

Loneliness

God intends human beings to live together in harmony and to value one another, but Scripture recognises many reasons for individuals to feel unwanted and isolated.

- **Loneliness is not part of God's plan for human beings**

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." Gen 2:18

See also Ps 68:5-6; Isa 49:15

- **God is with his people at all times and in all circumstances**

"Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God." Isaiah 41:10

See also Deut 31:8; Joshua 1:9; Ps 27:10; Isa 43:2; Mt 28:20; John 14:18; Hebrews 13:5-6

friends

Those to whom one is close.

Scripture stresses that friendship is often but not always a positive thing: where good friends can be invaluable in the life of faith, bad friends can be obstacles to the faith of believers, or even lead them astray totally.

fellowship

Association based upon the sharing of something in common. Believers have fellowship with one another on the basis of their common fellowship with God, their participation in the blessings of the gospel and their common task of mission. True fellowship is demonstrated in concern for, and practical commitment to, one another.

loyalty

A commitment to an ongoing relationship and to the attitude and behaviour demanded by it. It is evident in human relationships and also in the covenant relationship between God and his people.

relationships

God created people to be in relationship with himself and with one another in friendship, marriage, family, society and the church.

Human beings are created to be in relationship

With God “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them.’ Rev 21:3

See also Isa 43:6-7; Hos 11:1; 2Cor 6:18

With one another Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” Gen 2:18

See also Ps 127:4; Pr 17:6,17; 18:24; 27:10; Ecc 4:9-12

- “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.”
Ps 25:16 NRSV
- I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop. Ps 102:7 NRSV
- At my first defence no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! 2 Tim 4:16 NRSV

loneliness

- **Reasons why people may experience loneliness**

Sin

“See, the Lord’s hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.

²Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.” Isa 59:2

See also Gen 4:10-12; 1Sam 28:5-6; Ps 81:11-12; Isa 64:7; Hos 5:6; Eph 4:18

Remorse

Example of Judas betraying innocent blood. Mt 27:4-5

See also 1Ch 21:17 (David after the census); Peter weeps after the betrayal Mt

26:75

Lack of friends

“Look on my right hand and see— there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for me.” Ps 142:4

See also Jn 5:7; 14:18

Social ostracism

Jn 4:9 A moral outcast (see Jn 4:18), she was collecting water at the hottest part of the day, when she could do so alone. *See also* Lk 19:7 A Jew who worked for the Roman occupying power was considered a traitor.

Public shame

Jn 8:3 The woman caught in adultery

See also Jesus on the cross being derided by the crowds Mk 15:29-32

Desertion

“My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbours stand far off.” Ps 38:11

See also 2 Tim 4:16; Ps 88:18

Loss of family

The widow of Nain after the death of her only son. Lk 7:12

See also Ru 1:3-5; 2Sa 18:33; 2Ki 4:1; Job 1:20-21; Ps 27:10; Mt 2:17-18; Jer 31:15; 1Ti 5:5

Loss of identity

“As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.” Lk 8:27 pp Mk 5:2-3

See also Lk 8:30 pp Mk 5:9

Discontent

The vanity of riches and those always discontent with what they have.

Eccl 4:8

See also Eccl 2:10-11,18; Heb 13:5-6

Disability

A man lame from birth Acts 3:2

See also Lev 21:17-18; Mt 9:32; 12:22

Disease

Lk 17:12 Lepers were forbidden to mix with those not affected.

See also Lev 13:4; Nu 5:1-3; 2Ki 7:3; 2Ch 26:21

Insomnia

“I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.” Ps 102:7

See also Job 7:4; Dan 6:18

Depression

Elijah went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” 1Kings 19:4

See also Dt 33:27; Job 7:16; Ps 43:5; 73:16-17; Jer 15:10; Mic 7:1

Poverty

“If the poor are hated even by their kin, how much more are they shunned by their friends! When they call after them, they are not there.” Proverbs 19:7

See also 1Ki 17:12; Pr 19:4; Lk 15:14-16

Old age

“Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent.” Psalm 71:9

See also 2Sam 19:34-35

Dying and the approach of death

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

See also Ps 18:4-6; Ro 8:38-39

- **Loneliness experienced as a consequence of God's calling**

God's setting apart for service 1Ki 19:10 See also Jdg 6:14-15; Jer 1:5; 4:18-19; 15:16-17

Leadership Mk 10:32 See also Ex 24:1-2; Jos 1:6-7; Mt 20:17-19

Responsibility Nu 11:14 See also Ex 18:17-18; 2Co 11:28

- **Jesus Christ experienced loneliness**

Mt 27:46 pp Mk 15:33-34 *See also* Ps 22:1-2; Mt 4:1-2 pp Lk 4:1-2; Mt 14:23; Lk 4:28-30; Jn 6:67; 16:32

- **Positive aspects of loneliness**

Solitude provides an opportunity for communion with God Mt 6:6 *See also* Ex 3:1-2; 33:9; 2Ki 4:32-33; Mt 26:39; Mk 1:35; 6:45-46; Rev 1:9

Engaging in spiritual warfare Ge 32:24

The opportunity for spiritual experiences away from the crowd Mk 9:2
See also Da 10:8; 2Co 12:2-4

Solitude as rest from the turmoil of everyday life Mk 6:31-32 See also Mt 11:28

LONELY

[Heb *yāhîd*—‘only,’ ‘solitary,’ ‘isolated’] (Ps. 25:16); AV DESOLATE; [part of *bāḏad*—‘be isolated, alone,’ *bāḏād*] (Ps. 102:7 [MT 8]; Lam. 1:1); AV ALONE, SOLITARY; NEB IN SOLITUDE, SOLITARY; [Gk. *érēmos*—‘abandoned,’ ‘desolate,’ ‘solitary’]; AV also SOLITARY.

In ancient times (as sometimes today) SUFFERING was often intensified by the afflicted one’s isolation from human fellowship. Because adversity was regarded as divine punishment, the sufferer frequently had to endure abandonment by the human community as well as the devastating fear of having been forsaken by God (e.g., Ps. 25:16; cf. 22:1f, 6–8 [MT 2f, 7–9]). The writer of Ps. 102 compares his isolation to that of “a vulture of the wilderness ... an owl of the waste places ... a lonely bird on the housetop” (vv 6f [MT 7f]; cf. vv 8, 10 [9, 11]). Jerusalem’s terrible loneliness (Lam. 1:1) is twofold: her people (“children”) have been taken into exile (vv 1, 4f), and her former allies (“lovers”) have turned against her (vv 2, 5); cf. the description of the “solitary” (Heb. *bāḏād*) city in Isa. 27:10.

In the NT Gk. *érēmos* occurs most often as a substantive, which the RSV usually renders “wilderness” (or, twice, “desert”); cf. also *erēmia* (RSV “desert,” “wilderness”). As an adjective *érēmos* occurs nine times in the phrase *érēmos tópos* (RSV “lonely place,” except in Mk. 1:45, where it unfortunately renders “country”). *Érēmos* can denote any place that is uninhabited, not necessarily a DESERT region lacking water and vegetation. Jesus retreats to a “lonely place” when He wants to escape the press of the crowds; but the crowds pursue Him, even into areas where no food is available (e.g., Mt. 14:13–15 par Mk. 6:31–36; Lk. 9:10–12; cf. Mk. 1:45). In the “lonely place” (or WILDERNESS) one can be alone to fast and pray, to experience dependence on God and communion with Him. It is to such a place that Jesus withdraws for forty days after His baptism (Mt. 4:1f par). And to such places He returns when He seeks an opportunity for prayer (e.g., Mk. 1:35; cf. 6:45f par) or for rest with His disciples (e.g., 6:31f.).

Bromiley, Geoffrey W., ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Revised. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988.

Dunbar's Number

In a May 2010 article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the work of Robin Dunbar, Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology at Oxford University based on research on the social structure of primates was discussed. Dunbar has analysed historical data and brain science to formulate what he calls the Dunbar Number – the maximum number of friends or meaningful relationships that humans can have; he also discloses the maximum number of people for whom we can put names to faces – including ‘celebrities.’

1. 3-5 Core Group of Intimates – people that you can call upon at anytime for anything; presumed knowledge & intimacy
2. 10-15 Close friends – those who would be devastated at your death! Also called the sympathy / empathy group.
3. 50 Social Group – youth group / overnight campsite
4. **150** **Dunbar's Number** - the maximum number of friends or meaningful relationships that humans can have; the human brain can't cope with complexity of more than this
5. 500 Village – people we know, but not well enough to call friends
6. 1500 Maximum number of people for whom we can put names to faces – including ‘celebrities.’

Humans – like all primates – have developed a larger neocortex – the part of the brain of mammals that is responsible for social skills. Animals first formed pair bonds – monogamous relationships that were optimal for joint parental care. Once primates were able to master this skill, then they could use similar social and communication

skills to form non-reproductive relationships. These platonic partnerships – what we call friendships – were also rather helpful in reducing the chances of being eaten!

Once any social unit or workplace grows larger than the social group and begins to approach or exceed the Dunbar Number a tipping point is reached. Many companies find that it is best to limit working units and factories to this number. For example, Steve Jobs insisted that there be no more than 100 people working in the Macintosh group; if someone needed to be added, then someone else would have to leave. Steve wanted to be able to address every person in the Mac group by first name; he couldn't do this if the group was larger than 100. Similarly, Bill Gore, the founder of GoreTex insisted that factories should be no larger than 150 people; he would multiple the number of factories, rather than having any one larger than Dunbar's number.

You see a similar system of organisation within the military. The Australian Army is organised into:

1. 8-10 soldiers Section
2. 30 soldiers Troop
3. 100 soldiers Company
4. ~600 soldiers Battalion or Regiment
5. 3000 soldiers Brigade
6. 10k – 15k Division

Likewise, you can see this in the ministry and life of Jesus.

1. 3 Inner group (Peter, James and John)
2. 12 Apostles – close friends
3. 72 Disciples
4. 100s Larger Group of disciples
5. 1000s The crowds that Jesus ministered to