

# OVERCOMING LONELINESS

In his book *Six Hours One Friday* (Multnomah Press, 1989), author Max Lucado writes about taking a walk through an old cemetery in his hometown. Many of the graves were of people who lived and died in the 19th century. Many of the names belonged to children, bearing witness to the difficulties of life on the Texas prairie.

One grave he came across struck him sharply. It had no dates of birth or death, just the name of a woman and her two husbands. The epitaph on the grave read simply,

Sleeps but rests not.  
Loved but was loved not.  
Tried to please, but pleased not.  
Died as she lived—alone.

What a sad testimony, to have lived and died alone. We tend to think life among the pioneers and settlers might have been lonelier than our lives. No telephones or dependable mail system, no neighbors close by to keep company with.

But the truth is just the opposite. Loneliness has reached epidemic proportions in our modern world. Even though we have a half-dozen ways to communicate with the outside world at our fingertips, people today are lonelier than they have ever been in history.

Because loneliness creates a feeling of emptiness on the inside, people try to compensate for that feeling by filling themselves with food, drugs, alcohol, material things, sex, work, or other peoples' lives.

Loneliness is not removed by substitutes for true relationships in life—the most foundational being our relationship with God.

Everyone experiences loneliness at different times in life, and it is not always a bad or dangerous experience. There is something to be said for learning to be alone with ourselves and God. But loneliness over the long term can have negative effects physically as well as spiritually.

*In this sermon we'll talk about the experience of loneliness in life, we'll study some characters in Scripture who experienced loneliness, and we'll learn how to escape the negative effects of loneliness.*

## **THE EXPERIENCE OF LONELINESS**

Different stages of our lives result in different kinds of loneliness. Perhaps you'll identify with one or more of these significant times of loneliness.

### ***The Lonely Single***

I was single for several years. I know from my own relationships with single Christians that going home to an empty house or apartment night after night can be a lonely lifestyle. I used to buy my groceries on almost a daily basis so I would have someone to talk to after work. There were some weekends when I was depressed and didn't go to church that I would not have an adult conversation from Friday night to Monday morning.

The burgeoning singles bar and club scene in America is just one indication of how desperate many single people are to conquer loneliness by meeting someone—anyone—to talk to. Being a Christian helps—a single believer in Christ has spiritual resources to draw on in times of loneliness. But human beings were not created by God to spend their life alone (*Genesis 2:18*). And by that I don't mean marriage exclusively—but in the presence of other people.

### ***The Lonely Spouse***

It is amazement to me that the institution God created to provide the greatest sense of intimacy often becomes a place of great loneliness.

I have only spoken about this publicly one time and my comments are not a criticism of my first wife but are statement of fact that God has led me to share. The loneliness place in the world is not as a single person. The loneliness place in the world is in a marriage where there is no love or intimacy.

To everyone around you except your closest friends you pretend that everything is great but on the inside you are dying. Every love song is torture! Every time you see a couple holding hands or kissing you wonder what would be like to have that kind of relationship.

Someone commented recently on the fact that they had observed that my wife Kathy and I kiss often when we greet each other or when we leave each other. I think it is because we both are so thankful for what we now have!

It is sad that the very relationship God ordained to combat loneliness has become for many the loneliest place on earth.

### ***The Lonely Survivor***

Then there are the lonely survivors, the spouses who live on after a loved one has died. Lonely survivors experience a kind of pain which, I am told, is so intense that there is nothing in life to which it can be compared. Not having gone through that loss personally I can only imagine what it must be like.

You know, I passed a funeral on the road the other day: a hearse followed by a long line of cars all burning their headlights in broad daylight. I followed our quaint Southern custom of pulling off the road and stopping until they were past to honor the deceased and show respect to his loved ones. As I watched the line of cars I had this thought. There was one unseen car in the procession driven by Jesus.

As a Minister of the Gospel I have often had to preside at funerals like Tiny Simpkins this week. There one has the great privilege of offering comfort, sympathy, support, and hope based on the glorious Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. But there is also in such moments a feeling of impotence. When the funeral is over and the body is buried and the friends and family are gone. There is one who will never leave, our Savior, Jesus who is always with the lonely survivor.

### ***The Lonely Senior Citizen***

The number of senior citizens in our country is growing at a faster rate than at any time in history. The sense of loneliness that sets in with seniors is significant. Often they have lost a spouse, their children have moved away, and they struggle to find a place to fit in where they can feel significant. The position of authority, influence, and respect they occupied in their vocational years is no longer theirs, and so their loneliness is one of significance as much as personal contact. For today's seniors, the sense of loneliness that

comes from a loss of significance is often the most acute kind of loneliness there is. Searching for, and finding, a purpose in the twilight years of life is a great challenge.

## ***The Lonely Sufferer***

There is the lonely sufferer who experiences the pain he cannot describe to anyone else. Sometimes that loneliness is in a busy place like a hospital. One man wrote to me from his hospital bed: "It is when the lights go out and the room is suddenly plunged into darkness that the awful awareness comes. The traffic of the hospital goes on like an uncontrolled fever outside my door. But inside, the room is so still.

Loneliness can be compounded by suffering. Many suffer physically or emotionally in ways that cannot be described or be cured instantly. The loneliness Job felt was not just because he had lost his family but because he was suffering physically in the midst of his loss.

We can find great heroes of the faith in Scripture who experienced loneliness in their lives. It is not a sin to be lonely, for great men and women of God have battled loneliness. We can develop a sinful response to loneliness, but it is not a sin to experience those feelings from time to time. Seeing that others have been lonely can make us know that we are not alone in our feelings.

## **THE EXAMPLES OF LONELINESS IN THE BIBLE**

### ***David the King***

David wrote on one occasion, "*For my days are consumed like smoke, And my bones are burned like a hearth.... I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. I lie awake, And am like a sparrow alone on the housetop*" (Psalm 102:3, 6–7). You can almost feel the edge of David's pain as he describes his feelings. David was hounded all over the Judean wilderness by King Saul, a fugitive for much of his pre-royal life. When I read about David's loneliness, it comforts and instructs me to know that he survived and trusted God in the midst of it.

### ***Jeremiah the Prophet***

The story of Jeremiah the prophet is one of the most agonizing stories you will ever read. Jeremiah was also the author of the book of *Lamentations*, a collection of funeral dirges expressing the anguish of his heart as he watched the city of Jerusalem go down in ruin before his very eyes.

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet because of the tears he shed over the destruction of God's city. No one would listen to his calls for repentance whereby the city might be saved. He was a lonely voice crying out in a spiritual wilderness. He finally confessed that he would be better off leaving and going out into the dessert than to remain among those who cared so little for God (*Jeremiah 9:2*). For him, the loneliness of the wilderness would have been better than the loneliness he felt among his own people.

### ***Paul the Apostle***

Paul wrote most of the New Testament, founded missionary churches all over the Mediterranean world, and penned the greatest theological treatise of all time in the letter to the Romans. Would someone like Paul suffer from loneliness? On occasion he did.

At the end of the last letter he wrote before he died, addressed to his protégé Timothy, he found himself in a Roman prison. This was not the setting of his first arrest in Rome which was more like a house-arrest (Acts 28:30). This time, he was imprisoned in a Roman dungeon where his friends even had a hard time locating him. Listen to the words he wrote to Timothy which give evidence of his loneliness:

*“Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me .... And Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus .... Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm .... At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them” (2 Timothy 4:9–16).*

Do you feel that? Here is the great apostle, standing alone at the end of his life. No one is with him. You would think that could not happen after all he had done for the church, but it did. We sense no resentment in Paul’s words, only the fact of his aloneness.

When loneliness sweeps over you like a wave, remember you are not the first person to have been lonely, and not the first Christian. As I have said, it is no sin to be lonely.

But it can become a sin if we indulge it and allow it to turn to self-pity. God has given us ways to escape from loneliness before it becomes a downward spiral that pulls us down with it.

## **THE ESCAPE FROM LONELINESS**

Here are four ways to defend yourself from the power of loneliness:

### ***Acknowledge the Reality of Your Loneliness***

Christians have made an art of denying the reality of some parts of life. Because it seems unspiritual to confess to being lonely, many Christians will *quote Hebrews 13:5*, where Christ said, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you,”* and profess they are never lonely because He is always with them.

Theologically it is true that Christ is always with the believer, but our practice doesn’t always match our position. It is more honest, transparent, and real to simply say, “Yes, I am lonely at this time of my life,” than to deny the reality of our situation. Human beings experience loneliness at times, and there is no shame in a Christian admitting that fact.

### ***Accept God’s Provision for Your Loneliness***

Ultimately, God’s provision for loneliness is the only suitable solution. There is a fundamental emptiness in every human being which can only be filled by the presence of God Himself.

It is interesting to note that the only time Jesus Christ cried out in loneliness was from the cross when the Father forsook Him and allowed Him to die as a sacrifice for the world. Without the presence of God, the most agonizing loneliness will afflict even the strongest person.

No person should search for a solution for his loneliness without solving the basic issue of separation from God. Accepting Jesus Christ, and being filled by His Spirit, is the first step toward overcoming the negative dimensions of loneliness.

### ***Allow God’s Word to Fill Your Heart and Mind***

I say this so frequently that it can be misinterpreted as a Christian platitude. But it is not. I say it often because it is the absolute truth! Second only to the presence of God's Spirit in one's life is the presence of God's Word as an antidote to loneliness. God has spoken clearly, and if you read His Word you will hear His voice.

### ***Activate Your Network of Christian Friends***

Let me close with a strong word, strong because it is true: Living in the house of loneliness is a choice. You may not have become lonely by choice, but remaining lonely is something you don't have to do. The body of Christ exists to encourage and strengthen Christians, but if we refuse to get involved it is difficult for that to happen.

Each believer must assume the responsibility for his own emotional and spiritual health, including not lingering in loneliness. In the average church there are numerous "doors" through which one can enter into relationships of service and friendship. But you must walk through the door.

It is no sin to be lonely. But if you are, move purposefully toward overcoming the negative effects of loneliness. No one else can do as much for you as you can do for yourself by taking that step.

The choice is yours! Begin to take the steps you need to today to overcome loneliness!