

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 we 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, 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, again, 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."