

LONELY BUT NEVER ALONE

The darkest nights are not reserved for those who endure loss from fire, accident, earthquake, or hurricane. The darkest hours are destined for those whose tragedy goes unnoticed. The deepest pain belongs to those for whom no rescue is intended--those who must endure loneliness.

For many, loneliness has shown up at some of the most unlikely times and places. Answering a knock on the door, only to find an empty doorstep, has sometimes allowed in an unexpected intruder.

Thankfully, the solution also shows up in the most unexpected places. It is our prayer that this booklet, so skillfully and heartfully written by one who knew the darkness and the pain, will bring comfort to many. May the wisdom of J. Oswald Sanders bring you not only to the place of peace, but also to the place where you are never alone again.

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THE SUBJECT OF LONELINESS

Loneliness is not a pleasant subject to write about. Nor is it a pleasant emotion to experience. When I was asked to write on this subject, although the experience of twice losing a loved wife and 17 years spent as a widower had afforded personal experience of its poignancy, I shrank from the task. Others have done it, and doubtless done it better. But mounting experience with so many lonely souls in different lands and in different walks of life has impressed me deeply with the enormity and universality of the problem. And too few seem to have discovered a satisfying solution. So, reluctantly, I have taken up my pen, in the hope that something I write may help to calm the pangs of loneliness for some readers.

I know there is no simple or single answer to the problem, no glib solution; for while the root cause is the same, the contributory factors are many. It is a complex phenomenon, and different types of loneliness require different approaches. Relief will be found only when we go beyond symptoms and deal with the toxic center from which the affliction springs. The lack of intimacy, which is one of the most painful elements, must be addressed and remedied.

Ultimately, loneliness stems from mankind's alienation from God, so no remedy that does not take this factor into account will afford more than superficial and temporary relief. But while the condition is rooted in the spiritual, the relevant psychological and social elements must not be overlooked.

The resources available to lonely people, both from God and from fellow men and women, are more abundant than they realize and would discover if they made the attempt. Did they but realize it, their loneliness could be the starting point of a new journey toward moral and spiritual maturity. If they would abandon the search for someone to care for them, and set

themselves instead to care for someone else, they would be amazed to discover that their loneliness was quite bearable, even if it was not entirely banished.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

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 disorders of the spirit. Accordingly, in this first section, we will try to uncover some of the causes of the universal disease 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 problem, 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 emotional disorders of our times. Its growing prevalence in recent years 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 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.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

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).

Although 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 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).

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. From then on 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!

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

Mankind's Twofold Need

People were created with a twofold need--fellowship with God and companionship with other human beings. For these, if they 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 need most 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.

Although 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 the 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. He said, "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 disorder of the human heart, whether it be spiritual or social.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

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 our world 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 breakup of family groups and hinders the development of a 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 filed 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 300 cities of more than one 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 it is, sadly, very near the truth. 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.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

The TV 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. 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.

A great many of the programs presented are not merely senseless, but positively harmful. Violence and pornography slip through the censor's net and intrude uninvited into the homes of the people. As a direct consequence we are reaping the harvest in a sharply rising rate of crime.

Altogether apart from these crudely adverse features, 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 TV invasion combine to provide a fertile culture bed for loneliness.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

Loneliness Is Universal

"It is strange to be known so universally, and yet to be so lonely." These poignant words spoken by the great scientist Albert Einstein demonstrate that loneliness invades the lives of the intellectual as well as those in lower stations of life. It is no respecter of persons. But it may have been 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 has become pervasive in the world--as much among the sophisticated as 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, a 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 80 percent claimed that it was loneliness that drove them to seek help from the 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 the minor key and is a reflection of the negative aspects of life. Country and western music majors in broken relationships, desertion, and infidelity. All this tells its own story.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

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 with the principal of a high school in Los Angeles who said that among his student body no fewer than 52 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 disease. 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 toward 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.

SOLITUDE IS NOT LONELINESS

While there are points of similarity between solitude and loneliness, it is quite wrong to equate them without qualification. It is true that the two at times do converge, but neither the words nor the experience are synonymous.

The word *alone* occurs frequently in the Bible, but only in very few cases can it be equated with loneliness. Our Lord differentiated the two concepts when He said, "You will leave Me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for My Father is with Me" (Jn. 16:32). The different significance of the two words has been expressed in this way: *Loneliness* is the result of the absence of personal intimacy or meaningful activity. *Solitude* is not being in the company of others.

Loneliness is always a negative experience, while solitude is often positive and renewing. Loneliness brings a feeling of desolation and depression that can be destructive. It tends to stifle hope and quench aspiration. Solitude can generate a sense of solitariness that is both creative and motivating. The one is involuntary, unwanted. The other is voluntary and deliberately chosen.

Isolation was the first thing that God saw was not good: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). But there are times when the hard-pressed heart craves solitude more than anything else.

Following His claim that isolation was not good for Adam, God created "a helper suitable for him." So early in human history, God indicated that mankind was made for companionship. We were created social beings, capable of sustaining loving and congenial relationships with both God and our fellow men and women. Our full creative purpose can never be realized by itself, only in association with other men and women. Because we are social creatures by nature, the absence of a friend or companion creates an emotional vacuum that can work havoc on both body and spirit.

When the late Duke of Windsor abdicated the throne of Britain to marry the woman he loved, but who was not acceptable to the Royal Family, he went into a self-imposed exile. As a result of his own bitter experience, he declared that loneliness was not simply a matter of being alone, but rather the feeling that no one really cares what happens to you. It is not necessarily caused by a set of circumstances--it is a state of mind.

Being alone involves only physical separation, but being lonely includes both spiritual and psychological isolation. It produces a solitude of heart, the feeling of being cut off from others whom we should like to have as friends.

A certain degree of solitude--being alone with one's thoughts--is a normal state. It is essential to the cultivation of the inner life. We all experience times when it becomes essential to escape what Thomas Gray called "the madding crowd's ignoble strife" and engage in constructive introspection. Without such periodic physical withdrawal, the spiritual life will lack depth and

freshness. In such a period of solitude we will find a welcome alternative to the rat race of modern life.

"Most of us are so engrossed in making a living," said one writer, "that we do not stop to think whether we are making a life." We need to be alone to discover and confront our real selves. A time of self-imposed solitude has often led to invaluable self-analysis and a fresh outlook on life.

SOLITUDE IS NOT LONELINESS

Constructive Solitude

Periods of solitude can equip us to help others. Our Lord's frequent desire for solitude was not for the mere sake of being alone; it was primarily to enjoy communication with His Father. Then, strengthened and encouraged by that fellowship, He returned better equipped to meet the demands of the needy and lonely crowds that constantly pursued Him.

Far from being an unwelcome liability, solitude confers many fringe benefits. It is in the place of quietness that creativity flourishes, not in the hub-bub of modern life. We are so constituted that while we crave intimacy with other human beings, there are times when solitude becomes imperative, especially the silence of aloneness with God, when other voices have died away. It is then we have the unique opportunity of listening unhurriedly to His "voice of gentle stillness." The enrichment that follows cannot be exaggerated, for communion with the eternal God is the most potent medium of inner fulfillment.

The need for quietness and solitude was never greater than it is today. A. W. Tozer writes in his book *Of God and Men* that some of God's children "want to discover the blessedness of spiritual aloneness," to relearn the ways of solitude and simplicity. To such he offers this counsel:

Retire from the world each day to some private spot. . . . Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelops you. Deliberately tune out the unpleasant sounds and come out of your closet determined not to hear them. Listen for the inward Voice till you learn to recognize it. . . . Learn to pray inwardly every moment. After a while you can do this even while you work.

SOLITUDE IS NOT LONELINESS

Regaining Heaven's Perspective

Solitude affords the needed opportunity of regaining heaven's perspective on the mysteries of life. This was the experience of Asaph, who opened his heart and shared his perplexity in Psalm 73.

As he surveyed the world around him and observed the prosperity of the wicked people among whom he moved, he almost lost his faith. He was mystified that God should allow them to prosper and profit by their evil deeds, while often the good people appeared to have more than their share of adversity and suffering. Was God really being fair by acting that way? In the light of His seeming injustice, Asaph had begun to wonder about the point and profit of being righteous. Hear Asaph as he pours out his complaint:

As for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. . . . This is what the wicked are like--always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood (Ps. 73:2-5,12-13,16-17).

It wasn't until he went into the silence of the sanctuary of God that he gained heaven's perspective and found a fresh foothold for his faith.

Habakkuk the prophet was equally mystified, and for the same reason as Asaph, as he looked at the world around him from his lonely watchtower:

How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but You do not listen? Or cry out to You, "Violence!" but You do not save? Why do You make me look at injustice? Why do You tolerate wrong? (Hab. 1:2-3).

In his reflection on this passage in *Life of Faith* magazine, W. S. Hooton writes, "Like many today [Habakkuk] seems to have found it difficult to reconcile with the divine government the triumphs of the wicked and treacherous over those who, whatever their sins, were not so laden with guilt. The sins of God's people had called for correction (1:12), and the prophet knew where their refuge was to be found." Where did he find the answer to his perplexity? In his watchtower, when he listened for the voice of God.

In the rush of our pressured lives, it is easy to allow the world to dictate our agenda, to squeeze us into its mold, while we ourselves are unconscious of the subtle erosion of our own standards and values. Jesus did not allow even the tragic need and suffering of the masses to rob Him of those precious times of quiet. They were sacred oases in the desert of human sin.

He identified Himself so thoroughly with our humanity that He experienced acute loneliness--one of the sinless infirmities that He voluntarily assumed at the incarnation. It was no surprise to Him when His disciples all forsook Him and fled. Had He not already forewarned them of that danger? And they deserted Him in His hour of greatest need. But in that darkest hour of His loneliness, He confessed His unshaken confidence in His Father's abiding presence:

You will leave Me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for My Father is with Me (Jn. 16:32).

This joyous fact more than compensated for the absence of human companionship. He knew the ultimate panacea for loneliness, and so may we.

Let the desolate soul take comfort from the fact that God is just as present with His lonely children today as He was with His Son. But it is only as we believe and appropriate that fact that we will enjoy the blessing and benefit of His conscious presence.

Out of his rich experience of walking with God, Thomas à Kempis gave this advice concerning the value of solitude:

Watch for good times to retreat into yourself. Frequently meditate on how good God is to you. Skip the tricky questions. Read things which move your heart. If you will stop gossiping and chattering, you will find plenty of time for helpful meditation.

You will find in your closet of prayer what you frequently lose when you are out in the world. The more you visit it, the more you will want to return. But the more you avoid it, the harder it will be to come back.

SOLITUDE IS NOT LONELINESS

Transforming Solitude

"So Jacob was left alone" (Gen. 32:24). These words have a plaintive ring about them. But in the encounter that ensued, Jacob discovered to his great surprise that he was alone with the very God who, for two decades, had been pursuing him with undiscouraged ardor, with the sole purpose of blessing him. And now he had painted himself into a corner.

To soften up the brother he had so shamefully defrauded, Jacob had sent on ahead his wife, children, and flocks, together with lavish presents for Esau. And now he was all alone!

How he dreaded the hour of confrontation with his brother! Little did he dream that this unplanned hour of solitude would be fraught with unimagined blessing. He had to learn that God never gives up in His desire to bless His erring children.

The words *left alone* can hold different connotations to different people. For some they spell longed-for rest and quietness, for others only aching loneliness. To be left alone without God is hell. But to be left alone with God is a foretaste of heaven.

It was only when Jacob the deceiver was shut up alone with God that he was transformed into Israel the prince, who now had power with God and man. What marvelous grace on God's part! One could conceive of our generous God granting him the privilege of having influence with his fellow men. This would be an incredible expression of divine forgiveness and restoration. But to have power with God? Only a God as great and as gracious as our God could have conceived such an act of love and grace.

LONELY BUT NEVER ALONE

"Where is God when I am lonely?" is a question asked by many depressed people. It may not be actually articulated, but it is there deep down nonetheless. Of course the answer is, "Right beside you."

"Whether we feel it or not," writes Margaret Clarkson in *Decision* magazine, "we have His presence for our loneliness, His understanding for the human misunderstanding that ruthlessly assaults our quivering sensitivities, His unchanging and unchangeable purpose for the seeming hopelessness of our frustration and apparent uselessness. . . . Our very infirmities can open up our lives to more of the power of Christ."

Scripture abounds in promises, divine undertakings that await our appropriation. There is no conceivable situation for which there is no appropriate promise. Be alert as you read the Bible to discover what God has promised to do and then lay hold of it. Say to the Lord, "Do as You have said," Promises must be claimed by faith. It was by faith the patriarchs received the promises. Abraham had an abounding confidence in his God. He was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised" (Rom. 4:21).

The validity of a promise depends upon the character and resources of the one who makes it. God's holy character and boundless resources make His promises credible.

"Every promise is a writing of God," said Charles Spurgeon, "which may be pleaded before Him with the reasonable request, 'Do as Thou hast said.' The Creator will not cheat the creature who depends upon His truth, and far more, the heavenly Father will not break His word to His own child."

God's promises are bound up with His character and rest on four of His attributes.

- His truth, which renders lying impossible.
- His omniscience, which makes His being deceived or mistaken impossible.
- His immutability, which renders change or vacillation impossible.
- His omnipotence, which makes anything possible.

So, when we come to God with one of His promises, we can do so with the utmost confidence, for "He who promised is faithful." If there seems to be a gap between God's promises and our experience of their fulfillment, it is because we have not committed ourselves to claim them.

John Bunyan quaintly described his experience in endeavoring to appropriate one of the promises: "Satan would labor to pull the promise away from me, telling me that Christ did not mean *me* in John 6:37. He pulled and I pulled. But, God be praised, I got the better of him." Bunyan has not been alone in this representative experience.

THREE POSSIBLE ATTITUDES

We can adopt one of three attitudes in relation to God's promises:

1. We can "come short" by devaluing them to the level of our past experience (Rom. 3:23). It's possible for us to tone them down so that we come far short of what God is offering.
2. We can "stagger" or "waver" because of our unbelief, either because of the risk involved or because the promise seems too good to be true (Rom. 4:20). But the one who wavers misses the blessing. "That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord" (Jas. 1:7).
3. We can be "fully assured" of God's trustworthiness and receive the promises. Abraham, the father of the faithful, was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised" (Rom. 4:21), and therefore he "did not waver through unbelief" (v.20).

With God, promise and performance are inseparable. So take some of the great promises of Scripture and step out in confidence. Adopt Paul's attitude toward these divine undertakings: "I have faith in God that it will happen just as He told me" (Acts 27:25).

ON THE ROAD TO RELIEF

In the doctor-patient relationship, the most satisfactory results are secured when there is complete openness and sincerity on the part of both doctor and patient. So must it be if the cause of the loneliness is to be correctly diagnosed and the longed-for remedy prescribed and acted on. As with medicine, the most helpful prescription is often the most unpleasant to take. It is only the immature person, however, who refuses to swallow the curative medicine because it tastes unpleasant!

If loneliness is to be overcome, it must be accepted that the initiative in relieving the condition lies with those who are suffering. It is they who must take the first step and set the machinery

for recovery in motion. If they are unwilling to do this, they are likely to be left with their loneliness.

Ultimately, every one of us must face reality and take responsibility for our condition. It is our personal loneliness, and for it we have final responsibility. So if any change is to be effected, it is we who must take the initiative. If we choose to deny responsibility and blame others for it, the prospect for release is dim. We must cease blaming parents, environment, or other people or circumstances, or there can be no effective strategy for conquering the affliction. There is good hope for release when we accept that, in the end, we and no one else are responsible to create the conditions for change.

ON THE ROAD TO RELIEF

Clearing The Ground

Loneliness is by no means always spiritual in origin, but spiritual factors may very well accentuate the problem. Since this is very likely to be the case, the ground of our lives should be cleared of all noxious elements so that the Holy Spirit can work unhindered in the soil of our hearts. If there are things we know to be wrong, or about which the Holy Spirit has been convicting us, these should be honestly confessed with no excuses or secret reservations. One evidence that our confession is sincere will be that our sins are not only confessed but renounced.

If a secret resentment against the Lord is cherished in the heart--and this is often the case, though not openly expressed--this attitude must be corrected. God purposes only good for His child. "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness" (Heb. 12:10). We must be right with God before we can be right with ourselves and others. This process may be likened to the lancing of an infected sore. Before the healing process can begin, the offensive material must be drained off.

When we come to God in true penitence, He is very gracious. We need entertain no fear of rebuff or rejection, no matter how unworthy we feel and are. His attitude to His failing children is beautifully exhibited in His revelation of Himself to Moses when he prayed, "Now show me Your glory" (Ex. 33:18).

And He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Ex. 34:6-7).

ON THE ROAD TO RELIEF

Appropriating Forgiveness

A gift does not become ours until we appropriate it. God freely offers forgiveness for all our sin, and acceptance of that forgiveness is another important milestone on the road to restoration. Lonely people tend to be self-condemnatory. They see in their condition some real or imaginary fault of their own for which they find it hard to forgive themselves.

But if our holy God is willing, for Christ's sake, to forgive us on the basis of our confession, then surely we can forgive ourselves for the sins He has forgiven. Hear His assuring words: "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:12).

Why should we keep on remembering and tormenting ourselves when God assures us that He has not only forgiven our sins but forgotten them as well? Is it not unbelief that grieves His loving heart?

One writer termed forgiveness "this amazing therapeutic agent." He asserted that to be able to forgive affords such a relief to the soul that it is all the relief many need. So, if there is someone whom we have not forgiven for some injury suffered, that is a stumblingblock that must be removed.

So avail yourself of the therapeutic power of God's ready forgiveness. Take Paul's inspired advice and forget "what is behind" (Phil. 3:13). Resolutely slam and lock the door on past sin and failure, and throw away the key! Then strain forward to the better things that lie ahead.

Do not wait passively (and hopelessly) for someone else to do something about your loneliness. Look life in the face and step resolutely forward. Face reality and adjust to it.

Recently, in counseling a young man who had retreated from life as the result of some very painful experiences, I discovered that through discouragement he had dropped out of social life and had become a "loner." I encouraged him to make a new beginning the very next day, to ask God to enable him once again to establish contact with his fellows and begin serving the Lord again.

The very next evening he came to me with a beaming face. He had approached a non-Christian neighbor whom he found responsive to his advances. The neighbor had actually invited him to come and do some Bible study with him! God does not take long to answer the sincere prayer of one who desires to be right with Him.

ON THE ROAD TO RELIEF

Self-Disclosure

Another helpful step in coping with loneliness is to unburden oneself to God uninhibitedly, just as the psalmist often did. Be open and honest with Him. Tell Him exactly how you feel. He is your heavenly Father, whose sympathetic ear is always open to His children's woes.

For He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust (Ps. 103:14).

Pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge (Ps. 62:8).

Further, if there is some mature Christian whom you feel you can trust, unburden yourself to him or her. A burden shared is often a burden halved. Share your feelings and failures, your struggles and fears--and your joy as well. In other words, "unbutton" yourself, reveal yourself, weaknesses and all. You will be amazed at the sympathetic hearing you will receive, as well as the therapeutic value of such self-disclosure.

ON THE ROAD TO RELIEF

In Acceptance Lies Peace

"In acceptance lies peace" has become almost a spiritual cliché, but it enshrines an important spiritual and psychological truth. We cannot change our outward circumstances. These are beyond our control, and we are responsible only for things under our control. But we can, and should, change our inward attitude to them. By present action we can modify the future. Where no alternative seems possible, it is only common sense to come to terms with life. While this is admittedly a difficult lesson to master, it is an essential one.

Two friends of mine had six children, three of whom had below normal physical and mental abilities. In the early stages of this experience, my friends found it desperately hard to accept that this was God's will for them; they struggled against it and questioned why this should have happened to them. But they found that, far from helping the situation, they were only hurting themselves and spoiling their lives.

Then, like Jacob, they had a transforming encounter with the Lord. Finally, they accepted the fact that God had permitted this trial and that "in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

"Once we had accepted it as God's will for us," the wife told me, "we learned in experience the truth we had known in theory, that in acceptance lies peace, and we were able to triumph in the midst of the trial. But she added this significant word: "Once we had accepted it as the will of God, it couldn't hurt us anymore." So they emerged from the trial enriched, not impoverished.

Note that they accepted the will of God while still in the midst of the trying circumstances, difficult though they were. Then they adapted to the adverse circumstances; and those who knew them testified that they adorned the painful situation. Those three words--accept, adapt, adorn--carry their own message.

It can be so with our loneliness; we can accept it as God's will for us, and also accept the responsibility of triumphantly coping with it. If we react rightly, the whole experience can have a positive benefit. In accepting instead of resenting and rebelling, we find ourselves better able to accept ourselves and others. In the final analysis, the determining factor in the battle with loneliness is our attitude toward it.

The lonely person faces only two possible choices, and the choice he or she makes will determine the possibility of relief. He must either rise above the loneliness, or succumb to it and continue to suffer the consequences.

One can run away from life--and many are taking the suicide route--or look the facts in the face and meet them with the courage God will give.