



ALONE, ALIVE, FULFILLED

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is written and dedicated to everyone that is alone or feels alone. Maybe you're young, living with your family; but you are somehow alone. Maybe you're old, even two people growing old together; but you feel alone. Maybe you're divorced, and even have a handful of children to raise; but you are so alone in that responsibility. Maybe you're a college student, a member of the armed forces; there's so much "aleness" there. Maybe you're widowed and painfully alone. Maybe you haven't married yet and are beginning to wonder whether you ever will. Whatever your situation, you feel a keen sense of being alone in your world.

Being alone; feeling alone; no one else understands. Often nobody seems to care; and even if they really care, still they can't begin to understand or share your feelings of "aleness."

When you're experiencing "aleness," you are unique. You know it. You feel it keenly. And it's true. No one else can quite share your experience of "aleness." No one else can know exactly how you feel. No one else can quite experience your hurt or pain. You are uniquely alone. And you feel only you alone can deal with your "aleness."

But that's not completely true. Others are alone, too. Many others. Sometimes I wonder if everyone doesn't experience a painful kind of "aleness" often throughout their lives. I know I have. From childhood on, I can remember times of awful loneliness. Despite the fact that I grew up in a happy home with a large family, and had even the additional "family" of a large, active congregation that my father pastored, still I often felt the pain of loneliness. In my childhood and teen years I always yearned for a "best friend" but I could not seem to find one. I supposed that everyone around me enjoyed a feeling of wholeness with their best friends, and that it was only I, and maybe a few obvious others, who had been denied this fulfilling pleasure.

In my college years I did learn to develop good friendships; but I discovered "aleness" still hovered around me. A best friend couldn't quite take it away. A song I loved in those years provided me a strong secret sense of hope, however, "Some enchanted evening, you will meet a stranger: across a crowded room. Then fly to her side ... Once you have found her, never let her go." I believed it. Then my "aleness" would end in perfect happiness. My feelings of loneliness would disappear. But, for whatever reason, it never happened.

In the years that have passed since then, I have been a pastor to so many people who have experienced “aloneness.” I have sat with them through their grief at the death of a parent, a spouse, a child. I have shared with them their awful pain at the loss of a spouse, and sometimes children, through divorce. I have seen the often quiet hurt of those whose homes used to be filled with the melody of many voices, now silent only because the young have gone off to build homes and families of their own; but they have left behind a keen sense of “aloneness.” And I have often spent time with children and teens whose troubled homes have given them a painful experience of “aloneness” in a very difficult world.

Had anyone suggested to me in my youth or young adult life that I would be sitting here today, single, writing about “aloneness,” I would have emphatically said, “No!” That was far from my dreams and plans for life. Yet here I am, years later, having experienced and learned much in a ministry of my own, daring to write down thoughts about “aloneness,” realizing that, though alone, I have experienced a very full and satisfying life, and praying that I can convey something of meaning and hope, perhaps, to you.

So you are alone. From the outset, please understand two things. You are unique in your “aloneness.” No one else can quite understand or share the unique problems and pains you are experiencing. But remember also that many people around you are experiencing “aloneness” for whatever reasons. Their pains, their problems, may be different from yours, or their experiences may be similar. But you are not altogether alone. You can gain from the experiences of others. You can be encouraged and strengthened by them.

Most of all, I want to tell you that you have a God who wants to be with you in your “aloneness.” Let this booklet lead you to find fulfillment in your life through faith in God and through life among His people even though you are alone.

SHOULD I ACCEPT MY ALONENESS?

People find themselves alone for many different reasons. Some are alone because they have been separated from a loved one by death or divorce or because they have not found that special person with whom they wish to share that life. Often there is little or nothing they can do about it. They may not want to be alone, but that’s the way it is.

Others may be alone because they want it that way. They’ve chosen the single life, and they are quite happy and content to be alone. For a variety of reasons, more and more people today are deliberately choosing to be single. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 that remaining single was a good idea in view of the special circumstances that existed at that time in Corinth. Then he was anticipating Christ’s second coming to end our world at any moment. Staying single to better serve the Lord in that brief interim seemed good to him.

Implied in Paul’s words might be that choosing singleness in order to better serve the Lord is God-pleasing. And even though God Himself ordained marriage when He said, “*It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him*” (Genesis 2:18), being single may be God’s present plan for you, as it was for Paul and for Christ Himself—and at present, for me.

That doesn’t mean that I don’t believe in marriage. Quite to the contrary, I believe that God created marriage as a good and wonderful thing. Marriage is His idea. God meant it to be “good” for us. God created us so that it isn’t “good” for us, generally speaking, to be alone.

Nevertheless, for whatever reason, God has worked in my life so that I am single. My singleness is not a denial of the “goodness” of marriage. It is simply the way of life in which God has chosen for me to serve Him at the present time.

CAN WE BE ALONE, BUT NOT LONELY?

Wait a second. Can a person be truly happy, satisfied, and not lonely even though he or she is alone? Contrary to the romances of the paperbacks and the old movies, yes! People can find deep happiness and rich fulfillment in life even though they are alone for whatever reasons. Certainly there is a good precedent to follow: the two men of Scripture already mentioned, Paul and the Lord Jesus Christ. That evidence can be borne out in the lives of countless men and women of history, and friends and acquaintances of yours, I’m sure, if you will look for them.

Paul said it like this: *“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances”* (Philippians 4:11). Paul wrote often about his happiness, his contentment in life. A quick study of his many letters in the New Testament can demonstrate several reasons for his strong sense of personal fulfillment.

First was his very close relationship to Jesus Christ. Paul had been on a disastrous course when Christ found and claimed him. His heart was filled with hatred. He wanted nothing more than to destroy Christianity and wipe its followers off the face of the earth. But then he was confronted by the very Christ whose name and reputation he was committed to destroy.

And suddenly Paul saw in Christ His true identity. Christ was God’s Son. He was the Messiah, the world’s Savior. Paul came to see himself as accepted, loved, and forgiven—no matter what. What a refreshing gift to live in a meaningful relationship with Jesus for the rest of his life. In the love of his Lord, he found peace.

Second, Paul held onto a purpose, a mission, in life. His sense of mission was so strong, he was so committed to it, that he would sacrifice his life in its cause. And in obedience to his God-given mission, he found great fulfillment.

Third, Paul, though alone, built a personal, caring, intimate relationship with others. Read his letters to Timothy or the Philippian Christians and you see a man very much alone, yet who loved and was loved. Because he and his intimate friends shared a deep level of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, their relationship to one another could be deeper and more meaningful. Paul found great joy in these relationships.

No, Paul wasn’t without his “people problems,” or his times of loneliness. In this world of sin, who is? Paul’s letters show a great deal of painful “aloneness” throughout his ministry—times when friendships broke up or were threatened by serious differences of opinion or belief—times when whole groups of Christians seemed to be straying from the Gospel truths he taught—times when he was mistreated or imprisoned because he preached the Gospel.

He knew much pain and human loneliness. Yet he always turned back to his Friend, his Lord Jesus, for the strength and encouragement he needed. And he could be confident, at peace, and even joyful in his faith. It’s heartwarming to see, too, how his friends in Christ came through so often to give him the support and encouragement he needed.

So you and I should not succumb to the temptation to believe that suddenly finding a life's mate, or a close friend, or a better relationship with a spouse, or parents, or children, will mean all loneliness will disappear. Nor can we say a stronger faith will erase loneliness forever. Loneliness is caused by sin—the sin that brings separation into all human relationships, even the most perfect of them. All human beings, whether in the most perfect of marriages or in the most dedicated of single lives, will experience such pain at some time their lives.

But should you accept your situation, whatever it is, that causes you loneliness? Paul's answer is important. "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." You can never know contentment, satisfaction, in your life if you do not accept your life as it is. That does not mean that you don't try to improve, or perhaps even change, your situation. But if you are consumed by anger and frustration at the way things are, if you are buried in unhappiness and self-pity, if all you can do is yearn for something different, then you have just about lost any chance of fulfillment, of peace, of contentment. Again, this does not mean you are not open to change, or that you will not actively work for change.

For example, you may be doing the best work you can at your job, looking forward to a future promotion. But if you do not find some enjoyment in your present job and instead are filled with resentment because you don't have a better job, your performance may suffer and you might miss the promotion altogether. So accepting yourself as you are, being at peace with yourself, and finding contentment in your life now is primary. Being open to change simply means you are ready for the exciting things God has in store for you.

A wise Christian once put it like this: "You pray, 'Thy will be done.' As long as you recognize a desire for a change in your life, keep asking God for it. But always pray, 'You know what's best for me; Your will be done.' Now one of two things will happen. Either God will answer your prayer and bring about that change; or God will answer your prayer and give you acceptance of what He has in mind for you." Should you accept your situation? Yes, of course, trusting in God's loving care for you. But certainly, if you feel a desire for a spouse, a family, some other change in your life, talk to Him about it. Ask for His will to be done in you. Ask for acceptance of whatever His plan is for you. Keep talking to Him about it. In whichever way He answers your sincere, faith-filled prayer, you'll be surprised at the peace He gives you.

CAN WE LIVE VICTORIOUSLY ALONE?

Because Paul had experienced God's hand in his life in so many ways, he could say with confidence, "*I can do everything through Him [Christ] who gives me strength*" (Philippians 4:13).

Early in my single life when I had no expectation that these many years later I'd still be single, friends on two separate occasions counseled me very similarly. Both were older and were indeed counselors by training. One was a Christian, the other apparently not. Their words might seem like pious platitudes to many, maybe even to you; but to me they were very meaningful, and they've remained important to me. I had been worrying about my single state and my effectiveness as a pastor (and maybe even as a person) if I continued to live alone. Maybe with more foresight than I realized, they each told me how I had the promise of being more effective in my ministry because I was single. They said I might have more love and understanding to give to others since I had no family with whom to share it. In effect they were repeating that oft-spoken platitude which is also very true: "God never closes one door without opening another."

That's what my God was really telling me through those friends—and wants to tell you as well. Perhaps your "aleness" has led to a sense of not being needed. Well, God has opened doors for you. He has created you for a purpose, there is a mission for your life on this earth.

It begins as it did with Paul, with an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. He will be your Friend, your Companion—the one Constant in your life upon whom you can always depend. He already is that Friend to you; and He reaches out to you with His for giving love. Do you need to know more about Him? You can get to know Him better through the pages of His Holy Word, the Bible. You can get to know Him better through the fellowship of His people on earth in a Christian congregation. That’s an urgent first step in dealing with the problems of “aloneness,” with any problem—receiving Jesus as Savior and Lord and getting to know Him better.

“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). To people suffering severe loneliness and pain, their Bibles have often become their most precious possessions. American prisoners of war in North Vietnam wrote down the verses of Scripture they could remember on any bits and scraps of paper they could find and shared them with one another. We’re told these precious words from God’s Holy Book were the source of strength and endurance through their terrible ordeal. A new widow writes about how the sleepless nights became less frightening and lonely because she would take from her nightstand her Bible and read through the long nights, finding comfort and encouragement. A young woman had always had a special guy in her life from her mid-teens until now, when she had taken her post-college assignment in a small town far away from home. She testifies that her life with her Lord is dearer than ever because she has only Him to lean on now, and she’s grateful for that growing faith.

Your faith can grow, too. You can know that presence of Jesus Christ in your life with all His love and peace and power. Spend time daily with Him in meditation over His Word and in prayer. You will be blessed.

And always ask Him to lead you. Ask Him to show you His plan, His purpose, for your life. Few of us will be sent on adventures like Paul. Traveling the world for Christ was his exciting commission. Living for Christ every day is certainly yours and mine. It may not be with flair or drama. We will likely get no headlines, but we can let God lead us into avenues of service that will be pleasing to Him and fulfilling to us.

God’s deepest desire is that all the world experience His love and see His glory. Somehow, He has a part for you in making that happen. You feel alone. You have as much love to give as anyone. You have God’s love to share as well. Right now, perhaps, you have no “mate,” no family, to claim that love. Whose life can you enrich by sharing the love you have? Where has God given you opportunity to bless the lives of others with the love you have to give?

You have abilities. Again, how can this world become a better place and happiness brought into the lives of others through your skills and your time? Sometimes the most precious gift you can give to anyone is to pray for them. How many people among your acquaintances, your community, your church, your country, the world, could benefit from your prayers?

Everyone’s life needs a purpose. Right now yours may not be to live for a spouse. But it is to live for others. Get going doing just that with all the gifts and all the love that God has given you; you will find a sense of peace and joy, a fulfillment, that will make you know for sure that your life is worth living just the way it is.

HOW CAN WE DEVELOP FULFILLING RELATIONSHIPS?

Paul found fulfillment in his intimate, caring relationships with people. Being alone does not prevent you from developing close relationships with others. Some of the most meaningful relationships this world has ever known have been between close friends; and when such friendships are supported by a common bond of faith in Jesus Christ, they can be deeply rewarding.

A great problem for widowed, divorced, and single people, young and old, is that many church and community organizations focus activities around couples and families. These types of activities often give the alone persons a profound sense of being out-of-place.

But let me tell you that there are many others who also feel alone. They may be married or single, but they need your friendship, love, and support. And you need them, too. It's amazing how, as you reach out with love to others, you often receive more than you give.

People who need your love, and with whom you can share, are all around you. You'll find them in your community, at your job, at your church. But do be careful that the close friends support you rather than tear you down.

Sometimes when we're lonely we are most vulnerable to any kind of friendship that is offered us. We grab at it without concern that it might be a relationship potentially detrimental to us. That's why it is helpful to look for our most intimate friendships within the fellowship of the people of God. Even then we must test the friendship offered to know that it will be good for us.

"People who need people are the luckiest people in the world," the song goes. That's true, it's hard to imagine how anyone can think he or she can find happiness in life by going it alone. And yet many believe they are fated to do just that.

Happily, more and more single and alone people in our churches are recognizing their need to have support groups for sharing. Larger congregations have often developed effective ministries just for singles and young adults. Smaller congregations are sometimes joining together with others to form such groups. Communities also have developed some effective support groups to meet the needs of people who are alone. Parents Without Partners, VIVA, and THEOS are just some the groups that exist for those who are widowed or divorced. Keen-Agers and other groups for senior citizens are also becoming more common. All of these give support and friendship to individuals who must cope with loneliness. Ask your pastor or call a Christian social service agency to discover what might be available in your community. If no such groups exist, consider starting one. You can find out how to get one going by writing to an organized group. Again, your pastor or social service agency can give you addresses.

Don't be afraid of such groups. They do not intend to be "Lonely Hearts Clubs." Rather, they spend time dealing with the real issues of people who are alone and experiencing painful loneliness. They offer mutual support and encouragement. They provide opportunities for meaningful friendships. They can be most rewarding for their participants.

CONCLUSION

In the middle of writing this, I suddenly got up and grabbed a deck of cards to play solitaire. It's been a long time since I've tried that game. Why did I do that? I don't know. Maybe somehow I was trying to get in touch with the loneliness I have sometimes experienced. Yet this time solitaire was fun. It had nothing to do with being alone or feeling lonely; it just gave me the break I needed, so I could get back to writing. In the midst of it I found myself smiling, and thanking God. I haven't needed solitaire to fill in a lonely spot in my life for a long time. My life is filled with my Lord and the tasks He has sent me to do. It's filled with the people He has given me to love. It's filled with the world He has given me to enjoy. I am so grateful for His blessings upon me.

Certainly, like Paul, I experience my painful moments, too. But loneliness seldom gets me down now. There are people out there in need of a friend. When I want to rid myself of any self-pity or loneliness, all I have to do is look around me to the needs of others. In giving I am filled.

May God be with you in your life alone. May He help you fill it with meaning, love, and contentment. And may He bless many through you.

FOR A SUNNY DAY

Jesus, it wasn't always a sunny day for You, and it isn't always sunny for me. But today is a sunny day.

Sometimes good has happened to someone else and I am glad. It is just as if it happened to me. Actually, I guess it did happen to me!

How easily we overlook, Lord, the good things that happen to us. Or we fail to see where they come from. I feel good today because I know it is true: "Every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of lights, with whom there is not shadow of turning."

Give me a heart today for the gloomy and rainy days. Help me to see them, too, as a gift from You of life itself with its lights and shadows.

I don't pray, Lord, that every day should be a sunny day; I am glad for the rainy ones, too, knowing that You are there as You are here—with Your pardon and Your presence, Your grace and Your glory.

Amen.

FOR THE DARK DAYS

I did not ask for this dark day, Lord Jesus, but here it is. All of a sudden, it was here.

It is easy to feel abandoned, especially when I have trusted in You. Somehow the thought creeps in that trouble should never come to those who trust in You. I know this brings me again to trust, not in myself or in my own piety, but in You, Giver of real life and Deliverer of my soul.

You know the dark days, Lord Jesus. You know how it is to feel forsaken. The loneliness of Your cross is Yours and Yours alone. You put Your trust in Your Father, and He did not disappoint You.

In Your disgrace from my sin, I am healed. By Your resurrection from the dead, give me, on this dark day, hope that is alive. In Your kindness I put my hope for today and for tomorrow.

You promised one miracle for those who trust in You; to turn their sorrow into joy. In this dark world, please do that for me—not in my way, but in Your way. Your way is the best way, O Lord, and Your time is the best time. Amen.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Lord God, in my loneliness let me know that You are the One who cares, reaching out to me even when I don't reach out to You.

With the reassuring presence of Your Spirit, give me the hope of life eternal through faith in Your Son, Jesus.

Give me a heart to love You and hands to serve You in helping others to know Your gracious forgiveness and Your sustaining power, in the sure certainty that You never forget and do not abandon Your own.

This I ask from You in the name of Your Son and my Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

TAKE CARE —DO NOT BE AFRAID

Almighty and everlasting God, the problems and frustrations of this life are often more than I can bear.

Look with mercy upon me when I am filled with worry, anxiety, and even despair. Send Your powerful and calming Spirit into my troubled heart. Give me strength and grant me courage.

And may I always see Your Son, Jesus Christ, as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

In Jesus' name I pray.

Amen.

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