

CIC 8/30/26: Pastor Justin Samuelson, God Helps Me with Loneliness,

Start with Bible Engagement Project Video as Justin walks onstage

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The pastor in the video does a good job of talking about God's heart for the lonely. As the parable of the lost sheep illustrates, like a shepherd searching for his one lost sheep, God is eagerly seeking to find us in our isolation and bring us back home where we can be included in his family.

The topic of loneliness is addressed by other Scripture writers as well, and one I want to highlight today is the author of Hebrews. You might recall from our series on Hebrews last year some of the context. The writer is addressing a congregation of Jewish Christians in need of encouragement due to conflict with others due to their following of Jesus. At least at some point they had been through real persecution for their faith

Hebrews 10:32-36 NIV

³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

Great conflict full of suffering, publicly exposed to insult and persecution, suffering with those in prison, confiscation of property. They had good reason to feel isolated and lonely, reasons that are difficult for us in the American church to really imagine. But even still, the author encourages them, challenges them to persevere.

And before he does that, the author has a few things to say to help direct this group of Christians in their lonely state. And this is where the meat of our message is today.

Hebrews 10:19-25

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

If you notice, there's a few let us statements the author writes I want to focus on one in particular

²² "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings..."

Draw near to God, So when we are lonely we can draw near to God, and we can to that because, according to verses 19 and 20:

19-20 "...we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,"

1. We have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain that is his body.

The author of Hebrews is referencing the holy of holies, the inner portion of the temple in Jerusalem where the ark of the covenant was located and where only select priests could enter, where the Israelites believed God's presence on earth to dwell.

So what the author is communicating is that we can draw near to God with confidence because the death and resurrection of Jesus ensured our ability to have relationship with God, through him, through Jesus. The barriers to relationship that used to be there for the Israelites aren't there anymore. We can be confident of our relationship with God through Jesus.

And we can also draw near to God

²¹ "and since we have a great priest over the house of God..."

2. we have a great high priest over the house of God.

This sentence echoes what the author wrote just a few chapters earlier in

Hebrews 3:14-16

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Because we have a great high priest, who has ascended into heaven, we can hold firmly to the faith we profess. We can hold firmly, notice this is

very similar word choice to confidence, assurance. Something we can hold firmly onto is something we can be sure of.

And our high priest is great because he is not unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but he is able to do so. Because he was tempted in every way, but he did not sin. Jesus who did not sin because of his divinity, understands sin because of his humanity. Instead of a distant god, who has no interest in us or capacity to relate to us, who even disdains us because of our imperfections, we have a great high priest in Jesus who understands us and can empathize with us. As the author writes, his throne is a throne of grace, and when we go to Him, we can receive mercy, not condemnation.

Because Jesus understands us and empathizes with us, we can draw near to God.

So for anyone who is struggling with loneliness and that loneliness leads you to feel like God is distant, absent, inaccessible, know that is not the case with Jesus. Through him, we can draw near to God. Trust that.

Hebrews 10:23

²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

This scripture is worth mentioning for this message, both because it's an imperative that the author directs his audience towards, but also because in life I've noticed that loneliness and hopelessness tend to go hand in hand.

There was a season in my life when I went through an uncanny amount of relational loss in short order. For most of my time working in college ministry Chi Alpha, I was part of a two person staff team. I was support staff the other guy was the director. Since we were the only folks on staff at our campus, inevitably we did a lot of work together, we led worship services, leadership meetings, outreaches, mission trips, retreats, prayer meetings, and fellowship events together. We really were best friends. Because of a

personal failure, he had to suddenly be dismissed from the ministry and leave to go address what needed to be addressed. So very quickly I became director, and had to shift to leading alone after being a part of a close knit team for years. And when you go from being a team to working alone, the capacity of the ministry to do things just goes down. And by coincidence about a month thereafter, my girlfriend at the time broke up with me. I respect her reasons, we had different goals in life, but the timing was not optimal. So I was very suddenly working alone in ministry in the aftermath of what befell my director, and my best friend was no longer in the picture, and neither was my former girlfriend. I had gone through a lot of loss and had lost the people I would have processed and gone through that stuff with.

And because I went through those major losses in ministry, friendship, and romance, and didn't have the same people around to live life with, and the things that were possible in ministry with a team just weren't feasible alone, it became easy for the loneliness to start becoming hopelessness as well. When your work life, romantic life, and friend life are all turned upside down by others, when what once brought you joy now is a source of sadness, and when you have to walk through it without those you trusted, hope that things could be different feels distant.

And so I had to think, since my hope can't be in my ministry work, it can't be in my romantic life, it can't be in my friend life, where is my hope?

Let's look at that scripture once again:

²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

When we go through loneliness and hopelessness, we need to hold unswervingly to the hope we have in Jesus. When I went through that season of life, I was reminded of the martyrs of the faith, people who died for the kingdom of God, like Steven, Paul, Peter and so many others across our history as the church. I thought of the persecuted church in places like

China, Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea and so many other nations, who face isolation, poverty, abuse, imprisonment and even death regularly. Their hope was not and is not in their circumstances. Their hope was and is in the crucified, resurrected Jesus. Because the truth is, our circumstances in this life can be hopeless, we can be alone and unsuccessful in the world's eyes in spite of our best efforts otherwise, but Jesus can still be our hope, and that hope is worth holding onto unswervingly, for he who promised is faithful. He was faithful enough to die for our sake, and he proved that faithfulness yet again when he rose from the grave.

There is one more Let us statement from the author that is important to address

Hebrews 10:24-25

²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Consider how we may spur one another toward love and good deeds,

What does it mean to spur on? It's not a phrase you hear much in American English these days. It comes from the action of riding a horse, using the spurs on your boots to tell the horse it's time to get moving. Turning to some other translations, NLT says Motivate instead, NKJV and ESV translate it as stir up, NASB says encourage, KJV says provoke.

So spurring on one another here and now looks like encouraging members of CIC to serve in different areas of need around the church like we did a few Sundays ago, like Kids min, av team, Boys and Girls Ministries, the outreach team and more. Spurring one another looks like informing everyone of the different prayer needs in our community and our world, we share every week. Spurring one another on looks like inviting someone to the groups that meet throughout the week right here, so our fellowship can grow. It looks like asking for support for all of the national and global

ministries and missionaries we support as a body. It looks like a pastor or a leader saying, hey have you ever considered serving in this capacity, or being a part of this team, or helping to build this group. And when others accept that invitation, show support, step outside of their comfort zone, spurring on means recognizing that and affirming that. Saying, thank you, good job. Encouraging one another as the author says at the end of this verse.

But the author's encouragement to encourage all the more has a preceding statement that gives it a premise.

Hebrews 10:25a

²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,

No church is perfect, including our's. CIC is oftentimes too big to feel intimate, like you know everyone, and too small to have endless options for plugging in. And we are a diverse church. Diverse in ethnicities and languages, diverse in education and occupation, diverse in political views and religious backgrounds, even diverse in geography, we have people coming from as far away as Boston to the North, Aquidneck Island to the south, and Greenwich to the West. Diversity is beautiful, both because it's reflective of our region but also because it's reflective of God's Kingdom, and it is our strength as a church, but diversity can be a challenge to navigate. It creates numerous cultural differences and pockets. To all those that feel disconnected at CIC because you feel like you haven't found your ideal group, know that myself and the other staff here get it.

But the way to resolve the sense of disconnection is not to remain in that place of being alone. As the author demonstrates, the solution is not to be resigned to disconnection, but to proactively connect, to not give up meeting together. The moments when you feel most inclined to distance yourself from church might just be the times when you need to intentionally, proactively engage. To keep showing up, to keep making connections here, to find ways to serve. To find new people to meet and connect with.

Let's step out of our church context. Imagine you had a friend or family member outside of church, doesn't go here, who was struggling with isolation or loneliness in general. If they said they didn't want to talk to anyone, would you be ok with that? Would that sound like the best life to you? No, you would tell them please don't do that, please reach out. You would try and invite them into your life. Because you don't want them to be alone. You would tell them they should find their friends and invest in them.

And it shouldn't be different here, in American Christianity it's so common to be disengaged that I think we can forget how unhealthy it is. And know that every time myself or another pastor or leader announces an event or a service opportunity on Sundays or in the newsletter, or social media, that's us as a church offering you an invitation to connect into the life of the community.

So if you feel disengaged, disconnected here at CIC, my advice to you is this. Engage, connect.

Let's start with Sundays: **Show up early before service begins and leave late** so you have space in your schedule to linger, to talk, to catch up. Don't sit alone, find a group you don't know and sit next to them. If you see someone you don't recognize, say hello to them. Ask them their name, where they're from. Maybe **leave space in your lunch plans** so you can invite people out with you, or **open up your home and invite people** that you want to know better over to a meal.

Next, **Find a group outside of Sunday morning to meet with**. We have Boys and Girls ministries Sunday night, a Monday night Men's Group, Prayer Tuesday night, Women's groups Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, Young Adults, Men's Basketball, Pastor Jim Wallace's study group Wednesday night. We got Youth Friday Nights, and smaller home groups that meet throughout the week and weekend. With these groups you'll get to grow deeper in your faith, have the chance to not just listen but discuss, and you'll get the chance to grow closer to others.

And **serve on a team**. Whether that's with kidsmin, av, security, greeters, the outreach team, translators, the cleaning team, a mission trip, be willing to serve. You won't just help fill a need at CIC, but you'll be a part of a team, you'll have more people to know, you'll be doing real work that blesses others in the community.

My old church Saints Community Church in New Orleans used to use a meal plan analogy to talk about being a part of their body. It was a great city for food analogies. **Sunday morning was just the appetizer**, not the main event, just a taste of the meal to come. **Small groups were the soup and salad**, and it was **serving** that **was the entree**, the climax of the meal, the most substantial part. Not Sunday mornings, not small groups, serving. Which was to say, you won't feel like you're really plugged in, connected, engaged, on mission, until you actually serve. And so if you come to this church or any church for that matter, and you only attend on Sundays and that's the limit of your involvement, and you feel like this can't be it, there's more I'm looking for from this community, you're absolutely right there is more! But the solution isn't to be less involved, it's actually the opposite.

Don't give up meeting together.