

# Wait With

“A poignant, wise,  
at times searing  
invitation.”

JAMES K. A. SMITH

MEETING GOD  
IN LONELINESS

JASON GABOURY

# Me



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# 1 | See

**To** be human is to be lonely,” Friar Ugo said to me, his voice cracking with age.

For forty years he served as a Jesuit missionary on the African continent. Now he was sitting across from me, a thirty-something campus minister trying to make sense of God and my deep loneliness. Despite the gentleness, even fragility, of his appearance, Friar Ugo’s words pierced the space between us like a spiritual searchlight.

My heartbeat sounded in my ears, and I pressed my lips together waiting, *Say something else*, I thought. *Anything*.

I’ve wrestled with loneliness ever since I can remember, perhaps before I can remember. Growing up, my mother would tell stories about our separation at the hospital during the first six weeks of my life, or about times when, as a baby, I’d cry inconsolably for hours. Exasperated, Mom got in the habit of turning up the stereo and leaving me to cry it out. I don’t know what impact either of these situations had on my emerging sense of connection, but I can remember feeling lonely.

That sense of loneliness dogged me through childhood, college, and into adulthood. If Friar Ugo had observed my life from the outside, *lonely* would not be the adjective quick to mind. With two

girls in elementary school, our home was filled with Play-Doh, colored paper, and playdates. Sophia and I parented together and partnered in ministry. Our home was often full of students, friends from church, and neighbors from our building. I even had a reputation in our church for being an expert on building community.

Still, loneliness persisted. Washing dishes late on a Tuesday night after a group of friends had gone home, I'd feel strangely lonely, isolated, unknown, and unloved. Clearly, something wasn't working. *If anyone could help me*, I thought, *Friar Ugo could*. I made an appointment to talk to him, determined to resolve this sense of isolation.

For twenty minutes I'd talked about the ache of loneliness I felt even though it didn't make sense. Ugo didn't interrupt. He sat still as the furniture, his eyes dancing with something I couldn't place: insight, amusement, wisdom?

That conversation would change my life.

"Loneliness is all around us," Friar Ugo said. Of course, I knew that. Why else would I be sitting in this chair across from this old friar? You know it too. Perhaps you've picked up this book because you know the ache of loneliness in your situation. A friend who lived alone for many years said, "The hardest thing for me was just coming home and not having anyone to ask, 'How was your day?'" Perhaps it seems as if all the friends you used to talk with into the early morning hours have moved away or gotten married. Perhaps you're a young parent caught in the valley of diapers, isolated from other adults, and emotionally exhausted. Perhaps you're in a new job or school and miss the familiar faces and relationships.

The technological solution to our loneliness seems to be in our grasp. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are changing the way we see ourselves and the way we have relationships. We can create online communities or chat groups and instantly communicate with people across the world. With

access to so many human connections you'd think loneliness would be a thing of the past.

We've never been lonelier.

Katherine Hobson, citing a study released in 2017, reports,

It turns out that the people who reported spending the most time on social media—more than two hours a day—had twice the odds of perceived social isolation than those who said they spent a half hour per day or less on those sites. And people who visited social media platforms most frequently, 58 visits per week or more, had more than three times the odds of perceived social isolation than those who visited fewer than nine times per week.

A friend said recently, “We can have a thousand friends on Facebook, but based on how we spend our time, it seems like Facebook is worth a thousand friends.”

It's wrong though to place the blame for our social dislocation squarely on the shoulders of social media. Robert Putnam's famous book *Bowling Alone* describes the fragmentation and isolation of American community before the rise of social media. He says, “Americans are right that the bonds of our communities have withered and we are right to fear that this transformation has very real costs.” Increasing loneliness, according to Putnam, has to do with the decrease in neighborhood societies, civic organizations, religious communities, and social clubs.

Loneliness is not just a modern problem. It's an ancient problem because it's a human problem. Ultimately, loneliness is a spiritual problem.

## Not Good

A quick theological consideration of the problem of loneliness demonstrates its significance. In Genesis 2:18, God said, “It is not

good that the man should be alone.” The weight of this statement is even stronger when we remember the poetry of Genesis 1 that contains the refrain “God saw that it was good” seven times.

The repetition of the phrase alone is striking, but there are two additional amplifiers that we may not be aware of. First is the number of repetitions. In Hebrew the number seven is *sheba*’, a word identical in its consonantal root with *shaba*’, which means “to swear, as in to swear an oath.” Seven is the sum of three (a biblical number suggesting glory, weightiness, or perfection) and four (a biblical number suggesting creation). In Isaiah 6, the cherubim sing “holy, holy, holy” to signify God’s perfection in holiness, while the four corners of the earth and the four rivers flowing out of Eden signify the created order. The sum of three and four is thus meant to summon our attention. God saw and said that it was good seven times. The repetition and connotation emphasize and underline creation’s goodness in the eyes of God. It’s almost impossible to get a more emphatic statement, but we do.

Just in case we didn’t catch the poem’s refrain as it sang “it was good” seven times, we have a second amplifier, what in English is translated “very good.” The English term *very* is a weak translation of the Hebrew term *me’od*. *Me’od* is defined first as “force, might” and second “to express the idea of exceedingly, greatly, very . . . Genesis 1:31 . . . good *exceedingly*.” Creation is not just good. *It is exceedingly, abundantly, greatly, forcefully good.* This phrase gathers up all the earlier refrains from each “day” of creation that has come before. The Creator God beholds creation and describes it as exceedingly good.

Now consider again, “It is not good that the man should be alone” in Genesis 2:18. The contrast is like a verbal slap. The action breaks. It’s the first point of tension in the whole narrative of Scripture. For humans to be alone is *not good*.

Anyone who has experienced loneliness knows this. Loneliness is a primal disorientation. Quiet anxiety gives way to restlessness. We look for distractions to numb ourselves and take the edge off. Anger and resentment simmer in successive waves.

Loneliness is no joke. Isolation is so powerfully disorienting that solitary confinement is classified as a form of torture.

As I sat in that chair across from Friar Ugo, I could feel the primordial weight of loneliness pressing in on me. I knew the story of Genesis 2. Not good that the man should be alone. So I thought, *God, fix it!* I wanted Friar Ugo to tell me how God was going to take the isolation away. Instead, he started talking about something else.

“Have you ever considered,” he asked, “that the loneliness you’re experiencing is an invitation to grow your friendship with God?”

I hadn’t.

Friar Ugo went on, “Loneliness is part of the human condition. It is the experience of many around the corner who are living on the street. It is the experience of many around the world, separated from home, family, and land because of war or disease. And,” he paused, “it was often the experience of our Lord himself. You can look to me . . . or to something else . . . even to religion to try to make you feel better. Or,” he said, clearing his throat, “you could see this as the beginning of God’s work of transformation in you.”

And then we sat there in silence.

I pressed my lips together again, but something in his invitation had already stirred inside me. What if loneliness was a doorway to a deeper life with God? What would that mean? How might this idea reshape the experience?

After a short prayer our conversation ended. Friar Ugo didn’t share stories of his isolation in ministry. He didn’t talk, for example, about being forced to leave a country and a context he loved and

not being allowed to return despite years of continued effort. He didn't describe his experience of returning to New York after forty years on the mission field. He simply prayed, and then I stepped out into the cold New York City morning with lots of questions. What would it look like to respond to God's invitation in the midst of loneliness? Was this a biblical idea? If so, what might Scripture have to teach about loneliness as a place of transformation?

To my surprise, the Old and New Testaments are full of examples of women and men who met God in the midst of loneliness or isolation.

- Abraham experienced loneliness in *his desire for family*: “Oh that Ishmael might live in your sight!” (Genesis 17:18).
- Moses experienced loneliness *when he fled Egypt*.
- Jacob experienced loneliness in the face of *his ambition*.
- Elijah faced loneliness in fatigue *after his great victory*.
- Nehemiah faced loneliness *in leadership* as he dealt with opposition from outside and sabotage within.
- Job experienced loneliness *in suffering* while his friends offered little comfort.
- Esther experienced loneliness *in the palace*: “But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days” (Esther 4:11 ESV).
- Mary chose loneliness in *her embrace of God's call*: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38 ESV).
- Paul experienced loneliness *in mission*.
- Ultimately Jesus experienced *the deepest loneliness of all* as he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).



These stories reveal God's transforming presence and power in the lives of individuals and communities. They meet God in the midst of loneliness and are changed. Some walk away with a limp. Some walk away with deepened courage. The thought struck me, *What might I walk away with if I immersed myself in their stories?*

Turns out, we can learn a lot by sitting in the ashes with Job or in the wilderness with Hagar. God invites us into these stories, saying, "Wait with me." Entering these stories reframes our understanding of loneliness by demonstrating God's presence and purpose. It enlarges our heart to connect with the isolation of our spiritual forebears and perhaps to connect more deeply with others who face similar loneliness and isolation. Through these stories we are taught to hope in God's future.

## Entering Scripture

To be transformed by these stories, however, meant being willing to enter them imaginatively and emotionally. This took a different approach to Scripture than I'd practiced before. Friar Ugo recommended a way of reading Scripture with the imagination and the intellect. Rather than simply observe, interpret, and apply insights (the inductive method of Scripture study that I continue to teach and use), imaginative reading goes further. It invites us to use observations about language, context, repetition, and conflict, and to place ourselves in the midst of the unfolding drama. We then imagine the story as a participant within rather than as an outside observer. Reading with the heart and imagination deepens learning and transforms the habits of heart and mind in ways that reading for information, understanding, and even moral exhortation does not.

For example, one of Jesus' most profound teachings is found in Luke 10:25-37, the parable of the good Samaritan. The parable emerges out of a lawyer's desire to experience the eternal life

Jesus was preaching about. He asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 25). Jesus’ response points out that the lawyer already knows the answer. If he wants to experience God’s life, he needs to love God with everything he has and love his neighbor as himself.

Jesus’ challenge, “Do this, and you will live” (v. 28) masterfully draws out the lawyer’s real obstacle. Loving our neighbor as our self is much easier said than done. And so, as lawyers do, he asks Jesus to define his terms. “Who is my neighbor?” (v. 29).

What does this story look like from the inside if, for example, I imagine myself as the lawyer? Suddenly, I’m alert to the desire to have God’s life. I imagine spending days wrestling with the Holy Book trying to accurately apply its insights to my life. I imagine a gnawing feeling in my gut that tells me I’m missing something. I long for God’s life, not just for me but for my whole community. And I feel stuck. Then I imagine myself as the lawyer seeing Jesus. That he knows something about God’s life is evident in the authority with which he speaks and heals. What is it? What does he know or understand about God’s eternal life that I lack?

Placing myself inside the story helps me to see that the lawyer and I aren’t that different. This means that the story of the good Samaritan is not simply a moral tale Jesus tells about being nice to those in need, but it’s a key clarification of what it means to have life with God. It’s as much Jesus’ response to me in the twenty-first century as it was to this unnamed lawyer in the first.

The story of the good Samaritan does not answer the lawyer’s question directly. Jesus describes a scenario where a wounded and vulnerable man is left on the side of the road to die. Religious experts notice the man and pass him by. In a remarkable twist, Jesus has the religious and ethnic outsider, a Samaritan, experience *splanchnizomai*, a graphic description of compassion, that literally means a movement or churning of the inner organs

toward the wounded man. It's not just that the Samaritan "feels bad" for the wounded and vulnerable, he aches internally, seeing the earlier traveler's plight. This gut-wrenching compassion compels the Samaritan to act. The Samaritan, a man outside the law of God, disadvantages himself for the sake of this nameless, faceless other. Then comes the punchline, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Jesus said (v. 36).

This story from Jesus answers the lawyer's question by reshaping the lawyer's and our definition of *neighbor*. *Neighbor* is not defined geographically, ethnically, or categorically, but by the compassion and activity of the one who sees others in need. According to Jesus, we do not first decide who our neighbor is and then practice hospitality, compassion, or mercy. We first practice hospitality, compassion, and mercy, and by so doing become a neighbor to those around us.

If I'm reading this story imaginatively, from the inside, I feel its sting. Do I experience *splanchnizomai* when I look out the window and see kids on the playground of the failing school across the street? Am I willing to disadvantage myself for them? What about the neighbor across the hall with a broken leg, the one fighting breast cancer, or the mom heartbroken about her son?

As I read from the inside, God's invitation becomes clear. Like the lawyer I want to justify myself. "Don't you see the people I'm hosting at my apartment every week? Don't you see the effort we're making to raise kids and build community? Why don't I feel like I'm experiencing eternal life?" Jesus' response, "Which one of these was a neighbor?" is as unsettling as it is beautiful. It touches the nerve of loneliness and invites ruthless self-examination. What if my "community building" activities are less about compassion for others and are instead motivated by a desire for acceptance, approval, or affection? What would it look like to

“neighbor” others out of concern for their situation? As I ponder these questions, something like hope stirs inside. Even though today my love for my neighbor was self-serving, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps one day, I will be a neighbor and experience life with God in the ways I long for.

## Invitation

It is not good for us to be alone. Yet in the hands of God loneliness can transform. If we learn to hear the invitation of God in loneliness, we can discover aspects of God’s character, and ours, that are available no other way. If we meet God in loneliness, we can grow the desire and capacity to love others.

This book is an invitation to learn about God in the midst of loneliness by entering into Scripture. As you read, enter into these stories with your imagination. Let the tensions and puzzles of the characters create a space for you to articulate your own questions and tensions.

If you experience the ache of loneliness while you enter Scripture, slow down. Notice how it feels in your body. Notice what memories come up in your mind. Ask yourself, *How am I experiencing something like this in my life?* Read the chapter again and invite God to meet you in your memories, your experiences, and even the sensations you have in your body.

Remember not to judge your experience prematurely. Some of us have the tendency to associate all difficult emotion with sin. Anger, sadness, or fear, the emotions most basic to loneliness, are sometimes dismissed as unspiritual. They aren’t. The Scriptures themselves are full of angry, sad, and scared prayers.

Consider David’s prayer in Psalm 13,

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (vv. 1-2)

There is nothing unspiritual about complaining to God about situations and circumstances that feel unfair.

And consider this prayer breathed in the furnace of rage.

Rise up, O LORD!

Deliver me, O my God!

For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;  
you break the teeth of the wicked. (Psalm 3:7)

If you are tempted to deny difficult emotions or distract yourself from them, I hope you'll experience these chapters as a safe place to name and pay attention to them instead. The biblical characters we'll reflect on in this book experience and express a host of difficult emotions in their life with God. When they voice these emotions, they do not sin but expose themselves more fully to God's transforming grace.

Each chapter will end with some questions for further reflection. Use these questions to go deeper into personal reflection or to guide and direct conversation with others.

It's been years since Friar Ugo and I sat together that cold morning. His words launched a spiritual quest. Could the experience of loneliness deepen my friendship with God? Could Scripture guide that process? Could the women and men on the pages of Scripture become mentors and allies along the way? Friar Ugo's invitation exposed parts of my heart that desperately needed to be confronted as well as comforted. His invitation enabled me to enter into Scripture in fresh and unexpected ways that warmed my heart, freed my imagination, illumined my mind, and expanded my desire for life with God.

What about you? Let's explore Scripture together and see if we can discover new depths of friendship with God. Your story is unique, but your experience of loneliness is profoundly human. To be human is to be lonely. But to discover friendship with God in the ache of loneliness is also deeply human. As one writer says, "Your desire for more of God than you have right now, your longing for love, your need for deeper levels of spiritual transformation than you have experienced so far is the truest thing about you."

Imagine how God might meet us as we explore the Scriptures together.

## For Reflection and Discussion

As you experience seasons of loneliness, perhaps God has an invitation for you. The following are some questions to consider—now or later—on your own or with a group.

1. How has God used loneliness or isolation in my past to shape my character?
2. Which of the stories mentioned in this chapter resonate with my experiences?
3. What work might God be doing in me as I experience loneliness or isolation?
4. What do I wish God would do for me as I take time to reflect on his invitations?

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