

## How can I overcome loneliness? (2 Timothy 4:6-22)

In my Sixth Form at school, there was one girl that stood out. Joy Lovely. While my friends were into scooters and beer, Joy was into Jesus – in a big way. She tried to convert me and my friends on numerous occasions. After I became a Christian at university I thanked her for her prayers and persistence.

Joy also played a role in the life of Terry Waite the hostage negotiator who himself became a hostage in Beirut in 1987. As the Archbishop of Canterbury's Special Envoy, in 1980 Waite first became famous when he successfully negotiated the release of several hostages in Iran: Jean Waddell (who was secretary to the Iranian Anglican Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti), John Coleman, and Coleman's wife.

In 1984 he negotiated with Colonel Gaddafi for the release of British hostages held in Libya and again was successful. From 1985 Waite became involved in hostage negotiation in Lebanon, and he assisted in successful negotiations that secured the release of Lawrence Jenco and David Jacobsen. However, his use of an American helicopter to travel secretly between Cyprus and Lebanon and his appearance with Oliver North meant that he was compromised when the Irangate scandal broke. Against advice, Waite felt a need to demonstrate his continuing trust and integrity and his commitment to the remaining hostages. He arrived in Beirut on 12 January 1987 with the intention of negotiating with the Islamic Jihad, who were holding the men.

On 20 January 1987 he agreed to meet with the captors of the hostages as he was promised safe conduct to visit the hostages, who he was told were ill. The group broke trust and took him hostage on 20 January 1987. Waite remained in captivity for 1,763 days, the first four years of which were spent in total solitary confinement. On 17 November 1991 after nearly five years captivity, he was released. In his biography, *Taken on Trust*, Terry describes the experience of intense loneliness he encountered. When they led him into an underground, tiled cell, Waite said he knew his efforts had failed. "I knew I was no longer in a negotiation, but I was a hostage. I knew those cells were tiled because they were easier to clean after knocking people around," he said.

While being held, Waite said he focused on three attitudes: no regrets about his life so far, no self-pity about his predicament, and no over-sentimentality. He was most often chained to the wall 24 hours a day. He slept on the floor and was often beaten with canes. It was years before frequent tapping on the wall revealed to him that Terry Anderson and several other hostages were housed next door. During those five years, he received just one piece of mail.

A postcard of Bedford Jail where John Bunyan had been imprisoned. Terry wrote an imaginary letter to John Bunyan, "I shall never forget the day when you impinged on my life in rather a dramatic fashion. I was being kept in strict solitary confinement and had been totally alone for two or three years. I was not allowed to have any news whatsoever of the outside world nor did I have anything to read. The only words I uttered to another human being were to my guard when he brought me a simple meal three times a day. One day he came into my cell and handed me something. I couldn't see what it was as whenever he entered I had to wear a blindfold. After he had left I saw he had given me a postcard on which was written a simple message of encouragement from someone I didn't know. I turned the card over and it showed you in prison, sitting at a desk with a pen in your hand

gazing out across the city of Bedford. I remember thinking: "Bunyan, you're a lucky fellow. You have a pen and paper; you have your own clothes and you can see outside your cell." All these things were denied me."

The postcard was addressed to Terry Waite, Hezbollah, Beirut, Lebanon. And it was sent by Joy Lovely. Never underestimate the power of a postcard.

Mother Teresa said once, "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer. It's the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted – of being deserted and alone." She went on to say "The spiritual poverty of the Western world is much greater than the physical poverty of our people. You in the West have millions of people who suffer terrible loneliness and emptiness."

Can you be wealthy and lonely? Ask Howard Hughes. Can you be popular and lonely? Ask Michael Jackson. Can you be beautiful and lonely? Ask Marilyn Munro. Can you be married and lonely? You do not have to be alone to feel lonely. You can feel lonely in a crowd, lonely in a club, lonely at a concert and even sadly, lonely in a church. We all experience loneliness at one time or another.

### **What causes loneliness?**

There are at least four distinct causes for loneliness and four distinct cures for it. Please turn with me to 2 Timothy 4 and you may also like to follow using the sermon outline.

Paul is in Rome, in prison, probably for the second time. Under Nero, his future looks bleak. In contrast to his first imprisonment when he was under house arrest living in a rented home (Acts 28:30) on this occasion, Paul is languishing in a cold dungeon, chained like a common criminal. His friends are having a hard time finding out where he is being kept. And Paul is lonely. Very lonely.

### **Four Causes of Loneliness**

#### **1. Loneliness from Transitions of Life (2 Timothy 4:6)**

Growing older is a series of changes, and any change can produce loneliness in your life. Moving school can be lonely. Moving home can be lonely. Emigrating to a new country and encountering another culture can certainly be very lonely. Starting at university or military service can be lonely. Finding a new job can be lonely. Redundancy and retiring can be lonely. Divorce or separation is lonely. Gradually losing one's sight or hearing or mobility can lead to loneliness and isolation. The death of a loved one is very lonely. Some of you have recently moved country, moved culture.

And you are living in a new home with new neighbours and your children will be about to negotiate new schools. The combination can be very stressful and very lonely. Any new experience we have to deal with can create loneliness.

In 2 Timothy – probably the last letter the apostle Paul wrote – we meet him in the final transition of life. Writing from prison, Paul asks Timothy to come and visit him. He knows his time is short and he is lonely. "*I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near.*" (2 Timothy 4:6).

Transitions are hard, especially when they are terminal. But any new experience that we have to deal with can be lonely. That is why as a church we need to be especially sensitive to those who are moving to our community from another country to start work or begin their university course. That is why the gift of hospitality and our church meals are so important. The first cause of loneliness – the transitions of life. The second cause is linked.

## **2. Loneliness from Separation** (2 Timothy 4:9)

Being separated from friends or family can cause deep loneliness. Solitary Confinement, as Terry Waite endured is the most devastating form of punishment. Paul says to Timothy, "*Do your best to come to me quickly.*" (2 Timothy 4:9) In the next few verses,

Paul mentions his best friends, but none of them are with him, except Luke. Today, you can just pick up a phone and call someone. You can also email them, skype them, fax them, text them, you can even video conference with them. We think nothing of getting on a plane and travelling thousands of miles to meet a friend, attend a wedding, make a date, take a holiday or conclude a business deal. But in those days, Paul couldn't do any of these. It took a long time to travel anywhere.

Paul is lonely because he is separated from his friends. Twice in this passage, in 4:9 & 4:13, Paul asks Timothy to "*Come,*" and then in 4:21 he says, "*Do your best to get here before winter.*" Why is he saying this? Because time is running out. He's saying, "Timothy, I may not be around much longer. And I really want to see you. Please come back and see me one last time."

Think about it. Whom do you need to call? Whom do you need to write a letter of appreciation to? You need to do it now, while there's still time. Help relieve someone's loneliness of separation. Loneliness can be caused by the transitions of life and by separation. There's a third cause mentioned here.

## **3. Loneliness from Opposition** (2 Timothy 4:14)

Paul says, "*Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm.*" (2 Timothy 4:14) In other words, "Not only am I getting old and sitting here alone in prison, but I'm also being persecuted." We don't know what Alexander had done to Paul. Maybe he slandered Paul's name, or attacked his reputation. Maybe he was turning people against Paul. The Greek word for "harm" in this verse literally means to oppose or resist. And to be vigorously opposed creates a truly lonely feeling. It's a lonely feeling to be misunderstood, to be embarrassed, to be humiliated. Type my name into Google and you'll meet a few. Jesus said

*"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."* (Matthew 5:11-12)

You may be blessed when this happens but it doesn't necessarily take away the loneliness. The temptation when this happens is to draw yourself into your shell and to put up walls. But doing that only makes you lonelier. Three reasons for loneliness. Transitions. Separation. Opposition. There's a fourth reason.

## **4. Loneliness from Rejection** (2 Timothy 4:16)

This is the form of loneliness that causes us the most pain. It's the loneliness of rejection.

It's when you feel as though you've been betrayed or forsaken in your time of need by those closest to you. Paul felt forsaken. He says of his trial before Nero, "At my first defence no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me." (2 Timothy 4:16) You can almost hear the pain in Paul's voice:

"When things got tough, everybody left me." Nobody spoke up in his defence. Rejection is one of the most difficult things for us to handle, whether it is as children in the school playground, as a teenager at a party or as a spouse in a marriage. That is why divorce is so painful and why God hates it. It is an act of abandoning and forsaking and very painful – and I know some of you have been, or are there, at the moment. That is because God has created us for communion, for fellowship, for friendship. That is why we need acceptance and communication and love.

Some people try to deal with loneliness by becoming workaholics. But that eventually takes its toll. Others try materialism. They buy everything in sight. They think, "If I can just improve the quality of my life, I'll be happy." But things don't satisfy for long. The fact is you cannot buy happiness. Some people have an extramarital affair. Others turn to alcohol or drugs. Still others lose themselves in a fantasy world by reading novels, internet games or watching TV.

But these are poor substitutes and take us further and further from God's will. Four reasons for loneliness. Transitions; Separation; Opposition; Rejection.

## **Four Ways to Combat Loneliness**

How did Paul do to combat his loneliness? Four ways that are just as appropriate today: *utilize, minimize, recognize, and empathize.*

### **1. Utilize your Time** (2 Timothy 4:13)

The first way to combat loneliness is to utilize your time wisely. If life gives you a lemon, make lemonade. In other words, make the best of your bad situation. Resist the temptation to do nothing. Loneliness has a tendency to paralyze you if you just sit around and do nothing, and often, lonely people don't take care of themselves. They don't eat right, they don't exercise, and they ignore their personal needs. Paul resisted that temptation.

He wrote, "*When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.*" (2 Timothy 4:13). He refused to sit around and mope. Instead he said, "If I'm going to be forced to spend some time in prison I can use this time constructively. If I can't visit the churches I can still write to them.

I'm going to make the best of my situation. If I cannot be where the action is, I will create some action right here." God can use loneliness for good. Many of Paul's important letters might never have been written had he not been in prison. What the churches he planted missed in pastoral oversight because Paul was in prison, has been multiplied a thousand fold and blessed churches around the world, and throughout history, who have benefited from his inspired prison letters. So, if you are lonely, utilize your time.

### **2. Minimize your Pain** (2 Timothy 4:16)

The second way to deal with loneliness is to minimize the hurt. Play down the loneliness.

Don't exaggerate it and don't rehearse it over and over: "I'm so lonely, I'm so lonely." Don't allow the loneliness to make you bitter, and don't allow resentment to build up in your life. Resentment only makes you lonelier. Paul said, "*At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.*" (2 Timothy 4:16). Paul demonstrated that he wanted to forgive and be free from bitterness. Resentment only locks us up in a self-imposed prison and drives people away. Resentful people, always complaining and cynical are not pleasant to be around. Paul wanted to be a better person not a bitter person. How can you overcome loneliness? By utilizing your time and minimizing your hurt.

### **3. Recognize God's Presence** (2 Timothy 4:17)

Paul said, "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength." (2 Timothy 4:17) When Paul was physically alone and acutely lonely, God made his presence felt and gave Paul stamina. Where is God when you're lonely? Right next to you. Jesus said, "I will not leave you as orphans" (John 14:18) God the Father says, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

There's no place on earth where God is not present. As long as you understand that, you're never really alone. Prayer is a great comfort in lonely times. Talk to God and let him speak to you. When we are aware of lonely feelings it is a sign that it's time for us to become better acquainted with God. If you want to overcome loneliness, like Paul, utilize your time, minimize your hurt and recognize God's presence. And there is one more thing we can learn from Paul.

### **4. Empathize with Other People** (2 Timothy 4:17)

That's what Paul did. "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it." (2 Timothy 4:17) Paul was lonely and at the end of his life, and yet he never forgot his life's goal: to win people to Christ, build them in the faith and send them to do the same – to win, build, send. His constant thoughts and prayers were with the young churches he had helped to plant. In the last few verses of this beautiful letter, Paul's concerns are with the needs of others, especially the sick. He concludes his letter with the words, "*The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you all.*" (2 Timothy 4:22). If you are feeling lonely this morning, instead of focusing inward on yourself, focus outward on other people. Look outward to the needs of other people and God's grace will indeed be with you.

When Corrie ten Boom was a young woman in the Netherlands, she fell head over heels in love with a young man. But he broke off the relationship and married one of her good friends. Corrie was devastated. Nothing hurts more than being rejected and having someone else chosen over you. When Corrie got home, her father said something very wise. "Corrie, your love has been blocked, and he has married someone else. Now, there are two things you can do with a blocked love. You can dam it up inside and hold it all inside and it will eat you up – or you can rechannel it to something or someone else and can focus on other people's needs. Corrie chose to do the latter, and her story of a selfless life living under Nazi captivity and imprisonment are told in her book, *The Hiding Place*.

Instead of building walls we need to build bridges. We need to stop complaining, "God I'm so lonely," and start saying, "God, help me be a friend to somebody today". Because love is the antidote to loneliness.

Instead of waiting to be loved, take the initiative.

Remember, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God knows what it's like to be lonely. In his darkest hour, in the Garden of Gethsemane, while he prayed earnestly, his friends were all asleep. When the soldiers came to arrest him, his friends deserted. When he was put on trial, his closest friend denied him. On the cross, when Jesus carried the sins of the world on the cross, even his Father turned his face away. Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) Yes, even Jesus understands your loneliness.

In the example of Paul, we have seen today not only the common causes of loneliness, we have discovered four practical steps to overcoming it. Utilize your time, minimize your hurt, recognise God's presence and empathise with others. Let Christ help you conquer your loneliness as you turn to him in prayer and reach out in love to lonely people around you.

Lets pray.

The title and some of the content of this sermon is adapted with thanks from Rick Warren's *God's answers to Life's Difficult Questions* (Zondervan).

<http://www.purposedrivenlife.com/pdcafe/burningquestions-liveaboutaverage.htm>