January 16/17, 2021

Life Together

Life Groups Renewed

Ecclesiastes 4:1-12

Pastor Josh Luse

What a good God we serve! And it's so good to be together as a church family again this weekend. And we are really excited for a new series that's starting up next week in the book of Acts. Bryan will be back starting that series, and we couldn't be more excited about it. So, we hope you come back again then. But before we get into that, we felt like it was really important as a church to pause for one moment, for one week, and look at something that's very important to us as a church, that's a huge priority for us right now, and, as we move forward, will only grow as a priority.

I think one of the easiest ways to reflect on that would be to ask this question to begin with: "Who could you call at 3am?" Some of you are thinking, "I hope nobody; that's too late," right? But outside of your family, say you're at the bottom of your rope. Maybe you've made a poor decision; maybe some circumstances have taken place and you're in a spot where you have to turn to someone. How many names could you write on that list at that point?

It's kind of interesting. Oxford University did a study of all the social media, and they realized that the average person has 155 social media friends. But during a crisis, the study showed them that the average number of people that they would turn to in a crisis was only 4. To get a little more glimpse into this, Cornell also did another study. They surveyed 2000 adults, and they asked them, "In the past six months, who have you discussed important matters with? Would you just list all the names in the survey?" Now for about half of the survey responses, you know how many names they listed? One! The overall average for the survey was two! There was even a segment—4%—that listed Zero! So, they dug into these numbers a little bit more. And they said, for some of them that was because they just didn't have important matters to discuss. But 36% said it was because they had zero people that they felt they could turn to. The reality is this: We live in a world where we know more and more about each other—and yet we know less. We live in a world where we have more and more information about people every day, and yet we become more and more isolated every day. We see that; we feel that; we experience that, and yet we realize this is not how God intended life to be. So this is what we're going to dive into this morning.

If you have your Bibles, I'm going to be in the book of Ecclesiastes, and I'll be reading from the ESV. Now, before we get into Ecclesiastes, I have to set it up just a little bit, because I've got to warn you, the book of Ecclesiastes is kind of depressing. I'm talking country-music depressing, right? This past week I read through it. It took about an hour to read through all 12 chapters, and it's interesting how the book is formed. It's in the wisdom literature—so much like Job or Proverbs—but the technique that's used in this book is a little bit different. There's the author that's writing, but then he sets it up for the speaker, this character that comes in and gives all of his takes on life. The opening of the book calls him a *preacher*. Maybe your translation says *teacher*. It could be this critic that comes in and he's going to give his perspective on the truth of life as he sees it. And then at the end of the book, the author is going to come back in, and he's going to share the final words. But as the book opens, what it says is, "*Vanity, vanity, all is vanity*," or maybe your translation would say, "*Meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless*." That's where we start.

But it's important to understand the word that's used for meaningless or vanity, or you could say *futile*. Maybe that's in your translation as well. The literal translation would be *breath,* or *vapor*, and what he's trying to convey here is that some things are fleeting. He goes on and one of his arguments is that we have little time. Life is here for a moment, and then it's gone. You are young; enjoy it while it lasts, right? It's fleeting. But at other times commentators have talked about it as absurdity. Life is *absurd*. You do all the right things; you play your cards the way you're supposed to, and yet it doesn't turn out the way that you expect it to. Your plan doesn't unfold. It's *absurd*. Maybe another way that you could reflect on this would be that vapor aspect. There's this illusion. It seems like there's something of substance, and yet when you get to it, it's empty. There's nothing there. The point that the author or the speaker is not trying to make, is that life is pointless. But it's trying to say there are times in this life where it can be difficult to see the point. At times in this life, it can be confusing. So, as we walk through the difficulty in this life—in fact the author calls it *life under the sun*—here in this world, what are the things that we should latch on to? In the end, he's going to give us the idea to serve God, and follow His commands, right? To continue to follow God. Let's dive into this a little bit and see what the author says. Ecclesiastes chapter 4, verse 1.

> **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! (**If you're somebody that takes notes or draw something, code and circle that they had **no one to comfort them**.) **On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.** (You see it yet again.) **And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living or who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.** (*ESV Ecclesiastes 4:1-3)

The speaker is looking and he's seeing all of the oppression that's going on, all the injustice, all of the abuse of power, that he's watching unfold in life around him *under the sun*. Can you relate with that at all? As he looks out, he says, "*There's no one there with those that are oppressed."* In fact he says, "It's as if, for them, their situation is so difficult that death would be more welcome." He goes on even to say, "Some of them would probably say, 'I wish I would have never been born;' it's bleak." And throughout this, he shows how power has that grasp that's not giving the meaning that it's meant to give. But then he goes on to verse 4:

> **Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work comes from the man's envy of his neighbor. This is also vanity... (**There's our word again. This word is going to show up 38 times in the book of Ecclesiastes.) **...and a striving after the wind.**

So it kind of switches gears here. He stops talking about power so much, and he starts talking about **work**. What is it that people do, and why do they do it? **I saw all the toil (**work) **and the skill**. The word **skill** that's used means something that I'm really good at. Maybe it's something that I'm the best at. You look at others in your trade, and you think, "Boy, I could do that better. I want to be the top; I want to be the best at my trade." Why is it that we do that? He says it comes from **envy of his neighbor**. And sure, maybe it's some of the things that your neighbor has that you want to achieve, or you want to have. But that's not really the deep meaning of why. We want things, not just for things. We want things so that people can admire us for the things that we have. Why is it that we work so hard for that position? So when others look at us, they go, "Wow, there's something!" Why is it that we strive so hard for that house? So others look at us and go, "Nice

house.” Or that car? Why is that we want that phone or those clothes? Not because we need the accessibility and all the new functions, but so that, when others look at it, they go, “Wow, you're significant!” So all the significance in that is pointless. It's like a mist; it's like a fog. It's not going to give you what you want. The reality is this: Value doesn't come from work. You cannot work to achieve value. Value is only given to you. And there is only one person that can give you value, and His name is Jesus Christ. And anything outside of that is going to be vanity—chasing after the wind. He goes on to talk a little bit more about work in verse 5:

> **The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.**
>
> **Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and striving after the wind.** (Vs. 5-6)

The words that are used here give a very descriptive view of a posture that's taking place, and we see three postures used with hands. The first is this *folding of the hands*. The picture is of Uncle Joe after Thanksgiving dinner, as he's back in his recliner. He has crashed out, lazy; he's eaten enough. It gives a picture of somebody in the society that's not contributing. They're sitting there; they're mooching off everyone else and, to the point where they have nothing else. And then it's just them. But they haven't worked for anything and their life is imploding, and it's just devouring in on them.

The second perspective, though, that he gives, is this person who has **two hands full of toil**. This literally gives us a picture of grasping at things. What really gave me a glimpse of what he's talking about here was when I thought about pinatas.

Now, in third grade we made the first pinata I'd ever seen in my life. It was paper mache. We made it around a balloon, nothing to brag about at all, right? But later on in my life, we adopted four brothers and sisters from Costa Rica, and we started using pinatas at their birthday parties. Let me tell you this. I was not ready for the pinata. We got it all rigged up. Everybody was set. It was a birthday; they were excited. I had the bat, and at some point I hit it hard and it exploded after everybody had taken turns whacking at this thing. Candy went everywhere. If you've ever watched Shark Week, it was like a feeding frenzy of sharks. At that moment, my brothers and sisters dove on the floor and started scooping up this candy—hands, feet, everywhere. They would see something over there, go grab it, but they'd see somebody else was trying to get on their pile, and they'd come and dive back on it. It was just complete chaos! By the end of it, I looked down and I had three pieces of candy in my hand—and I had the bat the whole time! But I realized that there was this grasping for piles of candy.

That's what he's talking about in this *work*. I'm envious what everybody has, and I just keep pushing and going to get more and more. I work tirelessly. It gives these two extremes—one that does nothing, the other one that just has a drive that is out of control. But he gives a third extreme and he looks at this hand—this open palm. He says **better is a handful of quietness**, someone with drive and rhythm, work and rest. So he continues to give us more and more pictures of what life is like *under the sun*. And he gives yet one more, verse 7:

> **Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person** (Again, circle it.) **who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business.** (Vs. 7-8)

All of this is like I'm chasing *after the wind.* It's that picture of that person that has given their whole life to their work, at the expense of their family. In the end, they have their retirement package; they have all the toys and the houses and everything, but there is no one there to share it with, because they've all left as they realized what was most important in your life was your work. It's those young professionals that continue to pour themselves into their jobs at the expense of relationships. In pinata terms, it's the person with a pile of candy, but yet no one to share it with. Better is it to have a handful of candy and eat it with friends than a pile of candy by yourself. And in this we see people getting stepped on, taken advantage of, isolated, ignored, mooched off of, rather than people participating in community. And that's where he turns the corner next, verse 9:

> **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.** (Vs. 9-12)

Now there's debate on who the author is. Many think it's King Solomon, based on the first verse. Others think it's a later king down David's line. Some even think it's a Jewish writer that's taking on the perspective of one of these kings. But regardless of who it is, they would have seen many travelers coming through that region. In fact, one of the ways that King Solomon's kingdom built so large was because of the location it was placed. It was this perfect fertile valley, right in the middle of a trade route. So all the goods from Egypt would come up along the coast, in between the hillside and the coast, through this kingdom. Everything from the North would come down around the Mediterranean, and it would all meet right there. It was where trades were gathered, where trades were traded, and they would have seen travelers coming constantly.

And I wonder, as we go through this part of Scripture, what he's reminiscing and thinking about from the travelers, because travel was not the same as you and I travel. It looked differently, back when you didn't just pack your suitcases, throw it in the trunk and head out. You would have to really think through what you're going to do. It could be a couple of days travel, so you had to think of what you're carrying if you're carrying it, what you packed, and how you get there. You knew that if you traveled alone, it was going to be a dangerous thing. You knew you couldn't carry as much and that there could be others that you would encounter along the way. It could be mean life or death. So I wonder how many times they saw either a group traveling or even at least two, so that as they traveled on this long journey, they could share the load for the things that they needed.

Verse nine says **Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil**. You want to go fast? Go alone. You want to go far? Go together. It even makes me think of life nowadays. Anybody in this room ever moved houses? Probably most all of us probably have at some point. Better is it to move with a group of people than to move by yourself, right? I had a

friend call me. He said, “Hey, Josh, will you come help us move?” Two are better than one in moving, right? Unless your friend didn't tell you, he's moving to a third-floor apartment without an elevator. That's a different story! And the first thing you're moving is a couch! But let me tell you this. Better two moving a couch than one. We moved the couch up; others joined in and helped move boxes. We got it all set up there. The workload was cut in half because a group participated. You know the best part of it? We did it together. Later that week, they had us all back over for a meal. They had *Settlers of Catan* set up. We ate food; we played board games together. It was incredible! Two are better than one. There's no disputing that.

For if they fall one will help his fellow up. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not yet another to lift him up. Instantly I thought of hiking in Colorado. I used to hike in Colorado all the time. And I would constantly have to tell myself, “Put your eyes up,” because as you would walk through these trails, there were rocks constantly, so you didn't want to sprain an ankle. There were skinny trails, and you didn't want to fall off the cliff. But in doing that, I would miss the view.

But it reminds me of what travelers would have been like in that day. Similar conditions—rocks, holes, or cliffs to fall off of. If you're traveling alone and you sprained your ankle, good luck! But if there are two, you can pick your friend up. You put your arm around them and help them complete the journey. You can keep eyes up for one another. If you're veering off the trail in the journey of life, we need others that will help us when we fail, that will come alongside us and pick us up and remind us of God's grace, His forgiveness, and His plan ahead. We need others that are looking out for us and calling us out as we go off the path. And that's exactly what he's talking about here.

And again, **If two lie together, they keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?** All the college students and young adults were like, “Okay, I've been waiting for this verse,” right? But you’ve got to get some context into this verse. For us, it's hard to imagine what he's talking about because we go home, we set our thermostat, we get a blanket—we maybe put heated blankets on. You want to get context into what he's talking about in this verse tonight? Grab your camping gear and set up a tent in the backyard. You'll get a little more understanding of what he's talking about. If I'm journeying alone, I'm reducing the amount of things that are in my backpack. I'm not carrying tons of blankets and different things like that. I've got a long journey, and it's going to be a long cold night.

What really helped me think of this was a trip our family took to Leadville, Colorado, to go camping. We had friends from our church out there that would go camping in different places. One year they decided we're going to Leadville. Now let me tell you this: Leadville sits at 10,000 feet elevation. We had just gotten a new tent—we’d moved here to Lincoln—and it was this big three room tent. We thought it's perfect. We can put the dog in one room, the kids in another room, my wife and I have this other room with space to spread out. There's good ventilation through this tent. It's perfect! Not the tent you want in Leadville, Colorado! The first night we're there, after reading the reviews, I saw, “Well, hey, highs in June are maybe 73 degrees. It's great! I didn't look at the lows when it said that they can drop, maybe rarely, but drop below 37 degrees in June. Our family is shivering. By morning I think we'd put everything in our suitcase on our bodies. We had layered up, and one by one we started moving from room to room into one tent room. We were all piled up in one spot, huddled together. I think our dog was even on top of us by the morning. Why?

Because when you gather together, that warmth rose. But woe to the person that has a long cold night alone! There will be winter in life. I don't have to tell you that it's a guarantee there are going to be those moments where you walk through difficult things. And if you're there alone, the difficulty only grows. Who do you have in your life that you can call on that long, cold night?

Again, verse 12: **Though a man prevail against one who is alone to withstand him, a threefold cord is not quickly broken.** You see the progression he continues to put together in this? There's one; there's two, then three. He's showing the strength that happens in numbers. No doubt again, as you traveled, if you had to, you were way better off. Somebody's got your back. If somebody comes along, you know what happens to those that travel alone. Just go look at the story of the Good Samaritan. As you lay at night, you'd have one that can keep watch while another sleeps. If somebody does try to come, you can fend them off. Then he goes into this picture of a rope, not just one string. Again I thought of Colorado and all the climbers that I would see going up or somebody rappelling, and there would be somebody at the end belaying them on this rope. Now the ropes that are used are pretty incredible. You take one of those strands, one of those fibers, and you can snap it with your finger. But as those continue to get inner wound and put together, those are stronger than steel, strong enough that you could put your whole life on the line on one of these ropes.

He's giving us this picture of community, that life is not meant to live alone. We see that all throughout the Bible. Now let me clarify this. If you're putting your hope in relationships, you're going to be let down. You're going to be just like the speaker continues to say over and over, "*You're going to see this hope vanish."* But if your hope is in your relationship with Jesus, you are invited into a family. And in that family, God has an expectation of how we live together with one another. In fact, he talks about this all the time throughout the New Testament. He gives loads and loads of "*one another's*": Love *one another*; forgive *one another*. He doesn't say be loved by one another or be forgiven by one another. He puts it in your court for you to do the loving, for you to reach out. In fact, the list goes on and on. Bear with *one another*, accept *one another*, serve *one another*, instruct *one another*, encourage *one another*, build up *one another*, pray for *one another*. We could go on and on. But how do you do that in a church this size?

If you'll bear with me, I think this is time for a little team huddle, time for a little bit of strategy. We talked this through. I think it's time for some slides that might help us out. So let's take a little journey on what we could do to walk this out as a church of this size. Now we've been talking about this for a couple years. About five years ago, we started trying to think through, "How can we make a church this big, feel small as you connect in?" You'll remember we started talking about this thing of *sections* that, normally, when we come into services, we come to the same service, come to the same spot. And there are the same people sitting around us each week, even though there are thousands of us gathered. The opportunity that we had was to get to know the people around us, not get to know everyone, but the people around us. That would also help us if new people came in, to be noticed and feel valued. That was our desire. But we also wanted them to feel connected and valued—and that was really tough—and you did an incredible job over the last three years, helping people feel noticed and valued.

I know this last year has thrown a wrench in our plans, and it showed us that we need another way as well, to gather the church in smaller groups. And it also helps us with the challenge that we've

had on how to get people connected after they've met a few people. So we believe the strategy that will help us out with that is *Life Groups*. I know what you're thinking. "We've done this before," or maybe, "We've tried this." We realize this is not the only way to foster and cultivate community, but we believe this is where God is leading us, and has lead, that will unite us as a church and give us the greatest momentum to set up the opportunity for community. So:

What are life groups?
Life groups offer a weekly living-room conversation to help you figure out what to do on Monday with what you've heard on Sunday, or Saturday if you come to the Saturday night service. The idea is to help us walk out what we're learning. Now, the reality is this. We have been gifted as a church to have incredible teaching and preaching for decades. And potentially, one of the least things that we need at this moment is more information. Maybe more of what we need is more application. How do I get what I hear in here, to be lived out there during the week? We believe that this can happen through a small group of people sharing and wrestling through the series that's being talked about and the text that's being preached—studying it and figuring out how they can live this out in their lives. It works as we walk together. So:

When are the sessions?
What's this look like in a practical sense? Throughout the year, there are going to be three different sessions, one that will go September to November, one that will go from January to March, one that will start after Easter and go to May. Then you'll notice there are breaks. Why breaks? Well, for one, because we're calling these a Life Group, and some people think life group—life sentence. "If I try this thing out, I'll never be able to get out of it," right? This gives opportunities to find and connect into a group that works for you. It also gives us breaks, because we realized that in our life, there are different moments where we might need to take a step away for a season, that we need breaks and times to refresh. Over the summer, there won't be life groups. It will give us opportunities to do other things.

We also realize that studies tell us right now that the average person will give two time slots a week to the church, to come in and gather together. We realized that could be on the weekends for the weekend service, and then through a Life Group. Now, for others, it's more, and that's awesome! You say we should continue to grow, that we'll try to continue to walk that road, but we want to meet everyone where they're at, and we feel like this is a great way to do it. Come be a part of the church service; serve around the church on the weekend, and then be a part of a Life Group. It'll continue to help us as we walk together. The other reality is that we have new people coming into our church every single week. This gives us a lot of entry points throughout the year to help people get connected. So you might ask:

What does the schedule look like?
I'll give you a picture of what my life group and what our schedule looks like. Realize this. Every life group looks a little bit different. The times look a little bit different, when they start, when they end. You can go to the website and find out information about that. Some groups meet online; some meet in person; some have a hybrid. My group, this semester, we're going to start at 6:15. When we get together, the first 10 minutes, we're just catching up. We're talking with one another. Then we have some opening questions that the sermon discussion team does an incredible job helping provide for us. Then we talk through the questions; we start to work out what this means

for us this week as we live it out. At the end, we pray for each other with genuine, honest prayer requests. And we continue to pray throughout the week. But this sets us up for an opportunity for that. By 7:45, we're done, and we go ahead and put our kids to sleep. This is what a typical schedule looks like. I want to bring you along on the journey, so how did we get here, to this point?

May 2020
You remember we started something called *Online Connect Groups*. The world had just gotten flipped upside down, and we needed to adapt and change and find a way to continue to connect as a church. So, within a matter of weeks, our staff pulled together, and, after calling 1000's of calls and checking on our church, we set up a way that we could connect through smaller groups. We realized we had ministries that were connected in great ways, but there were tons of gaps for a unified, comprehensive strategy for the whole church. So we did our first five-week session. We launched 69 groups; we had 601 of you participate in that first session. At the end of it, one of the notes we got from a leader said, "Great time getting to connect. I love that we all just met a few short weeks ago but are laughing and doing life together." That then went into:

The summer of 2020.
You remember we did an eight-week session. We studied the *Renewed Series,* our vision for the church. And we added 5 more new groups at that time that started forming the strategy that we were looking at that we knew was coming. It sped up way faster than we had planned. So then in

The fall of 2020,
we launched what we're calling *Life Groups,* and that was because we wanted these to be groups that did life together, groups that would share honestly about their lives and they would walk together through every season. We did our 10-week session. You'll remember Bryan was preaching through the book of John. The session matched up with that book series. We added 40 more groups and, at that point, we had 1000 people in our Life Groups. So that brings us to where we are:

Winter, 2021.
How does it look as we move forward? Well, just this past week we hired and had the person start as our *Life Groups' Pastor*. He's going to be full time in this position, and we could not be more excited about it. He's been serving in our college ministry for decades. Matt has done an incredible job in the college ministry, but we've gotten younger leaders in that are starting to rethink college ministry in that sense. And this, through God's timing and plan, has been perfect. Matt Meyer is stepping in as our Life Groups' Pastor, and we are excited for that. He's going to give his time, his effort and his focus into this. This session we're starting this week, will start with 16 more new groups, maybe even more. That's the last number that I'd heard. And we're going to go through the book of Acts together. Our goal, by the time we reach our sweet spot as a church, would be that 70-80% of our entire church is in Life Groups.

So what about the other groups? What about Spiritual Care and Celebrate Recovery and serving groups? Those will continue on. If you're in a season where you need to connect with somebody, maybe the depression of Ecclesiastes rings true in your life, and you need some one-on-one connection, those are available. Celebrate Recovery continues to meet every Friday night, and we have support groups that will continue to happen. But our staff in other ministries and other areas has paused for a moment to all join in together—all of our staff, ministry staff—are leading Life

Groups. As we try to grow leaders and multiply this movement. we're trying to put our priority and emphasis into getting this off the ground and doing it well. Those other things will happen, but this will take priority. Why is this so important to us?

Check out this study: Studies show that a guest in your church will begin to have spotty attendance within 6 months, if they don't make 4 to 6 friends, and find a way to make a meaningful contribution. By 12 months, most of them will be gone if they don't find a small group or begin volunteering. Or I would say, or worse, they'll find a seat on the bench, and they'll stay there for weeks, or months, or years. But the Christian life was not meant to be a spectator sport, so what we want to ask you to consider and pray about this week is, "What does this look like in your life?"

Often three things keep people from joining something like this. One is *pace*. We live in a hurry-sick culture. You think, "I don't have time for this," which kind of goes into the second one, *priority*. We start to put other things in other orders, and they take priority over community together, what we just looked at in Ecclesiastics. And this goes to the third one, *perspective*. Do you agree with what he's telling us that *two are better than one*, that we need each other to grow in our walk with Jesus? And if that's true, we ask you to consider joining into a group like this. Maybe it's not even for you. Maybe God wants you in a group so that you can encourage and be there for someone else, so you could be the person they would reach out to and call at three in the morning.

So, as you consider this, this week, I wonder, maybe you are in an existing group that's met for years. Maybe it's aligning into this new strategy, to help us gain momentum and grow and have more opportunities for people to join into. Maybe it's opening a spot within your group for someone else to join. Maybe it's taking the step to sign up for a group or maybe, for you, it's joining in and reaching out about Spiritual Care or about our support groups. Maybe for you, it's being honest in your group as you start this week. Maybe for you, it's coming in and not being the one that's talking all the time, but positioning yourself to listen to one another. Whatever it is, we encourage you to take a step, because life under the sun is hard—and it was never meant to be lived alone. But we can't wait to see what God does, as we continue to journey together. Would you pray with me?

> *Father, I thank You so much that You are a good God, that no matter the chaos that life throws at us, You are the one that we look to, and our whole goal is to honor You and keep Your commands. God, we love You. Father, we pray, as we enter into a new season as a church, that You would allow us to continue to grow together in unity, that we would live out these "one another's" in significant ways that impact each other's lives. God, we pray for these groups as they're launched this week. God, we know this takes a risk. Anytime it involves people, there's risk. But we pray that You would continue to guide through these groups, that You'd form relationships and You would use these to encourage and spur one another on our walk. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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(Video)

Sarah was walking through the Minneapolis airport...

Sarah: So, four years ago I was an absolute mess. I felt horrible. I just had to go to specialist after specialist, and I was just struggling with headaches and GI stuff and ringing in my ears and nobody could help me figure it out and put all the pieces together. And so my doctor just finally suggested, "Hey, Sarah, what do you think about going to Mayo Clinic?"

At Mayo Clinic, they found two growths in my brain, and it wasn't cancer. However, we found out that was NF2, (Neurofibromatosis, Type 2) and so they had a plan to just have me come back once a year to monitor and see if they would grow and cause complications. And so then, the craziest thing happened in January. When I went to bed one night, I literally woke up the next morning, and like 80% of my hearing was gone. I was devastated because I love music so much, and even though I knew that there was a possibility that I could lose my hearing, I really didn't know what that would feel like until the day it actually happened. So the doctors at Mayo said, "If there was ever a chance to save your hearing, now would be the time to have neurosurgery," and so they wanted me to come in two weeks.

In April, we joined a Connect Group at church, because everything was just different at that time. And so we connected with them on Zoom, and they were such an encouragement to us. And so we shared this with them, and they said, "Oh, man, we will definitely be praying for you guys. If there's anything that we can do to help you when you get back, just let us know."

So I ended up going and having the surgery, and they removed the growth successfully, which was great! However, my hearing just never returned. And so that was really disappointing, because I realized that it's never coming back unless God completely heals it miraculously. And so today I live with no hearing and just really loud ringing all the time. What Mayo Clinic said at that time was, "Well, we could help. We could definitely do a cochlear implant that could help reduce the loud ringing and then your brain could learn how to hear through the cochlear implant. However, when we came back home, my insurance company had told Mayo Clinic that they were not going to provide the cochlear implants, which was just devastating because I did not want to lose all my hearing, and that was the whole reason why we had the neurosurgery in the first place. And so we started the appeal process, and Mayo Clinic wanted me to come for some testing. They thought that that testing could help with the appeal process for the cochlear implants.

And so I just reached out and emailed our life group and said, "Hey, can somebody please take me to the airport?" Behind the scenes, they had also said, "If anybody would like to give money to help towards Sarah's hotel cost and food, just let us know." And what was amazing to me is that they ended up providing way more than we even needed—and that was a huge blessing to us! I was super blown away by that because all I asked for was could somebody please take me to the airport, and then we ended up having all of our hotel and even food and above what we needed.

So we are finally on the plane, on the way to Rochester Minnesota. Our life group had been praying all this time that the appeal would get approved, and so as I was flying back from this last trip to Mayo Clinic, I ended up getting the phone call that the appeal process had been approved and

basically in about two weeks I would be flying back to have my surgery to be able to have the cochlear implant.

(*Since the time we recorded this video in December, Sarah has received her cochlear implant. But so far…..the implant hasn't worked.*)

(Messages from their Life Group):
Hi, Sarah. Hi, Rodger. We just wanted to let you know that as we live life together, you two personally have inspired us so much in our faith. You guys have an awesome day.

Hi, Sarah. You are such a bright light and a blessing to everyone you meet. Sarah, we pray for your healing and comfort. We love you.

You have had some closed doors bur you just walk through them with grace and courage, and I just am so blown away by your courage and trust in God.

Hi, Sarah. Thank you for all that you're teaching us through your deep faith, and your love and trust in God. We're praying for you. And we'll see you soon
.
My sweet Sarah. Bottom line is, we love you and when you hurt, we hurt. And I believe that in God's perfect will and time, we're going to get through this, and we're going to get through it together.

We had no idea that our life was going to turn into everything that we faced over these last several months and we never know in life when things are going to be rocky or when things are going to be absolutely joyful. It's life, doing life together. And I can't imagine doing our life that we just went through without our Life Group.