

*Potter's Inn*  
*Reader*

Soul Care: Exploring the  
Violence Done to Your Soul

***Soul Custody – Choosing to Care for the One  
and Only You***  
By Stephen W. Smith

## Chapter 1

### Soul Care: Exploring the Violence Done to Your Soul

*“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”*

*--Proverbs 14:12*

*“The violence done us by others is often less painful than that which we do to ourselves”--*

*François de la Rochefoucauld*

We're in trouble. We need help. The once upon a time American Dream has turned into an all too real nightmare that sears our minds as we try and sleep. Life is not working as we think it should.

Look around you. Listen. You can feel it. It's the violence.

News updates inform us every single day that our world is in trouble. Domestic violence is up; gang violence is out of control in many communities; sexual abuse against children is rising; drug abuse and prescription abuse are rampant. We deadbolt our doors at night and sleep with security alarms set because we fear the violence, the possible harm. We're convinced it is crouching at our door.

Job loss reports and economic peril have been like napalm vaporizing our dreams for a retired life on a sunny beach. I recently asked fifty business leaders, “How many of you in this room are living with more fear today than at any other time in your life?” Every single hand was raised.

Technology has been a blessing but also a curse. For some of us, life has no meaning apart from Twitter and the Internet. We feel enslaved by our laptops and can't get along without them. Google brings instant information, but little inspiration. We are overwhelmed at the e-mails, voice mails, even the snail mail crammed into our real mailboxes.

Uncertainty plagues our lives. Talk shows spin pseudo-optimism and we momentarily believe that maybe it's not that bad. Deep down, though, we know it is.

And its the *deep down* that concerns me most. We can't sleep. We don't eat right. We're constantly on the go, burning the candle at both ends. Is it any wonder that eight of the top ten drugs prescribed by doctors are mood-altering substances to help us cope with our interior turmoil?

We are sowing havoc and reaping the whirlwind. We are giving up ground that should never be surrendered. We are doing more but living less, making a living but not having a life. Some days it feels like nothing more than rearranging the deck chairs on the sinking *Titanic* of our lives.

Violence, all of it. It may not all be physical violence, but it's still destructive to us and the lives we'd like to live. The outer violence of the world rushes in and does its work on the inside, deep down, at the level of our souls.

Look inside. Do you see evidence of soul violence going on in there?

You don't have to answer me. I know you do. So do I.

We need help. Our very lives are in jeopardy. Is this hell on earth the only way to live until we die? The writer Annie Dillard stops us in our tracks: “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” If Dillard is right, and I believe she is, then redeeming the day is more than just a slogan. We need our days to improve so that our lives can improve.

Can't we be saved from more than just our sins?

The wonderful news is that this salvation does exist. God never intended for us to suffer the kind of violence that's being inflicted upon us as well as inflicting more violence upon ourselves by making bad choices. God provides means for us to be healed from the damage done. The kinds of choices we must make to find healing and experience transformation come under the banner of soul care.

I like to remember that the word *care* has its roots in a Latin word that means “cure.” As we learn to practice caring for our souls, we will also find a sense of healing from the violence happening in and around us. Caring and curing go together.

Thomas Merton said, “To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence.” The choice is really not difficult to comprehend. We can either choose to succumb to the outer and inner violence that we are now living in or choose to live in a different way—right here and right now. We can choose to care for our souls.

### **The Healing Way**

Every single person who feels more dead than alive, more tired than energized, more burned out than motivated, more unfulfilled than thriving is a soul in need—a soul that needs to be cared for. The Chinese have two characters for the English word “busyness” - they define it as “heart annihilation.” We’re killing ourselves by all of our busy, busy, busy. One of the reasons for so much annihilation around us and in us is that the sin of busyness is very subtle. It’s a subtle sin because busyness is validated, applauded and affirmed everywhere—and sometimes especially among Christians.

A busy marketplace leader came to me for help, describing himself as coming unglued due to all the stress in his life. He began our conversation this way: “Steve, I have a lawyer to keep me legal. I have a doctor to keep me healthy. I have a tax guy to keep me solvent. But I have no one to care for my soul. I feel like I’m going down.”

There was a long season in my life when my own life was being annihilated. I was affirmed for my hard work and the evidence around me validated my strong work ethic. I attacked each day as something to be conquered. I did more, worked harder, and accomplished a lot in my career. But I was coming up empty inside. The carnage around me was growing. I was losing my soul even though I was gaining the world. Little by little there was a soul erosion inside me. My marriage went south. My relationship with my four young sons was more like I sprinkled “father-dust” with quick appearances for meals and occasional bedtimes. Yet I was being affirmed for my successes. Something was deadly wrong. I paid the great price of nearly losing all to gain what in the end doesn’t matter at all.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of *Soul Custody* is to help you take back what you might have lost along the way in living your life. Why should we lose our lives in vain attempts to try to live? For me, caring for my soul has been a journey to reclaim my life—the life I want to live and the life I was intended to live. By choosing to live in life-giving ways, my own life is being healed, cured, restored. Yours can be too!

### **Soul Custody**

Taking custody of your own soul is all about being mindful of your soul and your God, your life and your future, your heart and what it’s beating for—whether for the Sacred or only for what is of this world. Being mindful of your soul is simply loving the Lord your God with all of your heart and mind. Sometimes, loving God is easier than mindfully choosing to live in ways that are life-giving—not heart annihilating.

Soul Custody is taking back what we’ve almost lost in order to gain what we should never want to lose. Its doing what the word *custody* implies—taking responsibility for our souls and hearts. This is our sacred privilege.

Of course, we really share joint custody of our souls with God. But we can be sure that he will do his part to look after our soul’s well-being. Are we holding up our end of the partnership?

Abdicating our role as the custodian of our own soul is handing over our responsibility to someone or something else who may not have our best interests in mind. You know as well as I that there is always someone who wants to tell us how to live, what to buy, where to go. Relinquishing our God-given role in caring for our souls usually results in paying a tremendous price, not once but throughout life. We can choose to sit down and throw our hands up in surrender or we can assume the God-given role each of us has in caring for our souls. The choice is ours to make.

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve written about my own story and need for transformation in *The Lazarus Life: Spiritual Transformation for Ordinary People* (David C Cook, 2008).

For example, if we allow our culture to be our soul guardian, we will find ourselves in a continual game of tug-of-war where we feel pulled between what we're told to do and what we ought to do. If, on the other hand, we step up to our responsibility to care for our own soul, we can begin to see the transformation that our hearts have secretly yearned for all along. This really is possible - believers down through the ages have practiced and benefited from soul care.

As you know, we are not the first to feel the threat for our lives. What we are missing are the old, trusted lessons given us by wise sages, courageous prophets, desert fathers and mothers who knew some things that we need to discover for ourselves—before it's too late. They, like us, made choices about how they would deal with their own plights against natural disasters, governments gone astray, eras in which disease wiped out entire generations and where wars were fought in their own backyards..

What we are going to learn in *Soul Custody* is how to find our way again to some of the old ways.

### **The Old Ways**

Hundreds of years before Jesus was even born, a Jewish prophet stood in the face of his own culture's demise and said,

Ask for the ancient paths,  
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,  
and you will find rest for your souls. (Jeremiah 6:16)

The old ways we will explore in this book are time-tested and documented throughout the centuries by men and women who lived out these choices in their own lives and for their own souls' sake. They used these ways and choices to help them navigate the tug-of-wars that people have lived in for centuries. And in the process they found the life that Jesus has wanted for us since the beginning, a life that is rich and satisfying. This is “real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of” (John 10:10, *The Message*). Collectively, these courageous souls warned people of the doom ahead unless we chose to live differently. Today, we need that prophetic voice again to be heard before it's too late—before we lose custody of our own souls.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson renders it: “Many people think that what's written in the Bible has mostly to do with getting people into heaven—getting right with God and saving their eternal souls. It does have to do with that, of course, but not mostly. It is equally concerned with living on this earth—living well and living in a robust sanity.”<sup>2</sup>

We only have one soul. We will not get another. This is the only life we will live—so let's live it well! In living life well, we honor God, honor every facet of our souls, and see that the life that Jesus offers us really is a life of “robust sanity.” Soul care is living with the end in mind but also living well now.

I wonder if you noticed the subtitle on the cover of this book? I don't want you to miss it: “Choosing to Care for the One and Only You.” You will not be given another life, or as you've probably heard – *this is no dress rehearsal*. This is it. You have already begun the journey. You may be just getting started or possibly having to rethink everything due to a crisis, threat, or tragedy. It doesn't matter where you are. You can begin to live a better, different life.

There are regrets in my life. One is simply this: I wish I would have known then what I know now. Had I known these ways, these practices, I believe I could have made better decisions about how to live my life. At least that's what I believe today! So much impacts our one and only life, body, and soul. I wish someone would have written this book earlier.

I am going to give you the chance to diagnose the state of your own soul and to hopefully make some important corrections. We're going to explore together the ways that seem right but aren't, the choices some thought would bring life but brought nothing but the smell of death. These people are best

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, “Introduction to Proverbs,” in *ReMix: The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003), 870.

described as the living dead. . . barely. As I've sat with thousands of men and women who all are wanting the same thing—life—I have seen how so many have made tragic choices that have only led to lives filled with regret and pain.

No matter where you are on life's spectrum, it's time right now to start living. It's time to take custody of your one and only soul.

### **In Defense of Soul Care**

As I talk to people about soul care, I sometimes get resistance. It often sounds like this: "Steve, doesn't the message of soul care contradict some of the most fundamental teachings of Jesus Christ, like 'deny yourself' and 'the man who hates his life will keep it'?"

I suppose the people who object in this way are just trying to be faithful to the to the Scriptures. But please hear me on this: caring for your souls is never a selfish act. In fact, caring for the soul is the opposite of being absorbed in one's own well-being. It is really an act of *stewardship*. How can we continually give what we do not have? Caring for the soul is God's way to replenish the heart, restore the soul, and revive our days to meet the challenges of life, work, and relationships. Far from being labeled as sin by the Bible, soul care is actually a biblical command.

- Proverbs 4:23 - "Above all else, guard your heart. For from it flows the wellspring of life."
- Deuteronomy 4:9 - "Only take care, and keep your soul diligently" (ESV).
- I Tim. 4:15 - "Watch your life and doctrine closely."

As I view the Christian landscape today, there's much more emphasis, program and strategy to watch our doctrine; there's little encouragement to watch out for our souls. This book seeks to correct this emphasis on one at the dire cost of the other.

But perhaps most telling is the way that Scripture links loving ourselves and loving others.

We first see this in Leviticus 19:18. It's given as an actual law. Here we read, "Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." Obviously this assumes that we love ourselves. And to love ourselves means to take care of ourselves, body and soul.

Other biblical writers expound on this necessary principle multiple times. Jesus himself says that loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves are the greatest of all the commandments in the entire law (Matthew 22:37-40). Paul repeated that loving our neighbor as ourselves is the summation of the commandments (Romans 13:9). James calls this kind of love the "royal law" (James 2:8).

When we love ourselves in a healthy way, we are actually moving away from self-centeredness and selfishness, not toward them. True love breeds life. It does not kill life. Paul reminds us that love "does not demand its own way" (1 Corinthians 13:5, NLT).

It is not God who looks down on taking care of oneself. It is our culture that is guilty of spinning the idea of loving ourselves to be selfish. Walter Trobisch reminds us, "Indeed, we are so ingrained with the idea of self-denial, self-sacrifice and the fear of being egotistical that the admonition to love one's self seems almost a blasphemy."<sup>3</sup>

And remember, we are not *just* caring for ourselves when we practice our own soul care. We are caring for every single person, thing, event, or aspect of our lives that we will touch and influence. Like Bill, a lawyer in a national law practice, confided in me: "Steve, if I go down, I'll take a lot of people with me. I cast a big shadow whether I like it or not. I've got to get a grip on what is happening in me and around me."

That's what is so painful about a soul that is imploding. Initially, it's a very private feeling, but the ripple effect of one person imploding can have dire consequences for those closest to him or her: the spouse, children, colleagues, and more. When a leader goes down, many people are affected for a very long time. When a man has an affair, when a woman suffers from abuse, or when a child is not loved, it is catastrophic. This is why caring for our souls is so strategic and important. But the opposite is also true: when the values of caring for the soul are embraced, the ripple effect is life giving and God honoring.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Trobisch, *Love Yourself* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 30.

We find again and again that it becomes difficult to love others well when there is no love and care for ourselves. So if you are worried that soul care might be selfish, please give that up.

The flight attendant on most airlines says it well as a reminder: “In the unlikely event of cabin depressurization, place the oxygen mask first on yourself, then help the person or child next to you.” You can’t help anyone else if you are dying for lack of something to breathe. It is not a selfish act for you to breathe first, then help the others in need. I hope and believe you agree with me on that.

But now we need to consider what we really mean when we talk about our “soul.” After all, how do we care for what most of us really don’t understand?

### **Understanding the Soul**

The American poet Mary Oliver was right when she said, “No one knows what the soul is.” Wise men and women in every culture, religion, and time have tried to explain it. There are Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and French words to help us. But still, if you look for a simple, easy-to-understand definition of the soul, you’ll be hard pressed to find one. The soul has remained a slippery, elusive topic and a subject of debate. For some, it’s even scary. Some think it is New Age-ish to speak of the soul.

Yet, as far back as there have been human beings, men and women have spoken of the life within. Call it “soul,” “spirit,” “heart,” “will,” or something else, we still need to grasp what it is we need to take care of in this life.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are learning much about the human body. We are making great advances on the war against cancer. We have figured out the structure of DNA and can prove our genetic roots. Stem cell research is the rage today in the hope of breakthrough help. Yet, knowing our soul? Understanding the most important part of a human being?—that feels sadly neglected. No surgeon’s knife can find the soul within us. It’s not hiding behind our heart and or just right below our kidneys.

D. H. Lawrence wrote, “I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections.” I believe Lawrence was right. None of us are machines built to be wound up, jump-started, or given a tune-up to run again until we finally wear out. We are far more complicated than that.

When we were conceived in our mother’s womb, not only was a fearful and wonderful body formed but also a fearful and wonderful soul was made. Job reminds us of our beginnings when he says,

Oh, that marvel of conception as you stirred together  
semen and ovum—  
What a miracle of skin and bone,  
muscle and brain!

You gave me life itself, and incredible love.

You watched and guarded every breath I took. (Job 10:10-12, The Message)

This “marvel of conception” that Job told us about matters. Your soul is this marvelous and sacred life within you. When you look at your spouse, your children, your friends, you are looking at souls—souls who need just what you need. Everything that is alive needs some form of care. No living thing can survive, much less thrive, without being replenished with life-giving sustenance. You are not the exception. Every living thing needs care.

Our souls and bodies were God-made, not man-ufactured. We are not machines. We are soulful beings. When God created the first human being, the first breath given to the man made from dirt gave him his soul. We read, “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!” (Genesis 2:7, The Message). From Adam till you and me, we are living souls!

In short, your soul is the real you—the whole shebang - heart, mind, emotion, desires, and longings all make up your soul. Look in the mirror and you will see more than your body—you will get a glimpse of your soul. The life that is within you is your living soul. It is the truest part of you and it will live on after you die.

Your soul is the real you. Your body is just the outerwear you live in while on earth. You may prefer different outerwear, as many of us do. I'd like more hair and have never really understood why my body is hair impaired. But there's nothing impaired about my soul or yours, in terms of the way they were made.

The real you, which God envisioned when he first had you in mind, is loved deeply and is a reflection of God's image. Your soul is God given, God shaped, God sustained. Yet, as we will find, we play a vital and necessary role in our own soul care. The real and the only you—that part of yourself that is alive right now as you are reading this book—is what matters the most. Take care of you.

### **Taking Custody of Your Soul**

Soul care has incredible potential for good that goes beyond what we might expect. It has benefits for us, benefits for others, and even—believe it or not—benefits for God. These are the benefits that God wants us to take hold of by embracing soul care.

As we care for the soul within us, our lives are transformed in many ways. We will enjoy vast benefits, such as -

- peace and serenity even in the midst of trying times
- exuberance about life and an ability to enjoy life
- an ability to make soulful connections with friends
- a growing awareness of God and intimate relationship with him
- fulfillment and contribution in our work as well as participation in something greater than just “doing our job.”

But soul care is not just about focusing on ourselves. It is a very active and involved life. As we care for our own souls, we will inevitably become more aware of the dire conditions of the souls around us. We will sense need. We will want to help. We can help to change the situation. But not if we are empty, not if we are depleted and burned out. The poet David Whyte speaks truth: “When your eyes are tired the world is tired also.”

The real benefit of taking custody of our souls is that we honor God in caring for what he most cares for—us! When we live in healthy ways, marshalling “our energies wisely” (Peterson's word in Gal. 5:22 for ‘self-control’); when we protect our souls from living in continual violence, we are living in a way that is the “rich and satisfying” life that Jesus spoke about and promised—even lived himself!

For example, when we choose to practice the Sabbath, time is spent in being truly present with God. He is glorified when we take up work that is truly his calling for us and fulfills his will. And he is glorified when we care for our body and value it as his created “marvel.”

These are just some of the benefits we can create if we embrace soul care.

And they are the benefits we forfeit if we continue in the way we are going.

One day Jesus issued a prophetic cry that, if anything, echoes louder today in our technological and nanosecond world. He said, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26). Jesus knew that life is more than doing stuff and accumulating things. Amid all of our gaining, we also need to understand what we are losing. Our very soul.

You and I have a clear and high probability that we can lose our souls while still trying to live. We can forfeit our souls every single time we choose to drain ourselves and not replenish ourselves, run on empty rather than stop and intentionally do the things that will bring us life, burn out rather than live meaningful, significant, and impactful lives that are enjoyable and life giving to others. We forfeit the life that God intended for us when we lower our souls to function as machines rather than living as soulful marvels that require more than a quart of oil or a recharging of our “batteries.”

We must take custody of our souls. It all begins with making a choice.

### *Chapter 1: Study Questions*

1. Read Matthew 16:26 and try to answer this question. What do you think you've lost along the way as you have lived your life thus far?
  
2. Take a moment and write down adjectives, words and images that might describe "The State of Your Soul" right now. Use descriptive words that will help convey how you feel you are really doing right now. ( You may find it helpful to use a dashboard analogy in a car describing different gauges; use seasons of the year to describe how you feel about where you are right now or something else.)
  
3. The writer Annie Dillard writes, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." How do you feel about how you are spending your days and your life?
  
4. Violence is a word that you might not have used at first to describe what is going on inside or a description of your actual life style. But what feels violated when it comes to your life—the life you want to live?
  
5. When you think of taking custody of your soul, what stirs in you?

My Take Away from Chapter 1:

What action, steps, choice do you want to make in light of what you know now?



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