

“kNOw Fear; Facing Life’s Phobias—The Fear of Loneliness”

Swiss psychiatrist, Paul Townier, called it the most devastating malady of this age. Billy Graham has commented that it is man’s greatest problem. Mother Theresa once said that it is easier to fill a hungry stomach than to fill an empty heart. Thomas Wolfe said that it is the central and inevitable fact of human existence. In reporting a study, *Newsweek* magazine said, “Loneliness can speed your demise no matter how conscientiously you care for your body.”

Ask the divorcee who just moved into the apartment. Talk to the parents whose arms still ache because of their deceased child. Speak to the man or woman who ended the engagement. Watch the family who just got transferred in from another city. Ask them to tell you about their loneliness. Loneliness is not a good thing. That’s why we try to steer clear of it at every turn.

And it’s interesting that being around a lot of people can actually magnify our loneliness. When we find ourselves in a crowded restaurant or a crowded church, we look at people connecting and interacting and we sort of feel ripped off relationally, like the “have-nots” looking at the “haves.”

I would guess that a lot of people here right now are dealing with some level of loneliness. We know how to mask it. We know how to keep it at arms length. We know how to sort of explain it away, but the cold reality is that we feel feelings of and are experiencing loneliness.

Loneliness can be defined as “being without companionship.” It’s not being alone. Being alone is different from loneliness. Being alone is something commanded in scripture. The Bible talks about solitude. Jesus went off to solitary places to be alone, to recharge his batteries, to spend time in quiet and reflection. We need to do the same. But sometimes we’re afraid to be alone because we know if we are by ourselves we will have to deal with our loneliness.

If we take a good hard look at ourselves we find a lot of motion and noise going on. We always have to have cell phones ringing and beepers buzzing and fax machines whining and computers e-mailing. We use technology and we stay tethered to it. But this technology stuff actually adds to our loneliness. In fact, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University found that the more time people spent at their computers, the more depressed and lonely they became, even when that time at the computer was spent emailing family and chatting with friends. Our culture has gradually nudges us into seeing people as clients rather than live in true intimacy and community with others. George Gallup wrote, “I think we are a very lonely populace; we are cut apart from each other.” We are a lonely people.

So today I want to challenge you with some words from the Bible that will help all of us deal with loneliness. The Bible gives us some good insight on how to deal with fear and how to deal with the fear of loneliness. So let’s look at two levels of loneliness and then see you how to deal with these levels.

Now if you are saying to yourself, “Me, lonely. Are you kidding me?” I will guarantee you something. All of us, including myself, all of us are dealing with one or more of these levels of loneliness. So we better understand how to face them.

Level 1: Spiritual Loneliness. We are all born with an L-1 situation. We are born lonely. We are born separated from God. The prophet, Isaiah, alluded to this in Isaiah 59:2 when he said, **“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2, NIV).** When God saw our separation, when he saw the implications of our state of loneliness, he didn’t just say, “Well, too bad for you, I guess you will live a lonely life.” No. Some of us have that gnawing sense that something is not right, something is amiss. It is loneliness. You are spiritually lonely.

Maybe you have been on a search for significance. You thought that joining this club or this team or climbing this corporate ladder would do it, but it hasn’t worked. You thought that making this amount of money would do it but it hasn’t worked. You thought that getting married to that person would do it, but it hasn’t worked. You thought that having a couple of kids would do it, but it hasn’t worked. You know down deep that you are lonely. You are spiritually lonely. I don’t care what you do, how much money you can pile up, how many toys and things you can accumulate, it is not going to fill that void in your life. The math doesn’t work.

So maybe today some of you need to make a Level 1 decision. Maybe today some of you need to allow Jesus Christ to come into your life. But the choice is up to you. It is your call.

You see, we serve an initiative-taking God. When God saw our loneliness, this chasm, this gap caused by our sinfulness, he sent Christ to live a perfect life and to die on the cross for our sins and rise again. That is the message of Christianity. When Jesus was dying there on the cross, what did he say? Some of his last words were chilling words. Matthew 27:46, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46, NIV)**. “Why have you, God, turned your back on me? Why this loneliness, God?” Jesus experienced a level of loneliness, like we will never, ever experience, because for that moment he had our sins on him. And for that moment as he was taking our sins, he felt the loneliness of that separation from God.

Why did he do it? Because he did not want us to go through life and eternity missing true community with God. He paved the way for us to get to God through a personal relationship with him.

It’s paradoxical when you think about it, because a lot of the time it’s our loneliness that drives us to our knees. It’s our loneliness that motivates us to become Christ-followers. Talk to people who have just stepped over the line. Talk to people who’ve been followers of the Lord for years and years. They’ll tell you that they felt lonely, a gnawing sense that something was wrong, a hole in their heart, that drove them to their knees and they received Christ. Maybe you are there. And if you are there, make a Level 1 spiritual connection with God through Christ. It all begins there.

But what if you are a believer already? What if you are like me and you know Christ personally, but now and then you still feel feelings of spiritual loneliness? What do we do with those feelings when loneliness rears its ugly head? What do we do about it? We have to deal with the feelings. This is when we have to allow the facts to overwhelm our feelings. This is when we have to internalize God’s promises, like when he told us, **“I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1:5, NIV)**. You can bank on that. You take the facts over your feelings. You remember Jesus’ words when he said, **“I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20, NIV)**. You can bank on that. You take the facts over your feelings.

We can either take those feelings of loneliness and allow them to push us away from God, think about what we don’t have, or we can allow those feelings to push us toward God. We can pray, “God, I am feeling feelings of loneliness. I know I am not truly lonely because I know you. But I am feeling the feelings. God, fill the gap. Fill the void. Help me, God, with your grace and your love and your power. Help me.”

Let’s talk about the next level of loneliness. **Level 2: Relational Loneliness**. If you go back to the first book of the Bible, Genesis, and read over the first two or three chapters, you’ll see God creating. And after every creative act, God stepped back and said, “It is good.” God was on a roll. It is good. It is good. It is good. Then God made man in his image and God said, “It is **very** good.” Suddenly, though, in Genesis 2:18, something changes. Adam, the first man had Level 1 going on, he was connected with God. He was interacting with God. But God saw a Level 2 problem and he labeled something as **not** good. Genesis 2:18, **“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’” (Genesis 2:18, NIV)**.

God didn’t go into denial. God didn’t try to explain it away. He said that there was a Level 2 need and that he would make someone suitable for Adam. God took the initiative with Adam. This is important: We serve a God who steps up and is proactive. That’s what God did. And God’s game plan is basic. He wants us to have a vibrant connection with him through Christ and also he wants us to walk deeply in relationships with others. That’s God’s agenda.

Before we go any further it’s important to understand that addressing level one loneliness is crucial to addressing Level 2. If you don’t address the connection with God and address your spiritual loneliness, then it’s almost impossible to address level 2 loneliness. Why, because if we’ve not made the connection to God, then we transfer the weight of our relationship with God onto other people. And no person is meant to handle that weight!

We have an elevator down in the kidspace and the Zone. There is a sign in it saying, “The maximum capacity is 2,500 pounds.” If the maximum capacity is exceeded, you are going to be in trouble on that elevator. It will just quit. If we’re in a relationship and kind of turn our backs on Level 1 and just go to Level 2 and put all of this stuff, all these expectations and pressure on human relationships, they’re bound to fail. That

human relationship says, “maximum capacity 2,500 pounds,” we are putting thousands and thousands and thousands of pounds on humans, and we expect human beings to meet needs that only God can meet.

It’s no wonder we go through so many relationships. No wonder we go through so many marriages. You are expecting your spouse to meet needs only God can meet. You can’t put those kinds of expectations on your wife or your husband or your friend. I don’t know about you, but my friends can’t deliver me from evil. I don’t know about you, but my friends cannot answer my prayers. I don’t know about you, but my friends cannot forgive me of my sins, or guide me or lead me. Only God can.

If we forget that level 1 relationship with God, we become so intensive, so clingy and so whiney in human relationships, we put so much pressure on another person that we turn off the person we are trying to relate to. They end up saying, “Whoa, what’s up with you? Back off!” They push us away, and we feel rejected. Go back to Level 1. Our Savior has to be the source of our relational strength. When we connect with him, when we walk with him, when we talk with him, then we have some real power to bring to human relationships.

Way too many of us say, “I want to have deep relationships. I want to really, really connect with others.” A lot of us say that, but in reality we don’t really mean it. Most of us have superficial relationships. We have known people for a long, long time and we are still talking about the same stuff; the weather, sports, current events. We are fearful to really relate to them on a deep level. Why? Because we say to ourselves, “If they could really peruse the portfolio of my problems, they would reject me; they wouldn’t like me. They wouldn’t believe what I am dealing with or what I have done or what I am struggling with. They would totally keep me at arms length.”

That’s not true. That’s not true at all. If we would come clean and commit to God, Level 1, and commit to God, Level 2, and begin to share who we are with people, people would see they are struggling with the same thing, dealing with the same issue.

Are we serious about Level 2? What do we do? Do we really want those deep water relationships? Several suggestions. First, **Take regular relational risks.** Every time we take a relational risk, we are reflecting the character and nature of God. When we don’t, we are disobeying God. Proverbs 18:24, “**A man who has friends must himself be friendly**” (Proverbs 18:24, NKJV). If you want to have friends, ask yourself several questions. “What kind of friend would I like to have? Am I willing to **be** that kind of friend? Am I really willing to be that kind of friend?”

I make friends very slowly, but when I do, they’re deep and long-lasting. And I’ve realized over the years that if I want true friends I have to take relational risks.

You can’t just walk in here every Sunday, sit down week after week and then after a few months say, “No one talked to me. No one came up to me. The church is just not a friendly church. It is full of snobs.” Then go to another church and do the same thing, the same way. “No one talked to me. No one came up to me. I guess that church is just full of snobs. No one cares about me. You know, I want to relate to people. I want to talk to people but no one comes up to me.”

Please, let’s don’t give that weak stuff to God! Let’s take relational risks. Let’s step out. There is no telling what God will do through an ordinary you taking an ordinary relational risk. Gallop says that the average church member knows 67 people per church, whether the church has 150 people in it or 15,000 people. And the great thing about Saint Paul’s is that it is a large church. If you meet somebody and you don’t jell, you don’t mesh, that’s OK. Look at all the other opportunities there. And you can meet anybody and everybody here. You can meet teachers, mechanics, computer programmers, realtors, whatever.

I would hate to get to the end of my life and have God say, “Aaron, you know you did a pretty good job at doing this and doing that. However, I had so many relational opportunities for you at the church, but, Aaron, you just sat there and waited for people to come up to you. You just sat there and didn’t do a thing. You just sat there and didn’t take initiative. You just sat there. I wanted this person to help you. I was going to speak through this person in your life but you missed it.” The church is to be a social church. Am I just making this stuff up? Read about the early church in Acts 2. It says they met together in the temple courts, then they met from house to house.

Here is another suggestion. I am still talking about Level 2. This suggestion is one you rarely hear articulated in a church. Hospitality. We need to **Make hospitality happen**. Yes, we need to take regular relational risks, but also we need to make hospitality happen. In 1 Peter 4:9 it says, **“Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling” (1 Peter 4:9, NIV)**. I am talking about that initiative-taking, hand-shaking, house-warming, guest-comforting mentality that says, “Come on over, we’ll put some more water in the soup. Let’s have a good time.” That’s hospitality. Are you being hospitable?

Hospitality is having what you have and using it for the glory of God whether you live in a little apartment, or gigantic home. In fact it almost seems like, the bigger and nicer your house, sometimes the harder it is to open it up, to extend hospitality. “It would take me too long to clean it up.” “I can’t really cook that well.” “I don’t know what to say.” Just try it. Man, you are missing some great blessings from God Himself. The book of Hebrews says that often we entertain angels without even knowing it. We are commanded to practice hospitality.

Taking it a step deeper, many of us are only one step away from Level 2 community. **“Step into a small group”** I’m talking about a home group or an ongoing small group. A home group is a cluster of adults who meet in homes for fellowship and Bible study. These are awesome places to connect, to grow, to learn, to serve. Yes, we are commanded to come together and worship God in large groups like this, but true life-change takes place in a small group. We want to grow smaller while we grow larger. You might be thinking, “Well, Aaron, if I connect to a home group, they might ask me a question about the Bible. I don’t know that much about the Bible. They might put me on the spot.” No, they won’t. It’s really pretty awesome, it’s casual, but it’s life changing. Here in just three weeks we start another round of home groups, find your way into an existing one (we’ll help), or let us help you form one.

It’s important to build this connection before the crises of life hit us. We have to connect because of community. We have to connect because of the loneliness that we are feeling. We have to connect because of what we will bring to the small group table.

If you are lonely, for the most part, you are lazy. If you are lonely, get outside of yourself. I can’t take you by the arm and drag you into a home group. You have got to do it.

What are the fringe benefits of this stuff? Let me hit a couple of them right quick. Still talking about Level 2. It will deepen and mature you like nothing else. It will help you move outside yourself. It will deepen your faith. It will enable you to articulate your faith and welcome people. It will broaden your horizons. It’s in a home group, an ongoing small group, that you come to the crossroads, where people who are very different, but at the same time, very similar meet. It’s in my small group that I meet with people from very different walks of life. Different education levels, different economic statuses, different outlooks, and I may not always see eye to eye with everything, but I am a wiser, richer, deeper person because of it.

You want to do something that really makes an impression on your children? Do the Level 2 stuff. They will see you sharing your resources. They will see you helping one another. It will change them and deepen them forever.

I’ve got to stop here for today, but you don’t. When these fears of loneliness raise their ugly heads, you and I, we’ve got the tools to face them, to overcome them. We have the tools to connect to God, and to connect with others and defeat loneliness for good. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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