

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

*How God Solves Our
Isolation and Loneliness*

WILLIAM P. SMITH


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For Sari—

I still remember the first time you broke so powerfully
into my world so that I was no longer alone.

I am so grateful to walk through this life together with you.

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INTRODUCTION

A LOT OF WORK HAS GONE INTO STUDYING LONELINESS. Countless books and articles describe how lonely modern people feel and how widespread that feeling is. A growing body of research identifies the harmful effects of being cut off from others and the ways in which our world fosters social isolation.

But you don't need academics to tell you any of that. You already know what loneliness is. Personally. And you know how crushing it can be. We all do.

Not a single person in human history has escaped feeling left out, overlooked, isolated, or marginalized at some point in their life. You've felt this way. Everyone you know has felt this way. Loneliness is no respecter of persons, gender, ethnicity, geography, or historical time period. It can find you wherever you are.

Ironically—and painfully—loneliness can find you even when you're surrounded by other people. Have you ever felt alone in a crowd—felt like no one around you knows you, is interested in you, or would even notice if you weren't there? That's lonely.

But it's not as lonely as feeling that way in your church or neighborhood. Or at work. That's worse. But that's still not as

bad as feeling misunderstood or unwanted at home. With your housemates. Your children. Your spouse.

There's no lonelier place than being with people who don't notice you, don't care if you're there, or make it clear that they wish you weren't. And we've all felt that way—far more often than we'd like.

The experience of being all by yourself leaves you feeling hopeless and trapped. See, if you're struggling with some other issue, you can always go to someone you connect with—someone you trust—to get a sympathetic ear and some much-needed advice. But who do you turn to when there isn't anyone to turn to?

On top of that, loneliness is sneaky. It disguises itself and comes in many different forms. For instance, I'm on the far end of the introvert scale, and so I don't think of myself as someone who gets lonely easily. In some sense, being isolated doesn't register for me in that way.

When my children were young, our family was playing the UnGame after dinner. It's a "game" where you draw a card that prompts you with a question that you then ask someone else.

One of my sons drew a card, then asked me, "How long can you go before you need to be with someone?" And I was stumped. I said to him, "Honestly, honey . . . I have no idea," and I told him about the time I went solo camping for a week and came back only because I had to go to work. I figured I just didn't get lonely.

Now I know better. Since that time, I've felt the alienation that comes from wanting to be connected to people who don't share my desire. I've felt the distance that comes from being misunderstood—accidently or intentionally. I know the hostility that comes when people signal "We don't want you here" or "You're not good enough for us." That's also lonely. And that kind of loneliness I get.

I remember the day I opened an email at work and found myself seriously considering, “If I stopped funding my retirement account, how much of a pay cut could I take to go do something else?”

Ever felt that unappreciated? That unwanted? That’s what it means to be alone—by yourself—feeling like no one cares. Feeling like no one will miss you if you don’t show up again tomorrow, or the day after . . . or ever. Feeling like they might even prefer it if you didn’t. That’s a lonely place to be.

That sense of isolation can come when people take an active dislike to you. But it also comes from impersonal things as well, like a chronic condition that keeps you from getting out and being with people. In a case like that, loneliness tags along. It gets added onto your other experiences and intensifies them.

And we’ve all been touched by isolation in some way. It’s an inescapable part of the human condition that we regularly experience in multiple ways.

NOW, IF YOU LOOK UP *lonely* or *loneliness* in Scripture, you’ll likely be disappointed with what you find. You may even end up thinking, “The Bible doesn’t seem to have a lot to do with modern life.” But if you think about the contours of loneliness or the many ways that it lands on your doorstep, suddenly you see it everywhere in Scripture.

This short book doesn’t aim to be exhaustive but rather aims to explore the various ways God speaks to us in Scripture as we’re struggling with how we experience being alone. My hope is to say something along the lines of “You may be far more isolated than you feel—more lonely than you’re consciously aware of—but God provides far more for you than you realize.”

So, what exactly do you need when you're lonely? It's tempting to jump to "Here's what you can do" to try for some quick relief.

If that were all you needed—some good advice and some impersonal ideas—then Jesus did not need to leave his robust community in heaven to come to an inhospitable planet and be shunned by an alienating race.

The fact that he did all this tells you that what you need when you struggle in life is, first, a Person, even more than you need principles. You need someone who comes to you:

- Someone who understands, from the inside, what it's like to be you.
- Someone who has explored every dimension of being alone that you have but who was not crushed by his experiences.
- Someone who could still extend himself to isolated people, and who could deal with the root cause of our alienation, so that you can trust him now to know exactly what you need to do next.
- Someone who will empower you to do so.

Jesus is that someone.

THIS BOOK IS NOT for everyone who's lonely—no single book could be. I'm writing for people who want a better understanding of why they feel so cut off from others so often *and* who hunger for the hope that the gospel offers to the multifaceted experience of loneliness.

This book, then, is for people who want God to meet them at their point of need—who want to experience him in their isolation and experience his solution to it to such an extent that they then gladly move toward others who are also cut off and alone.

To that end, I've arranged it into four sections that address four questions.

- Part 1 answers the question “Why Are We Alone?”—what’s the cause of our loneliness?
- Part 2 thinks about how we experience aloneness—what does it feel like existentially?
- Part 3 looks at “How Does God Solve the Problem of Human Alienation?”—how do Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection connect to our experience of loneliness?
- And only then does part 4 address how we experience God’s solution—what do we need to do now, given all that God has done and is doing?

Before we begin, though, let me put my cards on the table and share the heart of what I’m trying to say. When someone alters his or her world to join you in yours, then, by definition, you’re no longer alone. You can’t be.

And so, I’m literally praying now that the wonder and joy of seeing Jesus do that in your life becomes an even greater, more tangible experience for you over these next few pages.

Could I ask you then to pause and quickly pray that for me as well? Knowing things about God—even being able to write about them—is no substitute for knowing him. And I haven’t yet arrived at the same confidence that Jesus had when he told his friends who were about to abandon him that, although they would leave him, “Yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me” (John 16:32).

I haven’t yet arrived at the same confidence or experience that Jesus had . . . but I want to. And I suspect you do as well.

PART 1

Why Are We Alone?

1

GOD NEVER WANTED YOU TO BE ALONE

YOU FIND ONE OF THE STRANGEST PASSAGES of Scripture early on, in Genesis 2:18, when the Lord God says, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” That’s odd. Something is not good. But this doesn’t fit with everything else you’ve been told in Genesis up till now.

As we learn from other parts of Scripture, God made the universe to create a visible picture, a reflection, of his own glory (Ps. 19:1–4; Rom. 1:20). In Genesis 1, each time he finishes a part of creation, he stands back and says that it is good. He says that it accurately and adequately reflects the truth of who he is as the almighty, most holy God.

At that time, creation was flawless—pure and perfect. Not a single thing wrong with it. An ongoing refrain in Genesis 1 paces you through the various things God was doing: *And God saw that it was good . . . it was good . . . it was good . . . it was good . . . it was very good.*

But then, in this unspoiled creation that is behaving exactly the way he intends it to, God looks down, sees Adam by himself, and says, “It is *not* good for the man to be alone.”

It is not good. Here's a first. The first time we hear that something in God's world is not good is *not* because of sin or rebellion but because of aloneness.

Now, be careful here, or you'll misunderstand what God sees as the problem. It's really easy to take the word *alone*, turn it into *lonely*, and hear God say something like "It's not good for the man to be lonely."

We're not told that Adam is lonely. We're told that he's alone. Loneliness is not the problem. Aloneness is. And you might be confused right now, thinking, "Um, what's the difference? Loneliness . . . aloneness? *Tomātō, tomātō; potātō, potātō*. Seems pretty much like the same thing to me."

Remember, though, who notices that Adam is alone. It's not Adam. It's God. So, if you want to understand what Aloneness¹ means, you have to take God as your starting point. You have to think about Aloneness from God's point of view before you can consider it from Adam's.

SO AGAIN, KEEP IN MIND what God is doing. He's making a world that reflects himself. But here is a part that's not good. What does that mean? It's incomplete. Creation is not bad or flawed, but something's missing, so that it doesn't reflect the Creator like he intends it to. It doesn't show who he is.

And God made human beings to reflect him in a way that no other part of creation does. In Genesis 1:26–27, we read,

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the

1. From here on out, I will capitalize *Alone* or *Aloneness* in the middle of a sentence to underline that being alone is not only a personal experience but a state of being that God first notices and declares to be "not good."

sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image;
he created him in the image of God;
he created them male and female.

If you grew up with the same kind of Bible training as I did, you may instinctively think the beginning of verse 26 refers to a single, individual male person—“God made a single male human being in his image.”

But the Hebrew word there for *man* can also refer to more than one person, meaning something more like “mankind” (as the NIV translates it) or “humanity.” So how do you know which one is intended here? One person or all of us?

Take a look at that next line, where we’re told that “*they* will rule,” and again at the last line: “He created *them* male and female.” In both cases, the pronoun following *man* is plural, which means that more than one person is in view. God is referring to humanity as a whole.

And the longer you think about it, the more that makes sense. Remember that God’s intention in creation is to visibly display his invisible attributes—to show his “eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20).

If that’s the case, then just one or two of us would never be enough. No mere human being is so gifted that they can shed light on all of God’s nature, Alone. Instead, you need to bring together a countless number of us finite individuals to image the limitless glory of God.

Each person, with their own unique gifts and personality, can shed light on only a very small part of this great invisible God. This means that we more powerfully reflect the image of God in

community. No one can do that on their own. That's one problem of Aloneness.

But there's a second, equally important problem: God himself is not Alone. God is utterly unique in all his universe. There is no one else like him . . . and yet he is not Alone.

God is talking to others while he's deciding to create humanity. Who's he talking to? It can't be other created beings—supernatural angelic beings—because God says he wants to make humanity in “our image.” Nowhere in Scripture are human beings ever described as being made “in the image of angels,” so who's God talking to?

We learn later that our one God exists in three persons. Not that there are three gods, but there are three distinct persons in this one God, and they interrelate. Therefore, it is not good for humans to be Alone, because without the possibility of community, we cannot fully image this tripersonal God.

If you are Alone, then you have no way to love and be loved by an equal. To fully image God, you cannot be Alone, because that gives a false representation of who God is. You more fully reflect his image in relationship with others who are like you.

That's why God does not look at Adam in his Aloneness and say to him, “You should not be Alone, because you need to relate. Therefore, I will satisfy all your relational needs. I am the best friend that you could ever hope to have, and once you have me, you won't need anyone or anything else. Find all you need in me! I'll love you, and you'll love me.”

God doesn't say that because that's already been true. God has been relating to Adam—he comes to the garden in the cool of the evening to spend time with Adam. He talks with him, teaches him, and shares himself (Gen. 1:28–30; 2:16–17; 3:8). God is intensely relational with Adam, *and* God doesn't think that will be enough to solve the problem of Aloneness.

Why not? Again, think about the nature of God: three persons who are all equally God but who are also distinct from one another. To reflect this God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—more deeply, you will need to relate to someone who is your own equal but who is different from you. God cannot substitute for that person if you're going to image him accurately to the rest of the visible creation.

And God understands that. So he says,

“It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him.” The LORD God formed out of the ground every wild animal and every bird of the sky, and brought each to the man to see what he would call it. And whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the livestock, to the birds of the sky, and to every wild animal; but for the man no helper was found corresponding to him. (Gen. 2:18–20)

Now, the man is definitely not lonely. He's interacting with God, surrounded by fuzzy, furry companions . . . but he's still Alone. He's still the only one like himself, because none of the beings around him correspond to him. None of them, as the NIV puts it, are suitable to him. That means none of them can help him in his God-given role of reflecting the glory of God. In a very real way, Adam is still Alone. And it's still not good.

Please don't get hung up on that word *helper*, because it doesn't mean “less than” or “inferior.” In the Old Testament, it is most often used to describe God as Israel's helper (see, for example, Ex. 18:4; Pss. 10:14; 27:9; 40:17). He is the one who has the strength and the power to help when Israel is in trouble and needs to be rescued.

What's in view is that Adam needs an equal partner, who is both like and unlike him, with whom he can build real community and real friendship, of the kinds that reflect the God who made him.

This is not news to God, but Adam has to learn through experience that he needs a suitable helper.

He needs a helper for relationship. And he needs a helper for more than that. God put Adam on the earth to rule over the creatures, subdue the earth, and fill it (Gen. 1:28). This is how he is to go about doing his image-work of reflecting God.

And he can't do any of that on his own. He's finite, and there are way too many creatures for him to rule over and care for by himself. Subduing the earth involves extending the garden across the globe (Gen. 2:15), which is equally impossible for a solitary individual.

But even if he could somehow manage to do those things, what he absolutely cannot do, if he's Alone, is fill the earth. If he's the only human, vast stretches of the planet will lack a visible representation of God. And that's not good.

The animal kingdom is really, really amazing. But it cannot help Adam with his fundamental reason for being. It cannot help him fill the earth with the knowledge and picture and glory of God.

If God doesn't step in and alter Adam's Aloneness, then the not-goodness of this moment will last, which means that the glory of God will not be fully seen in creation. This is a really important moment.

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to come over the man, and he slept. God took one of his ribs and closed the flesh at that place. Then the LORD God made the rib he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man. And the man said:

This one, at last, is bone of my bone
and flesh of my flesh;

this one will be called “woman,”
for she was taken from man. (Gen. 2:21–23)

Here is the answer to Aloneness: someone who is like Adam but who is also different.

- Someone who can relate to him on an equal footing with him.
- Someone he can love and who can love him in return.
- And someone who will step into his calling with him to rule, subdue, and fill—someone who can help him turn the rest of the planet into one vast garden of Eden where relationships flourish.

That’s good. And that’s what Adam recognizes when he sees her—“At last, here’s my partner!”

Now, if you’ve read Genesis 2 before, you know that the passage goes on to talk about the first marriage between these two. But when you understand the larger problem of Aloneness, then you realize that what God is doing here is about much more than marriage.

It’s about embedding us in relationships that we can invest in—whether we’re single, married, or single again. He is giving us a way to work side by side with other human beings throughout the day, to fill the earth with countless pictures of how amazing God is.

That second part is really crucial, because relationships that reflect God are for far more than mere socializing.

Because we are images of God, relationships are hardwired into our nature. That means you don’t have to argue for them or justify why you like them. But for your relationships to image God, you need to go beyond simply hanging out with people. Imaging

relationships makes it possible for you to fulfill your role as one who rules, subdues, and fills.

These kinds of relationships look beyond themselves to the larger world and say, “God is not clearly seen everywhere, Eden is not being built, and we’re just not satisfied with this. So we’re going to connect with one another so that people can see God’s glory more clearly through us, as he intended.”

That’s an outward movement, not an inward one. It’s a concern for others and for what they’re missing out on. It’s a longing to share the love that you have with others. It’s what you see in the Trinity.

God has been complete and fully satisfied within himself from all eternity. That means he doesn’t need anything from us. He created us not so that we could meet some unfulfilled longing he had but rather so that we could experience some of his fullness—some of his love. He made us because he wanted to share himself with us. So, when you accurately reflect him, since you’re made in his image, you will long to give to others what God has given to you. You will be motivated even more by God’s concern about Aloneness than you will be by your feelings of loneliness.

Do you see the difference? Loneliness is unbearable. But there’s something much worse. Loneliness is a symptom—it’s our existential experience—of the real problem of Aloneness.

We feel the angst of not relating to others, and that cuts deeply. But when we’re forced to be Alone, do we also feel the horror of God’s glory being dimmed? Do we feel that just as deeply? More deeply?

Does it bother us that in our Aloneness, the universe is kept from seeing God as clearly as it should? Does it upset us when God’s glory is hidden by our Aloneness? Do we feel equally distraught for him when he’s not seen as we feel upset for ourselves?

It comes down to whose glory most captures you: yours or God’s. Whose glory is more important to live for? Is your chief

end to glorify and enjoy the God who loves you more than you can imagine? Or is your highest goal to *be* enjoyed—to be wanted, appreciated, delighted in, and cherished? Look at what upsets you most when you're forced to be Alone, and that will help you answer those questions.

Satan is a liar, and one of his most common deceptions is to convince us that we are impacted by our lives more than anyone else is. And so it just seems natural to believe “When I’m disconnected from other people, the biggest problem is that *I* feel bad; I feel lonely.”

That line of thinking keeps you focused inwardly on your experience of loneliness, while distracting you from the tragedy that God’s glory is veiled. It keeps you from seeing the greater problem: You can’t fill this earth with the glory of God on your own.

But because you’re tricked into thinking that loneliness is the real problem you need to tackle, you’ll be tempted to generate activities and put people into your calendar *so that you can feel connected*.

Do you see the danger here? God doesn’t put people into his calendar so that he’ll feel fuller. So, if you do, you’re acting out of a different motivation than he does. You might end up feeling less lonely because you have people to spend time with, but you’ll have filled your emptiness in a way that doesn’t image God. You’ll have rejected your true identity by trying to satisfy yourself in a way that has nothing to do with how God engages people.

But if you realize that Aloneness is the real problem, and if you’re committed to showing the rest of creation a God who does not keep love to himself but pours it out into you, then you will generate events and put people into your calendar *so that you can give them a small taste of what you experience from him*.

And so, the key to dealing well with loneliness is not to become hardened to it or to simply cope with it—to pretend it doesn’t affect

you all that much. The key is to passionately display God's glory in not being Alone, because it's a glory worth seeing and experiencing. It's a glory worth sharing.

When my wife or I see a beautiful sunrise out the kitchen window, we'll often call each other over to see it as well. My friends and I have texted one another during important sporting events when we've seen an amazing play. Someone will send me an article or a blog that they really liked. You'll tell your friends and family about a great new restaurant you've been to or a concert or book you thought was too good to miss. Why? Why do we share those things with one another?

Because the enjoyment of them increases as more people join in and enjoy them with us. Joy is one of those things that runs against economics. It increases the more you share it.

That's true of our love for God's glory as well. You can definitely enjoy him on your own, but as you share how good and amazing he is with others, your joy increases as they share in it with you. Living for the glory of God doesn't diminish you or your joy—it increases both. And it requires you to join your life with others, so that you can make him known to the rest of the world.

And the reason this is so hard is because we lost that drive long ago in the garden of Eden. We'll see in the next chapter how sin reintroduced Aloneness back into the world and how we keep spreading it daily.

Father, I think I just glimpsed something of your glory in what you planned for humanity. You saw Adam's real problem before he knew he had one. And you proactively solved it in a way that made you more

visible and made his life even better than it already was. It's right, then, that I feel the loss of relationships that you've made me for. But it's not right that I feel my loss more than I feel yours: When I'm Alone, your glory—your love, your heart—is hidden. Teach me to hate that as much—or more—as I hate feeling lonely.