

Recovery from Abuse

6 studies for groups or individuals

by

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Does the nightmare of abuse ever end? Is it really possible to live for years with constant threats from parents and later learn to trust other people? Is it possible to be called terrible names throughout childhood and later develop a healthy self-esteem? Is it possible to be physically beaten by someone you love and later develop a capacity for intimacy? Is it possible to be sexually violated and later feel secure in loving relationships? Is it possible to recover from abuse?

Most people who have been abused experience times in the process of recovery when it seems impossible.

Fortunately, many people who have been abused will testify that recovery is possible. Not easy. Not quick. It doesn't happen by just waiting for the memories to fade. Or by looking on the bright side. It's hard work. But, the broken pieces of life can be put back together again.

Some people experience abuse that is overtly violent—verbally, physically or sexually. Less overt forms of abuse such as ridicule, shaming, neglect, rejection and controlling can, however, also pose fundamental threats to a person's identity. No matter what form it takes, abusive behaviors leave the abused person with a decreased sense of personal dignity and an increased fear for personal safety.

Most abuse happens in the family. The one place that should be a safe place is, for many people, a place of terror. The hands and voices that are needed for guidance and nurture are used instead to harm, confuse and destroy. Abusive words and deeds are not, however, limited to the family. Teachers, pastors, counselors, employers, supervisors and others in positions of power may be abusive to those who look to them for help.

The impact of abuse can be profound. Abuse can shatter a person's identity and destroy the ability to trust. It can lead to isolation, depression, low self-esteem and helplessness.

Abuse can also effect a person's faith. How can people who have been abused trust God or make sense out of the phrase "God is love" when the adults in their lives have not been trustworthy or loving? For faith to contribute meaningfully to recovery from abuse, it will need to speak somehow to the

confusion and terror which come from abuse. Faith needs to be able to give voice to doubt, helplessness and anguish. People who have been abused need to know that God is on the side of those who have been abused, committed to justice, yet full of comfort and compassion.

The following studies are based on prayers found in the Bible. Each one gives voice in some way to the spiritual and emotional struggle experienced by people who have been abused.

In studying them we have been deeply moved by the ways in which Scripture speaks to the emotional pain of abuse. Our prayer is that these studies will encourage you in your recovery and allow you to experience God's healing presence.

May your roots sink deeply in the soil of God's love.

OUTLINE

- 1) A Prayer of Doubt Psalm 13
- 2) A Prayer of Helplessness Psalm 10:1-2, 5-11, 14-18
- 3) A Prayer of Anguish Psalm 25:16-21
- 4) An Inarticulate Prayer Romans 8:22-27
- 5) A Prayer to God Who Shares Our Anger Psalm 18:2-16;19
- 6) A Prayer to the Father of Compassion 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

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1. A Prayer of Doubt

“My dad would come home drunk in the middle of the evening several times a week and scream obscenities at us. Sometimes he would throw things and threaten us. I lived with continual fear. Now I look back and wonder how God could have let that go on for so many years. Where was God when that was happening to me? I always felt so alone. Today I live with terrible anxiety, and I wonder how long I will have to continue suffering because of my dad’s abusive behavior.”

People who have been abused struggle with unanswered questions about God and about themselves. People ask about God: “Why did God let this happen?” “Was he unable to respond to my prayers?” “Why hasn’t he healed me of these painful memories?” Of themselves people who have been abused ask: “Was it my fault?” “Was my faith too weak?” “Why am I not over this yet?” These painful questions and the doubts which they represent are difficult to discuss with other people. They can also be very difficult to share with God.

Fortunately, God’s Word itself gives voice to these painful questions. God is not shocked by our struggles with doubt.

May knowing that God is able to respond to doubt in helpful ways give you the courage to pray when your heart is full of unanswerable questions.

Personal Reflection

1. What feelings do you have when you recall past experiences of abuse? (Some possibilities are numbness, sadness, rage, confusion, disbelief, minimizing and shame.)

2. What questions are you aware of having about yourself as a result of abuse?

3. What questions are you aware of having about God as a result of abuse?

Bible Study

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
Look on me and answer, O Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;
my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

*But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
for he has been good to me. (Psalm 13)*

1. What insights did you gain during your time of personal reflection?

2. The author begins with two questions that express his doubts about God. What about the experience of abuse can lead a person to have doubts about God?

3. Why is it so difficult for us to follow the writer's example in expressing our doubts about God?

7. What makes this kind of self-doubt so painful?

4. Why is it helpful to express our doubts to God?

8. The writer ends the prayer of doubt with a statement of trust. How is it possible to doubt and trust at the same time?

5. The author not only has questions about God, he also has questions about himself. He asks, "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" What about the experience of abuse leads people to have doubts about themselves?

9. How might it give you courage in your spiritual struggle to know that the Bible gives voice to doubts?

Prayer

What doubts would you like to express to God?

6. What other kinds of self-doubt might a person who has been abused experience?

2. A Prayer of Helplessness

“I was trapped. There was nothing I could do. I was helpless to defend myself or to stop the abuse. Sometimes my abuser said, “This is a very special secret just for the two of us.” But what I remember most is when he said, “If you tell, I’ll kill you and then myself.” I felt totally helpless. What could I do?”

Helplessness. It is an experience shared by everyone who has been abused. Abuse is terrifying. There is no way out. There are no alternatives. It is an experience full of fear, rage and despair.

Because our culture places such a high value on individualism and self-reliance, the experience of helplessness is full of shame for us. We expect that others will blame us for letting it happen. And we end up blaming ourselves.

In times of helplessness, however, shame and blame are not helpful. What might be helpful is to know that God understands helplessness and that he hears the prayers of those who have been abused.

May knowing that God does not shame or blame you give you the courage to pray when you experience helplessness.

Personal Reflection

1. Recall a time when you felt helpless. Describe it briefly.

2. If you were to find yourself back in that situation, what resources for protection and defense would you like to have?

3. What resources do you actually have now that you did not have then?

Bible Study

*Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak,
who are caught in the schemes he devises.*

*His ways are always prosperous;
he is haughty and your laws are far from him;
he sneers at all his enemies.
He says to himself, “Nothing will shake me;
I’ll always be happy and never have trouble.”
His mouth is full of curses and lies and threats;
trouble and evil are under his tongue.
He lies in wait near the villages;
from ambush he murders the innocent,
watching in secret for his victims.
He lies in wait like a lion in cover;
he lies in wait to catch the helpless;
he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.
His victims are crushed, they collapse;
they fall under his strength.
He says to himself, “God has forgotten;
he covers his face and never sees.”*

*But you, O God, do see trouble and grief;
you consider it to take it in hand.
The victim commits himself to you;
you are the helper of the fatherless.
Break the arm of the wicked and evil man;
call him to account for his wickedness that would not be
found out.*

*The Lord is King for ever and ever;
the nations will perish from his land.
You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted;
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,
defending the fatherless and the oppressed,
in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.
(Psalm 10:1-2, 5-11, 14-18)*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

2. The prayer begins with the question, “Why, God, do you hide yourself?” Why is this such an urgent question when you are feeling helpless?

3. How does the author describe the perpetrator of the abuse?

4. How does the writer describe the person who has been abused?

5. The writer asks God to “break the arm” of the perpetrator (render him powerless) and to “call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.” What do these requests tell you about the writer?

6. Notice the author’s various perspectives of God. The prayer begins with an absent God: “Where are you, God?” In the middle the author risks asking God to respond on his behalf: “Arise, Lord!” The prayer ends with praise to the God who hears and defends the oppressed. Which of these perspectives of God have you experienced?

7. How does the writer describe God and his actions on behalf of people who have been abused?

8. How would it help you in your recovery if you experienced God as acting on your behalf?

9. The prayer ends with a description of God as “King forever and ever . . . defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.” Allow yourself some time to meditate on this image of God. Picture him as King forever. Imagine him defending the fatherless and the oppressed. Reflect on what it might be like for God to exercise his power so that the abuser “may terrify no more.”

Describe your thoughts and feelings during this meditation.

Prayer

How would you like God to respond to your feelings of helplessness?

3. A Prayer of Anguish

3. If you were to write a prayer of anguish, describing some of your own experiences, what would you say?

“My mother told me many times that it was my fault that she was upset and depressed. She called me terrible names. She said I would never amount to anything. Of course, I believed her then. I was just a child. I guess in some ways I still believe what she said. I know I feel very alone and completely worthless. My heart still aches with the pain.”

Abuse traumatizes for years after the actual abuse has ended. The depression, isolation and anguish can go on for decades.

Anguish describes an experience of extreme emotional and spiritual suffering. It is the imprint of abuse on the emotional core of a person. The author of the prayer for this study gives voice to this emotional and spiritual pain. He cried out to God to free him from his anguish.

May his example give you the courage to pray when you are filled with anguish.

Personal Reflection

1. How would you describe the anguish you have experienced?

2. What did you feel you were needing most in times of anguish?

Bible Study

*Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
The troubles of my heart have multiplied;
free me from my anguish.
Look upon my affliction and my distress
and take away all my sins.
See how my enemies have increased
and how fiercely they hate me!
Guard my life and rescue me;
let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
May integrity and uprightness protect me,
because my hope is in you.*

*Redeem Israel, O God,
from all their troubles! (Psalm 25:16-21)*

1. What insights did you gain during your time of personal reflection?

2. This prayer talks about loneliness. What contributes to the loneliness of someone who has been abused?

3. The author also says, “the troubles of my heart have multiplied.” In your experience how does personal distress multiply?

4. The writer talks about his anguish. How does the experience of abuse lead to anguish?

5. The author asks God to protect him from experiences of shame. How does the experience of abuse make a person vulnerable to further experiences of shame?

6. In the middle of his cry for help the writer asks God to take away his sin. People who have been abused often feel ‘it was my fault’. As a result, any mention of sin can trigger panic and self-condemnation. The writer, however, is not condemning himself for the abuse he experienced. He is expressing a longing for purity and acceptance by God. What words would you use to express your desire for purity or acceptance by God?

7. The author asks God to pay attention (“turn,” “look,” “see”). How might God’s attentiveness be a source of healing for people who are experiencing anguish as a result of abuse?

8. The writer also asks for God to “guard” and “rescue” him. In what ways do you want God to guard and rescue you?

9. The writer asks both that he would be faithful in participating in his own recovery saying, “May integrity and uprightness protect me” and that God would fulfill his responsibilities as well—“My hope is in you.” Why is this balance so important and so difficult?

Prayer

What would you like to say to the God who pays attention to you in times of anguish?

4. An Inarticulate Prayer

Bible Study

“When I think about the abuse, I don’t feel anything. I try to talk about it sometimes, but I don’t know what to say. I know there is a deep pain in me. I try to pray about it sometimes but no words come.”

The injury caused by abuse is so deep that words fail. Language seems hopelessly inadequate. Because our understanding and practice of prayer tends to be dominated by petitionary prayer (making requests of God), we may not know what to do when we can’t find words to speak to God. But Christian prayer is much more than making speeches to God. Words are important, of course, but there is also a time for silence.

The Bible is very clear that in those moments when we feel the most inarticulate and the most alone, God’s Spirit prays for us.

May the Holy Spirit’s commitment to pray for you give you the courage to wait in prayerful silence before God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we are saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will. (Romans 8:22-27)

Personal Reflection

1. What experiences have you had with talking to God about your experiences of abuse?

2. Paul says that people who have the firstfruits of the Spirit “groan inwardly.” How does this compare with your expectations of what it means to be a person of faith?

2. Take a few minutes to picture yourself sitting quietly and praying. You are aware of emotional pain, but no words come. Now picture God’s Spirit there with you. He feels what you feel. He knows your pain. He begins to pray for you with deep groaning. Listen to him praying with compassion for you.

What is your response to this picture?

3. The text says that we are waiting eagerly for “our adoption.” How might the hope of adoption be helpful to someone who has been abused?

4. Paul discusses hope as part of the process of waiting for God. Why is hope important in the process of recovering from abuse?

8. People who have been abused may respond to the prospect of God “searching their hearts” as an intrusive scrutiny. What does this text say about God that might help us to value God knowing our hearts?

5. The text says that God’s Spirit helps us in our weakness. How might it help you in your recovery to know that God does not reject you for your weaknesses but helps you in your weakness?

9. How might realizing that God knows your heart give you courage and hope when you can’t find words to pray?

6. Paul says, “We do not know what we ought to pray for.” How do you feel when you can’t verbalize something that is important to you?

Prayer

Spend some time in silence. Let God’s Spirit pray for you.

7. How does knowing that God’s Spirit prays for you with “groans that words cannot express” give you courage and hope when you can’t find words to pray?

5. A Prayer to God Who Shares Our Anger

3. How would it help you to know that God shares this anger with you?

“It took me a long time to figure out what I really needed. At first I thought I needed God to magically take away all my emotional pain. I suppose I would still like that to happen sometimes, who wouldn’t? But I know that’s not what I really need. What I really need is to know that God hears me when I cry and that he shares my anger over the injustice of it all. And, I need to know that God doesn’t see me as damaged goods! I need to know that he still loves me.”

If God is angry, people who have been abused will often assume that he is angry at them. If they experience anger themselves and bring it in prayer to God, they may expect God to respond by saying, “Calm down, don’t be so angry, just trust me, try having a little more faith.”

It may come as a surprise that God is angry at those who abuse. God shares our anger at injustice. In the text for this study, the author suggests that God’s response to abusers is anger which is so intense that the earth itself trembles.

May knowing that God shares your anger give you courage to pray.

Personal Reflection

1. How would you describe the anger you feel in response to your experience of abuse?

2. Write a brief statement to the person who was abusive to you, telling them of your anger.

Bible Study

*The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.
He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I am saved from my enemies.*

*The cords of death entangled me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.
In my distress I called to the Lord;
I cried to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came before him, into his ears.*

*The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook;
they trembled because he was angry.
Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it.
He parted the heavens and came down;
dark clouds were under his feet.
He mounted the cherubim and flew;
he soared on the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering,
his canopy around him—the dark rain clouds of the sky.*

*Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced,
with hailstones and bolts of lightning.
The Lord thundered from heaven;
the voice of the Most High resounded.
He shot his arrows and scattered the enemies,
great bolts of lightning and routed them.
The valleys of the sea were exposed
and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke,
O Lord, at the blast of breath from your nostrils.*

*He reached down from on high and took hold of me;
he drew me out of deep waters. . . .
He brought me out into a spacious place
he rescued me because he delighted in me. (Psalm 18:2-19)*

1. What insights did you gain during your time of personal reflection?

2. How does the writer describe the distress he has experienced?

3. How do the author's feelings compare with your own?

4. The text says that God is angry at the abuser. People who have been abused, however, are often terrified by any anger. What does the text say God actually does to the abuser?

5. . What thoughts and feelings do you have as you read this powerful description of God's response to a cry for help?

6. The author says that God "reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters." Picture yourself in deep water. You fear that the water will overwhelm you. Picture God reaching down and gently but powerfully drawing you out of the water. He has rescued you. What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to God acting on your behalf?

7. The writer began his prayer by addressing God as "rock, fortress, deliverer, refuge, shield, horn of my salvation and stronghold." Which of these images of God is most meaningful to you? Explain what the image means to you.

8. The author says that God "brought me out into a spacious place". People who have been abused often feel trapped. What would it mean to be 'brought out into a spacious place'?

9. The author says that God rescued me because 'he delighted in me'. How does it help you in your recovery to know that God delights in you?

Prayer

What would you like to say to the God who shares your anger and delights in you?

6. A Prayer to the Father of Compassion

Bible Study

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

“I have always wanted someone to comfort me. I have a longing to talk to someone who would care about me and who would listen to me while I cry. But I have never talked with anyone about what happened. I have always kept it to myself.”

When we have been hurt we long for compassion and comfort. Unfortunately, many people who have been abused experience isolation instead of comfort. They find themselves alone with their pain and trouble.

The text for this study presents God as a God of comfort, as the Father of Compassion. We can cry in his presence. We can tell him about our troubles.

The Bible also tells us that God comforts us so that we will be able to comfort each other. It is not necessary for us to be isolated with our pain. We can learn to share it with God and with others. We can be comforted. And we can, in turn, comfort others.

May knowing that God is full of compassion and comfort give you the courage to pray.

Personal Reflection

1. What experience have you had with receiving comfort from another person? Briefly describe the experience.

2. Think of a time when you felt compassion for another person? Briefly describe the experience.

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

2. In this short prayer of praise, Paul calls God the “Father of compassion.” How would you expect the compassionate Father to respond to a child who has been abused?

3. Paul also calls God the “God of all comfort.” How would you expect the God of comfort to respond to a child who has been abused?

4. How has it helped you in your recovery (or how could it help you) to see God as the Father of Compassion and the God of Comfort?

7. We can comfort others. Other people can comfort us. Who in your experience has God used to express his comfort to you?

5. What might make it difficult for you to see God in this way?

8. What comfort do you need to receive at this time in your recovery?

Prayer

What would you like to say to the Father of Compassion?

6. The text says that receiving comfort makes it possible for us to comfort others. How does the fact that you can comfort others help you in your own recovery?

Leader's Notes

Study 1. A Prayer of Doubt.

Psalm 13.

Purpose: To learn to pray when we experience doubt.

Question 2. Doubt is an understandable reaction to abuse. We ask: "Where was God?" "Why didn't he help?" "Why did he allow this to happen?" These are hard questions, but good questions. No progress will be made in recovery from abuse if these questions are ignored. Don't pretend that there are simple answers.

Question 3. Doubt, and the fear and guilt which accompany doubt, can increase the emotional pain experienced by someone who has been abused. When people need God the most, they may doubt that God is there or doubt that God is trustworthy. For this reason it may be tempting to find a quick solution which blunts the full emotional impact of doubt. It may seem easier to forget the questions. Even sincere friends may encourage people who have been abused to suppress difficult questions because they make us so uncomfortable. This explains why doubt is such a shame-filled experience for us.

Other fears that make it difficult for us to pray include the fear that we may drive God further away, that he will reject us for asking questions, or that we have failed because our faith is not strong enough.

Question 4. Scripture models this behavior for us. Notice that the doubts expressed by the author are not doubts about ideas or facts. The author is protesting God's unresponsiveness to his situation much like a child protests when separated from his parents. This kind of protest is not an indication that the child rejects his parents, rather it is a sign of a deep longing for a reconnection with the parent.

Question 5. The messages in abuse are: "You are worthless trash. You deserved this. Something is wrong with you." After an abusive event, these messages may be reinforced by people who suggest that you let it happen or were somehow responsible for the abuse. These extremely negative messages are often internalized by people who have been abused and profoundly erode their self-respect, self-esteem and self-confidence. Under the best of circumstances it is difficult for us to sustain a healthy self concept. When people you trust act or speak as if you are worthless, it is difficult to avoid self-doubt.

Question 6. People who have been abused often ask: "What is wrong with me?" "Why can't I get over this?" "Why should I suffer so long for something that someone else did to me?" "Am I crazy?"

Question 7. Self-doubt can undermine our self-confidence, our self-esteem, and our ability to concentrate and focus on other activities and other people. It can drain our energy. It hampers our social relationships. It makes it very difficult to take risks

in relationships. And in important matters it becomes hard to trust yourself to think straight or make decisions.

Question 8. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Disbelief is the opposite of faith. Doubt is the struggle with faith. It is true that doubt can eventually lead to disbelief. But, doubt can also lead to a stronger, deeper relationship. The faith that results from the struggle with doubts can be a healthier faith.

Study 2. A Prayer of Helplessness.

Psalm 10: 1-2, 5-11, 14-18.

Purpose: To learn to pray when we experience helplessness.

Question 2. In times of helplessness we are acutely aware of how much we need God to be responsive to our needs. When we are helpless, we long for God to be powerful, competent, available and active on our behalf.

Question 3. This text is not so much a profile of the perpetrator as it is a declaration of rage by the person who has been abused. The writer does, however, mention several of the core beliefs of abusers: "No one needs to know, "God doesn't pay attention," and "I won't have to live with the consequences of my behavior."

Question 4. To be abused is to be "caught," "dragged off," "crushed," "helpless," "in trouble" and "in grief." The whole prayer is an expression of rage at the injustice of the situation and a deep longing for God to intervene.

Question 5. They suggest that the author is angry. He is concerned for victims other than himself. He wants the silence to be broken. He wants the perpetrator to be stopped. And he wants him to be confronted. He wants justice to be done.

Question 6. Recovery from abuse will involve traveling through this cycle many times. It is important not to shame ourselves or others for not being able to maintain an ongoing attitude of praise.

Question 7. The writer says that God "sees trouble and grief," "considers it," "takes it in hand," "helps the fatherless," "hears the desire of the afflicted," "encourages," "listens" and "defends."

Question 8. People who have been abused and who know helplessness need God to act powerfully on their behalf. This is a critical source of hope and healing. Not everyone will be far enough in their recovery to appreciate or participate in the author's hopefulness about God. Some people may not be able to get beyond the questions about God's absence at the beginning.

Study 3. A Prayer of Anguish.

Psalm 25:16-21.

Purpose: To learn to pray when we experience emotional pain.

Question 2. Abuse, whether verbal, physical or sexual, is usually a secret. Sometimes people who have been abused don't talk about it because they have been threatened with reprisals. Even without such specific threats, however, families in which abuse takes place typically have strong taboos about discussing painful realities. The experience of abuse teaches people not to trust other people and that makes it difficult to talk. People who have been abused may also think that they are the only person who has ever experienced this, so others won't understand or believe them. Finally, people who have found the courage to speak about their abuse may continue to experience isolation when people respond with simplistic solutions, religious slogans or inappropriate advice.

Question 3. People who have been abused typically find that the trauma they have experienced effects every area of their lives. If abuse only created one problem, it would be easier to recover. All abuse leads to multiple problems.

The consequences of abuse include damaged self-esteem, confused identity, lack of self-confidence, depression, rage, perfectionism, difficulty in relationships and tendency toward addictive or compulsive behaviors.

Question 4. The anguish of abuse of any kind comes from the fact that the messages of abuse are so negative, so powerful and so quickly internalized.

Question 5. People who have been abused are very susceptible to shame and revictimization. The damage caused by abuse takes place at a fundamental level of a person. The rejection and hostility which they have experienced becomes internalized and is adopted as a part of their identity. The message "You are worthless" becomes understood as "I am worthless." Abuse can lead to self-abuse. Later experiences of rejection or devaluing, no matter how "small," may trigger these internalized feelings of self-rejection.

Question 7. Attentiveness can be very confusing for people who have been abused because in the past the attention they have received has been controlling and destructive. They may just want to be left alone, even by God.

On the other hand, people who have been abused long for appropriate, loving attention. God's attentiveness is a source of healing because it is not controlling, not compulsive, not destructive, not intrusive. God's loving attention is full of grace.

Question 8. Recovery from abuse is a power encounter. The abuser has had a powerful impact on the life of the person who has been abused. The central question in recovery is "Who can influence my life in more powerful ways than the abuser?" The

author calls on God because of his conviction that, no matter how powerful the abuser and no matter how powerless he feels, God's power is sufficient to allow full recovery.

Question 9. Two things about this balance are difficult for us. First, it is not easy to know what is our responsibility and what is God's responsibility. And secondly, it is not easy, once something is known to be God's responsibility, for us to let go of it. The "Serenity Prayer" prayer is a good restatement of the author's attitude: "God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference."

Study 4. An Inarticulate Prayer.

Romans 8:15-27.

Purpose: To realize that God prays for us when we are unable to pray for ourselves.

Question 2. We more commonly think of love, joy, peace and giftedness as signs of having faith. This text suggests that one sign of spiritual maturity is to see that things are not right in our world and to feel emotional and spiritual pain as a consequence. On a fallen planet relentless cheerfulness is not reality based. Christian maturity involves the spiritual grieving that comes as we long for God to put things right.

Question 3. Adoption provides a person with a new identity, a new name, a new family and new place to belong. However, because most victimization happens in the family, people who have been abused have learned that family is not a safe place. As a result, the invitation to be a part of God's family may not be immediately perceived as good news.

Notice that Paul is not merely longing to spend more time at church, he is longing for the resurrection (the "redemption of our bodies") which is the final step in the adoption process. Until then God's family is made up of broken and recovering people.

Question 4. Hope helps us to stay committed to the process of recovery. Hope focuses us on the fact that there is more to life than our immediate experiences. Hope is founded on the conviction that God is greater than the evil.

Notice that Paul focuses not on certainty or uncertainty about the future, but on the importance of not pretending that our hope eliminates the struggle, the groaning, the longing for God's intervention. People who have been abused know about the slick, sloganeering, alls-well-that-ends-well kind of hope that ignores their pain and struggle. That kind of "hope" is not helpful in recovery. What is helpful is the reassurance that we can be people of hope even if we are still waiting patiently with the rest of this broken and struggling planet.

Question 6. Not knowing what to say leaves us feeling stupid and incompetent. The expectation that we should be able to name our needs and thoughts and feelings is often unrealistic. Because in petitionary prayer we limit ourselves to what we can verbalize (prayer requests), we often miss the deeper concerns of our hearts.

Question 8. Our response to this text hinges on our image of God. If God is attentive because he genuinely cares for us and if when he sees our weakness, he is eager to help rather than to shame us, then God's searching of our hearts is good news. He searches and finds pain we may not yet have allowed ourselves to face and he is prepared to be helpful to us as we struggle with these wounds.

Study 5. A Prayer to God Who Shares Our Anger.

Psalm 18:2-19.

Purpose: To learn that God is on the side of people who have been abused.

Question 2. Although the author begins by affirming God's power and ability, he does not minimize or deny the emotional impact of his experiences. He describes his experience as a struggle against death. This aptly describes the painful mixture of fear and helplessness which comes from experiences of abuse.

Question 4. What God does is to 'scatter the enemy' and to 'reach down' to rescue the person being abused. God is not abusive with his anger. Some people may feel uncomfortable thinking about God's anger because they have experienced anger as abusive, unpredictable and inappropriate. Unlike the anger of an abuser, God's anger grows out of his commitment to justice.

Question 5. The text suggests that God shares in the emotions that come from abuse and that he acts on behalf of those who have been abused. People who have been abused need someone strong and trustworthy who is on their side. God is described by the author as the one whose power and anger are on the side of the person who has been abused.

Question 7. The idea that God finds pleasure in us and wants to be with us may be difficult to take in. Abusive experiences make it hard for us to enjoy, much less love, ourselves. A growing awareness of the delight God takes in us can be very helpful both in changing how we see God and in changing how we see ourselves.

Study 6. A Prayer to the Father of Compassion.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

Purpose: To see God as a God of compassion and comfort.

Question 2. The word compassion is derived from the Latin

words *pati* and *cum*, which together mean "to suffer with." A compassionate father would want to know what happened, believe what the child said, share the anger of the child, care about the child's emotional pain, want the child to experience healing from the trauma, and would want the child to have whatever resources were needed for recovery.

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human. When we look at compassion this way, it becomes clear that something more is involved than a general kindness or tenderheartedness. [Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison and Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Co., 1983)]

Question 3. This has nothing to do with being comfortable. To comfort is to strengthen, assist, support, console, give hope to, and ease grief.

Question 5. Because we tend to see God through the experiences we have had with our biological parents, people who have been abused by a parent may find it difficult to see God as Father.

Question 6. Many people who have been abused find that the possibility of helping others who have experienced similar trauma gives some redemptive meaning to their suffering. When people who have been abused comfort each other, the isolation and silence is broken, and new levels of healing are possible. This is not to say that God plans abuse so that we will become people who are capable of comforting others. But it does mean that no matter how badly battered a person has been and no matter how damaged a person feels, it is possible to participate in God's redemptive plan. It is God who comforts. It is also God who calls us to comfort others in the same way.

Question 7. Many people who have been abused are so excited about turning their trauma into ministry that they miss the mutuality which this text implies. God uses human agents to express his comfort. That means we need to be on the receiving end of comfort, not just the sending end.

Making the Most of These Studies

About This Series of Bible Studies

This series of Bible studies is rooted in four basic convictions.

First, we are in need of recovery. The word ‘recovery’ implies that something has gone wrong. Christians firmly believe this. Something has gone very wrong. Things are not as they should be. We have sinned. We have been sinned against. We are entangled, stuck, bogged down, bound and broken. We need to recover.

Second, recovery is a demanding process, and often a lengthy one. There are no quick fixes in recovery. Recovery means change. It means facing the truth about ourselves, even when that truth is painful. It means giving up our old destructive patterns, and learning new life-giving patterns. Recovery means taking responsibility for our lives rather than blaming, avoiding, minimizing or denying. It is not easy. It is sometimes painful. And it will take time.

Third, recovery is possible. No matter how hopeless it may seem, no matter how deeply we have been wounded by life or how often we have failed, recovery is possible. Our primary basis for hope in the process of recovery is that God is able to do things which we cannot do ourselves. Recovery is possible because God has committed himself to us.

Finally, these studies are rooted in the conviction that the Bible can be a significant resource for recovery. Many people who have lived through difficult life experiences have had bits of the Bible thrown at their pain as a quick fix or a simplistic solution. As a result, many people expect the Bible to be a barrier to recovery rather than a resource. These studies are based on the belief that the Bible is not a book of quick fixes and simplistic solutions. It is, on the contrary, a practical and helpful resource for recovery. We were deeply moved personally by these Biblical texts as we worked on this series. Our convictions have deepened that the God of the Bible can bring serenity to people whose lives have become unmanageable.

If you are looking for resources to help you in your recovery, we invite you to study the Bible with an open mind and heart.

May your roots sink deeply in the soil of God’s love

Dale and Juanita Ryan

Getting the Most from this Study

These Bible study guides are designed to assist you to find out for yourself what the Bible has to say about different aspects of recovery. The texts you will 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. Rather, they are designed to allow the opportunity for Biblical truths to renew your heart and mind.

We want to encourage realistic expectations of these discussion guides. First, they are not intended to be everything-the-Bible-says-about any subject. They are not intended to be a systematic presentation of Biblical theology. Second, it’s important to emphasize that these guides are not intended to provide a recovery program or to replace other important resources in recovery. If you are in a counseling relationship, we pray that these guides will enrich that relationship. If you are involved in a support group, it is our hope that these studies will enrich that resource as well. What these guides are designed to do is to help you study a series of Biblical texts which relate to the process of recovery. Our hope is that they will allow you to discover in a new way the Good News for people struggling to recover.

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 Leader’s Version also contains leader’s notes. These notes provide suggestions on how to lead a group discussion, 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. With such helps, someone with little or no experience can lead an effective discussion.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study pray that God would bring healing and recovery to you through his Word.
2. After spending time in personal reflection, 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. Share what you are learning with someone you trust. Recovery is empowered by experiences of community.

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 recovery is different, everyone's recovery 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. Realize that trust grows over time. If sharing in a group setting is risky, realize that you do not have to share more than feels safe. However, taking risks is a necessary part of recovery. 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 share what they have learned. 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. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

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 they feel 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.

About Leading a Group Study

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 of the kings, prophets and apostles in the Bible felt inadequate and afraid. And 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 and your own recovery. 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 the front of the 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 Personal Reflection 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 personal reflection questions are not designed to be used directly for group discussion. Rather, the first question in the Bible study section is intended to give group members an opportunity to share what they feel safe sharing from their time of personal reflection.

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. Each study ends with a prayer time. 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 dysfunctional patterns of not being comfortable with painful feelings.
2. Not only are you not responsible to take the pain away, one of the things people need most is an opportunity to face and to experience the pain in their life. They have usually 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 recovery 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 feel 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.

Other Bible studies in this series
are available at:

<http://www.nacr.org>

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