

Harris Creek Baptist Church
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Series: Ecclesiastes
October 17, 2021

Better Together and Awful Alone
Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

**I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter.**

**² And I declared that the dead,
who had already died,
are happier than the living,
who are still alive.**

**³ But better than both
is the one who has never been born,
who has not seen the evil
that is done under the sun.**

**⁴ And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of
another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.**

**⁵ Fools fold their hands
and ruin themselves.**

**⁶ Better one handful with tranquility
than two handfuls with toil
and chasing after the wind.**

⁷ Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

**⁸ There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.
“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,
“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”
This too is meaningless—
a miserable business!**

**⁹ Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:**

¹⁰ If either of them falls down,

one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
¹² Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Advancement Is Meaningless

¹³ Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. ¹⁴ The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. ¹⁶ There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Good morning, Church! Hey, let me say this, yeah, I'm glad you're here. If you're sitting in the lobby, I know you didn't plan to sit in the lobby this morning. You didn't plan to sit on 84 for as long as you did, and all of that. And so, just, thank you. I know it's going to be a little bit more difficult to receive a message. It's not going to be difficult for God; it might be difficult for you to pay attention as people are moving around you. But I know that that's packed out there, and for those of us in here, we're grateful that we get to be in here. And we're grateful for you allowing that to happen by sitting out there. I just want to start by saying thank you.

I'm going to tell you two stories today. Both of them, my two most or closest to, near death experiences. The two closest times to me dying in my life. I'll start with one, and if we have time, I'll tell you a second one towards the end. We can laugh about them now because I've lived, but they were not funny in the moment.

So, the first one, I land in Denver, Colorado for a speaking engagement there. It's actually in Estes Park, and so, I land in Denver and have to drive to Estes Park. Never been there, don't know where I'm going, got a rental car. There's a whiteout snowstorm in Denver, Colorado at the time, and I'm from Texas, so I don't get on the roads if it's below 40° typically, so I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm 10 and 2, (JP pantomimes hands on steering wheel) leaning forward, trying to see the road, driving from the city out into the rural area, through the mountains, and it's me, by myself. It's really dry in Colorado, and you can get altitude sickness, so I'm just slamming bottles of water, drinking water trying to stay hydrated. I get up there in the mountains, my ears are popping, elevation is rising; I haven't seen a car for a long time. No gas stations, nothing, GPS isn't working on my phone, and I really have to use the restroom. So, I'm sitting there, kind of doing the dance as I'm driving trying to figure out how this is going to go down. And then eventually, I cannot hold it any longer. I pull over to the side of the road. The snowstorm has let up a little bit, so I walk over around the front of the car so that I can use the restroom on the side of the road. It's the kind that's only semi-awkward. As I

get to the edge of the road and to where I'm going to walk off to use the bathroom, I take a step and then this happens. (JP hops off the stage and disappears, then stands up and steps back onto the stage.) I mean, I disappear. Like, I'm not kidding, snow up to my head. And I panic. I start trying to climb out (JP flails arms). There are no other cars, there are no people; I haven't seen a gas station for 35 minutes. I'm like, what is going to happen? I'm trying to climb out, and I can't. I'm thinking, I am about to wet my pants and freeze. They're going to find a human popsicle on the side of the road, and that's what the obit is going to say. They're going to say, "He just had to use the bathroom really bad." And I'm thinking, these are the things going through my mind in this moment.

Now, what could you change? What variable could you change in that story to make it not nearly as scary? (Someone says, "Dumb and Dumber") Dumb and dumber? Thank you! I'm not sure what to do with that! I receive both of those. Both dumb and dumber. What's something different that could be in that situation where it wouldn't be nearly as **scary**? (Someone says, "Wearing a jacket.") Wearing a jacket? I had a jacket on. If I had a buddy. If I had a friend. Right? See, this was before I realized "Never go alone." So, now when I go just about anywhere, I take a co-worker with me, or a child. They'd at least be able to do something! Flag down a car, I don't know, but this is before I learned to not go alone. So, I'm in this situation, and it's terrible. That's really what we're talking about today.

There's a rhythm in the Scriptures. If you've been in church long, you've heard this. Genesis Chapter 1: God said it, it was, and it was good. God said it, it was, and it was good. God said it, it was, and it was good. He said, "Sky," it was, and it was good. He said, "Water," it was, and it was good. He said, "Land," it was, and it was good. He said, "Animals," they were, and they were good. You see this rhythm and this poetic motion. And then you get to this break in this poem in Chapter 2, where it says, "and there was something not good." And you know that it was not good for man, or humanity, or mankind, to be alone. **"The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'"** Genesis 2:18 We always talk about that in the context of marriage, because then God created a helper, and we know that. But the statement is true, separate, and apart from marriage. It is not good to be alone. So, I really want to unpack the Hebrew here, because that's why you come. You want me to teach the Bible. You want me to explain this to you. Let me really explain so that you understand what God is saying. He is saying, when He says it is not good for someone to be alone, what He's really saying is it is bad for someone to be alone. It's not good. It's the opposite of good. It's bad. So, what is He doing? It's the first time, in the Scriptures, in Chapter 2, in all the Bible, where He says something is not good. And what's not good is loneliness; for us to be by ourselves.

We can read to you some stats:

In the last 20 years "the number of people saying there is no one with whom they discuss important matters nearly tripled."

Duke University Study

Now 24.6 percent of people report they have no one they trust in family or non-family – that's one in four Americans.

Duke University Study

Having a social evening with someone from your neighborhood is down 33%.

“Bowling Alone” – Harvard Professor

All of those statistics I just read to you are pre-Covid. Every single one of them is significantly worse today than it was two years ago. That is the world that we're living in.

I want you to know when we discipline someone from when you're this big (JP indicates with his hands a small child), if you get in trouble in school, what we do is we separate you from the class, and we put you in the corner. We want you to be by yourself. You cannot be with these people. Or we're going to send you to the hallway. You sit in the hallway. If you're really bad, ISS, in this room by yourself. If you mess up, if you commit a crime in society, we're going to separate you from those who are civilized, and we're going to put you in this cell by yourself. We're going to isolate you. And if you're really bad in prison, the worst living punishment that we can assign you is solitary confinement. That you would be in a box by yourself. This is the worst thing that we can do to anyone because God made us, our Designer and Creator, wired in us to live in the context of community with others. And we are the worst at this than anyone who has ever lived. For the vast majority of history, there would never be someone living by themselves. That's the truth. There would be very few examples, and they would all be extraordinary, of someone even spending extended time by themselves. God says, “It is not good. It's not good to do this.”

We're not wired for it. This is what it says, a professor from the University of Chicago says:

“Humans are not wired to live alone. The impulse for social connection – though it is stronger in some people than others – is rooted in the basic urge to survive. The need is so great, it is reflected in our neural wiring. It has more in common with hunger, thirst, and pain than it does with mental illness. It signals that something is wrong and needs to be corrected.”

- Survey of Isolation in America”

And so, if you're here, and you're an introvert, and you're thinking, “Man, that's my wiring. That's who I am.” Here's what I would say to you: You have more to learn from this message than others because it's going to make you uncomfortable. And that is to say, it's going to push you toward growth. It's going to push you towards growth.

I'm going to be in Ecclesiastes Chapter 4. We're in a series, if you're joining us today, moving through the book of Ecclesiastes. We've subtitled this “The Search for Meaning.” King Solomon wrote this. We're reading his journal. He's writing poetry at the end of his life. I told you I'd call it “The Musings of the Miserable”. He has everything; he's better than you, faster than you, richer than you, more married than you, wiser than you. And

he's opening boxes, searching for meaning. (JP searches through cardboard moving boxes with various labels on them) He searched in 'Education,' and he can't find it; in 'Projects,' he can't find it; then in 'Power,' he can't find it. He can't find it in 'Pleasure,' he can't find it in 'Rebellion,' he can't find it in 'Possessions'. He's looking in all of these things, trying to find where is there meaning under the sun? We've said, "under the sun" means apart from God, and he cannot find it. He cannot find meaning apart from God. Last week, he said, "Everything under the sun is meaningless, it's miserable. I'm coming up empty." He's going to bridge now, talking about loneliness and isolation, and really, a need for relationships, in Chapter 4.

A bridge text is going to be Verses 1-3, and I'll show you what I mean by that. But, as we move through this chapter, we're going to talk about three things that keep you isolated and four benefits of friends, and then, before you leave here, the loneliest place of all. I call this message "Life is Better Together ... and because Solomon is so negative, I'll say ... and Awful Alone." "Life is Better Together and Awful Alone."

Chapter 4:

"Again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—

and they have no comforter;

power was on the side of their oppressors—

and they have no comforter.

² **And I declared that the dead,**

who had already died,

are happier than the living,

who are still alive.

³ **But better than both**

is the one who has never been born,

who has not seen the evil

that is done under the sun."

So, he's coming out of this idea that there's a lot of bad things happening under the sun. Let's talk about oppression. And here's the real problem with those who are oppressed, they have no one around them to comfort them. He repeats that idea, **"they have no comforter."** So, not only are they oppressed, but they're also alone. And he's bridging these ideas for where he's headed, where he's going. And he says the only person lonelier than the one who sits in a box in the cemetery is the one who is alive all by themselves. What a heavy, despairing statement! He's talking about the oppressor, ironically, in 1 Kings Chapter 12 Verse 4. We learn he IS the oppressor; that he's the one who's oppressing the people, and really, the one who comes after him is worse than he is. So, let's talk about what keeps you isolated.

1. *What Keeps You Isolated?*

As he describes the oppressed, I want you to know this is the bottom. This is a lonely, lonely place. The bottom of the pyramid; they are by themselves. But in a minute, before you leave, we're going to talk about an even lonelier place, so hang in there with me. What keeps you isolated?

⁴ And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy (underline envy) of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

I saw that all toil and all achievement spring up from one person's envy of another. The reason that we're so driven, that you're trying to get a nicer watch, a better purse, a faster car, a bigger house, a nicer neighborhood, more well-behaving kids, is because you're in competition with one another. And competition does not drive unity. Comparison does not drive unity. You don't compare yourself, measure yourself, against someone else and move closer to them. You move further away from them.

- *Envy*

So, one of the things that keeps us isolated, directly from the text, is envy. It's envy. It's that we make life a competition. Does anybody know the person who makes everything a competition? You're like, "Hey, let's read the Bible." They're like, "Okay! Race you!" "If you're not first, you're last!" "Second place is first loser!" "Got to be the best!" "I've got to have a bigger house, a faster car, better neighborhood." Bigger, faster, better than who? Whoever you're measuring yourself against. And all of us are. So, name it. Who are you measuring yourself against? "You're right! I do ... wonder why she's prettier than me, or they get to live there, or why their kids are so well-behaved." Who are you measuring yourself against? Because comparing yourself to anyone robs you of contentment. We know this. Conceptually, we're all nodding our heads, and we're going to leave here and we're going to do it. We're going to keep doing it. What are you going to do to stop the competition?

He says, Verse 5:

"Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves."

Anytime in the Scriptures, specifically in the Books of Wisdom, you see a folding of the hands, it's a metaphor for laziness. Like Proverbs 6:10, a little folding of the hands. Proverbs 24:33, a little folding of the hands. And so, here's someone folding their hands, and they come to ruin.

- *Laziness*

And I will just tell you laziness will rob you of community, or keep you isolated. Being lazy. "I don't feel like it." "Let's go to Life Group tonight." "I don't really want to." You get so self-absorbed that you actually become the enemy of God. The opposite of worshipping God is worshipping self. So, the person who is the most self-absorbed is

actually the furthest from God because God calls us to love Him and love others. That's an outward. So, when we get in our heads, and we begin to focus on us, and our discomfort, and what we want, what we want, what we want, we're actually moving further from Him. And the person who's the furthest from God, or I'll say this, the person who's most isolated is actually the closest to Satan. Because the enemy is always looking for the person by themselves, the one who is sitting by themselves. He's the father of lies. That's when he can meet you, and he can lie to you. He can whisper to you. He can tell you things that aren't true, so that you can believe them and just drift further and further and further. He wants to separate you from the pack. This is what he does. This is his modus operandi. This is how he works. He wants you to be by yourself.

So, you might be like, "Well, I'm not self-absorbed." Self-absorbed and selfishness are really the same thing. Are you selfish? "Well, how would I know if I'm selfish?" It's really easy; it's a simple test. Do you make decisions primarily based on one question: "Do I want to?" Like, "Hey, we should go there." "I don't really feel like it." "Oh, cool, you don't feel like it. Then we shouldn't." "We've got Life Group tonight. Let's go." "I don't really want to." "Then, by all means, why would we? We should do whatever you want, for the rest of your life." That is the essence of being self-absorbed. That is going to drift you to a place of isolation, further from God, closest to Satan. Laziness will drive us to be alone.

Verse 6:

**"Better one handful with tranquility
than two handfuls with toil
and chasing after the wind.**

⁷ Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

**⁸ There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.
"For whom am I toiling," he asked,
"and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?"
This too is meaningless—
a miserable business!"**

He's working tirelessly, but he doesn't take any time to enjoy what he's worked for, or what he has. This is the millionaire next door. Or in Solomon's case, the trillionaire next door. He's just slaving away to death. What would we call that? Greed.

- *Greed*

So, something that keeps you isolated is greed, wanting more. He says he's all alone. That's what it says in Verse 8, "**all alone.**" This is the theme of this entire chapter. He's all alone. There's no one else there. He's just working, working, working, working. People say this all the time in 2021. "Man, I work to provide for my family." At the expense of your family? "Now, son, listen. I want you to go to a good school. That's why I do this. I want you to go to a good school, get a good education, so that you can get a good job." "I just want a good dad." What if he went to a sub-par school? A community college, or something, but his dad was there? "I got to know my dad!" That would be different. Are we sure we're always making a good trade? Because it's not provision. "Got to put food on the table!" Yeah, but it doesn't need to be fillet. I mean, peanut butter and jelly get the job done. You can sit at the table, too. Right? That's different.

What we learn from Ecclesiastes, is that if we were present with others and learned how to enjoy them again... Did you see what I said there? Learned how to enjoy them again because I think some of us forgot how. ...learned how to enjoy them again, we'd be better off. Having less with contentment is always better than having more with discontentment. One hand with contentment is way better than having both hands with no contentment.

Does anyone here know who has the highest career batting average in baseball? (Someone in auditorium says Ted Williams.) Ted Williams. Not Ted Williams, but I heard someone said it over here. (Someone in the auditorium says Ty Cobb.) Ty Cobb is the correct answer. (A picture of Ty Cobb appears on the screen) That's right, Ty Cobb. Let me just tell you about Ty Cobb for a second, okay? This is important, we need to know. He's an incredible competitor. His teammates said that he had a maniacal will to succeed. Some say he's the greatest player ever to play baseball. He held 90 major league baseball records for half a century. He still has many today, including the highest batting average, most steals at home, most batting titles, and he died with a net worth over \$200,000,000. And, on his deathbed, he said, audibly and out loud, "I wish I had more friends." At his funeral, he's got millions in the bank account, but three friends showed up. That wasn't enough to carry him into a room in a box. Ty Cobb won at baseball; he lost at life. Solomon won at just about everything, but he lost at life. You know why Ty Cobb won at baseball? Because he wanted it SO bad! Sometimes you get everything you want: he wanted to win, he wanted to compete, he wanted those titles, he wanted to hold some record long after his life so some preacher at some church could ask the question, and no one, but one, could know the answer. That's what he wanted. And here's my point: sometimes you get what you want. You want to be the best. Sometimes you are the best, but at what cost? That's an expensive watch, man! (Reference to a previous sermon – A top salesman was given a watch at his retirement party. One of the onlookers said, "That's an expensive watch. It cost him his family!") That's an expensive watch. It's a really costly watch. You gain the whole world, man, but lost your soul.

2. What are the Benefits of Friends?

So, let's talk about what are the benefits of relationships because we're seeing the needs here. We're seeing what keeps us isolated. So, now, from the text, what are the benefits of friends? What are the benefits of friends?

Verse 9:

**“Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:”**

- *Productivity*

So, the first benefit of friends is productivity; quite literally, productivity. We can be more productive together than we can be alone. This is the law of synergy. Together, we can be greater than the sum of our parts. The sum of the contributors. This is what we now know, in science, as the law of synergy. It looks like this: I can't reach the apple. You can't reach the apple. But together, we can reach the apple. Or maybe I can bench press 100 pounds, and you can bench press 100 pounds. But together, you would think that we would lift 200 pounds, but we can actually lift 300 pounds. There's a multiplier there. We are more productive together. This is what he essentially is saying.

He says in Verse 10:

**“If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.”**

I lived that, man, I was there, on the side of the road in Colorado.

- *Care*

The second benefit of friends is care. We can give or receive care, and the only way you can give or receive care is if someone else is there. And all of us need someone who cares about us enough to tell us the truth. Idiosyncrasies grow in isolation. You hear me on that? You get weirder by yourself. You need someone there to say, “Man, that is weird. I wouldn't do that. Okay? Like, that's not normal.” Stop doing those things, and as you get older, and as you get more alone, you get stranger. And you need people around you that will say, “Hey, man, I've just got to tell you. That's not okay.” He said it's pitiful. Pity the person who falls. That's me on the side of the road. I was pitiful. I was to be pitied.

Verse 11:

**“Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?”**

- *Comfort*

Another benefit of a friend is comfort. You have someone to comfort you. Remember what we said in those first three verses? They were there, and they were oppressed, and there was no one to comfort them. There was no one to comfort them. He repeats it. If

you live in the context of community, you have others around you who care about you. They help you. They comfort you.

My dear friend, right now, is hiking in the mountains of Colorado. As he checked the weather before he left, it said at night it was going to be five degrees. Five degrees on a mountain is too cold. You can bundle up. You can get in a sleeping bag, but your nose is still going to stick out and you are still not going to sleep. You are going to freeze. And so, as we're sitting there thinking, problem-solving with him, we said, "Are you taking a tent for one person?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Take a tent for two people. Put two people in the tent. The body heat will get the tent warmer. That is really what you need to survive." This is the same principle that he's calling out 3,000 years ago. And as he considered not going, he said, "You know what? I have to go, because if I don't go, they may get in a bind on the side of that mountain and not have enough people to go back for help." Right? There is strength in numbers. We can comfort each other.

Verse 12:

**"Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."**

- *Strength*

And so, another benefit of friendships is strength. We are stronger together, and there's a baked-in illustration here. He says, "You have one thread ... snap it. But you twist together three threads, now you have a rope. And that's harder to break. It can support more weight. We are stronger together." Right? We're stronger together. He's talking about the benefits of relationships. But woe to the person who falls, and there's no one there to pick them up.

Let me tell you something. This week I am going to get hundreds of emails. Emails, messages, direct messages; hundreds of messages. Hundreds, quite literally, hundreds of people are going to reach out to me this week because they've fallen. And fallen looks like, "Hey, my marriage is in trouble." "My husband left me." "My kid, I've got a prodigal. I don't know what to do." "Addiction, addiction to drugs, alcohol, pornography..." "I'm hurt in this way..." "I'm grieving." There are themes, and I'm not trying to make light of these situations. They're heavy. They're always the same, week after week after week. They all can go in particular files. There's nothing new under the sun, as Solomon would say. We all experience the same kind of grief. We talked about that last week. We all see similar things happen to all of us. And do you know why they're reaching out to me? Because they have no one else to reach out to. They're throwing a lifeline to some pastor in Waco. "Help me!" "But you're in Michigan. Do you have a church in Michigan? Do you have some community in Michigan? Do you know some believers in Michigan? Do you have other brothers and sisters around you to pick you up when you fall, because I'm not there. I'm not going to be able to pick you up through this email when you fall. I can give you a Bible verse to hold on to. You need community around you." And so, I respond always with the same thing. "Hey, who do

you meet with on a consistent basis that love Jesus and helps you; holds you accountable to knowing His word and pursuing Him?" And so often they'll say, "I don't have that." So, here's my Hail Mary pass. I've got to shepherd the flock among me. But that's very different.

My friend, Steve, fell a couple weeks ago. He's here; he's a member of this body. He got Covid, was hospitalized, and his life group rallied around him. They immediately go home, get his dog, keep his dog for him. "Hey, don't worry about that. We've got that. Don't worry about your yard. Hey, don't worry about this. We're going to bring you cookies. We're going to write you notes. We're going to text you verses. We're going to gather and pray for you regularly. We want to pick you up. You've fallen and we're there. You're on the mat and we're going to carry you." I'm his pastor and I'm the last person to know he's in the hospital with Covid because he's cared for. He's a blessed man. He's got people around him, when he fell, to pick him up. That's the model. That's the system if you will. That's what we're doing here. That's it working. Navy Seals say, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Because you can go fast and still fall in a hole, and you're not going anywhere. There's no one there to pick you up.

Listen, if I'm talking about you, here's the deal. Today. Today. God's providence. I didn't even know this until I ran through this message on Thursday, and they were like, "Don't forget. Life Group 101." It's today ... 1:30. Today. If you're not in community; if you don't have a Life Group, I don't care if you've tried it four times and it was a disaster all four times, we're going to give it a fifth go, and a sixth go if we need to, and maybe a seventh go. Today's your day. Sign up. You need a sign from God, "God, you me to sign up? Give me a sign." (JP jumps and waves his arms above his head. Congregation laughs.) Here's your sign.

Verse 13:

"Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. (What a word! What a word! There are people, who grow in age and grow unteachable because they've experienced everything, and there's nothing they desire to learn from you.)¹⁴ The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. ¹⁶ There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

He's saying leaders come, and leaders go, and leaders will be forgotten. You climb to the top of that ladder, only to find there are no more rungs and no people around you. This happens to generals. It's been written about generals in the military. One day they walk into a room, and everyone stands up and salutes them. Then they retire, and the next day they're a civilian, and they lose their minds at times because they don't know what to do. "My entire life, people have just done what I've asked them to do, and now a generation comes that doesn't even know my name." And so, we talked about the oppressed. What a

lonely place the oppression is, but the loneliest place is leadership. That's my third, and final, point.

3. *The Loneliest Place is Leadership*

And it is short-lived. You know who you want to lead you? Whoever is next. We've seen presidents' approval ratings rise and fall and rise and fall. "We want the next guy. He's going to be our savior. The next head coach, the next person, the next president of the company." I was the back-up quarterback, if you will, for a long time, and some would always say, "Everybody loves the back-up quarterback." And I used to think that was a statement of insecurity, and I didn't really give it much weight. And then I became the quarterback, and I realized the truth in that statement that we're always wanting someone else to lead us. And leaders are so quickly forgotten. There have been people that have preached on this stage for years whose names you do not know. I remember when I got here to Waco. I'd been here three weeks, three weeks in Waco. Someone got an email from somebody. "Hey, I visited your church." (It's not my church, it's God's church. I just serve there.) "I visited your church, and I really liked it, but just one thing I want to tell you is I didn't see anything for young adults there. There's a ministry in Dallas called The Porch I really think you could learn from. You should look into this ministry called The Porch. You really need to learn from those guys. Maybe they'll let you visit sometime." He was dead serious. If that doesn't make sense. If you're wondering, that's the ministry that I moved from. There's the punchline there. And so quickly forgotten.

Do you know another reason that I'll get hundreds of emails this week? It's not a flex. It's awkward, I get it, but do you know another reason I'll get hundreds of emails this week? Because people like me. And do you know why they like me? Because they don't know me. They don't know me. They've got some local pastor, who's trudging through commentaries, to write messages to powerfully impact them with the Word of God. He's doing the best he can to care for them, but when they fall down, they're like, "Oh, I need to find somebody else ... with cool shoes!" And that's the truth. That's where we've gotten. We always want somebody else, with some secret, you know, unlock the magic mystery of marriage and parenting, my work, whatever my problem is. And I'm very much aware of it. I am soberly mindful that I am incredibly replaceable, and so are you. And so are you.

I don't like this point because it says the loneliest place is leadership, and it's not true. See, there was a time on Calvary when One who had existed in community past, perfect community with the Father and the Holy Spirit, He went to the cross. And it's the loneliest place the world has ever known or ever seen, because for the first time in the history of history, the only community He sensed from the Father was His wrath. The only connection that He felt to the Son, felt from the Father, was His wrath, and that was for you and I. That, my friends, was the loneliest place in all of history. It's not leadership, it's the cross. And the reason that He endured the cross is so that you and I can move toward community, right community, with the Father. But it's not this "Me and Jesus" theology that you have been tempted to embrace, because Jesus says, "No, I've left behind my body. So, if you want to be in right relationship with Me, you need to be

planted firmly in the body of Christ, the Church, to experience community, to be held accountable, to be encouraged, all of the “one another’s”. So that when you fall, there’s people literally around you to pick you up, to help you.” What a price He paid for our privilege to do that. Do not miss that.

Some time ago, some friends and I, he was planting a church in Boulder, Colorado, and so, just a small group of pastors went there, and we began to meet with different pastors of churches. We went to the one that was a big one. A big one, and we were so excited. I was brand new in the ministry, so I had my pen and pad and my five questions, and I was ready. They were doing everything right, and so we sat down with him, and we were asking questions. They were particularly great at life groups, like community small groups. So, we were asking, “How do you form small groups?” “How do you audit small groups?” “How do you pastor small groups?” “How do you know how they’re doing?” “How do you grade them?” “How often is their turnover?” “Are they open or are they closed?” We were asking all the questions, and I’m writing so fast my pen is smoking. I look up for a minute, and I say, “So, are you and your wife in a life group?” And he’s like, “No, I’m the pastor. I can’t be in community with the congregation. That would be weird.” And I was like, “Okay. Something smells funny.” And you fast forward the tape, and he fell, and there was no one there to pick him up. So, you take this little area of your life (JP gestures in a circular motion in front of him with his hands) that you’re trying not to let people in on, and you just write, “Satan’s Territory.” This is where he’s going to take me out. (JP continues to gesture in the same spot) This is the area I don’t want to be sharpened, and so, probably what’s going to happen is he’s going to let you climb a little higher, so that when you fall, you hit a little harder. But make no mistake about it, write this date down, that’s the area he’s going after. The one that you don’t want to be transparent in.

So, in summary, envy, laziness, and greed will keep you isolated. Productivity, care, comfort, and strength, from the text, are benefits of having friends and relationships. And the loneliest place you’ll experience is leadership, while the loneliest place in history was the cross. And that’s the reality.

We have time, so I’ll tell you the second story. I was in high school. I went to Cuero High School, which was 30 minutes away from Victoria High School. Cuero is a small town. Victoria had a movie theater and a McDonald’s, and they were better than us in every way. They were a 5A school, and so, I would go there. I had a “beef”, if you will, with a student from there, and I had bumped into him in Red Lobster in Victoria. They also had a Red Lobster, and that’s how you know you’ve “made it.” We exchanged words in the foyer. I told him what I was graciously going to do to him, had I ever met him away from my parents, and he told me what he was going to do to me. And so, let me just say this for students in the room, I do not condone fighting or girlfriends in high school, but I wasn’t following Jesus. So, two weeks later, I went to a basketball game at that school. I’m not going to tell you why I was there, but it had something to do with a girl. My buddy dropped me off, and I was sitting in the stands. Jason Phillips went to half court at half time and just threw his hands up, pointed at me, and said, “Today’s the day!” I thought, “Great! Today’s the day!”

So, the game was over, we went to the back of the school, and just like in a movie: there's the outdoor basketball court, the streetlights, dark, and it was just me and Jason Phillips and a hundred Victoria students. Mistake #1. And so, push went to shove, shove went to punches. We went to the ground, and as I was down there, I felt a size 10 ½ Doc Martin in my kidney, and then a steel-toed Red Wing boot to my head, and I realized I had made a big mistake. I was in enemy's territory by myself. They got tired of kicking me, and eventually the crowd just dispersed. There I was on the asphalt, completely conscious, but I remember thinking, "I can't move my arm and I can't lift my head." There was no one there to pick me up.

And I tell you that story because I want you to know that you have an enemy, and he hates your children. He hates your family, he hates your marriage, he certainly hates your faith. He hates the way you're honoring God in your singleness; he hates your work. He's after you, and he can't wait to get you all alone. They're watching your every move. And he can't wait till you're all alone, and you do the things that you do when you're all alone, because they're going to jump you and carry you further from the Father. And you're going to justify it in all kinds of ways. "Well, we don't need that Covid. And, I don't know, is it safe? I'm going to stay over here, and we're just going to watch online by ourselves." No, you call your neighbors over. You bring somebody else in that living room. You begin to experience community, or you go back to church. Those are your options. If you've been putting off life group, now is your time. I'm telling you; it's not going to go well for you by yourself. It is bad to be alone. It is not good to be alone. You were not made to be alone. You can't grow, as a follower of Jesus, by yourself. And the price that Jesus paid so that you could be a part of His body was really high. It was really high. Don't take it for granted. Let me pray that you won't.

Father, help us not to take it for granted. You say that there are people that have everything, and all kinds of knowledge, and they grow to a place where they can't be instructed. I don't want that for myself, Father, so I pray now for my future self that in my future self I would be teachable. And I pray for those who are in the room, for our future self, that they would be teachable. And I pray for those who are in that season, that if something is different, they wouldn't write it off as bad. Maybe all they know is Sunday School, or all they know is a certain kind of church, and now we're like, "Hey, we want you to be in a life group." And they're like, "Not me." "And, hey, we want you to confess sin." "Not me. I'm not going to do that." Would your Holy Spirit overwhelm that? Would you rebuke, admonish, and instruct that? Would you make us teachable, keep us humble, and use us for your glory, God? If there's anything I said that's inconsistent with your Word, God, I pray that you supernaturally would remove it from the hearts and the minds of people. But if there's anything that I said, God, that is consistent with your Word, I pray that it would stir in our hearts, and it would stir in our minds. We thank you so much for the loneliest place in the history of history ... the cross, and for the community that we are afforded out of that lonely place. We love you. Amen