

Loneliness & Isolation

Well, good to see you guys. If you have a bible, turn with me to Psalm 142. If you're newer around here, we've been working through a series called *All the Feels*, where we've been talking through how to deal with our various emotions through the Psalms. So far we've looked at *anger & contempt, pain & suffering, and fear & anxiety*.

And I did want to give you guys an update on what we'll be covering the rest of the series. We published the schedule early on in the series, but then we had the week where we called the Gathering off because of flooding. So here's what we're looking at the rest of the series. Today, we'll be looking at loneliness & isolation—so you have that chipper topic to look forward to. Next Sunday it'll be confusion & doubt. But those of you who were around when we started the series know that we were also going to do a week on depression & despair. And that's obviously massively important, and something that doesn't get talked about enough within the Church. But since we have to move onto the next series, we're going to do that teaching as a mid-week podcast somewhere around Wednesday, March 20. It's going to be me, our other pastor Jeff who has dealt with depression personally, and then we're going to employ the help of Lauren Barbian, a member of our church family who is a licensed counselor. So be looking for that on our website and podcast feeds. That's how we'll round out this series.

All that to say, let's dive into Psalm 142 and take a look at loneliness & isolation. Take a look with me at Psalm 142, starting in v. 1:

[1] With my voice I cry out to the Lord; with my voice I plead for mercy to the Lord. [2] I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him.

So as we've said on *repeat* throughout this series, **when it comes to our emotions, the Psalms are going to teach us not to suppress them (pretend they don't exist), and not to obey them (let them determine everything about our life), but rather to pray them.** And so that's what the Psalmist is doing in the first couple verses of this passage. He's in some type of distress, but he doesn't consider whatever it is to be unspiritual or unacceptable to bring to God. Instead, he leans into it and pours his heart out in prayer about it. Now next, we're about to hear about *what type* of distress he's in *specifically*. So take a look at v. 3:

[3] When my spirit faints within me, you know my way! In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. [Now, pay attention right here...] [4] Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul.

"There is *none*," the psalmist says, "who takes *notice* of me. *No one* cares for me." He looks around and feels like no one is there and no one cares. At least one of the emotions David is dealing with as he writes this psalm is the age-old experience of *loneliness*. **For about as long as there have been human beings, there have been human beings who are lonely.** In America specifically, the number of people who report being lonely continues to *climb*. In the 1980s, 20% of Americans said they were often lonely. Now, it's 40%.¹ In one large study done recently,² most Americans suffer from strong feelings of

¹ From [The Blindness of Social Wealth](#), New York Times

² 2018 Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index, available [here](#).

loneliness and a lack of significance in their relationships. Nearly half of people surveyed say they sometimes or always feel alone or “left out.

And loneliness isn’t just an emotional issue—it’s actually a *public health* issue. Vivek Murthy, who was Surgeon General here in the U.S. under presidents Obama and Trump, is quoted as saying *this* about loneliness:

*During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was **loneliness**.*

He went on to say that weak social connections have health effects similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and a greater negative affect on people than obesity.³ The late Dutch psychiatrist J.H. Van Den Berg also said *this*:

*Loneliness is the **nucleus of psychiatry**. [...] **If loneliness didn’t exist**, we could reasonably assume that psychiatric illnesses would not occur either.⁴*

Now, that’s a strong statement. But agree with that statement or not, the point both he and Murthy are making is simply that **loneliness has a massive impact on our mental health**. All of this has been reported on and written about extensively.

What is relatively *new*, though, is that **culturally, at least on the surface, we have fewer excuses for our loneliness now than we ever have**. In the age of technology we live in, making connections with other human beings are *easier* than ever. Even if my most meaningful relationships are with people who are hundreds of miles away, I can pick up my iPhone *right now* and call them and see their face while I talk to them. And other than it freezing up while one of us has the goofiest expression ever on our face, it works pretty flawlessly. We have the internet, we have social media, **we are hyper-connected to everyone and everything at all times—and yet we are not becoming less lonely. Most of the data would actually show that we’re becoming moreso**. Loneliness and isolation are actually *increasing*. So it would seem that our loneliness isn’t just caused by a lack of *opportunity* for relationship—it must actually be something deeper than that.

But that’s where it gets a little complicated. Because **as common and as widespread as loneliness is, it’s not always caused by the same things. A lot of us are lonely, but we’re not all lonely for the same reasons**. Part of what makes loneliness so complex is that it can have a lot of different *sources*.

There are some causes of loneliness that we have absolutely *no control* over. Sometimes our loneliness is caused by external *circumstances in our lives*. I think about some of the people in our church that work the third shift or weird hours, which means they’re awake when most everybody else is asleep—that’s probably going to create some loneliness. Or maybe it’s just a demanding job or a demanding *season at your job*. That’s going to mean you’re not able to spend as much time with people outside of work as you want to. Maybe it’s not your job but your *season of life*. Sometimes transitioning from one stage of life to another can generate loneliness: going from high school to college, or college to the workforce, or for

³ From [this article](#).

⁴ As detailed in Peter Leithart’s book, *Traces of the Trinity: Signs of God in Creation and Human Experience*.

some parents that go from the workforce to staying at home with kids. A lot of times, when you go through a major life transition like that, you have to re-learn how to form *friendships* in that new phase, which in the meantime means you might experience loneliness. Maybe it's not a season of life, but a season of *suffering*. We talked a couple weeks ago about how suffering can be incredibly *isolating*. It can put you in this place where you're hurting and feel like there's nobody who knows about it.

Scripture also makes it clear that sometimes we are going to experience loneliness *simply because we are following Jesus*. Jesus says at one point to his disciples "if people hated me, they'll hate you also because you follow me."⁵ How's that for an encouraging pep talk? "You want to follow me? Get ready to be disliked, glared at, and excluded." This makes me think of a friend of mine. She happens to work somewhere where the workplace culture is to constantly gossip or talk bad about co-workers and customers behind their back. Where the default topic of conversation at work is to gripe and complain and throw other people under the bus—I'm sure none of you can identify, but just imagine. And this friend of mine—because she's a follower of Jesus—she chooses as much as she can to *not* to participate in those things, because she doesn't think that's okay for a follower of Jesus to do. But as a result, what happens is that her coworkers have become *suspicious* of her. They don't like that she doesn't join in on it all. And eventually because of that, they became very distrusting towards her. She didn't get invited out to lunch with them quite as much. She didn't get invited to grab drinks after work nearly as often. So it was actually because of doing the *right* thing, that she began to experience loneliness.

So listen to me here, this is not something that gets said very often, but it *needs* to be said: **there are going to be times where living a life as a faithful follower of Jesus is going to get *incredibly lonely***. There will be times where you look around and it feels like you're doing what God has called his people to do, and you don't have any or much company in doing it. There will be times where you, like the Psalmist, say "there is no one doing this with me." And that can be a very *lonely* feeling.

///

So there are some causes of loneliness that we have absolutely *zero control* over. Loneliness based on circumstances or on obedience to Jesus, or probably a number of other things. But that being said, there are *other* causes of loneliness that we *do* have control over. There is loneliness and isolation that we either contribute to or outright *create* for ourselves. And I do want to make sure we talk a little bit about *that* type of loneliness today. Because the last thing I'd want is for us to spend the rest of our lives unwittingly contributing to our own loneliness, when there is actually a better way forward. So before we continue on in Psalm 142, let's talk about three causes of loneliness that we *can control*:

Romantic Fixation

First, let's just call out the elephant in the room: **when many people say they're "lonely," what they primarily mean is that they're not currently in a romantic relationship, and want to be in one.** This one, from the bible's perspective, is a tricky one. Because the Scriptures would support the belief that romantic relationships—and specifically, *marriage*—can be a *great* source of companionship. **But that doesn't mean that they are the *only* or even the *primary* source of companionship.**

⁵ This is a paraphrase of John 15:18.

For example, can I just let you guys in on one of my pet peeves as a pastor, real quick? This will be very therapeutic for me. **I get really frustrated when I hear talk about the story of Adam and Eve like it's a story about God fixing our romantic loneliness.** And let me just tell you, I hear it *a lot*. People will take this line in Genesis 2:18 where it says "it isn't good for man to be alone," and then they make that the reason that all of us should be out there, on the prowl, looking for our better half. Now, I think I get *why* we teach it that way. It's easy to think, since God ends up giving Adam *Eve* as a wife, that he is solving Adam's romantic loneliness problem. But when you actually read the passage, that's not really the problem God is solving. The problem God is solving is that he has just given Adam this incredible task of taming and ordering and ruling over all of creation, and he then looks at Adam sitting there by himself and goes, "it's not good for Adam to be doing this alone." In other words, "this is too big a task for one person to accomplish." So then it says that God gives Adam *Eve* as a *helper*. As a partner to come alongside him in completing the task that God has given them to do. *That's* what the story is about. It is not about God solving Adam's romantic loneliness problem. Does that make sense? I get really passionate about that, and I might be a little angry about it—probably need to go back and listen to the "anger" week of this series.

But here's why I am so passionate about that: **if you buy into the belief that all you need to solve your loneliness is a romantic partner, a couple really destructive things will happen as a result.** One is that **you will be at least subtly bitter at God until the day he provides you with a romantic partner.** Because you will feel like he is withholding the one thing missing from your life, the one thing that would *fix* your loneliness. And two, if or *when* you *find* a romantic partner, you will expect them to be the ultimate *cure-all* for your loneliness. And that will put a weight on their shoulders that they *will not* be able to carry. **Your husband, wife, boyfriend, or girlfriend was not designed to single-handedly cure your loneliness.** But because we insist on believing that they *were*, we end up creating *more* loneliness for ourselves. **We convince ourselves that we will always be lonely until we find somebody, and even when we are with somebody, we are still lonely, because it turns out they can't meet all our relational needs.** So it's this sort of romantic fixation that ends up generating an awful lot of loneliness. And so we'd probably be better off not expecting a romantic relationship to fix all our loneliness. Next...

Relational Insulating

Sometimes we are lonely because we have insulated ourselves from meaningful relationships. Because we have consciously or unconsciously isolated ourselves from those who could help us not feel lonely. Our cultural tendency towards radical individualism absolutely *fuels* this. We say or think things often like "all I need is me." Or "I just need me and God"—listen, I don't care how many country songs say that—it's *horrible* theology. It's also horrible *grammar*. But definitely horrible *theology*. A lot of people say things like "I don't need anybody but *God*." That *sounds* right when you say it, right? But is it *true*? Because even Jesus didn't operate that way. Jesus needed the Father *and* he evidently needed *other people*. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus *insists* that several of his disciples come with him. **If Jesus needed other people, I'm going to go out on a limb and say we do too.**

Sometimes we insulate when we get into a *new* romantic relationship: we start dating somebody new and start neglecting friendships with other people who care about us—we just go MIA from friends we've known for years. Sometimes we do it by refusing to deal with *conflict* with people in our lives: we don't deal with frustration towards others, and so we end up labeling people with words like "toxic" or "hater"

and pulling away from relationship with them. Listen: ~~there is such a thing as a toxic person. But when we use that label for just anybody who we don't like being around, we dilute the real meaning of the term.~~

For some people, insulating can be as simple as just going home every day and turning on Netflix, and functionally shutting yourself off to the outside world. It can happen by an over-reliance on social media. Carefully crafting a version of ourselves online and never letting people get to know the real us. I read somewhere—can't remember where—where somebody said that social media is to friendships what porn is to sex. They're *related*, sure—but they are very much *not* the same thing.

Now, for *followers of Jesus*, loneliness can come from simply not prioritizing time with other followers of Jesus so that they can know us well enough to help with our loneliness. If you've been around long, you know that we harp on this *often*, because it's often the most *neglected* part of the Christian life—**you need meaningful, consistent relationships with other followers of Jesus**. Not just to help with *loneliness*, but just to get *anywhere* in your *discipleship to Jesus*. At our church, this happens primarily through LifeGroups. Now maybe you're thinking "well my LifeGroup isn't very helpful to me." Okay, but let me ask: have you given them the *opportunity* to *get to know* you well enough to *be helpful*? If you're only around them once in a blue moon, it's very possible that they *want* to be helpful, but they just don't have enough data to go on. When you're around them, do you actually talk about what's going on in your life?

///

It takes a lot of different forms, but all of these are ways of *insulating*. They are ways of isolating ourselves from other people, which reinforces our loneliness. And lastly...

Hidden Sin

The reality is that many of us are lonely even though we have *plenty* of friends. And that might be because **even though we have friends, those friends do not know the deepest aspects of who we are**. A lot of us live with hidden sin of some sort—sin that we consider too bad or too dark to let anyone know about. Our belief is that if people knew the things we think or do when nobody's watching, there's no way they would accept us or be friends with us. We start to believe that even when people say they love us, they care about us, they're only saying that because they don't know some of the things we've done. That's an easy lie to believe—it's one of Satan's oldest tricks.

But listen: **the longer we go on concealing parts of who we are from people, the more lonely we will feel**. And more than that, sin thrives in the dark. **The less people know about our sin, the more power our sin has over us**. It's only through the bold and scary process of letting other people in on it that we start to see victory over it. James says in chapter 5, "confess your sin to *one another*, that you may be (*what?*) *healed*." So **it might be that keeping your sin hidden is not only keeping you isolated, but also preventing you from getting any freedom over it**.

///

So to summarize, there are a lot of things that can contribute to our loneliness: some that we can't control, but some that we can. And honestly, a lot of times it's not just *one* of those causes. It might be several of them all working together. But—if it's overwhelming to you to think that your loneliness might be

that *complex*, I do have some good news for you: **whatever the cause of your loneliness might be, there is one common remedy for it.** For what it is, let's pick our passage back up in v. 5:

*[5] I cry to you, O Lord; I say, "You are my refuge, my **portion** in the land of the living."*

David calls God his "refuge," and his "portion." So we've seen the word *refuge* at least one time already in the Psalms—today I want us to zoom in on the word "portion." This word has a few different meanings in the original language, but the most common one just refers to a piece or tract of land that you possess. So **what he's saying is that God is his possession.** Not like in a superior, "I-own-God" kind of way, but as a way of saying, essentially, "even *when* I have *no one else*, I know I have God himself." Now, that's not the same as saying "I don't *need* anybody else." It's just to say that even in those seasons where I feel like I *don't have* anyone else, I know I am never truly *alone*. So David is gonna *get eventually* to asking God to fix the situations contributing to his loneliness, but not without *first* acknowledging the one thing he needs *most* in his loneliness: **God's presence.** That is the thing he needs *first* and *foremost*.

And here's why: with God's presence, romance might be a nice thing to *have*, but it's not something you need to *survive*. With God's presence, we are motivated to open up to others and not insulate ourselves from them. With God's presence, we have the freedom to be open and honest about our sin, because we know that God and others accept us on the basis of Jesus' performance, not our own. God's presence is the answer to all of our loneliness. Even in the type of loneliness we *can't* control...with God's presence, circumstances may be difficult but do not have to *do us in*, because God is with us in the midst of them all. With God's presence, even when the world *forsakes* us, we get to know that God never will. I love the way 1 John 3:20 puts this:

*If our hearts condemn us, we know that **God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.***

You see, whatever it is that *initially causes* loneliness—whether it's something you can control or something you can't—what *keeps* us lonely is *fear*. It's what we talked about earlier. It's that we think "if people knew the real me, they wouldn't accept me, I'd be too much of a burden for them to handle." But hear me: **Jesus knew everything about you when he died for you. He knew precisely how dark the things in your heart were, he knew precisely how much of a "burden" you would be—and he chose to carry that burden to the cross with him. None of that was too much for him. None of that was enough to make him turn away.** There was an old worship song back in the day—and I'm about to date myself a little here—but it had this incredible line in it that said "[God] *you see the depths of my heart and you love me the same.*" What an incredible line. **That is what we need most in our loneliness: the One who knows it all and loves us the same.** What we need most is *God's presence*.

But I'll also tag something very important onto the end of that. The remedy to our loneliness, part B, is this: **God's presence, made tangible by God's people.** Take a look with me at the last two verses, starting in v. 6:

*[6] Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low! Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me! [7] Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name! **The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.***

In the passage, the *contrast* to David's loneliness is "the *righteous* surrounding him (v. 7)." That's him talking about the nation of Israel—God's people—being present *with* him. So the *first* thing he needs is an awareness of God's presence in his loneliness, but he realizes that a central *piece* of that is the *tangible representation of God*, found in the *people* of God. And *that's* what we need too. **God's presence is an incredible reality, but the bible also repeatedly makes the point that God's people are one of the most consistent ways that God makes his presence known.** ~~1 John 4:12 says "no one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us [his people], and his love is made complete in us."~~ God's people are called to be the *tangible representation* of who He is.

God's people can help in the midst of romantic loneliness, because they show us that romantic companionship isn't the only type of companionship there is. God's people can help even when we insulate, because they check in with us and chase us down. God's people can help even when they know the worst about us, because they see us through the lenses of the cross, and not on the basis of what we have or haven't done. Do you see how this works? God's people are designed to be this tangible representation of God's presence in the midst of our loneliness and isolation. Even in the type of loneliness we can't control...God's people can help in the midst of difficult circumstances because they can be there to walk with us through it. God's people can help when we are hated by the world, because even when the world rejects us, they reject us *together*. So we need God's presence, and we need his presence made tangible by his people.

But that being said, I'll just go ahead and let you know: every bit of you will want to resist all that. Probably for a lot of reasons. Maybe you've been hurt by people in the past who have claimed to *be* God's people. Maybe you're *terrified* of people knowing the deepest parts of who you are. Maybe you're tempted to think "I'll be too much for people." "I'll be too much of a burden to them." Truth be told, that's not even true 90% of the time. 90% of the time, it's not even true that we're being a burden to people—it's just that we're realizing we *need* other people. But *even in the times where you are a burden to people*, here's the thing: the bible actually *calls us* to *bear* one another's burdens. So whatever the case, the answer is the same: *let God's people be what they are called to be.*

So I'll leave you with two applications today. First, an application for those currently dealing with loneliness themselves. If you're lonely: why don't you first own up to any parts of loneliness that you *can* control? If there are ways that you have poured fuel on your loneliness intentionally or unintentionally, let's start by acknowledging that to God asking him what it looks like to do things differently in that regard. Acknowledging to him in prayer "God I am indeed lonely, but here are the things I know I've done that have made that worse, and I want you to set me free from those things." And then, for the causes of loneliness we *can't* control: can I urge you not to go another *day* without letting people into that? If you are lonely right now, will you tell somebody? Whether that's somebody in your LifeGroup, or somebody you came with today, or somebody who you trust and isn't even here: shoot one of them a text and say "hey, I've been lonely and I don't want to be, can you help walk with me through that?"

But then for those of you who maybe *aren't* experiencing loneliness, what would it look like for you to enter into the loneliness of others? Maybe you know someone right now—their name is coming to mind and you've got a good feeling they are lonely. What if you just texted them to see if they wanted to grab lunch, grab coffee, grab a drink this week? Maybe you take it a step farther and set up a recurring hang-out with them to communicate you're with them through the long-haul. Now here's the trick: there are some people who are lonely but are really, *really* good at hiding it. So it may take some

perseverance, it may take some pushing past some defenses—but what if you just gave it a shot? Let's be the tangible representation of God's presence we're called to be.

Let me pray for us to that end.