

The Lie of Loneliness

by Brian Coatney

Loneliness drives much of human behavior. When I was in high school, in the days before the Internet and hundreds of television channels, the telephone brought a little comfort, but after a few hours of sitting around, I needed company, even if that only meant going to someone else's house and sitting around bored with that person—wondering together what everyone else was doing. In the 1960s, the boulevard offered very little, but driving around Jerry's Drive-In Restaurant once or twice an hour after ten o'clock provided some connection with who was with whom. Dating offered some relief, but that still meant going home alone. What would ever fill that inner longing?

Genesis records that God saw Adam's loneliness and created Eve as his companion. Did she meet his need? The Bible does not offer much hope that romance and marriage satisfy loneliness. When Jesus shocked his disciples with the standard for marriage—that a man not put away his wife except for fornication—His disciples answered, "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry" (Matt. 19:10). As a young man I found the disciple's view a cynical one, still myself infatuated with the hopes I grew up on in fairy tales, television, and movies. The disciples operated from the familiar legislation of Moses that allowed husbands to put away their wives because of displeasure with them, leaving them open to find a new wife. On and on the succession might go, and so it is today. Lose one, find another; get rid of one, get on a high with another.

Many conservative Christians think that the answer lies in finding the right mate, the one of God's leading, and that this will terminate loneliness. I have to say that this was not my experience, though I prize scriptures such as Proverbs 31 and Prov. 18:22, "Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor of the Lord." Then there is Prov. 19:14, "A prudent wife is from the Lord." Add to that the overwhelming celebration of the Song of

Solomon, and the case appears fixed for marriage as the answer to loneliness.

Jesus' disciples knew, however, that things are not so simple, and they had dispensed with the ideal; they had discarded the Hollywood parade of living by endless relationships. If Adam and Eve had everything together in Paradise, why did they look elsewhere for meaning? Surely Pascal was right when he said that there is a God-shaped vacuum in every heart, and only God can fill it.

I found this true. After an exciting courtship and start to my marriage, surprise hit me early when low level depression crept in. I hungered for a spirituality that I had started out on and then forgotten during the energized time of my courtship. My wife and I searched the Bible and began to look for the answers in it. This helped a lot, but our pursuit of happiness by trying to keep God's law only made us increasingly aware of our inability to keep those laws. One day, reading I John 5:3—"and his commandments are not grievous (burdensome)"—I blurted out, "That's a lie." I was caught. By my mouth I professed that I believed God's word to be inerrant; by in my spontaneous heart cry, I found myself struggling to really believe the scripture.

God has his way of boxing us in. Jesus' disciples had caught this, and noted psychiatrist M. Scott Peck in his best seller *The Road Less Traveled* voices it in our day with the riveting three-word sentence that begins his book: "Life is difficult." What is the answer? At first I was not prepared to hear it, still confirmed for years in my own efforts to live the Christian life, until finally, after bottoming out, I could really hear the truth that the Christian life is not we living it, but Christ living it in us. I had not wanted to accept that God created us to contain and re-express His nature of self-giving love as opposed to Satan's nature of self-for-self love that enslaved us as non-Christians and still kept us in bondage in our days of carnality as Christians.

Finally I could see Christ in me! Praise His name. At that moment, loneliness disappeared forever except for occasional moments of temptation and maybe an occasional foolish visit to the old badlands of loneliness. But I have to confidently say that in the

last nine years, loneliness has not troubled me. God tested this knowing through almost five years of marital separation after an initial two years of separation. The initial two years I lived crazy, but then when I saw my completeness in Christ, I knew I had reached home. The Lord popped a saying into my mind one day, "Christ plus nothing." I lived on that through years of solitude, but not years of loneliness. I would often tell people who said, "You need a life," something that surprised them: "I don't believe in loneliness anymore." And then I would tell them why.

I also stopped using the word relationship except with reference to God, saying, "I have only one relationship—with God, but I have fellowship with others. That got me plenty of curious or upset looks along the way. But this is scriptural, for Col. 3:4 says that Christ is our life; he is our very life. He doesn't give us life; He is our life.

Do I have a good marriage? Yes. But the secret came in desiring for my wife to have only one relationship for herself—with the same one I had come to know. As she stepped into this, she and I met in Him and out of our union with Him we united in a life of expressing the life of Christ in us.

At times, I think, "What would I do without her?" But then the Lord makes me know again that He alone is my life, as He is the life of every believer, whether or not that believer has discovered the secret. But we can only appropriate what we know. Our true marriage is to God, and in that marriage, loneliness can find no place. This is the simple truth of Christianity for any open to discover it. Loneliness can drive you there if you let it. Those living by the law will do as Moses allowed for those hardened of heart. Those questing all the way will find an inner dance, even in their deepest suffering that completely satisfies.