

# Session 2

## ISOLATION



*This guide—for individuals or groups—is designed to provide space to reflect on the experience of the pandemic and what comes next.*

*The exercises below invite personal reflection and discussion with others. The linked videos available on [conversatio.org](https://www.conversatio.org) provide instances of other Christians wrestling with the nature of this time. They can be used to stimulate thought during a small group session or in advance.*

Social distance. The words entered our collective vocabulary suddenly. Humans are relational beings, created in the image of our relational God. The COVID-19 virus stunned the world with its repercussions. It forced us to keep our distance from each other and uncovered the pandemic of loneliness that already surrounded us.

Loneliness paralyzes and makes people invisible. Isolated people need someone to call to them, as God did to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" The body of Christ can be that audible voice of God for lonely people.

For some, being shut into a house together caused bitter conflict or painful divisions. Unhealthy relational dynamics and abuse worsened under the pressures of the pandemic and the series of losses that followed. For others, the need for caution and physical distance, the physical requirement that everyone wear masks, and social upheaval, created caution, an internal defensive stance that caused further pulling back and alienation.

Others found new ways to draw closer. Video chat technology connected scattered family members more often. People reached out to walk, 6 feet apart, with friends. Neighbors got to know each other out in front of their houses.

All of us have a story to tell. The question is who will listen?

**Watch Elizabeth Hall and Rob Loane discuss “Isolation”**  
**<https://conversatio.org/classroom/session-2-isolation/>**

*This video is an optional resource, a minimally edited recording of a conversation between Elizabeth Hall and Rob Loane, moderated by Steve Porter. If you are using this guide with a group, you might choose to view it as a group or watch it individually, in preparation for your time together.*

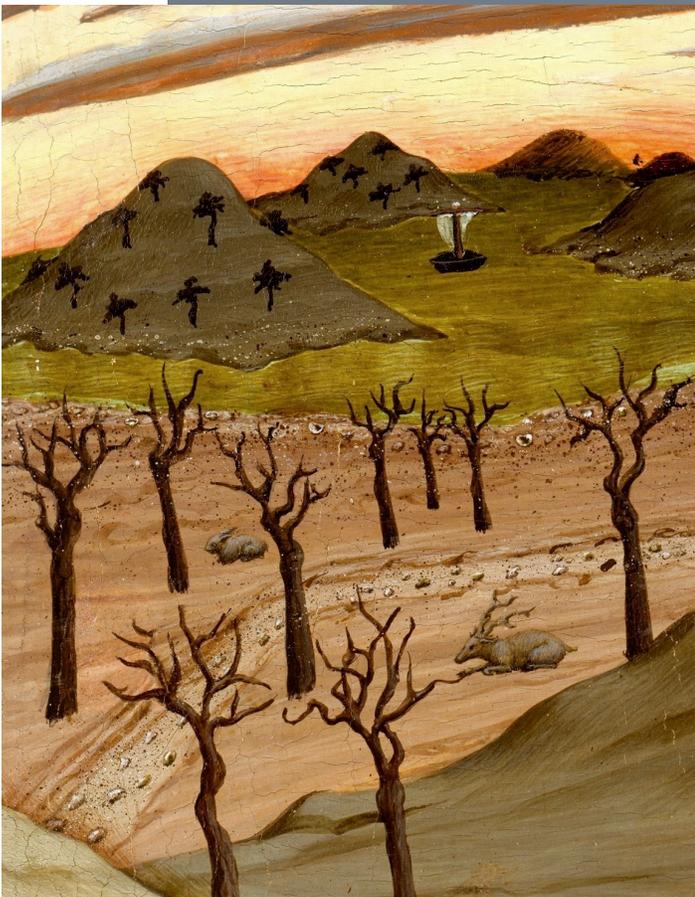
### **Visio Divina**

*The painting in this guide is another optional resource. Visual art can provide a window through which we can see things differently. Take some time to look curiously at the painting. What do you notice? What might God be saying to you about re-emerging through this masterpiece?*

More than any time in recent history there has been a growing recognition throughout the COVID crisis that the Christian life is a shared journey. The lockdowns, the overall anxiety and unrest, the many losses, have all underscored the reality that we are not designed to travel alone.

God sustains us on life's journey in large part through the people who come alongside us, reminding us who we are and who God is, confirming where we are heading and how we might get there.

Simone Weil's words capture for me the simple and hard work we all face in rebuilding community at this critical moment. She writes, "The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?'"



At the most basic level, I want to say to those with ears to hear, everybody has a unique 2020-21 story, will we just ask them about it? What are you going through?

For it is as we pay attention to one another that our lives are disclosed, that neighborly love is expressed, and an awareness of the life of the Spirit begins to develop and deepen among us.

Rob Loane

## Exercise 1: Reflect Individually

*Take about 10 minutes to reflect. If you are participating in a group using this study, this exercise can be completed in preparation for a group meeting or, if you prefer, as a brief part of your meeting.*

**Read** Luke 24:13–19 slowly.

Imagine you are one of the disciples walking along, processing their experience. Read the passage a second time. This time picture a road or path you might travel. Now, instead of talking about the events of their time, tell your 2020–2021 story. How did the pandemic, shutdowns, social distancing, mask wearing, unrest, injustices and deep political divisions impact your relationships?

**Read** the passage a third time. This time focus on Jesus, the questions he asked, and how he listened. Imagine he is listening to your story.

**Pause.** Rest. Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings. Take a few minutes to enjoy Jesus listening to you.

**Ask** God to remind you of one person, who may be lonely, who needs you to show up, walk with them for a bit, hurt with them, and listen.

That same day two of Jesus' followers were walking to the village of Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem. As they walked along they were talking about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came and began walking with them. But God kept them from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing so intently as you walk along?"

They stopped short, sadness written across their faces. Then one of them, Cleopas, replied, "You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days." "What things?" Jesus asked. "The things that happened to Jesus, the man from Nazareth," they said. "He was a prophet who did powerful miracles, and he was a mighty teacher in the eyes of God and all the people.

Luke 24:13–19 (NLT)

## **Exercise 2: Reflect with Others**

*If you are using this study individually, read the questions, think about them and journal about the ones that capture your attention. Consider bringing that question up in conversation with a trusted friend or family member.*

### **Look Back**

1. How did the events of 2020–21 increase your awareness of your own relational needs?
  - In what ways were you alienated from or how did you become aware of the fragility of your community?
  - How have you responded?

### **Right Now**

2. It is natural to try to fix problems for people who are suffering, but often people need companionship instead.
  - How do you intentionally notice people who may be experiencing loneliness and offer companionship to them?
3. Another impulse in trying times is to associate with people who are like us and avoid contact with people who make us feel uncomfortable or unsure.
  - Do you notice this impulse in yourself?
  - How might you resist it?

## Move Forward

4. Think about people who came down on a different position from yours on issues that polarized people in 2020–21.

- What relationship needs healing? Perhaps you wonder if you wronged them or perhaps you are the one who feels hurt. Name the person for yourself.
- What might be the next step in healing and forgiveness?

If you are with a group, pray for wisdom, humility, and courage to ask for and offer forgiveness and to reconcile if possible. (Avoid giving advice to members of your group about this process unless directly asked for it.)

5. It has been said, “There are two types of people. Those who come into a room and say, ‘Well, here I am!’ and those who come in and say, ‘Ah, there you are.’” What “There you are!” person do you know? How has that person impacted you?

We are told that God can find ways of benefiting us through even the difficult times in our lives. How can this lockdown experience strengthen our ability to build spiritual community? First, it increases our awareness of our need. The loneliness and isolation of the lockdown, and the many difficulties we have been left to deal with on our own, allow us to take a closer look at our need for spiritually intimate, embodied, intentional, and generative community. Second, the lockdowns allowed us to “reset,” disrupting normal patterns so that we can more intentionally set new ones as we emerge from the pandemic.

Elizabeth Hall

## Exercise 3: Practice

*“Grand problems require small moves.” -Rob Loane*

*Throughout this study we suggest ways to take small consistent steps in the right direction. Read them. Discern if God is inviting you to take a step.*

**Loneliness** causes relational paralysis. Persons experiencing loneliness require someone else to move toward them. What single, older person, or person who does not connect easily with others, could you befriend? Think of a doable first step and plan a time to take it.

**Practice deep interestedness.** Make a habit of being more interested in others than interesting to others. Focus on the other person. Ask to hear their 2020–21 story.

### Walk the Road

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were deeply troubled by Jesus' crucifixion a few days earlier. After recognizing Jesus alive, they returned the way they'd come. The walk back was filled with wonder and joy. Encountering Jesus altered their perception of all they had experienced.

Prayerfully try walking back the way you've come. Draw a simple road and note with words or simple drawings impactful events in your life since the beginning of 2020. Mark the onset of the pandemic with a word or symbol. Note isolation, illness, economic instability, trauma, etc. all the way up to this moment.

Now invite Jesus to interpret the events for you. One event at a time, starting with today, walk back the way you came. Ask God to show you how he moved. Was there comfort? Did you grow? Did he use evil for good? Which events are still confusing to you? Finish with prayer and journaling your thoughts or sharing them with a friend.

### References

Todd W. Hall with M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall. *Relational Spirituality: A Psychological-Theological Paradigm for Transformation.*

Randy D. Reese and Robert Loane. *Deep Mentoring: Guiding Others on Their Leadership Journey.*

**Dr Elizabeth Hall** is Professor of Psychology at Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University. She is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, associate editor of *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, the premier journal in the psychology of religion, and past president of Division 36, Society for the Psychological Study of Religion and Spirituality of the American Psychological Association. She is a licensed psychologist in California. She has published over one hundred articles and book chapters bringing together psychology and theology on a variety of topics, including embodiment, religious doubt, virtues, motherhood, gender issues, and missions and mental health. Most recently, her work has been focused on meaning in the context of suffering, which is supported by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation. *Relational Spirituality*, co-written with her husband, was recently released. She has received numerous awards for her scholarship, including the Narramore Award for Excellence in the Integration of Psychology and Theology from the Christian Association for Psychological Studies. She and her husband of 29 years, Todd, have two adult sons.

**Robert Loane** serves as President of VantagePoint3 (VP3), a ministry that helps adults discover more deeply who God is, who they are, and what God desires to do through them. VP3 partners with leaders in the church, marketplace, seminaries, and neighborhoods, who are looking for a proven, integrated process, like VP3's *The Journey*, to help deepen and develop adults in Jesus' name. Rob is coauthor of *Deep Mentoring: Guiding Others on Their Leadership Journey* (InterVarsity, 2012), *Growing Up: A Lifelong Journey* (VP3, 2017) and *A Mentoring Guide: Christ. Conversation. Companionship* (VP3, 2019). He is a Faculty Affiliate at Sioux Falls Seminary. He is a graduate of Albright College and Talbot School of Theology at Biola University. His wife Sarah and he live in Sioux Falls, SD, with their children Elliott, Rosie, and Rhys.

Cover (Full) and page 2 (detail): *Saint Anthony Abbot Tempted by a Heap of Gold*. Tempera on panel painting by the Master of the Osservanza Triptych, c. 1435. Metropolitan Museum of Art

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