

OUT OF THE DARK SERIES: ISOLATION

PASTOR NATHAN ELMS

From the CDC...

Recent studies found that:

- Social isolation significantly increased a person's risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.¹
- Social isolation was associated with about a 50% percent increased risk of dementia.¹
- Poor social relationships (characterized by social isolation or loneliness) was associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.¹
- Loneliness was associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.
- Loneliness among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly 4 times increased risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospitalization, and 57% increased risk of emergency department visits.

Isolation isn't new. It is as old as the human story. And I want to say to you: God cares!!!

The first man God ever created was isolated. And God noticed. And God cared.

Genesis 2:18 ESV

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 ESV

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

There are four basic causes of loneliness in the life of a believer.

1. Transition:

We've heard the statements: "Life Happens." "Change is the new normal." "Transition can lead to better things." All of that is well and good, but what do you do when the inevitable transitions of life become a personal reality?

Paul, in his last transition:

Timothy 4:6-8 New International Version

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

What transitions are you facing?

2. Separation

9 Do your best to come to me quickly, 10 for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 12 I sent Tychicus to Ephesus.

How are you separated from others in this time?

3. Opposition

14 Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. 15 You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.

My wife told me a funny story about a lady attacking her over vanilla beans... people are not in control of their spirits. They live messy lives... you need to understand this.

4. Rejection

Paul is used to trouble. He has attacked, beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, snake-bit ... and rejection still hurts.

16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Can you hear the pain in the text? More importantly, can you see how Paul strengthens himself in the faithfulness of God?

Paul is going to show us how to deal with isolation!



First, Paul utilized the time he had, even if he were isolated.

As the saying goes, "If life gives you a lemon, make lemonade."
Whatever you can do to combat loneliness, do it.

This is what Paul did: *"I sent Tychicus to Ephesus" (2 Tim. 4:12), and "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments" (v. 13).*

Paul refused to sit around and mope. He did not say, "Poor me, poor me." He did not complain, "God, is this what I get for thirty years of ministry? Is this my reward for starting lots of churches, for being the person most responsible for the spread of Christianity in the Roman world? Is this what I get—to die in loneliness in a damp prison in Rome?"

No pity party for Paul! Instead, he said, "If I am going to be lonely, I may as well be comfortable. I am going to make the best of a bad situation. Bring my coat so at least I will be warm."

Often lonely people do not take care of themselves. They do not eat right, they do not exercise, and they ignore their personal needs.

But Paul said, "Bring my coat and my books, and I will capitalize on this lack of interruption; I will use it for writing and study time." This was a great change of gears for Paul, because he was an activist, a church planter. More than anything else, he wanted to be in the Colosseum preaching instead of in a prison studying. But sometimes God can use loneliness for good.

If Paul had been in the Colosseum, he would have been preaching, but God left him in prison and we got part of the New Testament instead! Probably the only way that God could get Paul to sit still was to put him in prison.

And Paul's response was, "If I cannot be where the action is, I will create action right here."

Secondly, Paul minimized: The second way to deal with loneliness is to minimize the hurt.

Play down the loneliness.
Do not exaggerate it or rehearse it over and over.
Do not allow the loneliness to make you bitter, and do not allow resentment to build up in your life.

Paul said, *"No one came to my support, but ... may it not be held against them" (v. 16).*

God said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

Thirdly, Paul recognized God's presence. Paul said, "The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength" (v. 17).

Where is God when you are lonely? He is right next to you.

Jesus said, *"I will not leave you as orphans" (John 14:18)—"I will not leave you comfortless" (KJV).*

The fourth way to deal with loneliness is to empathize with other people's needs.

Instead of focusing inward on yourself, focus outward on other people. Instead of looking at yourself, look out to other people. Start helping other lonely people.

Paul decided to focus upon serving others without focusing on himself. As he said, *"The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it" (2 Tim. 4:17).*

Paul was lonely and at the end of his life, yet he never forgot his life's goal: to help other people.

When Corrie ten Boom was a young woman in the Netherlands, she fell head over heels in love with a young man. But he broke off the relationship and married one of her good friends.

Corrie was devastated. Nothing hurts more than being rejected and having somebody else chosen over you. When Corrie got home, her dad said something very wise to her: "Corrie, your love has been blocked, and he has married somebody else. Now, there are two things you can do with a blocked love. You can dam it up inside and hold it all inside and it will eat you up—or you can rechannel it to something or someone else and can focus on other people's needs. You can live a life of love, meeting other people's needs."

Corrie chose to do the latter, as we know from her captivating book *The Hiding Place*.

The Son of God knows what it is like to be lonely. In Jesus' darkest hour—the night before he was crucified on the cross—he was in the Garden of Gethsemane and all his friends fell asleep.

When the soldiers came and took him to the trial, all his disciples fled.

Then Peter denied him three times. When Jesus took the sins of the world on himself on the cross, he cried out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).*

Jesus understands loneliness.

Research credit: CDC, R Warren,