

# Loneliness: God's Remedy



By Jayne V. Clark

When I was a child, I often sat in church hoping they would announce my favorite hymn, number 253:

Have faith in God when your pathway is lonely,  
He sees and knows all the ways you have trod;  
Never alone are the least of His children;  
Have faith in God, have faith in God.<sup>1</sup>

Curious, don't you think, that a little girl—maybe six or seven years old—should love such a hymn? After all, how many pathways could I have trod? And what should I have known of loneliness growing up in the stereotypical white, middle class family of the fifties and sixties, with a mom, dad, and big brother, all of whom were Christians? Not only that, but as part of the baby boomer generation, we lived in one of those popular new suburban housing developments. Lots of kids my age lived there. We rode bikes, played dodgeball, and went sledding together. How could I have been lonely?

My loneliness intensified when we moved to a neighborhood with no kids my age. I did

find comfort in our new church, though. A verse was painted in gold across the huge red wall behind the preacher: "And lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Mt. 28:20, KJV). It reminded me that no matter where I was, Jesus was with me and God was watching over me. Even so, I was still lonely.

One benefit of my loneliness was that it alerted me to the loneliness of others. Karin, the smartest and scrawniest kid in the class, was often the focus of teasing on the playground. I went trick-or-treating with her one year because I felt sorry for her. At other times, I'm ashamed to say, I deliberately avoided her.

Robin was the first and only black kid in the whole school. It was nearly impossible to draw her out. I can only imagine how alone and scared she must have felt.

It wasn't surprising that Karin and Robin were lonely, but Joan? In high school Joan was part of the "in" crowd. Those of us on the "outside" thought becoming part of that group would solve our loneliness, but we were wrong. Popularity involved paying a price: conform, or else! If you didn't dress a certain way, act a certain way, and hold certain opinions, you'd find yourself on the outs. Joan felt like she was wearing a mask and wondered if she would ever be known for who she really was. Popularity had its perks, but protecting Joan from loneliness wasn't one of them.

How do I know all this? Because one way I

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dealt with loneliness was to become a good listener. I was quiet, so people felt safe opening up to me. Besides that, I knew from the Bible that I was supposed to “do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.” As I listened over the years, I came to see that a wide variety of circumstances resulted in a similar experience—loneliness. Loneliness is no respecter of age, race, gender, or marital or economic status.

### ***Loneliness: A Common Experience***

I know rich kids whose parents travel or work all the time, leaving them alone or tended by someone else; foster kids who have no sense of belonging anywhere; children from single parent homes who struggle with the loss of a parent through death or divorce; only children who long for a brother or sister; children from large families who feel lost in the crowd; and kids from “normal” families like mine. They all experience loneliness.

Singles adults experience loneliness. It's natural to desire someone with whom to share your life. But sometimes the expectations aren't even that high—they'd just like a place to go for the holidays. It's easy to think, “Surely a spouse is the answer.”

But guess what? Married people get lonely too. Sometimes it's because the marriage isn't all that great. Maybe the only thing they share is the same bed. Maybe the only thing they agree on is to stop talking. Whatever the reasons, the reality is that marriage has fallen far short of their dreams. They're lonelier now than they ever were.

Even spouses in great marriages sometimes feel lonely. A young couple splits their days between work and classes, studying all night and spending their weekends serving at church. A mother struggles when her husband is away on business trips, while he spends his evenings in lonely hotel rooms. A man who has worked his entire life so that he and his wife could spend their retirement traveling together now spends every moment caring for her as she slips away with Alzheimer's. He's committed to her, but he's lonely.

The list goes on and on. People change jobs and move away from family and friends. The elderly spend hours alone in nursing homes.

An alcoholic finds himself living on the streets. Soldiers overseas miss their families. Kids go off to college. Hospital patients. Prisoners. The list includes the person living next to you. It includes you. Let's face it: It includes all of us at one time or another.

Circumstances vary, but the feelings are similar. We feel isolated, vulnerable, and alone. We want to talk and be heard. We want to be known and understood; we don't want to feel invisible. We want to be included and cared about. We desire intimacy. We want to be connected to someone.

### ***A Flawed Strategy***

How do we remedy this loneliness? When I was a child I thought it was simple: Make one really good friend. I've already mentioned one of the strategies I used—I became a good listener. I combined that with a decent sense of humor and a willingness to be helpful. My job was to listen, make you laugh, and help you out. Your job was to be my friend so I wouldn't be lonely. But eventually I would upset the balance of this arrangement by asking *you* to help *me*. If you couldn't manage it, I felt hurt. Or maybe I couldn't get you to listen to me for ten minutes when I had already listened to you for hours. In either case I wouldn't dare tell you that I was hurt, because you might have gotten upset with me. So I would take self-protective steps to prevent getting hurt again.

Do you see the dynamic? I work to get you to like me, but I also work to protect myself from you. I move toward you because I want your acceptance, but I back away because I want to play it safe. A tug-of-war match goes on inside my heart. My desire for acceptance wins one moment, but self-protection wins the next. The result? I send out a continuous stream of mixed messages. When I am self-protective, I withdraw into myself. But then I become afraid you are (a) losing patience with me, (b) glad to be rid of me, or (c) not even noticing that I've withdrawn. All of these possibilities are bad, so I risk getting hurt by being nice again so you'll still like me. Sooner or later, it all takes too much effort and we drift apart. But eventually, loneliness gets to me, the memories fade, and I begin the cycle all over again.

I didn't always realize that my strategies

not only increased my own loneliness, but added to other people's loneliness as well. I also didn't realize what was going on in me beneath the surface. At a very basic level I was treating my friends like objects, manipulating them so that they would do what I wanted. When they let me down, I saw them as obstacles to my sense of belonging.

### ***The Remedy for Loneliness***

In his mercy, God didn't leave me to endlessly repeat this cycle. He opened my eyes to this reality: It isn't what remedies our loneliness, but who remedies it, namely, Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners.

Loneliness is a result of the Fall. It's true that God declared that it wasn't good for man to be alone *before* sin entered the world (Gen. 2:18). But He was stating a fact, not voicing

been praise, sin made for blame. Hiding. Loss. Rejection. Blame. Ingredients of loneliness. Loneliness was born at the Fall.

Some have implied, if not stated outright, that marriage is the solution to loneliness. But where does that leave a child who won't have that option for years? Or a prisoner with no hope of parole? Or an elderly widow? Maybe you're thinking they should be content with God alone, but Adam had God alone—without any sin whatsoever—and *God* said no, this is not good. And besides, aren't all of us—married or single—meant to find our contentment in Him? The notion that marriage is the solution to loneliness suggests that one category of people is potentially exempt from this experience, and the rest of us are just stuck with it. But that's not true. As a matter of fact, it was a *married couple* who first experienced loneliness.

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how Adam was feeling. At the time, Adam was enjoying perfect communion with God. Apart from God telling him, he had no way of knowing that anything more was possible. Maybe Adam began to get an inkling as the animals paraded past him, but it was *God's* assessment that man should not be alone. Perhaps that shouldn't surprise us. After all, God created man in His image and He is not a God who exists alone. He is one God in three persons, three who are alike, yet distinct. So maybe in addition to wanting man to enjoy fellowship with Him, God wanted man to enjoy the *kind* of fellowship God enjoys with Himself—with others who are like you, but separate.

When Adam and Eve sinned, the perfect union they had enjoyed with God and with each other was destroyed. Sin separated them from God and from each other. Where once there had been openness, sin made for hiding. Where once there had been completeness, sin made for loss. Where once there had been acceptance, sin made for rejection. Where once there had

The real solution lies not in marriage, but in our union with Christ, which leads to our union with one another. When God created Eve, He created marriage, but more than that, He created community. Marriage is a form of community, perhaps its most basic and elemental form. Community requires people coming together. In the case of marriage, this happens literally. It usually involves the group expanding. In the case of marriage, this happens by bearing children. But God's plans are always bigger and better than ours.

### ***We Are the Bride of Christ***

When God called Abram to follow Him (Gen. 12:1-3, 13:16), God told him that his descendants would outnumber the grains of sand on the seashore and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. As time went on, Abraham's descendents, the Jews, were so caught up in being the chosen race that they overlooked the "all nations" part of God's blessing. But God *always* wanted people from

every tribe and language and people and nation to be part of His community.

In our society today, we're big on *family*, but we tend to think of family in narrow terms—as in our own personal, nuclear families. But when someone told Jesus that His mother and brothers wanted to speak to Him, He asked, “Who is My mother, and who are My brothers? Whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother” (Mt. 12:48-50). Jesus redefined and enlarged the meaning of family.

If marriage were God's answer to loneliness, why isn't there any giving or taking in marriage in heaven? That's a trick question because, actually, there is. But it's not individuals who are married in heaven, it is God's people corporately—the church, the bride of Christ—who will finally meet our bridegroom, Jesus, face to face.

Consider Genesis 2 through the lens of the New Testament. As surprising and awesome as it must have been for Adam to open his eyes and see a woman who was like him but not like him, how much more awesome it is when we meet brothers and sisters who differ from us in innumerable ways—culture, background, social class, political views, education, interests, everything imaginable—but with whom we still have a sense of recognition and connection, a sense of familiarity that says, “I feel like I know you. Have we met before?”

As beautiful and miraculous as it is for a husband and wife to become one flesh, how much more beautiful and miraculous it is to be the body of Christ, so connected with one another that if one part suffers, we all suffer. If one part is honored, we are all honored. We are *all* the bride of Christ together.

As incredible as it is for a husband and wife to come together so that they can be fruitful and multiply, how much more incredible it is that Christ should multiply and grow His kingdom by sending flawed people like us to make disciples of all nations.

As wonderful as it must have been for Adam and Eve to be naked and unashamed with each other, how much more wonderful it is that dirty, rotten scoundrels like us should have our sins washed away by the blood of Christ and now stand clothed in His righteousness! We no

longer need to hide behind fig leaves when our sin is exposed. Now we can confess our sins one to another.

This is what Jesus has done for us. He went to the cross, betrayed and deserted by His friends. As He hung there, becoming saturated with sin—including those godless attempts we make to deal with our loneliness—even His Father had to turn away from Him. Has there ever been a lonelier moment?

But because of Jesus' love for His Father, and their united love for us, He hung there until He died. Sin caused separation, but Jesus' sacrifice caused restoration.

### **Loneliness Can Be Relieved**

Do the effects of sin still linger? Of course. Loneliness will not be eliminated until we get to heaven. But in Jesus Christ and through His work, change is possible. Loneliness can be eased for us and by us. When I tried to handle it on my own, I did not understand that I needed to love people rather than fear or use them. Through my counseling classes and Ed Welch's book, *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, God helped me to identify what was going on and to repent of it. Have I arrived? Certainly not. Ask anyone who knows me. But now, at least, I know to pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24).

I encourage you to ask the Lord to show you where you intensify your own loneliness and, even more importantly, the loneliness of others. For instance, some of us consider ourselves introverted or shy. To us, there's nothing more intimidating than starting a conversation. What a great opportunity for a heart check! Ask yourself what's holding you back. Fear? Fear of rejection? Fear of being embarrassed? You may be surprised to discover that it's actually pride: You don't want anyone to discover your flaws. Or maybe you don't want to be seen talking to someone “like that.” There are lots of possibilities. Ask God to show you.

Maybe you are extroverted and outgoing. It is easy for you to talk to people you've never met before. In fact, you talk and talk—and no one else can get a word in edgewise! What's going on? Pride? Do you love to impress people with how smart or funny you are? Or maybe it's

fear. You're afraid of silence or being alone. Ask God to show you.

Whatever you might find when God shows you your heart, remember that God wants to change you—and me—to make us more like Himself, more like the people He created us to be. When we surrender ourselves to Him and let Him work in us, funny things happen. First, our relationship with Him deepens. We find ourselves actually relating to Him rather than just referring to our relationship with Him. That kind of change certainly reduces our loneliness.

### ***Changed Priorities and Perspectives***

But God also changes our priorities. Rather than being self-absorbed, we become more focused on others. If your goal is to solve your loneliness, you will end up using people as I did. But when you “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33) you will end up loving people. Along the way you'll

run errands with someone else, you wind up helping each other with other mundane tasks.

What are some other ways to move toward people? I've chosen three that are so obvious, they're hiding in plain sight.

#### **1. Look and See**

How many people cross our paths every day? Shop clerks, bank tellers, trash collectors, neighbors, people we pass on the street, or those who sit behind us in church week after week. All these people blend into the background of our busy lives. We give them a nod, but that's it. Have we looked at them and seen them as people God has put into our path to love, even in the simplest ways?

God watches over us and he *sees* us. Remember Hagar in Genesis 16? Sarah could not conceive Abraham's child, so she decided that Hagar, her maidservant, should conceive in her place. When Hagar succeeded, she treated Sarah with contempt. Sarah reacted by driving

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discover that you're just not as lonely as you used to be. In fact, you may find you're not lonely at all.

What might these changed priorities look like? It might mean that the stay-at-home mom invites a single friend over for dinner when her husband travels. It might mean that a family adopts an elderly couple and helps them with the more strenuous household chores. You might run errands with someone else. We all have errands to run, so why not make it a social occasion?

You may be thinking, “I'm too busy as it is. I don't have time for this!” But when you take these kinds of steps, relationships develop. Your perspective changes and you find that certain activities don't seem as important as they used to. You also find that many times double benefits occur. While the family helps the elderly couple with household chores, the elderly couple shares the wisdom of their years. While the young mom provides dinner, the single person plays with the kids and gives mom a break. When you

Hagar into the desert. Surprisingly, the angel of the Lord followed Hagar and spoke with her. Hagar was amazed. She said, “You are the God who sees me” (Gen. 16:13). Hagar, the slave woman, was not invisible to God. Should anyone now be “invisible” to us?

In Luke 7 Jesus was on His way to the town of Nain with His disciples. A large crowd followed Him. Amid all the activity, Jesus saw a grieving mother and His heart went out to her. He stopped to comfort her and restore her dead son to her.

The Gospels are full of occasions of Jesus seeing hungry, lost, hurting people and doing something for them. How are we going to minister to a world full of lonely people if we haven't even looked to see them?

#### **2. Listen**

Something else we can do to move toward people is to listen to them and listen well. We have a God who knows our every thought. He knows our words before they even reach our tongue, yet He encourages us to talk to Him.

When we do, He listens. Why? Because He wants us to relate to Him, child to Father. How do we know He listens? Because Scripture records conversations He had with people—conversations that were give and take, between God and Abraham, Moses, Job, and many others. The Lord of the universe listens to us, too.

If God cares enough to listen to us, how can we *not* care enough to listen to others? Listen not only to the words they say, but listen for what they mean. Notice what their tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language communicate. Listening well requires us to take a genuine interest in others. It also requires patience and wisdom that come only by the work of God's Spirit in us.

### 3. Touch

Touch can ease the loneliness of others. In America this is a “touchy” subject, since we live in a society where absolutely everything has been sexualized. Even Christians are prone to read all kinds of things into innocent actions. I'm not naïve; I know that sinful touching occurs even within the church. However, the correct response is not to avoid touching or to be paralyzed by fear of lawsuits. Rather, the church should be a place where we treat one another as family members with “absolute purity” (1 Tim. 5).

Jesus didn't just talk to the people He healed. He touched them and He let them touch Him, too. Those who have been physically or sexually abused should be able to find comfort and healing not only in the words they hear at church, but in the touch they receive, touch that conveys nothing more or less than kindness. Do we want to be sensitive to people's experiences and wise in the way we go about it? Absolutely! But we don't want to overcompensate by never touching at all. When someone has been deprived of touch or hurt by it, it is wonderful to see her respond with joy when she is touched in kindness.

In Scripture we're frequently told to love one another (John 13:34). Next in line on the “one another” list is “greet each other with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16). If that's too much for you, how about a handshake, a pat on the back, a touch on the forearm, or maybe a hug? God created us with skin that is sensitive to touch

and He said it was good. We, as the body of Christ, can offer His touch to lonely, hurting people.

### *A Community of Oneness with Christ*

These suggestions are ways we can individually image Christ in a lonely world. But what can happen when people as a group decide to live out their oneness with Christ and each other? I once belonged to a church where the leadership didn't want to just *profess* that Christ was head of the church, they wanted to *practice* it. They reasoned that Christ wouldn't lead some of them one way and the rest another, any more than we would tell one leg to walk right and the other to walk left. They believed that He would lead them all in the same direction, so they agreed to submit first to Christ and then to each other. That meant decisions had to be unanimous, not decided by majority or consensus. And unanimity meant that everyone truly believed that this was where God was leading them. This is radical oneness.

One of the first things to change was the way the church leadership conducted their meetings. Rather than opening with a brief devotional and prayer for the congregation, they began studying the Bible together and praying for themselves, repenting of their sins and interceding for each other. Then they prayed for the congregation. Many were gifted businessmen who knew how to argue their positions and get their way, but this was a whole new ball game. Now they had to die to themselves and their agendas to seek the mind of Christ. Now they had to really listen to each other, not just wait until someone stopped talking so they could speak their piece. God trained them in patience, humility, and forbearance with one another. They learned to appreciate each other's God-given gifts and perspectives. They developed a deep affection and respect for each other. They had begun by agreeing to a philosophy of ministry, but God knit their hearts together in love as they met.

At times there would be one or two who thought things should go one way, while the rest felt otherwise. They would pray and wait until they were all of one mind. Sometimes the many ended up agreeing with the few. Sometimes the few eventually agreed with the many. But rather than being frustrated by the process, thinking,

“We’ve wasted so much time. Why couldn’t you have agreed with us in the first place?” the leadership recognized that the delay was actually God’s mercy to them. He had prevented them from moving ahead prematurely.

Sometimes the process was slow and painful. But something astounding happened. They not only learned to act as one, they *became* one. The Holy Spirit enabled them to live out of their union with Him to a degree they never had before. Their hearts were exposed and changed. They related to one another in new ways. Do you see the progression? Change in individual hearts led to change within the leadership, which then spread out into the congregation itself. God was growing and strengthening the church in a way that was faster and better than anything they could have done themselves.

It didn’t end there. Transformed members of the congregation reached into their neighborhoods, touching lives like never before. Those outside of the church noticed and responded to the invitations of their neighbors. Others just showed up at church out of curiosity. In time, the makeover within the congregation resulted in a change in the make-up of the congregation. Men in Brooks Brothers suits sat shoulder to shoulder with people in tee shirts and jeans.

Obviously, everyone involved was still a sinner. Problems continued to arise that needed addressing. But nothing diminished the joy of

witnessing firsthand an incredible answer to Jesus’ prayer.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in Me and I am in you. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. I in them and You in Me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me. (1 John 17:20-23)

No matter who you are, you will experience loneliness in this fallen world. But now I see how God has entered into our loneliness and transformed it. He has united us to Himself and each other in Jesus, and He calls us to enter into the loneliness of those around us. I look forward to the day when we will be delivered completely from loneliness to oneness.

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<sup>1</sup> B.B. McKinney, “Have Faith in God”