

Season 3 | Episode 19

## Q&A – Loneliness

Jenny Hill

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts or find us at [joniandfriends.org/podcast](https://joniandfriends.org/podcast).

Today, I'm joined by my friend once again, Jenny Hill, who's an author and speaker, holds her doctorate in education and lives with cerebral palsy. Welcome back to the podcast, Jenny.

Jenny Hill:

Thanks, Crystal.

Crystal Keating:

Well, it's good to have you, but we are discussing a rather heavy topic today, but one that needs to be talked about and that is the subject of loneliness. I'm so thankful to have a real friendship with you and one that we have talked outside of our recorded conversations, just about being women who are not married, women who don't have children. And add COVID onto that and some of the loneliness that we've both experienced and just finding our hope and our anchor in Christ. So I think this is going to be a conversation that resonates with many, but hopefully encourages many too. As you call it, flipping the script on not just being known, but who needs to be known and looking outside of ourselves.

Jenny, in a blog post many years ago, you wrote something that surprised me. You wrote, "My single girlfriends are bending the ear of heaven asking for a mate. My married ones are praying for babies. I have a hard time even pretending in the presence of the Almighty that these are my deepest desires. I'd like to become a speaker. I want to teach people to see each other." So in light of our current topic of loneliness, what did you mean by this?

Jenny Hill:

I first want to preface that I wrote that blog post in 2015. We're now recording in 2021. And I don't think I'd mind a mate. I'm just going to put it out there.

Crystal Keating:

Okay.

Jenny Hill:

But...

Crystal Keating:  
This is real talk.

Jenny Hill:

It is real talk. But I really do enjoy speaking. And as I think over the last season of COVID, if I were to name some things that I feel loss about, was actually the loss of being able to speak publicly. I think I had about five things lined up before March 2020. I was going to be part of a TEDx event. I was going to fly to a conference and speak about my dissertation research. I was going to speak at a church. And then it all stopped. I think some of those opportunities are now passed.

Crystal Keating:  
Well, that's disappointing.

Jenny Hill:

It is. And it was helpful for me to talk to other people who are in academia, who also just named that as loss. Like these are the things that have happened. What's interesting though is the opportunities to speak online have kind of increased.

Crystal Keating:  
Certainly.

Jenny Hill:

TED-Ed got ahold of one of my talks and put it on their YouTube channel. I'm talking with you today. So I think there's different avenues, but it's certainly changed. But what I was really getting at though in that blog post is I really care about how people see each other. And I think that that desire has grown out of being stared at in public and wishing that people would see more than just my body and how I move for a second, but actually take the time to get to know me as a whole person.

I have reflected a lot on this idea of when we go into a public space usually, we, by human nature, often scan the room and we're wondering who do I know in this room? Because you want to go engage in that conversation with that person.

Crystal Keating:  
Right.

Jenny Hill:

But what if we changed that, and instead of going into a room and immediately scanning it, who do I know? But actually look around and ask yourself, who needs to be known? Who is not being included here? Who is sitting in the corner, playing a game on their phone because they don't know how to connect and so that's how they're hiding? How might we connect with those people?

Crystal Keating:

That is hard to do when you, yourself, are feeling lonely or new. How do you do that?

Jenny Hill:

Well, here's what I've found, Crystal. Now, I am introverted, but I find new people fascinating. I think they have stories to share and life experiences that we don't yet know about. And I guess I see it as an opportunity to learn something new. And sometimes I find that more refreshing even than catching up with somebody I've known for a while.

Crystal Keating:

That's a great perspective.

Jenny Hill:

The other thing as it relates to disability, this is really challenging and I don't actually have answers about how to do this, but maybe to bring awareness. It's pretty common in social settings to have perhaps food out on the table, but then people are kind of standing and milling about, and they're kind of popping from conversation to conversation, right? Maybe you have a small plate, so you're filling it up periodically. That is a very uncomfortable scenario for me. I can't stand very long without leaning against something.

It takes a lot of energy and balance to do that. And then I'm spending my mental energy on being balanced. And now you're going to put a plate of food in my hand. And even worse, a beverage usually without a lid. Buy lids for your coffee, y'all. Your disability community will thank you. And then I find it very hard to socialize. And then sometimes I'll start looking for a chair to sit down, but that's kind of outside of the people milling around and talking. And so suddenly you're alone and people don't really realize it. And I don't necessarily expect them to stop doing the activity to come find me. But I think those experiences have also spurred me on to just be a little bit more aware that people have different needs.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. So being very mindful when you're in a group like that, to be noticing and sensing, this might be a challenge for someone, or I can be helpful in this way.

Jenny Hill:

Yes, exactly. And so I think that's what's motivated me to want to do some self-reflection around how I view other people, but also how I behave when I'm with other people. And again, that's where if you have a relationship with somebody with a disability and you've had multiple interactions with each other, I think you start to understand some of these idiosyncrasies about people. And you realize, my friend's going to need a chair. And they may never tell you that, but you know because you've been with them enough times.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and we talked about loneliness isn't necessarily just being alone. It's being with a group and not necessarily feeling understood or known. Spending regular time with people and knowing them, I think really is comforting to meet those needs and anticipate the needs. Okay. So for those of us who may have been in long seasons of isolation, not just loneliness, but

physical isolation. And not just COVID, but long seasons of loneliness because of singleness or divorce, losing a loved one, the ache can go so deep. And I don't know about you, but it's a grief that can really weigh me down. And it leads me... It really impacts me spiritually. It leads me to ask many questions of the Lord. And to be puzzled over his providence in my life. And furthermore, right now, even it turns the focus on me rather than who I could reach out to and bless, which is, I think the antidote to sometimes what I'm feeling. This is really personal, but have you had long seasons of loneliness? And if so, how did you manage them?

Jenny Hill:

Crystal, by God's providence I guess I had this experience yesterday. So I feel like a lot of these feelings are very accessible. I want to clarify or put an exclamation point on something you just said. In my experience, there is a difference between isolation and loneliness. To me, I feel like isolation is when you're actually physically separate from everybody else. And I think so many of us have experienced that during COVID-19. You may be the only human you saw today. Or you waved at your neighbors from a distance, that's isolation. But loneliness, I think can be most felt sometimes when you're with other people. Because I think loneliness or at least how I've experienced it lately is that inability to be able to relate to that other person. And an awareness that you're not having that shared experience and that can be painful and even feel like grief.

That is very, very real. So I think you're asking how I've dealt with that. A few things. One, we live in a very interesting time in which we have access to a lot of media and lately some talks by Elisabeth Elliot...

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Jenny Hill:

...have come across my YouTube feed. Elisabeth Elliot is no longer with us. She died in 2015. But the Elisabeth Elliot Foundation was actually just established a year ago. So there's now many of her sermons on YouTube and some podcasts recordings. And for the listeners that don't know, she actually lost two different husbands. One to being speared to death on the mission field. Another to cancer. And then remained married to her third husband until she died. But she's definitely experienced a lot of loneliness. And she knows and speaks of Joni Eareckson. She refers to her as Joni Eareckson in some of her talks. So I recommend looking her up.

But she did a sermon called "We're Lonely Because We're Human." And I thought, wow, I want to listen to that for multiple reasons. One, no one ever preaches on this.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah.

Jenny Hill:

And two, I think you're right, this is a human emotion. I think there's a temptation to think that only I experience loneliness or only people with disabilities experience loneliness. I think we experience higher levels of loneliness, but it is in fact, a human emotion that we all experience. And her encouragement in that talk is to remember that God promises to be with us.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. That is so true. And kind of what comes to mind is that hymn, "Oh, what a friend we have in Jesus."

Jenny Hill:

Yes. Yes.

Crystal Keating:

And that is so true. And maybe one of the reasons loneliness isn't talked about often is because perhaps there's this sense of, well, if you have Jesus, then you're not supposed to be lonely. But I love what Dane Ortlund says in his book, *Gentle and Lowly*. "It would be cruel to suggest that human friendship is irrelevant once one has been befriended by Christ. God has made us for fellowship, for union of heart, with other people. Everyone gets lonely—including introverts. But Christ's heart for us means that he will be our never-failing friend no matter what friends we do or do not enjoy on earth. He offers us friendship that gets underneath the pain of our loneliness. He offers us friendship that gets underneath the pain of our loneliness. While that pain does not go away, its sting is made fully bearable by the far deeper friendship of Jesus."

Jenny Hill:

Wow. That is well said.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. And I take great comfort in that. And you talk about Elisabeth Elliot. It's like, I can listen to her talk about loneliness because she's experienced great loss.

Jenny Hill:

Yes. As I age there's a lot of wisdom in listening to people who have walked with the Lord for a few decades longer than I have, or are in heaven, because they not only are hoping that God is walking with them, they've experienced it time and time again.

Crystal Keating:

One of the things about loneliness is that it's really created in me a deep awareness for the greater church, especially for shut-ins. I think we've talked about this, but who are shut-ins? It's often people who are elderly or families affected by disability who aren't able to participate in a Sunday morning or Saturday night worship like they often wish. And so how do we bring fellowship and friendship and church to those in their home? That's entirely possible, especially as we move out of COVID restrictions.

Jenny Hill:

Yeah. I think the streaming church service is actually perhaps a trend that will keep, because now people who weren't able to go to church can get it in their home, which I think is fabulous. I've kept in contact with people through Zoom and FaceTime and the Marco Polo app, where you can leave video messages. But right, as the COVID restrictions decrease, I hope we can actually visit people in the flesh. I think there's somebody who tweeted or mentioned about your [Joni and Friends Family Retreats](#). They said, "Not only do I remember that I'm loved by God,

but I'm also loved by God's people." And I think that's the gift of Sunday morning. We can remember, but that both are true.

Crystal Keating:

Well, we all want to be known, but as we've talked about in many conversations on our podcast, living with a disability can create barriers to building social connections. Jenny, as we close our time together, do you have a practical encouragement or advice for building meaningful relationships and combating loneliness?

Jenny Hill:

Yes. I think first of all, it is okay to say it out loud. I think I can meet a lot of my needs. I can pay the mortgage; I can cook a meal for myself. And by its very design, I cannot meet my own relational needs because relationships require more than one person. And I think it's okay to say it out loud to yourself, to God, to trusted few that you are actually experiencing this. Because it may evoke feelings of pain, grief, embarrassment, loss, hopelessness, because you're not sure how to solve this problem. All of the above. I think God can bring comfort and I think family and friends might have some solutions for you, including their own fellowship. Secondly, I think, I've been musing on this, but I think one of the purposes of hunger is so that we actually go seek out a nourishing meal.

And I wonder if loneliness works the same way, if it's really a hunger to be with people and have this deep fellowship. So just like I pay attention to hunger, I think it's wise to pay attention to loneliness. And yesterday I felt lonely, for example, and my neighbor ended up coming and talking to me just outside for a while. And I realized, wow, I really needed that. I needed another human to come alongside me and just talk to me. So in those moments, when you realize I'm lonely, just like you realize I'm hungry, I think there's an invitation to do something about it. I think right now there may be some restrictions and where people don't feel safe with human interactions. So then I think maybe we do need to look at FaceTime and Zoom and those things. But I think it can be as simple as getting out of your house and going to the grocery store or talking to a neighbor or inviting somebody over or calling them on the phone.

I think that's really helpful. I also think there's probably some wisdom in doing healthy things for yourself, like going for a walk and eating nutritiously and not just grabbing junk food and saying, "I don't feel very good right now, so I'm just going to eat whatever I want because that's going to feel good." And finally, I have a friend that I said to her, I said, "The next time I call you, I want you to lovingly ask me, did you go to the throne before going to the phone?" We do need people in our lives, but I think we need to have also an ongoing dialogue with God about this. I was in a situation recently where I realized everybody around me was in a very different life phase than I was. And just in that moment, people around me didn't know this, but I just began to pray to God. Lord, help me to be grateful and happy for what you've given these other people that I don't have. And to enjoy this moment with them.

Crystal Keating:

That's a humble prayer. And God loves to answer prayers like that. Jenny, it's always a joy and a blessing to speak with you. Thanks so much for coming on the podcast with us today.

Jenny Hill:

Thank you.

Crystal Keating:

Thank you for listening today. If you've been inspired, please send me a message, or leave a five-star review on your favorite app. That's a great way to help other people find encouragement from these conversations. And to get our next episode automatically, subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Crystal Keating and thank you for listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast.

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