

# Love

## EXPERIENCING DEEP CONNECTION

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# How to Use This Study Guide

FIVE PERSONAL OR SMALL-GROUP SESSIONS

**SESSION 1:** *To Love and Be Loved*

**SESSION 2:** *Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places*

**SESSION 3:** *Friendship*

**SESSION 4:** *Forgiveness*

**SESSION 5:** *From Loneliness to Belonging*

*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.*

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

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**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.

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**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.

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

# INTRODUCTION

“Love” is one of the most complicated words in the English language. It is grossly overused and confusing. It is the first choice for a hyperbolic positive sentiment about anything: “I love pizza” or “I love going to the movies.” How can that be the same word to describe how I feel about my children? What makes “love” even more complex is the way we often use it to describe both feelings and behaviors.

Our experiences with love are so varied. At our core, we want to love and be loved because love is the essence of our being. We are drawn to anything that offers us the promise of love because love is the primary reason this world was formed, as imaged in the Garden of Eden, the perfect expression of God’s love at the dawn of creation.

Henri Nouwen wrote extensively about the subject of love as he wrestled deeply and personally with the love of God, self, and others. For Henri, love is the essence of God himself, such that whenever love is shared, there is God. Henri also knew that pain was not the opposite of love. Indifference is the converse of love. But pain or even anger is the expression of love gone awry. When we experience pain and anger, love is very near.

**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](http://www.henrinouwen.org).

# To Love and Be Loved

*“Those you have deeply loved become part of you. The longer you live, there will always be more people to be loved by you and to become part of your inner community. The wider your inner community becomes, the more easily you will recognize your own brothers and sisters in the strangers around you. Those who are alive within you will recognize those who are alive around you. The wider the community of your heart, the wider the community around you. Thus the pain of rejection, absence, and death can become fruitful. Yes, as you love deeply the ground of your heart will be broken more and more, but you will rejoice in the abundance of the fruit it will bear.”*

WHEN I WAS TWENTY FOUR YEARS OLD, A SIGNIFICANT AND UNEXPECTED JOURNEY WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN FOR ME THAT WOULD SHAPE MY VIEW OF GOD, THE WORLD, AND MYSELF FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE. It was in this year that I got the news that I had contracted stage III testicular cancer. My wife Devon and I had been married for a year, I was a student at Fuller Seminary at the time, and I was applying for a youth minister position at my local Presbyterian church. Serving on a volunteer basis at the church already, I had a desk in the church office. I left my desk one day to visit the doctor about a rash I had on my back. I admitted that it had been over five years since I had had a physical, so the doctor gave me a physical and discovered a tumor on my left testicle as a result. After I left the doctor, I first called my wife to share the difficult news. The next day I went into surgery to have the tumor removed and analyzed. Two days later I went in for CT scans of my entire body. The day after that, I received the results that my tumor was a seminoma (the kind that spreads), and the scans lit up throughout my body. The cancer had

metastasized in multiple places below my neck. Devon and I met with the local oncologist who recommended an intense chemotherapy treatment at City of Hope Cancer Treatment Center in Duarte, California.

I was scared but hopeful. Mostly, I was frustrated because I didn't feel I could serve as a Christian ministry leader in that condition. I was afraid I had lost my opportunity to respond to what I believed was God's call in my life. I was confused even though I had confidence that God was right by my side.

The day after receiving this burdensome news, I went back to the church to visit the senior pastor in order to request removal from their hiring process due to the possibility that I may not be as available as I had originally intended when applying for the position. I was devastated and shaken up because I really wanted to be their youth minister. As I was walking down the church hallway toward the pastor's study, the pastor was on his way to my desk to offer me the youth minister position for which I had applied and our paths crossed. I said, "Pastor Jack, I got some bad news the other day that I want to share with you because I think it disqualifies me from the position." "What happened?" Jack asked. I explained that I had stage III testicular cancer and that I was going to have to get intensive chemotherapy at City of Hope, where I would reside for a week at a time, receiving a cocktail of three chemotherapy medications, morning and evening, and then return home to recover for two weeks before the next round, probably needing four rounds. This being the case, I thought that I should remove myself from the church's hiring process, I told him.

Pastor Jack had a look of confusion on his face, as if he wasn't making the connection between this news and this job opportunity. He expressed great concern for my health at such a young age. He expressed concern about my survivability and our future family plans. But he did not express concern about the job. In fact, he said, "Your call to ministry is not predicated on your physical health."

I was dumbfounded by this love and acceptance. In the months that followed, I learned much about the mutuality of love. When I first accepted God's call to ministry, I expected to be the one who would dole out love

to the congregation I served, but I did not expect to learn the importance and challenge of receiving love. As I began my new job as a minister to youth, I would spend a week at City of Hope Cancer Treatment Center, two hours from home, followed by two weeks of recovery at home. When I was home, I would lead the youth group, teach about faith in Jesus Christ, and mentor the teenagers in the faith. When I was at City of Hope, teenagers and their parents would come to visit, decorate the off-campus hospital apartment with bright colors, and bring food for my wife and me. I would wheel my hydration bag over to the hospital in the morning and evening to receive my infusion treatments. When my hair fell out, the boys in the youth group shaved their heads to show solidarity.

This would become the essence of ministry for me even until now, seventeen years later—giving and receiving the love of Christ within a worshipping community of faith. It was a gift of grace for me to discover this, because it caused me to be dependent on the community I was serving for my own support. I needed them as much as they needed me. I had to deal with my own aversion to being someone in need. At first, I just wanted to give love and not “use” the church to meet my needs. After all, I was called to serve them, not to be served by them. The great irony I learned was that receiving love was actually just another way of giving love. In receiving the care of the community, it was as if they were hearing me say: “You have something precious to offer. You have the love of God within you to share, even with me. I recognize that enough to make myself vulnerable to your care and love.” They recognized that I was loving them by my reception of their loving care for me. This led to a beautiful season of ministry as mutual love. Had I not loved them in return through my formation and teaching ministry, their loving care for me would have grown weary. Had I not received their love for me, they would have been kept at a safe distance, and my teaching would not have reached the depths of their hearts that perhaps it did.

## For Reflection

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1. When have you experienced mutual love in your life?
2. What is it like for you to receive love?
3. What benefits come from giving love?

## For Action

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*Reach out to someone who needs to receive an extra measure of love from you right now.*



DURING THIS SEASON OF CANCER, MY SEMINARY STUDIES INCLUDED HENRI NOUWEN AS CORE CURRICULUM FOR SEVERAL COURSES. Henri helped me understand this inseparable connection between giving and receiving love, when he wrote: “The more you have loved and have allowed yourself to suffer because of your love, the more you will be able to let your heart grow wider and deeper. When your love is truly giving and receiving, those whom you love will not leave your heart even when they depart from you. They will become part of your self and thus gradually build a community within you.”<sup>2</sup>

Love is mutual. If we want to give it, we must be willing to receive it. If we want to receive it, we must be willing to give it as well. We think about family and friends whom we love so much that we want to give all that we have to them and they want to give all that they have to us. The reason love is mutual is because, theologically, it is wrapped up in the personhood of God as Trinity. “God is love,” 1 John says. Is not the reverse also true, that “love is God”? God as Trinity exists in a perfect relationship of giving and receiving love among God’s three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As St. Paul reminds us, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all”

(2 Corinthians 13:14). When we give love and receive love, we are caught up in the essence and life of God in all its fullness, fellowship, and grace.

Henri was fierce when it came to love. He recognized not only the mutuality of love, but the integral connection between love and suffering. Henri writes:

It is like a plow that breaks the ground to allow the seed to take root and grow into a strong plant. Every time you experience the pain of rejection, absence, or death, you are faced with a choice. You can become bitter and decide not to love again, or you can stand straight in your pain and let the soil on which you stand become richer and more able to give life to new seeds.<sup>3</sup>

### **For Reflection**

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1. What has helped you to have a wider and deeper capacity to love?
2. How does the bond of the Trinity impact the bond you have when two or three are gathered in the Lord's name?
3. In what ways has pain and suffering brought more love to light in your life?

### **For Action**

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*Make an effort to show mutual love to those who have loved you.*



# Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places

HENRI NOUWEN LIVED HIS FINAL YEARS SERVING ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES OUTSIDE OF TORONTO. Many of Nouwen's earlier writings depicted a relentless searching. A search that he tried to satisfy by becoming ordained in the Catholic church as a priest, by getting a Ph.D., by serving as a seminary professor at Yale, by leaving seminary and becoming a monk at a monastery in Genesee, and later by serving as a missionary in South America. Through many of these experiences, he wrote profound books depicting what he was learning about the spiritual life. But if he did find what he was looking for, it came to him through the little fellowship at L'Arche Daybreak in Richmond Hill, Ontario.

Nouwen would spend the first two hours of every day caring for a man named Adam, who had severe disabilities and could not speak. Nouwen would wake him, get him washed and dressed, and take him to breakfast, where Henri would eat beside Adam. Then he would bring him to the place where he would spend his day. At first Nouwen was afraid of this assignment, thinking it would be overwhelming. But before long he began to look forward to the assignment as he always received a glimpse of the love of Jesus in the eyes of Adam.

People would ask Nouwen if this was the best way to be making an impact for a man of his academic training and whose writings were read by hundreds of thousands. It was such a small crowd—a searching scholar and a disabled man who could not speak. But Nouwen would always explain that he didn't spend time with Adam to perform miracles. He did it because Jesus led him there. And he did it because it was wonderful to