

thESource *Bible Study*

With Arms Outstretched

by Walt Waiser

Many Bible texts assure us of God's love; others focus on the love God's people have for one another. Still, we often feel lonely, isolated, and afraid that no one loves us. These three Bible studies are designed to help us explore some of our fears of being unloved as we seek the Spirit's help to open us to receive caring from others.

These studies offer an opportunity:

- to let God affirm His love for us;
- to open up to others so they can care for us;
- to let God use us to care for others.

Remember, it is not easy to talk about being unloved, so be sure to listen compassionately as each person shares. As leader, you will want to think through each study as you decide how to respond to each participant's needs and what parts of each study will fit your group.

One: With Arms Outstretched to Receive God's Love

Introduction

In the midst of all the talk of love in the world, both Christian and secular, there are still times when we wonder if anyone cares about us. In this study we want to hear God affirm His love for us.

My Fears That No One Cares

You might introduce this study with words like these: Frequently this fear is expressed: "Will I fit in?" To avoid facing the need to test whether or not we will fit in, we almost never go anywhere without a friend. Imagine for a moment you have to attend a party/gathering of people your age alone and don't know anyone there.

Move participants into groups of three to four and let them share responses to some of the following:

1. How do you feel as you walk in? Does anyone come up to find out who you are or make friends? Why or why not? If no one comes up to you, what do you do? Imagine sitting there by yourself—share what you are thinking and feeling.
2. Feeling that no one cares about you is not just something you experience in an imagination game, it's a very real experience. Share a time when you felt that no one cared about or loved you. To help the discussion you might suggest a time when you made a mistake and felt if anyone found out they could never accept you again; or a time when you felt you didn't fit in because everyone else was better looking, smarter, had more money, etc.; or a time when everyone around you seemed too busy to listen and talk with you about your problems. Let participants suggest other times.

Opening Up to God

Assure the participants that typically when we feel alone and hurt we react by saying, "Where in the world are you, God, when I need you?" That, at least, is a turn in the right direction. Many of the Psalmists shared their feelings of abandonment with God.

Fortunately, what we feel and what is the truth aren't always the same. The truth is that God loves us very deeply. He is intimately concerned about every moment of our lives (if need be, repeat that three times).

Read Ezekiel 34:11-16 aloud. Note that these words from God came at a very low point in the history of the children of Israel at a time when they were feeling very alone. Ask participants to discuss the following in groups of three to four:

1. Which of the verses or lines seem to speak the most comfort?
2. Notice and underline the times that the personal pronouns "I" or "myself" are used. How might that be especially comforting?

3. If you were feeling that no one cared, which of these verses would make you feel that God was intimately concerned about your life?

Worship

Psalm 23, best known as the Shepherd Psalm, has spoken to people for hundreds of years, assuring them of God's personal concern. Read the psalm from the King James Version and then a more modern version. Let each person choose one verse that speaks God's love to them as they need to hear it right now and share it with the group.

To affirm your faith that God does just what He promises, have the group read Psalm 23 in unison from the version of choice as a statement of faith. Close with a shared or circle prayer.

Two: With Arms Outstretched to Receive Love from Others

Introduction

God assures us of His love for us through His word, but He also loves us through others. This study will help us explore ways to open ourselves to others around us to sense their love for us.

Our Games of Hide and Seek

Suggest to the participants that the feeling that no one cares is, to some extent, common to everyone. When people feel that no one cares they often react in one of two ways:

1. Either they fake it, and continue to act like they are the happiest person around.
2. They close themselves off from others and begin to act like no one could possibly understand and care about them.

Which are you more likely to do?

What message will your actions probably send to those around you?

My Need for Others

Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-16 aloud. Note that Paul uses the analogy of a body to describe the Church. He emphasizes the need for each part to function properly, and the interdependence of each part on the other.

Discuss in small groups:

1. What does verse 21 say about interdependence? (If you don't believe each part needs the other, try to think of one part of the body that can serve itself or stand alone. Then try having your thumb scratch itself.)
2. Instinct tells me to curl up around any hurt to hide it and try to work it out myself. What does verse 26 suggest about hiding my hurts and fears?

Opening Up to Others

Tell participants that Lloyd Ogilvie in his book *Let God Love You* maintains that to receive love you must open yourself to others. He says, "to let God love you is to let God know you; and to let God know you is to be open to Him." Write the quote somewhere that the whole group can see it. Discuss: What does the phrase mean to you?

Then read this quote from Ogilvie: "This flows naturally into a whole new quality of relationships; to love people is to let them love you; to let them love you is to let them know you; to let them know you is to be open about your hurts and your hopes." Again discuss what this statement means.

Remind the young people that the people most likely to care about them are their parents (believe it or not) and their friends. For them to continue to care, it is important that we drop "the game of hide and seek" as we let them know us. "To let them know you is to be open about your hurts and your hopes." You can begin to open yourself by sharing some of your hurts, hopes and needs with the others in your group.

Let participants complete the following sentence stems and share them in their groups of three to four.

1. I feel that my parents don't care when...

2. One of the things I need from them is...
3. I feel that my friends don't care when...
4. One of the things I need from them is...

Worship

As you celebrate the oneness we share and our need for each other, instruct participants to form a circle. After everyone has had a chance to silently read the words to "Blest Be the Tie that Binds" (LSB 649, LW 205, TLH 464) sing it together.

Close with a shared prayer or circle prayer.

Three: With Arms Outstretched to Care for Others

Introduction

The outstretched arms of God and others reach out to help us feel loved. God also intends to touch others with His love using our outstretched arms. This study will help us become more sensitive to the unloved feelings of others and consider ways to care about them.

The Need to Feel Loveable

Introduce your study with words like these:

Dr. Sidney B. Simon, a pioneer in caring education, says that everyone wears a sign that reads, "I am loveable and capable." You can't see it but it's still there and no one can take it off. All need to feel that they are worthy of love and that others do care about what's happening to them. Unfortunately, too little of our time is spent looking for ways to make other people feel that we really do care about them.

Move participants into groups of three to four and discuss the following:

1. Think about and share the last time you did or said something for one of your parents to make them feel special—as if you really cared about them.
2. Think about and share the last time you did or said something to make a friend or classmate feel special—as if you really cared about them.
3. Think about and share the last time you noticed that someone else was feeling down and did or said something to let them know someone cared. As small groups conclude their sharing, ask, "What have you learned about our ability to affirm others from your discussion?"

Encouragement to Affirm Others

Read Romans 12:10 and Ephesians 4:29 from various versions and discuss their meanings using the suggestions below.

1. Think of someone you know who seems eager to show respect or honor for others and share how it feels to be around him or her.
2. Think of someone who needs to hear words that build him up—someone who few people seem to care for.
3. Think about what you might say or do to make that person feel loved. How can you act on your plan?

Remind participants that Philippians is one of Paul's most intimate and personal letters. As you read the opening section of his letter in 1:3-11, instruct participants to imagine how they would feel as they heard these words from a close friend.

Then suggest the participants do one or more of the following in small groups:

1. List the phrases that would help them sense Paul's deep care for them.
2. Share the name of someone for whom they would like to thank God and why. Some might write it in a letter to that person to let him or her know how important he or she is to them.
3. Think of someone who is experiencing some real difficulty in his or her life. Determine to keep that person in their daily prayers for the next week and decide what they might do to let him or her know they care. How can they put their plan into action?

Worship

Read aloud Leslie Brandt's paraphrase of Psalm 20 from his book *Psalms Now*. Let participants reflect as you read it aloud again. Join in prayer for the people who need your care. Affirm your hope for them and all of life by singing "Our God Our Help in Ages Past" (LSB 733, LW 180, TLH 123).

Close with a shared prayer or circle prayer.

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