

Ministers of Loneliness

Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 2

Ecclesiastes 4:9-16

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

God never intended for any believer to follow Him in isolation or in private; He designed followers of Christ to thrive in community through the body of the Church. However, loneliness is a growing problem in both the church and the world today. Even back in ancient times, Solomon dealt with this same challenge when he penned his journal called Ecclesiastes, and through the wisdom of God he conveys that priorities in life should be given to people rather than possessions to combat this lonesome epidemic. Christians should reach out and serve others in the church, as well as to the lonely world around us. We could all use the benefits gained from godly relationships and friendships.

Discussion Points:

God never designed the human race to live in isolation, but the enemy does his best to separate believers from each other. Our culture, through the advent of technology and social media, has further driven a wedge between meaningful relationships, causing loneliness to become a modern epidemic.

- Why does England creating an official Minister of Loneliness position reflect the dire nature of loneliness?
- This problem isn't new. How does Genesis and the miracle of Creation show that God's concern is that humans are not alone?
- What experiences have you or someone that you know had regarding loneliness? Was the experience positive or negative? Why?

Solomon claims four benefits in engaging in friendships. Relationships with others can provide the benefits of assistance when assignments are tiring, encouragement when strength is failing, support when hope begins weakening, and reinforcements when life becomes threatening.

- When it comes to many of our assignments in the life, how can another set of hands from a friend be far better than working alone?
- Whenever we struggle, stumble, or fall physically or spiritually, why do we need someone who will not walk away but help us back on our feet?
- Where in scripture does it state the benefits of relationships? Create a list as you study the scriptures.

Discussion Guide Cont.

Going it alone is not the way God set things up.

- Why does the author of Hebrews scold believers who were forsaking the assembly and refusing to encourage and serve the body (*Hebrews 10:24-25*)?
- Where or in what capacity do you serve or encourage or support or assist or reinforce another believer?
- What does it tell us about God's character that He designed us for fellowship?

Gospel Connection:

Jesus Christ not only provides salvation from sin, He gives us the gift of fellowship with the Trinity. Jesus is the ultimate faithful friend of sinners and desires to be part of your life.

Practical Implications:

Think: Are you reaching out to be a friend to others or are you waiting on others to become interested in you?

Pray: Thank God for His design for friendships and the gift of the Body of Christ, the Church. Ask Him to open your eyes for ways to be a friend and fill a need for those around you.

Do: Tell someone this week that Jesus is the ultimate faithful friend of sinners, and, because you belong to Jesus, you will be their friend as well.

Ministers of Loneliness

Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 2

Ecclesiastes 4:9-16

Researchers created a scenario where a group of people would form a circle and play a game of catch with a small ball; the participants are told to try and keep the ball from hitting the ground. They began their game of catch; however, one woman in that circle was unaware that the other participants had been told never to pass the ball to her. The ball was tossed randomly from one person to another around the circle – but not to her. She appeared patient at first. She laughed when the others laughed and smiled when they smiled. But as the game progressed and the ball never came her way, her smile eventually vanished. She edged a little further into the circle to draw attention. When that didn't work, she eventually dropped her hands, pretending she no longer wanted to play or try to catch the ball.

After numerous scenarios like this and interviews afterward with the person who was left out, the researchers discovered that the ostracized person began to believe that in their entire lives, not just during the game but categorically, they were unwanted and their lives were meaningless and without purpose. The author went on to apply the scenario to the reality of life – that our world is filled with people waiting for someone to throw them a smile, a simple hello, or to drop by or give them a call. People are lonely and longing for some small sign that they are not meaningless and without purpose.

One study I read recently recorded that the average middle-aged person and older was in contact with a family member or friends barely one time a week, sometimes less. The lack of family or friendship, in a word – loneliness, has become what many are now calling a societal epidemic.

I clipped an article out of World Magazine two years ago where the Prime Minister of England said in an interview that loneliness is the sad reality of modern life and it must be addressed. Loneliness is now undeniably linked to heart disease and a host of other physical diseases and mental issues. The Prime Minister then announced the creation of a new government position entitled, “The Minister of Loneliness”. That did not mean it was his job to be lonely; it meant that this minister and his office staff were commissioned to find ways to combat the epidemic of loneliness.ⁱ

This problem isn't new. All that way back in Genesis, everything God created in chapter 1, God summarized by saying, “*And it was good and it was good.*” Long before sin entered that perfectly created Garden of Eden, in fact just before Eve was fashioned by God from Adam's rib, God identified something that *wasn't* good and made the startling statement – *It is not good that man should be alone* (Genesis 2:18). I always find that fascinating because, for starters, Adam had God. He wasn't alone. They were taking evening walks together. But God said that Adam was alone.

What God specifically meant was that Adam didn't have a counterpart, a companion – a wife, and, with that, God custom designed Eve as the first living female and brought her to him. God introduced Adam to the fellowship of marriage, but He also stated a principle for life – that life was never intended by God for anyone to live in isolation. Whether it is the intimate partnership of marriage, the fellowship of another believer, or the buddy system on the school field trip when you were in third grade, relationships are one of God's greatest gifts in combating everything from heart disease to loneliness.ⁱⁱ

Whether married or single, young or old, we were never meant by God to experience life

alone.ⁱⁱⁱ And maybe you are in need of the kind of friendships we will discuss in this session today.

Dale Carnegie famously said a generation ago that you can make more friends in two months by showing interest in other people than you can in two years by trying to get people interested in you.

The truth is, the enemy has not stopped since Eve and her temptation until today in attempting to isolate people from one another, to pull you away and bring you down, to convince us to wait on someone else to take the initiative and throw the ball. It can happen in marriage, in the business world, in the family, and certainly in the church.

If you will turn in your copy to *Ecclesiastes*, Solomon has just finished describing the lonely life of the self-centered miser; Ebenezer Scrooge we called him. He is alone, self-absorbed, competitive while racing along in his mad pursuit for more. He becomes the epitome of loneliness. And following that, Solomon really doesn't break his train of thought but immediately begins to commend and encourage relationships with one another.

Look in *chapter 4*; notice what Solomon writes in *v. 9*:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him – a threefold cord is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

These happen to be wonderful principles for a marriage relationship. You have the principle of provision, the principle of partnership, and the principle of protection. A good marriage isn't two people competing but two people cooperating in God's assignments that are

unwrapped over the course of a lifetime. And the reason people assume that Solomon is talking about marriage is because of the phrase that ***if two lie together, they keep warm***. But Solomon is not only providing principles about marriage but about life, and relationships and community, and fellowship and friendships, in general.

It struck me after studying this passage that, in a very real sense, every husband, every wife, every parent, every single person, every widowed person, every young person, and every older person in the body of Christ has been appointed by our Lord to serve in His cabinet as Ministers of Loneliness. We address the epidemic . . . we happen to be the cure.

Together is God's solution to loneliness.^{iv}

Just listen to this list of commands from the New Testament which address this epidemic that was just as real in the First Century as it is today. We are told to:

- rejoice with one another (*Romans 12:15*)
- serve one another (*Galatians 5:13*)
- forgive one another (*Ephesians 4:32*)
- encourage one another (*1 Thessalonians 5:11*)
- offer hospitality to one another (*1 Peter 4:9*)
- pray for one another (*James 5:16*)
- carry one another's burdens (*Galatians 6:2*)

So what does this look like in shoe-leather, out there in the world where we live and rub shoulders with one another?

Solomon delivers in this paragraph four practical ways you can make this happen. Let's call them the benefits of godly friendships and relationships. The first benefit is:

Assistance When Assignments are Tiring

Go back to *verse 9*:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.
(Ecclesiastes 4:9).

This is homespun and rather obvious advice. Solomon is following up on his comments in the previous verses about the man who worked by himself, benefitting no one and enjoying nothing. Scrooge never laughs.

Solomon doesn't say here that you can never work alone; he is just stating the obvious that another pair of hands "cuts the load in half and doubles the output."^v Solomon promises that you will have *a good reward*. That word for *reward* can be material blessings, but it will be used later by Solomon to refer to spiritual blessings (9:5).^{vi} You have probably discovered both physical and spiritual blessings at the same time by tackling a project with other believers. Perhaps you cleaned someone's home or joined a group to make meals for others. Maybe you joined a service project where you traveled a long distance, or you and your teammates have undertaken difficult work, like swinging hammers and slinging mortar. It wasn't easy, so why was it, in the end, so enjoyable? Because, as one author wrote, "Work is a sacrament of sweat by which God reconciles us to one another."^{vii}

When it comes to many of our assignments in the life, a friend who comes along and offers another set of hands is far better than working alone. Solomon adds that the second benefit of godly friendships is:

Encouragement When Strength is Failing

Notice *verse 10*:

*For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow.
But woe to him who is alone when he
falls and has not another to lift him up!*
(Ecclesiastes 4:10).

Solomon is describing the moment when someone falls. He is imagining two friends walking along when one of them trips or falls, and he's too hurt to get back on his feet by himself. And it's not just some little stumble out in the woods. The first entire commentary we have on record on the Book of Ecclesiastes was

first published in 213 A.D. by a church leader named Gregory. This 3rd century church leader writes that Solomon is referring to someone who has experienced a great misfortune in life.^{viii} Something incredibly difficult has literally brought him to his knees.

Solomon warns here, *Woe to him who is alone* when this happens. The word for *woe* is a reference to someone in peril. The Hebrew word carries the connotation of danger and warning.

Whenever we struggle or fall physically, or even more broadly as Solomon implies, whenever we fail or stumble in life, we need someone who will not walk away but help us back on our feet.^{ix}

The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers living in Galatia that when someone was tripped up or ensnared, having fallen into sin or failing in their spiritual walk, those in the fellowship who were alert and spiritual prepared were to help him get back up on his feet (*Galatians 6:1*).

Solomon isn't casually suggesting that this kind of companionship is a good idea and that you would be better off if you tried it out; he's actually saying you're in danger without it.^x

The minister of loneliness offers encouragement to those whose strength is failing. But there is a third benefit of godly relationships:

Support When Hope Begins Weakening

Look at *verse 11*:

*Again, if two lie together, they keep
warm, but how can one keep warm
alone?* (Ecclesiastes 4:11).

At first glance this sounds like the marriage bed, and it can certainly apply unless, of course, your spouse has cold feet, then it doesn't work so well. But the immediate context is of two people who are either working together or traveling together. In fact, every commentator I read on this text all comment that Solomon is describing the typical culture of his day where

two traveling companions huddle through the night – the more the merrier! Certainly two is better than one.

The Australian aborigines had a phrase for sleeping outdoors in cold nights as a three-dog-night; in other words, it is so cold out in the open that it is going to take three dogs to keep you warm. It's a three-dog-night. If you are old enough, when you hear the phrase three-dog-night you might think of that rock group from the 1960's. They were originally a three member band and they took their name Three Dog Night from that every Australian phrase.^{xi} You are probably wondering how I would know this. Well, I read it in a book. I really did! When I was growing up I never listened to their music - without getting into trouble.

Now, back to Solomon! In Solomon's day, travelers slept out in the open beside the road. The Palestinian nights would be cold and they would lie back to back generating heat and surviving the night.^{xii}

In the first commentary by Gregory that I've mentioned already, he takes the verb translated *lying down* to refer to living together.^{xiii} This isn't just good traveling advice, this is wisdom for life. When times are hard, when the cold winds of opposition and trouble blow, when hope and assurance grows weak, these are the times when we can grow numb to the work of God and the word of God. God seems far away. We need the warmth of a friend whose words and comforts, encouragements, exhortations and reminders warm our souls and fire back up our hope.^{xiv}

The final benefit to godly relationships provide:

Reinforcement When Life Becomes Threatening

Solomon writes in *verse 12*:

And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him – a threefold cord is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

Some see the Trinity here in the reference to a threefold cord. This is not a reference to the Trinity, although the Trinity is a biblical doctrine. Others see this as a marriage partnership that includes the Lord as the third party. That is a true and wonderful picture of any godly marriage and other scriptures support that idea, but Solomon isn't saying here that a threefold cord can't be broken, rather that it can't *easily* be broken. Again, he is simply giving some more obvious, down-to-earth advice.

Isaiah used the same word Solomon used here for easily broken to refer to tent cords that were snapped by an army who would take the people into captivity. The word for being broken has a military sense of being defeated.^{xv} So if you are under attack physically or, more broadly, under spiritual attack, it's critical to have reinforcements who will watch your back, lift you up in prayer, and remind you of the promises of God's word. And what could be better than one loyal friend like that, but two, and the three of you will more than likely be difficult to overcome.

Simply put, there is safety in numbers!^{xvi} In fact, if one isn't as safe as two and two isn't as strong as three, how about 100 or 200 or 3,000? This is Solomon's commendation of community. This advice is the antidote to what Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship and now with the Lord, called the dangerous virus of radical individualism which has infected Christians to act as if all that matters is "Jesus and me." In doing so, they miss the point altogether; Christianity was never intended to be a solitary [experience].^{xvii}

This virus isn't new, and the danger to pull away from the church is still as real today as it was in the Apostle's era. How do we know? Because the writer of Hebrews had to scold believers who were forsaking the assembly and thus refusing to encourage and serve the body (*Hebrews 10:24-25*).

Paul had to reinforce humility in serving one another by reminding the church in Corinth that

they weren't random believers floating through life but actual gifted appointed members of a local church which was much like a physical body with feet and hands and eyes and ears (*I Corinthians 12:14*); he scolded them as well for saying to other believers, "I have no need for you" (*verse 21*).

The Apostle Paul describes an encounter with a minister of loneliness when he admitted to the Corinthian church that he had been *depressed*, translated "downcast", which sounds more spiritual (*2 Corinthians 7:6*). Paul was in the thick of the fight on the front lines; he writes that he was fighting afflictions without and fear within, and then he says, "*God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.*"

What brought Paul out of his downcast and depressed spirit? It wasn't another verse; it wasn't another book; it wasn't planting another church; it wasn't a gift of money; it wasn't listening to another sermon; it was the arrival of another believer. A reinforcement named Titus arrived when life for Paul had become threatening, difficult, depressing, and dangerous. Titus couldn't do that for Paul without showing up!

Where do we show up to serve or encourage or support or assist or reinforce another believer? Beloved, New Testament Christianity is not just about believing, it is about belonging.

Have you ever thought about the fact that our world longs for what the gospel offers and the church demonstrates? The church is the antidote to isolation. The local community of believers is described in the Bible as a family, a physical body, a wedding party, and a fellowship.

Going It Alone

Solomon wraps up this chapter by making up a parable which serves as his closing illustration of the danger of going it alone.^{xviii}

Notice verse 13:

Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice (Ecclesiastes 4:13).

In other words, this old king had become isolated on his throne; he wasn't about to listen to anybody any longer. Notice the phrase, ***he no longer knew how to take advice***. That's another way of saying he didn't have anybody close enough to him to tell him the honest truth. He's reached the pinnacle of power, only to be stranded there alone and lonely at the top.^{xix}

Verse 14:

[This wise youth] went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor (Ecclesiastes 4:14).

This is a rags to riches parable – here is a poor young man who has been in debtor's prison but by his wisdom and his wits he wins the approval of the masses and before you know it, he deposes the old king who never saw it coming.

Now ***verse 15:***

I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. But now look what happens – There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind (Ecclesiastes 4:15-16).

In other words, the masses eventually got tired of this new king too. He also became isolated, without friends, and the next in the long line of kings to lose their throne. It is as if Solomon is saying, in summary, crowds are going to be fickle, friends are going to remain faithful.

Perhaps you are thinking, "Man, I wish I had faithful friends like that." Well, let me encourage you with the words of one author who challenged my thinking – he wrote: I went out to look for a friend and they were nowhere; I

went looking for someone who needed a friend and they were everywhere.^{xx}

So, don't give your priority to possessions or to power or to prosperity - give your priority to people.^{xxi} Accept your appointment as a Minister of Loneliness, reaching and serving your church, other believers, and taking every

opportunity God brings you to reach a very lonely world around you.

Tell someone this week that Jesus is the ultimate faithful friend of sinners, and because you belong to Jesus, you will be their friend as well.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/19/2020 by Stephen Davey.

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i World Magazine, *Quotables*, February 17, 2018, p. 12

ii Adapted from David A. Hubbard, *The Preacher's Commentary: Volume 16* (Thomas Nelson, 1991), p. 123

iii Wayne C. Kellis, *Life Under the Sun* (Westbow Press, 2017), p. 81

iv Adapted from Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Crossway, 2010), p. 115

v John Phillips w/Jim Hastings, *Exploring Ecclesiastes* (Kregel, 2019), p. 150

vi Hubbard, p. 123

vii David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Integrity, 2004), p. 94

viii John Jarick, translator; Gregory Thaumaturgos *Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* (Scholars Press, 1990), p. 96

ix Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge* (IFL, 1986), p. 43

x Kellis, p. 83

xi Jeremiah, 96

xii Milton P. Horne, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes* (Smyth & Helwys, 2003), p. 443

xiii Gregory, p. 97

xiv Adapted from Ryken, p. 116

xv R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament: Vol. II* (Moody Press, 1980), p. 610

xvi Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes* (P&R Publishing, 2014), p. 102

xvii Charles Colson, *The Body* (Word Publishing, 1992), p. 33

xviii Adapted from Hubbard, p. 124

xix O'Donnell, p. 105

xx Adapted from Don Givens, *Storms of Life* (Xulon Press, 2008), p. 66

xxi Adapted from Givens, p. 68