



why

we're

feeling

lonely

(and what we can do about it)

Shelby Abbott

Foreword by Paul David Tripp

“If you’ve ever felt unknown in a crowded room or close to God but far from people, you’re not alone. This book speaks to that ache and offers a biblical path toward the kind of connection your soul was made for.”

BEN BENNETT, Speaker; Author; Cofounder,
Resolution Movement

“Shelby doesn’t write from a distance. He writes from the middle of the mess—naming the real, raw struggles that so many young people face, without sugarcoating or condescending. This book goes after the actual roots of loneliness with both truth and tenderness, pairing a deep grasp of the gospel with practical, soul-level help. Shelby has a rare gift for speaking with his readers, not at them, and that authenticity makes all the difference. Every chapter feels like a conversation with someone who has been there, who isn’t afraid to say the hard thing, and who wholeheartedly believes that Jesus has the power to meet us in our loneliest places and bring lasting change.”

AMY LYNCH, Author, *The Nehemiah Way: Mobilizing a Church Full of Leaders*; Founder and CEO, Fernling Press

“Shelby’s book on loneliness is a rare combination of power and purity. Power, as there were moments that I found myself shouting at the insightful diagnoses of our current cultural climate. Pure, because, like medicine, truth seeped into my own heart, especially as it relates to empathy toward others. If you’re struggling with loneliness as a student or young adult, or quite frankly at any other stage of life, you will be brought to your knees in prayer. A timely, timely book for this generation!”

RECHAB GRAY, Pastor of Preaching and Spiritual Transformation, New Creation Fellowship, Orlando, FL

“God said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone,’ and I think we’d agree. We were created for meaningful connection with others but too often can’t escape the haunting feeling of being alone. With wise and winsome candor, *Why We’re Feeling Lonely* helps diagnose what contributes to our loneliness and points us to meaningful ways to develop deep, life-giving relationships as God intends for us to have. I commend it!”

GARRETT KELL, Pastor, Del Ray Baptist Church;
Author, *Pure in Heart: Sexual Sin and the Promises of God*

“Shelby Abbott’s excellent book helps readers grapple with the questions we should all ask regarding the loneliness epidemic that continues to surge—especially among the younger generations. He invites readers to explore the poisonous substitutes that work as counterfeit sources of belonging. I loved reading this book and thinking more deeply about what Abbott calls “gospel friendships,” and how to bond more deeply with others in overlooked and deeply biblical ways. Don’t miss this book!”

HEATHER HOLLEMAN, PhD, Speaker; Author, *The Six Conversations: Pathways to Connecting in an Age of Isolation and Incivility*

“Campus ministers, youth-group leaders, or anyone discipling a young person struggling with loneliness—this is the resource you’re looking for. With empathy and clarity, Shelby identifies the root causes of Gen Z’s isolation and then combats them with biblical truth, practical tips, and thought-provoking questions. Easy to read, timely, and gospel-centered, this book is perfect for one-on-one or small-group discussions with the ‘Loneliest Generation.’”

SARAH EEKHOFF ZYLSTRA, Senior Writer,
The Gospel Coalition

“Every single person feels lonely at times, and sometimes we just don’t know how to navigate it. I love this book because it’s relevant, real, practical, and biblical. It’s going to help every person that reads it!”

ANN WILSON, Host, FamilyLife Today podcast

“Through easy-to-read, illustration-filled chapters, Shelby helps us see that real, unfiltered, other-person-centred commitment to the messy yet beautiful gift of the local church, centred around Jesus, is God’s wonderful answer to the epidemic of loneliness. It helped me realise again the joy and privilege of being friends with a God who woos and pursues me, and the possibility of unexpected friendships within the church. As a local church pastor on a council estate full of lonely and isolated people, it’s a joy for me to see a wonderful and realistic picture of how our little body of believers, even in its messiness, can bring hope to those who are hopelessly lonely, socially isolated, and totally detached.”

SAM GIBB, Pastor, Hope Church Vauxhall, London, UK

“This book convicted, encouraged, and deeply healed me in my struggle with loneliness. Even while surrounded by an amazing community, I often felt unseen—but Shelby Abbott gently exposed how self-centeredness can sometimes hide beneath that kind of loneliness. His words drew me to meditate on Scripture, sit in God’s presence, and pursue deeper, selfless connection with others. God’s design for meaningful relationships—with him and with people—is beautifully unpacked here. I’m walking away with renewed purpose and perspective, and I’m incredibly grateful for how this book has changed my life.”

SIERRA WILSON, Gen-Z reader

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Shelby Abbott

*To Gabe Mahalik and Brian Barnett (my Jonathans).
True friends who have been there for me in the
ups and downs of life.
Guys, I love Jesus more because of you.*

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Foreword

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

He hung there in incredible physical pain and anguish, naked and nailed to a cross that had been jammed into the ground. The nails ripped at the flesh of his hands and feet. Crucifixion was one of the most tortuous forms of execution the human community has ever known. You wouldn't die right away. No, hours would go by as you hung in unspeakable pain while the mocking crowd gawked at you. But the most horrible thing for Jesus, as he hung there between heaven and earth, numbered with common criminals, wasn't physical pain—it was something relational. His greatest point of distress was the moment when he cried out, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?”—that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Jesus had lived, in the endless forever of eternity, in a relationship of perfect love and unity with God the Father. It is the kind of relationship that all of our hearts long for, but that we will not fully experience until all those who have placed their trust in Jesus are

with him in the eternity that is to come. There was never a moment of anger between Jesus and the Father, never a moment of disagreement, and never even the slightest moment of separation. There was only perfect love and perfect unity. But on the cross, something shocking happened. The Father turned his back on the Son. Jesus, bearing our sin, experienced what sin does to all of us—it separates us from God. So, in his deepest moment of anguish, he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This question of Jesus was anguish crying out for love. And there is something that you may have missed in this dramatic moment of suffering. In anguish, Jesus prayed to his Father, and what he got in return was complete silence. It was one of those moments in human history when the silence was truly deadening. We all hate rejection. From the little moments of rejection on the playground to the horrible experience of a loved one turning their back on us and walking away, we find rejection deeply painful. But none of us has experienced relational pain at the depth that Jesus experienced on the cross.

Why? Why was it necessary for Jesus to endure this unthinkable separation from God the Father? The answer is found in understanding that Jesus was on the cross as our substitute, not only in his death—paying the price for human sin, which is death (Romans 6:23)—but also in his exclusion from fellowship with his Father, because sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2). He was willing to endure his Father’s rejection so

that we would never again see the back of God's head. Because of his exclusion, we can be reconciled to God, never again living in fear of his rejection.

What does this moment on the cross have to do with our loneliness? The brief answer is: everything! In the perfection of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in perfect harmony and love. There was no conflict, no perversion, no rejection, no betrayal, and there were no feelings of alienation, separation, or loneliness. But when Adam and Eve became alienated from God, separate from him because of their disobedience, they immediately became alienated from one another. All human separation, alienation, and loneliness can be traced back to this horrible moment when, for the first time, Adam and Eve were hiding in fear from God and separate from one another.

From that moment on, human beings have had to endure not only separation from God but from one another. And because this is true, millions of us are sadly lonely. Jesus came, once and for all, to flip the script. In his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, he not only unites us to God but invites us into loving community with one another. The good news of the gospel isn't just the restoration of relationship with God but also relationship with our neighbor.

So, because of everything that I have just written, I am very thankful for the book you are about to read. Shelby Abbott knows his Lord, he knows his Bible, he understands the gospel of Jesus Christ, and he knows the real-life struggles of his readers. These things

combine to give you a book that is loaded with honest and compassionate wisdom that is easy to understand and apply to your life. Here is a book written by a man who knows what he's talking about, not just because he has walked in your shoes but, more importantly, because he understands the will and the ways of the Savior, who is the ultimate friend of the lonely.

So, settle in and read slowly. Take notes along the way. Read with a couple of friends and discuss what you have read. Turn off your phone to consider and answer the questions at the end of every chapter. If you identify struggles or addictions along the way that you can't solve on your own, seek the help and wisdom of a mature and godly person near you. And approach all of these things with an open and humble heart. You will be glad you did.

Paul David Tripp
President, Paul Tripp Ministries

INTRODUCTION

The Loneliness Epidemic

"I feel so lonely, I could die."

Elvis Presley

“I don’t feel called to you anymore.” That’s what Christians say when they want to break up with you but don’t really want to use the phrase “I don’t like you anymore.”

After several months of dating, my girlfriend had uttered those words and consequently brought me up to speed on her new calling from the Lord... which didn’t include me. It was over. I’d thought that she was the one I was going to marry, but I guess I thought wrong. Afterward, as I sat alone on the couch eating cereal at 11 p.m. while watching professional wrestling, there was a dull pain in my belly that felt different from the average stomachache. It lingered and wouldn’t go away. It pulsed and kept reminding me of the fact that I was no longer in a romantic relationship with the girl I liked so much.

Sure, the one-bedroom apartment highlighted my aloneness, but this was worse than just being on my own. No, this pain wasn't because I was physically by myself; it wasn't even the pain of rejection. The pain was present because I was lonely, and frankly, loneliness sucks.

A Unique Life Stage

Natalie is a senior at George Mason University right outside of Washington, D.C. She confided that she felt incredibly lonely despite being constantly surrounded by her peers on campus in the dorm, in the dining hall, in class, and even casually hanging around in the student center. She doesn't seem to connect with anyone around her, and as a result, she has had major battles with mental health and depression since going off to college. It's weighed her down, impacted her grades, and even altered her appetite.

Josh is a sophomore at Virginia Tech. As we met one afternoon to talk and hang out, he told me that his battle with loneliness over the last two years at school has rekindled temptations to harm himself and even struggles with suicidal thoughts. He showed me a few scars he had from cutting his arms back when he was in high school, and I felt overwhelmed with sadness and compassion for him. I'm glad to say he's more deeply involved in a campus ministry now, and that's helping, but he still wrestles with the kind of dark desires that come from feeling isolated.

Sam graduated from high school a year ago and works at a construction company in eastern Pennsylvania. He's still dating the girl he was with last year as a senior, but admitted to me one evening that life just isn't the same as it was when he was in school. He's with other people all the time on construction sites and even spends plenty of time with his girlfriend, but loneliness still creeps up on him almost every day. He told me how much he misses the social life he used to have in high school, and his longing for the way it used to be makes his loneliness even more profound.

Malika turns 30 in two months and just moved out of her dad's house to get an apartment on her own in Orlando, Florida. She's single and loves spending time with friends, but she confessed to me and a few other people on a video call one day that moving out on her own has generated a significant amount of anxiousness, fear, and loneliness in her life. She loves having her own place and independence, but there's also a big part of her that hates it at the same time. Sometimes at night before she goes to bed, she feels scared and isolated to the point that it impacts her ability to sleep and feel rested.

I've been working with college students for over two decades now, and in my ministry with them, I've had a front-row seat to the struggles young people like you experience and wrestle with. When we begin to face life's hardships as a new adult, perhaps with more

independence than we've experienced before, there's a particular kind of loneliness that can take its toll.

The four examples I just gave are anecdotal, but Natalie, Josh, Sam, and Malika are real people—and their problem with feeling lonely isn't uncommon. The struggle is everywhere today. In fact, nearly all the significant ministry conversations I've had with 20-somethings in the last year or so have had the common denominator of a fight with loneliness.

A Public Health Concern

Nobody wants to be lonely. I've never met a person who would say that they love to be by themselves all the time, detached from everyone and everything.

You might be an introverted person who says you'd prefer to spend your weekends alone, tucked away from the world. But I'd be willing to bet that if I pried a little to find out what you did, you may well have spent your "me time" in some kind of connection with others in the form of social media or playing interactive video games. So though you might be alone on Friday through Sunday each week, many of your choices probably involve interacting with other people—albeit digitally. In a sense, we often elect to spend our "alone time" with other human beings. But why? Why do we choose—even when we're alone—to connect with other people?

Because loneliness, for anyone and everyone, is hellish.

A recent U.S. poll found that one in every four young adults feels lonely "a lot of the day."¹ I'm not sure how

much daily time “a lot” is, but in another survey, 73% of 18-22-year-olds reported “sometimes or always feeling alone,”² and to me, that seems quite significant. How significant? Well, the Surgeon General of the United States sees loneliness as a public health concern, equating its mortality impact to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.³

So, yeah—I’d say it’s a problem.

But the issue is much worse than surface-level gloom or a widespread individualistic spirit among the youthful masses. In reality, we are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. And surprisingly enough, the self-prescribed remedies that young people regularly use to deal with feelings of detachment often fall under the same categories. In our search to alleviate the pain of loneliness, I’ve found that the crutches we use end up being hazardous and creating more problems, not fewer.

The Future Can Be Bright

But I want you to know that there is hope! Life can always do a U-turn—things can change from dark despair and loneliness to profound joy and connection in legitimate relationships with others. If you’re currently experiencing loneliness like Natalie, Josh, Sam, and Malika, it doesn’t have to stay that way.

I want to tackle some of the issues that I’ve seen come up time and time again—the things that we hold onto for comfort yet actually cause us pain. But for each false promise, I will give you a bright promise to take its place—an authentic solution for healing that will

practically and tenderly guide you toward community, friendships, and a genuine passion for what it means to live a fulfilling life alongside Jesus Christ. Loneliness is attempting to destroy our ability to connect with God and others in a way that helps us to thrive, so we are going to explore solutions that go after the roots of feeling detached.

I care deeply about your generation, and I've seen what loneliness can do to young people who are suffering from it—young people who hate it, and want to know what they can do about it. And because of this, the coming chapters will be full of a lot of straight talk about what I see going on and how you can be super intentional about not just addressing your surface-level loneliness problems but your root-level loneliness problems too.

I've always personally responded well to verses like Proverbs 3:11-12, which says, "My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in." Going after the root problems in life can feel quite uncomfortable and even painful at times, because it's digging deep into our lives. But when the digging is done in love and not harshness, we can know it's for our good. So, I'm going to attempt to unearth the roots out of a motivation to love and care for you.

If a tree is producing rotten fruit on its branches, the temptation is to pick off the bad fruit and hope the tree generates good fruit next season. But if you want more than just fingers crossed for a better crop next year, you get wise and prune off the bad, dead things and add in

the good, life-giving things to address the real problem at the deepest levels.

Likewise, our temptation with life's problems is to deal with the symptoms of what's going on and wish for the best afterward. But to find genuine solutions to the problem of loneliness in our lives, we must ask better questions about why we're experiencing these feelings of detachment.

We have to get to the deep levels and apply lasting good news that will generate real and enduring change. Jesus is the friend, brother, and Savior who is the only unwavering answer to our loneliness problem, and I intend to show you how he can thoroughly and practically change your life. Then you'll have more than hope when dealing with your loneliness problem—you'll have confident gospel assurance.

PART ONE:

Screen Time



CHAPTER 1

Deepening the Disconnect: Digital Identities

You probably already know this, but an online social life isn't super social. Think about it: if you see a group of people all huddled together at a bus stop with their collective heads bowed, it might look as if they're praying together—but more than likely, they're all scrolling on their individual phones.

At its inception, social media and the digital world was created to make life more convenient and communal for people all over the world to connect. But now we can see that it's actually proven to have the adverse effect on the majority of people (young and old alike!) who use it regularly. It hasn't really connected us more closely with people; in some cases, it's driven us apart.

Of course, it's not all bad. One of the primary ways I keep in touch with some people in my life is through my phone—albeit by direct messaging funny memes

and videos while never typing an actual word—but I’m attempting to communicate nonetheless. The upside to your generation having a nearly universal engagement with technology in everyday life since you were kids is the ability to connect with people all over the globe, to gain a broader perspective on an endless number of topics, and to keep in touch easily with friends who aren’t close by. We have the internet to thank for those good things!

Connecting with others through your phone in moderation can be awesome, but I believe that one of the primary explanations for why you might be experiencing loneliness and isolation is because of this constant access to the online world. I’ve seen dangerous addictions start early because parents gave their third- and fourth-graders unlocked smartphones, allowing their kids unfettered access to video games, porn, and other dopamine-inducing digital vices. Maybe this was your experience as a kid, and it created tons of problems and addictions for you later in life. If so, you get what I’m talking about.

Even if your parents were adamant about not giving you a phone or iPad when you were younger, technology will still have left its mark because it’s so much a part of our culture. Regardless of how poor the average 20-something is today, I’ve never met one who doesn’t have some kind of a smartphone. It’s almost impossible to think about not having a phone because of the adoption of technology by practically everyone, everywhere, all the time.

Hardware and software advancements have given us opportunities to feel grafted into digital communities in ways that we would never experience if we didn't plug ourselves in. Your individual accounts, memes, gifs (no matter how you pronounce that word), emojis, Memojis, avatars, profile pics, and handles all provide you with access to the communities you want to communicate with. Your digital identity has generated a way for you to express yourself and relate to others in the world.

We believe it has given us something that will help us digitally link arms with others in community, but has it? All those young people at the proverbial bus stop I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter might think that they're staying connected, but they're not really present with one another. So here's the important question for you to ask yourself: has your digital presence really connected you or has it made you experience greater degrees of detachment from others?

You might be cool with the digital connections you currently have. You feel and experience a great sense of belonging in whatever corner of the digital social sphere you've adopted. You're good. Or maybe you're keenly aware of the dangers our phones and technology pose to any human being looking to connect, so you've always been cautious about how much and how often you check your phone. Or perhaps you're somewhere in between, not giving much thought to the consequences (bad or good) of including technology in your everyday life.

Regardless, I believe the irony in all of this digital "connection" is that we've detached from others more than

we've joined others in our desire to plug in and belong. And as a result, you may be experiencing an increasing sense of solitude as you dive deeper into your phone in escape or in search of a network you'll never be able to find.

Why? Because you're looking in the wrong place.

Fake It

Does your digital identity—your online profiles and how you present yourself online—make you feel more like yourself or less? You know that every post you see on social media, as well as the ones you make, is edited content. You know that if you record yourself, it's going to be from an angle that's probably the most flattering view of your face. You'll cut out that part at the end of the video when you blink and the recording pauses to make you look like an MMA fighter after several rounds of taking a beating. Yes, what you put out online is you—but it's the shined-up edition of you, because hiding the untidy or ugly parts of yourself is what has to happen if you want to be accepted as confident, attractive, intelligent, and capable to whoever is looking.

Bottom line: you know this isn't the real, raw you. But we see that this strategy works for other people whose followers, subscribers and likes keep growing when they show the best polished (not fully real) version of their lives. Even accounts that aim to show a more unkempt authenticity include a careful curation of what's fit to be shown and leave out anything they'd find genuinely embarrassing. Online influencers create a brand that needs to be nurtured and edited to an ambiguous list of

specifications, and if they don't, their online "community" is going to abandon them for someone flashier, prettier, funnier, or more extreme. I can't help but think there must be a nagging little voice behind the library of content that knows they're hiding behind a constructed version of themselves. So, are their online connections genuine if they're not really interacting honestly?

As we scroll through our feeds and deliberate about what we should post next, we know we can be dropped or unfollowed at any moment if someone better comes along. We know our digital platforms are volatile and unsteady ground to build our lives on, and that creates a deep sense of insecurity. Being unfollowed can feel a bit like a breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend—often a soul-crushing rejection of relationship.

The hunger for legitimate relationship that constantly grumbles in the belly of your soul isn't really being fed through the creation of a digital identity because you need something true. Let me run with this metaphor for a minute...

Gas-Station Snacks

Your soul wants and needs the nourishment of real food. Real connection. Real relationship. Real people. And you'll only get fed the food you need for growth and health when you experience the genuine article—real community.

But if you're feeding your soul with a steady stream of digital relationships with others whom you don't really know and who don't actually know you, you're

essentially cramming convenience store snacks down your throat all the time to assuage the hunger. Sure, if you're on a real-life road trip and need to stop at a gas station to fuel up and grab a soda, some candy, and a bag of Doritos, it's fine—as long as you don't do that for every meal of every day. If you do, you're going to eventually become very unwell from lack of nourishment to your body.

Again, I'm not saying all digital communication is bad, so don't get me wrong. The online world can be useful and fun. It doesn't always fall into the category of "detrimental." But your digital profile interacting with other digital profiles out there via apps isn't the real you interacting with the real versions of other people. Digital connection—be it through streaming services, parasocial relationships, online forums, or scrolling social feeds—is essentially throwing junk food into a hungry soul that aches for real nourishment. The convenience of convenience store nibbling will starve you because hearty, satisfying connection is what you really need. You need to know and be known.

So, what's the solution? Is it simply putting down your phone, going out there, and making a bunch of friends with people in the real world? Maybe.

But here's the thing: relying on a digital identity isn't necessarily the root problem. It's a crutch—a facade hiding the real issue going on under the surface of your life. I think the growling in your soul is further down and further in than finding a solution in the motherly advice of "Go make some new friends, sweetie." Truly

knowing and being known comes in a relationship that can't be replicated by any other relationship in the universe—a relationship with the living God. It's one of a kind, and it alleviates the hunger once and for all.

That being said, it's also true that we are meant to experience real closeness, care, and truth through other people so that we can better understand the love, grace, and fatherly heart of God. Making friends certainly isn't a lame consolation prize, and I'm willing to bet that if you picked up this book, you might want real help in forming warm, real, strong relationships with people as well as with God.

So don't worry—we'll get to both of these things.

Reflection Questions

1. Has your hunger for legitimate relationships influenced the way you use technology and social media? In what ways have you pursued online connections with people to the neglect of your relationships in the real world?
2. Have you ever experienced feeling that others know things about you but they don't really know you? What was that experience like?
3. Have you personally experienced digital relationships as being like junk food to your soul? What do you think are some characteristics of relationships that are actually soul-nourishing?