

THE LONELINESS OF CHRIST

by Frederick W. Robertson

Robertson's sermon exploring Christ's spiritual isolation as He faced rejection and crucifixion, contrasting physical and spiritual loneliness and arguing that true strength comes from relying on God alone and maintaining moral independence from worldly opinion.

1 Chapters

Table of Contents

1. The Loneliness of Christ

The Loneliness of Christ

The Loneliness of Christ

Jesus answered them, Do ye now believe? Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered every man to his own, and shall leave me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.—John 16:31-32.

There are two kinds of solitude: the first consisting of isolation in space; the other, of isolation of the spirit. The first is simply separation by distance. When we are seen, touched, heard by none, we are said to be alone. And all hearts respond to the truth of that saying, This is not solitude; for sympathy can people our solitude with a crowd. The fisherman on the ocean alone at night is not alone, when he remembers the earnest longings which are rising up to heaven at home for his safety. The traveler is not alone, when the faces which will greet him on his arrival seem to beam upon him as he trudges on. The solitary student is not alone, when he feels that human hearts will respond to the truths which he is preparing to address to them. The other is loneliness of soul. There are times when hands touch ours, but only send an icy chill of unsympathizing indifference to the heart; when eyes gaze into ours, but with a glazed look which can not read into the bottom of our souls; when words pass from our lips, but only come back as an echo reverberated without reply through a dreary solitude; when the multitude throng and press us, and we can not say, as Christ said, "Somebody hath touched me"; for the contact has been not between soul and soul, but only between form and form. And there are two kinds of men, who feel this last solitude in different ways. The first are the men of self-reliance—self-dependent—who ask no counsel, and crave no sympathy; who act and resolve alone, who can go sternly through duty, and scarcely shrink, let what will be crushed in them. Such men command respect: for whoever respects himself constrains the respect of others. They are invaluable in all those professions of life in which sensitive feeling would be a superfluity; they make iron commanders, surgeons who do not shrink, and statesmen who do not flinch from their purpose for the dread of unpopularity. But mere self-dependence is weakness; and the conflict is terrible when a human sense of weakness is felt by such men. Jacob was alone when he slept on his way to Padan Aram, the first night that he was away from his father's roof, with the world before him, and all the old broken up; and Elijah was alone in the wilderness when the court had deserted him, and he said, "They have digged down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword: and I, even I, only am left, and they seek my life to take it away." But the loneliness of the tender Jacob was very different from that of the stern Elijah. To Jacob the sympathy he yearned for was realized in the form of a gentle dream. A ladder raised from earth to heaven figured the possibility of communion between the spirit of man and the Spirit of God. In Elijah's case, the storm, and the earthquake, and the fire did their convulsing work in the soul, before a still, small voice told him that he was not alone. In such a spirit the sense of weakness comes with a burst of agony, and the dreadful conviction of being alone manifests itself with a rending of the heart of rock. It is only so that such souls can be taught that the Father is with them, and that they are not alone.

There is another class of men, who live in sympathy. These are affectionate minds, which tremble at the thought of being alone; not from want of courage nor from weakness of intellect comes their dependence upon others, but from the intensity of their affections. It is the trembling spirit of humanity in them. They want not aid, not even countenance, but only sympathy. And then trial comes to them not in the shape of fierce struggle, but of chill and utter loneliness, when they are called upon to perform a duty on which the world looks coldly, or to embrace a truth which has not found lodgment yet in the breasts of others.

It is to this latter and not to the former class that we must look, if we could understand the spirit in which the words of the text were pronounced. The deep humanity of the soul of Christ was gifted with those finer sensibilities of affectionate nature which stand in need of sympathy. He not only gave sympathy, but wanted it, too, from others. He who selected the gentle John to be His friend, who found solace in female sympathy, attended by the women who ministered to Him out of their substance—who in the trial hour could not bear even to pray without the human presence, which is the pledge and reminder of God's presence, had nothing in Him of the hard, merely self-dependent character. Even this verse testifies to the same fact. A stern spirit never could have said, "I am not alone: the Father is with me"; never would have felt the loneliness which needed the balancing truth. These words tell of a struggle, an inward reasoning, a difficulty and a reply, a sense of solitude—"I shall be alone"; and an immediate correction of that: "Not alone: the Father is with me."

There is no thought connected with the life of Christ more touching, none that seems so peculiarly to characterize His spirit, as the solitariness in which He lived. Those who understood Him best only understood Him half. Those who knew Him best scarcely could be said to know Him. On this occasion the disciples thought, Now we do understand, now we do believe. The lonely spirit answered, "Do ye now believe? Behold the hour cometh that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone."

Very impressive is that trait in His history. He was in this world alone.

I. First, then, we meditate on the loneliness of Christ. The loneliness of Christ was caused by the divine elevation of His character. His infinite superiority severed Him from sympathy; His exquisite affectionateness made that want of sympathy a keen trial.

There is a second-rate greatness which the world can comprehend. If we take two who are brought into direct contrast by Christ Himself, the one the type of human, the other that of divine excellence, the Son of Man and John the Baptist, this becomes clearly manifest. John's life had a certain rude, rugged goodness, on which was written, in characters which required no magnifying-glass to read, spiritual excellence. The world, on the whole, accepted him. Pharisees and Sadducees went to his baptism. The people idolized him as a prophet; and, if he had not chanced to cross the path of a weak prince and a revengeful woman, we can see no reason why John might not have finished his course with joy, recognized as irreproachable. If we inquire why it was that the world accepted John and rejected Christ, one reply appears to be, that the life of the one was infinitely simple and one-sided, that of the other divinely complex. In physical nature, the naturalist finds no difficulty in comprehending the simple structure of the lowest organizations of animal life, where one uniform texture, and one organ performing the office of brain and heart and lungs, at once, leave little to perplex. But when he comes to study the complex anatomy of men,

he has the labor of a lifetime before him. It is not difficult to master the constitution of a single country; but when you try to understand the universe, you find infinite appearances of contradiction: law opposed by law; motion balanced by motion; happiness blended with misery; and the power to elicit a divine order and unity out of this complex variety is given to only a few of the gifted of the race. That which the structure of man is to the structure of the limpet, that which the universe is to a single country, the complex and boundless soul of Christ was to the souls of other men. Therefore, to the superficial observer, His life was a mass of inconsistencies and contradictions. All thought themselves qualified to point out the discrepancies. The Pharisees could not comprehend how a holy Teacher could eat with publicans and sinners. His own brethren could not reconcile His assumption of a public office with the privacy which He aimed at keeping. "If thou doest these things, show thyself to the world." Some thought He was "a good man"; others said, "Nay, but he deceiveth the people." And hence it was that He lived to see all that acceptance which had marked the earlier stage of His career—as, for instance, at Capernaum—melt away. First, the Pharisees took the alarm; then the Sadducees; then the political party of the Herodians; then the people. That was the most terrible of all: for the enmity of the upper classes is impotent; but when that cry of brute force is stirred from the depths of society, as deaf to the voice of reason as the ocean in its strength churned into raving foam by the winds, the heart of mere earthly oak quails before that. The apostles, at all events, did quail. One denied; another betrayed; all deserted. They "were scattered, each to his own": and the Truth Himself was left alone in Pilate's judgment hall.

Now learn from this a very important distinction. To feel solitary is no uncommon thing. To complain of being alone, without sympathy, and misunderstood, is general enough. In every place, in many a family, these victims of diseased sensibility are to be found, and they might find a weakening satisfaction in observing a parallel between their own feelings and those of Jesus. But before that parallel is assumed, be very sure that it is, as in His case, the elevation of your character which severs you from your species. The world has small sympathy for divine goodness; but it also has little for a great many other qualities which are disagreeable to it. You meet with no response; you are passed by; find yourself unpopular; meet with little communion. Well! Is that because you are above in the world—nobler, devising and executing grand plans, which they can not comprehend; vindicating the wronged; proclaiming and living on great principles; offending it by the saintliness of your purity, and the unworldliness of your aspirations? Then yours is the loneliness of Christ. Or is it that you are wrapped up in self, cold, disobliging, sentimental, indifferent about the welfare of others, and very much astonished that they are not deeply interested in you? You must not use these words of Christ. They have nothing to do with you.

Let us look at one or two of the occasions on which this loneliness was felt. The first time was when He was but twelve years old, when His parents found Him in the temple, hearing the doctors and asking them questions. High thoughts were in the Child's soul: expanding views of life; larger views of duty, and His own destiny.

There is a moment in every true life—to some it comes very early—when the old routine of duty is not large enough; when the parental roof seems too low, because the Infinite above is arching over the soul; when the old formulas, in creeds, catechisms, and articles, seem to be narrow, and they must either be thrown aside, or else transformed into living and breathing realities; when the earthly father's authority is being superseded by the claims of a Father in Heaven. That is a lonely,

lonely moment, when the young soul first feels God—when this earth is recognized as an “awful place, yea, the very gate of heaven”; when the dream-ladder is seen planted against the skies, and we wake, and the dream haunts us as a sublime reality.

You may detect the approach of that moment in the young man or the young woman by the awakened spirit of inquiry; by a certain restlessness of look, and an eager earnestness of tone; by the devouring study of all kinds of books; by the waning of your own influence, while the inquirer is asking the truth of the doctors and teachers in the vast temple of the world; by a certain opinionativeness, which is austere and disagreeable enough; but the austere moment of the fruit's taste is that in which it is passing from greenness into ripeness. If you wait in patience, the sour will become sweet. Rightly looked at, that opinionativeness is more truly anguish; the fearful solitude of feeling the insecurity of all that is human; the discovery that life is real, and forms of social and religious existence hollow. The old moorings are torn away, and the soul is drifting, drifting, drifting, very often without compass, except the guidance of an unseen hand, into the vast infinite of God. Then come the lonely words, and no wonder. “How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?” That solitude was felt by Christ in trial. In the desert, in Pilate's judgment hall, in the garden, He was alone; and alone must every son of man meet his trial-hour. The individuality of the soul necessitates that. Each man is a new soul in this world: untried, with a boundless “Possible” before him. No one can predict what he may become, prescribe his duties, or mark out his obligations. Each man's own nature has its own peculiar rules; and he must take up his life-plan alone, and persevere in it in a perfect privacy with which no stranger intermeddleth. Each man's temptations are made up of a host of peculiarities, internal and external, which no other mind can measure. You are tried alone; alone you pass into the desert; alone you must bear and conquer in the agony; alone you must be sifted by the world. There are moments known only to a man's own self, when he sits by the poisoned springs of existence, “yearning for a morrow which shall free him from strife.” And there are trials more terrible than that. Not when vicious inclinations are opposed to holy, but when virtue conflicts with virtue, is the real rending of the soul in twain. A temptation, in which the lower nature struggles for mastery, can be met by the whole united force of the spirit. But it is when obedience to a heavenly Father can be only paid by disobedience to an earthly one; or fidelity to duty can be only kept by infidelity to some entangling engagement; or the straight path must be taken over the misery of others; or the counsel of the affectionate friend must be met with a “Get thee behind me, Satan”:—Oh! it is then, when human advice is unavailable, that the soul feels what it is to be alone.

Once more: the Redeemer's soul was alone in dying. The hour had come—they were all gone, and He was, as He predicted, left alone. All that is human drops from us in that hour. Human faces flit and fade, and the sounds of the world become confused. “I shall die alone”—yes, and alone you live. The philosopher tells us that no atom in creation touches another atom; they all approach within a certain distance; then the attraction ceases, and an invisible something repels—they only seem to touch. No soul touches another soul except at one or two points, and those chiefly external—a fearful and lonely thought, but one of the truest of life. Death only realizes that which has been fact all along. In the central deeps of our being we are alone.

II. The spirit or temper of that solitude.

Observe its grandeur. I am alone, yet not alone. This is a feeble and sentimental way in which we speak of the Man of sorrows. We turn to the cross, and the agony, and the loneliness, to touch the softer feelings, to arouse compassion. You degrade that loneliness by your compassion. Compassion! compassion for Him! Adore if you will—respect and reverence that sublime solitariness with which none but the Father was—but no pity; let it draw out the firmer and manlier graces of the soul. Even tender sympathy seems out of place. For even in human beings, the strength that is in a man can only be learnt when he is thrown upon his own resources and left alone. What a man can do in conjunction with others does not test the man. Tell us what he can do alone. It is one thing to defend the truth when you know that your audience are already prepossessed, and that every argument will meet a willing response; and it is another thing to hold the truth when truth must be supported, if at all, alone—met by cold looks and unsympathizing suspicion. It is one thing to rush on to danger with the shouts and the sympathy of numbers; it is another thing when the lonely chieftain of the sinking ship sees the last boat-full disengage itself, and folds his arms to go down into the majesty of darkness, crushed, but not subdued.

Such and greater far was the strength and majesty of the Savior's solitariness. It was not the trial of the lonely hermit. There is a certain gentle and pleasing melancholy in the life which is lived alone. But there are the forms of nature to speak to him; and he has not the positive opposition of mankind, if he has the absence of actual sympathy. It is a solemn thing, doubtless, to be apart from men, and to feel eternity rushing by like an arrowy river. But the solitude of Christ was the solitude of a crowd. In that single human bosom dwelt the thought which was to be the germ of the world's life, a thought unshared, misunderstood, or rejected. Can you not feel the grandeur of those words, when the Man, reposing on His solitary strength, felt the last shadow of perfect isolation pass across His soul:—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Next, learn from these words self-reliance. "Ye shall leave me alone." Alone, then, the Son of Man was content to be. He threw—Himself on His own solitary thought: did not go down to meet the world; but waited, though it might be for ages, till the world should come round to Him. He appealed to the future, did not aim at seeming consistent, left His contradictions unexplained: I came from the Father: I leave the world, and go to the Father. "Now," said they, "Thou speakest no proverb"; that is enigma. But many a hard and enigmatical saying before He had spoken, and He left them all. A thread runs through all true acts, stringing them together into one harmonious chain: but it is not for the Son of God to be anxious to prove their consistency with each other. This is self-reliance, to repose calmly on the thought which is deepest in our bosoms, and be unmoved if the world will not accept it yet. To live on your own convictions against the world, is to overcome the world—to believe that what is truest in you is true for all: to abide by that, and not be over-anxious to be heard or understood, or sympathized with, certain that at last all must acknowledge the same, and that, while you stand firm, the world will come round to you, that is independence. It is not difficult to get away into retirement, and there live upon your own convictions; nor is it difficult to mix with men, and follow their convictions; but to enter into the world, and there live out firmly and fearlessly according to your own conscience—that is Christian greatness.

There is a cowardice in this age which is not Christian. We shrink from the consequences of truth. We look round and cling dependently. We ask what men will think; what others will say; whether they will stare in astonishment. Perhaps they will; but he who is calculating that will accomplish

nothing in this life. The Father—the Father which is with us and in us—what does He think? God's work can not be done without a spirit of independence. A man has got some way in the Christian life when he has learned to say humbly, and yet majestically, "I dare to be alone."

Lastly, remark the humility of this loneliness. Had the Son of Man simply said, I can be alone, He would have said no more than any proud, self-relying man can say; but when He added, "because the Father is with me," that independence assumed another character, and self-reliance became only another form of reliance upon God. Distinguish between genuine and spurious humility. There is a false humility which says, "It is my own poor thought, and I must not trust it. I must distrust my own reason and judgment, because they are my own. I must not accept the dictates of my own conscience; for is it not my own, and is not trust in self the great fault of our fallen nature?"

Very well. Now, remember something else. There is a Spirit which beareth witness in our spirits; there is a God who "is not far from any one of us"; there is a "Light which lighteth every man which cometh into the world." Do not be unnaturally humble. The thought of your own mind perchance is the thought of God. To refuse to follow that may be to disown God. To take the judgment and conscience of other men to live by, where is the humility of that? From whence did their conscience and judgment come? Was the fountain from which they drew exhausted for you? If they refused like you to rely on their own conscience, and you rely upon it, how are you sure that it is more the mind of God than your own which you have refused to hear?

Look at it in another way. The charm of the words of great men—those grand sayings which are recognized as true as soon as heard—is this, that you recognize them as wisdom which passed across your own mind. You feel that they are your own thoughts come back to you, else you would not at once admit them: "All that floated across me before, only I could not say it, and did not feel confident enough to assert it, or had not conviction enough to put into words." Yes, God spoke to you what He did to them: only they believed it, said it, trusted the Word within them, and you did not. Be sure that often when you say, "It is only my own poor thought, and I am alone," the real correcting thought is this, "Alone, but the Father is with me,"—therefore I can live by that lonely conviction.

There is no danger in this, whatever timid minds may think—no danger of mistake, if the character be a true one. For we are not in uncertainty in this matter. It has been given us to know our base from our noble hours: to distinguish between the voice which is from above, and that which speaks from below, out of the abyss of our animal and selfish nature. Samuel could distinguish between the impulse—quite a human one—which would have made him select Eliab out of Jesse's sons, and the deeper judgment by which "the Lord said, Look not on his countenance, nor on the height of his stature, for I have refused him." Doubtless deep truth of character is required for this: for the whispering voices get mixed together, and we dare not abide by our own thoughts, because we think them our own, and not God's: and this because we only now and then endeavor to know in earnest. It is only given to the habitually true to know the difference. He knew it, because all His blessed life long He could say, "My judgment is just, because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me." The practical result and inference of all this is a very simple, but a very deep one: the deepest of existence. Let life be a life of faith. Do not go timorously about, inquiring what others think, and what others believe, and what others say. It seems the easiest, it is the most difficult thing in life to do this. Believe in God. God is near you. Throw yourself fearlessly upon Him.

Trembling mortal, there is an unknown light within your soul, which will wake when you command it. The day may come when all that is human, man and woman, will fall off from you; as they did from Him. Let His strength be yours. Be independent of them all now. The Father is with you. Look to Him, and He will save you.

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
 - 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net