mistaking it. It's a helpless feeling, an empty feeling. There are a number of circumstances that can lead to this. It's not just about the absence of people. Loneliness can take the form of unemployment, this feeling that society has moved on and no longer needs you.

Maybe you're single, and you have this longing or this ache to be in a romantic relationship with someone else. For those of you who are in that place, you live with the question, "Will this happen for me? God, do you see me?"

Maybe you are married, and there's a growing distance between you and the person you thought was your lifelong soul mate. Marriage can create an awful kind of loneliness.

Maybe you're the head of a company, and you've found leadership to be a lonely place.

Serious illness, death of someone we love, moving schools, divorce, empty nesting, aging...all these circumstances, all these changes in life, can leave us – without any choice in the matter – deeper and deeper into feelings of disconnection. It's painful.

Even before COVID-19, nearly 50% of Americans surveyed said they experienced loneliness. That figure is only expected to climb because of COVID-19.

Did you know that loneliness can affect your physical health? Studies have shown that feeling isolated is just as harmful to your physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes every day. It affects the human body twice as much as obesity does, putting you at a higher risk for health complications like heart disease and stroke.

Those are all scary statistics, especially on top of the health crisis we're facing. And the longer the pandemic goes on for, the more these feelings become long-term.

Long-term loneliness is associated with an increased risk of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and increased stress. The impact of long-term loneliness on mental health can be very hard to manage.

When we experience the actual pain of loneliness, we respond by what humans naturally do when they encounter pain. We try to avoid it. We hop on Facebook. We turn on TV. We write work emails.

We have all this technology to stay more connected with people faster than ever before. Yet statistics indicate we live in the loneliest time in history. We're actually becoming lonelier.

So here's the BIG question: God created us for, and wants for us, a life connect to Him and to other people relationally. So how do we begin to deal with the loneliness our sin and broken world have brought on us?

In the Bible, Psalms 22 and 23 are both written by King David at a time in his life when he was desperately alone. The beginning words of Psalm 22 say, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** Those are some of the loneliest words in Scripture.

"Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest."

As we read these words, I get the sense that David is awake. It's the middle of the night. David can't sleep. His mind won't settle down. There's so much to fear, and now at night, with nothing to distract him from his fears, he is all alone. Have you ever been there? If you read through the book of Psalms, you'll find the most honest and desperate prayers happen during the night.

During the day, we have all sorts of distractions. There are people we can call. There are to-do lists we can move through. But at nighttime, it's different. At night, the world quiets down and ceases to offer an easy way out, ceases to offer those distractions.

Sixteen years ago, I left a bustling, busy church ministry to become a church planter. A church planter starts a new church from scratch. What I wasn't prepared for was the loneliness. Suddenly, I was at home all alone. No colleagues or coworkers. We moved to a new community and there was no congregation waiting to welcome us in. No one. A pastor is supposed to be with people, teach and preach and visit. But there was no one for almost 2 years. It was hard, and discouraging. At times I felt like such a failure at a vocation I had put 20 years of my life into. There were many nights it was just me alone with my thoughts.

That's when my prayers were not polite. Prayers often become just honest and desperate. "God, this isn't working out. God, I'm afraid for my family – that I won't be able to provide for them. God, I want to trust you, but right now it's really hard to."

If you've ever had really bad news from a doctor and suddenly you found yourself in the hospital or at home sick or recovering for weeks and months; If you've ever been laid off and can't find a job; If you've ever had a family member die and suddenly the house is empty and quiet; – then you know that in the nighttime we talk to God in ways we never would during the day. At night, our prayers become bold. They become assertive. They become honest. They become bitter. At night, we cut to the chase.

When we're in that lonely place, what kind of prayers do we pray? "God, I'm afraid I'll be alone and single my whole life." Or, "God, I want a baby so badly. What if that can't be a reality for us?" Or, "God, I've invested years in this vocation. What if I fail? Everyone is watching. What if I fail?" Or, "God, I can't get past what he did to me. I'm so angry." Or, "God, what if my disease is not cured? I'm afraid." Or, "God, what if she doesn't come back?"

Psalms 22 is a prayer of the lonely. Then comes Psalm 23. With that first verse (one of the boldest prayers we see in all of the Bible), David says, ***"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."***

This is why it's really helpful to read chapters 22 and 23 together, because when you do that, you realize, given the nature of David's prayer in chapter 22, there are actually a lot of things David wants. He wants a reputation. He wants security. He wants

reassurance. He wants a human, flesh-and-blood companion. He is praying for the circumstances, the situations he is in that are leading him to feel isolated.

In the end, David names to God all of those circumstances in this life he desires to be changed. We name in prayer the circumstances in live that are driving our loneliness – like, “God, I’d like a spouse, a friend, a baby. Having named all these in Psalm 22, in Psalm 23 he comes face-to-face with perhaps the hardest question we all have to answer, which is, “Is God enough?” ***“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.”***

Can you say that? In that moment when it's just you and God, is He enough? See, if we let it, if we lean into our loneliness, we will be brought face-to-face with that very same question. “Given my life situation, given all I want to change in my life, if those things don’t happen, will I be okay with that?” That's a hard question, and we can't rush to answer it.

There was a famous and really interesting study done in Germany in the early 1990s looking at God and loneliness and the connection between the two. Researchers set out to determine whether a person's belief in God made them less lonely. The term *God* was kind of defined rather ambiguously. It was just kind of this higher power. The study ultimately concluded the mere belief in God was relatively independent of loneliness.

In other words, whether or not a person believed in God made no difference in their reported levels of feeling disconnected. It's interesting. Here's the really interesting catch. Upon looking closer, they found that what a person believed about God made all the difference in how lonely they were. Those who believed God to be vindictive, wrathful, and absent reported higher levels of loneliness. On the other hand, the folks who identified God with words like *helpful* felt less lonely.

See, when we're in that lonely place and we ask the question, “Is God enough?” it matters so much the nature of the God we're talking about. Psalm 23 continues, and David sheds light on the nature of that God for us. He says, ***“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”***

This is really important. Look at this text. Notice what hasn't changed. Circumstances haven't changed for David. It's still dark out. Things are not as David would ideally have them be. He is still fearing for his reputation and for his life, but in that darkness, he meets this God, this God who guides, who comforts, this God who is always with him.

I want to pause there and just say that if you're here today and you're wrestling with that question, “Is God enough?” you are in good company. You're in precisely the place where faith is born. Stay in it. See, there's something about the dark, something about David's loneliness that has allowed him to experience God's good character in a unique way, that has led him to depend on God in a way that David would never have to

rely or depend on God when the sun is out. He knows God in a way he didn't know God before.

Henri Nouwen was a priest and theologian who, during his lifetime, did a lot of thinking about this idea of loneliness. He talks about this important movement where we transform our loneliness into what he calls *solitude*. See, loneliness is the pain and emptiness of being alone. We weren't created for it. We weren't meant for it. But solitude is learning to be alone with God. *Loneliness* is the prayer of Psalm 22. **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** *Solitude* is the prayer of Psalm 23. **"...You are with me."**

David moves from loneliness to solitude, and part of what David is discovering is that solitude, this being alone with God, is a profound antidote to loneliness itself.

In John 17, Jesus tells his followers, **"Now this is eternal life: that they may know...God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."** If you think about it, those are really challenging words, because they indicate that this full and rich life that God desires for you is, at its core, relational – a relationship with Jesus.

This means that the full, abundant life is not about whether or not things go my way. In the end, it's about whether or not I can say with David at the end of the day, **"You are with me. The Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not want."** And you know what, friends, when we can say that in our loneliest, darkest moment, we find a source for life full and abundant that is unlike any other.

In Luke, chapter 5, nestled between a story about Jesus healing the sick and a story about Jesus healing a leper, Luke makes this single and curious observation. He writes, **"But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."**

See, for Jesus, loneliness wasn't a state to be avoided or numbed but rather something He went after. Apparently, He went after it quite often. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all talk about Jesus' habitual and intentional pursuit of quiet, lonely wilderness places. It's worth pausing for just a moment to think about the implications of the pattern we see in Jesus' life.

What if your loneliness, instead of something to be avoided, might actually be the means to the life of connection and fullness that God desires for you, that He created you for? What if your call as a follower of Jesus is not to withdraw from loneliness but, like Jesus said, withdraw into it? Intentionally choose loneliness to be with God. And then, from a rich full relationship with Him, be better able to cope with loneliness in your life?

This means the BIG question each person must face at some point in life is this: If God created me for and wants for me a life connected to others relationally, how do I begin to deal with the loneliness my sin and broken world have brought on me? The answer God gives is not what you would first think.

This is why Jesus sought out lonely places, because in His solitude, He found this sweet solidarity with God. He found He was and is never alone. Then and only then He could move forward. He could move through whatever circumstances He needed to

move through, one day at a time, with faith so that even when circumstances led Him to the pain of the cross, a place He admitted He did not want to go, He could still go because he believed it would not be the end of the story.

The cross is that moment that is the greatest loneliness the world has ever seen. Jesus experienced that incredible pain in His body and in His soul. Yet, because of that painful, lonely experience, where He took our punishment on Himself alone, then three days later He found life. It's because Jesus was willing to stay in that lonely time of suffering for us, and because of His Easter resurrection that now, in your life today, there is nowhere you can go where He won't go with you.

In your life, moving into your loneliness will be painful for sure, but ultimately, friends, there will be life. Nouwen said it so beautifully. He said, **"You are called to unity. That is the good news of the incarnation. The Word becomes flesh, and thus a new place is made where all of you and all of God can dwell. When you have found that unity, you will be truly free."** That is life.

To be clear, this doesn't mean your circumstances will for sure be changed. It doesn't mean the pain of your singleness will magically go away. It doesn't mean the ache of betrayal will disappear. It doesn't mean you'll be able to answer that hard question, "Why, God?" When all is said and done, David is still in the dark, but it's David who is changed.

David moved from Psalm 22 loneliness where he cried "Why have you forsaken me?" to Psalm 23 where he affirmed, "I'm never alone" to a strong statement of firm faith. David boldly, confidently proclaims: ***Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Psalm 23:6***

See, that final statement is one of trust. It's one of confidence, almost like victory. Circumstances in his life led David into his loneliness, but in that place he met God. Ever so slowly, David is changed. He says, "There's a greater story. There's this bigger narrative. God is writing it from beginning to end, and I know the character of that God because I met him."