

THE NEW LONELINESS

NURTURING
MEANINGFUL
CONNECTIONS
WHEN YOU
FEEL ISOLATED

CINDI McMENAMIN

Author of *When Women Walk Alone*

“If you ever struggle with loneliness, you’ll love this book! *The New Loneliness* offers biblical solutions to the pain loneliness brings. Filled with comfort, encouragement, and Cindi’s relatable trademark wisdom, you’ll walk away feeling seen, understood, and most of all, equipped to see how God can fill your deepest longings.”

—Donna Jones, author of *Healthy Conflict, Peaceful Life*,
host of *That’s Just What I Needed* podcast

“Cindi McMenemy has undertaken the timely topic of loneliness in a world where people are counted as ‘friends’ on social media. She shares examples that illustrate how a community of believers can and have provided true friendships by relating with people face to face. This is a well-timed book to have in your library; I have it in mine.”

—Gail Cawley Showalter, author of *Living, Learning, Loving*

“Are you weary of the pretense of community in today’s culture? Does the threat of being cancelled keep you from being real in your online relationships? You are not alone. At a time when society is most connected, loneliness is at its peak. It’s time to change that. And the change begins with you. In *The New Loneliness*, Cindi McMenemy insightfully unpacks the reasons you feel lonely, and more importantly, shows you practical ways to intentionally create connections that will last a lifetime.”

—Rhonda Stoppe, founder of No Regrets Woman;
author of *Moms Raising Sons to Be Men*, *If My Husband
Would Change I’d Be Happy*, and *Real-Life Romance*

“Cindi masterfully nails the serious problem of the new loneliness, a relentless companion for young and old alike. Loneliness flows like a poisoned river—contaminated with the isolation of shame, the crush of busyness, the pain of suffering, the endless scrolling of screen time, and more. I drank from that poisoned river for many years before God stemmed its flow through His transforming Word of truth. In *The New Loneliness*, you’ll discover how God’s Word can help you connect in closer companionship with Him, create a more biblical version of yourself, and build valuable relationships that comfort and encourage you. Like Cindi, you’ll find your loneliness is not pointless when God redeems it for His glory.”

—Dawn Wilson, author of *Truth Talk for Hurting Hearts*,
founder of Heart Choices Today and Truth Talk with Dawn

“Cindi McMenamin’s books are always powerful explorations of how God wants to be involved in our lives. In this exemplary book, Cindi not only points to the problems and causes of loneliness but gives us godly, empowering wisdom for connecting with God, our own hearts, and other people. I love her personal stories, which help make truth applicable. I especially appreciate each chapter’s ‘Being Intentional’ section, which is like a combined Bible study and journal. Read this book and face your loneliness confidently, or prepare your heart for times of being lonely.”

—**Kathy Collard Miller**, international speaker;
author of 60 books, including *Anger Management—Jesus Style*

“Cindi zeroes in on the almost-worldwide affliction of a new kind of loneliness that has produced unwanted depths of emotional isolation. Drawing insights from real-life situations and illuminating biblical perspectives, she offers lifelines through every chapter and reminds us that God assures we can thrive through immense challenges. Cindi’s ‘key seeds’—verses like Philippians 4:6-7, and her recurring theme that God is with us, is for us, and creates purpose in us—are sown throughout the book.”

—**Jeannie Linderman**, Bible teacher; cocreator of
Fresh Start—Evangelical Bible Foundations Study

“There is a high cost when you exchange interpersonal relationships for internet relationships. We may be connected to people around the world through our phones, but day-to-day life has become increasingly lonely. How can we grow closer to God through seasons of loneliness and live in fellowship with others again? Cindi McMenamin offers a book of hope and help for anyone who feels lonely today.”

—**Arlene Pellicane**, speaker; host of the *Happy Home* podcast; author of
Calm, Cool, and Connected: 5 Digital Habits for a More Balanced Life

“*The New Loneliness* is an amazing book that will equip and encourage you with practical ways to apply faith-filled steps to move forward from loneliness to trusting others in new ways. It will empower you to live in a new mindset as you begin trusting in your growing relationships with God and others. This book will change your day, life, and godly relationships with friends and family.”

—**Jayme Hull**, mentor expert and spiritual direction coach

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For my mom, who will never know loneliness again.

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HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Defining the New Loneliness

Are you feeling lonelier these days than you used to? Experiencing that unexplainable ache you can't seem to get rid of? Perhaps you're spending more time with your phone than with people and you don't want to think about how that might've happened. Maybe you used to feel closer to God and some of your friends and family than you do today, and you don't know how to reverse that. You could be feeling on the outside of popular opinion or wondering if you have a place or voice in today's culture or even in your own family. Or, perhaps you wish you had a church or were more connected at the one you attend.

You're not the only one feeling lonelier than ever. Loneliness has always been a struggle for many of us and continues to be. But in recent decades, the causes of loneliness have multiplied. A lot has shifted in the world around us, and there is a new loneliness afloat, making the problem more pervasive than ever. In addition to living in an increasingly high-tech and screen-focused society, we've been impacted by the forced isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic

lockdowns that persisted for nearly two years all around us. The lockdowns pushed our culture's reliance on tech and screens even more. Video conferencing alone has forever changed the way many of us operate—at work, in schools, at church, and in our homes.

While the pandemic is now behind us, our increased reliance upon AI, high tech, and screens isn't. And the habits formulated over an extended time of isolation and caution have led us into a new and different normal. Without necessarily intending to do so, we've all become more acclimated to new habits and new ways of going about life. We've adapted, but the results of our new normal have had a profound impact on us and aren't all positive.

Both technology and the consequences of the pandemic have taken us to a place where the traditional kinds of loneliness we've struggled with—loneliness caused by anxiety, shame, suffering, feelings of inadequacy, betrayal, and more—have become increasingly pronounced. The kinds of loneliness that have always plagued humanity since the Garden of Eden are still with us. But now we have new obstacles and complications that have contributed to isolating us from others. And these have made loneliness more a part of our lives.

In mid-2023, the US Surgeon General issued a health alert that confirmed there is an “*epidemic* of loneliness”—a health risk of isolation (which includes spending more time with screens than people), and a failure to connect deeply with others through friendships and risk of intimacy—that is now increasing your chance of dementia by 50 percent and your chance of premature death by more than 60 percent. It is actually *unhealthy* to be lonely today—mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and now physically, regardless of your age. According to the Surgeon General, the long-term health risks of loneliness are equivalent to the danger of smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day!¹

As I mentioned earlier, people have always suffered from loneliness. We have *all* felt it now and then. But now it's more persistent. And these more intense feelings of loneliness didn't happen overnight.

There has been a *progression of loneliness* for people in general over the past two decades, and more intensely the past five years.

The convenience of online everything has contributed to this, making it possible for you and me to not leave our home for days. Virtual meetings—which have become increasingly more convenient, time-efficient, and money-saving—have made us more comfortable sitting in front of a screen than interacting with people face to face. Hitting a “Leave Meeting” button (rather than exiting a room politely by saying your goodbyes) has made what used to be general courtesy and relationship-building behavior now seem like an unnecessary waste of time. Everyone has their work to do, right? Few people have time to talk instead of text. Stick to the work at hand. Refrain from speaking, opening up, or even starting a conversation. Avoid eye contact—everyone does. And most of us don’t even realize it. The result? Fewer conversations. Even less transparency. Next to zero relationships. Loneliness.

In this book, we’re going to look at the kinds of loneliness that we all experience. And we’re going to do so with an awareness that the “traditional” forms of loneliness now have to contend with the new normal.

THE TYPES OF LONELINESS

With that in mind, see if you can find yourself—or your type of loneliness—in one or more of these real women’s stories. As you read along, consider how today’s new normal can aggravate the loneliness these women are feeling.

The Loneliness of Feeling Overwhelmed

As a new mom, Janie feels overwhelmed and inadequate as she wades through the different suggestions, personal opinions, and online advice on what would be best for her child.

“Personally, I feel alone when I make wrong choices,” she said. “I

feel alone when I need to make an important decision for my child and there is no right or wrong answer. There isn't anyone to walk me through the correct answer because there are negatives on both sides. This also makes me feel inadequate because I don't feel confident in either choice."

And Janie feels particularly lonely when her husband is not sharing parenting responsibilities with her and "when my kids are needing all of me when all I need is a break."

Oh, the loneliness of feeling overwhelmed and constantly wondering if you're getting it right.

The Loneliness of Comparison

Alexa is a young wife and mom who is bright, capable, and a ray of sunshine to all who interact with her. But she doesn't see herself that way. She admits that watching others' highlight reels on social media can make her think she's constantly missing out or lagging behind.

"Comparing myself to others around the same age or stage of my life and seeing all of their accomplishments makes me feel like I haven't done enough," Alexa said. "I also feel guilty for my lack of community and intentional time spent with others." Having a different set of values and convictions than those around her, which can be accentuated these days by comments and responses on social media, also makes her feel especially lonely.

The Loneliness of Internal Struggles

Kadee has a personal relationship with Jesus, a godly husband who is a leader in their church, and five healthy children. She recently received her master's degree in social work. But Kadee struggles with that negative internal voice—a combination of hurtful things said to her in the past, her own inner critic, and taunting from the enemy of her soul—that convinces her, at times, that everyone else would be better off without her. She knows her worth in God's eyes, and she

is intentional about involving herself in Bible study groups and surrounding herself with godly mentors who help her continue to grow spiritually. Yet she still struggles with what is now diagnosed as mental illness—a tendency toward anxiety, depression, and self-harm.

“Personally, I feel like there isn’t anyone who could understand what I’m going through,” Kadee told me recently.

The Loneliness of Feeling Judged

Sherrill is still feeling the sting of loneliness after losing her church family a few years ago due to growing differences of opinion within her congregation that were based more on personal beliefs than Scripture. Her eyes were opened to how quickly people can divide over political and emotional issues and she’s been struggling to find a safe, nonjudgmental place to worship ever since.

“I feel like the destruction of the relationships within my former church family has touched every area of my life and has caused a deep distress and loneliness,” she said. “I know God is with me, but I know He created us for community as well. The loss of Christian community and not knowing exactly where I fit in anymore has been a lonely road these past few years.”

The Loneliness of Failed Friendships

Jenna believed nothing could separate her from her BFF. She and SueAnn were soulmates, partners in ministry, true sisters at heart. Until the day SueAnn started slowly backing away. A tension crept in between them and Jenna couldn’t understand why. SueAnn didn’t want to talk about it. She kept saying she was busy or unavailable for time with Jenna. Finally, SueAnn told Jenna she was tired of feeling she couldn’t compete or be half as good as Jenna in most areas of her life. Jenna felt devastated that her friend would turn on her for something she didn’t feel she could do anything about. She spent the summer seeking solace in her relationship with God,

and wondering whether she could ever trust another friend to get close to her.

What loneliness we can feel when we lose a friend or find we suddenly have much less openness than we used to with someone we loved and trusted.

WHAT IS *YOUR* LONELINESS FACTOR?

Loneliness can rear its ugly head through any number of circumstances, or through unresolved wounds that lie festering in our hearts. It can blow in during a season of being overwhelmed and feeling we have no one to support us, or during a season of fruitlessness when we feel we're too old, or too worn out, or too inept to do what we used to. It can pull us down when we feel we're at the top of the world with everything we want in life, but we have no one to share it with. It can taunt us in the late hours of the evening when we feel, even if just for a while, that no one cares about us, or understands what we're dealing with. And it can slam us when we least expect it through a sudden betrayal, a sense of abandonment, or a deep wound that we fear might never heal.

Loneliness also has a way of creeping up on us unnoticed, as it did in my own life, through a series of subconscious and tech-enabled habits that lead us to one day look around and think, *Where have all my friends gone? Why am I suddenly more of a loner than I ever set out to be? How did this happen?*

Whether your loneliness is caused by your work or living circumstances, a misunderstanding or falling out with someone, unresolved conflict with family or friends, or feeling inadequate, unprepared, unsupported, or overwhelmed, we were never designed to live this way. In addition to a myriad of reasons we can feel increasingly lonely today, the ever-changing, continually isolating culture we live in isn't helping. It's making our loneliness worse.

OUR CHANGING CULTURE — AND LANGUAGE

Regardless of what your circumstances look like, the loneliness is real. And ironically, this culture of convenience and all it seems to offer—including an increased sense of isolation—has robbed us of more than we realize. We even define ourselves and describe our feelings and activities today as if we are electronic devices instead of living, breathing, uniquely created individuals.

Think about it. When was the last time you said, or heard, something like “I’m on information overload, I just need to defrag,” or “I’ll need some time to recharge my battery” (and you weren’t talking about your phone)? We are often encouraged to *plug into* a church and to *unplug* from our busyness. When we’re high on adrenaline, we consider ourselves *wired*; when we’re tired or burnt out, we say we’re *fried* or we’ve *overloaded our circuits*.

In addition, our *interpersonal* relationships have gradually become outnumbered by our *internet* relationships. Face time used to mean what it sounds like, and it didn’t involve a screen. *Social* used to mean *talking* or *being* with one another, not typing or scrolling on an electronic device. “Can we Zoom about this later?” you might find yourself saying. “I don’t have the emotional or mental bandwidth for it right now.”

Today we refer to ourselves—and our daily activities—in electronic terms to the point that we use Google as a verb and may feel more comfortable with our electronic devices than with one another. I can’t help but wonder how much more alone that makes us feel—like objects rather than people, and digital codes rather than intricately designed creations. And the pandemic conditioned us in ways that make isolation seem more normal, more routine.

These factors give us even more to overcome when loneliness sets in.

TAKING TIME TO TALK — NOT TEXT

When was the last time you experienced a deep conversation with a friend on the phone or in person? When did you last express your heartfelt feelings about a topic, or inquire about what someone was thinking or reading and how it was impacting them? I've started doing that through handwritten letters I've been exchanging (yes, through snail mail) with my cousin. And it made me realize the depth of conversation that doesn't happen through text or even email. Sitting down to compile one's thoughts onto paper requires time to think and choose one's words carefully. No wonder letter-writing relationships can help people draw closer to one another. And no wonder they're nearly extinct today.

Can you remember when you last shared your heart over coffee or a meal and teared up—or witnessed a pool of tears well up in your friend's eyes—as you each peeled back another layer of your personalities or wounds and were willing to be vulnerable with one another? When was the last time you discussed with a friend the meaning of a certain Scripture passage or what God has been doing in their life or yours? How long has it been since you drove home after a conversation with a friend, reflecting upon the discussion and anticipating when you could meet again face to face to talk more?

Opportunities for truly openhearted interaction don't happen much anymore and rarely at random. There's an intentionality that is being lost in the midst of our busyness, the convenience of text messaging, the "normalcy" of isolation, or the desire to stay somewhat less transparent for fear of the emotional energy—and possible rejection—of going deeper with who we are and how we feel. Sometimes we might back off of expressing ourselves or saying what we really feel about a subject for fear that what we say won't be deemed politically correct or might unintentionally offend someone. Social media has taught us to guard our opinions or we might be unfriended or cancelled.

If you and I continue to fear backlash, prioritize productivity over people, prefer screens to faces, become online spectators rather than real-life participants, or fear a deeper emotional level with someone else, we will pay an even costlier price in the form of increased loneliness. And if we prefer to soak up information and answers from Google rather than God's Word, resulting in no longer challenging our minds to really think through an issue (and pray through it as well), we will live like our devices—cold, quick, devoid of feeling and emotion, and constantly in need of recharging.

HOW IT'S IMPACTING US

Multiple studies have confirmed that, regardless of our age, prolonged screen time, extensive social media use, and lack of interpersonal contact with other humans are greatly impacting our anxiety and depression levels as well as our ability to know how to develop and navigate deeper connections with other humans.* Add to this the fact that we live in a world in which people are becoming increasingly self-centered and narcissistic, partly due to social media (which gives everyone a chance to be “on stage”), and partly because of how society has shaped us to be self-focused rather than people-focused. Although today's preteens and teenagers are at the greatest mental health risk from prolonged screen time, every one of us who owns a smartphone or scrolling device is subject to being lured into a preference of virtual over reality, online observation rather than personal participation, texting rather than talking, and making a transaction or decision online rather than with the help of another human. We can claim the advantages of high tech, but the bottom line is we've found one more way to move further from personal interaction. We've added another layer to our loneliness problem. We've found one more way to increase our anxiety and depression levels.

* I will present the findings of some of these studies in chapter 8, “The Loneliness of Screens.”

The result of all this tech gone wild and unhealthy reliance on the digital rather than flesh and blood? Loneliness—to a degree we’ve never seen before. While tech in and of itself isn’t bad, an unhealthy reliance on it that replaces human touch cannot help but impact us.

But friend, you don’t have to be a victim of what is happening in our culture. You don’t have to be another loneliness, anxiety, or depression statistic that is worsening daily. You can rise above this by knowing Who is *with* you, Who is *for* you, and why you are here. You can make a much-needed trajectory change when you embrace the resources (and people) available to help you soar rather than suffer silently.

WHERE IS THE DIFFERENCE?

When you and I realize that we exist not to work or perform certain tasks (like an electronic device) but to reflect the glory of our loving Maker—and to enjoy His presence and the communion of other like-minded believers—it will transform our lives. We will not only understand who we are and why we’re here, but we will revel in our purpose, which involves so much more than producing, performing, pleasing others, or attaining perfection. We will be able to experience fulfillment and joy—and where that exists, there is no room for loneliness.

But wait! Loneliness should only happen to people who don’t know God, you may be thinking. Why is it happening to me? Isn’t God supposed to prevent these feelings of loneliness because He said He would never leave me nor forsake me? Isn’t He supposed to provide for all my needs, including companionship and emotional support? Why can’t I just pray and make these feelings of loneliness go away?

Loneliness will always exist as long as you and I are looking for something outside the realm of what God already offers us. Do you realize that—even though we live in a world that constantly disappoints, where sin has damaged our lives and the lives of those we

love—Jesus has *already* provided us with everything we need this side of heaven to live a fulfilling, joyful life in Him? He has *already* provided us with companionship, encouragement, support, personal affirmation, and a sense of self-worth and purpose.

How can you embrace all that has been provided for you through a relationship with the living God and those He brings your way? How can you experience the joy and *immeasurably more* Jesus came to give you and not succumb to this culture of isolationism? How can you live like a loved daughter of God, exuding the confidence that comes from being closely connected to your Maker and a spiritual family who supports you? That's what we're going to look at together in this book.

But before we proceed any further, it's time to ask yourself some questions.

HOW LONELY ARE YOU?

Turn to page 235 and take a few minutes to complete a brief self-assessment test to help you determine the likely degree to which this epidemic of loneliness has affected you. You may discover some things about yourself that you hadn't yet realized. After answering each question, come back here. (Please don't skip this part. It's super important, and you'll gain more insight into your loneliness factor and what might be contributing to it.) Go to page 235 now, and I'll meet you back here in a bit.

OUR NEXT STEP

Perhaps as you answered the questions in the self-assessment test, you were able to gauge your social, emotional, and spiritual health, or maybe get a better idea of your friendship factor—or how it can improve. While those results are certainly not all-conclusive, perhaps you realized, based on some of your answers, that a rerouting of your heart needs to happen, or a change of habits might be helpful. Maybe some initiation on your part or some risk-taking is in order as you

focus more on God and other people in your life. Perhaps there is some pain that needs to be addressed and surrendered to God so you can learn to trust again. And it's possible there are some relationships you can foster, return to, or begin to develop altogether. Sometimes it's a matter of merely putting away our phones and focusing on our relationships with God and the people who are right in front of us.

To solve our loneliness problem, you and I need more than another ten friends on our social media platforms. We need more than another handful of hearts or thumbs-up emojis on our posts. We need more than well-intended advice to “go to church” or “read your Bible” (although those last two suggestions are a good *start* toward experiencing some life changes). You and I need a closer relationship with Jesus and a deeper connection with our sisters in Christ—one of the ways we can experience “Jesus with skin on.”

Through the chapters in this book, I aim to share how you can connect more closely with God, with your own heart, and with women who can strengthen you personally and spiritually. I've divided this book into three sections:

1. Reconnecting with God

God is *with* you, He's *for* you, and He has a reason why you're here. When you reconnect—or start to *really* connect—with God, you'll find your value in Him, as well as the priority He set for your life—the one thing you're all about—to love Him with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love others as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39). When you better understand who you are and why you were created, you will be more equipped to resolve whatever is causing your feelings of loneliness.

2. Reconnecting with Your Heart

In chapters 4–7, we'll look at obstacles that can keep you from developing deeper friendships with others, whether it's your sense

of inadequacy, your belief that you're too busy, your excessive time spent with your devices, or your hesitancy to become vulnerable and transparent with others because of trust issues or society's lie that you don't need anyone else but you. As you free your heart of what keeps it in bondage, you can more easily trust those whom God brings your way and start developing more meaningful relationships with them.

3. Reconnecting with Others

In these last three chapters, we'll look at how to personally connect (or in some cases reconnect) with others despite our over-reliance on the convenience of screens and text messaging as well as our culture's increasing trends toward isolation. We'll look at how to push through the hesitation we may feel to forge friendships despite personality differences and misunderstandings that inevitably exist in the body of Christ. Finally, we'll look at how to be compassionate and forgiving followers of Jesus who can encourage, serve, and extend grace toward others in the kind of meaningful community God intended.

Each chapter will end with an application section called "Being Intentional." Here, I'll give you some time to go further in God's Word, along with a challenge to complete. Unless we are intentional about reconnecting with God and other people, it won't happen. God has already made the first move. I'll suggest practical ways you can respond to Him or make your next move toward reconnecting with others as another way of clearing loneliness out of your life.

It is my prayer this book will help move you forward out of a lonely life and into the abundant one Jesus promised when you're in relationship with Him and the community of believers He has placed around you. I want nothing more than for you to discover God's prescription for a far more joyful—and far less lonely—life.

Are you ready to open your heart so God can touch those broken, lonely places and expand your circle of friends? It's time to be brave, girlfriend. Let's see what the Maker of your soul has to say about who you are, why you're here, and the immeasurably more He has for you.

PART 1

RECONNECTING WITH GOD

Our path to a less-lonely life starts as we reconnect with God and consider Who He is and how that can make a difference in our lives. As we better understand His character and why He has us here, we will better know how to interpret feelings of loneliness that surface all too often.

Seeing the truth about God's heart for us is key to knowing how to live, love, and serve others in meaningful community and fulfilling relationships.

Let's look more closely at Who is with you, Who is for you, and the very beautiful reason He has for why you are here.

CHAPTER 1

THE LONELINESS OF ANXIETY

Knowing Who Is *with* You

The steadiness by which we walk secure in our journeys with Christ has everything to do with our confidence in the character of God.¹

RUTH CHOU SIMONS

I found myself deeply disturbed this morning.

I read that “stress and anxiety levels have never been higher—in our country, in our families, and *in our churches*.”² Of course, look around from day to day, and that alone shouldn’t be a surprise.

But the fact that those of us who know God tend to be just as stressed and anxious as those who don’t saddened me. And it woke me up to the anxious times we’re living in.

The blog post stated that “there is always stress in our lives and churches, but today’s environment makes soaring anxiety difficult to manage.” It listed reasons we deal with more stress and anxiety today, including

- increasing polarization;
- people taking hard stances politically on issues like race, police protection, and gender-driven issues;

- differing spiritual values;
- conflict and an inability to manage it;
- financial concerns; and
- a growing confusion about who we are and our purpose.³

While the article suggested internal investigation (which included asking yourself what you're anxious about), and then incorporating tips for a more balanced lifestyle (which included getting rest, exercising, and having a daily practice like meditation, keeping gratitude lists, and Bible study), what it *didn't* state is that *Who* we know and *how much we trust Him* can make all the difference in our anxiety and overall feelings of loneliness.

My mind began to race. *How can anyone who knows God begin to go down that road of being anxious? Is our theology now just theory, and not practical enough to produce any real changes in our lives and our ability to cope?*

And then, rather suddenly, I joined that segment of Christ-followers who become anxious.

My doctor had called, informing me that my blood test results 30 days after a minor surgery indicated I would need to go on a low-level medication. *For the rest of my life.*

As someone who has looked primarily to diet, exercise, and the power of prayer as the remedy to any ailment or attitude, I immediately became discouraged.

How could this have happened? My mind began its internal rant. *I was praying so hard that everything in my body would work normally after this surgery, and now I have to take a medication for the next 20 to 30 years?*

Then my inner critic took over.

This happened because you allowed yourself to get stressed and then sick. You weren't careful enough with your health, and now you're going to pay the cost.

Next, my sense of panic kicked in.

What do I do now? Do I start on the meds? Should I take natural supplements first and see if that will solve the problem? I don't have time to research this and make sure I'm doing it right—not while I'm trying to finish writing this book. I can't do this. I can't handle one more thing right now!

Amidst the stress, rising blood pressure, and a closing sensation in my throat, the truth of God's Word penetrated my situation like a light shining into a long, dark tunnel.

“Is anything too difficult for the LORD?” (Genesis 18:14).

“I have loved you with an everlasting love...I have drawn you out with kindness” (Jeremiah 31:3).

“I have searched you and known you...I am intimately acquainted with all your ways” (see Psalm 139:1-3).

“I will never leave you, nor will I ever forsake you” (see Hebrews 13:5).

As the truth of God's Word washed over my mind and drowned out my anxious thoughts, the truth of God's *character* softened my heart, slowed my pulse, and reminded me of what was true in that moment and always: My God is *with* me. This didn't take Him by surprise. And He will get me through this.

ANXIETY HAPPENS

How natural it is for you and me to go into a tailspin when circumstances feel overwhelming. When we can't see the future. How quickly we can panic and feel we must figure out our problems ourselves. How easy it is to rush ahead in our minds to the worst-case scenario, all the reasons to blame ourselves, and all the reasons we can't get through something. Yet how can you and I fear *anything* when we are under the watchful eye of the all-powerful, all-capable,

and ever-loving God who has repeatedly proven that He will not let anything touch us that hasn't first passed through His loving hands?

Anxiety happens. And it can happen at any moment that you and I are not fully convinced that we are intensely loved, intimately cared for, and being capably moved forward into His perfect plan for us as we surrender our situation to Him.

Anxiety can take our hearts and minds hostage when we are not fully convinced that God is capable of taking care of whatever concerns us. While you and I can only see today (and we are experts about *fearing* tomorrow!), the God who holds all our days in His hands and has seen every one of them before us is waiting to lovingly and gently convince us that

- all His ways are perfect (Psalm 18:30)
- He knows how to give eternally good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11)
- He will work *all things* together for good in our lives so that we will become more like His Son (Romans 8:28-29)
- He can give us His perfect peace that is beyond our understanding when we give our concerns to Him (Philippians 4:6-7)
- He will never leave us on our own (Psalm 139:7-12; Hebrews 13:5)

When I started focusing on my concerns and the circumstances I could not control, I slid into a state of stress and downward-spiraling worry, and realized I had one of two choices:

1. I could choose to feel neglected, discriminated against, and left to my own devices to figure this out (and the result would be continued stress, panic, fear, and full-blown anxiety).

2. Or I could call upon the One who loves me more than I can fathom and who is allowing me to go through this for a reason, and trust His goodness (resulting in the peace He promises to everyone who surrenders to Him in prayer).

I chose to give my situation to the Lord in prayer. I didn't give it to Him in a verbal vent. I *surrendered* it to Him, transferring it to His capable hands so I wouldn't be weighed down by it any longer, and thanking Him that it didn't take Him by surprise. And in return, God's promise to give His incomprehensible peace held true. His peace covered me like a warm blanket draped over my cold, worried heart. The worry and anxiety were gone.

Within a couple of minutes, I received a text message from Ashley, the research queen of natural supplements who has a voice that could calm a crying baby (which is what I was when I got her message). I hadn't heard from Ashley in six months, but that morning, she felt God's nudge on her heart to contact me and ask how I was doing in light of my recent surgery. We scheduled a time to meet for lunch a few days later. As I shared with Ashley my struggle, face to face, I let her know that her text message came at just the right time and that her listening ear, her comforting words, and her physical presence at lunch that day were reassuring gifts from God.

Our God is not only *with us* when we're stressed out, but there are times when He will also send His people our way to minister to our hearts when we most need it.

GOD ALREADY KNOWS

As you and I struggle with whatever is taking us down that lonely road of uncertainty or anxiety, God already knows what we need. But He often waits for us to surrender to Him our inability to work it out ourselves, and to come to Him with open arms ready to receive His help.

Through God's peaceful presence,* through His trustworthy Word, and through His body—our brothers and sisters in the Lord whose ears are tuned to hear His voice and detect His nudges—God will provide the guidance and wisdom you and I need to make every decision that is before us. You and I are not alone. Our God is *with us*.† And so are those He has surrounded us with, even when we're still feeling alone.

But we can tend to circumvent this process of trusting God's presence, looking to His Word for help, and reaching out to others in the body of Christ because we've been conditioned to consult Siri or Google for help, instead of the One who knows us intimately. Our reliance on tech can tend to interrupt our formerly instinctual response of going to God first. Could that be why we are more anxious today than we ever have been even though we have “expert advice” at our fingertips? By seeking to get the answers ourselves, on our devices, we are sometimes precluding prayer and the awareness that “God's got this” and entering the arena of feeling we're on our own. Perhaps we unknowingly assume it's more efficient to go online and search, rather than get on our knees and pray.

WHAT WE STRUGGLE WITH

I imagine you, too, struggle with the loneliness that comes from believing you are on your own at times, whether it's concerning your health, your finances, your love life (or lack of it), your marriage or relationships, your family issues, your children (and what they're going

* When we have surrendered our lives to Christ and accepted His sacrificial death for us on the cross, He sends His Holy Spirit to dwell within us, providing His comforting presence with us at all times (Ephesians 1:13 and 1 John 4:12-14). Sometimes we just aren't tuned in to the Spirit's voice or presence, so we forget He's there. But God promised His presence would never leave us. If you don't have the assurance that you have God's indwelling Holy Spirit, and therefore His guiding presence in your life, please turn to page 241 and read “How to Be Assured of God's Presence” before going any further.

† Matthew 1:23 tells us another name for Jesus is *Immanuel*, which literally means “God with us.”

through or whether or not they're talking to you), or anything else. You, too, might feel you are left to your own devices (literally) and have no real live support system around you. Perhaps you feel as if you are sinking into a dark tunnel of despair where feelings of uncertainty or the "Why, Lord?" questions become too much.

But you and I don't have to remain stuck there, in that ache of loneliness, as we struggle. In fact, we don't even have to *go* there. God has already *been* there, and can help guide us back toward the light, where fear and anxiety no longer exist.

OUR PRESCRIPTION FOR ANXIETY

God knew we'd be an anxious people. He is aware of our weaknesses and our worries, and He told us in His Word, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). In a translation that incorporates the original Greek meaning into idiomatic English, which is the way we think and feel today, that verse reads:

Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life (MSG).

Instead of worrying, pray. That's our God-given prescription for anxiety. As soon as we pray and hand our situation to God, He promises His peace will cover us and that peace will guard our hearts and minds from becoming distressed. As He gives us peace, depending on our need, He then provides us with wisdom from Scripture and

the Holy Spirit, or with people who can help us—such as doctors, nutritionists, friends, family, and others.

You may be thinking, *Well that's a little simplistic. Just pray and it will all go away?* But it's not about prayer and *poof*, the situation changes. It's about surrender to your Maker and believing His promise that you are not alone. You have a Helper.

If you and I have access, through prayer, to the Living God who can do all things, why do we still stress and fear the worst will happen? Why do we claim we believe God is good and in control but not live like it? The disconnect is in who we truly believe God is.

You and I can't love, trust, and be transformed by God if we don't truly *know* His character. If we rely on our own thoughts, imaginations, or experiences of who we believe God is, rather than trusting what His Word says about Him, then we make ourselves vulnerable to anxiety and fear. Yet as you get to know the true character of God, as described in His Word, it will transform how you process life. Everything will be funneled through the fact that He is *with* you, He is *for* you, and He has a *reason* for where you are. Your trust, then, is not in principles, or in theories, or in three-step formulas from Christian books. Your trust is in a Person—Jesus, who assures us He is *with* us and will never leave.

EXAMINING WHAT YOU BELIEVE

There really *should* be a difference between a woman who knows God and a woman who doesn't. There really *should* be a difference in the peace and anxiety levels as well as the mental and emotional health conditions of those who possess eternal life and hope and those who don't. I believe that difference comes down to how well we *know* the character of God and therefore how much we *trust* Him.

If you're struggling with trusting the character of God, I must ask: What are you believing about God that isn't true? That He's forgotten you? That He doesn't have time for you? Do you believe He's

given up on you or that He won't enable or equip you for the task ahead? Are you concerned that He cannot—or will not—heal you? Are you resolved to believing He is distant and uninterested in the specific details of your life?

Perhaps you believe He expects you to get yourself out of any mess that you got yourself into. If you happen to believe the popular lie “God helps those who help themselves,” the truth is that God helps those *who admit they can't* help themselves. He steps in when we stop our exhaustive and futile efforts and surrender our situation to Him.

Psalm 34:8 tells us, “Taste and see that the LORD is good; how blessed is the man [or woman] who takes refuge in Him!” Look at that verse again. We are instructed by the psalmist to *taste* and see that the Lord is good. *Try* His goodness. *Test* His faithfulness. *Experience* His comfort. Live it. Savor it. And your eyes will be opened, and you will *see* that He is good.

If you really believed that God is good, how might you live each day differently? Would you be as quick to worry about whatever went wrong? Would you fear the circumstances you or your loved ones face? Would you get anxious or stressed if it didn't appear God was doing something in response to your prayers?

I once heard it said that God will give you only what you would have asked for if you knew everything He knows.

He knows so well what we need and what we don't need. Can you rest in the assurance that He is a good and loving Father who knows what's best for you and that He is truly *with* you?

STOP IMAGINING THE FUTURE

As I was awaiting a biopsy last year, my brother, Dan—a military and FBI veteran whom I often describe as a godly Jack Ryan—was stateside from his overseas job and text messaged me:

How are you doing?

Are you keeping control of your thoughts and imagination about the future?

Don't let your thoughts run wild.

I was in the middle of writing a chapter for this book when I received his message. I wrote back:

My fear was intense after I saw that horrible image from the ultrasound, but after giving it to God and asking for His peace in return, I'm reminded that I'm still securely in God's arms, experiencing peace and no fear.

Dan texted in return:

We are in a survival course right now and we just had a lesson that taught that most of our fears are not reality; we often create fear as we try to imagine the future.

Whoa.

We often *create* fear as we try to imagine the future.

While there is a healthy kind of fear that keeps us from doing something that might harm us (like the fear of fire, or of falling from a building, or of running into a busy street), unnecessary fear that is not reality occurs when we let our imaginations run wild and we fear future events that "might" happen.

As I was digesting my brother's words, he added a disclaimer that the survival course was being taught by military special forces.

Of course it was!, I thought. It makes perfect sense that the *elimination of fear* is practical for soldiers so they can stay focused in certain situations during physical warfare and don't freeze up or become incapacitated by imagining the worst that could happen.

Scripture tells us God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7). The element of self-discipline is key here. We're to not let our imaginations run wild. We're to capture our thoughts of what might happen and bring them under His control, rather than let them run loose into all sorts of imaginations of what *could* happen.

Immediately after Philippians 4:6-7 tells us not to worry about anything but to pray about everything and experience God's peace (rather than the fear of what might happen), the next two verses tell us what to dwell on—only what is true or real, right, pure, lovely, and praiseworthy (verse 8). We are *commanded* not to dwell on what hasn't happened or the worst that could happen. God wants us to stay present—in the now—with Him, not to run out ahead of Him into the future.

As you and I deal with feelings of uncertainty or disappointment, our wandering thoughts of the future—of *What if...?*—can make the difference between snuggling securely into the arms of our Savior or keeping Him at arm's length, feeling alone, and pulling out our hair.

I want to take the safe and secure route, don't you? Take captive your thoughts that run wild about what might happen. About who might abandon you. About whether the funds will come through. About anything you can't control. And leave it with the Only One who really *is* in control. He's also the Only One who can calm your fears and fill your heart with peace. After all, every single one of your *What if...?* thoughts is rendered powerless by the single truth that God *is with you*.*

UNDERSTANDING THE GOD WHO IS WITH US

Reading about spiritual truths from writers who lived a century or more before us can help us maintain a biblical perspective on our

* If you struggle with surrendering control to God, see my book *Women on the Edge* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2010).

never-changing God in this ever-changing culture. James Smith, who wrote during Civil War times and mentored many men in the Christian faith, including Abraham Lincoln, wrote:

The Lord's people are all prone to fear; because they do not realize their relation to God, their interest in the promises of God, and that they are always in the presence of God. How graciously our God forbids our slavish fears, and encourages confidence in Himself!... Beloved, leave anxiety, distrust, and slavish fear, to the poor, godless worldling; but trust thou in the living God: always, and everywhere. Hope in God; wait upon God; expect from God; follow hard after God: and all you want will be given, and all that would injure you will be frustrated. Be not afraid, only believe; Jesus is with thee, and will preserve, bless, and keep thee; therefore, "FEAR THOU NOT."⁴

So many books have been written on understanding our identity in Christ so we won't be anxious. So many talks have been given on seeing ourselves through God's eyes so we will live more confidently. But perhaps if we get our eyes off *ourselves* and our circumstances and insecurities and look to *Him* and Who His Word says He is, that might convince us of *Who* is *with us* and that He is capable of anything.

I mentioned to you at the beginning of this chapter that I started to feel lonely and anxious when I got a call from my doctor. I had forgotten, in the moment, *Who* God is. He is my Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, and Helper. He is the Great Physician Who is always with me and knows exactly what's going on in my body. He is the One Who has an eternal purpose for those He loves. Don't forget *Who* He is.

God's Twofold Purpose for Us

When Jesus was asked which of God's commandments was the greatest, He said,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

Jesus' summary of God's entire law into two commandments was also His summary of our purpose for existing. He was essentially telling us:

- Love God with everything you are and everything you have.
- Love others as much as you already love yourself. (More on this in chapter 7.)

How God Helps Us

There are at least three ways God helps us live out our twofold purpose to love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love others as ourselves:

- Through His divine provision and intervention in our lives⁵
- Through the power of His Word and prayer
- Through the people He places in our lives

However, when you and I try to find our purpose and alleviate our anxiety through a romantic relationship, a career, hobbies, achievements, children, grandchildren, or even one big “mission for God,” we eventually find ourselves feeling lonely and unfulfilled because nothing and no one but God can fill that deep chasm in our

hearts—that soul hole that longs for purpose, unconditional love, and eternal hope. Even if we try to alleviate our anxiety through meditation, rest, and self-care, we will still come up short. Our soul cries out for connection with our Maker and with those He has placed in our lives to minister to us.

The songwriters of Scripture knew this well. In Psalm 73:25-26, Asaph wrote these words, perhaps during a time of loneliness:

Whom have I in heaven but You?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my
portion forever (NASB 1995).

I have related to those words during some of my loneliest times as a woman, wife, and mom. Many times, a mere *acknowledgment* that God is all we have and *all we want* is the first step toward losing the loneliness that occurs when we're outside the realm of an intimate relationship with Him. As we grow closer to Him, He can then help us trust any people He happens to bring into our lives, and sometimes they will help us grow closer to Him too.

WHY WE STILL STRUGGLE

If you and I are convinced God really is *with* us, and He is capable of handling all that concerns us, why do we still become anxious and fearful and experience loneliness? With all the biblical evidence for what we mean to our Creator God and all that He has given us, promised us, and entrusted us with, why do we not live like this is our identity and inheritance?

There are times when we can get caught up in our circumstances and forget Who God is, what He's capable of, and how much He has us on His mind. I believe that might be the reason so many of

us experience an anxious mindset—we have yet to apply what we know about God to our real-life situations and remember that He is absolutely capable of getting us through whatever we face minute by minute, day by day.

DON'T FORGET WHO IS WITH YOU

Lest you think I'm writing this from a position of having learned it all, God recently made me aware of how anxious I can become when I forget Who is with me.

I was preparing for a five-day trip to North Africa with my husband (Hugh) and daughter (Dana), where we would tour the Sahara Desert, see locations where *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* were filmed, and experience life on the other side of the world. Hugh and Dana were beyond excited for the adventure that was ahead of us. But the closer we got to taking our trip, the more fearful I became.

The night before we left, I slept very little. The impending 14-hour flight, the different foods, the lack of sanitation in some areas, and all the variables of risk for three light-skinned Americans who would stand out in a predominantly Muslim country seemed too much to fathom.

But then a calm overcame me as I remembered who was going to be there with us.

A Desert Storm war veteran and former FBI analyst who now works as a risk management consultant for an overseas company was meeting us there. He was familiar with the territory we'd be visiting. And keeping Americans safe was his expertise. I had forgotten I was going with my brother, Dan, the one I referred to earlier as my "godly Jack Ryan."

The moment we arrived, Dan was there to greet us. He gave us the ground rules of what we needed to do to be safe. He advised us to follow his lead as he walked ahead of us, listen for his cues or code

words if he sensed we were in any possible danger, and be ready for a sudden change of plans if he deemed it necessary. As long as we kept our eyes on him, heeded his warnings, and remained flexible, we would be safe.

If I had not listened to my brother and followed his lead, I would've literally fallen in several places where the infrastructure wasn't secure (safety codes are nonexistent in that country) or been hit by numerous passing vehicles while crossing streets (traffic rules don't exist there either). Yet I was safe, cared for, and even treated like royalty at times because I was with and paid attention to our guide. (And by the way, I absolutely can't wait to return to North Africa—as long as my brother goes with us.)

As safe as I felt while following my brother, he is not all-knowing. He was aware of the variables and possible threats, but he is still human and fallible, and anything still could have taken him—and us—by surprise. Dan was constantly on alert, but ultimately, God was our protector.

Dear friend, can your anxiety and mine be a result of forgetting Who is *with* us on this journey in life?

We have an all-knowing, all-powerful Guide who not only knows the territory, but has gone before us into all things. As we follow our Savior, He knows exactly what's coming and how to steer us on the right path. He is prepared for everything and has already solved every problem we may encounter. You and I are so much more secure under the protection of our all-knowing, ever-present God than with anyone else this side of heaven who offers us security.

The opposite of anxiety is *confidence in the person and presence of God*. As long as we keep our eyes on Jesus, follow His lead, and heed His warnings, we are safer and more secure than we can possibly be on our own.

Don't ever forget *Who* is with you. He can get you securely through whatever lies ahead.

WHERE JOY IS FOUND

Without a close relationship with God, there can be no peace or joy. There can be no sense of support. There can be no calm or confidence. And when we have solid relationships with other followers of Jesus, we can have daily reminders that He is with us, supportive strength when we start to feel weak, and helpful encouragement when the enemy tries to make us believe we are alone. To the contrary, joy is absent when sin has us avoiding God—or His people. Anytime we allow sin or doubt to come between us and God, we forfeit peace and joy.

Psalm 16:11 assures us *in His presence* there is *fullness* of joy.

We lose our contentment and joy when we're in sin, when we're looking somewhere other than to God for our fulfillment, when we're not in God's Word regularly, or when we don't have mature believers around to help us grow in our faith.

Philippians 1:6 says we are each a work in progress, but it's a *joyful* progress when we're gradually growing and moving forward day by day as an obedient follower of Jesus. If you are truly abiding in God and in His Word, you will experience His peace and His joy, and you will rest assured you are not alone.

If you are truly abiding in God and in His Word,
you will experience His peace and His joy, and
you will rest assured you are not alone.

ADOPT A JESUS-ONLY MINDSET

Before I close out this chapter, I must make the point that loneliness also occurs when we're convinced we must have a man in our lives. Right now, you might be thinking: *That's easy for you to say,*

Cindi. You've been married for more than 35 years. Yes, I have, and I can attest to the fact that being married—or simply having a man in one's life—is not the cure for loneliness. Not only have I experienced that God alone satisfies, but as a pastor's wife, former women's ministry director, and someone who has mentored single and married women for the past four decades, I've heard the firsthand accounts of what women struggle with and never has a woman said (after at least one year of marriage), "I am no longer lonely now that I'm married." When the honeymoon wears off, so does the fantasy that having a husband will fill you up completely and eliminate loneliness altogether.

As I've been saying in my books and at my conferences for the past 25 years, only God satisfies. It's when we want God *plus* a husband, God *plus* a career, God *plus* children, God *plus* financial security, God *plus* notoriety, and so on that we find ourselves anxious, lonely, and sometimes depressed. For that reason, I encourage you to go at least 21 days this month with a Jesus-only mindset. (It is believed that after 21 days of repetitious thought or actions, a habit is formed.)

Yes, we also need others in our lives (which I'll get to in the second and third sections of this book), but we must *start* with the foundational concept that it is God alone who can satisfy us. When we truly seek and depend on Him alone, we won't want to put someone or something else ahead of Him. As imperfect humans we naturally desire more, so we must settle the more by fully believing *He is enough*.

Jesus gave us the secret for not only having our material needs met, but for finding fulfillment and easing our anxieties as well. He said,

Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33 NASB 1995).

Jesus was saying "Desire Me first, and I'll make sure you have all you need"—all the calm, all the contentment, all the confidence,

all the companionship. I've seen many times—in my own life and in the lives of women I've mentored—that God, in His goodness, will often give so much of what we *want*, too, when we look to Him to provide only what we need. As we desire Jesus alone, we become content with the blessings He chooses to give, and we become more aware of His goodness everywhere we look.

YOU CAN DO THIS

Are you ever on your own when it comes to uncertainty, anxiety, or fear? Absolutely not. The God who wants your communion is *with* you, and He wants your life to reflect a steady awareness of His provision, His protection, and His presence. Be a conduit through which He can show the world how strong and capable He is. Big responsibility? Yes. Tremendous privilege? You bet. Doable? Absolutely—with His strength and grace.

You can do *all* things through Him who is standing by to strengthen you. You are not alone, my sister. You do not have to continue feeling uncertain, anxious, or lonely. You are a woman through whom God can do amazing things.

BEING INTENTIONAL

By getting into God's Word and learning more about His character, we can be assured that He is with us and will help us navigate and overcome feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

1. Read Psalm 139. Below, record what the following verses say about the God who is with you:

Verses 1-2:

Verse 4:

Verses 8-10:

Verses 13-14:

Verse 16:

Verses 17-18:

Consider what you learned from these verses about God's intimate knowledge of you. How can this help you process life differently?

In the space below, write a prayerful response to God's heart for you (as expressed in Psalm 139):

2. What causes you to worry and start imagining what might happen in the future?

3. What one or two verses come to your mind that could help you when you begin to imagine the future? Write your favorite one below. (If you don't have one already, this is a good time to find one and write it out.)

Consider committing this verse (or these verses) to memory so it is fresh in your mind the next time fear or worry bombard you.

A CHALLENGE TO HELP YOU GROW

Consider adopting a Jesus-only mindset for the next 21 days by doing the following:

- Read a chapter in the Gospel of John each day.
- Ask Jesus, before and after your reading, to help you long for Him above anything or anyone else.
- Recite this prayer in Psalm 73:25 and make it your own:

Whom have I in heaven but You?

And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.

- Each time you start to worry or fret, say this out loud as a reminder of Who is in control of everything that comes your way: “God is *with* me, He is *for* me, and there’s a reason He has me here.”