

TREASURES IN THE DARKNESS

by Sally Dixon

Becoming a Friend of God

In my mid-twenties, I once found myself alone for almost an entire weekend in an enormous house on a country property.

At that time, I worked for a Christian ministry, which ran teaching courses and retreats. The centre had only been open for a few weeks, and in those early pioneering days, the staff were thin on the ground. Only a couple of families and a few single people, including me, lived on the base. There were no scheduled events on the weekend in question, and everybody went away. Everybody that is, except for me.

Solitude is something I often relish, so the fact that I was alone did not unduly alarm me at first. But on Friday afternoon, after everyone had departed, silence settled on the house like a shroud. Distant voices no longer chatted or laughed through open windows or from behind closed doors. Footsteps no longer crunched over the gravel driveway outside, nor did they plod up and down the staircases or along the corridors inside the house. The familiar and comforting sounds of humanity going about their daily business completely vanished. All that remained was an engulfing emptiness.

As evening approached, that emptiness turned to eeriness. The old house creaked, the wind rustled through the trees, and the birds called to one another as they settled for the night. In the long corridor outside my bedroom, shadows crept into the corners, and darkness soon swallowed every speck of light.

**“Draw near to God
and he will draw near to you.”**

James 4:8



To be alone in an enormous house on a remote property at nighttime was both frightening and confronting.

Such is the nature of loneliness. It possesses the ability to creep inside our souls, casting its shadows and filling the empty spaces inside with darkness. Many of us are petrified at the prospect of being all alone in this world. When such seasons come to any one of us, it confronts our sense of belonging and self-worth. How vulnerable that can make us feel.

Recently, I read about a man called Patrick who, within his lifetime, experienced a dark season of tremendous loneliness.

Patrick lived many centuries ago. He grew up in a small village on the seacoast of North Britain, the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest. Despite his Christian upbringing, Patrick did not come to know God until his late teens. This divine relationship began only after he experienced sudden life-shattering trauma.

One night, under the cover of darkness, marauders raided Patrick's seaside home. With violent force, the invaders captured all the strong and attractive young people from the village. Patrick was among them. The young people were dragged by nets to the coast and tossed into the bowels of a ship. Most other inhabitants of that village were murdered that night.¹

Wrenched from everything he knew and sailing across the sea to an unknown future, Patrick's heart must have been overwhelmed with grief and terror.

After many days, the ship finally docked in an Irish port, and his captors hauled him onto foreign soil, where he was immediately sold as a slave to a Druid warlord named Miluicc. Patrick's trauma must have deepened as he witnessed the Druid's blood-curdling obsession with death and human sacrifice. Druid warlords wore the shrunken skulls of their victims on their belts, while human skulls were also occasionally used as drinking vessels. In those days, people were sometimes sacrificed in pagan ceremonies by being burnt alive inside large figures made from tree branches.² It is not known if Patrick witnessed such brutality in person, but he certainly would have heard about it.

In this exceedingly bleak situation, the conviction of the Holy Spirit came upon Patrick. He recognised his sinful ways and later admitted that as a sixteen-year-old, 'I did not know the true God.' He described how he, and many thousands of others who had also been kidnapped, deserved the hardship that had

befallen them. 'We had turned away from God,' Patrick said, 'and did not keep his commandments and did not obey our priests, who used to remind us of our salvation. The Lord brought over us the wrath of his anger and scattered us among many nations, even unto the utmost part of the earth.'³

Patrick turned to Jesus Christ and was converted with all his heart to the Lord God. Later, as an old man reflecting on his conversion, Patrick said, 'This I know for certain: that before I was humbled, I was like a stone lying in deep mire until He who is powerful came, and in his mercy raised me up.'⁴

He remained a slave for about six years.

Throughout that time, he tended sheep, and as he cared for the flock, he began talking to God as one would a friend. How well he would have known the ache of loneliness as he traipsed the damp and cold Irish hills. His stomach was often empty, and his scant clothing barely kept him warm, but through all this hardship, Patrick sought after God with all his soul. So often did he pray that he said as many as a hundred prayers throughout each day and almost as many at night. He said of those days: 'In the woods and on the mountain and even before the dawn, I was roused to prayer — in snow and ice and rain. I felt no injury from it, nor was there any slothfulness in me, as I see now because the Spirit within me was then fervent.'⁵

As Patrick toiled in harsh conditions, he grew in faith and fear of the Living God and came to know the love of the one to whom he talked. The Lord strengthened and comforted him 'as a father would his son.'

The ache of loneliness is a pain familiar to many who sojourn this earth. Throughout the pages of the Bible, we encounter many individuals who tasted its bitter waters. Patrick was not the first to experience isolating affliction.

'There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.'

Proverbs 18:20



'I despise my life,' lamented Job. 'Let me alone; my days have no meaning.'⁶ He had lost his children to death, his health to sickness, and much of his livelihood through disaster and theft. His friends' well-intentioned advice offered him little comfort as he languished through soul-shattering grief. Although surrounded by people, emotionally, Job suffered alone.

'No one is concerned for me,' cried David. 'I have no refuge; no one cares for my life!'⁷ A jealous king, in a murderous rage, wanted him dead and was hunting him down. David fled to the wilderness, where he hid alone inside a dark cave. Who could help him in such a dire situation?

Jeremiah poured out his complaint to God: 'I sat alone because your hand was on me.'⁸ After speaking God's truth to his own people, they had turned on him and left him for dead inside a filthy cistern. Rejected by men, Jeremiah walked alone throughout his obedient service to God.

We can learn much from these men in the Bible and also from the life of Patrick. How did these men handle the isolation that resulted from unimaginable trauma, loss, grief, separation, illness and rejection?

The pain each man felt was deep and real, and in their seclusions, no other human person could soothe their fears or wipe away their tears. They could have allowed themselves to wallow in bitterness, blaming God for the circumstances, but rather than turning their back on the Lord, they chose to turn to him instead.

As each reached out through prayer, they discovered a beautiful Scriptural truth: as they drew near to God, he came near to them.⁹ Their heartfelt cries

reached the ear of the One who promises to stick closer than a brother.¹⁰ The Lord came closer than any person ever can.

This promise also holds true for us today. If we draw near to the Father through his Son Jesus, the Holy Spirit will dwell with us, and we, too, will know the intimate friendship of God.

Jesus, our Saviour, is able to identify with all our sufferings. More than anyone else, he has tasted the bitter waters of separation. For all eternity, each member of the Godhead — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — had always existed in perfect love and unity. While Jesus hung on the cross, dying and bleeding so that we might be redeemed, he cried out in an anguished voice, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'¹¹ All our sins were placed on Jesus, and since sin cannot exist in God's presence, for the first time in eternity, his Father was far, far away. Our finite human minds cannot grasp the depth of what this temporary banishment from His Father's presence meant to Jesus.

How momentous that he endured such suffering for our sake. His atonement meant that we could draw near to God and that he would come close to us.

Humankind was created for divine relationship with the one true Living God. At the dawn of time, Adam and Eve knew unbroken fellowship with him in the Garden of Eden. They walked side by side with the Lord in utmost peace and confidence. But after succumbing to the devil's seductions, the curse of sin severed their relationship with God. Every individual born into the world thereafter inherited the results of this curse. This is the ultimate reason why we experience loneliness in our lives. We are fallen people in a fallen world, separated from the God who created us to be in relationship with him.

Jesus willingly sacrificed himself so that anyone who turns away from their sin and trusts in him will know the Father. That's how we become a friend of God. We choose to come to him through his Son who sets us free from the curse of sin. No longer then will there be any separation. We continue in this friendship as we walk and talk with the Lord every day of our lives.

When I found myself alone that weekend in my mid-twenties, the nighttime eventually ended, and daylight emerged. As the next day progressed, I encountered some beautiful moments, which made me realise I wasn't alone after all. On the ground floor below my bedroom, an old grand piano stood in a room with large windows and an empty fireplace. Sunlight streamed through the glass panes as I pulled out the piano stool and sat down. My fingers began to play the ivory keys. As I lifted my voice in worship, the silence throughout the house shattered into a fountain of musical notes. To be able to worship the Lord in complete and utter abandon, without anyone else to see or hear, was an unspeakable joy. I drew near to the Lord, and he came close to me.

The physical isolation I experienced on that occasion was but a fleeting moment in my life's journey. In the end, I didn't actually mind the solitude. In many ways, I relished it. (Although, I will admit, it was a relief when the familiar and comforting sounds of humanity going about their daily business finally returned).

However, there have been other seasons throughout my life, much harder ones, in which I have truly tasted the bitter waters of loneliness. I know I am not the only one. Difficult circumstances are unavoidable in this broken world. All of us will, at times, be faced with dark, lonely valleys.

I have learned along the way that aloneness and loneliness are two distinct states of being. It is possible to be alone without feeling lonely. On the other hand, sometimes our hearts can ache even when immersed in a crowd.

When bleak shadows do threaten to overtake our souls, so often, we avoid them to the best of our ability. We might distract ourselves with mindless entertainment and the pursuit of pleasure. We might fill each waking moment with so much busyness that there is no time to stop and feel anything. We might turn to addictions that temporarily soothe our nerves but end up ensnaring us. We might also go from relationship to relationship, trying desperately to meet the gnawing emptiness inside. None of these diversions will help in the long run. The shadows are always lurking, ready to flood back in.

The most helpful thing to do is to stop and face the loneliness head-on. Look it in the face. Acknowledge that it is real and allow yourself to feel the emotions. The pain will be intense, sometimes even excruciating, but it will never start to ease until it is brought into the light of the Lord Jesus Christ. Invite him into the midst of whatever you feel and pour out your heart like water. He cares more than you could ever imagine!

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. That's a promise.

Patrick discovered this truth as he trudged over the desolate Irish terrain. He talked everything over with the Lord.

Job, David and Jeremiah discovered this truth too.

'My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God,' declared Job. He spoke prophetically of the Redeemer to come. 'On behalf of a man, he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend.'¹²

'You are my refuge!' David cried out to the Lord. 'You are my portion in the land of the living.'¹³

'When my heart is faint within me,' Jeremiah prayed, 'You are my Comforter in sorrow.'¹⁴

God is faithful to his promise and will come near to anyone who genuinely seeks him.

I have been learning to draw near to him, especially in lonely times. What I am discovering is this: the darkest days are lined with gold. Nowadays, I count the lonesome moments as both a privilege and an opportunity. There is unspeakable joy to be found, and that joy is unearthed in friendship with the King. The Lord has become my closest friend.

"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."
John 15:15

Afterword...

Until now, I have refrained from using the title by which Partick is most famously known. Many have probably guessed by now that Patrick is none other than the famous 'Saint Patrick' who went to Ireland as a missionary in the 5th Century BC. I refrained from using the title 'Saint' as it makes him seem other-worldly, set apart and more holy than the rest of us mere mortals. The truth is that Patrick was like every other person who has ever lived. He was an ordinary, sinful human being who needed a saviour. He knew his own weaknesses, but he also came to know the One who is strong. He became a true friend of God.

After his solitary season as a slave, Patrick longed 'to make known the gift of God' to other people and to confidently 'spread abroad the name of God everywhere.'

That is precisely what he did.

What made Patrick remarkable was that he allowed Jesus Christ to speak and act through him. Before vast crowds of Irish people, Patrick spoke of 'his King's kingdom, telling them of the infinite love of his King for all of them, of His yearning desire to have them know Him, and to enter into and enjoy the kingdom.'¹⁵

Tens of thousands of lives were transformed as they also put their faith in Jesus Christ and came to know the Father. ■

Dear Heavenly Father,

I come to you through your Son Jesus Christ. I turn from my sin and choose to draw near to you. Thank you for your promise that you will draw near to anyone who draws near to you. Please walk and talk with me all the days of my life.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.

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