

Message: A Soul Experiment¹

Let’s take a moment to recap our series “Caring for Our Soul” as we begin. Life happens and we may have missed some steps along the journey. We started by looking at how many references there are to the soul in our culture. There’s a hunger for spiritual life. Defining the soul isn’t easy, but we embraced the wholeness of a unified soul and realized the care of our soul is a discovery process. This was our starting point.

Together, we began to explore a private world. We don’t often pull the curtain back and look at the deeper things in our life. It’s scary. We’re touching on places where darkness lives in us. As the Joker said, “We stopped looking for the monsters under the bed when we realized they were inside us.”² God is present inside us too, but sometimes we struggle because the light seems too unreal, too bright to bear or out of reach. We think “I’ve done too many things” or “Who would want me?” So we hide, believing what’s out of sight is out of mind. We’re safe. But we’re just delaying the inevitable.

Henri Nouwen wrote, “In my own life I well know how hard it is for me to trust I am loved, and to trust the intimacy I most crave is there for me. I most often live as if I have to earn love, do something noteworthy, and then perhaps I might get something in return.

This attitude touches the whole question of what is called in the spiritual life the ‘first love.’ Do I really believe I am loved first, independent of what I do or what I accomplish? This is an important question because as long as I think that what I most need I have to earn, deserve and collect by hard work, I will never get what I most need and desire, which is a love which cannot be earned, but is freely given.

Thus, my return is my willingness to renounce such thoughts and choose to live more and more from my true identity as a cherished child of God.”³ When our souls are fatigued, we may isolate ourselves, rather than connecting to God and other people.

Today, we’re going to explore what it means to be with God.

¹ Some material drawn from John Ortberg, *Soulkeeping*, Zondervan, 2014

² *The Joker* (Heath Ledger), *The Dark Knight*, 2008

³ Henri Nouwen, *From Fear to Love: Lenten Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son*, 1998

Let’s start with a question: Are you lonely? If so, you aren’t alone. Mother Teresa said, *“the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible form of poverty.”*⁴ She described loneliness as the modern-day equivalent to leprosy. Loneliness is a symptom of a needy soul.

The global health firm Cigna released a study of 20,000 American adults in May 2018 (pre-pandemic). “They found almost half (46%) of us sometimes or always feel lonely or left out. Other notable results:

- **Two in five** of us (43%) feel our relationships aren’t meaningful and we’re isolated from others.
- **One in four** of us (27%) rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand us.
- **One in five** of us (20%) report they rarely feel close to people or feel like there are people we can talk to.
- **Only half of Americans** (53%) spend meaningful, quality time with family or a friend on a daily basis.”⁵

Connie Kinder, a Christian therapist, says “85-90% of her clients wrestle with loneliness.”⁶ No matter whether we’re rich or poor, young or old, male or female, loneliness touches all people. Loneliness shows itself in different ways: anxiety, depression or anger.

The core issue is the pain of not being connected in a meaningful relationship. That’s what hurts most. Our soul feels disconnected, particularly after a pandemic and the polarizing way we treat each other.

Sadly, even though loneliness is something most of us wrestle with, almost no one wants to address it openly. Pastor John Ortberg, who publicly admitted the deep, secret loneliness he felt when he was younger, says this: *“People will readily acknowledge being too busy because that makes them sound important. But to say ‘I’m lonely’ is kind of like saying ‘I’m a loser,’ and nobody’s going to like a loser.”*⁷

Let me be clear: you aren’t a loser. You’re needy. That’s a big difference.

⁴ Corrie Cutrer, *The Loneliness Epidemic, Today’s Christian Woman*, 2014

⁵ <https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/>

⁶ *Op cit*, Cutrer

⁷ *Ibid*

Loneliness is one of the symptoms of a needy soul. Other symptoms include (1) difficulty making decisions, (2) the feeling we’re always vulnerable to other people or circumstances, (3) lack of patience, (4) being easily thrown off track, and (5) finding our identity in external things. Rather than being centered in God, we try to control every aspect of our life. This usually doesn’t go well. We end up defining ourselves by our accomplishments, physical appearance, job or our important friends. Then we lose jobs, retire, get older and our friends move away. When this happens, we can lose our identity.⁸ The lesson? Anything that becomes more important than God confuses our soul.

Our soul defines our identity. You’re the keeper of your soul. It’s your responsibility to help your soul become healthy, to figure out who you are. When you do, your relationship with others will be healthier. You won’t be anxious. Your mind will be at peace. You’ll find your life less hurried and more balanced. You’ll be free from guilt over your failure to be perfect. You’ll be more patient and loving with others. You’ll worry less about what others think or what happens at work, school or the family gathering. That’s because you’ll be more self-confident and assured of who you are. You are God’s child!

Before our conversion, we tend to think of God as “out there.” After transformation, as St. Teresa of Ávila wrote, “The soul ... never doubts: God was in her; she was in God.”⁹ It’s not us versus creation versus God. We can become part of a greater being, a nondual consciousness.

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

How can we be “with God”? It’s the key to having a centered soul. Here’s one thing: God has the greater part. That’s what grace is. Our part in developing a healthy relationship with God is lesser but still important. Our part is to believe, trust and accept God’s love.

⁸ *Op cit.*, Ortberg, pp. 100-103

⁹ Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), p. 123

When our soul is present with God, it doesn't matter whether you are a dishwasher or CEO, a Millennial, Boomer or Gen Zer, single, married or divorced, in prison, a slave or free. Our soul doesn't depend on our status or achievement but on simply being with God. We, as ordinary people living in today's world, can find a way to live with Jesus. We can find life with God.

I have news: there's no magic formula. There is a simple test we can try. It's called the Soul Experiment. It's a simple way of focusing our soul on God throughout the day. I invite you to try it for a week. Begin each day by challenging yourself with this question:

How many moments of my life can I fill with conscious awareness of, and surrender to, God's presence?

Then deliberately imagine yourself doing so at home, at work, in the car, when you're online, when you're watching TV, when you're in meetings, and when you're with other people.¹⁰

The test is to see how to live “with God” all the time. Can you keep God in your heart and mind all the time, regardless of what you're doing?

It isn't easy! Here's a picture of how it worked for me. This week I had a couple of conversations at church and with my family where I was irritated and frustrated. It wasn't pretty. When I got off the phone the second time, I realized I failed the test. I didn't listen to or think about God a single time in those hours. I was grouching because of the stress and emotional burden I was carrying. And I wasn't feeling like we wanted to work together. Those were unkind, but natural, responses.

Do you ever have these kinds of thoughts? I was feeling impatient, uncomfortable and out of sorts. It's not easy to admit, but it's true.

Then this thought came to me: how would I look at the next time? The hours would pass, whether I was with God or without God. I could continue to go through each day without God, feeling stressed, angry, sorry for myself and impatient, while being a pain in the neck to everyone around me.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 120-121 – material drawn from his illustration

Or I could choose to live those hours with God. I can be glad I’m alive. I can be grateful for the life I live. I can be filled with joy because of what I get to do. I can recognize God is running the universe, not me. God was doing pretty well before I was born and will be able to manage whether I get my way or not.

What’s it going to be, will you live with or without Jesus? When you look at life this way, doesn’t it make sense to say, “*Yes, God, I want to live life with you. My soul needs you more than it needs my frustration and impatience.*” Life with God isn’t a life filled with more religious activities or devotions or trying to be good. It’s the life of inner peace and contentment for your soul. You can be yourself with the maker and manager of the universe. And then, there’s the flip side. Life without God is the opposite. It’s death. It will kill your soul.

What’s it like when our soul is with God? It’s great! God wants to make every moment of our life glorious with God’s presence. This is the win. It’s the core of eternal life, of living life to its fullest. This way of life isn’t reserved for super-spiritual people. It’s what God wants for every one of us. It’s the whole point of tending to our soul.

Most Christians spend their energy and worry trying not to sin. The goal isn’t to try to sin less. In all our efforts to keep from sinning, what are we focusing on? Sin. God wants us to focus on Jesus. To be with him, to love more like he does. Jesus said, “*I am the vine, you are the branches ... abide with me*” (John 15:1-5). Abide means “stay connected” or “remain.” “*Be with me*” is what Jesus tells us. Just relax and learn to enjoy God’s presence. Surrender to it. No guilt, no stress, no deadlines or penalties, no extra lines on our face or pounds around our waistline. That’s easy!

How many moments of each day can you live with God? As many as you choose! Start where you are now and go from there. God will help. After all, God wants to be with you every moment of every day, 365 days of the year, for all the years of your life – now and through eternity.

Spiritual things aren’t challenging. They give life. As Jesus said, “*Don’t worry, for my yoke is easy and the burden is light*” (Matthew 11:30). **Give it a try. Your soul will be glad you did.**

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for making us the way we are. Thank you for giving us bodies, minds and the freedom to choose. Thank you for our soul, the deep, mysterious part of us always reaching out, seeking a connection with you. Help us to embrace and accept your love and grace. Teach us to trust you and to love so our soul may be healthy. Unite our will, mind and body in our love for you, for each other and for those we do not yet know. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Deuteronomy 4:29-31 (The Message)

... if you seek GOD, your God, you'll be able to find him if you're serious, looking for him with your whole heart and soul. When troubles come and all these awful things happen to you, in future days you will come back to GOD, your God, and listen obediently to what he says. GOD, your God, is above all a compassionate God. In the end he will not abandon you, he won't bring you to ruin, he won't forget the covenant with your ancestors which he swore to them.

Hebrews 4:8-13 (The Message)

And so this is still a live promise. It wasn't canceled at the time of Joshua; otherwise, God wouldn't keep renewing the appointment for “today.” The promise of “arrival” and “rest” is still there for God's people. God himself is at rest. And at the end of the journey we'll surely rest with God.

So let's keep at it and eventually arrive at the place of rest, not drop out through some sort of disobedience.

God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defense, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it - no matter what.