

3. Being Seen by God

13 Thereafter, Hagar used another name to refer to the LORD, who had spoken to her. She said, "You are the God who sees me." She also said, "Have I truly seen the One who sees me?" - Genesis 16:13 NLT

*"Our belonging is rooted in being seen by the God who created us out of the dirt but is also willing to get down in the dirt with me."
Sarah Westfall*

In the Old Testament the outcast servant of Sarah ran away to the desert and there was comforted by knowing that God saw her. God sees us and welcomes us no matter where we are, and He transforms us into His image. Our process of transformation is the shift from our belonging to the world to belonging to God.

Do you recognize that God is gazing lovingly at you right now? He is working to transform you more into His image each day. What area do you feel God is working on in your life to make you more like Him? (kindness, generosity, faith, love, justice, mercy..) If you don't know, ask.

WRAP-UP

Loneliness has become epidemic. We suffer when we don't belong because God created us for community. But sin has separated us from God and can separate us from others too. We need to begin by recognizing we belong to God because He loves us, not because of what we do. When we are filled by God's love and acceptance, we are assured that we belong to Him, and we find our place in the family of God.

MEMORY VERSE

28 But as for me, how good it is to be near God! I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do. - Psalm 73:28 NLT

Challenge-

Ask yourself these two questions Do you need to come home? Or do you need to stop striving, pick your head up and realize God has always been there.

Created to Belong No Longer Strangers - Week 1

INTRODUCTION

God created us to be in relationship with Him and with each other. How do you feel when you enter a room full of people and you don't recognize a single face? If the group already seems to know each other you're probably thinking "I don't belong here". But if there is someone in the room who recognizes you, and welcomes you in, that connection assures you that you do belong. We all long to be safe, seen and loved. Your relationship to your Heavenly Father is the starting point to belonging to God and belonging to His family.

Ice Breaker

Do you remember a time when you felt like an outsider or found yourself in a place you didn't fit in?

Key Passage

31 " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' " - Luke 15:31-32 NIV

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Created for Community

Our culture is drifting more and more towards isolation as the norm. Even before the pandemic of Covid 19 forced us to distance ourselves from everyone else, there was a significantly dangerous trend of loneliness which was identified by the Surgeon General as an "epidemic"¹.

¹Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* [Internet]. Washington (DC): US Department of Health and Human Services; 2023-. PMID: 37792968

We suffer when we are alone because God created us to be in community both with Him and one another.

27 So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." - Genesis 1:27-28 NLT

Being created in God's image doesn't mean we have a physical resemblance. What are some of God's characteristics that you believe we were created to reflect? How does v 29 identify some of God's traits we share?

We may find it difficult to feel welcome in the presence of God. This can come from shame, or guilt or the recognition of our own insignificance compared to God infinite greatness. But we should not confuse our feelings with how God views us.

27 for the Father himself loves you dearly because you love me and believe that I came from God. - John 16:27 NLT

16 So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. - Hebrews 4:16 NLT

28 But as for me, how good it is to be near God! I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do. - Psalm 73:28 NLT

What do the verses from John and Hebrews above reveal about God's relationship with you? Have you experienced anything like the feelings expressed by the Psalmist in Psalm 73?

18a Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone...." - Genesis 2:18a NLT

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! - Psalm 133:1 NIV

We were invited to participate in the divine community from the beginning, as our triune God said, "Let us make man in our image". We were never meant to be alone. After God created man, he also created woman and then He walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, until sin separated us. The immediate fallout from sin was distance from God, shame, and covering up. Mankind no longer belonged in Eden.

When we lose connection with other people or places where we once belonged it can be a painful experience. Share some of the feelings you've felt when you have experienced the loss of a relationship with an individual or a community. This might include death, divorce, relocating, losing a job, isolation during Covid... What has helped to ease that pain of that loss?

2. The Prodigal and the Heir

Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son at the conclusion of a trio of parables that illustrate how God restores lost things. God returns the thing that has been lost (sheep, coin, son) to the place where it belongs. Again, let's look through the lens of Jesus' culture. We don't know why the younger son was unhappy, but asking for his share of the estate while his father was still alive was an insult. This son didn't just leave the household, he left the country! But the consequences of his foolish decisions followed him, and we see that his self-indulgent lifestyle left him in a place he didn't belong.

12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 'Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ... 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' - Luke 15:12-13, 18-19 NIV

The younger son rejected his place in the father's house. What did he seek instead? Unfortunately, this story is still quite common. Discuss some of the self-indulgent lifestyles that someone might embrace in attempting to find a place to belong. How did the younger son seek to belong when he returned home?

28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' " - Luke 15:28-32 NIV

Based on the complaint of the older brother, it appears he attempted to secure his acceptance by what he did for the father. How did he expect to be recognized by his father? How did the Father show that he had always belonged? How might this parallel our relationship with God?