

A Pandemic Survival Kit: How to Be Alone
by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Lord God,
let the words of your servant's mouth
and the meditations of our hearts
be pleasing in your sight,
O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Scripture: Psalm 139:1-14, 23-24 (NRSV)

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

...
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – How to be Alone

Poet and priest John Donne wrote centuries ago, "No man is an island."

We may not be on an island, but in this season of physical distancing, many of us have felt like we've been stranded on an island, like Tom Hanks in "Castaway."

This might be a little more manageable for all you introverts out there—your whole life has been training for this moment! If you've been blessed with good health, you're probably reveling in your cleared out schedule for more alone time. That's called JOMO—the joy of missing out.

But my dear extroverted friends, this social distancing has been much tougher for you who LOVE being in the company of others. Extroverts often experience FOMO—fear of missing out.

But no matter who we are, extrovert, introvert or ambivert, we need to learn in this pandemic how to be alone because it appears physical distancing is going to have to continue through 2021...

What we first need to do is differentiate between being alone and being lonely. They aren't one and the same. It can be good to be alone.

But *loneliness* is a real problem in America, even before the pandemic. One study found that 43% of older adults in America are lonely. Some mental health professionals are saying that there may be a second pandemic that arises out of the first—the pandemic of loneliness because of the distancing we’re needing to do to prevent the spread of the disease. Experts have known for years the dangers of isolation—loneliness is just as bad for you as smoking, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Also, we’re more vulnerable to substance abuse when we’re feeling lonely and bored.

Zoom and social media have been extremely helpful in this pandemic, but all of us are missing meeting with people in person—in church, classrooms, restaurants, family gatherings, sporting events, and so much more. We need to find good ways to be alone.

I recently came across a newspaper article with a recommended quarantine reading list. One of the books that caught my eye is the Russian novel “*Oblomov*” written by Goncharov. Turns out this mid-19th century book is famous in Russia and was Tolstoy’s favorite novel that he re-read many times.

Most of the novel takes place in the main character Oblomov’s apartment. In the first fifty pages he only moves from his bed to his chair. His deadly sin is sloth. In the book, Oblomov has dreams about living in a country called Oblomovostan where he can effortlessly enjoy peace and tranquility. A word is made up in the book after him—Oblomovism. Oblomovism is when you find excuses to avoid doing what needs to be done. Although Oblomov was alone a lot, he didn’t learn how to be alone well.

Thankfully, our faith can teach us how to be alone in a redemptive way that will grow our souls, build our character, and make us better when we’re together with others. Remember Jesus—before starting his ministry, he spent 40 days by himself in the wilderness alone. Before making important decisions in his ministry, the Scriptures say that Jesus often “went off to a lonely place and prayed there.” The Apostle Paul, after his Damascus Road experience, rather mysteriously went to Arabia for three years of solitude before he began his ministry to the gentiles.

Seasons of solitude are crucial for building Christian character and maturity. Let’s not waste this opportunity, Immanuel. Let’s reframe this season of shelter and quarantine, into opportunities to practice the spiritual discipline of solitude.

I heard a Rabbi talk about changing our perspective on COVID-19. The Hebrew word “Covid” or “Kovod” means “glory” or “divine presence.” So without diminishing the seriousness of what’s going on, let’s see how COVID-19 can help us understand Kovod better—where we grow closer to God and to cultivate a deeper awareness of God’s presence. The choice is ours to see this alone time as either a pit to fall into or a portal to take you to new places.

See this as an invitation to see your solitude with the eyes of faith—as an opportunity to meet with God and get to know who you really are.

David in Psalm 139 says,

Where can I go from your spirit,
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I climb the heavens, you are there.
If I take the wings of the dawn
Or dwell in the sea's furthest end,
Even there your hand would lead me;
Your right hand would hold me fast.

We can continue the idea today,

"When I'm home alone in quarantine...
There you are God...right there with me."

God breaks socially distancing rules with us. He wants to be close with us, to commune with us. St. Augustine put it this way centuries ago:

"God is closer to us than we are to ourselves."

God also knows us better than we know ourselves.

See solitude as an opportunity for quality time and quantity time with God. You've got an opportunity to get to know God in a way you've never known before. Don't squander it. Use your solitary time well—wait upon God and God alone.

But I think we're all realizing that being alone can be scary—our compulsions, fears, and hidden motives often come to the surface. They've been there all along, we just didn't notice them. Solitude has a way of revealing these realities to us. Before, they were just masked and drowned out by busyness and distractions. But not now. But if you have the courage to enroll in the school of solitude, you'll have a riveting teacher—helping you to learn and see new things, like:

- *Who am I when I don't have attention or recognition?*
- *Who am I when I can't do a lot of things or go many places?*

Father Richard Rohr put it this way:

"It is easier to belong to a group than it is to belong to God."

When we're still before our Maker, we not only get to know God better, we get to know ourselves better, for we're made in the image of God.

John Calvin put it this way:

"The knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are interrelated."

See solitude as a way of traveling—not outward, but inward travel. Explore undiscovered things about yourself.

Solitude trains us to take total responsibility for all of our lives, rather than explaining things away or blaming others or just stuffing our problems. Own it.

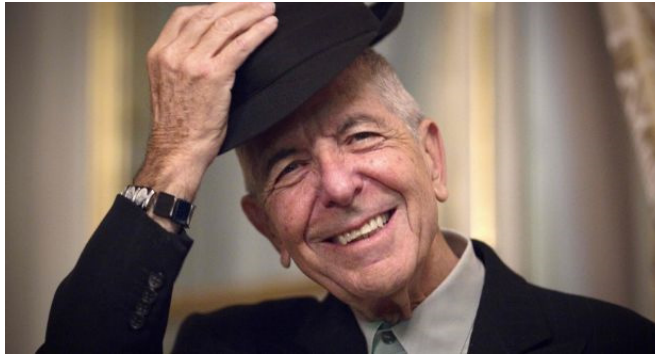
When we're alone—we go through dark nights of the soul. Slowing down and seeing our dark side a little more clearly is frightening. But hear the good news, as our Psalm says:

With God, even the darkness is not dark.
With God, the night is as bright as the day,
Darkness is as light to God.

Entering into the solitude is a way to step out of the darkness and into the light. To be still is to believe that God is with us, even in the midst of all that's going on outside of us, and inside of us—the fears, doubts, worries, and loneliness. God is there in the storm. God stills us in the storm. Knowing ourselves better, we can serve others better—understand them better.

Being alone is a spiritual test, a spiritual challenge for us to keep the faith and stay true to God when we're not at our best or no one's looking.

Trusting God when we feel weak and not in control of our lives or situation.



Canadian singer and poet Leonard Cohen taking off his hat to salute in Paris (2012)

I like how Leonard Cohen put it:

*"Blessed are you
who has given each man a shield of loneliness
so that he cannot forget you."*

Being alone puts us in touch with how much we need God.

- That we can't make it on our own.
- That we need our brothers and sisters that we miss so much.
- That no man or woman is an island.

And so may God use this gift of solitude to:

Free you from the addiction to being busy and distracted. May your old friend solitude liberate you from comparing yourself to others. And may God's stillness quiet the internal noises that drown out God's voice in your life.

Amen.

GUIDED PRAYER

Sin alienates us from God and one another. We feel estranged in our relationships. But the good news is that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He didn't come for the healthy, but for the sick. He came for us. So breathe deep and receive God's embrace of love found in Christ Jesus—the human face of God. I'll guide you through a prayer time using a prayer by Leonard Cohen.

*Blessed are you
who has given each man
a shield of loneliness
so that he cannot forget you.*

*You are the truth of loneliness,
And only your name addresses it.*

*Strengthen my loneliness
that I may be healed in your name,
which is beyond all consolations
that are uttered on this earth.*

*Only in your name
can I stand in the rush of time,
only when this loneliness is yours
can I lift my sins toward your mercy.*

God, we pray for all the lonely hearts out there.
Those who feel stranded at home or in hospitals.
Lonely hearts who are far from home and family.
Lonely hearts that haven't found their rest in you.

We pray for leaders and health care providers who might feel alone as they care for so many.

We pray for doctors and nurses and researchers—who risk their lives to care for the sick. Replenish them, and let them feel our prayers.

Thank you, God, for being a God who comes near to us in Christ Jesus—even when we were unclean and enemies of God. Restore in us a clean heart. Fill us with the warmth of your love and forgiveness.

Pray now to your Maker in the silence of your own heart...

Amen.

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"Canadian singer and poet Leonard Cohen taking off his hat to salute in Paris."

Photograph: AFP/Getty Images (2012)

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