

**Message: “What Good is Prayer?” Alone with God**

**The coronavirus continues to spread around the world, affecting millions of people.** Thousands have died. Lives are interrupted. There isn't a person joining us whose household hasn't been impacted. There's a lot of fear, uncertainty and doubt. We're asking “what if?” a lot, but there's no one who can give us answers. The government can't. Business leaders can't. Teachers, doctors and professionals can't. Even pastors can't. We all feel the impact.

**Are you feeling isolated, disconnected and lonely?** You aren't the only one. Mother Teresa once said “*the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible form of poverty.*”<sup>1</sup> She described loneliness as the modern-day equivalent to leprosy. Enforced social distancing can feel like that.

**Loneliness is one symptom of a needy soul.**

The global health firm Cigna released a study in May 2018 of 20,000 American adults. “They found that almost half (46%) of us sometimes or always feel lonely or left out, and that was before the coronavirus.

Other results:

- **Two in five** of us (43%) feel our relationships aren't meaningful and we're isolated from others.
- **One in four** of us (27%) rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand us.
- **One in five** of us (20%) report they rarely feel close to people or feel like there are people they can talk to.

A few, specific findings include:

- **Single parents or guardians** – even though you live with children, you're more likely to be lonely.
- **Only around half of Americans** (53%) have meaningful in-person social interactions on a daily basis, spending quality time with family or a friend.
- **Generation Z (adults ages 18-22) is the loneliest generation** and claims to be in worse health than older generations.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Corrie Cutrer, *The Loneliness Epidemic, Today's Christian Woman*, 2014

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/>

No matter what our age, gender, race, political affiliation, status, sexual orientation or beliefs are, loneliness touches people. Loneliness shows itself in different ways: anxiety, depression or anger.

**The core issue?** The pain of not being connected in a meaningful relationship. We miss our work friends, casual friends and peers. That's what hurts most.

**Loneliness is something most of us wrestle with, yet almost no one wants to admit openly.** Pastor John Ortberg, who has publicly admitted the deep, secret loneliness he felt when he was younger, says this: *“People will readily acknowledge being too busy because that makes them sound important. But to say ‘I’m lonely’ is kind of like saying ‘I’m a loser,’ and nobody’s going to like a loser.”*<sup>3</sup>

**Let me be clear: you aren't a loser. You're needy. God loves you and so do we.** What you're feeling is normal in this time of forced isolation and social distancing.

**What matters is how we respond.** There are healthy ways and unhealthy ways to live in uncertain times. Your mental health is being tested, but so is your spiritual health.

**I believe loneliness is one of the symptoms of a needy soul.** Other symptoms are difficulty making decisions, the feeling that we're always vulnerable to other people or circumstances, lack of patience, we're easily thrown off track, and we find our identity in external things. Rather than being centered in God, we try to control our life. We end up defining ourselves by our accomplishments, appearance, job, health, income or friends. Then, one day, we get sick, lose our job, get older or move away. When we that happens, we can lose our identity.<sup>4</sup> Anything that becomes more important than God confuses our soul.

**Our soul defines our identity.** You're the keeper of your soul. It's your responsibility to help your soul become healthy, to figure out who you are. That starts with a relationship with God. When you do, your relationship with others will be healthier. You'll be less anxious. Your mind will be at peace. You'll find your life less hurried and more

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Op cit., Ortberg, pp. 100-103*

balanced. You'll be free from the guilt of failure. You'll be more patient and loving with others. You'll worry less about what others think or what happens at work, school or at home. That's because you'll be more self-confident and assured of who you are.

**You are God's child! God loves you.**

**A healthy soul is a soul centered on God.** That's how we were designed. Our needs point us to God, who wants to be in a relationship with us. That means we're never truly alone. Once we learn God is for us, we'll find ways to rest and the courage to be in relationship with other people, even at a distance. That's the true cure for loneliness, for being connected.

**How can we be with God?** It's the key to having a centered soul. Let's admit one thing: God has the greater part. That's what grace is. God loves you and reaches out to you, every second of every minute of every hour of every day. Let me suggest this: the simplest and easiest way to be with God is through prayer.

**What good is prayer?** Prayer is one of the ways Jesus uses to center our soul. Prayer is a time of spiritual release, rest and nourishment. It's a time when we can take our pain, hurt, suffering, anger and loneliness to God without fear. God wants to hear from you, no matter what you have to say!

**Prayer is a God-moment.** It's a pause in life when we're reminded of God's steady, life-giving love, mercy, forgiveness and grace. God's love is so powerful it drives out fear, making the way for love. God's love shines even in the darkest of times and places. When we connect to God's Spirit, our soul is connected to the source of life and light. Through the power of faith, we find hope and love.

**How? The first step is trust.** Trust God and lean into that relationship. Seek it out. When we go to God in an attitude of openness, seeking the Lord because we know there's nowhere else to turn, we encounter God in a way that pardons and heals us. We find new spaces in our life that free us to be who we truly are. We discover what it's like to be in relationship with a God of eternal love and grace. We can relax and

accept the favor God wants to give us. We're refreshed and renewed. That's God's blessing.

**Prayer isn't a head thing.** It's an "all in" thing. We pour ourselves out in prayer. We enter prayer and nothing else matters. It's time with God. Whether it's you, your household, a group or a community who prays, what matters is connecting to God, the source of life.<sup>5</sup> When we're connected to God, we can listen, question and be who we are with full confidence. That's the lesson of Isaiah and the early church.

**Isaiah tells us God invites all people, outsiders, immigrants, those who feel left out, to gather in God's house.** It's a place of prayer, where we can come and be pardoned and healed. Our lives are made better. The early believers show us what that kind of life looked like in Luke's narrative (Acts 2:42-27). They gathered in the temple and in their homes for prayer, food and fellowship. They all contributed so everyone's needs were met. That's a wonderful picture of how we can come together and care, even in the days we're facing now.

**There are two voices we can listen to.** Henri Nouwen writes, "The voice of despair says, 'After endless promises to myself and others to do better next time, I find myself back again in the old dark places. Forget about trying to change. I have tried for years. It didn't work and it never will work. It's better that I get out of people's way, be forgotten, no longer around, dead.' This strangely attractive voice takes all uncertainties away and puts an end to the struggle. It speaks for the darkness and offers a clear-cut negative identity."

**Jesus came to open ours ears to another voice, a positive identity,** saying, "I'm your God, I've molded you with my own hands, and I love [you as you are]. I love you with a love that has no limits, because I love you as I am loved. Don't run away from me. Come back to me - not once, not twice, but always. You're my child. I'm your God, the God of compassion and mercy, the God of pardon and love, the God of tenderness and care."

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/selah-life-in-a-minor-key/third-sunday-in-lent-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes>

“Please don’t say I’ve given up on you, that I can’t stand you anymore, there’s no way back. It’s not true. I want you to be with me. I want you to be close to me. I know all your thoughts. I hear all your words. I see all your actions. And I love you because you’re beautiful, made in my own image, an expression of my most intimate love.”

**“Don’t judge yourself.** Don’t condemn yourself. Don’t reject yourself. Let my love touch the deepest, most hidden corners of your heart and reveal to you your own beauty, a beauty that you’ve lost sight of, but that will become visible to you again in the light of my mercy. Come, let me wipe your tears, and let me come close to your ear and say to you, ‘I love you, I love you, I love you.’”<sup>6</sup>

**I pray you discover something that helps to restore your soul in this time.** God’s grace blesses and refreshes us every day. We just usually aren’t paying attention to how God is present. Often, we aren’t ready to accept and receive God’s grace in the way God offers it.

**Peace, joy and contentment flow from those moments** when we seek and find God’s presence, surrendering our soul to God. That’s what prayer offers. Learning to live this way has a great impact on who we are now, who we’re becoming and how we’re in relationship with others.

**I want you to know you’re in a safe place.** I’m not just talking about this gathering, but anywhere you go, wherever you are. Your soul is safe and secure when you accept that we’re in God’s hands. Believe in God. Trust Jesus. Embrace the Holy Spirit. Accept God’s grace and love. And be patient as you wait for God.

**Most of all, go to God in prayer.  
Your life will be better when you do.**

*Let us pray ...*

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<sup>6</sup> Taken from Henri Nouwen, *You Are the Beloved*, Nouwen Legacy Trust, 2017.  
Available online at <https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/i-love-you-i-love-you-i-love-you/>

**Isaiah 56:6-8 (CEB)**

The immigrants who have joined me,  
serving me and loving my name, becoming my servants,  
everyone who keeps the Sabbath without making it impure,  
and those who hold fast to my covenant:  
I will bring them to my holy mountain,  
and bring them joy in my house of prayer.  
I will accept their entirely burned offerings and sacrifices on my altar.  
My house will be known as a house of prayer for all peoples,  
says the Lord God,  
who gathers Israel's outcasts.  
I will gather still others to those I have already gathered.

**Acts 2:41-47 (CEB)**

Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day.

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.