

# LONELINESS

CONNECTING WITH GOD  
AND OTHERS

LOU PRIOLO



P U B L I S H I N G

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## RESOURCES FOR BIBLICAL LIVING

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Lou Priolo, series editor

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OVER MY many years as a biblical counselor, at least half of all my shepherding ministry has been devoted to marriage counseling. But when I moved to Atlanta to serve as the director of counseling at Christ Covenant Church, the demographic of my counseling load changed significantly. The most amazing thing about this, from my perspective, is that I will turn sixty-eight years old later this year, yet the young people of the congregation (mostly between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-five and many of them single) are coming to an old guy like me for answers to life's problems. I am a very blessed man! God has been and is very good to me.

My new position, which I took on around the beginning of the COVID pandemic, opened my eyes anew to a growing problem in our culture. Although I have written briefly about the subject of loneliness before,<sup>1</sup> it has become necessary for me to delve deeper into the Scriptures to address this issue in a more robust manner.

What you read in this volume may offer you sufficient help all by itself. I pray that is the case. But the booklet is also intended to be used in the context of biblical counseling. Its various checklists and worksheets will enable a trained pastor or biblical counselor to not only help you get to the bottom of your loneliness but also facilitate your spiritual growth as you learn to apply the Scriptures to your life. The Spirit works through the Word! I trust that you, and the saints at Christ Covenant, will find help and hope in the pages that follow.

1. See Lou Priolo, "Why Are You Lonesome Tonight?," chap. 7 in *Picking Up the Pieces: Recovering from Broken Relationships* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012).

## It's an Epidemic!

Loneliness has become a worldwide epidemic.<sup>2</sup> It can be excruciatingly painful. What's more, it can be deadly. Research now indicates that persistent loneliness (loneliness that lasts for more than two weeks) may be deadlier than alcohol abuse, obesity, and cigarette smoking. Lonely individuals may be at greater risk of stroke, coronary artery disease, high blood pressure, anxiety (perhaps most notably, pessimism about their future), depression, poor cognitive performance, cognitive decline, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and dementia.<sup>3</sup> They also are prone to be reckless. The intense pain and sadness they experience often impel them to try to tranquilize themselves by drinking excessively, cutting themselves, using illegal drugs, or practicing sexual promiscuity.

If you are reading this booklet, you are probably more familiar with the symptoms and miseries of loneliness than you want to be. But there may be a few details you have not yet considered. In the inventory below, I have assembled some of them in the hopes that you will be able to better understand the extent to which you may be experiencing loneliness.<sup>4</sup>

Before you proceed, let me give you a word of hope. This booklet was designed not primarily to diagnose loneliness in the lives of Christians but to help to remedy it. So, regardless of what the inventory may reveal about your degree of loneliness, remember that there will be concrete, practical, biblical help and hope in the pages that follow.

2. In January 2018, the United Kingdom created an official office called the Minister of Loneliness.

3. It is believed that loneliness and social isolation negatively impact the body by increasing stress hormones and inflammation and interrupting healthy sleep patterns. This in turn compromises the immune system. A summary of the research is available in Jed Magen, "This Is Why Loneliness Is Bad for Your Health," World Economic Forum, February 27, 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/02/loneliness-is-bad-for-your-health/>.

4. This is not a scientifically normed instrument. It has been compiled largely from available research articles.

Here then is a little inventory that may help you to identify some of the possible precondition issues or component elements of your loneliness.

### **Loneliness Inventory**

- I wish I had more and deeper friendships.
- I wish people would call or visit me more often than they do.
- I wonder who will help me or take care of me if I get into trouble.
- I wish I had someone to bounce my ideas off.
- I think I am unlovable (or a “loser”).
- I wish I had more people with whom I could share my happy moments.
- It seems nobody really understands me—no one appreciates who I really am.
- I don’t have anyone I can really trust.
- It seems that nobody needs me or wants to be with me.
- I find myself struggling with intense feelings of loneliness even when I’m in a room full of people.
- When I do make efforts to connect with others, my offers are not reciprocated.
- I have thoughts and feelings of worthlessness.
- I binge shop, snack, or stream (movies or TV shows).
- I’m tempted to tranquilize my sad feelings by turning to temporal things rather than things of eternal significance.
- I crave physical affection.
- I crave physical warmth (blankets, hot baths, and beverages).
- I allow my feelings of hopelessness and depression to keep me from regular personal Bible study and prayer.
- I give in to self-pity.
- I spend more than two hours each day on social media (other than for business purposes).<sup>5</sup>

5. Research indicates that people who spend more than two hours daily on social media are lonelier than people who spend only half an hour. See Brian A. Primack et al., “Social Media Use and Perceived Social Isolation Among Young Adults in the

- I enter unhealthy relationships, or stay in them, out of fear of being alone.
- I find myself increasingly participating in irresponsible or reckless activities.
- I spend too much time by myself.
- I find it difficult to find and make new friends.

Please keep in mind that even though you may be experiencing some of the above symptoms, we have not conclusively proved the cause is loneliness. A sore throat may be indicative of a cold, the flu, or something much worse. We will address some of the issues from the inventory in the following pages. But our goal is not primarily to eliminate the indicators but to treat the infection, whatever or wherever it may be.

## You Are in Good Company

Can you think of anyone in Scripture who struggled with loneliness?

“I’ve never really thought that much about it. But I do know that no temptation can *overtake me* but that which is common to man. Other than maybe Naomi in the book of Ruth, and the prophet Jeremiah, I can’t recall too many.”

These are good examples. Naomi was bereft of her husband and two sons.<sup>6</sup> And Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, was told by God not to marry, and his life increasingly became more difficult.

Here are three more biblical examples.

*Elijah* said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the

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U.S.,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 53, no. 1 (July 2017): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.01.010>.

6. However, the Lord provided Naomi with Ruth, who was apparently better to her than seven sons.

sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kings 19:10).<sup>7</sup>

*King David* was also well acquainted with loneliness: “Look to the right and see: there is none who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for my soul” (Ps. 142:4).

The *apostle Paul* was abandoned by one of his closest friends and left alone.<sup>8</sup> He wrote to Timothy,

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. (2 Tim. 4:9–11)

In one of the most fascinating accounts in the New Testament, God opened up a door of ministry for Paul, yet he didn’t go through it. Why? Some believe it may have been loneliness that caused him to take a different path:

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest *because I did not find my brother* Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. (2 Cor. 2:12–13)

Loneliness is a common experience. It can be complex. It has many causes. It may or may not be the result of sin, but it can tempt one into sin—or further sin. God’s grace is sufficient to help Christians to deal with each aspect of loneliness—its sources, its symptoms, its seductions, and its sting.

7. As it turned out, Elijah was not as alone as he—in his exhausted, undernourished, suicidal state of self-pity—thought he was (vv. 4–7). God told him, “I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him” (v. 18). And in his mercy, the Lord also gave Elijah a companion, Elisha (vv. 19–21).

8. I don’t know about you, but every time I read the latter part of the book of Acts, I ask myself, “Where are all the other apostles in one of Paul’s greatest times of need? Did no one from Jerusalem care enough to help and defend him? They certainly knew he was in trouble.”



## What Is Loneliness?

So, what exactly is loneliness? Is it the same thing as being alone? Many view loneliness simply as not having the company of others to enjoy. But loneliness is a compound emotion that not every person experiences exactly alike. For most, it involves sadness and feelings of isolation. For many, it involves shame, grief, anger, and a sense of inadequacy or inferiority. For some, it includes feelings of rejection, jealousy, and envy.

Is loneliness a medical disease?<sup>9</sup> Is it a genetic predisposition? Is it a sin? Is it an effect of circumstances? Or may we more broadly and accurately define it as a condition that is “common to man”? We will look at loneliness through several descriptive lenses over the course of this book, but our first and foremost lens is this: for the Christian, loneliness may be the result of a defective relationship with God.

Loneliness may also be the result of not being in or enjoying fellowship with God at all. Sometimes people are lonely because they have never been saved from their sin—they have never truly put their trust in Christ. Consequently, they have not been indwelt by the Holy Spirit and do not have his abiding presence in their lives.

Without Christ and his substitutionary death on the cross, we would be *alienated* from God: “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). Talk about being alone! When we put our trust in Jesus, however, he comes to indwell us—to keep us company, if you please. Jesus said, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father

9. Don't be surprised if loneliness begins to be viewed as some kind of mental disorder. If that occurs, look for pharmaceutical companies to invest lots of money to develop medications that will treat the symptoms of the new loneliness disorder. They'll likely not be able to treat the cause because fundamentally the cause is not organic.

will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). Of course, once God is at home in us, he will do a whole lot more than keep us company!

As well as God the Father and God the Son, believers have one more companion to help them in their loneliness—one whom those outside Christ do not have. God the Holy Spirit is a real, living person—and a unique one at that! Do you perceive and appreciate and relate to him that way? After all, he has a personality. He has cognition and volition and relates to us through various affections. He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. If you are a Christian, he dwells within you.

He is present to comfort and assist you, to intercede for you, to guide you, to convict you, to teach and enlighten you, to sanctify you, and to empower you. He is your constant companion. He is the source of your power and personal relationship to Jesus Christ. You can enjoy continuous fellowship with him if you want it. Having a right relationship with him is your key to living life in a manner that is both pleasing to God and satisfying to you.

Now, when I speak of your having “fellowship” with the Holy Spirit, I’m referring primarily to the assurance that comes from confessing and forsaking all known sin and the sense of closeness to God that comes from having a clean conscience and drawing near to him through Bible study and prayer. Such fellowship doesn’t necessarily displace a person’s desire for marriage or companionship, but it provides a sense of contentment that should blunt the edge of loneliness: “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb. 13:5 NKJV). I will say more about this later on.

## **Rethinking Loneliness**

What would you say if I told you that you are going to have to repent of your loneliness?

“I’d say I’m not going to read another page of your booklet!”

Please stay with me a moment longer. It’s not what you think.

The Greek word for *repent* fundamentally means “to rethink.” I would like for you to *rethink* how you interpret loneliness. I would like you to view loneliness more through the lens of Scripture than through the lens of those who do not have an eternal perspective, as we do.

You see, in order to change your feelings, you have to change your thoughts as well as your actions. So, I would like to suggest (as have others) that loneliness starts as a state of mind before it becomes a feeling. The way you *think* about being alone affects the way you *feel* about it. If, for example, you believe that to avoid being lonely you must always have another human being at your side, you are likely to be a very lonely person indeed.

Although we may experience the complexities of loneliness differently, most of us think of it primarily as a very painful, debilitating emotion. Loneliness is indeed an emotion, but it is an emotion that God created—and, like every other human feeling, it serves a good purpose in our lives. Like a shrieking smoke detector or an annoying hazard light flickering on a car’s dashboard, our painful emotions often function as indicators that we need to examine something in our lives more carefully—something is not as it should be, and there may be danger ahead. We could say that loneliness is God’s smoke detector that lets us know it is time to draw closer to him.

For most of us, there are times, even in rooms filled with people, when we feel lonely. Yet if you arm yourself with the biblical mindset that loneliness is primarily the result of not enjoying communion with God, you may find that you feel less lonely even when you are alone. Consider these words of Jesus:

Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the

world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16:32–33 NKJV)

Jesus knew he was going to be forsaken by his disciples (John 16:32), but he also knew he wasn't really alone because the Father was with him. He viewed being *left alone* and being *lonely* as two different things. His mindset was not “I will necessarily be lonely as a result of being left alone” but rather seems to have been “As long as the Father is with me, I will not be lonely even though all forsake me.” Jesus knew that God's presence and provision were more than adequate to make up for the loss of all other company.

Loneliness is sometimes the result of expecting others to meet our needs and coveting their attention and care rather than letting God sustain us. When loneliness results from such unbiblical thinking, it reveals an idolatrous heart.<sup>10</sup> While it is not wrong to experience human companionship, especially in the bond of matrimony, it is wrong to substitute human companions for God and place your faith in them instead of him. Have you ever been guilty of displacing God with some other person? Could loneliness be God's way of letting you know you have been guilty of idolatry?

“Well, maybe to some extent—but how can God, who is a Spirit, meet my desire for companionship?”

God is able to minister to us in our loneliness *through other people* and certainly does so at times. But he also ministers to us in a more immediate, direct, and personal way: *through prayer and the Word*.

A friend once told a story about a family of three whose car broke down late one night during a severe thunderstorm. It stalled right in front of an old farmhouse. The father ran up to the door of the house and asked the farmer if he would be willing to put his family up for the night. The farmer agreed to let them stay but explained that the extra bedroom contained only a set of bunk beds. The man thanked the farmer and quickly brought his wife and daughter into the house.

10. The Bible equates covetousness with idolatry in Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5.

As they settled into bed, the little girl was given the top bunk; the man and his wife took the bottom one. When the lights were turned off, the thunder and lightning grew worse. The little girl became frightened and asked her father for some comfort.

“Daddy, I’m afraid!”

“Now honey, there is nothing to be afraid of. . . . Jesus is up there with you,” came the voice from below.

After a few moments, as the storm continued to rage, the little girl tried again.

“Daddy, I’m afraid!”

“Sweetheart, I told you there is nothing to worry about. The Lord is with you up there.”

Suddenly a clap of thunder exploded very close to the farmhouse. The little girl cried out, “Daddy, can you please come up here with God and let me come down there with Mommy?”

For some, the thought of God comforting them in their loneliness is about as appealing as sleeping alone on the top bunk. “Thanks for the offer, but I’d rather be ministered to by someone with flesh and blood.”

The Holy Spirit will comfort us in our loneliness as he will comfort us in any other trouble (2 Cor. 1:3–5). But he will do so in proportion to the time we spend in Bible study (in reading, memorizing, and meditating on Scripture) and prayer. The Spirit works in conjunction with the Word. You must provide the Spirit with his most powerful instrument if you want him to assist you in your trials.<sup>11</sup> Take up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17 NASB), so that he will have what he needs to comfort you most effectively.<sup>12</sup>

If you are single and lonely, let me ask you how much time you would spend in the company of a boyfriend or girlfriend to cultivate a relationship. Five hours a week? Twelve hours?

11. God’s Word, which the Holy Spirit himself has authored, is the means through which he works both directly and indirectly.

12. The word used for “word” here is *rahma*: the spoken word. The Spirit can most effectively use the Word when it is on the tip of your tongue, an indication that Scripture is already in your heart and thus ready to be used at a moment’s notice.

How does the time you would like to spend with this person compare with the time you now spend in prayer and the Word? What do you suppose would happen to your loneliness if you spent even half as much time with God as you would with this person? What if you invested half as much time meditating on Scripture as you do longing for and imagining how wonderful it would be to have such a person in your life?

If you are lonely while married or in a relationship you hope will lead to marriage, let me ask you the same basic questions. How does the time you spend in the presence of your companion compare with the time you spend in prayer and the Word? What do you suppose would happen to your loneliness if you spent thirty percent of the time you spend with that person with God instead? What if you invested as much time meditating on Scripture as you do with your special someone? One final question is this: To what extent are you looking to that person to meet your needs and fulfill your desires instead of turning to God? (To what extent is your emotional umbilical cord connected more to that person than to God?)

“I hear what you are saying, and I can’t disagree in principle, but practically speaking I need more than that. I mean, sometimes I just need a hug!!”

I understand. I really do. And your desire for companionship, and even hugs, is certainly not wrong in and of itself. But first things first. If you look *first* to other people rather than Christ’s abiding presence and resources to deal with or tranquilize the pain of your loneliness, you will be disappointed—if not very frustrated. If you look to these people instead of to Christ, or more than you look to him, it’s a clear indication that your desire to *not be lonely* is an idolatrous one.<sup>13</sup>

I just got off the phone with someone who inquired what I was doing today. When I explained that I was writing a booklet on loneliness, she asked, “Are you going to address the fact

13. To be free of loneliness is not a wrong desire per se, but it becomes idolatrous when we seek companionship on *our* terms rather than God’s.