

Dealing with Loneliness in a Time of Social Distancing (Growing in Isolation Week 3)

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[0 : 0 0] Hey guys, I'm Brian, one of the pastors at One Harbor, and this is week three of Growing in Isolation. So we're now about a month into the widespread practice of social distancing, and some of the real painful aspects of this have begun to set in. About a month ago, when this first started, my wife and I had a conversation where we really just lamented the fact that in some ways Americans are uniquely unprepared to handle this moment well, because we tend to be so individualistic. We have a go-it-alone attitude, we tend to prize individual liberty over community responsibility. But the result of that is that even before the coronavirus, we were experiencing a very lonely generation. In fact, this week I typed epidemic of into my Google search bar, and the first recommended fill-in was epidemic of 1918, but the very second recommended sort of fill-in was epidemic of loneliness. We are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. In one study, half of Americans reported feeling lonely or left out.

Half. And this isn't just an American thing, it's throughout the Western developed world. 41% of Britons in one study said that their television was their main source of company.

And that was before we started social distancing. This situation has made me think in some ways of the wisdom from the book of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes chapter 4, the writer says, two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him and a threefold cord is not quickly broken. You know, as hard as this moment we're all in is, there can be positives that come from it if through this adversity we're taught some lessons that we wouldn't otherwise learn. Verses like this, previously we may have just read quickly and moved past, but all of a sudden they feel incredibly relevant. So there is a sense that in this moment, it's a moment that uniquely prepares us to learn some lessons about the importance of relationships. Let's not waste what a moment like this can teach us. First of all, I think this moment can help us acknowledge our dependence on others. Ecclesiastes says two is better than one because there's a reward for their toil. In other words, all of our work and labors and what we do in the world, so much of it is impossible by yourself. You need other people. This whole event has made me freshly remember how dependent we are on so many people that we take for granted in a million different ways. We're dependent on grocery store workers, on the stores having stocked shelves, which means that we're also dependent on truck drivers who are delivering that food to the stores, which means that we're also dependent on people maintaining the roads that the trucks drive on. And of course, we're dependent on the farmers that are growing the food, and they're dependent on hundreds of other workers. And sometimes these are jobs that we're tempted to think of as menial or unimportant, and yet now during this pandemic, we're realizing that these are essential personnel. None of us is an island, and we are always dependent on each other, but this moment really helps us have eyes to see it.

And of course, our dependence goes beyond just how other people help provide for our material needs. We're also dependent on the emotional support and friendship that other people bring. And acknowledging this in this crisis means that this moment can also increase our gratitude for others.

Ecclesiastes says, Woe to him who is alone when he falls and doesn't have someone to pick him up. For some of us, that might be a lesson that you've had to learn the hard way. If this moment has left you feeling alone, let that compel you to increase your gratitude for the relationships that you do have, and to purpose to look at those relationships differently on the other side of this, to maybe approach those relationships with more intentionality.

[4 : 0 0] But what should we actually be doing now, especially if we're already feeling isolated? Thankfully, the Church of Jesus Christ has incredible resources to deal with loneliness in a moment like this, because being a part of a family is at the center of what it means to be a Christian.

This is what Jesus said in Mark chapter 10. Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life. So Jesus said if you follow him, you don't only gain eternal life someday, you also gain family a hundredfold right now. But what does it look like to experience that?

How do we grab a hold of that promise from Jesus during a time when we can't gather in church on Sundays? We can't even gather in our community groups? We can't go to lunch or coffee with friends?

We can't even have play dates with our kids? Let me give you a few practical handles. First of all, I'd say take advantage of the tools that we have. This is not revolutionary advice, but we are blessed to live in a time when we can connect in real ways with many online tools such as Zoom and FaceTime and Google Hangout. And many community groups have initiated these connections and I encourage you, if you are tempted to pass on that because you've never done it before or you're not comfortable with it, don't do it. Stretch yourself. This is a moment that might require us to step out of our comfort zones to create and maintain community in ways that we haven't ever done before. And there are also phone calls, of course. I'm finding that people really want to talk right now and we really need people to talk to you right now. So sure, maybe send a text, but maybe push yourself to actually call someone every day. You know, our pastors are all working really hard to make a lot of phone calls, but I think it's really important that other members of the church are calling one another too, not just for the pastors to call everybody. I love Ecclesiastes' advice about the threefold cord, right? This is a great time to develop not just that one-on-one relationship, maybe with a pastor and somebody else, but that threefold cord of the body, building relationships with one another.

For some of you, that's already normal. Maybe you call multiple people a day just to check in, but for some of you, that's totally counterintuitive. And it would be very easy for you to say something like, you know, I'm just going to wait till this whole thing blows over. And then on the other side of this, I'll jump back into community. I'll jump back into church instead of diving in with one of these new ways to connect. But I encourage you not to do that because this might be a very long season when we cannot gather physically. And Ecclesiastes says, woe to him who is alone when he falls and doesn't have another to lift him up. So things might be fine in your life right now, but a month from now, the crap might hit the fan in your life and you'll find out that you will have spent the previous two months isolating yourself instead of engaging with other people. And woe to you if you're alone when you fall. Not only that, but I want to encourage you that there are probably some great opportunities for connection right under your own roof. So press into family relationships in this time. For those of us who live with family members, spouses, children, seize every moment. Invest in this time. This can be a time when your marriage turns a corner into health. So ask yourself in this time, how can I serve my spouse through this season in such a way that our marriage is actually better on the other side of this?

[7 : 24] And with your children, I know some of us are feeling really overwhelmed. Some people are having to homeschool all of a sudden. But again, see this as an opportunity to invest in your children like never before. Take time to ask them questions, to pray with them, to read them Bible stories.

It's very possible to redeem this moment for your family and make it a special memory that your children will look back on at the time when you all grew closer than ever before. But as you do that, I want to encourage you to be mindful of those who don't have that and to extend family relationships to single people. Jesus's promise was that in the church, even those without family would gain family.

And if we are the church, how can we make that promise true to the singles in our church who are quarantined at home without their families? We have to be intentional with each other. Certainly, I encourage you to be safe. You know, families should not be having a bunch of singles over for game nights during this time. But maybe families could consider adopting one single person from their community group into their family for this season. Maybe making that one single person the exception to the rule so that they could join you around your family table whenever they want.

At the very least, I encourage you to go out of your way to call those who don't have other people and to encourage them and to check in on them. When we jump in on a Zoom call with our community group, I want to encourage you. You know, maybe there's moments where you don't really feel like doing it, but you're not just getting on there for yourself. You're jumping on there for the sake of other people who need to connect with you. Think about them. And finally, I want to encourage those of you who are experiencing some loneliness, but you haven't reached out to ask for help. You know, sometimes we don't reach out because we don't want to seem needy. We don't want to be a bother.

We don't want to burden other people with our problems. But this season requires us to reach out knowing that you are not a burden. It's not being a burden to reach out. It's being obedient to Jesus. Some of you need to get over your spiritual pride and admitting you can't do this alone. You need to reach out to others. So maybe set a reminder in your phone every day to text a friend from your community group just to check in. You know, that voice that's telling you that you don't need to burden anyone, that's not the voice of the Holy Spirit. And that's not your conscience. That's the enemy who loves to divide us and separate us so that he can pick us off in isolation.

[9 : 41] When we fall, because we are family, we can lift each other up. But woe to that person who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. But because of Jesus, none of us needs to be that person because we are not alone. At the end, there'll be some questions that will remain on the screen.

I encourage you to think about these things and discuss them with your community. We'll see you guys next time. Bye.