

A LifeGuide® Bible Study
DISTORTED IMAGES OF GOD
Restoring Our Vision
8 STUDIES FOR INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS
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Getting the Most Out of *Distorted Images of God*

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.

A. W. TOZER, *The Knowledge of the Holy*

Most of us developed our concepts and feelings about our heavenly Father from our earthly mothers and fathers, and these feelings become intertwined and confused. But the guilty and contradictory feelings are not the voice of God. They are often the continuing voice of Mother or Dad or Brother or Sister, or something internalized that puts pressure on us. Most of our basic patterns for relating come from the patterns of the relationships of our family.

DAVID SEAMANDS, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*

According to A. W. Tozer, our images of God are critically important to our spiritual well-being. And, according to David Seamands, these images of God are formed to a large extent by experiences in our families.

None of us has lived in a perfect family. Many people have experienced parents or other family members as emotionally distant, unreliable, abusive, unrealistic in their expectations, inattentive and weak, or as ones who abandon or withhold. As a result, we may see the God of the Bible through distorted lenses—lenses that may interfere with our ability to talk honestly with God or to trust God. Even more, our distorted images of God may keep us from fully experiencing God’s unfailing love for us.

Often our *images* of God influence us more powerfully than do our ideas or formal convictions *about* God, because images are rooted in powerful emotional experiences. Our images of God affect both how we feel about God and how we live in relationship to God. If we privately imagine God to be impossible to please, for example, we may spend our days feverishly slaving for the very One who invites us to rest. If we privately imagine God to be abusive we may spend our life hiding from the One who desires to carry us like a lamb close to the Shepherd’s heart. If we imagine God to be emotionally distant we may live cut off emotionally from the God who promises us empathy, help and grace in our times of need.

Our images of God often lay buried deep within us. Because our distorted images often begin to form early in life, we may not even be aware of them. In *The Knowledge of the Holy*, Tozer explains the situation this way: “Our real idea of God may lie buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what it is. Only after an ordeal of painful self probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God.”

Healing from our distorted images of God requires that we do the “vigorous search” to “unearth and expose” them, as Tozer suggests. At the same time, we also need to begin to read and reflect on imagery from Scripture about God, in ways that allow the good news of God’s unfailing love for us to sink deep within our hearts and minds.

The following studies examine biblical texts that directly challenge common distorted images of God. Some of the questions will ask you to make observations about the text. Other questions will encourage you to interpret parts of the text, based on your observations, and to apply the truth of the passage to your life. And other questions will ask you to engage with the images of God that these Scriptures offer, either by putting yourself in the story as one of the characters or by reflecting on the text in a way that allows the imagery to speak to your mind, your heart and your life.

Because our distorted images of God are often rooted in painful emotional experiences, identifying them and pursuing healing can be an emotionally challenging experience. If you find this to be the case, we encourage you to seek out the support of a trusted friend, pastor, spiritual director or counselor. It is also important to remember that healing deeply from distorted images of God will likely

mean healing slowly. None of us can change our distorted images of God simply by an act of our will, or by our own effort. What we can do is invite God to heal us and seek the support we need in the process. Our prayer is that these studies will be used by the Spirit to encourage you on your journey of identifying some of your distorted images of God and in gradually displacing these distortions with biblically accurate images of God.

May you experience God's healing presence as you come to see God more clearly.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.
2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.
3. Each study deals with a particular passage—so that you can delve into the author's meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.
4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. Observation questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. Interpretation questions delve into the meaning of the passage. Application questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.
Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word.
5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.
6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.
7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under "Now or Later," or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Distorted Images of God

1

The God of Impossible Expectations Versus the God of Compassion

Psalm 103:1–14

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+103%3A1%E2%80%9314&version=NLT>

Children have a tremendous need for approval from their parents and other important adults in their lives. Unfortunately, some adults, for whatever reason, withhold encouraging words and speak only to correct and criticize. When children are unable to win the approval they seek, they may take in negative messages, not only about themselves but also about God.

The result may be that God is seen as one who is never pleased. God's standards seem impossible. God's expectations always appear to be beyond reach. The image of God that results from experiences of this kind is described clearly by David Seamands in *Healing for Damaged Emotions*:

God ... is seen as a figure on top of a tall ladder. [The person] says to himself, "I'm going to climb up to God now. I'm His child, and I want to please Him, more than I want anything else." So he starts climbing, rung by rung, working so hard, until his knuckles are bleeding and his shins are bruised.... He climbs and struggles, but when he gets up there, his God has gone up another three rungs.... God is that little inner voice that always says, "That's not quite good enough."

In contrast to this distorted image, the God of the Bible is consistently presented as a gracious and merciful God who delights in each of us. The God of Scripture is a God who knows and accepts our limitations far better than we do ourselves.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Think of a little child you know and love—maybe a grandchild, a niece or nephew, your own child, or a child from your church. How will you respond to the child when he or she falls down in attempting to take his or her first steps? How will you respond when the child is hungry? How will you respond when watching the child play?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What would it be like to live or work with someone who rarely seemed pleased with you?

Psalm 103 reveals a God who knows our limitations and needs and who responds to our human condition with forgiveness, healing, compassion, strengthening, guidance, patience and love. *Read Psalm 103:1–14.*

1. What words does the psalmist use as he calls himself to this act of giving thanks (vv. 1–2)?
2. What is involved in the act of giving thanks?
3. In your experience, what happens to us when we express gratitude or praise?
4. Make a list of all the things the psalmist gives thanks for in verses 1–8.
5. Which of these gifts from God are you especially grateful for at this time?
6. What do these verses reveal about God?
7. What does the psalmist say about God in verses 9–14?
8. Based on this psalm, how would you explain to someone else God's expectations of us?
9. How does the image of God presented in this text challenge the image of a god-of-impossible-expectations?
10. How might this biblical image of God help you feel more accepted and loved by God?
11. Responding with praise or thanksgiving is a way of taking in the gifts of love God offers us. Write your own response of gratitude to God who is full of compassion and love for you.

Invite God to heal any distortions you might have of God as a God of impossible expectations. Pray for an increase in your ability to trust God's compassion for you.

Now or Later

Write a gratitude list each day this week, identifying specific gifts you are aware of receiving from God who is a God of compassion.

Distorted Images of God

2

The Emotionally Distant God Versus the God of Empathy and Grace

Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:1–10

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Hebrews+4%3A14%E2%80%9316%3B+5%3A1%E2%80%9310&version=NLT>

We are emotional beings who long for emotional connection with others. When others tune in to our emotions with understanding and empathy, we experience being seen and valued. A bond is formed, a relationship is created.

However, when significant others discount or judge our feelings, whether joy or fear or sadness, we can feel cut off and alone. We might even feel shame. The result is often emotional distance in the relationship.

When we suffer from such emotional distance with significant others—whether parents, pastors or friends—we may start to see God as unsympathetic and emotionally distant, cold and unapproachable. We may be left wondering, *How could God understand my problems? Why would God even care about what I feel?*

However, the image of an emotionally distant God is dramatically different from the image of Immanuel, “God with us.” God came and lived with us, as one of us. God, in Jesus, experienced our temptations and struggles and feelings.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Think about a relationship in which you have experienced emotional closeness. What are the benefits to you of having someone know and care about you emotionally?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What experiences in your life may have impacted your ability to see God as sympathetic and approachable?

Scripture teaches that God empathizes with us and offers us an intimacy that includes the emotional closeness for which we long. *Read Hebrews 4:14–16 and 5:1–10.*

1. What do you learn about the role of a priest in these verses?
2. According to these verses, what was it that allowed a high priest to “deal gently” with people?
3. From these verses, what qualifications does Jesus have to serve in this capacity?
4. What valuable roles might the high priest have played in the lives of the people?

5. Given these descriptions of Jesus' experience, what does it mean that Jesus can "sympathize with our weaknesses"?

6. Why is it important to know that Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses?

7. According to this passage, how can we expect God to respond to us when we are in need?

8. How does this text's image of God-who-sympathizes-with our-weakness compare or contrast with the image of a god-who-is-emotionally-distant?

9. Spend a few quiet minutes with God. Picture yourself approaching Jesus confidently. Picture Jesus understanding your feelings. Listen as he says to you, "Receive my mercy; here is grace for you in your time of need."

Describe your experience during this meditation.

10. What difference would it make to you as you face your current struggles to know that God deeply understands what you are going through and empathizes with you?

Take some time to share your needs and feelings with God-who-sympathizes-with-your-weaknesses.

Now or Later

Continue to identify your feelings this week and share them with the God who sympathizes with you. Keep a journal of the feelings you share with God and any sense you have of God providing you the help and compassion you need.

Distorted Images of God

3

The Inattentive God Versus the God Who Knows Us Intimately

Psalm 139:1–18

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+139%3A1%E2%80%9318&version=NLT>

“I just wish my parents would give me some attention! I feel so alone.” These were the words of a fourteen-year-old girl who had been admitted to the hospital after a suicide attempt. She was angry and lonely and ready to give up on life because she did not experience her parents as interested in her.

Parents are busy people. Their lives are full of anxieties about work and money and relationships. They live with a great deal of stress. They work long hours. They are tired. Sometimes they are depressed. They may have learned from their own childhoods not to talk and not to feel. So they may not be very good at helping their children talk and feel, and can end up communicating a lack of interest in their children. Even if they do manage to show interest in their child’s performance in athletics or in academics, they can still fail to communicate interest in the child as a person.

People who experienced their parents as inattentive often come to view God as inattentive as well. God may seem to be too busy with other matters to care or to listen or to even know that they exist. As a result, it may be very difficult for them to imagine that God could be intimately attentive to their daily joys and struggles of life.

The God found in the Bible, however, is intimately involved with us in every aspect of our lives. God is interested in what we need and think and feel and do, paying close, loving attention to us.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Think of experiences you have had with someone being lovingly attentive to you. What were those experiences like for you?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Reflect on the thought that God is lovingly attentive to you at all times. What response do you have to this thought about God?

Psalm 139 reveals a Creator who knows us intimately—a God who is with us, watching over us, loving us all the days of our lives, in every place and every circumstance. *Read Psalm 139:1–18.*

1. Make a list of all the verbs used in this text to describe God’s activities.

2. Now look over your list. What does all this active involvement in our lives communicate about God's character?

What does it reveal about God's abilities (especially in comparison to our human capabilities)?

3. What is the psalmist's response to God's attentiveness (vv. 6, 17–18)?

4. Looking again at your list of verbs, what is your response to these descriptions of God's active, loving involvement and attention in your life?

5. What is the significance of the imagery in verses 11–12?

6. Which of the descriptions of God's constant, attentive presence speaks the most to you at this time? Explain.

7. Paraphrase the stanza that the description you chose comes from.

What new insight did you gain?

8. How does this image of God-who-is-attentive contrast with the image of an inattentive god?

9. How might it affect you on a daily basis to trust that God pays loving attention to every detail of your life?

10. Write your own brief psalm of response to God based on what you've learned and experienced in this study. You might start with the words "Oh Lord, you know me, you see me, you are with me when ..."

Express your gratitude to God-who-is-attentive for the ways God lovingly sees you and every detail of your life.

Now or Later

At the end of each day this week, review the day, asking God to bring to your awareness the many ways that God was lovingly attending to you throughout the day.

Distorted Images of God

4

The Abusive God Versus the God Who Heals Us

Matthew 20:29–34

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+20%3A29%E2%80%9334&version=NLT>

We all are created with a longing to love and a longing to be loved. We long for relationships marked by kindness, respect, empathy and affection.

Unfortunately, too many people experience harsh criticism instead of affection, and abusive punishment instead of kindness and respect from important people in their lives. Too many people have encounters with peers, pastors or family members that convince them that they are not lovable or valuable or capable. And too many people are the victims of violent actions that leave them terrified and violated.

Experiences of emotional, spiritual, physical or sexual abuse can shatter any image of a loving God. God may be seen instead as easily angered and demanding. People can end up living with a private fear that if they don't think and act just right, God will punish them.

But the God of the Bible is not an abusive bully. God is not easily angered. God does not yell hurtful words at us or stand ready to club us. The God found in Scripture is, rather, the father of compassion. The God of the Bible is the God who heals us.

GROUP DISCUSSION. If someone believes that God is abusive, what specific images might they have of such a God?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What personal experiences might affect your ability to believe that God wants to heal you rather than hurt you?

The following story from the Gospel of Matthew is one of many stories of Jesus healing the sick, the lame and the blind. In Jesus we encounter the God who listens to us with compassion and responds to us by healing our wounds. *Read Matthew 20:29–34.*

1. What title would you give to this story?

2. When the blind men called to Jesus for mercy, “the crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet.” What kinds of things do you think the crowd might have said to these men?

3. Even beyond their words, what attitudes do you think the crowd might have had toward the blind men?
4. Compare Jesus' reaction to the men with the crowd's reaction. What did Jesus say and do in this passage?
5. What do Jesus' words and actions suggest about his attitude toward the men?
6. Jesus told his disciples that, having seen him, they had seen the Father (John 14:9–10). Given that Jesus came to show us the loving heart and face of God, what does Jesus' response to these men show us about God?
7. In addition to receiving their sight, how were the lives of the two men changed as a result of their encounter with Jesus?
8. How does the portrait of Jesus in this text challenge the image of an abusive God?
9. What experiences have you had of God's healing in your life?
10. How would it help you with your current struggles to know that God loves you and desires to heal you?
11. Reread this passage, putting yourself in the story as someone in the crowd. See the scene, and hear yourself and others responding to the blind men. Then hear and see Jesus' response. Make a brief note of your experience.

Now read the story again, this time putting yourself in the story as one of the blind men. Call out to Jesus for mercy. Hear the crowd's response to you. Take in Jesus' responses to you. Make a brief note of your experience.

Spend some time talking to God-who-heals about whatever healing you need today.

Now or Later

Read Matthew 15:29–39. Reread it slowly three times, sitting quietly for two to three minutes after each reading. Put yourself in the story each time as someone who was healed and fed by Jesus. Let yourself absorb this healing, compassionate encounter with Jesus. Write about your experience.

Distorted Images of God

5

The Unreliable God Versus the God Who Is Trustworthy

Psalm 145:1–16

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+145%3A1%E2%80%9316&version=NLT>

Many children conclude from observing the adults in their lives that people are unreliable. Adults sometimes make promises they do not keep. They sometimes get angry when there seems to be nothing to be angry about. They may be loving, attentive and kind at times and hostile, inattentive and unkind at other times. And these changes may take place without explanation and without an opportunity for clarification.

We all need love that's reliable and predictable in order to develop trust. When people whom we depend on are unreliable, we might feel confused and disappointed and, as a result, decide that we cannot count on others. We start to believe we can only count on ourselves.

When we have been repeatedly disappointed by parents or other significant people in our lives, we may, without even realizing it, come to see God as unreliable too—someone who cannot be trusted, who might be loving one day and unaccountably angry or distant the next. We may fear that we cannot really trust God's promises of grace and love and help.

The good news is that the image of an unreliable God stands in stark contrast to biblical images of God. The God of the Bible is the Faithful One, the Rock, the Fortress, the one who is “the same yesterday and today and forever,” as the author of Hebrews put it (Hebrews 13:8). The God of Scripture is a God of unfailing faithfulness and love.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Think of a person whom you see as reliable or trustworthy. Describe the person and your relationship to him or her.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Describe one or two experiences in your life that could have led you to conclude that people were either reliable or unreliable. What feelings do you have as you recall these events?

Psalm 145 is a psalm of praise to the God “whose kingdom is everlasting, whose dominion endures through all generations” and who “is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made” (v. 13). *Read Psalm 145:1–16.*

1. What does the psalmist say that one generation will tell to the next (vv. 3–7)?

2. What does this pattern of one generation telling these truths about God to the next say about God's constancy, faithfulness and trustworthiness?

3. What does the psalmist say that he will do in response to God (vv. 1–7)?

What effect do you think these activities might have on him?

4. How else does the psalmist describe the Lord and his kingdom (vv. 8–13)?

5. In verses 13–16 the psalmist paints an even more tender picture of God. Paraphrase what he says here.

6. What image of God comes through to you most clearly from this psalm?

7. How do the images of God in this text challenge the image of an unreliable god?

8. How would your life change if you were to more fully trust and believe that God is gracious, compassionate, rich in love and good to all, faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made?

9. What are some of the specific ways and times that you have seen God's trustworthiness in your life?

10. In order to correct distorted images of God, we need to allow ourselves to be engaged by the biblical text. Read the following phrases from verses 13–16: "The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing." Sit with these images for a few minutes. Then reread the phrases and sit with the images again for a few minutes. Describe your thoughts and feelings during this meditation.

Spend some time talking to God-who-is-trustworthy, asking for a greater capacity to trust in God's unfailing love.

Now or Later

Ask God to heal you so that you can learn to rely on God's unfailing love more fully every day. Express thanks to God each day for the ways you see God's faithfulness and trustworthiness in your life. Keep a journal of your daily experiences of learning to trust God's love for you and for others.

Distorted Images of God

6

The God Who Abandons Versus the God Who Pursues

Luke 15:1–7

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+15%3A1%E2%80%977&version=NLT>

Separation. Divorce. Death. Prolonged hospitalization of a parent. Mom's or Dad's endless hours at the bar. Or at work. Or at church. For a child, these are experiences of abandonment. One of their parents, to whom they look for their very survival, has left them.

Any type of abandonment is terribly traumatic for a child, in part because their perspective of reality is very limited. When they ask, "Why would my parent leave me?" the conclusion they arrive at is often, "It must have been my fault. If I had been better [or happier or nicer], my parent would not have left." A child who has been abandoned can therefore end up with feelings of anxiety and over-responsibility. Their sense of security may be destroyed. And they may harbor a deep fear that other people they love will leave too.

Out of this insecurity and fear grows an image of God as one who will also abandon. Because of this fear, a person may try very hard to please God, hoping that God will not leave. But the fear of abandonment by God may always be there.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Have you ever seen a child in a public place who has been separated from their parent(s)? What did you observe? What did you do?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Describe a time when you felt alone or abandoned or forgotten. Describe a time when you felt remembered and loved.

The god-who-abandons is not the God of the Bible. Scripture presents us with God-who-will-never-leave-or-forsake-us and God-who-will-be-with-us-until-the-end. Moreover, when we are lost, God-the-Good-Shepherd will pursue us and will carry us home with great joy. *Read Luke 15:1–7.*

1. How does the tax collectors' and sinners' response to Jesus differ from that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law?

What is significant about this difference in responses?

2. Why do you think the Pharisees believe it is wrong for Jesus to "[welcome] sinners and [eat] with them"?

3. Put yourself in the place of one of the Pharisees or teachers of the law. You are highly educated, highly religious and highly respected. You believe Jesus is very wrong for eating with “sinners.” Privately you have tried very hard to please God, but you feel like you cannot do enough to keep God from judging you and abandoning you. How might you experience the story Jesus tells in this text?

4. Put yourself in the place of one of the “sinners” listening to this story. You cannot imagine that God could care about you. Because of your own choices or because of how you have been treated by others, you believe God has abandoned you. How might you experience this story?

5. What does this story tell us about how God sees us?

6. What does this story tell us about God?

7. How does the image of God that Jesus gives us in the story compare with your personal images of God?

8. How might the realization that God has taken the initiative to have a relationship with you help you to be more secure in that relationship?

9. Imagine for a few moments that you have gotten caught in a thicket. God notices that you are missing and sets out to find you. Imagine that when God finds you, God’s face is full of joy; God’s response to seeing you is delight that is rooted in love. Let God pick you up and carry you close. You are found. You are loved by your Maker, your Shepherd God. Sit with this image for a few minutes. Describe your thoughts and feelings in response to this meditation.

10. What difference would it make to you in your current struggles to remember that God will never leave you but will always pursue you in love?

Spend some time thanking God for being God-who-seeks-you-and-rejoices-over-you.

Now or Later

Spend time each day this week with the images from Jesus’ story. Reread the story slowly and sit with it for a few minutes, and then read it again. And again. Write about your experience as you do this each day.

Distorted Images of God

7

The God Who Withholds Versus the God Who Provides

Matthew 6:25–34; 7:7–11

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+6%3A25%E2%80%9334%3B+7%3A7%E2%80%9311&version=NLT>

As human babies, we all come into the world completely dependent. At birth and for many years thereafter, we need adults to provide food, clothing, shelter, safety, empathy, structure, guidance, affirmation, and a sense of belonging and of being valued and loved in order to survive and thrive. Without this kind of support, we will die, either physically, psychologically or spiritually. Our sense of self as valuable and our sense of others as trustworthy will be damaged. And our ability to trust in God-who-provides will be replaced with deeply rooted anxiety about whether or not God is prepared to care for us in the ways we need.

Jesus often spoke about anxiety and provision. He understood that deficits in care can lead to deep, sometimes disabling, fears that we are not valued, that we are not loved, that we are on our own to provide for ourselves. He also understood that these anxieties are connected to our anxieties about God. So he spoke directly to our worst fears, often talking about God as the One who feeds the birds, nourishes the flowers and pours out good gifts from a heart of unfailing love.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What experiences might help a child know that they are loved and valued?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What fears are you aware of about God's desire to provide good things for you?

In the following texts from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus addresses our anxieties. Will God provide for us? Does God value us enough to care about our needs? Yes, Jesus answers. Yes. God values us even more than the lilies of the field or the birds of the air whom God sustains. God loves us more than the most loving human parent loves his or her own child. *Read Matthew 6:25–34 and 7:7–11.*

1. In Matthew 6:25–32 Jesus acknowledges that we worry about many things in life. What are the specific worries that Jesus names?

2. What threat does the lack of these things hold for us?

3. How do your worries about these things get expressed?
4. What change of perspective is Jesus offering to his listeners as he speaks about the birds and the lilies of the field?
5. In verse 26 Jesus talks about our value to God. Why is it sometimes—or even often—hard to believe we are deeply valued by God?
6. What practices might help you come to believe more deeply that you are incredibly valuable to God?
7. What does Jesus mean by his call to “seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness”?
8. In Matthew 7:7–11 Jesus continues the conversation about God’s desire to provide for us. What does Jesus say about God’s desire to give us good gifts?
9. How does the image of God that Jesus offers challenge the image of a god-who-withholds-good-things?
10. What difference might it make in your life to trust in God’s goodness and desire to provide for your needs?
11. Even though God gives gifts in abundance without our asking, Jesus suggests that our part in receiving God’s good gifts is in asking, seeking and knocking. Why might these be important activities for us?
12. In a time of quiet, open your hands as a symbol of openness to God’s goodness. Ask God to help you let go of your worries. Turn each worry over to God’s loving care. As you continue to sit with hands open in prayer, ask God to increase your capacity to trust in God’s desire to provide all you need. With hands open, receive God’s care for you, God’s dearly loved child.

Share with God-who-provides whatever needs and concerns you have today.

Now or Later

Spend time in prayer at the beginning of each day with open hands, letting go of worry, entrusting yourself to God’s loving care. At the end of each day, write about your observations of the ways God cared for you throughout the day.

Distorted Images of God

8

The God Who Is Weak Versus the God Who Is All-Powerful

Luke 8:22–56

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+8%3A22%E2%80%9356&version=NLT>

Children look to their parents for guidance and security. They need their parents to be strong and capable. But sometimes parents are overwhelmed or ill or depressed. Sometimes parents are passive. Sometimes they're frightened. Much of life is beyond a parent's control. Illness, accidents and tragedies happen. All these signs of human weakness can be deeply unsettling for children.

But God, our true Parent, is all-powerful. God's power is the power that created and continues to create. It is the power that sustains and contains and heals and blesses and provides. God's power is the power of love—a love that flows constantly from the heart of God into our lives, into our world.

In spite of evidence everywhere in creation of God's creative, sustaining power, many of us come to believe that God is weak in some way, and that God needs us to take over and be in charge. We may literally try to "play god" in our own lives and in the lives of others. Jesus came to show us the hands and face and power of the love of God. He calmed the storm, drove out demons, healed the sick and restored life to a child. The power of love to bless and release and redeem is a Power to whom we can entrust our lives.

GROUP DISCUSSION. When you think of God's power, what images or stories come to mind?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What experiences in your past might make it difficult for you to trust the power of God's love?

The God of the Bible is the Creator and Sustainer of all things whose active, powerful love was demonstrated to us in Jesus. *Read Luke 8:22–56.*

1. What headline would you give to each of these four stories from Jesus' ministry?
2. In the first story, after Jesus calms the storm, the disciples ask each other, "Who is this?" What do you imagine they were saying to each other in answer to this question?

3. In the second story, the people of the region of the Garasenes, where Jesus healed the demon-possessed man, ask Jesus to leave the area because they are afraid. What do you think caused them to feel afraid?

4. In the third story, the woman who is healed had been suffering for twelve years, and no one was able to help her. What do you imagine she was thinking and feeling as she reached out to Jesus?

What do you imagine she experienced as she returned home that day?

5. In the fourth story, Jairus and his wife witness Jesus restore a child they believed to be dead. The text says they “were astonished.” What might they have come to believe about Jesus and about God the Father that day?

6. Read through this passage again slowly, pausing briefly after each of the four stories. Put yourself in the place of one of the disciples. Watch Jesus calm the raging storm. Watch him free the demon-possessed man from terrible suffering. Listen as he blesses the bleeding woman for her faith—even though, according to the law, her touch would have made him unclean—and confirms both her healing and his love for her. Watch as he goes to the little girl whose anguished parents believe she is dead; listen as he takes the child by the hand and speaks to her. Let yourself take it all in as much as you can.

What was your experience as you placed yourself in these stories?

What new details did you notice?

7. What overall response do you have to these stories of God’s work?

8. Which story speaks to you the most, and why?

9. What do these four stories show us about God?

10. How does this view of God challenge perceptions of a godwho-is-weak?

11. How might it change your life to trust that God’s love is powerful enough and tender enough to calm storms, heal the sick and possessed, and raise the dead?

Talk with God about whatever powerful calming, freeing, healing or restoring you need.

Now or Later

Each day this week, reread the story from this text that spoke to you the most. Continue to let the story of God's powerful love speak to you. Write a prayer, inviting God to show you the power of God's love in tangible ways in your own life.¹

¹ Ryan, Dale, and Juanita Ryan. [*Distorted Images of God: Restoring Our Vision: 8 Studies for Individuals or Groups: With Notes for Leaders*](#). Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2012. Print. A LifeGuide Bible Study.