



Soul Care for Women Leaders

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LEADER'S GUIDE - STUDY 1

From Dawn to Dusk

Discover God's rest in a busy life.

“Get involved! Stay active!” Energized by the religious, cultural, educational, and athletic opportunities available, we enthusiastically follow our interests wherever they lead us. We can handle one more meeting, and sure, we can serve on that committee, and we promise ourselves we’ll work out at the gym a few hours each week. Our carefully constructed calendar tells us it can be done, so we do it. We do it until we realize we’re no longer engaged. No longer excited. Just exhausted.

When Susan Arico stepped back from her jam-packed calendar, she compared it to a “dark, overcrowded broom closet.” Dare to open the door, she said, “and everything is apt to topple perilously down into a heap.” Each activity in her “broom closet” could be described as God-pleasing, but she realized that taken together, her activities had become God-replacing. Her dilemma is shared by many engaged, motivated, and productive Christians.

Lesson #1

Scripture:

Exodus 18:13–26; 20:8–11; Psalm 18:16–19; Proverbs 31:10–31; Matthew 11:28–30; Acts 6:1–7

Based on:

“Laying Down a Busy Life,” by Susan Arico, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Laying Down a Busy Life" from GiftedforLeadership.com (included at the end of this study).

The typical church congregation defines itself not solely as a body of Sunday-morning worshipers, but as a family of God's people whose worship extends beyond the sanctuary into fellowship halls, classrooms, homes, and the community. Members form committees charged with directing Sunday school, Bible study, youth activities, neighborhood outreach, and missions. Additional committees oversee finances, grounds maintenance, public relations, social events, and other ministries.



Though members recognize the need for and value of the work these groups perform, few are willing to come forward and serve as leaders. The reason? Most of us do not see ourselves as effective leaders. We're willing to serve our congregation in various capacities, and we even say yes if asked to join a particular committee, but we pull back when asked to lead the group. We prefer to leave the actual leadership role to someone else—someone dynamic, charismatic, full of ideas—in a word, someone who's a visionary.

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** It's commonly said: "If you want something done, ask a busy person." Why do you think this might be true?
- [Q]** We tend to admire people who successfully manage a busy schedule. Do you esteem such people more than those who can only do one thing well? Be honest.
- [Q]** Author Susan Arico compares an over-scheduled day to a dark closet filled haphazardly with items of all kinds. Do you feel this is an apt metaphor? Why or why not?
- [Q]** What would you describe as your motivation for being involved in multiple activities? What are the benefits of involvement?
- [Q]** Have you ever been—or are you now—over-scheduled? Describe your feelings. How do you know when you are doing too much?

Optional Activity

Engage participants in a round-table discussion of the pros and cons of maintaining a full schedule of activities. Elicit personal, real-life examples, probing for motivation, rewards, and sacrifices involved.



PART 2**Discover the Eternal Principles****Teaching point one: God intends for us to use our gifts.**

Our discipleship is expressed through the things we do. And according to our skills, opportunities, and interests, God has given each of us plenty to do. Using our God-given gifts, we actively minister to others by participating in the activities of our home, workplace, church, and community. We practice good stewardship of mind and body by continuing to learn, by helping and serving others, and by exercising our mind and body. We give thanks for the world around us by taking hold of opportunities to grow, to influence and lead others, and to accomplish worthwhile goals. God invites us to make a difference!

The busy calendar of a disciple making a difference is not only a 21st-century phenomenon. Read Proverbs 31:10–31 and imagine what the calendar of a “wife of noble character” might have looked like.

- [Q]** List the woman’s activities mentioned in Proverbs 31. How might these tasks be described in contemporary terms?
- [Q]** How does the description of the Proverbs 31 woman make you feel? Discuss your reactions.
- [Q]** What cultural differences between then and now would have made the Proverbs 31 woman’s activities different from yours?
- [Q]** Have you ever taken on an activity out of a sense of guilt that you “ought to be doing more”? Describe the circumstance.
- [Q]** Arico resorted to “organization strategies” to accomplish all she wanted to do. What are the strengths and weaknesses of organizational strategies and time-management theories you have tried?
- [Q]** What cultural influences work to make us equate busyness with a person’s value? Draw from what you see, read, and experience.

Teaching point two: Our activities can become our god.

By foregoing time-wasting activities and using her good organizational skills, Susan Arico was able to add more and more to her to-do list. She went through her days checking off each task as if checkmarks paved the path to godliness. She found, however, not godliness in the number of her godly activities, but frenzy—frenzy that left her wondering where God had gone in all her busyness. Had God-pleasing activity taken the place of God in her life?

In her article, Arico mentions several influences that lead to overfull to-do lists: the range of options available; a desire to feel important; greed; self-indulgence; and unwillingness to make hard choices. All these things can, task by added task, edge out our initial motivation to serve God by using our many abilities and gifts. The activities assume the place of God when our purpose veers away from God.



The temptation to take on too much has stalked the lives of God's people throughout Bible history. Moses rose to a position of power and leadership, then found himself faced with the formidable task of single-handedly maintaining order and justice among the tribes of Israel. The apostles drew many believers to the gospel, then realized the job of running a vibrant and expanding congregation was more than a one- or two-man show.

Read Exodus 18:13–26 and Acts 6:1–7.

- [Q]** In what way can a godly and God-pleasing activity become an idol? What are likely results when this happens?
- [Q]** How is this kind of idolatry injurious to our own spiritual well-being, as well as to the well-being of others?
- [Q]** Briefly describe the situation in Exodus 18. What might have deterred Moses from taking his father-in-law's advice?
- [Q]** What advantages resulted from Moses' willingness to appoint representatives?
- [Q]** Briefly describe the situation in Acts 6. What might have deterred the apostles from allowing the congregation to call deacons?
- [Q]** What advantages resulted from the early church's solution?

Teaching point three: God offers (and commands) rest.

The "overcrowded broom closet" is loaded with more than simply too many things to do.

Constant stress, lack of adequate sleep and exercise, and poor nutrition wreak havoc on the human body. When we keep going at a frantic pace, we may succeed in getting things done in the short term, but we open ourselves to a range of serious, long-term health problems. Yet some stages in life seem to come with a built-in "broom closet" filled with urgent and necessary tasks and obligations.

Our God knows the challenges we face in trying to reach a healthy balance between work and rest, and he well knows most of us err on the side of too much work rather than too much rest! He knows we'll put aside our need for rest in favor of saying yes to someone who asks our help, meeting another person's needs, or being there for someone we care about. Jesus reached out to people just like us when he said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

In Jesus' words we find not simply a suggestion to "come" when we've reached our wit's end, but his repetition of the commandment God gave his people long ago: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8). Enjoying God's rest, refreshment, and renewal is not a luxury, but a necessity—as much a part of discipleship as active service.

Read Matthew 11:28–30 and Exodus 20:8–11.

- [Q]** Arico says God wants to rescue her from an over-full life "if only I will let him." Why would you resist God's offer?



- [Q]** What kind of rest do you think Jesus is talking about in the Matthew 11 passage?
- [Q]** Is it possible for, say, a single parent with young children, who works two jobs to make ends meet, to get the kind of rest Jesus offers? Explain your answer.
- [Q]** How does knowing God's rest is commanded make a difference in your thinking and planning?
- [Q]** What are some of the physical and spiritual benefits of keeping a Sabbath day?

Optional Activity: Read Exodus 20:8–11 from several Bible translations and paraphrases. Discuss the meaning of keeping the Sabbath. Point out that Scripture forbids us to set up laws concerning what we may or may not do on the Sabbath, or to judge anyone based on his or her observance of the Sabbath (Colossians 2:16–17). However, to set aside time to read, hear, and study the Word of God in fellowship with other believers, and to encourage and enable others to do so, may honor God's commandment. Explore the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of setting aside a certain time as a sacred and sanctified time of rest. Ask for volunteers to share how they honor the Sabbath. Discuss the meaning of God-honoring rest and refreshment.

Teaching point four: You can stand in the "spacious place" God has for you.

David's delight that God brought him to a "spacious place" (Psalm 18:19) holds as true for us as it did for him. King David's to-do list included winning battles against enemies, outwitting contenders to his throne, overcoming the effects of his personal sin and guilt, and reigning over Judah and Israel. He was busy! Nonetheless, God's "spacious place" lay ready and waiting for David simply because God delighted in him—the same way God delights in you.

To find your "spacious place," daily put yourself, your activities, and the hours of your day in God's hands. When you do, you will find yourself willing to accept your God-given responsibilities (rather than self-imposed responsibilities) and make positive choices among your many options. From this "spacious place," you can begin your day with a light heart and a positive frame of mind, because you have rested in his presence, no matter what the hours bring and no matter how pressing your tasks and responsibilities. Jesus promised that if you "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness ... all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

With God your first priority, instead of your tasks, your perspective on time shifts from yourself to him in three important ways. First, you recognize God has set time with limits, and he would never expect more from you than time allows. Second, your freedom from unhealthy competition and unrealistic goals allows you to put relationships ahead of achievements; delegate tasks to others; put certain dreams and desires on hold; say no when necessary to maintain balance in your life; and wholeheartedly focus on the path God has set out for you. Third, God's forgiveness and compassion are there for you, even if your "closet" gets full to overflowing and threatens to overwhelm you again. God's arms remain open, his "spacious place" ready and waiting for you!

Read Psalm 18:16–19.

- [Q]** What does "spacious place" mean to you?



- [Q]** What stands between you and God's "spacious place"? Consider specific personal habits and circumstances, as well as cultural and social influences.
- [Q]** God desires to rescue you from destructive busyness. What aspects of your life do you think he might want you to alter or change completely so you can enjoy his "spacious place"?
- [Q]** It has been said, "If you want to know your priorities, check your calendar." What does your calendar, daily planner, or to-do list say about your priorities?
- [Q]** How might consciously and deliberately putting God at the center of your life each day change the way you approach your to-do list?

PART 3**Apply Your Findings**

A healthy balance between activity and rest contributes significantly to physical, emotional, and spiritual well being. As Christians, we have an added incentive to pursue a balanced life because we're assured God wants this for us. The giver of our work, responsibilities, and activities also shows us how to enjoy them to their fullest by leading us to his place of rest and refreshment. Let God, the giver of time, show you how to live—and enjoy—the time of your life.

Action Point:

Make a list of your God-given responsibilities and a list of your optional activities. Create a fresh daily calendar, beginning with a scheduled time for personal prayer and Bible study. Add your non-negotiable responsibilities, then prayerfully assess your optional activities. Which ones do you need to set aside so you can stand in the spacious place God has for you?

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Additional Resources



ChrisitanBibleStudies.com

- [Six Principles for Women Leaders](#)
- [Balancing Work and Family Life](#)
- [Looking for Rest](#)
- [Does Your Life Mirror Your TV?](#)
- [The Spiritual Benefits of a Good Night's Sleep](#)
- [Psalms: Managing Our Emotions](#)



[Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World](#), Joanna Weaver (Random House, 2000; ISBN 978-1578562589)



[It's Not About Me](#), Max Lucado (Thomas Nelson, 2004; ISBN 978-1591450429)



[Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight](#), Norman Wirzba (Baker, 2006; ISBN 978-1587431654)



[The Purpose Driven Life](#), Rick Warren (Zondervan, 2002; ISBN 978-0310205715)



[The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring the Sabbath](#), Mark Buchanan (Thomas Nelson, 2006; ISBN 978-0849918483)



[Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation](#), Ruth Haley Barton (InterVarsity Press, 2006; ISBN 978-0830833337)



[Simplify Your Spiritual Life: Spiritual Disciplines for the Overwhelmed](#), Donald S. Whitney (NavPress, 2003; ISBN 978-1576833452)



My Answer is No...If That's Okay with You: How Women Can Say No and (Still) Feel Good About It, Nanette Gartrell (Free Press, 2008; ISBN 978-1416546931)



www.YesYouCanOnline.info – tips and ideas to maintain work/life balance



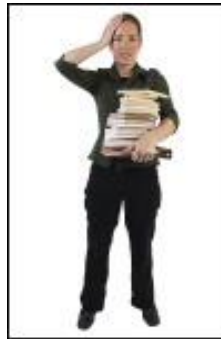
ARTICLE

Laying Down a Busy Life

By Susan Arico , for the study “From Dawn to Dusk”

The image of a dark, overcrowded broom closet comes to me periodically as a picture of my life. All manner of things are jammed in haphazardly, and everything is apt to topple perilously down into a heap when the door is opened.

I am a productive, organized, and fast-moving person; I do a lot and get a lot done in a short time. This is one of my greatest strengths—and almost surely my greatest weakness. It’s a weakness because I so quickly turn my capacity for productivity into an idol. My completed to-do list with tasks checked off feels so gratifying that it’s easy to find my worth in what I’m getting done instead of in God. The fact that many of the things I am accomplishing are worthwhile, God-honoring activities only serves to mask my sin.



I have known my tendency toward over-productivity for a long time and have tried to fight it. I’ve noticed a pattern I go through: gradually overfill my life; run around crazed; burn out; crash; acknowledge sin; repent; clear out my life somewhat; commit and try harder not to overfill. “Trying harder” often comes along with band-aid efforts like color-coding my Outlook calendar, reading up on organization strategies, or trying new time management tools.

But the problem is that the cycle repeats itself. “Trying harder” fails me. Productivity is like an addiction—I can’t just give it up. It creeps up on me and half lures, half fools me back into its clutches time and again. I’m like a junkie.

I know I’m not alone in this struggle. Most of America is on a fast track, trying to fit more and more activity into less and less time. Women—with so many life options and our born capacity to multi-task—are perhaps at the center of the frenzy. It’s a pandemic, and everyone laments how busy life is and then feeds the fire by running right along with their overfull lives anyway. We don’t know how to stop, and deep down, many of us aren’t sure we really want to anyway. Having so much to do makes us feel important.

If we’re honest, greed is a part of the problem. There are so many things we can do and want to do and are equipped to do: Work, parent, spend time with our spouse, go



out with friends, recreate, serve at church, volunteer, exercise. God endorses all these things. Surely we can find or make time for all of them? We indulge ourselves. We are unwilling to ask the hard questions about what is being scarified in our overfull lives, and unwilling to do the work of pruning out even good things to focus on the best—starting with God.

I recently ran across this sentence in a women's magazine to which I subscribe: "(She) is married with two children and works full-time ... She manages to fit part-time attendance at a university and volunteer work into her already busy schedule." Sounds so noble and impressive; what a capable woman! But I'm learning that the words "manages to fit" are the wolf in sheep's clothing. "Manages to fit" becomes the crowded, dark broom closet with objects piled up, teetering dangerously. That's me, too often – "managing to fit" all kinds of (worthy) things into my life that ultimately get me exhausted, harried, and distracted from the chief things that God is trying to do in and through me—and frequently from God himself.

The solution must be a life lived conscientiously—spending time doing the things God directs, not more, not less. As an antidote to the chock full, broom-closet life, God has come to my rescue with this verse: "He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me" (Ps. 18:19).

A God who delights in me in a bright, open space—what a concept! A "spacious place" is the very opposite of what my overfull life feels like when it reaches broom-closet stage – overwhelming and claustrophobic. And this is what God is trying to rescue me from, if only I will let him. So my effort is to make this my *one* to-do: lay down my productivity addiction and with its false sense of worth-through-accomplishments, and experience his delight simply because he loves me.

Susan Arico has run her own consulting company, Pray Creek Consulting, LLC., since 2004. She lives with her husband, her toddler son, a dog, and a small collection of various livestock at their small hobby farm in southern New Hampshire.

"Laying Down a Busy Life," by Susan Arico, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM





LEADER'S GUIDE - STUDY 2

Silence is Golden

Growing through solitude

When scholars of American religion try to describe evangelicals, they describe us as restless, eager, preachy, and committed to spreading the good news. While these are undoubtedly virtues in telling the world about Jesus, they may have a downside. This restless and talkative group seems to have trouble sitting still and keeping quiet. Since when did we become such bad listeners?

In Adie Johnson's reflection on group solitude, she reminds us of the value of silence, particularly when done as a group. Though women are so often relied upon to be communicators, to connect family and friends, this may cause women to assume that what God wants is our words. Instead, God may call us to a deeper communication—without words—to draw us closer and to fill us with his love.

Lesson #2

Scripture:

Exodus 19:16–19; Numbers 6:24–26; 1 Kings 19:9–13; Psalm 131; Job 37:14–24; Mark 4:35–41; James 1:2–27

Based on:

"Group Solitude," by Adie Johnson, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM, February 12, 2008



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Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Group Solitude" from GiftedforLeadership.com (included at the end of this study).

We live in the "Age of Communication." Cell phones, BlackBerries, and wireless internet guarantee that we never have to be alone. It is a world of constant cyber chatter. If we are not talking or texting, we squeeze away silence with our iPods. Being alone, or even just silent, seems to take more effort than it ever has before, as communication of some kind always creeps in.

But even if we steal some precious moments of solitude, many of us do not know what to do with them. We might feel uncomfortable, like during an awkward pause in a social setting. Or perhaps we are just not sure what the point of silence is. Adie Johnson summarizes the function of silence as "the spaces in between that help us understand life." We need such pauses to make our lives intelligible. A pause of silence may bring our world into focus.



Discussion starters:

- [Q]** How hard is it for you to find time for silence? When you get it, do you avoid it or embrace it?
- [Q]** In your prayer life, do you find it easier to talk or to listen?
 - How do your prayer habits either prevent you from or draw you into the practice of silence?
 - How do you think the way you relate to others, as an introvert or extrovert, affects the way you relate to God?
- [Q]** Share a time in your spiritual life that was particularly meaningful.
 - Was it a group or an individual setting? What does this say about how you best relate to God?

Optional Activity

Ask the group to stay silent for one minute. When you break the silence, ask people how they felt. Who felt like the silence could go on forever? Who felt like they were going to burst? Discuss why they felt this way.



PART 2**Discover the Eternal Principles****Teaching point one: Silence before God is prayer.**

It seems natural to connect prayer and words. Prayer is often supplication, a heart begging for comfort. Prayer is often praise, lifted up to God. In using words, we have a clear sense of what we want to accomplish.

Christian Taizé communities stop three times a day to bring all believers into prayer. Any Bible study, chatter, or work stops as the bell tolls, beckoning everyone into the church for long periods of silence interspersed with Scripture reading. They take the oldest prayer book, the Psalms, as their guide, and find three main forms of prayer. One cries out for help, another brings praise and thanksgiving to God, but a third kind of prayer does neither. Read Psalm 131.

- [Q]** How might this describe a third kind of prayer?
 - [Q]** Silence is not without activity. What must the believer do to enter this kind of prayer?
 - [Q]** What kind of posture before God is described here, and what might we gain from having no particular spoken agenda?
- Read Job 37:14–24.
- [Q]** Silence often draws us into a greater sense of our limitations. List some examples of God's abilities in this passage.
 - Do you find these abilities to be comforting, distressing, awe-inspiring, or ... ?
 - [Q]** Christians often value what they do for God. While this is good, what problems can it cause?
 - [Q]** Calming your heart before God requires the humility to leave to God what is beyond your ability. How might your church life, work life, or personal life benefit from this third kind of prayer?

Teaching point two: Silence calls a truce with our worries.

In his book *Mental Traps*, psychologist Andre Kukla describes 11 ways the mind gets itself into trouble—but still thinks that it's making progress. These "traps" are ways that we continue to spin our wheels but imagine ourselves to be moving forward. At times, we persist even after we know the way forward is a dead end; we amplify situations into things that are greater than they really are; we look backwards with a "could-would-should" revision of history. All in all, we are quite good at creating mental traffic jams that cloud our judgment and waste our time. One of God's solutions for these "mental traps" is silence, where we call a truce with our mind and give ourselves over to God.

In a well-known Gospel account, Jesus demonstrated his authority over every possible problem, even those caused by nature itself. The chaos and turbulence in our own lives can seem a lot like the storm that rocked the disciples' boat. Read Mark 4:35–41.



[Q] When struck with fear and worry, how similar is your reaction to that of the disciples? How certain do you feel that you can and will be rescued?

In verse 40, Jesus asks his disciples a simple but difficult question. Though they accompany Jesus everywhere, they seem unable to answer the most important question of all. We, too, are often so busy or caught up in circumstances that we forget to answer the most important questions in our lives. Or perhaps fearful, worried, or unsettled thoughts fill our minds to the exclusion of all else.

[Q] How mindful are you of life's most important questions in your daily life? How might silence be the pause button you need to think clearly?

Teaching point three: God speaks, even in silence.

When we go through difficult times, we often worry about God's silence. *Why can't I hear him? Why isn't he answering me?* Silence seems to be the removal of God's love and favor, and feelings of desertion soon follow. But what talk of God's silence sometimes forgets is that God's silence is not his absence. God speaks through the silence.

The story of Elijah clearly illustrates the power of God's silent speech. When Elijah fled from the death threats of Queen Jezebel, he hid in a cave, overcome by fear and sadness. But God revealed himself in the most unexpected way, and urged him to stop running and come out of hiding. God asks us to do the same. In silence, God can reveal his desires for us. As we empty ourselves, he is able to fill us and to reach into our hearts and minds with his transforming presence. And in doing so, he can free us from what we are unwilling or unable to face; he straightens what is bent and heals what is broken.

Read 1 Kings 19:9–13.

Elijah ran for his life and felt so overwhelmed that he begged to die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said, echoing a despondency that we may feel in our darkest hours (1 Kings 19:4). As Elijah struggled to go on, God tenderly revealed his presence. Compare this passage with the way God revealed his presence in Exodus 19:16-19 on that same mountain.

[Q] Is God's way of revealing himself to Elijah counterintuitive? What would you have expected from God?

Some translations render God's presence as "a still small voice," while others say "the sound of sheer silence." Read a few translations of verse 12. Consider the paradox of God's speech revealing itself as silence.

[Q] What could silence accomplish here that the earthquake or wind or splitting rock could not? What could silence teach you that any grand displays of God's glory could not?

Silence readies us for a different kind of encounter with God. As Adie Johnson wrote, "Like Elijah in I Kings 19, I discovered that God sounds much more like a soft whisper blowing through my heart than a raging wind tearing apart the mountains. It was an unimaginably rich experience for me, and it has only grown richer and deeper since then."



Teaching point four: Silence can lead us to greater love.

At times, Christians have earned the reputation of being the Morality Police, ever vigilant about behavior and living according to the law. A well-worn joke from the movie *Saved* depicts Hilary, a young Christian woman, failing to convert her friend Mary. Frustrated by Mary's retort that she doesn't know "the first thing about love," Hilary throws her Bible at Mary yelling, "I am FILLED with Christ's love!" Clearly, observance without inner transformation is not the Christian message. But at times, it can be easier to rely on a list of dos and don'ts than to allow Christ's love to transform us from the inside out. The practice of silence allows us to welcome hard truths into a quieted soul. In doing so, silence becomes the steady path to putting Christ's commandments into practice.

Read James 1:2–27.

[Q] What does James include when he implores us to be "doers of the word" (v. 22)?

[Q] Much of what James asks us to do seems impossible. If you were asked to live this out perfectly, what part would be the hardest for you to do?

Much of what God calls us to do cannot be simply willed into action, as if the Christian with the most grit and determination wins the game of perfection. Instead, God's high standards rely on his transforming presence; any good thing we live, breath, think, or feel comes directly from God.

[Q] Share a time in which the calm after a period of turbulence brought greater clarity to a situation. How might we use silence to put aside our pride and distractions and help us to give more of ourselves?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Nancy was feeling talked to death. As someone who led worship weekly, faithfully attended Bible study, and sought out Christian community, she felt hungry to know God more. And at the same time, she could barely bring herself to do it anymore. One more bit of instruction, and she felt she would explode. It was her discovery of Christian practices of group silence and Scripture reading that began to give her the energizing spirituality she had been looking for. She began to attend a Bible study focused on "Centering Prayer," a style of responding to Scripture that followed a pattern of spoken word and silence. "We would sit together," she described, "and hold ourselves in an attitude of listening, hearts open to God." Often reading from the Gospel accounts, the group alternated between periods of sharing and silence. It would conclude with a time of applying what they had learned to their daily lives. For Nancy, it was the silence that allowed Scripture to be real, like spaces between words. "Silence is the vehicle for the settling of the body and the mind," she concluded. "It allows me to be rid of distractions and focus on how God is speaking to me through his Word."

Allow God's silence to be a prayer, an end to the worry, and a space for instruction. It may be tempting to add the practice of silence as another "to-do," another bit of instruction on a long list of goals. This misses the point of practicing silence. Silence allows you to be at rest, remembering John 15:5: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in



him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." Apart from God, we are nothing!

Optional Activity

Invite participants to pray the words of Numbers 6:24–26. This is a blessing God gave to the Israelites as a reminder of God's love and intentions towards them. Have them pray it a few times aloud and then move into silence. Give them about five minutes of silence before drawing them back into another repetition of the prayer. Ask them to consider: How did you feel? Was it hard to get past yourself? What did you notice? Were you distracted? Encourage them to not be judgmental about their ability to be attentive, but to allow themselves to be human. The focus here is the presence of God, and learning to enjoy being blessed by it.

Action Point: Consider the way that you value yourself as a Christian. Do you value what you do? Who you are in Christ? Just being near God? Ask God to reveal the joy of just being in his presence. Consider asking a friend or a group to be in silent prayer with you. If that intimidates you, begin with just 15 minutes on your own. Listen to your heart. Pay attention and let your heart speak and listen. Allow action to take a back seat while you practice learning to be silent.

—Catherine Bowler is a Ph.D. student in American Religion at Duke University.

Additional Resources



ChristianBibleStudies.com

-[Six Principles for Women Leaders](#)

-[The Elijah Chronicles](#)



[Contemplative Prayer](#), Thomas Merton (Image, 1971; ISBN 0385092199)



[Centering Prayer: Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form](#), Basil Pennington (Random House, 2001; ISBN 0385181795)



[Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?](#), Philip Yancey, (Zondervan, 2006; ISBN 0310271053)



[Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home](#), Richard J. Foster (HarperOne, 1992; ISBN 0060628464)



[Keeping Silence: Christian Practices for Entering Stillness](#), C. W. McPherson, (Morehouse Publishing, 2002; ISBN 081921910X)



ARTICLE

Group Solitude

By Adie Johnson , for the study “Silence is Golden”

Macrina Weidekehr, in her book *The Song of the Seed*, tells of when she was young how she used to enjoy sending coded messages to her friends by typing letters without using the space bar. Without the spaces the words were hard to decipher. The spaces were needed to make sense of the message. She makes the comparison that the same is true in our lives, “It’s the spaces in between that help us understand life.”



I have found that one of the most powerful tools God has used to sculpt me in my spiritual life has been solitude, extended times set aside to be just with God. It was nearly 15 years ago that an older woman at the church I attended invited me to join her and others going to a park to spend a half day in prayer. I remember thinking I was pretty sure I couldn’t pray for that long, but still, something about it drew me. Perhaps it was the compelling, gentle spirit of the woman who invited me.

That clear, fall morning beside the Chesapeake Bay would change the direction of my journey with Jesus irrevocably. With very simple instructions my friend sent us off with Bible, journal and what felt like all the time in the world. Once I figured out that I didn’t need to speak to God nonstop for the next three hours, I settled into a listening mode that was new and surprisingly comfortable. Unbeknownst to me, God began that day to answer a prayer I had uttered to him a few months earlier: “Lord, help me to hear and recognize your voice. I just want to know it’s you.”

In those three hours, God, in his lovingly tender way, began to teach me just that—how to listen to him. Like Elijah in I Kings 19, I discovered that God sounds much more like a soft whisper blowing through my heart than a raging wind tearing apart the mountains. It was an unimaginably rich experience for me, and it has only grown richer and deeper since then.

In the last few years, I have begun to do my own invitations to others to solitude. Of the dozens of people who have joined me for intentional solitude, for nearly all it was their first time. Each one came a little nervous, hesitant, not sure what to expect.



Yet without exception, everyone proclaimed afterward—usually with tears in their eyes—that they had no idea how wonderful a time like this could be. They overflowed with gratitude that God would be present with them in such a palpable, intimate way. I know what they mean. What an unfathomable gift to be loved by the living God.

Some people think solitude is only for introverts or the “calm of spirit.” Not true. Just because you’re going off to be alone, and just because you are choosing to not talk to other people for a period of time, does not mean you can’t be moving, active, or expressive. Hike. Snowshoe. Journal. Paint. Draw. Read. Do what you enjoy. It’s important to use some of your time to be still, being intentionally open to God and to listen for what dreams he might desire to share with you, but that doesn’t have to happen sitting down with your eyes closed.

Another misperception of many people is that silence and solitude are for the “super-spiritual” and that they’re just too new at the faith journey to even attempt such an endeavor. In my experience God is just as eager and able to speak to beginners or even the “not yet convinced” as he is to long time followers of Jesus.

Group solitude may sound like an oxymoron, but like most new experiences in life, we humans prefer to try things with a friend. When I take a group on solitude, we carpool up to a retreat center together, chatting and enjoying conversation all the way there. Once we get there we split up to our various rooms alone and respect silence until we meet up together for lunch. After lunch we decide who wants to take a hike together or some other activity and who wants more time alone. No judgment is placed on either decision. We simply follow our hearts and wish each other well. Committing to dates and traveling together has been a great way to help each other make this spiritual discipline a priority.

Adie Johnson is a spiritual director and serves on the staff of a small church in Colorado as Pastor of Spiritual Formation. Adie is currently working on her Master’s degree at Denver Seminary. She is married and has three children and one daughter-in-law.

“Group Solitude,” by Adie Johnson, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM, February 12, 2008





LEADER'S GUIDE - STUDY 3

Your Just Deserts

Learning to lead in a culture of entitlement

Writer Tracey Bianchi observes, “Ours is a culture that believes if you work hard you will be rewarded. We participate in a system built upon incentives, praises, and bonuses.” As a result, it’s easy for us to develop a sense of entitlement that we carry into our spiritual lives. We operate under the unspoken assumption that our hard work for God’s kingdom will always lead to spiritual and ministry success.

How do we keep our attitude of entitlement from damaging our relationship with God and our commitment to ministry? And how do we cope—and lead—when the rewards we feel we deserve are few or nonexistent?

Lesson #3

Scripture:

Judges 11:29–40; Matthew 20:1–16; 1 Corinthians 3:5–11; Hebrews 11:35–40

Based on:

“What We Deserve,” by Tracey Bianchi, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM, February 5, 2008



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PART 1**Identify the Current Issue**

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "What We Deserve" from GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM (included at the end of this study).

We live in a culture that values hard work, and the success that comes with it. In our working lives, it's often easy to measure hard work through outcomes like deadlines met, sales goals achieved, projects completed, and bonuses or promotions earned. In our home lives, we have a sense of whether or not we are achieving the goals we've set for caring for our families and friends or for maintaining our living spaces. Although they are not always as easy to measure, we can often see the rewards of faithfulness in our commitments to our families or communities.



Those of us in ministry often have a deep sense of calling and mission that drives our efforts. Ministering to others can give us a sense of success, healing, happiness, and fulfillment. We relish the joy of seeing souls saved and lives changed. We feel humbled and honored by the opportunity to partner with God in his redemptive work.

But what do we do when we don't seem to have the rewards we feel we've earned? How do we prevent a sense of entitlement from infiltrating our ministry mindset? What sustains us when we don't see the rewards of ministry or faithful Christian living we feel we deserve?

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** How do your attitudes about work and success affect the way you view your Christian service, ministry efforts, or spiritual life?
- [Q]** Do you ever feel like you deserve a reward because of your efforts for God? If so, what kind of reward?
- [Q]** What kinds of frustration have you experienced when your hard work and ministry efforts don't seem to "pay off" the way you'd hoped?
- [Q]** In your opinion, what ideas lead to the belief that faithfulness to God results in rewards like success, healing, or happiness? What elements of those ideas are rooted in the truths of Scripture? What elements are rooted in our own ideas about success?
- [Q]** In what ways do you believe God is telling you "no" right now?



PART 2**Discover the Eternal Principles****Teaching point one: God uses our service, yet he is ultimately responsible for its results.**

When we approach ministry with a hard-driving, results-oriented mentality—or even with the God-given zeal that inspires and sustains us—it can be easy to act as if the success of God's work depends totally on us. Our faithfulness and commitment can get mixed up with other qualities that can cause us to lose sight of our role in partnership with God.

Although the passage below is about Paul's efforts to resolve a division between believers who were loyal to different leaders, it also offers important insights about God's role in helping people grow in faith.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5–11.

- [Q]** How does Paul seem to balance the ideas of serving faithfully while depending on God for results?
- [Q]** Verse 8 says that “each will be rewarded according to his own labor.” What does this mean to you? Is this idea a source of reassurance? Frustration? Clarity? Confusion? Liberation? Why, and in what ways?
- [Q]** Reflect on a time you experienced a reward or observed a result of your work for God's kingdom. What form did it take? What kinds of results tend to be most encouraging to you?
- [Q]** According to the passage, what does it mean to be “a fellow worker with God”? How have you experienced this principle in your ministry?
- [Q]** What is the significance of Paul's statement that he and Apollos are only servants? How can this statement inform your perspective about ministry and leadership?

Teaching point two: God's economy operates differently than our human economies.

Although it can be difficult to understand our complex job markets and economic systems, some of their principles are familiar to just about everyone in the labor market. For example, we spend thousands of hours and millions of dollars gaining credentials to meet a standard requirement for a job—then even more for knowledge and experiences to set us apart from the crowd. We negotiate the best combination of salary, benefits, and perks.

The bottom line is, we're expecting a predictable result: We're willing to work hard, as long as we're paid well and experience fulfillment. And we expect to be ahead of those who haven't worked as long, as hard, or as smart.

So it can be confusing—and irritating—when things don't go as planned, especially when it seems like someone else is receiving the benefits we've earned through hard work.

Read Matthew 20:1–16.



- [Q]** What do you understand to be the point of Jesus' parable?
- [Q]** From your perspective, what is the significance of the fact that the landowner went out to hire workers?
- [Q]** How do you think the different groups of workers each responded to the pay they received at the end of the day?
- [Q]** What do you find comforting or reassuring about this parable?
 - On the other hand, what is troubling or disturbing to you?
- [Q]** What comparisons do you see between the actions of the landowner and the principles of God's economy?
 - In what ways does the analogy break down?
- [Q]** In verse 12, some workers protested to the landowner that the later workers received the same pay as "us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day." Have you ever observed the success in ministry or leadership of someone who didn't seem to be working as faithfully as you have, or who hadn't faced as many difficulties as you had? How did you respond?

Optional Activity: *Brainstorm and write a detailed job description for the open position of a worker in God's kingdom. Include categories such as description, scope and responsibilities, necessary skills, training, performance standards, and benefits. Allow your honest sharing to shape the job description and to generate more discussion if desired.*

Teaching point three: Faithfulness to God does not always result in the earthly rewards we feel we deserve.

In the article, Bianchi shares an anecdote about her four-year-old, who occasionally justifies his requests by reminding her that "he has been a good boy." Even though few adults would express themselves this way, it's common for us to feel that we are entitled to certain rewards because of our service to God—or even that God should allow us to escape difficulties or pain because we belong to him.

The realization that following God doesn't guarantee we won't have trouble can be a real shock, especially when we live in a culture that values contracts and guarantees. But this often-stunning realization can also be the beginning of real, growing faith, even when we don't see all of God's promises coming to fruition in our lives.

Read Hebrews 11:35–40.

- [Q]** How do you respond to this passage? As you examine your initial response, how do your expectations of the Christian life compare to this description?
- [Q]** How would you explain this Scripture passage to an unbelieving friend?
- [Q]** Bianchi uses the example of an unemployed, unmarried friend who longs for a ministry career and a husband. What desires of yours are not fulfilled?



- [Q] Have you ever felt that you deserve something from God (a spouse, financial stability, resolution for difficulties, a more successful ministry, etc.) because of your efforts to serve him?
- [Q] What practical advice would you give someone whose desires are good and godly, yet remain unfulfilled?
- [Q] How can your responses to unfulfilled desires lead you toward sin?
 - How can they lead you toward godliness?
- [Q] In what ways can you demonstrate the truths of this passage as you minister to others?

Teaching point four: Support from the community can help us when we are faithful but face disappointing results.

Have you ever felt like following God made your life more difficult rather than less? Or wondered if you deserved an easier journey? Bianchi writes, “We would be naïve to miss the reality that our obsession with reward transfers into our spiritual lives.” But how can we cope when our faithfulness to God seems to be rewarded with difficulties?

One possible answer lies in the gift of community. An Old Testament passage that tells the story of Jephthah’s daughter provides a powerful example of the comfort we can offer one another when our faithfulness increases our troubles.

Read Judges 11:29–40.¹

- [Q] How do you respond to this story? What thoughts come to your mind as you read the story of Jephthah’s daughter?
- [Q] In your opinion, what is the “takeaway” or point to be gained from this incident?
Leader’s Note: *You may want to look up what some commentaries say about this incident since it is hotly debated among experts.*
- [Q] In this passage, the faithfulness of Jephthah’s daughter resulted in incredible grief and pain. Have you ever been wounded by someone else’s decisions in your life or ministry?
- [Q] Jephthah’s daughter and her friends retreated to the hills to weep together. How would you imagine Jephthah’s community offered comfort or support?
- [Q] Have you wept with a faithful friend recently? Been wept with? If so, how did this communal expression of grief affect the ways you thought about and approached your hurt?

¹ What’s behind this bizarre deal with God? The *Quest Study Bible* says, “Could God be honored by a sinful act (human sacrifice), if it was to fulfill a vow? No. Fulfilling a vow was a high priority in ancient times (Lev. 5:4; Deut. 23:21–23; Joshua 9:19; Eccl. 5:1–5), and Jephthah apparently didn’t want to be humiliated by reversing his promise. But God outlawed human sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:1–5). God disapproves of sin, even when committed to fulfill a vow.”



[Q] Do you have friends or supporters who would be willing to weep with you during difficult ministry situations or leadership challenges?

PART 3**Apply Your Findings**

In a culture where hard work and measurable rewards are valued, it can be difficult to reorient our thinking around the kingdom values we are to develop as servants of Jesus and workers in God's economy. Yet Scripture offers a sobering corrective to our entitlement thinking, challenging our quid-pro-quo approach to Christian service.

Recognizing God's role in bringing about spiritual growth, reminding ourselves of the upside-down goodness of God's economy, understanding the inevitability of disappointments, and engaging the support of trusted friends can help us move toward living faithfully without a sense of entitlement—and modeling that faithfulness before those we serve.

Action Points:

- Take a moment to reflect on ways you've experienced God's undeserved favor. Pray that God will make you aware of grace in your everyday life. Consider jotting down some of the things you discover.
- Consider several holy, healthy ways God has provided to meet your unfulfilled needs or desires. For example, if you find yourself needing solitude, think of ways to set aside a small amount of personal time each day, or consider going on a spiritual retreat.
- If you are facing temptation to meet your needs in sinful or unhealthy ways, consider asking a friend or mentor to provide spiritual accountability for you.
- If you have not yet found a supportive group of friends who can encourage you during times of personal or ministry-related disappointment, brainstorm two or three ways you can attempt to connect with people who can relate to your challenges. If you do have a supportive community, think of a small way to provide encouragement to a couple of people this month.

LaTonya Taylor is an editor with Urban Ministries, Incorporated.



Additional Resources



ChrisitanBibleStudies.com

- [Six Principles for Women Leaders](#)
- [Balancing Work and Family Life](#)
- [Looking for Rest](#)
- [Does Your Life Mirror Your TV?](#)
- [The Spiritual Benefits of a Good Night's Sleep](#)
- [Psalms: Managing Our Emotions](#)



[*Anonymous: The Unrecognized Riches in Uncelebrated Seasons of Your Life*](#), Alicia Britt Chole (Thomas Nelson, 2006; ISBN 9781591454212)



[*Waking Up from the Dream of a Lifetime: Real Life Stuff for Women on Disappointment*](#), Navigators (NavPress, 2005; ISBN 978-1576838624)



[*Secret Longings of the Heart: Overcoming Deep Disappointment and Unfulfilled Expectations*](#), Carol Kent (NavPress, 2003; ISBN 978-1576833605)



[*Traveling Together: Thoughts on Women, Friendship and the Journey of Faith*](#), Karla Worley (New Hope Publishers, 2003; ISBN 978-1563097218)





ARTICLE

What We Deserve

By Tracey Bianchi, for the study "Your Just Deserts"

As a parent, it seems I spend the vast majority of my day telling my children "no." After consistently receiving this response, they mope and moan until eventually my four-year-old reminds me that he deserves certain perks because he "has been a good boy." As a preschooler he already has a sense of entitlement that will carry over into adulthood, as did most of us.

Blame it on our parents, history, or that good old Protestant Work Ethic we inherited, but ours is a culture that believes if you work hard you will be rewarded. We participate in a system built upon incentives, praises, and bonuses. According to the UN International Labor Organization, on average Americans work 1,978 hours per year. This is 100 hours more than our Canadian and Japanese counterparts, 250 more than most Brazilians, and 500 more than Germans. Americans average two weeks of vacation per year compared with Europeans who receive four to six. At the end of this extravagant workload is the expectation that our efforts will pay off; we would be naïve to miss the reality that our obsession with reward transfers into our spiritual lives.

So how do we lead when despite our best efforts God says "no" to the reward?

The author of Hebrews reminds us of God's steadfast promises when he preached to a group of recent converts. Despite their best efforts, they found themselves at the mercy of Nero's persecutions. The author points them to Abraham (6:13-14) and God's promises to him, followed by a reminder that God is never changing and always faithful (6:17).

With sheer joy we often cling to words like these to remind us that God will come through for us during difficult times. But what happens when God's promises mean that for now, we will not achieve success? When with all of our planning a new ministry still crashes? When the best resume, preparation, and prayer yields unemployment? Or when the most prayerful among us end up, at best, confused and disheartened? We find ourselves groaning, "God, I've done everything you asked so why won't you deliver success, healing, happiness, etc.?"

I have a faithful and brilliant friend who is unemployed and unmarried. Her deepest desires include a ministry career and a partner. I once noted her efforts and



unparalleled skills, sighed, and said, “You deserve better than this.” To which she wisely replied, “No Tracey, no one really deserves anything.”

Leadership in a culture of entitlement requires us to rise above our expectations and point to the larger reality of God’s promises. Even with all our plans and preparation, we do not deserve a single blessing.

Undoubtedly the audience in Hebrews wanted something better. Most had converted to Christianity from Judaism, and with that conversion were messianic promises that did not find fulfillment in their former faith. They hoped for a better life than they had but many received worse. And in it all they were urged to hang on because ultimately God delivers redemption. These promises did not hinge on the efforts of the people; nowhere does the author say that if they just worked hard enough, the rewards would be rich. Those of us who have been in faith circles long enough know this reality, but the expectation for God to deliver based on our efforts can still infect even the best parts of our leadership.

So as we sweat and strive we must be aware of the underlying mantra that says with great effort comes great success. The author of Hebrews notes that God’s promises are unchanging, meaning his goals will be achieved, sometimes despite our best efforts. And as the author also reminds us, we have a high priest who intercedes on our behalf, regardless of our striving.

May we lead with the peace that comes from knowing that no amount of effort will make God act on our behalf, but rather that our hope can simply rest in him. It is from this truth we can find the strength to lead with grace and peace.

Tracey Bianchi is the former Director of Young Adults and Families at Christ Church of Oak Brook in Illinois. She currently works at home with her three preschool aged children where she writes and speaks nationally for organizations such as MOPS International and locally for women’s retreats and events in the Midwest.

“What We Deserve,” by Tracey Bianchi, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM, February 5, 2008





LEADER'S GUIDE - STUDY 4

A Crisis of Faith

God's faithfulness to us is not dependent upon our level of faith in him.

Enduring a crisis of faith is difficult, but it is doubly difficult for those in spiritual leadership. Not only must we face the bewildering challenges of our own relationship with God, but at the same time we must be mindful of those we serve. In her article "A Crisis of Faith," author Sherryl Stone writes, "For years we have taught others that God is good, loving, and faithful. Now we wonder if it is really true. Besides our inner struggle we realize there are people who look to us as an example during these hardships."

In this study, we will look at the lives of several biblical characters who faced their own crises of faith. We will see that a crisis of faith is a normal part of the spiritual maturing process, and that we're not alone in our desert experience. We will also examine some of the possible reasons that we go through faith crises, and we will remind ourselves that though we may falter in our faith, our God remains faithful to us.

Lesson #4

Scripture:

Job 13:12-15; 29:1-6; 40:1-7; 42:1-16; Psalm 22:1-8

Based on:

"A Crisis of Faith," by Sherryl Stone, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "A Crisis of Faith" (included at the end of this study)

In her article "A Crisis of Faith," Sherryl Stone asks, "How do we respond when we serve in a spiritual leadership position and face a crisis of faith? During these trials of seemingly unanswered prayer and unrelenting circumstances, we are shaken to the core. This can become so severe that we wonder if God has betrayed us. We reason that we are doing our best to fulfill our commitment to Christ, but it doesn't seem that he is pulling for us, but instead against us."



When we are going through a crisis of faith, trite answers and theological platitudes aren't enough. As women in leadership, we have often counseled others as they endured a crisis of faith—but now our own words come back to taunt us. It seems so easy to dispense godly wisdom to others, but when our faith is at an all-time low, we can't seem to make it all fit together in our own lives. It's as if all that we have believed in so whole-heartedly no longer "works."

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** How would you define a "crisis of faith"?
- [Q]** Have you ever had a crisis of faith? If so, what were some of your thoughts and feelings as you went through this experience?
- [Q]** "Is God really who he says he is? Can God do what he says he can do?" In what way can you relate to these questions? If not these, what questions have you asked during a crisis of faith?
- [Q]** As a spiritual leader, do you feel that your crisis of faith differs from that of someone who is not in a position of leadership? Why or why not?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: A "crisis of faith" is a normal part of a mature Christian life.

"I became fed up and very angry when I faced my own crisis of faith," Stone writes. "A profound sense of abandonment settled over me. My prayers seemed distant and hollow. I didn't know what to do or how to respond."

The desert. The word alone conjures up images of aimless wandering, unmitigated thirst, extreme temperatures, and unending barrenness. Enduring a crisis of faith is like entering a spiritual desert. But we are in good company. Richard Foster says, "Times of seeming desertion



and absence and abandonment appear to be universal among those who have walked this path of faith before us ... The old writers spoke of this reality as *Deus Absconditus*—the God who is hidden ... It is also true that some of the deepest experiences of alienation and separation from God have come to those who have traveled far into the interior realms of faith.”²

It's a relief to realize that this desert of the soul is a common experience. It doesn't happen because we have sinned, or missed God's will, or are suffering his judgment, or even because we are weak in our faith. God longs to work deep within us, and often the desert is just the place for this to occur. In the desert place, all the pat answers, theological platitudes, and self-serving motives are dropped as we desperately seek God's face. It is then we realize that he is sovereign and we can't control him. He is not at our beck and call—we are at his! And so, like Lucy in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we find ourselves asking about God, “Is he ... safe?” And the answer is “Safe? Of course he isn't safe ... but ... he's GOOD ... He's the King.”

Read Psalm 22:1–8.

Leader's Note: *The NIV Study Bible notes say that Psalm 22 is the “anguished prayer of David as a godly sufferer victimized by ... enemies ... from whom the Lord has not (yet) delivered him ... No other psalm fitted quite so aptly the circumstances of Jesus at his crucifixion ... The Gospel writers saw in the passion of Jesus the fulfillment of this cry of the righteous sufferer.”*

- [Q]** After reading this passage, what similarities can you find between the psalmist David's situation and your own? What do you think was David's purpose for this prayer?
- [Q]** Look at verses 3–5. Why did David say these things to God? What's the point of praying such things?
- [Q]** As spiritual leaders, we know that others are watching how we deal with our circumstances. Look at verses 6–8. What did David encounter from the people surrounding him?
 - If you have ever experienced such abuse, what were your thoughts or feelings at that time? What did you expect God to do during this experience? Did he do it?

Teaching point two: God can use a faith crisis to develop a deeper relationship with us.

“My faith and my ministry were at a crossroads. I thought through my options. I could abandon my own faith, become a hypocrite, or work through this with the Lord. Option one would destroy my family. Option two went against my nature. I chose to pursue option three,” Stone writes.

When we are experiencing a crisis of faith, it is often difficult to keep issues in perspective. We can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, so we conclude that there must not be any light—and that we're stuck in the dark tunnel forever. We plod along, choosing day by day to follow the God we thought we knew. Yet perhaps without realizing it, we are gaining ground. We are

² *Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, pages 17, 19.



slowly coming to realize that the God we thought we had contained in our experience, our theology, and our thoughts is free to do what he will. If he chooses to hide his face from us, it is his choice. And if we say that we belong to God and want to know him, then we must accept that even this mysterious, painful experience will reveal his nature to us. It is, as one author said, an “unsuspected grace.”³

Read Job 29:1–6.

[Q] Stone writes, “As long as I could remember, my relationship with the Lord meant everything to me. I couldn’t bear to lose it.” How does this statement correlate with Job 29:2? Talk about a time in your life when you felt this way.

[Q] In what terms does Job describe his crisis of faith? What does he mean by this?

- If you could use a word picture to describe one of your crises of faith, what would you use?

Leader’s Note: Job uses the words “God watched over me; his lamp shone upon my head; by his light I walked through darkness, the Almighty was still with me”, etc., to describe a longing for times past when he was aware of God’s protection, presence, guidance, and provision. Our desert experiences could be described using such words as barrenness; a long journey; a land without water, etc.

[Q] How could a crisis of faith push us into a deeper relationship with God?

- How could a crisis of faith push us away from God?
- What or who determines if we will run toward God or away from him? Explain.

Teaching point three: Trust and faith work together.

Stone writes, “The more I read the Bible, the more I was confronted with my own pride. I was demanding that God answer my prayers in ways that I deemed best based on my limited understanding ... One morning I sensed the Holy Spirit whisper to my heart, ‘I am God. Trust Me.’ I finally yielded my painful circumstance and my life anew to God’s plan and his glory.”

Trust and faith are two different things. The very term “crisis of faith” indicates that we are having difficulty with faith. Faith cannot be conjured up by sheer will, no matter how hard we try. On the other hand, trust is resting in what we know about the character of God. Renewed faith will come as we rest and trust, reminding ourselves that even as we question what is going on in our circumstances, God is still who he says he is. He still loves us. He has a plan.

Job went through the ultimate faith crisis. Yet, in the midst of it, he was unwilling to give up the fight for his relationship with God, though he was battered and bewildered. Read Job’s response to his friend’s poor advice in Job 13:12–15.

[Q] How does this passage show Job’s struggle with God?

[Q] Why do you think Job continued to hope in God, even though his circumstances were wretched?

³ Prayer, *Finding the Heart’s True Home*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, page 20.



Read Job 40:1–7 and 42:1–16.

- [Q]** When God finally broke his silence, what was Job's response? What do you think he learned during his desert experience?
- [Q]** From reading these two passages, what do you think was God's "answer" to Job's crisis-of-faith questioning?

Stone says, "Life can be intensely difficult. At times trials can seem unbearable. I still live with the same circumstances that tested my faith many years ago. Yet God continues to show himself faithful ..."

- [Q]** Compare and contrast Stone's experience with that of Job. What are the common threads in both of their lives? What can we learn from their experiences?
- [Q]** Can you think of any other biblical characters who endured a crisis of faith? What could we learn from them?

When we are going through a crisis of faith, God's Word is our anchor. Because we believe him and his Word, we can trust.

- [Q]** What are some specific ways God's Word can strengthen us as we trek through our own personal desert?

Leader's Note: Possible answers to this question could be reading, memorizing, meditating, speaking it aloud, singing it, etc.

Optional Activity:

Using Psalm 22 or Job 29:1–6 as a model, invite group members to write their own prayer to God. Encourage members to use word pictures and terms that powerfully convey their heart's cry to God in the midst of a desert experience. Allow several minutes of silence while members complete their "psalm." Ask for volunteers who would be willing to share what they wrote. If anyone volunteers to share, have them read their prayer and then invite thoughtful comments from others.

If no one volunteers to share, that's okay. Assure the group that God hears every cry of our heart, even when we can't sense his presence. Encourage members to write out their prayers to God as a tool to help them through crises of faith.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Relationship with God is an adventure. It would be easier, perhaps, if we could anticipate predictable timetables of suffering and joy, trials and blessings. In reality, the only thing predictable about these seasons is that they will come—and they will go.

God is not absent from us in our time of faith crisis. We may not be able to discern his presence or sense his guiding hand, but he is there. In the meantime, we must not give up the search. We must keep trusting that the God we thought we knew is *more* than we knew. We can learn to embrace the desert season, understanding that God's ultimate purpose is for our good.



The crucible of God's silence prepares us for his plans. Think of Moses, tending flocks in the desert, waiting for God to speak. Think of Abram and Sarai, waiting through God's silence until they received their promise. Think of Saul, waiting in blindness (literally) for three days until God sent him a message. And again, think of Job, who, when he finished his trek in the "desert," said to God, "I admit I once lived by rumors of you; now I have it all firsthand—from my own eyes and ears!" (Job 42:5, MSG). If we will let him, God will reveal himself to us in a new and deeper way—in his time.

Action Point: Stone concludes her article with the three things she learned from her crisis of faith:

- My life is not my own
- There is a plan beyond what I can see
- My faith means more to God than I can imagine

[Q] Consider your own situation. Name some specific things you are currently learning. How could these things be useful to you in your own Christian walk? How can these things be of value to those you minister to?

[Q] Thinking of the biblical characters studied in this lesson, which character most resembled or expressed your situation? What did you learn from this comparison? What can you draw from this person's circumstances that you could apply to your own life today?

[Q] If you were to write an article or speak to a group of women about a crisis of faith experience, what specific points would you share with them to encourage them in their journey?

Amy Rognlie is a freelance writer in Littleton, Colorado. She especially enjoys writing about God's Word.



Additional Resources



ChrisitanBibleStudies.com

- [Six Principles for Women Leaders](#)
- [Balancing Work and Family Life](#)
- [Looking for Rest](#)
- [Does Your Life Mirror Your TV?](#)
- [The Spiritual Benefits of a Good Night's Sleep](#)
- [Psalms: Managing Our Emotions](#)



[Faith Crisis: What Faith Isn't and Why It Doesn't Always Do What You Want](#), Ron Dunn (David C. Cook, 2007; ISBN 9780781444972)



[Restless Faith: Holding On to a God Just Out of Reach](#), Winn Collier (NavPress, 2005; ISBN 9781576837115)



[Standing Up to God](#), Anthony Phillips (Spck Publishing, 2005; ISBN 9780281056996)



[Authentic Faith: The Power of a Fire-Tested Life](#), Gary L. Thomas (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 9780310254195)



[Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home](#), Richard J. Foster (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992; ISBN 9780060628468)



[The Power of Suffering: Strengthening Your Faith in the Refiner's Fire](#), John MacArthur (David C. Cook, 1995; ISBN 9781564764294)



ARTICLE

A Crisis of Faith

By Sherryl Stone, for the study “A Crisis of Faith”

How do we respond when we serve in a spiritual leadership position and face a crisis of faith? During these trials of seemingly unanswered prayer and unrelenting circumstances, we are shaken to the core. This can become so severe that we wonder if we’ve been betrayed by God himself. We reason that we are doing our best to fulfill our commitment to Christ, but it doesn’t seem that he is pulling for us, but instead against us. Unanswered questions nag at our hearts: *Is God really who he says he is? Can God do what he says he can do?*



For years we have taught others that God is good, loving, and faithful. Now we wonder if it is really true. Besides our inner struggle we realize there are people who look to us as an example during these hardships.

I became fed up and very angry when I faced my own crisis of faith. A profound sense of abandonment settled over me. My prayers seemed distant and hollow. I didn’t know what to do or how to respond.

My faith and my ministry were at a crossroads. I thought through my options. I could abandon my own faith, become a hypocrite, or work through this with the Lord. Option one would destroy my family. Option two went against my nature. I chose to pursue option three.

As long as I could remember, my relationship with the Lord meant everything to me. I couldn’t bear to lose it. So I shared my struggle with my closest friends and family and solicited their prayers.

Scripture says to wait expectantly on the Lord. Day after day I did just that as I sat quietly in the early morning with my Bible open to Job and Psalms. I read Scripture and prayed honest, struggling prayers. I was desperate to hear some direction and assurance from God. More than a response to my unanswered prayer I needed to reconnect deeply with him.

The more I read the Bible, the more I was confronted with my own pride. I was demanding that God answer my prayers in ways that I deemed best based on my



limited understanding. One verse that really stuck with me was Isaiah 7:9: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all." I prayed, "Lord, I believe. Please help my unbelief."

Scripture helped me see faith through God's viewpoint. It opened my eyes to see that our faith is very important to God. Phrases such as "your faith which is of greater worth than gold," "without faith it is impossible to please God," and "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" haunted me. One morning I sensed the Holy Spirit whisper to my heart. "I am God. Trust Me." I finally yielded my painful circumstance and my life anew to God's plan and his glory. I began to see God's grace as he tested my faith to strengthen it.

Life can be intensely difficult. At times trials can seem unbearable. I still live with the same circumstances that tested my faith many years ago. Yet God continues to show himself faithful to me and my family. He reminds me that my life is not my own, that there is a plan beyond what I can see, and that my faith means more to God than I can imagine.

Sherryl is actively involved in ministry at Ginger Creek Community Church in Aurora, Illinois, where her husband is senior pastor. She holds a bachelor's degree in Bible from Mississippi College and a master's degree in religious education from Southwestern Seminary in Texas.

"A Crisis of Faith," by Sherryl Stone, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM





LEADER'S GUIDE - STUDY 5

Dark Night of the Soul

Finding hope for the downcast soul.

When doubt, confusion, or suffering threaten to drag us into the black hole of despair, the saving hand of hope can seem elusive. Far worse than any earthly circumstances that affect our physical bodies, doubts and fears threaten to destroy our soul. We desperately cling to what we know, but do not feel, to be truth. Even despair, however, cannot keep us from the fierce and faithful protector of our soul. It is during these “dark nights of the soul” that we begin to understand that true faith is hope demonstrated regardless of circumstances. We learn to stand still and wait until our eyes adjust to the darkness—until we can once again see the Rock to whom we cling, now more desperately than ever before.

Why does God allow “dark nights of the soul”? How did God restore Elijah’s hope when he hid in loneliness and despair? How did God the Father strengthen Jesus in his anguish at Gethsemane? What happened when Habakkuk questioned God? The purpose of this study is to learn to embrace the dark nights of the soul.

Lesson #5

Scripture:

1 Kings 19:1–18; Psalm 42; Habakkuk 1:1–2:1; 3:16–19; Mark 14:32–42

Based on:

“Embracing Dark Nights of the Soul,” by Sally Morgenthaler, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Embracing Dark Nights of the Soul" (included at the end of this study).

There comes a time in the life of every person when sorrow, doubt, loneliness, or fear crashes in like a tidal wave upon the shore of life. It threatens to wash contentment and joy into the midst of its sea, drowning them forever in its murky depths. At times we may find ourselves afraid to verbalize our feelings and doubts because in speaking of them, they become real. Yet once spoken, we find that they are far less destructive in the open air of honesty than they were locked in the darkness of isolation.



Sally Morgenthaler refers to two levels of consciousness that are often experienced in "the dark night of the soul." The outer level is the life of normal activity that surrounds us when we feel that the earth surely should have stopped rotating on its axis. It seems inconceivable that other people can laugh, have pleasure, and be so focused on the seemingly mundane aspects of life. Yet, we find ourselves pulled along with the gravitational force of societal norms—eating, talking, paying bills—while our soul (the inner level) is consumed with doubts, fears, and confusion. Our body and speech are focused on daily living, but our soul is in anguish—often an anguish we do not share with those around us. In our struggles, this place can seem like a continual grieving or questioning process that never goes away. It is exhaustive and clinging, refusing to be subdued or ignored until our soul begs God for relief. The feeling of loneliness is overwhelming; we are certain no one else understands.

Panicked, we grope for something known that we will recognize by feel and familiarity if not by sight. We reach for God, our only hope of getting through the darkness. As we cling to the Savior, we begin to see a flickering flame of newly discovered truth—the goodness and mercy of God.

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** Do you agree with Sally Morgenthaler's statement that "disorientation and doubt are gestational to faith"? Why or why not?
- [Q]** Share a time when you experienced the feeling of being "dislocated inside the familiar" that Morgenthaler describes—the feeling that you are just going through the motions and conversations of life, while your mind and soul are in a different place.
- [Q]** What doubts, fears, or thoughts have you been afraid to discuss with others when you were in a "dark night of the soul"? How does this feeling add to the isolationism of despair? Should we voice our dark questions and doubts with other believers? Share your thoughts.
- [Q]** Morgenthaler suggests journaling, painting, music, and photography as outlets for the soul to make its truth known. What mediums do you use or would you like to use to best express your soul?



PART 2**Discover the Eternal Principles****Teaching point one: God meets us in our desert place.**

Read 1 Kings 19:1–18.

Elijah faced a “dark night of the soul” immediately after his courageous victory against the worshipers of Baal. Revengeful Jezebel sent word that she was planning to kill Elijah. Fear gripped him. Leaving everyone behind, he fled to the desert into the cavernous darkness of despair.

Longing to leave the violence and wickedness of earth, Elijah was bent on escape. His mood was so dark that he lost the desire to live. And God let him escape—for a time, but there in loneliness and fear Elijah met with God. The Lord comforted and encouraged Elijah, rejuvenated him physically, listened to his emotions, and met his spiritual needs.

- [Q]** Elijah ran to God (1 Kings 19:8) and was transparent with him—sharing his deepest emotions. What did his transparency say about his relationship with the Father?
- [Q]** How did God respond to Elijah’s dark emotions? How did God meet and care for Elijah physically, emotionally, and spiritually? What need did God meet first and why? What does this story tell you about God’s character?
- [Q]** Why do you think God repeatedly asked Elijah what he was doing there (vv. 9, 13)?
- [Q]** Why do you think Elijah pulled his cloak over his face when he heard God’s whisper?
- [Q]** In his feelings of isolation and loneliness, Elijah claimed that he was the only prophet left. According to verses 15–18, that wasn’t true. What does that tell us about our perceptions when we are depressed?
- [Q]** Have you ever had an experience where you were so consumed with emotion that you isolated yourself from everyone? If yes, did the isolation help or hinder? Why? How did God meet you?

Teaching point two: Times of crisis help us to recognize our desperate need for God.

Read Psalm 42.

Doubts and fears threaten to undo the basic cords of faith that God has woven into our lives. We question why we cannot trust better, why we are afraid, why we worry, and why God allows pain and suffering. Sometimes God seems silent or does not answer as we hope. At other times, all we crave is a return to “normal,” but the normal we once knew may never exist again.

How will our soul then respond? Will we bow before his throne in submission to his sovereign will? Will we choose to praise him regardless of the situation? Crises help us to recognize our desperate need for God. We begin to understand that our Redeemer is the only one who can rescue our soul from torment. The very process of struggling through these dark days—this constancy of bringing our emotions before God, struggle by painful struggle—produces greater



intimacy with our Abba Father. Morgenthau encourages us to embrace these dark nights of the soul. It is at these times that we learn to lean on Jesus, regardless of what comes.

And in these moments of crisis, God grieves with us. He sings over us in the night, giving us a song in the most desperate of situations. As intimacy with the Savior becomes our focus, we crave God's Word, which comforts, convicts, and guides. We desire to bask in the healing balm of his presence. With the psalmist our heart then cries, "I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (Psalm 42:11b).

- [Q]** How did the psalmist deal with his despair?
- [Q]** The psalmist resolved to praise God despite his circumstances. Have you ever chosen to praise God even though you felt your heart wasn't in it? What happened?
- [Q]** God is omniscient, so it is futile to think we can hide our thoughts and feelings from him. What painful truths did this psalmist tell God? Why is it essential to be honest with God about our struggles and emotions?
- [Q]** If you've ever longed for normalcy during times of crisis, as the psalmist remembered his past time of praising God, how did you deal with those longings? How did your "new normal" affect your walk with Christ?
- [Q]** What is the most difficult "night of the soul" that you have experienced? How did your soul respond to God at that time?

Optional Activity: Write a psalm of your own, honestly telling God your thoughts and feelings about the dark times in your life that you do not understand. End your psalm with praise to God despite your circumstances.

Teaching point three: In our anguish, we cry out to our Abba Father, Daddy God.

Read Mark 14:32–42.

Even Jesus had a "dark night of the soul." Mark says that in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was "deeply distressed and troubled," his soul overwhelmed with sorrow. Luke says that Jesus was in anguish. Though he willingly died in our place, his soul struggle was so intense that he sweat drops of blood. Abandoned by all who followed him, Jesus turned to his Abba Father, Daddy God. In submission he prayed, "Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36b). As he prayed, an angel strengthened him.

During Jesus' last hour, he quoted Psalm 22 as he pleaded with the Father from an anguished heart, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34 and Psalm 22:1). Even as he questioned, he trusted in his Abba Father: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23: 46).

- [Q]** Why should it help us in our struggles to remember that Jesus also suffered?
- [Q]** What questions have you asked God during times of near despair or sorrow?



Optional Activity: Let each person choose a way to express the darkest time of his or her life. Provide pencils and paper for those who would like to draw or write poetry, an essay, or a song. Provide a digital camera for those who would like to photograph something in your meeting place that represents that sorrow. Provide modeling clay for those who prefer that medium, etc. Give everyone five to ten minutes at most then reconvene to give anyone a chance to share who would like to.

Teaching point four: God meets us in our dark places, and though we will never fully understand his ways, the very act of wrestling with God draws us nearer to him.

Read Habakkuk 1:1–2:1.

Babylon conquered Jerusalem, demolished the temple of God, and took the Israelites captive. In the midst of this disaster, Habakkuk cried out to God from a broken, doubting heart. Why wasn't God answering his prayers for help? Why didn't he save his people from injustice and violence? Why did the wicked appear to prevail?

We have the same questions. God doesn't often explain why he allows hardship. Life on earth is full of pain and suffering. Habakkuk poured out his heart before God. He wrestled with God through the "dark night of his soul" because he did not understand God or his ways.

[Q] What questions did Habakkuk ask God? How did God answer him? Was Habakkuk able to understand all that God was doing after God answered him?

[Q] In the song "Could It Be," Michael Card asks, "Could it be that questions tell us more than answers ever do?" What do you think this means? How might our questions lead us to a deeper trust in God?

[Q] What questions are you afraid to ask God? How does God answer our questions?

Read Habakkuk 3:16–19.

After wrestling with God, Habakkuk still did not understand his ways, for no one can fully know the mind of God (Romans 11:33–35). God does not need to explain himself, for he is God and we are not. Still, the very act of wrestling with God in our dark hours grows our faith, for in wrestling we are interacting with God. Each time we wrestle with God in our despair or fear, we understand God a little better, though our earthly understanding of him will always be like a poor reflection in a mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12).

It is doubtful that Habakkuk liked God's answers to his questions, but somehow through the process he made his peace with God. Though he feared the disaster, and probably the wrath of God, he trusted that God had a plan and that justice would eventually reign. Habakkuk proclaimed that regardless of the circumstances, he would choose to rejoice in the Lord. Though the circumstances of Israel had not yet changed, God had become Habakkuk's strength. Even with unanswered questions, Habakkuk had a new understanding of God's sovereign purposes and everlasting love.

[Q] Why did Habakkuk have this renewed hope despite the present violence and injustice against his people?



[Q] Do you think Habakkuk could have reached this point in his walk with God without struggling through a “dark night of the soul”? Explain.

PART 3**Apply Your Findings**

In our darkest night, our Abba Father, Daddy God will envelop us in his arms, comfort our souls, and offer songs in the night. When we reach for him, he will grasp our timid, trembling hand with his own righteous right hand. Though it is so dark that we cannot see the way, he will guide us. Through the darkness, this intimacy with God will strengthen our quaking questions into unquenchable hope. Like Habakkuk, the one who wrestled with God and emerged with an unwavering faith no longer dependent on circumstance, we will learn to more deeply trust our gentle Savior who understands our sorrow and pain.

Action Point: Spend some time with your Abba Father this week, sharing the thoughts and emotions that you have stuffed into the darkest corners of your soul. Bring them out into the light of his presence. Confess them. Weep if you must. Pour your heart out before your God. If it is helpful, use a medium to aid in your expression. (Examples: drawing, painting, photography, music, dance, writing, or something else that will help you to express your soul.)

Begin a journal of your thoughts and feelings during difficult times of your life. Include ways God meets you and what he teaches you during these dark times. As an introduction to your journaling, record insights from Psalm 22 about the thoughts and emotions of Jesus when he died on the Cross. Include a description of the physical suffering that he endured. In your own words, write down the praise that he offered despite his circumstances.

Julie Kloster, a speaker and freelance writer, is a regular contributor to ChristianBibleStudies.com.



Additional Resources



ChrisitanBibleStudies.com

-[Six Principles for Women Leaders](#)

-[The Elijah Chronicles](#)



[Blessed Be Your Name: Worshipping God on the Road Marked with Suffering](#), Matt Redman, Beth Redman (Gospel Light, 2005; ISBN:0830738193)



[Holding on to Hope: A Pathway Through Suffering to the Heart of God](#), Nancy Guthrie (Tyndale House, 2006; 1414312962)



[Our Ultimate Refuge: Job and the Problem of Suffering](#), Oswald Chambers (Discovery House Publishers, 2006; ISBN: 1572931981)



[The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth](#), Gerald G. May (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005; ISBN: 0060750553)



[The Power of Suffering: Strengthening Your Faith in the Refiner's Fire](#), John MacArthur (David C. Cook, 1995; ISBN: 156476429X)





ARTICLE

Embracing Dark Nights of the Soul

By Sally Morgenthaler, for the study “Dark Night of the Soul”

In his book, *Dark Nights of the Soul*, Thomas Moore speaks of both the mystery and necessity of the soul’s darkness. I don’t know about you, but my usual response to the dark is to switch on the biggest spotlight I can find. Yet, Moore reminds us that a life worth living (defined here as one that is changing ever more into the likeness of Christ) is full of barely-lit places. True transformation is nothing less than a deep alchemy, taking place in dim and murky places.

Read only a few of the Psalms, and you see this theme played out: Disorientation and doubt are gestational to faith. We may think that the certainty displayed in “leading the throng to God’s house” is the quintessential picture of conviction. But consider the trust displayed by the downcast and disturbed soul. Enveloped in a seemingly infinite expanse of questions, the uncertain pilgrim stretches forward to know and to see beyond herself. Beyond knowing. Beyond sight. Beyond the tangible. Just as darkness is the womb of being, so it is the beginning of faith. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

There is a tendency to view spiritual “eclipses” as depression—a kind of moodiness about God that rises and falls with whatever is happening (or not happening). But Moore speaks about something deeper that occurs when we question God and God’s activity (or seeming lack thereof). It’s as if we become aliens to ourselves. We don’t just feel sad or upset about life; we feel completely dislocated inside the familiar. We go through the motions of job, ministry, family activities, and relationships. Almost “out of body,” we observe ourselves doing life as we’ve always done it. Yet now, there is another self in the mix; another persona so far removed from who we have been, we shudder at the disconnect. We wonder what others would think of us if we said what we were really thinking.

You may be in a period of deep questioning right now. A new year is beginning. Perhaps your children are going to be starting school soon. The summer wasn’t near what it could have been, that dream of family closeness never achieved. Perhaps you will be changing jobs or ministry positions. Yet, what should be a time of adventure—of new possibilities—feels oddly leaden and life-less. Maybe you’re in the same old place—in your job, your marriage, as a single parent, or as a single human. The routine



has become deafening and stifling, just as God is becoming more distant and unreachable.

If this is your place right now, I grieve with you over the loss of joy or clarity; the inability to make sense of life, or simply the inability to find yourself in the old, familiar places. While we grieve together, I encourage you to embrace your now: this obscure and murky place. Because, in this now, you can live in unprecedented, unfettered honesty. Instead of reaching for the nearest spotlight, reach for your journal and begin saying those things you haven't even dared whisper. Or, reach for a paintbrush, a sketchpad, the piano, or your camera. Paint, scribble, compose, or picture this strange, new world you inhabit, this landscape in which you feel an utter misfit. This is your time of psalmody, and unless you take it from yourself, it will not be taken from you. It is your gestation into new life.

As a deer thirsts for streams of water,
So my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go to meet with God?
My tears have been my food
Day and night,
While people say to me all day long,
"Where is your God?"
These things I remember
As I pour out my soul:
How I used to go to the house of God
Under the protection of the Mighty One
With shouts of joy and praise
Among the festive throng.
Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
For I will yet praise him,
My Savior and my God.

Psalm 42:1-5 (TNIV)

Sally Morgenthaller is a frequent speaker and writer, Christian educator, author of Worship Evangelism and other books, and innovator in Christian practices worldwide.

"Embracing Dark Nights of the Soul," by Sally Morgenthaller, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM





LEADER'S GUIDE - STUDY 6

Rest for the Weary

Where to go when you're empty and spent.

Running on fumes is difficult. We're traveling at a decent pace when all of a sudden we sputter and eventually break down. We were warned it might happen, yet somehow we kept going, hoping we'd still reach our destination. Empty and spent, we brush ourselves off and get up. Where can we go when we're depleted? What do we need at those moments? How will God meet those needs?

Lesson #6

Scripture:

Isaiah 40:25–31; Psalm 23:1–3; 46; Philippians 2:17; Hebrews 4:15

Based on:

"Responding to Emptiness," by Susan Arico, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Responding to Emptiness" (included at the end of this study).

We've all run on empty at one time or another. Our list of things to do is longer than our time or strength. We've tried shaving our list and shifting things around, but to no avail. People are counting on us; we've got to come through for them. Or maybe we were on course and nearing our goal, when all of a sudden life happened. We were thrown for a loop by an unavoidable detour. Now we have little time and less energy with the project staring us in the face. There isn't enough caffeine in the world to give us the boost we need.



Sometimes we won't stop for anything. We feel resting is a sign of weakness, proof of our inadequacies. It's no wonder we eventually crash. We take long-awaited vacations, just to return to work exhausted. We stop only when we become ill or suffer a breakdown. Only when we are completely empty do we raise our white flags and admit defeat.

It makes sense to go to God when we are empty, since he is the all-sufficient one, the one who can meet every need. When we are exhausted, God tells us to come to him and he will give us rest—but we keep going anyway.

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** Share a time when you were completely exhausted. What were the circumstances? What did you do?
- [Q]** Mention some things people turn to when they get depleted. Are they helpful?
- [Q]** Does our Christian culture encourage or discourage overworking? Give some reasons for your answer.
- [Q]** Give an example in Scripture of someone who became empty? What did he or she do?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God promises us rest.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). We are to come to him in our weariness. Like children who are instructed to take our naps, we fight it, insisting we're not tired.

In his book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Phillip Keller talks about how sheep need to be forced to rest; how the shepherd actually makes them lie down. Rest isn't an option; it's a requirement.



Read Psalm 23:1–3.

We live in a world where people are overworked, overstressed, and overtired. Technology and convenience, which promise to make our lives easier, actually complicate things. They enable us to squeeze even more into our already crowded schedules. With call waiting, call forwarding, text messaging, and voice mail, we no longer have the luxury of being unavailable. The mother of a teenager shared, “My daughter sleeps with her cell phone on. She’s afraid she might miss a call.”

God made our bodies to require a certain amount of sleep, yet people often cut into their rest to work. Even traveling, which once provided time for quiet reflection, is now utilized as a time to return phone calls or make appointments.

[Q] When you have been unable to rest physically, how did it affect those around you?

[Q] How might Christians justify a crazy schedule even more than those who don’t know Christ? How can we battle this tendency?

[Q] Read Philippians 2:17. How can we find balance when we want to expend ourselves for Christ, as Paul did?

Optional Activity: Break into pairs and evaluate how you handle stress. Ask each other:

- Do you immediately go to the Father when you are stressed? Why or why not?
- What things prevent you from seeking him when you are in need?
- Do you need to regularly plan time alone?
- Are there times you need to turn off your phone or back out of a meeting? How do you know when those times are?
- How can you find the balance between being sacrificial and being frantic?

Pray that you will find your sufficiency in the all-sufficient one.

Teaching point two: God gives us strength.

All too often we try going in our own strength. This may work for a while, but it soon fails us. He is the vine; we are the branches (John 15:4–5). God is our sustenance. Our accomplishments are a result of our connection to him. Without him, we can do nothing. Without him, what we do counts for nothing. God is the all-powerful one. Read Isaiah 40:25–31.

God gives us strength for what he wants us to accomplish, but sometimes we have our own agendas. In his book *Simplify Your Life*, H. Norman Wright talks about suffering from the Superman or Superwoman syndrome. To discover if you have that syndrome, Wright says to ask yourself:

- Do you feel you rarely have any time just for you?
- Do you find it hard to say no to others’ needs?
- Are you a problem solver for other people?
- Is delegation a word that is foreign to you?



- Are others constantly calling or asking you for something?
- Would you rather do things yourself or ask for help?
- Do you continue to improve on whatever you do?

Wright goes on to say, “The Superman or Superwoman syndrome is not a loving or giving pattern of living; it’s a selfish one. It denies others the opportunity to give, to share, to learn, to grow, and to develop. It stunts their growth.”

Instead of trying to accomplish super feats, we need to ask God what he would like us to accomplish. That’s what Jesus did. God will enable us to do the things he requires.

[Q] Share a time when you attempted to do something in your own strength. How long did it take you to see your inadequacy?

[Q] If God is our strength, how is it that people who don’t know him can do so much?

[Q] Do you have the superhuman syndrome? If so, how can you change?

[Q] Give an example of a person in Scripture who relied on God’s strength.

- Give an example of someone in Scripture who relied on his or her own strength.

[Q] Share a time God strengthened you to do the task at hand. Were you aware of it at the time?

Teaching point three: God gives us his presence.

Sometimes what we need most from God is his presence. We need to feel like we belong, that we are somehow connected and have a place. When we feel depleted, we can come and sit with him, reflecting on who he is. He is the one who spread out the heavens, but also the one who notices every detail. Matthew 10:29 reminds us that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without his notice. There is nothing that doesn’t matter to God. Every single thing is significant to the Maker of all. Read Psalm 46.

When someone hurts, words are often unnecessary. That’s how it is with God. We can just sit and meditate on parts of his love letter to us. When we are feeling beat up and weary, we can trudge over to him with no apologies needed. How wonderful to know he accepts us as we are. He sees us and still loves us. Coming into his presence can transport us out of our own feelings of inadequacy.

When life is overwhelming, we have somewhere to go. Perhaps he’ll hear us say,

Lord, can I sit on your lap for I am very scared;
My fears are looming large to me and I feel unprepared.
Just let me sit there safely and feel your arms around,
And when I’m feeling stronger, I promise I’ll get down.
I hear him answer tenderly, while opening his arms to me
And on his face I see a smile as he says, “Come and sit a while.” (Anne Peterson, © 2002)



Sometimes God's lap is where we need to go when we're feeling empty. God can heal our wounded places because he understands. Jesus was well acquainted with grief. Read Hebrews 4:15.

- [Q]** Share a time when you sought comfort in God's presence. What were the circumstances?
- [Q]** In what other ways have you sought comfort? Were those ways successful? Why or why not?
- [Q]** Was there ever a time when you could not be comforted? What were the circumstances?
- [Q]** What Scriptures have comforted you in the past?

Teaching point four: We don't always go to God.

Sometimes we don't go to God, even though we know it would be the best thing to do. We turn to other things although they never give us the strength we so desperately need. Some of the reasons we don't go to God are:

1. Pride. We think if we just try harder we will be able to make it. Satan, God's enemy, loves it when we flex our independent muscles. We tell ourselves we just haven't tried hard enough, or worked at it long enough. We should be able to do this. The longer we take in admitting we are inadequate simply shows how much pride we have.

2. Resentment. We feel distant from God because of something he has allowed in our lives. We have harbored feelings of disappointment for some time, and they have grown into bitterness and resentment. When we confess our feelings to God, he can begin to soften our hardened hearts. Then he can carefully remove these destructive weeds, giving us room to grow.

3. Rebellion. Sometimes we just want to do things our own way. God is forever working with those who have a personal relationship with him. Little by little he is conforming us to the image of his Son. Sometimes that's a messy process.

In her book *Prime Rib and Apple*, Jill Briscoe writes about submission. She says, "Submission isn't submission if you agree." Ouch. We'd like to see ourselves as wholly submitted to God. And yet, the things we yield to don't cost us anything. We choose what we will withhold. We rationalize, reminding God of all the areas we have submitted to him, thinking somehow he will see that we're right and that we're entitled to keep back some for ourselves. And then God shows us his Son, and we remember how he gave up his rights—all of them—to follow God. Yes, God wants us to submit to him; he wants us to be like Jesus.

- [Q]** Share an area that is difficult for you to turn over to the Lord.
- [Q]** Why is it that Satan despises our dependency on God?
- [Q]** On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being the hardest, how difficult is it for you to go to God when you are empty? What do you think makes it difficult?
- [Q]** Why do you think some Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of expressing anger to God?



[Q] Who in Scripture felt free to tell God his or her feelings? How did God respond?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

As long as we are on this earth, there will be times when we are empty and spent. Where can we go in those times? Although we only reluctantly accept that we don't have what it takes to go on, God lovingly opens his arms, inviting us to come to him, the All-Sufficient One. Our God gives us the rest and strength we need, as well as his presence. Little by little we see how foolish we are in trying to do it on our own. Looking at the things that keep us from him shows us areas God is still changing.

At times, we will be spent and empty. But we can be thankful that there is a place to go to be refreshed and renewed. God waits patiently with arms outstretched. He knows it will take some of us a little longer to come to him, but he has all the time in the world. It was Richard Blanchard who wrote the fitting words to the hymn "Fill My Cup, Lord":

"Fill my cup, Lord, I lift it up, Lord,
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul,
Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more,
Take my cup, fill it up and make me whole."

Action Point: Plan a time when you can sit with the Lord for a couple of uninterrupted hours with just a hymnal or praise book. Sit in silence while God ministers to your waiting heart. Let your words be only words of praise, not requests or petitions for others. If you can't think of anything to say, just sing a verse or two and sit there. Afterwards write down five things you gained from this time alone with him. Share them with the group the next time you meet.

Anne Peterson is a published author, poet, and speaker, and a regular contributor to ChristianBibleStudies.com.



Additional Resources



ChrisitanBibleStudies.com

-[Six Principles for Women Leaders](#)

-[The Elijah Chronicles](#)



[Everyday Promises: Spiritual Refreshment for Women](#), Pamela Kaye Tracy (Barbour Publishing, 2007; ISBN 1597896497)



[Free Refill: Coming Back for More of Jesus](#), Mark Atteberry (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 0784719128)



[Garden Moment Getaways: Welcome Refreshment for the Soul](#), Bob Barnes, Emilie Barnes (Harvest House Gifts, 2008; ISBN 0736920188)



[God Moments: Daily Reflections to Refresh and Restore Your Soul](#) (David C. Cook, 2001; ISBN 1562928678)



[Mountain Breezes: The Collected Poems of Amy Carmichael](#), Amy Carmichael (Christian Literature Crusade, 1999; ISBN 0875087892)



[101 Cups of Water: Relief and Refreshment for the Tired, Thirsty Soul](#), C. D. Baker (Waterbrook Press, 2008; ISBN 1400073995)



[Spa for the Soul: Rejuvenate Your Inner Life](#), Lucinda Secrest McDowell (B & H Publishing Group, 2006; ISBN 0805440771)



[When Women Long for Rest: God's Peace for Your Overwhelmed Life](#), Cindi McMenamin (Harvest House Publishers, 2004; ISBN: 0736911308)



ARTICLE

Responding to Emptiness

By Susan Arico, for the study “Rest for the Weary”

Where do you go when you feel low, empty, spent? When you feel beaten down by your circumstances or just by your day?

At nine months pregnant with our second child, I experience moodiness and exhaustion as norms in my life now. But of course, I have plenty of non-pregnancy-related experience in feeling down too. We all do; we're human. And as women, we often experience our emotions fairly close to the surface—accentuated by a host of hormonal shifts that we encounter throughout much of our lives.

I've found that there are two contrasting responses that I and others often adopt when feeling empty or low—equally unhelpful and both, ultimately, of the Enemy.

1. The first response is **self-pity**. We feel sorry for ourselves. We lament our circumstances, our feelings, or the person or situation we believe is causing our distress. We compare ourselves to others we know and find our own situations wanting.

This response reflects the general mindset of modern Americans, bombarded with the lie that we should feel content and fulfilled at all times. If we don't then something is wrong, and someone else is probably responsible—partly or fully. We hoped for more; things should be better than they are ... Ergo, we are victims.

We adopt this false line of thinking with amazing frequency and power, even as Christians with a completely contrasting worldview. Subtly or implicitly, we condemn God: How could he have let this happen to us if he loves us? Or how could we feel so empty and low if he is truly good and sovereign? We become accusers and wallow in self-righteousness.

2. The second response is to **talk ourselves out of the way we feel**. We know God is good; we know we should be grateful for all he's done for us and our many blessings; we know many in the world have situations far worse than ours. Who are we to be upset about something as petty as feeling distant from our spouse (for example) when there are thousands of children starving to death in developing countries?

On its face, this response seems godlier than the first as it plays at selflessness. The problem is that it's dishonest. God is a God of truth, and acting as if our situation or



emotions didn't exist dishonors him and does violence to our own souls. God created us as emotional beings, and he is not glorified when we try to pretend away our feelings—even the ugly ones. Worse, this response robs us of the opportunity to engage with God and to hear from him in the midst of whatever we are experiencing. How can he help us work through our feelings to something holy and righteous if we won't let him shine light into our hearts?

The most helpful advice I've gleaned on this topic is from Elisabeth Elliot in her book *A Path Through Suffering*. A definition of suffering, she writes, that "covers all sorts of trouble, great or small, is this: *having what you don't want, or wanting what you don't have.*" I love this realism and practicality. So often we deny ourselves the opportunity for God to meet us in our suffering by forbidding ourselves to acknowledge that we are actually suffering—even if it is "small trouble" rather than great, as Elliot would say.

Too, this definition paves a middle road between self-pity and denial straight to God's heart. We acknowledge and name our "trouble," don't shy away from calling it a form of suffering, and then let God minister to us in that place. After all, when Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," he did say *all* you who are weary and burdened. He knows the legitimacy of our 21st-century-American forms of weariness and burden; we don't have to convince him.

I think this is critical for us as women leaders. Those we lead are watching us to see how we will handle our challenges. Will we become complainers, letting our hurts conquer us? Or will we pretend it away? Only by acknowledging the places of our suffering, to ourselves and to others, can we go to Jesus to gain the rest he promises. The hurting, watching world is desperate to see evidence of the rest that is found only in Jesus.

Susan Arico has run her own consulting company, Pray Creek Consulting, LLC, since 2004. She lives with her husband, her toddler son, a dog, and a small collection of various livestock at their small hobby farm in southern New Hampshire.

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