

Identity

FINDING
MYSELF IN GOD

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How to Use This Study Guide

FIVE PERSONAL OR SMALL-GROUP SESSIONS

SESSION 1: *Belovedness*

SESSION 2: *Belonging*

SESSION 3: *Imago Dei*

SESSION 4: *False Narratives*

SESSION 5: *Acceptance*

This guide is designed to be used easily by individuals or by a group.

AS AN INDIVIDUAL Set aside some quiet time to read through each section of the guide. Underline or jot down (in the margins or in a journal) any thoughts that strike you as particularly important for you. Choose one or two of the suggested reflection questions and write down your thoughts.

AS A GROUP Whether you are meeting in person or over the internet, *feel free to adapt the following general guidelines to your specific setting and participants' needs.*

Gather » Welcome everyone to your group. Ask participants to introduce themselves.

Read » Ask the participants to read the material being covered before you gather (perhaps using the suggestions for individuals given above). Now, invite each member to share what struck them as most important in the text.

Discuss and pray » Encourage participants to choose a question or prompt from the text that speaks to them. Allow time for participants to share their responses with the group, and to pray about them, if desired.

Finish » At the end of each session, ask participants to share something they learned from the session. Close with prayer.

INTRODUCTION

“Those two are brothers,” Joseph said with a thick Kenyan accent. From his driver’s seat, he pointed to two stunning cheetahs calmly walking through the valley of the Masai Mara. It was sunset. My 12-year-old daughter and I were on a safari at the tail end of a visit to Nairobi. Joseph was our guide. He camped with us for three days and led us through the breathtaking wilderness. Joseph knew where to go and when. He knew how many leopards lived there and where certain animals fed. He was well aware of off-trail locations where lions were sure to be sleeping. He knew when to leave a herd of elephants because that particular “Mama” would charge the van. Without a skillful guide, we would have been lost or even dead!

In many ways, the spiritual life is not unlike a safari in the wilderness. There is such breathtaking beauty, a world of wonder, and it helps to have a skillful guide who knows the terrain and can show others where to find what they came to discover. The late Dutch priest Father Henri J.M. Nouwen continues to be among the most beloved of such spiritual guides. A pastor, professor, theologian, and writer, Nouwen through his life and ministry continues to guide thousands of people through the wilderness of the human experience. His warmth, intimacy, and vulnerability help his readers discover new ways to find healing and life.

As part of the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the passing of Henri Nouwen, this booklet addresses the concept of identity and explores the topic of our belovedness—vital components of Nouwen’s writing. This booklet is part of a collection that is intended to acquaint the reader more closely with the writing and wisdom of Henri Nouwen, and thus closer to the deep love of Jesus. This collection of booklets reflects some of the ideas and themes related to the art of living a spiritual life that were so important in Nouwen’s work. These are concepts he intensely wrestled with in his own life. Writing was one of the ways in which he processed his personal experience. Nouwen’s writing on these topics invites us into our own deeper experience of being human.

This booklet has been designed to be used for either individual reading and reflection or as a group study. Either way, it can also serve as a devotional, helping to enrich your prayer life and your ongoing awareness of God's active love in your everyday experience. You may wish to keep a companion notebook, allowing yourself space to journal at length as you reflect. Nouwen writes: "When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand."¹ Henri Nouwen is one who can guide us through the wilderness of some of the deepest questions we ask, one of them being, "Who am I?"

HENRI NOUWEN was one of the most innovative and influential spiritual writers of the past century. His vision of spirituality was broad and inclusive, and his compassion embraced all of humankind. Nouwen wrote over 40 books on spirituality and the spiritual life that have sold millions of copies and been translated into dozens of languages. The passages quoted in this booklet are taken from certain of his published works, listed on page 32, all of which are available at www.henrinouwen.org.

Belovedness

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS WE CAN ASK OURSELVES IS, “WHO AM I?” Along with determining our purpose and place in this world, finding out our true identity is something sociologists suggest every young person must discover in order to flourish in adulthood. Historically, young people have tried to find identity primarily through participating in rites of passage, like Confirmation or a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Today, we often leave it to young people to determine their identity for themselves through the choices they make in life. We say, “If you choose to work hard and get into medical school, you can become a doctor, and that will be who you are.” This puts far too much pressure on them.

In his many writings, Henri Nouwen, one of the most cherished spiritual writers of our time, addressed the concept of identity and the question of identity by reframing our approach. For Nouwen, the answer to “Who am I?” comes not from what we do, but from who God created us to be. In the first chapter of Genesis, we are reminded that humankind is made in God’s image, the heart of which is love. We are God’s beloved children, and it is this belovedness that motivates and drives us. We belong to God and we always will. Nouwen writes, “Beloved, we are God’s chosen ones, I mean that we have been seen by God for all eternity and seen as unique, special, precious beings.”² We may well know this in our minds, but sometimes, the pressures around us tempt us to display an image of ourselves that we hope will be accepted. We have a hunger to be accepted by people, even if that means presenting an image that is a fabrication of our true identity.

This behavior was on display for all to see in the 2019 college admissions scandal in the U.S., the largest scandal in the history of college admissions in North America. Hundreds among the wealthiest elites in the United States, from CEO’s to Hollywood stars, were caught in a web

of bribery and fraud, having paid millions to get their overly privileged, yet apparently under-performing, kids into some of the most elite universities in the nation. It seems that the motivating factor for these parents was the social applause of having a child at USC instead of Cal State Long Beach, or at Stanford instead of San Francisco State. This scandal revealed the desire to make the public believe that these kids got in on their own merits. I believe that this is the message these parents have sent their kids: “*You matter to the degree that you perform, or to the degree that you make me look good, or to the degree that you are successful, popular, and good looking.*” The truth is that this is the message so many young people grow up hearing today. From our earliest years, we are praised for getting good grades and punished for low achievement.

According to Nouwen, we slowly grow to believe the lies that *I am what I do*, *I am what others say about me*, and *I am what I possess*. That is why Nouwen’s message of our truer and deeper identity as beloved children of God is so important. It is an identity that is not tossed about with the waves of success, failure, joy, and sorrow of life. “The great secret of the spiritual life,” Nouwen wrote, “the life of the Beloved Sons and Daughters of God, is that everything we live, be it gladness or sadness, joy or pain, health or illness, can all be part of the journey toward the full realization of our humanity.”³ Nouwen believed that we can claim this identity as we grow to see ourselves in two moments in the life of Jesus: his baptism and his final Passover meal.

The church has always taught that it is in our baptism that we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, who binds us into the Son’s relationship with the Father. It is in baptism that we are welcomed into the covenant community and entrusted to the church for the spiritual guidance that nurtures us to claim our created identity as the beloved of God.

The baptism of Jesus is the first time we see what many scholars have considered the first reference to the Trinity in the New Testament. When John the Baptist had submerged Jesus into the water at the River Jordan, the gospel tells us, “just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’” (Matthew 3:16-17).

But why did Jesus choose to be baptized? Most theologians agree that it was in order to identify with us and our need to be reconciled with God. It is incredibly significant that Jesus does not receive the Father's designation as the beloved until he identified with us by being baptized in the Jordan. He does not receive the title at his birth or during his early life. No, it came when he entered into our desperation in an identification that was so total and complete that you can hear God saying this to you as well.

This is the most surprising gift, that God says to you: *"You are my priceless child; I am deeply pleased with you."* That is who you are.

For Reflection

1. What does it mean to you to be beloved by God?
2. How would you describe your own identity in a few words?
3. Have you experienced the profound knowing that God is "deeply pleased" with you? If so, how has that deepened your relationship with God? If not, describe what might be blocking you from recognizing God's divine pleasure in you?
4. How can you be reminded of the blessings of your baptism day after day?

For Action

Wash your face today and say these words, "You are God's priceless child, and he is deeply pleased with you." Choose something to remind you of this blessing throughout the day.



NOUWEN BELIEVED THAT EVERY TIME WE PARTICIPATE IN THE EUCHARIST, WE ARE TO BE REMINDED OF HOW GREATLY PLEASED GOD IS WITH US. When Jesus celebrated his last Passover meal with his disciples in the upper room (what we refer to as "the Lord's Supper" or

“the Last Supper”), there were four movements, each represented with a word that helps us to claim our truest and deepest identity as the beloved: *Take, Bless, Break, Give*. Nouwen, replacing the word “take” with “choose,” says that, in the same way that Jesus “chose” the bread, he has also chosen you from before the foundation of the world. To be chosen by God is the greatest gift and deepest experience of being human. God’s choosing is not competitive or based on your merit, but is generous and based on God’s goodness and love. After Jesus took the bread, he “blessed it.” To be blessed by God is to be given God’s favor. It is a love and favor so deep and so wide and so complete that it covers over all the failures of those whom we needed to bless us. Nouwen writes, “A blessing goes beyond the distinction between admiration or condemnation...between good or evil. A blessing touches the original goodness of the other and calls forth his or her Belovedness. Being the beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.”⁴

Though we have been given God’s blessing, we are also wounded. We live in a broken world. We are all recipients, participants, and inheritors of this fractured cosmos. After “giving thanks,” or “blessing” the bread, Jesus broke it. Nouwen helps us to see that this breaking of the bread is an image of the brokenness of each of our lives. Nouwen suggests that we can find freedom and new life if we have the courage to embrace our brokenness. In doing this, we may press through our brokenness and arrive on the other side. But, he says, we must always remember to put “our brokenness under the blessing.”⁵ We are to embrace our brokenness, but not as our core identity. Because the blessing comes before the brokenness, we are to remember that our identity as “the beloved” (blessing) is deeper and truer than our experience of suffering (brokenness).

For Reflection

1. Can you name a time when you were particularly enriched by the Eucharist?
2. Choose, Bless, Break, Give. Considering your life journey, which of these Eucharistic words resonates most with you? Why?

3. How do you try to avoid the pain of brokenness?
Even so, how has God blessed you through brokenness?
4. “We must always remember to put the brokenness under the blessing.” What do these words of Nouwen mean to you?
5. Being “beloved” is deeper and truer than being “broken.” What has bolstered your identity and held you together in your brokenness?
How has a sense of “belovedness” expressed a core truth of your existence?

For Action

Jot down two or three blessings you have been given and choose a concrete way you will share these blessings with someone else.



THEN, JESUS “GAVE” THE BREAD TO THE DISCIPLES AND INVITED THEM TO EAT IT AND REMEMBER HIM. Just as Jesus was “chosen” and “blessed” in his baptism (as are we in ours), Jesus’ heart (if not his body) was broken on the cross (as are we in life). Jesus was then able to be “given” to the world for its salvation. In the same way, Nouwen says that we are “chosen,” “blessed,” and “broken,” in order that we may be “given” away (sent by God) for the sake of others. If we live our lives by avoiding our brokenness or claiming it as our deepest identity, thereby forgetting that we are chosen and blessed by God first, our lives will be tossed about by the waves of insecurity, anger, and discontent.

Instead, Nouwen invites us to hear the voice of God, the heavenly Father, who is so pleased with us. He is pleased not because of what we have done, but because God bestowed his own image within us. Before we had sinned, before the fall of humankind, the deeper truth that we are loved existed. You are the beloved not because you finally figured out how to choose the right way. You are the beloved of God because you have always belonged to God. And in the baptism of Jesus, God has found you