

MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT //

WE ARE TRADERS POINT | WE HELP PEOPLE FIND LIFE-GIVING RELATIONSHIPS

AARON BROCKETT | NOVEMBER 13, 2022

Alright. Well, how is everybody today? Good to be with you.

We've got the first snow of the season under our belts. How many of you, yesterday, got the Christmas tree up? Maybe there was some Christmas music playing. We either hear celebrations or groans. That's where we are with that. We may have had some Christmas music on at our house yesterday. No tree up yet.

Really good to be with you. I want to welcome everybody across all of our locations and online. And if you are just now joining us, we're in a series of messages called *We Are Traders Point*. And really what we're doing is we are looking back at the faithfulness of God over our past, not to enshrine that but to look ahead toward what it is that God is calling us to do into the future.

Last week I just made this observation that most churches have about a 40-to-50-year life span. Meaning that at one point there was a group of people who gathered together in a city somewhere, a community somewhere, and they said, "Let's start a church." And God breathed life into that gathering. And then there are these years of what we might call fruitfulness and faithfulness where a new generation has come to know Christ through that work.

But it's almost like every church has an S-curve where there is growth, they are reaching people, they are doing whatever it takes to get the gospel message out.

But then if we are not careful, vision leaks and mission begins to drift. And what we end up doing is instead of taking risks, instead of sacrificing, we can begin to guard what happened in the past and we enshrine our preferences.

And then the church begins to plateau and then experiences a long, slow decline and eventual death. It's usually about 40 to 50 years, because that represents a generation. One generation failed to pass the baton to the next.

Now, one of the very unique things about our church is that we are pushing 200 years old, which means that our life cycle has kicked over four or five different times.

Translation: what that means is that there was a group of men and women throughout every generation of our church who decided this won't stop with us. We are going to



pass the baton to the next generation. We're not going to hold so tightly to the way that we've always done things. We are going to hold loosely to our preferences.

Now, we're going to be very clear about what God has always called us to do and to be about as a church. That will never change. But we're going to talk about some of the things that can and even need to change to reach a new generation. That's been baked into our DNA. And I'm so grateful for that.

I recall 1 Chronicles 12, where it says the men of Issachar understood the times in which they lived and knew what they should do. And right now that's really what this series is about. We are like, "Okay, let's take a look at what God has done in our past and thank Him for it. And now let's understand the times in which we live in order to see where God is leading us next.

Last week I just read from the prophet Isaiah where God is recalling to the Israelites their history, where He has come through for them and delivered them from Egyptian slavery through the Red Sea. And He said as amazing as that was, I want you to forget all of that because I'm about to do something new and in fact that has already begun.

Right now I just want to... I don't want to take this season of our church for granted. I've shared this with a few people. Right now it honestly feels like there is some momentum building in our church. I don't know if you can feel that or not, but I can. And there is this sweet spirit in our church right now. I don't know how long it will last. So I'm actually trying to soak it up.

What I mean by that is that just the number of critical emails that I have gotten has just dropped drastically. I just knock on wood. Some of you are like, "Well, I'll send you one this week." But just lots of encouragement, lots of like, "Hey, we're all in." There are just some amazing things happening.

Now, with that said, I'm not saying that you can never offer constructive criticism or admonishment. I need it just like anybody else. We've all got our blind spots. But there just kind of seems to be... God has kind of pruned us as a church. He's focused us as a church. We've come through a really difficult few years. And right now it just kind of feels like this anticipation.

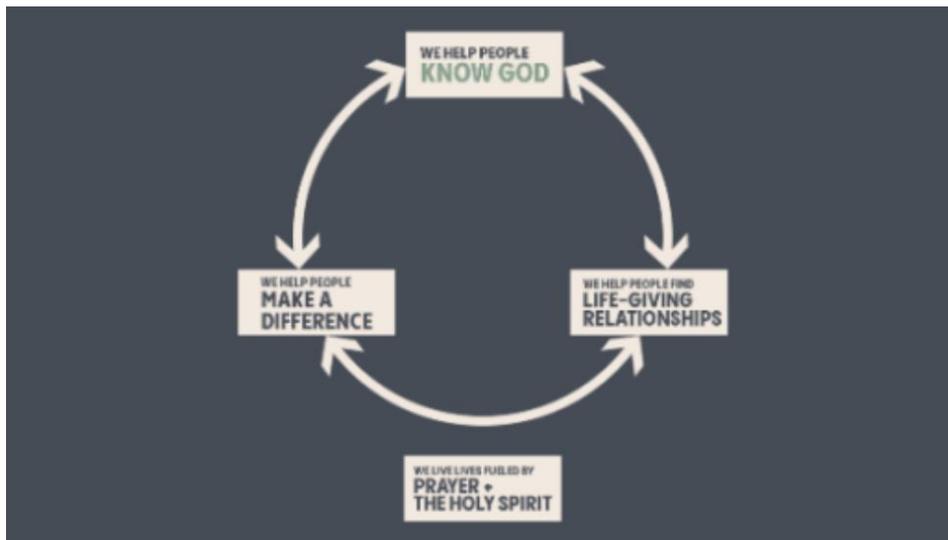
I said this last week. We don't ever want to speculate what God will do. We do want to anticipate. "God, what is it that You desire to do within us?" So that is what this series is about. Amen.

Over the last seven days I've had a bunch of people come up to me who are brand new to our church and they are like, "Man, this is such good information for us to have. We're all in." And I've had people who have been here over 40 years who have come up to me and said, "We've never been more excited about the future and direction of our church than we are right now."

So, it's awfully quiet in here. Let's just clap. Thanks. That's not for you. That's for me. Alright?

So this is where we are going in this series. Last week I just called this the Great Commission Engine. That's the terminology our staff uses to talk about it. And what I mean by that is that all of this is based on Matthew 28, which is the Great Commission. And it should be said for every church. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations."

So if you were to pop the hood of every God honoring, Christ centered, Bible teaching church you would find something similar to this.



Now, their terminology might be a little bit different, but in essence it is the same thing, because this is what we see in the New Testament church, these markers.

So last week we talked about knowing God. We want to help you know God. Not just head knowledge, but heart knowledge—an intimate relationship.

This week and I want to talk about this. We want to help people find life-giving relationships. Now, with that said (I think you know this, but I just want to go ahead and say it) we can't do relationships for you, but we do want to help create the environment where those relationships can happen and they need to be life-giving, not life-taking.

And what I mean by life-giving is not only do they encourage you, fill you up—that sort of a thing—because it's not just a bunch of people telling you what you want to hear. It could also be people telling you some hard truths. Because life-giving also means relationships that help you grow to look more like Jesus.

So when I say life-giving relationships, I'm not talking about social events or dating services. I'm talking about relationships that help form you and me more and more into

the image and likeness of Jesus. And this is so clearly one of the defining marks of the New Testament church.

Now, in Acts, chapter 2—the book of Acts is all about the very beginning of the big ‘C’ church. And in Acts, chapter 2 one of the things that you’ll read in that chapter is that all believers were together.

And while they gathered together on the day of this thing called Pentecost, it says that the Holy Spirit fell upon them and in that day the Holy Spirit removed any unnecessary barriers that might stand between them and the gospel.

And one of those barriers was a language barrier. So the Holy Spirit fell upon them and so they were able to speak in languages they did not know so that way people who didn’t speak the same language would hear and understand the gospel message.

Then Peter stands up and preaches the sermon of his life from verses 14 to 40. And afterward the people asked this question, “What should we do with that? What should we do with what we just heard?” And Peter says, “Repent and be baptized.” And then this is what it says in verse 41:

“Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.”

So one of the things that I just want to point out is that when Peter preached this message, they weren’t like, “Huh, that’s interesting information. We’ll just contemplate that for a bit.” No, they were like, “What do we do with this?”

And Peter’s response wasn’t like, “Raise a hand. Fill out a card. Walk an aisle.” It was, “Repent,” which means turn away from your life as a sinner and run toward Jesus, “and be baptized.” It was a spontaneous baptism, right in the moment. And the church started that day with 3,000 people.

I just want to go ahead and point this out. The size of church is not spiritual. We have a tendency nowadays to stereotype churches. And so we say things like, “Well, you know, big churches are large and impersonal and hard to get connected in. They are a mile wide and an inch deep. And smaller churches are where it is at because you’re going to get deeper teaching and more relationships.”

Yes, maybe. But not always.

Yes, there are big churches that can be a mile wide and an inch deep and really hard to get connected in. There can also be smaller churches where it is kind of cliquish and hard to get connected. Size isn’t spiritual.

One of the things we see in the New Testament church is that it started as a very large church from day one, but they didn’t stay in that large setting. This all was a result of Pentecost. This was a result of the Holy Spirit falling freshly upon them.

This was a mountaintop experience. This was Worship Night, Men's Night, Women's Night, and Easter for them all wrapped up into one.

And wouldn't it be great if we could live at the mountaintop? But most of the time that's not where life is lived. Most of life is lived in the valleys. And valleys are what produce fruit.

So what I want to do is... Pentecost is the mountaintop and then immediately after the author of Acts shows us what their daily rhythms were like in the valleys. It says in verse 42:

"All the believers," this is a key word, *"devoted,"* hard things require devotion. So it wasn't necessarily easy. It wasn't always convenient. That's why they devoted themselves. To what? To four things, *"to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer."*

So this was like the settling in to daily rhythms. These were like four definitive markers of the early church. And then in verse 46 it says:

'They worshiped together at the Temple each day,' which is shorthand for large groups. That's largely what we are doing right now in whatever room you might be in, unless you're watching online in your living room. You are in a big room right now. This is sort of like the temple for them. And then it says they:

"met in homes for the Lord's Supper..."

So understand that it's not either or. The church is an expression of large groups and small groups. Why? Well there are some things that can happen in large groups that cannot happen in a living room and there are some things that happen in a living room that can't happen in this room. Both are really important.

They *"met for the Lord's Supper and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people."* Now notice this, *"And each day,"* who added to their fellowship? *"the Lord added..."*

So we don't generate growth. We're not trying to manipulate growth. God... It's sort of like gardening. Our focus should be tending to the garden, and let God bring whatever growth is there. So we're not trying to grow a large church, but at the same time, I'm never going to put a No Vacancy sign out front.

I'm going to continue to tend the garden. Why? Because there are more and more people who need the hope of Jesus Christ. And I'm not saying that they all need to gather in our church. That's why we do multi-site and plant churches and send people out.

We just trust that if we are faithful in what God has asked us to do, teaching and preaching and fellowship and sharing meals and prayer, that God will be the One who will bring the growth.

And it says that He adds *“to their fellowship those who were being saved.”* Acts 2:46-47 (NLT)

Now, the common theme that runs consistently through all of the description of the New Testament church is that they were in relationship. You just don't see solo Christianity anywhere.

Now, is there a personal part of their faith and our faith? You bet. But there was nothing private about it. It means that they were in relationships that were life-giving, and they were devoted to them.

Here's a question I have as I look at Acts, chapter 2. All four of those things, why not just say that they devoted themselves to teaching and to prayer and then called it a day? It's because God isn't after converts only.

God really isn't all that interested or impressed with your belief in Him. And I think a lot of times we think that's kind of what God wants, “God just wants me to acknowledge that I believe in Him, that He exists.”

But the Bible says that the demons believe in God, and they shudder. So, He's like, “I don't want you to just believe in Me or to just be converted. Conversion isn't the finish line. It's the starting line.” What God desires is disciples.

Now, He doesn't want disciples just for Himself. He wants discipleship for you and me because life is too difficult, and you cannot sustain your faith without it.

So, what is a disciple? That's the terminology that we use in Scripture and maybe we hear that. Jesus had disciples. What is a disciple?

Let me break it down in perhaps a really simplistic definition and then we can expound from that. A disciple is just simply a learner. A disciple is somebody who had a great interest in something or someone. So he spends time researching. Or he spends time reading. Or he finds a group of people who are really good at that thing that he is interested in, and he hangs out with them.

So, if you have an interest in golf and you want to improve your golf game, you start practicing and you get the clubs and you go to the driving range and you're YouTubing golf videos. In essence, you're becoming a disciple of golf.

If you have a great interest in baking.... Just fill in the blank. Whatever hobby you may be in.

Oftentimes what finds itself in our Instagram or our YouTube algorithms is what is discipling you. So it's whatever you're watching. Whatever you're reading. Whatever you're examining. And it's actually changing you into somebody new.

So a disciple is somebody who has been saved by grace through faith in Jesus alone and now he is being formed more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus. That's what God desires.

And all discipleship happens within the context of relationships. You can't just become a disciple by listening to a sermon, reading a book, or watching a podcast. It comes in the form of relationships. Relationships are how God always does it. He always involves others in your spiritual growth, and He will always involve you in others' spiritual growth.

Now, I'm not saying that I always like that. Sometimes I wish that I could just read a book or take a test and God would go, "There, I grant you discipleship." That would be a lot easier and a lot less painful and more convenient. But the road to discipleship is messy at times. And it's going to require you to open up to people.

And here's the thing about people. People can build you up and they can tear you down. Some of the most rewarding things about life are relationships. Would you not agree? And some of the most painful things about life are relationships.

And what God can do is in the most life-giving relationships—He'll use them for your benefit and grow your faith. And even in the painful experiences, God can redeem them and use them to help you grow more like Jesus.

There are lots of examples that we can look at. I want to look at one really quickly from Acts, chapter 9. God used another person to help someone grow in their journey. In Acts, chapter 9 we read about the conversion of this guy named Saul (he later becomes Paul) and he's on the road to Damascus.

And what I love about Saul's story is that if God could get ahold of his life and change him, there isn't anybody God can't reach. There is nobody who is beyond God's grace. Look at what it says in verse 1. It says:

"Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers."

That right there tells you pretty much everything you need to know about this guy. Now, here's the thing about Saul. He wasn't an atheist; he wasn't anti God. He was actually very, very religious. He was just confused.

And so he saw all of these early Christians and he had no idea what they were about—these Jesus followers. And he thought they were a threat to his religion. So he thought he was doing God a favor by going out and killing them.

And in verses 3 through 9, Jesus comes to Saul in the form of a bright light, it temporarily blinds him. Look at what it says in verse 4:

“Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you, lord?” Saul asked. And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” Acts 9:4-6 (NLT)

For the next three days Saul can't see anything. He cannot eat anything. He's sitting in darkness. And this is a real pivotal moment for him.

Why three days? We don't really know. We can speculate about that. Jesus was in the tomb three days. There were all kinds of things that were happening.

But Jesus has come to him in the form of a bright light. He's spoken to Saul. And then for three days He just allows Him to sit in darkness. This was a pivotal moment in his life. Things are about to change for Saul—for better or for worse is yet to be determined.

And his response could have gone a number of ways. He could have gotten bitter. He could have been, “How could you do this to me?” Or he could have completely changed and turned toward God. For these three days it's just darkness and silence. But there is about to be an unexpected thing that happens here. Look at verse 10 with me. It says:

“Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, ‘Ananias!’ ‘Yes, Lord!’ he replied. The Lord said, ‘Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul.’”

Ananias knew who this guy was.

“He is praying to me right now. I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.” Acts 9:10-12 (NLT)

Now, before we go any farther we've just got to stop and think to ourselves, “How would I have responded if I were in Ananias' sandals?”

Here you were minding your own business, just kind of going about your day, and God knocks on your door, shows up, and goes, “Hey, I want you to go down the street and I want you to meet with a known murderer. Somebody who kills Christians. Somebody who thinks you are enemy number one.” Just imagine what your response would have been.

And Ananias said, in verse 13:

“But Lord,” that's a pretty good comeback. *“But Lord, exclaimed Ananias, ‘I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.’”* Acts 9:13-14 (NLT)

So what is Ananias saying? He's like, "This is a threat. If I go and meet with this guy, he has the authority to arrest me. And he might even take my life. And Ananias is pushing back on God and he's like, "God, why would You call me to go meet with this guy?"

Ananias doesn't necessarily say it, but I think this is implied. I think that he is going, "Hey, God. You've already begun the process of speaking to him. You've already blinded him. Why don't You close the deal Yourself?"

That's what I would have been saying. "Why do you need me?" I'm going to come back to that. That is an interesting thing that we see. In fact, the big 'C' church—same question. "God, why would You need us? Why can't You just close the deal Yourself? If You want the world to know that You have come, to know that You sent Your Son, why can't You? I think You would do a more convincing job, God."

I think we can all agree that God would do a better job than we can. But yet, He chooses to involve us in His mission. There is something so mind-blowing about that.

Well, it says in verse 15:

"But the Lord said, 'Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument....'"

Can I just say this? A little commentary. Sometimes we've just got to stop asking questions and go. I think sometimes we... It's fascinating to me. A lot of people come up to me, "My atheist friend has these questions. Can you answer them?"

And sometimes I'm like, "No." I could answer them. I don't know that I'm necessarily going to because the questions aren't the thing. The questions are the smoke screen. We get really good at asking all of these kinds of questions. And oftentimes we will never get our questions answered until we begin to move, until we begin to take action.

It's fascinating. God chooses not to engage with Ananias on any of his objections. He just goes, "Hey, Ananias. Would you just go?"

Go *"for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel."*

In other words, God is going, "Ananias, I've got a plan that Saul doesn't see coming and you can't possibly even know. I just need you to go." Verse 16:

"And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake.' So Ananias went and found Saul." Man, you've got to commend him. He didn't want to do it. But he went ahead, and he did it. "He laid his hands on him and said, 'Brother Saul,'" I love that. Right out of the gates, man. He's like, "This isn't an enemy. This isn't a threat."

Brother Saul, *"the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Instantly something like scales*

fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized. Afterward he ate some food and regained his strength." Acts 9:15-19 (NLT)

That is a remarkable passage. Now, what was it that Ananias had that had that kind of power? Did he just have some sort of amazing power in his hands? No. There wasn't anything about Ananias at all other than his obedience to do what God had asked him to do.

And the Bible is filled with all kinds of these examples. This is just one of my favorite ones. When you get done reading them, you just kind of scratch your head and you're like, "Okay, man. That was really, really interesting. Why was that necessary? Why did God send Ananias to do something that God easily could have done on His own?"

Because, here's the answer, maybe the power isn't so much in what Ananias said, but in his willingness to go and be with Saul in his hour of darkness, isolation, and confusion. God is trying to say something to us beyond just what the narrative says. God is trying to say, "I always involve others in your spiritual growth."

Now, you may come to know God by yourself in your backyard somewhere, but somewhere along the line, God sent somebody into your life to kind of get you to that space. God always uses others to lead us to a saving knowledge of Him. And it's this thing, just this power of presence that is undeniable.

You know, when I first got into ministry hands down the most uncomfortable thing for me to do was to make hospital visits. All kinds of reasons for that. I don't really care for hospitals. I don't know how many of us really do.

But I would go to the hospital, kind of feeling uncomfortable. Sometimes I didn't know the people very well or I didn't know them at all. So, I always felt like I was intruding. And I'd always get lost. I'd always go into the wrong rooms. All kinds of things made me uncomfortable.

And then I would walk into the room and maybe somebody was in a lot of pain, maybe the family is in tears, and I just felt this incredible pressure to say the right thing that would help make it better. And it just made me really uncomfortable.

I remember sharing this with a mentor of mine right when I started in ministry. He said something that totally changed my perspective on it forever. He said, "Aaron. It is not what you say. They are not expecting you to fix anything or to say the right thing. It is the power of presence. You just go sit with them. You just go stand with them." And that totally changed everything about it.

For those of us in the room who are fixers... I'm a fixer; it's so hard for you to bring me a problem. I immediately go into how you can fix it. And sometimes we just need to stop, and we just need to feel it, and we just need to sit with them.

See, there is something about what Ananias did and the fact that God would call him to do this, it sent a message to Saul. Brother Saul. Like, “You’re not in this alone. And God loves you so much that He actually called me to come.”

Saul would have known that Ananias would have been afraid of him. And I think all of this—God used it in profound ways.

Now, all that to simply say this. Can I just ask you this question? It’s really simple. Who is your Ananias? And who needs you to be an Ananias for them? “God, I don’t want to enter into that relationship. I don’t want to say that thing. I don’t want to go. All kinds of reasons why.” And God is calling us to go. God is always calling us into the lives of others.

There are 59 one another statements in the Scriptures. And I don’t have time to go through all 59 of them. You can look them up for yourself. We just see all of these one anothers throughout Scripture: Love one another. Carry each other’s burdens. Serve one another. Pray for one another. Confess your sins to one another. It is all over the Bible.

You and I cannot do this thing alone. Jesus didn’t want to do this thing alone. One of the first things He does is He gathers up a group of diverse men and He says, “For the next three years let’s just hang out together.” And the night before His arrest and crucifixion, when He was in the garden, He didn’t want to be alone. He said, “Guys, can you just stay awake with me to pray?” And if the sinless, perfect Son of God needed relationships, how much more do you and I need them?

So one of the things that we try to do—hands down... I think you could ask any one of our staff and they would all say the same thing. One of the most challenging things about what we do as a church is to try to help create environments where you can connect in life-giving relationships. Why? Because people are messy and inconsistent and challenging and we’re busy and personality conflicts and differences and all of the things that happen.

So, what we’re trying to do is we are trying to create these environments where life-giving relationships can take place. So we’re pretty decent at the big group gathering. We know how to do that. It’s the smaller group gatherings that we have to consistently lean into and push time into.

Roughly, roughly, I think about 60 percent of our church (that we know of) is in a small group setting. And we want to see 100 percent where you don’t just come and hear teaching and pray and call it a day and go home, but you’re involved in the lives of other people, and they are involved in your life as well.

Now, if you’re looking for a way to get connected into a group, the best way is to sign up for Rooted. Rooted is a 10-week experience to connect you with God, the church, and your purpose. You get together with about 10 or 15 other people. You study the Bible.

You engage in prayer. You have serving experiences. You share stories, build community, practice these spiritual rhythms in your life.

We just wrapped our fall session of Rooted. We had a celebration on Wednesday night. Let me hear it for those of you who hit the finish line of Rooted. I think we have a few pictures of the Rooted celebration.

We had 710 people sign up for Rooted. We had 655 complete it, which we're pretty happy about. Out of that we had 39 baptisms that came out of Rooted alone. It was amazing. Thirty-three brand new groups came out of Rooted. In other words, "We got done with it. We liked it so much that we want to stay together as a group."

And I think, quite possibly, one of the most impressive things about it is that we did a survey with them afterward and 99 percent who finished Rooted said they would recommend it to a friend. I don't know if any other thing that I've ever seen got that high of a rating.

So here's what I want to say. Our winter session of Rooted begins in January. And registration opens today. So if you would like to sign up for the next round of Rooted, you can do that today. What a way to kick off a brand-new year by jumping into a Rooted group. That will help you get connected for 10 weeks and then quite possibly stay in group beyond that.

And we just try to do groups through every age level. Our Kid's Ministries, Student's Ministries—they have groups with the same leader with the same goal of trying to build these life-giving relationships because we all need an Ananias in our lives. So who is it that God has sent into your life to help you see what maybe you're unable to see? To provide some strength when you are weak. To say a word over you when you need it the most?

Now, I just want to say that one of the greatest weapons that the enemy uses against you and me is this word right here:

ISOLATION

That's his biggest play. If he wants to get into your life, what he'll do, his first move, like in the game of chess, is to get you separated from others. To get you alone.

When sin came into the world through Adam and Eve, one of first things that it impacted was their relational connection with each other and with God. And when God cried out and He said, "Hey, you guys. Where are you?" They were hiding from God. And we've been hiding ever since.

During World War II there was a soldier who was talking about how he was stationed with his platoon, occupying a German town. And it was a beautiful afternoon. So he

decided to go for a walk. He wandered away from his platoon. Walked up on this hillside to kind of take in the view.

And right then he heard two rifle shots followed by two bullets that landed at his feet. And he said his heart began to pound out of his chest because he realized that he was in the crosshairs of a sniper. And he ran back to the safety of his platoon. And this is what this soldier said. He goes, "I was an easy shot up there all alone." Snipers wait for someone to drift away from the group.

And the same thing is true spiritually. It's happening right now in our culture. Odd things are happening right now in our culture where we have never been more interconnected through technology, but never been more alone.

Loneliness is just this epidemic that is happening all across our society. And when it comes to what believers say about it, look at some of these statistics. These come from Ed Stetzer:

Only 21 percent of believers say they see the need to connect with others to grow in their relationship with Jesus.

So 79 percent of us say, "I can do this on my own. I can just read my Bible, listen to a sermon, take in a podcast and I'm good."

And 65 percent say they keep their personal struggles to themselves.

So the enemy just gets us isolated.

One study done by Yale a few years ago said that only six out of 10 women say they have a close peer relationship that is marked by openness and mutual commitment. One out of 10 men say that they have that.

Loneliness is this epidemic that is facing a lot of men. Now I think that at a broad level, I think ladies are just much, much better at fostering that kind of emotional connection to others. Men have a tendency to isolate.

There is a study done at Harvard with over 7,000 people during the course of nine years. And they looked at the keys to flourishing in life.

Robert Putnam wrote a book about all of their findings called *Bowling Alone*. And he had this startling statement. He said this:

"If you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half."

Wow!

So I think that it is safe to say this. Get in a group or die. I could just say that. I don't think I'll say that though. Totally kidding. Sort of.

I think Putnam, what he is saying is that social isolation is as big of a risk factor for premature death as smoking.

So our emotional and spiritual health is at risk when we're alone. We flourish as human beings when we are rightly connected to God vertically and when we are rightly connected with others horizontally. There is power in connection.

There is also power in isolation, but not the good kind. When we are isolated, we are more likely to give in to temptation. We're more likely to be discouraged, disillusioned and self-absorbed. We're more likely to create and rehearse negative narratives in our head. We're more likely to spend money foolishly. We're more likely to relapse into destructive habits.

I know that for me, just speaking for me, that if the only voice that I've been listening to lately, the only voice that has been coaching me, the only voice that has been comforting me sounds like my own, then I'm in a dangerous spot because I need others to speak into my life as well. I need others to help me to see so that I can be healthy and growing to look more like Jesus.

Listen. You have an enemy who is stronger than you. But he's not stronger than us. And I think that most of us know this. I think that most of us know we need this. We know that we should have it.

And yet, even right now, maybe you're kind of pushing back on me. That's totally fine. I would say that there are two big objections to putting yourself out there, to be involved in a group or other life-giving relationships. What I mean is, just coming in here late and leaving early and just being an anonymous face in a crowd.

I think that for a lot of us there are two reasons why we resist this. One: We just say, "I'm so busy. I'm so busy." And I think the believers in the New Testament church would have been too. That's why they devoted themselves to it.

The second thing is this, and this is a lot more understandable, and I want to have much more compassion with this. You say, "Well, Aaron. I did that at one time, and I got burned. I got hurt. And I've got this baggage in my past because I got involved in a group and I opened myself up to people and the people who I thought I loved and trusted used what I shared with them against me."

Or, "I went through a divorce, and they ostracized me." Or, "I got caught in an addiction and they just shamed me." And so you said, "Never again." And I'm so sorry.

That's real. That kind of pain is real. And yet, without diminishing the pain that you experience, can I just simply say this? Jesus would nod His head in affirmation as well because He was hurt too. Every one of His disciples turned on Him. God, in His goodness, can take the pain and He can redeem it.

I've been a pastor for almost 25 years. Some of the most hurtful relationships that I've had have come from within the church that I'm serving. Some of the most life-giving relationships have come from the church that I'm serving. And if I cut myself off because of the pain, then I wouldn't experience the life-giving relationships that God wants.

Listen to me. To bring healing to that hurt (because people hurt you) God will also use people to help heal you. So, relationships and groups, they are kind of like a retirement account. You may not think you need one now. But one day you will. And when you need one, if that's when you start investing in it, then it's a little bit too late.

And one day you're going to find yourself in a place just like Saul: can't see, can't eat, sitting alone, feeling isolated. And who will be the people that you have been building intentional relationships with who will come around you?

Listen. This is what we want for you. God wants discipleship for you because He knows that belief, in and of itself, is not enough to sustain you from the attacks of an enemy and everything that life will throw at you. You've got to have a foundation of discipleship.

So I just want to finish with this passage out of John and then we're actually going to watch a really quick video of one of our groups after I pray. Let me just read this passage over you. Jesus says:

"So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." John 13:34-35 (NLT)

Notice He didn't say anything about good theology. He didn't say anything about arguing a legitimacy for your faith. He didn't say anything about answering the questions of your atheistic friend. He said, "Love will prove your discipleship."

Father, we come to You today and we thank You that You have desired a relationship with us and that you often use other people to help us see that and to claim that.

So, God, I just want to pray a prayer over those, I just feel it in the room, those who are experiencing the pain of relational fall-out, whatever that looks like, whatever that has been like.

God, I just ask that Your Holy Spirit would fall freshly into the room in the remaining moments that we have together and that You'd bind up those wounds and You'd bring some healing. That You would allow us to just to be open to what it is that You want to do in and through our lives, that we would be willing to become vulnerable again. That the answer can't just be in guarding ourselves and further isolating ourselves.

So, God, if there are some here who need that kind of a word of encouragement, I just pray that they would receive it. I pray that we would really learn, really lean in to this whole command that You have given us to love each other, even our perceived enemies like Saul and Ananias, so we can say, "Man, we don't see eye to eye on very many things, but you're my brother, you're my sister." Because that's what You've done to reconcile us to You. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.