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Dealing With Loneliness



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Dealing With Loneliness

Loneliness is a painful, common human experience that occurs for many reasons. This paper was written to help you understand what loneliness is and to provide you with biblically-based, practical guidance for dealing with it.

I. SCRIPTURAL DIRECTION & BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

A. When God created us in His image, He created us as relational beings.

Genesis 2:18, "And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him [a companion who will help him]."

B. Loneliness is seen repeatedly in Scripture, even in the lives of "heroes of faith."

Moses

Numbers 11:11,14, "And Moses said unto the LORD, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me? . . . I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me."

Elijah

1 Kings 19:9-10,18, "And he [Elijah] came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah? And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. . . . [And the LORD said unto him] Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him."

Job

Job 19:18-19, "Yea, young children despised me; I arose, and they spake against me. All my inward friends abhorred me: and they whom I loved are turned against me."

David

Psalms 38:10-11, "My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me. My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar off."

Paul

2 Timothy 4:16, "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge."

John (Exiled to the Isle of Patmos, he must have felt isolated and forsaken; yet, it was there that he wrote the entire book of Revelation.)

Revelation 1:9, "I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ."

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C. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, experienced loneliness during His earthly life, often during the times He was most in need of friendship and encouragement. Yet, he was comforted by His Father's presence.

John 16:32, "Behold, the hour cometh, yea is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me."

Matthew 26:55-56, "In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes [chief priests, elders, and Roman soldiers], Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me. But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled."

D. A close friend or faithful companion is an invaluable source of help and strength.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, "Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

E. Christ is a Friend and Brother to every child of God.

John 15:14-15a, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends."

Hebrews 2:10-12, "For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee."

F. God has promised that He will never leave or forsake us.

God's promise of continual presence and companionship is worth far more than the material blessings that others may have. Because He is our Helper, we need not fear.

Hebrews 13:5-6, "Let your conversation [lifestyle] be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me."

Psalms 27:10, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will lift me up."

G. The Holy Spirit, dwelling in the hearts of every Believer, is a constant companion and faithful Comforter.

John 14:15-17, "If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you."

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Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

H. To have a true friend, we must be a true friend.

Proverbs 18:24, "A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother."

I. Remember that God is ever-present even when our feelings may indicate otherwise.

We may feel emotionally distanced from God, but our feelings do not always align with truth. Even when we don't feel God's presence, His presence is constant and steady.

Psalms 94:14, "For the Lord will not cast off his people, neither will he forsake his inheritance."

Hebrews 13:5, "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

II. PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. Loneliness is a painful but common experience

Loneliness is the feeling of being alone, forsaken, and/or forgotten. There are times in everyone's life that we feel empty and lacking in companionship, often accompanied by thoughts of "No one cares" or "I'm all alone." As the Scripture references above give evidence, loneliness is no "respector of persons." It afflicts individuals without regard to a person's spiritual condition or relationship with God.

Understanding and applying what the Bible says about loneliness can be a very effective remedy. Some passages are designed to show practical ways to reduce our times of loneliness, although we may be required to use the Word as a mirror for self-examination in order to bring about a necessary change.

James 1:25, "But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed."

Other passages will help us gain emotional and spiritual strength in preparation for those times when we cannot avoid being alone.

Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ which [who] strengtheneth me."

Because God created each of us, we can take great comfort that He knows our needs, our strengths, and our weaknesses.

Psalms 103:13-14, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust."

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B. Different types of loneliness

Because loneliness can come from a variety of sources, identifying the factors that cause it is a very important step. In this section we'll review some of the most common causes of loneliness so that we can more clearly identify helpful strategies for dealing with them.

1. Loneliness due to physical separation

Some people experience loneliness due to being separated physically from other people. For example, some people move away from family and friends for a career or educational opportunity. These types of transitions can cause loneliness due to being physically distanced from the comfort of the familiar. Even if the new experience is laced with excitement, there still can be a sobering element due to the unknown.

Loneliness is also experienced by the friends and family that are left behind when a loved one moves away. The loved one who moves away simply cannot be replaced and so leaves an emptiness behind. The reasons surrounding the move or separation impact the intensity of loneliness and the degree to which the loss needs to be grieved. If marriage takes a son or daughter away, that kind of loneliness is laced with both joy and sadness. In contrast, if a serious family disagreement causes a family member to move away and become estranged from the family, that type of loneliness can leave a more intense feeling of emptiness.

2. Loneliness due to the passing of a loved one

Another type of loneliness due to physical separation can be experienced when a spouse, family member, or friend dies. Even though you may hold memories of this loved one in your mind, he or she is no longer physically present. After losing a young child or infant, you may long to hold her in your arms; after losing a spouse, you may ache for his touch. These types of experiences of loneliness require time for healing to occur—and it's very difficult to be patient through times of emotional pain, grief, and loss. To be clear, when we lose a loved one, the void cannot be completely filled by other individuals; however, other individuals can help build up your ability to manage the difficulties. In a sense, they can help absorb some of the shock that comes from working through grief and loss.

3. Loneliness due to emotional struggles

Another type of loneliness may be experienced on an emotional level. Many things can contribute to this emotional experience. Depression, anxiety, and low self-worth often involve feelings of loneliness and isolation. At these times, people often report feeling lonely even when surrounded by friends and family. Depressive and anxious thoughts can confirm that we are alone and that no one cares even when there may be a number of friends and family members who want to provide help and support.

4. Loneliness due to relational gaps

Loneliness may also be experienced due to not having close relationships. If your interactions with other people only occur on a "surface," impersonal level, loneliness is likely. We were created with a desire to know and to be truly known; and when we keep people at a distance, we will likely experience loneliness. Sometimes people find the vulnerability necessary for close relationships to be threatening. You may need to take a risk and reach out to others. *Proverbs 18:24* advises us by stating, "A man that hath friends must show himself friendly."

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We each need at least a few individuals whose relationship with us is characterized by honesty, accountability, authenticity, and encouragement. It is wise to look at your circle of relationships and see if you could make some of your surface relationships deeper. When we have relationships with individuals who care enough about us to challenge us in a loving, selfless way, we are less likely to feel lonely. *Proverbs 27:17* describes how friends “sharpen” one another: “*Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.*” Even though the sharpening process may involve some discomfort when we have to put our flesh aside, it is well worth it. Superficial relationships can be as isolating as not having relationships. Below are two types of commonly experienced relational gaps.

- a. *Isolation from peers:* At times, feelings of loneliness result from the reality that there aren’t many (if any) individuals in a similar life position as you. For example, you may experience loneliness due to being the only unmarried person in your peer group; or perhaps you feel significantly older or significantly younger than others in your church group. Maybe you feel isolated from others of like mindset, values, and experience. These feelings can be painful and often lead to struggles with loneliness.

One key to managing isolation from peers is to broaden your definition of your peer group. For example, if you are the only unmarried working female in your church, you could think of your peer group as “women” or “professionals” rather than people who are just like you. Also, remember that God designed the church to be made up of various people who fulfill different aspects of the whole body. These distinctions are intentional and ensure that the needs of the body are taken care of and that God’s work is accomplished. Read *1 Corinthians 12* for a more complete description of the body of Christ.

- b. *Not being at a relational stage you expected to be:* Unmet expectations can be difficult and even painful to face. Perhaps you pictured your life being “settled” by a certain age or dreamed about becoming a parent, and now you find that you are facing a reality that it did not come to pass. Perhaps you anticipated having your emotional needs met in marriage (or other relationship) and you now have to adjust to not having your needs met in that way or as fully as you hoped. Conversely, you may have experienced relationships that were initially intact, but then saw them disintegrate, and now the pain of divorce or relationship conflicts may leave you feeling alone.

The key to managing loneliness that stems from unmet expectations is (1) to acknowledge the losses and (2) to shift your mindset accordingly. The process of mourning these losses takes time and, often, the feelings of loss come and go and come again. After your losses have been mourned, you need to face the facts of your current life stage and to pray for the grace and strength to be able to make the most out of it. God often has opportunities in store that we could not even have imagined. As the Lord says in *Jeremiah 29:11*, “*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.*”

5. Loneliness due to spiritual struggles

Some people may experience spiritual loneliness. This type of loneliness is experienced on two different levels.

- a. Individuals who have never begun a relationship with Christ have a true sense of spiritual loneliness, being separated from God. The good news about this type of loneliness is that it can be completely cured! The way to remedy this level of spiritual loneliness is to come in faith believing that Jesus will forgive all those who repent for their sins. He wants all to be saved and to be part of His family!

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- b. Others have a personal relationship with Christ, but do not feel close to Him at times. This situation is an example of when we can know something logically, but do not feel it is true. In these cases, we need to be reminded to trust what we know is true rather than to trust our fickle emotions.

Whenever we experience spiritual loneliness, we often need to change our perspective, for God is constant and always available. We just don't always feel or acknowledge His presence.

Psalm 139:5-7, "Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?"

This verse from the book of Psalms reminds us that there is no where we can go to escape the presence of God. Two characteristics of God, His omniscience (knowing all) and omnipresence (being present everywhere), assure us that this is true. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, reminds us that nothing can separate us from God's love:

Romans 8:38-39, "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

A first-century Christian theologian, St. Augustine, described the source of much of our restlessness: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." The longings for fulfillment we sense are a result of being made by God, for God. We have genuine needs that only He can fill. When we look to other sources to try and fill these needs, we will continue to be restless and unfulfilled.

When we participate in our relationship with the Lord, growing in our Christian walk, we can find our rest in God. Through reading and listening to the Word, prayer and meditation, and being mentored and disciplined by other Christian brothers and sisters, we participate in the growth process.

C. The "loneliness cycle" is an isolating experience

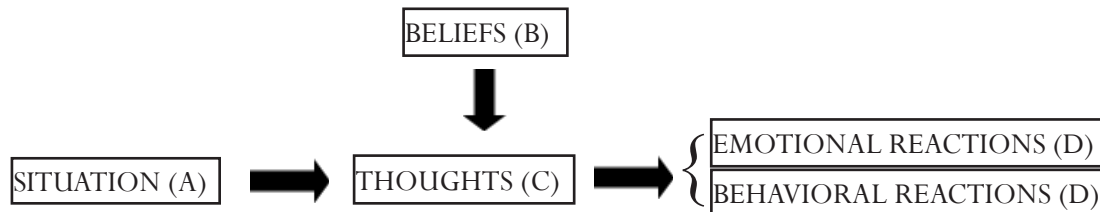
Even though loneliness is such a common experience, when we are in the midst of it, Satan works hard to make us feel as if no one could possibly understand what we're going through. He leads us to believe the lie that no one understands and that no one has ever faced the challenges we ourselves are facing. This painful perspective on loneliness can make us feel even more isolated. Unfortunately, even people who have good social support and yet are feeling lonely may pull away from their close relationships. They easily get stuck in the cycle of feeling alone, pulling away from people, and then feeling even more alone.

D. The role of our thoughts in the experience of loneliness

Proverbs 23:7a, "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he."

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Our thoughts and feelings are closely connected. How we think about and interpret a situation greatly affects how we feel about it. As illustrated in the diagram below, in each Situation (A) we encounter, the Thoughts we have (C) tend to be consistent with our Beliefs (B). For example, if an individual has a Belief that other people don't like him/her, then his/her thoughts are likely to be something like, "They wish that I wasn't here." or "They probably think that I'm not very interesting to be around." Negative thinking like this leads to negative emotional and behavioral reactions (D). Examples of emotion reactions include feelings of loneliness, sadness, discouragement, and depression. Examples of behavioral reactions include withdrawing from people, or trying to temporarily feel better by eating, shopping, etc.



Sometimes our thoughts do not align with truth which leads to base our reactions on distorted thinking. "Mind-reading" and "comparison" are two typical thought-distortion patterns that can contribute to emotional reactions of loneliness.

1. Mind-reading: Mind-reading occurs when we think that we know what other people are thinking about us and believe that they are looking at us negatively. When we feel as though no one could understand us, we find it difficult to reach out. Comments we hear from other people may increase our sense of isolation. Even close friends and family may make comments that we interpret (correctly or incorrectly) as insincere or insensitive. Someone may comment that you look like you have it all together and never struggle, which you interpret as meaning you *should never* admit a struggle. Someone else may mention an arbitrary preference about the *right way* to organize a committee, which you interpret as a standard that you too must meet. Individuals may state their opinions as facts, or we may interpret their opinions as true for us when they are not. We must use discernment when interpreting others' comments.
2. Comparison: Our thoughts and feelings about the extent to which we "fit in" can increase our sense of isolation as well. Any one of us can easily look around and find something that can serve as "evidence" that we do not fit in. If we look around objectively, we can see that diversity abounds in the groups with whom we normally associate (e.g., personalities, interests). However, when we look through the clouded lens of loneliness, we only see our differences that separate us from others. We may notice differences in our family situation, life experiences, marital status, current or past struggles, standard of living, etc. While these differences are commonplace and make for a well-rounded group, we use them to prove that we don't "fit in." Our diversity is part of God's design for the body of Christ.

Romans 12:4-5, "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another."

E. Options for dealing with loneliness

1. Seek support from God and His Word

Particularly in times of struggle, seek passages of Scripture that will bring you comfort and encouragement. The Holy Spirit can minister to us as we read these comforting passages.

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Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

Another way to seek support from God is through prayer. We need to be purposeful in acknowledging God's presence and in actively believing that He can support and encourage us in times of need. Just as Jesus often did during his life on earth, we need to take time to step away from responsibilities and distractions and commune with God through prayer and meditation. During this time with God, we can thank Him for who He is, we can pour out our needs before Him, and we can sit quietly and listen, allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us. In addition, lifting up spontaneous prayers throughout the day redirects our focus to God and acknowledges our reliance on Him.

Mark 1:35, "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed."

1 Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing."

2. Find common ground

Often only a small amount of effort is needed to find common ground on which to build a relationship. Instead of using differences as evidence of isolation, try instead to be purposeful in finding common ground from which a deeper friendship can grow.

3. Build your resiliency through relationships

Realize that in the midst of struggles with loneliness, we need to seek God and people. Each one of us needs to identify trustworthy individuals to whom we can turn in times of struggle. We need to have these relationships established so that when we face a trial or struggle, we know to whom to turn and know who will be looking out for us when we have difficulty reaching out. Remember that time is needed to build relationships. Expecting relationships to deepen quickly or not keeping up with relationships that could potentially grow deeper will lead to disappointment.

4. Invest in meaningful activities

Investing in meaningful activities can help fill the void that loneliness brings. To be able to invest your time and talents in an activity that brings you joy and gives glory to God brings fulfillment. Take time to explore your God-given talents and interests. Completing a spiritual-gifts inventory is one way to identify the ways God has equipped you to serve the Body of Christ. Identifying and then using your spiritual gifts and talents is an important component of the Christian walk.

5. Find your true worth

Your "identity," "self-worth," "self-esteem," and "self-concept" are all intricately connected and are not based on "self," but rather on God. In order to understand our true worth and to form an accurate identity, we have to "put off" the thoughts and feelings that are not based on truth and "put on" what is true.

Ephesians 4:22-24, "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness."

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Many people inaccurately define their identity by what they do. Therefore, their work equals their worth. Many people also define their identity by their marital status. They inaccurately put their worth and identity in another person. This tendency is particularly difficult for singles; they feel incomplete without a spouse. Since our ability to do changes drastically over time and the fact that marital status is equally insufficient to define one's identity, we must base our identity on something more stable and enduring. An accurate identity and worth is based on being created in God's image and being placed in His family. The truth is that each individual is fully complete and whole in Christ. Who we are in Christ is steady and constant.

Psalm 139:14, "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well."

6. Seek Counsel

Many barriers can keep us from reaching out for help from others and thus keep us trapped in the cycle of loneliness. If you find that you have having difficulty overcoming loneliness, reach out for help from a mentor, minister, or counselor. You don't need to fight these battles alone! Often, the longer we wait to reach out for help, the more difficult the task becomes.

F. Summary

In summary, remember that loneliness is a common experience: you are not alone in feeling lonely! God is near even when you don't feel that He is. Review the listing of things that you can do to help work through times of loneliness and get started today. Finally, hold onto the promise found in *Hebrews 13:5b*: "for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." This promise is true!