Good morning. For those of you who were unable to join us last week, Matt is away on sabbatical for the month of June, and I am in his stead. My name is Paul Matthies. I’m the membership pastor here at the Village Church, and last week I kicked off a series on loneliness entitled, “Only the Lonely.” And I had two common reactions to my message last week. The first one which was empathy. Many people contacted me and said, “I too deal with deep loneliness, and I understand exactly where you’re at.” So I appreciate your encouragement and your empathy with me as we take this journey together. The second reaction was one of sympathy. After the message, I realized and many of you realize as you got into your car, you said to yourself, “Wait a minute. Did Paul say he had a heart attack? Did he ever finish that story?” And to be honest, no, I never finished the story. I realized that I told you I was alone in the hospital, but I never told you what happened with my heart attack situation. So some of you have been wondering, “Are you okay?” And I’m fine. I’m here today, obviously doing well. And the only broken hearts I’ve had since then have been girl related. So you’re welcome to pray about that.

I started our journey last week and my aims were three. The first thing last week was to show you that loneliness is a common human experience. Meaning that all of us, whether single or married, whether for a short period of time or for an extended season, deal with with loneliness. Why so? Well that lead into my second aim that loneliness is, at it’s root, a spiritual issue. But often we define loneliness in physical or emotional terms. That is we think loneliness can be defined by the absence of people whether physically or emotionally. So we think to ourselves, “What we need to do to fix our problem of loneliness is to have more people in our lives.” And when that doesn’t work we think, “Well, we need more considerate people in our lives.” And so I talked about how we define loneliness in emotional or physical. But that doesn’t complete the picture because loneliness is also the presence of pain. It’s not just the absence of people, it’s also the presence of pain. The pain of separation from God and others, it began in the Garden of Eden when Adam decided to choose the pleasures of sin, and in doing so, he inherited the pain of loneliness. And I talked about how we have a heart problem, a sin problem, and we can’t enjoy intimacy with God and one another unless we address this pain called loneliness. Because we have a sin problem; we’re in need of a new heart. And God can use this time of loneliness, first of all, to draw people to Himself and to conform us to the image of Christ. And I talked about how God has provided us a solution to our heart problem, our sin problem in Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ serves as our advocate, He addresses loneliness at it’s root, He addresses our sin problem, and He stands in the gap. And God can use this time of loneliness, first of all, to draw people to Himself, to reveal to them the pain of separation from Him. And He can also use it in the lives of His children by allowing the pain of loneliness in our lives. He reminds us that we are still enjoying the pleasures of sin. And as long as we are enjoying the pleasures of sin, we will inherit the pain of loneliness. So, He even uses loneliness to draw his children back to Himself and remind us that we’re still in need of a Savior, Jesus Christ.

And so, I was talking all these things and talking about the pain of loneliness, and some of you were saying, “Yes pastor, it’s true. Loneliness is painful. But I’m here to tell you that I prefer the pain of loneliness to the pressures of people.” And have you ever thought to yourself, “Oh my goodness. Loneliness is nothing compared to dealing with unpredictable and often hurtful relationships.” Have you ever been in a place where you saw loneliness, not as a problem, but as a solution to your problem called people? And we sometimes choose loneliness over the pressures of people. Ministry would be great, if it weren’t for people. And sometimes, I myself like to hide. And sometimes all of us can think of hiding places that we go to when we’re feeling overwhelmed by circumstances, or frustrated with people, or even disillusioned with
our faith. How many of you have a location or something that you do to just get away? I think all of us have that. And something that I like to do, in those moments, is just get in my car and drive. Do I have any other fellow drivers that just get in their cars and drive? And sometimes I think to myself, “What if I just kept driving into Mexico? What if I just kept driving and started a new life for myself?” And that thought is just always in the back of my mind, “What if I just kept pressing the gas, just kept going and going and going?” Some of us, too, can think of times in our lives when we felt like getting away from the pressures of people.

Well, sometimes when I’m in my car, driving, in my rebellious moments, I turn on 106.1 KISSFM. And these are only in my rebellious moments mind you. But as I was listening to the music that our culture listens to, I realize that it’s amazing how all of us, even reflected in our music, fluctuate between loneliness as our problem to loneliness as a solution to our problem. And we start off singing this song, “Lonely, I’m Mr. Lonely. I have nobody to call my own. Lonely, I’m Mr. Lonely...” So we see loneliness as a great problem, but then, all of a sudden, we switch over to this song, “…but since you’ve been gone, I can breathe for the first time. I’m so moving on, yeah, yeah. Thanks to you, I get, I get what I want...” And so it is that we fluctuate between loneliness as being our greatest problem to, “Thank goodness those people are gone. I can breathe for the very first time.”

And so, we see loneliness as a problem at first, but then we think that maybe it’s a solution to our problems. And I’m here to tell you that we’re not the first people in the history of mankind to choose loneliness. Many of us, over the course of history, since the beginning of time, have chosen to hide. Hiding is something that humans have done since our beginning. And I’m here to tell you this morning the great news that God even has purpose in the hiding place. And sometimes we seek to escape the tough realities of life and escape the pressures of people only to encounter the great reality of God’s presence. And so, God has great purpose in the hiding place because it’s no longer merely a place of escape, but also a place of enjoyment of Him. And today, I’m going to talk about five biblical characters who chose to hide. And in their hiding, God met with them. And so, I want to look at these five biblical characters and I want to talk about those things that are common to each of them. And I want to talk about what it is to learn about God and ourselves so that we too can discover the joy of the hiding place. And so, today we are going to be talking about the joy of the hiding place.

Let me begin with a word of prayer, “Father, we come here with a great sense of expectation, not just to hear good music, not merely to hear what we hope is faithful preaching, but Father, to encounter You. And so, Lord, empty us of ourselves and fill us with Your Spirit. And Father, give us a reality of the gift of Your presence here with us. This morning, Father, our deepest need in our hiding is to encounter You. And so, Father, meet with us here this morning. And we ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

As I mentioned, loneliness and hiding have been with us since the beginning of mankind. As a matter of fact, Adam was the first person who chose to run to the hiding place. And in Genesis 3, God is painting the picture of what life once was when we enjoyed perfect fellowship with Him and with one another. And in Genesis 2, we learn that God took dust and formed man and He breathed into his nostrils and Adam came into being. And Adam had a killer deal. Adam was told that “all that you is keep the land, to cultivate the land and to enjoy perfect fellowship with Me.” And then God comes to him and puts him to sleep and provides a spouse for Him. And together, he and Eve were naked and unashamed. And they were able to enjoy all the pleasures of the garden and the pleasures of one another and the pleasures of intimacy with God, granted that they did not eat from one tree. So, they had a wonderful deal, a wonderful deal that any of us would take. But there’s always that red button, isn’t there, that we aren’t supposed to push, and we love to push it. And one day, the serpent, the craftiest of the garden, came to Adam and Eve and said, “If you eat of the fruit of which God told you not to eat, not only will you not die, you’re gonna be like God.” And they believed him and they bit and the world fell and suddenly they were overwhelmed with a sense of shame and a sense of disconnectedness and the pain of
loneliness and they covered themselves with fig leaves. And then, did they not only realize that they need to hide from one another, but they also had to hide from God. And so, they did the first thing they could think to do, they hide behind a bush. And it says that God was walking in the Garden in the cool of the day in Genesis 3. And then, they hear him and they want to remain hidden from His presence, because hiding would be something that humans do from then on out. And so, God calls out, “Adam, where are you? Where are you?” And his question was not for Him, it was for them to help them find themselves again, because they were lost. And so, Adam says, “Here I am.” And God leans down and He asks him, “Who told you that you were naked?” And from then on, humanity creates a history of hiding.

And next time we encounter someone hiding, it’s Genesis 16 when we encounter Hagar the maidservant of Sarah. And what’s interesting to note is that Hagar was an Egyptian woman, meaning that she was likely part of the bounty of battle, meaning that it went something like this, they conquered an Egyptian battle, and the Israeli people would then go in and say, “If you become our servants we will not kill you.” And so Hagar had likely made this deal with Abraham and Sarah, that she would have her life spared in exchange for her service. Well, Sarah and Abraham have a conversation in which Sarah says, “Abraham, you need an heir, and I realize that God has promised us an heir, but the reality is, I’m just past child-bearing age. And so, I have a better idea, why don’t you sleep with Hagar? And we’ll see how that works out. Maybe she’ll give you a son.” And so, Abraham says, “That’s a great idea. I know God promised me an heir, but maybe we should go ahead and do this.” So, he sleeps with Hagar, and Hagar conceives. Now what you have to understand about this picture is that, for Hagar, this no longer made her an Egyptian slave woman, it was also her chance to be something great. She was now the mother of the patriarch’s heir. And so she was thinking to herself, “Wow, this is fantastic. I finally get my opportunity. I have arrived.” But, she learns of Sarah’s plan, not to let her keep the baby, not to become the new matriarch, but instead, that Sarah was going to take the son and raise it as her own. And like any mother, she begins to hate Sarah for this plan, not to let her keep the baby, not to become the new matriarch, but instead, that Sarah was going to take the son and raise it as her own. And Abraham notices this hatred and she approaches Abraham and she says, “Abraham, this woman now hates me.” And Abraham says the unthinkable, he says, “do with her as you so please.” And Sarah decides to beat Hagar. And in a great moment of emotional and physical abuse, she beats her pregnant slave woman. And you can almost imagine Hagar huddled in a corner asking herself, “if this woman hits me again, am I going to lose my baby?” And so she runs and she hides and she seeks to escape her circumstances. It says she runs down by a well and it’s likely that she ran down by a well because she’s thinking, “this is my only opportunity to perhaps survive. I’ll just live off the water of this well. And perhaps I could raise my son here and I’ll just spend the rest of my life in hiding.” But then, behind her the angel of the Lord leans down and asks her, “Hagar, where have you come from? And where are you going?”

Elijah was the great prophet of Israel known for his workings of miracles. He was known for his miraculous deeds. And one day, he encounters Obadiah in 1 Kings 18, and he’s informed that many of the prophets are in hiding because Jezebel, the evil queen, has decided to put out a death warrant on all of the prophets of Israel, because she was now supporting the prophets of Baal. But Elijah, in an act of great courage says, “Oh no, oh no, I’m not going to hide. Instead, you tell those prophets of Baal to meet me on the mountain and we’ll see who the true God is.” And so, he engages in a “My God is better than your god” competition. And so, they meet up on the side of the mountain and they do this little thing where he tells the prophets of Baal, “You build your altar, I’ll build my altar. You put your oxen on your altar and you try to call down your god to consume it with fire, I will build my altar, I’m going to drench it with water and build a trench around it so that when He comes, I’ll show you that He really is the true God.” And so they engage in this battle, and suddenly the prophets of Baal start calling on Baal saying, “Come, consume the altar. Come, consume the altar.” And they don’t get any response. And so, starts taunting them and saying, “Is your god on a journey? Is he using the bathroom? Has he fallen asleep?” And then he starts taunting them, and he goes over to his altar and says, “Oh, great God, consume this altar.” And the true God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob consumes the altar and all of sudden, the people repent and turn their hearts to the true God. And all the prophets of Baal are then killed. And so, Elijah has his great moment of courage and obedience and victory. But then, they get a memo and the memo is from
Jezebel and she says, “I’m coming to kill you Elijah.” Now this is the point where women should feel empowered, the reality that Elijah thought, “I can take 400 men, but I cannot handle one successful woman.” And so, he runs away in fear because he realizes that now that a woman’s involved, something can indeed happen. And so he runs away in fear and in trembling. And he runs away and he keeps running and he keeps running to the point that he just wants to die. And an angel of the Lord comes to him and says, “Get up and eat. I’ll give you enough food for the journey.” So he eats, but then in 1 Kings 19, it says that he is hidden away in the cave. He lodges himself in a cave and behind him, he hears the voice of the Lord leaning down to him and asking, “Elijah, what are you doing here?”

Baruch was the great scribe of Jeremiah. Now, you may be less familiar with this character, by the name of Baruch, because Baruch was not a prominent figure in the book of Jeremiah, but we do learn that Baruch was a scribe of Jeremiah. And in doing so, Jeremiah had him writing down all of the prophecies. And if you remember the book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah’s prophecies were not popular with the people of the day. Because basically, he was telling them, “Babylon’s going to come and they’re going to take us into exile and we’re not supposed to fight it. It’s our punishment.” And the other Israelites preferred the ones that said, “We get to keep our homes and our land and get to keep things the way they are,” and so they didn’t like Jeremiah’s prophecies that much. And so, everywhere Jeremiah and Baruch went, there was trouble. So Baruch had a very difficult job, but his job got even more difficult one day when Jeremiah was imprisoned for his preaching. And Jeremiah commissions Baruch and says, “Baruch, no longer are you just going to write down the messages, you’re now going to have to read and preach the messages that I tell you.” And so, Baruch, being the faithful scribe that he is, agrees and he begins the process of preaching Jeremiah’s prophecies. Well, somewhere along the way, in Jeremiah 43, we learn that people start giving credit to Baruch for the prophecies and suddenly, Israel turns against Baruch not Jeremiah. And suddenly, Baruch takes all the heat for his boss’ work. Anyone ever been there? You take the heat for your boss’ work? And he suddenly starts thinking, “This isn’t fair. I’m just faithful. Why should I have to suffer the punishment of being a faithful servant. I’m just the mailman, not the actual messenger. So, I don’t understand why I’m being for this.” And in Jeremiah 45:5, we learn that Baruch is overwhelmed and he’s in hiding and he hears the voice of the Lord as speaking through Jeremiah lean down to him and ask him, “Baruch, do you seek great things for yourself?”

Simon remembered the day that he met Jesus. He was in his boat fishing and Jesus came upon him and said, “Simon, I’m no longer going to make you a fisher of fish, you’re now going to be proclaimed a fisher of men.” And Simon was very excited about this idea that he was no longer going to just be a lousy fisherman, he was no going to be perhaps a great warrior king with this great warrior king named Jesus. And he’s very excited that one day Jesus gives him a new name and He calls him “Peter.” And he says “Peter, you are now Peter, a rock upon which the church will be built,” and this only boosts Peter’s confidence in this great dream, this great hope of being someone big. But it wouldn’t be three years later that Peter would finding himself denying that very man and he would watch his hopes and his dreams of becoming someone great die with Christ upon the cross or so he thought. And so, he runs away and hides and he’s feeling abandoned and disillusioned and and heart-broken and feels as if his purposes have now ceased. And so, he goes back, according to John 21, to the very place in which Jesus originally found him, he goes back out fishing on his boat and he resigns himself to just going back to lousy stinking fish because now he’s no longer going to be able to deal with lousy smelly people. So he goes back to the way things were, but suddenly he hears a voice from the shore crying out, “Simon Peter, how’s the fishing today?” “Not too good.” “Why don’t you cast your nets on the other side?” So, he does and pulls it and it’s full of fish and suddenly he realizes it’s the Lord. So, he jumps off the boat, he runs to the shore, and there he would encounter a scene that would remind him of great shame, he would come upon a fire of coals and he had not seen a fire of coals since the moment he had denied Jesus. So you could imagine, at this moment, that Peter was full of great shame because this scene was reminding him of the very place in which he denied the man who is now coming back to reclaim purpose in his life.
And so, Simon Peter was very likely ashamed, but Jesus looked at him and said, “Simon Peter, stay here with me, eat breakfast, grab some fish.” And then He leaned down softly and He looked down and said, “Peter, do you love Me? Do you love Me?”

Wow, there are so many similarities in these passages about God and us and the hiding place. And we must take note of these similarities because they have much to teach us about our hiding as well as the character of God in the midst of our hiding. And I believe that we can now come to understand and define the hiding place as following: “The hiding place can be viewed as that place or season in our lives when we run from people and circumstances, feel that the world is against us and embrace loneliness only to encounter God, learn that He is for us and therefore experience true aloneness.”

And we can’t help but note this and see this through the many similarities in this passage. First thing to note is that no one came to the hiding place for the same reason, did they? Adam ran to the hiding place out of a great sense of shame. He had not only ruined his own life, but the lives of everyone else who would live on the planet. Now, that’s a bad day isn’t it? And Hagar was escaping emotional and physical abuse. She was overwhelmed by her circumstances, and so she ran away out of a sense of victimization and helplessness. And Elijah was there because, at one time, he was courageous and obedient, but suddenly he gave in to the reality that, all of a sudden he realized that, “I’ve believed the lie that this God who can consume an altar and consume 400 people doesn’t have enough power to save me. That was my thinking. I’m such a coward. I’m a failure. I’m no greater than my fathers.” And so, he runs away to the hiding place and he wants to die because he thinks, “I’m no better than anyone else. I’m just as week. I’m just as much a coward, I’m just as much less of a man than anybody else.” And he’s there out of hopelessness and loneliness with feelings of guilt and condemnation. Baruch was there because he was afraid for his life, and he thought it just wasn’t fair that he had to bear the brunt of his boss’ mistakes. At least, that’s the way he felt. And so, he was there because he just thought life was suddenly unfair and he was just through with it. He wanted to quit his job. And so, he was there because he wanted to quit. And Peter was there because he felt like he had been abandoned. Suddenly, the great hopes he had for his life, the great purpose with which he hoped to live had left his grasp, and now he was left feeling alone and disillusioned and he has that same thought that many of us think, “I’m getting older and I’m still not able to do what I thought I was going to be able to do. I’m such a failure.” And so, he was there because he was feeling disillusioned and defeated.

But the second thing we must note is that regardless of the reasons we’re in the hiding place, the result was still the same, God came near. In the midst of the hiding place, regardless of the reason why we as human beings choose to hide, there suddenly comes the realization that nothing, and I mean nothing, can separate us from the love of God. And we learn, in that moment, that we are not, by nature, seekers of God, our great God is a seeker of lost sheep. God was the one who initiated contact in these passages. They weren’t looking for Him, they were looking to escape. He approached them, He came seeking after them, He chased after them, He initiated contact with them. And suddenly, the big God of the universe became small enough to be near with them, so that they could cry out, “the nearness of God is my good.” And suddenly, we see that the hiding place for us...we think is a chance to run away from people in circumstance, but God sees it as a prime opportunity to encounter Him when we least expect it. And so God, the great God of the universe, in His great love for His children, decides that He is going to come and meet with them.

And the third important thing to not in this passage is not merely that He came and met with them when they least expect it, but He also came with a message and He did something in every passage, He asked a question. He asked a question. How many of you have been in a place in your life when one question changed your life? And here, we see that God comes asking a question. Why did God ask a question? Well, I think the purposes are two-fold.
Do you realize that there’s something of tenderness in questions? There’s something of tenderness in God’s questions, because He did not come to Adam and go, “Get out of here!” He said, “Why are you here?” And He didn’t come to Hagar and say, “Go back to where you came from!” He said, “Where have you come from? And where are you going?” And He didn’t come to Elijah and go, “You’re a failure! You’re a coward! Give up. You’re no better than your father.” He said, “What are you doing Elijah? What are you doing here?” And He didn’t go to Peter and go, “I told you from the beginning this would happen! Wake up you idiot.” He said, “Simon, do you love Me? Do you love Me?” And it’s in that moment that behind every single question, we hear and even greater question, “If I am for you, who can be against you? I’m here for you. You thought you were through, but do you understand that I’ve got plans for you, greater plans than even you imagined? I’m not done with you yet. Forget the fact that the whole world is against you. I’m greater than the world. Forget the fact that you feel like your plans have failed. If it’s my will, nothing can thwart my will. I’m here with you, I haven’t left you and if I am for you, then who can be against you? Nothing can separate you from my love, not even the hiding place.”

And the second reason He asks a question, is because He was making a profound statement that He was going to love them where they were at, but He wasn’t going to leave them where they were at. And there’s this common teaching in the church today that God’s love is unconditional. And you know what, there’s a partial truth in God’s love being unconditional. But here’s the deal, God’s love is greater than unconditional, because He can love you in your sin, but He doesn’t leave you in your sin. He not only addresses the problem and loves you in the midst of the problem, He is going to work in you to solve the problem. And by asking them a question, he was therefore orientating them to the reality that God was not only going to love them in the midst of their hiding, He was saying, “I know you’re hurt, I know you’re scared, I know you want to spend the rest of your life hiding there, and you know what, I love you right where you’re at, but come on out. You don’t have to hide anymore. You don’t have to hide anymore. It’s okay, I love you but come into My embrace. I’m not going to leave you in the midst of the hiding place. So, come on out. Come on out. There’s no shame in My presence.”

Some of you are thinking to yourself, “Well Paul, that’s all good and well, but if God loves us so much and He really feels that way about us and if He’s for us and not against us and if He’s initiated contact with me and it’s not merely up to me to seek and find Him, then why doesn’t He fix our circumstances?” Because if you notice in each of these passages, He never fixes their circumstances ultimately. Adam remains in a broken world, Hagar has to go back and give up the baby. And Elijah has to go back and face Jezebel. And Baruch indeed gets imprisoned for his faithfulness to teaching the prophecies of Jeremiah. And Simon Peter, he doesn’t become the great warrior king that he thought he was going to become. He became a great preacher instead, but it wasn’t quite the earthly victory that he had anticipated. So they had to go back to their circumstances, and God did not remove their circumstances. So the question is, “If God loves us so much, why doesn’t He just go and make things right? Why doesn’t He just undo the circumstances?” Well, I’m here to tell you that the joy of the hiding place is that God realizes that we don’t merely need happy circumstances, we don’t merely need an easy life, what our heart’s desire is is to meet with Him. That’s our greatest desire. And sometimes our desires can be clouded by our reality to want an easy life and happy circumstances, but in the midst of the hiding place, God is saying, “I’m not going to fix your problems, I’m going to extend to you My friendship. And your greatest need is not a quick fix. Your greatest need, your deepest heart’s need is My friendship.”

And I want to read to you this quote from Phil Anderson from “Running on Empty,” “I shudder when I recall the countless times I have lead broken people believe that if they will entrust their lives to Jesus, their troubles will cease and they will enjoy complete and fulfilling lives. And as much curb appeal as this message may have, it’s not even close to what God has promised. And we see in the scriptures it’s something much greater. We find the implausible promise that God has broken into our brokenness to find us there. And yet, this is important, there is no promise anywhere that having found us, He will paste our fractured life back together the way we want.”
Here’s another quote from Larry Crabbe in his book, “Shattered Dreams,” “An encounter with Him is what we want, but we don’t know it. We dream of good marriages, talented kids, enough health and money to enjoy life, rewarding work and enough opportunity to make a difference in the world, all good things. Of course we want them, but we think they’re the best things. One way He works for us is to allow our lower dreams to shatter. He lets us hurt, and He doesn’t make it better. We suffer, and He stands by and He does nothing to help. At least nothing that we’re aware we want Him to do. In fact, what He’s doing while we suffer is leading into the depths of our being into the very center of our soul where we feel our strongest passions. It’s there that we discover our desire for God. We begin to feel a desire to know Him that not only survives our pain, but actually thrives in it until that desire becomes more intense than our desire for all the good things that we still want. Through the pain of shattered dreams we wake up to the realization that we want an encounter with God more than we want blessings of life, and that begins a revolution in our lives.”

What our deepest need is is an encounter with God. We need to experience His friendship and the joy of the hiding place is not the removal of our problems it’s the reality of God’s presence with us. God doesn’t only meet with us, He doesn’t only come and sit with us, He also allows us to enjoy the pleasures of His presence. It’s not that He just comes with a message; He comes with a message of hope, a message of joy, and He says, “I’m going to never leave you, nor forsake you. And I’m going to give you new eyes and I’m going to give you great faith and I’m going to give you renewed purpose. I love you where you’re at. I’m not going to leave you where you’re at. I am for you, not against you, and I’m going to give you what your greatest heart’s desire is. You thought you were hiding, but in reality, I was setting you up to meet with Me. That’s what you need. You need an encounter with Me.” And it’s at that moment we discover the joy of the hiding place, it’s not a removal of our problems, it’s the gift of God’s presence with us. It’s not that we escape our great trials and tribulations, it’s the great joy of knowing that He calls us “friend.”

It’s so important that I read to you what I feel are definitions of loneliness vs. aloneness, because it’s in the hiding place that we move from mere loneliness, mere escape to aloneness, that is the enjoyment of God. You see, “Loneliness is seeking to run from the presence of people and the pressures of life and to withdraw from reality, but aloneness is experiencing the reality of God’s presence, running into the hiding place, not so you can just escape, but so you can enjoy God’s presence.”

Now some of you are immediately thinking, “Wait a second. I thought you said that God said it’s not good for man to be alone. And now, you’re saying that the hiding place can actually be redeemed, it’s actually a good thing for us to be alone? I thought it wasn’t good for man to be alone?” Well, here’s the issue with that, God did not only design us for community, He also designed us for communion with Him. And when you are in the hiding place, you aren’t alone, you are with God. And so, it’s not being alone, it’s comming with God. And in the same way that we’re supposed to be intentional about community, we’re also supposed to be intentional communing with God. And some of us need to recognize the power of the passage of Exodus 33, where God comes to Moses and He tells them this, “I’m about to leave you. I’m going to withdraw My presence, but I’m still going to give you the Promised Land, you’re still going to have one another. The deal is, I’m just going to leave you.” And Moses doesn’t like this deal at all, because he says, “God, we can have each other, we can have the Promised Land, but if Your presence isn’t with us, it’s not worth it. Don’t leave us. Show us Your glory.” And in that moment, God says, “Go to the cleft of the rock. Go to the hiding place. I’m going to meet with you. Why? Because I’m going to give you such a powerful glimpse of My character that you can not forget who I am. And I’m going to show you who I really am, so you’ll recognize My presence when I’m there, and you’re also going to recognize when I’m not. And if you really want to know who I am, you need to run to the hiding place. And you need to look at it, not as a chance just to escape from the realities of life, but also a chance to enjoy Me, so I can show you who I am, so that you’ll recognize who I truly am and you can enjoy Me. Because you can have the Promised land, you can have other people, you can have an easy life, you can have happy circumstances, but if we don’t have the enjoyment of God, it’s going to mean nothing.”
And so, true aloneness is intentional solitude. True aloneness is being serious intentional communion with God, not just intentional community. We don't just need to be around other people and love other people, we also need to make a point in being purposeful in seeking and loving God in the hiding place. And the great blessing is that God wants to meet us there more than we want to meet Him there. And this was shown time and time again in the fact that these people weren’t seeking it, He just gave them the gift of His presence.

And so, in closing, as we talk about what it means to be truly alone, to embrace the hiding place, to run to the hiding place, not as a place to merely escape from life, but to enjoy the realities of God’s presence...not merely as an opportunity to run, but an opportunity to run into God’s embrace. And I want to give you some very practical tools of what it can look like for you to enjoy God in the midst of the hiding place. And I’ve got to tell you that I’m not going to be able to give you such a full treatment as I would like, but my prayer is that you could use some of these tools to experience the joy of the hiding place.

And the first thing that I would tell you, that really helps us to enjoy true aloneness, is to remind ourselves of the Gospel, to get alone and remind yourself of the Gospel. Why? Because it’s in the Gospel that the message of the joy of the hiding place finds its finest form. And here’s what I mean by that, in the Gospel message, we learn that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and that all of us have decided to run and hide from God’s presence. And it doesn’t look the same for any of us, but we’ve all done it. But regardless of the reasons, regardless of the sin that causes you to hide, God came seeking after you. Despite that fact that He was a holy God, a creator God, who had a right to damn us for our sins, He instead decided to seek after us when we were hostile towards Him and separated from Him. He came seeking after us. He initiated contact. The great God of the universe, not only manifested His presence, He also became flesh and dwelt among us. And He came seeking after His lost sheep. And through doing so, He says, “I love you where you’re at. I’m for you, not against you. And I love you where you’re at, I’m not going to leave you where you’re at, even if that means the cross.” And God not only provides the answers to our problems, He provides a solution. And He says, “I understand that you’re separated from Me, but I desire to be in a relationship with you. So I’m going to sentence My Son to death. And He’s going to die for your sins so that you can have enjoyment of me, so that you can enjoy wholam. I don’t merely want you to walk in fear of Me. I want you love Me, I want you to see who I really am. And I’m not merely a God of wrath, I’m also a God of grace.”

And so, Christ died upon the cross, and if we believe in that message, and if we trust in that message then we can not only enjoy God once, twice, three times in the hiding place, we can enjoy God for eternity. And by reminding ourselves of the Gospel, we remind ourselves that God started this thing, He came seeking after us and He had a right to leave us in the hiding place, but he didn’t. Despite the fact that we were hidden in our sins, God came chasing after us. And He took on the form of the flesh so that we can agree with Romans 8:31-39 where we see the joy of the hiding place as expressed in the Gospel message where He says, “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It’s in the Gospel message that we are reminded of the joy of the hiding place.
It’s also in the hiding place that we can ask God’s Spirit to help us navigate our loneliness. You see, God has not only decided to meet with us, He’s also given us the Holy Spirit to help us to navigate our loneliness. God doesn’t merely just love us where we’re at, He’s not going to leave us where we’re at either. He’s going to give us the tools we need to understand those problems that keep us from Him. And I have drawn out this chart that I’m going to spend some more time over in the next couple of weeks, but I want you to understand something, that God not only wants to identify your problem, He also wants to give you practical steps to getting out of that problem. And He’s going to empower you to do so in the hiding place. He’s going meet with you and He’s going to reveal the source of your problems and also the solution to those problems. And there are three types of loneliness that I can identify in scripture.

There’s the worst type of loneliness that comes from our sin and disobedience. And who does this? We do it to ourselves through the pleasures of sin. And what does the scripture say we should do when we identify this loneliness in our lives? We should repent. We should own up to our sin and ask God to address our heart problem, our sin problem. And how do we view it now? We view it as a megaphone. We view it as an opportunity for God to reveal those things in our lives, the pain in our lives, it's also revealing the pleasures of our sin.

But the second type of loneliness is that loneliness that comes upon us through our circumstances. Not all loneliness is our fault. Sometimes we're thrust into it. And it comes from living in a sinful and fallen world, but how do we respond? Do we get depressed and run into sin? No, we redeem the time. Ephesians 5 is going to say that God has called us to be lights in the midst of darkness and not to give in to the temptation to run after the things of the world, but to redeem the time. And so we can view loneliness as a time of fasting, in which we say, “I'm not going to give in to the things of the world, instead I'm going to increase my desire for God.

And the third type of loneliness comes upon us through our obedience and courage, and this is the loneliness that comes from being Christ’s disciple. And how are we supposed to respond? We’re supposed to rejoice. And in 1 Peter 4, He’s going to say that you should count yourself blessed if you’re suffering for the sake of Christ. And you should rejoice in the midst of your suffering, because God is using that form of loneliness that comes from courage and obedience to draw you into deeper fellowship with Him.

But here’s the issue, most of us take the third and second types of loneliness and we transfer it into the first type. Because most of us, instead of enduring through our loneliness and redeeming the time, get sick of this world and turn to things that are not God to try to make us feel better about ourselves. And in the last type of loneliness, sometimes, we don’t count the cost of what it means to follow Christ and when the going gets tough, the tough get going back to sin. And so, God has given us His Holy Spirit to help us navigate our loneliness, so that we not only identify the problem, He doesn’t just love us where we’re at, He doesn’t leave us where we’re at. He tells us what to do. He tells how to do it. He tells us how to redeem it.

And so, you should remind yourselves of the Gospel, you should also ask God’s Spirit to navigate your loneliness, and you should also learn how to fight for community. Now, some of you are thinking, “What do you mean fight for community?” Well, God does want you to intentionally commune with Him, but He also wants you in an intentional community. You can’t just stay with Him forever. He’s not just calling you to be a monk. He’s also calling you to go out and make disciples and to get back into community. But here’s the reality, and if we can see the next slide, we'll see that most of us live in a continuous cycle, a very unhealthy cycle because we desire intimacy. But in order to achieve intimacy in a fallen world, that necessitates conflict because when fallen people try to get together, bad things happen. Right? And so, in the midst of our intimacy, what we desire, we also experience conflict. But instead of dealing with conflict, we instead choose withdrawal. And most of us, with our times with God and our times with other people, experience this crazy cycle between intimacy and withdrawal. And so our relationships are either hot or cold, because we don’t like to
do the hard work of identifying those things in our life that keep us from God and keep us from other people. And so, God’s Spirit is here to help us also fight for intimacy in community, and God can use the hiding place as that time to identify those things in your life that keep you in this continuous cycle. Because so many of us in our relationships have unrealistic expectations, we have unresolved conflict and we’re ignoring the power of unpredictable circumstances. And it keeps us in this continuous cycle of intimacy to withdrawal, because we’re not willing to evaluate our heart and those things that are keeping us from true intimacy with other people.

But you see, God loves you enough, that if you spend time in intentional communion with Him, God wants to speak to you about the state of your heart, and He wants to reveal to you those times when you’ve expected too much from people, those things you have not dealt with in your life, as well as those circumstances that may have been thrust upon you. But you have used them, not as an opportunity to worship an opportunity for sin.

And so, God wants to redeem the hiding place in our lives, and He wants us to use it as a time to commune with Him, and he wants us to use it as a time to remind ourselves of the Gospel and to use it as a time to navigate our loneliness, and as a time to learn what it means to truly fight for community. And I’m here to tell you that we will never have intimacy and community until we learn what it means to intimately commune with God. And we also must remember that God started this thing when He came seeking after us. And my desire for us is that, through the joy of the hiding place, we will return to our right view of ourselves, to a right view of others, to a right view of God and we’ll see the hiding place, not as an opportunity for escaping, but a for enjoyment. And we can agree with the psalmist in Psalm 32:7, when he sings this, “You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance.” And my heart’s cry is that we, as God’s people, will run to the cleft of the rock and meet with Him in the hiding place. And Michael, now, is going to come and sing over us a song that was written by Ross King that talks about that thing, meeting with God in the cleft of the rock. And I want us to spend some time praying and asking God, in the midst of our hiding, to meet with us, to change our perspective, to teach us what it means to encounter the joy of His presence. And my desire for us is that we won’t merely view loneliness as a solution to our problems, but we’ll see that our God is leaning down and whispering softly to us, “My child, if I’m for you, who can be against you?”

Let’s pray, “Father, thank You for this time to open up You word. Thank You for for this time to see what it means to truly be in the hiding place. And Father, forgive us when we’ve underestimated Your power in our lives. And Father, forgive us when we’ve underestimated Your love for your children and all those times You came seeking after us and invited us into Your presence. And Father, we view the hiding place merely as an opportunity to just veg out, but Father, we realize that the hiding place can also be a place of intentional communion with You. And Father, I pray that, through intentional communion with You, our church will also experience intentional community. And Father, my heart’s desire is that we will remind ourselves of Your love for us and Father, that you will use our experiences in the hiding place to surprise us with the beautiful gift of Your friendship in our heart and our lives. And Father, we bless Your name all to the glory of Christ. Amen.”