

God's Love

This is a series of five one-hour interactive Bible studies focused on the very essence of God, as we are told in 1 John 4:16b: "God is love". The studies were written to help us ponder the magnitude of God's love and how it influences all aspects of our lives. The sessions are titled:

1 – Being Filled with God's Love

2 – How God's Love Influences My Life

3 – How God's Love Influences My Relationships

4 – How God's Love Helps Me Forgive

5 – How God's Love Helps Me in Difficult Times

These studies were written by Marilyn Miller, a WELS Staff Minister at Abiding Word Lutheran Church in Houston, TX. It was reviewed for theological content by Professor-emeritus Joel Gerlach.

Copyright ©2015 by Marilyn J Miller; MarilynMiller@aol.com; Permission granted to download from wels.net/women and duplicate for Bible study.

God is Love: Being Filled with God's Love

Lesson 1

Leader's Guide

Opening prayer

The world often tells us we are just one of many out there and we are not uniquely and individually special. Or, if we do matter, it's our numbers and letters that make us worthwhile – our salary, our degrees, our grades, our position, or even where we live. This worldly perspective easily leads us into a downward spiral as we reach out for love, either fearing the love of others will run out, or protecting our hearts from the hurt of rejection. The world so easily skews what we think of as love, that God's love, freely and abundantly given, seems almost foreign to us.

Let's look at some of things God tells us about his love and see how it is so very different from what the world can give.

1. *1 John 4:16b* says "God is love." What does it mean to you that God is the very essence of love?

There is no way God cannot love. God is the definition of love; they are synonymous. Just as 1 + 1 will absolutely always be 2, so God will absolutely always be love. There is nothing that we can ever do to change this. We have nothing to do with his love and cannot affect it, though we can reject it to our own destruction.

2. What do we learn about God's love in Psalm 103:8-11 and why is this so important to us?

God's love means he has compassion on us and forgives us. As our hearts are heavy with sin, God's forgiveness floods us with relief. Love is God's first response, not his anger, not vengeance, not walking

away. These are responses that we see in this world, motivated by Satan; they are not the things of God. God IS love.

3. What do we learn about God's love in 1 John 4:10 and why is this so important to us?

God's love is attitude and action. He doesn't just tell us he loves us and stop there. He shows us just how much he loves us by providing a path of reconciliation, by sending us his Son to pay for our sins.

4. Read Psalm 139 and Psalm 23:6. What do we learn about God's love and why is this so important to us?

God's love pursues me. God's love comes to the real me, even in those hidden and dark places that no one knows about. I can never go to a place where God isn't. Think of him coming to Adam and Eve in the Garden after they had sinned. He called out "Where are you?" He wants us to be with him and close to him, even when we may feel that we don't deserve him.

5. What do we learn about God's love in 1 John 4:18 and why is this so important to us?

We have absolutely no reason to fear anything when we lean on Jesus. From a worldly perspective we hear "What if this, or what if that?" What if I lose my job, my money, my spouse, my health... this pattern of thought can only lead us to anxiety and despair. When we say "If," we are really saying "I fear." God provides us complete relief from all fears.

6. What do we learn about God's love in Romans 8:35-39 and why is this so important to us?

There is absolutely nothing that can separate us from his love. What an amazing thought! Though Satan will try his best to split us away from God, we are MORE than conquerors through Christ. All we need is one little word, "Jesus," and Satan must flee. No sin, no illness, no situation - nothing can build a barrier between us and God.

7. What do we learn about God's love in Hebrews 12:6 and why is this so important to us?

Even as a parent must discipline a child to help that child grow into a responsible and self-disciplined adult, so God at times also disciplines us. Nobody likes it because it usually hurts and is unpleasant at the time. We see the benefit of discipline in our children and we see how this discipline reflects the values of their parents. God's discipline in our lives will also reflect his love for us. How blessed we are to have "someone" love us enough to discipline us.

8. What truths did God teach the Children of Israel about his love? Why do we need to know these truths still apply to us today?

In Isaiah 43:1 – Deliverance depends on God alone. He does all the work. I do nothing and it doesn't depend on me in the slightest.

In Isaiah 43:2 – Nothing can prevent his deliverance; even the worst things this world has to offer cannot prevent God's deliverance.

In Isaiah 43:3-4 – No price is too great for God's deliverance.

In Isaiah 43:5-7 – Deliverance is for all people, and I'm definitely included in that!

We need to know these truths still apply to us today because we have exactly the same issues as those people long ago. We stray and our guilt convicts us, we feel lost in this huge world, we face huge obstacles and problems that could easily overwhelm us, Satan tempts us in the same ways by threatening our security. And yet God calls us by name and promises to be with us and calls us precious and honored. What comfort and confidence this gives us. My God has all these problems under his control.

9. As God's love takes root in our hearts, it changes us. In what ways do we respond differently from those who do not know God?

1 John 4:11 – We use God's love for us as the model of the love we show for others – completely selfless and enduring. Without a 3D model to follow, we would not know how to love.

Matthew 5:43-48 – God holds us to a high standard. Let us identify who our "enemy" is and then let us proactively figure out how we can love them. Think of this the next time we begin to feel anger, resentment, disagreement or frustrations pour into our hearts and minds. Without a 3D model to follow, we would not know how to love.

John 13:34-35 – The world sees how we respond to others and this is how they know what is in our hearts. God has commanded us to love others as he has loved us. Lord, help me properly reflect your grace in my life. This is not optional! Without a 3D model to follow, we would not know how to love.

Closing Prayer:

CW 365

Love divine, all love excelling, Joy of heav'n, to earth come down,

Fix in us your humble dwelling, all your faithful mercies crown.

Jesus, you are all compassion, Boundless mercy from above.

Visit us with benediction; Comfort us with heavn'nly love.

Sanctify your new creation; Pure and spotless let us be.

Let us trust your great salvation, Won for us on Calvary,

Till we lay our crowns before you, Till in heav'n we take our place,

Till in glory we adore you, Lost in wonder, love and praise.

God's Love: How God's Love Influences My Life

Lesson 2

Leader's Guide

Opening prayer

1. "Jesus loves me; this I know for the Bible tells me so." Even the youngest Christians know this basic truth—God loves me! The English language uses the word love in three different ways – let's talk about them. What or whom do you love with a "really like" type of love?

Chocolate, going to the movie, someone with whom you enjoy spending time...

What or whom do you love with a friendship type of love? This is often called phileo (from same root word as "Philadelphia") love.

Your friends, someone you find especially appealing, a favorite author, someone you might go out of your way to spend time with...

What or whom do you love with a completely self-sacrificing love, that you would be willing to give your life for? This is often called agape love.

Your children, spouse, sibling, father/mother... Only God has true agape love; our love will always fall short.

In which category did you put your love for God?

Which type of love are we talking about when we sing "Jesus loves me, this I know?" (see 1 John 3:16, 1 John 4:9-10; 19, John 3:16, Romans 5:8) How do you know this?

Jesus laid down his life for us; this is no passing love. This is a love of complete and absolute commitment. This is a love that surpasses anything we could accomplish here on earth, and yet the little ones who sing this favorite hymn know what it means.

2. Genesis 1:26-27, Genesis 2:7 and Genesis 2:22 tell us about the creation of the human race. How does this differ from how God created everything else? What does it mean to be made in God's image? What does this say about how God regards us?

We are not simply another animal; we are special. Notice the intimate and special way God made man and woman vs the “let there be” for the rest of creation. God breathed life into man, using his very own breath. God specially engineered woman (the literal meaning of the Hebrew words in 2:22) to complement and complete the man and only then did he declare his creation “very good” (1:31). Being made in God’s image means that we were made without sin, able to understand God’s will and with the desire to please him. God created us as the crown of his creation with the command to rule over the rest of creation. He created us to be his companions and he desires to have us with him. Then sin entered the world. Sin didn’t change God’s love for us but it did change us and our desire to know and please God. Sin entering the world did not derail God’s love for us. God sent his Son so we can be reconciled with him and live with him eternally. Even though we have caused God much pain by our behavior, he still desires to be with us, transferred our sins to his own Son and has promised us eternal life with him. We are obviously VERY important to him.

3. Consider Paul, who went from being a persecutor of Christians to ultimately dying for his faith in Jesus. Surely Paul is an example of how God’s love impacts our lives. Consider Paul’s statements in Romans 7:14-25. Paul’s struggle is familiar to us. What obstacles do you find in doing what you want to do/not doing what you don’t want to do?

Discuss obstacles (priorities, habits, lack of trust, love of self, pride, ...)

4. As you meditate on God’s love for you, how will this impact the priorities you set for your life? How and when can your priorities become a problem? (Review Luke 9:57-62 and Exodus 20:3.)

The stronger our faith becomes, the more we will strive to understand God’s will for our lives and will work to keep our priorities in line with this will. Possible priorities that can become a problem: jobs, families, children, providing for our earthly needs, etc. Priorities become problems when we put them before God or when we trust in them instead of trusting in God.

Think again about your priorities in life. How do our priorities change when we keep God first in our lives? Read Matthew 6:33.

Our faith is strengthened through Word and Sacrament, through trusting in God as we face the many challenges in life. When we keep God first, everything else will fall into place and we are blessed with a contentment that makes the things of this world less important and serving God more important. We are given a peace that this world cannot understand.

5. How often do we say, “I don’t have the time!” Consider this—who created and controls time? What tips can you share to help us use our time in a way that honors the love God has for us? (Review Psalm 31:15, and Isaiah 33:6).

Discuss group's ideas. It is so easy to waste this precious resource, to postpone things we need to get done, to focus so much on one aspect of life that we neglect another. As we keep the enormity of God's love in our minds, we will find that we desire to thank God by giving the first-fruits of our time rather than what is left at the end of the day or week. We ask him to help us do this by giving freely of our time for devotion, service, praise, worship and witness. Satan celebrates when he manages to keep our time filled with anything other than serving God.

6. Money is necessary and not a bad thing. Money is one means God uses to provide us with clothing, food, shelter, and other things we need in life. When does money become a stumbling block in the life of a believer?

It is a stumbling block when it becomes the main thing in our life, or we are so focused on obtaining it that we neglect other things, or we use it for things that separate us from God or do not give him honor.

In Mark 12:41-44 we are told the widow's gift was greatest because it was absolutely all she had; she had nothing left. If we were asked to empty our wallets and bank accounts into the collection plate, most of us would struggle with compliance. How would meditating on God's love for us help us give more generously than we already do?

The widow had an attitude of gratitude and a complete confidence in God's promises. We might think of how God owns and rules this world, all is his anyway. He put us here to serve him and certainly he will provide for us. He has promised over and over that he will provide (Matt 6:25-34). He has even challenged us to give generously just to see if he won't provide more than we can imagine (Malachi 3:10). He has told us he loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor 9:7). He always has provided and we have no reason to believe that it will change now (1 Sam 7:12). We might try giving a bit more, and then a bit more, and more yet; pretty soon we will realize that God's promises are indeed true. When we meditate on God's love, and respond to his love, we will be content; our joy in material goods will be replaced by a joy in seeing our wealth, as large or small as it may be, accomplish God's will. Try it, you'll like it!

When considering our priorities, stewardship, and love for God and others, it is not enough to simply go through the motions. The motivation must also be there. God wants us to JOYFULLY serve him and others in response to his amazing love. Lord, work this desire in our hearts.

Closing Prayer:

CW 498

Though I may speak with bravest fire

And have the gift to all inspire

And have not love, my words are vain—

As sounding brass and hopeless gain.

*Though I may give all I possess
And striving so my love profess
But not be giv'n by love within
The profit soon turns strangely thin.*

*Come, Spirit, come; our hearts control.
Our spirits long to be made whole.
Let inward love guide ev'ry deed;
By this we worship and are freed.*

God's Love: How God's Love Influences My Relationships

Lesson 3

Leader's Guide

Opening prayer

Paul tells us *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit let us keep in step with the Spirit.”* (Galatians 6:22-25).

1. Discuss how this passage from Galatians has influenced your marriage and family relationships, giving examples of when (or how you would imagine) this passage has made a difference in your response to a family member or a situation.

Examples may include self-sacrificing love, type of discipline, traditions for Christmas/ Easter/ birthdays that focus on God, respect, trust, commitment, ability to forgive, faithfulness to spouse, intentional time together, tone of conversation, ... Notice that this passage is not conditional; it says the fruit IS; everyone with the Spirit in their heart shows this fruit! (Or: sincerely desires with the help of the Spirit to produce these fruits of faith.)

What do you do as a family to strengthen the bond between you and the Spirit?

Examples may include family or personal devotions, Sunday worship and Bible class, prayers, talking about God within the family and especially with the children...

2. How does this passage influence your relationship with Christian friends? With non-Christian friends?

These fruits of the Spirit are not something we turn on and off; the sinful nature with its passions and desires has been crucified and therefore we desire to exhibit the same behaviors and attitudes no matter where we find ourselves! Our relationships with Christian friends are special in that we share the love and grace of Christ and the motivation it gives to our lives. With non-Christian friends it is our prayer

that God, shining through us, will lead these people to know that we have the special gift of God's gospel and we are willing to share it with them.

3. What differences do you think these gifts of the Spirit make in our relationships with employers, employees and co-workers?

We strive to imitate Jesus! Here again the guiding light of the gospel should be readily seen in our attitudes and behaviors. With God's help we can stand out as individuals who do not go along with the crowd but live to a different standard. Because we seek to honor God with our lives, we work honestly and are trustworthy, we treat others with respect and honor. In so doing we open the doors to sharing the saving truth of the gospel.

Discuss: "The world doesn't read the Bible, therefore Christians must be the Bible to the world."

4. How do our words influence our relationships? (Proverbs 12:18, James 3:17-18) What tips can you share to control what you say?

They either soothe or pierce the heart. The words of a friend who gives comfort, Godly advice, or joyful news are a great blessing; the voice of someone we love is fine indeed. But our words can so easily be misunderstood or be filled with bitterness and sin. (see James 3:1-12) While we can think before we speak, we can also so immerse ourselves in meditating on the grace of God that our words will much more often be filled with his love and tempered against piercing, sinful utterances.

5. What tips do you have for loving the unlovable, whether that is a difficult family member or a smelly, wild person who lives under a bridge, or anybody in between?

We can strive to look upon that person as someone for whom Jesus has died just as he has died for me, as someone loved by Jesus just as he loves me, as someone who needs Jesus just as much as I need Jesus. We can think of how Jesus did not ignore or belittle the man who was outcast from society because of his leprosy, or the adulterous Samaritan woman at the well and then we attempt to imitate Jesus. Jesus doesn't love us because we deserve it; he loves us in spite of what we have done. What powerful examples we have been given! This focus will help us be much more compassionate, loving, and forgiving. We remember that loving one another is not optional (John 13:34) even though it may be difficult.

6. Discuss how this saying could influence your relationships: "Love is an attitude – a condition of the heart without which the activity of the hands can have no value."

God says this a bit differently in James 2:14,17: “What good is it, my brothers (and sisters), if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” Anything motivated by something other than the love of God is not a God-pleasing thing. With God living in our hearts, his light is so powerful it must shine through and influence our actions or else we are nothing more than hypocrites only claiming to believe, but not allowing the Spirit into our heart.

7. If we are honest with ourselves, we know our hearts are not always filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. What do we do about that?

We remember the Spirit DOES give us this fruit. With him in our heart we ARE capable of this. We fall on our knees, ask God to forgive and ask him to remove the barriers that keep these wonderful gifts from showing themselves in our life. We follow Paul’s example when he tells us in Romans 7:18b,24 – “for I have the desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out...who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The Old (Wo)man has been put to death and the New Wo(man) lives! Lean on the blessings of your baptism and the God who stands behind those blessings.

Thought to ponder:

Having God in our hearts does change us and make us stand out from the rest of the world.

Think of:

- the hardened criminal who said “Jesus, remember me.”
- an order-following centurion who said “This man was the Son of God.”
- the timid Pharisee who stepped out of the shadows: “May I care for his body?”
- a rich man from an empty religion: “I know of an empty tomb.”

These are the things that come from faith. The unmistakable flavor of love hangs all about them. This is the sound of people changing. This is the accomplishment of Christ and of his life turned loose in the barren wilderness of the world. – More Prepared to Answer, Mark Paustian, pg 207.

Closing Prayer:

CW 497

O Maker of the loving heart, The friend of all in need,

We pray that we may be like you In thought and word and deed.

Your days were full of kindly acts; Your speech was true and plain;

Of those whoever sought you, Lord, None came to you in vain.

Your face was warm with sympathy; Your hand God's strength revealed;

Who saw your face or felt your touch Were comforted and healed.

Oh, grant us hearts like yours, dear Lord, So joyous, free and true,

That all your children, ev'rywhere, Be drawn by us to you.

God's Love: How God's Love Helps Me Forgive

Lesson 4

Leader's Guide

Opening prayer

1. Recall a time when you or someone you know allowed un-forgiveness or bitterness to take root. What were the consequences?

It begins to influence our whole life and can lead to broken relationships, neglect, betrayal; it has spiritual, emotional and physical effects; it grows until it takes on a life of its own. But the biggest problem is the barrier it puts between you and God!

2. How important is forgiving according to Matthew 6:14-15?

If we forgive, God forgives us; if we don't forgive, God doesn't forgive us!! Our very soul is in jeopardy if we don't forgive! If we refuse to forgive others, we are saying we believe people should atone for or suffer the consequences of their own sins. We are telling God not to forgive us either. An unforgiving spirit cannot coexist with humble Christian faith, and without faith we have no forgiveness or salvation. Think of what we say each time we speak the Lord's Prayer – "and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

3. In the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:22-35) the master forgives a huge debt for his servant. But then that same servant refuses to forgive the much smaller debt of another man. Read Matthew 18:34-35. Why do you think God's sentence against us is so severe if we don't forgive?

Because we grieve the Holy Spirit with a heart that is focused on self rather than on God and his will. It does not allow God's light to shine through us into the world. It does not allow us to freely worship. Our energy goes into grumbling, complaining and criticizing, rather than honoring God (doesn't this make Satan happy!) We stop growing in faith. We betray the very purpose that we have in life, which is to praise, worship and serve God in response to the enormity of his forgiveness and mercy showered on us.

We become slaves to the one we serve (Romans 6:16) and in this case we are serving sin which leads to death, rather than obedience which leads to righteousness!

4. But isn't there a limit to how often I forgive? And aren't some things just too big to forgive? See Matthew 18:21-22 and Hosea 3:1.

Jesus told John to forgive 7 times 70 times, in other words, always, indefinitely. In Hosea the grace of God is illustrated in the personal life of the prophet. Hosea's faithfulness to his adulterous wife Gomer, whom he later graciously forgives and redeems from the slave market, is symbolic of God's love for his people, whose willful unfaithfulness merits the judgment of God, who ultimately will restore and save his wayward people. Our entire relationship with God is one built on forgiveness and mercy. Thus we are told to forgive as God forgives us personally, even (especially) when sin makes it so very, very difficult.

5. Think of a person who has hurt or mistreated you whom you have had difficulty forgiving. Consider that situation as you discuss these four statements about what is required to forgive others. How would a focus on these requirements help you forgive? What have you found helpful when trying to forgive someone?

- Forgiving requires refusal of pride in my heart.

Often it is our pride that gets in the way of forgiving. Forgiving is an "unnatural act" in that we must make our feelings secondary. We don't have to deny the seriousness of what happened or deny the pain we feel. But these emotions cannot take top billing in our heart – only God gets that spot. God says he hates pride and arrogance (Prov 8:13) and it leads to destruction, but with humility comes wisdom (Prov 11:2). He has promised that with him all things are possible and we can let these emotions be removed, with his help (Phil 4:13).

- Forgiving requires admitting my own sinfulness; an awareness that all have sinned and fall short of God's required perfection – I am chief among those.

Perhaps the greatest source of strength to forgive comes from acknowledging that this person is a sinner just as I am, that Jesus died for this person just as he died for me, that God forgives this person just as he forgives me; then who am I to withhold my forgiveness? Am I greater than God? Is my desire greater than his? In humility, I forgive.

- Forgiving requires a desire to please and obey God.

God has made it abundantly clear that he expects me to forgive just as he forgives me, to show mercy as I have received mercy. With the Holy Spirit living in my heart, I have the ability to do that which pleases my Lord and Master. Remembering my baptism, I know the Old (Wo)man is drowned and the New (Wo)man has taken hold of my heart. When I do what pleases him, God has promised to bless me. This is what I most desire.

- Forgiving requires a sincere love for souls and realization that I must reach out with the gospel to all people - even those who have wronged me.

Jesus' last word to his disciples, before he ascended into heaven, was to make disciples of all people. (Matt. 28:19) We are told God wants all people to be saved (John 3:16) We are told people can't be saved without hearing the Word. (Romans 10:17) We are told we are God's ambassadors and God works through us to share the saving Word around the world (2 Cor. 5:19-20). Doing this is impossible if there are barriers between us and those God has put in our pathway of life. Ask God to help you pray for the person who has wronged you that both his and your soul may rest securely in his hands.

6. What joys do you experience when you have sincerely forgiven someone?

We have a feeling of peace and oneness with God. We have a sense of closure and a sense of freedom from sin, grumbling and complaining. We are able to joyfully live a life of thanksgiving for God's bounty. We worship wholeheartedly and with hunger receive the body and blood of our Savior as we remember this greatest act of forgiveness.

This week, ask God to help you forgive. Pray for those you are struggling with forgiving. Pray for someone who needs your forgiveness.

For your pondering - some Bible wisdom that may help you forgive:

Ephesians 4:1-3

Psalm 133

1 Peter 4:7-8

Philippians 3:13b-16

Matthew 7:7-8

Isaiah 43:1-2

Hebrews 12: 5-6,11

Ephesians 4:26-27, 31-32 Psalm 55:22

1 Peter 5:6-7

Romans 12:17-21

1 Samuel 25

Psalm 24

Psalm 55:22

The Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:9-13

Closing Prayer:

CW 493

"Forgive our sins as we forgive," you taught us, Lord, to pray,

But you alone can grant us grace to live the words we say.

*How can your pardon reach and bless the unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs and will not let old bitterness depart?*

*In blazing light your cross reveals the truth we dimly knew:
What trivial debts are owed to us; how great our debt to you!*

*Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls and bid resentment cease;
Then, bound to all in bonds of love our lives will spread your peace.*

God's Love: How God's Love Supports Me in Difficult Times

Lesson 5

Leader's Guide

Opening prayer

When sorrows like sea billows roll-

Whatever my lot

Thou hath taught me to say,

It is well, it is well with my soul. – Horatio Spafford, 1873

Sorrow is a natural response to trials and difficulties. But in his Word, God helps us discover why even in the darkest times of our lives we can say with convincing clarity, “It is well with my soul.”

1. How does joy differ from happiness?

Happiness is a transient emotion that can be somewhat flighty and is often dependent upon someone or something external to us and therefore can easily be out of our control. Joy is a deep-seated contentment that goes beyond emotion and meets a much deeper need. Joy is possible in the most dire of physical or emotional situations.

2. Read James 1:2-5, 12. It seems strange that we should “consider it pure joy...whenever we face trials of many kinds.” How can this be? Do you think trials are important in a Christian life?

Going through trials strengthens our faith and we are brought closer to God as we see his work in our lives. Trials can bring us to our knees as we acknowledge that only God can handle the issues of this life. This is right where God wants us – leaning on him and trusting in him to meet all our needs. We can

always rejoice in knowing that God is in control, has the plan, doesn't give us more than we can handle, that his work is being done, that he loves us ... and he gives us so many more promises that make us able to rejoice at all times, even in trials.

3. Read Hebrews 12:1-3. The author compares the Christian life, with all its difficulties, to a race. What advice does he give for this marathon and what's the analogy to our lives?

Wear the right clothes, nothing that hinders or entangles – stay away from anything that will come between us and God, or anything that will keep us from living a life that is less than completely committed to doing God's will: this could be habits, friends, priorities, attitude, pride...

Persevere – an athlete must train on good days and on bad days, on rainy days, hot days, headache days and beautiful spring days: God's grace fills us each and every day, God asks for our commitment to him each and every day,

Focus on the goal – a runner can't look backward and continue to make the same progress; he can't take his eye off the goal without stumbling or even getting lost. Whenever we take our eyes off Jesus, we lose our source of energy, falter and fall; but with our eyes firmly focused on Jesus and the love he has for us, we will make it safely to the finish line. A focus on Jesus brings us through the low times, makes the high times higher and gives us passion and a purpose

Do not grow weary and lose heart – if a runner begins to think he can't make it to the goal, he most likely won't; as we focus on our Lord and the many promises he has given us, we become confident that we can endure whatever comes our way, as long as Jesus is by our side, carrying us.

4. In Hebrews 12:7-11 the author goes on to tell us to look at hardship as a discipline. Read these verses. Where is the encouragement in what this tells us?

Our Lord loves us enough to make us better and stronger. He has a plan and goals for us to accomplish and he is fitting us to do his will. The right reaction of God's disciple is a confidence in his love.

What do you think it means to "share in his holiness" (vs 10)?

Proper training includes both instruction on the way to go and also correction. Through discipline God reclaims and redirects his wayward children. Our Holy God wants his children to be like him (Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect – Matt5:48). The Spirit leads us to the Savior, then leads us to walk more and more in the footsteps of that Savior until we are joined with him in heaven. This is the purpose of our discipline!

The results of discipline are "a harvest of righteousness and peace" (vs11). What might this look like in a person's life?

Contentment; peace based on the knowledge and conviction that our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled with God – we go to heaven!!!; an attitude that even though our difficulties may not come to an end, God will give us what we need to carry on; actively doing God's will by sharing the gospel and using our time, talents and treasures to his glory without regard to the good times or difficult times we go through.

5. How can our attitude toward our trials affect our spiritual growth?

We can put our energy into anger, denial, fear, anxiety, trying to control ... or into submission, acceptance and seeking wisdom from God. We either stand in the way so God can't work in us or we turn to God with humility and the desire to do his will, to glorify and honor him. Our attitude will affect our spiritual growth, either positively or negatively.

6. Difficult times can be truly difficult. Even Jesus struggled in his life on earth. Read Matthew 26:36-46 and identify first what Jesus did and then some practical things that we can do or that we can do for others as we face difficulties?

Jesus surrounded himself with friends and went to a secluded spot to pray. His wasn't a quick, light prayer but one that was so intense he sweated blood! He admitted that his soul was overwhelmed with sorrow and asked his Father for relief but at the same time was willing to submit to the Father's will. He continued to love his disciples even though he was overwhelmed (told them to not fall into temptation but watch and pray). He repeated his prayer three times.

We also can surround ourselves with Christian friends who can help support us when we are weak. There is strength in numbers! They can pray with us, read Scripture with us, encourage us, help us with the basic needs of life like food, transportation and cleaning.

We can admit to God that we are overwhelmed. There is no shame in this and besides, God already knows this. We are just acknowledging reality.

We can pray and not feel as if we are bothering God. He wants us to pray frequently and fervently and intensely. But when we pray, we acknowledge that everything be according to God's plan and in complete submission to his will. We pray with the confidence that God loves us and will do only what is good and necessary.

We strive to not become so self-focused that we ignore the well-being and spiritual health of our friends. We continue to pray for them, thank God for them and encourage them.

Closing Prayer:

CW 451

Precious Lord, take my hand lead me on, let me stand;

I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night,

Lead on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord; Lead me home.

When my way grows drear, precious Lord, linger near,

When my life is almost gone, hear my cry, hear my call;

Hold my hand lest I fall. Take my hand, precious Lord; Lead me home.