

# WEEK FOUR • DAY ONE

## LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

ALL BY MY  
LONESOME

“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”  
Joshua 1:5c (NIV)

### LONELINESS OR SOLITUDE

Meagan Briggs [Spearfish, South Dakota]

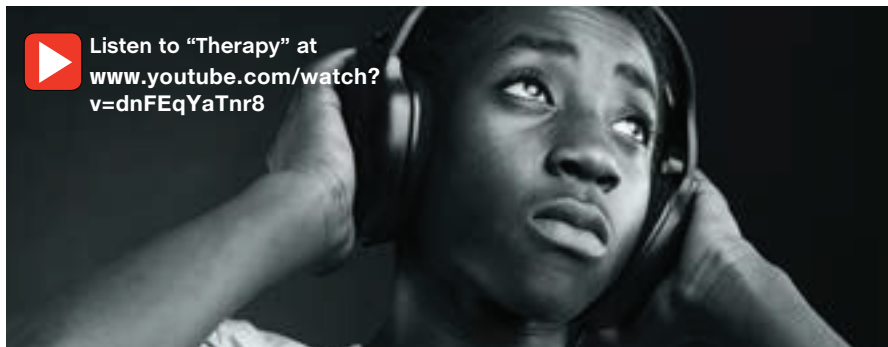
Loneliness isn't a matter of numbers. I am sometimes lonely in a large family, in a huge school, with a full schedule, and with a phone that doesn't stop ringing. True loneliness is believing that no one cares or understands.

I love being around other people, but I often seek solitude. I like working alone, driving alone, and walking alone so that I can process what's going on in my life. But I have to be careful. If I shut myself off from other perspectives, my thoughts tend to turn bleak. If I don't renew my mind with God's word or talk with other people, I begin to think that no one understands or cares, maybe not even God.

No matter how isolated I am, I will never know true loneliness. At times I'll be alone, but faith in God's presence means the difference between loneliness and solitude. <



Listen to “Therapy” at  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnFEqYaTnr8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnFEqYaTnr8)



**JUST A THOUGHT:**  
“Loneliness and solitude are two things not to get confused Cause I spend my solitude with you.”  
—Relient K, “Therapy”

Spending time by yourself gives you a chance to reflect on matters of the heart and to express your thoughts to God. Jesus went off by himself to talk to God (Matthew 14:23) and woke up early to pray (Mark 1:35). Solitude was high on his list of priorities. I think it should be the same for us.

Anna Solomon, 19 [West Paducah, Kentucky]

# WEEK FOUR • DAY TWO

## LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

### ME TIME

**“Be strong. Take courage. Don’t be intimidated. . . . God, your God, is striding ahead of you. He’s right there with you. He won’t let you down; he won’t leave you.”**  
**Deuteronomy 31:6 (The Message)**



### LONELY OR ALONE? 19

**Katy Steele, 21** [Elon, North Carolina]

**B**eing lonely and being alone are not the same thing—not even close. Yet, only recently did I realize the difference.

I love being with my friends and hanging out in groups; and like many people I know, I experience the occasional case of FOMO (fear of missing out) when I’m not a part of something. Society conditions us to believe that our worth is tied into always being plugged in, being in the loop, going somewhere, and doing something. I fell into this trap my freshman year of college when I was convinced that if ever I was alone, I was somehow less cool.

As I’ve grown up, the Lord has shown me that being alone can be beautiful. Solitude quiets my heart, my mind, and my soul so that I can listen for God. Now, I often crave alone time, and I plan it into my days and weeks. I may walk in the park, relax in my hammock, or wander through the quaint coffee shops in town. Whatever I do, I always come back feeling uplifted and full of life.

A few years ago, I think I would have said that being alone was scary; but I failed to understand God’s promise never to leave us. Now that I know God is always with me, being alone will never be lonely again. <

**TRY IT:** Pick a day this week to enjoy half an hour of intentional alone time. Invite God to be with you in that time, and be honest with God if you start feeling lonely. If this practice isn’t easy, don’t give up! Try again next week and the week after that until you begin to feel more comfortable with solitude. Before long, you too may begin to crave these times with God.

# WEEK FOUR • DAY THREE

## LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

### **A Better Friend**

Sarah Parsons

*Being a friend to myself in solitude makes me a better friend.*

Friendships can be difficult. When you are lonely, they can be even tougher—which is ironic because that’s when you want friends the most!

I learned a lot about friendship—and loneliness—from an argument I had a few years ago. My friend and I met to play squash one morning, as we had on many other mornings. My friend said something to me that sounded critical, and suddenly I was boiling over with anger. I didn’t say anything at first; I just hit the ball harder. My friend noticed, of course; and we went outside to talk. I was overwhelmed with feelings. For a long time I had felt picked on; I had felt like a sidekick, and I was angry. I started talking faster, trying to keep my voice from shaking, trying to control my words so they didn’t turn mean and ugly. This flood of feelings took my friend completely by surprise. As far as she knew, I was having a weird reaction to one joking remark; and after listening to me for a while, she left, upset. We didn’t talk again for several days; and when we did, our conversation was strained.

Why hadn’t I said something sooner? Maybe I thought that she had been teasing, that I shouldn’t be upset. Maybe it had all been my imagination. Actually, deep down, I was afraid she’d go away and never come back. I was afraid of being left alone, and I didn’t want to take that risk. Being quiet was easier and safer.

### **Loneliness and Solitude**

Looking back, I think my biggest problem was loneliness. I was desperately seeking companionship when what I needed was solitude. Solitude is a state of heart and mind that allows a person to be alone without being lonely. We all move back and forth between loneliness and solitude. Solitude is loneliness transformed. When I’m lonely, I want to jump up and call someone whenever I’m by myself. In solitude, I can sit quietly, resting in God’s presence and open to both God and myself. When I argued with my friend, I was lonely. I was terrified of being left alone, and so I had kept quiet when I should have been honest.

Moving from loneliness to solitude means becoming friends with ourselves. We must take time alone to face the terrifying lonely spots and to move through them. If we persevere, we find ourselves on the other side of loneliness, like people relieved to watch a storm pass; and in the new stillness, we befriend ourselves. We may also learn how to listen to ourselves, encourage ourselves, and give ourselves good advice. We may even learn how to hang out with ourselves and have a pretty good time.

When you know that you can be alone, friendships are more relaxed and free. You can begin to take risks; you can even tell your friends how you really feel.

# WEEK FOUR • DAY THREE

## LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

### **Dig Deeper**

Henri Nouwen writes, “To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude.”

Spend some time alone in your “garden of solitude.” Persevere, even if you are afraid. Listen to your thoughts and feelings. Be aware of God’s presence. How does solitude change you? your friendships?

# WEEK FOUR • DAY FOUR

## LISTENING

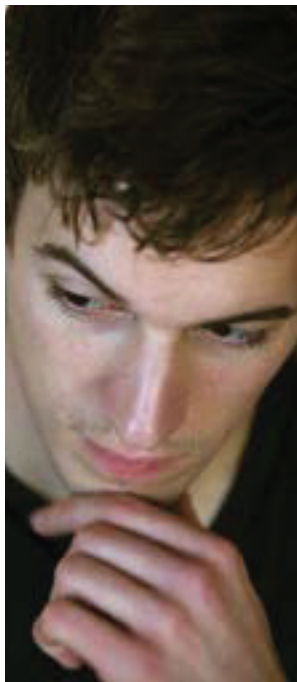
### LISTENING

God has blessed you, because your eyes can see and your ears can hear!

**Matthew 13:16 (CEV)**

### 30 LISTEN UP

**Karin Mittmann** [British Columbia, Canada]



In our culture, there is often more talking than listening. People want to be heard. But by listening, we hear one another and, in turn, we hear ourselves. Listening to others and to God nurtures our relationships and gives us life, but it takes time and effort. Here are four ways of listening that you can practice with your friends and family, as well as in your daily devotions.

**+ Listen with your eyes.** Look around. What do you see? What time of day is it? What do you notice about your environment? What are people doing? What are they saying with their body language? Where do you see God?

**+ Listen with your ears.** What do you hear? What noise do you notice in the background? What are people saying? What is their tone of voice? Do their words match their expressions? What is God saying to you?

**+ Listen with your heart.** Pay attention to feelings, to the emotions evoked in your heart. How are you feeling about your situation? What is your attitude toward other people? Can you respond in love? What are you and others feeling about God?

**+ Listen with your mind.** Are you able to focus and concentrate? Choose to ignore the things that distract you. Think about what other people are saying, what God is saying. Think about how you will respond. <

**REFLECT ON REVELATION 3:20: This Christmas, can you hear God's voice? Are you listening?**

NOV>DEC 2010 33

# WEEK FOUR • DAY FIVE

## LISTENING

REAL TALK

WEEKEND!

# being *real*

15

Our society seems more divided than ever. We see this in our relationships, in politics, and even within the church. When we can't find commonality, many of us tend to avoid or even reject the people with whom we disagree. But these rifts can affect our personal relationships and our ability to share the Gospel. How can we reach those whom we dismiss?

We all are broken, imperfect people. We can't do life alone. We need community—with one another and with God. So how can we move beyond our disagreements to focus on loving others, loving God, and offering to all our unique skills, abilities, and personalities?

**Aly Mitchell, 23** [Lynchburg, Virginia]



be  
yourself

To be genuine means to be authentic, honest, real, true. But being genuine in a relationship or even in a conversation can be difficult. We want other people to like us and respect us, so we're tempted to present ourselves as somehow "better" than we think we are.

Everyone has room for improvement, but trying to be what we think others consider perfect is a recipe for disaster. *Get real!*—this common expression is good advice. Being who we already are has to be easier than being someone we're not.

**Mike Gadell** [Cedar Park, Texas]



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JANUARY>FEBRUARY 2020 **49**

# WEEK FOUR • DAY FIVE

## LISTENING

REAL TALK

WEEKEND!

**be willing  
to learn**

I love to debate. I enjoy gaining insight into other people's thoughts and opinions. Even if I think a person's stance is unreasonable, I ask sincere and honest questions. We may not change each other's minds, but we can learn from each other. If we can't debate amicably, I agree to disagree and thank him or her for offering me another perspective. These discussions are not about who is right or wrong. Instead, I see the conversation as a chance to learn something I might have missed and to discover how other people's experiences shape their way of thinking.

**Sarah Klauda** [Baltimore, Maryland]

**be patient,  
listening  
in love**

Recently, we were debating a controversial topic in one of my classes. If this had happened a year ago, I would have been quick to interrupt and make my point. But this time I allowed other students to speak. I listened to their opinions, then offered mine. I have struggled with being patient. But patience is important in a debate, argument, or confrontation. Instead of simply disagreeing, I am learning to ask questions that encourage further conversation: "Can you help me understand what you are saying?" "Can you tell me why you believe that?" "Can you explain the evidence you have to support that idea?" If we listen with love and patience, even when we disagree, other people may be more open to hearing and understanding our opinions as well. <

**Victoria Betrous, 16** [Chattanooga, Tennessee]

### 16 NEXT DAY STRETCH

**be like Christ**

When I face conflict, I look to Jesus as my example of love, kindness, and patience. "Love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8, NIV). If we put love first as Jesus does, then we won't be focused on who is right or wrong but on how we can show others the love of Christ.

**pray:** Lord, please help me to love people as you do. Especially in times of disagreement, fill me with your spirit of love. Amen.

**Coby Shelton, 20** [Blue Ridge, Texas]

50 JANUARY>FEBRUARY 2020

february 10-16

# WEEK FOUR • DAY SIX

## CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

ALONE IN A CROWD

WEEKEND!

# in real life

We are tired of hearing how “screens will rot our brains” and how “teens don’t look up from their phones anymore.” But the presence we carefully craft for ourselves (online and IRL) often consumes our thoughts. So how can we use both social media and real-life interactions to create and strengthen authentic relationships?

### be real

Social media has allowed voices to be amplified around the world, relationships to transcend geographical boundaries, and news to spread like wildfire when it needs to most. It also makes readily available those posts that can leave us thinking we need to change or aching with loneliness. Instead of second-guessing ourselves, let’s be real. I challenge you to post without editing your life, to speak your mind without worrying what others think, to wear what makes you comfortable rather than what’s fashionable, and to be honest with God. As we let go of the need to be perfect and we accept who we are, we can learn to love one another as Christ loves us.

Elizabeth Ingeneri, 19 [Chandler, Arizona]

### form deeper connections

At 16 I was a social butterfly, flitting from one friend group to another. But when I faced a crisis, I realized these “friends” were actually a bunch of acquaintances. I didn’t have anyone I felt I could confide in. During this lonely time in my life, I realized that I needed to make a change. I began by letting many of those surface relationships fade into the background as I developed a few strong friendships. The result was incredible. Finally, I had people with whom I could be real and whom I could encourage as well.

Ronnell Gibson [Fond du Lac, Wisconsin]

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SEPTEMBER>OCTOBER 2019 **31**

# WEEK FOUR • DAY SIX

## CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

ALONE IN A CROWD

WEEKEND!

### connect beyond a like .....

I was shocked to hear that an ever-happy friend was going through a tough time. I had no idea. I didn't see her struggle in her happy pictures posted online and boosted by likes and comments. I wondered if I would have noticed it if I had seen her face-to-face or heard it in her voice if I had called.

Social media friendships cannot begin to wade through the depths of off-line relationships. How genuine can we be on a platform where we can't see the way others react? How can we be honest in a forum where records are etched forever in cyberspace? By all means, relate with your friends on social media. But every so often, communicate beyond a like or an emoji. Make the effort to visit, to call, or to pray with someone today.

Osemome Ndebbio [Katy, Texas]

### do life together .....

Loneliness is such a terrifying condition that we will do almost anything to escape it. We join more clubs, find more Instagram followers, or get more involved in "church things." But even in these crowds, we still can feel lonely. We long for fellowship. Simply put, fellowship is participating in life with another. When we fellowship with God, we join in an active relationship with our Maker. The same is true when we fellowship with others. We do life together. ♥

Zachary Kralik [Lake Worth, Florida]

### 29 NEXT DAY STRETCH .....

**pray:** God, we need people to sit across the table from us at a coffee shop. We need people to wrap their arms around us when we experience disappointing news. We need people to see the truth in our eyes when we lie and say everything is OK. Help me to be a friend to someone who needs a friend. Help me to cultivate authentic relationships. Amen.

Tynea Lewis [New Holland, Pennsylvania]

32 SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2019

september 23-29

# WEEK FOUR • DAY SEVEN

## CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

I SEE YOU

WEEKEND!

STEVE MATTHEWS

# I SEE YOU

12

I was looking for a book I read several years ago. I knew the title of the book, and I was certain it had a red cover—so I searched my bookshelves for that red cover. As I began to think that I must have loaned it to someone or lost it, there it was—right at eye level with the title printed boldly . . . on the blue cover. I had seen the book when I scanned that shelf earlier, but I had not seen it as the book I needed because I was looking for the wrong color.

Seeing is different from perceiving something with all its attributes and qualities. We can see something with our eyes but still have some measure of selective blindness when it comes to understanding it in its fullness.

This selective blindness can affect our interactions with people. Our hurried lives can limit our ability to see people in all their complexity and beauty. Instead, we look for what we expect or need from another person. Most of the time we are not being mean-spirited; this habit is simply a way of organizing our world. But this practice does not deepen our understanding of ourselves, others, or God.

In Isaiah 43:19 (NRSV), God invites us to see differently: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” God invites us to see with a spirit of patient curiosity.

14 MAY>JUNE 2018

# WEEK FOUR • DAY SEVEN

## CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

I SEE YOU

WEEKEND!

I recently read that judgment and curiosity cannot coexist. The more I play with this concept, the more I find it to be true. When I judge people, I may see them, but I see them with blinders on. I see what I am looking for, with few exceptions. This kind of seeing can be hurtful to others and can inhibit my ability to be a transforming expression of God's love to them. It can also inhibit my ability to be transformed by God through other people.

When I make assumptions about people, I limit them and limit the way God might be active in the relationship. On the other hand, if I can be curious about people, I am much more likely to engage them with questions, sensitivity, and understanding. Being curious helps us to see people, but it also frees us to see the movement of God in their lives and in our own. <

**Steve Matthews** was a youth minister for over 15 years. He is now a spiritual director, a coach working with redeveloping churches, and Executive Director of the South Coast Mission Hub, a collaborative of churches sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts.

### 13 NEXT DAY STRETCH

Many Christian contemplatives talk about awareness as one of the key components of prayer. They encourage us to slow down, to let go of our agendas and judgments, and to notice God in the world around us.

Consider doing that this week. Try spending five minutes a day practicing awareness, but focus your attention on the people in your life. The people might be strangers in a park or in line in front of you. See them with curious eyes. What do you notice? Look beyond their clothes or social status. What do you see?

Now try this with someone you know. Check your judgment at the door, and invite a loving awareness into this spiritual practice. God says, "I am about to do a new thing; . . . do you not perceive it?" What is God's invitation to you in this moment with this person?

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