



These last several weeks, feel more like several months. We've experienced incredible changes in the way we conduct ourselves during daily life. When the idea of social distancing started to be discussed by government leaders and the media, it didn't sound so bad to those of us who are somewhat introverted. I recall multiple conversations with other introverts who looked forward to some extra space for their personal bubbles. Fast forward to today and I've had more recent conversations with some of those same people and they are now struggling with loneliness. Even introverts need companionship and connection to other people. We were made for relationship and feeling disconnected can wreak havoc on our emotional and spiritual well-being, which can negatively impact our physical health as well.

In this time of staying home to stay healthy, many are now struggling with the unhealthy affects of loneliness that come from prolonged isolation. We can't visit our friends' homes. We can't meet with others at our favorite restaurants or coffee shops. We can't join with other believers for worship services in church buildings. Many of us are closed out of our work places. While we can attempt to connect through zoom meetings, social media and online parties, in the long-run those are all poor substitutes for the connection that happens when we can be with friends in person. Many are becoming deeply saddened by the loss of that kind of connection and loneliness is a serious issue.

In a moment I plan to look to scriptures for some insights into times of loneliness. As I do that, I want to be mindful of the fact that the issue of loneliness is not exclusive to this period of time, when we are all being impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Feeling isolated, disconnected and alone is quite common, even in times when things seem much more normal in the world. Right now, the problem is magnified by circumstances beyond our control.

While there are signs that the spread of the virus is slowing, we are still uncertain of how long this will go on. We aren't really certain that the worst is behind us or if another wave will come in the near future. What we do know is that loneliness is not good for us and it is not what we were created for.

God said, ***"It is not good that the man should be alone."*** Genesis 2:18

One of the realities of living in a world affected by the fall is that things are not all as they were created to be. We do experience times of loneliness. Sometimes it is our own fault. Sometimes it is not. Sometimes there are good reasons for us to be alone for a short time. Sometimes it is bad. When we consider the stories in the Bible, we see times when people of God experienced periods of solitude. Within the familiar stories of Moses, Joseph, Elijah, David and the Apostle Paul, there are times of isolation, solitude and being alone. Even our savior, Jesus, experienced loneliness. That is extremely helpful to remember in times like this.

¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Hebrews 4:15

Have you ever comforted a friend who is feeling pain from a circumstance that you have previously walked through? If so, it is likely that your past experience, with that same circumstance, provided an extra measure of grace for your friend as you were able to understand what they were going through. What we learn from Hebrews 4:15, is that Jesus has a gracious understanding of what we're going through in our times of weakness. He is sympathetic toward us because he understands what we are feeling.

Consider how that might relate to the issue of loneliness. Remember the night that Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples. That in itself is bad enough. While they broke bread in the upper room, Judas, his traveling companion over the previous three years, departed to locate and lead those who would arrest Jesus later that night. There were other major problems within our Savior's circle of friends that night. Think of the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, before Judas and the cohort showed up. Jesus asked his closest friends, Peter, James and John to join him in the garden to pray.

"My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour?" Matthew 26:38-40

This repeated three times. Jesus was literally sweating blood and his closest friends went to sleep. He wanted fellowship in prayer. He wanted his friends to be there for him in this hour. We know Jesus is the Lord but don't forget his humanity. He wanted his friends to be there for him in this moment of anguish and they failed him. You also know that is not where their failure ends. It goes from bad to worse.

When the soldiers came, ***they all left him and fled*** Mark 14:50.

And the next morning, Jesus says, ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*** Matthew 27:46.

Let's return to Hebrews 4 where we read about our sympathetic high priest. This time let's also look to the 16th verse.

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Your time of need right now may very well be that you are in a time of loneliness. If that is true, please know that our savior, Jesus, has experienced being betrayed, abandoned and forsaken. Part of the reason He endured all of that was so that we could boldly pray for grace, even in times of loneliness, with full confidence that He will provide it. He knows what we are feeling. He understands. When you pray and cry out to Him for grace, He will supply what you need.

How do I know that and why do I believe it to be true?

Remember what he told his disciples in **John 14:18**? He said to them, ***“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”***

Maybe you say, “but that was before Jesus was arrested and they all fled.” You would be right to say that. However, we must also consider what Jesus said to them after the arrest, the cross and the resurrection. He gathered them together and commissioned them to go into the world as ministers of the gospel. He told them, ***“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”*** Matthew 28:20.

The spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, is with every Christian. If you belong to Him, you are not alone. If you belong to Him, you are never alone. Even in times of isolation and solitude, when you feel utterly alone, He is with you. If He is with you, you should not fear.

***Fear not, for I am with you;
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand***

Isaiah 41:10

We know by our own experiences, and by the reading of God's word, that even the people of God experience times of loneliness. We also know, because God's word and our experiences inform us, that God has not left us in this world without grace. He gives grace to His people. He has grace for us in all seasons, even seasons of loneliness. Jesus knows what we are experiencing. He has felt it, only much worse than we can imagine. He promises to not leave us as orphans and tells us that He will come to us. He says that He will never leave us and that He will be with us always, to the very end of the age. Pray for His grace. Experience His abiding presence, knowing that you are not alone. He is with you. Do not fear!

You are loved,

Tony