

Only the Lonely - Part 1: The Pain of Loneliness

PAUL MATTHIES, *June 4, 2006*

Good morning. Well, Matt is away for the month on sabbatical, and you're stuck with me. My name is Paul Matthies, membership pastor and spokesmodel of The Village Church. Last time I joined you, I did a two-part series on singleness entitled "Single Minded." And as Matt shared last week, this time for the month of June, I will be doing a four-part series on loneliness entitled "Only the Lonely." And some of you, after hearing first singleness now loneliness, have asked, "are you okay?" And I'm really fine for now, but I encourage you to stay tuned for my six-part series "Desperate in Dallas." We'll be covering the five love languages, and on the sixth week, I'm just going to give out my cell phone. And you can speak whatever love language you want; I take it any way I can get it. I'm fluent in all five. Well, now that I appear totally desperate, I want to say in all seriousness that this series is coming from an extended personal struggle of mine with this topic of loneliness. And I don't feel like I'm alone in this because as I've shared, with people, the topic I'm going to be speaking on, many of you have told me your own personal struggles with this issue. And it seems to be an issue that gets a lot of us into trouble. And so my prayer is that this would be an encouragement to you, that it would edify you, that this topic of loneliness would be taken seriously and that together, we can look at God's word concerning this topic.

But I do want to spend a few minutes in orientation for the month in terms of what to expect, while Matt is away, from me. The first thing that you need to expect is that every week, I will be very nervous. I'm scared every time I get up here. And let me tell you something, asking me, "Are you ready?" does not help. So, don't do that. Or my favorite is, "Oh, you're preaching for a month? Matt's gone for a month? Ohhhhhh." That makes me feel no better. But you do know that I do ask for your prayers, because I am nervous. But I have learned something, God never takes away the butterflies in my stomach, because they are a reminder that I cannot do this apart from His Spirit. So I need you to pray for me this month. And I have two firm beliefs. The first belief is that God loves His children. The second belief is that God will use whatever vessel that makes himself or herself available to Him to speak to His children. And I would ask for your prayers this month, not only for me but for you, that you would pray for your heart, that you could believe that God could speak to you...yes, even through me. And so I ask for your prayers this month as I endeavor to navigate us through this topic. And I want to tell you that I am not going to be giving five easy steps for overcoming loneliness. This is not going to be a self-help seminar. This is going to be about spiritual application, not practical application. Let me explain that. I'm not going to give you ten steps on how to fix your loneliness; I'm going to talk to you about how to find God in the midst of loneliness. And there's a big difference. There's a big difference between asking God how to solve our problems and asking God to meet with us in the midst of our problems, because Jesus says, "you will have trouble in this world, but take heart, I am with you forever till the end of the age." So, we're going to meet God in the midst of our loneliness this month.

And secondly, I am not planning on purposely using funny jokes or stories. Now, I know it's going to shock some of you and you know that we have a history here of really enjoying each other's presence and making one another laugh and I'm all about that. As you know, Matt is a hoot, and I have a rich history of stories including the time I saved a squirrel and the time I set a girl's hair on fire with a marshmallow. And share these stories and they're light-hearted and they're fun, but, you know, sometimes God's words says that we should take topics seriously. And we shouldn't laugh at things that don't need to be laughed at. And to be honest with you, the topic of loneliness is a serious issue, and I desire to treat as such.

And I came to this firm conviction as I was reading Philippians 3:10, where Paul uses the phrase, "the fellowship of His sufferings." You know, so many of us love to enter into the fellowship of God's joy, but scripture also calls us into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. And sometimes, we don't need avoid the pain or numb the pain, we need to look at that pain and ask God for a deeper joy. And I believe, this month, that God wants us to be in the fellowship of His sufferings, so that we may know Him better and experience a deeper joy. So, as you pray for this month, pray over that verse and ask God to meet us in the fellowship of our sufferings with Him.

You know, I am going to spend four weeks on this topic. And some of you are probably thinking, "okay, loneliness...that's one week. What are you doing with the other three weeks?" And that was my first reaction as well. But as I started talking about and studying this topic, I realized that loneliness affects a huge number of people in a variety of ways resulting in a host of emotions, frustrations and circumstances. And as I started preparing for this sermon series, I realized that loneliness is a huge, vast topic. And now, my opinion has changed. Now, I'm saying, "only four weeks Lord? Only four weeks to talk about this topic that affects so many people in so many ways?" And I can only touch the tip of the iceberg of this topic, but I'm praying that it will start you on a journey to navigate through your loneliness. And I have a firm belief that the reason I called this series "Only the Lonely," is because I believe that lonely people have a unique opportunity to encounter God in ways that only lonely people can. Let me repeat that. I believe that lonely people have a unique opportunity to encounter God in ways that only lonely people can. And so we're going to be talking about "Only the Lonely" and what lessons we learn in the midst of our loneliness. And I hope that in some way, I speak to you in a God-centered, Spirit-filled way, and that it edifies you.

Well, now, after telling you all of that, my last concern is that none of you are going to come back, but, as my roommate encouraged me, worst case scenario, in one month, I've solved our space dilemma.

So, on that note, let me pray for us as we begin this journey together, "Father, meet with us. Lord, we know in our minds that when we gather together, You are here, but Father manifest Your presence with us. Make Yourself known to us. And Father, that's our deepest prayer. And if knowing You means being in the fellowship, not of joy, but of suffering, Father, we still welcome you because our deepest need is fellowship with You. And we trust, even in the midst of the pain of our loneliness, You are working in us that which pleases You most, faith. And so Father, we pray that You would meet with us this month, that You would encourage our hearts, that You would shepherd us. And Father, I lay myself down and crucify my flesh, Father, so Your Spirit can speak through me. And I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is a very personal topic for me, and this has been a very personal journey for me as I have prepared for this month. Because, to be honest with you, for the past six months, I have been in an extended season of deep loneliness. And sometimes when you try to pinpoint loneliness, the immediate reaction is, well, it's because I am single. And singles just need to expect to be lonely, but you know what, I don't think that's just it. Because as I look at my life and I look at other circumstances, I think some of it has to do with being in leadership. And I don't know if you've ever been in a leadership position, but sometimes being in leadership can be a very lonely place. And maybe perhaps, to the surprise of some of you, sometimes this stage can be a lonely place. And maybe you can attribute it to certain circumstances, you know. I'm in a season in my life where some of my deepest friends in life, their station is changing. They're either engaged or in their first year of marriage or having their first child, and I don't feel like we're in the same place. And other people who I've invested into have gone to overseas for missions or they've decided to go on or work has kept us apart. And so, I can kind of attribute it to my circumstances that that's part of my being lonely. So, I look at all of these things and think about all these reasons, and then I say, "well maybe it's just my personality," because to be honest with you, despite that fact that I get up and speak sometimes, 9 times out of 10, if I'm invited to a social gathering, I choose to stay home instead. Just personality wise, I choose to be lonely over awkward social gatherings. So you know, I will choose loneliness, so some of it's personality.

But have you ever been to that point that, try as you might, you just can't pinpoint the source of your loneliness? I've been in one of those seasons that no matter how hard I tried, I really couldn't figure it out. Still wrestling with this topic of "God, what are You trying to teach me? What's going on here?" And, I didn't even want to call it loneliness until month three, and someone comes up and they ask, "Paul, how are you doing?" You know the typical Christian question, the question of all questions, the question you should expect in every church lobby. "How are you doing?" And instead of giving the superficial answer, I went on to tell them about my struggles and I said, "well, I'm feeling...out of place. I'm feeling disconnected. I'm feeling like I don't have a place to call home." Have you ever used any of those phrases? So I start trying to say it, and then they look at me and go, "so you're lonely?" And I think, "that has a lot more bite to it than 'feeling disconnected, misunderstood, out of place'" But those are all euphemisms for loneliness. So, I said, "I'm lonely. I'm lonely, and I don't know what to do about it." So in about March, I began seeking God through books. If you look behind me, I have a stack of books here that I'm going to be referencing through the month that I've read on this topic. I started searching the scriptures. I started pleading with God in prayer, "Lord, what am I do do with this pain called loneliness?" And I really believe that this month, God has given me some clear directions, some things to speak into your life on this topic that have served as cool water to my thirsty soul. And my prayer is that we would enter in together the fellowship of suffering so that perhaps we might identify ourselves with Christ and be in intimate relationship with God and one another. And so I'm struggling with this issue along with you, but I'm here to tell you that I really believe that God has given me some water, and I really want you to drink this month.

But you know, I have three aims here this morning. My first aim is to share that maybe I'm not the only one who's lonely a lot. In fact, my first aim is to establish that loneliness is a common human experience and many of us struggle with this topic called loneliness. And, in my journaling time, I wrote out the variety of ways that loneliness comes upon us. And I've been encouraged by the thought by I Corinthians 10:13 that, "no temptation has overtaken you but such as is common." And here are the different types of loneliness I have journaled: loneliness that comes upon us through circumstances, loneliness that comes upon us through sin and disobedience, loneliness that accompanies our courage and obedience. And then I wrote on more specific categories: the loneliness of fear, of being afraid of being angry. Have any of you ever lost your temper and been so embarrassed that you felt alone in the room and just ashamed that you just blew up? There's the loneliness of divorce, of loss...whether your job or your home or a loved one... the loneliness of death, of grief, of rejection, of traveling, of being new. Anybody ever been the new guy? The loneliness of following Christ in the face of conflict, of widowhood, of being single, of loveless marriages, of isolation in dating, of being alone at home, of spiritual wilderness, of choosing purity. Have any of you ever chosen the road to purity and felt like you were the only person in America that desires to be pure? Loneliness of being misunderstood, of leadership...of dropping your microphone...of ministry, of being a stay at home parent. I came up with this one after having a conversation with a lady. I called the lady and said, "how are you?" And she said, "Thank God you called. This is the first conversation I've had with someone older than a two year old. So, we talked about something other than "Baby Einstein." She was appreciative. Loneliness of the party lifestyle. Maybe you're in this party lifestyle where you have these big explosive parties, but then you come home and you feel alone and empty. Have any of you ever felt a mile wide and an inch deep? The loneliness of being removed from Christian fellowship and the loneliness of illness, whether it's for a short time or an extended time.

You get my point here? And to prove my point even further, I'm going to do something audacious and ask you to participate in this. And I'm going to ask you a question and ask you to raise your hand if the answer is yes. Raise your hand if, within the past six months, you have experienced, whether for a short amount of time or an extended season of time, emotions that you would qualify as loneliness. Now hold up your hands and look around. You want to know what the crazy thing is about loneliness? It makes you feel alone. True thoughts. But we're not. We're not alone. We're not alone in our struggles.

But most of us feel alone, and most of us come to church thinking that people come to church for holy reasons. They come here because they love Jesus. They serve Jesus. They read their Bible. They witness. And they're coming here to say, "God, look at my six days. I am awesome and holy and perfect. And we think we're the only one who doesn't experience community. And we get upset, because we think everybody at the church feels connected but me. And we feel alone. But can I tell you something? If you are lonely, you're at the right place. Because I believe that God desires deeper fellowship with you than you even desire for yourself. And God desires deeper relationships with people than you even desire for yourself. And so, if you are here because you are lonely, don't think that that's a bad reason to be here. Offer it to God in worship and see what He does with it. See what He does with it. Because we have this great hope that God is here with us together.

But here's the deal, if we're going to meet with God, we have to meet with Him on His terms not ours. And if we're going to talk about loneliness, we have to see loneliness as He sees loneliness not how we see loneliness. You see, too often in church, we come to church and we say, "God, here's my problem. Will you fix it?" But you know what, sometimes God not only wants to give an answer to our problems, He wants to define the problem. Sometimes we think that we ask all the right questions and expect God to give all the right answers. But have you ever thought that maybe you're asking the wrong question? And maybe we have a wrong, unbiblical view of what loneliness is. And sometimes when we come to God, we don't merely ask Him for the solution to our problem, we say, "God, I don't even think I know what the real problem is. Could you show me, not only the answers to my questions, but the right questions to ask?" And God is going to say this, which is my second aim today, to show that loneliness, at it's root, is a spiritual issue. Loneliness, at it's root, is a spiritual issue.

Now, we often define loneliness ourselves in terms of physical or emotional terms. Or, to put it differently, we define loneliness as the absence of people, whether physically or emotionally. Right? And this is how loneliness normally looks, we get lonely, and our first reaction is, "I need to be social more often." And we start going, looking out for more social opportunities, more people to hang out with, more times of getting together with people. And somewhere along the way we think, "well, this isn't working." So then we think, "oh, I know what it is, people don't know how to speak my love language." So we don't just need a greater quantity of people; we need more quality people. We need people in our lives who love us like we should be loved. And so the answer is not that we need more people in our lives; we need more considerate people in our lives. And so, we define it as physical need and emotional needs, but the problem is, that we still experience pain when we frame it in those terms alone. Because loneliness...there's more to the story here...loneliness is not just an emotional and a physical issue, it's also a spiritual issue. And loneliness is not merely the absence of people, whether physically or emotionally, it's also the felt presence of pain in our lives. It's the felt presence of pain in our lives. And what is that pain exactly? It's the pain of separation.

And I'm going to define this more after I tell you a little story about how I learned this lesson the hard way, that loneliness is not just the realized absence of people, it was also the felt presence of pain.

And I had to admit, humbly, that I had a wrong definition of loneliness when, in January of 2004, I had just been promoted to the next generation assistant, and I had begun work on planning an event for the student ministry called "Road Rules." I was very busy at the time. I was the executive assistant to the preschool children, student and singles pastors...not busy at all. And so I was planning this trip called "Road Rules" and somewhere in the midst of it, I was so busy and under a lot of stress. And one night, I started having chest pains. And so, I was having these severe chest pains and being the stereotypical male who believes that the words "doctor" and "devil" are synonymous, I decided to ignore it and keep pressing through it and just forget the fact...not just merely heart palpitations, but chest pains...it hurt. But the problem was that I had this view that they need me on that youth trip. Who else would set out the spray cheese and all sorts of things that they would need? So I decided to fight through it. This was three days before the event and two

days before the event. I had an episode that afternoon where my entire left side of my body went numb and I had severe chest pains, equivalent of a heart attack. And I decided, "oh, I can handle this when I get back." And then that night, I'm laying in bed around 10:00PM, and suddenly, I have another episode. And it's just more than I can bear so I think to myself, "I'll call my sister." So, I call my sister and I tell her a little bit about what's going on and she says, "That sounds pretty serious. I don't know what to tell you. Why don't you call somebody in your church that you trust?" So I called the nurse here at the church and I said, "I'm experiencing heart issues and I'm having severe chest pains and my left side of my body is going numb." And she suggested, "Paul, if you're having heart problems, you should probably go to the doctor." So I did. But I didn't want to go to the ER, because bad things happen there. And so I decided to go to one of those 24 hour clinics. So I went to the 24 hour clinic, and the doctor there was a former ER doctor. Yay for me. And he runs the EKG, and he says, "Paul, it looks like you have experienced a minor heart attack, but I've been in this business for quite some time, and I know you're too young to have a heart attack. I think you have a viral infection of your heart called myocarditis, which is making your body believe that you're having heart attacks." And he said, "But I'm going to need you to go to the ER."

So they transport me by ambulance to the ER. Now, this was January 2nd, okay, this is around the time of New Year's. And I'm not sure if you're familiar with what happens at New Years, but Americans tend to celebrate by getting drunk and fighting one another. So the ER was full of people with issues more than heart problems, like crowbars out of foreheads. And they were packed. And so they put me through triage and the doctor said, "Yes, it looks like you have evidence of a minor heart attack. And so we're going to put you in a room, but I have good news and I have bad news. The good news is that we do have room for you here. The bad news is that our heart ward is full, and we're going to have to keep you behind a curtain in the ER"

So, they wheel me over beside an 80 year old lady, who through the entire night would scream, "I'm dying, I'm dying!.....I'm dying!" So Ms. Johnson and I were hanging out in the ER. And my sister comes in, and she says, "I'm here to stay with you." But she had just had a baby, and I said, "No, no, no, you can't stay here. I'll be fine. I got this. I can handle it. Go home. You have a baby at home. Take care of your baby." So, she went and very soon, Barry Keldie, the student pastor at the time, now lead pastor at Providence Church, came and visited. And he said, "I'm here for you all night." I said, "No, you're not. You're here for the briefcase with all the information about 'Road Rules'" And he said, "Yes, but..." I said, "You know, your concern is duly noted, but please, I'm taking one for the team. Go home, grab my briefcase. Everything you need is in there and you can do the event without me." Soon, the phone rings...Ms. Johnson answers. She hands it to me, and it's my parents. And my parents say, "We will drive up immediately." I assured them it wasn't a big deal, it was only heart problems. So I tell my parents to stay at home, not to worry about driving up and coming to see me. So they wait until the morning and from 11:00PM to 8:00AM that night, I was alone in an ER and suddenly, my heart starts to swell. Now, I'm not sure if you've ever injured your ankle or sprained something, but the worst pain in the world is the part where the swelling happens. And if you can imagine that pain, not outside of your body where you can put ice on it, but inside your body. It was the worst pain I have ever experienced. So soon after, I called the nurse, and he walks in and asks, "What's wrong sir?" And I said, "I'm in great pain." And he says, "Well, I can give I can give you the maximum amount of pain medication, and we'll give it 30 minutes to an hour and see what happens." And he does that, and I think it was a placebo....nothing happened...sugar. So, an hour later, finally he comes. And he says, "What's wrong?" And I say, "The pain medication didn't work. You need to give me more." And he said, "I'm sorry sir, there's nothing we can do. The heart doctor has to sign off on that, and he's up there in a six-hour surgery." And I said, "You've got to do something." He says, "I'll try to page the doctor and see what happens." An hour later, he comes back. He says, "I'm sorry, the doctor cannot come. You're just going to have to endure the pain." So, sitting there alone in my bed, I get this hair-brained idea that I realize that if I pull off my heart monitor, someone will come to my aid. But I didn't feel that expressed, the amount of pain that I was in. So I pull off my heart monitor, pull out my IV, walk over to the wall and start beating it. Now, I don't know if you've ever been in intense pain, but you lose the ability to reason. And my thought was, "I'm going to beat the

wall until the doctor upstairs comes down and helps me. So, suddenly, Ms. Johnson is no longer dying, she's annoyed, and she starts yelling. And the orderlies come and the nurse walks in and they're afraid my heart has stopped beating, but then they see me beating the wall. And so, the orderlies come and they grab me and they put me down on the bed. And the nurse looks at me and he's irate and he says, "Sir, what do you think you're doing?" And I calmly explain, "I'm beating on the wall until the doctor comes down and helps me." And he says, "Sir, I've told you that there is nothing we can do." And then I looked at him, in a moment of frustration and said, "if you can't lessen the pain, then just don't leave me alone! Don't leave me alone. If you can't give me the pain medication to numb it, would you at least stay with me?" I started crying. And then he looked at me, and he said, "Sir, I can give you heart medication to numb it and I can stay by you bedside, but ultimately, I can't fix your heart problem. And that's why you're in so much pain." He was right. He was right. In the midst of my pain, I need a doctor. I needed someone to fix my heart problem.

You see, we have a heart problem. And we can invite more people into our lives, and we can invite more quality people into our lives, but the problem is that doesn't take care of the root pain of separation that's happening there. Because we have a spiritual heart problem and we don't need medication we need a new heart and that takes a doctor. And so, we have a strong desire to be in intimate fellowship with God and others, but the problem is that we have, at our root, a sin problem that clouds our hearts.

So let's take a look at 1 John, chapter 1, where John is going to discuss our heart problem. Starting with verse 3, "what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete." Isn't that invitation appealing? Full fellowship with God and with others that brings joy and intimacy. That's what we want! We have a physical need of people in our lives and an emotional need of love, but what keeps us from experiencing a complete joy?

"These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. God Is Light. This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."

Now, this passage is going to say that we have an invitation into fellowship...fellowship with God and others that makes us joyous and complete. However, he's going to backtrack here and he's going to say, "If you want to have fellowship with one another, you must have fellowship with God; but in order to have fellowship with God, you're experiencing separation because the presence of sin in your life. And at the root of this fellowship issue is not merely the absence of people or the absence of God in your life, it is the presence of sin in your hearts that separates from God and other people. You have a heart problem, and that problem is painful.

How so I know that the separation that we experience ,because of sin, from God and others is painful? We can look at Genesis 3. And in Genesis 3, the bible's going to talk about the origin of sin in our lives and in our hearts. And in Genesis 3:1-10, the serpent is going to deceive Adam and Eve, and he's going to tell them something, he says, "if you eat this fruit, you will not die." Now, let's take this passage in terms of physical and emotional realities. Did the serpent tell the truth? No, he told a half truth. Because when Adam ate of the fruit and Eve ate of the fruit, did they die physically? No.

When they ate of the fruit, did they stop feeling? No. What happened was, they experienced a spiritual death. They became spiritually dead. So, the serpent deceived them into thinking he was telling the truth because they did not die, but they did die. Because suddenly, they look at each other and experience a feeling of profound shame. And suddenly they don't even want to look at each other anymore, so they put on fig leaves. And then they think, "I don't want to be with God anymore either," so then, they go hide behind a bush. And suddenly they start experiencing the pain of separation, and they try to hide themselves. And God comes into the garden and He says to them, "What are you doing here? Why are you hiding yourselves?" It wasn't a question for Him; it was a question for them. And he says, "Well, we believed the serpent, we ate of this fruit, and now we feel ashamed, we feel separated from one another, and we want to hide ourselves from You." And God curses them and He says, "Because you have chosen the pleasures of sin, you are going to inherit pain." It's going to be a painful reality where life is going to hurt, childbirth is going to hurt, work is going to hurt and you are going to hurt and groan until I come back and redeem you. So He introduces the pain of separation and in verses 23-24, it says that He sent them out of the garden and He put angels to guard the gate and He drove them out, and it hurt. Because Adam chose the pleasures of sin, humanity has inherited the pain of loneliness and the pain of separation from God and others. And, at it's root, loneliness began in the Garden of Eden, and we are all children of Eden. We are all children of Eden.

Well, how does this impact us? Well this impacts us because we're so prone to elevate our lonely problem above our sin problem. If we think of loneliness only as a problem with other people and not a spiritual problem, we start saying things like this, "Well, if women would just learn to be women and start liking the nice guys instead of the bad guy, I wouldn't have to turn to my computer for false intimacy." "If men would just start being men and learn how to lead women like they should, I wouldn't have to turn to the world for dating." "If the Church would start being the Church, then I wouldn't feel so disconnected. So I wouldn't have to go back to my old lifestyle." You know what, men should be men, women should be women, and the Church should be the Church, but do you see what the problem with that is?

Your statement is, "I do bad things because I'm lonely." But the biblical formula is, "I am lonely because I'm a sinner. I don't need people to come and make me feel better about myself. I need an advocate. I need help. I need someone to save me. I've got a heart problem." And it manifests itself in so many ways, but somewhere along the way, Americans have quit being responsible sinners, and now we're just victims of loneliness. Blame everyone else for my lonely problem. But that's the view of secular psychology and not God's word. Because God's word is going to say that your sin problem is a deeper problem than your lonely problem.

And let me put it in this way, we live in a dark and fallen world covered with the filth and stench of sin, where people are spiritually dead, with hearts of stone and no one seeks God. This world is under the rulership of the Prince of Darkness, the enemy of God, who blinds the minds of unbelievers. The people in this world love the darkness and hate the light. We live in a dark and fallen world (Romans 5:12), covered in the filth and stench of sin (Isaiah 64:6) where people are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1), where we have hearts of stone (Zechariah 7:12), where no one seeks God (Psalm 14:1-3), where the Prince of Darkness rules this world and blinds the minds of unbelievers to the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:4), and all these people who dwell in this earth love the darkness and hate the light (John 3:19), and this is the world we live in and this is the types of people we are. Is it any wonder that we're lonely? We are children of Eden. And we live, despite the fact that our eyes tell us that things are good and all we need is more people in our lives, the reality is that scripture calls us blind people, groping around looking for one another. But we're all in the dark, wearing dark clothing and we're blinded. And by the time we actually run into each other, we can't see each other clearly, because we're covered in a sin problem. And we need new eyes, and we need a new heart. Is it any wonder that we're lonely?

Now, this is not to devalue the physical needs we have. If you are depressed and you take medication, and you realize that you have a chemical imbalance, and it's biological, and it causes you loneliness, I'm not saying that, by mere repentance,

that fixes the issue, but I am saying we can't divorce our physical needs from spiritual realities. In that, every time we realize we have a fallen body, we must also acknowledge that the reason why we have a fallen body with a chemical imbalance is because, somewhere along the way, we've inherited pain of the fall. And we must mourn the reality that we live in a fallen world. And some of us have emotional needs and we've lost a loved one and we haven't chosen to lose a loved one and we're upset and we're lonely. But every time we lose a loved one, it's not merely an emotional need, it's also a spiritual reality, because death happened because sin happened. And every time we lose a loved one, we must the fact that we live in of sin. We cannot forget that loneliness, at its root is a spiritual issue. We don't need to merely hang out with more friends. We don't need to merely learn how to speak love languages. We need help. We need a savior. We need an advocate whose name is Christ Jesus. And our heart cry should not merely be, "I do bad things because I'm lonely, so someone come keep me company, make me feel better." Our deep heart cry should be, "I'm lonely because I'm a sinner in a dark and fallen world. God help me."

And it's when we allow God to define the problem, that God also comes through with an answer, because we haven't been left alone. Because Isaiah 9:2 says "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light." And loneliness, even though it was introduced at the fall, can be used by God to display the glory of Christ in drawing us to Himself and using it to conform us to His image. And it is true that the choices we have made, James 1:13-15 that our own sinful choices have given birth to death, but let's not lose sight of the fact that God can still be sovereign over our loneliness. And He's still sovereign over our sin issue. And even we have chosen death, God says, "Listen, this isn't news to Me, and I haven't left you without hope. Because from the very moment the Garden of Eden happened, I set in motion a plan to redeem you and save you and call you My own. And in fact, Romans 1 tells us that God gave us over to our sins. We said, "God, I choose this over You." And He says, "Go for it." And it also says that God is not intimidated by a dark world, because Psalm 139 says He has ordained all of our days and darkness and light are alike to him. Meaning that God's not only with us in the good times, He's also ordained those bad times. And you can also look in Job 1 and realize that if Satan comes against us and attacks us, he had to ask permission from God in order to do it. So we have this great hope that God is sovereign over our loneliness. He isn't ignorant of our deepest problems. Instead, He's provided us a solution to our sin problem. And in 1 Timothy 1:15, it's going to say that Jesus Christ came to save sinners. And in John 16:33, it's going to say that Jesus came to overcome the world. And in 1 John 3:8, it's going to say that Jesus was manifested to destroy the works of the devil. So, God can use our loneliness as an opportunity to display the glory of Christ in conquering sin, overcoming the world and destroying the works of the devil. That this is an opportunity for God to be sovereign over it and introduce to us our solution to our spiritual problem who is Jesus Christ, praise be to Him. And we can say with Genesis 50:20, what the world meant for evil, God has meant for good. And we can say with Romans 8:28, that God uses all things, all things for the good of those who love Him, even our loneliness. Because our loneliness lead us to our deepest spiritual need who is Christ. And we can also say with 1 John 3:20, that even when we feel condemned, God is greater than our hearts and that loneliness cannot separate us from the love of God. We have a solution to our spiritual problem, and if we will submit to the Lord and accept His solution for our deepest spiritual problem, the atoning work of Christ on the cross, God can attack loneliness at it's root and overcome the pain of separation in our lives that leads to separation from Him which leads to separation other people and leaves us cold and alone and screaming, "if you're not going to take away the pain, then please don't leave me alone!" And He hasn't. He hasn't. And He tells us to get on our sick bed and rest, because He's a doctor and He knows how to deal with our heart problems.

And when we make that decision to allow God to speak to us in our deepest spiritual need, we then come to realize that God can redeem our loneliness. And loneliness becomes a useful tool in His hands. Because I'm not telling you loneliness goes away, because again Jesus says in this world you will have trouble. But I am going to tell you that God can take loneliness and use it. And the first way He uses loneliness, is loneliness becomes a megaphone. And let me read this quote for you from C.S. Lewis, "We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities, and anyone who has watched gluttons shoveling down the most exquisite foods as if they did not know what they were eating will admit that

we can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. A bad man, happy, is a man without the least inkling that his actions do not 'answer,' that they are not in accord with the laws of the universe." Do you see God, in His great mercy, will not remove the pain of loneliness until we no longer find pleasure in our sin. And even though we have sin in our lives, God still desires to speak to us through His megaphone called pain.

And next week, we're going to be talking about the joy of the hiding place. Have you ever been in those moments where you do desire fellowship with people and you do desire fellowship with God, but you're frustrated with God, you're frustrated with people, so you just try to hide from everybody. And we're going to be talking about that loneliness, the loneliness that we choose because we're sick of people and frustrated with God, in a sermon called "The Joy of the Hiding Place."

The next way that God can use loneliness in His hand is that loneliness becomes a cross to bear. Here's a quote from Larry Crabb in "Shattered Dreams," "Seasons of personal suffering are opportunities for God to do His deepest work." Think about those three hours of darkness on the cross, Jesus screamed in agony, "God where are you?" God said nothing, but it was during that exact time that God was in the Son reconciling the world to Himself. And in week three, we're going to be talking about the jewel of the wilderness. The reality, have you ever had those times whenever you feel like God is playing hide-and-seek with you? And you're seeking for Him and you can't find Him. And you're saying "God, where are you?" And I'm here to tell you that scripturally it says that God sometimes hides Himself from us. And the reason why He does that is because He is working in us and doing the most important work that He could do. He is working within us, faith. And we're going to talk about what God means to do in us during those wilderness seasons and we're going to talk about worshiping by faith not by feeling and deepening our desire for God, not deadening our pain.

And in the final week, week four, we're going to talk about the hope of the exile. Have any of you ever had a deep longing to find a place to call home? Well, the problem is sometimes our desires are so deep that we try to make this world our home. And I'm going to talk about and answer the question, "Why does God never let us feel at home here? What is He doing whenever he exiles us and He calls us pilgrims and strangers?" And so, that's going to be week four, "The Hope of the Exile."

And the final quote is from Elizabeth Elliot and "The Path of Loneliness." "We have noted that aloneness was not a painful thing until sin entered the world. Loneliness now means pain. The other aspect of loneliness, solitude, need not mean pain. It may mean glory. Loneliness is a wilderness, but through receiving it as a gift, accepting it from the hand of God and offering it back to Him with thanksgiving, it may become a pathway to holiness, to glory and to God Himself." And we're going to talk about loneliness as a fast, or loneliness as a pathway to God in week four.

As I close here today, and as Michael comes up and sings over us "Be Near," and as people deal with what God is speaking into their hearts, I want us to turn briefly to James 4. And I want you to spend time meditating on this text if you feel God...and let me tell you, I really feel that God is working on some of your hearts right now, that you thought your only problem was you needed more people in your life or you needed better people in your life, and you have ignored the reality that you need an advocate. And I'm not just talking about unbelievers here, but if this is the first time you've heard this message, that you have a deep spiritual problem that only a savior can fix, I invite you to meditate on that text and ask a Christian friend what it means to enter into a relationship with God. But I'm also talking to those believers in here who have believed the lies of the world that their lonely problem is greater than their sin problem and today you need to repent of those things that your loneliness have led you to. And you need to admit that you didn't sin because you're lonely, but you're lonely because your heart is sinful and you are a sinner. And you need to be forgiven and you need to repent of that.

And in James 4 starting in verse 1, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?" You adulteresses do you not know that the pleasures of sin are responsible for the pain of your loneliness? "Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us?" God desires more for us to be in relationship with Him than we desire to be in relationship with Him. And He desires for us to be in community more than we desire to be in community. And He yearns jealously for us, but the problem is that we keep defining the problem. And He wants to tell us that our deepest problem is we need a new heart. "But He gives a greater grace Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Submit therefore to God Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you." This morning, some of you need to take heed to do what scripture calls us to do in the midst of our pain of loneliness and resist the devil and submit to God and draw near to Him and purify ourselves through the purifying and atoning work of Jesus Christ, who is our advocate who solves our heart problem. I will see you next week, but I invite you, when I pray now, to stay here, as Michael plays, and deal with the pain of loneliness.

"Father thank You for Your word. Thank You, Lord, that You have not left us hopeless and helpless. Thank You that Jesus Christ is our advocate. Father, for those of us who are Your children, but have believed the lie that our lonely problem is greater than our spiritual need for You, Father, we come here now with to repent and to confess that we keep dealing with the symptoms and not the problem. And Father, far too long we've cried, 'Either lessen our pain or just give us some friends' and we haven't cried out, 'I need an advocate.' And Father, for those of us who feel the pain of separation from God and have been feeling it, Father, I believe that right now in the presentation of the Gospel message, You are drawing the hearts of unbelievers to Yourself and right now, you're putting upon the hearts of unbelievers the weight of their separation from you. And Father, I pray that they would respond in repentance and confession and plead the blood of Jesus, and that they would come to know you and that they would act today, as your scriptures say, do not harden your heart while it is still called today lest we be given to the deceitfulness of sin. And so Father, I pray that Your word would not return void. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen."