

# Recovery from Distorted Images of Self

## 6 studies for groups or individuals

by

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**A**nn is attractive, athletic, bright and successful. Ann is also generous, kind and well liked by all who know her.

The images which shape Ann's self concept, however, do not reflect any of these realities. Ann sees herself as ugly, awkward, stupid and alone in the world. She sees herself as unlovable, unworthy and incapable.

Our self images are not, of course, simple reflections of what we see in the mirror each morning. They are complex mosaics assembled from our emotional and relational histories. But why do the images which shape how we think and feel about ourselves become so distorted? Although our images of ourselves are always in the process of changing in response to new experiences, the critical foundations for our self images are laid early in life in the words and deeds of our parents and other significant care givers. Any distortions at this foundational level can have profound implications throughout life.

Children are dependent on their parents and other adults for everything - for shelter and food, for love and acceptance for explanations of the world around them and for feedback about who they are and how they are perceived by others. Children who receive appropriate feedback expressed as attention, affection, understanding and appropriate limit setting will grow to see themselves as valuable, lovable and competent. Unfortunately, not all children receive this kind of healthy foundation for their self image. Criticism, abuse, emotional or physical neglect, abandonment and smothering communicate to a child that she is not lovable or valuable or capable. Children easily internalize these distortions and become vulnerable to depression, addictions, and perfectionism as they grow into adulthood. It is not only experiences of neglect and abuse in childhood that seed these thorny weeds. Experiences outside the home and in adulthood can also be damaging. Rejection by peers can leave us feeling unloveable. Failures at school or work can leave us feeling less than capable. Observing anorexic, surgically enhanced models and movie stars can distort our body image. Experiencing broken relationships can shatter our self concept and undermine our self-confidence.

Fortunately, it is possible to heal from distortions in the way we see ourselves. There are no quick fixes for deeply rooted distortions, but healing is possible. We can build healthier foundations for our self image. The central task of recovery

from distorted images of self is to learn to think and feel about ourselves in ways that are consistent with how God thinks and feels about us. It is the clarity of God's image of us — as communicated through the community of God's people — that makes it possible for us to experience healing from the distorted ways in which we see ourselves.

The purpose of this Bible study is to provide you with an opportunity to reflect on a few of the many passages in the Bible that talk about God's image of you. Many of us, of course, anticipate that God will see us in the same distorted ways in which we see ourselves. We may expect God to criticize and abuse us in the same ways we have experienced criticism and abuse in the past. It may be difficult, therefore, to fully appreciate passages in the Bible which teach that God loves us and values us and sees us as capable. It can, however, be an important first step in the recovery process to hear clearly what the Bible teaches about God's image of us.

As you study these texts it is our prayer that you will hear God saying "I love you. I value you. I see you as capable. You are wonderfully made. I am able and ready to repair the broken places in your life. You are my child." May you find yourself surprised afresh by the joy that comes from knowing how loved and valued and precious you are.

May your roots sink deeply in the soil of God's love.

Dale and Juanita Ryan

### OUTLINE

1. Seeing Myself As Loved Psalm 23
2. Seeing Myself As Valued John 10: 7-15
3. Seeing Myself As Capable Ephesians 4:11-16
4. Seeing Myself As Wonderfully Made Psalm 139: 13-18
5. Seeing Myself as Repairable Jeremiah 31: 3-5, 11-13
6. Seeing Myself as Human Psalm 100

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# 1. Seeing Myself As Loved

“I never wanted you in the first place! You have been nothing but trouble since the day you were born!”

Abusive words flew around the kitchen whenever Joe’s mother was in one of her rages. She was not always like this. Sometimes she was gentle and kind. But, far too often, her words were like missiles aimed at Joe’s young mind and heart. He tried to protect himself. But the missiles landed, exploded and did lasting damage to his ability to see himself as lovable.

When children experience abuse, abandonment or neglect they do not, unfortunately, come to the conclusion that their parent’s own pain is getting in the way of good parenting. Children are much more likely to conclude that they are bad, that something is wrong with them, or that they are not lovable. The truth, of course, is that when parents and other significant adults communicate to a child that he is not lovable, this failure has nothing to do with the child. God tells us that we are lovable. May you grow in your ability to see yourself as lovable as you focus on God’s loving words and loving actions toward you.

## Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Reflect for a few minutes on the things you say to yourself about yourself. As you identify them, write them down.

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2. Sometimes self criticism comes from an accurate and balanced assessment of who we are. Much more commonly, however, negative self-talk is the result of the internalization of criticism from others. How do you think the messages you listed above were first communicated to you?

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3. Write a more realistic and grace-full message to replace each of the negative things you say about yourself. (This might be difficult. But, give it a try.)

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## Bible Study

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside the quiet waters,  
he restores my soul.  
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.  
Even though I walk through  
the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.  
Psalm 23*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

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2. What does this psalm tell us about ourselves?

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3. Restate, in your own words, the phrases used by the psalmist to describe God's actions on our behalf.

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7. Which of the actions you listed in response to question number three would you like God to take on your behalf at the present time? Explain.

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4. What does this psalm tell us about God's view of us?

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8. Spend a few minutes picturing God as a gentle, loving, attentive shepherd expressing love for you in one of the specific ways described in this text. Allow yourself time to picture this in detail, reflecting on what it looks like, sounds like, feels like. What thoughts and feelings did you have about this image of God's love for you?

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5. How might this picture of God's unconditional love challenge the distorted image of ourselves as unlovable?

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## **Prayer**

What would you like to say to the God who loves you?

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6. Think of some of the times when you have experienced God as a shepherd. What did you experience God doing for you in those times?

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## 2. Seeing Myself As Valued

“My uncle used me as a sexual object,” Ann explained. “He treated me like a rag doll and then threw me away. How can I possibly see myself as having any value?”

“I was not the son my parents wanted,” Dave stated flatly. “My brother was the smart and athletic one. He was clearly their favorite. I never had a chance really. But I tried. I tried a dozen different ways to earn their approval. I wanted desperately to feel that they valued me. But it never worked. Eventually I gave up and tried to numb the pain with drugs and alcohol.”

There are many ways that children come to see themselves as having little or no value. Often this painful distortion of self gradually becomes deeply buried beneath layers of anger, depression and fear. Distortions learned early in childhood can drive us as adults to continue the quest to earn a sense of value by compulsively seeking to achieve or perform in some way. Unfortunately, it is not possible to be ‘good enough’ to feel good about ourselves. Without a firm foundation for our self image, each achievement, each success, leads only to merciless self-criticism and an increased compulsion to do better.

It is fundamental to the Christian understanding of human persons that our value is not something which we can earn by performing. Personal value is not a prize to be gained but a gift to be received. Just as children need to receive a sense of value as a gift from parents and other adults, so we need to receive our value from God. We are valuable because God values us.

### Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Imagine yourself watching a young child sleeping. Seeing the child makes you smile with delight. The child seems precious to you. What makes this little child valuable?

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2. In what ways have you attempted to earn a sense of value?

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3. What are the dangers you have experienced with trying to earn your sense of value?

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### Bible Study

*Therefore Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. John 10: 7-15*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

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2. Jesus describes himself as a “gate for the sheep”.

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a. How in the first paragraph of this text does Jesus describe what he does as a “gate for the sheep”?

b. God desires to provide these good things for you. What does this tell you about how God sees you?

3. Jesus goes on to describe himself as a “good shepherd”.

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a. How does Jesus contrast the behavior of a good shepherd with the behavior of someone who is merely a hired hand?

b. How does Jesus contrast the differences in motivation between the hired hand and the good shepherd?

4. Jesus talks about knowing his sheep. What is the relationship between being known and feeling valued?

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5. What experiences of God’s care have helped you to believe that God values you?

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6. This text suggests that God values us highly. How does this compare with the way you feel about yourself?

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7. Spend a few minutes picturing yourself as a sheep being cared for by the good shepherd. Imagine a wolf coming to attack you. This has happened in the past and the hired hand who was caring for you abandoned you and ran away, leaving you alone and unprotected. You expect this to happen again. But this time you are with the good shepherd. The shepherd loves you, values you and stands between you and the wolf. The shepherd is willing to give his life for you because you are precious and valuable. What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to this picture?

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8. What impact would it have on you if you saw yourself as valuable to God?

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## **Prayer**

What would you like to say to the God who values you?

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# 3. Seeing Myself As Capable

Children master all kinds of skills - they learn to walk and talk, to read and write, to play and work. Children thrive when adults delight in their attempts to master these skills. When children first pull up to a standing position, they need someone to share their joy at this extraordinary accomplishment. Children need someone to smile when they put together their first puzzle. Someone to laugh at their first joke. Someone to show them how to make spaghetti and then to enjoy eating it together. Someone to cheer when they score their first (or their hundredth) goal in a soccer game. Experiences like these help us form a self image that includes an appropriate sense of competence and mastery.

Unfortunately, significant damage can be done to this part of our self image. Some children, for example, are expected to master adult skills in childhood. The resulting experiences of failure and insecurity can leave lasting scars. Other children never experience support or delight from their parents as they attempt mastery. These children are on their own in their attempts to grow and develop. As a result, they often experience little joy in their accomplishments. Still other children are not allowed the necessary freedom to make mistakes. These children are criticized and controlled. As a result, they have great difficulty trying new things and taking risks.

The need for an appropriate sense of mastery continues throughout life. We want to know that we are capable and that our capabilities are appreciated by others. God sees us as capable and invites us to use our capabilities to their fullest as we participate in the work of the kingdom.

## Questions for Personal Reflection

1. List as many of your capabilities as you can identify.  
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2. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you look at this list?  
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3. As a child what experiences did you have with learning and mastering skills? (Check all of the following that apply to your experience adding any comments you wish to make.)  
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- \_\_\_\_\_ a. I was not expected to amount to very much. I was expected to be a failure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. I was expected to master skills on my own.
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. I was rewarded primarily for what I did, not who I was.
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. I was expected to perform at a high level.
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. I was rarely appreciated for my abilities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ f. I was given support as I learned to master skills.
- \_\_\_\_\_ g. I was appropriately appreciated for my abilities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ h. I was enjoyed for who I was and for what I could do.

How do you think these childhood experiences affect your self image?  
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## Bible Study

*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Ephesians 4:11-16*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?  
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2. According to this text, God has given gifts to each of us to prepare us for “works of service.” Restate in your own words the goals which our works of service are intended to accomplish.

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3. The text suggests that it is a good thing to grow and mature and to master new abilities.

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a. What are some of the advantages of maturing in the faith?

b. How have you experienced this in your life?

4. How does speaking the truth help us to “grow up?”

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5. The capabilities which God gives to us are intended to empower us to make a contribution to God’s work, as an interdependent part of God’s family.

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a. What metaphor does this text use to describe this interdependence?

b. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of

interdependence?

6. The last phrase of this text says the body “builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” What thoughts and feelings do you have about being a partner in God’s work?

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7. What specific kinds of “works of service” bring you joy or satisfaction?

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8. How might it help you to know that God sees you as capable?

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## **Prayer**

What would you like to say to the God who sees you as capable?

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# 4. Seeing Myself As Wonderfully Made

“Come give your Dad a big hug, you little pig, I think you’re getting fatter every day!” Jean’s father said with a laugh. He did not see the expression on eleven year old Jean’s face. He was unaware of the damage his words might do to her image of herself.

Like Jean, many of us have distorted images of ourselves that include distorted perceptions of our bodies. We have all had far too many opportunities to compare our bodies with the images of bodies in magazines, in movies and on television. As a result, we may find ourselves rejecting our bodies for being less than ‘perfect’.

People who have experienced the trauma of physical or sexual abuse may experience a profound distrust of their body or a sense that their body has somehow betrayed them. Other people may abuse or neglect their bodies in the same way in which they were once abused or neglected. They may fail to do the most basic caring behaviors for their bodies like resting or exercising

It is difficult for us to experience our bodies as the gifts which they are intended to be. As a result, we often miss the moment by moment miracle of our lungs breathing and our heart pumping and our minds creating and our senses taking in the world around us. Fortunately the Bible is clear that God sees us as works of art. God, our creator, sees us and feels good about who we are. We are, God says, wonderfully made.

## Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What thoughts and feelings are you aware of having toward yourself physically?  
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2. What neglectful or abusive behaviors are you aware of engaging in toward your self physically?  
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3. What experiences may have contributed to a distortion in your view of your body?  
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## Bible Study

*For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.  
My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place.  
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,  
your eyes saw my unformed body.  
All the days ordained for me were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.  
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand.  
When I awake, I am still with you.  
Psalm 139:13-18*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?  
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2. The psalmist experiences God’s personal attention and involvement in his life. How does he describe his relationship with God?  
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3. What does this text tell us about God?  
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7. What would you like to do to take better care of your body?  
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4. The psalmist speaks of being “fearfully and wonderfully made.” List all the things you can think of about the human body that are examples of God being a Creator whose “works are wonderful.”  
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8. What obstacles stand in the way of you doing these things?  
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9. How might it help you to see your body as God’s wonderful work?  
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5. Spend a few minutes meditating on the psalmist’s image of God carefully, lovingly paying attention to your growth and development. What thoughts and feelings do you have about this image?  
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## **Prayer**

What would you like to say to the God who gave you the gift of your body?  
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6. This psalm is a prayer thanking God for the gift of physical life. Write a prayer or poem of your own expressing your feelings about God’s gift of your body.  
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# 5. Seeing Myself As Repairable

“If you look at the things I have done, you will probably reach the same conclusion I have reached. I am a bad person and I probably won’t change.” Bill reflected for a few minutes after sharing these feelings and then added. “The truth is that I’ve felt broken and unfixable for as long as I can remember - from the time I was a small child. I felt like a ‘bad’ person long before I started doing ‘bad’ things. It was feeling like a ‘bad’ person that led to my addictions in the first place. Now it is my addictions which seem to prove that I really am a ‘bad’ person. I don’t see how this can be changed.”

The feeling that we are beyond repair leads to despair. Often the roots of such feelings reach back to early life experiences and are related, therefore, not just to things we have done, but also to things that have been done to us. When we focus on our lives in isolation, it can be difficult to avoid despair. But we are not alone. It is a fundamental Christian conviction that the God who created us is a God who is with us as a healing, saving God. It is not God’s desire for us to stay broken. It is God’s desire to repair us - to heal us, restore us and set us free.

The text for this study is a message which God gave to the prophet Jeremiah. According to this message the people of Israel would be conquered, taken into exile, and their capital city(Zion) would be destroyed. In spite of the fact that the damage would seem irreparable, one day God would rescue them from their enemies, rebuild their city and give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. This picture of God’s ability to restore things that seem damaged beyond repair can serve as a reminder that God sees us as repairable.

## Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What areas of your life seem broken?

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2. What does it feel like when you think of yourself as being “bad” or “beyond repair?”

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3. What might give you hope that you are not beyond repair?

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## Bible Study

*The Lord appeared to us in the past saying;  
“I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
I have drawn you with loving-kindness.  
I will build you up again  
and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel.  
Again you will take up your tambourines  
and go out to dance with the joyful.  
Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria;  
the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit.”*

*For the Lord will ransom Jacob  
and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.  
They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;  
they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord  
the grain, the new wine and the oil,  
the young of the flocks and herds.  
They will be like a well watered garden,  
and they will sorrow no more.  
Then maidens will dance and be glad,  
young men and old as well.  
I will turn their mourning into gladness;  
I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. Jeremiah  
31: 3-5, 11-13*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

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2. Restate in your own words the promises and plans God revealed through Jeremiah.

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3. According to the text, what motives lie behind God's promises?

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7. No matter how damaged we see ourselves to be, God's plans for us include dancing, singing and celebrating. Allow yourself to picture this for a few minutes. You are full of energy and joy. The heavy burden of despair is gone. You are aware that the areas in your life that seemed irreparable have healed. You are dancing with joy. What thoughts and feelings do have in response to this image?

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4. Which of these promises is most meaningful to you? Explain.

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5. To people who feel broken or powerless God promises to "build you up again." What specifically would you like God to rebuild in you?

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8. How might it help you to know that God sees you as repairable?

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## Prayer

What would you like to say to the God who promises to heal the broken places in your life?

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6. God sees our brokenness. But God also sees what will be. God sees us as "a well watered garden" full of the potential for new life and growth.

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a. What gifts of new life and growth has God already given you?

b. What areas of new life and growth would you like to see in the future?

# 6. Seeing Myself As Human

“It makes me nervous when people say ‘I’m only human’”, said Bob. “I’m afraid that if I give myself excuses like that I will just let myself off the hook instead of doing my best. I don’t know why, but I need to keep pushing myself beyond my limits or I become terribly anxious.”

Perhaps the most fundamental distortion in our self image occurs when we find it difficult to see ourselves as human. For a variety of reasons we may find ourselves functioning as if we were either super-human or sub-human. Like Bob, we fear what will happen if we are ‘only human.’ We may not consciously ‘think’ that we are super-human, but we often try to act that way in order to avoid our vulnerability and our neediness. We may not consciously ‘think’ we are sub-human either, but we may feel that way about ourselves when we cannot escape our finitude and dependency. To be human, for us, is to be a long list of things we would rather avoid. We do not like the vulnerability, the limits, the dependency. or the needs.

And so, all too often, we defend ourselves against our fears by trying to be God. But, we are not God. There is only one God. The more we are able to embrace this most fundamental of realities - that we are creatures and God is our Creator - the freer our lives can become.

It is a freeing and joyful thing to be a creature. Creatures are not responsible for or in charge of things over which they have no power or control. It is a freeing and joyful thing to let God be God. And to let ourselves be God’s children. The text for this study will help us to see ourselves as belonging to God.

## Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Imagine a young child who feels secure in the care of his parents. He runs freely in a fenced backed yard, builds castles in the sand, throws a ball to his puppy and marvels at a passing caterpillar. After playing hard all day, the child comes inside, is given a bath, a hearty dinner and then falls into a sound, peaceful sleep.

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a. What adjectives might describe this child and his experience of life?

b. What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to this picture?

c. How closely does it match your own experience as a child?

2. God invites you to see yourself as a child of God - a child like the child in this meditation. What obstacles might keep you from seeing yourself in this way?

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## Bible Study

*Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come before him with joyful songs.  
Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he who made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.  
Enter his gates with thanksgiving  
and his courts with praise;  
give thanks to him and praise his name.  
For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;  
his faithfulness continues through all generations.  
Psalm 100*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

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2. According to this psalm, who is God and what is he like?

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3. This psalm also tells us about ourselves. According to this psalm, who are we?  
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6. What things are we invited to do in response to God?  
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4. The text instructs us to “know that the Lord is God.”  
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a) What does it mean to “know that the Lord is God”?

7. Picture yourself as one of God’s lambs. You have just been let out to pasture. It is a protected area, large enough for you to run and play, but not so large that you will get lost. Imagine yourself romping, feeling free and secure because you know that your shepherd who is good and loving, is watching over you. What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to this image?  
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b) What freedom might knowing this provide?

8. We are invited by this psalm to worship the Lord with gladness. Write a brief song or poem or prayer of worship or praise to God.  
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5. How might it help you personally to “know that the Lord is God,” that you are a creature, and “the sheep of his pasture”?  
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### **Prayer**

What thoughts or feelings or needs do you want to express as God’s child?  
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## Leader's Notes

### Study 1 Seeing Myself As Loved

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**Purpose:** to learn to see ourselves as lovable

**Question 2.** Some people may hear 'I shall not want' as 'I should not want.' Note carefully the difference. The text is not about how 'bad' we are for wanting things. It is about God's intentions for us. God's plans for us are not scarcity but abundance. This psalm reminds us that we are creatures in continual need of God's protection, provision, guidance, comfort and love. It tells us that our needs are opportunities for God to express his unfailing love to us. It tells us that God loves us and that we are, therefore, lovable.

**Question 3.** Notice how active God appears in this text. God is not passive or disinterested in us! The damage experienced in passively neglectful families can be just as profound as the damage experienced in overtly abusive families. People who have experienced passive neglect often expect God to be passive. God seems like a distant observer or critic or judge. This text emphasizes God's active role in our lives. The psalm tells us that God provides for our rest and nourishment; leads us; is attentive to our needs; heals and restores us; teaches us to live in ways that are life-giving; stays with us during difficult and dangerous times, comforts us; honors us; gives to us generously, blesses our lives with goodness and love; and promises us life with him forever.

**Questions 4.** God is attentive and compassionately understanding of our needs. He sees us as needing his attention and care and as worthy of his love.

**Question 5.** Sometimes it is difficult to take in the reality of God's love. People who have been taught that God is harsh and rejecting, and have therefore come to see themselves as unlovable, may find it difficult to believe that these images of God's love apply to them. Remember that changing our images of ourselves is a process that may take a long time. However badly distorted our self image may be, this picture of God's love challenges the belief that we are not lovable. Struggling with the contrast in the way we see ourselves and the way God sees us can be painful but healing.

**Question 8.** Some people may find visualization exercises like this one to be very difficult. It is important to remember that God cares about our 'imaginings' as well as our 'convictions'. Acknowledge the difficulty of such exercises but encourage group members to struggle with these exercises because they can be very revealing of our core convictions about ourselves.

### Study 2 Seeing Myself as Valued

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**Purpose:** to learn to see ourselves as valuable

**Question 2.** Some people may respond negatively to the 'gate' image thinking that the purpose of a gate is to exclude. But the 'gate' in this text is the entry way into a place of safety as well as the entry way to the pasture. Jesus' purpose is to protect, nourish and give life. We want to give gifts of great value (like protection and a full life) to people because we love them and value them. Much like a loving parent wants good things for his or her child, God wants good things for us because he values us.

**Question 3.** a) Jesus says that a hired hand abandons the sheep and runs away when the wolf comes. As a result, the sheep are unprotected. The good shepherd, by contrast, does not run away, but protects the sheep even to the point of endangering his own life. b) The hired hand runs away because he does not care about the sheep. He is not emotionally attached to them. The good shepherd must care a great deal about the sheep. He is prepared to risk his own life to protect them.

**Question 4.** When another person is interested and attentive enough to get to know us as the unique individual we are, we feel valued by that person. We are not just one of the crowd. We are unique and special to that person. God sees us as unique and special.

### Study 3 Seeing Myself as Capable

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**Purpose:** to learn to see ourselves as capable

**Question 2.** The goals of our works of service are 1) that "the body of Christ may be built up" (we will be encouraged, we will become strong because we will benefit from receiving gifts from each other.) 2) that "we reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God" (we will be connected to each other as we meet each other's needs, we will become interdependent, we will be united by our growing faith in Christ), and 3) that "we become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (we will be more stable and secure, more complete, we won't feel empty, we will be full).

**Question 3.** When we are not mature, we are vulnerable to being deceived and led astray," blown here and there, tossed back and forth." The advantage to maturing is a growing sense of stability.

**Question 4.** Honesty is that basis for all of our emotional, spiritual and relational growth in life. An important part of the process of growing from childhood to adulthood is learning new things. We learn new realities about life and about God. We confront pain and suffering. We learn how to develop close relationships with other people. All of this learning is based on open, honest exchanges between people.

**Question 5.** The metaphor used here is a body which is growing and which is joined and held together by supporting ligaments. Competence in our culture is usually understood individualistically. We value the lone, self-made, I-can-do-it-

myself kind of competence. This text emphasizes competence-in-community rather than competence-in-isolation. Interdependence requires that we give up being isolated, self sufficient individuals. For many of us this feels risky because we decided early in life that the only way we could get our needs met would be to take care of ourselves. Interdependence also requires that we make a contribution, that we use our gifts and abilities to give to other people. This can be difficult if we do not see ourselves as competent. Interdependence means allowing ourselves to be close enough to other people that we risk being hurt in some way. This can be very frightening. We will need to learn the skills of honest confrontation and forgiveness. Interdependence means that we will need to learn to work out problems. This may be a new skill for many of us who have not learned constructive conflict. Interdependence will cause us to grow. It will challenge us. It will enrich our lives. But it will feel risky and frightening.

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#### Study 4 Seeing Myself as Wonderfully Made

**Purpose:** to learn to value our physical bodies

**Question 2.** The central feature of the relationship between God and human persons is the relationship between Creator and creature. We are not self-made. We are one of the wonderful works of God. Notice that creation for the psalmist is not an abstract thought. Creation is not about 'human origins' or scientific concerns. Creation for the psalmist is about our 'inmost being'. To be a creature is to be in intimate relationship with the Creator at the center of our beings, it is to be known by the Creator, to be in the Creator's thoughts.

**Question 3.** This text describes God as a Creator who is intimately involved with each of us. Notice the things God pays attention to: our 'frame' is not hidden from God, God sees our development and growth, God writes about our lives in his book, God thinks about us. Even when we sleep, God is still awake and attentive to our needs.

**Question 5.** God's attentiveness to our physical being came long before we had any of the physical attributes of adulthood. Some people may find the biological metaphor (God 'knit' you together in your mother's womb) to be helpful. Others may prefer the poetic image of God weaving us 'together in the depths of the earth'. Either is a picture of attentiveness and care from our beginnings.

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#### Study 5 Seeing Myself as Repairable

**Purpose:** to learn to see ourselves as repairable

**Question 2.** God promises to rebuild us, to rescue us from those who are stronger than us. God promises that we will 'plant gardens and vineyards again', that we will be like a well watered garden, that God will comfort us so that our sadness and grief will turn into joy and gladness and that we will dance

with joy.

**Question 3.** God says that he will do all these things for us because he loves us with a love that never stops, because he wants a relationship with us.

**Question 7.** Some people will find it extremely difficult to 'picture' themselves as 'dancing with joy'. The contrast to current circumstances may be too dramatic. The point of this exercise is not to shame people who have difficulty with imagining joy - most of us have times when it is a struggle to imagine a joyful future. Even when deep in depression, however, we can still suspend for a moment our absolute certainty that the future holds nothing but sorrow. We can try to tolerate for a moment the thought the future may have horizons broader than what I can experience today.

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#### Study 6 Seeing Myself as Human

**Purpose:** to learn to see ourselves as human

**Question 2** God is the one who made us. God is good and loving and faithful through all generations.

**Question 3.** We belong to God. We are his people, his creatures, the sheep of his pasture.

**Question 4.** We are invited to worship with gladness, to come before God with joyful songs, to know that he is God, to enter his gates with thanksgiving, to thank him and praise him

**Question 6. Knowing the difference between ourselves and God seems like it should be very easy. Unfortunately, idolatrous attachments come easy to us. We attach ourselves to things, to people and to distorted images of ourselves. In the process we lose sight of who God really is and we also lose sight of who we really are. When we know that we are not God, however, we are free to accept our limits. We are free to stop trying to be God. The burdens that come from idolatrous self-images are lifted. We can stop being human-doings and become human-beings again. We can relax. We can accept our need of God and rejoice in his loving care for us.**

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# Making the Most of These Studies

## About This Series of Bible Studies

This series of Bible studies is rooted in four basic convictions.

First, we are in need of recovery. The word ‘recovery’ implies that something has gone wrong. Christians firmly believe this. Something has gone very wrong. Things are not as they should be. We have sinned. We have been sinned against. We are entangled, stuck, bogged down, bound and broken. We need to recover.

Second, recovery is a demanding process, and often a lengthy one. There are no quick fixes in recovery. Recovery means change. It means facing the truth about ourselves, even when that truth is painful. It means giving up our old destructive patterns, and learning new life-giving patterns. Recovery means taking responsibility for our lives rather than blaming, avoiding, minimizing or denying. It is not easy. It is sometimes painful. And it will take time.

Third, recovery is possible. No matter how hopeless it may seem, no matter how deeply we have been wounded by life or how often we have failed, recovery is possible. Our primary basis for hope in the process of recovery is that God is able to do things which we cannot do ourselves. Recovery is possible because God has committed himself to us.

Finally, these studies are rooted in the conviction that the Bible can be a significant resource for recovery. Many people who have lived through difficult life experiences have had bits of the Bible thrown at their pain as a quick fix or a simplistic solution. As a result, many people expect the Bible to be a barrier to recovery rather than a resource. These studies are based on the belief that the Bible is not a book of quick fixes and simplistic solutions. It is, on the contrary, a practical and helpful resource for recovery. We were deeply moved personally by these Biblical texts as we worked on this series. Our convictions have deepened that the God of the Bible can bring serenity to people whose lives have become unmanageable.

If you are looking for resources to help you in your recovery, we invite you to study the Bible with an open mind and heart.

May your roots sink deeply in the soil of God’s love

Dale and Juanita Ryan

## Getting the Most from this Study

These Bible study guides are designed to assist you to find out for yourself what the Bible has to say about different aspects of recovery. The texts you will study will be thought provoking, challenging, inspiring and very personal. It will become obvious that these studies are not designed merely to convince you of the truthfulness of some idea. Rather, they are designed to allow the opportunity for Biblical truths to renew your heart and mind.

We want to encourage realistic expectations of these discussion guides. First, they are not intended to be everything-the-Bible-says-about any subject. They are not intended to be a systematic presentation of Biblical theology. Second, it’s important to emphasize that these guides are not intended to provide a recovery program or to replace other important resources in recovery. If you are in a counseling relationship, we pray that these guides will enrich that relationship. If you are involved in a support group, it is our hope that these studies will enrich that resource as well. What these guides are designed to do is to help you study a series of Biblical texts which relate to the process of recovery. Our hope is that they will allow you to discover in a new way the Good News for people struggling to recover.

All of the studies in this series use a workbook format. Space is provided for writing answers to each question. This is ideal for personal study and allows group members to prepare in advance for the discussion. The Leader’s Version also contains leader’s notes. These notes provide suggestions on how to lead a group discussion, provide additional background information on certain questions, give helpful tips on group dynamics and suggest ways to deal with problems that may arise during the discussion. With such helps, someone with little or no experience can lead an effective discussion.

## Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study pray that God would bring healing and recovery to you through his Word.
2. After spending time in personal reflection, read and reread the passage to be studied.
3. Write your answers in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God’s Word. For the same reason, we suggest that you write out your prayers at the end of each study.

4. Share what you are learning with someone you trust. Recovery is empowered by experiences of community.

## Suggestions for Group Study

Even if you have already done these studies individually, we strongly encourage you to find some way to do them with a group of other people as well. Although each person's recovery is different, everyone's recovery is empowered by the mutual support and encouragement that can only be found in a one-on-one or a group setting. Several reminders may be helpful for participants in a group study:

1. Realize that trust grows over time. If sharing in a group setting is risky, realize that you do not have to share more than feels safe. However, taking risks is a necessary part of recovery. So, do participate in the discussion as much as you are able.

2. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they share what they have learned. You will learn from their insights. If you can, link what you say to the comments of others so the group stays on the topic. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

3. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to share what we have learned that we do not leave opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to do so as well.

4. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have a profitable time together.

5. We recommend that groups follow a few basic guidelines, and that these guidelines be read at the beginning of each discussion session. The guidelines, which you may wish to adapt to your situation, are:

a. Anything said in the group is considered confidential and will not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

b. We will provide time for each person present to talk if they feel comfortable doing so.

c. We will talk about ourselves and our own situations, avoiding conversation about other people.

d. We will listen attentively to each other.

e. We will be very cautious about giving advice.

f. We will pray for each other.

## About Leading a Group Study

You may be experiencing a variety of feelings as you anticipate leading a group using this study guide. You may feel inadequate for the task and afraid of what will happen. If this is the case, know you are in good company. Many of the kings, prophets and apostles in the Bible felt inadequate and afraid. And many other small group leaders share this experience. It may help you to know that your willingness to lead is a gift to the other group members. It might also help if you tell them about your feelings and ask them to pray for you. Realize as well that the other group members share the responsibility for the group. And realize that it is the Spirit's work to bring insight, comfort, healing and recovery to group members. Your role is simply to provide guidance to the discussion. The suggestions listed below will help you to provide that guidance.

### Preparing to Lead

1. Develop realistic expectations of yourself as a small group leader. Do not feel that you have to 'have it all together'. Rather, commit yourself to an on-going discipline of honesty about your own needs. As you grow in honesty about your own needs, you will grow as well in your capacity for compassion, gentleness and patience with yourself and with others. As a leader you can encourage an atmosphere of honesty by being honest about yourself.

2. Pray. Pray for yourself and your own recovery. Pray for the group members. Invite the Spirit to be present as you prepare and as you meet.

3. Read the text several times.

4. Take your time to thoughtfully work through each question, writing out your answers.

5. After completing your personal study, read through the leader's notes for the study you are leading. These notes are designed to help you in several ways. First, they tell you the purpose the authors had in mind while writing the study. Take time to think through how the questions work together to accomplish that purpose. Second, the notes provide you with additional background information or comments on some of the questions. This information can be useful if people have difficulty understanding or answering a question. Third, the leader's notes can alert you to potential problems you may encounter during the study.

6. If you wish to remind yourself during the group discussion of anything mentioned in the leader's notes, make a note to yourself below that question in the your study guide

### Leading the Study

1. Begin on time. You may want to open in prayer, or have a group member do so.

2. Be sure everyone has a study guide. Decide as a group if you want people to do the study on their own ahead of time. If your time together is limited, it will be helpful for people to prepare in advance.

3. At the beginning of your first time together, explain that these studies are meant to be discussions, not lectures. Encourage the members of the group to participate. However, do not put pressure on those who may be hesitant to speak during the first few sessions. Clearly state that people do not need to share anything they do not feel safe sharing. Remind people that it will take time to trust each other.

4. Read aloud the group guidelines listed in the front of the guide. These commitments are important in creating a safe place for people to talk and trust and feel.

5. Read aloud the introductory paragraphs at the beginning of the discussion for the day. This will orient the group to the passage being studied.

6. If the group does not prepare in advance, approximately ten minutes will be needed for individuals to work on the Personal Reflection section. This is designed to help group members focus on some aspect of their personal experience. Hopefully it will help group members to be more aware of the frame of reference and life experience which we bring to the text. This time of personal reflection can be done prior to the group meeting or as the first part of the meeting. The personal reflection questions are not designed to be used directly for group discussion. Rather, the first question in the Bible study section is intended to give group members an opportunity to share what they feel safe sharing from their time of personal reflection.

7. Read the passage aloud. You may choose to do this yourself, or someone else may read if he or she has been asked to do so prior to the study.

8. As you begin to ask the questions in the guide, keep several things in mind. First, the questions are designed to be used just as they are written. If you wish, you may simply read them aloud to the group. Or, you may prefer to express them in your own words. However, unnecessary rewording of the questions is not recommended.

Second, the questions are intended to guide the group toward understanding and applying the main idea of the study. The authors of the guide have stated the purpose of each study in the leader's notes. You should try to understand how the study questions and the biblical text work together to lead the group in that direction.

There may be times when it is appropriate to deviate from the study guide. For example, a question may have already been answered. If so, move on to the next question. Or someone

may raise an important question not covered in the guide. Take time to discuss it! The important thing is to use discretion. There may be many routes you can travel to reach the goal of the study. But the easiest route is usually the one the authors have suggested.

9. Don't be afraid of silence. People need time to think about the question before formulating their answers.

10. Don't be content with just one answer. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" or "Anything else?" until several people have given answers to the question.

11. Acknowledge all contributions. Try to be affirming whenever possible. Never reject an answer. If it seems clearly wrong to you, ask: "Which part of the text led you to that conclusion?" or "What do the rest of you think?"

12. Don't expect every answer to be addressed to you, even though this will probably happen at first. As group members become more at ease, they will begin to interact more effectively with each other. This is a sign of a healthy discussion.

13. Don't be afraid of controversy. It can be very stimulating. Differences can enrich our lives. If you don't resolve an issue completely, don't be frustrated. Move on and keep it in mind for later. A subsequent study may resolve the problem.

14. Stick to the passage under consideration. It should be the source for answering the questions. Discourage the group from unnecessary cross-referencing. Likewise, stick to the subject and avoid going off on tangents.

15. Periodically summarize what the group has said about the topic. This helps to draw together the various ideas mentioned and gives continuity to the study. But be careful not to use summary statements as an opportunity to give a sermon!

16. Each study ends with a prayer time. There are several ways to handle this time in a group. The person who leads each study could lead the group in a prayer or you could allow time for group participation. Remember that some members of your group may feel uncomfortable about participating in public prayer. It might be helpful to discuss this with the group during your first meeting and to reach some agreement about how to proceed.

### **Listening to Emotional Pain.**

These Bible study guides are designed to take seriously the pain and struggle that is part of life. People will experience a variety of emotions during these studies. Part of your role as group leader will be to listen to emotional pain. Listening is a gift which you can give to a person who is hurting. For many people, it is not an easy gift to give. The following suggestions

will help you to listen more effectively to people in emotional pain.

1. Remember that you are not responsible to take the pain away. People in helping relationships often feel that they are being asked to make the other person feel better. This is usually related to the helper's own dysfunctional patterns of not being comfortable with painful feelings.
2. Not only are you not responsible to take the pain away, one of the things people need most is an opportunity to face and to experience the pain in their life. They have usually spent years denying their pain and running from it. Healing can come when we are able to face our pain in the presence of someone who cares about us. Rather than trying to take the pain away, then, commit yourself to listening attentively as it is expressed.
3. Realize that some group members may not feel comfortable with other's expressions of sadness or anger. You may want to acknowledge that such emotions are uncomfortable, but say that part of recovery is to learn to feel and to allow others to feel.
4. Be very cautious about giving answers and advice. Advice and answers may make you feel better or feel competent, but they may also minimize peoples' problems and their painful feelings. Simple solutions rarely work, and they can easily communicate "You should be better now" or "You shouldn't really be talking about this."
5. Be sure to communicate direct affirmation any time people talk about their painful emotions. It takes courage to talk about our pain because it creates anxiety for us. It is a great gift to be trusted by those who are struggling.

**If you find this study to be helpful. . .**

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