Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we continue the sermon series titled, □ "Wisdom for the Weary." It is a study of selected Proverbs in the Bible on how to deal with weariness.

One common source of weariness is social isolation. The lack of meaningful interaction with others can weigh us down.

A recent study conducted at the University of Vienna and published in *Psychological Science* suggests that weariness or low energy can be a basic human response to a lack of social contact. Being alone can make you tired.[1]

According to the study, the effects of social isolation are similar to those of food deprivation. Going without social connection and food both produce lowered energy and heightened fatigue.

My wife, Cathy, might chuckle at this. As a Chief of Staff at ASU, she can be weary from too much social interaction. At work, it sometimes feels like everyone wants a piece of her.

I suspect there may be a mediating factor not addressed in the study I just cited. It is not just about the presence or absence of human interaction but also the nature of the interaction that is determinative of its effect on weariness. Yes, being alone can be wearisome. But so can being in the presence of draining people.

Let me share with you right up front the big idea I draw from the proverbs we'll be studying today. Here it is: □ Weariness is heavier in isolation but lighter in supportive community. Being alone can exacerbate weariness, while being in the company of encouraging, helpful people can uplift us.

[1] Reported at Neurosciencenews.com on April 4, 2023, https://neurosciencenews.com/social-isolation-energy-22934/.

Note that this big idea is not a blanket endorsement of being in physical proximity to other human beings as the magical antidote to weariness. That would mean that standing in line at the Motor Vehicle Department should be energizing.

The little word, "supportive" is an important qualifier. Cultivating connection with encouraging, helpful people is key.

Let's look first at □ Proverbs 17:17. It says,

ESV Proverbs 17:17
A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for adversity.

This is an example of synthetic parallelism, where the second line amplifies or expands on the first line in some way. This suggests that the "friend" and the "brother" in view are the same kind of person. It is someone who is close, known, trusted, loved, and loyal.

It says, "A friend loves at all times." The love in view here is more than just a warm feeling. It is a love that actively supports the wellbeing of another. Not just in good times. But also, in bad.

The second line expands on this saying, "a brother is born for adversity." The idea is that your brother or friend is created by God to be a help to you in adversity. The original Hebrew term for "adversity" is *sawráw*. It describes "an oppressive state of physical, mental, social, or economic adversity."[2] So, friends or brothers are a part of the divinely designed supportive community that can help us in wearisome circumstances.

Who would be in your supportive community?

[2] *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017).

Almost forty years ago, noted pastor and author, Gordon MacDonald wrote a classic book titled, *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* that helps us sort this out.[3] In the book, MacDonald identifies five kinds of people who can affect spiritual passion.

1. There are □ Very Resourceful People (VRPs) who ignite your spiritual passion. This group can include mentors, coaches, and teachers.
2. There are □ Very Important People (VIPs) who share your spiritual passion. This group can include teammates, coworkers, and close friends.
3. There are □ Very Trainable People (VTPs) who catch your spiritual passion. This group can include proteges, students, and disciples eager to learn.
4. There are □ Very Nice People (VNPs) who enjoy your spiritual passion. This group can include people who want to benefit from you. They are more often consumers than servers. More often takers than givers.
5. There are □ Very Draining People (VDPs) who sap your spiritual passion. This group can include malcontents, complainers, and grumblers.

The "friend" and "brother" from Proverbs 17:17 likely belongs to one of □ the first three groups: the Very Resourceful People, the Very Important People, or the Very Trainable People. People in these groups constitute the supportive community.

I am not advocating permanently pigeonholing people. People can and do grow and change.

Nor am I suggesting we shun the remaining two groups: the Very Nice People and the Very Draining People. We are to love and bring life to them, too.

[3] Gordon MacDonald, *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1986) 69-88.

We just shouldn't expect them to be of much support to us in our weariness, and we should manage our relationships accordingly.

MacDonald explains,

> *Our Lord spent ample time with the draining and the nice people in his path . . . but they never captured his full schedule. Rather, Christ seems to have maximized His time with the resourceful (in His case, His heavenly Father), the important, and the trainable . . . I do not want to be misinterpreted in my discussion of the VNP's or the VDP's. They are very much a part of the assembly of believers. And they must be ministered to. But we must understand that they will make greater and greater demands [on our spiritual energy]. . . . If our calendars reveal that the predominant part of our time is merely with the nice and the draining, then we must not keep wondering why we lose our vitality. These people take but do not give, and unless we pause and rebalance, the result is often disaster . . . [Those] who permit an imbalance of contact with these . . . can expect to pay a massive bill in inner exhaustion.*

I invite you to take a mental inventory of who you have spent time with over the past month or so. If there is a dearth of supportive people, perhaps something needs to change.

Remember the big idea: □ Weariness is heavier in isolation but lighter in supportive community.

Another angle on community is presented in □ Proverbs 18:1. It says,

ESV Proverbs 18:1
Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire;
he breaks out against all sound judgment.

Let's break this down and try to understand what it is saying. The person in view is "whoever isolates himself." The original Hebrew word translated, "isolates," is *niprád*. It means to separate oneself or to cut oneself off from others. It's the unfriendly person who avoids relationships. It's a reclusive or antisocial person who holds himself aloof. It's the person who alienates himself from others. It's the rugged individualist who shuns community. It's the person who is deliberately disconnected.

This is not talking about introverts who, by nature, need some regular time alone. There's nothing wrong with being an introvert. I happen to be one of them.

This is talking about the person who isolates himself out of a selfish disregard for the needs of others. This person is one who "seeks his own desire." He is fixated on his own longings, his own wishes, his own appetites, his own agenda, without regard for what others may desire or need.

This person is further described as, "he [who] breaks out against all sound judgment."

The original Hebrew word, translated, "breaks out" describes fighting or quarreling or arguing or opposing. And what this person fights against is "all sound judgment." He rejects any wisdom that may be offered by the community. He is not teachable; he takes no advice. He's not open to suggestions. He's convinced his way is the superior way. He arrogantly perceives no need for the wise counsel of others.

And this opposition to the sound judgment of others may not always manifest itself overtly in a verbal argument. The Hebrew verb translated "breaks out" is in a form that normally indicates the action is reflexive,

suggesting that the person is fighting within himself. So, the person may not always verbally push back against advice; he may simply ignore it.

As we look at the saying as a whole, it is quite clear that it is describing unwise behavior that we should avoid. In this case, it doesn't spell out the negative consequences of this behavior, but it's not hard to fill in the blanks.

We can derive advice by identifying the opposites of what is described.

For example, the opposite of isolating ourselves would be to pursue healthy relationships. So, instead of isolating, we would be wise to pursue supportive community.

At least two important reasons for pursuing supportive community can be derived from the text, again by considering opposites.

First, the opposite of seeking one's own desire would be to sacrificially serve the needs of others. The implication is that we have something to give, we have something others need, we have something to offer. And this is a strongly biblical idea that is often overlooked.

For example, in my selfishness, I may think to myself, "I don't want to be a part of that group because it's way outside my comfort zone and I don't think I'd get much out of it." Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that this is true. Yes, it is outside my comfort zone. And yes, I won't get much out of it. (I personally have never been in a small church group that was a complete zero in terms of personal benefit, but let's just say it's true in this one case: I won't get much out of it.)

Even if that were true, it's not the whole truth. The whole truth includes other people. To the extent that I deliberately disconnect and withhold myself from others, I am withholding something they may need from me.

God has wired us to live in community, to love one another, to serve one another. If you're missing in action, something important is missing for somebody else. Someone else needs what only you can give. That's one reason this verse calls out selfish isolation.

But it's not the only reason. There's a second reason. The opposite of breaking out against all sound judgment would be to embrace the truth that we have something to gain in pursuing healthy relationships. We have something to learn. We have something we need from other people. Our burden of weariness can be lifted through the loving support of others.

Remember the big idea: □ Weariness is heavier in isolation but lighter in supportive community.

The next verse we are going to consider is □ Proverbs 27:9. It says,

ESV Proverbs 27:9
Oil and perfume make the heart glad,
and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.

This is an example of emblematic parallelism, where the first line is a figurative illustration of the second. In high-school English, we learned it as a simile.

In the first line, "oil" likely refers to olive oil, which was sometimes used as a soothing ointment for pain relief or as a base for perfume with a sweet fragrance. The term "perfume" actually describes incense that gives off a sweet smell when burned. Together, "oil and perfume" represent pleasant things that make the heart glad or joyful.

The first line figuratively illustrates the main point in the second, where the sweetening of the soul and the gladdening of the heart is sourced in the earnest counsel of a friend. “Earnest counsel” is a translation of a Hebrew phrase that literally reads, “advice of the soul.”

The clear implication is that, when your heart is weary, the heartfelt wisdom of a friend can lift you up.

Earnest counsel is not about mindlessly parroting some Christianese platitudes. It can be as simple as a genuine, “me too,” which carries the profound counsel: “You are not alone.” Much the same counsel can come from simply saying, “I am with you.”

But there is a prior risk involved.

Not stated in the proverb but clearly implied is the sharing of a burden that prompts the counsel. The earnest counsel of the friend is a response—a response to some disclosure—the disclosure of a heavy heart that needs lifting.

“I am lonely. I am afraid. I feel so overwhelmed. I am weary. I believe God loves others, but I’m not sure he loves me.”

Vulnerably confessing such things requires great courage because there is always a risk of rejection or humiliation or silence. I remember when our four-year-old daughter experienced the first of nine neurosurgeries over the better part of twenty years. Some Christian woman we barely knew came and told us there must be some sin in our lives that caused this. (I suspect she was a VDP.)

Some Christians can be such hurtful idiots. It can tempt us to never share our struggles with anyone.

But if we withhold, we have no shot at experiencing the sweetness of the earnest counsel of a friend.

Last week I listened to Jonny Sun, a best-selling author who gave a TED talk titled "You are not alone in your loneliness," in which he describes his own efforts to share his imperfections, insecurities, vulnerabilities, and loneliness on social media, largely because he felt there was nowhere else to turn.[4] When someone responds with empathy, he describes it as "one tiny, tiny sliver of light in all the darkness."

This made me sad and hopeful. Sad that the church is not known as a safe place to share our brokenness. Hopeful that we can become the sliver of light in all the darkness, bringing life to our world. It starts with being a supportive community.

Remember the big idea: □ Weariness is heavier in isolation but lighter in supportive community.

The last verse we're going to consider is the most well-known. □ Proverbs 27:17 says,

ESV Proverbs 27:17
Iron sharpens iron,
and one man sharpens another.

This is another example of emblematic parallelism, where the first line is a word picture figuratively conveying the main idea presented in the second.

In antiquity, iron tools were used to sharpen cutting implements also made of iron. An example is an axe. If you have ever tried to use a dull axe to cut wood, you have experienced what it is like to expend a lot of effort

[4] https://www.ted.com/talks/jonny_sun_you_are_not_alone_in_your_loneliness/transcript?subtitle=en

without getting much done. Using a dull axe is draining. Sharpening the axe makes the work much less wearisome.

In the same way, one person can sharpen another, making life less wearisome. One commentator explains, “Sharpens is used figuratively here to mean ‘to make or cause a person to be keen in perception, quick witted, or full of energy.’”[5] Bringing our dullness and weariness into the presence of a supportive friend can have a sharpening effect on us.

Ironically, we can get stuck in a vicious cycle. When our mental axe gets dull, we become weary. We need sharpening. But we rationalize that we are just too weary and too busy cutting to seek out a friend. And the axe keeps getting duller and we keep getting wearier.

We need to stop to get sharpened in supportive community.

Which brings us right back to the big idea: □ Weariness is heavier in isolation but lighter in supportive community.

How can you apply this to your life today?

You may need to reevaluate your thinking about Sunday mornings. Yes, Sundays are opportunities for worship and learning. But equally important, they are also opportunities to be involved in a supportive community.

This sermon is a little shorter than usual to give you more time to take the risk of reaching out to connect with someone this morning before you leave. Find someone. Push through your reluctance. If necessary, introduce yourself. Say hello. Offer a smile. Listen. Linger. Get another cup of coffee. Our lobby is designed for hanging out.

[5] Reyburn, William David, and Euan McG. Fry, *A Handbook on Proverbs*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2000), 580.

Your warmth may be the very thing someone desperately needs today. It may be the sliver of light in the darkness someone is longing for.

Or you yourself may end up leaving here feeling lighter, less weary, less alone.

But this has little chance of happening unless you take the risk.

Imagine what a difference it would make if everyone who came to Moon Valley felt supported in this community, an oasis in the middle of a weary world. I can't think of a better way to bring life.

Let's pray. Lord, help me to proactively pursue supportive community that I may help and be helped in my weariness. Amen.