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Experiencing Loneliness

Finding satisfaction in
our relationships with
God and others.



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Introduction

To Know and Be Known

By Kelli B. Trujillo



When I was a little girl, I loved being with my neighbors—my best friend Angi and the three Kahler girls were always around to play while our moms sat together and talked. Later, when we moved, it was the Held girls and several other neighbor families who quickly became our new group of friends. Growing up, our neighborhoods felt like large extended families—we knew each other, we talked, we were friends.





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But now, for many of us, the world is very different. Despite technological advances like Facebook and Twitter that allow us to constantly network and communicate, we're an increasingly isolated, anonymous culture. Many of us hardly know our neighbors and have merely peripheral relationships with coworkers. The social landscape in America has become disturbingly bleak.

Christians are not immune to this trend; like the culture at large, we often live lonely lives. As we clip through each day at a frenetic pace, we hardly have the time or emotional energy needed to go deeper in our relationships with Christian friends or even with our spouse.

Though the growing degree of social isolation in our culture is unprecedented, loneliness is not new. From the beginning of time, God declared that it wasn't good for the first human to be alone (Genesis 2:18); though he was already in relationship with God, Adam also had a fundamental need for companionship with another human being. This same need for human connection lives on in each of us; we long to know be known—to be understood and loved both by God and by others. And from Adam and Eve's first conflict until now, our efforts to sustain close human relationships—marriages, friendships, familial bonds—are fraught with missteps, misunderstandings, mistakes, and misplaced expectations. We get it wrong; we hurt others or are hurt by them. Inevitably, we end up feeling lonely.

I'm not one for gender stereotypes, but I do think it's true that in general we women are wired to be "relational"—we long for communication, emotional expression, and





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intimacy with our friends and, if we're married, with our husbands. And so for us, when friendships fall flat or our husbands disappoint us, feelings of loneliness can be an almost ever-present reality.

Are true Christian friendships supposed to solve this problem? Shouldn't a strong Christian marriage eliminate feelings of loneliness altogether? And if God truly satisfies us, why do we feel lonely at all? This KYRIA download will explore these and many other questions about loneliness and its place in the life of Jesus-followers. In the articles that follow, you'll read transparent, honest descriptions of the painful reality of loneliness; you'll be both challenged and inspired by the authors' insights into how to get through lonely times with God's help. The Reflect questions after each article will prompt you to look to God's Word as you consider how God can use even the lonely experiences in your life to draw you closer to him and to help you minister to others.

If you're struggling with loneliness right now, my hope is that God will meet you in a special way as you journey with him through this download. If you aren't feeling lonely right now, let these articles and questions inspire you to reach out to someone who is—to show that person powerful, life-changing, Jesus-like friendship.

Grace,

Kelli B. Trujillo

Managing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use “Experiencing Loneliness” for a group study



“Experiencing Loneliness” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.
3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.
4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
5. When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
6. End the session in prayer.

What's Missing in Friendship



It's worth it to be "real" with others.

By Laura Polk

Are we missing something in our relationships with our friends?

I'm beginning to think that women's relationships are not what they use to be. Over the last few weeks, I've had repeated discussions about this. A complete stranger, a new friend I'd just met, and an old friend that I was having dinner with each brought it up in conversation unprompted.

I think God is trying to tell me something.



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In each case the discussion has led to how these women are tired of superficial living. They have each reached points in their lives where they feel that everyone around them is putting on a good face, their friendships are surface only, and they are tired of living this way. They want to get real. And they want me to join them.

I have to say that I agree. For a long time I've felt it was just me—a pet peeve I've had.

But is it something more?

The strange thing about these conversations is that all three women would appear on the outside to have it all. Good jobs. Great family lives. A multitude of friends. They are successful women by all accounts. Still, as we sat together talking, I could tell each of them were lonely. They felt isolated and were hoping for friendship that went beyond the surface. I understood completely.

I believe that women today are struggling through life in relationships that Beth Moore has called "a mile wide and one inch deep." Superficial living. Superficial relationships. Superficial hope. Something I find deeply sad and uncomfortably familiar.

This is one thing that our mothers' generation got right—relationships with other women. They understood. There was an unspoken bond between them. A nod towards shared lifestyles and experiences. A comfort in understanding that most women were much like you.





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While diversity in womanhood is to be celebrated, I often wonder if we are actually celebrating or exploiting our differences. Are we showcasing them to teach others things they may have never had the opportunity to enjoy and to help them get there? Or do we want to stand out as "different" and therefore "better" in some way because we go against the grain in such a way that is coveted in today's society?

Do we now have more things that differ between us than those we share? Or are we putting up fronts, pretending to be things that we aren't to impress people we will barely get to know because of it?

And if what we are doing is pushing each other away in an attempt to build ourselves up or better position ourselves in society, what good is it to be at the top of that mountain alone?

As women of faith, we should draw near to each other as we draw near to God. We are called to minister to one another. To reach between the differences and find the commonalities. To offer friendship in the chance that one day we might offer the hope of Christ. Sincere friendships that aren't based on appearances, street addresses, occupations, titles, or church attendance. Friendships based on godly ideals, not the world's.

We need to ignore the inner push to protect ourselves and honor the inner voice leading us to make ourselves vulnerable to someone who needs to see vulnerability in a





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friend. So that someone desperate for hope might find that spark through a conversation that leads to friendship and possibly the hope that comes through knowing God.

Laura Polk is a freelance writer who blogs at www.laurapolk.com. This article was first published on GiftedforLeadership.com in October 2008.

Reflect

- *Laura begins her article with a provocative question: "Are we missing something in our relationships with our friends?" What do you think? Do you feel like something's missing—like your relationships are "a mile wide and an inch deep"? Explain.*
- *Laura describes several women who have great families and many friends, but who shared that they were lonely, felt isolated, and were hoping for friendship that went beyond the surface. Can you relate to these women? Do you think this is a common experience? Why or why not?*
- *What factors, both external and internal, contribute to friendships being more superficial and less intimate than we really want?*
- *What do you most desire out of your friendships? Identify at least three key desires or needs.*



Where's God in My Loneliness?



What I learned about being
alone with Jesus

By Nancy Guthrie

It was one month to the day after my six-month-old daughter, Hope, had died of a rare metabolic disorder. Heading out alone on a business trip, I thought getting away and being busy might actually alleviate my grief. But instead, sadness traveled with me. That night in my hotel room, I desperately wanted someone to remember Hope with me.

I did what most people do when they feel lonely—I reached out to find someone to help make my loneliness go away. I punched my way through the numbers programmed on my cell phone, but no one answered. I didn't know how to connect with God in a way that would soothe my loneliness, so I finally cried myself to sleep.



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Throughout the Old Testament, God promises Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and the Israelites he will be with them. He told Joshua, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Joshua 1:5). While I've believed these promises are for me too, sometimes when I've read them, I've thought, *Well, I was hoping for something better than that*. God's presence seemed more like the consolation prize than the reward.

But when my friend Angela lost her husband, she told me, "It took me two years after Wes died before I was willing to say to Jesus, in the loneliness of my bed, 'I need you to make your presence known to me, to satisfy me.'" She admitted it was awkward to wait in silence for him, but it's been worth overcoming the awkwardness for her to experience God's friendship.

The trouble is, I'm rarely quiet or patient enough to wait for God to meet me. Perhaps what's more deeply true is that I really didn't fully believe being alone with Jesus—even when I'm lonely—would satisfy me.

Obviously I've much to learn from the Old Testament patriarch Moses. After the children of Israel rebelled against God in the desert, God had it with his "stiff-necked" people and told Moses he would send an angel to lead them into Canaan instead. The very thought of living in the land of milk and honey without God's presence among them brought Moses to his knees: "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here" (Exodus 33:15).

To Moses, experiencing the felt presence of God was more important than anything. Seeing his example, I've started looking for ways to live like I really value God's presence. So I occasionally turn off the radio in my car and think about





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him, or I turn off the television in my house to cut down on the world's noise. When I'm willing to wait for him to make himself known to me, I offer more than just lip service to what's truly important.

What I wanted in the hotel room that lonely night was to hear the voice of someone who really knew my sad circumstances. But who could know more about me than God? If I want to hear his voice, I have to open up his Word in a spirit of quiet humility and expectation, and wait for him to speak to me. Now I set aside time to meet with him rather than rush through it. I persevere in listening, chew on words and ideas, and open myself up to his words, rather than listen for only what I want to hear. Sometimes he speaks comfort, assuring me of his sovereign care in my life. And other times he speaks conviction, pointing out patterns in my life that need to change.

But when I'm lonely, I also want to pour out my heart to someone who'll come alongside me and be touched by my concerns. What a relief it is to know that I can talk to God about what matters most to me; I can share my victories and defeats, questions and concerns, joys and sorrows. That's our privilege in prayer—we can have this ongoing conversation with a cherished friend. It's this kind of deep, ongoing sharing that helps me feel and know the friendship of God.

Sometimes I'm lonely because I'm waiting for someone else to make the first move. But when it comes to God, he's already made the first move. God doesn't want to love me from a distance; he invites me to draw near. James 4:8 says, "Draw close to God and God will draw close to you" (NLT).





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But there's only one reason we can draw close to God himself in the midst of our loneliness—because Jesus willingly experienced the ultimate loneliness in our place.

As Jesus prepared to face the cross, his frightened friends abandoned him. As he readied himself to drink the cup of God's wrath in our place, he anticipated what lay ahead—when God would withdraw from him. This desperate loneliness caused Jesus to cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

So when I've felt desperately alone, I find comfort in the truth that Jesus understands. He experienced the ultimate abandonment and loneliness of the cross so my sin—and yours—would never be a barrier between God and us. His sacrifice cleared the way so we can go to God and experience his felt presence in the lonely times of our lives.

Since that night in the hotel room when I couldn't seem to find God, I've been learning how to bring my loneliness to God with the expectation he'll meet me. Recently, I lay awake one night rehearsing all the wrongs done against me, practicing my best "I'll put you in your place" speech to let people know how much they'd hurt me. Caught up in my loneliness and pain, I suddenly remembered what I'd studied in the Bible the week before, that Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would "convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness" (John 16:8).

And that's exactly what God did. As I brought my loneliness and pain to him, God spoke to me that night, suggesting all that I'd labeled as "baggage" was nothing more than the sin of





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unforgiveness in my life. I heard God calling me to repent. His presence was with me in the room—and his voice of conviction was clear.

Now when I struggle with loneliness, I'm able to tell God, "I feel lonely." This begins a conversation that makes his presence real. I've discovered that as I draw close to him, he draws close to me, and I don't feel so alone.

*Nancy Guthrie is the author of numerous books including **Holding On to Hope and Hoping for Something Better: Refusing to Settle for Life as Usual**, a study of the book of Hebrews (Tyndale). This article was first published in 2007 in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

Reflect

- *Read Joshua 1:5, 9; Matthew 28:18–20; and James 4:8. What do these promises actually mean? What about times in life when it seems like God isn't there or we cannot feel his close presence?*
- *Have you ever gone through a time in which you tried to draw near to God but it didn't seem like he was drawing near to you? What was that experience like? How did you eventually "reconnect" with God?*
- *Nancy Guthrie has battled deep loneliness related to the loss of her daughter, Hope. She wrote candidly, "I really didn't fully believe being alone with Jesus—even when I'm lonely—would satisfy me." Can you relate to this feeling?*





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What do you expect from Jesus' presence? Or what don't you expect?

• *Nancy writes that one key to her connection with God is perseverance in listening, describing the importance of being willing to wait for God to make himself known. What pressures, feelings, or habits can get in the way of this type of waiting? What practical choices can we make to help us "live like [we] really value God's presence"?*





Why One Isn't the Loneliest Number

Being alone doesn't have to be lonely.

By Camerin Courtney

I'm not ashamed to admit it: I spend a lot of time alone. And in all my years of alone time—eating alone, driving alone, sleeping alone—I've learned a valuable lesson: Alone isn't the same as lonely.

I'll be honest, some of this truth sunk in by default as I felt and observed loneliness in the most unusual places. A couple years ago I attended a Chris Tomlin worship concert with friends. Standing in this crowd of a couple thousand people, with eyes closed, arms raised, and voices joined, I felt a searing stab of loneliness.



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I'd been experiencing a "dark night of the soul"—lobbing questions heavenward and sensing nothing but silence in return. So standing there amidst people who seemed so sincere while singing "How Great Is Our God" made me feel like an outsider in this community of faith. Like an orphan looking in the window at a family feast.

Likewise, several years ago I walked with a friend through a very lonely time in her marriage. Due to some unusual receipts and phone records she'd found, she began to suspect her husband of only a year was cheating on her. It took many lonely months for her to recover from his emotional affair.

And not too long ago I received a phone call from a friend of mine who's the mother of twin toddlers. She'd been watching her girls solo over a three-day weekend while her husband was out of town on business. Now that he was back, she was lonely for some grown-up girl time, which I tried my best to provide at an impromptu gathering at our neighborhood Starbucks.

In these and many other experiences, I've observed a key distinction: Alone is the absence of people, while lonely is the absence of connection. Loneliness is a disconnect with the community we crave.

Oh sure, lonely and alone sometimes occur simultaneously. I've had my fair share of lonely Me Nights during friend-shifts or after break-ups, when I've gotten lazy about my social life. When I let them, these lonely moments are needed nudgings to reach out, to risk new friendships, to lean into God more. In my weaker moments, I just cry it out.





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But I've also experienced some Me Nights that are altogether splendid. I love munching on takeout from the Chinese restaurant around the corner and watching a subtitled flick I couldn't get anyone else to sit through with me. In this scenario, I don't have to be coworker, friend, daughter, sister, aunt, church member. I get the delicious freedom to just *be*. Alone, all of your personality is able to unfurl and fill up the spaces of your home. Like airing out a well-used blanket. Like stretching muscles after a long flight.

When I'm home alone—watching a movie, reading a book, washing dishes—I get to hear myself think. And talk, since I often carry on an audible conversation with myself. In listening to the dialogue that comes tumbling out when I'm alone, I often hear feelings, thoughts, dreams, and joys I wasn't conscious of before. Alone, I've thanked God for raspberries, dreamed up new articles, remembered faraway friends to e-mail, and sometimes broken into a spontaneous song or dance.

Sometimes in this thinking aloud, I come face-to-face with pains I need to feel. So often the busyness of life drowns out these feelings, sometimes by design. But with just my thoughts and words filling the air, I'm forced to see and feel them—painful but necessary steps in dealing with these issues. And bringing them to God.

In so doing, these conversations often turn into prayers—even as I make my bed or cook dinner. There's something right about discussing the drama of the day with God while I'm up to my elbows in suds and dirty dishes. Experiencing God in the mundane moments of life—right where I need him.





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In the past year I've made two new friends who are newly single—a 30-year-old divorcee and a 63-year-old widow. As these women face new stretches of unanticipated alone time, it's been great to be able to tell them that being alone doesn't have to be a fearsome thing. Actually, it's something we can embrace. And perhaps that's part of the secret—coming to alone moments expectantly, asking God to meet us there and fill the empty spaces as he sees fit.

And in so doing to remind us of a glorious truth that we can't really grasp in the presence of others: We're never truly alone anyway.

Camerin Courtney was editor of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. This article was first published on Christian Singles Today in 2008.

Reflect

- *Camerin writes about feeling alone even in a large crowd; when have you felt that way? Describe a specific experience in which feelings of loneliness surprised or snuck up on you.*
- *Camerin makes a key distinction: "Alone is the absence of people, while lonely is the absence of connection. Loneliness is a disconnect with the community we crave." Do you agree with Camerin? Why or why not? How would you define loneliness?*





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- *At this time in your life, does the idea of having some extended time alone appeal to you? Why or why not?*
- *Being alone can be tough, but it can also be great! Describe some positive experiences you've had during alone-times.*
- *Camerin describes how her thoughts during alone time turn into conversations with God. Read **1 Thessalonians 5:16–18**; what does it look like to embrace this type of mind-set for your time alone?*
- *Realistically speaking, can a person turn painful lonely time into joyful alone-time? If so, how?*



Married . . . but Lonely



It doesn't have to stay that way. Try these ideas to bring your spouse closer.

By Jeanette and Robert Lauer

"I thought I'd lost it," said Billie, a wife of eight years. "I was in the grocery store check-out line. The man in front of me glanced back and smiled. He looked so kind. I had an overwhelming impulse to ask him to hug me. When I got to my car, I burst into tears. I finally had to admit how lonely I felt."

"I'm tired of feeling alone," Diane, who's been married 14 years, commented. "My husband, Ben, is into everything. He has a ball game or a meeting nearly every night. If he's home he's on the phone talking over strategies for the next game or meeting. He has time for everyone except me."



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"If friends and colleagues were enough," Kim, a wife of 10 years, complained, "I wouldn't have married. I want a husband. I want someone who's with me, who can share my life on a daily basis."

No one expects it to happen. Marriage is supposed to prevent loneliness, isn't it? Unfortunately, it doesn't.

In our work with couples, we've frequently heard the same kind of complaint: "I'm married, but I'm lonely." We all crave the physical and emotional intimacy of a spouse who's really there for us. When this doesn't happen, frustration, hurt, and anger mingle with feelings of betrayal. "What's the point of being married," as Billie put it, "if you have to go looking when you need someone?" And the longer those feelings of loneliness exist, the stronger the possibility that a spouse will look outside the marriage for support, affection, companionship, and love.

What are some ways to battle marital loneliness?

Analyze your situation.

If you're feeling lonely, ask yourself: *What's going on in my marriage that makes me feel lonely? Is this a short-term situation I can live with or a long-term situation that needs to change?* Answering these questions can save you from falling into several traps:

(1) Blaming yourself. Both Billie and Diane initially felt guilty about their loneliness. Billie was certain that her painful loneliness meant that she had somehow failed. And Diane felt like an ingrate when she complained





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about a husband who was faithful, family-oriented, and involved in worthy activities. She thought she needed to change the way she felt. But her feelings weren't the problem; they were a signal that she needed to change her circumstances.

(2) *Blaming your spouse.* Billie blamed Steve for being self-absorbed and cutting her out of his life. Yet she missed the real source of his behavior—depression rooted in a business venture at the edge of failure. In this case blaming didn't help the situation.

(3) *Thinking your marriage is doomed or at least condemned to mediocrity.* Such thinking only deflects you from the task of finding a workable solution.

Create an action list.

Answer these questions: *What changes would alleviate my loneliness? What can I do, and what can my spouse do, to bring about these changes?*

Write a list of the kinds of activities and changes that will relieve your loneliness. Ask yourself if the items are realistic. It's not realistic, for example, to expect a personality change. It *is* realistic to ask for extra effort. Although an introvert won't become an extravert, for instance, he can become more outgoing.

Next, ask if the suggested changes on your action list are sufficiently specific. Diane's first effort—"We need to spend more time together"—was too general. She finally came up with more specific suggestions: "We need to spend time together each day—lingering over a cup of coffee after





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dinner, walking the dog around the block, or talking about the events of the day. And we need to go on dates at least twice a month." The more specific, the better. For instance, saying, "I need you to be more communicative" is so general that your spouse may find it difficult to respond. But saying, "I need you to share with me one feeling you have each day" is a specific request to which he can respond.

Discuss your list with your spouse.

Once you have your list, share it with your spouse. This may not be easy. Billie found it difficult because Steve hates to talk about feelings: "He becomes defensive and then retreats into his shell. His message is clear: *They're your feelings—deal with them yourself.*"

What do you do if your spouse grows angry, defensive, or more withdrawn? Carefully explain the intensity of your feelings and how important it is for you to have his or her help in coping with your loneliness. But don't blame your spouse. Your approach can be: "We have a problem. I feel disconnected from you and lonely," not "You are a problem. You're making me feel miserable."

Work out an action plan.

Negotiate the items on your list. As you discuss them, you may come up with some additional ones. Select several items and develop a plan of action. One item on Diane's list was that Ben cut back on his activities. He agreed. So their plan of action called for Ben to limit his activities to Saturday morning Little League games and Thursday evening Boy Scout meetings. In response to another item on Diane's list—more couple communication—they decided to reserve 30 minutes each evening to reconnect.





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As they negotiated, Diane realized that part of her loneliness involved a need for personal growth. She'd become too dependent upon Ben, looking to him to fulfill all her needs. They agreed that she'd take an art class on Wednesday evenings while he stayed home with the children. Finally, they decided to reserve Friday nights as their date night.

Whatever the cause, you can attack marital loneliness if you work together. Be creative, knowing that the possibilities for a fresh start are endless. And if your spouse works with you, the effort will pay off in enhanced intimacy—the best remedy for marital loneliness.

*Drs. Jeanette and Robert Lauer, married 55 years, have written 19 books together, including *Forgiving Yourself: Why You Must, How You Can* (to be released by Pilgrim Press). This article was first published online at MarriagePartnership.com in 2009.*

Reflect

- *How common do you think deep feelings of marital loneliness are among Christian women? Explain.*
- *The Lauers provide several suggestions for alleviating loneliness in marriage. If you're married, which of their ideas do you think would be helpful in your relationship? Why?*





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- *One of the women in the article, Diane, came to the realization that some of her feelings of loneliness resulted from a lack of investment in her own personal growth. What are some hobbies, interests, or activities you do (or desire to do) that could help you feel fulfillment and happiness?*
- *When we look to marriage to meet our deepest relational needs, we will inevitably end up disappointed—there are some needs that only God can satisfy (see **Deuteronomy 8:3**). Do you ever struggle with looking for your spouse to meet needs that only God can truly meet? Explore this issue together.*



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Look at All the Lonely People



A radically old way to reach out
to a friendless culture

By the editors of CHRISTIANITY TODAY

In Norman Rockwell's classic 1943 painting, "Freedom from Want," an extended family is gathered around the table to celebrate a holiday feast. Fast-forward to current Thanksgivings and—while lack of food is still a problem for too many in this land of plenty—you are much more likely to find want of a different kind. More and more Americans are starving for significant relationships.





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Look at All the Lonely People

The *American Sociological Review* published a disturbing study, "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades." Researchers Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears reported a "remarkable drop" in the size of people's core network of confidants—those with whom they could talk about important matters.

As of 2004, the average American had just two close friends, compared with three in 1985. Those reporting no confidants at all jumped from 10 percent to 25 percent. Even the share of Americans reporting a healthy circle of four or five friends had plunged from 33 percent to just over 15 percent.

Increasingly, those whom we consider close friends—if we have any—are household members, not people who "bind us to community and neighborhood." Our wider social connections seem to be shriveling like a turkey left too long in the oven.

"You usually don't expect major features of social life to change very much from year to year or even decade to decade," Smith-Lovin, a sociologist at Duke University, told the news media.

Some may contend that the trend is no big deal, because the population is growing older and more racially diverse, and these demographic groups usually have smaller networks where friendships form. However, the nation's increasing level of education, the study says, should more than offset those factors (because, it argues, education often brings more social contacts). Yet our isolation has increased, leaving us at higher risk for a host of physical, social, and psychological ailments.





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Certainly, the pressure to isolate ourselves is longstanding in our increasingly fragmented society based on the radical autonomy of the individual. Perhaps the same thing that is sabotaging marriage is undermining friendship: our increasing unwillingness to commit to relationships that require sacrifice, mutual accountability, and a generous share of humility. That refusal is often not so much willful as fearful. Back in the '60s, cultural critics Simon and Garfunkel noted the temptation to what is now innocuously called cocooning: "I've built walls, a fortress deep and mighty, that none may penetrate. I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain. It's laughter and it's loving I disdain."

Well, yes and no. People may fear the commitment friendship entails, but they remain fascinated with it. The long-standing popularity of TV programs such as *Cheers*, *Friends*, and *Grey's Anatomy*—which portray the lives of people in multilayered friendships—signals that fascination.

One wonders what it would take for the church, the new community, the friends of Jesus (John 15), to hold equal fascination for our lonely culture. To draw our culture to Christ, evangelical churches spend enormous amounts of money on slick marketing materials, enormous amounts of creative energy crafting "authentic" worship, and enormous amounts of intellectual capital on postmodernizing the faith. We're not convinced these strategies get to the heart of our cultural malaise.





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Perhaps another "strategy" is in order. What if church leaders mounted a campaign to encourage each of their members to become friends, good friends, with one unchurched person this year?

Oh, but that would require so much commitment, sacrifice, and humility! Exactly.

This editorial was first published in the November 2006 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.

Reflect

- *Various sociological studies have identified an ongoing trend in our culture: we are increasingly isolated from each other. People have fewer friends; many of us hardly know our neighbors; more and more of us spend more time "connecting" with others online than we do in person. On a broad scale, what do you see as negative consequences of the increasing degree of social isolation in our culture?*
- *CHRISTIANITY TODAY's editors propose that one reason friendships in our culture are becoming more tenuous and fewer in number is "our increasing unwillingness to commit to relationships that require sacrifice, mutual accountability, and a generous share of humility." Do you agree? Why or why not? Do you struggle with these issues yourself?*
- *Do Christians have an obligation to "make friends" with lonely people? How do you think God wants us to respond to the loneliness we see in our culture—or even in our own neighborhoods or families?*





Experiencing Loneliness

Look at All the Lonely People

- *The term "friendship evangelism" is often used in Christian circles, but what do you think it really means? What role can true friendship play in bringing someone to Christ? If you can, share examples from your own life.*
- *When has another's friendship ministered to you in a significant way?*
- *You may be feeling lonely right now; perhaps God wants you to respond to those feelings by reaching out to someone else, beginning a new friendship or strengthening an existing one. Who may God be challenging you to offer true friendship to?*



Is God Enough?

What it really means to be God's "friend"

By Virelle Kidder



Mornings seemed so empty now. I used to love hustling through my usual routine to get my husband, Steve, off to work and the kids ready for school. I aimed at my cherished reward—talking to my best friend Jean on the phone over a second or third cup of coffee. Her wit and godly advice gave my life focus and helped me work through the problems I faced. That is, until she moved two thousand miles away.



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Withdrawal was hard. I dragged through my daily tasks, mentally carrying on one-sided conversations with Jean. No one else understood me as she did. Steve and I had a happy marriage, but somehow he didn't fit the bill for a girlfriend. I was on my own, or so I thought.

Early one morning I awoke, sensing God speaking to me. *What about me, Virelle? How about letting me be your best friend?* What a novel idea! God wasn't quite the same as a warm voice on the other end of a phone, but he certainly was never hard to reach. I wondered, though, if I could ask God the same things I asked Jean—silly stuff, perhaps, but important to me, such as how to handle a difficult neighbor, juggle a too-tight budget, teach our kids not to tattle, even figure out what to make for dinner. Could God really meet my needs like a best friend?

What I discovered changed my life—and the lives of others. I've met others who sought intimacy with God after being hemmed in by a difficult marriage, physical or emotional pain, an unexpected move, or other trying circumstances. He never failed them either. If you ever feel isolated, as though no one truly understands how you feel, here are four truths about God's friendship you can nestle with:

God listens when no one else will.

He has time, limitless time, even if you talk all day. You just can't wear him out! God never says, "I'm too busy," or "Sorry, I'm listening to someone else at the moment," or "Not this problem again!" You are always first on God's list and nothing you say will ever sound silly or be repeated. Do you know anyone else so patient and trustworthy? What a wonderful friend he is!





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After years of feeling boxed in with an angry, discouraged, unbelieving husband, my friend and prayer partner, Lisa, found encouragement in the life of Joseph in the Bible. God allowed Joseph to be mistreated, misunderstood, and unfairly imprisoned, but later transformed his life into one of richness and blessing. "Life has its prisons for each of us," Lisa reflected recently. "The Lord put me in a place where the only person I could rely on was him."

God knows you thoroughly and loves you anyway.

I may not be very lovable at times, but God loves me even when I don't like myself! One hot summer afternoon, when our four children were young, sticks in my memory. Half the neighborhood was playing in our yard, and I'd been settling fights all morning. As I wiped the last traces of peanut butter and jelly from the kitchen table, I heard a long wail from outside, "Mommy, Dave won't get off my swing, and he hit me!"

"Lord," I blurted out loud, "I can't stand my children right now! Is there anything wrong with that?"

Instantly I felt him answer my tired spirit, *I know exactly how you feel, Virelle. Sometimes I can't stand my children either! Just see that you don't sin.* What a relief to know God didn't condemn me in my bad moments, but cautioned me about what really matters to him.

Imagine a friend who cares enough to save all your tears in a bottle, to plan good things for you when you don't deserve them, and to give you perfect counsel every time you ask, even if it's not what you wanted to hear. This friend loved





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you enough to come to this world in a body like yours and offer it in death in exchange for your life. Can anyone love you more than that?

God acts powerfully on your behalf.

As many times as I turned to my best friend Jean for advice, encouragement, and help, she really couldn't do anything about my problems. She had a busy life and family of her own. But God acts on our behalf, working in us "to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:13). When we turn our life and concerns over to him, God not only changes things, he changes us into contagiously hopeful, loving people who want to do what pleases him. That's a miracle.

Yet, these lessons of faith are not automatic and are seldom learned easily. It's been four years since my friend Debbie's husband died of leukemia. Coping with life as a single mom to two little girls without their beloved daddy has been a lonely, faith-stretching marathon. Tears welled up in Debbie's eyes one day and she said, "Sometimes I wonder if God is enough. My intellect is certain he's enough. He's proven that on many occasions over the past six years, but sometimes it doesn't feel as though he's enough." Debbie recalled miraculous answers to prayer during her husband's 16 months of illness. One time he needed emergency surgery to stop massive internal bleeding, but his blood platelet count was far too low to perform it safely. Debbie prayed, and God floored even the doctors and nurses by raising his count from 20,000 to more than 118,000 platelets for one day only—the day of the surgery. Later, God brought her unexpected comfort after her husband's death by providing a vacation with her girls through the generosity of a friend.





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Memories of God's faithfulness help Debbie trust God for the uncertainties ahead. But let's face it, loneliness hurts. And surrendering our will is a supreme test of faith. Can it be we sometimes need to feel God's longing for us, too?

God craves closeness with you.

One of the biggest discoveries of my life was realizing that God has a strong and tender desire for intimacy with his children. How remarkable it is that he can be grieved by my indifference and lack of faith. True intimacy with God doesn't happen overnight. It requires time spent talking as best friends, sharing, listening, turning toward him with our deepest needs.

One way to foster closeness with God is through unguarded prayer, regular as a heartbeat. Tell him everything! Best friends are gut-level honest. When I believed Jesus' promise in Matthew 7:7, "Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you," I quit asking little "please bless and help so-and-so" prayers. Now I make huge requests only God could answer. What a rush it is to watch him respond to my small voice!

Realizing God is enough even in the worst of circumstances has changed the way I respond to life in several ways:

I'm learning to run expectantly to God with my fears, perplexities, and emotional needs. After I pour it all in his lap, he often gives me a new perspective, a Scripture verse, or just the right counsel through another person or a radio voice. Then when I turn to my husband, friend, or prayer partner, I no longer expect them to meet my deepest needs. I know God will do that.





Experiencing Loneliness Is God Enough?

I'm convinced God's character is consistently loving and good, even when circumstances appear otherwise. Looking back on trials, I see the tracings of God's ways, the wisdom of his design. God is in control. His sovereignty in my life gives me the peace and confidence to know that nothing can happen to me unless it's passed by him first. Now, rather than moaning when things don't please me, I try to quiet my thoughts with the clear memory of all God's goodness in the past.

It's becoming uncomfortably easier to recognize when I've displeased God. He makes me instantly miserable when I allow myself the luxury of a lousy attitude or, worse, a stubborn refusal to do the right thing. I'm also learning the joy of pleasing God is far greater than the small satisfaction of getting my own way or having others think well of me. Now, even though I often miss the mark, I long to be obedient, even in the tiniest measure.

It was five years after Jean moved away before God gave me another best girlfriend. By that time my deepened friendships with God, my husband, and family made me forget how heavily I once depended on others.

Like my friends Lisa and Debbie, I don't like it when God confines me in difficult circumstances, but I've found he holds me close there and makes the trial at least





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bearable. No matter what happens, God will prove himself the most loving father and best friend anyone could have. He is enough!

Virelle Kidder is an author and conference speaker who lives in upstate New York. This article was first published in the July/August 1998 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *Read **John 15:15**. We talk about "friendship" with God often in evangelical circles, but do we really grasp what this means? How can your relationship with God be like a human friendship? How is it distinctly different?*
- *On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being "distant acquaintances" and 10 being "the very best of friends," how would you honestly rate the state of your friendship with God? What would you like it to be? How can you get there?*
- *Which of the truths about God highlighted in this article most comforts you during times of loneliness? Explain.*
- *Sometimes we make the mistake of focusing so much on our human relationships that we end up putting very little effort into cultivating intimacy and friendship with God. Pause for a moment to remind yourself of why God is enough for you and how God really satisfies. Share one especially meaningful way God meets your deepest needs.*



Additional Resources

Books, online articles, and a Bible study to help you further



Books

Finding Purpose Beyond Our Pain: Uncover the Hidden Potential in Life's Most Common Struggles by Paul Meier and David Henderson (Thomas Nelson, 2009; 304 pages). Most of us do all we can to avoid pain. But what if our struggles are gifts from God? Exploring seven crucial life issues—injustice, rejection, loneliness, loss, discipline, failure, and death—Meier and Henderson claim challenges are necessary to our spiritual health and show how to grow through them to reach Christian maturity.

Into Abba's Arms by Sandra D. Wilson (Tyndale, 1998; 250 pages). Wilson leads readers on a personal journey toward healing by helping them to hear God's voice inviting them to find ultimate acceptance and safety in a deep relationship with him.



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Additional Resources

Love Me, Never Leave Me: Discovering the Inseparable Bond that Our Hearts Crave by Marilyn Meberg (Thomas Nelson, 2008; 208 pages). How do you handle disturbing emotions? Do you turn away from them? Meberg offers the encouragement you need to face them. Drawing on personal experience, she reflects on her fear during her pregnancy, anger when her baby died, and loneliness after her husband's death to help you better understand yourself, and God's plan for you.

My Soul Waits: Solace for the Lonely in the Psalms by Marva J. Dawn (InterVarsity Press, 2007; 256 pages). "I'm lonely, Lord—how long?" "Will you forget me forever?" Our cries from the heart often echo the laments in the Psalms. In this compassionate book, Dawn guides you through passages that reveal the burdens of your soul as well as God's profound concern for your pain and his promise to abide with you in it.

The Naked Soul: God's Amazing, Everyday Solution to Loneliness by Tim Alan Gardner (Random House, 2004; 224 pages). Learn how to break free from loneliness and be the person God created you to be. *The Naked Soul* shows you how to know and accept others, and how to be known and accepted by others. As you read each of the 10 chapters of this book, you will discover what an authentic, God-honoring relationship looks like.





Online Articles

“The Crazy Dark Days”

By Jenni Catron (from GiftedforLeadership.com)

“Honda Prayers”

By Camerin Courtney (from Kyria.com)

“Only the Lonely”—*Where to find comfort when you're feeling alone.*

By Verla Gillmor

Bible Studies

“Celebrating the Single Life”—a single-session Bible study about the benefits of being single, available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

“Dark Night of the Soul”—a single-session Bible study about finding hope during times of spiritual discouragement and loneliness, available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

“Encouraging the Depressed”—a single-session Bible study about praying for, identifying with, and finding purpose for those who are depressed



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