

A LifeGuide® Bible Study
DISTORTED IMAGES OF SELF
Restoring Our Vision
8 STUDIES FOR INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS
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Getting the Most Out of *Distorted Images of Self*

The way we think and feel about ourselves is one of the most important things about us. Our self-images have an enormous impact on our lives. Among other things, our sense of self affects our peace of mind, our creativity and our ability to engage meaningfully in the world. Perhaps most important, it affects our relationships with others, including our relationship with God.

Self-image is not a simple thing. Our ideas about ourselves tend to be complex and even conflicting, to the point that it is not uncommon for us to present one version of ourselves to the outside world and struggle with another version in private.

Our self-images tend to be constructed from our complicated emotional and relational histories. All of our relationships and experiences throughout our lives are woven into our self-concept, but our most foundational self-images, both positive and negative, take root in early life.

As children we come to conclusions about ourselves based on the mosaic of experiences we have with others. These conclusions are not logical, rational deductions. They are more like impressions of ourselves in the context of life events

and interactions with others. They are interpretations made at a time when we had a very limited maturity or understanding. As a result, some of the most foundational aspects of our self-image are constructed from our limited childhood perspectives.

Unfortunately, many of us have experiences in early life that lead us to see ourselves in negative ways. These conclusions can develop into ongoing distortions in our sense of self.

Because we do not simply outgrow our distorted images of self, and because these distortions tend to be hidden from others and often from ourselves, these components of our self-image are capable of having a significant impact on what we do and think in all aspects of our lives. They can form a kind of grid through which we see ourselves well into our adulthood and potentially all the days of our lives.

Our distorted self-images are based in deep-seated fears. These fears are almost always too uncomfortable or too painful to expose to other people and often too uncomfortable or too painful to stay fully aware of ourselves. For that reason we develop ways to protect ourselves from our fears. If, for example, we live with a distorted self-image that we are unlovable, we may drive ourselves to the point of exhaustion to earn the love we fear can never be ours. Similarly, if we see ourselves as worthless, we might either do all we can to prove to others that we are valuable, or we might despair of being valued and settle for depressed, secluded lives.

Probably the most important thing to emphasize about distorted self-images is that they are not really who we are. Under all of our pretense and defensiveness, and deeper than our worst fears and distortions about ourselves, is a self that God created in God's own image. We are God's children, loved beyond our wildest imaginings, valued beyond telling, made to live in joyful reliance on our Maker, freely forgiven, fully repairable, always remembered and seen, significant in our capacity to be part of God's presence in this world, and made to live in loving community with others.

The purpose of this LifeGuide is to help you see yourself through God's eyes of love. Thomas Merton once described the important healing work we have to do in order to live in the truth of who we really are: "We must cast off our false, exterior self like the cheap and showy garment that it is. We must find our real self in its very great and very simple dignity: created to be a child of God, and capable of loving with something of God's own sincerity."

Because our distorted images of self are often rooted in painful emotional experiences, identifying them and pursuing healing can be an emotionally challenging experience. If you find this to be the case, we encourage you to seek out the support of a trusted friend, pastor, spiritual director or counselor. It is also important to remember that healing deeply from distorted images of self will likely mean healing slowly. None of us can change our distorted images of self simply by an act of our will or by our own effort. What we can do is invite God to heal us and seek the support we need in the process. Our prayer is that these studies will be used

by the Spirit to encourage you on your journey of identifying some of your distorted images of self and in gradually displacing these distortions with biblically accurate images of yourself.

As you study these texts it is our prayer that you will learn to think and feel about yourself in ways that are consistent with the ways God thinks and feels about you. Our prayer is that you will hear God saying to you: “I love you. I value you. You are my very own, dearly loved child. This is who you are.”

May your vision of who you are be renewed as you come to see yourself through God’s eyes of love.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.
2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.
3. Each study deals with a particular passage so that you can delve into the author’s meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.
4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. Observation questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. Interpretation questions delve into the meaning of the passage. Application questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.
5. Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God’s Word.
6. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.
7. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.
8. You may want to go on to the suggestion under “Now or Later,” or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF SELF *Restoring Our Vision*

1

Unlovable Versus Loved *Ephesians 3:14–21*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+3%3A14%20%9321&version=NLT>

We are creatures. We are created in love by God who is love. We are the much-loved children of God. Scripture teaches us that all that love is, God is toward us—patient, kind, respectful, self-giving, keeping no record of wrongs, protective, hopeful. God's love for us is a love that is steadfast and unshakable. It is a love that endures forever.

Yet we struggle to trust that this is true. We may believe that God is loving, but we may not be able to live in the joy and peace of this reality because we see ourselves as unlovable. We may have constructed a self-image that assumes that something is so wrong with us that no one who knows us fully could possibly love us. Each of us has a unique story of how these false images come to take on the force of a foundational truth in our lives. But whatever our story—and however much we believe these distortions—they are not the truth about who we are.

God, who is love, loves us. This is good news. It is powerful news—powerful enough to compete with the distorted images of ourselves which seem to exercise control over our lives. It is the good news that can set us free to be the much loved children our Creator made us to be.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What negative things have you heard other people say about themselves—things which you could tell they believed—but which you could see were not true?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What negative things do you find yourself saying to yourself about yourself?

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

The text for this study is a prayer on behalf of the people at the church in Ephesus. It is a prayer that they would come to know deeply and fully the powerful truth of God's great love for them as expressed in Christ. *Read Ephesians 3:14–21.*

1. This prayer is directed to God the Father. What do verses 14–15 and 20 say about God?

2. Make a list of all the specific requests expressed in this prayer.
3. What thoughts do you have about this list of requests?
4. What is your thought about what verse 20 states on the heels of making all these requests?
5. What might it mean for God to strengthen us with power through the Spirit in our inner being as a way to make us ready for Christ to dwell in our hearts?
6. What might it mean for Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith, in the context of all that is being prayed here?
7. How is the love of God in Christ described in verses 18 and 19?
8. How do these words which describe God's love affect you?
9. What might it mean to be "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God"?
10. Sit for a few minutes of quiet and meditate on the image found in verse 17: "And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love ..." As you can, see yourself as a parched plant being transplanted into the soil of God's rich, vast love for you. You are parched and dying because you have believed yourself unlovable in some way. But now you are being planted in the heart of God's love. Slowly, let your roots relax, and begin to take in the nourishment available in the amazing soil of love. Drink it in. Let it strengthen you with new life, new hope, new joy. Write about your experience of meditating on this image.
11. What do you imagine it would be like for you to be filled with God's love?

Use the prayer in this text as the basis of a prayer for yourself to know God's love.

Now or Later

Sit with the image in question 10 for a few minutes each day this week. Continue to write about your experience of letting your roots sink deeply into the soil of God's rich, vast love.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF SELF *Restoring Our Vision*

2

Worthless Versus Valued *Luke 15:1–2, 8–10*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+15%3A1%E2%80%932%C+8%E2%80%9310&version=NLT>

We are treasured by God. We are held in high esteem by our Maker. The sweeping narrative of Scripture is that God made us in God's image and seeks to live in close relationship with us. Scripture shows us a God who freely gives to us, not only good gifts but also God's very self.

We came from God. We are a part of God. We are valued by God. This value is not something we earn. It is not part of an "if-then" clause—if we do this or that, then God will value us. It is a given. It is part of the structure of the universe. We are valued.

Yet a large number of us spend our lives chasing the hope that maybe *if* we accomplish certain things, *then* we will be valued. If we are smart enough, knowledgeable enough, good looking enough, rich enough, thin enough, spiritual enough, caring enough, giving enough, then maybe we will earn some sense of worth. We strive to earn what is already ours. We *are* valuable. We *are* valued. This gift is ours to receive with humility, wonder and joy. It is ours to live in—freeing us to abandon all competition and comparison with others who are equally valued by our Maker. Freeing us to treat all others with the same great value our Creator bestows on us.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What kinds of things might communicate to a child his or her value?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What moments come to mind of times when you felt you were being treated by someone as having little or no value?

What moments come to mind of times when you have felt valued by someone?

The text for this study is one of a trilogy of stories that Jesus told about God, who values us highly. In one story God, represented as a father, demonstrates to both a son who left home and a son who stayed home their great value as God's much-loved children. In another story God, represented as a shepherd, goes in search of the one sheep that strayed from the group and got lost. And in this story God,

represented as a woman, sweeps the floors in search of the missing silver coin. *Read Luke 15:1–2, 8–10.*

1. Who were the two primary groups in the audience when Jesus told this story?

How were they outwardly different from each other?

How might they have been similar?

2. What specific pictures and ideas come to mind as you read this story about God as the woman who lights a lamp and sweeps in search of the lost silver coin?

3. If you were going to give voice to the lost coin, what might the coin be saying to itself about its value while it is lost?

4. How might the image of God as the woman who sweeps have been heard by the various members of Jesus' audience?

5. How might the image of us as the lost coin have been heard by the various members of Jesus' audience at the time?

6. What does this story tell us about God?

7. How does this compare and contrast with how you see God?

8. What does this story tell us about how God sees us?

9. How does this compare and contrast with how you see yourself?

10. In a time of quiet, imagine yourself in this story as a valuable silver coin that has been knocked off the table and has rolled into a dark corner where you have been gathering dust and grime. You are powerless to help yourself. And you have lost your shine and all sense of your value. But the woman to whom you belong lights a lamp and picks up a broom and begins to sweep the floors in search of you because of your great value. When the woman finds you, she picks you up and gently rubs the dust and grime away until your silver shine is restored. Then she throws a party, calling all her friends to celebrate. Let yourself be held in those tender, powerful hands. Let yourself experience the party in your honor. Write about your experience.

11. How might knowing these truths about how God sees you and values you make a difference in your life?

Thank God for valuing you so highly. Invite God to help you live in the truth of your great value to God.

Now or Later

Use the meditation from question 10 again. Allow yourself to experience your value to God, as described by this story.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF SELF *Restoring Our Vision*

3

Self-Reliant Versus God-Reliant *Isaiah 30:15–21*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+30%3A15%20%9321&version=NLT>

We are creatures. We receive in each breath, in each beat of our hearts, the gift of life from our loving Creator. In much the same way that we are designed to be sustained and strengthened by the regular intake of oxygen, we are designed to be sustained and strengthened by the ongoing intake of God's help and guidance. We are designed to live in reliance on our Maker. It is in this reliance on God that our lives are able to become the loving, joyful, rich experience they were meant to be.

Scripture teaches us that God created us to need God's help. It also teaches us that God longs to help us. Yet, all too often, we resist these good gifts from God. We resist them in part because we live with a distorted view of ourselves as self-reliant. There are various reasons why we might be attached to this image of ourselves. Self-reliance might seem like what everyone, including God, expects of us. Self-reliance might seem *strong*, whereas reliance on God might seem *weak*. Reliance on ourselves might seem like the only way to be in charge, whereas reliance on God might seem like giving up control. For some of us the thought of trusting anyone to be there for us, including God, might seem impossible. We may have concluded early in life that we are on our own, that we need to take care of ourselves.

God calls us out of this kind of distorted self-reliance and into the truth of dependence on our loving Creator. God calls us in love to know that we are not on our own. God is eager to help us and care for us.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Think about walking with a young child in an area that has major traffic hazards. What would it be like for you if the child took off and ran ahead of you, saying he wanted to do it by himself?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. In terms of your relationship with God, think of a time when you acted like the child who runs off on his or her own. What was the experience like?

In the text for this study we hear God calling us in love to ask for the care, help and guidance we need. We hear God confronting our resistance and reminding us that God is always ready and eager to help us. *Read Isaiah 30:15–21.*

1. In verses 15–17, how would you contrast what the Lord is calling the people to do with what the people were doing?
2. In what ways do you relate to what the people were doing?
3. What does it mean in verse 17 that “a thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away”?
4. How do the practices mentioned in verse 15 relate to living in reliance on God rather than ourselves?
5. In your experience, what is difficult about the practices of repentance, rest, quietness and trust?
6. In your experience, what are the benefits of practicing repentance, rest, quietness and trust?
7. What do we learn about God in verses 18–21?
8. What promises are made in verses 18–21?
9. Why might it be so important that we actually ask for God’s help?
10. To repent is to turn around, to change the direction we are headed. God calls us to give up our distortions of being self-reliant and to turn to God to experience, instead, that we are creatures made to rely on God. In a time of quiet, invite God to show you how you need to repent of your self-reliance and learn anew what it is to rely on God. Write whatever you sense God is showing you.
11. God’s call to repentance is a call to rest, to quietness and to trust. It is a call to give up all the hard work that self-reliance requires and to “let go and let God.” In a second time of quiet, let yourself rest before God as you talk honestly with God about both your fears and your longings to live in trusting reliance on God. Listen to God’s voice of compassion and guidance speaking to you. Write about your experience.

Thank God for God’s compassion toward you, and for God’s desire to guide you.

Now or Later - Continue to use the focused prayers of questions 10 and 11 throughout the week, writing about your experience.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF SELF

Restoring Our Vision

4

Condemned Versus Forgiven

1 John 1:5–2:11

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+John+1%3A5%E2%80%932%3A11&version=NLT>

God is a forgiving God. Scripture teaches us that God “remembers our sins no more,” that God “freely pardons” and that while we are actively sinning God is actively loving us. Yet we struggle to live in this truth. We struggle with the burdens of guilt and shame. We see ourselves as condemned.

Imagine the difference it would make in our lives if we lived every day with a conscious awareness that we are fully, freely forgiven by God. Imagine for a moment what our lives would be like if shame had no power over us, if guilt did not lead us to despair and if despair did not reinforce our depressive tendencies. God’s desire is that we receive the gift of forgiveness and the freedom it brings from the many burdens we carry.

The path toward the freedom of forgiveness is the path of honesty and humility. As we face the truth about the harms we have done, confess the many ways we have failed to love and make amends to those we have harmed, the darkness will pass and the true Light will shine.

GROUP DISCUSSION. How would you define and compare the terms *condemned* and *forgiven*?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. How might it affect you on a daily basis if you feel condemned? How might it affect you on a daily basis to know yourself fully forgiven?

The text for this study confronts our denial about our hurtful, destructive, self-serving ways and calls us to acknowledge the truth of our sin. It reassures us of God’s forgiveness and instructs us to take ongoing inventory of our failure to love, even as it calls us to live more and more fully in the light and love of God. *Read 1 John 1:5–2:11.*

1. This text begins by presenting us with a contrast between lying to ourselves about the sin in our lives and telling the truth about our sin. In your own words, how would you summarize what is being said here?

2. List all the reasons you can think of why we might lie to ourselves, to others and to God about the sin in our lives.
3. List all the reasons you can think of—including those given in the text—for telling the truth about the sin in our lives.
4. According to this text, what is the relationship between sin and failure to love?
5. How does this understanding of sin compare with your thoughts about sin?
6. What does it mean to hate someone?

What does it mean to love someone?

7. According to this text, what does hate do to us?
8. First John 2:8 talks about a process of change that is going on in us. What is it that John suggests is happening in us?
9. The text promises us the gift of forgiveness and teaches us that the way to experience God's forgiveness is through honest confession to God. What would it be like to live in the grace of God's full and free forgiveness?
10. In a time of quiet, reflect on God as a God who freely, fully forgives. Let yourself reflect on the light of God as not condemning us but as healing and freeing us to love like God loves. See yourself sitting in the healing, loving presence of this light. As you bask in the light of God's love for you, ask God to show you where you are failing to love in your life. Write whatever comes to mind.

11. Acknowledge your failures to love in a time of confession to God. Receive the gift of God's full forgiveness, offered freely to you. Focus on the image of the darkness of hate (resentment, judgment of others, withholding of love) passing from you and the light of God's love filling you. Write whatever came to your mind as you prayed.

Thank God for the gift of forgiveness.

Now or Later

Use questions 10 and 11 in a time of prayer each day this week. Write about your experience of doing this.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF SELF *Restoring Our Vision*

5

Irreparable Versus Repairable *Psalm 30*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+30&version=NLT>

God is our Healer and our Help. Scripture teaches us that God is able to rescue us, restore us, transform us and make us new. God is able to replace our fear with peace and joy. God is able to remove our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. God is able to heal our shame and guilt and to set us free to know ourselves as loved and valued.

This is all very good news. It is especially good news for those of us who see ourselves as damaged beyond repair. It is good news for those of us who fear that we are beyond help, including God's help.

We may put a lot of energy into hiding our sense of irreparability. We may try to cover up our fears about ourselves with attempts to look good. But the distortion of ourselves as irreparable lingers and drives us to work harder and harder while our fears increase more and more.

As we have seen in the previous studies, Scripture reminds us that we are loved, we are valued, we are not on our own, we are forgiven. In this study we are reminded that God is powerful, loving, eager and able to repair and heal us.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What might it be like to feel hopeless about being able to change for the better as a person?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. In what ways do you feel that you are beyond help or repair?

In the text for this study, we hear the story of a man who believed himself to be beyond hope, who called out to God for help and experienced restoration. *Read Psalm 30.*

1. How does the writer of this psalm describe himself before he experienced God's rescue and help (vv. 1, 3, 5, 7, 11)?
2. In what way do these descriptions match experiences you have had?
3. What did the writer do when he was in this desperate, hopeless situation?
4. What language does the writer use to describe what God did for him?

5. How might these descriptions of God's help speak to someone who fears that they are irreparable?

6. Which of these descriptions of God's active help speak to you the most?

7. In verse 5 the writer states that God's "anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime." In verse 7 the psalmist talks to God about a time when God "hid his face." What do you think he is saying in these two statements?

8. In what way do you relate to the experiences described in verses 5 and 7?

9. How would you describe the psalmist's response to being rescued, helped and healed by God?

10. In a time of quiet, talk to God about your own need and distress. Talk to God about whatever feelings of fear, shame, despair or hopelessness you have about yourself. Invite God to help you and heal you. Write about what you shared with God.

11. God is powerful and loving and actively working to heal us. As this psalmist puts it, God is working "to turn our wailing into dancing, to remove our sackcloth and clothe us with joy." In a time of quiet, invite God to show you how God is doing this in your life. Write about whatever you sensed in this time. Stay open to whatever God might continue to show you.

Thank God for being powerful and eager to rescue, heal and restore you.

Now or Later

Continue to use questions 10 and 11 in a time of quiet with God each day this week.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF SELF *Restoring Our Vision*

6

Forgotten Versus Remembered *Genesis 16*

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+16&version=NLT>

God is frequently described in Scripture as faithful in love and goodness. God's love never fails. God's lovingkindness endures forever. God actively loves and cares for all that God has made.

We read that God's love is too vast for us to comprehend, that it surpasses our knowing. Yet we also read that it is a love that is deeply personal. Our Creator knows when every sparrow falls and knows us so intimately that even the hairs of our head are counted. God knows when we rise and when we rest, what we think and what we say.

We are known. We are seen. We are valued. We are loved. In ways that are constant, sure and everlasting. Yet some of us experience ourselves as invisible, forgotten, neglected and abandoned. These distorted images of ourselves feed our fears and loneliness.

God invites us to see and experience ourselves as seen and known. God never forgets us. In a text in Isaiah, God asks if a mother can forget her child, and goes on to say that even if a mother could forget her own child, God can never forget us. We came from God. We are God's own creation. God will never forget us.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What might it be like to feel invisible or easily forgettable to others and to God?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Have you had times when you felt like God has forgotten you? What was the experience like?

In the text for this study we read a story about a woman who was a servant. She was a handmaiden to Sarah, wife of Abraham. She had little voice or choice in her world. She was someone who might have seemed invisible, forgettable to others. But she was seen and remembered by God. *Read Genesis 16.*

1. This chapter reads a bit like a four-act play (vv. 1–4, vv. 5–6, vv. 7–14, vv. 15–16). What titles might you give to each act?
2. What sense do you get from this story about how Sarah (Sarai) saw Hagar?

3. What sense do you get from this story about how Abraham saw Hagar?
4. How does Sarah's and Abraham's treatment of Hagar compare with the way God treats Hagar?
5. How does Hagar respond to God?
6. What do you imagine it was like to be Hagar—to have no voice or no choice in life and to be seen as someone's property?
7. Are there ways in which you relate to Hagar's experience of being treated as "less than"?
8. How do you relate to the experience of feeling forgotten by others, to the experience of feeling alone?
9. What would it be like to know that God does not forget you but rather remembers you and sees you with compassion?
10. Take a few minutes to breathe deeply and easily. Picture yourself out in the desert, having run out of supplies, crying and listening to your child cry. You have been mistreated. You believe you are forgotten and alone. But then you hear an angel of God speaking to you, telling you that you are remembered, you are seen, your misery is known to God and your needs are being provided for. Stay with the experience of being seen and remembered by God in such loving ways. Write about your experience.
11. What would you like to do to acknowledge and respond to the God who sees you and remembers you?

Thank God for never forgetting you.

Now or Later

Use question 10 as a prayer meditation each day this week. Write about your experience of being seen and remembered by God.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF SELF *Restoring Our Vision*

7

Insignificant Versus Significant

Matthew 5:1–10, 14–16

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5%3A1%20%20%9310%2C+14%20%20%9316&version=NLT>

Who am I? we wonder. What significance does my small life have in the big world, in this vast universe? What is the point of my existence? What is the meaning of my life?

The psalmist reflected on this ancient question when he queried the Lord:

When I consider your heavens,

 the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars,

 which you have set in place,

what is mankind that you are mindful of them,

 human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3–4)

It is true that in many ways we are very small. We are each just one out of many billions of humans on this earth, living on a spinning sphere that is one of many billions of spheres spinning in God's great universe. But small is not the same as insignificant to our Maker. The psalmist goes on to say, quite astonishingly, about humankind that God has "crowned them with glory and honor" (v. 5).

We are crowned by God with glory. We are crowned by our Creator with honor. Yet we struggle with painful feelings of insignificance that can either drive us into desperate, exhausting efforts to "be somebody" or drive us into the despair of apathy and depression. As this text suggests, the solution is to recognize that our significance is a gift from God. It is a gift to be received with childlike humility.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What kinds of things would you say that people in our culture do in order to gain a sense of significance?

What impact do these attempts to gain significance have on peoples' character and relationships?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What thoughts and feelings have you experienced as you reflect on your sense of significance or insignificance?

In the text for this study Jesus turns common wisdom on its head. Jesus teaches us that we do not become significant when we strive to gain power or status. All our attempts to grasp self-made glory only hide our true significance. Instead, our true significance is seen only when we abandon such attempts and allow the true glory God has given us to shine through. *Read Matthew 5:1–10, 14–16.*

1. Make a list of the ways of being that Jesus blesses in verses 2–10.
2. What do these characteristics have in common?
3. How does this list contrast with the list our culture sees as blessed?
4. Rewrite the list from question 1 using your own words and phrases to capture the meaning you see in each way of being.
5. Which of these character qualities challenge you or speak to you the most?
6. Look at who Jesus says we are in verse 14. Sit with this statement for a minute. Read it again. What thoughts do you have about being told that this is who you are?
7. What does Jesus say in verses 14–16 about the ways people might respond to the reality of their God-given significance?
8. Why would we hide our true significance?
9. What is it about the character qualities that Jesus blessed in verses 2–10 that allows our lights to shine in a way that would “give light to everyone in the house”?
10. In a time of quiet, see yourself as a lamp lit but hidden. Ask God to show you what is blocking God’s light of love from shining. Invite God to remove, bit by bit, the things which conceal your light. Write about your experience.
11. In a time of quiet, see yourself as a light lit and sitting on a stand, providing light for others. Write about your experience of being the light that you are.

Thank God for the gift of significance.

Now or Later

Use questions 6, 10 and 11 in a time of reflection and prayer this week. Write about your experience.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF SELF *Restoring Our Vision*

8

Disconnected Versus Bonded in Love

1 John 4:7–21

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+John+4%3A7%20%9321&version=NLT>

We are all created with a need to be deeply bonded to others and to our Maker. We are designed to belong to someone greater than ourselves and to each other. This is the core of who we are.

Yet we often feel like the odd person out. We often see ourselves as disconnected, different and alone. And when we see ourselves in this way, we are usually unaware that many others around us are feeling the same way. Single, married, with or without children, young or old, rich or poor, this view of ourselves as outsiders can affect any of us.

But this way of seeing ourselves is a distortion. We do belong. We are loved. Whether we know it or experience it, this is the truth about us. We belong. We are connected to God and to others.

In the text for this study we are reminded that we live in relationship with our Creator and in relationship with each other.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What does belonging mean to you?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What is it like to feel disconnected from others and from God?

What helps you to feel connected to God and to others?

In the text for this study we read that God is love, that God loves us first and always and calls us to experience the richness that comes from knowing ourselves to be deeply bonded in love to God and to each other. *Read 1 John 4:7–21.*

1. List several things we learn about God in this text.
2. What are the effects of knowing God, according to this text?
3. How does this kind of knowing differ from an academic knowing of God?
4. What does the text say about how God showed love to us (vv. 9–10)?

5. Given this gift of love from God, what might it mean, in practical terms, to love each other?
6. The text seems to be talking about a progression of love between God, ourselves and others. Why might it be important to know that this progression of love begins with God—to know that God loved us first?
7. In verse 16 we read that “we know and rely on the love God has for us.” What would it be like to know and rely on God’s love for you?
8. According to verse 18, fear and love seem to be in opposition to each other. Fear causes us to feel disconnected and alone in the world. How does fear create barriers to knowing and relying on the love of God?
9. In what way does fear create barriers to knowing and relying on other peoples’ love?
10. In what way does fear create barriers to freely loving others?

11. In a time of quiet, close each hand and picture the fears that create barriers to receiving love from God and from others as items held tightly in your fists. Invite God to help you release your fears to God’s loving care. As you are ready, open your hands and keep them open in an act of release. Then read verse 16 three times slowly, giving yourself a couple of minutes to sit with these truths between each reading. “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.” As you keep your hands open, invite God to fill you with a deeper experience of God’s love, freeing you to love more and more as God loves. Write about your experience of praying in this way.

Thank God that God loves us first and calls us to live in that love, and to be that love to others.

Now or Later

Continue to use question 11 in a time of daily prayer and reflection this week. Write about your experience of praying in this way. Notice any sense of feeling more deeply bonded in love to God and to others.¹

¹ Ryan, Dale, and Juanita Ryan. *Distorted Images of Self: Restoring Our Vision: 8 Studies for Individuals or Groups: With Notes for Leaders*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2013. Print. A LifeGuide Bible Study.