

WILD AT HEART

DISCOVERING THE SECRET
OF A MAN'S SOUL

UPDATED EDITION

STUDY GUIDE | SIX SESSIONS

JOHN ELDREDGE

WITH ALLEN ARNOLD



NELSON
BOOKS

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Wild at Heart Study Guide (Updated Edition)

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CONTENTS



Introduction	v
SESSION 1: The Heart of a Man	1
SESSION 2: The Poser	23
SESSION 3: The Wound	43
SESSION 4: The Battle	67
SESSION 5: The Beauty	89
SESSION 6: The Adventure	111
Leader's Guide	131
Endnotes	139



INTRODUCTION



The way a man's life unfolds nowadays tends to drive his heart into remote regions of the soul. Endless hours at a computer screen; selling shoes at the mall; meetings, relentless texts, phone calls. The business world—where the majority of American men live and die—requires a man to be efficient and punctual. Corporate policies and procedures are designed with one aim: to harness a man to the plow and make him produce. But the soul refuses to be harnessed; it longs for passion, for freedom, for *life*. As D. H. Lawrence said, “I am not a mechanism.”¹ A man needs to feel the rhythms of the earth; he needs to have in hand something real—the tiller of a boat, a set of reins, the roughness of rope, or simply a shovel. Can a man live all his days to keep his fingernails clean and trim? Is that what a boy dreams of?

Society at large can't make up its mind about men. Having spent the last thirty years redefining masculinity into something more sensitive, safe, manageable, and, well, feminine, it now berates men for not being men. Boys will be boys, they sigh. As though if a man were to truly grow up he

would forsake wilderness and wanderlust and settle down, be at home forever in Aunt Polly's parlor. "Where are all the *real* men?" is regular fare for talk shows and new books. "You asked them to be women," I want to say. The result is a gender confusion never experienced at such a wide level in the history of the world.

How can a man know he is one when his highest aim is minding his manners?

Walk into most churches in America, have a look around, and ask yourself this question: What is a Christian man? Don't listen to what is said; look at what you find there. There is no doubt about it. You'd have to admit a Christian man is . . . bored. At a recent church retreat I was talking with a guy in his fifties, listening really, about his own journey as a man. "I've pretty much tried for the last twenty years to be a good man as the church defines it." Intrigued, I asked him to say what he thought that was. He paused for a long moment. "Dutiful," he said. "And separated from his heart." *A perfect description*, I thought. *Sadly right on the mark.*

As Robert Bly lamented in *Iron John*, "Some women want a passive man if they want a man at all; the church wants a tamed man—they are called priests; the university wants a domesticated man—they are called tenure-track people; the corporation wants a . . . sanitized, hairless, shallow man."² It all comes together as a sort of westward expansion against the masculine soul. And thus the *heart* of a man is driven into the high country, into remote places, like a wounded animal looking for cover. Women know this, and lament that they have no access to their man's heart. Men know it, too, but are often unable to explain why their heart is missing. They know their heart is on the run, but they often do not know where

to pick up the trail. The church wags its head and wonders why it can't get more men to sign up for its programs. The answer is simply this: we have not invited a man to know and live from his deep heart.

But God made the masculine heart, set it within every man, and thereby offers him an *invitation*: come, and live out what I meant you to be. God *meant* something when he meant man, and if we are to ever find ourselves we must find that. What has he set in the masculine heart? Instead of asking what you think you ought to do to become a better man, I want to ask, *What makes you come alive?* What stirs your heart?

There are three desires I find written so deeply into my heart I know now I can no longer disregard them without losing my soul. They are core to who and what I am and yearn to be. I gaze into boyhood, I search the pages of Scripture and literature, I listen carefully to many, many men, and I am convinced these desires are universal, a clue into masculinity itself. They may be misplaced, forgotten, or misdirected, but in the heart of every man is a desperate desire for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to love.

This study guide is a companion to my book *Wild at Heart*. You can do this series as part of a group or on your own. Either way, you'll want to have a copy of the book and video series. You will note the book has twelve chapters, and this is a six-session study guide. Several sessions combine two chapters; others focus on one. Some chapters of the book are not included due to space. That's why we highly recommend reading the book in full in addition to being part of this study.

If you're leading a group, a guide has been provided for you in the back of this study. Each session in this guide follows this format:

- Welcome
- Video Summary
- Group Discussion
- Respond
- Closing Prayer
- Between-Sessions Personal Study (Five Days)
- Recommended Reading for Next Session

May God find you through these pages and restore you as his man.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

SESSION 1



THE HEART OF A MAN

A man's heart reflects the man . . .

PROVERBS 27:19 NIV 84

WELCOME

Welcome to session 1 of *Wild at Heart*. This first session covers chapter 1, “Wild at Heart,” and chapter 2, “The Wild One Whose Image We Bear,” of John’s book. If there are new members in your group, take a moment to introduce yourselves to one another before watching the video. We suggest you simply share your name, some brief details about your life, and why you decided to join this study. Now, let’s get started!

VIDEO TEACHING

Play the video segment for session 1. A summary of the key points is provided for your benefit as well as space to take additional notes.

Summary

In this six-part series, we are going to take a journey together into the most important part of your life—your masculine heart.

What does it mean to be a man? Is masculinity something that is just socially created?

Genesis 1:26–27 gives us insight into what God had in mind: “Then God said, ‘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.’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Male and female he created us.

This is an absolutely incredible passage, because right here at the beginning, the very first things God says about the

human race—about *you*—is that you are made in his image and that you are made in his image *as a man*.

Gender is from God. Masculinity is deep and immortal and everlasting.

God made the masculine heart and sets it within every man he creates. This is going to help us understand so much about our lives as men. If we know who we are, if we know what we were designed for, it will help us make sense of our stories and plan for our future.

Out of your masculine heart flows all of the things that make your life worth living—friendship, love, adventure, career, your dreams, and your relationship with God. If you look at the games that little boys play and the movies men love, you will find in every man's heart three core desires: a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to love.

You simply have to get your heart back. This is like a treasure hunt with Indiana Jones. Only we're not looking for a golden statue; we're looking for something a whole lot more valuable than that.

Notes

GROUP DISCUSSION

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

1. Could you relate to the stories and struggles of the men in this group? Why or why not?
2. What adventures or games did you play as a boy?
3. What is your favorite movie? Why are you drawn to it?
4. The core desires of a man's soul is a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to love. How do you see these three desires expressing themselves in your life?

THE HEART OF A MAN

5. The Creator made the human race as male and female. Gender is from God. How would you describe what this truth means to you?

6. Where do you find yourself losing heart? Has greater duty or obligation helped in your attempts to awaken your heart? Explain.

RESPOND

Briefly review the summary for the session 1 teaching and any notes you took. In the space below, write down the most significant point you took away from this session.

CLOSING PRAYER

Wrap up your time together with prayer. Remember, prayer is simply talking to God. Here are a few ideas of what you could pray about based on the topics of this first session:

- Ask God to reveal why you're drawn to the movies you most love . . . and what that reveals about your deepest longings.
- Invite God to reveal your true hunger for adventure, battle, and beauty.
- Confess how it is a hard time to be a man in the world today.
- Name the ways you've lost heart and your longing to get back what's been stolen.
- Speak Proverbs 4:23 aloud, asking God for help in guarding your heart.
- Pray that through this study, God would reveal more of your masculine heart.



SESSION 1

BETWEEN-SESSIONS PERSONAL STUDY

In this section, you are invited to further explore the material in *Wild at Heart*. If you haven't already done so, read chapter 1, "Wild at Heart," and chapter 2, "The Wild One Whose Image We Bear," in the *Wild at Heart* book at this time. Each day's study in this section offers a short reading from John's book along with reflection questions designed to take you deeper into the themes of the study. Journal or just jot a few thoughts after each question. At the start of the next session, there will be a few minutes to share any insights . . . but remember that the primary goal of these questions is for your own personal growth and private reflection.

DAY ONE: A BATTLE TO FIGHT

There's a photo on my wall of a little boy about five years old, with a crew cut, big cheeks, and an impish grin. It's an old photograph, and the color is fading, but the image is timeless. It's Christmas morning 1964, and I've just opened what may

have been the best present any boy received on any Christmas ever—a set of two pearl-handled six-shooters, complete with black leather holsters, a red cowboy shirt with two wild mustangs embroidered on either breast, shiny black boots, red bandanna, and straw hat. I've donned the outfit and won't take it off for weeks because, you see, this is not a “costume” at all; it's an *identity*.

Capes and swords, camouflage, bandannas and six-shooters, all the superhero outfits—these are the *uniforms* of boyhood. Little boys want to know they are powerful, they are dangerous, they are someone to be reckoned with. Despite what many modern educators would say, this is not a psychological disturbance brought on by violent television or chemical imbalance. Healthy aggression is part of the masculine *design*; we are hardwired for it. If we believe that man is made in the image of God, then we would do well to remember that “the LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name” (Exodus 15:3). God is a warrior; man is a warrior.

Little girls do not invent games where large numbers of people die, where bloodshed is a prerequisite for having fun. Hockey, for example, was not a feminine creation. Nor was boxing. A boy wants to attack something—and so does a man, even if it's only a little white ball on a tee. He wants to whack it into kingdom come.

On the other hand, when my boys were growing up, they did not sit down to tea parties. They did not call their friends on the phone to talk about relationships. They grew bored of games that had no element of danger or competition or bloodshed. Cooperative games based on “relational interdependence” were complete nonsense. “No one is killed?” they asked, incredulous. “No one wins? What's the point?” Look

at the global popularity of the video games boys and men play; they are overwhelmingly games of battle. The universal nature of this ought to have convinced us by now: The boy is a warrior; the boy is his name. And those are not boyish antics he is doing. When boys play at war, they are rehearsing their part in a much bigger drama. One day, you just might need that boy to defend you.

Those Union soldiers who charged the stone walls at Bloody Angle, or those Allied troops who hit the beaches at Normandy or the sands of Iwo Jima—what would they have done without this deep part of their heart? Life *needs* a man to be fierce—and fiercely devoted. The wounds he will take throughout his life will cause him to lose heart if all he has been trained to be is soft. This is especially true in the murky waters of relationships, where a man feels least prepared to advance. As Bly said, “In every relationship something *fierce* is needed once in a while.”²⁴

Now, this longing may have submerged from years of neglect, and a man may not feel that he is up to the battles he knows await him. Or it may have taken a very dark turn, as it has with inner-city gangs and terrorists. We need to heal the warrior heart in men, to be sure; set it in the service of goodness. Because the desire is there. Every man wants to play the hero. Every man *needs* to know that he is powerful. Women didn’t make *Braveheart* one of the most popular films of its decade. *Saving Private Ryan*, *Top Gun*, the *Die Hard* films, *Gladiator*, the Star Wars and Marvel series, all the superhero blockbusters—the movies a man loves reveal what his heart longs for, what is set inside him from the day of his birth.

Like it or not, there is something fierce in the heart of every man. *Every man.*

WILD AT HEART STUDY GUIDE

John notes that as a boy, capes and swords, camouflage, bandannas and six-shooters, and all the superhero outfits weren't *costumes* but an *identity* to you. How did you find this to be true in your early life?

Life *needs* a man to be fierce—and fiercely devoted. What battle are you fiercely devoted to—and why?

"The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name" (Exodus 15:3). God is a warrior, and as men, we are created to be warriors. Is your "warrior heart" currently set in the service of goodness or playing out in destructive ways? Explain.

DAY TWO: AN ADVENTURE TO LIVE

I am no great hunter. I didn't play college football. In fact, in college I weighed 135 pounds and wasn't much of an athlete. Despite my childhood dreams, I have never been a racecar driver or a fighter pilot. I have no interest in televised sports. (Okay, except March Madness and the World Cup.) I don't like cheap beer, and though I do have an old Landcruiser, its tires are not ridiculously large. I say this because I anticipate that many readers—good men and women—will be tempted to dismiss this as some sort of macho-man pep rally. Not at all. *Wild at Heart* is not about becoming a lumberjack and drinking motor oil. I am simply searching, as many men (and hopeful women) are, for an authentic masculinity.

When winter failed to provide an adequate snow base, my boys would bring their sleds in the house and ride them down the stairs. My wife found them once with a rope out their second-story bedroom window, preparing to rappel down the side of the house. The recipe for fun is pretty simple when you're raising boys: add to any activity an element of danger, stir in a little exploration, add a dash of destruction, and you've got yourself a winner. The way they ski is a perfect example. Get to the top of the highest run, point your skis straight downhill and go, the faster the better. And this doesn't end with age; the stakes simply get higher.

A judge in his sixties, a real southern gentleman with a pinstriped suit and an elegant manner of speech, pulled me aside once during a conference. Quietly, almost apologetically, he spoke of his love for sailing, for the open sea, and how he and a buddy eventually built their own boat. Then came a twinkle in his eye. "We were sailing off the coast of Bermuda a few years ago, when we were hit by a northeaster

[a raging storm]. Really, it came up out of nowhere. Twenty-foot swells in a thirty-foot homemade boat. I thought we were all going to die.” A pause for dramatic effect, and then he confessed, “It was the best time of my life.”

Compare your experience watching the latest James Bond or Star Wars thriller with, say, going to Bible study. The guaranteed success of each new release makes it clear—adventure is written into the heart of a man. And it’s not just about having “fun.” Adventure *requires* something of us, puts us to the test. Though we may fear the test, at the same time we yearn to be tested, to discover that we have what it takes.

That’s why we set off down the Snake River against all sound judgment, why a buddy and I pressed on through grizzly country to find good fishing, why I went off to Washington, DC, as a young man to see if I could make it in those shark-infested waters. If a man has lost this desire, says he doesn’t want it, that’s only because he doesn’t know he has what it takes, believes that he will fail the test. And so he decides it’s better not to try. For reasons I hope to make clear later, most men hate the unknown and want to settle down and build their own city, get on top of their life.

But you can’t escape it—there is something wild in the heart of every man.

Adventure is written into the heart of every man. What types of adventure set your heart racing? Why?

Have you ever passed on an adventure, deciding it was better to not try than risk failing the test? Describe how that affected your heart.

Real adventure requires something of us. It puts us to the test. How has a recent adventure tested you—and what did it reveal about you?

DAY THREE: A BEAUTY TO LOVE

Romeo has his Juliet, King Arthur fights for Guinevere, Robin rescues Maid Marian, and I will never forget the first time I kissed my grade-school sweetheart. It was in the fall of my seventh-grade year. I met Debbie in drama class, and fell absolutely head over heels. It was classic puppy love: I'd wait for her after rehearsals were over, carry her books back to her locker. We passed notes in class, talked on the phone at night.

I had never paid girls much attention, really, until now. This desire awakens a bit later in a boy's journey to manhood, but when it does his universe turns on its head. Anyway, I longed to kiss her but just couldn't work up the courage—until the last night of the school play. The next day was summer vacation, she was going away, and I knew it was now or never. Backstage, in the dark, I slipped her a quick kiss and

she returned a longer one. Do you remember the scene from the movie *E.T.*, where the boy flies across the moon on his bike? Though I rode my little Schwinn home that night, I'm certain I never touched the ground.

There is nothing so inspiring to a man as a beautiful woman. She'll make you want to charge the castle, slay the giant, leap across the parapets. Or maybe, hit a home run. One day during a Little League game, my son Samuel was so inspired. He liked baseball, but most boys starting out aren't sure they really have it in them to be a great player. Sam was our firstborn, and like so many firstborns he was cautious.

He always let a few pitches go by before he took a swing, and when he did, it was never a full swing; every one of his hits up till that point were in the infield. Anyway, just as Sam stepped up to bat this one afternoon, his friend from down the street, a cute little blonde girl, showed up along the first-base line. Standing up on tiptoe, she yelled out his name and waved to Sam. Pretending he didn't notice her, he broadened his stance, gripped the bat a little tighter, looked at the pitcher with something fierce in his eye. First one over the plate he knocked into center field.

A man wants to be the hero to the beauty.

Young men going off to war carry a photo of their sweetheart in their wallet. Men who fly combat missions will paint a beauty on the side of their aircraft; the crews of the WWII B-17 bomber gave those flying fortresses names like *Me and My Gal* or the *Memphis Belle*. What would Robin Hood or King Arthur be without the woman they love? Lonely men fighting lonely battles. Indiana Jones and James Bond just wouldn't be the same without a beauty at their side, and inevitably they must fight for her.

You see, it's not just that a man needs a battle to fight; he needs someone to fight *for*. Remember Nehemiah's words to the few brave souls defending a wall-less Jerusalem? "Don't be afraid . . . fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes" (Nehemiah 4:14 NIV 84). The battle itself is never enough; a man yearns for romance. It's not enough to be a hero; it's that he is a hero *to someone* in particular, to the woman he loves. Adam was given the wind and the sea, the horse and the hawk, but as God himself said, things were just not right until there was Eve.

Yes, there is something passionate in the heart of every man.

There is nothing so inspiring to a man as a beautiful woman. She'll make you want to charge the castle, slay the giant, leap across the parapets. How has this been true in your life?

It's not just that a man needs a battle to fight; he needs someone to fight *for*. Who is that beauty in your life?

Think of an example of pursuing the beauty in your life. How did that experience go?

DAY FOUR: BY WAY OF THE HEART

Which would you rather be said of you: “Harry? Sure, I know him. He’s a real sweet guy.” Or, “Yes, I know about Harry. He’s a dangerous man . . . in a really good way.” Ladies, how about you? Which man would you rather have as your mate? (Some women, hurt by masculinity gone bad, might argue for the “safe” man . . . and then wonder why, years later, there is no passion in their marriage, why he is distant and cold.)

I rest my case.

What if? What if those deep desires in our hearts are telling us the truth, revealing to us the life we were *meant* to live? God gave us eyes so that we might see; he gave us ears that we might hear; he gave us wills that we might choose, and he gave us hearts that we might *live*. The way we handle the heart is everything. A man must *know* he is powerful; he must *know* he has what it takes. A woman must *know* she is beautiful; she must *know* she is worth fighting for.

“But you don’t understand,” said one woman to me. “I’m living with a hollow man.” No, it’s in there. His heart is there. It may have evaded you, like a wounded animal, always out of reach, one step beyond your catching. But it’s there. “I don’t know when I died,” said another man. “But I feel like I’m just using up oxygen.” I understand. Your heart may feel dead and

gone, but it's there. Something wild and strong and valiant, just waiting to be released.

Which would you rather be said of you by others—"I know him; he's a real sweet guy," or, "Yes, I know about him; he's a dangerous man . . . in a really good way." Why?

Which description do you think is a more accurate reflection of who you are *currently*?

Even if your heart feels dead and gone, something wild and strong and valiant is there, just waiting to be released. How does that make you feel?

DAY FIVE: WHERE DO WE COME FROM?

Who is this One we allegedly come from, whose image every man bears? What is he like? In a man's search for his strength, telling him that he's made in the image of God may not

sound like a whole lot of encouragement at first. To most men, God is either distant or he is weak—the very thing they’d report of their earthly fathers.

Be honest now—what is your image of Jesus *as a man*? “Isn’t he sort of meek and mild?” a friend remarked. “I mean, the pictures I have of him show a gentle guy with children all around. Kind of like Mother Teresa.” Yes, those are the pictures I’ve seen myself in many churches. In fact, those are the *only* pictures I’ve seen of Jesus. They leave me with the impression that he was the world’s nicest guy. Mister Rogers with a beard. Telling me to be like him feels like telling me to go limp and passive. Be nice. Be swell. Be like Mother Teresa.

I’d much rather be told to be like William Wallace.

Wallace, if you’ll recall, is the hero of the film *Braveheart*. He is the warrior poet who came as the liberator of Scotland in the early 1300s—a true historical figure beloved by Scots to this day.

Now—is Jesus more like Mother Teresa or William Wallace? The answer is, it depends. If you’re a leper, an outcast, a pariah of society whom no one has *ever* touched because you are “unclean,” if all you have ever longed for is just one kind word, then Christ is the incarnation of tender mercy. He reaches out and touches you. On the other hand, if you’re a Pharisee, one of those self-appointed doctrine police . . . watch out. On more than one occasion Jesus “picks a fight” with those notorious hypocrites.

Take the story of the crippled woman in Luke 13. Here’s the background: The Pharisees are like the Scottish nobles—they, too, load heavy burdens on the backs of God’s people but do not lift a finger to help them. What is more, they are so bound to the Law that they insist it is a sin to heal someone

on the Sabbath, for that would be doing “work.” They have twisted God’s intentions so badly they think that man was made for the Sabbath, rather than the Sabbath for man (see Mark 2:27). Christ has already had a number of skirmishes with them, some over this very issue, leaving those quislings “wild with rage” (Luke 6:11 NLT).

Does Jesus tiptoe around the issue next time, so as not to “rock the boat” (the preference of so many of our leaders today)? Does he drop the subject in order to “preserve church unity”? Nope. He walks right into it, he baits them, he picks a fight. Let’s pick up the story there:

One Sabbath day as Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, he saw a woman who had been crippled by an evil spirit. She had been bent double for eighteen years and was unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are healed of your sickness!” Then he touched her, and instantly she could stand straight. How she praised and thanked God! But the leader in charge of the synagogue was indignant that Jesus had healed her on the Sabbath day. “There are six days of the week for working,” he said to the crowd. “Come on those days to be healed, not on the Sabbath.”

— LUKE 13:10-14 NLT

Can you believe this guy? What a weasel. Talk about missing the point. Christ is furious:

But the Lord replied, “You hypocrite! You work on the Sabbath day! Don’t you untie your ox or your donkey from their

stalls on the Sabbath and lead them out for water? Wasn't it necessary for me, even on the Sabbath day, to free this dear woman from the bondage in which Satan has held her for eighteen years?" This shamed his enemies. And all the people rejoiced at the wonderful things he did.

— LUKE 13:15-17 NLT

Christ draws the enemy out, exposes him for what he is, and shames him in front of everyone. The Lord is a *gentleman*?! Not if you're in the service of his enemy. God has a battle to fight, and the battle is for our freedom.

To most men, God is either distant or he is weak—the very thing they would report of their earthly fathers. Be honest now—what is your image of God? Do you know where that image of him came from?

Is your image of Jesus as a man more similar to Mister Rogers or William Wallace? Why?

BETWEEN-SESSIONS PERSONAL STUDY

What most stood out to you about Jesus and his willingness to heal people on the Sabbath? How does that change or deepen your perception of his personality?

RECOMMENDED READING

Before your group gathers for the next session, read chapter 3, “The Question That Haunts Every Man,” in *Wild at Heart*. This chapter will be the focus of session 2. Use the space below to write any key points or questions you want to bring to the next group meeting.

