

Good evening. Wow, a warm crowd tonight. It is the fourth and final week of this series on loneliness, and I hope that I have not depressed you too much. And I was thinking that, if perhaps we sell a CD set of the series "Only the Lonely," it could come with complementary sackcloth and ashes. And I just wanted to make a few comments while I still have the pulpit. This is my last time to preach this month, and I will not back behind the music stand until November. And so, I just wanted to make a few comments before I get started on this sermon. First of all, this preaching thing is hard. And I am tired and a little drained emotionally, spiritually and physically. And there's one thing I've learned this month, I've been convicted that I should be praying more for Matt than what I do. This is hard work. And it's not easy to get up here and pour yourself out on stage, and he does this week in and week out. So, I would just encourage you, whenever you think about it, to be praying for our lead pastor, Matt, and the wonderful job he does and continue to lift him up in prayer. Also, be praying for Michael Bleeker, who so faithfully serves. And we can take him for granted, but it takes a lot of hard work and preparation, and he is attempting to lead us into the throne room of God. And being up here, all your weaknesses are in just front of everybody, and it's not always an easy thing to do to get up here. So, I want to start us out by just praying for Matt and Michael this evening and just asking God to bless them as our way of honoring them and lifting them up for the wonderful work that they do here at The Village.

So, let me pray for them and us, "Father, thank You for the men of God, whom You have placed in spiritual authority over this church. Thank You for their love and passion for You, for their families and for The Village. Father, we honor them, and we ask that You would continue to put it upon our hearts to lift them up in prayer. Father, bring Matt home safely to us. We look so forward to having him back with us next week. And Father, thank You for the gift of Michael's presence with us and the work that he does in leading us every week to the throne room of grace. And Father, I pray that in their private times with You, that Your presence would be rich, Your presence would be mighty, and Father You continue to speak a word to them on behalf of the people here at The Village. And Father, for tonight, for myself and for us, I come once again in fear and trembling. And Father, I pray that we would see a demonstration of Your spirit and of Your power again tonight. Father, that no man may take credit for the work You're doing here and that Lord, people would not put their faith in the wisdom of men, but they would put their faith in the power of Your Spirit to change their hearts. And Father, we ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen."

Well, to recap where we've been these past few weeks, I'd like to share a couple of definitions that we used as we've discussed some various locations. In week two, we discussed the joy of the hiding place, and in doing so, we defined the hiding place as the following, "The hiding place can be viewed as that place or season in our lives when we run from people and circumstances, feel that the world is against us and embrace loneliness, only to encounter God, learn that He is for us and therefore experience true aloneness." And from the hiding place, we went to the wilderness. And last week, we talked about the jewel of the wilderness, and we defined the wilderness as the following, "The wilderness is that season of our lives where God, through our loneliness, teaches us that His will is to do something in us, not merely do something for us. That is, by walking by faith and not by sight, He works in us a stronger faith, leading to a deeper worship that results in a greater joy." And it was also last week that I took us one step further in saying, that God sometimes ordains loneliness in the life of a believer. And it's this week that I'm going to be talking about a location, which God sometimes sends His people, in which loneliness sets in. And we started out in the hiding place, we moved on to the wilderness and this week, I want to talk about the exile. Boy, I'm a happy pastor. Aren't I?

Do you ever have that feeling that you just want to go home? Do you know what I'm talking about? And I'm not just talking about that feeling you get ten minutes into my sermons. I'm talking about that feeling you get, that you don't merely want a place to live, you want a place to belong. You want a place to finally call "home." Have you ever gotten that feeling, that you just want to go home? Well, three years ago, I moved here from Abilene, Texas. And I moved here for two reasons. The first of which was practical and I realized that the economy was still suffering from the aftermath of September 11th. And so I moved here because I thought the job market would be better in Dallas than it would be in Abilene. But also, I discerned what I believed was a clear call from God to live here in the metroplex. But I was very hesitant to move here, because I have only lived in the country or small towns and I've never lived in a large city. So this was really a faith decision for me. And looking back and seeing now, I know exactly why I am here. But at the time, it was very difficult and when I first moved here, I was actually out of work for six months. And I was sharing an one bedroom/one bath apartment with my roommate and his pug, Pugsley. And I was flat broke with no money. I was submitting up to 30 resumes a day, all to no avail. The only neighbor who spoke to me was the guy next door who tried to sell me his stolen television. And I realized that, more than anything, not only did I feel alone, I also didn't feel like I fit into the Dallas culture. It was a strange culture for me, and even to this day, I don't feel like I totally fit in here. And it's just strange to live in the "big city" if you gotta keep in mind that I've spent most of my life in small town living.

I grew up in in Crawford, Texas, which was a very small town. There were actually more farm animals than people in Crawford, Texas. I mean, I was country when country wasn't cool. And growing up in Crawford, you know, it made this move very difficult to be here. And when I got here, and I was experiencing this loneliness, and I felt so alone, living in the big city, I started reminiscing about life in the small town. And I used to dream about how wonderful it was to be back in Crawford, Texas. And I dreamed about the time when I actually saw stars, and not just the remnants of the light of the American Airlines Center. And people here are so worried about image you know. I mean, everyone here has a personal trainer, and a traditionalist and a counselor. And in Crawford, you know, there were just three philosophies: work hard, eat what's on your plate and speak when spoken to. And everything else just worked itself out. It wasn't so complicated. And the only marked creatures were cows. There were no tattoos, there were only branding irons. And, you know, people didn't pay \$300 for clothes you could buy for a quarter at a garage sale, vintage clothing. Who had heard of vintage clothing? Those were called hand-me-downs and they were free. They were absolutely free. You know, and men went to the barber shop, and you had three options: the crew cut, the buzz cut and the trim. You know, we didn't exorbitant fees to a stylist to make our hair look messier. That just didn't happen. And, you know, these guys who wear their pants halfway down their backside. We didn't call that guy cool, we called him our mechanic. And there was no church shopping, you know. Everybody here in the metroplex, they're into church shopping. There was only three churches in Crawford, and all were equally painful to endure. And nobody expected to come to church and get an all inclusive paid vacation and resort, you know. There was no kid's zones, no playgrounds. They put Cheerios and coloring books on the pews and you made the most of it. And we didn't have worship wars. It wasn't, "Should we do contemporary? Should we do traditional?" It was whatever musician showed up that morning. If the guitarist showed up, we sang to the guitar. If the pianist showed up, we sang to the piano. And the musician got up and he asked us, "Anybody know this song?" And if only one person knew it, we called it "special music." And life was so much less complicated living in a small town.

And, you know, as I started thinking of all the perks of living there, I started reminiscing about life in a small town, and I started feeling extremely lonely. And I looked up at the Lord one day and said, "I just want a place to call home. Tell me this isn't it, Lord. Tell me this isn't it." And I started thinking to myself, "I know what I need to do. I need to read a happy verse." Do you ever get that way, where you just want to find a happy verse to read in the Bible? So, I read Jeremiah 29:11, and that's where we're going to flip right now, which you might recognize now from an assortment of coffee mugs and bookmarks. But it's a happy verse. And in Jeremiah 29:11, this is what it says, "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'" And when I read that, I just breathed out and thought, "Oh, God has a plan for me, He has a future for me, He wants to give me hope." But being the

Bible major that I am, I thought, "Maybe I should read the context surrounding this verse to get a better idea of what it is that God's trying to tell His people."

And so, let's look at verse 1 and read the context surrounding Jeremiah 29:11 "Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon." Skipping down to verse 4, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, 'Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.' For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them,' declares the LORD. For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'"

And after reading this passage, I said, "Uh oh." And I felt the Spirit of the Lord, clearly at that moment, speaking into my heart, saying, "Paul, you aren't going anywhere. I have you here in Dallas for a purpose, and that purpose is to show you the reality of what it means to be in exile." And it was at that moment, I began calling Dallas, "Babylon." And I still refer to my time here in Dallas as the Babylonian exile, because it's still a strange culture to me and I don't still don't feel like I fit in. But God has told me, just like He told the Israelites, to pray for the city, because in it's peace, I shall have peace. And I had what was a clear call from God to remain here. And it's as I've accepted my state as an exile that God has been teaching me some very important truths. And I thought He was going to tell me about how bad this city is, but in reality, He's ended up teaching me how evil my heart can be. And in the same way He had to move the Israelites to a location to show them the wickedness of their hearts, in the same way, He has moved me here to show me how idolatrous my heart can become. Isn't it amazing how we, as God's people can turn away from Him and turn our hearts back to idols. And sometimes, God has to physically move us or provide emotional unrest before we finally come home to Him. And so, God has shown me through accepting my reality is in exile, that He's also showing me the idolatry of my heart. And I believe, more than ever, that what the Old Covenant people of God, Israel, experienced as a physical reality, we as the New Covenant people of God, the church, experience as a spiritual reality, namely that we are currently living in a place that is not our home. We, as the church, do not belong on earth. We belong with Jesus in heaven. And there's a very real sense in which we experience great discomfort, because we too, once we have encountered Christ, begin living in a world that is ultimately not our destined home. And sometimes, we make the same mistake that Israel did and we forget that this earth is only a temporary arrangement. And we begin finding so much promise in the promised land, that our hearts turn away from the Lord. And sometimes, we start enjoying this world a little too much, and we forget, ultimately, that the Bible calls us as Christians, aliens and strangers and exiles.

And so, tonight, I want to talk about our spiritual reality as exiles on earth and in order to show you that the Bible indeed does call us aliens and strangers and exiles, I'd like us to open to 1 Peter 2:9-12. "But you are a chosen race, A royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are The people of God; you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain

from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation." "Visitation" meaning Christ coming again in judgment. Do you hear what he just said here. The New Testament Church, we as the people of God are aliens and strangers here. And this isn't merely some type of physical reality, it's also a spiritual reality, that is, He is telling us that ultimately this world is not our home and this happens at, very much, a soul level. And look at verse 11. He says "I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul." At a soul level, built within us, by God is the reality that ultimately we don't belong here anymore. We belong with Jesus in heaven, so we shouldn't get too comfortable with this world. Yes, God has purpose for us in it, but we are done being residents of earth, we are now citizens of Heaven.

This is made even more clear by the writer of Hebrews in chapter 11:13-16. "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them." This passage is telling us that, as people of faith, the great confession of our hearts should be, "I am an alien, a stranger and an exile, and ultimately, I am seeking a better home that is a heavenly home." But look what the Scripture says, that you can have an opportunity to return if you want to. And isn't it amazing how many of us, after we've encountered Christ, try to run right back into the life we were once living? But I'm telling you, if you are God's child, that's not gonna work. And that's not going to turn out very well for you, because God is calling us here to not merely recognize our state as aliens and strangers, but embrace our reality as aliens and strangers.

And I believe that Jeremiah 29 has very much to teach us about how we are to live as exiles. Because in the same way he spoke to the physical exiles in Jerusalem, I believe that he's speaking to us, as the New Testament Church today. And he wants to teach us three important things that he also taught the people of Israel while they were in Babylon. The first thing is, that there is nothing wrong in desiring a family, a home and a culture. And if you notice in Jeremiah 29, the very first he tells them is, "Go ahead. Build a home, plant vineyards, have a good time, enjoy the culture, get married, have kids. There's nothing wrong in desiring those things. Go ahead and plant your roots. But, this is the second important thing, God is going to go on to say, "Don't plant your roots too deeply, because this is just a temporary arrangement. This is just a temporary arrangement." And He tells them that in 70 years, He's going to revisit them, and He does not want them to make it their home; they're merely to be residents. In the same way, God is telling us, on earth as Christians, that we are to be residents here who live lives on purpose, but we should never never expect to call this earth our home. And it's interesting that He tells them in 70 years, He's going to revisit them, because the average life expectancy of a Hebrew man was 45 years of age. Due to the famine and to the pestilence and to disease and to war, the man usually lived to about 45 years of age. So guess what, if God told a 35 year old man that, in 70 years, He was going to visit them and return them to the home from which they came, guess who inherited the promises. His grandchildren and his great-grandchildren did. So this is even harder, because God's not merely saying, "Make your home there and within 10 days, I'm going to come and take it from you." He's saying, "Go ahead and establish a legacy. Go ahead and build generations. But don't let anybody in your family be deceived into thinking that this is a permanent arrangement. This is only temporary." And this can be likened to the reality that we live as Christians, and God says, "Go ahead be residents on earth, but at any moment, My Son could return and take everything and take you home with Him." Isn't that a strange paradox that we live in sometimes, where we wonder, "How much do we make this earth our residency?" versus "How much do we live for the sake of a heavenly country, a better country?" Because we know, at any moment, that Christ could come back and take us home and everything that we've labored for will be gone, except for that which we've done that will last eternally in Christ.

But, you know, the Bible goes through great lengths to show us three things that we can be sure of, to make sure that we don't start thinking that this world is a permanent arrangement. The very first thing the Scriptures are going to tell us, to help remind us that we are exiles here, is that the people that we love will ultimately either fail us or they will die. And the homes that we labor so hard to build will eventually be sold or destroyed. And the culture that we live in will eventually change and become part of the history books or it will cease altogether. And while that's not the most encouraging thing to think about, the Scriptures go to great aims, because we've got to remember that this is only a temporary arrangement. But how often do our hearts turn right back to those things and try to make idols out of them. And we forget that this is only a temporary arrangement. We look to people to fulfill us in ways that only God can. And then we start looking to our homes to provide the safety and security that only God can. And then we begin looking to our culture as a way to fit in, as a way to be cool again, as a way to feel more at home. And instead of being conscious that God has set us apart as His holy people. To be "holy" means to be set apart, to be sanctified. There's going to be something in us that no longer allows us to fit in anymore in this world. And it is God given. And the final thing we can learn from Jeremiah 29 is that our greatest need is to find our home in God and in God alone. We are, in a very sense, exiles on earth. And God uses the exile to teach his people today what He told His people in the Old Testament. First, He's going to use the exile to show us our idolatrous hearts. And He's going to remind us that, sometimes, He has to physically move us or provide emotional unrest to get us to come home to Him. Have any of you ever had a sudden change in circumstances or a loss of a job or something earth-shattering that has caused you to realize how many earthly attachments you still have? And it's not uncommon for God to use our circumstances and make us feel like exiles to show us how much we still love this world, as opposed to Him. And He's also going to show us that we cannot forget about Him. You know, home is where the heart is and our hearts belong to Him. But so many of us are trying to run back to the countries from which we came, and guess what, we can't go back there. We're not the same. We now belong to the Lord. And the Lord has told us in His Word that He is going to put three heart realities within us to prevent us from mistaking that this world is our home. He's going to give us three innate longings, three innate desires to make sure we don't start believing the lie that this world is ultimately our home.

And I'm going to spend the rest of our time discussing these three realities. Let me tell you, in brief, what they are and then expand on them. The first reality is that we will always experience a longing for unhindered intimacy. We will always, as long as we're living on earth, experience a longing for unhindered intimacy. Secondly, we are always going to experience a groaning for our redemption. And finally, if we are serious about our walk with the Lord, it says that "indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," (2 Timothy 3:12) and we will always face the type of suffering that comes from being an exile. And so, we will always face a form of suffering that comes from being an exile.

And if you remember a couple of weeks ago, and even last week, I mentioned a loneliness chart to you. Do you remember this chart? And behind me is the chart. And if you remember, I talked about that there were three different forms of loneliness. And the second form of loneliness is the loneliness that comes upon us through our circumstances, that is it comes from the reality that we live in sinful and fallen world. Have any of you ever fasted and had that terrible hunger pain, like five minutes into your fast? It reminded you that, "Yeah, you should go ahead and eat something." In the same way, we as Christians, will always face this innate desire, this hunger. But sometimes, we mistake that for loneliness and we try to run to the world to numb it and we don't realize that that innate desire is really a hunger for God. And so, I talked about how there's a loneliness that comes upon us through our circumstances through living in a sinful and fallen world. And whenever we have that hunger, we're to view that type of loneliness as a form of fasting. That is, we use that hunger, not as a time to deaden our pain, but to deepen our desire for God. And we are to live our lives in such a way as to redeem the time. And we're not to run back to earthly things, but we're to live our lives on purpose and just recognize that loneliness is going to come whenever you live a place that, ultimately, you don't belong.

But that's compounded by the fact that we also experience loneliness as being Christ's disciples, through our courage and obedience. You know, we're never going to fit in again. Our days of being cool are over. And sometimes, we get bothered by this and we run right back into sin instead of recognizing that God has called us to be lights. But He's called us to be lights in a world that loves the darkness and hates the light. And there are going to be moments in our courage and obedience that we become very lonely. But that's why God has given us the body of Christ. And He has also told us to rejoice, because He has a better plan for us than what this world has to offer. And so my hope is that I'll be able to expand a little bit more upon these ideas as we discuss these three heart realities.

So let's start with the first heart reality, that we will always have a longing for unhindered intimacy with God and others. And let's turn to Philippians 3:12-21, another famous passage that makes its way into Family Christian quite often.

"Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained. Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself"

And Paul, in this passage, is telling us something that we must recognize: that he is always pressing onward towards perfect intimacy with God, but he recognizes that he's never going to be able to obtain it as long as he's on earth. And he's going to encourage us though and say, "You have to remember that your citizenship is in heaven, and you might not be able to walk in perfect intimacy with God on earth. But that no longer serves as an excuse to return to earthly things. Keep pressing onto Jesus. When you're caught in that form of loneliness that comes upon you from that reality that you will never have perfect intimacy on earth, keep pressing on toward the upwards call of Jesus. Don't go back to those earthly things, because if you return to the earthly things, it's going to end in your destruction. Keep pressing on towards Jesus." And he's going to remind us that we can never have complete, perfect fellowship until we recognize our Savior returning for us, coming back for us and transforming our bodies. But sometimes we forget, don't we, that we will not experience perfect intimacy. We forget 1 Corinthians 13:12 that says, "now we see in a mirror dimly," and we will not know fully until we are fully known, which is at Christ's return. But sometimes, we forget that since we cannot have perfect with God on earth as long as we live in these bodies, we then forget that we can't have perfect intimacy with other people. And what happens, in that moment, is we start rationalizing to ourselves, "Well if I can't have perfect fellowship with God, then I'll just go and have perfect fellowship with people, and I'll try to make them give me what God can't give me." You know, sometimes, we rationalize to ourselves, "Well, if God won't give me the love and intimacy I desire, then I'll look for it through the relationships from the people I love." And some of us think that's healthy, but the bible calls that "idolatry."

And we look to people to start filling us in ways that people cannot fill us. And we start looking to people to be God for us, but if you remember a couple of weeks ago, I talked about an intimacy chart. And in that intimacy chart, I talked about how we all desire intimacy with one another, but I also talked about the reality of conflict in our relationships as long as we live on this earth. Because when two sinful people try to become one, this doesn't happen perfectly. Right? It usually looks more like this. And we usually enter into conflict, and I talked about how conflict is a natural part of our

relationships, as long as we are sinful people living on a sinful planet. But then, I also talked about sometimes we have unrealistic expectations, and that can lead us into withdrawal. Because we start putting expectations on people that they simply cannot provide. And can I say the number one reality of what we do, as people, is we start expecting people to be God for us and they can't do it. The most unrealistic expectation we have of people is that they can fill us and complete us in ways that God can't. And that is called "idolatry."

Ed Welch, in his book, "When God Is Big and People Are Small," writes, "This is not to say that taking delight in being loved was the original sin. Certainly not. Since we were forged by the Lover, we should delight in loving and in being loved. It would be inhuman to not delight in being loved. It would also be inhuman if we didn't hurt deeply when rejected or sinned against by others. The problem is not that we desire love; the problem is how much we desire it and for what purpose we desire it. Do we desire it so much that it overshadows our desire to be imitators of God? Do we desire it for our own pleasure or for God?" You know, the question then for us is, "How do we view others?"

But we have a theological problem in the church today, because many of us assume that when God came to Adam in the Garden of Eden and said, "It is not good for man to be alone," that in that statement, God was saying that people could fill us in ways that He couldn't. And sometimes we say that God responded to Adam's need that Adam was lonely, but did you know that nowhere in Genesis 2 or 3 Adam doesn't ever say that he is lonely? No, it was God who approached Adam in the Garden of Eden and said, "It is not good for man to be alone." But we often think about that statement in terms of what it means about people, and we don't think about what that statement means about God. And many of us take a man-centered view of what's happening in the Garden of Eden, and we start believing that God was saying, "Adam, you have a need, you're lonely, so I'm going to provide Eve to fill that. I know you have perfect fellowship with Me, I know you have perfect intimacy in the garden, but there's something in you that I can't fill." And that's a theological error, because we start thinking about what it means about man and not what it means about God. God approached Adam in the Garden of Eden and said, "It is not good for man to be alone," not because Adam was lonely, but because He was making a statement about Himself. He was saying, "It is not good for man to be alone, because a man cannot glorify Me by himself." God cannot be glorified by just one person; He needs an entire race of people to glorify Him. Do you recognize that the Scriptures tell us that God is glorified in diversity? 1 Corinthians 12 is going to talk about the body of Christ. God, throughout history, has been glorified by a body of people and the image of God is not just something that one person carries alone, but together, as the body, we carry the image of Christ. And we should not view other people as those who can complete us emotionally, but we should look to people as those who compliment us as we seek to image and glorify God. And so, God has not given us other people to complete; He has given us them to compliment us as we endeavor to bring Him glory. And this is what Ed Welch writes, "There is, however, a real sense in which we need other people. The fact that God created Adam and Eve indicated that the image of God in man could not be complete in any one non-divine person. Imaging God could not be done alone. It is done in partnership. His glory is too immense to be reflected in any one creature. The image of God is corporate and that we all share in it. In a very practical sense, God's command to reproduce is a way to bring Him glory is simply impossible for an individual. Therefore, God created male and female as His image bearers." The commands to reproduce and subdue the earth are the forerunners of the New Testament's great commission, the command to preach Christ to the nations. Here again we cannot be carried out by any one person. We need each other...for missionary work, we need farmers, truck drivers, engineers, builders, store owners, missionaries, mothers, fathers, pastors, Sunday school teachers and janitors. The panoply of gifts is essential if the church is to function as God intended. Image bearers are not lone rangers, and we see the great scriptural truth that God has not given us people to complete us, but to complement us as we seek to glorify Him in community.

But we will, always as long as we are on earth, experience a longing for unhindered intimacy that we will not realize fully until we are in heaven. And we cannot make idols out of people. And this book, I'm going to recommend to you, is

going to talk very beautifully about this idea and if you want to think more about this topic, I would recommend the book, "When People are Big and God is Small" by Ed Welch. And he's going to talk about our codependency as human beings and how often we live under the fear of man and we look to people to provide things that only God can. So I'd really recommend reading this book, "When People are Big and God is Small" by Ed Welch and we also use it in our Celebrate Recovery program, and I recommend that book to you. But not only do we experience a longing for unhindered intimacy with God and others, we will also experience a groaning for our redemption. Where do I get that? Romans 8:22-25, "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it." You know, in leaving us on earth, God never intended us to replace heaven with earth, but so many of us spend so much of our time trying to make this world our home. But I love this quote from C.S. Lewis in "The Problem With Pain," "The Christian doctrine of suffering explains, I believe, a very curious fact about the world we live in. The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world; but joy, pleasure and merriment he has broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun and some ecstasy.

It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God; a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bath or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home." We cannot mistake that this world is not our home, but, some of us, we experience this groaning within ourselves. Have you ever experienced that groaning, that hurting sensation that you don't belong here? And Scripture's going to say that that's going to stick with us no matter what we do to try to numb that. And so many of us try to run from that reality and we don't embrace that reality that God says that we are suffering the pains of childbirth. I'm not even going to "guessture" about what that might be like, but I'm telling you, it must be painful. In the same way, God is saying that this groaning that we're experiencing as believers awaiting our redemption, we share in it with the Holy Spirit, who's telling us that this world is not our home. But we don't like that sensation, so sometimes we return to earthly things to try to deaden it. You know, two things usually happen to us. The first thing is we start being really unappreciative for what we have currently. And then the next thing that happens is we start thinking about how great things things used to be or how great things can be.

Now, I've learned something about looking back on my life in Crawford: the grass is always greener on the other side of the septic tank. And life in Crawford was not as great as I made it out to be, but in my moments of feeling lonely, I start thinking about how wonderful life was and how I just want to go home there how easy it was there. But as I look back on life there, there was so much gossiping, there was so much backbiting in small-town living, there was little desire for God in many of the churches, there was little opportunity for advancement, there was little opportunity for change. It was not that grand. But isn't it always amazing how we think back to th "good old days" and we become unappreciative of where we're at because we're still trying to find our home on earth. But then we also do the opposite thing where we start thinking how great things could be. And we start thinking about, "Well, maybe if I just bought a new home...maybe if I moved to a nicer neighborhood...maybe if we just upscaled our house...maybe if we got a better job in a bigger city, finally this world would feel like home. But nothing we can do can hide the groaning, because we belong with Jesus in heaven. And no matter how hard we try to make this world our home, there is nothing we can do because we don't here, we belong with Jesus. But we try to numb that instead of praising God for His provision and viewing our earthly homes with purpose.

And some of you may be thinking, "How then should we view our homes?" Well, in 2 Corinthians 5, it calls us ambassadors for Christ. Do you know what an ambassador is? It's someone who lives in another country but represents

the country from which they came. And so, if we are ambassadors for Christ, then our homes should be embassies. And you know what an embassy is? It's a building that represents another country within a country different from itself. So when people walk into our homes, they should lean over and ask us, "You're not from here, are you?" "No, I'm not. I'm an ambassador. I live in an embassy, but I represent a heavenly country, whose king is Jesus. Do you want to live there too?" But so often do we lose sight of our homes and we try to look to them for safety and protection as opposed to viewing them as an embassy as we seek to be ambassadors for Christ.

But as we seek to be ambassadors for Christ, we will also experience a suffering that comes from being in exile. And this, the last reality that we face, is a suffering that comes from being in exile on earth. And, in calling us to reach out, God never intended us to lose sight of our reality as aliens and strangers and exiles on this earth. But do you want to know what the sell, the millions of copies "The Purpose Driven Life" sold tell me? Somewhere along the way, the American church has lost sight that God has saved us with purpose. And somewhere along the way, someone asked a really good question. They said, "If God has destined us for heaven but has left us on earth, then what are we doing here?" Great question, but the problem is that we didn't start turning to God's word to seek answers, we started rationalizing to ourselves. And somewhere along the way, someone come up with a great idea and he gets on television and he starts preaching to all of America saying, "I know why God has left you here. He wants you to experience the best of heaven and the best of earth. And not only are you going to get a mansion in heaven, you can also get a nice mansion on Elm Street and you can get a Cadillac to boot. And God has left you here on earth so that you can have a good time, you can hang out, you can fit in and you will eventually live on streets of gold with Jesus, but you can also get the opportunity to live the high life here on earth." And what a terrible lie that is.

Larry Crabb in "Shattered Dreams" writes, "The problem that sincere Christians have with God often comes down to a wrong understanding of what this life is meant to provide. We naturally and wrongly assume that we're here to experience something that God has never promised. More than perhaps ever before in history, we assume we are here for one fundamental reason: to have a good time. If not good circumstance, then at least good feelings. Sometimes, all that separates Christians from non-Christians is our understanding of how to produce those good feelings. The pursuit of sole pleasure remains the primary. It continues to be the aim behind our choices rather than an occasional and welcome by-product of a higher aim. The aim of glorifying God is the object of our deepest, most passionate desire. We continue to want something or want someone more than God. We don't think that's our biggest problem, but it is."

You know, sometimes we get so frustrated, as Christian, because we want so much to fit in again, and we try, as the church, to make Jesus cool. And we think our greatest job as Christians is to show how cool Christians are, and we're shocked when people don't accept us. And we're shocked whenever everyone does all they can in the public forum to keep Christianity out. But God has promised us that there's going to continue to be something in us, something about us that makes us different, that won't allow us to be cool and fit in again. Our days of "cool" are over. In 1 Peter 4:12-16, He's going to write this, which is a very important passage in understanding what it's going to be like to live on earth as exiles and strangers, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you;..." Newsflash! That's what He's saying here "(paraphrase) Don't be surprised when people hate you, when people despise you, when people don't think you're cool anymore." In my case they never did, but even if I wanted them too, my days are over. "...but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name." Do you understand that the Spirit of glory rests on you? As believers, the Spirit of glory rests on you, and to some, it's going to be the aroma of life, but to others, it's going to be the aroma of death. And our days of fitting into this world are over.

But then we must ask ourselves, "Then how are we to view culture?" Well, I'm here to tell you that there's nothing wrong with culture. Cultures exist though, not merely for us to have a good time, but as a great means to communicate the Gospel. God intends to use our cultures as a means to communicate the Gospel, but let me make this statement that I believe is very scripturally true. God tells us to be culturally relevant for the sake of the Gospel, but to never expect to be culturally accepted because of the Gospel. Jesus turns to His disciples and says, "If the world hated Me, it's going to hate you. And a servant is no better than his master." And He tells them, "The world is going to despise you. The world is going to hate you. The days of fitting in are over, but take heart. You're going to be different, but one day I'm going to come back for you." And in John 16:20-24, Jesus says something beautiful. He says, "On that day I come back to you, you won't ask Me anything. And all this suffering that you're going through, this feeling that you don't belong, all this feeling like you no longer have a home, it's all going to go away and you're not going to ask Me anything." Instead, He challenges us to live our lives on purpose for the sake of the Gospel and to take heart and to join in with the work that the Holy Spirit's doing. But at no part does He ever expect us to mistake this world for home.

And in closing today, I've said that loneliness can once again be seen with great purpose, because it reveals to us what God has already stated in His word. And we as Christians call "loneliness" what God calls something else. And sometimes we call "loneliness" what God's word is going to call a longing for unhindered intimacy with Him and others. And we start thinking that other people can provide us what only God can provide. And it amazes me how often I call "loneliness" what is actually a groaning for redemption. And instead of trying to numb that, instead, I should embrace that and try to realize that it's God's good gift to me to remind me that this world is not my home. And ultimately, we will face a type of loneliness that God's word is going to call a form of suffering for being an exile and a stranger. And there's nothing we can do to get rid of that, because we are God's child, His Spirit rests upon us. But I want to encourage us with this great hope from a quote from Larry Crabbe, "We will not suffer in heaven. Pain will have no purpose then, so it will not be allowed. Our appetites will be straightened out. We will not desire the good above the best. For now, while we still have the hard time realizing that what's good is not always best, suffering still has a function. As nothing else can, it moves us away from demanding what's good towards desiring what's better until heaven provides what's best."

And the question for us tonight, and the question for us in this series called "Only the Lonely" is "Are we going to continue to try to run back to earthly things and keep trying to make this world our home or are we going to embrace our new redeemed nature as exiles and strangers? Are we going to embrace that form of suffering that comes from being Christ's disciple? Are we going to view it as our cross to bear? Are we going to continue to try to return to those countries from which we came?" And at the end of the day, God's going to do everything within His power to make sure His people remember that in Him and Him alone, do we finally feel at home. So, are you going to come home? Because God's waiting for you there. And you will feel no more at home than in God's presence.

Let us pray, "Father, thank You for Your word. And Father, it's not always a happy, comforting message to us to realize that loneliness is part of the life we will live here on earth. Because, Father, You have given us three realities that keep us from running right back into the life in which we were living. And Father, what we often call "loneliness," Your word is so clear, is really a longing for intimacy that we will only experience in heaven. And Father, I pray that You would give us the grace to keep pressing on towards the upward call of Christ Jesus and that we would not turn back to earthly things, in which leads to destruction. And Father, I know that Your word, what we call "loneliness," Your word actually says is a groaning for our redemption. And Father, I pray that we would not run from that groaning and seek to deaden it, but we would understand that You're calling us Your children and that You desire for us to at home with You. And You remind us just to hold on a little bit longer and to live our lives with purpose. And Father, I pray that we would also come to embrace that suffering that comes from being an exile. And Father, that's not an easy thing to do, but I pray, Lord, that You would help us to see that in You and You alone do we finally find our home. So Father, I pray you would take our hearts home with You tonight. And we ask all of this in Jesus' name. Amen."