

CARING



COMMUNITY

A SCRIPTURE STUDY FROM *CARING*

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IT'S WHAT WE'RE MADE FOR



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Why is community important? Why do we need it in our lives? We have a deep desire to belong to something and participate in the complicated lives of others. It can be frustrating at times, but we can rest assured that it isn't by accident.

We were designed for community. We were intended to belong in relationship. Scripture tells us we were created in the image of God. Often, we consider singular attributes when we reflect on the image with which we were created. One thing that is often overlooked, is that God is a God of community. To be made in his image means that we are made for community, too.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Genesis 1:1 reads, *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."* The word used for God here is *Elohim*. This word can be used in both a singular and plural form for god(s). Later, Genesis 1:26 offers the narrative of God's creation of humankind. It reads, *"Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness."* God is speaking about himself using plural language. From the very beginning of his Word, we are shown God is in community, and this Old Testament reference isn't the only time God is written in Scripture in the plural form.

In the New Testament, the book of John opens with an understanding of God always being in community, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"* (John 1:1). John calls Jesus the Word. This is a familiar term for both Jews and Greeks but perhaps the most telling part of the verse is the word used for *"with God."* In Greek, the word is *pros* which means *"toward."* This is significant because it is implying a face-to-face relationship with one another. From the beginning, as in before creation, God was togetherness.

God refers to himself as the Trinity from the beginning of time. God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in relationship with one another is the image we were created from. Each person in the Godhead relies on another. While each offers a unique function, there is still a relationship of dependency with

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one another. It's complex, and at times, it is difficult for us to even wrap our minds around. Still, it offers such an explanation into why we are the way we are.

BEYOND THE SURFACE

From birth, we need other people. Newborns need nurturing touch, reassuring voices and gentle love to grow and thrive. As children age, they still need that trusted voice and affirming love. Into adulthood, we long for relationship with others. We seek out those who will feed our souls through trusting bonds. We do this because the God we were made in the image of is constantly in a perfect relationship.

In his book, "Experiencing the Trinity," author Darrell Johnson writes, "It is because we are created in the image of the Trinity that loneliness is so crushing, that broken relationships are so debilitating, that death is so painful. Lack or loss of relationships violates our essential nature, created to reflect the relational essence of God."

When we think about community, we often think about the cities we live in. Occasionally, our minds lean toward the thought of schools, churches or social clubs. The thing that makes all these places our community is our sense of belonging to them. There is rightness in our connection with others in a way that sometimes feels indescribable. As a product of God's creation, we were made to take refuge in our relationship with him and find comfort in our relationships with others.

In Genesis 2:18, the Lord says, "*It is not good for man to be alone.*" While this is preceding the creation of Eve, the sentiment remains that it isn't good for us to be alone. Throughout Scripture we read stories of people who seek community with God and community with others during all parts of their life. Living and participating in community is one that is necessary for our well-being.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Take a moment and consider your own relationships.

- Where do you belong?
- How would you describe that community of people?
- Do you belong with a group of people?
- Do you have community outside of your own family unit?

Sometimes we struggle to find community. If you can't identify the friends and/or loved ones that make up your community, take a moment to ask God to show them to you. Ask him to open conversational doors so that you can build those relationships that will nurture your soul.

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IN THE HARD SEASONS



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BEHIND THE SCENES

Read what Scripture says in Exodus 17.

One of my favorite stories in all of Scripture is that of Aaron and Hur holding Moses' arms up while Joshua battled the Amalekites. The story reads that the Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites. Moses told Joshua to take some men out and fight them. Moses said that he would stand on a hill with the staff of God in his hands. Joshua did this and so long as Moses raised the staff, the Israelites would be winning. Moses naturally grew tired, so Aaron and Hur gave Moses a rock to sit on and they held up his arms. One on each side, they kept the staff raised until the Israelites defeated the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-13).

BEYOND THE SURFACE

Sometimes in life, we are like Moses. There are days that are dark, tough and even overwhelming. Our arms are weak under the weight of our stress and hurt. We can barely keep them up, and we know that when we let them down, we will be overtaken by the forces that seem to attack from every side. Our faith is weary and our trust waivers. This is where our community of Aarons, Joshuas and Hurs come in. Having a community when we're broken makes carrying the burden a little easier.

Suffering, loss and hardship are inevitable and our response to them can't always be predicted. Sometimes we are so consumed with grief that we can't stand on our own. There are seasons in life where we are crippled with sadness, anxiety and heartache. Those seasons were never meant for us to endure alone. Galatians 6:2 tells us to *"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."* It was never God's intention for us to suffer alone. We are called to carry each other's hardships. We are called to lift up the arms, fight the battles and work together in life.

When my daughter was born, she was not an easy baby. I didn't know it at the time, but she had reflux and would cry constantly. She didn't nurse well, and I was exhausted. I didn't understand why everything

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was so much easier with my first baby than it was with my second.

At the time, we lived within walking distance of a good friend. One day, when I had reached a low, I walked that tiny baby to the front door of my girlfriend's apartment and knocked. She opened the door, and I handed her that small girl and cried. I needed a break.

I didn't love my daughter any less, but I was so tired. My friend held my baby and I laid down just long enough to get it together. If you've ever been a new mom, perhaps you know this feeling. If you haven't, I'm certain you've experienced your own moments where you just needed someone to take the "crying baby" from you while you rested a minute.

Life has a crazy way of running us ragged at times. Seasons of darkness can last months or even years when the weight is significant enough. God's plan to help us get through it all is his presence and the presence of others. Without my friend, I'm sure I could have made it. But with my friend, it was a bit easier.

How often do we go at life alone because we don't want to burden others? We think about how busy our friends and family are and we don't want to bother them, but the truth is that these are people who love us and want to know when we are suffering. Our community of loved ones want the opportunity to walk the weary road with us and hold up our arms when we can't seem to find the strength to do it on our own.

BETWEEN THE LINES

1. Do you let your community hold your arms up when you're tired?
2. Do you let your friends pray for you? Do they hold your arms, fight for your safety and bring you into a posture of rest?
3. Are you doing it for others?
4. How is your community supporting one another?

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Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says, *“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.”*

We need each other; especially in seasons of struggle. Take a moment to evaluate your role in your community. Are you able to uplift others or are you needing support of your own? Pray that God would give you opportunities to participate in both.

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CELEBRATING SEASONS OF JOY



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BEHIND THE SCENES

Read what Scripture says in Luke 1.

BEYOND THE SURFACE

Have you ever been so excited about something that you just had to share it with someone else? Perhaps you received a promotion at work and you just had to call home to share the good news? Maybe you got engaged and you couldn't wait to broadcast the news on social media? Have you ever welcomed a child and you wanted everyone to know about your perfect baby? It could be that you received a call from your doctor explaining that scare you had with your health isn't anything to worry about.

Our lives are riddled with moments of joy that we often want to share with those we love. Think of a time in your life when you couldn't wait to share your joy with someone else. What was it like? What was the life event? Who did you share the news with?

In Luke 1:39-45, we see two women celebrating a joyous occasion. After learning she was pregnant, Mary went to be with Elizabeth in her home. Elizabeth, immediately recognizing the significance of Mary's pregnancy, begins a joyful monologue of celebration. Mary's response was a song of praise. (Luke 1:46-55). I imagine these women giddy, hugging one another and shedding tears of happiness in this moment—the joy in their hearts abundant and pure.

There is something about sharing our joy with others. We are certainly capable of celebrating alone, but it isn't the same as when we celebrate with others. John writes in 1 John 1:12, *"Though I have many things to write to you, I don't want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face so that our joy may be complete."* When we celebrate with each other, we find a deeper joy.

Imagine that moment you thought of earlier, the joyous occasion you shared with someone else. What would that have been like if you had kept

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it to yourself? When we share our joy with others, they become joy-filled, too. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leapt when Mary was near. That infectious joy is what happens when we celebrate as a community.

A few years ago, a friend of mine was awarded a house as part of a wounded veteran program. After being wounded in combat, he had gone through a tough season that included a brutal divorce and custody battle. At the advice of a relative, he applied for a program that gave previously foreclosed homes to veterans who were wounded in war. The lengthy application process was followed by a series of interviews. He was visiting our family when he had to take another interview call. After several minutes on the phone, he walked back into the kitchen, shaking, with the phone still in his hand. He looked at me and said, "I got the house." Even now, nearly 10 years later, I can still vividly see that moment in my mind, and it fills me with joy.

Being in community means that we ride alongside the seasons of hardship but it also means we get a front-row seat to the most incredible events in each other's lives. If you have been in a season of struggle, lean into your community, not only to support you but to celebrate their joy. It will have a profound impact on your own joy, too.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Take a moment to thank God for the way he designed us to celebrate with each other. Ask him to give you more opportunities to celebrate in your community.

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DESIGNED FOR EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN



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BETWEEN THE LINES

Read what Scripture says in Acts 2.

BEYOND THE SURFACE

In Acts 2, we read about the growth of the church. *“Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”* (Acts 2:46-47). The church grew because of the relationships that were being built.

It hasn't always come naturally for me to open my home up to people. For years, I felt like my home wasn't good enough, and believed that it needed to be perfect to have people in it. I could pick apart anything: It was too small, never clean enough, people won't like my snacks, and so on.

It is only within the last couple of years that I have been challenged spiritually to make my home a place of refuge and comfort for the people I know. In the last two years, I have been intentional to open my doors and let people see the flawed and messy contents of my life, and let me tell you: God has used my willingness to build a community.

Sitting at my dining room table, friendships have bonded deeply, theological discussions have been had and relationship advice has been shared. Not only has God blessed me with friends who feel like family, he has allowed me the voice to be a mentor to younger women.

Many evenings our chit-chat is mindless. We talk about the shows we're watching. We catch up on school, work and the mundane. Then, when life seems to go off course, there we are at the table, wiping tears and sipping tea. What I have learned is that community is established in the ordinary.

In Romans, Paul writes, *“I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually*

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encouraged by each other's faith" (Rom. 1:11). While Paul's words are a sentimental greeting, it doesn't take away from his desire to be with them. He desired to share words of encouragement and faith stories so that they can all grow. When we participate in relationships of this nature, the reward is two-fold, and Paul knew that. His writing implies that both parties will be blessed by sharing their faith.

I can tell you that every person who has sat across the table from me in my kitchen, has participated in a faith conversation. And, each time we talk about our faith, each one of us has grown. I count it a blessing to openly talk not only about God's Word, but also about God's work in our lives. Moreover, I thank God for the work he is doing in my life to build my community.

BETWEEN THE LINES

When you think about your own community, what does it look like? Do you spend time breaking bread and sharing faith with one another?

It can be challenging and terrifying all at the same time to open your home and life to others.

As you consider where you are in this season of life, where do you have some room to let people into the ordinary?

Are you a work-from-home mom that can host a play group? Are you retired and know of other retired people in your neighborhood that might need some friends? Perhaps your co-workers need to feel seen; can you throw some soup in a crockpot before you head out the door in the morning and invite them over for dinner after work?

I can promise you, people will overlook the little things you're insecure about in your home if they feel they are welcome there.

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Put on some coffee or tea and just open the space. If you're not sure where to start, google "IF:Table" as it is a great resource that can ease your pressure. Don't let your insecurity prevent you from finding your community in the ordinary.

If you feel like God is calling you to do more for your community and asking you to be the bridge where people find a place to belong, be faithful to that calling.

Write out your next steps to breaking bread with the people God is calling you to. If you're not sure, pray about it. Ask God to lead you to where you should be creating community. Ask him to open doors, soften your heart so it's responsive, and guide your initial steps.

Our society doesn't foster togetherness well, but as we talked about in week one, we were designed for it. We must retrain ourselves to seek out opportunities to be together.

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