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The Genesis of Loneliness

AN ADAGE GOES, what can you know if you see a turtle on top of a post? Someone put it there. If an entire ranch had a turtle on every post, you could safely deduce that the rancher had a purpose. One could be a fluke. All of them indicate a purpose.

The reality of human loneliness is so pervasive and powerful, like the turtle, there must be a reason. A government agency produced a careful survey of who Americans are spending their time with. It turns out, mostly no one.

The 2020 pandemic exacerbated an already existing national health crisis. As I wrote this book, study after study was published saying the same reality: we are a crazy lonely society. One indicator shows that more Americans are living alone than ever.¹ Even our dining together isn't what it used to be, with Americans eating 40 percent of their meals alone.² A sociologist summarized the findings: "It's just a stunning social change. . . . I came to see it as the

biggest demographic change in the last century that we failed to recognize and take seriously.”³

Further, loneliness significantly diminishes us both emotionally and physically. Recent studies indicate a correlation between the number of social interactions and the health of our brains.⁴ People with fewer social connections had smaller brains; correlatively, those with more had larger brains. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania write, “Social isolation has been associated with . . . premature mortality, increased risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, increased reporting of depressive symptoms, as well as increased dementia risk.”⁴ Recent terms like “doomscrolling” (frenetic social media surfing of bad news) and “bed rotting” (a coping mechanism of isolation and obsessive media consumption) were neither heard of nor practiced in all of human history. While pathologies have always been with us, technology provides faux intimacies and perceived soul care as never before. Contemporary sociologists’ alarm bells ring consistent with the ancient story of humanity from the biblical text.

Actor Matthew Perry’s tragic death in his hot tub brought news reports of his profound loneliness. Perry made his fame and fortune acting on the show *Friends*. It was a massive comedy hit, not only for its humor but also for the camaraderie and community it depicted. In some ways it is a metaphor for friendships in the twenty-first century in which we often portray ourselves as having robust relationships and friend circles online, appearing to be fulfilled, while privately enduring relational emptiness.

Scripture tells the story of loneliness. Loneliness is one of the many consequences of the fall, when sin invaded humanity and has left brokenness and destruction in its wake ever since. Not that loneliness is a sin! One of my goals with this book is to help

you see loneliness as a consequence of humanity's fall into sin but not sin itself. It is a gracious gift from God that can draw us back to Him and others. Relational pain and strain weren't always a part of our story. The book of Genesis begins the story of loneliness with the account of God's creation of humanity.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:24–27)

Adam is God's final act of creation, indeed, His masterpiece. We know this because far greater detail is given about the how and why of Adam's creation than anything else God created. Note how the narrative slows down by providing the intra-Trinitarian contemplations regarding the creation of Adam.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

The roots of our present-day experience of loneliness are all found here. Notice the pronouns. "Then God [singular] said, 'Let us [plural] make man in our [plural] image.'" This is Trinitarian theology, the very first in Scripture. It hints at the singular nature of God and the plurality of persons within the Godhead. Scripture unveils this further in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one." Some have described it as the John 3:16 of Judaism. Every service in a Jewish synagogue begins with these

words, and faithful Jews quote them daily. The oneness of God is also a fundamental truth in Christianity.

On the surface it might not be apparent how this relates to loneliness, yet the essence of our loneliness is rooted in Trinitarian theology. Let's spend a little time in the deep end of the theology pool.

ONE IN NUMBER

How is God one? The oneness of God in number (monotheism) is the most obvious implication of the verse, also known as monotheism. Some verses in Scripture do seem to imply that there are other gods.⁵ However, these verses are not saying there actually are other gods; instead, they call for Israel to worship the One true God rather than the make-believe gods of the pagan world. God is not the best choice or the first of many gods; He is the One and only.

ONE IN UNITY/SIMPLICITY

Here, God's oneness takes us to the deep end of the doctrinal pool and points out an unintended error many Christians have in their view of God. Theologians call this the *simplicity of God*. That is not to say there is anything intellectually simple about God or that this concept is simple. Instead, the essence of God's being is simple. He is a singularity. He is an absolute unity of oneness. The classic definition is that God is not made up of any parts. Everything about God, and in God, is God.

Many people think about God and don't think about His essence but aggregate His attributes. God is love. God is spirit. God is power. Here is the danger: We can think about God as

we think about a recipe where God is a dash of this and a cup of that, and you mix it up, and out of the oven comes God. We easily compartmentalize God according to the attributes we prefer. When I was in seminary, I remember making this mistake on a paper or two. My professors went ballistic. I was failing on the simplicity of God because it is so easy to do.

God is not part this or part that. He is not merely “attribute this” and “attribute that.” When we do that, we deify the attribute itself, diminishing the actual God. The most common example of this is the love of God. Humans like love, and we quickly reduce God to this single attribute. Yes, He is love, but He is simple, a singularity.

Remember, all that God is, is God. His love is a holy love. His mercy is a just mercy, and His justice is a merciful justice. His power is a wise power. He is not a part; He is a whole, a unity. He is one. Article 1 of the famous Belgic Confession (1561) begins with: “That there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God.”⁶ This historic confession of doctrine starts with the principle of the simplicity of God. It is that important.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

If you come from a church background, you may be wondering how God is a unity if He is also triune. Here is the marvel of God’s essence. He is an absolute singularity, *and* He is a diversity. This sounds like double talk. The Lord is one, *and* the Lord is three. We call it the Trinity. Tri (three). Unity (one). The Old Testament hints at this—the Spirit hovering over the waters in creation, the fourth man in Daniel’s fiery furnace, messianic prophecies with an eternal throne. What is veiled in the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. There are many examples of the Trinity

in the New Testament, such as the Spirit conceiving Jesus in His mother, Mary, and the Father's words and Spirit's dovelike appearance at Jesus' baptism. None makes it more evident than Jesus' commission in Matthew 28:19, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

In what can only be described as a mystery, the singularity of God includes three distinct persons. There is only one God. Yet God is also an "us." A plurality. A community. God is a mysterious, simultaneous Oneness and Threeness. The emphasis in the Gospels is much more than the corporate organizational chart of God. It is the deep love between the Father, Son, and Spirit (theologians call this "perichoresis"). Their mutual passion is so abiding, eternal, and covenantal that the three are eternally one.

WHY DO I FEEL SUCH PROFOUND LONELINESS?

The story of human loneliness has its roots in the character of God and God's purpose in creating us.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. (Gen. 1:27–28)

The roots of our present-day experience of loneliness are all found right here. We were made in the likeness of a relational, communicating, and triune God. His social nature is hardwired into our nature. We were designed for relational fulfillment vertically with God and horizontally with other humans. Like God, these relationships are fulfilling by design to the extent that they

are harmonious. God's threeness is the paradigm for our social needs, and His oneness is the paradigm for human relationships marked by love and peace.

You know, like the old song says: "you don't know what you've got till it's gone."⁷ Loneliness is first theological before it is existential. Loneliness isn't the opposite of relational fulfillment. It is the absence of it. Loneliness is an experiential void and vacuum. Its pain is a backhanded compliment to the pleasure of what God originally designed.

We are on a crucial truth that I urge you to consider carefully. I know this is hard, as I have had seasons where I was drowning in loneliness. Ask God to renew your mind so that you may think differently about your loneliness. Our feelings generally flow from our knowings, at least what we believe is true about loneliness. Lou Priolo connects these dots:

**GOD'S THREENESS IS
THE PARADIGM FOR
OUR SOCIAL NEEDS,
AND HIS ONENESS
IS THE PARADIGM
FOR HUMAN
RELATIONSHIPS
MARKED BY LOVE
AND PEACE.**

You see, in order to change your feelings, you have to change your thoughts as well as your actions. So, I would like to suggest (as have others) that loneliness starts as a state of mind before it becomes a feeling. The way you think about being alone affects the way you feel about it. If, for example, you believe that to avoid being lonely you must always have another human being at your side, you are likely to be a very lonely person indeed.⁸

The depth of your loneliness signals the opposite height of your potential joy. Think of it like a swing. My young daughters love to swing and love me to push them as they swing. The higher, the better. I do a run-under to get them as high as possible. They squeal in delight as they swing to the opposite side equally high.

Let's be honest. Loneliness pain is acute. It can be overwhelming. Debilitating. Even life-threatening. Yet the pain can be part of the cure if we understand the pain like a swing; the greater the pain, the greater the potential pleasure. God made us to feel emotionally the absence of the presence of His purpose. I am convinced this is why we feel lonely in the manner we do.

In this way, loneliness is a gift from God. It is intended to prod us toward what is best for us. This is God's grace, and it applies both vertically and horizontally. The absence of a reconciled relationship with our Creator is spiritual pain, and the lack of meaningful relationships with others is social pain.

And the story of loneliness emerges in a garden.



Discussion Questions

- 1) How does the book of Genesis help your understanding of loneliness?
- 2) The author writes, “God’s threeness is the paradigm for our social needs, and His oneness is the paradigm for human relationships marked by love and peace.” How can you emulate God’s threeness and oneness in your relationships?
- 3) The focus of this book is viewing loneliness spiritually. How have you connected loneliness with your faith journey so far? How would you describe loneliness in spiritual terms?