

HOW NURTURING YOUR SOUL, YOUR
SELF, AND YOUR SANITY HONORS GOD

GOOD
NEWS
ABOUT
SELF-
CARE

BENJAMIN D. ESPINOZA

In *Good News About Self-Care* Benjamin Espinoza, a highly accomplished pastor, writer, and academic, explains how he learned the hard way about the importance of taking care of himself. In the past, he thought self-care was fluff, the habit of the weak. In these pages, Espinoza demonstrates that self-care is a biblical practice. He recounts how Jesus practiced self-care in his own life and cites examples from Scripture wherein God makes self-care a priority for his people. Espinoza adroitly highlights that Christian self-care is countercultural, enabling us to resist the culture's push for productivity and the dehumanization of ourselves and our fellow human beings. Above all, self-care enables us to more fully honor God. Espinoza knows well of what he speaks. Listen to him.

Marlena Graves, author of *Bearing God*

In this book Benjamin Espinoza effectively illustrates two key foundations of the Christian life: (1) Jesus wants us to live abundant lives and (2) he is the Lord of our lives, not us. Therefore, a proper understanding of ourselves and our relationship with the Lord helps us practice self-care, enabling us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves adequately. This honest and practical book will indeed bring good news to our oftentimes weary souls.

Octavio Esqueda, professor of Christian higher education at the Talbot School of Theology at Biola University

Self-care is the word of the decade. Yet it has confusing practices, and in many ways, no definition at all. *Good News About Self-Care* is truly that: *good news!* The writing style is compelling, especially when coupled with Ben's vulnerability and humility, and this book is packed with solid practices for self-care that is healthy both physically and spiritually. The probing questions at the end of each chapter call

for deeper reflection. I highly recommend this book for spiritual and mental growth, no matter one's calling, profession, or work.

Jo Anne Lyon, general superintendent emerita of The Wesleyan Church

Ben Espinoza's *Good News About Self-Care* is refreshing in its simplicity and authenticity. Ben seamlessly weaves stories of his own journey toward emotional, spiritual, and relational health with insights from the lives of people we read about in Scripture—especially Jesus. Ben admits his own tendency toward overwork and dares us to disarm the incessant demands of connectivity and productivity we all face. He calls us to sanity, boundaries, and positive attention to all aspects of appropriate self-care so that, as persons created in the image of God, we can flourish.

Linda Adams, bishop of the Free Methodist Church in Canada

Ben Espinoza is a seasoned leader, educator, theologian, and human being who shares his thoughtful insights on self-care. In a self-help world that promises quick fixes, shortcuts, and perfection, Ben offers reachable, doable, and sustainable approaches to give you small wins that fuel momentum. Before you pick this book up for someone else, read it for yourself. Trust Ben's voice as an empathetic, wise, and hopeful guide who walks alongside you toward that full life Jesus promises (the one you desire to live). As Ben says, "Adelante"—forward into the integrated wholeness you were made for!

Steve Argue, associate professor of youth, family, and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary and applied research strategist at Fuller Youth Institute

This book isn't a subtle deviation from the necessary selflessness of Christian holiness. It's resisting the priority of success as defined by

the world. Investing in others at the expense of bankrupting oneself is hardly modeling Jesus. The author has been on a mixed journey, driven to achieve and excel, admitting the spiritual challenges of an aggressive extrovert. Following Jesus requires respecting one's own physical, mental, and spiritual self. We are responsible to honor—not worship—our bodies. The alternative will cut short productive discipleship. Espinoza encourages practicing the Sabbath, solitude, and selective use of technology. Self-care is Christian stewardship. If you love Jesus, start loving yourself!

Barry L. Callen, dean emeritus of Anderson University, longtime editor of the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, and editorial director of Aldersgate Press

A growing chorus of Christian ministers and academics has decried today's existential crisis of the "empty self." Whether one is far from God or intimately close to him, we live in a time of unprecedented change that is exacting an excruciating toll on us all. In *Good News About Self-Care*, Dr. Benjamin Espinoza challenges readers to recognize the limitations of our humanity and to respond by embracing self-care as an act of discipleship. Rooted in Scripture and teeming with pastoral wisdom, the book reframes self-care—not as selfishness but as the faithful stewardship of the *imago Dei* in us. Espinoza writes with stirring and courageous humility, weaving his own journey with practical and holistic guidance. *Good News About Self-Care* is a valuable resource for parents, pastors, students, and church leaders—or anyone seeking to flourish in life or ministry through abiding in Christ. Both challenging and refreshing, this book deserves wide reading and much heeding.

Dr. Freddy Cardoza, vice president and dean of Grace Theological Seminary

This book is a wise and tender companion for anyone seeking spiritual guidance in our culture of overwhelm, exhaustion, and worry. Dr. Espinoza offers a vision of care rooted in wholeness, care that embraces our relationships with God, ourselves, society, and others. With both depth and practicality, he provides insight into *why* various dimensions of care matter and *how* to engage in them with grace and intention in daily life. This book invites readers to rediscover self-care as a deeply Christian practice, one that nurtures the soul, honors our limits, and helps us live more faithfully and fully.

Angela Gorrell, author of *Braving Difficult Decisions*, *The Gravity of Joy*, and *Always On*

In this book Benjamin Espinoza offers a courageous and encouraging vision of a complex topic: self-care. He does this by rooting the concept in the theological vision of the image of God and a self who is centered on the Lord. From this framework, Espinoza provides a compelling vision of pursuing healthy relationships with God and others, relationships that can't flourish apart from attention to our own souls. By sharing himself and his journey with us, Espinoza paints a theologically rich vision of self-care that calls us to a deeper relationship with God and our neighbor.

Dr. Joel Lawrence, president of the Center for Pastor Theologians

“Work hard and play hard” is an easy, quick phrase we use too often to explain our effort in caring for ourselves. But with transparent care, Dr. Espinoza helps us see that self-care is far more than willful determination to balance two opposite priorities of life. Tending the well of our souls is an act of stewardship in respecting God's

greatest gift to us. Dr. Espinoza puts a powerful point on our call to honor God's image in us and surrender to a new mind that weaves our lives into the wholeness God desires for us.

Kevin Mannoia, former president of the National Association of Evangelicals and former bishop of the Free Methodist Church USA

Good News About Self-Care is a comprehensive and scripturally grounded guide to self-care practices that every God-created human would be blessed to read. Benjamin Espinoza leads with his own story of discovering his need for self-care and finding fresh direction and unexpected encouragement in the Scriptures that he knows so well. If you have any doubt that God desires his children to practice self-care, or if you struggle to know how to implement self-care practices, this book is for you! It will be both a theological justification and a practical guide. Espinoza is truly a kindred spirit in caring for the well-being of people of God.

Janice McWilliams, author of *Restore My Soul*

I often wake up to the pull of my cell phone—emails, schedules, and the weight of the day ahead. Choosing to wait until my quiet time is over before engaging with the digital world has become a small act of resistance. That's why I'm so grateful for Benjamin Espinoza's *Good News About Self-Care*. This book reframes self-care not as selfishness but as spiritual formation rooted in the Sabbath, Scripture, and the rhythms of grace. Espinoza's emphasis on resistance to hustle culture and his call to honor the divine image through rest, boundaries, and relational health is both timely and theological. I encourage pastors, leaders, and laypeople to read this book and apply its principles. It's not just about feeling better; it's about the call to scriptural holiness, for each of us to become

the person God made us to be. This is the kind of resource our churches and institutions need now.

Andy Miller III, PhD, president and associate professor of preaching and theology at Wesley Biblical Seminary

Good News About Self-Care is a personal, practical guide to caring for the self by connecting with God. Ben shares not only his insights but also his soul—a soul now in a better space because God has seen him through. If your soul needs care, this book is a good start.

Aaron Perry, senior pastor of King Street Church

From his personal transparency to practical steps and questions for reflection, Ben integrates self-care with spiritual formation. His unexpected suggestions on breathing, playfulness, grace with boundaries, and walking away are among contributions to flourishing over just surviving. There are wake-up calls related to the achievement addiction and the idolatry of productivity as well as to toxic workplaces and unhealthy relationships. What Ben offers in these pages are not magic bullets but actionable insights into the stewardship of self-care for your good and God's glory.

Wayne Schmidt, general superintendent of The Wesleyan Church

In a culture (and a church!) marked by burnout, stress, anxiety, and depression, how can we pursue a flourishing Christian life? In Ben Espinoza's *Good News About Self-Care* we get a gospel-infused picture of such a life and a clear road map to its realization. Espinoza offers practical wisdom to help us develop spiritual, social, emotional, and bodily rhythms that honor the ways God has created us. With a biblical approach to self-care grounded in the notion of stewardship, he helps us see and live into the

beautiful life that God has designed us to pursue in our work, play, health, and spiritual practices. Filled with practical suggestions and real-world stories, *Good News About Self-Care* offers an alluring invitation to the abundant life that Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). In a world that so often deforms the soul, this is good news indeed!

David Setran, Price-LeBar Chair of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College

Good News About Self-Care is timely, full of wisdom, and full of deeply practical counsel. With honesty, biblical insight, and pastoral warmth, Benjamin Espinoza reminds us that caring for ourselves is not selfish but a way of honoring the God who created us in his image and enables us to love others well.

Ken Shigematsu, senior pastor of Tenth Church and author of *Survival Guide for the Soul*

During one of the most stressful times in my life, I read *Good News About Self-Care*. On every page, I heard God's gentle voice urging me to slow down. The insight Benjamin Espinoza shares through his candid personal narratives is reflective and instructive. I applaud his courage in peeling back the layers of pretense that often shroud ministry leaders so that we can learn practical solutions that benefit us all. *Good News About Self-Care* elevates self-care to a spiritual discipline by highlighting its vital role in spiritual formation. After all, if we don't take care of ourselves, we risk working ourselves into an early grave. The adversary of our souls rejoices when we neglect our spiritual, physical, and emotional self-care and become useless wrecks. I urge pastors, teachers, and ministry leaders to pause, take a break, and read this book!

La Verne Tolbert, PhD, Christian educator and author

Ministry can take us through seasons that are grueling, discouraging, and exhausting. Faithful and sustainable spiritual leadership requires us to steward all the gifts and means of grace available to us, including our physical bodies, our meaningful relationships, our emotional well-being, and perhaps most importantly, our souls and our spiritual lives. *Good News About Self-Care* is a rich, personal, pastoral resource that offers both thoughtful and practical guidance on how we can do this well.

David C. Wang, THM, PHD, Cliff and Joyce Penner Chair for the Formation of Emotionally Healthy Leaders and professor of psychology and spiritual formation at Fuller Theological Seminary

This book speaks to the heart of struggles many Christians face but often feel too afraid to voice. Ben does a fantastic job of inviting readers into a sacred, safe space, one where they can wrestle with and identify the pressures they carry while also discovering practical and theologically sound steps forward. This is a great resource for people who are just beginning to explore what self-care means in a Christian context and for those who have been on this journey for some time.

David Whyte, district superintendent of the Wesleyan Holiness Church (UK)

HOW NURTURING YOUR SOUL, YOUR
SELF, AND YOUR SANITY HONORS GOD

GOOD
NEWS
ABOUT
SELF-
CARE

BENJAMIN D. ESPINOZA

NavPress 

Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers



NavPress.com

Good News About Self-Care: How Nurturing Your Soul, Your Self, and Your Sanity Honors God

Copyright © 2026 by Benjamin Dallas Espinoza. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

NavPress and the NavPress logo are registered and/or common law trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO, in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. *Tyndale* is a registered and/or common law trademark of Tyndale House Ministries in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. See tyndale.com for a full list of trademarks owned by Tyndale House Ministries.

The Team:

David Zimmerman, Publisher; Deborah Sáenz, Acquisitions Editor; Kami Rice, Copyeditor; Lacie Phillips, Production Assistant; Ellery Sterling, Designer; Sarah Ocenasek, Proofreading Coordinator

Cover photograph of stained glass for letters by Alondav/Pixabay. Public domain.

Author photo copyright © 2022 by Joe Gallo. All rights reserved.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] *NIV*.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

URLs referenced in this book were verified as live and accurate source material prior to publication. Some links may have expired or redirected since publication.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-64158-980-2

Printed in the United States of America

32 31 30 29 28 27 26
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my family—all of you.

CONTENTS

Introduction 1

PART 1 OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

- 1 The Life in the Word 17
- 2 The Life of Prayer 31
- 3 The Life of Worship and Gratitude 45

PART 2 OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OURSELVES

- 4 Caring for Our Physical Bodies 59
- 5 Caring for Our Emotional Lives 71
- 6 Caring for Our Playful Sides 83

PART 3 OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIETY

- 7 Practicing Solitude 99
- 8 Practicing the Sabbath 113
- 9 Limiting Technology 127

PART 4 OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS

- 10 Knowing Your Limits 141
- 11 Setting Healthy Work-Life Boundaries 153
- 12 Walking Away from Unhealthy Relationships 167

Conclusion Toward a Self-Care Revolution 181

Acknowledgments 187

Appendix A Self-Care for Men 189

Appendix B Schedule for a Personal Retreat 195

Notes 197

INTRODUCTION

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was invited to speak at a major pastors' conference in Chicago. I knew this would be a great opportunity to shake hands with important people and represent the national seminary I was now leading, so I happily accepted the invitation. On the day of the conference, after delivering my breakout session, I meandered over to the hall where the plenary sessions were being held. Many of the plenary speakers were folks I had wanted to hear for a long time, so I entered the hall with joy and anticipation.

Among these sessions was one by the event's keynote speaker, who had written an academic book that had become a bestseller overnight, prompting conference organizers to book this person for talks left and right. After listening to the speaker's excellent plenary session, I lined up along with everyone else, eager to make small talk with this author and establish a connection.

When it came time for us to shake hands, this person greeted me with a gentle smile as I introduced myself. I was so starstruck that the question I had planned to ask suddenly slipped out of my mind, so I went with my backup question: "You've been so busy with this book tour these last several months that I'm curious—how are you taking care of yourself?" There I was, the head of a

seminary, asking an incredibly basic question. I felt like a bumbling fool.

I expected an answer like “Oh, prayer, Bible reading, exercise, family, all that good stuff.” But instead, the gentle smile turned to a slight frown and a look of dread.

“I’m not,” the speaker deadpanned, eyes welling up with tears. “I’m just not. I didn’t expect this to happen so fast. I can’t keep up with it all. It’s terrible, and it needs to end soon. I haven’t spent much time with my kids. It’s getting bad. I’m just not taking care of myself. This all needs to end soon.”

I was shocked by this honest response. I’m not naïve, but I thought that a Christian author would offer a more sophisticated and put-together description of their life. I walked away slowly, allowing the next fan to walk up and have their moment with the speaker.

This experience brought into sharp focus something that had been unfolding in my life for several years—a growing, Spirit-led awareness of the importance of self-care in my walk with Christ. This is how I came to write a book on self-care as Christian practice.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME?

In November 2019, I accepted an administrative post at a small Christian college near where my wife grew up in western New York. I was nearing the completion of doctoral studies and was thrilled to obtain the only position I applied for. When I began the job in January 2020, we were still living in Michigan, and I commuted to New York every other week for about two months. During those two months, my wife and I packed up the house so that we could put it on the market. In March 2020, we left our

Michigan home and moved in with her parents, who lived literally two minutes away from my workplace. My wife was pregnant with our second son and also completing her doctorate, so moving in with the in-laws, where we had some extra help, was a blessing rather than a curse.

This was the state of things for me as I entered March 2020. Then we all know what happened next.

The COVID-19 pandemic threw my life into a tailspin. On top of working on my dissertation and getting my feet under me at my new job, I now had new questions and fears dancing around in my mind: *How do we navigate a global pandemic? Will my family be safe? How will my wife give birth?* Then my university underwent a significant budget review process that resulted in layoffs of long-time faculty and staff. Was I next? Like the rest of the world, I didn't know what was going to happen.

That April, my hands began to itch. A couple of days later, red bumps spread around the tops of them. I self-diagnosed through the help of Dr. Google and determined that this was all a sign of too much stress. I put some fancy lotion on my hands, and the rash went away in a couple of days. Problem solved.

Two weeks later my eyes started twitching. I already knew this was common during stressful times, but with health anxiety taking the world by storm, I believed it *had* to be something more. I even read that if eye twitches last for more than two months, which mine did, the condition could be something *very* serious. Still, I didn't go to a doctor, since stress still seemed to be the most likely cause.

About a week or two after my eyes stopped twitching, I felt a deep, tight pain in my lower back and abdomen. I had experienced this before, and my doctor had said that it was most likely stress

and that I needed to relax. But itchy hands followed by eye twitching followed by pain in my lower back and stomach? Something *had* to be wrong.

The back pain got so bad that I had trouble sleeping. While I had gone several days without good sleep before, this was at a new level. I was going to sleep only to wake up an hour later in extreme pain. The combination of pain and anxiety would mean that I wouldn't sleep the rest of the night. Again, Dr. Google (in consultation with my own increasing anxiety) suggested that something fatal was going on. When you go without much sleep for more than a few days, reality and your imagination blend together, and you begin to lose touch with what's real and what's just in your head. I knew I needed to get help, and *fast*.

After a couple of days of calling the doctor's office over a dozen times a day to see if there had been a cancellation, I finally had an appointment. Once at the doctor's office, I immediately felt a modicum of peace. I waited patiently for the doctor to come into the exam room. When he came in, I burst into tears because I was so relieved to see someone who could take care of me.

I told him about all the problems I was experiencing, and he said I had all the hallmarks of anxiety and depression. But I didn't believe him. "Look at my back. Look at my legs. Look at my whole body. It hurts, and I can't sleep!" He looked over my whole body, assessed my walk, and took a few notes. "Those are just spasms. Get a heating pad, and you'll be fine." Spasms? What?! He said that my physical problems could be rooted in my mental and emotional well-being and encouraged me to talk with a therapist. I went home feeling a little bit better.

That feeling didn't last. I spiraled into my anxiety, and all my pain immediately came back. Something more had to be wrong

with me. I still couldn't sleep at all. I immediately called the doctor and told him he was wrong; there *had* to be something seriously physically wrong with me. During a follow-up appointment, he touched my abdomen and my lower back and assessed my walk once again. Nothing. But he did prescribe a muscle relaxer to help me sleep. He said he would run some blood tests and see if there were any issues. Finally I was getting somewhere.

I took the muscle relaxer that night and instantly felt better. I was finally able to sleep for a whole night. I woke up feeling a little better yet. I knew the battle wasn't over, but after a few days on the muscle relaxer, I began to feel more like myself.

The next week, it was time to see the doctor for the results of a blood test. This kicked my anxiety into high gear. I knew something was definitely wrong with me and I would be able to say "I told you so" to my doctor.

"Dr. Espinoza," he said, "we got the results of your blood test. Can I walk you through them?"

The doctor then explained the results, test after test, with the conclusion that I was completely healthy. A little low on B₁₂ and vitamin D, but otherwise completely normal. No indications of major illness. There was nothing wrong with me.

This news rocked my world. I was a completely healthy individual. But what was wrong? Why did I have all these symptoms? My doctor said I was experiencing serious stress, anxiety, and depression due to all the major life circumstances I was navigating—new job, new kid, new house, new place to live, all wrapped up in a global pandemic. "Too many good things all at once combined with a global health crisis. That's all," he told me. Nothing was physically wrong with me.

Despite not giving me the terrible diagnosis I had anticipated,

the doctor helped me recognize how the accumulation of this many life changes had taken a toll on my mental and emotional health. This is what had thrown me into a tailspin.

Weeks went on, and I got better sleep. I found a counselor to walk me through my issues. It was still a rocky road to recovery, but eventually I got there. Every now and then I have an anxiety flare-up, but those instances are few and far between.

Throughout this scary experience, beyond my consultations with Dr. Google and my real doctor, I leaned into my relationship with the Lord. I prayed and prayed for relief. I searched the pages of Scripture on almost an hourly basis. I consulted with pastors and colleagues. In the face of all the fear about what was wrong with me, I found great peace in knowing that I have a Savior who has walked through every kind of human pain and truly understands what I was going through (Hebrews 4:15).

THE COST OF IGNORING SELF-CARE

After that whole episode, I needed to do some self-analysis. *Why did all this happen to me? Why was I ill-equipped to handle so much change? What could have prevented this episode?* I began to examine my life and saw a deeply troubling pattern: I had no idea how to take care of myself.

From my earliest days, I have been an ambitious person, which I partially attribute to my family background. My father came from a family of Mexican immigrants. My grandpa had no more than a sixth-grade education, since he dropped out of school to take care of his entire family. He and my grandmother left northern Mexico and south Texas and migrated way north to Detroit, where my grandpa became an electrician. In Michigan, my grandmother

INTRODUCTION

worked in the driver's license division of the Department of State. She helped Hispanic immigrants obtain their driver's licenses and connected them with Detroit's Latino communities. The immigrant spirit of "Work hard, enjoy as much life as you can, and create as good a life as you can for your kids" has always been in my family.

Because of his parents' example, my father excelled in all that he did, including graduating with the Chancellor's Medallion and a 4.0 GPA while earning his bachelor's degree in accounting from a prestigious institution. My mother had a similar story of coming from a working-class background, being a first-generation college student, and striving hard to realize some upward mobility.

This drive to achieve and excel despite the hardship of one's experiences characterized the context in which I was raised. I sought to excel in whatever I did, whether it was practicing my violin for hours at a time, learning how to play guitar well, mastering esoteric theological concepts, or getting good grades in school. I prided myself on my ability to multitask extraordinarily well and be good at everything I set my mind to. Taking care of myself was my last priority.

I graduated from college in three years, breezed through seminary, and became the lead pastor of a growing church by twenty-six. I was one of the fastest graduates of my doctoral program and was hired for a senior-level administrative post even before I had fully graduated—the only job I had applied for! On paper, all these accomplishments are stunning.

But they came at the cost of my physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional health. While logging these achievements, I *would* sometimes take time to relax, eat good food, and spend time with friends, but these activities always took second place after my

career ambitions and goals. I had made an idol of my career and had lost my ability to care for myself in the process.

Looking back on my life, I realized I had a somewhat cynical view of self-care: *That's something people who don't care about their careers do!* People would tell me about the restful, relaxing vacations they took just to get away, and I would secretly judge them for wasting their time and money. In my heart, I thought that friends who took “mental health days” in order to work through devastating emotions or trauma simply didn't have the mental resolve I did. But as my 2020 episode demonstrated, I wasn't as on top of things as I thought, and these friends were probably much healthier than me.

Recognizing all this led me to become an advocate for the very thing I had ignored for most of my adult life—the care of the self.

HONORING THE DIVINE IMAGE

The book you hold in your hands is the result of a journey I have been on my whole life from skeptic to advocate. I now believe that Christians need to embrace self-care as a Christian practice. I have come to believe that caring for ourselves is a means of honoring the divine image of God in which we were created, one that is rooted in the witness of Scripture. By “honoring,” I do not mean “worshiping.” I mean that to honor something means to hold it in high regard.

In the first chapter of Genesis, God proclaims, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26). My friend Richard Middleton, in his

acclaimed work *The Liberating Image*, suggests that the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2 has a “predominantly royal flavor”¹ since in it God gives humanity authority to rule and steward his creation.

The idea of the image of God has been the subject of scholarly debate for a long time now, but its essence is this: God has created us in his image and likeness in order for us to steward creation as its rulers. While humanity is broken by sin and has fallen short of reflecting God’s perfect image (Genesis 3), we can experience salvation through faith in Christ, who is himself the perfect image of God. Through this redemption, God progressively molds us more and more into Christ’s likeness, transforming us by the Spirit to better reflect the divine image we were originally created to bear. If we are then to care for creation and care for others, it is imperative that we practice that care for ourselves first. This may be a hard pill to swallow—especially for folks, like me, who are quick to point out Christ’s *kenosis* (self-emptying) in the story of redemption (Philippians 2:7) and who take seriously that the Son of Man “did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matthew 20:28).

Yet when we look at the life of Jesus, we see that he took time to rest, pray, eat, and enjoy time with others. Even in the midst of a storm, when his disciples were panicking and trying to take action to preserve their lives, he slept (Matthew 8:23-25). He woke up early to spend time with his Father (Mark 1:35). He regularly ate and drank with all different types of people, so much so that folks accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 11:19)! You don’t get that reputation if you aren’t regularly enjoying a merry time with others. Jesus also knew his limits—when to act and when to take a break, when to speak and when to listen, when to push and when to draw in. He knew these things not

only because he is the Son of God but also because, as the perfect image of God, Jesus knew how to be fully human, taking care of his own self as the image bearer. In other words, Jesus knew to care for himself so that he could lead an effective ministry, care for others, proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, go to the cross, die for our sins, and eventually be raised from the dead to sit at the right hand of his Father once again, from where he still rules over all creation. He embraced practices that enabled him to effectively fulfill his mission and purpose during his time on earth.

Reflecting on his journey through bouts of depression, Parker J. Palmer writes in his exceptional work *Let Your Life Speak*, “I have become clear about at least one thing: self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others. Anytime we can listen to the true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch.”²

WHAT SELF-CARE IS AND ISN'T

Even as I was writing this book, I grew a little wary of the term *self-care*. I doubt that my grandfather thought very much about self-care (though he liked to have a good time), and folks who live paycheck to paycheck may not think that self-care is something they can afford.

Self-care has garnered, for better or worse, a reputation as being for the privileged and elite, who have the time and money to indulge in the common trappings of self-care, such as vacations, spa days, dark chocolate, and bubble baths. I completely understand this perspective because I sometimes believe it myself!

For me, self-care isn't just about rest or routines—it's ultimately

a matter of spiritual formation. As we will see in the way this book is organized, our relationship with God come first and inform every area of our lives. I am less interested in helping you squeeze in bubble baths and arrange for spa days and more interested in helping you approach self-care in a richer, more Christ-centered way.

This book is not meant to be a treatise on the theology of self-care. Rather, my goal is to help you think biblically and theologically about self-care and suggest ways you can incorporate self-care practices into your daily routine.

A ROAD MAP FOR OUR JOURNEY

Every chapter follows roughly the same format. First, we'll look at Scripture, gleaning insights into the particular practices that aid in our care of self. Then I'll provide several suggestions for integrating these self-care rhythms into our lives. Finally, I'll end with a brief section that I've entitled "Adelante." *Adelante* is Spanish for "forward," which I believe captures the essence of what comes next: We understand what the Bible teaches, we grab hold of several practices, and we move forward by making them part of our everyday lives. Every chapter includes a closing prayer and some discussion questions to help you move adelante.

For the purposes of clarity and flow, I've divided this book into four parts, centering on four key relationships—our relationship with God (part 1), our relationship with ourselves (part 2), our relationship with society (part 3), and our relationship with others (part 4).

In part 1, we will look at our relationship with God, specifically our engagement with Scripture, prayer, worship, and gratitude. I am intentionally starting here because if our relationship with God

is out of sorts, most everything we talk about for the rest of the book will be too. Moreover, I think it's important to deviate from the way many approaches to self-care prioritize focusing first on the mind and body. Ultimately, if we are to care for ourselves as people created in God's image, we need to first align ourselves with our Creator. In contrast to those who take nonreligious approaches to self-care, I contend that *true* self-care begins here. You will see throughout this book that our relationship with God informs all our other relationships.

With our relationship with God as the starting point, we then turn our attention to our uniqueness as God's image bearers. In part 2, we will explore our relationship with ourselves, particularly the physical, emotional, and recreational dimensions of our lives. Much of the popular conversation around self-care focuses here, and understandably so. These are deeply personal parts of us, often where we feel life most acutely. Thankfully, Scripture provides much guidance for how we should engage with these aspects of our lives. My hope is that these chapters will give you the theological and practical tools you need to care for yourself.

But we're not done yet! Self-care isn't only about our relationships with God and ourselves. We also need to take a hard look at our relationship with society. This is where self-care rubs against the ways of the world. In a consumerist society that demands much of our attention and can often exploit us for its own gain, self-care becomes an act of spiritual resistance against the gods of productivity, monetary success, and unhealthy desires. In part 3, we will look at our relationship with society and explore how the practices of solitude, the Sabbath, and limiting the role of technology are powerful acts of self-care, pushing us to rely on God more in order to find greater peace in our souls.

INTRODUCTION

Finally, we will turn our attention to our personal relationships. In part 4, we will look at how to understand our limits, set healthy work-life boundaries, and nurture healthy relationships with others. While we are often expected to serve others selflessly, we should not serve at the expense of caring for ourselves. We will look at how to say no more often, develop a healthy work-life balance, and nurture relationships that energize us rather than drain us. The result, hopefully, is that we will be better prepared to serve and love others.



Recently my wife's family invited us to take a beach vacation with them. Growing up, most of my family's vacations were spent exploring cities or visiting relatives, so a beach vacation with my young family was new to me and sounded like a breath of fresh air.

What they don't tell you about beach vacations is that they are *work*. You will have to find ways of rinsing sticky, salty ocean water and jagged sand particles from nearly every crevice of your person. You will have to account for the heat, apply sunblock liberally, and pack gallons of water for your beach days. You will need to make sure your kids don't go too far out in the water lest they get caught up in the waves or a riptide. Then add in the fact that you will be very, *very* tired at the end of each day on the beach.

But there's a reason people *live* for these kinds of excursions. Being under the sun with my toes in the sand while looking out at the vast expanse of the ocean was an intoxicating experience. Feeling the waves pound against my chest as I sought to cool off from the hot sun is something I won't easily forget. Most of all, my kids love these experiences. Seeing the joy on their faces added

to my own pleasure of experiencing the ocean in a new way and made the experience all the more worth it.

Maybe self-care sounds like a beach vacation—a lot of planning, a lot of work to execute, and a lot of tiring effort in the midst of it. But like a beach vacation, in the end, it is worth it. There may be aspects of self-care that you will not enjoy. Some of them you may even dread! Instead of facing those aspects last, I actually recommend that after you read part 1 you head to the unappealing chapters first, the ones you *know* will be a challenge for you.

Maybe you're really into taking care of your physical body but terrible at ramping up your prayer life. Then head to the chapter on prayer. Maybe you're a voracious consumer of God's Word but really struggle with boundaries in your life. Then go to the boundaries chapter. Whatever the area of your life where you struggle most to take care of yourself is, spend some time with that chapter and begin your self-care journey there.

PART 1

**OUR
RELATIONSHIP
WITH GOD**

THE LIFE IN THE WORD

IF YOU'RE ANYTHING LIKE ME, you have an interesting relationship with Bible reading.

When I was called into ministry at age sixteen, I began devouring the Bible endlessly. I started to dig into commentaries to make sense of difficult passages of Scripture. I even set a goal of writing a whole commentary on the Bible by the age of thirty! However, if I am being honest, my biblical consumption at that young age was for the purpose of knowledge. It wasn't until I was much older that I started to *experience* and *love* the Bible in a fresh way.

In my early twenties, when I was undergoing major life changes—such as getting married, starting my first full-time job, moving to a different state, and settling into a new church—I began to realize that my head knowledge of Scripture was excellent but rarely did I turn to Scripture for comfort, nourishment, or direction. One time when I was reading through Psalm 119, in

which the psalmist extols the virtue of constant meditation and reflection on God's perfect law, I began to wonder how the psalmist could say stuff like "I delight in your commands because I love them" (verse 47) and "At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws" (verse 62). It seemed odd that someone would delight in rules because they loved them or that someone woke up in the middle of the night to pray a prayer of thanksgiving for commands to follow. But it occurred to me that this sort of relationship with God's Word gave the psalmist immense comfort in times of pain. As I took on the new responsibilities that come with maturity, I began to reflect more deeply on my own relationship with Scripture. I wanted to delight so much in the beauty, richness, and truth of God's Word that the feeling could lead me to wake up in a dark room and sing the praises of the Lord.

Thankfully, as I entered my 2020 season of pain and anxiety, I had already nurtured a deep affection for knowing God through his Word. Was I perfectly consistent in reading Scripture every day? Admittedly, no. But I did derive comfort from God's Word in a season of deep pain and uncertainty. When I had trouble falling asleep at night, I would open my Bible app and listen to someone reading the Mosaic law or the Psalms. After soaking in the words for a while, I would usually fall asleep. I get how funny that probably sounds. I'm a pastor, so I know better than anyone that falling asleep during a Scripture reading is not good! But when pain and anxiety were keeping me up at night, listening to Scripture was the only thing that could bring me a deep sense of comfort. This is the level of comfort that the psalmist seems to understand in Psalm 119.

But reading Scripture as a way to get through times of deep emotional and physical pain can't be the only way we use it.

Reading Scripture, absorbing its message, and allowing it to shape us into the image of Christ needs to be one of the cornerstones of self-care. In this chapter we'll look at how embracing a life in the Word can enable us to honor our divine image and aid our spiritual self-care. Specifically we'll look at three major metaphors for Scripture—spiritual food, a light in our lives, and balm for our souls—and how Scripture helps us care for ourselves.

THE BIBLE AS SPIRITUAL FOOD

God is not short on vivid similes to describe the beauty of his Word. One of my favorites is the Bible as spiritual food. The Bible is clear that God's written Word is spiritual food for our souls, and it has different tastes as we journey along in our faith.

When we come to Christ as newborn believers, the Bible is God's spiritual milk for us (1 Peter 2:2). As we mature in our faith, the Word becomes our spiritual meat, or more directly, food, offering us hearty spiritual sustenance that helps us grow strong and healthy in the faith (Job 23:12; Matthew 4:4; 1 Corinthians 3:2). When life brings us tough situations, God's Word is sweeter than honey as it lightens these bitter experiences (Psalms 19:10; 119:103).

Milk, meat, and honey. These are all pretty great-tasting things (unless you're vegan!). But what about the aspects of God's Word that aren't so tasty? Eugene H. Peterson writes in *Eat This Book* that after "eating" the Bible

sooner or later we find that not everything is to our liking in this book. It starts out sweet to our taste; and then we find that it doesn't sit well with us at all; it becomes

bitter in our stomachs. Finding ourselves in this book is most pleasant, flattering even; and then we find that the book is not written to flatter us, but to involve us in a reality, God's reality, that doesn't cater to our fantasies of ourselves.¹

A bitter taste isn't always a terrible thing. I think of the 90 percent cocoa dark chocolate bars I enjoy savoring for dessert when I'm trying to cut back on sugar. I also think about the sweet and spicy Mexican candies from my abuela that I devoured as a kid.

The Bible can taste like milk, meat, and honey, but it can also taste like jalapeños, dark chocolate, and lemons—which all have wonderful flavor profiles. In other words, if God's Word is spiritual food that can taste sweet and desirable, it can also sometimes be spicy, issuing hot takes on the issues of the day and illuminating God's perspective in the midst of chaos and disorder. It can also be bittersweet, like dark chocolate, showing us the beauty but also the challenge of repentance. Moreover, like sour and sweet lemons, the Bible can be refreshing to our souls while providing unexpectedly pointed perspectives on topics or concepts that have gotten a bit stale.

The whole menu of God's Word contains a well-balanced feast of encouragement, comfort, challenge, and conviction. This is why it's so important that we're engaging in a diet of Bible reading that cuts across the varied genres and passages of God's Word rather than turning to the Bible only when we need spiritual comfort or encouragement. Whether in times of peace or distress, we need to digest a balanced diet that nourishes us with the fullness of God's Word.

THE BIBLE AS LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Have you ever walked into a dark room only to step on a LEGO piece or, worse yet, a sharp block? I have—and I literally have the scars to prove it! Walking through cluttered spaces is much easier when you turn on the light or have a flashlight with you. In a similar way, knowing God's Word keeps us from stumbling in the dark. The Bible trains us in what is good, right, and holy. Knowing such things is a powerful act of self-care.

In Psalm 119:105-106, the psalmist remarks, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.” The psalm continues, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (verse 130).

The Bible provides clarity for how we should act in the world, even in times of confusion. Without a thorough understanding of the Scriptures, we're prone to wander away from God's will for our lives and stumble into chaos and confusion.

In the book of Nehemiah, we're treated to the story of how the Israelites returned to Jerusalem, after their exile in Babylon, to rebuild the walls of the city. While Nehemiah was faced with several challenges to his leadership (rather, project management), the walls were rebuilt. But the harder task was rebuilding the spiritual lives of the people.

In Nehemiah 8, we read of how Ezra, a priest and teacher of the Law, read aloud the Book of Moses to the people. Ezra's reading, paired with instruction from elsewhere in God's Word, led the Israelites to lament how they had disobeyed God's commands, commands meant to guide them into abundant life. Nehemiah, Ezra, and other leaders were quick to remind them that the reading

of God's Word was a cause for celebration rather than mourning (Nehemiah 8:9-10). The people then covenanted to follow the Lord once again (Nehemiah 9–10).

By continual exposure to the Word of God, the Israelites understood the errors of their ways, repented of their sins, and recommitted themselves to following the ways of God. They recognized their status as God's people and rededicated themselves to acting as such.

For us today, recognizing that the Bible can be light in the darkness does not translate to reading the Bible simply as a list of moral guidelines to keep us out of trouble. Rather, being immersed in Scripture is the best way to understand how God has designed us to find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in him. If we believe that we were created by God and for God, then we must live according to his Word. If I am living out of sync with what God has shown me in Scripture, then I can expect that my life will be out of order. This won't always be the case, but do you really want to take that chance?

When we spend time in God's Word, we realize the error of our own ways and are given guidance on how to proceed. Of course, we may disagree on some of the particulars, but we must recognize that God's Word is God's Word, no matter how we slice it. I'm reminded of how the psalmist wrote that the one who delights in the law of God is "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers" (Psalm 1:3). While dark times may hit our souls in deep ways and the darkness of the world clouds the perspectives of others, God's Word can provide a light unto our path and help us understand how to live in the midst of darkness.

When I first came to know Jesus as a young man, I came face-to-face with the depth of my pride and arrogance. I realized that

should I continue walking down the path I was on, I would end up in a place of pure despair. God's Word showed me that for me to experience the joy of God, I needed to root out the pride, arrogance, and overambitiousness that characterized my everyday life and replace those tendencies with love, humility, and service. As I shared in the introduction, I am still unlearning all those sinful tendencies, and I will probably be unlearning them for the rest of my life in the process of growing in holiness. But God's Word is a light to my soul, showing me areas where I need to grow on a daily basis.

THE BIBLE AS BALM TO OUR SOULS

There's a reason that even secular memorial or funeral services will sometimes include a reading of Psalm 23. This psalm provides comfort to those experiencing the painful loss of a loved one. The Bible can be balm to our souls; it can bring healing and comfort during difficult times.

When I was going through an emotionally painful season in high school, I drew comfort from Psalm 88. The psalmist, traditionally understood to be Heman the Ezrahite, is experiencing a time of deep emotional, relational, and spiritual agony. He is hurting in the depths of his soul, and his community has abandoned him. Moreover, he feels as though God is far away and has completely rejected him with no plan to save him. The psalm ends on a decidedly unhappy note: "You have taken from me friend and neighbor—darkness is my closest friend" (verse 18).

Among all the poetic, comforting psalms in the Bible, why did *this* psalm bring me comfort? It reminded me that I wasn't alone in feeling a multifaceted agony. The psalmist's words also

reminded me that it's okay to cry out to God and feel distressed by his perceived lack of presence. Maybe I was a little bit emo back in those days, but even so, this psalm was definitely a comfort for this emo soul.

Over time, I have realized that the words of Scripture are comforting to me not because of their beauty or their encouragement but because of their *truth*. Those of us who love the Bible and turn to Scripture for refuge and guidance know that the power of the Word is in its ability to provide clarity amid the world's confusion and uncertainty. When I fall short, I am reminded that God is quick to forgive me (Psalm 86:5). When I develop schemes and plans that fail, I am reminded that even tomorrow is not promised (James 4:14-15). When I am sad, I am reminded that Jesus was too (John 11:35). When I am brokenhearted for any reason, I am reminded that God is close to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18). The words of Scripture bring us comfort because they are truth for our tired and weary souls.

In times of sadness, anger, frustration, or malaise, I often picture my heart outside my body. My image of my heart is shaped like it ought to be anatomically, with ventricles, atria, and valves (rather than being one of those big, thumping cartoon hearts). I picture my heart being bruised in certain places, such as where I hold my love for my friends and family. As I turn to the pages of Scripture for comforting truths, I imagine myself literally applying the words of Scripture onto my heart with my fingers and rubbing them in like a cooling balm. Over time, this cooling balm heals the bruises and helps strengthen the parts of my heart that it touches. This imagery helps me see the process of applying God's Word to my heart in times of emotional pain, and it allows me to take comfort in knowing that God's Word is doing its job.

HONORING THE DIVINE IMAGE: BIBLE READING

Intentional and copious amounts of Bible reading are necessary for our self-care. In reading Scripture, we're reminded that we are loved and cared for by the God of the universe. Bible reading also gives us a foundation of core truths and understanding that helps us navigate the complex situations we encounter in life. Bible reading helps us know God better so we can be guided and comforted by his character. A cornerstone of honoring the divine image is knowing God's Word, the same Word that created the universe out of nothing. How can we do this practically?

Regularly read across genres.

Without some intentionality, we'll likely be tempted to read and meditate on "easy," familiar passages that make us feel good. We're less likely to make our way into the pages of the Mosaic law, for example, which reveal God's heart for the people of Israel and God's desire that they remain pure. The Minor Prophets, the words of which can sometimes feel like salt in a wound, are also less likely to draw our attention. But to care well for ourselves spiritually, we need to read across all the genres of Scripture in order to discover how they interact with, inform, and enrich each other. It's essential that we take in parts of the Bible that make us uncomfortable while they nourish our souls. When you read Scripture, make sure you're including the parts you may not be familiar with. Following a plan can help ensure this. A few options include

- *a Bible-in-a-year plan (or any Bible-reading app, including audio apps), which is a guided reading schedule that helps*

you journey through the entire Bible in 365 days, offering structure and rhythm to daily time in God's Word.

- *the Revised Common Lectionary*, which is a cycle of weekly Scripture readings drawn from the Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles, and Gospels designed to guide readers through the full story of Scripture over the course of three years. While this resource does not include every part of Scripture, it's still a great starting point.
- *joining a Bible study or small group at your local church*, which will help keep you accountable in your journey toward understanding God's Word better, provide insights from fellow travelers in the faith, and take you deeper into the words you read.

Embracing a broader swath of Bible reading will help ensure that we're biblically literate and that we're allowing God's whole Word to speak into our lives so that we are better equipped to navigate whatever life circumstances come our way.

Whatever ails you, get God's perspective first.

If you're going through a season that requires wisdom, seek to understand what God's Word has to say. Sometimes it's tempting to look first to a self-help guru on YouTube. I've definitely done that before, but I've found that these teachers will either simply teach what the Bible teaches without knowing it or give advice that is contrary to God's Word. You're better off doing the legwork of studying the Bible for yourself and getting God's perspective before you get everyone else's. Perhaps you are deciding whether to say yes to one more thing or politely decline in the interest

of self-care. Absorbing Jesus' teachings in the Gospels provides a foundation for guiding how we live, and the advice of those in your community can then provide contextual nuance for your situation.

Know your tendencies and apply God's Word liberally.

I wrestle with anxiety, which stems from my desire to control things and strategically plan my future. The famous line quoted in John Lennon's "Beautiful Boy" song "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans"² is particularly annoying to me, but it's right! If you also struggle with anxiety, you may believe there is a future where you are *not okay*, even if today you *are* okay. Or maybe you're a people pleaser who takes things too personally, tries to solve too many relational problems, and eventually burns out. Whatever your default unhealthy mode can be, keep a few Bible verses in your back pocket for when those times strike.

Scripture tells us, "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps" (Proverbs 16:9). In the times when I'm trying to make everything work together, I need to rest in the fact that God will bring about events and circumstances that will bring ultimate honor and glory to himself. When I'm feeling anxious, I'm reminded of the words of Paul, who writes, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). These are some of the verses I turn to for encouragement when my thoughts spiral out of control.

Take a moment to think about your own tendencies. Do you lean toward depression, negativity, or anger or sometimes feel

distant from God? Consider finding a few Scripture verses you can turn to for spiritual sustenance.

ADELANTE

Believe it or not, I myself still haven't devised a Bible-reading routine that works consistently for me in all times and places. Just when I feel as though I've landed on a workable routine, I quickly fall out of it for some reason or another before finding a different one to try. Perhaps different seasons demand different approaches to reading. Or maybe I am easily bored by a plan that's too structured. Whatever the case may be for you, rest assured that this is okay! As long as you are spending time in the Word and applying it to your life, you are in good shape. Being immersed in Scripture is the important thing, however it happens.

As we continue on the journey of understanding self-care a bit better, you'll see that biblical principles undergird nearly everything we're going to explore throughout this book. May the Word of God be spiritual food, a light for our paths, and balm for our souls as we seek to honor God by honoring God's image bearers.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of your Word, which nourishes our hearts, lights our paths, and heals our souls. Help us turn to Scripture in every season of life, finding comfort in your truth and strength in your promises. Teach us to embrace its richness, even when it challenges us, and to apply its wisdom to every area of our lives. May your Word be our guide and refuge, shaping us into your image each day. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does engaging with Scripture regularly affect your emotional and spiritual well-being?
2. In what ways can you approach Bible reading as an act of self-care, not just a spiritual duty?
3. What changes might you make in your routine to allow Scripture to restore your soul?

