

"Aspects Of Loneliness"

By Alan Morrell

Loneliness – Introduction

Hebrews 13.5-6.

There are many experiences in life which are common to all of us. At some time or other we all have to face pain and suffering. Unless we live on desert islands, we will all know the grief and sorrow of losing a friend or loved one in death. We will all face disappointments, having our hopes dashed to the ground, or seeing them disappear as mist in the early sun - this is all part of the world in which we live!

There is, however, one emotion which we all experience, but to which we seldom admit; it is that awful sense of loneliness which grips our hearts, coming unannounced and unwanted, and often when we least expect it. Loneliness has many side effects; it can make us withdrawn and unsocial, even resentful and bitter; it can change our characters completely and it can give Satan, the enemy of our souls, the opportunity of attacking us more successfully, causing us to doubt the love which God has for us.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta says that "Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty" and William Cowper, the great hymn-writer tells us that "Absence from those we love is worse than death." Perhaps you are passing through a time of great loneliness today; if so, this message is for you!

In this study we are going to look at men and women in the Bible who faced loneliness, and see if we can get some real help from their experiences. In this introductory talk I want us to look at two really exciting Bible verses which are found in the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 13 verses 5 and 6. The writer makes three points, which we will call Contentment, Comfort and Confidence, and there probably isn't one person who wouldn't like such emotions.

Contentment

In the first place the writer challenges us - "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have." It doesn't matter where we live or what circumstances we find ourselves in, there is always the temptation to be dissatisfied with what we have. This is human nature and the sales men and women of the world play on it, offering to enrich our lives with new and glittering goods and services. People in the gambling industry play upon our natural desire to want more money, so that Great Britain, once known as "a Christian country" spends far more money on gambling than on helping people who are in need. The writer of this verse says that we need to face up to this, and ask God for a spirit of contentment, free from the love of money which attacks society in every country.

In the early days of the ministry of Jesus people asked what action He wanted them to take in response to His teaching and when some soldiers enquired "What should we do?" He told them "Be content with your pay!" You may very well say that your circumstances are so poor that no-one could possibly be content with them; well, remember that the Apostle Paul was in prison when he wrote "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances", and when in another prison cell he could say "If we have food and clothing we will be content with that."

Comfort

Thankfully the verses we are looking at today do not end with the challenge to be content; if that was all we could offer there would little point in bringing the message. They give us some good reasons for being content, as they go on to say "Because God has said 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you'." What an antidote for loneliness, to know the constant presence of the Living God, day and night; to know that when we close our eyes in sleep He is still very much awake; when we go on a journey

we don't leave Him behind; when we feel forsaken and even betrayed He is still there with us whispering words of real comfort and assurance, telling us that there will never be a moment when He will desert us. These words were written for Christians, and before we can claim this powerful promise we need to be sure that we have invited the Lord Jesus Christ into our hearts and given our lives over to Him.

Confidence

Once we know that we are true Christians, cleansed by the blood of Christ, saved by His grace and indwelt by His Holy Spirit, then we have a confidence which the world can neither give nor take away, and verse 6 tells us that we can "Say with confidence 'The Lord is my Helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"

Perhaps you're feeling lonely right now; you don't seem to have a friend in the world; there is no-one who will stand up for you or help you. Everyone seems to have deserted you. Why don't you accept this wonderful promise of God that He will never leave you, so that you can say with confidence "The Lord is my Helper"; not just One who is ready to help all Christians, but your Helper, the One who has committed Himself to being with you constantly, especially when you feel all alone. Once you know this you can go on with the verse "I will not be afraid"; you might well be very fearful if you are on your own, but if you have the Living God with you then He will take the fear right away. This will enable you to finish off the verse by asking the question "What can man do to me?" Men can attack us, harm us, say hurtful and untrue things about us and desert us, but if we can have the Comfort and Confidence of God's Presence with us it will make all the difference. We will not be tackling our problems alone, nor facing the opposition on our own, we will have the Strong Arm of the Lord to Protect and Guard us, and His Presence to Guide us.

I close with a word of warning. Only too often we, as Christians, want to take the promises of the Bible without responding to its commands. We have seen that the verses in Hebrews that we have been looking at commence with a Command to be Content, and we cannot expect to experience God's Presence if we are constantly dissatisfied with our lot. But if, with God's help, we show a spirit of Contentment we can then go on to experience the Comfort and Confidence that the verse promises. May each of us, whether experiencing loneliness or not, know the joy and assurance of His abiding presence, confident in the knowledge that when He says "I will never leave you" He really means it!

Loneliness In Witness Genesis Chapters 6-8

In this series we are looking at the problem of loneliness that we all face from time to time. In our last talk we saw how it brings many other problems with it, but we saw that there is a solution, for God has promised never to leave His children, nor to forsake them. This time we are thinking of the loneliness of witnessing for Christ in a world that has little time for Him, and is often not prepared to hear our message.

There is one Old Testament character whose witness was both long and strong, but who must have known great loneliness as he met with considerable opposition. The story of Noah is found in chapters 6 to 8 of Genesis, and makes very interesting reading. Briefly, God was grieved as he saw man's wickedness and His heart was filled with pain. His righteousness demanded punishment and He decided that the total flooding of the earth was the only penalty for such world-wide sin. This should cause us to pause for a moment and consider how God feels today, as He sees international sin and corruption which must surely be just as bad as in Noah's day. Thankfully, in His mercy, God has not judged the earth again, although we should never forget that a final judgement day is coming, and the Bible makes it very clear that it will be a terrible time for all those who do not know Christ as their Saviour.

We will look at this story under three simple headings, Walking with God, Witnessing to the World and Worshipping the LORD.

Walking with God

Genesis 6 verse 9 tells us that "Noah was a righteous man...and he walked with God." 17. That is a wonderful testimony to have. His friends and his family would all know that he walked with God, that he only did those things that would please His Lord and that he lived a life of obedience to God. This should be a great challenge to those of us who claim to be Christians. The great example of our Lord Jesus Christ was that "He only did what pleased the Father", and as we are Followers of Him, that is the kind of life we should be seeking to live.

You may remember that it was also said of Noah's great-grandfather, Enoch, that "he walked with God." As he lived for the first sixty-five years of Noah's life, it is almost certain that his godly witness made a great impression on Noah. This is challenge to those of us who are parents or grandparents as to the kind of example we are setting our young people. Would we be pleased or ashamed if we thought they were following in our steps?

Witnessing to the World

When we walk with God it will be quite natural for us to witness to the world. We will not find it strange or difficult, because we will be talking about the Friend with whom we are spending so much time. Noah's witness, however, took on a very different form to ours. God revealed to Noah that the time was drawing near when He was going to judge the world for its' sin. He also told him that a way of escape had been planned. There would be salvation for all who would avail themselves of it. Noah was given clear and concise instructions about building a large boat, called an Ark, which would then be used as the means of salvation, both for people and animals.

Noah was over 500 years old when he received this command, and although people lived much longer in those days, it was still a good age to commence such an unusual venture, without any previous experience to help him. Noah would not be put off, God had given the instructions and that was good enough for him. It is highly likely that his wife and his family all tried to persuade him that the whole idea was foolish; they were living miles from the sea; just where was he going to sail his ship? Doubtless the people around him would pour ridicule and scorn on such a venture. Noah must have felt very lonely as day after day he built the boat and witnessed to the Living God, as he faithfully carried

out His instructions. He would not be put off, and the day came, as Noah knew it would, when God sent His judgement. As Peter writes, in his second letter "God did not spare the ancient world when He brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness."

There are two further references to Noah in the New Testament, in Hebrews 11 verse 7 we are told "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, built an ark to save his family." In chapter 3 verse 7 of his first letter Peter writes: "God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built...only a few people, eight in all, were saved." It is clear from these three scriptures that Noah was not mythical, but a real man who witnessed for the only true God who had called him personally.

When the Lord Jesus told His followers to "go into all the world and preach the Gospel" He also said "and surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age." If you are feeling lonely and isolated as you witness for your Lord, take heart for He has promised to be with you, and He will never break His word. I am certain that Noah, too, knew the abiding presence of God, and as we follow the story we see him and his little family leave the ark safe and secure.

Next we see him ...

Worshipping the Lord

When Noah and his family left the ark he built an altar to the Lord and sacrificed burnt offerings. We then have a lovely picture of the Lord expressing pleasure in the worship being offered to Him, and making the wonderful promise that, "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease."

There are probably very few Christians who have witnessed faithfully for their Lord who have not also known the loneliness that comes from taking a stand for him. Perhaps you are the only Christian in your family or circle of friends, or in the area where you live, or work - keep the flag of witness flying for the Lord, confident in the knowledge that the One who has sent you out to witness for Him, is the same One who has promised to be with you always to the very end of the age!

Loneliness In Persecution

Genesis Chapters 37-50

Are you feeling lonely right now? The clouds seem very dark and low, and you're wondering just how you'll make it through the day! Well this message is just for you! Discover what God has to say, and really expect Him to speak right into your circumstances.

In this series we're looking at people in the Bible who experienced loneliness in many different ways, and today we're thinking of Joseph in the book of Genesis, chapters 37 to 50. Just picture the scene! At the start of our story Jacob was a prosperous farmer with twelve sons, and Joseph was next to the youngest. Sadly he was favoured by his father, a situation that often spells trouble, and one we should always guard against. In this story we will see that Joseph was Persecuted, Provoked and finally Promoted.

First we see him being ...

Persecuted

Joseph's father provided him with a very special coat, a sign of his favour and a token of his authority and responsibility over his older brothers. This was not the wisest move, and it enflamed the hatred of the brothers. The record says: "They hated him and could not speak a kind word to him." Joseph was 17 years old and would find the persecution very hard to bear. This was not just a small family difference but ten older brothers not even on speaking terms with him! He might very well say, "But I've done nothing wrong; if our father wishes to give me a special coat that is up to him. I didn't ask for it or expect it. What have I done to deserve this?"

Perhaps that is where you are today. You are just an ordinary Christian, going about your work, yet some people have it in for you, without any real reason; so you're feeling lonely and depressed. But that was only the start of Joseph's problems. There was much worse to come. Perhaps it was partly his fault; I leave you to judge; but it happened this way. Joseph had two dreams, in one of them he was in a field with his brothers, binding wheat, when their sheaves bowed down to his. Then the dream changed and the sun, moon and eleven stars were bowing down to him. Of course, he couldn't help the dream coming, but he then went and shared it with his father and brothers. You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife! If they hated him before, then there wasn't much hope for him now! And that is how it turned out!

Taking their opportunity, the brothers stripped him of his special robe and put him into a pit, miles from home. He was desperately lonely, but the God he trusted in had His eye on him. Just then a group of traders passed by on their way to Egypt, and seeing their chance of easy money, the brothers sold him for twenty shekels of silver, two shekels for each brother!

Things seemed to improve for Joseph when he was sold to the captain of the Egyptian guard, and by working hard and conscientiously he gained the respect of his master, and was given responsibility. He was still a long way from home, but at least he had food, clothing and shelter. Suddenly, almost without warning, it happened again, and this time he was really ...

Provoked

Just when life seemed a little easier, the master's wife tried to entice him into bed with her, and when he refused she falsely accused him to her husband, claiming he had tried to rape her. What an impossible situation for a God-fearing young man in which to find himself.

This soon landed him in prison with little hope of ever seeing freedom again. He was still a young man, in a strange country, miles from home, in an Egyptian prison, and with no

news of his father. If you think your loneliness is bad, just picture how Joseph must have felt. To what depths of loneliness he must have sunk. Should he give up and resign himself to the certain knowledge that he was serving a sentence for life? No! Joseph was made of sterner stuff. With diligence he applied himself to every task given to him, and soon caught the eye of the jailer.

The jailer gave him responsibility for looking after Pharaoh's chief baker and cup-bearer, who were in prison because they had upset their royal master. When, with God's help, Joseph was able to interpret dreams for these royal servants, and when the chief butler was reinstated to his position, just as Joseph had foretold, everything seemed to be going well for Joseph once again. He had asked the royal butler to put in a good word for him at the palace, to get him released from prison, and he was sure it wouldn't be long before he was free. Human nature being what it is, we're not surprised when we read "The chief cup-bearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him!"

As the days lengthened into weeks, and the weeks into months, Joseph's loneliness in prison increased; he didn't even have the royal servants to talk to now! How desperate he must have been, and how depressed he must have felt! If that is how you are feeling today, listen to the rest of the story. God was still caring for his lonely servant! After two long years when, no doubt, Joseph had given up all hope of being released, strange things were happening up at the palace.

Pharaoh had two dreams that greatly disturbed him, and when none of the wise men could interpret them, the chief butler remembered Joseph, and he was speedily brought out of prison. Witnessing bravely, Joseph told Pharaoh that he could not interpret dreams, but his God would give Pharaoh the answer. In a remarkable way he was able to tell the ruler that there were going to be seven years of wonderful harvests, followed by seven years of famine. Under God's guidance he then told Pharaoh that he should appoint a wise and discerning man who would ensure prudence during the plentiful years so that there would be supplies in hand to meet the years of famine. Pharaoh immediately said "Where can we find such a man as this, one in whom is God's Spirit?" What a wonderful testimony!

Here was a lonely man who battled through, knowing that God was on the throne and would look after him. He was then ...

Promoted

Joseph was still only thirty years old, but under God's gracious hand he had gained a wealth of experience. He actually became God's instrument for saving the lives of his own family...but that is another story. Years later he was able to say to his brothers "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good!"

Away From Home And All Alone!

Luke Chapter 15 Verses 1-24

The world is full of lonely people! There are as many lonely young people as older ones. Young people at college, or in the armed forces, or working away from home, or perhaps they've just got fed up with the strictness of home-life and have gone off to "do their own thing." Yet it hasn't worked out as they planned and hoped, and now they are desperately lonely. If you're in that situation right now, read carefully, because this message may be just for you!

Jesus told a story in Luke chapter 15, and that is as up to date as tomorrow's newspaper. It can be summarised in three words, Reckless, Friendless and Gladness.

Reckless

A well-to-do father had two sons, and the younger one told him that he was fed up waiting for his share of the family fortune and he wanted it now! The father was very sympathetic, divided up the estate, and gave the younger son his fair share. As he looked at all the money he was really excited; now he could go places - do things - make his own way in the world without always looking over his shoulder. Perhaps that is how you're feeling today. You would just love to be able to kick off the restraints that are holding you back.

It wasn't long before this young man had made his plans and he was away to a distant country where he was sure the sun would always shine and the grass would always be green. Well, as long as his money lasted that was just how it worked out; plenty of friends helped him to spend it, and they had a jolly good time.

The story changes at this point and we see him ...

Friendless

At last the day came when his money ran out, his cheques began to bounce, and he looked around for all his so-called-friends but there wasn't one standing by him! They had all left him in the lurch! Imagine his loneliness! In a foreign country, with strange customs, an unknown language, no money and no friends! To make matters worse there was no social help from the government and the only work he could find was feeding pigs, which was socially unacceptable in his own country.

If he was lonely before, he felt absolutely terrible now. No-one to turn to, and no-one to talk to! He was desperate! Perhaps that is where you are today! If you are, I've good news for you. As this young man sat looking at the pigs' food and feeling so hungry that he wished he could eat it without being caught, his mind turned to his father, and his father's servants with a good home, good clothes and good food. "What a fool I've been", he thought. "This loneliness is really all my own fault. I will go back home and confess my sin to my father and ask him to take me back as one of his servants."

As Jesus told the story He said, "So he got up and went to his father." It was the first sensible thing he had done for a long time. It may be that the lonely feeling gripping your heart is partly of your own making. There may be some action that you should be taking. Someone whose forgiveness you should be seeking. A long road home which you should be treading. Don't delay act today!

This part of the story has a really happy ending for next we see ...

Gladness

As the young man travelled along the familiar road leading to his home his thoughts must have been very mixed. How would his father receive him? And what about his elder brother? And how would the servants like the thought of having the boss's son working with them? He had a lot of unanswered questions, but at least he was on his way home!

Then the story takes an exciting twist! It goes on to say, "but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." What love; what a welcome! Before the son could finish the little piece that he had rehearsed so carefully, asking to be made a servant, the father said to his servants "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

What joy! What gladness! Why did he ever doubt his father's love? Although we are thinking of loneliness, there is an even deeper message in this story for Christians who have wandered away from God. There was a day in your experience when you trusted Christ as your Saviour, and you knew the security that comes from a personal relationship with God. He was your Heavenly Father and you were His son, but things have changed. Like the son in our story, you became dissatisfied with life; wanted your own way instead of going God's way, and in a sense you are now living in a "far country." You are well away from God.

Perhaps you are even wondering if God would ever welcome you back into His family. Remember who told the story; it was God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and He was giving a beautiful picture of God's love for those in His family who have wandered away from Him. Just as we have seen how the young man repented and asked his father's forgiveness, and that forgiveness was given freely and willingly, so you, too, must come back to God in real repentance. There can be no half-measures; the return must be complete and the repentance must be real. There must be a desire for a real change of life-style.

Can you imagine the young man in our story, usually known as The Prodigal Son, going out into his father's fields the next morning to do the menial work he had been doing when he was away from home? Not at all! He had been welcomed back and he took his place once more as a son. Nevertheless his changed life would show everyone just how much he appreciated his father's love and care, in welcoming him back so freely and so fully.

As we close this little study, think for a moment of those in the Bible who did wander away from God, yet came back in true repentance, and were given a Royal Welcome. There was King David, after his sin with Bathsheba; Elijah who gave up and asked God to take his life away from him; Peter who denied his Lord three times, and many others. Will you add your name to that list by returning to God today?

"It Was All His Own Fault"

Luke Chapter 15

We all like a story with a good ending. In the last study we were thinking of the young man who ran away from home, lost all the money that his father had generously given him, but then returned to a loving welcome. The father was so thrilled that he told his servants to put the best clothes on his son and prepare a great welcome home feast. It seemed the perfect ending to what had been an episode of loneliness and heartache. Sadly that was not the end of the story, for, as we read in Luke chapter 15, the reaction of his older brother was not all welcoming. We shall see in his attitude that there was Anger, Accusation and Anguish.

First, think of ...

Anger

As Jesus told the story, the first part ended with the delightful words, "So they began to celebrate." This was the long-lost son and brother back home again. The father's broken heart was already beginning to heal as he saw the son he loved, and who had been away for so long, now back in the family circle once more. He could picture how pleased his other son would be to see his younger brother back with them.

But that is not how the story ends. We read, "The older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing and asked one of the servants what was going on. When he was told that it was a party to celebrate the return of his younger brother, he was furious and refused to go in." Now the father's joy turns to sadness as he realises the anger that is burning in his older son's heart. An anger that would not be calmed. The father pleaded with him, but the young man was full of self-pity and self-righteousness, without a single spark of brotherly love. Now his anger turned to ...

Accusation

Just listen to his expression of self-pity: "All these years I have been slaving for you, but you never gave me a young goat to celebrate with my friends." It makes me wonder if he really did have any friends. I am sure that here was one very lonely young man - out of sorts with his father, out of sorts with his brother, and out of sorts with himself. And it was all his own fault! His father loved him and wanted to befriend him, and no doubt there was nothing his brother would have wanted more than for him to join in the celebrations. But the older brother's anger and self-pity stood in the way.

Perhaps you can identify with this man? You have anger and jealousy tearing at your heart, and you cannot control it. Like the older brother, you blame everyone but yourself. Listen to his self-righteousness as he protests to his father: "I have never disobeyed your orders." Then he presses home his wild accusations: "you never gave me a young goat.... but when this son of yours" - notice that expression carefully, not "my brother" but "this son of yours." He says, "When this son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you killed the fatted calf for him." He is accusing his brother of total immorality, and he is accusing a loving and gracious father of unfairness and favouritism.

What an accusation! And yet it is possible that you may be ready to accuse and blame a loving God for the situation in which you find yourself today. God, Who gave His only Son to die on a cross for your sins. Because everything is not turning out as expected, you are ready to blame Him. Is this the reason for your loneliness and depression? If it is, may I say very gently but firmly, that it is not God's fault. If your attitude is like that young man's, then the problem is of your own making.

We see next in this story, the father's ...

Anguish

He pleads with this lonely, disillusioned and angry son: "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." You see, you've got it all wrong. The young goat for a party of your own was always there for the asking. You are now the only person in my will; everything I have will be left to you. It is true that my younger son has wasted his share, whether with prostitutes or not, I don't know, the important thing is that he is back home. My love reaches out to him, and I am the one he has wronged and sinned against, not you. If I am willing to forgive him and welcome him, won't you? But there was no response from this angry young man. He has made up his mind and nothing would change it. Not even the love of his own father! The father did his utmost to resolve the problem, but ultimately it was a problem that the son had to solve himself. His loneliness was of his own making.

There is real lesson for us all in this story told by the Lord Jesus. I think there is something of the spirit of the older brother in most of us. Pride and jealousy can make us bitter and resentful, and that is the very spirit which shuts us up to ourselves, and makes us lonely people. As always, the healing will only come through genuine repentance and seeking forgiveness. This is the way back into fellowship with others, and it is the only way back into fellowship with our Heavenly Father if we have grieved Him.

You may remember that when Jesus told this story it was not principally for His disciples, but for the Pharisees and religious leaders of His day. He knew that despite all their religious activities many of them were bitter, angry and resentful. They were not willing to allow those they regarded as sinners into their synagogues. They saw themselves as the only righteous people and even said, accusingly, of the Lord Jesus, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!" (Luke 15 verse 2).

In his letter to the Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 30, Paul tells his readers: "Do not grieve the Spirit of God." He concludes the section by saying: "Let all bitterness, wrath and anger... be put away from you, along with all malice." So it is clear that these are the very things which grieve God's Spirit. In the story the older brother's attitude was all wrong. It is a picture of us grieving the Holy Spirit. When that happens we no longer enjoy his fellowship, and we become cut-off and lonely. The glorious message of the Gospel is, that even if you have sinned and are bitter, angry and frustrated, if you will come to the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness, He is far more ready to forgive us than was the father in the story. We must come in repentance and faith, remembering that the One to whom we come is the Saviour of the world. Only He can dispel our sense of loneliness with the wonder of His abiding presence.

There Is A Way Out!

Psalms Chapters 42 & 43

The Bible is a very honest book. As we read it we discover that many of its heroes had their dark days, when nothing was going right and God seemed far away. In these studies we are looking at the great problem of loneliness that we all face from time to time. Psalms 42 and 43 were probably one Psalm when written, and as we look at them we will see that the writer was brought from Trouble and Tears to a position of Trust and Triumph.

First of all, it is obvious that he was in ...

Trouble

This poem is addressed to the choirmaster and is called a Maskil of the Sons of Korah. Now that is important, because Maskil is a Hebrew word meaning teaching, and these two psalms set out to teach us how to handle loneliness. A little chorus appears three times and the psalmist, probably King David, cried out in his trouble "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?" It is suggested that this was written when King David was in exile outside the City of Jerusalem. He had been driven there by his own son Absalom, who had conspired against his father in order to take the throne away from him. Forsaken and even betrayed by many of his former friends, David was in deep trouble.

Perhaps that is your problem. You don't know which way to turn; your friends are few and your troubles are many. You almost feel as though these words were written for you, because, like the psalmist, your soul is cast down and your heart is disturbed within you! These psalms have a message for you.

The writer realises that only God can lift his spirits and fill the loneliness in his heart. He expresses his deep longing with a beautiful prayer picturing the thirsty hart, and saying that in the same way as the deer pants for the brook, so his heart longs for the living God. Then he lets us into a little of the secret of his loneliness, as he cries "When shall I come and behold the face of God?" The presence of the Lord, once so real to him, has become nothing more than a memory, and he feels very low. Is that where you are today? Take a leaf out of David's book and cry out to God, and you will not be disappointed.

Jeremiah, the prophet was a man who knew the heartache of loneliness. In the 29th chapter of his book, and verse 13 he writes: "This is what the Lord says...'You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart'." Solomon, David's son, tells us in Proverbs chapter 8 verse 17 "those who seek Me find Me." The Lord does not mock us, and He will always reveal Himself to the genuine seeker.

Before the psalmist came right back to God, however, he was to experience a time of... Tears. He was so lonely and disturbed that he couldn't eat or drink. He said "my tears have been my food day and night." He tried hard to cheer himself up by remembering the times when he had enjoyed God's presence, when he had actually led the procession of worshippers to the House of God, but it just seemed to make matters worse. The thought of the joy and thanksgiving which came through worshipping the Lord brought even more tears to his eyes, and again he cries out "Why are you downcast, O my soul?" It is as though he is saying, "I know it is because I no longer enjoy the presence of the Lord, but why has He withdrawn from me. There must be a reason, but I don't know what it is." Does this echo a chord in your heart? Can you look back to days when you were like the disciples on the Emmaus road?

They said "Did not our hearts burn within us as Jesus walked with us and talked with us on the way?"

Well, don't give up hope, for the psalmist did come into a fresh experience of God's love and power, and it came through ...

Trust

The glimmer of hope seems to start in verse 3 of Psalm 43, as he asks God for light and truth; this is where we all need to start when we're feeling lonely and depressed. There is a way out, it is the truth of God's Word linked with the light of His guidance upon it. It is the Holy Spirit making the scriptures real and living to the believer. David says: "If you will do that for me, I will go to your altar with joy and I will praise you with the harp." What a difference! What a change!

There often comes a time in the lives of Christians when they discover that their trust in God must come through the Word of God. Our experiences of God and His dealings with us can be an encouragement to others. The ministry of other Christians is often a very real help, but, in the end, our confidence in the Lord must be based upon His inspired Word. Nothing else will withstand the tests and trials of loneliness and heartache. This is what the psalmist is saying. You are feeling lonely and depressed, and nothing you can do relieves the feeling. You have considered all the good times of the past, and recalled again the unchangeable relationship that you have with the living God, but it just doesn't seem to help. When you reach that point you have nothing left but to rely upon God's Word, to let His truth grip your heart, and His promises heal your broken spirit. You have nothing left, but you need nothing more!

As the psalmist draws to a close he again uses the little refrain that has occurred twice previously, but it seems as though this time there is a difference. It's not a prayer, nor a vain hope, but a moment of truth and ...

Triumph

He asks himself once again why he is downcast; why he is disturbed. Then he takes the place which God wants him to occupy, and says "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Saviour and my God."

There are three simple thoughts in this verse, and it is a good note on which to close our brief study today. First, we are to Put our Hope in God." Some versions render it "Yet I will wait for God" or "Wait patiently upon God." The motto of the world is "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush", or let's get all we can now, without having to wait. God says that patience is a Christian virtue, and when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians he commended them for their "hope-filled patience." That is what we need! Then the psalmist says "I will yet praise Him"; he is determined to praise God immediately his spirits are lifted. Answers to prayer must always bring forth praise. Finally he says "He is my Saviour and my God." That is where we need to be - in a personal, ongoing relationship with our Saviour God! Is that where you are today?

The Man Who Hit Rock Bottom

1 Kings Chapter 19 Verses 1-18

It had been one of the most thrilling and eventful days of his life. And his life had been packed full with excitement! On this special day he had stood upon one of the coastal hills of Samaria and faced eight hundred and fifty false prophets, each one supported by the king, Ahab. There was the howling mob, to say nothing of the evil queen, Jezebel, who was back in the palace awaiting the result of the contest. With growing confidence she thought that this would be the end of Elijah! Under God's powerful hand it hadn't turned out that way, and the prophets were defeated and brought to justice.

The land had been experiencing great drought, but in answer to Elijah's prayers the clouds were already forming, and rain was on the way. You would expect this man of God to be walking on cloud nine; everything had gone so well, even better than he had ever thought possible. But no! After the high comes the low, and this great prophet of God was hitting rock bottom. The story is found in 1 Kings 19.1-18, and we will see: A Deadly Foe, A Desperate Fear and A Divine Faithfulness.

A Deadly Foe

As soon as Queen Jezebel heard of the way Elijah's God had proved His power and authority, and the prophets whom she supported had been executed, she was furious. She sent a message to the man of God: "May the gods deal with me...if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like one of them." She was a deadly enemy, well able to fulfil her threat. She was powerful; King Ahab was like putty in her hands and she could make him do whatever she wanted. She was positive; what was one more murder to her? She was personal and Elijah was her target. She was going to make sure she finished him for good.

But surely Elijah, who had seen God's hand work in such a powerful way, would turn to his God in confidence and trust. Sadly that wasn't the way it happened, for after the "high" came the "low" and Elijah experienced.. A Desperate Fear. "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life...he sat under a tree and prayed that he might die." Here was one very frightened and lonely man! Is that how you're feeling right now? Your enemy is not a powerful heathen queen, but your loneliness and fear are just the same as Elijah's. You, too, go to bed wishing you would never wake up! It may be that, like Elijah, you have known the presence and power of God in your life in quite remarkable ways. Now you feel as if the bottom has fallen out of your world, and you don't know which way to turn.

Francis Dixon was a well known British preacher, and in his little book "Elijah's God and Mine" he writes "It is applicable to our own experience. It is my story and yours." He then asks us to answer several questions with complete honesty: "Do I ever get discouraged, depressed and despondent? Do I ever find myself in the grip of despair? Does fear ever possess me? Do doubts assail me? Do I ever experience loneliness and a feeling that nobody understands? Do I ever seem to be at the end of my tether? Do I ever go to sleep and wish I need not wake up?"

Is that where you are today? Is that the cry coming from your heart?

This is not the end of the story, and we next see...

A Divine Faithfulness

Here is Elijah, God's man, sitting under a juniper tree, absolutely shattered, longing for death, when the tender, loving hand of God reaches out to His child. That is often God's way; He waits until we realise we can no longer handle the problem ourselves, then He steps in and graciously ministers to us. In this way all the glory goes to God. We haven't been strong enough to go it alone and we admit it!

The way in which God undertook for His servant Elijah was so practical. First of all he showed him that he needed Regular Food. Do you remember how Jesus told His disciples to meet the needs of the five thousand men on the hillside, and when they could not He stepped in and provided a splendid meal for each one of them? Do you recall the lakeside scene after the resurrection, when the disciples returned tired after a night's fishing, and Jesus cooked a meal of bread and fish for them? God expects us to look after our bodies as well as we can, and regular food is very important. The Lord provided freshly baked cakes of bread together with some water for Elijah, as well as the gracious touch of the angel's hand!

Then He gave him Rest for Mind and Body. In Mark's Gospel we read that Jesus told His disciples "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." The psalmist tells us "He knows our frame." Our bodies were designed in such a way that they need rest and refreshment, and God has wonderfully provided sleep as the natural way to regain our strength. While not everyone can sleep through the night, it is good to get into the habit of early nights so that we are fresh to meet the Lord first thing in the morning. It may be that is an area of your life that needs adjusting!

Then God gave to Elijah - A Refreshing Holiday. A six-week holiday tour was granted, finishing up at the beautiful Mount Horeb! And there was a cave conveniently situated for him to spend the night! What a place to meet with the living God and find refreshment. This is our God, who cares for us. Peter tells us "He cares for you" and if that doesn't give you the encouragement you need then I really don't know what will! Elijah was given food, sleep and plenty of fresh air. Then, when His servant had recovered physically and mentally, God came to him with a gentle whisper, or, "a still small voice."

Are you still feeling lonely and discouraged? Will you take hold of the promise of Psalm 103.13? - "As a father loves his children so the LORD loves those who fear Him." That is not the love of the failing father, but is the genuine care and concern of a Heavenly Father who is perfect in every way. As the words of the little chorus tell us "God is still on the throne, and He will remember His own, His promise is true, He will not forget you, God is still on the throne."

One final thought which I hope will encourage you! In his loneliness Elijah told God "The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me." God said "No, Elijah, you've got it all wrong, I have seven thousand in Israel who are faithful to me." If you are a Christian you are not alone; there is a whole family of Christians surrounding you, but above all God Himself is with you!

Longing For Death

Job Chapter 3 Verses 20-22

There are probably very few of us who have had such a time of deep pain, suffering and loneliness as the Bible character we are to study now. He lived hundreds of years before Christ, so did not have the knowledge of God's love displayed in the gift of His Son that Christians enjoy. He did not have the constant indwelling presence of God's Spirit to encourage and empower him. Nor did he have God's Word to guide him. Yet despite all the drawbacks and disadvantages we read that God spoke of Job as "My servant, a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil."

How did such a God-fearing man come to experience trouble and loneliness, and what was it that caused him to cry out from the depths of his agony "life is bitter and I long for death?" The story is told in the book bearing his name and is far too long for us to do more than look at very briefly. We will concentrate on Job chapters 1- 3 and chapter 19 verses 23-26 and will consider the story under three headings, Tragedy, Trial and Triumph.

First of all we will look at ...

Job's Tragedy

He appears to have been a prosperous business man, happily married man with a large family of seven sons and three daughters. He had a very large farm with thousands of sheep, camels and cattle, and was highly respected, even having several well-known philosophers among his friends. Everything was going well for him when suddenly tragedy struck. A messenger arrived to say that bandits had raided his farm and stolen his oxen and donkeys, killing all of his servants caring for them, except the one bearing the message. Almost immediately another servant came to tell him that a terrible storm of lightning had burned up the sheep and the shepherds, he alone escaping. While he was telling Job his sad news another servant arrived to say that an enemy tribe had crossed the border in three parties and taken all his camels, killing all the servants except him. Job was devastated, but worse was to follow for another servant brought the terrible news that his sons and daughters had been involved in a freak storm that had killed every one of them.

Job immediately went into mourning, yet the amazing fact is that instead of bemoaning his lot, or even blaming or cursing his God he said "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." What a man! What faith! Just imagine surmounting an obstacle like that, yet coming out with your faith intact! Yet there was even worse to come, for he was struck down with an extremely painful disease that covered him in boils from head to foot. Just when he needed the love and support of his wife the most, she deserted him, telling him to curse God and die.

What terrible loneliness Job must have experienced; on the verge of bankruptcy with all his property gone, all his sons and daughters dead, and his wife turning against both him and his God! Yet even in this experience he did not blame God!

Job's Trial

Why did all this happen to such a godly man? Is there any clue? Can we see any reason for such a tragedy? Yes, the Bible makes it clear that this was a trial permitted by God to prove to Satan that there are men and women prepared to honour God even when the going gets tough! Satan had sneered at Job's righteousness, saying that he only feared God because he enjoyed an easy lot, with a large family and a prosperous business! So God actually allowed Satan to bring this trial into Job's life to prove that his faith was real and his love for God was genuine.

Are you passing through a time of trouble and trial, even tragedy? How are you standing up to the test? Is the devil frustrated because he sees your confident trust in your God or

does he rub his hands with glee as you lose heart and even your faith? Listen carefully to the words of Job as he faced up to the terrible loneliness of losing his business, his family, even the loyalty of his wife and see what lessons we can learn from...

Job's Triumph

In chapter 19, after his philosopher friends had tried to produce cut and dried answers to his problem, Job cried from his heart "Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! That they were engraved on a rock with an iron pen and lead for ever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God." What a wonderful testimony to the way in which God had undertaken for him in the midst of his tragedy and trial.

What was he really saying? How can his experience help us? Are there any lessons we can learn? First of all he was saying that there is a day coming when wrongs will be put right, when wickedness will be finally judged, when sin will be seen for what it is, an affront to God! The bandits and marauding robbers may have thought they were getting away with it when they took his cattle, but the record of their lives will be revealed and judgement will take place.

Secondly I believe he was saying that laying up treasure in heaven is much more important than laying up treasure on earth. This is a lesson that we all need to learn. Even we Christians can be very earth centred, thinking far more about our careers, our work, our families and our homes, than about God.

Finally, in chapter 23 verse 10 Job showed just how much he had learned from his experience of loneliness and trial when he could say "He knows the way that I take; When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." Is that the word you need today? God knows just what trials you are passing through! He is with you in your loneliness, as we were reminded in an earlier study, for He has said "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Just as gold has to be tried and tested in a fire in order to remove the dross and prove its value, so our faith needs testing and trying. In chapter 1 of his first letter Peter tells us "for a little while you may have to suffer...all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed." What a prospect! Never let your faith grow dim!

Lonely In A Crowd!

Daniel Chapter 6

Not many years ago children in the Britain had a good knowledge of the Bible, but in recent years this has changed dramatically. No longer do they learn well-known Bible verses, and they are unfamiliar with characters that their grandparents and even their parents knew a great deal about. However the man into whose life we are looking today is probably the exception, for many people who have never opened a Bible have heard of Daniel, and his experience in a den of lions! The story is told in Daniel 6 and falls under three headings, The Enemy's Conspiracy, The King's Command and Daniel's Courage.

First the Enemy's ...

Conspiracy

Daniel was a godly young man who was taken into captivity in Babylon, hundreds of miles from home, yet he took his stand for the only true God! By a series of events upon which God obviously had His hand, he was promoted to a high governmental position under King Nebuchadnezzar and when the kingdom passed to Persia, he retained popularity with the new ruler, Darius. Daniel's outstanding qualities were so unmistakable that Darius decided to promote him over the whole kingdom. This enraged the other civic leaders and they plotted Daniel's downfall. They agreed that he was so trustworthy they could only catch him out if they could bring charges against him for putting his God before his king. The clever plan was to get the king to approve a law that anyone praying to any god or man apart from to the king would be thrown into a lions' den. Darius fell for the plot and the next thing we see is The King's ...

Command

The decree was duly passed. There seemed to be no way out. The enemies of Daniel had got their way, and it was well known that the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be annulled. The den of lions awaited anyone praying to any god or man apart from the king. All these wicked men had to do was to wait until they caught Daniel praying to his God, and they would soon be rid of their enemy! No doubt they wondered if he would pray secretly...they would have to watch his every movement, to make sure they could produce the evidence. Just suppose he denied that he was praying, how could they prove it? But they need not have worried on that score, for next we see Daniel's ...

Courage

Daniel knew that he must either deny his God or become a meal for the hungry lions! Listen carefully, for God had other plans. Was this man, living in a strange country, many miles from home, going to obey the new law of the land and deny his God? Would he fall in with his fellow-countrymen and simply adopt their religion? Surely this would enable him to get on even further in the promotion chase; perhaps he would even become king, and then think of all the good he could do!

These, and many similar thoughts, must have troubled this lonely man as he faced the test. No doubt the devil would do his best to turn Daniel from the pathway of obedience. Yet here we see a man of great courage. He may be the only man in the kingdom prepared to take his stand for God, but take his stand he would! So three times a day, as before, he opened his upstairs window toward Jerusalem and prayed to his God. The verse actually says, "He prayed and gave thanks to his God."

I wonder what he gave thanks for? The opposition and persecution of his fellow officials? The new law which he felt obliged to break? Or was this lonely man giving thanks to God for a sense of His presence filling his life with peace in the midst of such trial. Was he thanking God in the words of Psalm 28, which no doubt he knew well, "Praise be to the Lord for He has heard my cry for mercy. The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped." God is true to His Word and He will strengthen YOU, if you take your stand for Him!

Although we have seen Daniel's courage as he faced what seemed like certain death for disobeying the new law of the land, it is important to realise that this courage was based on his faith in the living God. He knew that the One to whom he was praying, and for whom he was witnessing was well able to take care of him. It didn't help Daniel to know that King Darius was distressed when called upon to make the order committing him to the lions' den. The king now realised that this had been a wicked plot to get rid of this outstanding statesman, but he had passed the law and could not change it. So, the king reluctantly stamped the committal order, and the group of courtiers took Daniel personally and "They threw him into the lions' den." There was no relenting; no gentle treatment; no lessening of the sentence; no court of appeal. Daniel had met his end. But no! The God who had ordered the affairs of Daniel so that he was promoted to high office, was the same God who could take care of him.

There is a strange twist to the story. As God shut the mouths of the lions, and Daniel spent the night in quiet confidence in his God, we read "The king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without entertainment...he could not sleep!" Then, at the first light of dawn, the king hurried to the lions' den, and in an anguished voice cried out "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually been able to rescue you from the lions?"

As Daniel replied we see that Daniel gave all the glory to God. There was no mention of the courage of this lonely man, just a desire to set the record straight as he declared his innocence and said, "My God sent His angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions." The story then ends with Daniel's enemies being committed to the same den of lions, and Daniel prospering in the service of the king.

There are several important lessons for us to learn from this true story. First of all, when we feel lonely, for whatever reason, let us remember that God is in control. He can still order the affairs of men. His word as recorded in Romans chapter 8 is still true: "In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." Let us also take to heart the challenge, that even if obedience to God's Word brings us into opposition with powerful enemies, God is stronger and greater than all our foes, and we can say with Paul "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Deserted By Friends!

2 Timothy Chapter 4 Verses 14-17.

There has probably never been a Christian who has experienced such power and blessing in his ministry and walk with the Lord as the Apostle Paul. He was the man who could write: "I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength." On another occasion he wrote: "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us."

Surely a man like that, with such a record could never experience loneliness, the topic we are looking at in these studies from the Bible? He would rise above the circumstance without so much as a care in the world! Yet, when we read his final letter, which he wrote to Timothy shortly before they came to execute him, we discover that he not only knew what it was to be lonely, but it was obviously a very bitter experience. We will look at the second letter to Timothy chapter 4, verses 14 to 17, and we will see Distress, Desertion and Deliverance.

Distress

"Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm!" Is this the great Apostle Paul writing these words? Yes, and I wonder what deep feelings of hurt lie behind them. Paul is writing from prison, and in verse 6 of the same chapter he tells us very clearly that he hasn't long to live. "The time has come for my departure", he writes. He can almost hear the iron heel of the Roman soldier at his cell door, coming to take him to his execution. If ever there was a time when he needed his friends it was just then, yet Alexander, who in Acts chapter 19 had professed to be his friend, not only fails to support him, but does him a great deal of harm. The phrase could be translated: "Did me much evil."

This was almost certainly the same man who is mentioned in chapter 1 of Paul's first letter to Timothy, when he mentioned him as one of those who had rejected his teaching, and had shipwrecked his faith. That is often where the real trouble starts, by doubting, then disbelieving, and finally denying the Word of God, and it always leads to a shipwrecked faith!

Perhaps, like Paul, you are facing difficulties, even danger, and the very Christians, who you thought would support and help you are, instead, "doing you much harm." You just can't understand it! Has God failed you? Has He forgotten you? Has He deserted you? No! The failure of those who profess to serve and love Him must never cause us to blame God. Listen carefully to this message, for there is light at the end of the tunnel; there is "good news as well as bad news." Paul was feeling the full force of the enemy's punches but he didn't throw in the towel! He was made of sterner stuff!

Christian friend, feeling bruised and buffeted and battered by the opposition, with loneliness gripping your heart and fear gnawing right into your soul, don't let Satan win. Open your heart to the Holy Spirit as He brings you God's Word, and let it bring you healing and refreshment.

But before we have the "good news", there is further "bad news", for in verse 16 we see ...

Desertion

Paul writes, " Everyone deserted me!" Here is the greatest missionary of all time who, under God's hand, has been the means of blessing to thousands of Christians, facing a new experience of total desertion. Not one Christian standing with him! Totally alone! He actually wrote, "No-one came to my support, but everyone deserted me." What an experience for a man who was used to being surrounded and supported by men and women who loved the Lord!

No doubt in his loneliness Paul remembered that his Lord had also experienced desertion and loneliness, so he should be ready to put up with the same treatment. If you feel that your friends are deserting you just when you need them, then be comforted by the thought that your Lord passed through the same experience Himself, and can fully understand and sympathise.

It is very important for us to remember this as we look at our final point ...

Deliverance

Just when Paul felt he could take no more; just when he thought that the bottom had fallen out of his world. Just when his last friend had deserted him and he was desperately lonely, it was then he was able to write, "BUT the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength." No doubt he would remember earlier times in his life when the Lord stepped in at the right moment and supplied his need. When he suffered from a thorn in the flesh and pleaded with the Lord to remove it, but it seemed as though the skies were brass, and God wasn't listening. Then God brought peace to his heart with the strong word of comfort and provision, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

What joy had filled his heart as he experienced the warmth and fellowship of the Lord's presence, and he could write "I delight in weaknesses...for when I am weak then am I strong." Now, once again, his Lord has met his deep, personal need, and he is able to testify to the personal presence of his Lord. Weymouth translates it "The Lord filled me with inward strength" and another version puts it "The Lord stood with me and gave me power."

You may be facing loneliness or desertion by friends right now. Well, be encouraged, for the Apostle Paul was not being singled out for special treatment. Just as from his heartache and pain came the joyful experience of knowing the power and strength of the Lord, so you, too, can draw from the same wonderful resources. This was the same Paul who prayed that the Ephesian Christians would be strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit in their inner beings.

Now you may ask the question, "How can I enter into this experience?" Is there some secret formula? Do I have to be a super Christian, without sin in my life in order to know the presence of the Lord in this vital and living way? Thank God, the answer is no! Of course the Lord does desire our holiness, and commands us to repent of all known sin. We are commanded to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, even if we don't see eye to eye with them! That is not the basis on which we can know the Lord's presence; it cannot be earned; it is all of God's grace.

The Apostle John puts it simply in his first letter, "Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." Then he adds: "If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth." The message is clear: our responsibility is to seek to live in the light of God's Word - reading it and obeying it with God's help. Then we will move from loneliness into the light and love of His presence and strength. May you know His presence with you day by day.

"Total Failure"

Luke Chapter 22 Verses 31-62

There are very few experiences in life more devastating than letting down a close friend. It is heart-breaking to be the injured party, but I believe it is even worse to be the one who has broken the trust of a well-loved friend. The thought of living with such guilt is often totally overwhelming. We have been looking at some of the times when men and women in the Bible passed through times of deep loneliness and depression. This time we are looking at the Apostle Peter, one of the best-known of all the disciples of our Lord.

The story is found in three of the Gospels, and we are taking Luke chapter 24, verses 31 to 62 as the basis of our study, looking at it under four headings: Forewarning (verses 31-34), Forgetting (verses 39-46), Forsaking (verses 54-60), and Fearing (verses 61-62).

Forewarning

Our Lord must have had many thoughts upon His mind, and many concerns in His heart as the hour of His death drew near. But He took time to speak to Peter personally, warning him of the concerted attack that Satan was launching against him, and assuring him of His care, concern and prayers. Together with the word of warning Jesus gave Peter a powerful message of reassurance: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail."

What a word from the Creator of the Universe, the Lord of Life and Glory, the Saviour of the World; "I have prayed for you!" Pause for a moment to remember that this was spoken in the shadow of the cross upon which Jesus would suffer and die a few hours later. What grace! May I also remind you that this was spoken by the very One who has ascended to the right hand of God and is now our Great High Priest, who intercedes for us.

If He was concerned about the attack of Satan against Peter, don't you think He is equally concerned about Satan's attacks against you? If He prayed for Peter then don't you think He prays for you? Hebrews 7.25 tells us that "Jesus lives for ever, with a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them." That is a message for you today, and it comes with all the powerful authority of God's Word which cannot be broken!

How did Peter respond to this gracious warning? Did He thank the Lord for His concern and His prayers? Did he realise his weakness and cast himself upon God's mercy and grace? No! We next see Peter guilty of a human frailty to which we all fall prey only too often... Forgetting. He reacted in the same way in which many of us react, in pride and self-confidence. He told the Lord, "I am ready to go to prison and death with you." I am sure he really meant it, as we often do when we make our bold promise of commitment to the Saviour and His cause!

First of all it seems that Peter quickly forgot his Lord's warning, but perhaps of even greater importance he also forgot the teaching that Jesus had given him during His three years of ministry. Jesus had told the disciples, "Without Me you can do nothing." He had pleaded with them, "Abide in Me", and had expressed His personal desire, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Yet here was Peter, just a few hours later, thinking that he was well able to resist Satan in his own strength. The other disciples may fail the Lord but not him; he was made of sterner stuff! But only a few minutes later we see this bold, brave fisherman, who claimed to be so strong ...

Forsaking

He denies His Lord with oaths and curses, terrified when an ordinary servant girl in the High Priest's Palace accuses him of being associated with Jesus. Only too often the tests that we fail to pass, and in which we let our Saviour down, are the ones that come in

small and insignificant ways. The taunt of ordinary people; the curl of the lip by a neighbour or business colleague; the unkind remark by a so-called friend; these can often cause our downfall.

Peter himself tells us in his first letter that, "The devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Paul also reminds us that there are times when Satan masquerades as an angel of light. We need to be on our guard constantly, taking full advantage of the spiritual armour which is listed for us in the sixth chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If only Peter had remembered the warning of Jesus, and had followed the wonderful teaching He had given during His earthly ministry, he would have been prepared and armed for the devil's attack. Let us learn the lesson and act upon God's gracious promises, so that, as Peter goes on to tell us, we will "Resist the devil, standing firm in the faith."

Finally we see Peter ...

Fearing

Verse 61 paints a graphic picture "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him 'Before the cock crows today, you will disown me three times'." Imagine the thoughts running through Peter's mind! Would the Lord now disown him? Was this the end of their beautiful friendship? Had he completely blown it? Was there no hope for him now? A deep sense of loneliness gripped Peter's heart as he disappeared outside into the cold night air and, says, the writer "he wept bitterly."

This was no passing emotion; no mere sentiment; he had failed his Lord, and Jesus knew all about it. He was out of touch with his Lord; at odds with his Saviour. And the worst part of the whole experience was the thought that he might never see Jesus again; might never be able to obtain His forgiveness. A dreadful fear filled his heart, and a deep sense of loneliness.

I wonder, is that where you are today? You have failed a close friend, or member of the family, or worse still you have failed your Lord and Saviour, and life just doesn't seem worth living! You are beginning to ask where and when it will all end. Is there any light at the end of the tunnel? Do not forget that this story of Peter, failing his Master, has a happy ending!

When we turn to the last chapter of John's Gospel we see the genuine repentance of Peter, and the lovely way in which Jesus not only restored to him the joy of his salvation, but also gave him a most responsible and rewarding work to do! There is a way back from your place of failure and loneliness, but it is the way of repentance and confession. Peter himself could write: "You were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." What a word for us in our day!

"Watching Her Son Die!"

In this series of studies we have been looking at some of the occasions in the Bible when men and women suffered from an intense sense of loneliness. There were very few who knew the depths of this emotion more than Mary, the mother of Jesus. In this study we will see that she knew this loneliness at different stages of the life of Jesus: At His Birth, His Boyhood, His Manhood and His Death. These four incidents make fascinating reading, and we will call them - Misgiving, Misunderstanding, Misjudging and Mistreating.

First...

Misgiving

Life is full of surprises! We lay our plans and look forward with great excitement to seeing them fulfilled, then, in a moment of time, everything changes and what was to have been a high spot in our lives becomes a time of great uncertainty and frustration.

Can you picture the utter loneliness of a young Jewish woman, engaged to be married, and looking forward to the occasion with great joy, being told by an angel that the Holy Spirit was going to conceive, without any human involvement, and the baby to be born would be the Son of God? Imagine how she would explain that to her fiancé, to her parents and to her friends. No doubt there would be disbelief and disappointment; followed by blame and a demand to know the truth. Even those who loved her deeply would be inclined to say "These things don't happen; there must be a man involved, and if that man is not her fiancé, she must have been unfaithful to him."

What loneliness would grip her heart! Yet, as we read in Luke 2.38, her response was one of obedience to the Will of God "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." What an antidote for loneliness; what a challenge and example for us! This experience is quickly followed by a special greeting from her cousin "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." God will not leave us in our loneliness...He will always be faithful!

Some 12 years later, Mary had another, quite different, experience of loneliness, recorded in Luke chapter 2, which we will call ...

Misunderstanding

Jesus had gone up to the Passover at Jerusalem with Joseph and Mary, and as pilgrims they travelled in a large caravan of friends and relatives. It would be quite natural, therefore, to assume that the 12 year old boy was with one of their extended family; but when he was obviously not in their party, Mary's heart would be full of fear. You can picture her and Joseph on the long trek back to Jerusalem, wondering if they would ever see Him again. When eventually they found Him in the Temple in Jerusalem it was also natural for Mary to relieve her pent-up anxiety in a gentle reprimand: "Son, why have you done this to us?"

Notice how the writer, Luke, comes to the climax of the story. As the learned rabbis listened to the questions of Jesus with astonishment, they were further amazed by His reply to Mary: "Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" These religious leaders would know from the scriptures that no king or prophet had ever referred to the tabernacle or the temple as "My Father's house." It's not surprising that Mary and Joseph "Didn't understand what He was saying", but it would increase their sense of loneliness! There is a lovely little touch in verse 51 where we read that, "Mary treasured these things in her heart." As she did so I am sure that her loneliness would quickly disappear!

Our next little cameo comes in Luke 8 ...

Misjudging

As Jesus was teaching a great crowd of people, some of those closest to Him told Jesus

that His mother and brothers wanted to see Him. He replied: "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's Word and put it into practice." They must have felt very "shut-out." Here was Mary's son not making time for His own mother! Once again she must have felt very lonely. But she was the one who was misjudging, for Jesus had commenced His public ministry, and His statement made it very clear that His over-riding concern was obedience to the Word of God.

We are not told how Mary handled this problem, but I think she would take His message to heart, and she would quickly go back to God's Word for her comfort and encouragement. This is always the real antidote for loneliness: - "Hearing or knowing the Word of God, and putting it into practice."

Our final incident is one that would touch the hardest heart and I have called it ...

Mistreating

There are few experiences in life which are harder to cope with than watching a loved one die. As I give this message I have just buried my wife whom I loved dearly, and to whom I was married for over fifty years, so the sense of loss and loneliness is very real. But thank God she died peacefully, and I have the glad assurance that she is with Christ.

If a loved one's death is caused by the brutality of men, then it becomes extremely difficult to bear. When Mary saw her Son suffer an agonising death upon the cross her whole world must have fallen apart. She would have known that one of His friends had betrayed Him and His closest friends had deserted Him. She may well have known that even Peter had denied that he ever knew Him. She would certainly have known the harshness and torture of the lashings and the buffeting, the taunts of the crowd, the ridicule of the religious leaders.

She took her place at the foot of the cross, as her son, whom she knew to be the Son of God, died upon a Roman gibbet. What loneliness must have filled her heart! She might well have questioned God's dealings with her. Her thoughts would be in turmoil. Was this all one big tragedy or did God have a purpose in it? Perhaps her mind would go back to the prophecy of Simeon "A sword will pierce your own soul also." She had not understood it at the time, as the godly man took the baby Jesus in his arms and blessed Him. Now she could see that this was the very day which Simeon had foretold. Then she would recall Simeon's other words, and they would bring comfort to her heart "My eyes have seen your salvation...a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel." Yes, God had His purpose even in the mistreatment of her son upon the cross!

Are you experiencing loneliness right now? Are you filled with fear as you face a most difficult situation all on your own? Well, I've got good news for you! God wants to come right into that situation with you, bringing you comfort, peace and a real sense of His Presence! Will you turn to Him in faith today? It will make all the difference.

"Deserted!"

Matthew Chapter 27 Verses 45-46

We have been looking at men and women in the Bible who knew what it was to be lonely and seeing just how they dealt with the problem. Now we are going to see the most lonely man this world has ever known. One who chose this loneliness for the sake of ordinary men and women like us.

The Bible makes it clear that the Lord Jesus Christ is both God and man. He is the Creator of the Universe, yet One who was prepared to face desertion for us. We will think of the way in which He was Deserted by His Family, His Friends and His Father.

Deserted by His Family

It is a wonderful experience to be part of a caring, loving family, where each of the members is loyal to the others and gives support when it is most needed. We are probably all familiar with the playground scene where the little boy under threat, with pride in his voice, informs the school bully, "I'll tell my big brother about you" and the bullying stops immediately! How different is the picture when families are torn in two by disloyalty and misunderstanding. When one member, desperately lonely, and needing all the backing he can get, finds himself or herself deserted by brothers and sisters, and even parents.

You may recall the scene in John chapter 7, when Jesus was in Galilee at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. His brothers turned on Him with carping criticism, "You ought to go to Judea so that your disciples can see the miracles that you're doing." They were telling Jesus that He'd got it all wrong. They knew far better than He what His proper course of action should be! And then, in case we should think that they were telling Him this so that He could be sure of their love and support, the text goes on to say, "For even His brothers did not believe in Him."

Here is an amazing thing! They had doubtless seen His miracles, as He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, strength to the paralytics, and even raised the dead, yet their attitude was one of cynical unbelief. How this must have hurt the heart of the Lord. Perhaps at this very moment you, too, have been deserted by your family, just when you need them the most; or you look back to a time when they failed to give you the support you needed. I trust that it will be a comfort for you to know that if you are a Christian you have a Saviour and Friend who fully understands. You have One who has been there Himself, and can enter into your circumstances, and assure you of His love and care.

But Jesus was not only deserted by His family, He was also ...

Deserted by His Friends

Most of us have been let down by those who claimed to be our friends, and it has brought a sense of real loneliness with it. When those friends were special, people upon whom we thought we could depend, it made the feeling of loneliness even more intense.

Try to picture the scene in Matthew 26, when Jesus knew that the time of His death upon a cross was drawing near and He warned His disciples that they would desert Him. Peter immediately answered, "Even if all the others fall away, I never will." Two verses later we read, "All the other disciples said the same!" How Jesus must have longed for their friendship and support.

These disciples had been with Him for three years, listening to His teaching, watching His miracles, observing the tender way in which He cared for people, young and old. They had wondered as He handled crises with a wisdom and authority that only confirmed what they knew to be true, that He was the Son of God. Now, having assured Him of their intention to stand up for Him, whatever the cost, we read those remarkable words, "Then all the disciples deserted Him and fled." How desperately lonely He must have

been! With what longing He must have looked around for just one person to stand with Him. Yet the words are clear, "All the disciples deserted Him."

May I pause for a moment and ask if you are prepared to stand with Jesus today, when everyone around you is mocking Him? Are you prepared to stand up and be counted for Him today? If we're not, then we certainly have no right to be called His followers. Paul has a very strong word on this subject when writing to Timothy in his second letter and chapter 2. He says, "If we endure we will also reign with Him. If we disown Him, He also will disown us." May we be amongst those who are ready and willing to take our stand for Christ, whatever the cost!

Finally, we see Christ...

Deserted by His Father

This was an experience which was unique to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was God's Son, Who was able to say, "I do only those things which please my Father." He was the One who had heard God's voice from an open heaven declaring, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."

Now, in Matthew 27.46, while He hangs upon a Roman cross, nailed by His hands and feet, Jesus cries from the depths of His loneliness: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" He was quoting words used by the writer of Psalm 22 who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was able to foresee the events of Calvary, and knew that the Messiah would be deserted by God.

It should touch our hearts when we realise that the only reason He was deserted was because, as Peter writes in his first letter, "He was bearing our sins in His body on the tree." This was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah in his 53rd chapter, "He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed."

God, as a righteous judge, could not look with pleasure upon His Son, because He was the Sin-bearer, taking the punishment that was due to us. This is an amazing truth! The Lord Jesus suffered separation from God for us! He knew the heartache of a loneliness which was indescribable, so that we need never be separated from God. That is why you can know total forgiveness and cleansing. There is nothing more that Christ can do to bring you peace of heart and mind.

In 1 John 1.9 we are clearly told "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." That forgiveness can be yours today; then you can enter into the joy of His promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." This will dispel your loneliness!