

Solitude

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[0:00] But yeah, we've been talking and going through the series of spiritual disciplines. We've been talking about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus, and to be disciplined disciples, and to be disciplined in order to look like Gabs, in order to look like Kenneth and Uday.

They have workouts. They have a regime. They have a strict pattern of things that they do in order to work out, to look like that. They don't just head to the gym whenever they feel like it. Similarly, Jesus had his workout.

He had his MO. He practiced these spiritual disciplines. He went to prayer. He went to fast. He went to worship. He went into the Word. And today we're going to look at a spiritual practice he often did, which is part of his pattern, his lifestyle, which is solitude.

This is what he did. This is important because as much as we love his Word and much as we live to obey his Word, we also want to see the way Jesus was living.

The way he lived was equally, if not as important, as the way and the things that he taught. And, you know, he is actually the first true teacher who walked the talk.

[1:03] He wasn't a hypocrite like all of us in many ways. When he says one thing, he does it. And we see this in his life as he goes and he retreats regularly, as he fasts regularly, as he prays regularly.

And one thing you guys might like about this spiritual practice is different. It's not another thing you have to do. It's not like you've got to memorize more Scripture. You have to go and do this. You have to go and do that. No, this is a spiritual practice where you do nothing.

It's something that you don't do. In fact, it's something that you just have to stop doing and pause. We're living in a world where we know that it's noisier than ever before.

We're the first disciples of Jesus in a digital age. And there's a quote that says, you know, we're constantly surrounded by entertainment, by screens, that we don't even know how to be alone anymore. That, in fact, actually, we could even be at a risk of entertaining ourselves to death.

I was hosting a colleague from Rwanda last week, and I love it when visitors come to Hong Kong. I get to see and show them the beauty of Hong Kong. I took her to the MTR, and as we're sitting in the MTR, I was like, wow, look how beautiful this MTR is, isn't it?

[2:08] I'm giving her the background of the story of the MTR logo. Do you know what it means? The circle up, the circle down. There's Kowloon, Hong Kong Island, and there's a line across it. And it's the beauty of the history. Ah, there we go.

That one's for free. Of the MTR. And I was like, isn't this amazing? And I'm looking around, and I said, look, it is so clean here. You can sit on the floor and eat.

And she's like, wow, it is amazing. But then she noticed and said something interesting. She's like, but it does make me a bit sad that everyone here is looking at their phones. Everyone looks quite miserable.

And it's young and old. It was not just the youth. It was the old as well, crushing the candy crush. And everyone had this stern face staring at the screen, just scrolling, scrolling.

LOL. LOL. LOL. LOL. Smiley face. Smiley face. They looked miserable. And it broke her heart.

She's like, it is sad, Joe, that we've come to this where we have everything we need. We have this beautiful MTR.

[3:07] We have this beautiful city. And all we could do is look at our phones. And it doesn't seem to bring us joy. And we can all agree we're living in the most connected time in the human universe where we can talk to anyone in any parts of the country in a second.

Yet we feel more alone than ever before. One clear fact as we head into this is being alone and being lonely are two very different things. Who understands that? You can be sitting surrounded by

people on an MTR and still be very alone.

You can be alone and not lonely. And one of the highlights of my time in Hong Kong, apart from meeting Alex and starting a family, was actually the 21 days I had in quarantine. Do you remember those days? Those 21 beautiful days I got to be on my own in this hotel.

And I remember, I promise you, by the last day I was just, God, I just wish I could have one more week. The introvert in me just loved it. I yearned for it. I was not lonely at all.

But again, loneliness is a real thing. Loneliness we can all feel whether we're alone or not. It's an epidemic. And could it be that we struggle to practice the solitude, the stillness, the silence is because we're so scared of being alone?

[4:19] And could it be that we're so scared of being alone because when we're lonely, we realize all these questions in our minds, all these feelings in our hearts are unanswered and we have no answer to them.

And we just don't want to face it. So we just pick up our phone and we start scrolling. We watch the next thing. We go do the next thing. We see people. We do things in order to find meaning and purpose for ourselves.

Anthony the Great, this is in the church in 251 AD, is an Egyptian from an Egyptian family, very wealthy. He's known and seen as one of the kind of the founding fathers of the practices solitude. He was a young man. His parents died and he gave up all his wealth to go and follow Jesus. And he took that literally and he moved to the desert for 20 years. He lived in a desert in silence and solitude.

And he was in this furnace of transformation as Henry Nairon whites. And he found this inner peace that in fact he was actually able to go back into the town, into the city.

[5:21] And people from all around the world and Emperor Constantine himself would go and ask him for counsel, for wisdom, for advice. Because he had found this inner peace. Thousands around him were saved. And he said this one quote, which is interesting and scary, as my colleague was telling me on the MTR.

She says, but this quote reminded me of this. It says, the time is coming when men will go mad.

And when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him. Saying, you are mad.

You are not like us. Could it be that we are living in a time where we are all so addicted and so used to the noise that when someone walks into a room who is used to silence and has inner peace and has inner solitude, we think that something is wrong with him.

And I am worried as mankind we are headed to that direction. Pascal in the 1400s had a great quote. It is that all of humanity's problem stemmed from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone. This is a true test of solitude. In 2004, they had put 15 people into a room. Some of you may have heard this before. They left them alone with nothing, in silence.

[6:24] All they had was a button in front of them. And if they pressed that button, they would get this electric shock to their body. 55 people in the room. 70% of the men pressed that button within 15 minutes.

25% of the women pressed that button within 15 minutes. So within 15 minutes, all of these people just couldn't stand sitting in the nothingness, sitting in the silence, that they would rather electrocute themselves than to be with their own thoughts.

So let me ask you this. When was the last time that you were truly with your own thoughts? Where you went on a walk without your phone, without a podcast, without your headphones? When was the last time you just daydreamed and walked and looked and thought and think about what's going on inside?

When was the last time you spent a whole day without your phone? I encourage you, if you go on holiday, do that. Put your phone away. Spend a whole day without your phone and just feel the freedom that comes of it. And it's hard.

I struggle to sometimes even forget to, you know, if I forget to bring my phone to the toilet, I run back out to get it. Because I'm like, there's a good five minutes in there that I don't want to waste. I don't want to sit alone in my thoughts.

[7:29] But can we do that? Can we be practicing stillness and silence? More importantly, why do we do this? Because Jesus did. Jesus practiced silence and solitude throughout his life. He was busier than any of us.

When I ask people, hey, do you want to come out on my monthly retreat with me? And most of the time they say, I'm busy. I've got a trip coming. I've got this work deadline coming, which is understandable. But Jesus, he was so busy that people would risk their lives just to get into his space and just touch his cloth.

He was needed and busier than any of us. Yet he made time regularly and frequently out to retreat, to be on his own, to the solitary place, to the quiet place.

Jesus had this pattern of retreating community and going to community back and forth. So one thing about solitude is before we head into the psalm is solitude and community come hand in hand.

As we sit here in this room, we're surrounded by community. You cannot have solitude without community. Jesus retreated, but he went back into community. He went back in to love the people. [8:32] He was with God and he was with people. Without one or the other, it won't last. Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.

And I think when I got to Hong Kong, I realized there's a lot of people who attended many church service, who went to many Bible studies, but they weren't in a community. They knew God. They knew Jesus. They had a relation with Jesus, but they were outside of community.

They were doing life on their own. They were doing the solitude life without the community. And after a while, that is a danger as well. But solitary confinement, there's a reason for that, for being one of the greatest punishments you can have.

Because people were created to be with community. We're not meant to be alone. And so solitude, community, this is what Jesus retreated back and forth throughout his life. And that's something that we too want to practice.

And I think Jesus had a secret to his solitude. First of all, it wasn't just me time. He didn't go to the spa and have a 90-minute massage or a foot massage and have his quiet time. And he's in my personal space. First of all, personal space is also something that is a luxury.

[9:34] I didn't realize that until I moved out living in different countries that actually most people didn't grow up with their own rooms, didn't have personal space. I grew up with a roommate. He was there by the time I was born, and he wouldn't leave.

He was a horrible roommate, by far the worst. When he was about 12, I was about 9 or 8. He had this sleepwalking thing. And he would wake up, and he would start switching on the light, on and off.

Hide down, seek down, hide down, seek down. And he would do this, this guy. And I was like, James, not today. Can you not? And he would just be in a sleepwalk. And I was like, God, I wish I had my own room.

I wish I had some privacy. But even in the darkness, he was bringing light. That's the pastor that he was. That's the pastor that he was. So Jesus didn't have his own room.

He was surrounded by his disciples. He was brought up 12 guys in the room, and he had to go out and find retreat in solitude. So solitude is not just me time. It's not some self-love time. I need to go off and have an evening of self-love. No.

[10:35] Solitude, guys, is encountering the source of love. It's not self-love. It's encountering the source of love. And we're going to look through Psalm 23 today to dig deep and see from this passage what it says about solitude.

And what we can find out about solitude. And Psalm 23, who's memorized it? Who knows this off by heart? I know our group has memorized it. Sam, yeah. This is a passage we know so well. But let us hear it today in a new way.

I'm going to ask my dear friends, Cubon and Annabelle. We're not just going to read it in English. I'm going to read it in Chinese today as well. I think there's something unique about hearing this passage in multiple languages and just allowing these words to speak to us.

And so can I invite Cubon up? Round of applause. My dear Cubon. And Annabelle, where are you? There you are. Okay. Cubon, you go first. And then Annabelle. The one thing we do at this practice in the gathering is we stand for the word because what you're about to hear is more important a billion times than what I'm going to say.

And so please, let's listen to the word of the Lord. Am I doing the Chinese version? Please, please. It's okay. Psalm 23.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

find here
about what it means to find true solitude. Jesus knew the secret of solitude.

When he was alone, he wasn't really alone. St. Columbus said, we're never less alone than we're alone. We're never less alone than when we're alone. And so when we realize who we are with, that is solitude. That is solitude. And here the first verse says, the Lord is my shepherd.

[14:06] I shall lack nothing. I shall not be in want. That's literally the most wholesome truth that as human beings we can hear. How often do we wake up our days looking for affirmation, looking for approval, looking to please perform, to gain and garner trust and favor?

We live in a mode of MO of not having enough. We want to have more. But here it says, I lack nothing. And in order to lack nothing, you need to get to the first five words of the psalm. It says, the Lord is my shepherd. This is one of the most wholesome, again, powerful truths that I remind myself constantly. The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord, Jehovah Jireh is. He wasn't, he won't, will be, he is. And he's my, he's not just Pastor James and Pastor Gaines. No, he's my shepherd. The shepherd that was willing to risk his life for the sheep, the shepherd that is willing to give up the 99 in order to look for the one sheep, the one being you and I. And if we know the shepherd, we will lack nothing. But if God is the shepherd, guys, what does that make us? The sheep. And that's not a pretty truth. I mean, last week, Nathan Maher was service leading and he was saying how, you know, we call him a simple sheep. And did anyone grow up with sheeps around? Did anyone in the city, is not out of the city? Yes, you grew up with sheep in the area. Anyone from Australia? I don't know, New Zealand, I think. Any sheeps in Australia, Paul? Loads, heaps, heaps of them. So if you grow up with sheep, I didn't, we actually, James and I, we did grow up with sheep in our country, in the countryside. If you know anything about sheep, three things. You can think of Nathan Maher as well at this time. They're simple, they're stupid, and they stray. They're simple, they're stupid, and they stray.

Can you even imagine, have you seen a sheep fight when there's an enemy attack? They don't even nerdify. They just get eaten. I mean, if you think of all the country flags and the crests and the animals that represent countries. We have the great United States, we have the eagle, we have the UK with the dragon. Can you name one country that has a sheep? No. Even in the Chinese zodiac, I think sheep is just one that you kind of, you wish you were the tiger or the dragon. That's not all the ox. Sheep is not highly favorable. Sheep are not very smart. Yeah, that's who we are. And in solitude, we are reminded of who we are and who he is. And in order to be sheep that lacks nothing, we need to know our shepherd. And I worry sometimes, could it be that many of us and many people in the city, they're just sheep without a shepherd, wandering around and just panicking, anxious, lost. They're trying to lead themselves because they don't have a shepherd. Do you know your shepherd?

Because if you know your shepherd, then you won't be in lack. But if you don't know your shepherd, you will always be in lack. You will always be seeking that approval. You'll always be seeking for that next thing, that next relationship, that next promotion. If you know your shepherd, you will not be in lack. That's what solitude reminds us of. Jesus is our shepherd. He is the good shepherd. The good shepherd, if you follow him, if you know him, he'll make you lie down in green pastures. He'll lead you beside still waters. He restores your soul. That picture of lying down in green pastures still waters. When you, for those, I thank you for deep seek. I did a lot of sheep ology research this week. But sheep, in order for them to lie down and rest, they need to be well fed. They need to feel safe. You won't see a panicked sheep lying down. A sheep has to be fully rest, fully content, fully safe, secure, and fed in order to lie down. And God, the shepherd, the good shepherd knows how to allow the sheep to lie down. Because the sheep feels safe with the shepherd. And the still

waters, that picture of imagery is just, the water is still. It's not like Hong Kong where you're rushing for that last trip. And if there's not enough for everyone, you need to drink quickly and then you're off to the next place. No, the still waters.

[18:04] He restores my soul. Solitude restores your soul. Going to Japan doesn't always restore your soul. Going to Maldives may give you that temporary peace for a day or two, but it doesn't restore your soul.

We all have been there. We go on holiday. It takes us two, three days just to slow down, get away from work, which is good, get away from the city, which is good. But just before we even get to slow down inside, we're already flying back and then we need another holiday and we're complaining and then we're working for the next holiday to go away to find refuge and restoration for our soul. But our soul rest comes from knowing the shepherd and being with the shepherd, not striving, but in stillness. St. Augustine has a great quote, we are restless. Our souls are restless until they rest in you. Our souls are restless until they rest in you.

Curious, how many of us actually practice in our regular rhythm of life, a practice of solitude and silence? Who's gone away for an afternoon? I know the people at Young Life do, they have an afternoon spiritual retreat. There's a few of you, not many. I'm so glad we get to talk about this today because I remember I didn't practice until I got to Hong Kong. Prior to Hong Kong, I was living all my 20s in the developing world. The three years before Hong Kong, I was in Zambia. The pace of life was slow. It was still waters. Every Saturday afternoon, we'd drive to the elephant orphanage and bathe the elephants and look after them and we'd go to the nature.

We're surrounded by the nature. It was such a slow place of life. And then I got to Hong Kong and then I got to the MTR and then I got to see people running around and this anxiety. And I just actually felt like a sheep without a shepherd. For the first few months in Hong Kong, it was tough. I was in a new job in a new organization doing a very new role. I knew nobody in the city. And I just felt overwhelmed, like a sheep wandering around. Like, what am I doing here? Everything in me wants to run back to Zambia, to the place I know, to calm, to the still waters.

[19:59] And still today, for those close to me, I know that. In a heartbeat, I'd go back. But God says, no, you need to learn to be still here in the city. You need to learn to hear my voice in the noise of the city. And so I was introduced to this place in Changjiao in a fishing village, 30 to 50 minute boat ride away. Fishing village, no cars, there's no humming sound in the background. And there's this beautiful retreat center at the top of the hill called the Bethany Retreat Center. And I remember hiking up there that first day. It was just like a pilgrimage, getting up there. And just every step that I took as I went up, the noise, the stress, the weight of the city, the weight of my work, just started to leave. And I remember getting to that room, and I had all this planned. Like, I had a journal, I had a Bible with me, I had all these things. I just fell asleep. I was so tired.

And I didn't realize how tired. I was like 5 p.m. And I think I slept at night. And that's the first time I felt, wow, this is what it feels like to be on your own with the Good Shepherd, to have your soul feel restored. And ever since then, I've been going nearly 100 times now in the last few years, every single month I go. There's an open invitation today, if anybody wants to join me, I go once a month, block it out. Don't wait. I won't give you some tips later on how to take solitude, but join me. There's an invitation to solitude. And God isn't only in Bethany and Retreat Center and Chungtao, no. He's in the place where you seek Him. He's in the place where you retreat from the life that you know. And God is everywhere, obviously, but we need to sometimes get away from the noise until we hear His voice so clearly and so loudly. But I remember the first time was so difficult. I got to Hong Kong and I realized it took me days just to get all the emotions that I was angry at God for bringing me to Hong Kong. I was angry at God for leaving this amazing community I had back in Zambia. But all these deeper things started to come up. The lamenting, as we mentioned last week, when you sit alone in silence long enough, everything comes up and it's scary. And a lot of times we don't want to let it get there because we don't want to feel like we're worth nothing. And so I remember just getting there and just thinking, God, I want to lay everything down and everything that I didn't even know I swept in the rug to be gone. I was reminded, actually, that the first person I ever dated in my life actually was from Hong Kong and committed suicide, something I never even faced. I was a teenager at the time. But God reminded me 15 years later that these are things you need to surrender. And that wouldn't have happened if I didn't go to Bethany, if I didn't sit alone in silence long enough for the voices of the world to fade away and for the true feelings and hearts and emotions to come out. So are you lacking nothing? Do you know your shepherd? If you know your

shepherd, you lack nothing. If you don't know your shepherd, you'll always lack something. But my other question is, are you lacking nothing or are you afraid of being nothing? Because that's a true fear. If you don't know the good shepherd and you are a sheep and you sit alone with your thoughts, it's overwhelming, the suffering in the world. Why did this happen?

Why did that happen? Why is this like this? And if we don't have the answers, we can leave ourselves in a very challenging place. And you need to know the good shepherd if we're going to have solitude. Solitude is the great place of great struggle and great encounter where I get to lay down the false self and bring in the new self, the new self, which is Christ. As an Enneagram 3, I would always be performing and pleasing to the things that I'm doing and the work that I'm doing. But when you're alone, there's none of that. You're just completely yourself. And that's what Solitude did for me in Bethany. And that's why I continue to go. And let's continue in the passage. The shepherd leads us by the right paths. He leads us by the right paths for his namesake. It's his nature to lead his sheep in the right paths, in righteousness, the paths of righteousness. But very quickly on the next verse, these right paths, they lead to the valley, the valley of the shadow of death, the darkest valley. Just as you're imagining, oh, you know, the sheep walking with the good shepherd, everything's going to be okay from now on. No, Jesus doesn't promise us a life of no conflict and challenges and darkness and suffering. In fact, actually, these right paths lead us to very thick of it into the wilderness. This valley is a representation of life. It isn't just footprints in the sand. We all know that picture so well. It isn't. As we follow the shepherd, there will be times we will enter into darkness. People will die. We are all born and will die. But the key word here is, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, through is a powerful word here.

[24 : 42] It means you're going through it. You're not sitting in it. You're not waiting in it. No, we're walking. There's movement. And as long as we hold on to the shepherd, we're going to still move and walk through this. And we need not fear the shadow of the valley of death. We talked a few weeks ago about death. You know, it's more scary to be hit by a bus than the shadow of a bus.

Right? I would much, much rather be hit by the shadow of a bus than a bus. In the same way, the shadow of the valley, the shadow of the valley of death is clearly just a shadow. And with a shadow, it just means one truth that I can encourage you when you're going through the shadow of the valley of death is, in order for the shadow to exist, there must be light. There must be light nearby, and the light is close. My wife, Alex, is heading out to Myanmar this afternoon, a country that is faced with great shadow. Great, great shadow. And as we're praying this morning, as we were wrestling this morning, we're reminded, and we just saw this eagle fly outside our window. And it's like, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. You see, it's in suffering. It's in this struggle. Like the Lord is my shepherd. And third person becomes personal, becomes first person. For you are with me. Your rod, your staff comfort me. The valley is tough, guys, and we will all go through it. But we need to know who we're going through it with. Your rod and your staff comfort me. This is a picture of a shepherd, something again, thank you for the deep sea, where the shepherd would actually often hook the sheep back into line if they're wandering off the cliff. And in that hooking, it actually could even hurt your feet. The sheep could actually come out with a limp. But trust me, having a limp is way better than falling off a cliff or being eaten. But at that time, that limp could feel so difficult. You won't understand why you have this limp. But I can tell you this, that sheep who has that limp will walk closer with the shepherd than ever before, especially through the darkest valley of the shadow of death. And the only thing worse than suffering is suffering alone. And God's promise is that he is with us in the darkest valley. So there is encouragement. So number one, the Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing. In solitude, we find that we lack nothing. Number two, in solitude, we need not be afraid of anything. We need not be afraid of the darkest valley. We need not be afraid as we're going in the next passage of our enemies. The next passage says this, do you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies? We do not need to be afraid of our enemies. God prepares a table before me, in the presence of your enemy. You might have real enemies. You might have real battles. [27 : 25] You might have cancer. You know, people with cancer. And God invites you to sit in that chemo ward and face the enemy. You might be going through heartaches, breakups, loss of friends, loss of jobs.

God invites us to sit boldly in the place, in the face, in the presence of my enemies. God invites us to sit in the face of our enemies. So this analogy of the Psalm 23 goes from the good shepherd protecting us, the sheep, to now he's the good host who's protecting us as the guests.

And just in Eastern culture, the host would do everything to protect the guests. Even last week, as I had guests from out of town, if anything happened to them in Hong Kong, I would be live. I would be gladly take responsibility, whatever that they've done, because that's what a good host does. But again, this host goes to the extreme. He is willing to die and give his life up for his guests. And so this is the good host that we have. And the passage after it goes on to, my cup overflows. My cup overflows.

And he anoints my head with oil. That's it. There's two. He anoints my head with oil. My cup overflows. This is something that the hosts would do to their guests to show honor, to show prominence. And this is actually something that the shepherds do for sheep. Again, something I learned this week.

[28:44] Shepherds actually would cover the sheep's face with oil because there's sometimes these flies that would fly through their nose and lay eggs and actually lead them to misery and despair and then ultimately death.

And how often I think in solitude, when I reflect, when I feast on his faithfulness, I look back at what God's done in my life, what he's protected me from. But at that moment, you have no idea. He's putting this oil in your face and you have no idea what's going on.

You're sheep. You're simple. You're stupid. But the shepherds like, no, you need this because I'm protecting you from things that could kill you. From an enemy, you can't even see. From an enemy, you can't even understand.

And we don't see that so much later on in life. And we need those solitude times to look back. Otherwise, we're just going to keep living without reflecting. And we don't see the faithfulness of the shepherd.

So is there anything that God's protected you from? Have you looked back in your life? I know I have. I'm thanking God that that job didn't work out or that dream didn't work out or that relationship didn't work out. Because if that did, I wouldn't be here and where I am today.

[29:44] So I thank the Lord. I thank the good shepherd for the way that he anointed and protected. Second, my cup overflows. This is another imagery and reflection of I lack nothing.

There's nothing that we lack if we know the good shepherd. In Middle Eastern culture, again, if you're visiting someone there and you're eating tea, having tea with them, as long as they pour the tea, you're welcome to stay in the house.

So it's like Chinese culture. You just did a little tap. Thank you. Thank you. And you carry on drinking. But the moment they start pouring tea, that's the moment you know it's time to go home. It's kind of like the cha cha thing where they just put the bill on your table and you're like, OK, it's time to go home. It's time to vacate the table, let someone else eat.

But this imagery of our cup, your cup, my cup overflowing, that is the host. And God's picture is saying, actually, you are always welcome in my home.

There's never going to be a time I will not pouring the cup for you. So I welcome you to join me in my presence. That's what the host is telling us. Our cup overflows. He's always, always welcome to be with him.

[30:49] And finally, as we head into the last part, the last verse, surely your goodness and your mercy will follow me all the days of my life. Solitude ultimately is a glimpse of eternity.

It's a foretaste of being in heaven, being with him in his presence. A youth leader used to tell me when I would miss worship times, he's like, Joe, you better like worship because that's all we're going to be doing in heaven.

And I thought to myself, I don't want to go to this heaven. It sounds terrible, especially the worship that we used to have in a small group. For that, 24-7. That's not the heaven that God says, look, when we are in heaven, in the kingdom, we will be with him 24-7.

I don't know if any of you have felt so seen and so loved by him in your prayer time, in your quiet time. I think of the few moments that I have and I'm like, wow, if I can get that 24-7, oh, that's the best.

That's something this world cannot give. That's the best feeling in the world. That is what solitude can be with the good shepherd. Surely, when you know the good host, when you know the good shepherd, surely his goodness, his mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[32:06] When you know the good shepherd, you know that his character, who he is, will follow you. And follow here in the word in Hebrew is radap, it means pursue. He will pursue us just like a

police and pursue his goodness, his mercy, will follow us all the days of our life.

Last week at lunch, I had a great conversation with someone who was new at our church and she was asking me, you know, what makes Christianity different? What makes Christianity unique? And I said, actually, simple is this.

In all the religions that I've studied, it's about us as humanity, performing, reaching out to God, trying to please him, get his approval. But in Christianity, it's about God pursuing us, God coming down, sending his son down to reach us, to reach his children.

God is pursuing us. And even as a church, I think a lot of these spiritual practices can feel like, oh, we're doing all these things in order to pursue God, to please God. No, it's not a transaction.

We're not doing these things in order that we get something back. We're doing this out of an offering, out of a worship, out of a your will be done. God is pursuing us. And I hope that we can sit long enough and realize that truth.

[33:12] And that truth changes everything. When you realize the king of the universe, the good shepherd is pursuing us, pursuing you, pursuing me, then you desire. That discipline of solitude becomes the desire of wanting to be with the shepherd.

And finally, I know many of us, some of us even, have been in church for 20, 30 years. We've joined many Bible studies. We've gone to many BSFs. We even probably memorized Psalm 23.

But do we know the good shepherd? It's one thing knowing Psalm 23, but it's a whole other thing of knowing the good shepherd. Do you know how to spend time with him?

Do you know how to be with him? If I encourage you to spend an afternoon on your own, without doing anything, without doing any Bible study, without even listening to anything, can you sit in your silence? And can you hear the voice of the shepherd? Because if we don't, then I worry that we know the psalm, but we don't know the shepherd.

Henry Nouwen says, we don't take spiritual life seriously if we don't set aside time to be with God and listen to him. Without solitude, it's virtually impossible to live a spiritual life.

[34:13] No solitude, no spiritual life. Can I encourage you today, guys? Can we practice it during Lent? Practice silence. Practice solitude.

Practice meditation. Starts with just maybe if you're reading your daily devotional, great. Start with two minutes of silence. Before you read, just to quiet your soul. You're not rushing into just ticking off your daily devotion.

Just sit in silence for two minutes. See if you can do that. And then at the end, after you read the devotion, sit again in two minutes of silence. Reflect actually what you've just read. Or something I try to do every day, I sit in ten minutes in silence of doing nothing.

Just being with my thoughts. And I find myself, there are many days I forget, but the days that I do it, that whole day, there's this peace that pursues me, that follows me for the whole day.

For those, I encourage you who can, enable. Schedule a time. Don't wait for the next free day. Book a time. Go to Bethany. There's other places you can have retreat centers across Changzhou. Book yourself a retreat.

[35:14] Go out. Spend a night. Spend two nights. There's something about scheduling a time, just like Alex and I, we have our date nights that we schedule. And you go out and you spend that time with the Lord.

And you're just like, God, I want to meet you. I want to encounter you. Something that Jay, who just got married, I remember when I was walking with him as a student, there was a time he was like, Joe, I just want to hear the voice of God. I just want to hear him.

I want to encounter him. So he went home that day. He locked himself in the room. He's like, yeah, I can share this story. He said, God, I'm going to stay in this room until I hear your voice. One hour passed, two hour passed, three hour passed.

He fell asleep. But a few hours later, he woke up and crying, just feeling the weight and the love of God for him. And I know that's carried him since. I know that's what leads him on to his solitude regularly to go out.

And I know some of us here practice that. I encourage you, life group leaders, go. Go yourself. Join me. Bring your groups. Go and schedule yourself some time of solitude. And know your season, though.

[36:12] There's grace. Again, this isn't something that we have to do. This is something that we are learning discipline. And we hope that it brings desire. Know your seasons. If you're a newborn,

a new mother with a newborn, you know, there's grace.

Maybe just 20 minutes, maybe 30 minutes, going for a walk on your own nearby will do. My wife's giving birth in August. You know, I'm not going to schedule a seven day solitude retreat on my own, am I?

It might just be five days. So, know your season. Know your season. There is no pressure. But finally, the last thing I'll leave you with is how do we know the voice of the shepherd?

That's probably what some of us are asking. How do we know? How do I sit long enough in a room without going crazy? Is it my voice? Is it his voice? Is it James' voice? No. The way you will know that it's the shepherd's voice, for me at least, is simple.

I need to know what isn't the shepherd's voice. And if it isn't the shepherd's voice, it's simple. It says, you are not enough, Joe. You are not good enough. You're only worth whatever you do, whatever other people say about you, and whatever you have.

[37 : 16] And it's sad. In this world, we literally count people's worth by net worth by the things that they have. That can't be further from the truth. If Jesus, the good shepherd, says, you are loved by what I've done, what I've given you, and what I say about you.

If the good shepherd risked his life to die for the sheep, then that sheep has infinite value because the shepherd has infinite value. The shepherd gives worth to the sheep. Sometimes we can just be all playing sheep, collecting little stones and coins, thinking, oh, how many coins do you have?

This is what I'm worth. No. Our worth doesn't come from things. It comes from knowing the shepherd. That is eternal life. That is what it means to know the good shepherd.

A picture of Eden comes to mind when I share about this. She must have been two, three months old. And it was the middle of the night. She was crying and screaming, changing a nappy, which I would do occasionally.

And I remember looking at her, and she was this tiny little being, screaming, crying. And I just said, you are my daughter, who I love.

[38 : 24] And I'm so pleased with you. I'm so pleased with you. She's done nothing to deserve it. She doesn't know who I am. She might know my voice. But I said, everything that I have is yours. Everything.

I will give my life for you. And in that moment, she pooped her pants. And she's literally. But I said, you are my daughter, and I love you. And nothing changed.

And many of that can be in the same for us with God. And that same picture, many of us, as adults, still often poo our pants. But God picks us up as little sheep and says, no, this is my son.

This one's my daughter, who I love. And I'm so pleased with you. That's the voice of the shepherd. Do not let the voice of the world get to you. Get away from the noise of the world until all you can hear is the voice of the shepherd.

Let us pray. Father Lord, you say in Psalm 46, 10, be still and know that I am God.

[39 : 28] Lord, I know all of us in this room, we want to know you. We want to know your voice.

And it's humbling first. The first thing we admit is that we are sheep. We are lost without you. We will always be in want.

We will always be in need. But Lord, we want to grow. We want to hear your voice. We want to find safety and refuge in you. We want our souls to be restored.

We want our cups to overflow. And so Lord, even in this silence, may you speak. We are listening. We are listening. We are listening.