

# ALONE, YET NOT ALONE

By Rev. Will Nelken

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*John 16:31 Jesus asked, "Do you finally believe?"<sup>32</sup> But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when you will be scattered, each one going his own way, leaving me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me.<sup>33</sup> I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."*

The apostles' belief was fragile; their faith, immature. Everyone wavers from time to time, but these young disciples were headed for a faith-collapse!

*"Scattered...going his own way...leaving me alone."*

## **Their Perspective**

Jesus had burst into their lives nearly four years earlier, a wandering wonder worker. He had captivated their hearts during an age of despair, when the dim hopes of many turned once again to the age-old story of a Messiah-to-come, who would break their shackles and free a nation of downtrodden people.

They had left everything they knew—families, friends, careers, traditions—to discover, more than a liberator, a Life-Leader. Jesus introduced them to a new way of celebrating their Jewish heritage, a new way of living, a new way of knowing God.

But the growing bubble seemed to be shrinking. Now, He talked of His imminent death repeatedly. Who could understand this? How could One who demonstrated such power over death—He healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead—surrender Himself to death's dark clutches?

They had walked with Him faithfully these years, listening carefully, and doing everything He asked of them—even that which was hard to understand and impossible to explain. Hadn't they loved Him and been loyal to Him? How could He now suddenly suggest that they would faithlessly abandon Him?

## **His Perspective**

Jesus' view of the situation-to-come, as you might expect, was somewhat different. Abandonment was not in His view, but a momentary lapse due to extreme pressure. He continued to instruct them about what would follow their departure (but they failed to notice).

He knew their lapse of faith would be more disheartening to them than the circumstances that precipitated it. Lest they be overcome by grief, He forewarned them of further pressures and obstacles they would face and endure for His name's sake.

He offered them this comfort: *"you may have peace in Me...I have overcome the world."* Frankly, they couldn't hear it.

## **What About You?**

Have you ever experienced a lapse of faith? Have you ever wondered about things that once seemed so secure? Has your world ever suffered collapse? Have your friends ever departed for "greener grass" or new worlds of their own? Have you ever felt all alone?

Props gone. Friends gone. Dreams gone. Motivation gone.

All alone?

A poll taken by George Gallup concludes that 40% of Americans admit to feelings of intense loneliness. Four out of ten.

In an age when we champion the rights of people to take the lives of their unborn infants, for research or relief, and we trade in guns and drugs, which warp and destroy the hopes and lives of our young, and we build entire communities where our aged may be “placed” apart from their families and familiar surroundings to live out their lives...is it any wonder that people feel at risk?

I want to quickly offer a disclaimer: I recognize there may be reasonable exceptions in the cases of the unborn and the elderly, but exceptions do not dictate the norm. What we have today is a “norm” that threatens many lives and leaves many more very insecure.

In a blazing summer like this one, eleven years ago in Chicago, hundreds died of the heat. Among them were 41 dead whom no one—not friends or relatives—claimed. Forty-one people who were buried in a mass grave because they had no one who would claim them.

A book by Robert D. Putnam (“Bowling Alone”) demonstrates the increasing disconnect from neighbors, friends, family, and church. Drawing on nearly 500,000 interviews over a 25-year period, he shows that we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know our neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with our families less often. People bowl alone, play games alone, watch TV alone, go to movies alone, eat alone, work alone, study alone, workout alone, spend free time alone, think alone, hurt alone, suffer alone, and age alone.

When we focus so intently on our own needs, our own desires, our own appearance, our own pleasures, and our own successes, we are building a platform for stress, fatigue, loneliness, and unrelenting decline.

### **Loneliness Is A Destroyer**

If you have ever experienced loneliness, you will relate to these words from Psalm 102:

- <sup>1</sup> *Lord, hear my prayer! Listen to my plea!*  
<sup>2</sup> *Don't turn away from me in my time of distress.*  
*Bend down to listen, and answer me quickly when I call to you.*  
<sup>3</sup> *For my days disappear like smoke, and my bones burn like red-hot coals.*  
<sup>4</sup> *My heart is sick, withered like grass, and I have lost my appetite.*  
<sup>5</sup> *Because of my groaning, I am reduced to skin and bones.*  
<sup>6</sup> *I am like an owl in the desert, like a little owl in a far-off wilderness.*  
<sup>7</sup> *I lie awake, lonely as a solitary bird on the roof.*  
<sup>8</sup> *My enemies taunt me day after day. They mock and curse me.*  
<sup>9</sup> *I eat ashes for food. My tears run down into my drink*  
<sup>10</sup> *because of your anger and wrath. For you have picked me up and thrown me out.*  
<sup>11</sup> *My life passes as swiftly as the evening shadows. I am withering away like grass.*

Can you hear his complaints? My body aches. I feel sad. I have no appetite. I have no strength. I sit alone at night. I am persecuted by my own thoughts. I have no taste for food. I cry uncontrollably. I feel my life slipping away.

God-lovers of the Old Testament era believed that bad things happened to them because of God's displeasure with them. If people turned against them, they thought that God had turned against them. If circumstances failed, they believed that God had masterminded their defeat.

I'm sure that many of you can relate to such thoughts. Perhaps, however, you can also recognize something that none of them (and too few of us) ever realized: the First Covenant was only the beginning. We no longer live according to the First Covenant. We now live according to the New Covenant in Christ Jesus.

Through Jesus Christ, God has corrected a lot of our wrong thinking about Him and His purposes for our lives. God relates to us differently through Jesus than He did before He came. The blood shed by Jesus transformed God's relationship with us! He is for us, not against us. His love is strong and His mercy toward us is great.

Unfortunately, we still tend to judge God's attitude by our circumstances. And, as a result, we are still susceptible to bouts of deep loneliness.

Loneliness creates deep longing in the heart, as the psalmist expressed:

*Psalm 42:1 As the deer longs for streams of water,  
so I long for you, O God.*

*<sup>2</sup> I thirst for God, the living God.  
When can I go and stand before him?*

*Psalm 84:2 I long, yes, I faint with longing to enter the courts of the Lord.*

Loneliness and powerlessness often seem to travel together.

Jesus' mother, Mary, was sick with loneliness because of her love for her son, and her powerlessness to help or relieve Him.

If love may be the mother of loneliness, doubt must be its brother. Thomas battled the loneliness of doubt, which separated him from Jesus and from his fellow disciples, too.

Suffering or trauma can generate loneliness—the kind of loneliness that even a close crowd cannot diminish, like the lame man at Bethesda's pool, who spent 38 years of his life in isolation while in the daily company of others who sought for healing.

Judas tells us the sad tale of loneliness that results from sin. Sin shatters relationships and estranges people. One sheep who went astray. One son in a far off country. One woman at the well in the middle of the day.

## **Hope for the Hopeless**

Yet Jesus said, *"You will be scattered, each one going his own way, leaving me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me."*

Abandoned by His friends and supporters, and eventually, even by His Father in Heaven (though only for a necessary moment)!

You may be inclined to write that off simply because it is Jesus who said it. After all, He's the Son of God. He could overcome such things because He is God in the flesh, and He knew He was about to return to Heaven, where such feelings cannot invade. Such notions may be convenient, but they are untrue.

It is just for this purpose that Jesus made these statements. He longed that would might grasp the nature of His enduring relationship with God the Father. He hoped that we might apply it to ourselves.

You, too are a child of God. You, too, can overcome such feelings, because God the Holy Spirit is in you. You, also, are heaven-bound. Don't sell yourself short. Don't trade your new birthright for a bowl of crying-in-your-soup.

Jesus was expressing a truth which is the key to overcoming loneliness. But before I describe it further, I must try to undo another common error.

To many, “overcoming” means eliminating. Many imagine that to overcome loneliness, for example, they must defeat it altogether, so that it never arises again. If it rises again, they imagine they have failed to overcome it. These are misunderstandings.

If the Hittites are my enemies, and one of them attacks me, I may overcome him by killing him or by chasing him off. If I chase him away, he may come back at a later time, but at least I have effectively overcome his immediate attack. If I kill him he will not return, but that does not insure that another will not come in his place.

Our battles with loneliness, and other emotional upsets and spiritual downturns, are similar. To overcome one attack of loneliness, all I need do is chase it away with the truth of God’s Word. Even if I could so thoroughly vanquish it with truth that it could not arise from that area of my life again, it could not insure that similar feelings would not later arise from another quarter.

Jesus overcame the devil in His wilderness trials, by confronting his lies with the truth of God’s Word (“It is written...”). But in the end, the devil only departed from Him “for a season.”

In other words, overcoming is not permanent; it is *immediate* relief. It is victory in the battle, but not the end of the war.

## Overcoming Truths

What truths can help us battle loneliness?

First, this one: Loneliness is not really about being alone. One person may be perfectly comfortable to be alone; another may be excruciatingly lonely in the midst of a crowd. The physical proximity of other people can neither prevent nor overcome loneliness, for loneliness is a spiritual condition.

Therefore, loneliness is overcome by spiritual transformation. Changing location, or surrounding yourself with people cannot drive it out. It is not a physical or social emptiness, but a spiritual emptiness that must be filled. And God Himself is the only One suited to fill that space.

So, I offer several truths from Scripture that can release your faith and begin to fill that space in your life.

How about Jesus’ own words of promise:

Matthew 28:20 *Be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

And the reminder from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 13:5 *Be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, “I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.”*

<sup>6</sup> *So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?”*

I love this one most of all—though it is from the First Covenant, it prefigures the Messianic age to come:

Psalms 68:6 *God places the lonely in families; he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy.*

Or, as Moffat translated it: *“father of orphans, champion of widows, the God who brings the lonely home.”* (Psalm 68:5-6)

Take these truths into your mouth. Commit them to memory. Write them on the walls of your home. Post them on your desk at work. Whisper them to yourself, *as often* as you need to hear them. Tell them to one another as you share with and pray for one another.

You, too, can overcome loneliness...one day at a time.

## Fellowship of Overcomers

May we all find God's answer for our lonely moments, remembering that "this, too, shall pass." And may we grow in sensitivity to the opportunities to assist one another.

Just by being with someone who suffers loneliness will not help them much, but if you bring God's presence with you, you may make a tremendous difference. How would you do that?

It is common to suggest things like, "You should try to get out more," and "Why not join a gym or a club or a church?" Those are kind efforts, but they will probably seem impossible to a person who is really lonely. Two ways occur to me that would be more effective.

First, check your own attitude. Don't be afraid of lonely people (as if you might "catch it" from them). Neither dismiss them as unworthy of your attention. Instead, be patient with them, because loneliness is a deep pain. Minister to them in small doses (you can't talk them out of it and you must not become absorbed by it).

Bring God's presence by sharing appropriate words from God's truth with them. Don't overwhelm them with words, but give them the best you can think of and try to help them see how it applies to their situation. *"Faith comes by hearing...the message about Christ."* (Romans 10:17) Use passages that encourage and give them something to "hang their faith on": a message about Christ.

Bring God's presence by praying for them (with them, if possible). The telephone is good, but combining prayer with the touch of your hand is better. Keep your prayer *simple* and *brief* and *personal*. It's okay to acknowledge your own struggles with loneliness as you pray, but don't let the prayer become about you instead of them. Pray that God would fill the vacuum in their soul to the point that they have enough for themselves and more to give away to others.

This is what the Church is to be: a Fellowship of Overcomers, loving one another in transparency and kindness, and lifting one another to faith and victory. May all your lonely days be overcome in the process.