

Viktor had lived in the same house longer than most of us had been alive. He'd lived alone since his mother passed more than twenty years before. A sister and two nieces lived in another state and they never came to visit.

Viktor's neighbors on one side had lived there for forty years, but had an argument with Viktor's mom years before and hadn't spoken to him in decades. When Viktor died the only eulogy they could offer was that he was weird. Another neighbor had lived across the street for a dozen years. When emergency services came and discovered Viktor's body, she could only tell the gathering crowd, "I didn't know him."

The only neighbors who ever talked to Viktor was a younger couple who moved in next door. The wife and Viktor bonded over the backyard fence because of their shared love of gardening. It turns out flowers were his only friends.

As the young couple was getting ready for Halloween, Viktor talked briefly with the husband sharing, "You know, I don't know what happened but no one comes to my house on Halloween anymore. They used to. I'm always there with candy. But no one ever comes."

A 38 year old woman, Judith Bucknell, was brutally murdered in Miami. In the aftermath of her murder, her private diaries were published in newspapers around the country. It was a heartbreaking chronicle of loneliness. Shortly before her murder, she wrote, "Who is going to love Judy Bucknell? I feel so old, unloved, unwanted, abandoned, used up. I want to cry and sleep forever...I'm alone, and I want to share something with somebody."

Isn't that the cry of every human heart? We want to share something with somebody. Thomas Wolfe, author of the great American novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, once wrote, "Loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon...is the central and inevitable fact of human existence." Dr. Paul Tournier, the reknown Christian Swiss psychiatrist once said, "Loneliness is the most devastating malady of this age."

Both literature and music are filled with the theme of loneliness. Artists bleed out their lonely hearts in word and song and it strikes a chord deep in our hearts. From Hank Williams, who was so lonesome he could cry, to Justin Bieber and Benny Blanco's *Lonely*, we've been singing our lonely songs for decades. Both Roy Orbison and the Motels had hit songs both called *Only the Lonely*. Even more impressive is Paul Anka, Andrew Gold, and the Black Keys who all hit the charts with different songs called *Lonely Boy*.

Three millennia before any of these sad songs, there was another songwriter who sang about the aching pain of loneliness. It is the Psalmist who wrote Psalm 102. Listen to the first 11 verses of this Psalm and hear the despairing cry of loneliness.

Hear my prayer, O Lord;

let my cry come to you!
 2 Do not hide your face from me
 in the day of my distress!
 Incline your ear to me;
 answer me speedily in the day when I call!
 3 For my days pass away like smoke,
 and my bones burn like a furnace.
 4 My heart is struck down like grass and has withered;
 I forget to eat my bread.
 5 Because of my loud groaning
 my bones cling to my flesh.
 6 I am like a desert owl of the wilderness,
 like an owl[a] of the waste places;
 7 I lie awake;
 I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.
 8 All the day my enemies taunt me;
 those who deride me use my name for a curse.
 9 For I eat ashes like bread
 and mingle tears with my drink,
 10 because of your indignation and anger;
 for you have taken me up and thrown me down.
 11 My days are like an evening shadow;
 I wither away like grass.

This psalmist knew what it felt like to be lonely. Not only does he feel separated from other people, he feels like even God is hiding His face from him. There are times we could all add our own verses to this song. Maybe this is how you feel right now. I want to point out three things about loneliness.

I. The Desolate Feeling of Loneliness

The first thing we see in these verses is the desolate feeling of loneliness. Listen to the language the Psalmist uses, the word pictures he paints. He describes it in terms of physical pain, "*my bones burn.*" He describes it in terms of personal isolation, an owl in the wilderness, a lonely sparrow. Finally he describes it as emotional desperation, "*my heart is struck down like grass and has withered.*"

You don't have to be alone to be lonely. Some of us love being alone sometimes. Being alone can be healthy and good. Spiritually speaking, we need alone time to be alone with God.

You can also be surrounded by people but still feel isolated. You can be out with a group of friends and still feel lonely. You can share a home with a spouse, and still feel like you have no one. You can be in a crowd of thousands of people and still feel very isolated. Henry David

Thoreau said that a “city is a place where hundreds of people are lonely together.” Loneliness, when you are not alone, is the worst kind of loneliness because then you realize that company is not necessarily the cure.

Loneliness is not isolation in space, it is isolation in spirit. It is feeling cut off, unnoticed, unloved, unheard, unneeded, and even unnecessary. It is a desolate feeling. The silence of loneliness is deafening. You can hear it— at night as you crawl into a half-empty bed because your spouse has walked out. You hear it as the school bus screeches to a halt on your street and no one comes running from its door to yours. You hear it in an empty mailbox because no one writes anymore, a phone that never rings because no one calls anymore. Loneliness is such a desolate feeling.

II. The Definite Fact of Loneliness

We also see here the definite fact of loneliness. This is a part of the human experience. We should find comfort in the fact that God’s Word is honest enough with us that it includes chapters like this one. It assures us that we’re not alone in being alone. The Bible doesn’t sugarcoat the emotional toll that life on this planet sometimes takes.

Being a temple singer doesn’t exempt you from loneliness. Worship leaders and Sunday School teachers get lonely. People who’ve been Christians all their lives feel disconnected sometimes. Preachers sometimes feel like we don’t belong. Retail clerks, nurses, and truck drivers get lonely. Someone sitting on the same row with you, or in front of you might be lonely right now. Millions of people every day are crying on the inside, if not the outside, because they are lonely.

There is no denying the prevalence of loneliness and its effects. Last year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a report called “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.” This was in response to what mental health experts are calling an “epidemic of loneliness.” This report points out that half of us experience measurable levels of loneliness. It warns that the physical consequences of poor connection can be devastating— a 29% increased risk of heart disease, 32% increase in the risk of stroke; and a 50% increased risk of dementia in older adults.

In some ways, we are more than connected than ever. We have social media accounts with dozens, if not hundreds of friends. We have online gaming communities filled with people who share a common interest. Every week, I race with people from around the world. I know their names. I know where they live. Often I know what they do for a living. Sometimes I know what’s going on in their lives. One just had a stroke. Another just had a baby. One just graduated from the University of Missouri. Another recently retired.

Our phones are filled with contacts, but how many of them do we feel like we could call at any time and share what’s really going on in our lives? Our lives are filled with promising connection, but really they are barriers to real relationship. There’s a lot of people that we know and that know

us on a surface level, but very few who know our heart. The very tools that were created to enhance our sense of belonging, leave us feeling lonely. The more connected we've become, the more disconnected we feel.

Have you noticed in alcohol commercials that people are never drinking by themselves? They are always drinking with someone else. There's always happy, smiling faces. They're not really selling alcohol; they are selling friendship. But did you know that increasingly, people drink alone. One study found that 40% of young adults that drink alcohol, drink alone. For so many, drinking is not a social activity that forms connections. It's a way of drowning the loneliness.

So, why are we so lonely? I realize I'm just skimming the surface, but here are several factors:

A. Sorrow

First, we are kept isolated by our sorrow. Sometimes, it's the sorrow of rejection. How many have experienced rejection, often through no fault of your own? Your spouse walked out on you, ditching family and vows, sometimes with the flimsiest of explanations. You think you have forged the bonds of lifelong friendship, only to be stabbed in the back. You feel put down, ignored, and spurned. Sometimes, if you've been burned once, you would rather be lonely than ever to be burned again.

It can also be the sorrow of loss. This is particularly true when you lose a mate, a best friend, a parent or child. You become trapped in a whirlpool of sorrow, and drown in a sea of loneliness.

B. Self-esteem

Sometimes loneliness is the result of low self-esteem. It's really hard to accept others when you don't even accept yourself. So instead of building bridges, we build walls to keep people out, and we wonder why we feel so lonely.

Listen to this anonymous admission,

I've been extremely lonely for a long time now and over this time I seem to have internalized some beliefs about myself to such an extent it makes making friends almost impossible for me. Now even if someone wants to be friends I genuinely cannot believe them or understand why they want it because over time, all these years, all alone, I've come to see myself as a thoroughly unlikeable, repulsive, even, dumb, ignorant, mean, human being and now before anyone else has a chance to reject me, I withdraw myself because I genuinely feel that they deserve to befriend better people.

This should remind us as Christ followers that we need to believe in people, even when they don't believe in themselves. You might be the grace they so desperately need.

C. Selfishness

Let's be honest. Some people are lonely simply because they push everyone else away. It's their

own selfishness. They are so self-centered, so wrapped up in who themselves, so strongly opinionated, and closed to other possibilities that people can't stand being around them.

Two men were talking about a man like this at work and one man said, "You know John and his wife have something in common." The man said, "What is that?" He said, "They both love him." Self-centeredness and selfishness is a sure-fire way to be lonely.

With that being said, keep in mind that loneliness can cause people to act in ways that seem standoffish. It's hard to tell whether they are lonely because they are a jerk or they are a jerk because they are lonely. This is one reason why we as believers need a default stance of forgiveness, compassion, and understanding. Only the grace of God is going to reach through this kind of defensive barrier.

D. Success

Surprisingly, success can lead to loneliness. People from all walks of life experience loneliness. Money, wealth, position and power cannot pay loneliness to stay away. In fact, sometimes that is exactly what success buys.

It can be very lonely at the top. People fight and climb to get to be the king of the hill, and then when they get there, they quickly realize that many of their former colleagues no longer feel that comradery or connection to them. Out of jealousy or intimidation or embarrassment that they haven't made it as far, they no longer want to have that relationship. Just your presence makes them uncomfortable. Some of the loneliest people on earth are the people with the most success, the biggest job title, the most money, the most responsibility.

E. Society

Another factor is that we are living in a society that has so de-personalized us that it almost guarantees loneliness. You ever feel like you're not a name, just a number? I filed taxes this week and I had to submit my social security number, my driver's license number with its issue and expiration date, my bank account number, and my routing number. That's isolating.

We have become data, and algorithms that organize that data. Philosophers used to say that we are mind, body, and soul. Today, Colin Koopman, chairman of the Philosophy Department at the University of Oregon has written a book, *How We Became Our Data*. He says, "I don't want to claim we are only data and nothing but data. My claim is you are your data too." We are body, mind, soul, and data. To companies like Google, Microsoft, and Meta/Facebook you are just a commodity to be data-mined. That doesn't build community or connection.

F. Sin

Ultimately, though, those are all just surface level causes. The root-cause and the real source of loneliness is sin. The first human emotion Adam felt in the Garden of Eden after he sinned was

loneliness. His relationship with Eve was broken because he blamed her. His relationship with God was broken because he felt guilt and shame. Adam's instinctive response was to hide. He isolated himself. That causes loneliness

It is our sin that separates us from others and from God. It is sin that makes us selfish. It is sin that causes us to ignore the needs of others. It is sin that destroys trust. It is sin that causes us to use people instead of invest in people. We will never deal fully with the problem of loneliness, until we deal fully with the problem of sin.

IV. The Defeated Foe of Loneliness

Thankfully, our message doesn't end here. Loneliness is a desolate feeling. Loneliness is a definite fact. But there is an answer, but it's not in many of the places that we usually look. Loneliness is vacuum in every soul that people try to fill in every way imaginable. I heard about a man who went to see a psychiatrist. He asked if he could give him a split personality. The doctor said, "Why do you want a split personality?" He said, "Well, that way I would have somebody to talk to."

People, every day and every way, are trying all that they can to curb and to cure their loneliness. We try to fill the hole in our souls with pills, we fill it with pleasure, we fill it with power, we fill it with possessions, we fill it with people. But the hole in our souls is a God-shaped hole. The only true and lasting cure for loneliness is found in Jesus.

If you are one of the lonely today, let me point out two ways to defeat loneliness in your life.

A. Reach Out To The Lonely

First, let me give you a real practical response, and that is if you are lonely, reach out to the lonely. Look for another lonely soul and befriend them. By blessing them, you will heal your own heart. We get so focused on our own loneliness and longing for others to come to us, we forget the power we wield in being a companion to others. Vera Nazarian has written,

To be alone with yourself is to be alone. To be in the company of others is to be alone together. The only time you are not alone is when you forget yourself and reach out in love — the lines of self blur, and just for a wild, flickering moment you experience the miracle of other. And now you know the secret.

That's actually very good advice and it agrees with Scripture. Is. 58:10 promises, "*If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.*"

Loneliness isn't really a number thing. It has to do with our hearts and minds and what's going on inside. Kindness toward others is the cure for what's ailing our hearts. You want to receive some love, show some love.

B. Reach Up To the Savior

The second answer is the spiritual answer, but that doesn't mean it's any less real, and that is reach up to the Savior. Jesus understands your loneliness. The unexpected twist of Psalm 102 is that it is a messianic Psalm. We talked about these in our Easter Eggs series, a clue hidden in the Old Testament that points to Jesus. The New Testament quotes this Psalm and says it's about Jesus. This isn't just the song of a lonely person crying out to God. It also points to the loneliness that Jesus would suffer on earth. I would argue Jesus knew an intensity of loneliness greater than any other person on earth has ever experienced.

Jesus understands what it is to be rejected. He can relate to that "nobody cares about me" feeling. John said this about Jesus, "*He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.*" (John 1:11) Jesus was rejected by his family. Throughout his earthly ministry, they did not believe in Him. He was rejected in his hometown. They refused to listen to Him. He was rejected by his own disciples who fled in his hour of need.

He was even rejected by His heavenly Father. As Jesus was dying, a perfectly pure and holy God had to turn His back on His only Son who carried the sin, the shame and the guilt of the whole world. Jesus cried out from the cross, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?*"

Jesus knows what it is to be alone and to be lonely, but because of Jesus, you will never have to be alone again. When you reach up, He moves in. Jesus says in John 14:23, "*Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*"

As a child of God, you enjoy the permanent company of God the Father who said, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you.*" (Heb. 13:5) You enjoy the unbroken fellowship with the Son who said, "*Behold, I am with you always.*" (Matt. 28:20) You enjoy the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit whom we are promised, "*will abide with us forever.*" (John 14:16) The first cure for loneliness is to reach up to the Savior.

Only Jesus can fill the empty places inside and make us holy whole. I am here to tell you that through the Lord Jesus loneliness can be a defeated foe.

The greatest loneliness you will ever know is if you have to stand before the judgment seat of God, completely alone without Jesus as your advocate, and then to be banished forever from the presence of God, in a Christless eternity alone and lonely forever. I've heard people say, "I don't want to go to heaven, because all my friends will be in hell." I know they are sometimes joking, but please don't misunderstand the true nature of hell. But it doesn't have to be that way. If you are lonely, you come to Jesus and you will never be truly alone again.