STUDY GUIDE
GROUPS / INDIVIDUALS

SIX SESSIONS

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HOW'S YOUR SOUL?

WHY EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS STARTS WITH THE INSIDE YOU

Session 1

WHEN IS MY SOUL HOME?

WELCOME

Welcome to the first session of *How's Your Soul?* Our goal in the next six weeks is to explore what it means to have a healthy soul. The apostle John wrote, "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul" (3 John 2). We are going to explore what it means to be healthy and whole on the inside: our minds, our wills, and our emotions.

Before we begin, it is helpful to define what we mean by the term *soul*. David wrote in Psalm 103:1, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!" In this verse, David equates his soul with his inner self: "All that is within me."

Your soul is "all that is within" you. Your soul is not your eye color or your height. It's not your hairline or your waistline

(thank God). It's not your name, your education, or your bank account. Your soul is the invisible but incredibly significant part of you that thinks, feels, and decides.

During this first week, we are asking the question, "When is my soul home?" We will look at the origin and creation of the human soul, which gives us a clue about where our souls can truly be at home, at rest, and at ease.

VIDEO TEACHING

The following are a few key thoughts to note as you watch session one of the video. Use the space provided to jot down personal observations or applications.

> It is possible to have everything look good on the outside but to be unwell, small, and unsuccessful on the inside. True success is not determined or gauged by the outside but rather by the inside. Much—if not most—of life is the result of who we are on the inside.

> When God created Adam, he was just a form. He was just a body. It wasn't until God breathed his own life into him that he became a living soul, a living being. Our outside

form isn't what makes us alive—our soul is what makes us alive.

Our souls come from the breath of God. We are living on the borrowed breath of God.

When it comes to our souls, we are often nomadic: our souls don't have a place to belong, a place to rest. They are restless and homeless. But if our physical bodies need a place to call home, how much more do our souls need homes?

God's breath is the origin of our souls. Therefore, our souls return home when we use our borrowed breath to return praise to God.

Psalm 150:6 tells us that everything with breath—everything with a soul—should praise God. Gratitude and worship have incredible power to bring health to our souls.

Mary and Martha illustrate two different approaches to God. Martha was worried and troubled because of what she had to do. She was unwell in her soul. Mary didn't do anything except listen to the love and acceptance of Jesus. Yet Jesus said she had discovered the one essential thing in life.

Our souls find their homes when they return to the creator, God; when they lean into his love, listen to him, and stay close to him. That is when we are truly healthy on the inside.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Take a few minutes to discuss the following questions with your group.

1. How would you define or describe the concept of the soul? What is your soul?

2. How important is it to have a healthy soul? What are some benefits of a healthy soul? What are some negative results of an unhealthy soul?

3. How would you describe the feeling of being at home?

4. What does the idea of our souls needing to go home mean to you?

5. What does the origin of the human soul—when God breathed into Adam's lifeless body and created a living soul—indicate about the soul's original home?

6. What was the difference between Mary's approach to Jesus and Martha's? What do you think the "one thing" was that Mary did?

CLOSING PRAYER

Close your time together in prayer. Here are a few ideas of what you could pray about based on the topic of this session:

- Pray for God to help you evaluate the health of your soul and discover areas that could improve.
- Pray that you would be more aware of God's presence and reality in your life.
- Pray that you could, like Mary, learn to just "be with Jesus" and enjoy his love.

- As a practical way of using your soul to bless God, take a few moments to thank God for who he is and what he has done.

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

Once or twice this week, set aside ten minutes to just be with Jesus, like Mary did. It would be helpful to find a quiet place with no distractions. Maybe put on soft music to help you focus. Then spend time just thinking about who God is, what he has done for you, and how much he loves you. If you want, come prepared next week to share how you felt afterward.

RECOMMENDED READING

Review the introduction and chapter 1 in the book *How's Your Soul?* Use the space provided to write any key points or questions you want to bring to the next group meeting.

Personal Study

Session 1

THAT'S AWKWARD

If it weren't for Chelsea, I'd probably forget one of our kids somewhere at least once a week. It's sad but true. I left our oldest son, Zion, in the car outside a burger place when he was literally three days old. Talk about starting off on the wrong foot.

The problem is that multitasking is not my strong suit, especially when the multiple "tasks" happen to be high-energy, highly mobile humanoids. I tend to lose track of them. That's why in our family, one of my main jobs is to make sure our kids enjoy their childhood, while Chelsea's is to make sure they actually *survive* it. It's sort of an arrangement of necessity.

This arrangement was working well until recently when Chelsea came down with infectious mononucleosis, more affectionately known as mono. Mono is also called the "kissing disease" because it's transmitted by saliva, but Chelsea assured me you could also get it from your kids. Seemed slightly suspicious, but I took her word for it.

One of the main symptoms of mono is extreme fatigue. You might feel great when you wake up, but partway through the day you are so exhausted you can't even stand on your feet.

So for quite a few weeks, Chelsea wasn't able to do all the kid-related things she is so good at (and I am so good at avoiding). That meant I had to gingerly, awkwardly, and amateurishly do some stuff I wasn't used to doing. You know, like laundry. And dishes. And cleaning up the bodily excretions children randomly produce.

Full disclosure: grandparents, friends, nannies, babysitters, and little old ladies who didn't know me but saw me struggling in grocery stores also helped. A lot. But still, let it be known that I went *way* out of my comfort zone there for a while. And I did a fairly good job of it, I might add. I actually found myself getting comfortable with things I would previously have done anything to avoid.

Somehow I sense that most of you are unimpressed. Don't judge me—we all have our weaknesses. Mine just happen to be wimpier than yours.

The point is, we naturally avoid uncomfortable, unfamiliar, or awkward situations. But just because something doesn't come easily for us doesn't mean we should avoid it. Actually, life has a way of dropping us into the most wince-inducing scenarios and then abandoning us, and we usually come out better on the other side.

What does this have to do with our souls? I find that a lot of people get uncomfortable when it comes to evaluating their inner selves. They feel awkward and anxious when faced with authentic

introspection. Opening up to themselves or others about what is out of alignment on the inside can sound almost terrifying. So they simply avoid soul-searching at any cost—like me with household chores.

How about you? When was the last time you looked at the state of your soul? How comfortable are you with asking thoughtful, revealing questions about the state of your inner self? That can quickly get nerve-racking, because we aren't used to thinking this way. Usually it's the "outside us"—our health, finances, families, careers—that gets most of our focus. When we do pay attention to the condition of our souls, it's usually because our emotions or thoughts are screaming in desperation.

I'm so angry right now.

I'm scared to death.

I feel betrayed and abandoned.

My life isn't worth living.

But we shouldn't wait until our souls have entered crisis mode before we start listening to them. I believe God wants to give us a level of peace, stability, joy, and hope on the inside that is beyond what we can imagine. He wants to help our souls be at rest no matter what our worlds might look like on the outside.

For that to happen, we have to get comfortable with awkward questions. Questions about our feelings, our thoughts, our fears, our motives, and our needs. Questions that are hard to answer not just because the answers are elusive, but also because the answers are embarrassing. Questions that reveal what is hurting us and hindering us, even if it might take some gut-level courage to deal with what we discover.

The apostle John wrote this to one of his close friends: "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul" (3 John 2). I believe he was expressing God's heart for each of us: that our souls would be happy, healthy, and whole.

God wants to help us with our soul searching and soul healing more than we might realize. He is committed not just to our happiness—which is notoriously fleeting and subjective—but also to our well-being. And that well-being starts on the inside.

Are you up to the challenge? Are you willing to face the dirty dishes, crumpled laundry, and random bodily fluids of your soul? Okay, I might have just pushed that analogy too far. But you get the point. *Comfort zones are overrated.*

Your soul is you, and you are your soul, and you are definitely worth taking care of. So don't be too afraid, too busy, or even too selfless to start paying attention to your soul. You'll be glad you did.

- Are you comfortable talking with other people about your feelings, hurts, dreams, and desires? If not, why do you think it's difficult for you?

- Why do you think people often wait until their souls are in crisis mode before they think about them? Do you tend to do this?

- Take a moment to think about the state of the inner you. Then write down at least three specific fears, feelings, assumptions, or insecurities that might be affecting you.

STALKER GOD

Have you ever felt like you knew someone just because you followed that individual on social media? You've had zero personal interaction in real life, but you're basically BFFs—at least in your mind. You notice when she gets a new haircut. You feel bad when you see a photo of him with a broken leg. Or you find yourself personally offended when the person makes a bad decision or posts a picture of questionable taste.

Do you remember when observing someone from a distance was considered creepy? That used to be called spying, by the way. Or stalking, or prying, or snooping, or staring. Your mom probably told you not to do it.

Now we call it *following*, because social media and modern technology have turned staring at people into a normal part of life. We even brag about the number of spies/stalkers/snoopers attached to our own social media accounts, because being watched from a distance must mean we are important.

I'm not here to criticize social media. I love it, actually—probably too much. Just ask my wife and kids, who I stalk regularly with my camera phone in hand. Snapchat is my current obsession, but I've gone through a Twitter phase, an Instagram phase, and a Periscope phase. I've never had a LinkedIn phase. That probably says something about me.

Our fixation with following happens to be a good illustration of a couple of realities that can affect how well we know our souls. These aren't new phenomena, by the way—they are as old as humanity itself. Social media just makes the issues more obvious.

Let me explain.

First, when it comes to *others*, we often jump to conclusions without knowing people's hearts. We label them awesome or arrogant, remarkable or ridiculous, clever or clueless. We critique their romantic choices. We pick apart their fashion. Based purely on their online posts, we think we know the contents of people's souls, and we are authorized and obligated to publish a response.

Second, when it comes to *ourselves*, we tend to project a persona we think will be accepted by others. That usually means we focus primarily on the outside. Why? Because we know very well how quick we are to judge superficially, and we fear that other people are doing the same to us.

This fascination with our facades, our exteriors, and

our appearances means that the inside us—which is far more important—often remains unknown. Not only to others, but even to ourselves. We genuinely don't know if we are at peace. We don't know if our minds are in a healthy place. We don't know if our desires and decisions are right.

We like to think we know other people, but do we even know ourselves? Can we sort through the confusing barrage of emotions and thoughts and really judge ourselves?

I don't think we can. At least not completely.

We can and should do our best, of course. But ultimately, only one person knows us completely. He's been watching and following us, not from a distance, but from right next to us.

That person, as I'm sure you've already guessed, is God. God is the creator of every human soul. He sees the inner you. He knows your thoughts and feelings and decisions. He watches your past, present, and future at the same time. If anyone is qualified to make an accurate, comprehensive evaluation about the inside you, it's God.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote this about God's insight:

> *The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful,*
> *a puzzle that no one can figure out.*
> *But I, God, search the heart*
> *and examine the mind.*
> *I get to the heart of the human.*
> *I get to the root of things.*
> *I treat them as they really are,*
> *not as they pretend to be.*
> (Jeremiah 17:9–10 MSG)

How does that passage make you feel? If you're like me, you might feel a bit nervous. I'm not too proud of some things deep within me. There are a few recesses in my soul that I'm trying to ignore. The idea that God is searching and examining the inner me can make me uncomfortable.

But in reality, this shouldn't be threatening—it should be comforting. God isn't watching us to criticize us, shame us, or judge us. He wants to help us.

Yes, our insides might be a bit embarrassing at times, but God isn't turned off by that. He knows exactly who we are, and he loves us anyway. He has loved us since before we even thought about him. He loves us when we don't love ourselves. And he will love us forever, regardless of whether we earn or deserve or reciprocate that love.

God is our most avid follower. He's crazy about us. He's madly in love with us. But unlike social media stalkers, God actually does know us—far better than we know ourselves.

In your journey of finding health on the inside, start by turning to God. He is the only one capable of truly knowing you.

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do you think you know yourself? Is it possible to truly know yourself? Why or why not?

- Are there any areas of your life that you are a bit nervous about having God examine? Write a couple of them down. Why does it make you uncomfortable that God might see those things?

- If God is your most avid fan and follower, how do you think he responds when he sees something inside you that needs to improve?

JUST STOPPING BY

Spending time visiting friends and relatives is great. Right? Hanging out at their homes, laughing, eating, and playing card games—I highly recommend it. It's awesome.

Except when it's not.

Maybe you have one or two people in your life whom you don't love visiting. It's not that you don't love them as individuals—it's the environment they live in that is hard to handle. It's the house. It's the odor. It's the toilet bowl that hasn't been cleaned since 1986. It's the pet that ambushes you at the door with way too much affection and hair.

You love them, but you just prefer to love them from a distance. Or at least from a neutral location. But Christmas comes around, and you find yourself standing on the doorstep again.

You know you are visiting one of these people when this telltale phrase slips out of your mouth as soon as you walk in the door: "We're just stopping by."

Have you ever said that? The door creaks open. You smell the smells and see the sights. You look sideways at your spouse, and your spouse looks back. In unspoken agreement you say, "Aunt Ruthie, hi! Wow, we love you. And . . . your five cats! Um, we can't stay long. *We're just stopping by.*" You don't pre-plan to say it. You assess the situation, and it springs out of the deep places of your heart. "Cousin Frank, so great to see you! Hey, we are just stopping by!"

As soon as politely possible, you make your exit and head home. To *your* home. When you walk in your own door, you are flooded with a completely different emotion and sensation. It's familiar, comforting, reassuring. You are finally home.

Even if your house is small, even if you are renting, even if the neighbors play their music too loud, even if it's not a house at all, just a room or a shared apartment—it's still *home*. It's still yours. If you find a hair on the bathroom counter, you know who it belongs to. If you see a dirty dish lying around, at least the germs are in the family.

There's nothing quite like the feeling of coming home, and there's nothing quite like other people's homes to make you value your own. So ask yourself: *If your physical self needs a home so much, how much more does your soul need a home?*

The truth is, many people never find a home for their souls. They never find a haven, a safe place, a refuge where their inner selves can kick off their shoes and completely relax. They spend their lives making sure their external selves have a place to live, food to eat, and other necessities, but they neglect their souls—which are far more important.

I think if most of us were to slow down for a moment, we'd realize that often our souls are longing for home. Some of us have gotten so used to visiting uncomfortable places on a soul level that we don't even know what home feels like. Instead of just stopping by, we've moved in. We've taken up residence in homes called doubt, insecurity, anxiety, and frustration.

God wants to help your soul find its way home. He wants you to feel as comfortable on the inside as you feel on the outside when you walk into that familiar, welcoming place you call home.

The big question is, when are our souls home? It's easy to agree that our souls need to find that place of rest, of refuge, of relaxing. But where exactly is it?

The answer isn't complicated, but isn't the most obvious, either. We are used to assuming that peace on the inside is the result of peace on the outside. So we work hard to try to eliminate danger, hurt, and risk so that our souls can finally feel at home and at rest.

But the ultimate home of the soul is not found in this life, because the soul is eternal. The soul is the creation and the reflection of God himself, and it naturally longs for something beyond the confines of this planet. It longs for God.

God created the soul, and the soul is home when it returns to God.

The book of Genesis describes the creation of the human soul this way: "God formed Man out of dirt from the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The Man came alive—a living soul!" (2:7 MSG).

In other words, God started this whole thing called life. And life began not when he made our physical bodies but when he made our *souls*. His breath gave us life. We are living on borrowed breath, you could say, so it's only natural that our souls long to return to their original source and home.

The world around us, exciting as it is, is not really home for our souls. We are just stopping by. We can't stay long, because nothing in this world can ultimately satiate and satisfy the longings of our inner beings.

If you find within yourself a yearning for something that life can't seem to give you, it might be your soul catching your eye and telling you it's time to move on from petty pursuits. It might be God himself calling to the inside you, inviting you to return home.

Maybe you feel far from God. Let me encourage you that the journey home is not difficult, long, or perilous. It doesn't require massive self-control or impossible self-sacrifice. It simply requires faith, which is nothing more than an openhanded, childlike acceptance of Jesus' love and forgiveness.

Maybe you have followed Jesus for years, but the cares and concerns of life have gotten in the way of your relationship with him, and your soul hasn't been home in a long time. You used to love God and life, but something seems to have changed. You find

yourself worn and weary, wondering where all the wonderment went. God invites you to return to him, to rest in him.

No matter where you are in life, you can simply open your heart to God and allow your soul to reconnect to him. In God, your soul is home.

- Why do you think we often neglect the state of our souls? Is this an issue for you? Why or why not?

- What does the phrase, "the soul is home when it returns to God," mean to you?

- When was the last time you felt that your soul was truly home, and you felt genuine peace, rest, and belonging on the inside?