

Session 3

LONELINESS

Psalm 23:5-6

Memory Verse

*⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*⁶ Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.*

– PSALM 23:5-6, CSB



Loneliness

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God’s presence and care abide when nothing else does.

In a May 3, 2019 article on forbes.com (“Millennials and the Loneliness Epidemic”), demographer and researcher Neil Howe presented the results of recent studies surrounding Millennials and loneliness. As a result of a rapidly increasing trend over the last several decades toward single-person households, the escalating fear of loneliness among young professionals has skyrocketed into the top 4 fears. It ranks ahead of losing a job or home. What is more surprising are the recent medical studies that have linked physical consequences to long-term loneliness. In summarizing his findings, Howe remarks:

So far, much of the alarm surrounding loneliness has been met with efforts by public officials to help older residents build social connections. But policy interventions are hardly sufficient to stop or even slow the momentum of a social trend which has been gathering steam worldwide for decades. And when we can’t easily slow something, we had better brace for the consequences. In this case, the consequences include rising rates of chronic physical and emotional illness triggered by loneliness and social isolation (including the so-called “deaths of despair” highlighted by Nobel laureate Angus Deaton) as well as a further drift in politics toward communitarian agendas.¹

While Howe’s prognosis is fairly bleak, there is tremendous hope to be found in the way that God desires to have relationship with His people. Further hope shines forth in the knowledge that God’s church has the opportunity to not only participate in biblical community, but invite others in as well. God wired humanity to crave community, as Howe’s article verifies repeatedly. The church can be the redemptive environment that helps meet that deep desire.

? When you think about your normal weekly routine, at what points do you feel the most disconnected and/or lonely?

? Think of a time when you felt completely out of place. How did you deal with those feelings? What feelings do you have even now when you remember that experience?

Session Summary

In this week's session, David closed Psalm 23 by proclaiming the abundant blessing of God's presence. In doing so, David pointed out that the experience of God's presence is not limited to times of blessing and abundance. Instead, even in the presence of his enemies and in his darkest times, God was always with him – giving him hope and a home.

1. God's Abiding Presence, Even in Danger (Psalm 23:5a)

There is a notable shift in Psalm 23 between verses 4 and 5. Mainly, the metaphorical location that provided the backdrop for David's proclamation of God's presence changed. Where in verses 1-4, the location was the pasture, verse 5 moves to the banquet hall. According to Allen Ross, "The image of the LORD changes from shepherd to host. Here David reflects on the provisions of a host to his honored guest. . . . The LORD provides for His guests the way a banquet host would provide."² The description of the table with regard to the ceremonial process of throwing a banquet was in stark contrast to the setting David found himself in.

Many cultures have passed elaborate dining rituals and ceremonies down through the centuries, and the Israelite culture would have had similar customs. Therefore, the act of preparing a table for someone indicated more than merely meeting the basic need for

sustenance and nutrition. Rather, it involved careful planning, ceremonial dishes and utensils, an etiquette by which the meal was to be enjoyed, and celebration of relationship among those attending the banquet. Tremper Longman notes, “Eating with someone implies entering into an intimate relationship with them.”³

In the grander context of Psalm 23, Ross notes, “The verse probably refers to the provision of actual food, for the LORD provides all good gifts (and the feeding in verse 1 referred to teaching spiritual things). It would still be considered a spiritual provision here, especially if it were a thanksgiving feast eaten in the sanctuary, the house where the LORD welcomed His guests.”⁴

? What does the Lord’s preparation of a table for David indicate about His relationship with David? How does that compare with your own relationship with the Lord? Why do you think so?

? Application: How does it make you feel to know that when David felt the pressure of enemies creeping in and isolation from allies, the Lord was not startled, rushed, or in any way out of control? How does that help you process the things that make you feel anxious or isolated? What do you need to do based on this revelation?

As if the preparing of the table were not enough, the circumstances under which David said the Lord prepared a table for him were remarkable. The table the Lord set for David was in the midst of his enemies. This lavish, peaceful, celebrative meal of intimate fellowship was to take place while all of the attention of David’s attackers was on him.

Additionally, the providing of the banquet in the sight of his enemies would have made perfectly clear whose side God was on, or—in keeping with Joshua 5:13ff—

who was correctly aligned with God. Such confirmation of God's favor and divine leadership were frequent in the Old Testament. When Israel crossed into the promised land under Joshua's leadership, the indigenous peoples had already heard of the might of the God of Israel on their behalf and trembled. When Nehemiah led the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem to a miraculous completion in only 52 days, the oppressive enemies of the exiles were hushed by the physical evidence that the Lord was with them actively.

2. God's Presence Soothes and Heals (Psalm 23:5b)

As part of the preparation for the banquet that God had prepared for David, in keeping with the banquet metaphor, the host would have been responsible for helping his honored guest freshen himself for the banquet meal. Ross notes, "It was the duty and delight of the gracious host to give the guest scented, perfumed oil to freshen up (especially after being in the sun and sand; modern skin lotions may be similarly refreshing)."⁵ This act of generous hospitality would have blessed both the honored guest and all of the other guests at the banquet by providing an aromatically pleasing atmosphere indicative of a festive occasion. However, there was the additional quasi-medicinal value of the anointing with oil. The ceremony would have soothed parched skin, provided an antiseptic property to any wounds that might exist and generally moved the honored guest toward health and comfort.

The banquet etiquette of anointing with oil lay behind Mary's act of anointing Jesus with the costly perfume. In the moment in which the murmurs regarding Mary's reputation and the inappropriate nature of her presence at the dinner, Jesus rebuked the host for not offering Him any oil to anoint His head (Luke 7:46). David, then, was clearly saying that, in light of the lavish hospitality and care God had extended to him, God was his only true source of joy.

? Part of David being able to say that God was his only source of joy was the experiences he had already had with God. What has God done in your life that has caused you to celebrate? Why do you think it is important to remember those moments in times when you feel isolated or alone?



Application: How do you think being connected to a biblical community helps address feelings of loneliness? What potential hurdles would you seek to encounter? What should your next step be?

In considering the abundance with which God had blessed him, David exclaimed, “my cup overflows.” The Lord filling David’s life with good things must be held in context with David’s journey with God. While it would be easy to make a list of David’s victories under God’s anointing (defeating Goliath, anointed as king of Israel as a boy, becoming the gold standard for Israel’s kings, wildly victorious in battle, etc.), it would be equally easy to compose a list of trials, difficulties and brokenness that left David feeling isolated and alone. He was hunted by King Saul (in spite of his loyalty) for years. He was forced to live among his greatest enemies and pretend he was insane. He lived in caves. His kingship was challenged mightily. His own sins brought consequences on his family that broke his heart repeatedly. The point being that even in seasons of absolute hardship, persecution, and abandonment, David could remember the goodness of God toward him and the favor he enjoyed.

3. Life Lived in God’s Constant Presence (Psalm 23:6)

Taken out of context, the beginning of verse 6 would seem so unrealistic and detached from what the Bible tells of David’s life that it would lead one to believe David was speaking hyperbolically. However, David was speaking of God’s essential characteristics in a personified way. David was not saying that nothing bad would ever happen to him or that he would never feel sad or depressed. Rather, David was relying on the perpetual presence of God with him to sustain him going forward. Precisely because God’s presence would never leave, His characteristics would always be with David. Longman offers a powerful image, “If the shepherd metaphor does extend into the second stanza, then goodness and love act like the shepherd’s sheepdogs, helping the shepherd to keep the sheep going in the right direction.”⁶

God’s love and mercy, then, would follow David, guiding him when needed, bringing him to repentance when needed, and doing so because God had chosen David to be His vessel. His presence would remain when allies were absent. His presence would remain when enemies crouched by his door. God’s love and mercy would pursue David.

❓ Why do you think it is important to properly understand David saying, “Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me”? What possible danger or harm could come about with an incorrect understanding? How would a Christian explain their difficult seasons?

❓ Application: When you experience a growing sense of loneliness, how have you noticed it impacting your relationship with God? Family? What have been your benchmarks of your closest moments with God so far?

Dwelling in the house of the Lord was a metaphorical way of David continuing to live his life constantly in God’s presence. The house of the Lord would obviously be the temple or, in David’s time, the tabernacle. No one was permitted to live there, so David speaking of it being his dwelling place could not have been a literal thought. However, because God had chosen to allow the temple or tabernacle to be the location where He would meet with His people, it was the ideal symbol for God’s faithful and powerful presence. David’s understanding of dwelling in the house of the Lord was not based on any sense that he deserved such an honor. Rather, David was very much aware, as seen in Psalm 23, of God’s favor and kindness toward him. He knew God was faithful and unchanging. His ability to dwell in the house of the Lord, then, was due to God’s faithfulness to His promises.

For Christians, the dwelling in the house of the Lord forever holds deeper significance. Instead of having in mind the temple, the focus of the Christian’s mind must reside on the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21, in which God will dwell with His people. In eternity, certainly God’s people will forever dwell with Him and in His magnificent presence without interruption.

Conclusion

Loneliness is a growing threat for many reasons. Thankfull the Bible is not absent on this subject. Here are some points to consider. from Psalm 23.

First, the fundamental nature of what it means to be a Christian is based on the fact that our extremely personal God desires to have a personal and increasingly intimate relationship with us. When David spoke of God preparing a table for him in the presence of his enemies, that promise was predicated on both God protecting David from his enemies and David having the freedom to enjoy the divine banquet. God is for His people. He is not some passive force or idea that merely created everything, set it in motion, and passively watches as it plays out. Quite the opposite! He desired relationship with us so much that He came down here to be like us so that He experienced every hurt, temptation, and frailty that we do. God wants to have a relationship with you!

Second, the presence of isolation or loneliness does not mean that God has forgotten you. In fact, it was in the presence of David's enemies that God prepared the banquet at which David was the guest of honor. There was no mention of where David's friends were. In fact, if someone were to read through Psalms completely, he or she would notice that there are numerous psalms in which David lamented of his own loneliness due to desertion or abandonment. Even still, God was always there.

Third, the beautiful thing about the body of Christ is that we do not have to be lonely. The whole reason group life exists in churches is to help one another grow in Christ in relationship with one another (i.e., not lonely). Granted, those transparent, deeper relationships that are frequently longed for take time to develop. All the more reason to get started now and participate.

Fourth, experiencing the type of relationship and intimacy with God that wards off loneliness requires consistent time and priority invested in building that relationship. Learning to discern God's voice through reading His word and prayer, being in spiritual conversations with other believers that may have been walking with Christ longer, and regular participation in personal and corporate worship are pivotal ingredients to a deepening relationship with God.

❓ What changes can you identify in the last five years that have made our culture more sterile and less relational? How have those changes impacted you specifically?

❓ Whose life are you learning from the most right now with regard to what it looks like to follow Jesus? Are you learning through direct conversation or by watching from a distance? How can that mentoring relationship help fight against loneliness? (for more on mentor relationships, see Brentwoodbaptist.com/adults)

❓ Who do you know that would benefit most from a word kindly spoken or an investment in their life personally? How would doing so push back the growing threat of loneliness?

CHRIST CONNECTION: When Jesus identified Himself as the Good Shepherd, Psalm 23 took on new meaning for believers. He provided His unending presence with believers through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Loneliness is boldly confronted by the perpetual presence of God in the disciple's life. As culture becomes increasingly isolated, believers carry the hope of divine community.



FOR NEXT WEEK

Creation

Main Passages

- John 1:10-13, Psalm 33:6-9

Session Outline

1. The Glory of God in Creation (John 1:10b; Psalm 33:6-9; Genesis 1)
2. The Wonder of God as Trinity (John 1:10b; John 1:1-3)
3. The Mystery of God Incarnate (John 1:10a, 11a, 14a)

Memorize

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶ Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.

- Psalm 23:5-6, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Isaiah 41:10
- Tuesday - Psalm 27:10
- Wednesday - 2 Timothy 4:16-18
- Thursday - Romans 8:35-39
- Friday - Deuteronomy 31:8
- Saturday - John 14:18

References

- ¹ Howe, Neil. "Millenials and the Loneliness Epidemic." <https://www.forbes.com/sites/neilhowe/2019/05/03/millennials-and-the-loneliness-epidemic/#137087727676>, accessed November 11, 2019.
- ² Ross, Allen P. A Commentary on the Psalms, vol. 1 (1-41). Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2011.
- ³ Longman, Tremper III. Psalms. TOTC, vol. 15-16. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014.
- ⁴ Ross.
- ⁵ Ross.
- ⁶ Longman