

Lonely By Myself: Gospel Hope For An Epidemic Of Loneliness

By Pastor Tommy Briggs

*It's such a lonely life,
I almost cry each night,
Cause fate has put me on the shelf.
I get so lonely, so lonely by myself.*

- Larry Norman
Lonely By Myself

In early 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy released a shocking report entitled *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*. In it, he detailed how loneliness among Americans has reached epidemic levels, noting that "approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness." Rates of loneliness among young people are even higher, with "young adults . . . almost twice as likely to report feeling lonely than those over 65. The rate of loneliness among young adults has increased every year between 1976 and 2019." This sad trend is not limited to America. ABC RN, citing a survey by the "men's health organization Healthy Male, found that 43 percent of Australian men were lonely, with 16 percent experiencing high levels of loneliness." The Center for Bible Engagement conducted a study among people of various faiths around the world. Among the findings were that 49% of Buddhists, 46% of Chinese Traditionalists, 52% of Hindus, 34% of Jews, and 46% of Muslims all struggle with loneliness on a regular basis. Christians are not immune to this trend. A 2020 Barna Group poll found that 1 in 5 Christians reported feeling lonely.

This trend has been exacerbated by many factors, one of the main ones being the nature of new technologies. Social media and smartphones have come to monopolize our daily interactions. According to the Surgeon General, "Americans spend an average of six hours per day on digital media. One-in-three U.S. adults 18 and over report that they are online 'almost

constantly,' and the percentage of teens ages 13 to 17 who say they are online 'almost constantly' has doubled since 2015." This heavy online engagement has been directly linked to negative social outcomes. "In a U.S.-based study, participants who reported using social media for more than two hours a day had about double the odds of reporting increased perceptions of social isolation compared to those who used social media for less than 30 minutes per day." Arnie Cole of the Center for Bible Engagement reports that after the introduction of the smartphone, the number of people reporting feelings of loneliness jumped 30%.

Loneliness and social isolation are not only taking a toll on people's mental health but also on their physical well-being. The Surgeon General's report states that "Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26% and 29%, respectively." They have been linked to increases in heart disease and the risk of stroke. The negative health effects of loneliness are the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. In addition to physical disease, loneliness and isolation lead to an increase in suicidal thoughts and actions. Citing a 2010 study, the report finds that "Social isolation is arguably the strongest and most reliable predictor of suicidal ideation attempts and lethal suicidal behavior among samples varying in age, nationality, and clinical severity."

We are literally dying from loneliness.

At its heart, however, this is not primarily a mental or physical health crisis. This is a spiritual crisis. It is no surprise that the same Surgeon General's report found a decline in religious engagement and activity:

Research produced by Gallup, Pew Research Center, and the National

Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey demonstrates that since the 1970s, religious preference, affiliation, and participation among U.S. adults have declined. In 2020, only 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque. This is down from 70% in 1999 and represents a dip below 50% for the first time in the history of the survey question.

As we have cut ourselves off from God, we have also cut ourselves off from each other. The results are devastating. We are not made for isolation; we are made for relationships. This is one of the ways that we bear the image of God. Indeed, the first thing in all creation that God says is not good is for man to be alone.

"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'" – Genesis 2:18

Imagine this: Adam is living in direct contact and relationship with God, unhindered by sin, and still, God says it is not good for him to not have someone like himself. People will often say, "All I need is God," but God says this is not true. We need others who are like us to be in relationship with as well. This is not due to any defect in God but reflects how we are created and designed. We are made to be relational beings just as God is a relational being in Himself through the Trinity. The three persons of the Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live in perpetual communion and relationship, each being God, distinct in persons but one in being. Thus, God lives in eternal relationship with one like Himself even though He is One God. This is a deep and profound mystery, but it also forms the core of God's being and existence. We are created in His image, so we, too, are created to not only have relationship with God but with others like us as well. Thus, from

Adam, God creates Eve, a helper suitable for him, one who is like him and with whom he can be in relationship.

This is why community has always been at the heart of the Christian faith. In Acts, we read that the early Church met together daily for worship and fellowship. *"And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people."*¹ Hebrews warns us against neglecting this fellowship: *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*²

Given this history and command, it would seem that the Church would be perfectly suited to address this situation. Yet we are prey to this contagion of loneliness as well. During Covid, churches were forced to shut down in-person services for a time. Even after government restrictions were lifted, many churches chose to remain closed, offering services online instead. As a result of this extended disruption of in-person worship, many chose to forgo meeting together even after they were able, and it was perfectly safe to do so. Christianity Today recently reported that 22% of Christians continue to watch services online instead of meeting together in person.

While Covid certainly exacerbated feelings of isolation and loneliness in both the culture and the Church, it did not cause them. The trend, even in the Church, existed before Covid. This points to a deeper problem in the Church that we must address if we are to become the hope to this world we are called to be. That problem is our teaching and conception of the Gospel.

Many things have contributed to our epidemic of loneliness and isolation. One of the main factors is our culture's embrace of hyper-individualism and autonomy. Unlike God's purposes in creation we outlined earlier, hyper-individualism exalts the self above everything. Our only purpose is to actualize our authentic self, however we define that. Anything that allows me to do that is good. Anything I perceive as hindering it is bad. Other people matter only insofar as they help me realize my self-actualization. I owe nothing to them and have no obligation to or for them other than to be my best self. It is this kind of thinking that allows people to believe that the obvious evil of genitally mutilating children so they can live their "true" gender is actually a good thing. It is also what leads these lost children to such desperate beliefs.

In the Church, this has manifested itself by an individualized conception of salvation. The Gospel becomes a highly individualized transaction where I confess my sin, Christ forgives me, and I receive salvation and get to go to heaven when I die. While there is truth in this, it is far from a complete understanding of the whole work of the Gospel. In truth, it is a deeply impoverished view of salvation. That has led many to an impoverished Christian life where they are not receiving or living in the full blessings of what God accomplished in Christ. In a sense, we end up living the same hyper-individualized ethos as the world with a spiritual gloss applied. My quest for self-actualization simply becomes a quest for my self-actualization in Jesus. The focus ultimately remains on the self. God's work of salvation is ultimately for me and my spiritual actualization. A quick perusal of top titles for Christian Living books (*Your Best Life Now*, *Get Out of Your Head*, *You Can Change*, *What if God Wrote Your Bucket List*) reveals a consistent theme: you, you, you. This doesn't represent all Christian

books, of course, and I'm not saying there is nothing good in these titles or that their authors are somehow charlatans, but it reveals the subtle influence of the culture on the Church. We must recognize this and intentionally counter it if we are to be all God has called us to be: a community of believers.

The work of the Gospel is far more than just a system for managing sin. It is God's work for the total restoration of His creation. At the heart of creation is relationship, both with God and others. The two greatest commandments are relationship commandments – Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. The Gospel is ultimately about restoring relationship. The removal of sin is the necessary precondition to that end, but it is not the end in itself.

Many scriptures speak to this, but we will look at Ephesians 2:11-22 where Paul lays this out explicitly.

"Therefore remember that at one time, you Gentiles in the flesh, called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near."¹⁸

For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

In the first two chapters of Ephesians, Paul outlines God's eternal plan of salvation as well as how we receive the gracious gift of God through faith. In this passage, he expands on the purpose of salvation. It is not just about individuals coming to Jesus but about the formation of a community of believers. He uses the example of Jews and Gentiles, who at one time were separated by "a dividing wall of hostility." The Gentiles represent the nations of the world disinherited by God at Babel. After their disinheritance, God called Abraham to form a new nation, one that had never existed but was a creation of God, Israel, to be His vehicle of salvation. They alone carried the instruments of salvation in the Law and Covenants, from which the Gentiles were utterly cut off. Thus, a deep separation existed between the two. Sin had alienated us from God and from each other. God's plan, however, was always to redeem the nations through Israel and the promised messiah Jesus Christ. Now that Jesus has come, the division between the two has been torn down. No longer are Gentiles cut off from the hope of salvation because in Himself, Jesus has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. Why has He done this? So *"that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing*

the hostility." Jesus is not just reconciling us to God, He is reconciling us to each other. The Gospel restores us to each other as it restores us to God.

The "one body" referred to in v. 16 may be interpreted as a reference to Jesus, but I believe the stronger reading, both grammatically and theologically, is to see this as the Church as it refers back to the "one new man," which immediately precedes it. In Jesus, we have been made one body, the Church (which is the Body of Christ)³, and it is as that one Body we are being reconciled to God through the cross. We are being saved together. As Paul says later in the letter, this is the mystery of God revealed: *"that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."* The Body, the Church, is not an afterthought or a mere organizational principle. It is an essential work of the Gospel meant to restore human relationships rooted in true love for one another as an expression of our faith. It is together that we are "being built into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." This cannot happen apart from the Church, from our fellow believers.

It is this communal dimension of the Gospel that has been either lost or minimized by our overemphasis on individual salvation. Truly, there is no salvation apart from the Body together. Yes, we must each make a choice for Jesus, but that choice immediately brings us into the Body of Christ, the Church, and it is together as the Church that we are being saved. This is because God's purpose in salvation is the restoration of all the relationships He established at creation. It is only in this way that we can truly be His imagers that reflect His glory. God himself declares this purpose in Revelation 21:3, *"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is*

with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

This is indeed good news to a culture dying of loneliness and isolation. God is working for our restoration, to bring us into life-giving community with Himself and others. It is good news that must be lived and preached if it is to be believed. As Christians, we need to embrace the fullness of the Gospel. More than that, we need to live it. We cannot treat the fellowship as an afterthought or religious duty but as an essential element of living out our faith. Our salvation is not an individualistic affair between us and God but a gracious work to restore us to God's holy community of saints to live and be together. We must resist the culture's temptations to isolation by intentionally choosing to live differently. This means putting down our phones, turning off our screens, and looking beyond ourselves to love and serve others with selfless dedication. Far more than just not neglecting to meet together, we should enthusiastically embrace the fellowship of the Church, recognizing that this may be the most powerful witness to the Gospel that we have today.

Our commitment to community must also go beyond the doors of the church. We should dedicate ourselves to rebuilding the lost social institutions that once served to draw us together. Get involved in your community. Join the PTA, coach a team of kids, visit nursing homes. Even starting a bowling league can be a gospel action. Then, at every turn, be "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you." ⁴

¹ Acts 2:46-47

² Hebrews 10:24-25

³ See 1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 4:11-13, Colossians 1:24 & 3:15

⁴ 1 Peter 3:15

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