

When Alone



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Eccles. 4:9–12, Phil. 4:11–13, 1 Cor. 7:25–34, Matt. 19:8, Gen. 37:34, Isa. 54:5.*

Memory Text: “And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him’ ” (*Genesis 2:18, NKJV*).

A fascinating yet painful story made the news years ago. A young woman had been found dead in her apartment. Though the death was tragic itself, what made the story worse was that the woman had been dead for more than 10 years before being found. Ten years! Thus, the question that people had asked, and rightly so, was: *How in a big city like this, with so many people, and with so many means of communication, could a woman, who was not a street person, have been dead for so long and no one know?*

Though extreme, this story is an example of a reality: many people are suffering from loneliness. In 2016, *The New York Times* ran an article entitled “Researchers Confront an Epidemic of Loneliness.” The problem is real.

From the start, we as human beings were not meant to be alone. From Eden onward, we were to live in fellowship with other human beings to some degree or another. Of course, sin came in, and nothing has been right since then. This week we will look at the question of companionship and loneliness at the various times of life that, perhaps, all of us have at some time faced. If not, then count yourself fortunate.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 27.

Companionship

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9–12. What’s the basic idea there? What principle of life is it talking about in general?

Very few of us can make it alone. Even if we are loners and like being alone, sooner or later we not only want some companionship but might even require it, especially in times of need. We were, indeed, made for community, for fellowship. How fortunate are those who have close family members who can give comfort and support, especially in times of need.

Unfortunately, there are people in our church, where we work, in the communities where we live, who have no one to turn to, not just in their time of need but even for some conversation at the end of the day. The sense of loneliness can come at any time. “The hardest day for me,” an unmarried man said, “is Sunday. During the week I am surrounded by people at work. On Sabbath I see people at church. But on Sunday I am all alone.”

What principles can we all learn from the following passages, particularly when we may be going through a time of loneliness? *John 16:32, 33; Phil. 4:11–13.*

Yes, as Christians we have not only the reality of God but the reality of being able to fellowship with God. And we can, indeed, draw comfort from the closeness of God to us. But the closeness of God to Adam in Eden didn’t stop the Lord from saying, “ ‘It is not good that man should be alone’ ” (*Gen. 2:18, NKJV*). Thus, God knew that Adam, even when he had fellowship with God in a world undamaged by sin, still needed human companionship. How much more, then, do the rest of us need companionship, as well.

We need to be careful, too, of assuming that just because there are a lot of people around, a person cannot be lonely. Some of the loneliest people live in big cities where they often have interaction with others. Just being around other bodies doesn’t mean someone cannot feel alone and alienated and in need of fellowship.

It’s not always easy to know who is feeling lonely, alienated, or rejected, or who is just plain hurting and in need of someone, if nothing else, just to talk to. How can you proactively seek to be more sensitive to whomever those people might be?

The Unmarried Life

A young woman told of the advantages of not being married: “Twice I had the opportunity to go serve in the mission field, and I responded without any hesitation.” A married person, with a family, might have had to take a little more time making that decision because it doesn’t just involve them but also their spouse and children.

What are, according to Paul, good reasons for remaining unmarried?
1 Cor. 7:25–34, NKJV

Most people think that being married is God’s will for them. Didn’t He say, “It is not good that man should be alone?” And yet, we have many examples in the Bible of people who were not married, including the greatest example of all, Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah was told not to marry (*Jer. 16:1–3*); it was a judgment on a historical situation. We don’t know if that restriction was ever removed, but it is clear that Jeremiah was a great prophet while he was single.

Ezekiel’s wife died suddenly. God took away this important person in his life to convey a hard lesson about the situation of His people. He was not even allowed to mourn but was to continue on with the ministry the Lord had assigned him (*Ezek. 24:15–18*). The prophet Hosea also experienced a broken marriage but was able to continue in ministry. While the story seems strange to us, God told him to go marry a prostitute whom God knew would leave Hosea for other men (*Hosea 1–3*). Looking back, we can see God trying to illustrate the one-sided love that He has for Israel and for us, but it must have been extremely hard and painful for Hosea to be the object lesson.

In each of these examples, marital status was not an issue. God was interested in the person’s integrity, obedience, and ability to say what God wanted him to say. We need to be sure that our life is not defined by our marital condition. Many voices today will tell us that unless we are married we are not complete. Paul would respond, “Don’t be like the people of this world.” Instead, “offer your bodies to him as a living sacrifice, pure and pleasing” (*Rom. 12:1, 2, CEV*).

What are practical ways you can minister to those who are unmarried, both church members and non-church members?

When a Marriage Ends

Of all the ways sin has devastated humanity, with the exception of physical suffering and death, what has faced more devastating consequences from sin than the family? It's almost as if the phrase "dysfunctional family" is redundant. What family isn't, to some degree, dysfunctional?

Outside of death, one of the hardest things a family can face is a divorce. People going through this terrible experience run a gamut of emotions. Probably the first and most common is grief, which, depending on the individuals, may last for several months to several years with different intensity. Some may experience fear—fear of the unknown, financial anxieties, and fear of being unable to cope. Some may go through a period of depression, anger, and, yes—loneliness.

What broad principles concerning divorce can we gather from the following verses? *Mal. 2:16; Matt. 5:31, 32; 19:8; 1 Cor. 7:11–13.*

“The Church as a redemptive agency of Christ is to minister to its members in all of their needs and to nurture everyone so that all may grow into a mature Christian experience. This is particularly true when members face lifelong decisions such as marriage and distressful experiences such as divorce. When a couple's marriage is in danger of breaking down, every effort should be made by the partners and those in the church or family who minister to them to bring about their reconciliation in harmony with divine principles for restoring wounded relationships (*Hosea 3:1–3; 1 Cor. 7:10, 11; 13:4–7; Gal. 6:1*).

“Resources that can be of assistance to members in the development of a strong Christian home are available through the church or other church organizations. These resources include: (1) programs of orientation for couples engaged to be married, (2) programs of instruction for married couples with their families, and (3) programs of support for broken families and divorced individuals.”—*The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th edition (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2016), p. 161.

What are practical and *nonjudgmental* ways you can help someone going through divorce?

Death and Loneliness

Someone once asked the question: What's the difference between humans and chickens in regard to the question of death? The answer is that, unlike chickens, who die, we humans, who die, too, *know* that we will die. Chickens don't. And it's this knowledge of our impending death that greatly impacts how we live now.

As we know, all relationships, including marriage, sooner or later come to an end in our greatest enemy: death. No matter how close a union, no matter the great love, the deep companionship, the time spent together, as human beings we (unlike chickens) know that sooner or later death will come (unless Jesus returns beforehand), and when it does, all our relationships will cease. This has been our fate from the first sin and will be so until the return of Jesus.

The Bible doesn't tell us which of the two, Adam or Eve, died first, but it must have been particularly painful for the other one, especially since death was never supposed to be part of life to begin with. If, as we saw in an earlier lesson, the death of a single leaf caused them to mourn, who could imagine what they went through with a death of a spouse?

The problem is that we are so used to death that we just take it for granted. But it was never supposed to be something that we as humans experienced. Hence, even to this day, we struggle to make sense of it, when so often we just can't.

What do the following texts teach us about death and about how people struggle with it? *Isa. 57:1; Rev. 21:4; 1 Thess. 4:17, 18; Matt. 5:4; 2 Sam. 18:33; Gen. 37:34.*

No question: not only do we all face the reality of our own death, we face the reality of the death of others, of loved ones, of maybe our closest companion. Hence, sooner or later, many of us will face a time, a season, of loneliness brought about by the death of someone else. It's hard, it hurts, and at such times we can, and often must, just claim the promises of God. After all, in this world of sin, suffering, and death, what else do we have?

How can your church help those whom you know are suffering loneliness from the death of a loved one?

Spiritually Single

A young woman named Natalie had been married for seven years when, at the invitation of a friend, she attended an evangelistic series at a local Seventh-day Adventist church. Convicted by what she learned, she surrendered her heart to Christ, had a new-birth experience, and—despite the strenuous objections of her husband, parents, in-laws, even her next-door neighbor—Natalie joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. She also adjusted her lifestyle, to every degree possible, to her newfound faith.

As one could imagine, she faced a great deal of pushback; what made it especially hard was her husband, who argued from his point of view: “This is not what I signed up for when we got married. You are a whole new person, and I want the old one back.”

For years now, she has been struggling to live a life of faith. Though married, she is what we could call “spiritually single.”

What encouraging words do we find in the following verses for those who may feel spiritually single? *Isa. 54:5; Hos. 2:19, 20; Ps. 72:12.*

All over the world, there are “Natalies” in our church. These people, men or women, are married but attend church alone or only with their children. They may have married a person of a different faith. Or perhaps when they joined the church, their spouse did not. Or when married, both were members of the church—but one, for whatever reason, dropped out, stopped coming, and might even be hostile to the faith. These men and woman come alone to church and to the meal after the worship service or go alone to the outreach or social activities of the church. They are saddened when they cannot contribute financially to the church’s ministry as much as they would like because their spouse does not agree to do so. Though married, they might feel spiritually like a widow or a widower.

We probably all, at some time or another, have met people like this in the church, and they do need our love and support.

What practical things can we, as a church family, do to help the spiritually single in our midst?

Further Thought: “In the midst of a life of active labor, Enoch steadfastly maintained his communion with God. The greater and more pressing his labors, the more constant and earnest were his prayers. He continued to exclude himself at certain periods from all society. After remaining for a time among the people, laboring to benefit them by instruction and example, he would withdraw, to spend a season in solitude, hungering and thirsting for that divine knowledge which God alone can impart. Communing thus with God, Enoch came more and more to reflect the divine image. His face was radiant with a holy light, even the light that shineth in the face of Jesus. As he came forth from these divine communings, even the ungodly beheld with awe the impress of heaven upon his countenance.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 52. Though the story of Enoch here is encouraging and has something powerful to say about those who choose to have times of solitude, many face a solitude they don’t ask for. They don’t want to be alone. Yes, we can always have a joyful communion with the Lord, who is ever-present, but sometimes we crave human companionship and fellowship. How crucial that we, as a church, be ready to reach out to those who might be sitting right next to us on Sabbath each week, yet who are going through a terrible season of loneliness. At the same time, if you are going through such a time, seek out someone whom you feel that you can trust at church (or elsewhere) and let them know. Many times people simply cannot tell by looking at someone what they are going through. It’s easy, at least for some people, to hide behind a mask.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How can your church learn to be more sensitive to the needs of the lonely in your midst?
- 2 “Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content” (*Phil. 4:11, NKJV*). Read the larger context of Paul’s words here. How can we learn to apply these to ourselves? At the same time, why must we be very careful in how we quote this passage to someone who truly is hurting?
- 3 In class, talk about a time you went through severe loneliness. What helped you? What hurt you? What did you learn that could be a help to others?

Division President Baptizes Father

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Samuel Saw, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Southern Asia-Pacific Division, grew up without a relationship with his father.

The two never spent time together in their home country of Myanmar. They didn't talk about things.

"He never hugged me," Saw said. "I was a boy without a father."

Saw, who was raised by his grandparents, went on to study in an Adventist school and graduate as a pastor from the Myanmar Union Adventist Seminary in Myaungmya, a city of 280,000 people located about 140 miles (225 kilometers) west of Myanmar's capital, Yangon.

Church work was challenging in the southeast Asian country where just four percent of the population is Christian. Buddhists account for about 90 percent of the population, and Muslims comprise 4 percent.

As a pastor, Saw told many people, "Reach out to your non-Christian family and other relatives." But he never reached out to his own father.

Saw got married, had two children, and served as a pastor and church administrator in Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines.

While serving as executive secretary of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, Saw attended a Week of Prayer that prompted him to think hard about his father. He shared his childhood story with the speaker, and the two men prayed together.

"You've got to reach out to your own father," the speaker said.

Saw prayed to God to give him strength. He felt pain when he thought about his father, and he lacked a desire to connect with him. He kept praying—and the unexpected happened.

"I was privileged to baptize my own father at the age of 76," Saw said.

Saw still remembers what his father said afterward.

"Son," the elderly man said, "I want to be a Christian who goes to church with a songbook and the Bible in my hand. Please buy a songbook and a Bible for me, so I can carry them to church."

Saw choked up with emotion as he remembered his father emerging from the water of the baptismal tank and wrapping his arms around him.

"It was the first time that he hugged me in my whole life," he said.



In 2016, Saw was elected president of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, whose territory of 14 countries includes Myanmar. He encourages others to ask God for help to overcome bitterness and hurt.

"We are just human beings without God's transforming power," he said. "But with His power, we can be a difference to the world."

Part I: Overview

At some point in our lives we will taste how it feels to be painfully alone. How do we manage those moments? The questions can be desperate: “Where is everybody? Will I always be alone? Where is God?” This week’s lesson tracks our need for companionship all the way back to Eden, where God created not one person but two.

Aloneness can emerge anytime in our lives no matter where we are or what we are doing. But it can be particularly acute in certain contexts: being single, living the Christian life with a non-Christian spouse, being divorced, or losing a loved one. The lesson offers biblical perspectives on these moments and encourages the church to be active in identifying lonely people. The challenge is to minister to those hurting by connecting with them and connecting them with the Lord. No one need feel alone in the body of Christ. In fact, all those in Christ who are separated from others for any reason (broken relationships, disability, distance, death) possess the consoling hope that there will one day be a grand reunion in which the word *lonely* will become obsolete.

Ultimately, God is the answer to human aloneness. Even human relationships, in order to have the healthiest expression possible, require God’s presence. Perhaps there are stalwarts who feel that they can manage life totally alone, without God or others—that all they need is themselves. The journal of a young man who sought to live totally alone in Alaska should cause those who choose isolation over companionship to pause. Chris McCandless, who after living close to a hundred days by himself in a remote corner of the U.S. state of Alaska, wrote his epiphany in a journal before he died of starvation: “HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED.”—In Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), p. 189. It is the sharing of our lives with God and with one another that enriches all life’s experiences.

Part II: Commentary

Scripture

The first problem solved on earth was not that of sin, but of being alone (*Gen. 2:18*). After nine instances of the Hebrew *tov* (good) in the Creation and Eden story, there is finally something that is *lo-tov* (not good) in Paradise. “It is not good that the man should be alone” (*Gen. 2:18*).

Interestingly, the phrase *lo-tov* (not good) is not invoked again until

Jethro admonishes Moses. Again, the issue surrounds aloneness. The burden of the people is too heavy for Moses. So Jethro bluntly says, “ ‘What you are doing is not good. . . . You are not able to do it alone’ ” (*Exod. 18:17, 18, ESV*). Reality, especially after sin’s entrance, is often too overwhelming to bear alone. Nor is it in God’s blueprint for humanity that we do so.

Aloneness in Eden was more than the loneliness that we have all experienced at some point, though it includes it. Adam’s aloneness in some ways is closer to that of being isolated on an island deprived of human engagement of any kind. Given that Eve also was created on the sixth day, Adam’s experience of being the sole human on earth was brief but just long enough to accentuate his appreciation of his newly created companion.

All too often the story of Adam and Eve is reduced to a commentary on marriage. The aspect of being alone that it contains is relegated exclusively to the singleness of unmarried life. But Eve’s creation didn’t solve a singleness problem. It solved a human aloneness problem. Eve was not only a wife; she was friend, coworker (*Gen. 1:28*), spiritual companion, and the locus of Adam’s social life, as he was to hers. This fact is good news for the unmarried. Many may have been burdened by the divine proclamation “It is not good that the man should be alone” (*Gen. 2:18*) and received it as a virtual condemnation of single life. Not true. We may be single and yet *not be alone*, because of the human presence of family, friends, and acquaintances at our homes, churches, and places of work.

Aloneness also rears its head in the temptation and Fall. There is disagreement among scholars as to whether Adam was present with Eve during the serpent’s temptation. The argument that he was present revolves around two points: the text speaking of Eve’s eating the fruit and giving some to her husband “with her” (*Gen. 3:6*) and the serpent using plural verbs as if he is talking to more than one person. In support of Adam’s absence, he is conspicuously absent from the dialogue, and appears neither as the subject or object of any sentence in the narration. There is an exclusive verbal volley between Eve and the serpent: “He [the serpent] said unto the woman” (*Gen. 3:1, 4*) and “The woman said unto the serpent” (*Gen. 3:2*). The controversial phrase “with her” can be understood in a relational rather than spatial context as in the way Adam retold events to God, “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat” (*Gen. 3:12*). Obviously, “with me” in Adam’s words means “with me as my companion,” and “with her” in the narrator’s words likely means the same thing. As far as the serpent using plural verbs and pronouns, this diction shows that Satan’s target was both Adam and Eve. The use of plurals would make it all the more surprising that Adam didn’t speak up if he were indeed there. For a brief

study of the subject, see Elias Brasil de Souza, *Was Adam With Eve at the Scene of Temptation? A Short Note on "With Her" in Genesis 3:6*.

Just as aloneness was not ideal at Creation, it was a liability in temptation. We can conclude that "it was not good for *the woman*" to be alone either. Could the Fall have been prevented simply by Adam and Eve staying together? Perhaps so. Ellen G. White says, "The angels had cautioned Eve to beware of separating herself from her husband while occupied in their daily labor in the garden; with him she would be in less danger from temptation than if she were alone."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 53. A faith community, even if it consists of two people, provides spiritual strength and accountability.

When the Lord approached Adam and Eve after their sin, they did one of the most disappointing yet profound actions in Scripture: they "hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God" (*Gen. 3:8*). Sin created a self-damaging condition: *a desire to live alone without God*. But He is not so easily deterred, and the prophetic pleas of the Hebrew prophets testify to that fact. God culminated His pursuit of lost humanity with the Incarnation of His Son Immanuel, God with us (*Matt. 1:23*). The Incarnation echoes the Eden account. After sin has ravaged the world, God sees that it is "not good" for man to "be alone" (*Gen. 2:18*); so He sends a "helper," one "corresponding to" him.—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 46. The word for "helper" in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) in Genesis 2:18 (*boethos*) is the same word in Hebrews 13:6: "The Lord is my helper." But instead of succumbing to the "serpent's" temptations (*Matt. 4:1–11*), Jesus "resisted to the point of shedding [His] blood" (*Heb. 12:4, ESV*), so that one day we could all hear a "great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, *and be their God*" (*Rev. 21:3*), never to be alone again.

Reflection

Some have wondered, "If God is so great, why isn't His companionship sufficient to meet all of Adam's needs, precluding the necessity for the creation of another?" It's a question worth pondering, but experience shows that the question can be turned on its head. The fact that God is all-sufficient for us individually *anticipates* and *prepares* us to enter into relationships with others. In this way, our approach to human relationships will come from a posture of wholeness rather than from one of neediness or desperation. Often others, especially romantic partners, are unconsciously pursued to fill needs that only the Creator can satisfy.

Best to have the water that, once taken, Jesus says will prevent one from ever being thirsty again (*John 4:14, ESV*). Why? Because it becomes a “spring of water” in the individual. Jesus and/or His message is that water. Without it, relationships can become skewed, or worse, idolatrous.

The previous insight is at the root of handling the various aloneness scenarios in the lesson: being unmarried, losing a spouse to divorce or death, being spiritually single. The specific way of handling these diverse experiences is unique. Though they can be extremely difficult, they are made bearable by the knowledge that we have a God who is present (*Acts 17:27*), who sees what we are going through (*Gen. 16:13*), and who promises never to leave us (*Deut. 31:6, Matt. 28:20*).

Part III: Life Application

The degree to which we are utterly convinced of the Christian worldview, with a deeply invested and personal God at its center, is the degree to which despairing aloneness can be mitigated. We’ve all felt alone at times. There is nothing wrong, per se, with that experience. But if God is real to us, we should be able to testify to the buffering of that aloneness with a sense of God’s presence. Testifying to this fact may help people in your Sabbath School right now. Give them opportunity to share experiences of how God moved in their lives during times of loneliness. Here are some other questions that challenge us to think of the intersection between God, us, aloneness, and church:

- 1. Philosopher and theologian Abraham Heschel entitled his two books on the philosophy of religion *Man Is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*. Is it not more difficult to feel alone when one believes that he or she is being passionately pursued by another? In what ways have you seen God pursuing you in your life?**

2. As societies around the world race toward secularism, more and more people view the world in exclusively naturalistic terms (only nature and nature's laws exist, to the exclusion of the supernatural or God). This view comes at a price. If naturalism is true, we are truly alone in this universe. How can the Christian leverage the existential despair that naturalism produces in order to point people to God?

3. Whereas the world frequently isolates people based on appearances, ethnicity, and social and economic class, the church is called to lovingly embrace these same people (*Gal. 3:28*). How can a local church organize itself so that people struggling with loneliness don't slip through the cracks?
