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## CHAPTER ONE

# When You Don't Feel Connected

*Encourage one another and build each other up.*

1 THESSALONIANS 5:11

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*We are wired to connect. Neuroscience has discovered that our brain's very design makes it sociable, inexorably drawn into an intimate brain-to-brain linkup whenever we engage with another person.*

DANIEL GOLEMAN

**M**y husband, Steve, and I arrived home after some intense weeks of ministry. I was exhausted and a bit cranky from traveling through so many different time zones. We had been with people round the clock and I'm an extrovert, so I should have felt elated.

Instead, I felt drained. I love meeting people and I had met plenty. However, my soul felt dry, completely parched. As I reflected on what was going on inside, I felt shocked to discover a deep ache of loneliness in my soul. How in the world could I feel lonely when I had just spent countless hours with people?! As I

analyzed my feelings, I realized I was longing for deep connection. I needed extended time with God and my people.

Though I had ministered for God, I felt disconnected from Him. I longed to nestle down for extended time in His loving presence. I wanted to experience the joy of being fully known and loved. Even though I had ministered with my husband for weeks, we hadn't had "us" time. I felt disconnected from him too. On top of all that, I missed my kids, grandkids, and close friends. While we had been with lots of people nonstop, I lacked deep connection.

I missed the people who knew me best.

The morning after we arrived home, I got up early and brought all my jumbled feelings before the Lord. As I knelt in His presence, I began to realize that while ministry had been exciting

and exhilarating, I was longing for more. Not more events. Not more flights. Not more opportunities. I was longing for deeper connection. I needed unhurried time with God, Steve, my family, and friends! Each of those relationships are precious to me and yet, because of ministry demands, each had in some way been neglected.

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***Loneliness is not  
the absence of  
people—it's feeling  
disconnected from  
those people.***

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You've felt the ache of loneliness from time to time as well. After all, it's why you picked up this book. Loneliness can hit you at the most unexpected times. Perhaps the job is going awesome and in many ways you're climbing the corporate ladder, but then it hits you how many of your relationships have been sacrificed on the altar of success. Or you've been busy chasing toddlers, and

you realize it's been weeks since you've had adult conversation and connection with friends. Maybe you attend a megachurch, but you really don't have close relationships there. When Sunday morning rolls around, you don't feel excited about attending.

The truth is our hearts were created for connection. Loneliness is not the absence of people—it's feeling disconnected from those people.

All of us, whether introverted or extroverted, need close, deeply connected relationships. It's the way we were created. We crave a place of belonging. When there is a lack of significant attachment, feelings of being isolated settle in. Loneliness doesn't imply a lack of friends. It means we don't feel connected.

At one time or another every one of us has felt lonely.

It's the ache of the mom with young children craving adult conversation.

It's the cry of the single woman longing for a spouse.

It's the throb of the married woman longing for deeper intimacy.

It's the sting in the heart of the woman who feels uninvited.

It's the misery of the one who's been divorced.

It's the agony of the widow whose husband is gone.

When we feel lonely it's a signal that we need to return to what we were created for: deeply connected relationships. And according to recent research, loneliness is at an all-time high.

## **LONGING FOR CONNECTION**

A public statement from the surgeon general of the United States revealed that one in two adults feels significantly isolated. The report suggests that loneliness is the new epidemic and that we

now have a dire need to again figure out community and what it means.<sup>1</sup> In other words people are feeling disconnected. That number is staggering and interestingly, it didn't stem from the COVID pandemic of several years ago. Many have called the pandemic the great revealer. It didn't cause the problem but definitely showed us how deep the problem is. Our loneliness has been growing steadily over recent years.

Maybe you've felt lonely after a divorce, or when moving to a new city, or after a conflict with a friend. You might feel lonely because you're single and you've been praying for a mate for years. On the other hand, it could be that you are married but feel like you and your spouse are on different planets. Perhaps you've grown too busy. Long hours at work are preventing you from enjoying deep conversation with your family and friends. It's possible you've been hurt, and as a result you've built sturdy walls of protection around your heart. Unfortunately, those walls have kept other people out and now you are feeling all alone. While the reasons are many and varied, we are now facing the epidemic of loneliness.

Eve accepted a new job, a great career opportunity in management she couldn't pass up, but she's having a hard time connecting with her new coworkers. It seems that everyone else has been with the small company for years, and she keenly feels she's an outsider.

Noelle has moved to a new area and is considering trying to meet new friends online but isn't sure that's a good idea. Week after week goes by as she hesitates, and now she feels stuck in a pattern of unwanted solitude.

Roberta is single but would like to meet someone special to share her life with. When she returns to her apartment every evening after work, she feels depressed and wishes someone were there to greet her and ask about her day.

Candy is married, but the distance she feels in her marriage leaves her feeling isolated and sad.

You may look at your pastor or someone else who seems to be a people person and projects an aura of being upbeat. However, even ministers and others in positions of leadership experience feelings of isolation on a regular basis. The demands and pressures, not to mention the criticism, can leave many feeling like they don't have a friend in the world. Author Ruth Haley Barton writes about the loneliness that leaders feel: "On some days the magnitude of the responsibility and the awareness of our aloneness can be crushing."<sup>2</sup>

While some may have lots of connections on social media, those aren't necessarily true connections. In fact, research shows that people who spend long hours on social media are more lonely than ever.<sup>3</sup> Social media serves a function; however, it is not a replacement for authentic close relationships.

Honestly, loneliness is a frequent visitor in our broken world, and we're grappling with a profound sense of disconnect. To make matters worse, our loneliness is costing us not just emotionally but also physically. The CDC links social isolation and loneliness to depression, anxiety, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, dementia, and more.<sup>4</sup>

Though these reports are challenging, loneliness is nothing new.

## **LONELINESS IN THE SCRIPTURES**

As we read the Scriptures, we discover that many heroes of our faith felt lonely:

- Moses felt the loneliness of leadership. With deep fear of abandonment Moses cries out, “If your presence does not go with me, I don’t want to go at all!” (Ex. 33:12, 14; my paraphrase).
- Job felt lonely when his friends brought him no comfort and instead kept accusing him of sinning against God (Job 4–23).
- Nehemiah felt lonely as he led the wall reconstruction project (Neh. 2:16).
- Elijah felt lonely in the cave and cried out, “I am the only one left” (1 Kings 19:10).
- David felt lonely as he hid from his own son who was trying to take his life (Ps. 3).
- And ultimately, Jesus our Savior felt lonely in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before He was going to die, when His friends kept falling asleep instead of praying with Him (Matt. 26:40).

Here’s the thing: if you wrestle with loneliness, let go of the guilt because the guilt isn’t helping you. It’s normal to experience seasons of loneliness, as I described above. However, it is not meant to be the general tenor of our lives. Instead, our daily life needs to be anchored in a deep sense of community, an intimate relationship with God, and close attachment with others.

The truth is, all of us desire genuine, loving, connected relationships. We want to feel like we belong and that we’re known and loved. We need each other. And you know what? That’s God’s desire for you as well.

## THE THEOLOGY OF BELONGING

The desire to connect is from God. Our souls throb with a hunger that only God Himself can heal. He created us with that divinely given ache to connect and, amazingly, God Himself aches for us. Shocking, I know! God yearns for us to have a deep relationship with Him. He is the only one who can fill the deepest longing of our hearts.

Author Ruth Myers said it this way: “God offers us a perfect and permanent love, a love relationship that can meet our deepest needs at every point of life and forever.”<sup>5</sup> Only as we enjoy secure attachment to God are we able to love others out of the overflow of a full heart. For the record, that is exactly God’s plan! He never created us to live our lives in isolation. Rather, He created us for intimate relationship with Him and others. He designed us with a need for community and connection.

Way back in the beginning of the Scriptures, God said, “Let us make mankind in our image” (Gen. 1:26). Just as God lives in eternal community between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so He designed us for community. After He made man, He said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). In other words, because man was created in God’s image, he was designed for community. Shortly after God created the man, He gave him a

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***The more firmly  
rooted we are in  
Christ’s deep love,  
the more willing  
we will be to love  
and connect with  
others.***

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friend, partner, and soul mate in the person of Eve. It's clear that God doesn't want us to live in isolation—He designed us for relationship both with Him and others.

On the night before He was crucified, Jesus prayed, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:22–23).

The deeper and more intimate our relationship is with God, the more at home we will become with ourselves, and the richer our connections will be with others. Too often our relationship with Jesus is, in the words of one writer, "seriously underdeveloped."<sup>6</sup> As a result, we are not able to offer deep friendship and connection to others. Tight bonds of community form out of the overflow of a heart that has experienced deep belonging in Christ.

Jesus yearned for us to understand the depth of our attachment to Him. Before He ascended into heaven, He had some comforting words for His disciples, and I believe His words can bring us comfort for today as well. He told His disciples not to feel troubled or worried, but to trust Him. He went on to say, "I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:16–18).

Did you catch that? Jesus promised He will not leave you as if you were an orphan. He won't abandon you! He left you the Holy Spirit who would be your 24/7 journey mate. As a result, **you are never alone!**

I remember how God brought His tangible presence home to me in a very personal way when I had cancer. I was in the hospital hooked up to all manner of machines after having a six-hour surgery to remove both my breasts. Steve, my husband, and I had decided beforehand that after the surgery was complete, he would go home and be with the kids. We knew they were terrified over the fact that I had cancer.

However, when Steve left to go home, I felt afraid and lonely. I knew he had to leave, but I didn't want him to go. I felt so alone and vulnerable. Someone had given me a little teddy bear that was created for those battling breast cancer, and I remember in the darkness of my room holding that teddy bear and reminding myself of the words I had learned as a child, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

In the darkness of my hospital room with machines beeping I felt the Lord speak in comforting whispers, "Becky, I am here with you." Before I fell back asleep, I silently acknowledged His presence with heartfelt gratitude, "Thank You, Lord Jesus, that I can trust Your promise. You are here with me. Never will You leave me and never will You forsake me. Not even during cancer. I relax in Your presence, knowing You are with me and in me."

You see, my friend, that's where our path out of loneliness begins: our relationship and intimate belonging with Christ. Once we have received His love by faith, we are bonded with Him. He will never leave us nor forsake us. Not during a divorce. Not when work deadlines pile up. Not during cancer or other illness. Not during wars or persecution. Not during earthquakes. Not during hurricanes. Not ever! He is Immanuel—God with us. He is faithful, and you can trust Him to keep His word. The Spirit of Christ lives in you (Gal. 2:20). You never have to worry about being alone again!

Out of that securely bonded relationship we are then able to reach out to enjoy rich relationships with others and find healing from loneliness.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

In this book, we will consider tangible stepping stones to deepen your relationship with others. We're going to answer the question: When you don't feel connected, what can you do? As you read, keep in mind how you can change the narrative and take initiative.

You might consider yourself a victim of loneliness. In your mind, you rehearse messages like "I'm not a good conversationalist" or "I never get invited because I'm single" or "I'm just not good at relationships."

I suggest that you change the narrative. Remind yourself that you have deep value, and that God calls you precious. He has designed you to be a gift to others. Beyond changing the narrative, start to take initiative. Invite a friend to coffee. If you feel shy, plan questions you can ask to get to know the other person better. Or call someone on the phone, and simply ask them how they are doing and what's new in their life. One psychologist suggests calling at least three friends per week. That's a great start. Join a community group at your church or reach out to some of your neighbors. The thing is, in order to have friends, you must put in a little effort.

Through the rest of the book, you will find very practical steps you can take to triumph over loneliness. You won't be able to develop deep relationships with everyone. That's not possible or healthy, but as you continue reading, you'll discover tips for how

to strengthen your relationships so that you have several close-knit connections with whom you feel a sense of secure belonging.

The Bible will be our authority on relationships. We'll study the principles of deep connection as taught in the "one another" statements found in the New Testament. Each of these statements teaches us a quality that needs to be found in our relationships. So if you don't feel connected, and you're feeling a bit isolated, here are some practical steps you can take that we'll be unpacking throughout this book:

Embrace Humility  
Let Go of a Critical Spirit  
Develop Loyalty  
Start Cheering, Stop Comparing  
Be Attentive  
Offer and Receive Comfort  
Open Your Heart *and* Your Home  
Don't Be Easily Offended  
Find Your Prayer People

At the end of every chapter is a section called ***Digging Deeper into Connection***. This section will include some reflective questions to consider under Deeper Connection with God, Deeper Connection with Yourself, and Deeper Connection with Others. At the end of each chapter will also be a brief section reminding you of how God exemplifies each of these characteristics in His friendship with you. The Bible is the place where we discover who God is, so I've added some verses in this section to give you a true picture of what an amazing friend God is to you.

As we discover the beauty of one another and allow the Word of God to teach us how to enjoy rich relationships, both with Him

and others, we'll find ourselves feeling less lonely. Instead, we'll enjoy tight knit community and intimate connection. Are you ready? Let's dive into deeper connection together. Why not pause now, before you read any further, and pray this prayer with me?

*Lord Jesus, You know my ache to belong. Thank You that You created me to have a desire to feel connected both to You and others. As I embark on this journey, I pray that You would allow me to feel Your love and enjoy Your presence. Thank You that Your Word teaches me that You have loved me with everlasting love and You have drawn me to Yourself with cords that can't be broken by anyone or anything. Thank You that nothing can separate me from Your love. Show me the beauty of living in relationship with others as You have outlined in Your Word (Jer. 31:3; Rom. 8:38–39).*

## **DIGGING DEEPER INTO CONNECTION**

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### ***Deeper Connection with God***

- 1. When you consider connecting more deeply with God, what comes to mind?*
- 2. One of the primary ways we connect with God is through the Bible. That may feel overwhelming to you. But if you look at Scripture in bite-size pieces, it will feel easier.*
- 3. Look up the following verses and consider what they teach you about the relationship God wants you to enjoy with Him.*

*Jeremiah 31:3*

*John 15:4–6*

*James 4:8*

*What did you learn about God from each of these verses?*

- 4. Another way we connect with God is through prayer. When we pray, we can talk with God about anything that is on our hearts. He is always willing to bend down and listen. How have you viewed prayer in the past? How might it change your relationship with God to view prayer as simply a conversation with God?*

### **Deeper Connection with Yourself**

*If you feel disconnected with yourself, you can't enjoy deep friendships with others. One way to connect with yourself is to spend time in solitude so you can understand yourself more fully. Neuroscience seems to point to the fact that if we understand ourselves more deeply, we are able to connect more effectively with others.<sup>7</sup> Spend a few minutes considering:*

- 1. Do you feel comfortable when spending an hour or two alone? Why, or why not?*
- 2. When do you feel the closest to God? How do you best experience His presence?*
- 3. What are your hopes and dreams as you read this book?*
- 4. When have you felt disappointed in friendships?*
- 5. What qualities do you offer friends that could bless them and help them feel connected to you?*
- 6. God was intentional in the way He created you. What are some unique gifts that God has given you?*

### **Deeper Connection with Others**

- 1. Out of your friends, who do you feel the closest to in this season of life?*

2. Who do you feel distant from and why?
3. Who in your life could you share a deep problem with and not feel judged?

*This week, go to the store and pick out a card for a friend. Write a short paragraph affirming some qualities you see in their lives that bless you. Get a stamp, address the card, and send it! In this day and age of texting and emojis, people appreciate the beauty of a handwritten note.*

### **God Longs for Deep Connection with You**

*"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness" (Jer. 31:3).*

*"The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing" (Zeph. 3:17).*

*"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command" (John 15:13–14).*

*"See what love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1).*

*“This is how God showed his love among us; He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9–10).*

## COURTNEY'S STORY

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*Courtney and her husband, Jake, had a desire to serve sacrificially. So they became licensed as foster parents. They cared for their kids' practical needs, loved them, and prayed over them. But the journey had been tough. While she was trying to make a difference in this dark world, Courtney felt isolated and alone.*

*Recognizing that they desperately needed community, Courtney and Jake began coming to our church, and there they found connection. People stepped up and offered to help where needed. Courtney and Jake found a place to belong where they would feel valued for what they are doing to help kiddos in the foster care system. Courtney often asked for prayer.*

*Courtney knows she cannot do this journey alone; while she and Jake are partners in this ministry of childcare, the fact remains that he works full-time, so the daily responsibilities are largely hers. She needs others as part of her support team. She has been humble enough to reach out to our church community for help with diapers, clothes, food, and other essential supplies.*

*The journey to take in foster care kids is a very lonely one, and at times those feelings can be overwhelming. However, Courtney serves with a loving, joy-filled heart. Recently, one of her friends described Courtney to me as one of the most humble, unassuming people she knows. Yet Courtney is aware of what she can and can't do. As she serves, sometimes in lonely places, she knows she needs others on the journey with her.*