

Let's ascribe, to the Lord, glory tonight. And let me begin with a word of prayer, "Father, my prayer is simple tonight. Would You decrease me, so that You may increase tonight? Father, would You remove Paul from the picture, so that we could have a greater vision of the beauty of Jesus Christ. And Father, would You send Your Spirit not to fill us and guide us and lead us into all truth. And we ask this now in Jesus' name. Amen."

Well, we're now into week three of the series entitled, "Only the Lonely." And in week one, we discussed the nature of loneliness. And we discussed how loneliness is a painful thing. And we said that loneliness is not just the absence of people, it was also the presence of the pain of separation that comes from sin, that separates us from God and others. And we talked about how we need an advocate, an advocate named Jesus Christ to deal with our spiritual sin problem, our heart problem, which is greater than our loneliness problem. And then, last week, we discussed the joy of the hiding place, the reality that though our sin may cause us to run and hide, our great God does indeed still seek us out and speak to us and manifest Himself in such a way that He comes to us and searches us out. And He doesn't always offer to fix our problems, but instead He offers us the gift of His friendship. And we said last week, that the joy of the hiding place is not the removal of our problems, but the gift of God's presence with us. And I am still convinced, now perhaps more than ever, that lonely people can encounter God in ways that "Only the Lonely" can. And tonight I wish to bring that humble message again to God's people.

And, if you will remember last week, that God loves us where we're at, but He never leaves us where we're at. And I talked about how, we should not only be intentional about community, but we should also be intentional about our communion with God. And I tried to offer you some help in the way of two charts last week, to help you be intentional about your communion with God. But this last week, after prayer and reflection, I realized that I tried to give you what I am calling a two-for-one special, and I preached to you what should have been two sermons in one Sunday message. And so, in a public act of repentance, I have included those charts in your bulletin, so that you could have those. I'm sorry to those of you who frantically tried to write down all of those thoughts as I flew through the last 15 minutes. And so I just wanted to take note that I have included these charts in your bulletin. The one of which is called "Navigating Loneliness in Your Life." I can't take full credit for either one of these; this one came to me in an e-mail correspondence with a member here named Buddy Hall, who very beautifully put into words the three types of loneliness that are represented here on this chart, and I expanded on that. On the back, "Fighting for Intimacy and Community" is something I adapted from Dewey Wilson, who is in charge of a ministry called "Marriage Mentors" in Plano. So I can't take full credit for these, but I hope they are useful for you, and I hope to include these in the book I'll probably never write.

But tonight, this week, I want to take us one step further, and I want to talk about those times in which loneliness is actually ordained in the life of a believer. I'm going to take it one step further and talk about the times in which God actually ordains loneliness in the lives of His children. And I'm here to say tonight, very humbly, that loneliness can be God's will for a period of your life. And I want to begin with a quote from Elisabeth Elliot and her book, "The Path of Loneliness." "We have noted that aloneness was not a painful thing until sin entered the world. Loneliness now means pain. The other aspect of loneliness, solitude, need not mean pain. It may mean glory. Loneliness is a wilderness, but through receiving it as a gift, accepting it from the hand of God, and offering it back to Him with thanksgiving, it may become a pathway to holiness, to glory and to God Himself." Have any of you ever been in what you would call "the

wilderness." Perhaps some of you called it "the valley," perhaps some of you called it "the spiritual desert," but have you ever been in that place in your life that, try as you might, you still feel disconnected with God, and from others and you are spiritually dry?

Some of you, I realize, I have left completely frustrated with these past two sermons. Because, in week one, I talked about the reality that we have a sin problem, that we have a heart problem and that our chief need is that we need to turn to Christ. And most of you agree with that, and say, "Pastor, I have done that." And last week, I talked about how we don't need merely need to view the hiding place as an opportunity to escape from the realities of life, but a place in which we can be intentional about reminding ourselves about the reality of God's presence with us. And I encouraged us to be intentional about that and to carve out time within our day to meet with God. And some of you are saying, "I agree with that, pastor, and I do that." But, some of you are thinking now, "Pastor, I've submitted my life to Christ, I've turned my heart over to Him, I'm a believer in Christ, I daily walk in confession, I ask and plead the blood of Christ over my sins. Not only that, every day, I'm seeking Him out in the Word, I'm seeking Him out in prayer, I'm seeking Him out in community. I am now out and about intentionally seeking God. And I can remember that moment in which God showed up to me in my hiding place and He said, 'Come on out. You don't have to hide anymore. What are you doing there?' I remember that moment, and now I have become a seeker of God and I am seeking Him. And in the same way that God came to Adam and Eve in the garden and said, 'Adam, where are you?' He came to me and said, 'Where are you?' And now I know where I'm at, and now the tables have turned and I have a question for Him, 'Where are You, God? Where are You? I can't find you. I'm out seeking you and I'm doing everything I can. Where are You? I didn't sign up for some cosmic game of hide-and-seek. How long, oh Lord, will You forget me forever? Will You hide Your face from me forever? Where are You?'" And we're thinking to ourselves, "Why can't we find God?" And if you're like me, you remember Psalm 139, and you realize that God's presence is always with you. And the truth of God's word is God's omnipresence, the teaching that God is always with us, in all places, at all times. But we don't just merely want to know that He's out there, we want to know that He's down here. We want to know that He's near us, we want more of Him in our lives, we want God's manifest presence, we want to experience Him, we want more Jesus but we can't find Him. And we're not lonely because of sin, we're not lonely for people, we're not lonely from hiding, we're lonely for God. How many of you have ever been in that place, where you're lonely and you can't find God?

I can relate to that feeling. I don't know if there are things that you have vowed to never do alone. Some people will tell me that they will never go to a restaurant alone. Some people say that they will never go to the movie theater alone. Some people tell me that they will never go grocery shopping alone. And I made a vow that I would never go vacationing alone. But, last November, I was in a very spiritually dry season, in which I could not seem, for the life of me, to find God, though I was seeking Him. And so, I started inquiring to people what I should do, and they said, "Maybe you should take a sabbatical....maybe you should get away somewhere and go someplace and try to reconnect with God." I thought that was a great idea, so I started asking around and someone told me the best place to go is where God lives, San Diego, California. And so, I carved 8 days out of my schedule to go to the place where God resides. And I went there and I was told that, with all the beautiful sunsets and the beautiful beaches and the great food and the great atmosphere and the friendly people, that there is no way that I could miss out on God and it would be the best thing for my soul, the best thing I could do. And so, last November, I got on a plane, I went, I saw beautiful sunsets, I saw great beaches, I had great food, I met friendly people, and then 8 days later, I got on a plane and I came home. Some of you are thinking, "What was the point of that story?" Nothing happened! That's the point of this story. Nothing happened. I left San Diego feeling no more connected to God than when I had left. Now, some of you are thinking, "These are not the types of stories that pastors are supposed to tell. You're supposed to tell us happy, uplifting stories." But that's the reality of what it is to follow God sometimes. Isn't it? And if anything, I was standing on the most beautiful beach in the world, on Coronado Island, voted the most family friendly beach in America. Sadly, I was there alone. But I remember looking up at the sky and screaming, "I feel nothing! God, where are You? I should feel something for You." But I felt numb and cold

and distant and I had never felt so alone. And I got on a plane and I came home lonely for God's presence. And I started asking myself, "Am I just numb to Your presence? Did I do something wrong. Or could it be, God, that You have purpose in my loneliness? Are You trying to teach me something here?"

And when I got home, I got home in time to read another quote from "The Path of Loneliness," by Elisabeth Elliot, where she writes, "Our loneliness can't always be fixed, but it can always be accepted as the very will of God for now. And that turns it into something beautiful. Perhaps it is like the field wherein lies the valuable treasure, we must buy the field. It is no sun-drenched meadow embroidered with wild flowers; it is a black and empty place. But once we know it contains a jewel, the whole picture changes. The empty scrap of forgotten land suddenly teams with possibilities. Here is not only something we can accept, but something we're selling everything to buy. In my case, selling everything meant giving up the self pity and the bitter questions. I do not mean that we're to go out looking for chances to be as lonely as possible; I'm talking about acceptance of the inevitable. And when, through a willed act, we receive this thing we want, then loneliness, the name of the field nobody wants, is transformed into a place of hidden treasure."

And tonight, I'm here to talk about "The Jewel of the Wilderness." And I'm here to talk about how God can make this ugly thing called loneliness into something beautiful, a pathway to Him. And tonight, I'm going to seek to define the wilderness as the following: "The wilderness is that season of our lives where God, through our loneliness, teaches us that His will is to do something in us, not merely do something for us. That is, by walking by faith and not by sight, He works in us a stronger faith, leading to a deeper worship that results in a greater joy." And, in order to better understand this definition of the wilderness, there are a few important things we must understand about the nature and the will of God.

And the first thing we must understand about the nature and the will of God is that God desires us to please Him. God desires for us, His children, to please Him. And we too, whenever we have an encounter with God, have a God-given desire to please Him as well. Don't we? But here's what normally happens, we go to God in prayer, and we say things like, "God, I think I could be a better servant, I think I could please You more if You just removed these difficulties from me.... God, how about we have this 'I'll scratch Your back if You scratch my back' sort of thing....I tell You what, God, I could please You more if You gave me a spouse....I could please You more if You gave me a new job...God, I could please You more if You made me more financially stable...God, I could please You more if You made my kids better behaved....God, I could please You more if my spouse was more understanding....God, I could please You more if...." And the problem with this thinking is, first of all, it assumes that God's will is about doing and not about being. It assumes that we're in a relationship with God, where He does good things for us so that then, in turn, we can just do good things for Him. But God is not just after our good works. That is obviously what He has destined us for, but but God is after more than just our good works. It's not an "I'll scratch Your back if You scratch mine" sort of thing. God is after our hearts. "He no longer calls us servants," John 15:15, "but friends." He's after our hearts. And He's no longer about just giving us right circumstances, He's about giving us right character. And God knows more about what we need than we know, but we come to God telling Him, "God, if you would just did this for me, I think I could do a better job of serving You." But God's going to say something shocking in Hebrews 13:20-21. So, let's look there now together, "Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen." Did you just hear that? God is working in us. God doesn't just exist to do things for us, God is actively doing something in us. And the things He is doing in us are pleasing to Him.

What is it that God is doing in us is pleasing to His sight? Well, we don't have to guess, because in Hebrews 11, it's going to what that thing is that pleases Him. And if you look Hebrews 11:6, it says this "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." Do you

realize that what pleases God is faith? And God desires to work in us, faith. And faith is believing that God exists, and that we are to diligently seek Him, period. It doesn't say that we're to diligently seek Him if we're guaranteed a spouse. It doesn't say we're to diligently seek Him if everything goes to plan. It doesn't say, "Seek Him when things are good." It just says, "Seek Him, period." Translation: In all times, in all places, in all circumstances, faith is believing that God exist and that we are to diligently seek Him. And God is working this very thing in us, so that we may please Him.

But the next thing we have to understand about the nature and will of God is that God is seeking worshipers. God desires people who will seek Him. He's seeking people who will seek Him. And God's desire is to give us a heart full of faith, so that we may worship Him more deeply. Where do I get this? John 4:23-24, "But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." And now we must understand some thing more deep, that if God is actively seeking worshipers, sometimes it requires that He hide His face from us. And we often talk about the God who is near, and the God who is available, but sometimes we don't like to discuss the God who hides His face. But Isaiah, in an act of exaltation, and worship, in Isaiah 45:15 says, "Truly, You are a God who hides Himself, O God of Israel, Savior!" And this in exaltation. This isn't bitter, this isn't upset, this is praising God as a God who hides Himself. And prior to that, in Isaiah 8:17, he says, "And I will wait for the LORD who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him." Who does God hide His face from? The house of Jacob. Jacob was the one who wrestled the angel and became Israel. God is hiding His face from His chosen people, Israel. He's hiding His face from His children, but look at Isaiah's resolution, "Yet, I will even look eagerly for Him." How could such a verse merit such a response in Isaiah? I think there are two solid reasons. The first of which is that he understood what faith is, that faith is looking to God and seeking God in the midst of all our circumstances, even the tough ones. Look what he says, "I will look eagerly for Him." And parallel that with Hebrews 11:6 that says faith is believing that He is, and He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. He understood what faith was, but he also understood what worship is. Do you understand that God is worthy of worship regardless of how we feel and regardless of the circumstances that we're in? We have to learn to put a period where God puts a period. And He says "I am worthy of worship, period." Worship is not just a response to what God does for us, it's a response to who He is. Do we realize, church, that if God never did another good thing for us, He would still be worthy of worship? God, as His very nature of being God, is self-existent and self-glorious, and His very nature mandates worship, because He is God and we are not. He is glorious, and He is the Creator and we are the created thing. And we must ascribe to Him glory due His name, because He is worthy of worship, period, regardless of the gifts He gives us, even when He's seeking to hide His face. And let me read from 1 Chronicles 16:25 and on that expresses this, that says, "For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; He also is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before Him, strength and joy are in His place. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come before Him; worship the LORD in holy array." And it's here that we suddenly stop and say, "Worship is not about getting stuff from God, it's about ascribing to the Lord the glory due His name. That's what worship is. Even when God's hiding Himself, we must earnestly seek Him. And a verse that John and Sherry Ware shared with me at dinner on Monday night is Hosea 5:15 that I will read to you now. And this is the Lord speaking here. He says, "I will go away and return to My place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face; in their affliction they will earnestly seek Me." Do you hear that? "In their affliction they will still have faith and they will honor Me as the God who is worthy of worship."

And here we must understand, that just because God is hiding His face from His children, does not mean that He has quit working. If anything, He is working in us that which is most pleasing to Him, faith. And so, when God is working to hide His face from us so that we may be filled with faith, it goes something like this, "Seek Me. I'm going to hide My face from you, but right now, I'm doing the most important work in you that I could ever do. I'm going to teach you what it means to diligently seek Me, period. And I'm going to give you a heart of worship that says I am worthy of worship,

period, not for the things I do, but for who I am. So, are you going to turn to the world? Are you going to turn away, or are you going to keep pressing in? Because, right now, if you trust Me, I'm doing the most important thing that I could do. I'm working in you the things that please Me, and what pleases Me is faith that leads to worship." So God has not turned away from us, though He hides His face from us. He's doing the most important thing He could do. He's giving us the level of faith and type of worship that makes Him smile.

"What does this have to do with loneliness?" you may be wondering. What it has to do with loneliness is, that sometimes it's not the will of God for you to run from your loneliness. Sometimes, it's not the will of God for you to fill it up with the world or other people. Sometimes, the will of God for your life is to walk in it. Don't run from it, walk in it. Why? Because as seeing it as something given from God, we can then understand that in that moment, even though we may not feel it, He is working in us faith. But how many of us are given to worship by feeling and not by faith? How many of us are allowing our loneliness to diminish our worship, and sometimes we try to withhold our worship until it fixes it. We try to punish God by our church attendance. And we do that thing where we say, "God, I asked you for a new job, and you didn't give it to me. So I'm just going to stay at home for three weeks. And I'm going to punish You. Because You didn't do what I asked You to do. And I'm sure that church and the kingdom of God is suffering greatly right now, because I am going to stay home." Or my favorite is, "I didn't come to church to leave sad. I came to leave happy. Why did You give that pastor that message to preach? Until You change Your word, I am staying home, because I deserve better than that. Don't I?" The question is, is God still worthy of worship? That's the question. You know, it's sad because sometimes, in my own life, I can tell how well I'm doing spiritually by where I sit in the sanctuary. You know what I'm talking about? Sometimes in the back row, "I just came to give my tithe check." Then, you know, the middle people, their week was so so, so they just kind of clap along. But then the holy rollers up front, they get the holy hernia on and they love God so much, it apparently hurts. And we worship by feeling and not by faith. You know, we think that worship is somehow rooted in how we feel about God that day, and too many of us depend upon whether or not we assume an attitude of worship because we say, "How am I feeling today?" instead of saying, "God, how should I be feeling today? Are You still worthy of worship?" You know, it's not always going to feel good to assume an attitude of worship because the thing about dying to self is sometimes it feels like death! And it doesn't feel good, but we worship by faith that God is still worthy of worship and worthy of a faith that seeks Him.

Here's a great quote from C.S. Lewis from "The Problem of Pain," "A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word, 'darkness' on the walls of his cell. But God wills our good, and our good is to love Him (with that responsive love proper to creatures) and to love Him we must know Him: and if we know Him, we shall in fact fall on our faces. If we do not, that only shows that what we are trying to love is not yet God -though it may be the nearest approximation to God which our thought and fantasy can attain. Yet the call is not only to prostration and awe; it is to a reflection of the Divine attributes which is far beyond our present desires. We are bidden to 'put on Christ', to become like God. That is, whether we like or not, God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want. Once more, we are embarrassed by the intolerable compliment, by too much love, not too little." And God loves you too much to give you a weak faith. And He loves you too much to give you a shallow worship that's contingent on what He does for you instead of who He is. And God intends to work in us a stronger faith that leads to a deeper worship that leads to a greater joy.

And this is evidenced in the scriptures by several biblical characters, and I want to spend the remainder of our time looking at these characters and what they teach us about worship in the midst of the wilderness. And I want to take a look at Matthew 15:21-28. And there's going to be an important cross-reference to Mark 7:24-30, but we're not going to flip there, I'm just going to read this passage and tell you about that cross-reference. Matthew 15:21-28 says this, "Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. and a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-

possessed.” The important cross-reference here is two things, number one, in Mark 7, we learn that Jesus was not merely withdrawing Himself, He was actually hiding Himself in a house. He was withdrawing Himself and hiding away from His people. Because it says He was trying to hide, He was overwhelmed, He was trying to get away. And sometimes, Jesus hid Himself, but this woman kept knocking at the door. And the woman that was knocking was a Syrophenician woman, which means she was a gentile. She was not from the house of Israel. She was a gentile woman, not a Jewish woman. But look at what happens in verse 23, “But He did not answer her a word.” Well, that wasn’t very Christ-like of Jesus. “And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, ‘Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.’” Do you see what just happened here? First, she comes to Jesus and He ignores her. So then, she goes out to His disciples and said, “well if He can’t help me, maybe you can help me.” And they get sick of her, because Lord knows the church doesn’t know what to do with broken people. And so, they go back to Jesus and say, “Either form a committee to handle her, or send her away. Because we don’t know what to do with her. This woman has been ignored and she’s just been despised. And look at verse 24, “But He answered and said, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’” Jesus said, “Let her be sent away.” “But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’ Now don’t miss this. The word “bow down” here is “worshiped.” “And He answered and said, ‘It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’” What? He just insulted this woman and called her a dog. Now this is not the word “dog” like the American version of female dog, nor is it the Jewish curse word for gentile, dog. It was the word meaning “puppy dog” or “family pet.” But she still got called a dog. “But she said, ‘Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus said to her, ‘O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed at once.” Oh my goodness, we suddenly realize this woman was ignored, she was despised, she was rejected, but she realized something, that sometimes we fail to realize: that God is worthy of worship regardless of how we feel. And can you imagine this response after all that she’s been through? Where she says, “Lord, I’m going to worship you no matter how I’m feeling because You are worthy of worship. And not only that, I’m okay with being the dog. Because at least the dog gets to sit and watch people as they sit at the table with You and enjoy Your presence. And if they’re enjoying Your presence, I’ll enjoy the fact that they’re enjoying Your presence, and I’m still going to worship You. And if I can’t look at You face to face, then at least I get to be at Your feet. You are worthy of worship regardless of how I feel.” And the Lord says in that moment that He was working in her what pleases Him most and He says, “O woman, your faith is great.”

John the Baptist, in John 3, also makes another shocking claim. In John 3:23-31, we get to learn even more about the nature of worship through his example. And it says, “John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized--for John had not yet been thrown into prison. Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John’s disciples with a Jew about purification. And they came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.’” Translation: “The church down the street’s doing better than we are. What are we going to do Jesus? What sort of church growth strategies are we going to implement? What sort of evangelistic programs are we going to start up? Maybe we should improve our children’s curriculum.” “John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Christ;’ but, ‘I have been sent ahead of Him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice So this joy of mine has been made full. He must increase, but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth He who comes from heaven is above all.’” Did you hear what he just said? He said, “I can spend the rest of my life being the best man at the wedding, and as long as Jesus is the groom, I’m okay with it. My joy is full. It may not be my day, it may never be my day, but as long as it’s Jesus’ day and His name is being lifted up and He’s recognized as being above all, my joy is full. And let me speak a very personal word to singles in the audience tonight and how this ministered to me. For most of us, the greatest fear in the world is that we’re always going to be the bridesmaid and never be the bride, and the hope that this passage gives us is that God is worthy of worship regardless if we die alone and in

obscurity. He can still make our joy full. He can still fill us with joy. Why? Because as long as Jesus is being lifted up, we have the great promise that He who is above all can still fill us with a joy and, even though we may be forgotten, as long as the works of the Lord are not forgotten, our joy can be made full. And God is worthy of worship even if we die in obscurity.

I don't have time to go through the other texts word for word, so I want to summarize these next four examples for you and the lessons we can learn from it. And I have the verse references on the back of your booklets for your personal study at home. But I want to remind you of a man named Job. Do you remember Job? In Job, Satan comes to God in chapter 1, and he says "I want to take everything from Your servant Job and bet You he's going to curse Your name." And God says, "Go for it." So, He unleashes Satan, Satan attacks, and he takes his family, he takes his possessions. And do you want to know what Job's first response was? It says that he fell on his face, and he worshiped. And then, in Job 2, Satan comes back and says, "Well, I took everything but his health, but I bet You if I took his health, he would curse Your name." And God says, "Go for it." And so, Satan strikes and he takes Job's health, and he's covered with boils, he's covered with sores, and it says he had a pot shard and he was just scraping them, he was in so much pain, trying to relieve what he could. And his wife comes to him and says, "What is going on? Curse God and die! Get this over with. Just curse God. Blame Him and die. Get it over with you idiot. There's nothing more you can do. Why are you holding fast to your integrity?" And he says, "Can I accept good from the hand of the Lord, yet not accept adversity. Blessed be the name of the Lord." God is worthy of worship regardless of my circumstances.

And in 2 Samuel 12, we learn that David has just committed a terrible act of adultery with Bathsheba, and she has a child and God strikes down the child with a sickness. And so he goes and he fasts and he prays that perhaps God might have mercy, but the child dies. And do you want to know what David's first response was? He anointed himself with oil, he went to the house of the Lord and he worshiped. And the reason why I have to share this passage is because earlier I said that the Syrophenician woman's daughter was healed, but I can't you the promise that things always turn out that way. Sometimes people who are full of faith, who are after God's heart, things don't turn out like we want them to turn out. And his child died, and yet he still worshiped. And his servants came to him and said, "What do you think you are doing?" And he responded in such a way as to say, "Does this change the fact that God is still worthy of worship?" Worship is not my way of controlling God and changing Him; worship is my means by which I submit to God's control and He changes me. Because God is worthy of worship regardless of the outcome.

Do you remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? To you VeggieTales fans, Rack, Shack and Benny? Now, we remember that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were told to bow down before the golden idol of Nebuchadnezzar. And they refused to do so, and so the king calls them to himself and says, "Why won't you worship this golden idol?" And they say, "We have need to answer you in this matter O king. God is able to save us from the fire." And that's where the VeggieTales video stops, but that's not where the scriptures stop. Because the very next verse says, "And even if He doesn't, we will not bow down to your idols. Those are idols, He is God. Those do not demand my worship, He does. But God is worthy of worship even if this turns out bad, even if He doesn't rescue me from the fire God is worthy of worship, even if we die and suffer for being obedient."

And Simon Peter...in John 6, you might remember this passage in which Jesus has just preached a very difficult sermon where He says, "Eat of my flesh and drink of my blood." Yuck. And that's exactly how all the people there, three thousand people, responded. And the very next moment, Jesus looks around and all three thousand people have left because they didn't like the sermon He preached that day. And He's left with His twelve disciples, one of which He says is the devil, named Judas. He has eleven faithful people left, His church growth strategy has now failed, three thousand people left that day, this is my greatest fear in preaching. And so, He's left with these eleven faithful disciples and He looks at them and says, "Are you going to go away as well?" And do you know what Simon Peter has the audacity to say?

He looks at Him in a fit of emotion and says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Do I have an option? You're the chosen Son of God. You're the path to eternal life. I don't like your sermon more than anybody else does, but I can't help but worship You. Because You are worthy of worship even if I don't like what You have to say. Do I have another option? Can I take You to court? Can I change Your mind? No. I don't control You, I surrender to You."

How many of us come into worship, and we love to hear those verses that make us feel great. But then, when the going gets tough, the church-shoppers get shopping. But perhaps, in our time of worship, we should come to God and offer Him our struggles. In "The Path of Loneliness," Elisabeth Elliot writes this, "To give God everything must mean that I give Him not only my body as a living sacrifice, but everything else as well, all that I am, all that I have, all that I do and all that I suffer." That covers a lot of territory, but the particular ground we are discussing is one form of suffering loneliness. I have said that it can be seen as a gift, something received and something accepted. A gift may also be seen as something offered. And let me ask you, if you're lonely tonight, have you ever thought about coming to God and offering it to Him as a gift in worship?

In saying, "I've tried everything to fix it, and I can't. I've tried filling it with the world. I've tried filling it with people. I've tried seeking You. I don't know what to do with it. So I'm just going to offer it up to You. And can You take this ugly thing and make it something beautiful?" And He says, "Sure, if you give it to Me, I can turn it into something beautiful. I can turn it into a pathway to greater faith, that leads to deeper worship, that leads to greater joy." And it was in that moment that I turned to God and I gave Him my loneliness that I began to sense God's presence working at my life again. And He started asking me questions like this, "If I asked you to move overseas, would you go? If you were to be single your entire life, would you still walk in purity? If no one ever liked a single word I asked you to speak, would you still preach? If your job remained difficult, would you still serve Me. If I never fixed your problems, would you still worship Me? If I never gave you a faithful friend again, would you still love your neighbor as you love yourself? If the Gospel was offensive to every unbeliever you know, would you still share your faith?" And the underlying question behind all this that God was speaking into my heart and He's speaking to your heart, "Am I still worthy of worship?" And the answer to that is always, "Yes!" And therefore, the rest of the answers should be, "Yes! Yes, I'll walk in purity if I remain single. You deserve purity. Yes, I'll worship You if things go tough, because You're worthy of worship. Yes, I'll go overseas if You ask me to go, because it's not about me. And worship is not about my changing circumstances; worship is rooted in Your unchanging nature. And You are always God, and You are always good, and You are always worthy of worship."

Some of you tonight are worried and asking yourself, "Well pastor, does that mean, in order to have a deeper faith, in order to understand worship, does that mean that I'm going to have to suffer or someone I love is going to have to suffer terrible things? Are you saying that in order to understand what it means to have faith, to what it means to have worship, to know what it means to have joy, am I going to have to suffer? Is someone I know or love going to have to die in order for me to understand faith and worship in joy?" And really, the question is not, "Is someone going to have to die in order for us to understand those things?" The question is, "Do we realize that somebody already did die for us to understand those things?" And it wasn't our son, it was the Son of God. The scriptures say that we didn't even love Him, but God loved Him a lot. He was His beloved Son. And Jesus had to suffer upon the cross and purchase our faith, because we were faithless. And He had to offer to us worship, because had forgotten what it was to worship. And He had to show us what joy is, because we were too happy with the world.

And so tonight, my invitation is not to think about all the terrible things that are going to happen, all the suffering that is going to have to happen. I want us to think about the cross for a moment, and I want us to dare to think and believe for a moment that that moment upon which Jesus was on the cross, and He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" And He felt the weight of separation between God and mankind, and it came upon Him. Do you realize that in that moment, He felt distant, that it was in that moment that God was reconciling the world to Himself?

And do you realize that right now, in the midst of your loneliness, where you are crying out, "My God, My God, where are you?" He is working in you the thing which pleases Him most, faith. And to choose the way of the cross is to choose the path of suffering. And I wish I could tell you that there were any other way, but you know what? If you're going to live a godly life, the scriptures promise us there involves suffering. And you are going to enter into the fellowship of God's Son, and God is going to help you to understand that, when we are crying out, "My God, My God, where are you?" It's in that moment, He is doing the most important things that He could ever do. So sometimes, we don't run from loneliness. Sometimes, we walk in it, and we trust Him, and we worship Him, and we seek after Him, because the way of the cross is the path of suffering. But the jewel of the wilderness, the hidden treasure in all of it, is that, in a way that we would have never imagined, God can do those things in us which are most pleasing to Him. And when He does that, when He grows your faith in you, that He teaches you what it truly means to truly worship Him, and He says, "I'm telling you, there's a greater joy coming and for the joy set before you, I'm inviting you to endure the cross." And sometimes taking the way of the cross is to journey down the path of loneliness.

Let us pray, "Father, would we dare to believe here tonight, that upon the cross of Christ, when He cried out, You were doing the greatest work that mankind has ever known. And would You give us the faith to believe, in the moment we wonder, "Where are You?" that You are still at work in us? Father, it doesn't feel good, but You're still worthy. Father, we wouldn't have chosen the path of suffering, but to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And Father, it hurts so bad to be in the fire. And the reality is, You might not rescue me, but even if You don't, I can't go back to my idols. Because, Father, You are worthy, and You're working in me a heart of faith that says, that You are and always will be and that I'm called to diligently seek You, period. So Father, give us a heart of faith, that leads to a deeper worship, that finds exaltation in the great joy of Your Son. And we ask You to now go with us, in Christ's name. Amen."

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