

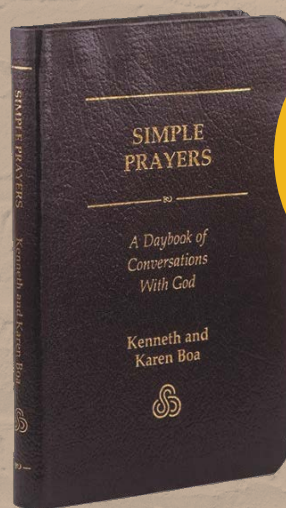
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THE PROMISES OF GOD

CALLED BY GRACE

The average adult fills many roles in life: family member, neighbor, employer or employee, citizen, spouse, parent, church member, and so on. As responsibilities increase, resources can grow thin. At some point, a person can screech to a mental halt and declare, “No more!” The Christian life is similarly filled with commitments, but the resources that we need to fill those commitments are potentially endless.

When God calls us into a relationship with Christ, we soon discover that we have been called to far more than salvation and eternal life (2 Thess. 2:13–14). We have been called to a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), to be saints (Rom. 1:7), to be holy (1 Cor. 1:2), to have fellowship with Christ (1 Cor. 1:9), to live in peace (1 Cor. 7:15), to suffer (1 Peter 2:21), and to live in hope (Eph. 1:18). That’s a lot of responsibility! Were we to try to tackle all of these roles in our own strength, we would find ourselves coming up tragically short of the goal. So how does one live up to all these commitments? Paul gives us an idea.

Paul often spoke of his calling as an apostle (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1) and testified that his calling was brought about by God’s grace (Rom. 12:3; 15:15; 1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 2:9). To the believers in Rome, he said that each Christian has a calling from God to serve the body of Christ—“according to the proportion of his faith” (Rom. 12:6). Some people are prophets, some are servants, some are teachers, some are encouragers, some are givers, some are leaders, and some have a great capacity for showing mercy

(see a delineation of other callings in 1 Cor. 12:28–30). But rather than this calling being “one more thing” we have to do as Christians, we discover that God gives us His power, by His grace in our lives, to accomplish what He asks of us.

Unlike trying to manage a multitude of roles in our own strength, we find that the deeper we go into our calling from God, the more power we have. Have you identified the grace to serve that God has given you?

God’s Promise:
When you respond to Him by faith, He responds to you by grace.

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A teaching letter encouraging believers to develop a clear mind and a warm heart

JESUS’ IDENTIFICATION WITH US

God of all creation, even though creation has been subjected to the futility of the curse, it is still Yours, and You will redeem nature when You reveal the children of God in the redemption of our body. The material world is still good, because it comes from Your hand, and You have made us to be incarnate beings. And when the Word became flesh, He dwelled in our midst and identified Himself with the human condition, except for our sin. This incomprehensible identification with us in His incarnation, death, and physical resurrection is the glorious foundation for our hope. By becoming one of us, He could take our sins upon Himself on the cross. And through His bodily resurrection from the dead, He made it possible for us to be resurrected as well. Thanks be to God for this wondrous gift.

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Confronting the Spiritual Problem of Loneliness

The Spiritual Condition of Loneliness

Thomas Wolfe once wrote, “The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence. When we examine the moments, acts, and statements of all kinds of people—not only the grief and ecstasy of the greatest poets, but also the huge unhappiness of the average soul... we find, I think, that they are all suffering from the same thing. The final cause of their complaint is loneliness.”¹

For Wolfe, loneliness is the spiritual condition of humanity. For most of us, however, loneliness amounts to little more than a problem of physical health. As is typical of a culture that sees spirituality as a purely private phenomenon, we’ve translated loneliness into a matter of public health, choosing to concentrate on its deleterious effects on a person’s physical wellbeing. Those physical effects, among them high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, and anxiety, are indeed harmful, but they remain symptoms of an underlying spiritual condition.² Why is loneliness at “epidemic” levels in an age that’s more connected than ever? If email represented a drastic new infringement on our privacy, the advent of smartphones and social media has only exacerbated the issue, further blurring the line between public and private life. In short, it takes serious effort to get away from the constant clamor of voices. Not even an airplane offers the reprieve it once did. Yet we remain desperately lonely.

The spiritual character of loneliness becomes clear when we recognize that it’s possible to be lonely in a crowd and content in seclusion. One thinks of Travis Bickle in Martin Scorcece’s *Taxi Driver*, strolling down New York City’s teeming streets proclaiming, “I’m God’s lonely man.” Conversely, the novelist Marilynne Robinson speaks of her childhood in Idaho as a place where the word *lonesome* described a sacred state of solitude that enlivened the mind

and quickened the senses.³ If loneliness were merely a physical problem, surely proximity to other human beings would be sufficient to mitigate its most severe effects. In fact, social proximity has left the problem of loneliness in our society largely untouched. Why? In a word, because we’re treating spiritual symptoms in purely physical terms. If we want to confront the challenge of loneliness that’s wreaking such havoc in our culture, we must go to its spiritual roots—namely, our estrangement from our Maker.

The Foundation of Relational Spirituality

In *Conformed to His Image*, Ken Boa writes, “In the deepest sense, Christianity is not a religion but a relationship that is born out of the trinitarian love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁴ In a time of great loneliness, fear, and isolation, we would all do well to dwell on the nature of God’s love for us: “God’s loyal love for us is causeless (Romans 5:6), measureless (5:7-8), and ceaseless (5:9-11).”⁵ Such abundant love is a *mystery* in the deepest sense of that word—namely, it’s a reality that exceeds our full comprehension. To be sure, this doesn’t mean that understanding on the matter permanently evades us. Rather, it means that we can never plumb the depths of God’s love for us. No time is ever wasted on contemplating the extravagance of our Lord’s love for us.

Because He first loved us, we must begin by dwelling on God’s love and then learn to see ourselves and others in the light of it. If we fail to acknowledge the initiating action of God’s love toward us, we cannot love properly. If it’s possible to be lonely on a crowded street, in a busy office, in a church, in a marriage, it’s also possible for God to transform our loneliest moments into times of profound intimacy. This doesn’t mean that all sadness is immediately eradicated from our lives, but it does mean that a vital relationship with our Lord grants to us the stability of resting in His love, rather than constantly depending on others for affirmation and fulfillment. At its heart, loneliness is a spiritual problem and as such the only way to address it is to address the most important relationship in our lives. Treating physical symptoms alone will offer temporary relief at best, ongoing despair at worst.

How do we prioritize our relationship with Christ? Ours is an age obsessed with methodology and technique. For this reason, we’re more inclined to read books or listen to podcasts *about* the Bible, prayer, and church than we are to actually read God’s word, pray daily, and serve in our local congregations. Precisely because we’re at a moment of spiritual crisis in our culture, however, we must go back to basics. In short, if we want to cultivate a vibrant relationship with our Savior, we must recover the time-tested practices that have served God’s people down the ages. We must read our Bibles and commit generous por-

tions to memory. To those who object that memorization doesn’t come easily to them, call to mind the vast amounts of song lyrics, movie quotes, and other pop culture trivia that most of us carry around in our heads. We remember what we choose to dwell on. Sometimes that’s a sobering thought. The problem is often that our imaginations have been nourished more by the wider culture than by Christ, His word, and His people. For those of us who follow Christ, prayer must be as routine as brushing one’s teeth. If that statement runs the risk of trivializing something as profound as prayer, let’s also guard against the tendency to elevate our spiritual lives into irrelevance. If prayer is difficult, pray God’s word starting with the Psalms. In God’s word, we have all we need, whether it involves words of praise or lament. Finally, we must return to the pews and do more than be consumers of “spiritual goods and services”—Eugene Peterson’s pungent phrase. We must be active members in our local congregations, serving others, and helping to clean up the many messes, ours included. People are messy, but we serve a good God whose church prevails in spite of our shortcomings. In sum, start to address your relationship with Christ by reading His word, praying, and going to church. Basic as all these practices may seem, they are in desperate need of recovery.

If all of these practices are an integral part of one’s life, loneliness will cease to be an all-consuming problem. Naturally, we live in a fallen world and we will continue to struggle with aspects of loneliness. But we will no longer be in bondage to it. The tragic attempt to treat a spiritual malady in purely physical terms is a recipe for frustration and ultimately despair. By prioritizing our relationship with Christ, we will be liberated to love because He first loved us.

1 Thomas Wolfe, *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe* ed. Francis E. Skipp (New York: Scribner, 1989), 492.

2 Available online: <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/what-doctors-wish-patients-knew-about-loneliness-and-health>

3 Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 88.

4 Ken Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical, Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation (Revised Edition)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 16.

5 Ibid., 14.