

Facing Problems

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4 LONELINESS

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LONELINESS

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THE PROBLEM OF LONELINESS

It is found with the young teenager in the midst of his confusing problems, feeling that no-one understands him; in the business executive with his far-reaching decisions which need to be made quickly; in the little old lady living in a small apartment house by herself. It is found with the single missionary working in the remote jungles of New Guinea; with the bereaved husband whose wife, after 40 years of marriage, has passed away; with the silent sufferer in a hospital bed whose mind turns over and over. The experience, common to all, and the problem which plagues more people these days than any other is LONELINESS.

Dr. Paul Tournier, the eminent Swiss psychiatrist, calls it "the most devastating malady of the age." You can be lonely even when in the midst of crowds of people.

I remember some years ago walking down the crowded streets of New York, when suddenly I realised that there was not a person who knew me personally amongst the millions. I was alone. No-one would have cared if a heart attack had dropped me to the ground. I could only hope that some compassionate soul would kick my body into the gutter so that it wouldn't be trampled on by too many others. A sudden pang of loneliness makes you think like that.

There is no condition so acute, so universal. Everybody, at one time or another, is subject to its ravages. With many, the disease of loneliness becomes chronic. Some live constantly under its blight. They are melancholy, bored, forlorn, and friendless.

There are various kinds of loneliness:

1) THE LONELINESS OF MATERIALISM.

This eventually comes to those whose whole emphasis is upon material possessions. The rich young ruler in the Biblical record came in the midst of his discontentedness to Jesus with a question - almost as if he had exhausted all the resources of this life and sought something more by asking "What good thing

shall I do, that I may inherit eternal life?" Jesus quickly came to the point, "Keep the Commandments". The young man said "Which?" Jesus said, "Those which show how to love your neighbour." The man said, "I've done the right thing by other people all my life. I haven't murdered anybody. I haven't done anything wrong sexually. I haven't stolen anything. I haven't told lies about people. I've always looked after my mother and father." Then Jesus said, "Sell everything you have, and give the money away and follow me." But, of course, he was not really prepared to do the right thing by his neighbour when it meant that kind of sacrifice. Nor was he prepared to obey the voice of God which was coming to him then. Why? Because materialism had eaten into his soul. The Scriptures tell us that he went away sorrowful for he had great possessions.

We may be rich or poor and still suffer the consequences of our materialism. In the recent Federal elections, did we vote from motives of concern for the welfare of others or our own interests? How easily materialism possesses our beings. We say, "I must have this!" "I must get one of those!" Money, money, money! Those who have it, want to keep it. Those who haven't it, want to get it. A man's worth is measured not by what he is, but by how much he possesses. But with it, or with the pursuit of it, there comes a great loneliness, because the heart of man is never satisfied with material things.

Another kind of loneliness is

2) THE LONELINESS OF RESPONSIBILITY.

It is experienced by the general whose responsibility it was in the war to give the final word of command, by the headmaster of a school, the manager of a firm, by the leader of a Trade Union. It is known, in a very real way, by the Christian whose responsibility it is to witness to the truth which he knows in Christ.

St. Paul, a converted Jew and a Pharisee, knew what it was to be alone, and this is what he wrote to the Corinthian Christians - "In my many travels I have been in danger from floods and from robbers, in danger from fellow Jews and from Gentiles; there have been dangers in the cities, dangers in the

wilds, dangers on the high seas, and dangers from false friends. There has been work and toil, often I have gone without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without enough food, shelter and clothing. And not to mention other things, every day I am under the pressure of my concern for all the churches." (2 Cor. 11:26, TEV)

Leadership often involves loneliness, especially in the work of the Kingdom of God. The mental anguish sometimes involved in making a difficult or unpopular decision can be fully known only by those called upon to do it.

Perhaps I am speaking to someone who is suffering a similar loneliness because of your Christian witness in your office, or your factory, or your shop or your school. It is not that you have separated yourself from others, but they have separated themselves from you. Then be encouraged by the words of Christ, who said, "Happy are you when men insult you and mistreat you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Rejoice and be glad....." (Matt. 5:11-12, TEV).

Or perhaps I am speaking to a husband or wife whose partner does not share your Christian convictions - you pray alone; you read your Bible alone; you attend Church alone. You have been tempted to give up the Christian life or to lower your standards "for peace sake", to compromise your convictions in the hope of harmony in the home, but you cannot bring yourself to do it. Then be encouraged by this fact. There are families worshipping together in this Church now who were previously divided on spiritual issues, but because someone in that family - the husband, the wife, the daughter, the son - was prepared to face for Christ's sake, and in His strength, the loneliness of their Christian responsibility, others have come to see how real and vital is the Christian life.

Another kind of loneliness is

3) THE LONELINESS OF HELPLESSNESS.

Helplessness may come through sudden or prolonged sickness. In these circumstances it is so easy to indulge in the luxury of self-pity so that there are no windows in our life through which

we may look out beyond ourselves, but only mirrors so that all we can see is ourselves. Someone said that "Loneliness is 90% self-pity." But there are those who are completely victorious in this loneliness.

I am thinking of a man who experienced all the hidden fears, the silent anxieties, and the persistent pain which comes to some of those who have cancer, but in the loneliness of his own suffering he experienced the power of God. He said to me, "I don't know when my call will come. It may be soon, it may be later. But whenever it is, I'm happy because God has always provided for me." Into the loneliness of this man's sickness came the warm Hand of God's love to strengthen and to point to Heaven, for always "underneath are the everlasting arms." The Psalmist in the favourite 23rd Psalm expressed it in these words, "Yea, though I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me...."

The helplessness of bereavement may also bring its loneliness. Peter Marshall's wife, Catherine, speaking of her husband's death, said, "Sorrow is a wound in the personality as real as any physical mutilation. Most of us grieve not for the interrupted happiness of the one who died, but because of our own loneliness and need. Sorrow is usually interlaced with self-pity." Her husband's last words to her were, "See you in the morning!" Surely that expresses the hope of the Christian! "Heaviness may endure for a night", said the Psalmist (Ps. 30:5), "but joy cometh in the morning."

If the loneliness of bereavement is your experience then listen to the words of the Risen, Living Christ - "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28). "Let not your heart be troubled, ye believe in God, believe also in Me." "In my Father's house are many mansions:.... I go to prepare a place for you....that where I am there ye may be also." (John 14:1-3). Christ said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. 28:20).

In an article which appears in this month's issue of Reader's Digest, Billy Graham, in his article on Loneliness, quotes a Christian woman, living alone and crippled with

arthritis, as saying, "I have spent many a day alone, but never a lonely day."

Another kind of loneliness is

4) THE LONELINESS OF CONVICTION.

This is the deep dimension of the problem. It is the loneliness which comes because of alienation from God. This is demonstrated in Christ's parable concerning the Prodigal Son, who left his father's home to go his own way, and consequently experienced the emptiness of his own foolishness. He spent his substance in riotous living away from the companionship of his father's love, and the Bible tells us that when eventually he took a good look at himself and realised how low he had sunk, he said, "I will arise and go to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and I am no more worthy to be called your son.'" That was the loneliness arising from an accusing conscience.

Each one of us, to a greater or lesser degree, has had a similar experience. We have suffered in our own soul the stinging lash of an alarmed conscience. We may not have sinned so as to bring ourselves within the reach of the long arm of the law; we may not have been guilty of any great anti-social act; we may not even have offended in any outward sense at all; but in our own minds and in our motives. It is quite safe to say that, without a single exception, we are all guilty.

The emphasis in the Bible is repeatedly that "sin separates from God." That the "wages of sin is death" - spiritual death, or eternal separation from God. There is no loneliness to compare with that which comes to the sinner through conviction in his own heart.

Am I speaking now to someone who is suffering from that kind of loneliness? It is not the will of God that anyone should be lonely. Christ has done everything necessary to bring anyone who will from loneliness into fellowship, from isolation into communion, and from separation into reconciliation.

Materialism was faced by Jesus when He was tempted by the

devil in the wilderness. "Satisfy your hunger by turning these stones into bread." (Matt. 4:3). In that experience of loneliness He was completely victorious over the subtle devices of the Evil One, and in His strength we, too, may find victory.

Responsibility brought its loneliness to Jesus, too. In His small band of 12 disciples, one betrayed Him, another denied Him, and they all forsook Him and fled. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night of His arrest, as He contemplated the awful prospect of the Cross, He said to Peter, James and John, whom He found asleep, "Could you not watch with me one brief hour?" Then alone He prayed to His Heavenly Father, "O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matt. 26:39).

Then Jesus Christ also faced the loneliness of Helplessness. He made Himself helpless voluntarily for your sake and mine. On the Cross of Calvary He took upon Himself the sin of the whole world - your sin and mine. He felt the full weight of that sin and cried in His God-forsakenness, "My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?" Was there ever a more lonely moment than that, suffered at such a depth by anyone else?

The Son of God also knew the loneliness of the conviction of sin for "He was made sin for us." He took our place on the Cross of condemnation, "the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God." We who were separated from God have been made right by the precious blood of Christ. Those who put their trust in Jesus Christ have this basic problem of loneliness dealt with and the means whereby every other form of loneliness can be dealt with, too.

I want to say to you now in all earnestness, if you are lonely come to Jesus. Come boldly unto the Throne of Grace, that you may obtain mercy and find help in time of need. Jesus invites you into His warm fellowship. This He made possible by dealing with the very things which would separate you from our Heavenly Father. Come to Him now.

Lonely? no, not lonely,
While Jesus standeth by,
His Presence fills my being,
I know that He is nigh.

A PRAYER

O God, my Heavenly Father, I come to You now recognising my loneliness without You. Help me to trust in the Name of Him Who has promised never to leave me nor forsake me, even Thy Son, my Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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