

Strangers and Sojourners: Alone

Strangers and sojourners often travel the road of life alone.

That road is so narrow that no one can travel it except in single file. The road is no freeway or smooth highway that lends itself to high speeds and a rapid destination. Rather, as we have previously observed, the path of strangers and sojourners is more like a rugged trail that allows only single-file travel, and that is fraught with obstacles and troubles. Sometimes the trail is so rough and remote that the travelers cannot see anyone else ahead or behind.

While all of God's people travel essentially the same road, while their journey is basically the same, and while their goal is the same, yet there are individual differences among them. Each one of us needs to walk his individual, distinct path along the road of life.

In the Bible the concept of "alone" implies the idea of separation, to be apart from, to be distant. This means not to have close friends with whom one has conversation and fellowship, not to have something in common, but to be distinct and separate from others. Usually, though not always, "alone" carries with it a negative connotation.

One notable exception is Deuteronomy 33:28, which is part of Moses' farewell address to Israel. After promising the people that God would thrust out their enemies before them, he says that Israel will dwell in safety alone. Israel's strength will be in possessing their own land and living in isolation from the heathen nations around them. Their aloneness will enable them to live as strangers and sojourners in a physical, outward manner, which is typical of the believer's spiritual journey.

Being alone has different aspects and shows itself in various ways. By looking at some of these, we will understand what it means to be solitary.

God himself does not like aloneness. He says of Adam in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone." The animals were created male and female, but Adam had no companion, so God created Eve to be his helpmeet. Why did God not want Adam to be alone, and therefore created the woman? Because God is a covenant God; within his divine being he has friendship and fellowship with himself. He wanted man, the head of his creation, to reflect the covenant life that he enjoys within himself. This is impossible if Adam is alone, so he gave

the woman to the man that together they would be covenant friends with one another and with the Lord.

A similar idea we find in Psalm 102, a prayer of one who is afflicted and pours out his complaint to the Lord. The psalmist prays, "Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble" (verse 2). We do not know what his specific problem is, but he spends several verses describing his pitiable condition. Apparently he suffers alone without anyone to share his grief and trouble, for he says in verse 7, "I am like a sparrow alone upon the house top." The picture is that of a sparrow bereaved of its mate. There on the top of the house sits the poor little lonesome sparrow, all by himself, with no one to help or comfort him. Have you ever been a sparrow alone on the top of the roof? It's not a good place to be, is it?

We think of Jacob as he traveled toward the promised land after a long absence, only to meet with his brother Esau, from whom he had bartered away the birthright. After sending his entire family and all his possessions across the Jabbok River, Jacob hit a major bump in his stranger's sojourn. Genesis 32:24 tells us that Jacob was left alone to wrestle all night with the angel of Jehovah. Jacob was one who always tried to help the Lord along a bit, and who tried to do things in his own strength. When finally God put him in a position in which he was truly alone, he had to learn the hard way that the Lord is sovereign and that salvation is his alone.

In considering the idea of being alone, we cannot forget the example of Job. He lost all his possessions. He lost all his children. His three alleged friends repeatedly told him what a sinner he was, miserable comforters that they were. His wife told him to curse God and die. He was covered with boils. He had no friends. He suffered alone. He was so miserable that he said to God, "I despise my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone; my days have no meaning" (Job. 7:16). He uses similar language in Job 10:20: "Are not my days few? cease then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little." Job did not want to hear what God has to say to him. Can you conceive of telling God, "Leave me alone?" I cannot. To put it in today's language, Job said, "Quit bugging me." Have you ever been so miserable that you have said such a thing? Maybe some have. I have not.

Perhaps the epitome of lonesomeness in the Old Testament is the prophet Elijah. The narrative in 1 Kings 19 is familiar. After his glorious victory over Baal and his prophets on Mt.

Carmel, the wicked queen Jezebel swore to kill him. Elijah fled for his life and ended up in a cave at Mt. Horeb. When God asked him what he was doing there, Elijah replied: "I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, and left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (vv. 10, 14). Romans 11:3, speaking of Elijah, expresses his words this way: "Lord, they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thy altars; and I am left alone, and they seek my life." In the light of what Elijah says about Israel, all of which was true, we can understand a little of how he felt. I say "a little" because his situation has never been ours. We have not experienced apostasy and its results as they are described by the prophet. We have never had to flee for our lives. Talk about being alone! Can you imagine thinking that you are the only person left who stands for the Lord's cause and covenant? We know that Elijah drew the wrong conclusion from his situation. He was not the only one left, for God had preserved a remnant in Israel, seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Nevertheless, the point is that from his personal perspective, Elijah was alone.

Christ is the ultimate example of being alone. Unlike Elijah, usually he was alone by choice and for a definite reason. We read that after the feeding of the five thousand, "When he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone" (Matt. 14:23; see also Luke 9:18). John Calvin instructs us as to the reason Jesus wanted to be alone, with application to us on our stranger's journey:

By going up the mountain he was seeking the possibility of praying free from all interruption. We know how easily warmth in prayer can be quenched or at least cooled by the least distractions. Although Christ did not suffer from this weakness, yet he wished to warn us by his example to be careful to use all the helps that will disengage our minds from the snares of the world, so that we may be carried up to heaven. The most important thing is solitude. Those who set themselves to pray with God as their only witness will be more watchful, will pour forth their heart into his bosom, will

examine themselves more carefully, and, knowing that they have to do with God, will rise above themselves.¹

In John 16:32, referring to the time of his death, Jesus says, “Behold, the hour cometh, yea, now is come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.” Here is the ultimate manifestation of being alone. Christ came as the mediator between God and man. As the savior he alone can make satisfaction for the sins of his people. There can be no work of man involved whatsoever. No one can help Christ, no one can contribute to the work of salvation, no one can add anything to his redemption of his people. Christ must be alone; he must suffer and die alone; he must rise again alone. Therefore he tells his disciples that everyone will leave him alone. So it is, and so it must be. The road that Christ must walk is solitary.

To his assertion of his aloneness he Lord immediately adds, “Yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.” It does not matter that all men will forsake him and leave him alone in his suffering. Even if he is forsaken by the whole world, as he will be, he has no need of anyone, because his heavenly Father is with him. The Father will sustain him through his suffering and death. Though he is alone, yet he is not alone.

This truth has implications for you, young people. When you are alone, or when you feel like Elijah or Job, remember that Christ was also alone. He knows, and he understands the difficulties of the path we must walk, for scripture teaches us that he was like us in all things except sin. We have a high priest who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He will sustain us in our darkest hour, and will comfort us by his Spirit, so that we are never really alone, appearances notwithstanding.

There is an implied admonition in this matter of being alone. It is that we need friends on our stranger’s sojourn. As I plan to show in next month’s column, we need to walk together on our rugged trail. The negative consequences of being alone are stated by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 4:9–11. In verse 9 the wise man states a general principle: “Two are better than one; because they have good reward for their labour.” This makes one think of the necessity of

¹ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, 3 vols., trans. T. H. L. Parker, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, n.d.), 2:151.

lifting and moving something that is too heavy for one person. Two people working together can get the job done. Applying this principle to the rough and rocky trail that strangers and sojourners must walk, we note what Solomon says in verse 10: “For if they fall [which is a virtual certainty, given the jagged and craggy nature of the trail], the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. The meaning is so clear that it needs no explanation. Solomon drives home the point with the rhetorical question of verse 11: “Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?”

Being alone, according to verse 10, is a “woe.” One who is alone is to be pitied. He is certain to fall, but he has no one to help him. Do you have friends? Do you have companions on life’s road? If you do, then you are blessed. If you do not, make every attempt to make friends. You can’t reach the Christian’s goal alone. While every one of us must walk his own individual way in this world, we must also travel together toward the narrow gate that leads to eternal life.