

An Antidote for Loneliness

In our world, today, loneliness is an epidemic. According to recent surveys, nearly half of Americans aged 18 and older report they sometimes or are always feeling alone or left out.1 One in four Americans rarely or never feel as though people understand them. Two in five Americans sometimes or always feel their relationships are not meaningful and that they are isolated from others. And one in five people reports they rarely or never feel close to people or feel like there are people they can talk to.

According to the General Social Survey, the number of Americans saying there is no one with whom they discuss important matters nearly has tripled since 1985. While the model respondent in 1985 had three close friends, now the model respondent reports as having no one to confide in.2

This is not to condemn those who struggle with loneliness. In fact, it is something Christians will experience and is not wrong. In fact, maybe it is even necessary. We need to be lonely for God and living in anticipation of seeing Jesus face to face.

How does loneliness affect us? Research shows that the areas of the brain associated with loneliness are the same areas that process physical pain. Possibly the term “broken heart” becomes more significant when one considers the relationship between loneliness and actual physical pain. Lonely people are also more likely to show depressive symptoms. Research has shown that depression and loneliness can feed off each other. Loneliness also can affect one's overall physical health, so those constantly experiencing loneliness may be more susceptible to health issues. Lacking social connections may be as damaging to a person's health as smoking. (Holt-Lunstad, 2010)

Even though loneliness is very real and at times seems overwhelming, it is a feeling – not always a fact. Even if it is a fact, it is hard to define where the feeling becomes the fact. The feeling of loneliness can turn into a paralyzing fear that controls our wellbeing and outlook on life.

The question could be raised – why does it seem we are lonelier than ever? Secular sources may say we work too much and exercise too little. Or we get too much sleep, or is it not enough? Recently it seems there is a substantial link between the amount of electronic social networking and the degree to which that causes physical loneliness. While at first glance, we would say that electronic social communication would help loneliness, the opposite is actually true. Consider the following points:

The more time one spends online, the less time he has for face to face relationships. Face to face communication is more authentic, sincere, and encouraging than words or images on a screen.

Aspects of social media tend to magnify the fun events of the poster's life, while the reader looks on from his personal screen - alone and lonely. Loneliness is not helped by "living" in the moments of exciting posts from others.

The result is a distorted view of the lives of others, because usual postings are of the fun and exciting happenings, not the mundane, daily realities of life. Finding fulfillment in our God-given, daily life becomes hard to bear and brings us loneliness and discouragement.

Why do we struggle with loneliness? Or, what choices do I make that bring on loneliness? We become lonely when we expect others to provide friendship and company and excuse ourselves from being friendly. This is selfishness, an easy way out, getting something for nothing. As proven in other areas of life – it does not work. Proverbs 18:24 A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly... Another quote, "Friendship is a plant; but it requires cultivation to grow." We realize there are cases and times where others are needed to provide care and support, such as serving those with disabilities.

Wrong choices also bring loneliness. Psalms 38:11 My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore, and my kinsmen stand afar off. Bad choices are often based on selfishness – a near cousin to loneliness, which can be a launching pad for greater sin. In these circumstances, it is no one's fault but our own. Psalm 38:4-5 clearly indicates that the Psalmist had made wrong and sinful choices because of the word choices of "iniquities" and "foolishness" used to describe his condition.

Loneliness ensues when we do not know the God of all comfort (2Co 1:3). If we do not know God and therefore have not experienced His love and peace, we are incapable of giving or understanding true love. When we do not know the God of comfort, we are lonely and limited in our ability to comfort others. Christians truly should be world-class comforters to the lonely!

In life, when we encounter problems, we look for solutions. When we consider this epidemic of loneliness, we wonder what the world has to offer.

- Join a community class. It automatically exposes you to a group of people who share at least one of your interests and help stave off loneliness.
- Become a volunteer. Becoming a volunteer for a cause you believe in can provide the same benefits as taking a class — meeting others, being part of a group, creating new experiences — and also can help you find more meaning in your life. It will bring you greater happiness, life satisfaction, as well as decrease loneliness.
- Connect with people on the internet.
- Strengthen existing relationships.
- Find a therapist.
- Get a pet. Pets prevent loneliness by giving you companionship. It can connect you with other people— walking a dog opens you up to a community of other dog-walkers, and a cute dog on a leash tends to be a people magnet. Additionally, pets provide unconditional love, which can be

a great salve for loneliness. The phrase "part of the family" has become near-synonymous in the pet industry today. Ninety percent of pet owners— and not just owners of "typical" pets like cats and dogs— report their non-human family members are full-fledged family. But perhaps no statistic says it better than this one: when surveyed, more than half of adults say they would choose a pet over a person to be stranded with on a desert island. Surveys show that a full 81 to 85 percent of pet owners regard their pets as a reliable daily go-to resource for affection, unconditional love, stress relief, relaxation, and improved overall health.³

While some of these suggestions clearly have some merit, the resources the world has to offer are meager fare and may be dangerous to our spiritual lives. May our pets never become our main suppliers of social comfort!

What does the Bible say? In Genesis 2:18, the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone... God's remedy in this situation was to provide a wife for Adam, and we know the cure for loneliness is not marriage. But what we do learn from this is God's determination that man does not do well by himself. He needs companionship. Ecclesiastes 4:8 says There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labor; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labor and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail. And also, Ecclesiastes 4:10 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. The Ecclesiastes writer clearly identifies the loneliness so characteristic of the experiences of so many today. He calls it a sore travail, which indicates the deepness of the hurt.

From the account of Elisha in II Kings 6, we see that it is possible to feel alone even when we are not. All Elisha's servant could see was the Syrian army surrounding them. What he could not see, until God made them visible, were the horses and chariots of God protecting them. While it seems to us sometimes we are completely alone; often our "loneliness" is a self-manufactured problem. Often there are people around us that we choose to disregard, sometimes because of relationship struggles we may have or had with them. Unresolved or fractured relationships have made many lonely people. When we choose to forgive and love others unselfishly, it will open doors to relationships that stave off loneliness.

Sometimes it is a low after a high and coupled with deep discouragement. In I Kings 19, Elijah experienced loneliness and deep discouragement after a spiritual and emotional high. After the Mt. Carmel experience, God worked in a public and mighty way, proving Himself superior to all other gods. First Kings 19:10 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. God reminded him he was not the only one left – verse 18. Again, we learn from this that our perceived loneliness is just that – not an actual representation of reality. Too much self-focus puts us into a self-analyzing mode that isolates us from

others. Self-focus prevents “others focus” and, most importantly, God focus. Then we have loneliness. God gave Elijah a list of jobs to do that required him to relate to people.

Are we ever completely alone? Unless you find yourself on a deserted island and have chosen to walk away from God, you are never completely alone. Many promises in the Bible remind us that God is with us.

Isaiah 41:10 – Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.

Psalms 23:4 – Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou [art] with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Matthew 28:20 – Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, [even] unto the end of the world. Amen.

Psalms 38:9 – Lord, all my desire [is] before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee.

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.

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

John 14:18 – I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.

We are not alone because God is with us. This thought alone should make us praise the Lord and bring us comfort in our low times of distress and loneliness.

Finally, what is my responsibility to the lonely? The lonely have a responsibility to reach out for help, but we have a responsibility as well; to show empathy and to try be understanding. We need to develop sensitivity toward lonely, hurting people. For some of these people, this love is what God can use as the living Gospel message that they may never read.

We need to point people to Jesus. He understands. *Isaiah 53:3* He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

How will we fare the next time the wave of loneliness hits us? No, we are not alone. Reach out to Jesus. Read His Word. Read the accounts of Job; Apostle Paul in front of Nero, Joseph in prison, Daniel in prison, and the many faithful since! Do not forget – God has an antidote for loneliness!

-Dave Sweigart

Footnotes

1. <https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/>
2. <https://psychcentral.com/blog/understanding-the-loneliness-epidemic/>
3. <https://www.dailydogstuff.com/us-pet-ownership-statistics/>