

## Doing Life Together

Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

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In May 2023 the U.S. Surgeon General released a report titled, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.” In it, he detailed the effects of loneliness on the American population, claiming that *“lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.”* One commentator remarked, *“Isn’t it strange that in a world more connected than ever through technology, the scourge of loneliness still strikes a lethal blow?”* Other studies suggest that Gen Z is the most digitally connected generation but also the most socially isolated, lonely, and depressed.

This week I heard about a new AI-powered companion simply called, “Friend.” Designed to wear on a lanyard around your neck, it promises to provide companionship and emotional support by sending unprompted commentary throughout the day. The developer states that it’s essentially a good listener so it can speak into what it hears from you and from others around you.

Listen to what a reporter said in *Wired*, which is a website devoted to how technology is changing every aspect of our lives...

*The ‘Friend’ purely offers companionship. It’s meant to develop a personality that complements the user and is always there to gas you up, chat about a movie after watching it, or help analyze how a bad date went awry. [The inventor] wants the Friend to be your friend, he wants it to be your best friend – one that is with you wherever you go, listening to everything you do, and being there for you to offer encouragement and support. He gives an example, where he says he recently was hanging out, playing some board games with friends he hadn’t seen in a while, and was glad when his AI Friend chimed in with [some commentary]. Listen to what he said, ‘I feel like I have a closer relationship with this [blank] pendant around my neck than I do with these literal friends in front of me.’*

Oh, my. That’s so sad. As I did some more research, a headline in *Elle* grabbed my attention: *“Can an AI Necklace Fill the Bestie-Shaped Hole in my Life?”* Even more sad and chilling is a headline I saw in *Fortune* magazine about the AI Friend: *“Meet the Harvard dropout who made an AI necklace he says is like ‘talking to God.’”*

Wow, those are quite the claims. This AI Friend wants to be your best friend and take the place of God!

In striking contrast, as we learned last week, God has placed eternity in our hearts because we've been made to know Him through the new birth. Here's a summary of the sermon: *While we are mired to earth and tethered to time, we are also wired for eternity and will live eternally, in either Heaven or Hell.*

What we'll discover today is God has also implanted within us a desire for relational community in our souls. There's nothing artificial about that. Here's our main idea: *Be intentional about connecting with others because we are made for community.*

We'll spend the majority of our time in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 but first, let's put this text into context. As he begins this chapter, Solomon observes some troubling aspects of loneliness.

- **The loneliness of oppression.** Check out verse 1 where we see how the oppressed often suffer alone: *“Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had **no one** to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was **no one** to comfort them.”*
- **The loneliness of envy.** If you only focus on coveting what others have, you'll end up isolated and irritable. Listen to verse 4: *“Then I saw that all toil and skill in work come from a man's **envy** of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.”*
- **The loneliness of isolation.** In verses 7-8, he describes the emptiness of isolation: *“Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has **no other**, either son or brother...”* Satan attacks believers when they are alone, much like he did with Eve in the garden and Christ in the wilderness.

In Genesis 1, God declared six times that everything He made was good. In Genesis 1:31 we read, *“And God saw everything He had made, and behold, it was very good.”* When we come to Genesis 2:18, we read what God thinks about isolation: *“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”*

God wants us to be integrated, not isolated, and to have authentic, not artificial relationships. Please turn to Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 and notice the word *two*, in contrast with the words *one* and *alone*: ***“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him – a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”***

While it is appropriate to make applications of this text to our lives, and we will, the original context is of two men on a journey together. Traveling in the ancient Near East was arduous and hazardous, especially at night, when they could easily fall into a pit. There were also robbers on the road like Jesus referenced in Luke 10:30: ***“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.”*** These travelers needed each other for companionship, collaboration, consolation, comfort, composure, and completion. We’ll use these words as our outline.

I see six advantages of authentic community in this passage.

**1. Companionship.** Check out the first part of verse 9: ***“Two are better than one...”*** Earlier in the chapter we read about isolation, and now we’re introduced to the importance of being connected to a companion. Psalm 119:63 says, ***“I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts.”*** We are better together as Proverbs 27:17 says, ***“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.”*** Instead of being independent, we’re called to be interdependent.

I especially see this lived out in our Celebrate Recovery ministry where the emphasis is upon the gospel, accountability, getting connected to a share group on Fridays, and joining a Christ-centered 12-step group during the week. When people in CR realize that someone is isolating, alarm bells start going off because they know the pitfalls of trying to handle addiction alone. Are you connected to a companion?

Fight for companionship, knowing Satan wants you to be isolated and alone so you falter and fall out.

**2. Collaboration.** When you have a close companion, you can collaborate together. Let's pick up the second half of verse 9: ***"...because they have a good reward for their toil."*** The word ***"toil"*** refers to *"trouble or labor."* It goes without saying that relationships take a lot of work, but there's a reward when both work together.

I'm reminded of the popular saying, *"Friendship doubles your joys, and divides your sorrows."* Psalm 133:1 says, ***"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"***

Do you seek to collaborate with others or are you trying to do things on your own? Proverbs 27:9 says, ***"Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel."***

One way we can collaborate with others is by praying together. On Sunday night at 7pm, we're inviting everyone to do a prayer walk for our local schools. If you don't know where to go, join me at Jane Addams in Moline. Many area schools have coordinators in place. Also, there's a group of people fasting and praying on Wednesday. They're meeting in the conference room at noon to pray together.

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**3. Consolation.** Another big benefit of being in community is that others can console you when you're down and help you get up when you've fallen. This is found in verse 10: ***"For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"*** The word ***"fall"*** has the idea of falling flat on your face and ***"lift"*** means, *"to raise from the ground."* The word ***"woe"*** refers to *"a cry of warning"* and was used to convey the urgent importance of having someone to help us when we're hurting.

I witnessed two examples of this recently. The first was Monday night, when about 45 people gathered together to pray for Edgewood member SW who left for West Asia on Tuesday. The night was organized well because her "Care Team" gave attention to all the details. They'll continue to provide support for her while she is gone.

The other example happened one day during VBS last month. When I walked into the gym, I noticed a young boy sitting off to the side crying hard while Allie Cox, one of our student leaders, knelt on the floor next to him consoling him. It was such a beautiful picture of how God used an available servant to help lift up

this hurting little guy. BTW, if you want to make a difference in the lives of young image bearers, stop by the table in the south lobby, and fill out a “Say Yes” to serving with EdgeKids in Awana, Sunday mornings, or Celebrate Recovery.

**4. Comfort.** Living in close community can also warm your soul when the coldness of life has frozen your faith. We see this in verse 11: ***“Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?”*** During the cold nights in Israel, travelers would often share blankets to keep warm. This verse always makes me think of a woman chaplain I knew in a previous community who was ministering to an older woman who was dying with no family or friends in the room. When the chaplain heard the woman say she was cold, she laid down next to her and held her tightly until she died.

The Apostle Paul often wrote about his need for the emotional warmth that fellow Christ-followers gave him. I think of Acts 28:15: ***“And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.”*** One band of brothers traveled about 33 miles and the other group of guys journeyed over 40 miles to be with Paul. When they arrived, Paul gave thanks to God and ***“took courage.”*** We might not think much about this, but being with other Christians gave Paul courage and comfort. This might be why Paul wrote so many one another statements in his letters.

We have a responsibility to live out the 59 “One Another” statements in the Bible. These are impossible to obey if you’re not in community with others. We’re to encourage one another according to Hebrews 3:13: ***“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”*** Our first value as a church is to gather together as we see in Hebrews 10:24-25: ***“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”***

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**5. Composure.** It’s easy to fall apart and to feel overwhelmed when we’re alone, but the presence of at least one close companion can give us confidence to withstand problems. We see this in the first part of verse 12: ***“And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him...”***

Proverbs 17:17 says, “*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.*” That’s why Jesus sent witnesses out “*two by two*” in Luke 10:1.

The US military has a well-established buddy system where two individuals are linked together to monitor and help each other. In adventurous or dangerous activities each may be able to prevent the other from becoming a casualty or rescue the other in a crisis.

If you are alone or staying away from church, hear what my pastor friend Ben Lovelady, who pastors at First Baptist in Silvis, posted about the church. I have his permission to share it.

*Man, oh man, would I encourage you to venture out and go to a gospel-preaching church...don't listen to the naysayers. See the torn fabric of lives being mended by His hand. Experience intimacy with Him...witness His body on earth at work...ministering to the broken, being patient with those who offend, extending kindness to strangers, learning to appreciate the gift of giving vs receiving – and being ridiculously loved and built up by Him when they fail miserably at these time and again. There's no place like His body on earth. All things in Heaven and earth are in the process of being united to Him – either in glorious reunion or fearful judgment. Become a part of the joyful reunion today.*

**6. Completion.** We’re designed to integrate our lives with others, not live isolated from others. The end of verse 12 says we’re stronger when we’re together: “*...a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*” One paraphrase of verse 12 is helpful: “*By yourself you’re unprotected. With a friend you can face the worst. Can you round up a third? A three-stranded rope isn’t easily snapped.*” If two is better than one, then three is even better. There’s a lot of strength when we are woven together because there is strength in numbers.

One application of this passage has to do with marriage. I went back and pulled a section out from one of my wedding messages, but first I asked Jonathan and Greta Holmquist if I could borrow what they used in their wedding recently.

It’s really difficult to braid two ropes together because they keep unraveling. Left alone they will come apart. If you choose to do life apart from the Lord and try to hold things together on your own, things will unravel. But when you allow Christ to wrap Himself around each of you individually and then weave Himself

in and through your marriage, you will have a marriage of oneness that will not be easily broken.

Remember, your spouse is not your Savior. If you look for fulfillment in each other, you will be disappointed because you've been designed to live your lives with Christ at the center. A marriage of two chords is insufficient; but a three-cord marriage is indestructible.

The twist of the strands in a twisted or braided rope serves not only to keep a rope together but enables the rope to more evenly distribute tension among the individual strands. Without any twist in the rope, the shortest strand would always be supporting a much higher proportion of the total load.

Two strands alone are limited and not stable because they can unravel under pressure and slide over each other causing friction. But the third strand keeps everything in place.

Another example of two being better than one is Belgian draft horses. The Belgian draft horse is one of the largest, strongest horses in the world. One horse can pull 8,000 pounds by itself. The weird thing is if you put two Belgian horses in the harness who are strangers, together they can pull up to 24,000 pounds. Two can pull not twice as much as one, but three times as much as one. However, if the two horses are raised and trained together, they learn to pull and think as one. The trained, and therefore unified pair can pull up to 32,000 pounds, almost four times as much as a single horse.

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### **Action Steps**

What do we need to do to be in Christian community?

**1. Enter into a saving relationship with Christ.** Proverbs 18:24: *“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”*

**2. Get connected with others.** This has been quite a week for our Edgewood family! On Sunday, 13 people were baptized and 150 came out to celebrate. On Monday night, nearly 50 people came together to worship God and pray over S.W. as she was sent out for long-term service in West Asia. And Wednesday night,

nearly 100 men came together to fellowship over food and to be challenged in the Word. God seems to be answering our prayer from Psalm 85:6: ***“Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?”***

There are a lot of ways for you to get connected. We have weekend and midweek Growth Groups, and one-on-one Intentional Discipleship groups. Next month, Second Winders, our ministry for senior adults which meets on the second and fourth Thursdays, will begin. We also offer DivorceCare, GriefShare, and a memory care support group on Sunday afternoons starting in September.

For women, there is a swim party this afternoon, a Coffee, Connections, and Conversations event on September 10, and a fall retreat September 27-28. The Bible Weavers group meets the second Saturday of the month and there is a Women’s Connect Group at 9:00 am every Sunday.

For men, there’s a golf outing next Saturday, another cookout on September 21, and a Chili Cookoff on October 16. In addition, there are men’s discipleship groups on Sunday mornings at 9, Wednesday nights, Thursday mornings, and Thursday nights.

**3. Become a functioning member of Edgewood.** This commendation of community is a welcome antidote to the individualism that affects most every local church. We must embrace the ecclesia! A cord of three strands is not easily broken and a cord of 900 is impossible to break. As we’ve said many times before, if you unplug you will unravel.

This week, I was out in the community working on this sermon when my new friend Bruce came up and thanked me for using his name in the sermon last weekend. I was surprised and thrilled he had watched the service but told him I was referencing a different guy named Bruce. I asked him when he was going to attend a service in person, and he said maybe, someday. Then, he looked at me, smiled, and said, *“Actually, it’s your gig to get people to come to church.”* That struck my funny bone. Then he said, *“Don’t give up on me.”* I couldn’t stop laughing at his comment so I asked if I could quote him in the sermon. He gave me permission, so I told him if he hears the name Bruce, it’s really him! Hi, Bruce.

Then I read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 to him and because he’s a musician, he immediately thought of four songs that go along with it. The first one was made famous by Three Dog Night, called “One.” And then he quoted the opening line: *“One is the loneliest number.”*

**4. Meet one new person every day.** This is a good practice throughout the week when we're out and about in the community as this will open up unforeseen gospel opportunities. This also applies when you're here to gather with God's people. Instead of only talking to those you already know, introduce yourself to someone you've not met yet.

Friend, it's time to get connected so you can have authentic, not artificial community. When you do, you'll experience...

- Companionship.
- Collaboration.
- Consolation.
- Comfort.
- Composure.
- Completion.

It's teamwork that makes the dream work. In his sermon called "The Missing Companion(s)," Daniel Palmer makes a compelling plea:

*Are you discouraged or depressed? Do you need a friend who will comfort you and pull you through? Embrace the church. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken...fellowship is more than sharing a cup of coffee after the service. It is sharing life together, sharing sorrows, fears, pains. So that together we might fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith, and long for the Glory of Christ appearing. Get a church and a community and step into it, go all in, find where God wants you to serve. Find where and how He wants you to connect with other people, and love like Jesus loved, invest like Jesus invested. Find ways to help protect and support, cherish and to care and watch what God will do in your life and in the life of the church. Don't stay not ready because it isn't perfect, because you will never be ready. God makes beautiful disciples by displaying His perfect love in imperfect churches...what does God, the Holy Spirit have for you to be more interconnected for the Glory of Christ?*

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That beats having an artificial friend hanging around your neck.

We really see teamwork on a missions trip. I encourage you to listen or watch this week's 4G podcast featuring race Tucker, two young people who served on Team Belize. They built one another up and helped those who were struggling.

## **Belize Team Report**