

Series: Through It All
Title: Through the Valley of Loneliness
Text: Matthew 26:36-45
Key Word: Responses
Proposition: Everyone will apply a variety of biblical responses to loneliness.

Good morning everyone. My name is Chris Farmer. I serve as one of the pastors. We are thrilled that you have chosen to come and worship God with us today. God is in this place. He offers His presence and power, so that we can love him and others; grow to be like Jesus, and serve the world.

Last year may have been a difficult year for you. The recession in the Miami Valley may have left you wondering if God will see you through it. The death of a loved one or a divorce may have raised questions whether or not, you would ever be loved again. An unexpected illness, lay-off, or an expensive car repair may have left you doubting if anything good would happen in life. The Bible speaks of difficult experiences. In fact, throughout the Bible we see people wonder if they will get through it.

Our “Through It All” series is just for you. If you are not in such a season of life, you will face one later on. Troubles fill this life. God never promised that He would exempt us from difficulties. He promised that He would see us through them. Jesus said, *“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

(John 16:33b)

In the weeks to come we will discover God’s promises and resources to see us through various valleys of life. Today we will discover how we can respond to the valley of loneliness.

John, a single man, has a great job, money, and cars. He had a drug history that robbed him of his 20's and 30's. He said, "I still find myself more alone than ever." He has a great job. He arrives at work early and leaves late so that he can delay entering into an empty house. He does all the good he can.

He is not invited out for coffee. He wonders, "What have I done wrong? God seems to keep punishing me for my past failures. I can't seem to fit in. I often regret my past mistakes." At 44, a friend or coworker has never asked him to go to a movie or out for a meal. He goes home to an empty house except for his cat. No one calls to say hello or ask him what he did that day. John is the odd man out. He hates it. His every breath is a gift, but shadowed by this personal pain. John wants friends, but no matter how hard he tries, he ends up short. It feels as if God wants to leave him in the valley of loneliness. Many, like John, live in the valley of loneliness.

Loneliness is isolation but not by choice. It is the inability to make oneself heard, understood, seen, accepted, valued, or loved. Physically, loneliness is an acute attack of skin hunger. It is an aching to be held and stroked. It attacks in the dead of night. Sometimes it feels like it could last forever.

Loneliness strikes a happily married person as well as a single person. Every person who has a productive spouse, for example, knows loneliness. A girl once said, "There are two kinds of men I'll never marry—a doctor or a pastor. Their spouses are so lonely." The spouses of other professions can echo these thoughts. The more

professionally successful a person becomes, the lonelier the spouse will be. Many of marriages have been sacrificed on the altar of work.

Many people expect other people to lead them through the valley of loneliness. However, we cannot always look to people. Friends, of course are a great help—but they can be unavailable. It is as if they have fallen asleep, when we need them to be with us.

According to many psychiatrists, humanity's biggest problem is loneliness. Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm said, "The deepest need of man is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness." The Bible says, "*It is not good that the man should be alone*" (Genesis 2:18).

Technology is behind much of our loneliness. Take television, for instance. Columnist Ann Landers has said, "Television has proved that people will look at anything rather than each other." People put on the television hour after hour. We no longer sit down and have a meal together as friends or as a family. We are too busy watching TV to talk to each other - on a meaningful level! People plug a wire into their ears and pump music into their brains. They "log on" to the computer - alone. TV, computers, cars, CD's, MP3s - all of this technology - has not made us happier. It has made us lonelier. Albert Einstein said, "It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity."

In this valley of loneliness, God offers us Good News: The Psalmist wrote, “*God sees the lonely in families,* (Psalm 68:6) How can we make it through the valley of loneliness? Let me offer a few responses for your consideration.

First, acknowledge your loneliness: David wrote Psalm 142 while he was alone in a cave hiding from King Saul. David wrote, “*Look at my right and see; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life.*” ^{vs4} David acknowledged his loneliness. Zacchaeus was a successful executive IRS agent in Jericho. He wanted to see Jesus but he was pushed out by the crowd. Some say he was crowded out of life as well. It may be that Zacchaeus was crowded out because of his success. Sometimes, as soon as you get to the top, people will separate from you, because of awe.

Other times, people draw away because of envy. When a student does well in school, or a businessperson does well in a difficult market, some peers immediately crowd them out because they resent their success.

David and Zacchaeus experienced loneliness. We all experience loneliness. When we are in a season of transition, we are prone to loneliness. David and Zack found peace because they acknowledged their loneliness to God. God then assured them they were normal.

Next, build value in your free time. Those who choose to add value to their free time make it through the valley of loneliness. Some read to add value to their thought life as they connect with great minds and think their thoughts. Reading Scripture

develops a positive self-esteem by replacing destructive self-talk, such as telling yourself that you are unlikable and unlovable.

Others develop constructive hobbies or engage their soul with music. Paul wrote, *“Make the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.”* (Ephesians 5:16) *“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.”* (Colossians 4:5)

Positive, constructive activities keep us from wallowing in self-pity.

Connect with the Living God: Loneliness can be God’s gift drawing us into a deeper relationship with Him. God made us capable of great loneliness to assure that we will reach beyond ourselves to him. Knowing that the time was approaching for his disciples to abandon him, Jesus sought the comfort of his Father in the Garden. In John’s Gospel, we see Jesus tell his disciples, *“But a time is coming and has come, when you will be scattered each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet, I am not alone, for my Father is with me.”* (John 16:32) Then John reveals that Jesus looked toward heaven and prayed. When his closest friends were about to leave him alone, Jesus connected with His Heavenly Father. We too can take comfort that God is already aware of our loneliness before we even approach him, and he understands. He is with us. He draws us to Himself.

There is a church in Copenhagen, Denmark, that houses some renowned statues. They are carved out of cold stone, but they look like warm, living personalities—so warm they melt your heart. One statue depicts Christ with his arms extended. One person walked up to that statue. It seemed as though his eyes were closed. A man

seated in the front pew said to the man, "You have to get on your knees to see his eyes." The man got down on my knees and looked up, and saw His eyes filled with such grace and compassion. Connect with Living God.

Finally, delight in serving others. Get involved in anything where you will connect with people. If you are very shy, find a group that serves others. Our Growth groups and SIMS groups provide opportunities to serve. We have a group of men who come every week to set up or tear down chairs. Talk with our staff and they can help you find people whom you can serve. Try these serving opportunities with the only expectation to enjoy yourself regardless of what happens.

Look around you. What concerns and needs do you see? Think of the people you do not know. Consider people at church or in our community whom you may have heard about but have never met. What skills, interests or resources has God given you? What can you do to reach out and help others? Even little acts of kindness and little deeds of love are no longer little when God is in them.

Help those who are sick or shut-in. Call a person on the phone to cheer him up. Mail a card to a friend. You and I are in the world to serve, to live, to help, and when we are doing this, we do not have time for self-pity. God leads us through the valley of loneliness when we shift our attention off ourselves and onto serving others.

Once, a famous surgeon of England was asked about was his-most thrilling experience. He told the story of a time he delivered the graduating speech to four hundred nurses of the Massachusetts General Hospital. Before he spoke, he learned that

eight nurses were desperately needed in Labrador to work in his hospital. He made the plea, "Yet all I have to offer", he told the graduates, "Is clothes, room and board, and work. You will be giving one year of your lives for God". When he asked for volunteers, a murmur went up over the crowd. Then he raised his hand for silence and asked, "Are there eight of you who will give one year of your life to the Master?" A moment later about three fourths of that class of nurses stood up. Peter wrote, *"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."* (1 Peter 4:10) Serving changes you. Your attitude, if you serve out of compulsion, will be sour. You receive no benefit. You will be the same person you always were. But if you serve with an attitude of love, and if you sense that Christ is the one who is receiving the glory, then the sky is the limit for what you can accomplish. When you begin to serve others outside these walls, you will never be the same. You will walk through the valley of loneliness.

A troubled woman watched a bird trapped inside her house trying in vain to escape from the closed windows encircling her vaulted ceiling. Confused and discouraged the bird could not see an open door. She realized that she is like this bird, trapped in a prison of loneliness until she flies through the door of God's provision. The lonely fly through the door of acknowledgement, valued free time, connection with God, and delightful service. Change your direction and fly through the open door.