

Recovery from Family Dysfunctions

6 studies for groups or individuals

by

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Every Friday morning for several years I met with two friends to talk and pray. One Friday in particular stands out in my memory. I was anxious that morning about a very difficult problem. My friends sensed that I was upset and attempted to draw me out. My voice surprised me as I shared the basic facts of the situation. I sounded so calm. Yet I felt so afraid.

I wanted to talk about the turmoil I was feeling, but instead I heard myself quietly sighing and saying, "I guess we should pray about it." At that moment, I pictured myself standing on the inside of a partially open door. My friends were on the other side of the door, asking about me, when suddenly I closed the door in their faces. The sound of the door closing startled me. But my friends did not seem to notice. This choice to hide my pain must have been familiar to them. Yet I was acutely aware of my behavior. I was aware, perhaps for the first time, of my inability to talk and to feel and to trust - of my quiet choice against intimacy.

God intends for us to experience intimate relationships. He created us to live in relationship with himself and with each other. Developing intimate relationships, however, requires that we know how to talk honestly, to feel genuinely and to trust confidently.

These basic skills of intimate relationships have been modeled for us by God himself. He has spoken to us and he invites us to speak freely to him. He has expressed his feelings to us and he invites us to share our deepest feelings with him. He has trusted us and he invites us to trust him.

The family is the primary environment in which we learn to talk, to feel and to trust. Unfortunately, most families have difficulty encouraging honest talking, genuine expression of feelings and a sense of trust among family members. Dysfunctional patterns of relating learned early in life can carry over into all of our relationships. As a result we become guarded and defended. We talk little about what really matters to us. We feel little of what is stirring in us. We trust God and others far less than we wish.

God intends, however, that his family be a functional family. God wants us to learn to talk and to feel and to trust. The discussions in this guide are designed to help you examine what the Bible teaches about talking, feeling and trusting.

In preparation for each study, you will look at family patterns you experienced as a child and young adult. We want to emphasize that the purpose of looking at these patterns is not to blame your parents or your family. It is important to remember that dysfunctional families are not bad families. They are ordinary families struggling to manage in life without all of the tools needed to be fully functional. It will not help your recovery to judge, blame or condemn your family for its failings. It is necessary, however, to honestly face your heritage of dysfunction so that you can begin to take responsibility for your own growth and recovery.

Recovery from dysfunctional family patterns is not easy. It requires a transformation at the deepest levels. Remind yourself frequently that change is a process. It cannot be hurried. It will take time. Be patient with yourself. The patterns you have learned were acquired over many years. They will not change in a few days or weeks. Remember that God has promised to be actively involved in this transformation. He has said, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezek 36:26).

As you examine your relationship patterns in the light of these texts, may God grant you the courage to talk and feel and trust in new ways. May you experience the joy of relating more intimately with God and with others.

OUTLINE

- 1 Learning to Talk [Ephesians 4:25-26, 29-32]
- 2 Learning to Talk to God [Jeremiah 33:3; Psalm 116:1-5]
- 3 Learning to Express Feelings [1 Corinthians 12:14-26]
- 4 Learning to Express Feelings to God [Psalm 55:4-8; 34:18]
- 5 Learning to Trust [II Corinthians 6:11-12, 7:2-9]
- 6 Learning to Trust God [Luke 12:22-31]

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1. Learning to Talk to Others

“Your father does not have a hang over. He is staying home from work because he has the flu. It is just the flu. I don’t ever want to hear you talking about your father like that again!”

“Your brother was arrested again last night. But whatever you do, don’t tell your mother. She just can’t handle it.”

“Don’t you call me grouchy! The trouble we have around here is all because of you. So don’t tell me I have problems! You’re the problem!”

Families pretending. Families keeping secrets. Families blaming. Families using words to harm. Families using shame to silence people who speak. In such families children learn that it is not acceptable to talk about what is real.

Both silence and negative messages can be very confusing for children. It’s not easy for children to figure things out on their own. Because children in such situations do not experience love by being included in conversations or by being heard, they do not develop the skills needed to communicate with others.

More functional families, in contrast, encourage family members to talk about their experiences. Family members talk together about their successes and about their problems. Children in such families experience love by being heard and understood and by being included in important conversations.

God is a good Father. It is not his intention for his family to be dysfunctional. He invites us to learn to communicate in ways that are honest, direct and helpful.

Personal Reflection

1. Who did you talk to about your concerns and problems in your family-of-origin?

2. What response did you typically receive from your parents about your concerns?

3. What things were safe to talk about in your family?

4. What things were not safe to talk about?

5. What is it like today for you to talk honestly about your concerns with family and friends?

Bible Study

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are angry, and do not give the devil a foothold, . . . Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:25-26, 29-32)

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

2. In this text, Paul provides some basic guidelines about talking. The first guideline is to “put off falsehood and speak truthfully.” How would you paraphrase this idea?

6. Paul makes it clear that our responsibility to be truthful about our anger does not give us the freedom to harm each other with our words. What guidance does he give about this?

3. Learning to “put off falsehood” and to “speak truthfully” is a process. For people who have spent years pretending, denying and trying to “be nice” this learning may not be easy. What risks do you perceive for yourself in speaking truthfully with others?

7. Some people read the last half of this passage and feel that Paul is saying, “We should be nice; we should pretend everything is fine.” But the passage started with a clear call to honesty. How is it possible to be both honest and compassionate?

4. What gives you the courage to share honestly your concerns and struggles with another person?

8. What practical things could you do this week to take responsibility for developing healthier patterns of communication?

Prayer Time

How would you like God to be helpful to you as you seek to be both honest and constructive in your communication?

5. Many people who have learned dysfunctional patterns find that anger is one of the most difficult emotions to be honest about. Why do you think this is so?

2. Learning to Talk With God

People from dysfunctional families often find it difficult to talk to God. They may assume that God is too busy for - distracted with important matters. They may think he is not interested in individuals and their concerns. People from dysfunctional families may find it especially difficult to communicate with authority figures. And God certainly qualifies as an authority figure. Powerful people, may be expected to be rejecting and judgmental.

Neither the god-who-is-too-busy-to-listen nor the god-who-is-eager-to-reject-us is, however, the God presented in the Bible. Unfortunately the expectations learned in dysfunctional families can carry over very easily into our relationship with God and interfere with our ability to be honest with him and to talk freely with him about our concerns.

Honesty is a necessary ingredient in all intimate relationships. If we are to grow in our intimacy with God, we will need to learn to be honest with him. This will require us to challenge our distorted images of God and to grow in our understanding of him.

God invites us to talk to him. He has promised to pay attention. He does not require any physical, mental or spiritual gymnastics to get his attention. He does not insist that we have our lives "together" before we can talk to him. We can talk to him even when we are in trouble. We will always find him interested and compassionate.

Personal Reflection

1. How do you think the communication patterns in your family-of-origin have influenced your freedom to talk with God?

2. When you talk with God, what images (positive or negative) come to mind?

3. Image yourself as one of the little children whom Jesus

invited to come to him. Imagine yourself standing next to Jesus. Take a few minutes to close your eyes and experience his arm around your shoulder as you stand next to him. Share with him any of your thoughts or feelings.

What thoughts and feelings did you have during this meditation?

Bible Study

This is what the Lord says, he who made the earth, the Lord who formed it and established it - the Lord is his name: 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.' (Jeremiah 33:2-3)

*I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.*

*The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
"O Lord, save me!"*

*The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.* (Ps 116:1-5)

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

2. What did the author of this psalm experience when he called on God?

3. What images of God are presented here?

What made it difficult for you?

4. People who have learned dysfunctional patterns often think they must meet certain requirements before it is possible to call on God. These passages suggest that we can simply call on him. How might this truth about God make it easier for you to talk to him?

8. Recall a time when you did call on God and he “answered you and showed you great and mighty things.” What was this experience like for you?

5. God invites us to talk to him about our troubles. He does not ask us to ignore them or minimize them or take care of them ourselves.

How does this compare or contrast to your expectations of God?

9. What practical things could you do this week to grow in your ability to talk with God?

How does this compare or contrast to your behavior when you are experiencing trouble?

Prayer Time

What do you need to talk with God about today?

6. What are your thoughts and feelings about God’s invitation to communicate with you?

7. Think of a time when you had difficulty calling on God.

3. Learning to Express Feelings to Others

“Cheer up.” “It’s not so bad.” “It was only your feelings that were hurt.” “There’s nothing to be afraid of, what’s wrong with you?” “Stop crying, or I’ll give you something to cry about!”

In dysfunctional families the expression of feelings, especially unpleasant feelings, is not accepted. Because people do not talk honestly about their concerns and problems, feelings cannot be shared or validated. As a result, relationships become increasingly restricted by a lack of human emotion.

Learning not to feel in our families is a significant loss to us. Our emotions are a gift from God. They can enrich our lives. And they provide vital information about both the positive and the negative realities we are experiencing.

Healthier families accept a wide range of human emotions as a normal, predictable part of life. Feelings are talked about, validated and resolved. As a result, relationships are enriched and informed by emotions which range from love and joy to anger and sorrow. When someone in the family has something to celebrate, other family members celebrate. When one person is grieving, other family members share in the grief.

The repression of emotions learned in dysfunctional families is sometimes reinforced by misguided ideas about the Christian life. It is not uncommon to hear, “If I really trusted God, then I would not experience anger or depression.” The notion that mature Christians should be relentlessly cheerful and perpetually victorious finds little support in God’s Word. The Bible consistently assumes that we experience a wide range of emotions and encourages us to express our deepest feelings both to each other and to God.

Personal Reflection

1. What was the response in your family-of-origin if you expressed anger? sorrow? joy?

2. Think of a time when there was cause for celebration because something good happened to a family member. What was done or said to express joy?

3. Think of a time when there was cause for weeping because of a loss or trauma in the family. What was done or said to express sorrow?

4. What did you learn from your family about the expression of feelings?

5. How do you express your feelings today?

Bible Study

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. . . .If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, everyone of them, just as he wanted them to be.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. . . .But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (1 Corinthians 12:14-18, 20-26)

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

2. What does Paul say to the Corinthians about what it means to be a part of the family of God?

6. What kinds of behaviors constitute “suffering with” someone else?

3. What is the significance of being “indispensable” no matter what or who we are?

7. What is the potential benefit to a person when someone suffers with them?

4. What is suggested about experiencing and expressing feelings in the last sentence of this passage?

8. When you are hurting, what do you want most from a friend?

9. How can you begin to grow in your ability to express your feelings?

5. A common response to someone who is suffering is to try to “fix the pain.” Pain makes us uncomfortable. We may feel responsible to make the person feel better. We find it difficult to simply share in the emotion, to “suffer with those who suffer.” What is the result of trying to make someone who is hurting feel better?

Prayer Time

What feelings would you like to express to others and to God?

4. Learning to Express Feelings to God

“I wish I could talk to God about this. But I just can’t. I can’t get the words out. I feel so guilty because I can’t trust him with the things which are most important to me.”

Learning to express our feelings to God is not easy. Most of us learned to pray by listening to emotionally neutral prayers. The passionate, emotionally unrestrained prayers of the Bible are not the kind we grew up with. We may find, in fact, that the prayers of the Bible make us anxious. We wonder how God would respond if we told him what we really felt. We worry that he might say ‘Pull yourself together and come back when you can talk more reasonably.’

Fortunately, God is not a needy parent who can only tolerate hearing our positive feelings. He does not ask us to be cheerful when it is more appropriate to grieve. He does not insist that we calm down before he will listen. Instead, he invites us to express our feelings to him.

Learning to express our feelings to God is a vital part of growing in intimacy with him. When we can tell him of our sorrow and anger and confusion and joy, we will experience his faithful love in new ways. In his Word we find many models of godly people who openly expressed their deepest feelings to God.

Personal Reflection

1. What feelings are you aware of having today?

2. How might the rejection or affirmation of feelings in your family-of-origin have influenced your freedom to express feelings to God?

3. When you are sad or angry and you are talking to God, how do you expect him to respond?

Bible Study

*Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea;
hear me and answer me.
My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
at the voice of the enemy,
at the stares of the wicked;
for they bring down suffering upon me
and revile me in their anger.
My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death assail me.
Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me.
I said, “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest -
I would flee far away
and stay in the desert;
I would hurry to my place of shelter,
far from the tempest and storm.”
(Psalm 55:1-8)*

*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
(Psalm 34:18)*

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

2. What feelings are described in this section of Psalm 55?

3. Which feelings in this list do you identify with the most? Explain.

7. How does God's promise to be near you when you are feeling "brokenhearted and crushed in spirit" compare with what you have experienced in other relationships?

4. What concept of God would allow the writer to speak so freely to God about his feelings?

8. How does it effect you to know that God is near to you when you are in pain?

5. We often have a negative response to our "negative" feelings. What thoughts do you typically have in response to your feelings of anger, depression or fear?

Prayer Time

How would you like God to help you to grow in your ability to express your feelings to him?

6. When we experience "negative" emotions, we often feel that God is displeased or far away. Paraphrase Psalm 34:18, emphasizing what it says about God's response to our emotional pain.

5. Learning to Trust Others

“I know that I promised to be at this game and that I have broken this same promise before. But something very important came up at work. What am I suppose to do about it?!”

In dysfunctional families, children experience repeated disappointments. Adults may not be consistent or available or friendly. Adults may be verbally or physically or sexually abusive. Children learn that they cannot depend on the most important people in their lives. They learn not to trust others. They learn instead to become independent and guarded.

Healthier families teach children that it is possible to trust because parents are responsive to their needs. Parents are dependable and interested in their children’s lives. They are physically present and emotionally available on a regular basis. As a result, children experience safety and security in their relationships at home. They learn they can trust others.

We were created for intimacy with God and with each other. This intimacy is built on the ability to trust. To the degree that we have learned not to trust in our human family, we will find it difficult to trust in God’s family. We see in the text for this study that building and sustaining trust is a struggle. It requires effort, commitment and a willingness to keep trying. But it is a good struggle since it is in trusting relationships that we find comfort, love and hope.

Personal Reflection

1. What did you learn about trusting from your relationships in your family-of-origin?

2. What qualities in a person make it possible for you to trust him or her?

3. What is most difficult for you about trusting another person?

Bible Study

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us... Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn - conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever. Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it - I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while - yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. II Corinthians 6:11-12, 7:2-9

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

2. There were people in the church at Corinth who did not trust Paul. Paul had confronted the church about a difficult matter in an earlier letter and this had posed a threat to their relationship. Paul asks the Corinthians to “make room for us in your hearts.” What does this image suggest to you?

3. Paul was a charismatic leader and teacher who was able to be honest about his emotional life. How might his honesty about needing comfort and having 'fears within' have effected the Corinthians ability to trust him?

7. Paul did not find building trust to be easy. What barriers to trust do you experience ?

4. How might Paul's expression of affection for the Corinthians have contributed to the building of trust?

8. Paul built trust through honesty, affection, affirmation and commitment. Think about a specific relationship in which you have experienced trust. How have these qualities contributed in positive ways to your experience of trust in relationships?

5. Paul affirms the people at Corinth in several ways. How might these affirmations have helped to build trust?

9. Learning to trust takes courage and persistence. What practical steps could you take this week to find the courage and persistence to continue the process of building trust ?

6. How might Paul's expression of commitment to the Corinthians have contributed to the building of trust?

What would you like to trust others with today as you bring your concerns to God?

Prayer Time

6. Learning to Trust God

Bible Study

“I felt like I was hanging onto the end of a long rope. There was nothing around me or under me that I could see. But I was being asked to let go of the rope. God was saying to me, “I will catch you.” All I needed to do was trust him.”

Trust God. It seems like it should be a simple thing to do. But it is a lifelong struggle for most of us. Each day we discover new meanings to that little phrase. Each day we discover again how hard it is to do.

People from dysfunctional families have learned from experience that people are not always trustworthy. Promises are broken. Responsibilities avoided.

In many ways we transfer these experiences of broken trust into our relationship with God. Even though the Bible proclaims God’s faithfulness and even though our personal experience of God may have shown him to be faithful in the past, we still struggle to trust him.

Personal Reflection

1. How might your experiences with trust in your family-of-origin have influenced your ability to trust God?

2. The expression ‘trust God’ is sometimes used as if it were an easy thing to do. It is common, for example, to hear someone say: “Just trust God.” As a result, many people find the expression a source of discouragement and self-condemnation. How do you respond to the words “trust God”?

Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. (Luke 12:22-31)

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

2. What is the experience of worry like?

3. When Jesus says do not worry, do you hear this as good news or bad news? Explain.

4. What reasons does Jesus give for trusting God instead of worrying?

7. What experiences in the past give you reason to trust God today?

5. Which of these reasons for trusting God do you especially need to hear?

8. What practical things can you do to increase your capacity to trust God?

Prayer Time

What do you need to trust God about today?

6. What do you conclude about God from Jesus' teaching in this text?

Leader's Notes

Study 1. Learning to Talk to Others

Ephesians 4:25-26, 29-32.

Purpose: To encourage healthy communication.

Question 2. Paraphrases might include 'stop faking it, tell the truth' or 'stop pretending that everything is fine and tell me how you really are', or 'stop denying and start being honest'. People who have experienced dysfunctional family patterns may understand that we should be honest. But they may only hear the word 'should'. It may be important to acknowledge their struggle at this point. Affirm together the goal of honesty. But also acknowledge that honesty is scary, that it takes time to learn how to "put off falsehood."

Question 3. Perceived risks to "speaking the truth" come from past hurts. People may expect honesty to result in rejection, judgment, lack of confidentiality, or abandonment. Acknowledge that these perceived risks are reasonable reactions to past hurts.

Question 4. Seeing other people pursue honesty gives me the courage to take risks. Seeking to pursue this goal together as a group can also be a source of courage. Courage to be honest also grows out of experiences of being heard, affirmed and cared for.

Question 5. Honesty about anger will be particularly difficult if a person a) has been abused as a result of someone else's inappropriate behavior when angry, b) has been taught that God rejects us when we are angry, c) has a long history of 'earning' acceptance from other people by 'being nice', or d) feels like it will not be possible to control the rage once it begins to be expressed.

Notice that the text does not say "don't get angry". It assumes that anger will be a normal part of our experience and offers advice on how to respond appropriately. People in dysfunctional families learn either to "stuff" their anger or to explode in rage. A person who is skillful at denying anger may smile sweetly and say, "Oh, don't worry, it's all right." But such behavior is not truthful behavior, and it can be dangerous behavior. If consistently ignored, anger will find a home deep within us where it may fester for years, undermining our relationships and our sense of well-being.

Question 6. Exploding when we are angry also poses a significant threat to our relationships and our sense of well-being. Explosive anger rarely finds the appropriate target and can cause irreparable damage to relationships. The text assumes the existence of a third alternative. It says "be angry" but "do not sin." It says we need to be constructive rather than destructive with our anger.

Question 7. My need to be honest doesn't mean that I should ignore other people's needs. If I pay attention only to my own needs, I run the risk of being abusive to others. If I pay attention only to the other person's needs, I run the risk of self-abuse. Some balance is needed. David Augsburg put it

this way: "Caring confrontation is characterized by this constant concern for the other's self-respect as well as for asserting one's own needs for greater respect. When the other's emotional safety and security are as important to me as my own, caring will be unquestionably present" (Caring Enough to Confront, [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981], p. 58). Balance is difficult. Acknowledge it. Struggle with it!

Question 8. Some may say that any talking would be a challenge. Others may focus on the freedom to be honest or on the importance of not being abusive to others as a change in their patterns.

Study 2. Learning to Talk with God.

Jeremiah 33:3, Psalm 116:1-5.

Purpose: To encourage healthy communication with God.

Question 2. God heard him and listened attentively. He found God to be full of compassion.

Question 3. God is the gracious, righteous, compassionate Creator. He invites us to call on him. He listens attentively and responds.

Question 4. People from dysfunctional families may believe that God will listen if they pray often enough, if they pray sincerely enough, if they pray with pure enough motives, if they pray early enough in the morning and/or if they've been good enough. This text describes a God who says, "Call and I will deliver." It is pure invitation.

Question 5. Minimizing is a key survival strategy in dysfunctional families. The message is, "Since there's no way for us to deal with this, we'll have to make it seem insignificant." There are, however, ways of dealing with issues in God's family. Minimizing and ignoring painful emotional realities are not necessary for our survival.

Question 6. For some people, the fact that God invites us to talk to him without preconditions may feel really good. Others may find this scary or hard to believe. Encourage reasonable expectations. If a person has spent the last twenty years, or more, learning that people don't really listen, it will take time to learn to trust God to listen. And if a person has not had the opportunity to practice talking, it will take a while to do so freely.

Question 7. People often have trouble "calling on God" when they are suffering, in grief or in crisis. They will need other people to pray for them. Job said, "I want someone to plead with God for me as a man pleads for his friends" (Job 16:20, Good News Bible).

Question 8. Encourage people to share specific stories of answered prayers. Testimony to God's loving responsiveness will help to build each others' faith.

Question 9. Practical helps might include reading the passionate prayers of the Psalms, keeping a record of feelings experienced and using them as a guide in prayer, or journaling prayers to God.

Study 3. Learning to Express Feelings to Others

I Corinthians 12:14-26.

Purpose: To realize the value of the expression of emotions.

Question 2. Paul says that our differences are valued. We are interdependent. Each person is respected and significant. In contrast, within dysfunctional families differences are seen as a problem. In God's family differences are part of the plan. In dysfunctional families people must be independent in order to survive. In God's family we are interdependent—we need each other. In dysfunctional families people are not respected. In God's family each person is due respect because he or she is indispensable to the functioning of the family.

Question 3. Being indispensable means that people can't do without you. Things won't work as intended unless you're involved. You would be missed if you weren't here. You are not an inconvenience.

Question 4. Many people work hard to avoid having their emotions known by others. This verse states the norm for God's family. Both suffering and rejoicing are to be common knowledge, shared and experienced communally. The norm in God's family is to feel with others. We suffer when others suffer. We rejoice when others rejoice. And others suffer and rejoice with us. This is, however, much more difficult than it sounds since our instinctive response to pain is to protect ourselves.

It might be prudent to discuss the fact that sharing other people's emotions need not mean that we lose our sense of personal identity in the process. If our empathy is to be helpful to another person and not harmful to ourselves, we must not get lost in the other's experience or feelings. Even as we share their emotional pain, we need to remind ourselves that their story is not our story. Our happiness does not depend on their happiness. If we can suffer with another person while maintaining our own personal identity, we can offer them a genuine gift. They will not need to feel that they have become a burden to us because, in fact, they will not be a burden.

Question 5. The result for the person who is hurting is that they feel their pain is being minimized. They will not feel that they have been understood.

Question 6. Joe Bayly put it well: "I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly, he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved, except to wish he'd go away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go" (*The Last Thing We Talk About* [Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook, 1973] pp. 55-56).

Question 7 "Suffering with" someone means that we participate in the emotional pain of their experience. As a result,

they feel heard and understood, they know their feelings are accepted, and they realize they are not alone with their suffering.

Question 8. It is important not only that we share other people's feelings, but that we allow them to share ours. For many people this is the much more difficult thing to do. The personal risks are greater. Encourage people in your group to discuss what they need when they are hurting and to commit themselves to begin taking small risks to let others know what they are feeling and needing.

Question 9. Practical helps might include taking ten minutes at the end of the day to focus on the feelings you experienced, journaling about feelings, or taking time to talk and listen to friends of a regular basis about feelings.

Study 4. Learning to Express Feelings to God.

Psalms 55:4-8; 34:18.

Purpose: To understand God's response to emotions.

Question 2. Most of us have a very limited vocabulary for expressing our feelings. Because the expression of feelings is discouraged in dysfunctional families, we have not had an opportunity to identify and name our feelings. The Psalms are rich in the language of feelings and can be a helpful resource to us. While it may seem obvious, take the time to list the many feelings named in the text.

Question 4. The author must have trusted God to be attentive and understanding. He must have known that God would respect his emotional pain and not try to dismiss his feelings as inappropriate or unacceptable.

Question 5. Many people from dysfunctional families expect that when you express feelings you will be rejected, ignored or worse. Frequent criticisms of people who express feelings include that they are "weak," "self-pitying," "complainers," "making things seem worse than they are."

When negative feelings are consistently rejected in dysfunctional families, this rejection becomes internalized by family members. As a result, we reject our own emotions. We feel guilt and shame in response to "negative" feelings. We think "I shouldn't feel this way" or, worse, "Good Christians don't feel this way."

It is important, therefore, to emphasize the positive qualities of character associated with the expression of feelings. For example, the author of this psalm exhibits honesty, courage, self-awareness, trust and a willingness to be needy.

Question 6. One example of a paraphrase would be, "Sometimes I feel like God is far away when I'm sad, angry or afraid. But in those times, he actually is very close to me. And when I feel depressed or hopeless, he pays attention and keeps me safe."

Question 7. In addition to internalizing the rejection of emotions, we frequently project the rejection of emotions onto God. Because people we have trusted have rejected our emotions, we anticipate that God will do so as well. This text

says that God is “close” in times which are full of “negative” emotions. He does not abandon. He does not reject. He is “close”; he “saves”; he is “on our side.” This can give hope and courage in our struggle to talk and feel.

Study 5. Learning to Trust Others

Ephesians 2:17-22.

Purpose: To understand ways to build trust

Question 2. Trust involves ‘opening’ ourselves to others, breaking down the barriers between ourselves and other people. Letting someone into your heart does not mean, however, that you lose your own identity but that you share yourself with another person while maintaining your own separate sense of identity. Paul seeks the return of mutual affection, affirmation, commitment, and honesty in his relationship with the Corinthians.

Question 3. It is very difficult to build trust with someone who has it all together. We may admire or respect those who seem to have no needs, but we know somehow that there is deceit involved and so we do not trust them with ourselves. Paul let the Corinthians know that he had been hurting. And he also lets them know that when he heard of their affections for him, that it made a difference. He was emotionally impacted by them. This kind of honest exchange about real emotions is a key element in building trust.

Question 4. Paul says that he has spoken freely, opened wide his heart and not withheld his affections from the Corinthians. Intimate relationships have a strong emotional component. The free expression of emotions and affection provides the warmth and nurturing in which trust can grow.

Question 5. Paul says “I have great confidence in you,” “I take pride in you,” and “You gave me comfort.” For trust to be built we need to know that the other person respects us. Affirmations are one way to communicate this valuing. Affirmations that are dishonest erode trust. But honest affirmations can contribute to trust.

Question 6. Paul says “we would live or die with you.” This is a strong statement of commitment. Commitment is the foundation which gives stability during times of stress or conflict in a relationship. Commitment is also necessary for building trust because trust takes time. It cannot be hurried. We need to know the person will be there for us over time.

Question 7. People may have experienced dishonesty rather than honesty, coldness rather than affection, judgment rather than affirmation and rejection rather than commitment in the Christian community. Paul had the advantage of being able to say ‘we have wronged no one’ and you ‘were not harmed in any way by us’. Unfortunately many people have been wronged and harmed by others in the Christian community. Forgiveness and recovery from bitterness may, therefore, be an important part of learning to trust. It is also important to emphasize that becoming the kind of people who are capable of trust doesn’t mean we lose the capacity to distinguish between people who are trustworthy and those who are not.

The goal is not to trust indiscriminately, but to trust wisely.

Question 9. This text reminds us that relationships are full of struggle, risks and uncertainty. This text also reminds us of some of the benefits which make the struggle worthwhile. It is in the context of relationships that, like Paul, we find help when we are down. Practical steps might include making plans to ‘speak freely’ with someone, expressing affirmation or affection to someone, or reaffirming a commitment.

Study 6. Learning to Trust God.

Luke 12:22-31.

Purpose: To increase our ability to trust God.

Question 2. Worry is the anxiety that your basic needs will not be met. It comes from the experience of not having basic needs met in the past. Encourage people to talk about some of the specific things that “worry” them.

Question 3. Many people from dysfunctional homes will read “do not worry” and will immediately feel guilty and ashamed of their anxieties. They will feel less spiritual and more depressed. It is very important to help each other focus on what Jesus is really saying here. When Jesus says “don’t worry,” he is not saying “don’t pay any attention to your needs.” Nor is he saying “your needs don’t matter.” The purpose of the text is not to say “shame on you for worrying.” Instead the text assumes that worry is part of our daily experience and reminds us that God pays attention to the things that worry us. In addition, while taking seriously our worries (“God knows your need”), the text calls us to a perspective that takes us beyond ourselves into the life of God’s kingdom.

Question 4. Help the group to identify the following points: (a) there’s more to life than the things we usually worry about; (b) God feeds the birds and dresses the flowers and will also care for us; (c) we are valuable to God; (d) worrying is ineffective; (e) God knows our needs; (f) God invites us to focus on the concerns of his kingdom.

Question 6. God pays attention, he cares about our needs, he values us, he provides for us, he invites us to seek his kingdom.

Question 7. The recounting of God’s faithfulness in the past has always been an important experience for God’s people. Our collective memory of God’s gracious intervention in the past can reshape our values, our hopes and our behavior today.

Question 8. God’s kingdom is a radically new social reality. It is not just a kind of religious experience that happens to individuals. Faith is nurtured in community. We have learned distrust in dysfunctional relationships; we must learn trust in functional ones. Practical things people can do include a) acknowledging the struggle, worry and lack of trust, b) studying other texts which show God’s faithfulness, c) continuing to remember God’s personal care for them in the past d) looking for ways God is caring for them at this time.

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 from:

The National Association
for Christian Recovery
www.nacr.org

Things you can do with this Bible study guide:

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