

A Theological Reflection on Loneliness

Since its formation, The Salvation Army has been called to support and care for those in need, using Williams Booth's term 'heart to God and hand to man'. The Salvation Army's missional statement is to 'Love God and Love Others', and therefore there will be times that we are called to help and protect those in our care.

In this reflection we will consider scriptural truths that helps us understand how the Bible can speak into the lives of those who are experiencing loneliness and isolation.

'If God is real, why do I feel lonely?' This question has probably echoed in our minds on at least once in our lives, whether as a child or young adult. We can have a huge social network friend list or be in a crowd all day long, and still have this inner sense of creeping emptiness.

The prevailing theory of loneliness suggests that experiencing loneliness, and feeling disconnection from others, is a common consequence of marginalisation from society. Loneliness is a normal human emotion. Most of us experience it at some point in our lives, but when it becomes persistent – when we are lonely often, or all the time – it has serious consequences. The experience of loneliness is unequal: people who experience discrimination or disadvantage are at greater risk of persistent loneliness.

Today there are far more ways to connect with people than we can begin to understand. The more we try to connect, the more the disease of loneliness seems to spread. In both secular and governmental strategies, it has been identified that what we know is that the best proven steps to tackle loneliness include connection and relationship. It's not just proximity to others or communication with others, but a feeling of connection that must be made.

Loneliness is the most ancient invisible disease. Hidden in our hearts, it can eat away at any age. It can strike children who are sometimes left out at school. Husbands and wives have agendas so full they must schedule times to be with each other. Loneliness sometimes impacts those in later life who live in isolation.



Within the UKI Territory one of our hallmarks of mission talks of sharing the 'good news'.

We are not alone in our loneliness, but 'we can only tackle loneliness when we take on the full character of God'. We are passionately committed to sharing the good news of the gospel to inspire our congregations, communities and wider society that a personal relationship with Jesus is the only adequate and eternal response to loneliness.

What does the Bible say about Loneliness?

As early as in the first book, the Bible recognises the threat of loneliness. In Genesis 2:18, for example, amid the magnificence of creation, God says it is 'not good' for the man to be alone.

Secondly, the narratives and poems in the Bible show how common and complex loneliness is. Jeremiah experienced isolation when he distanced himself from his sinful peers (Jeremiah 15); elsewhere, people experience loneliness as part of God's judgement or restoration (Lamentations 1).

Beyond these Old Testament examples, even Jesus was not immune to the pain of loneliness. His closest companions abandoned him in his hour of greatest need. Part of the agony of the cross was his overwhelming feeling of abandonment; he cried out from the cross when he felt abandoned by his Father. It's remarkable to acknowledge that if Jesus expressed that he felt abandoned, it shows just how important it is to cultivate a language for loneliness and to remove the stigma of being alone. Feeling lonely and needing to talk about it doesn't make you a failure or a bad Christian. It's a reality of our human state and our vulnerability.

Psalm 102 is a helpful biblical reflection. After setting a scene of mental and physical distress, verses 6-7 say:

'I am like a desert owl, like an owl among the ruins. I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof.'

The roof setting is vitally important here because roofs in much of biblical times were often places to socialise, sleep and worship. The roof is an ideal place for portraying the full pain of loneliness. At the very moment the psalmist enters that place of human rhythms, company and worship, he realises just how lonely he is.

Psalm 102 also illustrates how loneliness can have a severe physical and mental impact.

In the ancient world, loneliness and death are two sides of the same coin. Modern psychological analysis echoes the diagnosis of the psalm: social isolation is not just an undesirable state of existence, but rather a threat to existence. Loneliness has a wide range of negative effects on individuals and societies. There is consistent evidence that it is associated with poorer health and increased risk of premature mortality. Further, loneliness correlates with the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke in adults (and, in older people, it increases physical frailty and the risk of developing dementia).

Bible verses may not themselves end loneliness, but they can help people become more comfortable with time spent alone.

Relationship – being fully known, understood and loved – is at the heart of the Christian faith. We believe that the God we love and worship has promised that he will always be there for us. Hebrews 13:5 says, *'...God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*



A Theological Reflection on Loneliness and Isolation



A passage in Psalm 139:7,8 says, 'Where can I flee from your (God's) presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there...'. In John 14:18, Jesus promises that he will not leave his followers 'as orphans'. Many Christians draw comfort from these assurances when they are faced with loneliness.

Some Christian responses to loneliness are along the lines of 'Jesus will always be with you'. In other words, 'You may feel alone, but you're not'. It's a point of discussion to acknowledge how unhelpful saying this may be for people who still feel lonely, and discussion around the reality of loneliness requires dedicated pastoral skill and relationship.

The Bible reminds us, however, that the feeling of loneliness is something everyone experiences; accepting and acknowledging that we have to cope with loneliness at certain times is important as is removing the stigma around the admittance of voicing our loneliness.

'In my distress I groan aloud and am reduced to skin and bones. I am like a desert owl, like an owl among the ruins. I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof' (Psalm 102:5-7). The voice of the lonely bird in verse 7 can be the first step to articulating and acting upon our loneliness.

This image holds within it the hope of a new-found freedom, of soaring again with the flock. But this text is not only for the lonely: it calls all who read this to look beyond the edge of their nests and to notice the lonely birds that sit all around them.

When a local corps/centre is functioning well, the fellowship of believers is very often the 'glue' that binds people together and helps build stronger communities – a place of mutual love, support, encouragement, and friendship. It is also a place to serve, by nurturing our disciples to use skills to help others both within the church and outside in pastoral integrity across the community and wider society. This shared sense of purpose can be a positive influence in the lives of people facing the prospect of being alone and lonely.

The inclusive community of believers is for everyone, which means that each individual has a place in the fellowship of believers. Having a sense of belonging to the community and fellowship will hopefully ease the loneliness some may feel, and the best example of this to follow is found in Acts 2:42-44 where we read of the first church and how they fellowshiped together. Surely following this biblical teaching is the best way to approach loneliness and isolation.

'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer ... All the believers were together and had everything in common' (Acts 2:42,44).