

**Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee**

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Dr. Steven P. Eason

Six Bad Words in the Bible; 5. "Alone"

We are in a sermon series on *"Six Bad Words in the Bible."* Today's word is *"Alone."*

The context for this passage is the wilderness. The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for 430 years. (*Exodus 12:40*) God is delivering them, using Moses as their leader. About 600,000 men, not including women and children, were led into the wilderness, in route to the land God had promised them. (*Exodus 12:37*). There are well over a million people out there in the wilderness. No lights, no food, no sanitation, no hospitals, no shelter, no law enforcement. Just wilderness. This is a part of their story.

Numbers 11:10-17

¹⁰Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹²Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? ¹³Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery."

¹⁶So the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. ¹⁷I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself."

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Moses is out there in the wilderness talking to God. So he's praying. He is surrounded by thousands of people, yet he prays,

*I am not able to carry all these people **alone**, for they are too heavy for me. (11:14)*

It's when we are carrying the heaviest loads that we can feel the most alone. The weight is on you. You can be surrounded by a million people and not feel connected to any of them. They don't know what you are going through. They don't know what's on you. They don't know what you are thinking, what you are feeling, or what you are doing. They don't know your dreams, your hopes, your aspirations. You can feel alone in a crowd. It happens.

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In the Creation story, everything is created "good" but one thing. "*It is not good that the man (or humanity) should be **alone**."* (Gen. 2:18). Alligators are good. Snakes, spiders, bats and mice are all good. One thing is not good. "Alone" is a bad word in the Bible.

There are times that all of us want to be by ourselves, but to be alone is to be disconnected, isolated and without community.

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Dr. Peter Cohen has made the observation, "*If we can't connect with each other, we will connect with anything we can find...*" ("*The Likely Causes of Addiction*," Johann Hari, 1/20/15, www.huffpost.com). We have a deep need to bond. If that doesn't happen we will seek out substitutes. Obsessive gambling, drugs, alcohol, food, and pornography can all be substitutes for connection with other people. We long for intimacy.

According to the *American Psychiatric Association*, strong social ties and relationships have proven to decrease stress, support mental health recovery in times of grief and hardship, and provide a positive impact on our wellbeing as we age.

Loneliness is such a social problem that the United Kingdom recently established *The Campaign to End Loneliness*. The goal is to raise awareness, provide hotlines and connections for those who are disconnected and alone.

Being connected is such a basic human need that prisons will put you in solitary confinement as punishment for breaking the rules. You're alone, isolated, detached, void of human contact. That's punishment because it deprives us of something we desperately need. Community.

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In this prayer, Moses says he would rather be dead than be alone with all this burden. God had some options. **Option 1:** God could have killed him and answered his prayer. (*Be careful what you pray for...you might get it!*) **Option 2:** God could have fired him. Moses was not a good speaker and he complained a lot anyway! **Option 3:** God could have scolded him for being so weak and faithless. But none of that happened. Here's what did happen.

The Lord said to Moses,

"Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, who you know to be elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself." (11:16-17)

Moses didn't see this fourth option. When you are in a wilderness, all you can see is wilderness. Moses had seen God do some incredible things: the burning bush, the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, but when we are under stress we tend to forget what God has done. We live by logic and reason. We forget how creative and powerful God is.

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In the Presbyterian Church, 50% of our pastors leave the ministry in the first 5 years of their first call. After seminary, the costs, the investments of so many people, they leave the ministry. Why? There are probably many reasons, but I wonder if one of them is loneliness. Out there in the wilderness of people leaving church, a growing secular culture, and shrinking budgets, it would be easy to feel alone. We forget how creative and powerful God is.

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It's not Moses' idea to put 70 elders together to work on a team. It's not Moses' idea for God to put some of the Spirit that was on Moses onto those elders so that *"they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself."* (11:17b) God puts Moses back in community. Moses wouldn't have thought that up in a million years.

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Today we elect deacons and elders to serve as officers with the clergy of this church. What we are doing stems all the way back to that wilderness. We don't work alone. We don't lead alone. We are a team and that is where we find our strength.

Today is also *Mother's Day*. Our mothers carried us in their wombs. We were literally attached. The cutting of the cord was never meant to send us into isolation, but to free us to live in community with one another.

People need human touch, whether they are homeless people, criminals, millionaires, educated or uneducated, Americans or Russians. There is no one who is built to be truly alone.

I think Dr. Cohen was right. *"If we can't connect with each other, we will connect with anything we can find..." (Ibid)* How significant does that make a church family? How important does that make our hospitality? A church is a *Campaign to End Loneliness!*

"Alone" is a very bad word in the Bible. We are blessed to have one another, and to open our arms to anyone who would come to be embraced by us. We are blessed to have a God who is with us in every wilderness of life.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: **Amen**