

Overcoming Loneliness

By Dr. Mark Smith

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Psalm 139:1-10, Matthew 26:36-46

Few things in life are as painful as the experience of intense loneliness. Loneliness is the anxiety of un-relatedness. It's the painful awareness that we lack meaningful relationships with others. It's a feeling of being disconnected: cut off from others even though we may be physically surrounded by people. We often feel left out, unwanted, uncared for - like we just don't belong.

Everyone has experienced that kind of loneliness from time to time. But for some, it is chronic condition. In fact, many psychiatrists agree that loneliness is perhaps the most dangerous and widespread illness of our day. *"It has reached epidemic proportions in America..."* says one well-known psychiatrist, *"It has been estimated that seventy-five to ninety per cent of adult Americans experience chronic loneliness."*

Our society is contributing to the problem. The emphasis on having a career is creating greater numbers of single people. More marriages are disintegrating in divorce, resulting in lonely partners and lonely children. There is more mobility in our society, resulting in families being spread from one part of the country to the other. With increasing life spans, when a marriage is broken by death, the period of loneliness for the surviving partner can be quite long.

It's true: there are a lot of people in our society whose hearts are broken because they are lonely. And I mean that quite literally. Some time ago, Dr. James Lynch wrote a book called The Broken Heart- the Medical Consequences of Loneliness. In the book he makes the point that loneliness has a negative impact upon us physically. The evidence is irrefutable.

- Single, widowed and divorced people die prematurely from heart disease five times more often than those who are in significant relationships.
- Every kind of terminal cancer is more common in lonely people than in those who are not lonely.
- Those who lose themselves in their work because they cannot lose themselves in a loving relationship with another person run an infinitely greater risk of debilitating illness.

And so when we use words like "heart-broken" and "heart-sick" as figures of speech, there is a literal truth to them as well.

Perhaps I should say at the outset that there is a difference between loneliness and solitude. Solitude is a voluntary withdrawal from other people for purposes of renewal and rejuvenation. We all need solitude to get our bearings and a renewed perspective on life. We all need to get away from people at times and pray and think. Solitude is a good thing. But loneliness, on the other hand, comes when we are forced to be alone; it is a feeling of being abandoned, it is a painful, unpleasant, draining, debilitating experience.

The fact is, we all come into this world feeling lonely. Statistics indicate that more twins are being born than previously. When a teacher mentioned this to her third grade class, one of the pupils said, *"I guess more twins are being born because little children are afraid to come into this world alone."*

Loneliness and the fear of abandonment are our primal fears. As C.S. Lewis put it: *"We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves..."*

We are people who need people. God made us that way. *"It is not good that the man should be alone"* said God. We need people who will love and accept us as we are and who will listen to us and take us seriously.

Some time ago someone placed this ad in a Kansas newspaper: *"I will listen to you talk for 30 minutes without a comment for \$5.00."* It sounds like a joke, but do you know, people actually called? It wasn't long before the individual was receiving 10 or 20 calls a day.

There are so many hurting and fearfully lonely people out there! They need real friends, not just a paid ear. We all do! Jesus himself did!

Jesus knew what loneliness was all about it. He experienced it in the Garden of Gethsemane. When he was troubled and full of anguish, he asked his closest friends--Peter, James, and John, to stay awake with him and to pray with him. Jesus needed friends around him to relieve the awful loneliness he felt just then. Granted, the disciples fell down on the job and couldn't stay awake with them because of too much partying at the Last Supper.... but just the presence of his friends gave him some comfort...

We are indeed fortunate if we have friends who truly care for us and who will be there for us, no matter what. But what if we don't? What if no one seems to care? What if we feel ignored, neglected, cast off?

Before we blame the unfriendliness of others, perhaps we would do well to examine ourselves. Sometimes our loneliness and sense of isolation are self-imposed. We tend to build walls instead of bridges. We erect barriers to keep people out....we might do so out of fear of intimacy--of getting too close to others, or a fear of rejection or a fear of being hurt.

Someone has said:

Anybody can make himself lonely:
 He can allow himself to grow so sensitive that he lives in constant pain;
 He can nurse his grudges until they are an intolerable burden;
 He can think himself insulted until he is apt to be;
 He can believe that world is against him until it is;
 He can imagine troubles until they become real;
 He can hold so many under suspicion that he trusts no one,
 He can question the motives of his friends until he has no friend...

We can think people are unfriendly and find it too easy to simply withdraw and feel sorry for

ourselves. We can become absorbed in our own pain and play the role of victim.

Let me suggest a remedy for loneliness; it involves initiative and little risk:

Think about some of the qualities you would like in a friend. No doubt you would want friends who accept you as you are, who would not misuse you; they would be people who you could count on in spite of everything - people you could trust – people with whom you could share your deepest hopes and fondest dreams. Now, if you intentionally seek to be that kind of friend to other people, you will undoubtedly find that is what they will be to you. In other words, if you want to have a friend, be a friend.

It has been said: *"Love always means going to others, not demanding that they come to us"* (Paul Tournier, *Escape from Loneliness*). If we make an effort to be friendly and to show love, we will invariably find that people will more than meet us half-way.

Someone thoughtfully prayed:

Today, I have had another lonely day, Lord.
 The one phone call I received was a wrong number.
 Was there someone that needed a call from me?
 My neighbors wave as they go about their tasks
 But we seldom take time to talk..
 At church we sit in the same pews with people we do not know
 Are they lonely too?....
 Our marriage has been good but sometimes I expect my husband to sense my
 aloneness...
 Am I lonely because I am afraid to risk reaching out to another?"

Reaching out to others does indeed involve initiative and a little risk. If we want a friend, we have to be a friend. This is an important strategy for overcoming loneliness.

However, there is a sense in which you and I will always be lonely, in spite of the people around us, until we discover a deep personal relationship with God. As St. Augustine put it: *"Lord, thou hast created us for thyself and made our hearts restless until they rest in Thee."*

Our loneliness is most deeply rooted in the lack of fellowship with God for which we were created. The problem goes back to the very beginning of human existence. In the Genesis story, Adam and Eve once enjoyed a full and satisfying relationship with God and each other. But then the man and the woman rebelled against God, disobeying him and going their own way. They began not only to hide from God, but from each other. Their relationship became less than satisfying. And so loneliness became part of the human condition. Because of humanity's revolt in sin, people were cut off from God and from each other: the anxiety of un-relatedness.

And so the inner pain of loneliness is really a longing on our part to get connected with God again. It is a kind of "homesickness" for God.

I've heard loneliness described as a kind of "homing instinct." We have all heard of dogs and

cats who have found their way home after being lost at great distances. Swallows will make an aerial journey of thousands of miles each year and return to their exact nesting place. Salmon return to spawn in the very part of the river where they were hatched. That same kind of "homing" instinct is in us; it is called "loneliness" and it's meant to drive us home to God. We have this inner longing or loneliness to be at home with God again. That is why nothing else will take our loneliness away. It doesn't help (in the end) to get with other people or to join clubs. No person or activity can satisfy that inner longing - only God can.

The writer of the 139th Psalm overcame his loneliness when he discovered the wonder of God's presence and love. He tells us that God knows us and has searched us. God knows when we sit and when we rise; God knows our thoughts, our going out, our lying down...God is familiar with all our ways, he says. *"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me...Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, you are there..."*

God shows himself to be our ever-present friend in Jesus Christ. Jesus said he would never leave us nor forsake us. He came to reassure us of his love. He died to heal our broken relationships. He died to bring us back into meaningful fellowship with God and with those around us. He died to take away our loneliness.

If we are lonely and have never received Him into our heart and life, then that is where we must begin.....We don't have to wait for a special event...We can simply say *"Lord, I am here. I am desperately lonely...I need you as Savior and friend. I confess that. I receive you into my life..."* And he promises to come, to make his home in our heart.

Then each and every day, we can pray *"Lord, I need you today....Be my constant companion. Walk with me."* And true to his promise, the Lord will do just that. A guess the question is, will we walk with *him*?

He truly is a companion who understands our loneliness. He experienced intense loneliness in the Garden, but even more on top of Calvary's hill on the cross. He knows our pain. He knows what it is to be abandoned and forsaken and alone. He offers his care, his presence, and he also offers us his family -- the church. Loneliness need not be a way of life. But Jesus came, Jesus died, and Jesus provides his own self and his family to enable us to overcome the often intense pain of loneliness. What a friend we have in Jesus! Befriend him, for he has already befriended you! Amen!