

"GOD I'M LONELY"

SEVERAL years ago, a popular television series called Gilligan's Island dramatized one of society's gnawing problems. The series centered around the comical and usually frantic efforts of a group of castaways to extricate themselves from their small uncharted island. Between the emotional tides of high hopes and subsequent failures, they lived a relatively normal life. But with each failure, one sensed the group's despair. Life went on as they continually contrived ingenious ways of coping with their situation, and all the while hoping to contact the outside world. They frequently came close to freedom, but their efforts were always thwarted. It seemed they were condemned to live forever as marooned castaways on their lonely island.

I watched with the kids and laughed at the comical efforts of Gilligan and his gang; but inwardly, each episode struck a responsive and emotional chord. Most of us can identify with their plight because at times we all feel like castaways. Though we carry on our normal activities, we feel isolated from the rest of the world. At times it seems the whole world passes by our island of loneliness without seeing our frantic distress signals.

Like Gilligan and his friends, we desperately try to signal the world to stop and pick us up, but it passes by without slowing down or looking our way. After each unsuccessful attempt to break out of our isolation, we feel the chill damp fog of loneliness settle on our souls, and secretly cry out, "God --- I'm lonely".

Have you ever said to a friend, "I'm so lonely; I could just curl up and die?" In the quietness of our own souls, honesty impels us to admit we all suffer from loneliness. Because, like it or not, we are as vulnerable to loneliness as the common cold.

Webster says loneliness is the feeling of "standing apart from others of its kind; isolated unhappy at being alone; longing for friends, company---".

Loneliness is that sense of solitude, glooms and unfulfilled yearning for companionship. It makes us feel no one knows or cares about our plight. We feel isolated and cut off from the mainstream of human activity.

We could cope with loneliness if it were possible to pinpoint the ONE thing that causes it. But that's impossible because there are many causes of loneliness.

Death of a loved one can cause a once beautiful world to crumble and fall apart. My Mother died and shortly after that my step-father. Within a short span of time I watched him out of loneliness die each day of his life. I spoke with him of this. One of the saddest aspects of the work of caring for people and counseling with them is to see one partner of a long, happy marriage die and the other left to spend the remaining years alone. The loneliness created by the death of one partner is almost more than the living partner can bear.

Loneliness can be caused by the feeling of being in the way -- a common experience for many of our senior citizens and so many others of all ages. After years of productivity, they are tucked away in a retirement home --castaways from the "now" generation. Weeks and months can go by without any interest from their family. Loneliness closes in like a fog obscuring visions and hopes for any kind of future. Many feel they no longer have anything to contribute and would be better off dead.

Betrayal by a friend can also be devastating. Have you ever shared an intimate problem with a trusted friend only to have him or her break confidence? When this happens we begin to feel no one can be trusted and withdraw into our shell to nurse our hurts. We would rather suffer alone than dare open our heart to anyone again for fear of being hurt.

Society's "IBM approach" can cause loneliness. People in our mad, mad world have seemingly been robbed of their personhood. They have been made to feel like IBM cards stamped "do not fold, spindle, or mutilate". The vastness of our society makes us feel like numbers rather than people.

But the most profound sense of isolation is spiritual separation from God. Adam and Eve knew perfect communion with God in Eden, but when they sinned, they were driven from God's presence and were the most alone, desolate people in history.

Modern man with all his technological know how has designed equipment to put man on the moon and developed cures for polio, measles, whooping cough. But will all our technical advances and sophisticated machinery, we have not been able to cure the problem of loneliness.

We were created by God with need for fellowship and, unlike 1 11 machines, were not made to sit in a quiet corner and run for days and years. We need to touch, hear, rub shoulders with other human beings. We feel alone and isolated when those we care about do not include us in their plans. The need to belong is part of our basic make up. We have to interact and relate to others to confirm our sense of personhood.

Things never satisfy! Assume it were within my power to give you every luxury your heart could desire---with one stipulation --that you live on an island---alone. You could have anything and everything you wanted --except human contact. How long do you think your happiness would last? Not long! Things do not satisfy that longing of the soul to see and be with other people. This is why placing a man in solitary confinement is such a terrible punishment; it violates his basic need to be with people.

Loneliness is recognized as a tragic characteristic of our frantic society. The great disease of the Twentieth Century is loneliness, the lonely crowd.

Emptiness is the central neurosis of our time. The pressures and problems of our complex society have produced a world of lonely people jammed together like sardines in the can called "earth".

If it is any comfort, loneliness is not a problem unique to modern times. Many great men of the Bible spent time on the "island of loneliness". Think about Joshua, the conquering general and man who did great exploits for God. We read that after the death of Moses on Mt. Nebo, "the Lord spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant, saying, Moses my servant is dead ---" (Joshua 1:2)

Imagine how Joshua must have felt when he heard Moses' death. For forty years he had been number two in command as Moses' "Executive Office." Certainly, he felt keenly the loss of a personal friend. But what struck Joshua was the over whelming realization that the mantle of leadership had fallen on HIS shoulders. He was now number one in Israel. Moses, in his farewell address not long before, had already set Joshua apart as his successor. (Deut. 31)

But now Joshua was alone. When a crisis arose He could no longer say, "Moses, what do we do now?" The nation would look to him to solve their problems. The position of leadership set him apart---to stand alone.

The apostle Paul also suffered the anguish of loneliness. We usually think of him as a great preacher who almost single handedly shook the world as he preached the gospel of Christ. He endured many trials in the course of his successful ministry. But some of the last paragraphs penned while he was in prison reveal his lonely heart. He laments that no one stood with him in his defense (II Tim. 4:16); he pleads for Timothy to come and see him because Demas had gone back to the world and others had been dispatched to points of ministry. The only person with him was Luke. We can sense the loneliness of Paul in his pleas: "Make every effort to come to me soon". (II Tim. 4:9) " ----pick up Mark and bring him with you --" (II Tim. 4:11)

He needed the companionship of friends in his hour of trial.

These great men of God had moments when they felt like castaways and no one cared. But to curl up and let the world go by would be no solution. Loneliness which is allowed to bud and blossom will eventually run riot and destroy a person.

But to break the smothering grip of loneliness is not easy. Most avenues of escape are dead end.

Some try the escape of popularity. A man may have world acclaim, be a box office attraction, and still be lonely. The suicide attempts of Hollywood's most popular "super stars" illustrate the inability of box office acclaim to meet the aching needs of the human spirit.

And paradoxically, we can't necessarily escape loneliness by being around people, for sometimes people accentuate our loneliness. We can be lonely at family gatherings and in a crowd.

Also, success is not a sufficient antidote to loneliness. Hemingway, an eminently successful author, said toward the end of his life that he, "--- lived in a vacuum as lonely as a radio tube when the batteries are dead and the current off."

Tennyson described his visit and assessment of the regal Queen Victoria when he said, "Up there in her glory and splendor, she was lonely."

Now add to loneliness the frustration of being unable to escape or cope with it ---crippling despair sets in, often triggering suicidal thoughts. How tragic to be mired in despair so deep that death seems preferable to life.

Though human solutions fail to break our loneliness, we need not feel strained; God has provided an escape from loneliness.

First: Realize we are never alone. God has given all who know Christ His personal presence. Only those who do not personally know Christ are truly alone!

When Joshua stood alone as the head of the nation Israel, he experienced the loneliness of command. But God did not allow him to feel alone for long. God promised the nation success under the leadership of their new general, and more important was His personal assurance: "---- as I have been with Moses, I will be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you." (Joshua 1:5) do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9.) The promise of God's personal presence dispelled Joshua's awesome sense of isolation and inadequacy.

You may not be Joshua, but God has a personal promise for you, too. Jesus told His frightened disciples as He faced the cross, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." (John 14:18)

After His crucifixion and just before His ascension, Jesus promised the disciples His personal presence. "--- and lo, I am with you, always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:20)

Once we accept the reality of Christ's personal presence in our lives, we can face the pressures of daily living with the comfort that no matter what happens, we're not alone! Christ is present in our lives and we can talk to Him at anytime. The woman who has to wash her dishes to the tune of three crying sick children and who has been housebound for a week desperately needs to remember that she is NOT ALONE.

Paul exemplifies this truth in II Timothy 4:17 when his friends faded into the woodwork after he was thrown into prison. With strong confidence he said, "But the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me---".

We too, who know Christ, have a friend who stands with us at all times and meets the longing of our heart for companionship. When we place our faith in Christ, we establish a VERTICAL relationship with God that brings His presence down into our life.

After recognizing this vertical relationship we need to Realize there are other people in the same boat. Frequently we think we're the only ones, but we're not! Elijah thought he was all alone as God's prophet, but he discovered God had an additional seven thousand people who worshipped Him. Multitudes suffer the same pangs of loneliness ---the same desire for belonging and having someone who cares.

But to realize and understand is not enough; we need to reach out. It's amazing how we can overcome our own loneliness when we take the initiative and seek out other people who are down. Sitting around complaining about how lonely we are only adds fuel to the fires of our misery. The answer to loneliness is never found by an invitation brought on a silver platter.

Paul instructed Timothy to bring Mark along with him because Mark was "profitable" to him in the ministry (II Tim. 4:11). The presence of Mark would be an encouragement to Paul

Some said, "People are lonely because they build walls instead of bridges." Because we are people, we need people, helping someone else who is lonely will be the antidote to our loneliness.

As we seek to establish and nurture HORIZONTAL relationships, we begin to lift ourselves from the morass of our own loneliness and help others escape with us.

Finally: Get involved in God's program. It's essential for us to be engaged in the total plan of God for our lives. It's not enough to realize that God is personally present with us, nor that others are in the same boat. We must go on --reach out to others and personally commit ourselves to an active participation in God's program.

Paul reminds us that we are "partners together with God." (I Cor. 3:9) Think of it. You are in partnership with God in this life. As God's partner, you have a task to do; and you will not be completely free from loneliness unless you are engaged in that task.

Consider Paul's dilemma: He was in a Roman prison and couldn't go to Spain; he couldn't preach in the forum; he couldn't go anywhere. What could he do? He did the only thing he could do; he utilized his time studying. "When you come," he pleaded, "bring the books, especially the parchments." (II Tim. 4:13)

Paul didn't spend time sitting around feeling sorry for himself. He was busy studying for the day he would be released. He redeemed the time! We all should redeem the time our Father gives us also.

Did it ever occur to you that God may allow isolation to come so you will have time to do something you've been neglecting? Take a new look at your loneliness. Is God trying to tell you something you've failed to do for Him? Don't overlook this as a possibility.

Far too many Christians suffer from loneliness because they are sitting instead of servng. Loneliness comes when we sit instead of stepping out in the work of God. Once you begin to actively participate in God's program, you will find a deep camaraderie developing between you and the other workers of God. This will then place the vertical and horizontal relationship in proper balance. Final deliverance comes by realizing your proper place in the program of God along with other people.

Indeed, we all have times when we feel alone and deserted. But God does not intend for us to languish from loneliness; He has provided an escape.

Why not follow the steps He has set and join the freedom flight from the island of loneliness?

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