

REST IN CHRIST

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Restless 24-7

John's schedule was always full, yet you could always depend on him to squeeze in one more appointment. He was a well-liked, hard-working department director who was married to a beautiful woman. As a father of two young boys, John never had a dull moment. Soccer practice, fishing trips with his sons, dinners at the golf club, and yachting with his wife on weekends kept him busy. Yet no one could have known that John had to keep the busyness going. If he stopped for even a moment, the dull ache of loneliness would threaten to drown out any meaning in his life.

Issue—when busyness cannot save us from loneliness

We live in a world that is constantly in the “on” mode. We are busy 24-7. Our jobs demand continual engagement. Our families need attention. Add to that a good dose of social media and the ever-demanding rhythms of living in our connected world, and we eventually find ourselves physically and emotionally exhausted.

One would imagine that the increased availability of digital connections and our ability to travel easily would help us to find community and balance. Unlike our grandparents, who often grew up in small

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communities or long-established neighborhoods where everyone knew everyone, we often feel lonely and—in spite of our many digital connections—disconnected. Busyness is not an antidote for loneliness.

Research has shown that loneliness affects a growing swath of people. In the United Kingdom, nearly 20 percent of the population say they are always or often lonely.¹ In the United States, between 25 and 60 percent of older Americans are lonely, especially Americans fifty and over.² Loneliness, however, affects many beyond the older population groups. According to a Viceland UK census, loneliness is the number one fear of young people today—ranking ahead of losing a home or a job.³

Loneliness can be destructive, devastating, and even deadly—especially when it is not immediately visible. Who could have known that John, who was constantly busy at work and at home, really felt disconnected and lonely and tried to use his busyness as a means of overcoming the ultimate sense of being alone?

Loneliness is not linked to a particular personality trait, like being an introvert or an extrovert. Introverts and extroverts (and any other personality types) may relate differently to loneliness, yet we are all touched negatively by the experience of loneliness.

The impact of loneliness on our health is staggering. Being lonely has a health risk factor equivalent to smoking fifteen cigarettes per day, shortening one's life span by eight years.⁴ The mortality rate of lonely people increases significantly, in line with other high risk factors, such as cancer and neurodegenerative diseases.⁵ Preliminary research also suggests a close link between loneliness and cardiovascular problems.⁶ While living in a 24-7 world, connected by media and ever-expanding social networks, should, theoretically, offer more community, the fact is that loneliness is a key factor affecting the health and well-being of Western societies.

Worldview—created for community

Against this backdrop of modern loneliness, one wonders whether the

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ancients faced a similar challenge. People living in the world of the Bible were part of a community-dense culture and context.⁷ Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede described four relevant dimensions of cultures; one of them directly affects the issue of restlessness and loneliness.⁸ Individualism versus collectivism seems to focus, at least at first glance, on the density of one's social networks. People living in Manila or Accra look at the world through the lens of *we* instead of *I*. Persons living in Berlin, Budapest, or Boston, on the other hand, experience themselves first and foremost as individuals and focus less on the larger community.

A close reading of the Bible clearly underlines the concept of the collective nature of culture and society in the biblical world. Abraham was not called out of Ur alone but was part of a larger family and clan, which included numerous male servants (Genesis 14:14)—and many more women and children. God's covenant with him, visualized in the covenant sign of circumcision (Genesis 17:10–14), was applied to all male members of his household (verses 23–27), and there is no indication of individual consultation. Good kings inspired their people to a closer walk with God. In contrast, the leadership of evil kings often resulted in idolatry and the rupture of Israel's covenant with the Lord. (A good example of this can be found in 2 Chronicles 14:2–5.)

The Ten Commandments suggest that sin directly affects larger communities and entire generations—up to the fourth generation (Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Deuteronomy 5:9). At the same time, the Bible is also clear that there is no collective guilt (Deuteronomy 24:16). The fact that people in the ancient world lived in three- to four-generation families may explain the language of the Ten Commandments and the direct effects of sin on several generations.⁹ *We* was undoubtedly more important than *I* in biblical times, yet an even stronger emphasis on community did not result in less loneliness.

Digging deep—sin separates us from God and one another

The Creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 unmistakably emphasizes that

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we were made for community—beginning with a nuclear family but also involving the networks of larger family structures, including clan and tribes. Sin, however, not only introduced doubt and distrust, ultimately resulting in rebellion, but also separated us from God and those we love and need the most.

Genesis 3:1 suggests that Eve must have wandered away from Adam as she explores their garden home. Somehow, she feels drawn to the one tree that God had set apart. Its intriguing name—“the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:17)—is reason enough to have a closer look. Imagine her surprise when she suddenly sees a strikingly beautiful serpent that can speak. The serpent’s question, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1, NKJV), does not represent a frontal attack against the divine order. Instead, it sows doubt and distrust in Eve’s mind. Then and now, the main battlefield is the human mind and our perception of God’s character. Eve does not skip a beat and enters into a conversation with the serpent adversary (verses 2–5). The serpent’s bold contradiction of the divine command, “You will not surely die” (verse 4, NKJV), is followed by a dark insinuation of ulterior divine motives: “For God knows that in the day you eat of it [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (verse 5, NKJV). Knowledge is an alluring currency, and it works in Eve’s case. She eats from the forbidden fruit. Her next reported action is sharing the fruit with Adam (verse 6). This is the first time Adam appears in this narrative. Between the terse lines of Genesis 3, we can imagine the struggle that Adam experiences, torn between faithfulness to God’s commandment and his commitment to his life partner. Ellen White describes this pivotal moment poignantly: “Adam understood that his companion had transgressed the command of God, disregarded the only prohibition laid upon them as a test of their fidelity and love. There was a terrible struggle in his mind.”¹⁰

We still experience the consequences of Eve’s and Adam’s choices. Sin has separated us from God—and also from one another.

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Selfishness, greed, abuse, and so many more destructive negatives have resulted from this one decision that changed who we were. Instead of reflecting God's image and likeness, we have become self-centered and hurtful and abusive, even if we manage to cloak ourselves behind a façade of civility. While there are many causes of loneliness, sin's separation of God's creation is definitely among the top five.

God's search for His creation, however, offers hope in a sad story. His "Where are you?" (verse 9) continues to echo down the ages and reaches us in unexpected places. In one of His most famous parables, Jesus tells of a son who demanded his inheritance from his father, and after receiving it, he left home and managed to waste everything (Luke 15:11–32). He finds himself eking out an existence as a swineherd, which was an unimaginable occupation for any Jewish son. Finally, he comes to his senses and decides to return home and throw himself at his father's mercy. As he walks the familiar road leading to his father's house, he is surprised to see his father running full throttle toward him to embrace him and kiss him. He is home and loved and forgiven, for God always takes the first step to draw His wayward children back to Him (John 6:44). Beginning in Eden, God has always been searching for His fallen creation and continues to search for the lost and lonely.

Implications—combating restlessness and loneliness

Here are some practical, hands-on tips for combating loneliness:

1. *Recognize our restlessness and loneliness*, and acknowledge that we need outside help. Restlessness and loneliness are as real conditions as being hungry or thirsty.
2. *Consciously form connections*. Before we can form meaningful connections with the people around us, however, we need to learn to connect with ourselves. Part of that process involves the recognition that we are loved and cherished, even with our imperfections and challenges. God's yes to us in Jesus Christ is foundational for this realization.

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3. *Form meaningful connections with others* as the first step in breaking negative thought patterns and cognitive routes. Patterns are not easily changed, for they have become our default modes of operation. Sometimes we may need to find professional help to break destructive patterns.
4. *Serve others in the community.* Serving others is a wonderful way to overcome loneliness and uncertainty as we realize that we are an intricate part of something bigger than ourselves. Studies suggest that volunteering for a cause and working with others for a greater good are effective therapies for loneliness and help us to be better braced against the uncertainties of life.¹¹

Take a breather—trust His promises

The Bible is full of divine promises offering hope to those who experience restlessness, loneliness, and darkness. Here are five examples.

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6). These words are directed to people living on the threshold of change. Moses is about to die, and a new leader, Joshua, has been appointed. God promises His people and the future leader that He will never leave them or forsake them. Intriguingly, in Hebrew, the point of reference—“you”—in this sentence refers to an individual. God’s promise is personal.

*Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).*

This text sits right in the center of one of the most loved and best-known psalms of the Hebrew Bible. It is a comforting picture to imagine the

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Good Shepherd walking with us through the dark moments. In the midst of uncertainty, danger, and restlessness, we can rest in Him, for He promises to be with us and protect us in the midst of our challenges and fears.

“Come near to God and he will come near to you” (James 4:8). When children are afraid, they instinctively draw close to the person they trust and love. Proximity means safety and assurance. While the actual danger may not have disappeared, just knowing that Papa or Mama is close by makes the child relax. The New Testament tells us that God moves very close to us. In fact, His incarnation is the best illustration of this principle. The Bible says that Jesus came to carry our pain and suffer our punishment, and He did not use the VIP lounge or palace as His earthly headquarters. People came close to Him: the discouraged, the sick, the abused, the restless, and the weary. They all came to experience love, grace, and transformation. Drawing close to God changes us and brings us closer to each other.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). When Jesus makes this powerful statement, He seems to think of a community of believers because the Greek personal pronoun used here is plural. Rest is not only extended to a group of insiders or those with special privileges—rest and recovery from burdens and uncertainty are offered to *all* who come.

“So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). Paul’s letter to the church in Rome is a message to people dealing with the constant threat of persecution and death. Uncertainty was a way of life for them. They were also part of a church where Jews and Gentiles were learning how to build bridges to one another. The body imagery used by Paul highlights our need for connectedness. We all like to belong and feel needed.

But beyond connectedness, Paul’s words also point to shared service. Each member of the body has been gifted to serve together purposefully and become a blessing to others. Serving others in community is a wonderful way to overcome loneliness and uncertainty.

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1. See the relevant data, based on research from 2016, at “Loneliness Research,” Campaign to End Loneliness, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/loneliness-research/>.
2. Charlotte S. Yeh, “The Power and Prevalence of Loneliness,” *Harvard Health Blog*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/the-power-and-prevalence-of-loneliness-2017011310977>.
3. See Hannah Ewens, “What Young People Fear the Most,” *Vice*, September 21, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/nnyk37/what-vice-readers-fear-the-most-hannah-ewens-love-loneliness.
4. Yeh, “Power and Prevalence”; “The Facts on Loneliness,” Campaign to End Loneliness, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-facts-on-loneliness/>.
5. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton, “Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review,” *PLOS Medicine* 7, no. 7 (July 27, 2010): <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>.
6. Ning Xia and Huige Li, “Loneliness, Social Isolation, and Cardiovascular Health,” *Antioxidants & Redox Signaling* 28, no. 9 (2018): 837–851, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5831910/>.
7. See the discussion in Gerald A. Klingbeil, “Between ‘I’ and ‘We’: The Anthropology of the Hebrew Bible and Its Importance for a 21st-Century Ecclesiology,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19, no. 3 (2009): 319–339.
8. Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, rev. ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), 3–138. The other dimensions discussed by Hofstede include (1) power versus lack of power, (2) feminine versus masculine, and (3) certainty versus uncertainty.
9. Research studying the propensity of children or grandchildren of alcoholics toward alcohol addiction underlines this notion of one’s actions affecting more than the individual.
10. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1958), 56.
11. Tchiki Davis, “Feeling Lonely? Discover 18 Ways to Overcome Loneliness,” *Click Here for Happiness* (blog), *Psychology Today*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/click-here-happiness/201902/feeling-lonely-discover-18-ways-overcome-loneliness>.