

## Why Do I Feel So Alone

II Timothy 4:9-18

February 7, 1999

In the Southwest corner of the city of Memphis is one of the most visited homes in America. It is called Graceland and it is the former house of Elvis Presley, the king of rock and roll. Today even though Elvis died as a relatively young man, hundreds of thousands of people continue to go every year to get caught up in his career and his music of one of the most enduring entertainers in America. The night that he died one of his friends noticed that he had written a note, crumpled it up, and threw it in the trash. And after they recognized that he had died in his sleep, his friend went and got the note out. This is what Elvis wrote a few hours before he died: "I feel so alone. The night is quiet for me. I wished I could go to sleep. I'm glad that everybody is gone now. I'll probably not rest. I really don't have any need for all of this. Help me Lord." The man who used to get people to swoon at his feet at the song "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" was himself one of the most lonesome and one of the most miserable men in America. Billy Graham was asked on one occasion, what do you think is the number one malady in America? He said, people are surprised at my answer for I tell them that the number one malady in America is loneliness. He said it is because of loneliness that people sometimes enter into relationships that they should not. It is because of loneliness that people are willing to stay in relationships that they should get out of. He said its because of loneliness that people are willing to put aside their character so they can be with a group. It is because of loneliness that many people turn to drink or to drugs. He says the number one malady in America is loneliness. That is the reason that several years ago the American Council of Life Insurance companies did a survey in America. They began to deal with what are some of the big problems in our Nation, and interestingly enough, they came to the same conclusion. They said the number one problem in America is loneliness. And they said surprisingly the people who are the most lonely are college students - said they are around people many times they do not know even though they are in a group they do not feel that people pay any attention to them, they want to be liked, they want to be loved, and yet they feel so alone even in a college dormitory. And they begin to list other people, they begin to list singles, they began to list divorcees, they begin to list people who have lost a mate, they begin to mention elderly, they begin to mention housewives, and they said that behind many a smiling face there is a heart that longs to have someone to pay attention to them. And so, Tom Wolfe the noted author, said it this way; the whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness is for me not a rare and curious phenomenon peculiar to myself, but it is an essential fact of human existence. This is the reason that in our own congregation we're getting ready to spend several million dollars to build a fellowship hall and to build a family life center. The reason that we are investing this money is because we understand that one of the greatest needs for people is to be able to build a community and to be able to be around people that know them and care for them. I am aware that

some individuals say why would a church build a fellowship hall, why would a church build a family life center - people can go other places to build relationships - oh yeah they can - and they do. They go to bars, they go to happy hours, they go to places they should not go, and for a church to say all that we are interested in is for you to come and park your body for an hour on Sunday morning where you probably will not get a chance to get to know ten percent of the people in the congregation, but we're not interested in you as a person and your relationship with others, is in my view very, very superficial. And we ought to be able to say to people, yes we understand and yes we care for you, and yes we want a place where we can build community and build relationships and through that can build a relationship with God. Now in the passage of scripture that I am going to read this morning, Paul is very lonely. He's in a Roman prison. Here is one of the most famous men the world has every known - cathedrals are built after him - but when you read this passage of scripture, he is almost alone in a Roman prison. The verses just before indicate that he knows that he's getting ready to die, there's not any reason he's going to be able to get out. He usually travels with an entourage of people and now here he is in a very isolated, cold, damp, rat infested, vermin infested place, and he's largely by himself. And to me one of the most fascinating passages in the Bible is to read how this man dealt with the loneliness in his own life. And I hope that as we walk through it this morning that you will be able to find some answers for the loneliness within your own life. The first thing that he did was that he began to emphasize the person who was with him rather than all the people who were not there. Listen to what he said; Luke, do your best to come to me quickly for Demas, because he loved the world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. But Luke is with me. Most of you are aware that Luke was a physician. Paul probably led him to faith in Christ and Paul, as you know, was a person who had tremendous physical problems. He said on one occasion, I know you would like to take your eyes out and give them to me. He seemingly has some type of ailment that even when you looked at him you recognized something was wrong. When he talked about his physical body he said, I walk around as though I have a spear sticking in me. And here was this young man by the name of Luke who said, my ministry to God will be to take care of Paul. Now Paul was arrested and when he was writing this he's writing it in Rome and what you need to understand is that the only way that Paul could have anybody in prison with him was that he had to be a slave. And many Bible scholars think that Luke the physician actually sold himself to Paul so he could be his slave so he could sit with him in prison. Several months ago my son my son-in-law in Africa was in a traffic accident and he had to spend the night in jail. Released the next morning and there were no charges but he had to spend the night in jail. Closest missionary to him is two hours, John Dana came and stayed with my son-in-law all night, he slept on the floor with him. And my son-in-law said he stayed up at night and watched him because the rats kept running over his body. He stayed with him. If you think Paul is in some nice air-conditioned Holiday Inn, he's there with the rats running over him. And guess who's with him, Luke. Some of you in your life need to

emphasize the friend that you have. You need to thank God for the people that God has sent into your life. Your best friend may be a parent, your best friend may be a grandparent, your best friend may be a cousin, your best friend may be somebody you went to school with. But what you ought to do to deal with the loneliness in your life is that you ought to magnify the relationships that you have. Now please understand, friends cannot fill the place of God, but you need to spend time in building relationships with the people that you know. Second way he began to deal with the loneliness in his life was that he began to draw on people that he had written off before. Listen to what he said. He said, get Mark and bring him with you because he is helpful to me in my ministry. Boy what a change. Mark was the son of Mary. Not Mary the mother of Jesus, but another Mary - the Mary that the Bible says provided the upper room where they observed the supper of our Lord. And Mark was in the inner core, he was the man who was right there when the Christian faith started. When Paul got ready to go on the missionary journey he said, I'll take Mark with me. And the young man went with him. They got to Cypress and Mark for some reason decided he didn't want to go on and he went on back and in Paul's mind he wimped out so that when they got ready to go on another missionary journey, Barnabus said, I tell you who let's get, let's get old Mark to go with us and Paul said I'm not taking that wimp with me. It got so bad that Barnabus took Mark and went one way and Paul took Silas and went another way. Now here he is in prison. What does he turn to. You know who I'd like to see? I'd like to see old Mark. Go get him and bring him to me. It may be in your life there have been people that for some reasons you have written off. Maybe for some reasons you have broken a relationship, and maybe part of dealing with the loneliness in your life is to reach out to those people that for some reason you have let pass by. If you want a good illustration of this you should have been at the Richmond Forum a couple of weeks ago when two brothers spoke. They came out of the same room and immediately went in different directions. They are the Bennett brothers. One of the Bennett's is the lawyer for President Clinton. One of the Bennett brothers is the conservative who has been the Secretary of Education the first drug czar and the famous author. I'm sure they argue about the weather. Somebody asked them, how can two brothers be so different? And then they explained that that's not the issue. How can two brother still be brothers? Listen to the answer. How we disagree is not as important that we are brothers. Sometimes for political reasons sometimes for theological reasons sometimes for social reasons, we write people off and sometimes they would be the person that if we could rise above those things, we could get to the point that they may be some of our very best friends. There's a third way in which he dealt with it. He began to deal with it when he began to care for himself. Listen to what he said. He said, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus and my scrolls, especially the parchments. I don't know whether you're familiar with the name Leo Buscalla. Leo Buscalla was an Italian - one of the most effervescent, brilliant men in America. He for many years was a professor at Southern Cal. And Southern Cal is the only place I know of under Leo Buscalla you could get a major in - listen - love. Buscalla said we teach people how to do everything but the most important thing and

that's how to love. And in one of his books he has written it's called Bus Nine To Paradise, he has a whole section in there about loneliness. And he said, one of the reasons that people struggle so much with loneliness is they do not develop themselves and so when loneliness comes, they do not have any resources to call on. So he began to talk almost I felt like I was reading the Bible. He said, begin to take care of yourself physically. Begin to expand yourself mentally and that will be one of the antidotes for loneliness in your life. One of the things that my wife does is that she is involved with a an organization called Ministering to Ministers. Ministering to Ministers is a group that started here in Richmond that helps ministers who are forcefully terminated from their jobs. They have conferences all over America but two or three times a year they meet here and my wife goes out and speaks. Now one of the things that my wife has is the gift of mercy. (END SIDE A - BEGIN SIDE B) If you are hurting, if you are handicapped, she is drawn toward you and I say that that' s the reason she married me. If you were talking to ministers, they've sat in a congregation like this and enough people raised their hand and said we'd like to fire him, and you had to sit down and talk with them, what is one of the things you would talk about? Listen to what my wife talks to them about. Take care of yourself. If you don't continue to read, if you don't continue to take care of yourself physically, then all of these problems are going to be greater than you think. Paul said at this time, listen - he's getting ready to die, but he said bring me a coat, I want to take care of my body. Getting ready to die, bring me a book, I want to go to the execution chamber, I want to go reading books. One of the ways in which you can deal with the art of caring of loneliness is the art learn the art of caring for yourself. Fourth thing that he did. Fourth thing that he made the decision was he would not spend time, emotional energy trying to build relationships for which there was no hope. Alexander the metalsmith did me great harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too need to be on guard against him because he has strongly opposed our message. Sometimes, when you'd like to build a relationship, and you put all of your energy in it, and it's not going to work out, and you can keep on trying, and you can keep on trying, and you ought to try as much as you can, but after a while you come to the decision this is not going to work out. Paul said, just as I reach out to try to make friends with those that I might have neglected he said, I came to the understanding that sometimes I just have to write some situations off. I tell people all the time you have just so much emotional energy. You can spend all of your energy trying to do relationships for which it will never work or try to spend your time for relationships for which there's hope. Once you come to understand that, then you can begin to get to the place where you can build good relationships. Notice the next one. He decided he would not spend his time in bitterness, but spend his time in forgiveness and thanksgiving. In my first offense, nobody came to my support, everybody deserted me. But I'm not going to hold it against them. And you can spend your time as well saying they should have been here, they should have done this, this is what they have done, or you can spend your time in forgiveness and thanksgiving. And one of the ways in which you do that is that you stop thinking about me and you start thinking about them. You get out of yourself and

you start thinking about how you can help others. Preacher decided on one occasion that he would start a sewing project in his church. He would ask people the ladies to come and sew and give the clothes to the orphans and many of the ladies said we don't know how to sew, that it takes too much time, it's a good project Pastor, thank you but we don't want to do that. So he said, you know once a month we go down to this hospital where a lot of people are there with mental and emotional problems. This would be a wonderful project for the women there, and so he said, I went down and I offered it to them and he said, to a woman they said to me, we got enough problems of our own we don't have enough time to take on anybody else's. And then he said, ah - now I know why many of them are there. When you can never get outside of yourself, when you can never offer forgiveness, when you just drown in your own pity and your own bitterness, loneliness will eat you alive. Notice how he walked on. He began to walk on when he decided that he would remember how God was working in his life. The Lord stood by my side, gave me strength so that the message was fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it and I was delivered from the lion's mouth. People understand that the reason that you and I deal so much with loneliness is because we are cut off from God. When God made us, He made us to have a relationship with Him and when that thing called sin came in, somehow or another, even in our best moments, we feel cut off and sometimes you can be with friends but it never meets this need. Paul said the way I'm going to deal with it is that I'm going to spend my time thinking about all the ways God has used me and what God has done for me. One of the men I have appreciated so much through the years is the man who was, at one time, one of the assistant ministers of our church, his name was Ernest Northen. People who have been here a while remember that Ernest was a retired Army Chaplain, he got out, pastored several churches and then you invited him to come here, work part time as minister of visitation. One of the great testimonies that Ernest did while he was here was that he cared so deeply for his wife who was ill for many years. When Judy and I moved here, Ernest Northen's wife had died and he invited us over to his house to eat an evening meal. And after we ate he began to talk about his wife and about the illness and about what he was doing and then he turned to me and said something I remembered all of these years. He said, you know I am alone, but I am never lonely. And I said, well Ernest, how do you do that? He said, because I nurture my relationship to God. That's what Paul said. I'm going to keep my relationship with Him. That's the way he did it. He kept claiming God's promises for the future. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack, the Lord will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom, to Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Let me quote you. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, You were with me. Your rod and Thy staff they comfort me. I will not leave you orphans, I will send a spirit to be with you, and lo I am with you always even to the end of the earth. And I wanted to remind you about a God who said, even when you are alone I want you to know that I am still with you. Many of you in this room are dealing with this malady of loneliness. Some of you are feeling that you're cut off and isolated and alone. Maybe that you're almost like a Presley and that you have a

lot of people around you but feel like no one ever touches this inner spot in your heart. I wanted to remind you today there are some ways you can walk with God to be able to find a way out of that. And it may be that some of you have begun to realize that the reason I have this emptiness in my life is that I don't have a relationship with God, and I'm interested in trying to build that. You recognize that the way you do that is you give your life unto Jesus Christ, and you may want to come today to do exactly that. Maybe that you're here today and you're a Christian and you say, you know, I, I understand more now why it's important to be a member of a church. I understand why it needs to be a part of a community and what I want to do today is I want to join in not only for myself but to build a community for others, and you want to come today to move your life in membership. As you know, we always stand together and sing, provide you an opportunity to say yes, that's what the decision I want to make for God. You're going to come this morning to make that decision for Him. So we stand and sing to provide you that opportunity. Let's stand together and do that now please.