

Receiving Strength From God

by Dale and Juanita Ryan

Part of the “Letting God be God” Series

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God is our refuge and strength
an ever-present help in trouble.
Psalm 46:1

There are times in life when we are forced to recognize that we are not powerful enough to do what needs to be done. There are times when we come to the point of realizing that trying hard, trying harder and trying our hardest are not enough. There are times when we find ourselves needing physical, emotional and spiritual strength that we do not have. It may be that we need the strength to endure pain, to face fear, or to make difficult decisions. It may be that we need strength to love those who have not loved us. It may be that we need the strength to say ‘no’ or the strength to say ‘yes’. We may need the strength to be people of compassion and integrity in times when the cost is very high and the benefits are not clear to us. Every day we need strength that we do not have.

God is strong. And loving. In love, knowing our need, God offers to be our Strength. “Do not fear, for I am with you,” God says,

“Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you” (Isaiah 41:10).

To let God be our strength is to “Let God be God” in our lives.

Yet, for a variety of reasons, we find ourselves relying on our very limited human strength. At times we may even insist on this self reliance. When we do this, we find ourselves attempting to control what is beyond our control. This, of course, leaves us angry and frightened and overwhelmed. When we try to play God, we invariably

fail. The choice is ours. We can continue with this insanity, or we can let God be God in our lives. We can give up our attempts to be strong—our attempts to play God—and live, instead, in reliance on God’s strength.

The strength which God supplies comes in many different forms. The strength to love, the strength to tell the truth, the strength to acknowledge and make amends for wrongs we have been done, the strength to grieve a loss, the strength to forgive, the strength to make difficult decisions. Sometimes God’s strength will come in the form of a wonderful surprise. It is impossible to predict exactly how God’s strength will manifest itself. But what we can be sure of is that God will be with us, giving himself to us, being the Strength we need.

The purpose of these studies is to help you explore God’s offer to be your Strength. It is our prayer that in the process of working through these studies, God’s Spirit will free you to receive God’s strength in new ways.

OUTLINE

1. God, Our Strength (Psalm 46)
2. God’s Promise of Strength (Is 40:25-31)
3. Relying on our Own Strength (Daniel 4: 4-6, 19-37)
4. God’s Surprise: Strength in Weakness (II Cor 12:7-10)
5. Seeking God’s Strength (Daniel 2:1-23)
6. Living in God’s Strength (1 Peter 4:8-11)

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., [Minneapolis: 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 guide-

lines, 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, Our Strength

Some of us have a difficult time thinking of God as loving. We know that God is powerful but we have experienced the abuse of power and as a result we find it difficult to imagine that power can be used in loving ways.

Others of us have a difficult time thinking of God as powerful. We know that God is loving but we have experienced love as a kind of impotent, passive sentimentality. As a result we find it difficult to imagine that love can be powerful.

In God, love and power coexist. The importance of this becomes clear when we face difficulties in life. In the midst of the difficulties of life our hearts long for a loving, powerful God who is “our strength and our ever-present help in trouble.”

Prepare

1. What images come to mind when you think of strength?

2. Which of these images most closely picture the kind of strength you need at this time?

READ

[1] God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. [2] Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, [3] though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. [4] There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. [5] God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. [6] Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. [7] The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. [8] Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. [9] He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. [10] “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” [11] The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Psalm 46

Study

1. What major theses do you see in this psalm?

2. What kinds of trouble does this psalm describe?

3. Put yourself in the descriptions found in verses 2-3. How would you feel in these situations?

4. How do these troubles compare with the troubles you are facing, or have faced?

5. What specific images does the psalmist create to describe God's power and strength?

6. What response do you have to these images of God's strength?

7. The psalmist says that because God is our Strength, "we will not fear though the earth give way." How can knowing God is with us help us in time of great difficulty?

8. What experience have you had with being aware of God's presence in a difficult time?

9. In a moment of quiet, reflect on the advice of verse 10: "Be still and know that I am God." To calm and quiet yourself, take a few, slow deep breaths. Be aware of any tension in your body, and of any fearful thoughts in your mind. Reflect on what the psalmist has been saying about God being with you as your strength and help. Continue taking slow deep breaths. As you exhale, release your fears and tensions to God. As you inhale, breathe in God's strengthening presence.

What thoughts and feelings did you have during this time of prayer?

10. What help and strength do you especially need from God at this time?

11. Spend some time praying for yourself (and for others in your group). Pray that you will be able to receive God's strengthening in your life.

Reflect

The psalmist tells us that God is our refuge. Spend some time reflecting on this image. What pictures come to your mind? Who or what has been a refuge for you? How does seeing God as your refuge offer you greater strength?

Respond

Use the meditative prayer in Question 9 for a time of daily reflection. Journal about your thoughts and feelings in response to these daily reflections.

2. God’s Promise to Empower Us

Not only is God powerful, God offers to strengthen us.

Some people hoard power. They hold on to every little bit of power they can acquire and share as little as possible. It is as if power is in scarce supply and any that is shared will make one weaker.

In contrast, God loves to share power—to empower people. God wants to strengthen us—to use even our weaknesses as opportunities to demonstrate his powerful presence with us. God is not threatened by making us strong. There is no scarcity in God’s power; it is available in abundance and is not diminished by being shared.

As we will see in the text for this study, when life is difficult we may fear that God has forgotten us, or that God doesn’t care. It is in these moments of weakness and vulnerability that we are most acutely aware of our need for a strength that is beyond ourselves. And it is also in just these moments that God most wants to strengthen us.

Prepare

1. Reflect on the ways God has strengthened you in the past. Write about one or two of these memories.

2. What impact have these experiences had on your relationship with God?

Read

[25] “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. [26] Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by

name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. [27] Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God”? [28] Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. [29] He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. [30] Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; [31] but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:25-31

Study

1. This text is passionate poetry from God’s heart to our heart. List some of the poetic images you find yourself responding to most strongly.

2. Re-read the passage, inserting your name in place of Jacob and Israel, and in other places in the text. How does it change your experience of this text to read it in this way?

3. What do we learn about God’s strength from this text?

4. Which statement about God's strength, power and understanding strikes you the most deeply at this time?

5. In this text God seems to be responding to a complaint from the people of Israel. How would you state their complaint in your own words?

6. Think of a time when you felt this way about God. Describe your experience?

7. In verse 29 God promises to give strength to the weary and to increase the power of the weak. The key to receiving this gift seems to be "hope in the Lord." What do you see as the relationship between hope and being open to receiving God's strength?

8. God's promise of strength comes in three forms: soaring, running, walking. These are beautiful images and powerful action verbs. How do they compare and contrast and in what way?

9. In a time of quiet, turn to God as your strength and hope. If you find yourself hesitant or unable to do this, gently notice your thoughts and feelings and be honest about them with God. Perhaps you need to register your "complaint" about feeling abandoned or disregarded by God. Whatever you discover in your heart, simply acknowledge this to God, asking God to help you with whatever you are experiencing.

What thoughts or feelings did you have during this time of quiet?

10. Pray for yourself (and for others in your group). Pray that you will have the courage to receive God's strengthening in your life.

Reflect

Spend some time quietly reflecting on the image from this text of God bringing out the starry host one by one, calling them each by name. Continue with quiet reflection of the fact that this same God gives strength to the weary so that they soar like eagles, run without growing weary, and walk without fainting. Stay with these images, going back and forth between them as you choose. Allow these images to deepen your capacity to hope in God and to be open to receive strength from God.

Respond

At the beginning of each day ask God to strengthen and help you during the day. At the end of each day, take note of the ways in which God strengthened you and helped you. Thank God each day for all the ways you experienced being strengthened.

3. Relying on Our Own Strength

The God of the Universe, the Creator of all that exists, offers us strength. God wants to be our strength. God wants to empower us. God wants to make the full resources of his Kingdom available to us. Our response to this offer is often quite remarkable. More often than we would prefer to admit, we respond by wanting to manage by ourselves. We want to do things with our own power, with our own strength. Forgetting that our every breath comes as a gift from God, we pull away from an awareness of our dependence on God and think of ourselves as separate, independent and self contained. We become as misguided as a two year old who is convinced he doesn't need any help doing anything.

What is so attractive to us about depending on our own resources? Why is self-reliance such an appealing option? In the text for this study we will focus on the story of a king who refused to give up the delusion of his own strength.

Prepare

1. What fears and beliefs might cause you to rely on your own strength rather than on God's strength?

2. What is your experience of relying on your own strength—how does it affect how you see the world, how you see yourself, how you see God?

Read

[4] I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. [5] I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in my bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. [6] So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me.

[19] Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you." Belteshazzar answered, "My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries! . . .

[24] "This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: [25] You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. [26] The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. [27] Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue." [28] All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. [29] Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, [30] he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" [31] The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. [32] You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes." [33] Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. [34] At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most

High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

[36] At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before.[37] Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

Daniel 4: 4-6, 19, 24-34. 36-37

Study

1. What would you suggest as a title for this story?

2. What adjectives would you use to describe King Nebuchadnezzar?

3. The king relies on his own strength and abuses the power of his position. According to Daniel, how has this become destructive and dangerous to others?

4. What self deception does the king express?

5. We may not be as outrageous as the king in this story, but we each have some of this destructive kind of pride in us. In a time of quiet, allow God to help you become aware of ways in which you think of yourself as superior to another person(s). Notice how this separates you from that person. Notice how it separates you from an awareness of God's love for that person. Notice how it draws you into thinking that you can rely on your own strength.

What thoughts and feelings did you have during this time of reflection.

6. Daniel interprets the dream for the king, saying that he will live like a wild animal until he "acknowledges that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes." How might such an acknowledgment change the way this king sees himself and how he sees other people?

7. In a time of quiet, prayerfully reflect on the areas of your life in which you are most likely to rely on your own strength. Ask God to show you whatever he wants to show you about how you rely on your own strength. Write about your experience in this time of prayer.

10. What freedom might come from realizing that your life and strength and ability comes as a gift from God?

8. In another time of quiet, reflect on all the strengths of your life, on all of your accomplishments. Picture each of these as loving gifts handed to you by God. Write a brief prayer thanking God for these gifts and the love that comes with them.

Reflect

Write a prayer acknowledging to God the ways in which you are tempted to rely on your own strength and acknowledging that all you have and are is a gift from God.

9. The story has a happy ending. How would you describe it?

Respond

Pray each morning that God will reveal to you specific ways in which you rely on your own strength. As God reveals these areas to you, invite God to be your Strength in that area. Ask God to give you more of a sense each day of what it means to live life in partnership with your Creator who loves you. Keep a journal of what you sense God is showing you.

4. God's Surprise: Strength in Weakness

If God chooses to use gifted people to do important tasks, that does not surprise us. If God chooses strong people to do powerful things, that does not surprise us either. But when God chooses weak, vulnerable, broken people to do important and powerful things, that does surprise us.

God has a long history of choosing surprising people to achieve important goals. Abraham was a nobody in the ancient world—no money, no family, no prospects. Gideon's army, according to God, was too large and strong to win a critical battle. God kept insisting that he send home elements of his military until the army was so weak that it could not possibly achieve a victory. Only then could the victory be a demonstration of the power of God. David was the youngest son—the least likely person in that culture to have a promising future. Jesus came as a vulnerable infant. In all of these examples God demonstrates power through people and in situations where weakness is a central feature.

It is our weakness and difficulties which God most often chooses to show his strength. This is the surprise which we will examine in this study.

Prepare

1. What physical, emotional, spiritual difficulties are you aware of in yourself?

2. What thoughts and feelings do you have about these weaknesses?

Read

[7] To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.[8] Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. [9] But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. [10] That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

II Cor 12:7-10

Study

1. How would you summarize the main point of this text?

2. Paul was given remarkable revelations (See, for example, 2 Corinthians 12:1-6). He begins this passage acknowledging the possibility that these experiences could have caused him to become conceited. Putting yourself in Paul's place, what do you think he might have been tempted to think about himself?

3. What is the danger of this kind of conceit?

4. Why would it be particularly important for a leader like Paul to be aware of his weakness?

5. People have speculated that the weakness which Paul had to endure was blindness. But it may have been some other difficulty. Restate in your own words what God said to Paul about this weakness.

6. What do you think God wants Paul to understand?

7. What was Paul's response?

8. What experiences have you had of God using a weakness in your life to demonstrate power?

9. What is the impact of this kind of experience in a person's life?

10. What weakness are you aware of at this time in your life? In a time of quiet, offer this weakness to God. Ask God to use it for his purposes. Write about your experience during this time of prayer.

Reflect

Read Luke 1-2 and Luke 23. The birth and death of Jesus were times of apparent weakness for Jesus. Reflect on God's power being demonstrated in these vulnerable times in Jesus' life. Spend some time writing your thoughts and feelings in response to this time of reflective reading.

Respond

Each day, repeat the time of prayer in Question 10. Journal what you observe happening inside and outside you as you continue to pray in this way.

5. Seeking God's Strength

There are so many compelling reasons to manage by ourselves. It feels somehow shaming to need anybody's help— even God's help. So seeking God's help is, for most of us, a learned behavior. It is something we can practice and something that will become easier for us as we experience God's powerful presence with us.

What does it look like to ask God to help us? The text for this study is about one man's search for God's strength and power in a time of tremendous need. From his example we can learn some of the basics about seeking God's power.

Prepare

1. Strength from God comes in many forms. The strength to love, the strength to tell the truth, the strength to acknowledge and make right a wrong, the strength to grieve a loss, the strength to forgive, the strength to make a difficult decision, the strength to be an instrument of God's power. As you reflect on this list, recall a time when you experienced being strengthened by God. How did you go about seeking God's strength?

2. What evidence did you see that made you aware that God was strengthening you?

Read

[1] In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. [2] So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, [3] he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means." [4] Then the astrologers answered the king in Aramaic, "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it." [5] The king replied to the astrologers, "This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. [6] But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me." [7] Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it." [8] Then the king answered, "I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: [9] If you do not tell me the dream, there is just one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me." [10] The astrologers answered the king, "There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. [11] What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men." [12] This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. [13] So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death. [14] When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. [15] He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. [16] At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him. [17] Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. [18] He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. [19] During

the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven [20] and said: “Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. [21] He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. [22] He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him. [23] I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers: You have given me wisdom and power, you have made known to me what we asked of you, you have made known to us the dream of the king.”

Daniel 2:1-23

Study

1. Write brief descriptions of the two main human characters in this story.

2. If you put yourself in Daniel’s position in this story, what thoughts and feelings might you have had?

3. What kinds of strength did Daniel need from God?

4. How did Daniel go about seeking strength from God?

5. How did Daniel respond after his prayer for help was answered?

6. How might this response have further strengthened Daniel?

7. How is this story similar to your experiences of seeking strength from God?

8. How is this story different from your experiences of seeking strength from God?

Reflect

Read Colossians 1:9-20. Spend time reflecting on this prayer for strength which focuses on the love and strength that are in Christ. Write about whatever insights came during your time of reflection.

9. In a time of quiet, ask God to give you clarity about the kind of strength you need at this time. Ask God how to seek that strength. Write about your experience during this time of prayer.

Respond

Focus on the simple five part strategy modeled by David: collect information, share the concern or need with others, ask God for help and strength, wait in restful expectation that God will supply the strength that is needed and express gratitude for God's gifts of strength as they become evident. Which part of this strategy do you most want to increase in your life at this time? Follow up on your desire with a simple action plan.

6. Living in God's Strength

God's power is not the power to manipulate, or the power to abuse. When we receive the power of God we become empowered to love.

What would it mean for us to receive God's strength every day? What would it look like to live in God's strength? It is difficult to make generalizations but clearly we will become strong in love and in grace. We will become more like our God whose strength is always about love. To receive God's strength every day would mean becoming strong in the strength of love. In the text for this study we will see the close connection between serving others in love and receiving strength from God.

Prepare

1. As you have worked on the studies in this Guide, what have you noticed about your experience of receiving strength from God.

2. In what ways have you been strengthened?

3. How has the experience of receiving strength from God effected your life?

Read

[8] Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.[9] Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. [10] Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. [11] If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 4:8-11

Study

1. This text begins with a call to "love each other deeply." What does it mean to love each other deeply?

2. What is the relationship between love and service in this text?

3. According to this text, "If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides." What difference does it make to serve others from our own strength or to serve others from the strength God provides?

4. The text specifically urges us to avoid “grumbling.” What difference would it make to avoid grumbling when we are doing the things encouraged in this text (hospitality, speaking and serving)?

5. What experiences have you had of *receiving* service done in God’s strength and love? What were your thoughts and feelings about receiving service? (For example, was it difficult to accept? Was it affirming?)

6. What experiences have you had of *giving* service done in God’s strength and love?

7. What has helped you to receive God’s strength for the practical circumstances of life?

8. The text says “each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others.” The gift of service we have been given is a gift to us from God. How might remembering this make a difference in our approach to service?

9. The text describes our simple acts of service as “administering God’s grace in various forms.” In a moment of silence ask God to give you images of yourself being strengthened to administer grace to others. Write about whatever you sense God is showing you.

10. Write a prayer of gratitude to God your strength.

Reflect

This text begins, “Above all love each other deeply.” Spend some time reflecting on this wisdom. Ask God to show you how deeply you are loved. Ask God to deepen your love for the people in your life.

Respond

This text calls us to receive God’s strength so that we can administer “God’s grace in its various forms.” It is a great privilege to administer God’s grace. Each evening spend time reflecting on the ways God grace was ministered to you by others, and on the ways you have been able to administer God’s grace to others during the day.

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 peoples' 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, Our Strength. Psalm 46

Purpose: To reflect on God's character.

Question 1. The purpose of this question is to provide an overview of the text. Encourage people to think of a wide variety of titles. Titles might capture themes from the psalm related to God's power, God's involvement in human affairs, or God's personal and ever-present help.

Question 2. The troubles which this psalm describes are mostly catastrophic—the earth giving way, mountains falling and quaking, seas foaming. It also describes the troubles of war and of political instability.

Question 3. The images in this psalm are terrifying images. The point which the psalmist is making is that, no matter how bad it seems, God is bigger and stronger than what is happening. God is always with us to help us in life—even in the darkest, most frightening times God is present to help us.

Question 4. Some members of your group may have faced catastrophic events and losses. Others may have experienced events that created fear and distress but perhaps weren't catastrophic. The point here is to draw out stories of trouble which were frightening or threatening in some way. As the group leader, you may want to be prepared to share something to begin the discussion. If participants have not done the study ahead of time, you may want to give group members a few minutes to reflect and write about a time of trouble they have experienced so that they are prepared to share something with the group.

Question 5. The psalmist uses the images of refuge and of fortress. God is within the city under attack and does not allow the defenses to fall. God lifts up his voice and causes the earth to melt. God brings conflict to an end by breaking the weapons of war. And, finally, the psalmist presents an image of God being exalted.

Question 6. Encourage people to share honestly whatever they experience. Some people may experience awe or gratitude. Others may experience fear or uncertainty as they read these descriptions of God's power and strength.

Question 7. The psalmist is saying that God can keep us from fainting with fear because God is all powerful. And God is always with

us—to help us in times of trouble. Because God is loving, powerful and always with us, we are always held safely in God’s arms, no matter what happens, no matter how desperate things may seem.

Question 8. Encourage people to share their experiences of being strengthened by God in times of trouble. You may want to begin this sharing by sharing personally from your own life.

Question 9. Give group participants time to reflect on the invitation to be still and know that God is God and to write about their experience. Anticipate that every one in your group will have a unique experience. Allow for the full range of reactions from not finding this exercise to be helpful to having a deep sense of encountering God in a new way. Not every one will want to share, respect the need for privacy some may feel.

Question 10. This is a opportunity to make this study personal and immediate in its application. You may want to share on a personal level what you are needing as a way of beginning the time of sharing.

Study 2. God’s Promise to Empower Us. Isaiah 40:25-31

Purpose: To hear God’s promise to be our strength.

Question 1. The purpose of this question is to provide an overview of the text and to connect with the powerful emotional images of the text.

Question 2. You might want to allow a time of quiet for each person in the group to do this quietly. Or you may want to break into pairs and have people read the text aloud to each other, inserting the other’s name as they read.

Question 3. God is not on an ego trip here. God is simply telling us the truth. It is a truth we need to know. God is the Creator of all that is. God’s strength, power and understanding are truly unfathomable. God is also telling us that strength is available to us. God wants to infuse us with strength.

Question 4. Some people may respond most strongly to God’s awesome power. Others may respond to the realization that even when it seems that God has forgotten us, God remembers us. Others may respond to the promise of strength when they are weary.

Question 5. What is being voiced by the Israelites is a common human fear. They have been in captivity. Things have been very difficult. From the looks of things, God forgot about them a long time ago. They are saying in their complaint to God, “you don’t care, we are nothing to you, you don’t see us, you have abandoned us.”

Question 6. Encourage people to share times when they have feared these things. This is a lot to risk sharing, so you may want to give people some time (3-5 minutes) to reflect and write about such a time and what they experienced. You may also want to lead the way by sharing briefly on a personal level yourself.

Question 7. When we hope in the Lord we are not running around trying to get these needs met in some other way. We are not pre-

tending to be strong when we are faint. We are being honest about our need, seeking God’s help, knowing that God is the one true source of strength, waiting for God to help us. We are focused on God and receptive to God’s strength and trusting God will give us the strength we need.

Question 8. This can be an important time of remembering ways in which God has provided strength in the past. Recounting such stories and hearing such stories can greatly increase our faith and our ability to wait with hope for further gifts of strengthening.

Question 9. Allow a time of quiet for participants to reflect and to pray in this way. Remember, some people may want to share others may not. Respect this difference.

Study 3. Relying on our Own Strength. Daniel 4: 4-6, 19-37

Purpose: To explore the choice to either rely on our strength or on God’s strength.

Question 1. This story lends itself to a variety of creative titles. Enjoy a few minutes of creativity together.

Question 2. Arrogant people are not very likable people. Their self-focus and pride keep other people around them feeling insignificant.

Question 3. Allow group participants time for this prayerful reflection. Reassure them they can share as much or as little as they choose of their reflections with the group.

Question 4. The king boasts about how he has built the great city by his strength. He speaks of himself as if he were God. That is a big part of the deception.

Question 5. One of the things Daniel says to the king on God’s behalf is that the king is oppressing the people. He is treating them abusively. This has to stop, God says.

Question 6. An acknowledgment of God as the Most High requires the king to give up his self deception. This honesty and humility would lead to a host of other changes. He would see himself as the king only because God as given him this responsibility. He would see himself as a creature—and others as creatures as well. Because he would no longer see himself as superior to others, he would stop oppressing other people and using them to make him look powerful.

Question 8. Allow participants time for this prayerful reflection. Reassure them that they can share as much or as little as they choose of their reflections with the group.

Question 9. Encourage participants to describe what happens in their own words.

Question 10. Realizing that our life and strength comes as a gift from God frees us in many ways. Our part is to be grateful for these gifts and to stay open to receiving these good gifts from God. We do not have to strive and try to do things that are not in our power to

do. We can live our lives in trusting, joyful dependence on God.

Study 4. God's Surprise: Strength in Weakness. II Cor 12:7-10

Purpose: To remember God's surprising preference for using our weaknesses rather than our strengths.

Question 1. The thesis of this text might be "My weakness is the occasion for God's strength" or "Just because I am weak does not mean that God is also weak."

Question 2. Any of us might be tempted to think that we are somehow better than others—more spiritual, or more loved or more favored. Being conceited has to do with thinking of ourselves as superior to others in some way rather than remembering that we, with all others, are loved and valued by God.

Questions 3-4. Spiritual conceit is especially dangerous because it leads easily to spiritual abuse. It can cause us to separate ourselves from others. It can cause us to believe and teach terrible distortions about God, about ourselves and about others. If we see ourselves as "better" spiritually, then we will see others as "less than" and we will imagine that God also sees us and others in this way. Other people can become very discouraged spiritually as a result of such conceit in us.

Question 5. God told Paul that even though he felt tormented by this weakness, that God's grace would make it bearable. The way that Paul lived with this weakness could be a demonstration of God's power.

Question 6. Some people may see that God wanted Paul to experience the thing that caused him grief and shame was something that could lead him to a deeper experience of God's grace and strength. Others might see that God is telling Paul there is a reason for what he is experiencing.

Question 7. Paul's response was one of humble gratitude, of surrender to God's will and purposes.

Question 8. You may want to open this time up for honest sharing by sharing something significant in your own life experience.

Question 9. The impact of this kind of experience will be different for each person, because each person's weakness will be different, and each person's relationship with God will be different. But, in general, this kind of experience leads to powerful, personal experiences of knowing God's love and grace.

Question 10. Allow participants time for this prayerful reflection. People may or may not want to share their experience during this time of prayer. Close by praying for specific needs or simply with the general request that God would use your weakness.

Study 5. Seeking God's Strength. Daniel 2:1-23

Purpose: To explore the practical dynamics of seeking God's strength for our lives.

Question 1. The two main characters in this text are Daniel and the king. The contrast between them is interesting. The value of focusing on them is that it will draw you and other group participants into the drama of this story. You might have each person write their descriptions and then you can discuss them as a group.

Question 2. This must have been a very frightening experience for Daniel. He certainly must have felt afraid. He may also have felt some anger at the injustice—some outrage at the kings' decision to have all the wise men killed.

Question 3. Daniel needed the strength of courage and of faith. He also needed the power of a miracle.

Question 4. Daniel gathered information about the situation and then went immediately to friends—asking them to pray with him for the help they needed. He did not do this alone. And then, amazingly, he slept. He told God of his need, he asked friends to pray as well, and then he rested. This is a story of asking for what we need with the support of a community and of waiting in trust. Ask. Get support. Wait in hope.

Question 5. Daniel's response was a response of gratitude. The prayer of gratitude at the end of this text is a beautiful prayer. You may want to read it aloud. Daniel's prayer focuses on God's power and strength and on God's wisdom and knowledge. It is God who puts kings into power. It is God who holds all knowledge and wisdom. We may be faced with someone or something that seems impossibly powerful, but God is more powerful than anything or anyone in our lives.

Question 6. Gratitude allows us to take in—to receive—God's good gifts to us. Daniel was receiving God's gift of strength, even as he prayed and gave thanks. Daniel was acknowledging that things are not what they seem. People in positions of power who are doing great harm and who cannot be stopped, can be stopped by God. Circumstances and people, no matter how powerful they may seem are in God's hands.

Questions 7-8. Encourage people to be honest. They may have had an experience like Daniel's in which prayer was answered and help was given. They may have had experiences when no help seemed to come—and, as a result, may feel God abandoned them, like the Israelites felt in the text in the second study in the workbook.

Question 9. Awareness of where we need to be strengthened always comes from recognizing where we feel weak. Identifying our weak points is rarely easy. Clues may come from identifying fears, losses or potential threats we are experiencing. Allow group participants time for quiet prayer.

Study 6. Living in God's Strength. 1 Peter 4:8-11

Purpose: To realize the potential of living and serving in God's strength.

Question 1. Encourages participants to take time to reflect on what it means in practical terms to love each other deeply.

Question 2. It is clear in this text that love is an action verb. It has

everything to do with giving of ourselves to others in a spirit of joy and gratitude.

Question 3. The text tells us to serve others with God's strength. If we serve others because we have a need to gain a sense of value or love, it is very easy to fall into the trap of giving with grumbling and resentment. Similarly if our service is rooted in a sense of scarcity—that there are only limited resources available and everything we give away must come out of our limited supply—then we are also setting ourselves up for disappointment and burnout. But when we draw on God's strength, on the strength of God's love, we can give out of abundance and with gratitude and joy.

Question 4. If serving and caring are done with grumbling, damage is done to both the giver and receiver of the care. The one who gives grows more resentful. The one who receives feels unloved, unvalued, unwanted. When serving and caring are done in love, the giver grows in love and the receiver knows himself to be loved and valued. Henri Nouwen described this when he wrote:

The basic meaning of care is: to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with. I am very much struck by this background of the word care because we tend to look at caring as an attitude of the strong toward the weak, of the powerful toward the powerless, of the have's toward the have-not's.

When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares.

(Out of Solitude, p. 34)

Nouwen also reminds us that in times of prayer and reflection we are able to draw on God's love and strength in a way that allows us to give and serve in love:

In solitude we discover that our life is not a possession to be defended, but a gift to be shared. It's there we recognize the healing words we speak are not just our own, but are given to us; that the love we can express is I part of a greater love; and that the new life we bring forth is not a property to cling to, but a gift to be received. (Out of Solitude, p. 22)

Question 7. You may want to reflect back to study 5 and the story of what helped Daniel. But encourage participants to share from their life experiences.

Question 9-10. You might want to share the written prayers of gratitude as a closing time of celebration and praise to God for the ways each one has been strengthened by God or come to see God as their strength.

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