

HELP!

I'M SO LONELY

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To Bill

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INTRODUCTION

*Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
and like a hired hand who looks for
his wages,
so I am allotted months of emptiness,
and nights of misery are apportioned
to me.*

*When I lie down I say, “When shall I arise?”
But the night is long,
and I am full of tossing till the dawn.*

(Job 7:2-4)

Loneliness is a universal condition. It touches people of any race, religion, gender, nationality, age, social standing, or financial status. If we live long enough, all of us will experience it at some point. Christians are certainly not exempt.

Loneliness takes many forms, and its causes are almost endless. There's loneliness from:

- » Losing a spouse or other loved one.
- » Being alone in a new environment.
- » Being single in what seems like a world full of couples.
- » Being in a loveless or troubled marriage.
- » Being married to someone who, through debilitating illness, is a shadow of his or her former self.
- » Being elderly, often starved of companionship or a friendly touch.
- » Being exceptional—whether exceptionally beautiful or plain, exceptionally intelligent or cognitively challenged, exceptionally fat/skinny, exceptionally tall/short, exceptionally famous or seemingly invisible.
- » Anything that sets us apart from others, which can cause us to feel disconnected and isolated.

Not only are there different causes, but loneliness varies in other ways. Some loneliness is temporary; some is long term. Some is deep and aching; some is merely unsettling.

Some causes minor discomfort; some causes major dysfunction.

The idea for writing about loneliness was first suggested to me by a friend I was visiting in the hospital. His suggestion launched a cascade of ideas for this mini-book. But which perspective of loneliness should I focus on? After much deliberation, I decided to concentrate on the loneliness caused by losing a spouse, whether by death or divorce. My friend and his wife had been virtually joined at the hip for more than forty years. Losing her to cancer several years previously had left him feeling like an amputee, as if part of his body was missing. Her death left a void nothing seemed to fill.

God gives us an assignment when we marry. We are to love that person as we love ourselves, to live together within the principles in his Word. When we lose our spouse, we are given another mission, no less important. In our widowhood or new found singleness, we are still to live according to God's Word, and to glorify him in the way we carry out this new assignment.

Such close associations exist between loneliness, depression, and grief that these three afflictions can be considered interchangeably. The ultimate solution is the same, regardless of which form your own loneliness takes.

Warning Signs

Though there is no right or wrong way to overcome grief and loss, there are some danger signs that indicate you need additional help. If you struggle with any of the following, please seek help from a medical, social, or spiritual professional:

- » Persistent self-destructive thoughts.
- » Failure to provide for basic needs, such as daily hygiene, food, drink, and shelter.
- » Persistent depression that significantly affects your ability to function in life.
- » Substance abuse (alcoholic beverages, illegal drugs, tranquilizers, sleeping pills, junk food, etc.).
- » Mental illness—that is, psychosis: hearing things others don't hear, seeing things others don't see, having delusions, and intense confusion.¹

Through my research I've come to realize how much more pervasive loneliness is than I had previously thought. It is relevant to all of us, even if perhaps not at this moment. It has long been

¹ Adapted from Bob Deits, *Life After Loss* (Tucson, AZ: Fisher Books, 1988), 51.

my belief that the time to help a broken heart is *before* it's broken. Similarly, the best time to help with loneliness is before we're lonely. In some small way, I hope this mini-book will prepare us for that time.

As always, it is my prayer that God will give me wisdom as I write this mini-book, and grace to the suffering who read it. May it result in blessings to us and glory to the Father!

1

Perspectives on Loneliness

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!

(Ecclesiastes 4:9–10)

The Bible has a surprising number of passages dealing with loneliness. In addition to my research and Bible study, I developed a brief questionnaire on loneliness. I sent the questionnaire to acquaintances who are or have been in situations where at least the *opportunity* for loneliness exists. Their answers were revealing, and patterns quickly emerged. The remainder of this chapter provides a sampling of their answers.

The Questionnaire

1. DESCRIBE WHAT SHAPE LONELINESS TOOK IN YOUR LIFE. WHAT DID IT FEEL LIKE TO YOU? AND HOW LONG DID IT LAST?

There were no generalities in the answers because this was such a personal issue for each respondent. One person noted differences in intensity, character, and consequences depending on factors such as time, situation, and the reason for loneliness.

Several said they exhibited increased irritability and depression as a result of their loneliness. One said she became quieter and more withdrawn.

Another said that, when her husband died, she felt that half of her was missing. Her identity had been so wrapped up in caring for him for so many years that she didn't really know what to do with herself and couldn't figure out who she was apart from him. Several others mentioned this loss of identity, and the pain accompanying their need for self-rediscovery.

One man remarked that there was so much activity required right after his wife's death that he didn't feel loneliness initially. "The daily pressure was gone. The race was over. Sorrow and grief were still there, but not loneliness until after a few

weeks passed. Then the feeling of emptiness set in. I was alone. What do I do now?”

Another wrote, “It was as though all that had meaning lost all its meaning. It was as though music came without notes, spring came without color, summer came without sunshine, laughter came without joy. All was a big emptiness, gray and hopeless and beyond recovery; unending and deep sadness permeated all of it.”

Several people mentioned that their world lost its color—that everything existed in shades of gray. The things that had previously brought them enjoyment and energy no longer did so after their loss.

A couple of respondents mentioned feeling anger towards God for causing their situation. Even when/if they prayed, they felt he was distant and sometimes not even listening.

Many others mentioned feeling cut off from the world. Loneliness caused them to turn within—to focus upon their own pain. They found it difficult to look outwards to other people or care about them. In a room full of people, they would remain disengaged and alone.

One wrote, “It amazed me that people were still walking around enjoying themselves and engaged in happy activities. I couldn’t comprehend it.” Others made similar statements, explaining that it

was like watching people in a dream. It just didn't seem real that the world hadn't come to a sudden halt for anyone except themselves.

The above responses were from people who were deeply affected and afflicted by their loss. On the other hand, there were people in similar situations who said things like, "It never occurred to me to be lonely. I was just so busy with activities and other people that I guess I didn't feel that kind of pain!"

One man said it depended on how a person views the situation; that he never viewed his circumstances in those terms so he never experienced what he would call "loneliness." Still others remarked that they considered their brief periods of loneliness as "pity parties." They learned to apply God's Word to their attitudes and were able to rise above the pain and reenter the mainstream of their lives.

2. IT'S ONE THING TO BELIEVE WITH ALL YOUR HEART THAT THE LORD IS RIGHT THERE WITH YOU, BUT SOMETIMES THAT'S NOT MUCH COMFORT WHEN YOU NEED SOMEONE WITH FLESH AND BLOOD TO PUT HIS OR HER ARMS AROUND YOU. WHAT SOLUTIONS DID YOU FIND FOR THIS PHYSICAL CRAVING FOR HUMAN TOUCH AND AFFECTION? (I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT SEX HERE.)

Most said that they hadn't figured out any answers to this problem. Some said that meditating upon

the fact that the Lord promised to provide for our needs seemed to help, and that they tried patiently to “wait upon the Lord.”

One lady said she joined a support group of other grieving people who truly understood what she was going through. They met for group sessions to share their hearts, and provided comforting hugs and compassionate hearts for each other. They also went out to dinner and scheduled movie dates together, prayed for one another, and supported each other during the times of deepest pain. Little by little, they learned to laugh and enjoy life again with others who understood their torment. Eventually, they stopped meeting as a group but remained in contact as special friends.

Some said they found comfort in the loving embraces of their family and close friends, while others acknowledged that even hugs from people who loved them left them empty and unfulfilled.

One man tried to start dating again, but this proved futile because no one was like his darling wife. And dating requires so much energy and giving of yourself—something that’s difficult to do when you’re suffering from severe loneliness.

Two people acknowledged trying the “highly un-recommended solutions of drugs, alcohol, and casual sex,” but one said it was empty and

unsatisfying, and the other said that afterward, it left her feeling lonelier than before.

One lady signed up with an online dating service almost immediately and met someone she eventually married. But she said the work of grieving over her lost relationship was something that didn't resolve fully until well into her new marriage.

The people who didn't see themselves as truly suffering from loneliness had slightly different answers. Several remarked about the unconditional affection they received from pets—mostly dogs. Others said that they enjoyed receiving hugs from other people, but their happiness and sense of well-being did not depend on this.

One lone respondent said he never experienced this need for human contact and that it was a non-issue for him. He was content to wait upon God's timing and provision.

3. DID (DO) YOU FEEL HOPELESS THAT YOU COULD EVER STOP FEELING LONELY?

Many simply wrote, "Yes." The majority of respondents, though, denied feelings of hopelessness.

One friend admitted that though several years had passed since his wife's death, he still felt

hopeless. He said it was less intense, but the pain had by no means ended.

Another wrote, “At the seven-month mark, I remember waking up one morning and saying to myself, ‘I’m not tired anymore (and I didn’t even know I was tired)!” Little by little, she made similar discoveries, so that she was now able to remember her husband with joy, not tears.

Many of those who had experienced or were experiencing deep loneliness wrote that they never felt hopeless about their situation; they were content to trust in God’s promises to provide. Several mentioned how helpful their families had been during this period.

One wrote that she never remembered being hopeless about her situation, and never agonized about whether she would ever know true love again. She knew she was strong and that her happiness did not depend on having someone else to “complete her.” She wrote, “I haven’t been sitting on a shelf waiting.” She just went on about the business of her life.

Another wrote, “I have probably felt hopeless at times, but that is definitely when I have lost my bearings in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I know my feelings are fickle. I know that the Lord cares for me deeply.”

4. *WHAT DID OTHERS DO/SAY THAT HELPED YOU THE MOST DURING THIS TIME?*

Some of the suggestions offered by respondents were understanding and support from their friends and families, and encouragement to take rest and relaxation and to do activities designed for stress relief (meditation, exercise, massage therapy, Scripture reading).

Acts of thoughtfulness seemed to be especially remembered. Sometimes it helped to be invited to family gatherings, particularly during the holidays. Most expressed the feeling that holidays were intensely lonely.

One wrote that it helped when people told her they loved her for who she was and that their love was unconditional.

One dear friend recalled that her best friend offered her home as a type of ICU during her most painful hours. It helped her to be immersed in a family of people who loved each other and embraced and supported her. "For a brief week, my pain was greatly decreased. I'll always be grateful." Several echoed this sentiment as they recounted ways their good friends and family came alongside them in their time of loneliness.

Another respondent was angered when people asked him, "How are you?" He just wanted to be left

alone. If he wanted to talk to someone, he would! But others expressed the opposite, saying it was comforting when people asked how they were doing; otherwise, they tended to think nobody cared.

One respondent said, “Sometimes I just need to be reminded of the gospel—I need to hear that the Lord loves me. Even though intellectually I know this is true, it can be so encouraging when someone just says it aloud. It’s like a reality check for me.”

Another recounted that getting involved in challenging activities proved really helpful. For another lady, her career became her singular focus until she gradually realized she was on the mend.

This theme of staying busy was one of the most significant aspects of recovery, according to my respondents. It engaged the brain, got them thinking about something other than their pain, and helped them stay in contact with others.

5. WHAT DID OTHERS DO/SAY THAT HURT YOU THE MOST DURING THIS TIME?

Most often, people were hurt by thoughtless comments that weren’t intended to be hurtful. One person said it was most hurtful when, whether in words or actions, the message seemed to be that she just needed to “get over it.”

Sometimes even quoting Scripture could be

a thoughtless response to someone's pain—especially if the loss was fresh. This was not the time to say, “Well, it's God's will,” or “You just need to trust in the Lord.” (That might be appropriate later, but not when someone was first bereaved.)

Several people related that, after the loss of their spouse, couples stopped asking them to join them. Several said they had to initiate contact even with their closest friends, because they stopped calling after they were no longer in relationships; all agreed this was extremely hurtful.

The complaint I heard most often was that few people know how to actually *listen*. When many tried to talk about their situation, they were shut down by people trying to tell them how they should feel, or that their feelings weren't valid. Others tried to solve their problems rather than just offering a safe sounding board. Still others jumped in to describe their own experiences with loneliness in great detail.

6. *WHAT SOLUTIONS DID YOU FIND TO YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE WITH LONELINESS?*

As mentioned above, the most consistent solution was getting involved—with people and activities, finding new interests, traveling to new places, and making new memories.

One person found it helpful to realize her tendency to feel sorry for herself. Once she recognized what she was doing, she could move past it.

Another suggested making measurable goals, perhaps starting out with hourly goals, then daily ones, before beginning to make and achieve bigger, long-term goals.

Most believers wrote that studying God's Word was beneficial, strengthening their belief in his provision and love for them. One said that belonging to a church, a body of believers who were a family for her, was extremely healing and encouraging. She said that it still sometimes hurt to see so many couples and very few singles in the church, but she reminded herself that they were all part of the body of Christ together.

7. HOW WOULD YOU SUGGEST HELPING OTHERS IN A SIMILAR SITUATION?

The vast majority mentioned being a good listener, allowing them to pour out their hearts without judgment or trying to jump in to "fix" the situation for them.

Others mentioned that sometimes the best thing to do is sincerely to tell them you're sorry for their loss, offer to pray with them, or send little cards saying, "I'm thinking of you and I'll be praying."

One simply said, "Tell them to get involved with kids and animals. It's impossible to stay lonely when you're around them!"

Another wrote, "Let those who are newly single or widowed know they're not half a person. Don't send the message that they're not worthy of consideration because they're no longer part of a couple."

The sense was that it was important to think in terms of practical suggestions. Those trying to help others should take note of what is needed and fulfill that need. Especially for newly grieving people, it takes supreme energy to do simple things such as going to the grocery store, mowing the lawn, or making dinner for one.

Summary

This section has been lengthy because I wanted to illustrate how diverse and personal loneliness is. I don't know where you are in your journey through loneliness, but perhaps you saw yourself in some of those answers. Perhaps now you realize there are others who *do* understand what you're going through and genuinely want to help. In this next section, let's consider what the Lord says about this painful topic.