

Christ for the Lonely

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[0 : 00] We're going to read together from the New Testament, from the Gospels, from the Gospel of Matthew. We're going to read chapter 26 at the very end, 69 to 75, and then move over to chapter 27 verses 27 to 46.

This is God's Word. Now, Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant girl came up to him and said, You also were with Jesus the Galilean, but He denied it before them all saying, I do not know what you mean.

And when He went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw Him, and she said to the bystanders, This man was with Jesus of Nazareth. And again, He denied it with an oath, I do not know the man.

After a little while, the bystanders came up and said to Peter, Certainly you too are one of them for your accent betrays you. And then he began to invoke a curse on himself and swear, I do not know the man.

And immediately the cock crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus before the cock crows, you will deny me three times. And he went out and he wept bitterly. And chapter 27 verse 27.

[1 : 14] Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus and of the governor's headquarters and they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and they put a scarlet robe on him and twisting together a crown of thorns.

They put it on his head and they put a reed in his right hand and kneeling before him. They mocked him saying, Hail, King of the Jews. And they spat on him and they took the reed and they struck him on the head.

And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and they led him away to crucify him. As they went out, they found a man of simeon, Simon by name, and they compelled this man to carry the cross.

And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means place of the skull, they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall. But when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. Then they sat down and they kept watch over him there. And over his head, they put the charge against him, which read, This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.

[2 : 17] And then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right hand and one on the left.

And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself.

If you were the son of God, come down from the cross. So also the chief priest with the scribes and the elders mocked him saying, He saved others. He cannot save himself.

He is the king of Israel. Let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God deliver him now. If he desires him, for he said, I am the son of God.

And the robbers who are crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. Now from the sixth hour, there was darkness over all the land until the ninth. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying, Eli, Eli, Lama, Lama, sabachthani.

That is my God, my God. Why have you forsaken me? We are looking in this Advent series, Advent season at Jesus Christ, the wonderful counselor.

[3 : 21] And the more reading I've been able to do on the problems of the soul, the problems of the soul, the turmoil that we face in our inner lives as modern people, all the counselors, all the psychologists tend to say the same thing.

That the three great issues that we face most often as modern people are anxiety, boredom and loneliness. And anxiety, we said in week one of Advent, is a state of fearfulness. It's when you are perpetually fearful because you think about hypothetical circumstances of loss in the future and you allow that to eat you up from the inside out. And boredom is the sense of apathy and purposelessness. We defined it last week as a disgust for the responsibilities God has given us for today right now. So it's the sense of a lack of meaning and purpose in your life. Loneliness, what is loneliness? Loneliness is an emotional pain that we experience deep down in the heart, deep down in the soul that comes from an experience of a lack of interpersonal relationships that we expect to have in our lives.

[4 : 34] Loneliness is an emotional pain that we sense because of a lack of interpersonal relationships we expect to have in our lives that oftentimes we might not have. Now, Stuart Andrew, do you know who your UK Minister of Loneliness is?

It's Stuart Andrew. And Stuart Andrew is the second UK Minister of Loneliness. The first was appointed in 2018. So we now have a minister that oversees the problem of loneliness in the modern world and in Britain.

And we have that because we seek community online more than in person. And it doesn't work because we have moved towards remote work, work from home.

And we don't have the interpersonal connections with our colleagues we used to have. We have a minister of loneliness because of the idols of modern people, careerism.

Careerism breeds superficial relationship because we're focused on ourselves. We have a minister of loneliness because of our individualism because of the fact that for modern people all the factors in our lives, people are getting married less and less, getting married later.

[5 : 41] And that means that in every facet of life, relationships tend to be far more superficial than they used to be. And so people are overwhelmingly lonely. In 2018, the UK Minister of Loneliness was established because they found that 9 million people, 9 million people in the UK have some relationship to chronic loneliness.

And so they established this post. Jesus says, don't be anxious, little one. Don't be anxious, little one. I come to bring you peace.

Seek first the kingdom of God. Make the kingdom of God the most important things in your life. Don't chase things that you can lose. And that's the best way to fight anxiety. Jesus says, don't be apathetic.

Don't be bored with your life. How can you? I've appointed you. I've given you such purpose. I've given you such meaning. I've told you, abide in me. I've offered you friendship with God forever. He offers peace for the anxious, joy for the bored. What does he offer to the lonely? The wonderful counselor to the lonely. And the answer is Christmas. The answer is unexpected, but the answer is Christmas.

[6 : 48] He says peace for the anxious. He says, don't be anxious. He says, don't be bored. You've got purpose. But to the lonely, what is the primary thing the wonderful counselor does? And the answer is he gives himself.

Jesus Christ himself for the lonely. So let's think about that briefly. Why are we lonely? Secondly, how Jesus counsels us? Thirdly, what you can do to fight your loneliness.

So first, why are we lonely? Loneliness is not being alone. We see all throughout the Gospels, Jesus would go away in solitude and he would pray.

He would be by himself. He loved that. We all need that. There are some of us who are alone more than not, but don't feel lonely. And there are some of us who are constantly around people and even sometimes people who really love us, but we feel lonely, chronically lonely at the very same time.

We read the story of the cross here. And if you just look at it with me for a few minutes, this is the very end of Jesus's life, the cross, his death. And Matthew, this writer here does not give hardly really a single word of interpretation.

[7 : 53] So if you read John's account of the cross, John is regularly interpreting the cross for you and telling you what it means. Here Matthew does not do that at all. He just gives you the facts. He just gives you exactly what happened.

And the way he does it most commonly is he focuses on all the people who were there at the cross and tells you what they did, how they reacted to the cross. And so if you look, you can see in the second half of the passage we read from verse 27 on verse 27 to 31 is all about the soldiers, the Roman soldiers.

And just scan your eyes across it, you can see that they mocked Jesus. They took him to the governor's headquarters. They stripped him naked. He died on the cross naked.

They put a purple robe on him, a mockery of his quote unquote kingship, his enthronement, an ironic enthronement all throughout this passage. They twisted together a crown of thorns and embedded that into his head.

They beat him with a reed. They mocked him saying King of the Jews, right? And they spat on him and then they appointed Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross for him, the cross beam in particular.

[9 : 02] This is because in the first century, if a Roman governor or King emperor would enter a city, there would be somebody that would come before them in a parade carrying a cross beam as the opening sign that the emperor was about to come.

And the cross beam would have etched on it hail the emperor Julius, whoever is coming. Gaius Octavius is coming into the city. This is a mockery. They're saying Simon, you carry the king's cross beam.

This is his kingly parade and the soldiers are mocking him at every level. And then it turns in verse 39 to the civilians. You see, if you look down at verse 39, it says the civilians who passed by derided him, wagging their fingers at him, making fun of him.

This is because you would be crucified on an open road. They were always careful to do that so that anybody who passed by could see it. And so these are people who are going about their day and they're mocking him.

And then from there in verse 40, verse, well, down to verse 47, that the civilians continue to mock him. They, when Jesus says, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[10 : 06] They said, is he calling Elijah to come and help him? And this is because in Aramaic, the word Eli is also the word for Elijah. It sounds like Elijah in Hebrew. And so they think he's crying out for Elijah when he's saying, my God, my God.

And so they say, wait, verse 49, they say, wait, let's wait here. In other words, they're saying, this is going to be a spectacle. This is something to watch. Let's all sit down and see what happens. So they're mocking him, saying, this is a great show.

Verse 41, the chief priests, they make fun of him. Verse 41, they say, save yourself. If you're so strong, if you're the king, save yourself. They're saying, you're a fool.

Come down from the cross if you have such great power. And then in verse 44, we're told in one little sentence, the robbers, the criminals who were being crucified next to him, they mocked him as well.

And you see what John's doing, Matthew's doing. He's saying that every type of person at every level of society mocked him in the event of the cross.

[11 : 04] It didn't matter what race you were, Roman, Greek, Jewish. It didn't matter what socioeconomic status you had. You were rich, elite, wealthy, lower class, you mocked him.

And we can say one of the great reasons that maybe we struggle with loneliness, maybe one of the reasons loneliness exists is because of an alienation that we feel in the face of other people, around other people.

And when you look at Jesus' life, when you look at the cross, the cross typifies the loneliness that Jesus Christ experienced throughout the whole of his life.

And at the moment of the cross, you see that loneliness at its absolute climax, every level of society, leaving him, mocking him.

And you know, mockery is one of the reasons we do feel lonely sometimes. Maybe it's loneliness at its worst. C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful essay called The Inner Ring.

[12 : 05] And in this essay, he talks about how we all have this desire for relationship. And in this desire for relationship, we long to be known, we long to be loved. And this is what he says.

Because of our desire for deep relationship, I believe that in every person's heart, every person's life, he writes, at certain periods and in many people's lives, at all periods, between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local ring and the terror of being left out.

And what he means by the local ring is the group, the person, the relationship, the part of society that you desperately want to be on the inside of. And all of us have different ones that we want to be a part of.

And he's saying, one of the greatest terrors of life is to desire someone, to want to be a part of that group and to be left out. That's even worse, is to desire the inner ring, to be left out, but even more to be made fun of, to be mocked by that group and that society.

The greatest, possibly the greatest experience of loneliness there can be. This is an aside, but we're a culture of banter.

[13:21] I enjoy the banter of this communion here. But be weary of it, because banter can oftentimes be, you can call it banter and it can be a disguise.

You can say, you know, my culture, when we make fun of you, it just means we love you. And it's true and sometimes it's not. And it just be very weary, because you can actually be creating, curating loneliness in a person's life through banter.

Mockery is one type of social loneliness. We experience all different types of social loneliness. And awareness of a lack of interpersonal connections that we long to have, that we expect to have in our lives, you can be single and not want to be.

You can have moved to a new place. And in a previous place, you felt like you had so many connections, but in the new place you don't. You never feel like you can quite get the connections that you longed for when you move.

You might care for a person who feels, who's sick. And in your caring, in your love for them, you're incredibly lonely, because you've lost. In their disease, in their sickness, you've lost the connection you once had.

[14:28] Some of us have a broken relationship, a breakup that produces incredible loneliness. Some of us are surrounded by people, but we never feel like we have any depth of relationship.

It's all superficial. It never goes beyond the surface. Some of us maybe are moms or dads caring for little babies all the time. And we're at home all the time. And we feel real loneliness in that.

We never have adult conversations. And there's a thousand ways to experience loneliness. Every single one of us is different. Every single one of us will experience loneliness at different times. And some of us chronic loneliness.

And there's also what Jesus is going through here is cultural alienation, cultural loneliness, where you are holistically rejected within a culture that you should belong to.

Some of you feel that when you are a Christian going to school, going to university, going to work, and you feel on the outside looking in all the time around your colleagues, some of us feel that especially maybe when we move from the village to the city.

[15:28] And we just think, I don't know that the city is a place where I can really connect. There's a million ways this can happen, this breaking, this lack of expectation in our interpersonal relationships.

Why does it happen? Look at the cross. Why are we lonely? The reason that we're lonely is the reason that the cross happens.

It's the same reason. And if you were around earlier this semester for our Genesis 1 and 2 series on foundations, we said that we are made for deep and abiding relationships with God to be in His joyful presence forever.

And we said we are made for deep and abiding relationships with other people that are full of love and joy. And we are made for a relationship with the land and with our work and with every creature that God has made all meant to be full of fruition and delight.

And as soon as Genesis 3 comes and rebellion, human rebellion, our rebellion enters into the scene. What happens? God comes and says, thorns and thistles, the ground will give to you when you try to work.

[16:31] The curse of the thorns, the theologians call it. And it means that we are now alienated from the land. We're alienated from the joy of good work. We're alienated from all the things we expect in our physical life.

And what else happens? Adam turns to God and says, she did it. This is her fault entirely, the woman you made. And we immediately see the beginning of interpersonal human alienation, loneliness.

And the very next story is that Cain murders his brother and Cain is exiled away from his family. And we see this development of alienation and alienation on top of alienation, loneliness arising and you can trace loneliness throughout the whole Old Testament.

Jeremiah thrown into a pit for his faithfulness. Joseph imprisoned for two years because he was forgotten. So many stories of loneliness that arise from this alienation.

And then most importantly, God comes into the garden and Adam and Eve hide and God says, where are you?

[17 : 32] You see, the real source of all loneliness is the break of spiritual communion that we were made for. It's spiritual alienation. Every bit of our loneliness comes from our alienation before God, that we were made for God, made to be in his presence.

And our relationship to everything else flows out of that. And that break that we had from the beginning with God is the result, is the source of all loneliness, spiritual loneliness.

If you're in a state of loneliness right now, it may be hard to let this sink down into your heart, but it's so important for you to hear and see, loneliness is the pain of alienation from the depth of relationships you were made for with God.

Spiritual loneliness is the source of all loneliness. A lack of deep and abiding joy in the holy presence of the living God is the beginning of all loneliness.

Spiritual communion. And because of that, we experience loneliness in all sorts of other ways, all the way to the point of existential loneliness. And existential loneliness is when loneliness comes to the max, it comes to its highest height.

[18 : 42] And existential loneliness is a breakdown of peace in your heart to such a degree that you have a disregard for even yourself, where you think, I don't know that I'm a person that people can have relationships with.

That's existential loneliness. It's when loneliness has become chronic and it's breeding upon the plasticity of the soul. The soul is plastic, not like Barbie plastic, but malleable.

The more you feel the pain of something, the more you start believing the lies that it's true. And it's a cycle, a perpetual cycle, and then you experience existential loneliness, where you say, I'm not sure that I'm fit for relationships at all.

And it's a lie. It's a lie, but it arises in the soul all the way from the condition of spiritual loneliness.

That's the beginning. That's the beginning. Now, look at Jesus at the cross.

They twisted a crown of thorns into his head. Why? Because he was experiencing in this moment the alienation that we all experience with the ground, with the land, with our work.

[19 : 52] He experienced the very curse of the thorns from Genesis 3. And the soldiers mock him and the priests mock him and the people mock him. Every level of society, his family abandoned him.

Peter, his great apostle in the story we read at the beginning, left him. Why? Because he's experiencing the breakdown of all interpersonal relationship that we see from Genesis 3.4.

What happens? The cry of dereliction. Why? My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? And Jesus in that moment is confessing out loud to us so that we can see what's invisible, the total loss of all spiritual communion, utter spiritual loneliness.

And because of that, he experiences utter existential loneliness, no peace, utter chaos, death, total death. Now, that means, secondly, how does Jesus come to counsel us today?

Every single one of us will experience loneliness sometimes in our lives in different ways at different times. And so it's impossible, obviously, for us today, for me today, to talk about the specificities of fighting the battle of loneliness, because every single person is different.

[21 : 04] Every single person has to fight in a very specific way. But the most important single thing I think that you can come today and see is that Jesus, the wonderful counselor, comes to counsel you by becoming lonely.

Jesus Christ, the lonely. Your Redeemer, the lonely. He counsels by compassion, because he became utterly lonely.

You know, the incarnation, the Son of God, become flesh. Sometimes we get lonely when we move cities, when we move places, and we can't quite connect with people in the new place, talk about the ultimate move.

Jesus came from heaven. From heaven, he came to seek us, heaven to earth. Boy, the cross, every alienation experienced in this moment.

And if you think back through the Gospels, I mean, we could sit here for hours and talk about Jesus' loneliness. Jesus, John chapter 7, verse 5, was rejected by his family. Jesus, in Mark 14, was abandoned by all his friends.

[22 : 07] They couldn't help him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Remember that his hometown rejected him, Nazareth. Remember that in Matthew 26, the last of his great apostles left him.

And in this moment, the climax of this scene is what theologians call the cry of dereliction down in verse 45. In verse 45, you can see from the six hour to the ninth, there was darkness over all the land.

Now, in this moment, everything that was good about the world is coming to utter darkness. The darkness signals a complete turn on the purpose of creation.

We see that in the Old Testament, and then we see it here at Jesus' death. The darkness of the land signals that there is an alienation about to be experienced, that we cannot understand.

Lots of biblical thinkers have talked about it being the utter moment of decreation. The moment when all that was meant to happen in creation becomes chaos.

[23 : 07] Something that should never take place in this world happening at the cross. The cross is the one thing that should never have happened. God, the Creator, dying at the hands of His creation, darkness.

In Psalm 22, we sang Psalm 22 earlier, and we sang the three great stanzas in Psalm 22 that talk about this. Psalm 22 is a Psalm of David.

So David is saying this Psalm, but what does David say? David says, verse one, my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Verse seven and eight, David says, my garments are stripped, I'm naked, my bones are broken, my heart melts, you lay me in dust in the ashes of death.

We read all these things about David, but we look at David's life and think, this never happened to David. This is not anywhere in David's story. When you realize that you think, you come to this moment in Matthew 27, and Jesus quotes the words of Psalm 22, one, and he was stripped naked. And you realize that from the Old Testament, from the moment David spoke these words, it was the Son of God speaking these words about himself through David. This was always meant to be, it was always about Jesus from the moment, the time it was spoken.

[24 : 24] And when Jesus cries out in the cry of dereliction, my God, my God, this is covenant language. You can think about, if you know the Old Testament at all, all throughout the Old Testament, every time God would make a covenant, he would say, I will be your God, and you will be my people.

And receiving that covenant meant you saying, the Lord is my God, my God. This is Jesus pronouncing this covenant reality from the Old Testament.

And that means that Jesus came. Jesus came to be the Israel, Israel never was. Israel received this covenant promise in the Old Testament, but they could never obey.

They always ran away. They are us. We receive these great promises. We could never keep them. We could never obey. Jesus came into the world, and he obeyed at every level, at every step.

He is the only person in all of human history who deserved to have total spiritual communion with God. He's the only one. And when the clouds cover this place, when darkness comes down, this image of hell arises.

[25 : 36] We're being told here that Jesus Christ in this moment descended into the darkness of hell. The only person who never deserved that, it happened to him. He took it on.

And that means the only one who shouldn't have received this received utter loneliness, total spiritual loneliness, total isolation.

He heard the deafening silence of divine wrath. He said, my God, my God, he heard nothing. He was left alone. His father broke relationship with him.

And he died in hell. In utter agony here, he was excluded. He was alienated. He became truly and finally lonely. There is no greater degree of loneliness that can ever take place in anybody's life in this moment.

John Stott writing about this, he says, I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who is immune to pain?

[26 : 42] I have entered many Buddhist temples in different countries. I have stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha. His legs crossed. His arms folded. His eyes closed.

The ghost of a smile playing around his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of this world. But each time, after a while, I've had to turn my face away. And in imagination, I've turned instead to that lonely twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through his hands and his feet. Back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry, intolerably thirsty, plunged into Godforsaken darkness. That is the God for me. He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered the world of flesh and blood. He entered tears and death. He suffered for me, for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of him. There is still a question mark on human suffering.

[27 : 48] And over it, we boldly stamp another mark, the cross, that symbolizes divine suffering. The other gods were strong, but thou wast weak.

They rode, but thou didst stumble to the throne. But to our wounds, only God's wounds can speak. And not a God has wounds, but thou alone.

Look, if Jesus had only died physically, he would not be an effectual savior for you. Jesus did not merely die physically. He died to the uttermost.

He died a spiritual death, utter loneliness, all the way to the depths of hell. And so what makes the cross so powerful and so effective for us is his loneliness in this moment.

He became utterly alienated, so you don't have to be forever. And let me move on to the final point, but let me say this. In the loneliness of Jesus, we've got to look up and say, I've never experienced loneliness like he did, but that is not to say, that is not for a second, for a moment to say, therefore, I can pull up my bootstraps and just be better about it, get over it.

[29 : 00] I'm lonely, yeah. But look at Jesus. No, not at all. When you realize Jesus experienced loneliness, loneliness, yeah, there it is.

Nobody else ever has. You've got to say, it's because the pain of loneliness is so serious to him. It's because he took my loneliness so seriously that he entered into a loneliness I never have to.

That's what you have to see here. Hebrews chapter four, verse 15 picks up on this and says these great words, we have a high priest, we have a high priest who suffered with us in every way.

We have a high priest who is not unable to sympathize with our weakness. And the word weakness there means our emotional suffering.

Sympathize means sympathos. He feels the feelings with us. Jesus Christ feels the feelings with you. He is not unable to suffer, to know what it's like, to feel the emotional turmoil of your life.

[30 : 04] He really does. You can say today, at least this, my Redeemer knows, my Redeemer knows. Lastly, what do you do?

How do you fight? Try to be a bit practical. Again, can't be specific because every single one of us need specific counseling, specific reflection on the struggle and the plight of loneliness.

Let me tell you that the cross gives you four things to do. They're very brief. First, enter the fight against loneliness. There's no magic bullet for anxiety. There's no magic bullet for getting out of boredom.

There's no magic bullet for loneliness. I think the first thing to fight, the first way you can fight is to really meditate on and contemplate the reality of the cause of your alienation.

So there's all sorts of causes of loneliness and alienation in our lives, and they're different for every one of us, but you've got to be willing to truly reflect on the deepest cause of alienation and that spiritual alienation and loneliness.

[31 : 09] That's a separation from the living God, a break with spiritual communion. To our anxiety, Jesus, what does Jesus say? He says, don't be anxious, little one.

Speak first the kingdom of God, fight to care about the kingdom of God more than your career, more than the stuff you can lose in this world, more than your money, and that's the real beginning of the fight against anxiety.

What does he say to boredom? He says against boredom, don't be apathetic, fight apathy, fight purposelessness, fight disgust for the present by realizing you have been given friendship with God. You have a purpose you've been appointed to something that's so enormous and so grand and so meaningful that you don't have time for boredom. What does he say to loneliness? He says, fight your spiritual loneliness by first recognizing that your spiritual alienation has truly and forever been satisfied in Jesus Christ, that you really have been offered spiritual communion.

The feelings of loneliness are very real. It's a very real problem, and it is not your permanent condition. You have been offered spiritual communion. That has to lead us to something like saying loneliness is not good.

[32 : 23] It is a product of alienation, but there is a good in loneliness, an opportunity. The writers who write books about loneliness talk about the good of the restlessness that we feel in loneliness.

Here's what they mean by that. Loneliness is inescapable in this life. That's really what they mean. Loneliness is inescapable. There are times that it has to be there, that it will be there in this bruised and broken world, but there's a good in it.

Here it is. It helps us to recognize that there is an inner life, you, the true you, the soul, that nobody really knows. Do you know that?

That nobody really knows you? Words of comfort. Nobody knows you, and you don't even know yourself. Not really, not ultimately, not to the bottom.

Only God knows you. Truly. There are aspects of your soul you do not yet know about. You need other people in your life to tell you about them sometimes, but not even they can see.

[33 : 25] Only, only God sees the depths of your inner life, and that means that in the midst of the pain of loneliness, it can drive us, it can help us to sense the restlessness of our longing for God, that God knows us, God knows me.

Truly. He's the only one. Here is a homelessness that you've got to experience in this life. There's a restlessness that will never go away in the life of this world, and it's got to lead us to sense, I belong to God.

I'm made for him. Steve DeWitt is one writer who's written a couple books about loneliness and his own wrestling lifelong chronic loneliness, and this is what he says.

When a wave of loneliness hits me, I try to consciously think, why do I feel this way? I feel this way because I was made for God. I say that to myself.

Following the counsel of Elizabeth Elliott, I turned my loneliness into solitude, and I turned my solitude into prayer. And in this way, loneliness ceases to be the devil to me.

[34 : 26] Actually, it becomes a painful guide, but this is only true when I respond to it in the way that God intends for me. If I go on a shopping spree, which I'm prone to do, I sit astew over the person who left me all those years ago, I stunt loneliness, profound ability to deepen my walk with God, to draw me to the one I belong to.

Third, Louis, C.S. Lewis talks about breaking the cycle of the desire for the inner ring, looking at the example of the cross. When you've let Jesus become your redeemer, the one who's rescued you out of all alienation, then he can also become your example.

The cross becomes your example. And this is what Louis says. This is a paraphrase, but he says, one of the dangers of deep desire for that ring, that person, that circle, that relationship, that we always hunger for that, that, that, one of the real dangers, he says, is it will create the fear of always being on the outside, of being lonely, and it may prevent us from using the great gifts God has given us and taking hold of the relationships we actually do have around us in our lives.

And so Louis says, one of the greatest ways to fight loneliness is to become a servant, is to seek servanthood, is to dive headfirst into servanthood, and using your gifts, and looking around and saying, I want to give myself away to other people.

And it's oftentimes in that activity of giving yourself away and really focusing on that, that the relationships actually do begin to emerge all the more. He talks, one writer, Lydia Brownback, she talks about how we can become our own worst enemy when we experience loneliness.

[36 : 11] We can enter into a downward spiral of negativity, experiencing the plasticity of the soul, where what we believe about ourselves reshapes us to the point where we stay away from people and don't want to use our gifts.

And she says that instead of that, we've got to fight, we've got to get out of our heads, we've got to say, I'm made to be a servant. The cross gets me out of my head, out of myself, and pushes me to give myself away.

It's a way to fight. It's a way to fight. Just a word before the final point. To those who are not presently lonely, beware of existing in a closed inner ring.

And know that the church means, the existence of the church today means that no one in this community should ever be without a great friendship. No one should ever be without a great friendship.

And to the degree that we are, we've got closed inner rings, that we've got to break. We've got to be aware if we're not lonely, are we creating loneliness? Lastly, Hebrews 4.15, Jesus sympathizes, feels, sympathizes, feels with you the feelings of loneliness.

[37 : 22] You have a redeemer that does that. And you don't only have a wonderful counselor that feels loneliness, that felt loneliness. Boy, if that was it, it wouldn't be good news.

It's not just that Jesus felt loneliness. It's that he's not only a wonderful counselor, he's also mighty God. He has the power to break it, to end it, to put it away forever.

When you look to the cross at your redeemer who experienced utter loneliness for you, you can say, I have loneliness, I may have chronic loneliness, but joy is your permanent condition.

Communion is your permanent condition. Utter and abiding relationship is your permanent condition. And so the words of Fannie Crosby, the great hymn writer from the states in the 19th century, she says this.

He knows it all. That's the title. A heart bereaved and lonely whose brightest dreams have fled, whose hopes like summer roses are withered, crushed, and have fled.

[38 : 31] Though link by link is broken and tears unseen may fall, look up amid thy sorrow to him who knows it all. O clean to thy redeemer, thy Savior, brother, and friend.

Even trust his promise to keep thee to the end. Let us pray. Father, we ask now that you would come and speak to the plight of the lonely. And we thank you, O Jesus, that you know what it's like.

We ask, O Lord, in your mighty power that you would help those with great comfort, peace, and ultimately the pursuit of the permanent condition of joy to find relief in this life.

Even until then, Lord, Holy Spirit, come and give us help to enter into the fight. O God, we ask for that. Come and strengthen us by this supper we are about to receive by this great meal of communion.

Lord, commune with us in these next moments. And we pray for that in Jesus' name. Amen.