

SOUL AND MIND SERIES

James Lee Robinson (ed.)

**Wistful Stories
of Loneliness
from All Over
the World**

feat. Enlightened Tibetan and Athonite Monks, a Contemporary Robinson Crusoe, Napoleon Bonaparte, Emily Dickinson, Famous Astronauts, Quotes from The Holy Bible, thoughts of Khalil Gibran and more

INTEGRAL

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#3

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James Lee Robinson

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Foreword: Loneliness and Solitude—Poverty and Richness of Self

*"The Loneliness one dare not sound
And would as soon surmise
As in its grave go plumbing
To ascertain the size*

*The Loneliness whose worst alarm
Is lest itself should see
And perish from before itself
For just a scrutiny..."*

Emily Dickinson

"Life is an island in an ocean of loneliness, an island whose rocks are hopes, whose trees are dreams, whose flowers are solitude, and whose brooks are thirst" said Khalil Gibran.

In the book *Journal of a Solitude*, the poet May Sarton once wrote that "Loneliness is the poverty of self; solitude is richness of self".

In this book you will find some of the best moving stories about loneliness and solitude...

The Bible about Loneliness

God's people are not exempt from the pain of loneliness. David was well-acquainted with it, and his honest cries to God are recorded in the Psalms. As you read Psalm 25:16-21 below, you'll see David's longing to be connected to God and his reliance upon that relationship:

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish. Look on my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins. See how numerous are my enemies and how fiercely they hate me! Guard my life and rescue me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in You. May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in You.

God's prophets often felt the pain of rejection and loneliness, states author Michael Lee Stallard. Consider the prophet Jeremiah. The Lord told Jeremiah not to marry. He had few friends. Scholars refer to Jeremiah as the "weeping prophet." God called him to speak out against the sinfulness of Judah and warn of impending judgment unless the people of Judah repented and changed their ways. Jeremiah chapter 15 captures the prophet speaking to God about his loneliness, unending pain, and suffering. Despite his pain, Jeremiah trusted the Lord and followed God's calling for his life.

Scripture tells us that Jesus experienced loneliness. On the cross, He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). And in Isaiah 53:3, a prophecy about Jesus, we read, "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem." Jesus can empathize with the pain of loneliness because he experienced it.

Scriptures on Loneliness

Throughout the Bible, we see that connection with God and other followers of Jesus is good and desirable, and preferable to being isolated and alone. David wrote “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! ... For there the Lord bestows His blessing, even life forevermore” (Psalm 133). Jesus assured His disciples, “For where there are two or more gathered in My name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18:20).

Speaking to the effects on a person’s work and enjoyment of life when we are not connected with others, King Solomon observed:

"Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. 'For whom am I toiling,' he asked, 'and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?' This too is meaningless—a miserable business! Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:7-12).

In Ephesians 4:25-27, Paul conveyed a sense of urgency about repairing broken relationships so that we are not alone and weak, thereby giving Satan a foothold to attack the Body of Christ. These and many other verses communicate the message that together we have greater support and strength to resist temptation and idols so that we can continue playing our part in God’s plan to advance His kingdom.

When I’ve felt lonely, I have found that reading or listening to Scripture being read on one of the Bible apps has been a source of comfort to me. Scripture is supernatural and can help anyone who feels lonely, including lonely singles, lonely married couples and those who are experiencing loneliness and depression. As the foundation, God’s Word reminds us that, despite our loneliness telling us that we are alone, as His beloved children, we are never alone. The following verses are a good place to start:

- Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me (Psalm 23:4; I recommend reading all of Psalm 23)
- Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6)
- Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me (Psalm 27:10)
- For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39)
- Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7)
- A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, He leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land (Psalm 68:5-6)
- See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1a)
- Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” (Hebrews 13:5)

God's Answer to Loneliness

As a follower of Jesus, you are part of God's Kingdom of priests and you have a role to play. Let me explain. In 1 Peter chapter 2, Peter wrote: "...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light." The function of priests was to connect the Jewish people with God. The Law was clear that priests were to be from the tribe of Levi (interesting side note: the word "levi" means *connect*) and there were strict rules in place about how and when and who could approach God on behalf of the people. Jesus changed that.

Mark's account of the death of Jesus on the cross includes a curious statement: "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mark 15:37-38). What is the significance of the curtain? This is the curtain that separated the people from the holy of holies. Only certain priests were allowed to step into that sacred space. In ripping open the curtain, God communicated that the old priestly order ended so that now we are the priests and together we are a royal priesthood charged with connecting people with God and empowered by the Holy Spirit for that purpose. God's plan is for you to proactively live your life as a priestly calling.

So when you're sad and lonely, or when you feel so alone, remember that you are called to connect people with God. Intentionally living into your calling will help you overcome chronic loneliness. Being a Kingdom of Priests means that each of us is to connect with God, connect with fellow believers (i.e., our fellow priests) and reach out to connect with people who don't know God.

1. *Connect with God* through reading Scripture, praying, participating in worship and communion. One practice I enjoy is writing out meaningful Bible verses on index cards, organizing them into topics (e.g. love, the Trinity, service, the Holy Spirit, etc.) and then reading several cards at a time or taking one card and memorizing the verse written on it. Sometimes I will do this as I am preparing to head off to sleep.

2. *Connecting with fellow believers* includes attending worship services on a regular basis, participating in a Sunday school class, Bible study or small group, enjoying times of fellowship, and serving alongside others at events or out in the community. I recommend you look for a group you can participate in weekly that combines time spent in the Word, sharing prayer requests and praying for each other. Developing trusted friendships in a men's Bible study group at my church has been an enormous blessing in my life.

3. *Reaching out to connect with people* who don't know the Lord is integral to the Christian life. Get involved in your community by volunteering for social sector organizations and finding ways to humbly love and serve the people you meet. As God puts people on your heart, pray for them then reach out to connect with them.

Your natural inclination when you are feeling lonely might be to pull back and see if anyone will reach out to you. I would encourage you to turn that around. Start by praying for God to help you live out your priestly calling, to fill you with the Holy Spirit, and to give you wisdom about who to connect with in your local church family and community. God is faithful. He will open doors for you to become more connected to your local church family and community. When people come in contact with the Divine connection reflected in you as a priest, John 17:20b-23 tells us they will see that God loves them. Hear Jesus' heart for you and His heart for connection in this prayer to our Heavenly Father:

I [Jesus] pray also for those who will believe in Me through their [His followers] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. I have given them the glory that

You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one—I in them and You in Me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved me.

Lessons in Loneliness

Kate rolled over at the sound of the alarm, glanced at the clock, and wondered if she wanted to get up. Why bother? The house was silent. All three of her children had left for college over the past two days, and their absence hung heavily in the air. To make matters worse, the family dog had died a month ago, and even his friendly little wagging form had been removed from her life.

She wandered into the kitchen where her husband Hank was reading the sports page. "Hi, honey," she murmured. "Hmmm . . ."

Hank's eyes never left the paper. She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the window, staring at the September garden.

Hank stretched and groaned, got up and headed for the closet. Grabbing his suit coat, he walked toward the front door. "See you . . ." The door slammed, and Kate listened as the car started and backed out of the driveway, its sound fading into the cool morning air.

How would she fill another empty day? Kate dialed a couple of friends' phone numbers, but reached only their answering machines. She turned on the TV, made her way around the channels, then flipped it off in frustration. "I'll go to the mall," she decided aloud, smiling grimly at the bumper-sticker reality: "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping."

The mall was crowded. Kate was caught in a tide of last-minute back-to-school shoppers, yet the crowds made her feel lonelier than ever. She sat at Starbuck's sipping a latte, watching the people chattering, laughing, and smiling at each other. 'Tears stung her eyes—she felt like the oldest shopper in the mall and the only one shopping alone. She fought off the idea that the world had somehow passed her by.

When she got home, Kate began to look forward to Hank's return from work. She decided to fight off her depression by making his favorite meal, which she did. The sound of his car pulling into the driveway gave her a surge of hope. Her solitary confinement was over!

Unfortunately, although Hank seemed to enjoy the dinner, he did so without comment. "How was your day, honey?" she inquired sweetly.

"Fine. Where's the *TV Guide*?"

She handed it to him, and he studied it during dessert. While she cleaned up the kitchen, Hank turned on the first in the series of sitcoms he would watch for the next three hours. Kate had a choice. She could sit at his side and watch with him. Or she could go into the den and spend the evening reading the new book she'd bought during her mall excursion. Either way, she would find no relief from the loneliness that seemed to follow her everywhere, dogging her steps like an unwelcome companion.

Lonely, But Not Alone

Loneliness. Even the word sounds sad, doesn't it?

What does it mean? Is being with people a solution? Is being married a remedy? Is having lots of friends a sure cure? Is being alone the same as being lonely?

According to Les Carter, "Loneliness is a *feeling* of separation, isolation, or distance in human relations. Loneliness implies emotional pain, an empty feeling, and a yearning to feel understood and accepted by someone."

Here's another interesting observation from Tim Hansel: "Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Loneliness is feeling alone . . . no matter how many people are around you. It is a feeling of being disconnected, unplugged, left out, isolated."

This means that we can be in a crowded room and feel isolated, locked in a bubble of our own. Like Kate, we can be married and lonely, yearning to be accepted as we are. This is one of the saddest kinds of loneliness there is. We can be at family gatherings and feel at a distance from other relatives. Loneliness is a feeling, not a circumstance. And all of us have felt it at some time because I don't think it's possible to find anyone who feels completely understood and fully satisfied all the time.

A Man Called to Loneliness

God called the prophet Jeremiah to live a very lonely life, and his loneliness came as a result of his commitment and obedience to God. In fact, that might be the very reason why some of us feel isolated and distanced from members of our families and some of our friends today, says late author Vickie Kraft (a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, who served as Minister to Women at Northwest Bible Church in Dallas for over 13 years; she passed into eternity in September 2015 and is with our dear Jesus).

As we read in Jeremiah 1 and 2, God called Jeremiah to be a prophet, a spokesman for God. He was to give God's words to a nation of idolatrous, wicked people. His messages were to be warnings of

impending disaster, a judgment upon their rebellion against God and their worship of the pagan idols around them. We know Jeremiah was not courageous by nature; in fact he was timid and insecure. But God promised to make him strong and able to stand alone against the whole nation. It was clear from the beginning that Jeremiah would never be a popular preacher who told people nice things about themselves. His message didn't exactly build their self-esteem. He gave them God's Word—and they hated it! Nobody ordered tapes of his messages. He didn't make many friends. Instead, he made very powerful enemies. To make matters worse, the Lord gave Jeremiah some very hard orders. We find them in chapter 15 of the book of Jeremiah:

"Then the word of the Lord came to me: 'You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place' For this is what the Lord says. . . . 'They will die of deadly diseases. They will not be mourned or buried but will be like refuse on the ground.' . . . 'Do not enter a house where there is a funeral meal; do not go to mourn or show sympathy, because I have withdrawn my blessing, my love and my pity from this people.' . . .

"And do not enter a house where there is feasting and sit down to eat and drink. . . . Before your eyes and in your days I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in this place" (Jer. 16:1-5, 8-9).

Jeremiah would never know the intimacy, comfort, and joys of marriage and family. He couldn't even enjoy a normal social life, sharing the joys and sorrows of his community. God wanted his lonely life to be an object lesson for what would soon happen to the whole nation. Talk about isolation and loneliness! There was no safe place, humanly speaking, for Jeremiah to be loved, encouraged, and accepted.

God gave His prophet a very tough assignment, and it lasted more than forty years, growing progressively worse. It's a real comfort to me to observe that Jeremiah wasn't always on top of things. He had deep feelings. There were times when he mourned for his people and times when he bitterly complained about his lot in life, including his relationship with God. Here are just a few of his grievances:

"Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people? Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people" (Jer. 8:21-9:1).

"Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends! I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me! . . .

"I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long" (Jer. 15:10 and 20:7-8).

Wouldn't you agree that Jeremiah was a very lonely man? He was angry, frustrated, fearful, uncertain, and depressed. He knew his enemies wanted to get rid of him. He couldn't trust his friends. He felt sometimes that even God had deceived him. His life was so painful he wished he had never been born.

The interesting thing is that he expressed his feelings. He told God what he was thinking. Some of his complaints were a mixture of good and bad. He'd complain, then he'd remember God's promises, then he'd complain again. The reason Jeremiah was able to fulfill his mission for all those years was that he always came back to the Lord and remembered his promises to him. He said, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you" (Jer. 32:17).

In the same way that Jeremiah was distressed because he believed God's promises of disaster and exile, he was encouraged and enabled to endure because he believed God's promises of a future restoration of Israel to the land that would be permanent. In the generations to follow, there would be no rebellion because God would bring His people under a new covenant that would be written on their hearts, not on tables of stone (see Jer. 31:31-34).

The Strength to Go On

Jeremiah could bear the hatred, the treachery, the plots against him, the imprisonment, the loneliness, even being stuck in the mud in the bottom of a cistern till he almost starved to death—he endured it all for the Lord's sake. He endured it because he knew he was doing what God told him to do, and he could see the big picture. He believed God would bring His people back to the land and to Himself. And even though Jeremiah wouldn't live to see it, he found comfort in its certainty.

Some of us experience isolation and distance from husbands, mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers, just because we are believers and are living in obedience to God. Perhaps you aren't invited to family gatherings. Maybe your husband is angry because you won't do some of the things he wants to do. Or it could be that some of your friends have dropped you since you've begun to be serious about living according to Scripture. Jesus knew this would happen to those who trusted Him. He invited us to take an eternal perspective on what happens to us here for His sake, saying, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12).

Just as Jeremiah demonstrated for his people what was in their future, Jesus modeled for us what we can expect when we choose the narrow road of faith and obedience.