

# Receiving Love From God

by Dale and Juanita Ryan

Part of the “Letting God be God” Series

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**W**e all long to know that we are loved by God. We long to know that God responds to us with delight, compassion, tenderness, and regard.

The good news is that God does love us unconditionally. God has made this clear in many ways. God’s love for us is declared consistently throughout the Bible in powerful images and stories which teach us that God loves each of us personally. God’s love for us is on display in the breathtaking drama of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. And God’s love for us is quietly whispered to our hearts and minds by the Spirit. God loves us and keeps telling us that we are loved.

So what is the problem? Why is it difficult for us to trust God’s love, to receive God’s love, to rest in God’s love? What are the road blocks that hinder our journey into the fullness of God’s love? And how can these road blocks be removed?

Most of us have found that our longing to be loved in painful tension with many kinds of fear. We fear that love will only last a short time and then disappear. We fear that love will turn into rejection or abuse. We fear that we are not really lovable - that those who declare their love for us would not love us if they knew the truth about us. Often these fears are too painful to admit even to ourselves. We try to ignore them or talk ourselves out of them, only to find these fears surfacing as strange and surprising forms of resistance to love.

Have you ever listened to someone express their love to you only to realize that although you can hear the words, you are unable to take them in? Some people describe this as having a heart that can’t “hold” love—much like a broken pitcher that cannot hold water. Our hearts have been broken by love’s disappointments and are unable to

hold or trust God’s love.

As we will see in the texts for this study, God’s response to our fears and resistance is to offer us even more love. God understands our resistance and offers us the love that can ultimately heal our fears and strengthen us deep within to more fully trust God’s love.

The purpose of these studies is to help you to remember God’s love, to assist you in exploring your fears and resistance to God’s love, and to open your heart to God’s healing work so that love can find a home deep within.

As you work through these studies, our prayer is that God will increase your capacity to receive love, until your heart becomes a reservoir of love - spilling out into the lives of others.

## OUTLINE

- 1 God’s Declaration of Love—1 John 4:7-21
- 2 Resisting God’s Love—Hosea 11
3. Being Strengthened to Receive God’s Love—Ephesians 3:14-21
4. The Trustworthiness of God’s Love—Romans 8:31-39
- 5 Relying on God’s Love—Psalm 33
- 6 Living in God’s Love—Ephesians 5:1

## Learning to Let God Be God

The “Letting God Be God” Bible study guides are based on three basic convictions.

The first of these convictions is that we are, by our very nature, dependent on our Maker. We need God. We need God’s help with the daily challenges of life. We

need God's love, peace, forgiveness, guidance and hope. The invitation to "Let God be God" is an invitation to let God be who God really is. But it is also an invitation to be who we really are—God's deeply loved children.

Second, these studies are based on the conviction that God is willing, ready and eager to be God in our lives. God is not distant, inaccessible or indifferent. Rather, God is actively involved, offering us all that we need. God offers us all the love, strength, hope and peace we need.

Finally, these studies are based on the conviction that the spiritual life begins with receiving from God. What we do when we "let God be God" is to receive from God the good gifts which God is eager to give to us. God has declared his love for us. We are "letting God be God" when we receive this love. God has offered to guide us. We are "letting God be God" when we receive this guidance. Receiving from God is the starting point of the spiritual life. There is, of course, a place in the Christian journey for giving to God—a place for commitment and dedication. But if we have not learned well to receive from God, then we will almost certainly experience the Christian journey to be full of heavy burdens.

These are basic Christian convictions that closely resemble the first three steps of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The short summary is: "I can't. God can. I'll let him". They are spiritual truths that apply to all of our lives. They may seem pretty simple. But most of us find that actually doing them—putting these truths into practice—is anything but simple. The problem is that receiving is not instinctive for most of us. What is instinctive is self-sufficiency, independence and managing by ourselves. What comes naturally is trying, trying harder and trying our hardest. Letting go of this performance-oriented spirituality and allowing ourselves to receive from God will be a challenging adventure for most of us. It is the adventure which is at the heart of these Bible studies.

These Bible studies are designed to help you explore what it means to receive from God—what it means to let God be God in your life. George McDonald used a wonderful metaphor when talking about the process of learning to receive from God. He said "There are good things God must delay giving, until his child has a pocket to hold them—until God gets his child to make that pocket. (as cited in Michael R. Phillips, ed., [Min-

neapolis: Bethany House, 1989], *Discovering the Character of God*, p. 156). These studies are designed to help you sew some new pockets that are big enough to hold the abundant good gifts that God has prepared for you.

## **Getting the Most from the Letting God Be God Bible Study Guides**

The guides in this series are designed to assist you to find out for yourself what the Bible has to say about God and to grow in your ability to "let God be God" in your life. The passages you study will be thought provoking, challenging, inspiring and very personal. It will become obvious that these studies are not designed merely to convince you of the truthfulness of some idea. And they won't provide a systematic presentation of everything the Bible says about any subject. Rather, they are designed to create an opportunity for biblical truths to renew your heart and mind.

There are six studies in each guide. Our hope is that this will provide you with maximum flexibility in how you use these guides. Combining the guides in various ways will allow you to adapt them to your time schedule and to focus on the concerns most important to you or your group.

All of the studies in this series use a workbook format. Space is provided for writing answers to each question. This is ideal for personal study and allows group members to prepare in advance for the discussion. The guides also contain leader's notes with suggestions on how to lead a group discussion. The notes provide additional background information on certain questions, give helpful tips on group dynamics and suggest ways to deal with problems that may arise during the discussion. These features equip someone with little or no experience to lead an effective discussion.

### **Suggestions for Individual Study**

1. As you begin each study, pray that God would give you wisdom and courage through his Word.
2. After spending time in preparation, read and reread the passage to be studied.
3. Write your answers in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper

understanding of yourself and of God's Word. For the same reason, we suggest that you write out your prayers at the end of each study.

4) Most studies in these studies contain questions that invite you to spend time in meditative prayer. The biblical text is communication addressed personally to us. Meditative prayer can enrich and deepen your experience of a biblical text.

5. After you have completed your study of the passage, you might want to read the leader's notes at the back of the guide to gain additional insight and information.

### **Suggestions for Group Study**

Even if you have already done these studies individually, we strongly encourage you to find some way to do them with a group of other people as well. Although each person's journey is different, everyone's journey is empowered by the mutual support and encouragement that can only be found in a one-on-one or a group setting. Several reminders may be helpful for participants in a group study:

1. Trust grows over time. If opening up in a group setting feels risky, realize that you do not have to share more than what feels safe to you. However, taking risks is a necessary part of growth. So, do participate in the discussion as much as you are able.

2. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they talk. You will learn from their insights. If you can, link what you say to the comments of others so the group stays on the topic.

3. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to share what we have learned that we do not leave opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to do so as well.

4. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have a profitable time together.

5. We recommend that groups follow a few basic guidelines, and that these guidelines be read at the beginning of each discussion session. The guidelines, which you may wish to adapt to your situation, are:

a. Anything said in the group is considered confidential and will not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

b. We will provide time for each person present to talk if he or she feels comfortable doing so.

c. We will talk about ourselves and our own situations, avoiding conversation about other people.

d. We will listen attentively to each other.

e. We will be very cautious about giving advice.

f. We will pray for each other.

If you are the discussion leader, you will find additional suggestions and helpful ideas for each study in the leader's notes. These are found at the back of the guide.

# 1. God's Declaration of Love

God is love. God loves us. God has acted in love towards us. God has been clear about this. Unambiguously, consistently, emphatically God has expressed love toward us.

We are the kind of people who need this clarity. Love can easily become sentimentalized. How do we know that "I love you" is more than a line from a greeting card? Is it a formality? Is it just something you're supposed to say? A polite social gesture? Or does it go deeper? How deep? Can it touch the core of who we are? Is it that kind of love? If we are to rest in the love of God we need God to be absolutely clear about how we are loved.

The purpose of this study is to give us an opportunity to listen again to God. In the text we will hear what our hearts and minds long to hear more than anything else in life: God loves us.

## Prepare

1. Think of two or three people whom you experience to be very loving people. List some words, phrases or stories that describe love as you see it in these people's lives.

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2. Think of two or three people whom you love. What thoughts and feelings do you have about these people as you think about your love for them?

## Read

[7] Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. [8] Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. [9] This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. [10] This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. [11]

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. [12] No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

[13] We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. [14] And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. [15] If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. [16] And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. [17] In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. [18] There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. [19] We love because he first loved us. [20] If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. [21] And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

I John 4:7-21

## Study

1. How would you describe the two or three primary themes which are woven throughout this text?

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2. Imagine that you do not know much about God and that you personally received this letter. What ideas would you have about God after reading the author's words?

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3. Make a list of all the times in this text that the author declares God's love.

4. What specifically does the author tell us about how God demonstrates love toward us?

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5. Reread verses 9 and 10. In the places where the author uses the words *us* or *we* replace this with *I*, and with your name. Read this personal message of God's love for you several times. Let it sink into your heart and mind. What feelings do you have in response to this declaration of God's love for you?

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6. Make a list of the specific responses to God's love which are suggested by John in this text.

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7. In a moment of quiet, reread verses 7 and 21. As you do so, let God bring to mind various people in your life. Some of these people may be easy for you to love. Others may be difficult for you to love. Hear God declaring love for each of these people. Write about your experience during this time of reflection.

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8. According to verse 18, "love drives out fear." What specific examples of how you have experienced this truth come to mind?

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9. Take a few minutes to ask God to show you the fears which prevent you from receiving God's love. As fears come to your mind, acknowledge each one to God and actively release each one of them to God's care. Write about your experience during this time of prayer.

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10. Take a few minutes to ask God to show you the fears which prevent you from experiencing and expressing God's love for others. As fears come to your mind, acknowledge each one to God and actively release each one to his care. Write about your experience during this time of prayer.

## Reflect

Read I Corinthians 13:4-7. This is a description of love. Read these verses a second time, replacing the word *love* with *God*. Read the verses a third time, this time replacing the word *love* with *God* and add your own name at the end of each phrase (For example: "God is patient with Mary"). Write about your response to this description of God.

## Respond

Use questions 9 and 10 of this study each day this week. Journal each day about the fears God has revealed to you and about your experiences in acknowledging and releasing those fears to God.

## 2. Resisting God's Love

God loves us. God has been clear about this.

Our response to God's love often surprises us. There are times, of course, when we simply welcome God's love. But at other times we may be aware of a resistance within us to fully opening ourselves to God's love. This resistance may take many forms. We may sense a hesitation, a discomfort, or an anxiety. Or we may be skeptical. We may even reject God's love. We may run in the opposite direction from our heart's true desire.

This resistance to love is most common when we have been hurt in other relationships which should have been characterized by love. Sometimes it is the people who love us—or who should love us—the most, who have done the most harm to our capacity for receiving love. How can we trust God's love when any love makes us anxious or afraid?

As we will see in this study, God's response to our resistance to love is. . . more love. Ongoing love. Faithful love. Pursuing love. Passionate love.

### Prepare

1. Think of a time when you loved someone but they were unable to trust your love. They rejected you and your love. What was that rejection like for you?

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2. Think of someone who befriended you, who was loving and respectful toward you, but whose love you rejected either fully or partially. What kept you from receiving this person's love?

### Read

[1] "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. [2] But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. [3] It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms;

but they did not realize it was I who healed them. [4] I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.

[5] "Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? [6] Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans. [7] My people are determined to turn from me. Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them.

[8] "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. [9] I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man - the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.[10] They will follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. [11] They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, like doves from Assyria. I will settle them in their homes," declares the LORD.

[12] Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, the house of Israel with deceit. And Judah is unruly against God, even against the faithful Holy One.

Hosea 11

### Study

1. This text is a love letter from God's heart. How would you summarize this love letter from God in two or three sentences?

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2. Consider the intimate, tender tone of verses 3 and 4. What words and phrases set that tone?

3. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you read and reflect on the tone of this text?

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4. Make this a personal letter from God to you. Re-write verses 1, 3 and 4, with your name in the verses. Read aloud these verses, as you have re-written them.

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5. How does the text say that Israel resisted God's love (vv 2 and 12)?

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6. In what ways have you (or do you) resisted or rejected God's love?

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7. The text suggests that when people reject God's love God experiences anger. When we are angry with someone we love, it does not mean we do not love them. What evidence is there in the text that God loves the people who are rejecting him, even in the midst of his anger?

8. What is the significance of God's decision not to "carry out" his anger?

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9. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you reflect on God's saying that all his compassion is aroused in response to the people's rejection?

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10. Verses 10 and 11 contain an image of passionate, active love. It is the image of a parent who will go to the wall to reconcile with a child, and bring the child back into a nurturing, respectful relationship with the parent. It is the image of a lover, a spouse, who will search the ends of the earth for their love to bring them home. In a moment of quiet, listen to God calling your name in love and longing. Write about your experience in this time of prayer.

## **Reflect**

Re-read your written response to question 4. Respond directly to the love of God by writing a love letter to God.

## **Respond**

Spend a few minutes each day this week listening for God to call your name in love. Journal about whatever thoughts or feelings are a part of this experience for you.

### 3. Being Strengthened to Receive God's Love

Is love something you 'fall into?' Is it something you are 'swept away by?' Such expressions imply a kind of passivity—as if love is something that happens to us. But once we begin to recognize the ways in which we resist love, it becomes clear that love will not be a passive experience in our lives.

Learning to receive love freely will take effort, commitment and courage. It takes effort to stay connected with our longing to love and be loved. It takes commitment to the process of healing from the wounds that have decreased our capacity for experiencing love. And it takes courage to receive love when our anxieties are telling us that being open to love will make us vulnerable again.

In the text for this study we find the Apostle Paul praying that his friends would be strengthened deep within so that they can more fully receive love from God. That is what the journey into love looks like. It will not be something we simply 'fall into.' It will begin with a strengthening deep within us.

#### Prepare

1. Make a list of the beliefs, fears, uncertainties, and insecurities that make it difficult for you to fully trust that your friends love you.

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2. Make a list of the beliefs, fears, and uncertainties, insecurities that make it difficult for you to fully trust that God loves you personally. In a time of quiet, offer these fears to God, releasing them and yourself to God for healing.

#### Read

[14] For this reason I kneel before the Father, [15] from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. [16] I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, [17] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, [18] may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, [19] and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

[20] Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, [21] to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3: 14-21

#### Study

1. Imagine for a moment that the Apostle Paul sent this letter to you personally and prayed this prayer for you. What thoughts, feelings and images come to your mind as you read the text in this way?

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2. What does Paul say about God in this prayer?

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3. What does he say about God's love in this prayer?

4. Make a list of all the things he asks God to do for his friends.

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5. Paul prays that God will strengthen us with power through his Spirit in our inner being (v. 16). What ideas and images come to you as you think about a person being strengthened in his or her inner being?

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6. In a time of quiet, ask God to let you see yourself being strengthened by God deep within so that you can receive and hold more of God's love for you. Write about your experience in this time of prayer.

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7. What is the relationship between this inner work and our ability to receive God's love?

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8. Paul prays that we will be "rooted and established in love." What helps you sink your roots in the soil of God's love?

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9. Paul prays that we "may have power . . . to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. (v. 18)." How might the sense that there is always more love to be received be helpful to you?

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10. In a time of quiet, pray this prayer for yourself. Read the text slowly, substituting *me* or *I* for *you*. Take some time to be quiet before God after praying. Write about your experience in this time of prayer and reflection.

## Reflect

In a time of quiet, picture God's Light shining on you. Imagine that God's Light is God's love for you. Allow the light of God's love to surround you and fill you. Let it melt away fear and shame and the hardness of anger and despair. Breathe it in deeply. Allow it to touch the deepest places of your heart and mind and body. Keep this light with you. Come back to it whenever you think of it, whenever you are afraid, whenever you remember that you need and long for God's love.

## Respond

Write a prayer to God asking for clarity about the healing and strengthening you need in order to receive more of God's love. Be alert for answers to your written prayer. Keep a journal of what God is showing you and how God is strengthening you to receive more love.

## 4. The Trustworthiness of God's Love

Love will always be tested. Can it be trusted or not? Will it stand the test of painful circumstances? Is it a fair weather love or will it sustain us when the worst and most difficult of circumstances seem to fill our lives with pain?

Sometimes we find ourselves questioning God's love. How can you be loving when. . .? Why are you being so passive and uncaring? Why have you abandoned us? Are you punishing us? We wonder if God's love will be found trustworthy even under this kind of painful questioning. And we wonder if we can hold on to the reality of God's love for us in the face of circumstances that lead us to ask such painful questions.

There are no simple answers to painful questions. But we can learn from the Apostle Paul who faced many painful and traumatic events in his life. He was imprisoned, beaten, and betrayed many times. But he understood in the midst of all these events that God's love was solid and unshakable. He understood that nothing separate us from God's love.

### Prepare

1. What event or events in your life have caused you to question God's love for you?

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2. What fears about God did this event(s) raise for you?

### Read

[31] What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? [33] Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died - more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is

also interceding for us. [35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? [36] As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

[37] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [38] For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, [39] neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:31-39

### Study

1. If you were to give a title to this text, or state the thesis of this text, what would it be?

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2. Make a list, using your own words, of the questions Paul asks in this text.

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3. In your own words, how does Paul answer each of these questions?

4. What are you afraid might separate you from God's love?

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5. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you look at the difference between what your fears tell you and what this text says?

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6. How might this text help you in times when you fear that you are unlovable?

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7. Personalize this passage. Insert your name where possible and change *us* to *you* where possible. For example: "If God is for John, then who can be against John?" Write about your experience of reading the text in this way.

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8. Think of a time when you were especially aware of God's loving presence with you. What happened? What impact did the experience of God's presence have on you?

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9. In a moment of quiet reflection, picture yourself in a situation that distresses you—in the past, or present, or that you imagine in the future. Picture God with you, loving you and caring for you in that moment. Write about your experience of seeing God's loving presence with you in that distressing situation.

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10. How does seeing God's loving presence in that situation change the situation?

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## Reflect

In a time of quiet, picture your fears about all the things that might separate you from God's love as a dark shadow in your heart. Picture the wind of God's Spirit slowly gathering that shadow into a ball and moving it from your heart into your hands. Open your hands and ask God to take those fears. Listen, again, as God's Spirit says to you "nothing will separate you from God's love."

## Respond

Throughout the week, repeat the exercise found in question 9. You may want to focus on events in the present, or past, or future; focus on whatever is creating the most anxiety for you. Keep a journal of your experiences.

## 5. Relying on God's Love

We have seen that God loves us. And that God's love is always with us. But we may wonder if God's love is strong enough to rely on. Is love something soft, even weak? Or is love the power we need to sustain us in the midst of the battles of life?

Love is powerful. Don't be confused by the way the word *love* is sometimes used. Love is not about the social niceties of greeting cards. It is not about cute marketing slogans. Love is a powerful force. Love changes things.

As we will see in this text, God's unfailing love is the power by which the heavens and earth were created. It is the power by which the earth and each of our individual lives are sustained. It is strong enough to be the foundation for our lives. It is more than powerful enough to help us face our most difficult challenges in life.

### Prepare

1. What images come to mind when you think of the word *love*?

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2. As you reflect on these images, would you say that they are images of weakness or images of strength?

### Read

[1] Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. [2] Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. [3] Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.

[4] For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. [5] The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

[6] By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. [7] He gathers the waters of the sea into jars [1]; he puts the deep into storehouses. [8] Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. [9] For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. [10] The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. [11] But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all, generations.

[12] Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance. [13] From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; [14] from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth - [15] he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do. [16] No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. [17] A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. [18] But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, [19] to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.

[20] We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. [21] In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. [22] May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you.

Psalm 33

### Study

1. What are the major themes of this psalm?

2. In your own words, summarize what the psalmist says about God.

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3. Make a list of all the ways the psalmist calls us to respond to God.

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4. The psalmist paints a vivid portrait of the relationship between God's power and God's love. It is God's love that is all powerful. How do you see this in the psalm?

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5. Verses 16 and 17 contain images of human strength which were part of everyday life when this psalm was written. What images of human strength might be more common to us?

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6. How do the images from verses 16 and 17, and the more current images, compare and contrast with the images the psalmist gives us of God's strength?

7. The psalmist calls on us to rely on the strength of God's unfailing love. What human strength are you most tempted to rely on instead of the love of God?

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8. The psalmist calls on us to hope, and to wait in hope, trusting in God's unfailing love. What might help you to wait in hope for God's strengthening love to guide you?

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9. What experiences have you had of relying on God's unfailing love in a difficult situation?

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10. In a time of quiet, call to mind a specific upcoming event or situation that is difficult in some way for you. Allow some of the images of the power of God's love from this psalm fill your mind and heart as you anticipate this situation. Write about your experience in this time of reflection.

## **Reflect**

The psalm calls on us to praise God for his love and power. Write a prayer of praise for the power of God's unfailing love.

## **Respond**

Think of other ways you would like to offer praise for God's unfailing love. Make a plan to do so this week.

## 6. Living in God's Love

Love is not an event. It is not something that happens and then is over. Receiving God's love is an ongoing activity. Learning to receive more and more of God's love is an adventure worthy of a lifetime.

We can receive God's love like a riverbed receives the thaw of winter's snow. Like a riverbed receives water, we receive God's love as God's very life in us. God's love brings us to life and in response we cannot help but bring the life of God's love to all around us.

To receive God's love is to be changed. It is to become more like God. It is to become more loving toward God, toward ourselves and toward others.

### Prepare

In the time you have been working through these studies, what changes have you noticed in your relationship with God?

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What changes have you noticed in relationship to yourself?

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What changes have you noticed in your relationship with others?

### Read

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 5:1-2

### Study

1. How would you summarize these verses?

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2. As you think of imitating God and God's love, reflect for a few minutes on what you have learned and experienced about God's love during this study, and throughout your life. What specific features of God's love stand out to you?

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3. What would it mean in practical terms for you to imitate God in these ways?

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4. This verse addresses the readers as "dearly loved children." What images come to mind as you hear that phrase?

5. In a moment of quiet, listen to God calling you by name and telling you that you are God's dearly loved child. Write about your experience in this time of reflective prayer.

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6. In another moment of quiet listen as God talks to you or shows you that other people are God's dearly loved children. Write about your experience in this time of reflective prayer.

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7. This verse reminds us that our model is Jesus. His life of love was a life of surrender to God. Giving ourselves to God comes out of our growing trust in God's love for us. How would you describe the relationship between trusting God's love and desiring to seek his will for your life?

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8. How might a greater sense of receiving God's love and trusting God's love impact your desire to follow Jesus in living a life of love?

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9. This verse pictures God as someone who gave—and continually gives to us—in Jesus, and who, like a great lover, longs for us to give ourselves in love. Receiving love from God leads to a mutual giving and receiving. In calling us in this way God reveals a love for us that is intimate, tender, and marked by high regard for us. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you reflect on this?

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10. What part of this verse do you especially need to receive and respond to right now? (That you are God's dearly loved child? That you are called to be like God and live a life of love? That you are called to surrender yourself in love and trust in God's love?)

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## Reflect

Describe or define this word *love* as you have seen it described in the texts for these studies.

## Respond

Begin each day with a prayer of surrender to God, giving yourself to God in love as God gave (and gives) to you in love.

## Leader's Notes

You may be experiencing a variety of feelings as you anticipate leading a group using this study guide. You may feel inadequate for the task and afraid of what will happen. If this is the case, know you are in good company. Many other small group leaders share this experience. It may help you to know that your willingness to lead is a gift to the other group members. It might also help if you tell them about your feelings and ask them to pray for you. Realize as well that the other group members share the responsibility for the group. And realize that it is the Spirit's work to bring insight, comfort, healing and recovery to group members. Your role is simply to provide guidance to the discussion. The suggestions listed below will help you to provide that guidance.

### Preparing to Lead

1. Develop realistic expectations of yourself as a small group leader. Do not feel that you have to "have it all together." Rather, commit yourself to an on-going discipline of honesty about your own needs. As you grow in honesty about your own needs, you will grow as well in your capacity for compassion, gentleness and patience with yourself and with others. As a leader you can encourage an atmosphere of honesty by being honest about yourself.
2. Pray. Pray for yourself. Pray for the group members. Invite the Spirit to be present as you prepare and as you meet.
3. Read the text several times.
4. Take your time to thoughtfully work through each question, writing out your answers.
5. After completing your personal study, read through the leader's notes for the study you are leading. These notes are designed to help you in several ways. First, they tell you the purpose the authors had in mind while writing the study. Take time to think through how the questions work together to accomplish that purpose. Second, the notes provide you with additional background information or comments on some of the questions. This information can be useful if people have difficulty understanding or answering a question. Third, the leader's notes can alert you to potential problems you may encounter during the study.
6. If you wish to remind yourself during the group discussion of anything mentioned in the leader's notes, make a note to yourself below that question in the your study guide

### Leading the Study

1. Begin on time. You may want to open in prayer, or have a group member do so.
2. Be sure everyone has a study guide. Decide as a group if you want people to do the study on their own ahead of time. If your time together is limited, it will be helpful for people to prepare in advance.
3. At the beginning of your first time together, explain that these studies are meant to be discussions, not lectures. Encourage the members of the group to participate. However, do not put pressure

on those who may be hesitant to speak during the first few sessions. Clearly state that people do not need to share anything they do not feel safe sharing. Remind people that it will take time to trust each other.

4. Read aloud the group guidelines listed in this guide. These commitments are important in creating a safe place for people to talk and trust and feel.
5. Read aloud the introductory paragraphs at the beginning of the discussion for the day. This will orient the group to the passage being studied.
6. If the group does not prepare in advance, approximately ten minutes will be needed for individuals to work on the "Prepare" section. This is designed to help group members focus on some aspect of their personal experience. Hopefully it will help group members to be more aware of the frame of reference and life experience which we bring to the text. This time of personal reflection can be done prior to the group meeting or as the first part of the meeting. The Prepare questions are not designed to be for group discussion but you might begin by asking the group what they learned from the prepare questions.
7. Read the passage aloud. You may choose to do this yourself, or someone else may read if he or she has been asked to do so prior to the study.
8. As you begin to ask the questions in the guide, keep several things in mind. First, the questions are designed to be used just as they are written. If you wish, you may simply read them aloud to the group. Or, you may prefer to express them in your own words. However, unnecessary rewording of the questions is not recommended.  
  
Second, the questions are intended to guide the group toward understanding and applying the main idea of the study. The authors of the guide have stated the purpose of each study in the leader's notes. You should try to understand how the study questions and the biblical text work together to lead the group in that direction.  
  
There may be times when it is appropriate to deviate from the study guide. For example, a question may have already been answered. If so, move on to the next question. Or someone may raise an important question not covered in the guide. Take time to discuss it! The important thing is to use discretion. There may be many routes you can travel to reach the goal of the study. But the easiest route is usually the one the authors have suggested.
9. Don't be afraid of silence. People need time to think about the question before formulating their answers.
10. Don't be content with just one answer. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" or "Anything else?" until several people have given answers to the question.
11. Acknowledge all contributions. Try to be affirming whenever possible. Never reject an answer. If it seems clearly wrong to you, ask: "Which part of the text led you to that conclusion?" or "What do the rest of you think?"

12. Don't expect every answer to be addressed to you, even though this will probably happen at first. As group members become more at ease, they will begin to interact more effectively with each other. This is a sign of a healthy discussion.

13. Don't be afraid of controversy. It can be very stimulating. Differences can enrich our lives. If you don't resolve an issue completely, don't be frustrated. Move on and keep it in mind for later. A subsequent study may resolve the problem.

14. Stick to the passage under consideration. It should be the source for answering the questions. Discourage the group from unnecessary cross-referencing. Likewise, stick to the subject and avoid going off on tangents.

15. Periodically summarize what the group has said about the topic. This helps to draw together the various ideas mentioned and gives continuity to the study. But be careful not to use summary statements as an opportunity to give a sermon!

16. End each study with a prayer time. You will want to draw on the themes of your study and individual prayer and meditation as you now pray together. There are several ways to handle this time in a group. The person who leads each study could lead the group in a prayer or you could allow time for group participation. Remember that some members of your group may feel uncomfortable about participating in public prayer. It might be helpful to discuss this with the group during your first meeting and to reach some agreement about how to proceed.

### **Listening to Emotional Pain.**

These Bible study guides are designed to take seriously the pain and struggle that is part of life. People will experience a variety of emotions during these studies. Part of your role as group leader will be to listen to emotional pain. Listening is a gift which you can give to a person who is hurting. For many people, it is not an easy gift to give. The following suggestions will help you to listen more effectively to people in emotional pain.

1. Remember that you are not responsible to take the pain away. People in helping relationships often feel that they are being asked to make the other person feel better. This is usually related to the helper's own anxieties about painful feelings.

2. Not only are you not responsible to take the pain away, but one of the things people need most is an opportunity to face and to experience the pain in their life. They may have spent years denying their pain and running from it. Healing can come when we are able to face our pain in the presence of someone who cares about us. Rather than trying to take the pain away, then, commit yourself to listening attentively as it is expressed.

3. Realize that some group members may not feel comfortable with other's expressions of sadness or anger. You may want to acknowledge that such emotions are uncomfortable, but say that part of growth process is to learn to feel and to allow others to feel.

4. Be very cautious about giving answers and advice. Advice and answers may make you feel better or competent, but they may also

minimize people's problems and their painful feelings. Simple solutions rarely work, and they can easily communicate "You should be better now" or "You shouldn't really be talking about this."

5. Be sure to communicate direct affirmation any time people talk about their painful emotions. It takes courage to talk about our pain because it creates anxiety for us. It is a great gift to be trusted by those who are struggling.

The following notes refer to the questions in the Bible study portion of each study.

### **Study 1. God's Declaration of Love. I John 4:7-21.**

Purpose: To reflect on God's declaration of love for us.

Question 1. The purpose of the question is to provide an overview of the text. There are several ways to state the major themes, so encourage people to share in their own words. A basic version might be: God is love; God has actively made his love known to us in Jesus; the result of receiving God's love is that we become loving toward God and toward others.

Question 2. God is love. God is the initiator in love. God's love is active and tangible. God showed his love through Jesus. To know God is to live; to know God is to love; to know God is to have God living in us.

Question 3. Because the threads of this text do weave in and out of each other, pulling this thread to look at it separately for a moment can be clarifying and powerful.

Love comes from God (v. 7). God is love (v. 8). God showed his love among us in sending his one and only Son (v. 9). This is love, that God loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (v. 10). If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (verse 12). God is love (v. 16). God first loved us (v. 19).

Question 4. The author tells us that God showed love to us by reaching out to us actively, dramatically and sacrificially in Jesus.

Question 5. This is a form of meditative prayer which has a long history in Christian practice and which will be encouraged in many of these studies. This is how Richard Foster describes this form of meditation:

"In Meditative Prayer the Bible ceases to be a quotation dictionary and becomes instead 'wonderful words of life' that lead us to the Word of Life...The written word becomes a living word addressed to us. This is a time not for technical studies or analysis or even the gathering of material to share with others. We are to set aside all tendencies toward arrogance and with humble hearts receive the word addressed to us." (*Prayer* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1992], p. 145).

Encourage group members to realize they may have unique and very personal responses to the text, depending on many things, including

how they are feeling physically at the moment, the particular emotional stresses they are under. Encourage participants not to judge their ability or inability to take in the reality of God's love, but to gently observe their response at this time to God's love.

Question 6. John starts this text with the primary response to God's love to which we are called. "Dear friends," he says, "let us love one another for love comes from God." John also calls us to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 15) and to live in love, which is to live in God (v. 16).

Question 7. Allow group participants time for personal reflection. You may want to suggest that they write down the names of people who come to mind, perhaps especially those whom they are having difficulty loving.

Question 8. Encourage participants to think of specific times when they have been afraid of being hurt or rejected in some way and were unable to love—how did they feel and behave? Encourage them to contrast these times with times when they have been free of fear and able to love—how did they feel and behave?

Question 9. Allow participants time for reflection. You may want to suggest some physical action for signifying release, such as closing hands as they think of fears and opening their hands to release our fears to God.

Question 10. Allow participants time for reflection. Allow people time to share what came to them in response to questions 9 and 10.

## **Study 2. Resisting God's Love. Hosea 11**

Purpose: To explore our tendency to resist God's love.

Question 1. One of the purposes of this question is to help provide a broad perspective of the text. A summary might sound something like "I loved you. You left me. I am angry. I still love you. I want you back. Come back."

Question 2. Each person may have a different sense of what sets the tone for this text. Encourage a variety of responses.

Question 3. When we talk about God's love we can think of it in abstract terms - as a fact, a truth, a doctrine. Texts like these can startle us into remembering God's love as a tender, intimate, emotional, passionate reality in our lives.

Question 4. You may want to allow time for each person to do this in group, or for each person to do this individually.

Question 5. Israel resisted God's love by leaving, by worshipping another God, by "surrounding me [God] with lies" and deceit. If we do not trust God's love, if we resist it, we will run away in fear and despair, fill the void with something else which we make into a God substitute, and lie to ourselves and to God about what we are doing.

Question 6. Our resistance to trusting God's love can come in hundreds of forms. We can see the evidence of our fear and our running in everything from our attempts to please God, in our crazy

schedules, in our despair and withdrawal from God, in our seeking out mind-numbing activities.

Question 7. This text shows how God feels great compassion and longing for those who reject him: "How can I give you up?" God asks.

Question 8. The significance of God not carrying out his anger is that he is "God and not man." God's love is passionate, personal, intimate. He experiences rejection with grief and longing. And he experiences rejection with deep compassion for the ones rejecting him.

Question 9. This is a surprise. God's love surprises us over and over again. It is not what we fear. It is real, constant, tender, active, respectful, passionate, compassionate, enduring.

Question 10. Allow time for this mediation. You may want to encourage people to write about their experience. If some group participants experience nothing or silence, encourage them to keep coming back to God in this listening way. The silence may be a reflection of fears or of a lack of adequate time or it may even be a sign of God's loving response. We have all experienced people who have spoken too soon, too glibly or too intrusively to us. Perhaps the silence is a sign of God's respect for us. God respects our resistance to love, sees with grace the wounds that have created the resistance and waits patiently for the right time to speak words of love.

Remind participants that they will have unique thoughts and feelings and be at different places in their experience of God. Encourage them to release all judgment of themselves or of others. Some may be discouraged. Some may be struggling. Some may be overwhelmed by fears. Some may feel numb. Some may feel gratitude. Whatever our experience in the moment, God is with us, loving us.

## **Study 3. Being Strengthened to Receive God's Love Ephesians 3: 14-21**

Purpose: To become open to God's strengthening deep within us.

Question 1. People reading this text in this way are likely to feel blessed to be prayed for in such a rich and powerful way.

Question 2. Paul refers to God as the Father, as the one from whom all in heaven and on earth derives its name, as possessing glorious riches, as Spirit who strengthens, as Christ who dwells in us, as loving in a way that surpasses knowledge, as able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine.

Question 3. Paul speaks of God's love as wide, long, high, deep, surpassing knowledge.

Question 4. Paul asks God to strengthen them with power through his Spirit in their inner being. He prays that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith, that they would be rooted and established in love, that they would have power to grasp how wide, long, high and deep God's love is, that they would know God's love that surpasses knowing and that they would be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God

Question 5. People will have a variety of images. Some might picture a deep reservoir being carved out in us which can hold more and more of God's love—God strengthens us within by opening our hearts and filling them. Some might picture a place inside where they are held by God—God strengthens us by holding us close. Other might think of having strong foundations—God strengthens us by rebuilding our foundations. The text does not intend to provide a detailed description of what the 'inner being' is like. The point is rather to emphasize that God works from the inside out.

Question 6. Give participants some time for this individual time of prayer. Invite them to share their experiences with the group as they feel comfortable doing so.

Question 7. If our inner self is weakened by fears and shame, by trauma or neglect or abuse, by discouragement or exhaustion, we will be less able to believe, trust and hold experiences of God's love. We will reject God's love with thoughts that we are undeserving, or that it is too good to be true. Often, God's Spirit strengthens us by taking us through a time of emotional and spiritual healing. This spiritual surgery is not painless. The fears and shame and wounds may need to be painfully exposed before they can be touched by love. But the result will be an inner strength and stability and an increase in our capacity to receive love from God.

Question 8. Encourage people to think of specific things that help them ground themselves in the reality of God's love and to share these things with each other.

Question 9. This is a picture of abundance rather than scarcity. God's love is abundant, immense. It fills the whole earth (Ps 33:5). Many of us have fears that love is in short supply. Seeing the vastness of God's love can strength our hope and trust.

Question 10. Again, allow participants time alone for this time of prayer. Invite them to share their experience, as they choose, with the group.

#### **4. The Trustworthiness of God's Love Romans 8:31-39**

Purpose: To increase awareness of the trustworthiness of God's love.

Question 1. The purpose of the question is to provide an overview of the text. Welcome a variety of titles.

Question 2. Paul asks: "If God is for us who can be against us?" He gave us Jesus, his only Son, his very heart. Can't we rely on God to gladly give us everything we need? Who can bring a charge against those God has chosen? Who can condemn us? Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword separate us from the love of Christ?

Question 3. Paul is telling us that no matter how things look, no one can condemn us because Jesus is praying for us. And no matter how bad things look no one can separate us from the love of Christ. God's love is always with us even when we are in great danger or distress.

Question 4. Encourage people to be as specific and personal as they feel comfortable being. You can open the way for this sharing by

sharing about your own fears.

Question 5. People may feel comforted by the bold and sweeping promises of this passage, or they might feel amazed or discouraged that intellectual knowledge of these promises does not change their fears. Encourage honest expression of both struggle and gratitude.

Question 6. Encourage participants to apply the promises declared in this text directly to their specific, personal fears. The text tells us that absolutely nothing can separate us from God's love.

Question 7. Allow individual time for people to hear this text in this way. Invite them to share their experiences of doing this.

Question 8. Remembering times in the past when God's loving presence broke through to our awareness can help us stay open to receiving God's love in similar ways. Sharing stories of these moments can greatly strengthen and encourage each other.

Question 9. Allow time for this meditative prayer. Respect people's need for privacy and their potential desire to share about their experience in this meditation.

Question 10. The reality of God with us, loving us, at all times, in all things radically changes our experience of life. It is not easy to stay connected to, but the more we see and know God's loving presence with us, the more God's Spirit is able to strengthen us in the inner person, and the more we are able to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

#### **5. Relying on God's Love. Psalm 33**

Purpose: To reflect on the reliability of God's love.

Question 1. The major themes are God's unfathomable power and unfailing love, and the call to respond in reverence, praise and trust.

Question 2. The psalmist tells us God is faithful, God loves justice, God's love is unfailing, God's love fills the earth, God made the heavens by the breath of his mouth and holds the waters of the seas in jars, when God spoke things came into existence, God's plans stand firm, God watches over us and all we do, God's eyes are on those who hope in his unfailing love.

Question 3. The psalmist calls us to sing joyfully to the Lord, to praise him, to make music with instruments and song, to shout for joy, to fear and revere God, to hope in God's unfailing love.

Question 4. The psalmist intertwines statements about God's creative activity and God's loving presence. This is especially evident in verses 4 and 5 (which speak of God's loving presence filling the earth) and then verses 6 and 7 (which use strong metaphors to describe his creating power).

Question 5. Horse-driven chariots were state-of-the-art offensive military technology at the time the psalmist wrote. People may think of modern military technology, or other examples of science and technology.

Question 6. Even the human power in this century do not touch God's power and strength. Our warheads and our science and our technology are "a vain hope for deliverance," as much as a horse or the strength of a great warrior.

Question 7. People may find that they rely on their own strength, on their hard work or intelligence. Encourage people to share whatever comes to mind.

Question 8. Participants may want to reflect on times when they have waited in hope for God. They may want to think about what helped them to sustain hope during those times. Sometimes we go to God in desperation. Sometimes we are more likely to go to God and wait in hope because we are doing things that help us actively remember that God is loving, powerful and reliable (worship, study, reflection, sharing stories of his love.)

Question 9. This allows an opportunity to share stories of experiencing God's love, with the probability that these shared stories will be a source of encouragement to all.

Question 10. Allow time for this meditative prayer. Invite people to share their experiences during this time of prayer.

#### **Study 6. Living in God's Love. Ephesians 5:1-2**

Purpose: To reflect on the richness of a life lived in love

Question 1. A very basic summary might be: You are loved! Love!

Question 2. Allow for a time of reflection and consolidation of all that group participants have received from God in the past weeks of study. This questions and those that follow are personal reflection and application questions. You may want to see this as a time of celebration, a thanksgiving party of sorts.

Questions 5-6. Allow time for reflection and meditation, then allow for a time of interaction.

Questions 8-9. As we receive more of God's love, we begin to realize that we are safe with God. God wants to give us good gifts. God wants to bless us and free us. God wants to make our life significant. God wants our lives to be lived free of fear and filled with the spiritual wealth of living in love.

Question 10. If you are using this study in a group, take some time to pray for each other in relation to each person's need.

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