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Single and Lonely

Finding the Intimacy You Desire

Jayne V. Clark



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Perhaps you are single by choice—you want to be on your own for a while, enjoying the freedom and benefits of adulthood. Perhaps it's not your choice, and a divorce, death, or broken relationship has propelled you back into singleness. Or maybe the opportunity for a serious relationship has never arisen. But whatever your situation, sometimes you feel lonely and long for companionship. It's natural to desire someone with whom you can share your life, and it's easy to think, *If I were married or just had some kind of relationship, then I wouldn't be lonely.* But will a change in your circumstances really solve your problem with loneliness?

A Common Experience

Unfortunately, getting married won't protect you from loneliness; married people get lonely too. Sometimes it's because the marriage isn't all that great. Maybe the only thing they share is the same bed. Maybe the only thing they agree on is to avoid talking to one another. Whatever the reasons, the reality is that marriage has fallen far short of their dreams. They are lonelier now than they've ever been.

Even spouses in great marriages sometimes feel lonely. A young couple splits their days between work and

classes, studying all night and spending their weekends serving at church. A mother struggles when her husband is away on business trips, while he spends his evenings in lonely hotel rooms. A man who has worked his entire life so he and his wife can spend their retirement traveling together now spends every moment caring for her as she slips away with Alzheimer's. He's committed to her, but he's lonely.

The list of people who experience loneliness goes on and on. People change jobs and move away from family and friends. The elderly spend hours alone in nursing homes. An alcoholic finds himself living on the streets. Soldiers serving overseas miss their families. Kids go off to college. Prisoners are in isolation. Patients are confined to bed. The list includes the person living next to you. It includes you—but *not* just because you are single. All of us, at one time or another, experience loneliness.

Circumstances vary, but the feelings are similar. We feel isolated, vulnerable, and alone. We want to talk and be heard. We want to be known and understood; we don't want to feel invisible. We want to be included and cared about. We desire intimacy. We want to be connected to someone.

A Flawed Strategy

So how do we remedy this loneliness? When I was a child I thought it was simple: Make one really good friend. I was a good listener, and I combined that with a decent sense of humor and a willingness to be helpful. My job was to listen, make you laugh, and help you out. Your job was to be my friend so I wouldn't be lonely. But eventually I would upset the balance of this arrangement by asking you to help me. If you couldn't manage it, I felt hurt. Or maybe I couldn't get you to listen to me for ten minutes when I had already listened to you for hours. In either case, I wouldn't dare tell you that I was hurt because you might have gotten upset with me. So I would take self-protective steps to prevent getting hurt again.

Do you see the dynamic? I work to get you to like me, but I also work to protect myself from you. I move toward you because I want your acceptance, but I back away because I want to play it safe. A tug-of-war goes on within my heart. My desire for acceptance wins one moment, self-protection the next. The result? I send out a continuous stream of mixed messages. When I am self-protective, I withdraw into myself. But then I become afraid you are (a) losing patience with me; (b) glad to be

rid of me; or (c) not even noticing that I've withdrawn. All of these possibilities are bad, so I risk getting hurt by being nice again so you'll still like me. Sooner or later, it all takes too much effort, and we drift apart. But eventually, loneliness gets to me, the memories fade, and I begin the cycle all over again with someone else.

I didn't always realize that my strategies not only increased my own loneliness, but added to other people's loneliness as well. Neither did I realize what was going on in me beneath the surface. At a very basic level I was treating my friends like objects, manipulating them so they would do what I wanted. When they let me down, I saw them as obstacles to my sense of security and belonging.

The Remedy for Loneliness

In his mercy, God didn't leave me to endlessly repeat this cycle. He opened my eyes to this reality: it isn't what remedies our loneliness, but who remedies it—namely, Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners.

Loneliness is a result of man's original sin against God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1–13). The perfect union Adam and Eve had enjoyed with God and with each other was destroyed when they chose to disobey God. Sin

separated them from God and from each other. Where once there had been openness (they had been naked and unashamed), sin made for hiding (behind fig leaves and trees). Where once there had been completeness, sin made for loss. Where once there had been acceptance, sin made for rejection. Where once there had been praise, sin made for blame (“she made me do it”). Hiding. Loss. Rejection. Blame. All ingredients of loneliness. Loneliness was born at the Fall.

It is true that before sin entered the world, God had declared that it wasn't good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18), but God was stating a fact, not voicing how Adam was feeling. At the time, Adam was enjoying perfect communion with God. Apart from God telling him, he had no way of knowing that anything more was possible. Maybe Adam began to get an inkling of it as the animals paraded past him, but it was God's assessment that man should not be alone. This shouldn't surprise us. After all, God created man in his image, and he is not a God who exists alone. He is one God in three persons—three who are alike, yet distinct. God wanted man to enjoy fellowship with him, but he also wanted man to enjoy the kind of fellowship God enjoys as three