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CONNECTED

Bishop John Henderson

American 'daredevil' circus performer Nik Wallenda crossed the Grand Canyon on a tightrope. More than 450 metres above the ground, he crossed the canyon in just under 23 minutes, covering 426 metres along a steel cable with no safety harness. Live cameras ran on a 10 second delay in case he fell, so vision could be instantly cut off.

In the recording of the event you can hear Nick repeatedly thanking Jesus. When interviewed he said, "What I get from my Christian faith is that I know where I'm going to go when I die. And that affects my business, because what I do is risky, and if I die, I have peace. I'm not scared of dying."

Now if I tried to copy Nik Wallenda I would be certain to fall to my death. I couldn't do what he did but I can still admire his bravery and skill. How many of us have the single-minded focus that kept him trained on the far side of the canyon, balanced for so long and so high while being buffeted by gusts of wind and maybe a sense of fear as well.

Have you ever faced such a lonely time, such a lonely task? Have you ever been scared? Do you feel there is very little to hold on to, to keep you going in life?

So many of us live among great crowds of people. Over 80% of Australians crowd together in cities and large towns yet so many feel alone, disconnected, lacking intimacy, and the security of stable, established warm relationships. The more we shift towns, change jobs, and chase careers, often the less satisfied we are and the lonelier we become. We lose contact with friends and family. Relationships and marriages get strained, and can snap. Children suffer, and the cycle is repeated.

My childhood was spent as an army kid, and that meant moving every two to three years, usually interstate, occasionally overseas, and always to a new school. As a teenager I was always the new boy, the outsider. I remember struggling to catch the bus to school in strange cities. I was often embarrassed and ashamed as I adapted to different ways of doing things and new school programs. I didn't understand the local football teams. I developed a sense of solitude, shyness, and a forced contentment with my own company.

In my case, however, Dad made a specific choice. He realised his boys needed a stable community that would survive such an itinerant lifestyle. He could choose his army mates or, as a believer, he could choose the group of Christians who gathered each week at the local church. I am eternally grateful that he chose the local church. Wherever we moved, that was where we belonged. Those local Christians didn't care that we were new in town, or that we didn't support the same teams. They just accepted us as fellow travellers with Jesus. That made a huge difference to me, and it's still how I think of the church and of faith.

My personal experience, however, isn't all that common. If it were, so many of us would not feel as lonely as we do. Loneliness can cause many behavioural extremes, damaging both ourselves and those around us. It can make us feel unwanted, unloved, and irrelevant. We watch other people with seemingly wonderful lives, and wonder why that can't be us. Loneliness feeds upon itself, generating bitterness, jealousy, anxiety, and sometimes rage, even hate. Hate can turn

destructively inwards, or outwards, toward others. The violence that can result, in extreme cases, is frightening. We can overbalance beyond the point of no return, and fall right off the wire.

For some, loneliness is a prolonged inner sadness. They can give up on the thought of ever being happy, of finding the human companionship they so deeply need. Have you ever noticed, in the book of Genesis, that when God first formed human beings, he said it wasn't good for them to be alone? God intends us for companionship, with him, and with other people. The thought of individuals, standing alone and apart from each other, has only been invented in recent years. Before that people were always part of a group, a family, a society, or nation. To be alive was to be with others. It was more than survival – it was the meaning of life and the source of joy.

Have you ever dared to think of God as a friend, someone you could get close to? It's not how people usually think about God, but it's how I hear him in the Bible. Yes, sure, there are stories in there about God the Creator, the eternal being, and sometimes the angry judge. God is always more than we understand. The main thing, however, is that God wants us to be truly alive, to be close to him. He has shared our loneliness, and now he wants us to share his life. That's what Jesus is about. That's why he was born without airs and graces, or any barriers between him and other people. That's why he walked among friends, and he walked alone. He came close to us so that we could get close to him, and know him.

Psalm 145 promises:

*“He reaches into the void of empty lives
and enriches and fulfils their hungry hearts.
He is near enough to hear our every cry,
to sense our every need...”*

For centuries human hearts have known the loneliness of being separated from God, and being separated from each other. Many others have known what we experience today. There is a way forward, a step we can take to lead us away from the edge and the fear of falling. Like Nik Wallenda on his tightrope, we too can trust God to bring us to the other side, step by step, day by day, steadily moving forward. He is there with us on the tightrope of life, guiding us and catching us when we fall.

He can do it because Jesus is one of us – born of a human mother, and living a human life. He knows what it's like. He knows how it is for friends to let you down, people abandon you, and the world to turn against you. He understands the temptations, the cries for help, and the feeling of being lost in the wilderness. He knows what it is like right through to the end. He stands in your place, faces all your demons, and he doesn't let you go. He didn't wait for you to ask before he did this for you and He won't force himself on you now. All he asks is that you trust him, and let yourself get to know him.

Jesus invitation to you always stands. He'll never withdraw it. If you want to pick up a Bible you can check it out for yourself. Jesus invites you not only to know him, but to become part of a community of those who trust him. There you will meet others who are on the same journey. You will find that you are not, perhaps, as alone as you thought you were. Slowly, but surely, life can become connected, and meaningful, once again. Like Nik Wallenda on his tight wire, step by step, we know where we are going, we know how to get there and we know who is going with us.

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