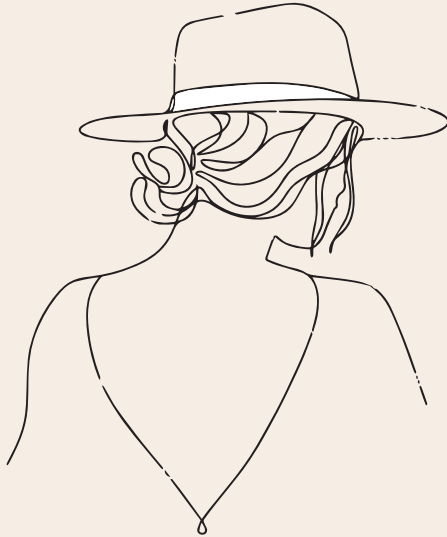


# SINGLE ME.

LEARNING TO LOVE THE  
UNWANTED PATH OF SINGLENESS



NERI MORRIS

# LONELY.

A few weeks after my boyfriend broke up with me, I attended a friend's wedding. He was supposed to join me at this wedding but due to the break up, I was attending this wedding on my own. It is a truly horrible feeling to have to admit to the bride your plus one is now a minus.

With the break-up still very, very fresh for me, I did my best to put on a brave face. I mustered every ounce of courage I had to stand up in front of everyone (which if you know me, is saying something, I am not one to shy away from a stage) and say a prayer for my friends during their ceremony. I kept it together when asked to hold my friends' drinks and hand bags as they took photos in front of the harbour with their respective others. I even managed to make small talk when the conversation swung to babies or a friend's recent engagement.

But a simple chair was my undoing.

Arriving at the buzzing reception, my friends and I eagerly hunted down our table, scanning the little cards for our names. Walking the full length of the table, my eyes came across my name. I was seated in the last chair, at the end of the table. A friend of mine sat to my left. But no one to my right. In that moment of realisation, a deep, dark black pit of despair opened up inside of me and I felt as though I wanted to curl up and die.

Not because I was angry for being seated at the end of the table. But because I realised that if my boyfriend and I were still together, I wouldn't be sitting at the end of the table, alone. There would have been a seat to my right where he would have sat. And we would have laughed, and talked, and maybe even awkwardly shuffled on the dance floor together, ending the night with his arms around me as we waved farewell to the happy couple.

Instead there was only my chair. A married couple to my left and married couples directly across from me.

And I felt so alone.

Loneliness is a horrible feeling.

It feels icky, uncomfortable and worst of all, inescapable. It has a nasty habit of following you where you go rooms full of people are just as isolating as a cave in the wilderness. It's a feeling no one wants to sit in for long. In fact, it is a feeling that physically propels us to act. In that moment, with the chair, I physically had to escape, and I couldn't leave the venue since the reception had just started. So, I did the next best thing. I politely excused myself and made a beeline for the bathroom. Locked in a stall I could release at least a few of the tears I had been holding back

all day. Every moment that had pointed to love and marriage highlighted my lack of it. This had all compiled and compacted throughout the day and I felt as though the weight of the deep rejection and loneliness I was experiencing was going to crush me. So I silently cried in the stall, letting the weight of loneliness release a little. At least enough to not feel like it was going to crush me. After a few moments I pulled myself together. Not wanting my friends to come looking for me, I checked my face in the mirror, hoping they wouldn't notice my watery eyes, and made my way back to that seat.

The feeling of loneliness was still very much there, I had just managed to stuff it far enough back in its box to somewhat enjoy the evening.

Reflecting back on this event, a few questions come to mind: why didn't I tell anyone? Why didn't I reach out?

Recent studies have shown that loneliness is just as bad for our health as smoking. The isolation can contribute to an early death. And this isn't only applicable to people who are isolated or choose to isolate themselves. That night at the wedding, in a room of around 120 people, I felt desperately lonely. And yet, I chose to not tell anyone. I had many good friends there that night that would have understood and supported me. But I chose to not let any-

one in on my pain. I chose not to reach out.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised it was because I was embarrassed. I didn't want people's pity: "poor Neri... she must feel so lonely... it's ok hon, God has a plan..."

I didn't want people to think they had to wrap me up in cotton wool. I didn't want their pity and I didn't want their platitudes.

I just didn't want to feel lonely anymore.

But I felt like I couldn't tell anyone. Why is that? Why do we shy away from loneliness, wanting to hide it like it's something to be ashamed of? As if being lonely is somehow wrong.

I spend most of my week in a co-working space which proves incredibly helpful when needing to seek out other opinions or thoughts about anything from the best place on the street to get food through to deep theological questions. In fact, the latter is my favourite part about working in a co-working space that exists within a church. I'm surrounded by some very smart, very well-read, very passionate people. Lunch is never boring.

I walked in one day, this book on my mind as I had been editing the night before, desperately wanting to make sure that I was writing things that were to some extent biblically sound. So, to the two pastors in the room I posed this question:

“If the Garden of Eden is a representation of heaven-“

“Is it?” The Senior Pastor asked.

“Isn’t it?” I replied.

“Is the Garden of Eden a real thing?”

“Good question. But maybe a discussion for another time and potentially the ultimate answer to the question I’m about to ask, but let’s say Eden is real. My question is, if Eden was real and is a representation of Heaven, being in oneness with God, then will loneliness exist in heaven because it existed in Eden?”

The Children’s Pastors chimed in with “No, loneliness is a sin.”

A little surprised by her comment I responded, “Is it?”

“Well yeah, loneliness comes from a place where you have

taken your eyes off God. You aren't relying on Him." She responded.

"The real question is - is there a difference between being alone and loneliness?" The Senior Pastor added.

I had never thought about loneliness being a sin. I didn't think I was being sinful that night at the wedding reception. If I was being sinful, I certainly wasn't intending to be. I just was being real with what I was feeling. In fact, running to the bathroom was in a sense running to God, it was a place I could be alone with Him and bring to Him the deep pain I was feeling because I didn't want to take it to anyone else. So, what is it about loneliness that could make it sinful? What is it about loneliness that makes it a bad word?

In my opinion, we need to not shy away from words like lonely. Loneliness is not a sin. Loneliness is not a bad emotion. One of the fascinating things I find about loneliness is that it existed in the Garden of Eden. Loneliness was there before anything went wrong with the world. Right alongside love and grace and hope and kindness and compassion, loneliness existed with God and His creation from the start.

"The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be

alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Genesis 2:18

Side note: Ok, so I need to take a hot second and highlight something about this word ‘helper’ because if you are of the mindset that when the word ‘helper’ is used here that it means our only calling on earth as women is to simply help the man, then let me correct some wrong theology. The Hebrew word used here is ezer and when translated into the English means ‘helper’ but by translating it into English, we miss completely the true meaning of this word. Ezer is used 21 times throughout the Old Testament, and 16 of those times it refers to God and essentially means in Hebrew ‘a strong, rescuing kind of help’.[1] When used in relation to Eve in Genesis 2:18, the Hebrew words used are ezer kenegdo which essentially means ‘a strong, equal help’. Not subordinate, not lacking in calling or purpose, not weaker but rather one of strength and equal purpose.

Women are called to live a life of deep purpose in equal partnership with men, lifting each other up to realise the call God has placed on each of our lives.

Ok, back to it.

So, what is it about loneliness that makes us think it’s a bad thing? Do we ever look at love or kindness or grace as



a bad thing?

I believe there is a deeper purpose in loneliness.

If we didn't feel lonely, we wouldn't need each other, we wouldn't need God. We wouldn't understand the depth of human connection. We wouldn't have an inbuilt mechanism that draws us back to God when we are feeling alone. Every time I have felt lonely, I feel as though I need to get out or get away, somehow physically change where I am or what I'm doing. Loneliness, in all its complexity, is an emotion that causes us to run to something, rather than away. And anything that is designed to propel us towards God can't be a bad thing. Loneliness is like fear, which is something else that can keep us running from God.

The sinful part of loneliness sits within what we do with the moments we are feeling alone. You could take the feeling of loneliness to bar or you take it God. You could take it a bottle of wine or you could take it a trusted friend. What we do with our loneliness matters.

The purpose of loneliness is not to taunt us about our lack, rather, it is designed to highlight our need. Our need for each other. Our need for God. Our need to not walk through life alone.

Loneliness is what reminds us that we need human connection. It's the driving force behind our desire to be seen and known. Jesus experienced deep loneliness, not just when God abandoned him on the cross but for most of his life. Think about it, no one on earth could truly understand what it was like to be Jesus: fully God and fully man. Yet this did not deter Him from reaching out and pressing in, especially to those who experienced loneliness in greater levels, like the sick, the oppressed, the forgotten. Jesus' depth of understanding of loneliness drove Him to reach out to those who also knew what it was like to be cast out.

So, if Jesus knew loneliness in ways we can never understand, is it possible God has a purpose for this feeling within our story of singleness?

I believe the answer is a resounding "yes". We hate how loneliness feels but it's the very feeling that can drive us towards greater connection, greater understanding and greater growth.

Is it uncomfortable? Yes!

Do we like feeling lonely? No!

Does loneliness propel us into connection? Yes!

Could that be the purpose of loneliness? I believe so. I think God, who knows this feeling well—the deep desire for connection—knew what he was doing when he created us with the same need (connection) and the ability to yearn for it (loneliness). But he left it up to us to decide on what we would do about our loneliness when it rears its ugly head.

This is where Jesus provides the perfect example. In all instances where we can identify a sense of loneliness in Jesus' story, we see him reaching out, either to God or to his friends, to fill that gap. We see this in the moments when Jesus would remove himself from a crowd of people around him or send his disciples ahead of him whilst he took time out with God. It's quite possible that Jesus, fully God and fully human, felt loneliness in crowds of thousands because no one there would have completely understood what it was like to be fully God and fully man. Probably the most perfect example of Jesus responding to those feelings of loneliness is in Gethsemene. He gathers his friends to accompany him to pray while he first seeks God in response to the burden that only he can bear. He then reaches out again to his friends who have fallen asleep to wake up and continue to support him in his hour of need.

This was something I didn't do that night at my friend's wedding. How different might my evening have been if I had simply allowed my loneliness to lead me to a friend, rather than only fleeing to the bathroom and hiding what I was going through.

Loneliness should propel us to take action, but this is only possible if we're willing to acknowledge how we feel, have the courage to push through the shame we might feel over our loneliness and stop hiding it.

It's time we stop hiding our feelings of loneliness and instead bring them into the light. Only when we bring a thing that is in darkness into the light can we truly see it for what it is and by doing so, remove the power it has over us. Loneliness isn't as scary when we aren't sitting in it, on our own, in the dark. We need to share how we are feeling so that those around us can step into the gap we are tempted to fill with endless dates or chocolate chip cookie dough.

Don't run from your loneliness. Don't be crippled by loneliness. Invite the light in and see how God will show up in ways you never thought possible.

[1] <https://margmowczko.com/kenegdo-meet-subordinate-suitable-or-similar/> (visited 20/1/19)