

The Starting Point of  
*a New Journey*

# FACING LONELINESS



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*Facing Loneliness*

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PART 1:

# ISOLATING THE CAUSES

# DIAGNOSING THE MALADY



Once a philosophical problem contemplated by poets and prophets, loneliness is now a universal condition for millions of Americans. Not only for the elderly and divorced, but also for the men and women filled with the ache of loneliness within their marriages. It is fast becoming an American tradition.

— Tim Timmons, *Loneliness Is Not a Disease*

Diagnosis precedes prescription. It is only when the physician has made a correct diagnosis that he will be in a position to prescribe the appropriate remedy. It is no different with maladies of the spirit. Accordingly, the first section of this book aims at uncovering some of the causes of the universal malady of loneliness.

Loneliness is more readily experienced than defined. The Webster's Dictionary definition is: "Being without company; cut off from others; not frequented by human beings; sad from being alone; producing a feeling of bleakness or desolation." Taken together, these concepts combine to describe a dismal yet painfully common experience. It is not without reason that *loneliness* has been termed

the most desolate word in the English language. Its very sound seems to echo its own desolation.

One of its distressing features is that its victims are usually unable to diagnose the nature and source of their malady, and as a consequence are unable to discover an appropriate remedy. However, this should not discourage us from endeavoring to trace its tortuous course and hopefully discover ways in which its harmful effects can be subdued, or even totally eliminated.

Loneliness assumes many forms, each equally undesirable — an unsatisfied inner ache, an inner vacuum, a craving for satisfaction. The human heart has an insatiable longing to be loved.

Research has revealed that the experiences most conducive to acute loneliness are the death of a life partner or other family member; a separation or divorce; a broken engagement; leaving one's homeland for a new country. All of these incur deep emotional trauma.

In other cases the loneliness unconsciously reflects a person's inability to initiate or maintain a stable and satisfying relationship, especially with members of the opposite sex. But whatever the cause, the experience is painful in the extreme.

At one of his crusades, the Latin American evangelist Luis Palau asked the people in his audience to indicate the subject on which they would most like him to speak. A number of themes were suggested, but the majority requested him to speak on the subject of loneliness.

They were giving voice to the plight of many who suffer from one of the most pervasive and emotional disorders of our times. Its growing prevalence in the last half-century warrants careful investigation of both cause and possible cure. Of course loneliness has always plagued mankind, but the special conditions that prevail in our times have increased its incidence enormously.

One of the frequent side effects of loneliness is a sense of emptiness and futility that nothing seems to dispel. Contemporary social and environmental factors are often the villain of the piece. For older people the breaking up of the family home, with the consequent loss of familiar friends and scenes, can prove a traumatic experience. They feel rootless and find it desperately difficult to strike up a new relationship in strange surroundings.

In her article for *Mental Hygiene* titled “Loneliness in Old Age,” Irene Burnside contends that “loneliness is the state of mind in which the fact that there were people in one’s life in the past is more or less forgotten, and the hope that there may be interpersonal relations in the future is out of the realm of expectation.”

It is no sin to be lonely, so there is no need to add a sense of guilt to the problem. Our sinless Lord was lonely. But if the facts of the case are not faced realistically and purposefully, harmful attitudes may develop that will hinder present enjoyment of life and fruitful service for God and man in the future.

## THE SEEDS OF LONELINESS

It is rather surprising to discover that despite its universality in past ages as well as in our own, loneliness is nowhere treated at length in the Bible. Illustrations of its ravages, however, abound. The Scriptures alone provide us with a credible and authentic diagnosis of mankind’s fundamental problems, so it must be to the Bible that we look for both diagnosis and cure.

The biblical record asserts that in his original state, Adam was perfect in form and intelligence.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. . . . God saw all that he had made and it was very good (Gen. 1:27, 31).

But though he came perfect from the hand of God, Adam was still finite and incomplete. This is implicit in the first recorded statement from the mouth of God.

The Lord God said, "*It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.*" . . . So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man (Gen. 2:18, 21–22; *italics mine*).

In their original innocence, Adam and Eve lived without shame or fear. They enjoyed uninhibited companionship with each other and with the Lord God. They were neither alone nor lonely.

Into this ideal scene the serpent subtly introduced himself and successfully seduced them into sin. This, in turn, resulted in the forfeiture of their perfection and innocence, for it was an act of rebellion against their Creator and Benefactor. Henceforth they were fallen beings, and involved the whole human race in their fall. But though the image of God in them was sadly defaced, it was not totally obliterated. In that pregnant moment loneliness was born.

The immediate result of their sin and folly was banishment from the Garden of Eden. From then on they were enmeshed in the tentacles of fear and gripped by the icy fingers of loneliness. Tragic exchange! Desolating loneliness for intimacy with God!

## MANKIND'S TWOFOLD NEED

We were created with a twofold need — fellowship with God and companionship with other human beings. For these, if we are to realize the full purpose of His creation, there can be no substitute. The social instinct is deep within every human being, and when

this need remains unsatisfied, the seeds of loneliness grow and flourish.

We are vulnerable to the onslaught of loneliness on a number of levels, of which the emotional is the most distressing because it involves the loss of close relationship with other people. It can be relieved only by establishing some alternative, congenial association. To those who are by nature shy or reserved, this presents an almost insurmountable obstacle.

Social loneliness is related to the contacts we have — or do not have — with the community in which we live. This is a chronic sense of being “left out,” and this in turn generates a feeling of low self-worth. The victim labors under the conviction — by no means always justified — that he or she is of little significance to anyone, and therefore no one desires his or her friendship. This attitude often leads to a largely self-imposed isolation.

What people in this state of mind most need is a group of caring and supportive friends; but how and where can they find them? In many churches this need is met in home groups, whose members exercise a mutual interest in the others' welfare. But the initial step — the joining of such a group — is the decision of the sufferer.

Though social loneliness is undoubtedly distressing, spiritual loneliness is even more fundamental to the condition, for it carries with it the feeling of isolation not only from fellow men and women but from God, who alone can fill the vacuum in the human heart.

Blaise Pascal, the noted French scientist, held that in every human heart there exists a God-shaped vacuum. Centuries before him, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, put his finger on the root cause of loneliness: “God created man for Himself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Him.”

For this reason, the greatest need of the lonely person is to ensure that he or she is in a right relationship with God, the Great

Physician. He has a cure for every lack and malady of the human heart, whether it be spiritual or social.

## CONTRIBUTORY CAUSES

In our indulgent and affluent Western society, where most can gratify their every desire, it seems unexplainable that so many are victims of the scourge of loneliness and that it is as prevalent among the rich as among the poor. Many factors have combined to produce this effect.

Sweeping changes in the social structure of society have contributed their quota. Unprecedented mobility on land and in the air has encouraged this trend. Every year, 20 percent of a community living in an urban situation change their location. This inevitably precipitates the break-up of family groups and hinders the development of community spirit and the forming of enduring friendships.

Modern technology and the magic of the microchip have added immeasurably to the complexity and yet uniformity of modern life. Everything tends to grow more impersonal. The old corner store, with its personal attention and service, has given way to the relentless competition of the supermarket. The mass production line has reduced many skillful workers to the status of human robots. The competent tradesman, who used to take pride in his work, has been made redundant, or forced into early retirement. Following is how one unwilling retiree expressed his feelings:

*Since I have retired from life's competition  
Each day is filled with complete repetition,  
I get up each morning and dust off my wits,  
Go, pick up the paper and read the obits.  
If my name isn't there, I know I'm not dead.  
I get a good breakfast and go back to bed.*

Paradoxically, the rapid urbanization of the world — a modern phenomenon that has spawned over 300 cities of more than a million citizens — while forcing people to live closer together physically, has resulted in even greater social isolation. According to the census taken in 1982, only about 20 percent of the people in China lived in city centers. By 1986 the proportion shot up to 37 percent.

The stark high-rise apartment blocks of the mega-cities are characterized more by fear and suspicion than by friendship and neighborliness. There are, of course, glorious exceptions to this generalization, but they are, sadly, the exceptions. Is it not a strange anomaly that large numbers of people can live shoulder to shoulder, and yet at the same time be gripped by intense loneliness? Yet such is the case.

## THE TELEVISION INVASION

Television has proved a mixed blessing. Like many other inventions that have great potential for good, television has been exploited — one could say prostituted — by greedy and unprincipled people for selfish and often evil purposes. A great many of the programs presented are not merely senseless, but positively harmful. One of its destructive effects is that habitual viewers seldom communicate with one another in a meaningful way. Superficial viewing habits are formed that inhibit intelligent conversation and deep thought.

Viewers are encouraged to live in a world of fantasy. Instead of enjoying genial and congenial action and interaction with family and friends, many live their lives vicariously in the lives of the television actors and actresses, be they good or bad. When parents who are concerned about the intellectual and moral standards presented to their children attempt to monitor the programs, the result is very often family discord.

These factors involved in the television invasion combine to provide a fertile culture bed for loneliness.

## LONELINESS IS UNIVERSAL

“It is strange to be known so universally, and yet to be so lonely.” These poignant words were spoken by the great scientist Albert Einstein and demonstrate that loneliness invades the lives of the great and intellectual as well as those in lower situations of life. It is no respecter of persons. But perhaps it was Einstein’s very brilliance that isolated him from lesser mortals and gave birth to his loneliness.

Perhaps more than at any time in history this scourge of loneliness has become pervasive in the world, and not less among the sophisticated than among primitive societies. It is a rapidly increasing part of human existence, an inescapable fact of life. Loneliness seems to keep pace with social and industrial change in today’s world. It has been accurately described as a debilitating deficiency disease that knows no limitations of age, class, or sex.

In an effort to discover the type of problem that was of most concern to its readers, an American newspaper conducted a broad survey. In the responses received, three problems predominated. They were — in order of priority — fear, worry, loneliness. In the last of the three there are elements of the first two as well. But it is loneliness that casts the longest shadow on our contemporary world.

In a poll conducted among patients in a psychiatric hospital, almost 8 percent claimed that it was loneliness that drove them to seek help from a psychiatrist. It is small wonder that in his book *Overcoming Loneliness*, David Jeremiah termed it “the disease of the decade, perhaps of every decade in our mid and late twentieth century.”

A large number of modern pop songs and lyrics are shot through with the melancholy themes of frustration, emptiness, loneliness. Much of the accompanying music is set in a minor key and is a reflection of the negative aspects of life. Country music majors in broken relationships, desertion, and infidelity. All this tells its own story.

### THE RACIAL MIX

The impact of the electronic age, the widening reach of the media and communications, and the burgeoning population in many nations have thrown people together to a degree never before experienced. The racial mix in many mega-cities is almost unbelievable. I was speaking recently with the principal of a high school in Los Angeles who said that among his student body no fewer than fifty-two ethnic groups were represented!

Instead of eliminating loneliness, as one would expect, this inescapable contact of the races has served only to exacerbate it. There seems to be little desire in most ethnic groups to overleap racial and cultural barriers. Too often it is a case of physical proximity without emotional intimacy.

Foreign students in Western lands are exceptionally vulnerable to the ravages of this malady. An African student, who attended a British university, opened his heart to Mary Endersbee of *Crusade* magazine and poured out his lonely experience as he struggled to adapt to an alien culture:

At home, I walk along, my eyes raised, meeting the eyes of the people coming along the road towards me — neighbors, family, friends. We call out, we greet one another. Here in Britain I walk along your streets. People's eyes do not meet mine. They look away, avoiding my glance. No one greets me, no one calls out. Everyone seems to be rushing, silent.

How deep and poignant was this man's loneliness! And he is representative of thousands.

A student in one university carved a pathetic question on his desk: "Why am I so lonely when there are two thousand here?" He was learning the painful lesson that there can be close physical contact without meaningful relationship.

*Yes: in the sea of life enisled,  
With echoing straits between us thrown.  
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,  
We mortal millions live alone.*

— Matthew Arnold, "To Marguerite"