

LONELINESS IS MEANINGLESS-
THE VALUE OF FRIENDSHIP

Ecclesiastes 4: 7 - 12

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24th June 2018



Many years ago, I was leading a church youth camp. In a questionnaire I asked the young people to list their greatest concern. What do you think the result was? Approximately 70% listed their main concern was loneliness. This may come as a surprise to some. But it is no surprise to many others. Our cities have more and more people. But the greater the crowd, the greater the loneliness. Despite all our social media people are starving for real connection. Hugh MacKay writes '...thanks to our rate of relationship breakdown, our shrinking households, our busy lives, ...and our ever-increasing reliance on information technology, we are a more fragmented society than we have ever been...we are in the grip of an epidemic of anxiety.' There are a lot of lonely people whose simplest desire is a friend who will acknowledge and affirm them. Mother Teresa said, 'The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved.' It may surprise you who is lonely. It doesn't just involve those who are different or on the fringes. Even in the church there a plenty who are lonely. And not just those on the outer circle. It can also be those who are most involved in the church. Once at a minister's fraternal a minister and his wife from another denomination shared how lonely they were. During the three years they had been in that church they had only been invited out for tea once. They ministered to many, but almost no one ministered to them.

A few years ago, a newspaper columnist named Marla Paul published a column in which she revealed her frustration over her lack of friendships. 'The loneliness saddens me,' she wrote. 'How did it happen that I could be forty-two years old and not have enough friends?' She goes on, 'I think there are women out there who don't know how lonely they are. It's easy enough to fill up the day with work and family. But no matter how much I enjoy my job and love my husband and child, they are not enough.' When this column appeared, letters poured in from housewives, executives, and university professors saying, 'I've had the exact same experience.' One person said, 'I've often felt that I'm standing outside looking through the window of a party to which I was not invited.' As Marla later wrote, 'They wanted to share their frustration and estrangement. All were tremendously relieved to discover they weren't the only ones.' And it's not only women who have this problem. If anything, men have more difficulty forming and maintaining friendships. Professor Damien Ridge, who specialises in

men's wellbeing, says 'Friendships often drift in mid-life, because it's hard to stay in contact and your interests change... You have to work at friendships, as you do in a relationship with a partner...Loneliness in older men is a real issue, and many men in their 30s already show signs of heading that way. Compared with women, the men who see me for psychotherapy are emotionally isolated. I'm sometimes the only person they've opened up to.' He recognises similar traits in himself: 'At a time in my life when I'm busy, I have to try really hard to keep friendships.'

The teacher in Ecclesiastes understood these feelings about loneliness. That is what he speaks about in our text. He says there was a man "...*all alone*". Now the Teacher has well pointed out so far, the limited value of human wisdom, of wealth and pleasure, as well as the frustration of work. In fact, he insists all these things, done 'under the sun', without God, are 'meaningless'. His constant repetition that everything is just 'a bag of wind' can be very depressing. But, when all is said and done, the thing that can make us despair the most is loneliness. Life can be tough, but if we have friends to help us through, we can make it. It is the despair of loneliness that most of all brings us to the edge, and the feeling that life is pointless. As someone said 'The hardest walk is walking alone...' It seems the writer may have known the feeling from personal experience. The words in verse 8 sound autobiographical. (Ecclesiastes 4:7-8) "*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!*" Some commentators judge the man here as greedy. That is, he is lonely because he avoided people and wanted to keep all his wealth for himself. But I think this verse is best interpreted in its plain reading "...*there was a man all alone because he had neither son nor brother*". The man, it seems, had no close relatives. And that was a far greater problem in those days than today. We stress our identity as individuals. In our post-modern world, each person has their own opinion. They do what they want and see themselves as the most important person in the world. But in the writer's time, in the Middle east, a person's identity was established by their membership in a family and their tribe. An individual with no family or clan lost their place in society. So, this man was very lonely. The man buries himself in this work. The Teacher says "...*there is no end to his toil...*" Because of all his work he amasses a great fortune. But the money and property do not satisfy him: "...*yet his eyes were not content with his wealth*". That's because what his heart yearned for, like ours, like all human beings, is love, companionship and being affirmed. The man has great wealth, but no one to love, no one to share it with. "*For whom am I toiling, and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment*".

So, because of his loneliness he finds life, and all his toil "... *meaningless- a miserable business...*" You can have everything but if you are lonely it is a miserable business! Just think of celebrities who seem to have it all but are so lonely at the top. How many have died far too early, often with drug overdoses? But then, think of ourselves. Too often we are so busy working that we have no time for relating! Forming friendships is made difficult by the hectic pace of the world we live in. We're running from work, to sports practice, to piano lessons, to grocery shopping, to home. Then we have a quick dinner, often with several family members not present. And then we log onto the computer to do the work we didn't get finished at the office or head out to a church meeting. We don't know our neighbours. So many of our relatives live halfway across the country. Put all this together, and you can understand why we often feel disconnected. I remember a few years ago running a 'Friendship Evangelism program'. An elder said in frustration 'I have no time to form friendships. I don't even have time to spend with the few friends I have, let alone form new friends to evangelise'.

The thing is, God created us as social creatures. He made us to live in families and communities. The point of a community is to commune and not just pass each other on the way to work. Each of us has a built in, created feeling for companionship. We are made in God's image, who is himself, a communal being. He is three in one. That's why the Bible says, (1 John 4:8) "*God is love*". Because he is a community. Dallas Willard said, 'God's aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with himself included as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.' Our life and our work have meaning by our relation to others. We need this sense of acceptance, of being part of a group; of belonging. When that is removed, we feel useless, unwanted, unneeded. That is at the heart of the pain of the poor and of the unemployed. It can also be a real problem for certain groups of people who become isolated from life, like the elderly. In a study of 1,600 seniors 43 percent of participants reported being lonely. It was found they were more likely to die or suffer a decline in health over a six-year period than their non-lonely counterparts. Many of them described feeling 'out of sync' and disconnected from society.

Now in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, the writer lists the blessings of friendship. He notes how friendship takes away the ache of loneliness. And it puts meaning and joy into our lives. He lists four very practical things. First (Ecclesiastes 4: 9) "*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour*". In other words, work that friends do with each other achieves more. For example, working together as friends gets more done in our church working bees, and with more enjoyment. More so, than one person on their own. Friends, working together on each other's property, get the work done in half the time. And they have a great time, sharing ideas, problems and laughter.

Second (Ecclesiastes 4: 10), *"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"*. From my bushwalking experience in Tasmania, I found the value of this. The rule was you never walked alone; two was the bare minimum. Three was better. If you fell while walking on your own in the rugged Tasmania terrain you could be in a very dangerous situation. Those of us who have fallen ill and had friends to help with the work, bring a meal, care for the family, know the joy it brings. Those who have been depressed, know the blessing of a friend who has encouraged them. Those who have fallen because of their sin know the tears of joy when a friend has shown them the grace and forgiveness of God. Job (Job 6:14) says, *"A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty"*. If we in our despair give up on God, it is so good to have a friend who won't give up on us. As our text says: *"... pity a person who has no such friend!"*

Third, (Ecclesiastes 4: 11), *"Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm."* The idea here is that a friend is a strength in a situation of crisis. For example, imagine two friends caught in a blizzard while hiking in the mountains. By sharing their body warmth, they can stay alive. In other words, friends help us to survive! Finally, (Ecclesiastes 4: 12), *"Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."* The idea here is that friends provide security. We might be walking a dark street together. Or coping with the pressures of life. A friend is one who sticks by us, who defends us. Even when it seems the whole world is against us. Proverbs 17:17 says: *"A friend loves at all times."* When criticism is flying from all directions, our friends stick up for us. When we have lost a job or a loved one, the friend is there, being our strength. Says the writer, if we understand that one friend is good, then we will realize that having two is even better: *"A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."*

Now the Teacher has well pointed out how meaningless it is when we are lonely. And he has shown, in very practical terms, how friendship brings meaning and joy. That is the ideal. But where is the ideal friend? Many of us have good friends and thank God for them! Others do not have a real friend and long for one. Where do we find the ideal friend? The Teacher does not say! He has made it clear how often we fail when we live 'under the sun', life without God. Like in so much of this book the Teacher is driving us towards someone. He is pointing to the one who will provide for our all needs. Like the whole Old Testament, he is pointing his readers to the Christ. Jesus is the one who answers our ultimate need for a true friend. He said (John 15:13-14) *"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends..."* Jesus is the one who has dealt with the cause for our loneliness. Because of the human rebellion against God, we have broken our relationship with God. And as a result, alienated ourselves from God, each other, and even ourselves and the creation. Ultimately, that's why we feel lost and alone. But through Christ there is forgiveness.

We are restored in our relationship with God. Jesus is our closest friend. He is always there for us. He is always caring, defending, protecting. God has promised (Hebrews 13:5) *"Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you."* The wonderful thing is, as we said with the Small Group Festival, the closer we get to Jesus, the closer we get to each other. He binds us together. Jesus, through his body, provides us with the resource for the friendship and support we need. He said, (John 15:14) *"You are my friends if you do what I command...that you love one another as I have loved you."* So, give thought to each other in our church. Who could do with friendship and support? Plan this week to make a visit, or phone call. Write a letter or email of support. Invite someone. It doesn't need to be 'Guess who is coming to lunch' Sunday. Make a point of praying for someone. Let them know you are. Go up to someone after this morning's service, someone you don't know, and introduce yourself. Keep doing it each week. One of the greatest things we need in life is a friend. If we believe Jesus is our friend and will remain so for eternity. No matter what. Let's be that to each other.