

Lonely, But Not Forsaken

Martin G. Collins

Given 30-Jan-21; Sermon #1581

God's people sometimes, maybe even often, feel very lonely. But this does not mean we have been forsaken, although it may feel that way sometimes. So, what can we do about it?

The Foundation for Art and Healing summarizes its research on how loneliness affects older adults:

Social isolation and loneliness are public health issues that affect more than one-third of adults, with seniors most at risk for depression, substance abuse, and suicide triggered by feelings of isolation. Health risks associated with loneliness and social isolation are comparable to the dangers of smoking and obesity, increasing mortality risk by up to 30%.

Loneliness is a significant predictor of poor health. In a 2010 AARP Research survey of adults age 45 and older, among respondents who rated their health as "excellent," only 25% were likely to be lonely, compared to 55% for those who rated their health as "poor."

Loneliness is a common source of distress, suffering, and impaired quality of life for adults older than 60, and is a predictor of functional decline and death, according to a 2012 study.

Some 19% of older adults report feeling lonely fairly frequently, according to a study on social connectedness based on data from the National Social Life Health and Aging Project.

Relative to others, lonely adults tend to have lower incomes; are less likely to be married; live alone; and have poorer self-rated health, more physical limitations in carrying out daily activities, and fewer friends. They also socialize, volunteer, and participate in organized groups less frequently.

Causes of social isolation include poor physical and mental health, poorly designed communities, and major life events such as loss of friends or a partner. Risk factors include lack of transportation, mobility impairment, untreated hearing loss, and limited opportunity to engage with others.

Health outcomes in older adults may be improved by promoting social engagement and helping seniors maintain interpersonal relationships, according to a 2012 study.

Many older adults suffer from frequent feelings of loneliness, but others are relatively unscathed by loneliness, according to a 2017 study. Factors that combat loneliness are a support network of friends and family and improving physical problems that limit independence and the ability to get out and about.”

For people in general of all ages, loneliness has negative effects on mental health, worsening depression, anxiety, mood disorders and cognitive decline, and on physical health, leading to higher rates of cardiovascular impairment, chronic pain, and metabolic disorders.

Loneliness is associated with as much as a 30% increase in early mortality.

King David was sometimes troubled and battled deep despair. In many of the psalms, he writes of his anguish, loneliness, fear of the enemy, his heartfelt cry over sin, and the guilt he struggled with and suffered because of it. David’s honesty with his own weaknesses gives hope to us who struggle today.

David recognized that sin causes loneliness because it makes us feel forsaken.

Psalm 38 is a lament that lays a person’s troubles before God, when that person realizes that these troubles result from his own sin. The psalm describes anguish of body and mind, desertion by friends, and how the person’s folly has made him vulnerable to enemies ready to pounce.

The psalm acknowledges that one’s sins lie behind these troubles. Of course, not all troubles result from one’s own sins; but this psalm is geared to those that do.

Psalm 38:1-22 O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your wrath, nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure! For Your arrows pierce me deeply, and Your hand presses me down. There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds are foul and festering because of my foolishness. I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are full of inflammation, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and severely broken; I groan because of the turmoil of my heart. Lord, all my desire is before You; and my sighing is not hidden from You. My heart pants, my strength fails me; as for the light of my eyes, it also has gone from me. My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague, and my relatives stand afar off. Those also who seek my life lay snares for me; those who seek my hurt speak of destruction, and plan deception all the day long. But I, like a deaf man, do not hear; and I am like a mute who does not open his mouth. Thus I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth is no response. For in You, O Lord, I hope; You will hear, O Lord my God. For I said, "Hear me, lest they rejoice over me, lest, when my foot slips, they exalt themselves against me." For I am ready to fall, and my sorrow is continually before me. For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin. But my enemies are vigorous, and they are strong; and those who hate me wrongfully have multiplied. Those also who render evil for good, they are my adversaries, because I follow what is good. Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!

The description of anguish intensifies as David tells of his loneliness. He knows himself to be open to God's inspection, and yet his friends and companions stand detached, thus compounding the helplessness with loneliness. Further, his own humbled condition, together with the disconnectedness of his friends, leaves him vulnerable to those who would do him harm.

If we find ourselves in such a hopeless situation, we must look to God alone, and we must plead with God to help us. David shows true faith in confessing the sin for which he is being disciplined and in acknowledging God and calling the Lord his salvation.

“Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, be not far from me!

Forsaken people, especially women, appear throughout the Bible. While God has always been a God of mercy who never forsakes those in need, abandoned people nevertheless exist and are abused.

In the Bible the word “forsake” and its synonym “abandon” were used in two ways: In one meaning, “forsake” was a verb that meant to forget or discontinue performing a specific action. In the other meaning, “forsake” conveyed the abandonment of individuals who had no one else to care for their distresses. Both uses are important in the Bible, and when God speaks of Israel, He links the two uses.

Because women were far more helpless than men, requiring legal, financial, and physical protection from men, the individuals most often abandoned or forsaken in the Bible are women. Such abandonment was a disgrace as well as an inconvenience, and it typified such outcast individuals as widows, orphans, and foreigners.

Throughout the Bible, God expresses a special compassion and care for individuals who are abandoned and in need. God's enduring faithfulness to those who love Him is expressed by the psalmist Psalm 37:25, "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread."

In Psalm 27:10 he expresses that God is more faithful than any other on earth, because as he says: even "When my father and my mother forsake me, then Lord will take care of me."

God calls Himself the "father of orphans and protector of widows," and with His own hand He "executes justice for the orphan and the widow" and "loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing."

God demanded that Israel to do the same, commanding, "You shall not abuse any widow or orphan," and reminding His people to care for the strangers in their land. Additionally, God set up a specific system for their provision in Israel by allowing them to glean any leftover food from the grain fields, olive trees, and grapevines.

When Israel disobeys Him, their treatment of orphans and widows is one of the charges God brings against them. Thus, God understood the plight of the most forsaken in society and compassionately endeavored to care for them.

Every day we pass by people who are desperate, suffering, and lonely. Many feel forsaken! Sometimes we notice, but often we do not. Maybe we are too busy, preoccupied, or overwhelmed ourselves. Or maybe *we* are those people—the desperate, the hurting, the lonely. Just needing someone to notice, to slow down, to take time—to care.

In looking for secular quotes about “suffering” I found that most people did not understand it and for the most part complained about it. But there were just a few that had something worthwhile to say.

The blind, deaf, and mute woman Helen Keller who knew a thing or two about suffering said, “All the world is full of suffering. It is also full of overcoming.”

She also said, “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.”

The American writer, H. G. Wells said, “There's nothing wrong in suffering, if you suffer for a purpose. Our revolution didn't abolish danger or death. It simply made danger and death worthwhile.”

I do not know whether this one is worthwhile or not, but it certainly gets to the point and helps us put suffering into perspective.

Another American writer, Tennessee Williams wrote, “Don't look forward to the day you stop suffering, because when it comes you'll know you're dead.”

Suffering can lead to loneliness and depression.

Though the Bible does not use the word “depression,” except in a few translations and verses, it is often suggested by other similar words, such as “downcast,” “brokenhearted,” “troubled,” “miserable,” “despairing,” and “mourning,” among others.

Throughout the Scriptures, there are stories about godly influential men and women of faith, who struggled and suffered through bleak times of depression and loneliness.

Elijah suffered loneliness because he became discouraged, weary, and fearful.

After great spiritual victories over the prophets of Baal, God-fearing Elijah became afraid and ran for his life. He put as much distance as possible between himself and the threatening Jezebel.

And according to I Kings 19:4, there in the desert, feeling crushed and exhausted, he sat down and prayed, "It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!"

I Kings 19:14-18 And he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."

Then, God told Elijah to do something.

I Kings 19:15-18 Then the Lord said to him: "Go, return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria. Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. It shall be that whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and whoever

escapes the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

So, Elijah was not as alone as he thought he was. Just as we are not!

Moses moaned over the sin of his people. He felt forsaken by the Israelites' rebellion against the Lord and their lack of respect for him.

He came down from the mountain and his experience with God, commandments in hand, only to find the Israelites in complete chaos and sin. In his feelings of anger and betrayal from his own people, Moses, as a leader, was about ready to give up on them. But instead, he gave a desperate, heartfelt cry to God on their behalf. Moses said,

Exodus 32:32 "Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written."

Jeremiah wrestled with great loneliness, feelings of defeat, and insecurity.

The prophet suffered and wept from constant rejection by the people he loved and warned. God had called him to preach yet forbade him to marry and have children. He lived alone, he ministered alone, he was poor, persecuted, and rejected by his people.

Amid this, he displayed great spiritual faith and strength, and yet we also see his honesty as he wrestled with despair and a great sense of failure.

Jeremiah 20:14 Cursed be the day in which I was born! Let the day not be blessed in which my mother bore me!

Jeremiah 20:18 Why did I come forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?

Even **Jesus** Himself was in intense anguish over what lay before Him.

He knew what was to come. He knew that God had called him to a responsibility of great suffering, he knew what must happen for us to live truly free. Jesus was willing to pay the ultimate price on our behalf. Although He gave His life willingly, it was not an easy sacrifice to make. Isaiah prophesied:

Isaiah 53:3 He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

We can be assured, that in whatever we face, Jesus understands our weakness and suffering, our greatest times of temptation and anguish, because He also walked that walk, yet without sin. Luke 22:44 describes that so great was his anguish, that he sweat “drops of blood.”

In the garden, through the night, Jesus prayed, all alone, calling out to His Father, asking Him for another way.

Mark 14:34-36 Then He [Jesus] said to them [His disciples], "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch." He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."

If you feel lonely remember God cares for you. He knows about loneliness. Jesus experienced the greatest loneliness of all when the Father forsook Him when the sins of the world came upon Him.

These faithful people, and many others, had God’s assurance that He was always with them.

Psalms 34:18-19 The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

God cares. He shows compassion. He offers mercy. He brings hope. He instills purpose. He gives victory. And He continues to work with faithful people day after day.

We have a Savior who understands our pain, who knows about every weakness and affliction, and reaches out with compassion and hope. He is our Guardian, our Healer, and our Comforter.

He will never waste the times of suffering we face, but will use it, in some way, to bring good, to instill purpose, to help others, and to make us stronger.

Let us shift gears here and notice something about thanksgiving and deliverance.

After God called Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach to the people, he fled as far away as could.

Jonah 1:17 “Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”

Alone!

Jonah 2:1-10 [immediately following 1:17] Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly. And he said: "I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me. "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice. For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me; all Your billows and Your waves passed over me. Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head. I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God. "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple. "Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy. But I will sacrifice to You with the voice

of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord." So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

An important characteristic of Jonah's prayer was thanksgiving. "Thanksgiving?" we might ask. "Why thanksgiving? What could Jonah, swallowed by a fish, amid the ocean awaiting death, possibly be thankful about while suffocating in a fish?"

If we continue to ask the question in terms of a physical deliverance, there is no answer; Jonah's attitude continues to be puzzling. But if we ask the question in spiritual terms and think of a spiritual deliverance, the answer is easy.

True, Jonah had no hope of deliverance from the fish. But he had found the lovingkindness of God again—his own word is "salvation"—and for this he was profoundly thankful. Jonah was not thankful that God had delivered him from the fish because God had not yet delivered him. He was not thankful that God was going to deliver him, because he had no idea that God was going to do it.

What he was thankful for was that God had turned him from rebellion and had caused him to call on the name of the Lord once again. He was thankful for salvation. He was thankful for the abiding grace of God.

Jonah has not been answered if we take the answer to be rescue from the belly of the fish, salvation from eternal death. But he has been answered if we take the answer to be adoption under the care of the God who takes on the totality of our sufferings, dramas, and circumstances.

He is answered because grace does not fail in any way, and even if there is no visible, actual, and personal sign, Jonah can state that the answer takes place because mercy has been granted to him. Jonah rediscovers this lovingkindness of God at the very moment his situation is hopeless and to all appearances nothing more is to be expected.

Events have taken place without any indication of a favorable intervention, only signs of judgment. But suddenly, when he has accepted his

condemnation, when he has acknowledged before God that he was guilty and that God was just, he sees that at no point did God cease to show him lovingkindness.

Nothing proves this to Jonah. No fact confirms his insight. He does not have even the first beginning of deliverance. But simply in the fact that he has been able to repent, to condemn himself, to recognize the sentence of the just judge, he has reason to acknowledge in faith that he has been delivered. It is here that the great decision is taken.

It is also here that the great miracles are performed. It is not when history is redirected by some supernatural, spectacular event, not when bodies are brought to life or heavenly bodies are stopped in their normal motion that the great miracles occur.

It is when a person is called and comes to acknowledge his or her sin and confess it before God that, consequently, God restores the broken personal relationship. But until that time, we often get in our own way because of our human tendency to struggle with our pride and contrary attitude.

During Jonah's whole ordeal with the storm, the giant fish, Nineveh, the heat, he suffered anger and loneliness especially when swallowed by a giant fish, and then being saved and given a second chance, he obeyed.

He preached God's message to the people of Nineveh. God's mercy reached out to all people who turned to Him. But instead of rejoicing, Jonah got angry. And again, he experienced loneliness because of his own negative attitude.

Jonah 4:3 "Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"

And even after God reached out to Jonah again with great compassion, Jonah was still angry and lonely. And, he became more angry about a shade plant withering and dying.

Jonah 4:9 “Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"

Now, here is a man who experienced several miracles of various magnitudes and still he is a pessimist, a defeatist.

Jonah 4:10-11 But the Lord said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?"

So, Jonah goes through all these trials. He has a self-centered attitude, then a wonderfully thankful attitude, and then a self-destructive uncaring attitude.

This story of Jonah helps us to understand the apostle Paul’s meaning in,

Romans 7:14-25 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

Next let us analyze the cry of a person who feels alone, isolated, and is suffering greatly but is trying to turn to God when everything else is collapsing.

In Psalm 102 we find a prayer and lament of an afflicted person, when he is overwhelmed and pours out his complaint before the Lord.

Psalm 102:1-7 Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come to You. Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my trouble; incline Your ear to me; in the day that I call, answer me speedily. For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned like a hearth. My heart is stricken and withered like grass, so that I forget to eat my bread. Because of the sound of my groaning my bones cling to my skin. I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. I lie awake, and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop.

The psalmist is sick, but that is not all that is bothering him. He is concerned for Jerusalem too, and he is being taunted by his enemies. These conditions are included in his moan. Nevertheless, it is mainly his sickness, frailty, and the brevity of life that trouble him and give force to his complaint. In verse 3 he complained “My life is like smoke.”

When Job was bemoaning his sad condition, that great sufferer said a similar thing.

Job 5:6-7 Hardship does not spring from the soil, nor does trouble sprout from the ground; yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.

Since there are other indications in Psalm 102 that the psalmist may have known and drawn upon Job, it may be that his ideas regarding life dispersing like smoke were inspired by God through Job’s writing.

Job suffered through great loss, devastation, and physical illness. This righteous man of God lost everything. So great was his suffering and tragedy that in Job 2:9, even his own wife said, “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!”

Though Job maintained his faithfulness to God throughout his life, he still struggled deeply through the trenches of pain. Notice his anguished state of mind in the following verses.

Job 3:11 “Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb?”

Job 3:26 “I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, for trouble comes.”

Job 7:16 “I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone, for my days are but a breath.”

Job 10:1 “My soul loathes my life; I will give free course to my complaint, I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.”

Job 30:15-17 “Terrors are turned upon me; they pursue my honor as the wind, and my prosperity has passed like a cloud. And now my soul is poured out because of my plight; the days of affliction take hold of me. My bones are pierced in me at night, and my gnawing pains take no rest.”

From experience Job has learned that each generation of human beings is born to suffer, that they are merely logs thrown upon the blazing fire of life to be consumed and fly upward as sparks and be blown into oblivion. Through all this we know that God brought Job through this and greatly blessed him.

The psalmist also feels like he has been thrown into the fire and that his life is vanishing like smoke. Or to change the image, he is withering away like summer grass.

In Psalm 102:5 he said, “my bones cling to my skin.” As in other psalms written by sick men, there is not very much in these verses to indicate the psalmist’s particular affliction. But whatever it was, it affected his appearance. It had taken away his appetite. As a result of this sickness and not eating he was reduced to skin and bones.

In verses 6-7 he wrote, “I am alone on a housetop.” This seems to be a reference to a “bird alone on a roof” which helps us visualize the isolation more clearly.

Later in the chapter the psalmist writes that suffering is a difficult enough burden to bear all by itself. But when enemies also mock you for it, it is virtually intolerable. Yet they do! These cowards would have been afraid to mock a strong man when he was on his feet fighting, but they attacked the author of the psalm when he was down and unable to fight back.

Then, he says, that he cannot explain his sufferings. The psalmist speaks of God as having taken him up and thrown him aside “because of [God’s] great wrath.” This shows awareness of sin on his part, but it is significant that nowhere in the psalm does the psalmist mention his sin specifically or confess it.

Although he is aware that nothing that has happened to him is undeserved (we all sin and deserve God’s fiercest wrath), still the psalmist is not at all sure what he has done to deserve that wrath or why God is afflicting him in this way.

In other words, his experience was almost identical to Job’s. Job was not sinless. But Job could not understand why he was being singled out for such particularly intense suffering. All the psalmist can say is that, in the final analysis, it is God who is responsible. He leaves it at that.

Psalm 102:12 is the important turning point of the psalm. All that was said earlier points to this verse. All that follows builds on it also.

In the previous verses the psalmist described his frail and wasting condition. He is like smoke that vanishes. Nonetheless, he has a God who is not at all

like that! His is the eternal, immutable God, and it is God whom he is trusting.

Psalm 102:12 But YOU, O LORD, sit enthroned forever; Your renown endures through all generations.

These verses are simply a turning to God when everything else has collapsed.

This is a lesson that Christians today need to learn. Claiming a right to good health or anything else may seem spiritual. Some may even describe it as a proof of strong faith. But rather than faith, it is a proof of worldly thinking in the church. People sometimes wrongly believe that by being a member of God's church they deserve good health.

In Psalm 102 we find the contrast between the way people today think about health and the attitude of the psalmist. We are obsessed with health issues because we are obsessed with ourselves. Nearly every “new medical thing”: drug and vaccine, medication and treatment that Big Pharma creates appears in TV commercials and social media advertisements.

Every dietary quirk gets attention. Exercise routines proliferate. We think we have a right to live with perfect health forever. So, when the church gets into demands for healing, as many churches have, what is this but the invasion of Christianity by the world's way of thinking?

Do not misunderstand. God is the source of all good, including good health. God can heal—and does, though not as frequently as we would like and certainly not on demand. When we are sick, we can ask God to heal us; and we should. But perfect health is not a right, and ill health is often as much a gift from God as wholeness.

Do you see how different it was with the author of this psalm? He is praying. He is laying his tired and damaged condition before God. But his words are spiritual, because they are focused on God and express full confidence in the Almighty Creator.

In other words, the psalmist has reminded himself that God is sovereign. Therefore, what happens in his life is no accident. It has been given to him

by God; so, regardless of what happens to him, he will anchor himself in God's mercy and promises. His focus is not on his own healing; it is on how the Sovereign God is to be seen! Job says, "Now my eye sees You." in Job 42:5.

The sense of the eternity of God strengthens our heart in suffering and inspires our mind with courage as danger and difficulty come.

But that is not all we can observe at this important turning point in the psalm. Because it is not just a case of the writer turning his reflections from himself to God, anchoring himself in God's eternity and mercy.

When we have done that, and thereby have shattered our obsession with self that so often strangles our spiritual lives, the psalmist then finds himself thinking about other situations and other people and praying confidently for them. In his suffering and loneliness, he looks for what he can do for others.

Solomon's experience with the independent man caused him to consider the importance of friendship and the value of people doing things together in Ecclesiastes 4. He illustrates a sharp contrast in verses 8-12.

Ecclesiastes 4:8 There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.

On the one hand, there is one person who continues in endless toil, yet who is never satisfied even though he acquires great riches for himself (he has no other). This, Solomon says, is in vain and has an unsatisfying reward because it was achieved alone.

On the other hand, he affirms how much better two are than one. Thus, the wise person will work side-by-side with another, enjoying a good reward and finding help in times of need.

Then, Solomon begins to show the value of a friend.

Ecclesiastes 4:9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor.

Two are certainly better than one when it comes to working, because two workers can get more done. Even when they divide the profits, they still get a better return for their efforts than if they had worked alone. Also, it is much easier to do difficult jobs together because one can be a support and encouragement to the other.

Ecclesiastes 4:10 For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.

Throughout most of human history roads and paths were not paved or even leveled, and there were many hidden rocks in the fields. It was not uncommon for even the most experienced traveler to stumble and fall, perhaps break a bone, or even fall into a hidden pit. It is a blessing to have a friend who can help you up (or out).

But if this applies to our physical falls, how much more does it apply to those times when we stumble in our spiritual walk and need restoration?

Galatians 6:1-2 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Proverbs 27:17 As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.

We should certainly be grateful for Christian friends who help us walk spiritually straight.

Ecclesiastes 4:11 Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone?

Up until recently, two travelers camping out, or even staying in the courtyard of a public inn, would feel cold at night and need one another's warmth for comfort. The only way to be "warm alone" is to carry extra blankets and add to your load.

In verse 9, two have a good reward for their hard work. The wise person will pursue cooperative ventures rather than give in to jealous striving to be first (this contrasts vv. 8, 10, 11), a striving that isolates him from others.

In verse 12, a threefold cord stands for the great value of "plurality" (more than one or even two) as opposed to being alone. It also represents strength and safety.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

It was almost always dangerous for anyone to travel alone, day or night; at times people have had to traveled in groups for companionship and for safety.

Solomon started with the number one (v. 8), then moved to two (v. 9), and then closed with three (v. 12). One cord could be broken easily; two cords would require more strength; but three cords woven together could not be easily broken.

In contrast with the futility of selfish greed that Solomon described in the earlier part of the chapter, he commended sharing with others by citing several advantages that come from companionship:

- better profit (a good return) from one's labor (v. 9),
- help in time of difficulty (v. 10),
- comfort in time of need (v. 11; one's body heat can keep another person from freezing),
- protection in time of danger (v. 12).

The last three of these are illustrated by examples from the benefits of two persons traveling together. In the case of the second and third of these (vv. 10b, 11b) Solomon lamented the perils of isolation (a characteristic of selfish greed, which compares with "a man all alone," in v. 8).

Having set forth the advantages of joint effort and the mutual benefits of sharing one's hard work and its fruit with another, Solomon concluded that if two are better than one (v. 9) then three are even better (v. 12). Our efforts and benefits should not always be confined to merely two persons.

If two travelers are better than one, then three would fare even better. Solomon had more than numbers in mind; he was also thinking of the unity involved in three cords woven together—what a wonderful picture of friendship!

Proverbs 18:24 A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

One of the virtues praised in Proverbs is never to forsake a friend.

Proverbs 27:10 Do not forsake your own friend or your father's friend, nor go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity; better is a neighbor nearby than a brother far away.

Not forsaking virtue supplements the broader responsibility of not forsaking the needy.

We might say that in the Bible the ultimate consolation, especially in loneliness, is to know that we are *not* forsaken by God. The ultimate shame is to forsake God or His ways. The ultimate horror would be to *be* forsaken by God.

II Corinthians 4:7-18 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the

Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you. And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed and therefore I spoke," we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

What are we to do when God has allowed us to be or put us in a lonely circumstance or condition? What can we apply practically to our lonely lives?

The response to loneliness on a human level may be to take up a new hobby, make more time for friends or get a pet. If loneliness is negative, we must take action to overcome it. But God can help transform it into something beneficial for us.

1. Loneliness can help us to seek God on a deep spiritual level.

We are so busy we often leave little time for God. When we are alone God has our uninterrupted attention and can speak to us and we can listen to him. Nine times in the gospels we are told that Jesus went away to a lonely place to be with the Father. Jesus sought out solitude so he could seek the Father's will for His life.

Matthew 14:22-23 Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the

multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.

When we are alone and seek after God, we will be blessed. He will give us knowledge, discernment, and wisdom. These are desperately needed today. This kind of guidance and inspiration does not come without setting apart time to be with God.

Sometimes God causes us to seek Him by driving us to Him through the loneliness we experience. We can get angry, depressed or we can see it as a gift. Loneliness is a great benefit if we have drawn closer to Christ.

2. Loneliness can be used by God to help us develop character.

In loneliness God reveals our weaknesses and works on changing them. He will test and even increase our patience while we wait in our loneliness. Our insufficiencies, uncertainties, and protective instruments are revealed in our aloneness, which God can then use to improve and strengthen our character.

Paul knew the power of weaknesses becoming strengths.

II Corinthians 12:10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

When we are alone our commitment is tested and our true character shines through. Being faithful alone gives us confidence that we can also be faithful when we are with others.

3. Loneliness can stimulate us to be greater meditators and witnesses.

The Patriarchs, the apostles, and Jesus Christ all had to deal with loneliness and knew what to do with it. They were not afraid of being lonely because they knew that then they would be able to meditate on more complex spiritual matters. It gave them the time to meditate, to think things through more deeply.

When thinking and writing we can get so much more done alone than we can when we are around people. Paul advised the young pastor Timothy to think deeply when studying the word of God and about living God's way of life.

I Timothy 4:15-16 Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

We reject Christ's call when we refuse to be alone in meditation and prayer. If we do not meditate on how to live God's way of life we cannot be convicted of it. God wants to give us inspiration and encouragement of what He can do through us and that can come through aloneness. Your greatest achievement may be inspired out of your loneliness.

4. Loneliness can create in us a desire to serve.

When we are away from people, we can develop a greater appreciation of them. You remember the old adage: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." There is some truth in that! What we learn in our loneliness can give us a heightened sensitivity to others. There is a time to be apart and there is also a time to be with others. Put another way:

Ecclesiastes 3:7 A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

So, there is a time to be alone and a time to fellowship.

The opposite of self-centered loneliness is serving one another in love. Sometimes our loneliness has been caused by our lack of serving. In loneliness we can easily become self-absorbed.

In our loneliness we can more easily recognize what needs there are and then determine to do something about it with God's help. Ask God to use you to serve in a way that provides comfort, encouragement, and solutions. Serving involves acting: a helping hand, an encouraging phone call or letter or email. Now there are various video chat services.

There is so much to be done and God may have to put us in a lonely place for a time so that we can get a greater burden challenge to serve.

Isaiah 32:17-18 The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever. My people will dwell in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

God makes a home for the lonely. It is a place where he can work in us; it is a place that can be very beneficial for us. It is not a place to avoid because we are never alone. God will never forsake us; He is transforming us into righteous members of His Family.