

LYDIA BROWNBACK



FINDING

G•ÖD

IN MY

LONELINESS

“I have a great marriage and lots of good friends and a great church family, and yet I often feel lonely. I don’t think I’ve ever read anything on loneliness that seemed to get to the heart of it, or applied any real wisdom to it until *Finding God in My Loneliness*. Instead of presenting a merely psychological, social, or practical answer, Lydia Brownback provides a profoundly biblical answer to the loneliness we all feel at times, walking readers through the biblical story and ably demonstrating how God works in and through loneliness in the lives of those he calls his own.”

Nancy Guthrie, Bible Teacher; author, *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow*

“We used to know who the lonely people were—young singles living solo in small apartments, aging shut-ins, or those sequestered away by illness. It’s not that way anymore. In a world of frenetic activity, loneliness is an epidemic that is impacting everyone. It’s why Lydia Brownback’s new book is urgently needed—too many people, especially women, are suffocating for lack of real and meaningful friendships. Christians can make the difference, though, and *Finding God in My Loneliness* speaks not only to the solitary heart, but also to those who desire to reach out, embrace, and fill the space. A remarkable book with a culturally timely message!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“At some level—ever since Genesis 3—every human being experiences the pain of isolation and alienation. Lydia grapples honestly with various loneliness-inducing life seasons and circumstances. And she helps us understand how our loneliness can be redeemed by the Friend who endured the ultimate loneliness for our sakes, and who anoints us with the oil of joy as we walk in union and communion with him.”

Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, author; Host, *Revive Our Hearts*

“I love this book. It is full of truth. Regardless of whether you’re married or single, eighty years old or eighteen, man or woman, rich or poor, Western or Eastern, everyone will face loneliness at one time or another. Brownback tells us that the main reason we get lonely is because we’re not home yet. She helps us to see that only when we find our significance, security, and comfort in Christ will we realize that we are never alone. Reading this book set off a gospel bomb of joy and hope in my heart. I urge everyone to read it immediately and meditate on these truths for a lifetime.”

Dave Furman, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Church of Dubai; author, *Being There: How to Love Those Who Are Hurting*

“At one time or another, all of us experience loneliness—not just solitude, but loneliness. In this unique and valuable study, Lydia Brownback draws from Scripture and experience to uncover the heart issues and responses that lead lonely Christians in healthy or unhealthy directions. Without downplaying the inescapable loneliness of living in a fallen world, *Finding God in My Loneliness* nonetheless finds abiding hope in the friendship of Jesus Christ.”

Philip Graham Ryken, President, Wheaton College

Finding God in My Loneliness

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to Everything*

Finding God in My Loneliness

Lydia Brownback

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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Finding God in My Loneliness

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With gratitude to God
for
the special women of the
Cazenovia Women's Bible Study,
who encouraged my soul on Thursday mornings.

And,

for
Elisabeth Elliot (1926–2015)

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Truly, truly, I say to you,
unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains alone;
but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

John 12:24

Introduction

Why Are We Lonely?

The unexpected snowfall brought the neighborhood together as we worked to clear cars and walkways before the early December sunset. “Looks like winter is here!” I called over to my friend next door.

“Indeed it is!” she replied. “And the timing of all this snow is perfect. After supper we’re going to make hot chocolate and decorate the Christmas tree. The kids are really excited.”

As I stood there picturing her happy family scene, I was suddenly buried under an avalanche of overwhelming loneliness. For the first time ever, I decided against getting a Christmas tree that year. The thought of having no one with whom to unwrap each memory-laden ornament from its tissue-paper hibernation was just too depressing. A casual conversation was all it took.

A few Christmases later, determined to have for myself the sort of holiday fun my neighbor enjoyed with her family, I invited a few girlfriends to my home for a tree-trimming party. One friend was especially enthusiastic, and I asked her, “Why is

coming to my place so great when you've got your own tree to decorate and a husband and kids to do it with you?"

"Let me tell you how *that* goes," she replied. "We pick a day when we're going to do it, and I get treats prepared and Christmas music playing, and all the ornaments are set out on the table. And when I'm ready, everyone wanders in. But five minutes into it, phone calls and texts and whatever else distract them, so they grab a cookie and disappear. I wind up decorating the tree alone every year."

How eye-opening that was! Those pictures of others' lives that we get in our minds or see on social media are rarely the reality. Behind the smiles and accolades and images of family fun lie all the normal stuff of everyone's life: heartbreak, rejection, anxiety—and loneliness.

Single or married, young or old, man or woman—everyone experiences loneliness at various times and to varying degrees. No one is exempt. We were created for togetherness, which is why, even before the fall, God declared that man's aloneness was not good (Gen. 2:18). And immediately after his declaration, he created marriage. But marriage was never intended to be the ultimate, eternal remedy for loneliness. That's why the unmarried aren't doomed in this regard. God created human beings with a capacity for loneliness so that we would yearn for and find our all in him:

In Genesis 2 God ordains the marriage of male and female as another aspect of his design for our aloneness. Yet he never designed marriage to fulfill the incompleteness or eradicate the aloneness. Rather, it more fully reveals our need for our ultimate destiny—to be in union with him.¹

In other words, loneliness is an indicator that something is missing, and that something is found only in Jesus Christ. He com-

pletes what's missing, that thing we identify as "loneliness," beginning from the moment we are joined to him in faith and brought to completion in glory. In other words, the primary reason we are lonely is that we aren't home yet. God created us for communion with him, and therefore loneliness will be fully eradicated only when we get to heaven. That's why everyone— young or old, single or married—experiences loneliness. No one is exempt.

That being said, the loneliness we feel and the circumstances that make us aware of it arise because of man's fall into sin back in the garden of Eden. The loneliness we experience is a consequence of sin and has been ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God. The couple hid from God after they ate from the forbidden tree, and that's also when they began to hide from each other. Loneliness began in the garden.

Let's make an important distinction right here at the beginning of this book: there is a difference between *loneliness* and *being alone*. Sometimes loneliness and aloneness overlap, and one can breed the other, but they are not the same thing. Some of the loneliest people live among many, while other people can exist day to day with limited human contact and feel no lack. Why is this? What makes the difference? Thinking through these things helps us cultivate a deeper understanding of ourselves, our family and friends, and our Lord.

Loneliness is everywhere, but we don't talk about it too often. Perhaps that's because we've grown so accustomed to its oppressive weight that we've lost awareness of it altogether. Oh, something seems off, but we attribute it to the weather or the stress *du jour*, and we try to shake it off with a good dinner or a night out on the town. But there it is again the next morning.

Relief comes only as we acknowledge our loneliness and turn

to God and his Word for the help and understanding we need. That's where this book aims to take us.

We will start out by asking—and then seek to answer—a basic question: *Why are we lonely?* And then we'll see that the best remedy for loneliness in this lifetime is found in something Jesus said: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39).

We'll also look at how God works in and through loneliness in the lives of his people. From the patriarchs in Genesis up through the present day, we will see that loneliness isn't something to fear but something that God redeems. In Scripture we discover that God is present in our loneliness. He is there in times of grief and in times of discouragement. He is there when others forsake us, and when our hopes are disappointed. He never leaves us, not even when our loneliness springs from our sin and bad choices.

Ultimately, what we're going to see is that those who belong to God through Christ Jesus are never really alone, and because that's true, loneliness does not have to characterize us. Isn't that a relief? As you join me in exploring this challenging issue, I pray that we all would come to a fuller understanding of who God is for us in Christ our Lord.

Part 1

**LONELINESS
REINFORCED**

Hence, all earthly treasure!
Jesus is my Pleasure,
Jesus is my Choice.
Hence, all empty glory!
Naught to me thy story
Told with tempting voice.
Pain or loss, or shame or cross,
Shall not from my Savior move me
Since He deigns to love me.

Evil world, I leave thee;
Thou canst not deceive me,
Thine appeal is vain.
Sin that once did blind me,
Get thee far behind me,
Come not forth again.
Past thy hour, O pride and power;
Sinful life, thy bonds I sever,
Leave thee now forever.

—Johann Franck, “Jesus, Priceless Treasure”

Treasuring the Wrong Treasure

“I can’t seem to make my life work,” Lanie complained to her friend. “I’ve spent years trying, but I can’t find what I’m looking for.”

And it’s true. Over the past decade Lanie has started her life over, three separate times in three different states—new job, new church, new friends, new home. Well-meaning loved ones tell her what’s missing is a husband. All she needs, they say, is a man to love and settle down with. But Lanie has had opportunities for marriage, so in her case that just isn’t it.

Lanie can’t explain what exactly isn’t working in her life, although a pattern is clear. After a few years in a particular place, she gets a sense that something is missing, and a restlessness sets in; so in an attempt to obtain that missing something, she starts everything over again. The pattern has become a cycle—a vicious cycle—because wherever she goes, inevitably there is

something missing. Lanie doesn't connect that missing thing with loneliness, but it is there, and it adds to the viciousness of the cycle. Every time she uproots, she intensifies her loneliness.

So what is Lanie's chief problem, and what is her real need?

The Loneliness of Freedom

A major contributor to Lanie's loneliness is, surprisingly, freedom. Never before has it been easier for women to pick up and go. Women today are well equipped; we've got financial investments, cutting-edge modes of transportation, and sophisticated street smarts. But the reality is that so much freedom can actually increase our loneliness. Today, because we no longer have to stay in one place and do life with the people also staying in this place, we don't make commitments. After all, why commit if we don't have to? Why risk getting stuck in undesirable circumstances, perhaps missing the fulfillment that lies right around the next bend in the road? But this view of freedom—the one thrown at us from everywhere today—actually robs us of the very thing it promises. In earlier eras, when there was less freedom, people made commitments—to a marriage, a job, a place—because they had no other options. And if you do some digging, you'll likely discover across the societal board that loneliness was less pronounced then, when people committed just because their choices were so limited.

Today we can all too easily follow what Barry Cooper calls the “god of open options.” He writes:

The god of open options is a cruel and vindictive god. He will break your heart. He will not let anyone get too close. But at the same time, because he is so spiteful, he will not let anyone get too far away because that would mean they are no longer an option. On and on it continues, exhausting

and frustrating and confusing and endless, pulling towards and then pushing away, like the tide on a beach, never finally committing one way or the other. We have been like the starving man sitting in front of an all-you-can-eat buffet, dying simply because he would not choose between the chicken and the shrimp. The god of open options is also a liar. He promises you that by keeping your options open, you can have everything and everyone. But in the end, you get nothing and no one.²

Finding Our Life

This sort of thing has definitely contributed to Lanie's loneliness. But the root of it is even simpler than that. Take a closer look at Lanie's dominant refrain: "*I can't seem to make my life work.*" Who is she focused on? Who is she living for? It's all there to see: Lanie has been living for Lanie. But are we—you and I—really that much different? Chronic loneliness and a sense of ongoing restlessness can be tip-offs that we're more like Lanie than we've realized. We, along with Lanie, need to see that whenever our primary pursuit is self-fulfillment, we're sure to miss it. Conversely, if we pursue Christ above all, we'll find what we've been restless for all along. Self-seeking breeds loneliness; self-forgetfulness breeds fullness. It's what Jesus was getting at when he said, "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:38–39).

Self-seeking leads to the loss of real life, and our experience of this loss is often what we define as "something missing." It's what sends us on a perpetual search for that one next thing. For many of us, that one next thing seems to lie in the relational arena. Single women want to be married. Married women want

a better marriage. Childless women want babies. Mothers want happier children. Empty-nesters want grandchildren. For others, that one next thing is more about accomplishing something important or having more meaningful work. There's nothing wrong with these desires—we're hardwired to want them. But at the same time, if we live to get them, we're sure to find them hollow when we do.

Look again at Jesus's words: "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." He is telling disciples that following him is costly, but what we gain is far greater than what we lose.

Choosing Our Treasure

So we have a choice. We can do all we can to hang on to our dreams and hopes and personal goals for life, love, and success in this world, or we can let go of those things as our primary reason to get out of bed every morning. But we will never make this choice unless our hearts grasp what it is we are meant to find instead. This *finding* comes out more fully in Jesus's parables:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matt. 13:44–46)

Is that how we see the kingdom of heaven? Do we value it as our greatest treasure? Simply realizing that it *is* our greatest treasure indicates that we're on the way to finding true fullness of life.

Theologians rightly teach that the best way to get at the true meaning of Jesus's parables is to find the main point and not get lost in the details, but it's still beneficial to consider the

details too. All of God's Word is inspired, not just the main point. So, with that in mind, let's look a bit more closely at Jesus's words.

First, notice that the treasure is *something that was hidden*. On another occasion, Jesus was praying, and he said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things [kingdom things] from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children" (Matt. 11:25). Jesus was talking about the heart attitude necessary to understand and know God and to realize that he is the greatest treasure we'll ever have. So treasuring the right treasure begins with humility. It is revealed only to the humble.

Second, *finding the treasure brought joy*. We find joy in getting what we treasure. On the other hand, we do not find joy if we don't treasure what we get.

Third, *the treasure was worth letting go of everything else*. The only way we are going to know Christ as our supreme treasure is if we diminish the value of competing treasure. Anything—even good things—must go if they hinder Christ's lordship in our lives and hearts. If we cherish and cling to competing treasures, our affection for God will grow sluggish and our loneliness will only increase.

Notice also that everything owned by the treasure finder was sold in order to purchase the treasure; in other words, his possessions weren't merely given away. A truth we can glean from this detail is that the things we give up to follow Christ aren't without value in their own right. Sometimes laying hold of kingdom treasure will prove costly, but coming to know Christ as our greatest treasure is worth the cost.

When loneliness covers us like a blanket, our instinct is to look for a way out. When we don't know Christ as our treasure,

we seek escape in whatever we can see in front of us—certain habits or indulgences, places we go, and even certain relationships. Not only are such things more ready at hand, it seems, but also, at some level, we tend to blame God for our loneliness. We won't know him as our greatest treasure if our view of him is skewed, and the more we seek escape from our pain in worldly things, the more warped our view of God becomes. Instead of looking for a way out of loneliness, we need to look at Jesus. Only then will we discover that he is what we've been looking for all along. And only then will we really be willing to "sell" our earthly possessions and acquisitions for the sake of God and his kingdom.

Jesus said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost?" And he concludes all this by saying, "Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26–28, 33). A great deal of loneliness comes from either a reluctance or an outright unwillingness to follow Jesus if doing so means letting go of the way we want our life to work out.

Loneliness Fortified

We cling to our life in a variety of ways, one of which is a devotion to *laying up treasures on earth*. Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your trea-

sure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19–21). In other words, devoting ourselves to acquiring material treasures isn’t a good use of our lives because earthly treasures never last. They fall apart, or get stolen, and they certainly don’t fill up our emptiness.

Attempting to *juggle competing treasure* is another way we cling to life on our own terms. But competing treasures are never equal—one will always dominate the other. That’s why Jesus says we just can’t do it, and because this world and what it offers often feel more real—and certainly more immediate in terms of the payoff—the self-centered, worldly competition can all too easily win.

Finally, we will remain entrenched in loneliness if we *seek a Savior without a cross*. Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26–27). There is no discipleship without the cross, and in taking it up, we find the fullness of life that Christ promised.

We nod in agreement about the value of God’s kingdom until it hits our personal brick wall. Do we have a nonnegotiable—something we aren’t willing to part with in order to follow Christ? If so, it’s no wonder we are lonely. Think about David Powlison’s wise words:

Fear and desire are two sides of a single coin. A sinful fear is a craving for something not to happen. If I want money, I fear poverty with its deprivations and humiliations. If I long to be loved, I’m terrified of rejection. If I fear pain or hardship, I crave comfort or pleasure. If I crave preeminence, I fear being subordinate to others.³

Loneliness Lifted

Getting at what we fear and desire or what makes us anxious is a good way to uncover what vies with Christ for top place in our hearts. If we are willing, we will come to see that we have nothing to fear in letting go of our self-oriented lives in order to follow Jesus. Just consider what he promised:

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29–30)

We are quick to think, “Oh, yes, I’ll have treasure in heaven, but right now, I’m here, and this is what I’ve got to deal with.” But Jesus makes clear that enjoying Christ as our true treasure isn’t just for heaven; it’s for now too. The path out of loneliness begins by letting go of all our attempts to make life work on our own terms. It’s about taking up our cross and following Jesus.

If loneliness is weighing us down, and if we find ourselves doubting that God really is our greatest treasure, we can be honest with him, our kind Father and friend. We can tell him that we’ve been trying so hard to make our life work the way we want that we’ve lost sight of all he is for us in Christ. We can ask him to show us afresh who he really is and to change our heart. Sometimes change begins with praying, “God, I’m willing to be willing.” If that’s the best we can do today, God will meet us there. He is more eager than we are that we come to treasure him above all else, and it is only as we seek him that we’ll find what we have been looking for all along.



Questions for Discussion or Reflection from Chapter 1

1. How do today's many freedoms contribute to loneliness? How has this played out in your own life?
2. Discuss or describe what Barry Cooper calls "the god of open options."
3. How do Jesus's words in Matthew 10:38–39 speak to the issue of loneliness?
4. From the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:44–46), list the steps involved in laying hold of Jesus as our greatest treasure.
5. In Luke 14:26–33, Jesus explains the nature of true discipleship. Are you allowing something or someone to hold you back from following Jesus fully? If so, can you identify how your reluctance to let it go contributes to your loneliness?

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3:1-2127

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2 Peter

1:20154

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1 John

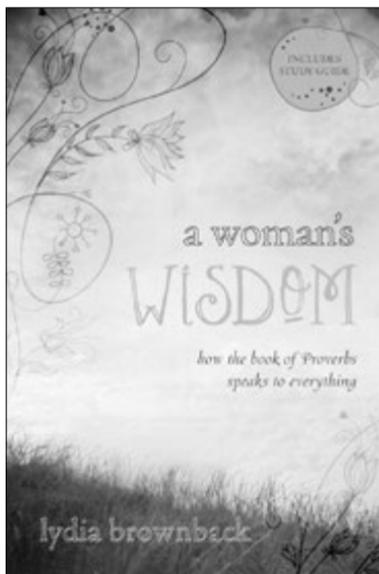
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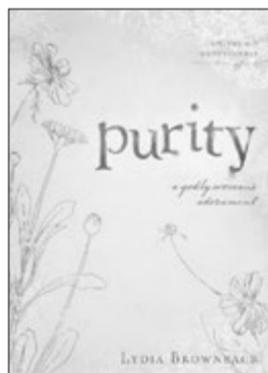
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ELYSE FITZPATRICK, author, *Because He Loves Me*

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WHY AM I LONELY?

Young or old, single or married, male or female—at some point in life, we're all confronted with loneliness. We try to fill the void or change our circumstances so we no longer feel the pain. But what if our pangs of loneliness are meant to point us to something greater?

Looking at various aspects of loneliness, Lydia Brownback reminds us of God's power to redeem our loneliness and use it in our lives to draw us to himself. Ultimately, she helps us see that even when we feel misunderstood, forsaken, or abandoned, we're never really alone. God is always with us, and only he can meet all of our needs in Christ Jesus.

"In a world of frenetic activity, loneliness is an epidemic that is impacting everyone. *Finding God in My Loneliness* speaks not only to the solitary heart, but also to those who desire to reach out, embrace, and fill the space. A remarkable book with a culturally timely message!"

JONI EARECKSON TADA, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

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PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, President, Wheaton College

LYDIA BROWBACK (MAR, Westminster Theological Seminary) is the author of several books and a speaker at women's conferences around the world. She previously served as writer in residence for Alistair Begg and as producer of *The Bible Study Hour* radio program with James Montgomery Boice.

RELATIONSHIPS / WOMEN

