

Loving God as a Whole Person

FOUR SHORT BIBLE STUDIES ON TAKING CARE OF YOUR HEART



*“Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.”*

—Proverbs 4:23, NIV

We think of “heart” as the physical organ that circulates our blood and keeps us alive and healthy. We also refer to our hearts as a place of deep emotion—our hearts swell when we think of someone, or hurt at a loss. Scripture writers use the word “heart” to encapsulate both of these meanings. Throughout the Bible, they use heart to refer to the center of our being. It is both an organ and the source of our feelings, desires, and passions. They recognize that all our parts—physical, emotional, spiritual and relational—are interrelated and stem from the same source.

As the center of our being, our hearts are of utmost importance:

- Christ makes his home in our hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:17)
- God’s love is poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5)
- We believe with our hearts (Romans 10:10)
- Our words reflect what is in our hearts (Matt 12:34)

Because our hearts are connected to every part of who we are, taking care of our hearts is critical. As we care for our *whole* selves, we come to know God in the center of our being—and we can be “completely filled with the very nature of God” (Ephesians 3:16-19). This is a reality beyond our comprehension, too wonderful to even grasp!

Scripture gives us a helpful framework in taking care of all the aspects of who we are. Here are four Bible studies to get you started.



PHYSICAL CARE

Read *In the evening a large flock of quails flew in, enough to cover the camp, and in the morning there was dew all around the camp. When the dew evaporated, there was something thin and flaky on the surface of the desert. It was as delicate as frost. When the Israelites saw it, they didn't know what it was and asked each other, "What is it?" Moses said to them, "This is the food that the LORD has given you to eat. The Lord has commanded that each of you is to gather as much of it as he needs, two quarts for each member of his household (Exodus 16:13-16).*

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence (Luke 24:40-43).

Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts (Acts 2:46).

- Reflect**
- After Moses led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, they grumbled and cried out for food to sustain them in the wilderness. In the morning God gave them bread from heaven and in the evening quail. How could our need for food teach us to rely on God?
 - God instructed the Israelites to take only as much food as they needed. What can this teach us about trusting God with our physical needs?
 - When Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection, he showed them the wounds from his crucifixion then asked them for something to eat. Does it surprise you to think of God taking on a physical body through his son, Jesus? Can God relate to our physical needs? Do you think taking care of our bodies is important to God?
 - The early church gathered together to worship in the Temple and eat meals in each other's homes. How do meals help us foster relationships and grow in unity? Should sharing meals be part of our communal worship?
 - What is the role of food in your life—do you eat on the run and treat food as fuel? Is food a way of bringing people in your life together? Do you savor your meals?
 - What other ways can you think of from these or other passages to take care of your body and thus your heart? Consider the Sabbath, rest in general or music.

React Prepare yourself a healthy meal. Ask God to be present with you in the preparation and partaking. Take time selecting your ingredients, at the grocery store or farmer's market. Consider where your food comes from and how it was harvested. Pick a variety of colors. Pay attention to the smells and textures as you cook your food. Invite a friend or family member to enjoy your work with you! Thank God for his provision of this meal.

Pray Dear God, thank you for caring about my physical wellbeing. Let my physical needs—like hunger and thirst—remind me to rely on you to sustain me. Give me what I need each day and each moment. Help me to take time to enjoy the ways you provide for me. Amen.



EMOTIONAL CARE

Read *The Lord is near to those who are discouraged; he saves those who have lost all hope* (Psalm 34:18).

Why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled? I will put my hope in God, and once again I will praise him, my savior and my God (Psalm 42:5).

He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds (Psalm 147:3).

Jesus saw her weeping, and he saw how the people with her were weeping also; his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved. "Where have you buried him?" he asked them. "Come and see, Lord," they answered. Jesus wept. "See how much he loved him!" the people said (John 11:33-36).

- Reflect**
- When Jesus found out his close friend Lazarus died and he saw people grieving, his heart was deeply touched. Jesus also felt the emotional impact personally: he wept. Have you thought about Jesus having a wide range of emotions? Do you think Jesus can empathize with what you are feeling?
 - Jesus' grief indicated his deep love for his friend Lazarus, and he experienced the loss within a close community. Do you share your feelings with other people? What role have other people played in your own times of grieving?
 - The Psalms promise that the Lord is near those who are discouraged and that he heals the brokenhearted. Have you experienced God's presence in feelings of loss, sadness, or hopelessness?
 - The Psalmist also says "once again I will praise him." Do you think God is present in your praise, joy, and happiness?

React Have a conversation with someone you trust. Invite Jesus to be with you. This could involve meeting a friend for coffee, going to a therapist or counselor, or talking to your pastor. Be honest about how you are feeling and your life experiences. Don't be afraid to cry, get angry, or express great joy. Pay attention to the ways you encounter God's grace through this person's words and presence.

Pray Dear God, thank you for entering into our human experience and feeling deep emotions. Be near to me in my times of grief and loss, as well as my joy and rejoicing. Give me courage to share my feelings with other people, and to know that you are present. Amen.



SPIRITUAL CARE

Read *After sending the people away, he went up a hill by himself to pray. When evening came, Jesus was there alone (Matthew 14:23).*

Very early the next morning, long before daylight, Jesus got up and left the house. He went out of town to a lonely place, where he prayed (Mark 1:35).

But he would go away to lonely places, where he prayed (Luke 5:16).

- Reflect**
- Why was it important for Jesus to get away by himself and pray?
 - Jesus not only spent time alone, he sent people away who needed him in order to be alone. Is it difficult for you to spend time with God when other people need your help?
 - Jesus went to “lonely places” to pray. How does it feel to be alone? Is it lonely? Do you enjoy it? What are the challenges and rewards?
 - Spending time alone with God was so important to Jesus that he went out in the very early morning and the evening. Are you aware of your *need* for time spent with God? How does time spent with God help you accomplish your other tasks, stay healthy, and live as a whole person?
 - What are other ways you spend time with God? Do they involve going to church or spending time in community?

React Pick a day this week to spend an hour—or two!—alone with God. What time of day will you choose? Early in the morning before your kids are awake? During your lunch break at work? Think about where you will go, perhaps a nearby park or a quiet room in your house. Be intentional to protect your time. Turn off your phone and any other electronics. When stressful thoughts come up, simply observe them and then let them be signs that point your thoughts back to God.

Pray Dear God, thank you for always being available to spend time with me. Help me create space in my life to connect with you and so improve my spiritual health. Give me discernment about when I need to be alone with you, or to meet with you alongside other people. Make these times of renewal and strength. Amen.



RELATIONAL CARE

Read *He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. 'Father,' the son said, 'I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.' But the father called to his servants. 'Hurry!' he said. 'Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.' And so the feasting began (Luke 15:20b-24).*

If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with a wrong. Try to do what everyone considers to be good. Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody (Romans 12:17-18).

You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:12-14).

- Reflect**
- In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the son leaves his family and squanders his inheritance. Yet when he returns home, his father runs toward him and joyfully receives him back. What is the relational conflict in this story? How is forgiveness extended? Who initiated reconciliation?
 - Do you think it was difficult for the son to come home? Why?
 - Do you think it was difficult for the father to extend forgiveness? Why?
 - The father not only received his son back home, but also threw him a party and gave him a place of honor. How does this demonstrate the father's "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience"?
 - Why is forgiveness and reconciliation important in our relationships? How do they contribute to being relationally whole?
 - Have you experienced forgiveness in your own life?

React Deal with a conflict in your life. Is there a relationship that needs repairing? Does forgiveness need to be asked or given? Think about the feelings you have experienced in this conflict. What would be lost without repairing this relationship? How can you take the first step to initiate the process? This may involve waiting with open arms or running toward someone. It may involve a meal or celebration, like the prodigal son and his father. Be open to the new life that can come through resolving this issue.

Pray Dear God, thank you for always offering me forgiveness. Help me do the same for others. Give me the boldness to approach a relationship that needs mending. Show me if this involves steadfastly waiting or running after reconciliation. Let my relationships reflect your love, as you lead me into wholeness. Amen.