

What Readers are Saying

As a part-time working mother with five children, ranging in age from infant to teenager, I realize that emotional needs run high in our house. Each chapter seemed like it was written for me and led me to reflect on my reactions to current stressors and past traumatic events. I gleaned valuable strategies to help me grow in and tend to my own emotional and mental health and that of my family—all grounded in biblical truth. This study engaged me in a way no other Bible study has, and I especially appreciated the author's emphasis on building up Christian community, because "we don't need to do hard things alone."

— Karla Reagles, part-time University of Minnesota
Extension employee and stay-at-home mom

Strong IN THE LORD



A WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDY
ON FAITH AND MENTAL HEALTH



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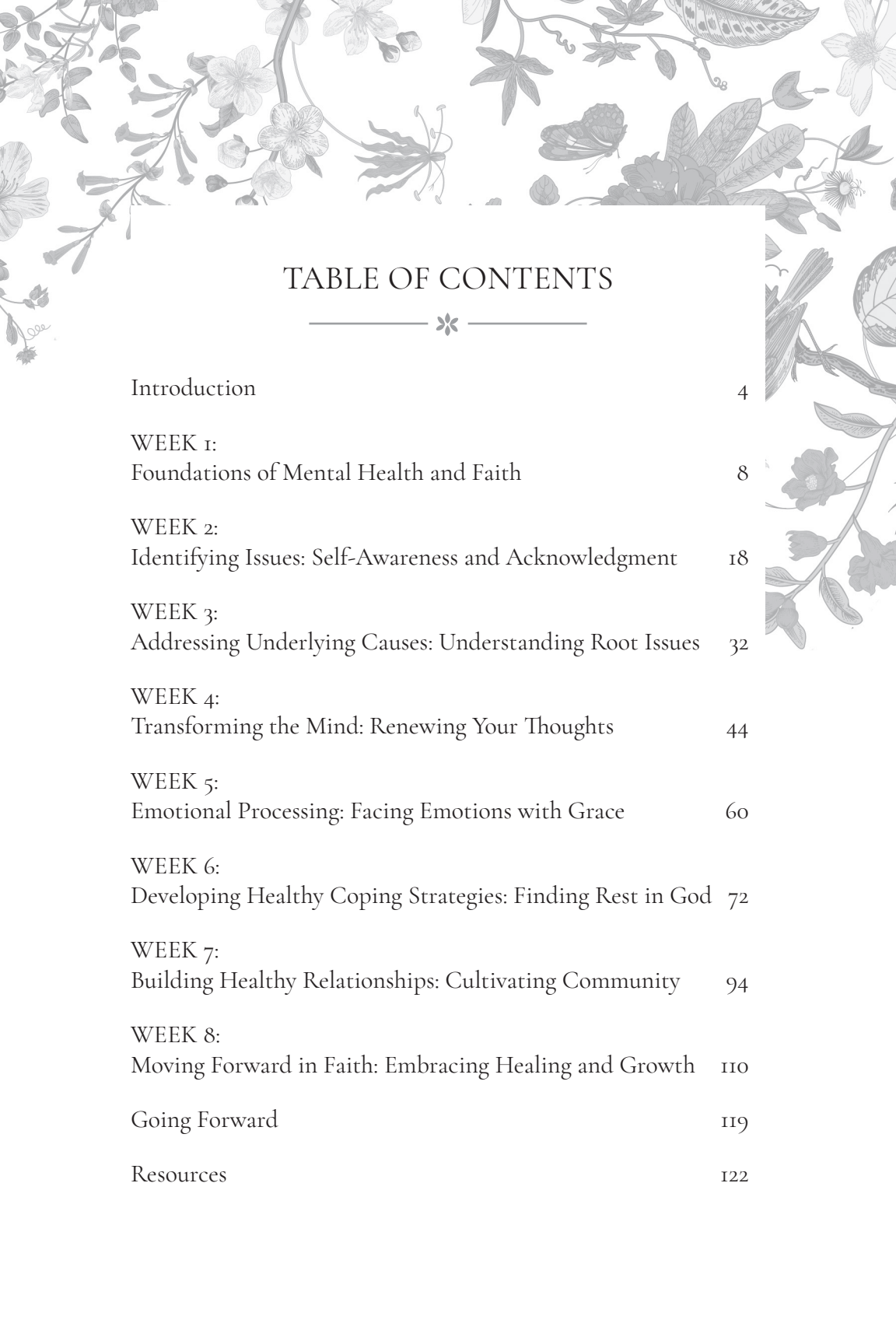


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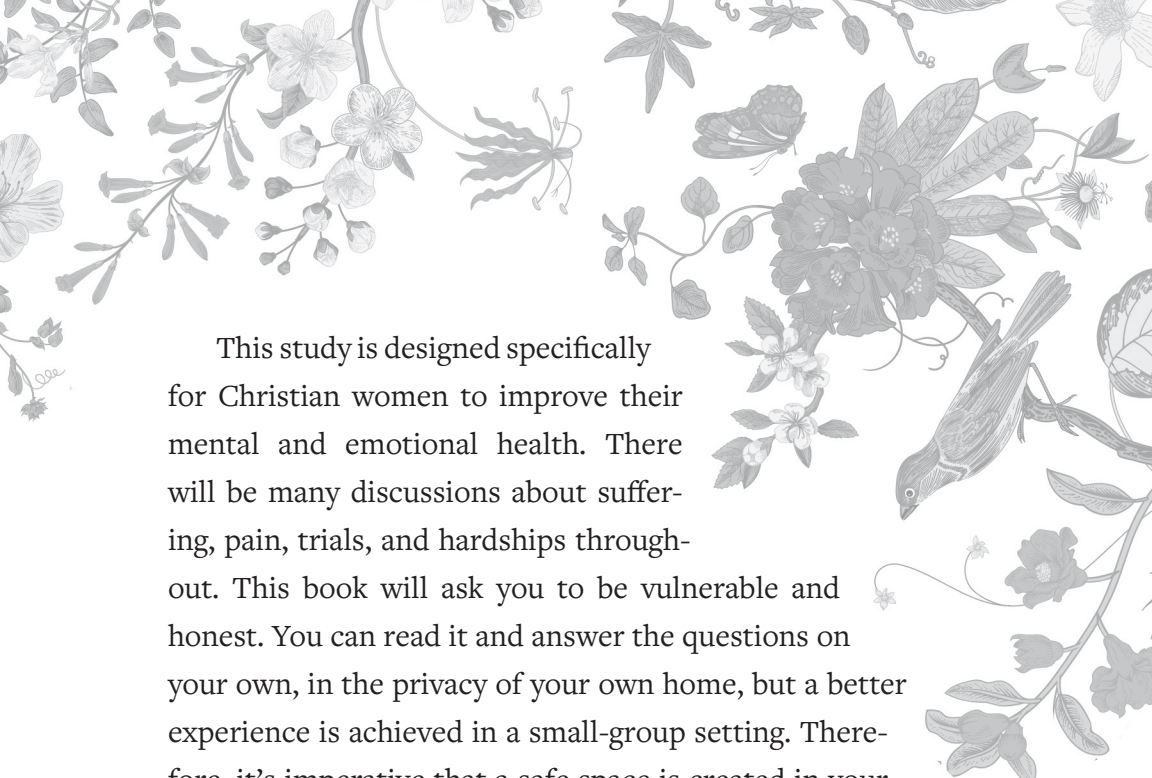
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Strong in the Lord*, a Bible study that integrates mental health principles with biblical perspectives. My name is Jenna. I'm a Christian woman and a professor who specializes in teaching about addiction and mental health. The goal of this study is to draw on psychological studies and data alongside the beautiful truths of the Bible that God has given us to enhance our understanding of mental and emotional health. My aim is that you will gain comfort and strength in knowing, as a woman, the following:

- You are not alone.
- You have a unique set of emotions, thoughts, experiences, and needs.
- God has given you tools to understand, share, and optimize steps toward healthy well-being.
- Utilizing those tools effectively, you will be better able to serve God, your family, and your community at large.

You were created in God's image, which means you are designed for relationships—with God, others, and yourself. Our emotions, thoughts, and bodies are not accidents; they are part of God's perfect design. However, sin has distorted how we experience our existence as children of God. This distortion can appear not only in our actions but also in our fears, thought patterns, relationships, and sense of self. My goal with this book is to encourage you while constantly pointing you back to Scripture. Consider me a friend, mentor, or personal cheerleader, someone in your corner who guides you toward understanding your mental and emotional health with a biblical foundation. You are doing brave work, and I'm so glad you're here.



This study is designed specifically for Christian women to improve their mental and emotional health. There will be many discussions about suffering, pain, trials, and hardships throughout. This book will ask you to be vulnerable and honest. You can read it and answer the questions on your own, in the privacy of your own home, but a better experience is achieved in a small-group setting. Therefore, it's imperative that a safe space is created in your group—a core element of which is that trust is established among those who attend. If someone discusses something they are struggling with or something painful they have experienced, it's critical that this information is not shared outside of the group, even with spouses, best friends, or significant others.

To get the most from your group time, it will be helpful to read each chapter ahead of time and think about the questions before your group meets. Pray before you read and before your group meets too. During meetings, share only what you feel comfortable sharing, but do be honest. Group members can offer meaningful support, encouragement, and guidance that you might not receive anywhere else.

Journaling after group discussions is optional, but it is a wonderful tool to help you process. You don't have to go in-depth in your journal unless you want to. Some days, you might

be able to write only a sentence or two, but it is still well worth the effort. And writing Bible verses that are especially meaningful is a great way to take them to heart.

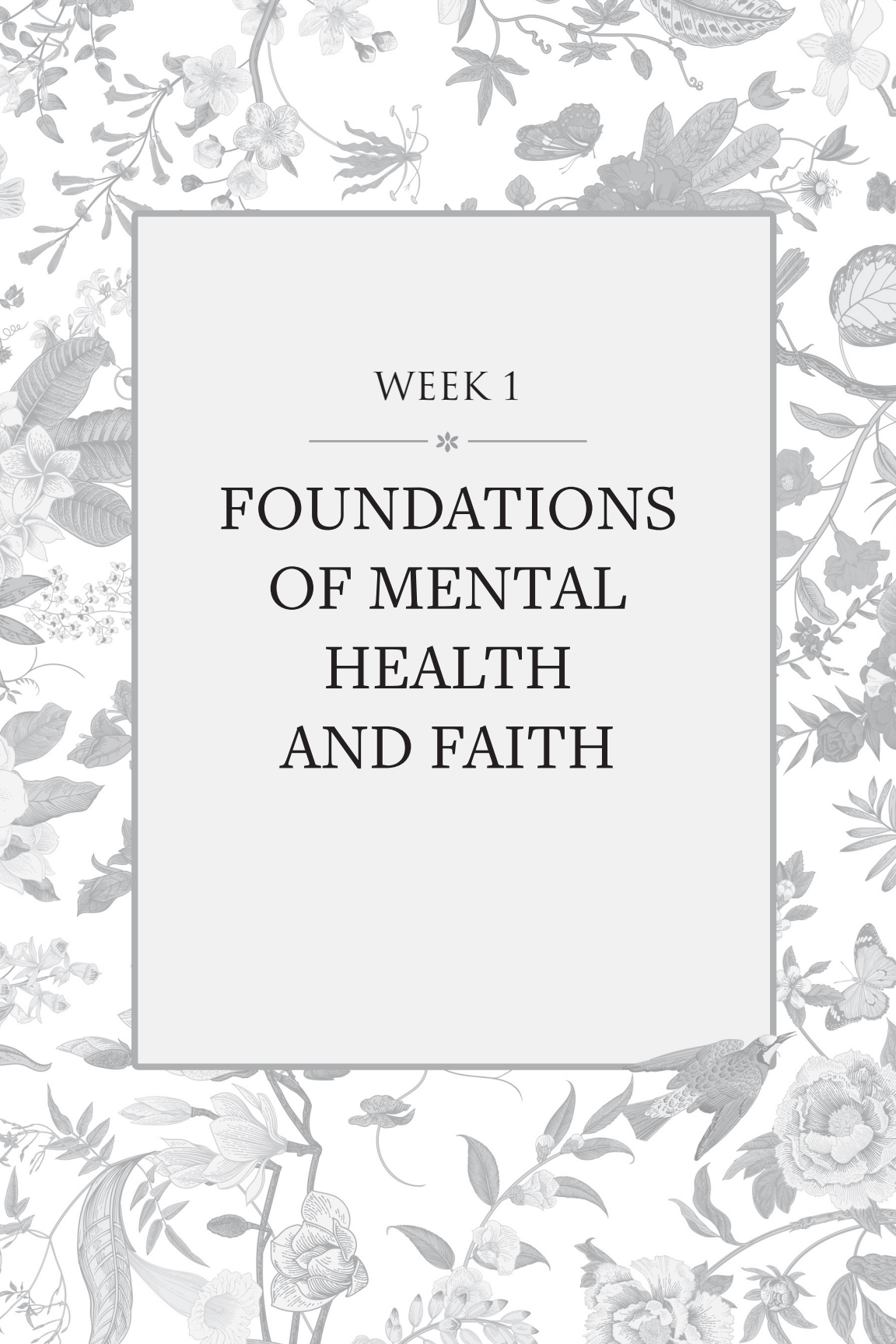
In addition to prayer, studying Scripture, and journaling—all the things this study encourages you to do—the content of this book and the group discussions you have about it might inspire you to seek additional resources. I encourage you to do this, but be warned that a quick online search will yield an overwhelming amount of information, tools, and other books. I'm familiar with many of these resources and have listed a few at the end of this study. Yet I do this with a caveat: Be alert to ideologies and doctrines that are not consistent with what you know from God's Word and the teachings of our church body. Some resources conflict with what we believe, teach, and confess, and they will, therefore, be counterproductive. So be cautious—but do keep going.

While talking about hard things is beneficial—and receiving support in a small group helps us know we aren't alone—it's important to note that this study (and the meetings or sessions where the study is discussed) are not designed to supplant therapy or professional mental health services. Please use your discretion about the types of issues you disclose and consider seeking professional support for mental health symptoms or situations that have been traumatic or chronic.

Pain is a universal human experience. It's vital for us to acknowledge that life can be really hard sometimes. As women, we may frequently feel exhaustion, frustration, anxiety, and anger—and these feelings can be hard to talk about. In ad-

dition, we so often care for the needs of others (and absorb their emotions) that sometimes we are left feeling depleted and empty. Realizing and sharing what we need can feel selfish; we may even feel confused about our emotions and reactions. The beauty of this study is that we will frequently return to the truth, which is this: We find rest in Christ.

Another joy of this study is that when we meet as a group of Christian women, we are reminded that we don't need to do hard things alone. Christian fellowship with other believers is a true gift. In such a community, we can learn about dealing with challenging circumstances and hard feelings through the words and wisdom others share and through new perspectives in this book. Underlying all this though is the truth of Christ's Gospel. This is where you find peace, grace, understanding, and hope. God's Word, as you will read in the pages following, also gives us the best coping mechanisms! Pain is universal, but God never leaves us alone in it!



WEEK 1



FOUNDATIONS
OF MENTAL
HEALTH
AND FAITH



OPENING PRAYER

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen

Have there been times in your life when you've felt like you were at your breaking point? There have been many times in my life when I've felt overwhelmed to the point of questioning whether I was able to handle the challenges and situations I've faced. When my husband and I were first married, we bought a fixer-upper house with a lot of confidence and very little skill. This was when DIY home remodeling shows were at the height of popularity, and these kinds of shows make home renovation look easy and seem inexpensive. When we bought the house, we were newlyweds in our mid-twenties and both in graduate school—we had no real home renovation experience and very little money. We jumped in anyway, and as we were working on the house, we learned that we were expecting our first child.

Shortly before I gave birth, my husband fell through the floor of the tiny room that was meant to be both the nursery and the laundry room. Thankfully, he wasn't hurt, but that mo-

ment felt symbolic of everything I was carrying at that time. Living in the middle of the mess of home renovation, working on my dissertation, preparing to care for a newborn, grieving a sudden death in the family—and then that crash through the floor—pushed me all at once to what felt like my breaking point.

Read the following passage to hear from the Word of God what we are to do when we feel weary, broken, exhausted, and worn out, then answer the questions below.

Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.
(Matthew 11:28–30)

What are the characteristics and circumstances of the people God is asking to come to Him?

What does He promise He will give them?

Talk about a time when you felt particularly heavy-laden or weary. What was going on for you at the time?

What are ways you can remember to come to God first when you feel this way?

Many times when we feel overwhelmed, anxious, frustrated, or even bored, we may automatically reach for something to change how we feel. We distract ourselves with movies and TV shows or scroll social media on our phones, looking for anything that will help us unwind. But whether we're consuming celebrity content or the posts of our own friends, such constant exposure to the lives of others, especially when we're at a low point, can leave us feeling left behind or inadequate—as if we are doing life wrong. Instead of bringing rest, these habits can increase our anxiety and rob us of joy. When anxiety takes hold, our minds often move into rumination. Rumination is a pattern of thinking that becomes repetitive, unresolved, and focused on worry. We replay past events, imagine worst-case scenarios, and come back to the same thoughts without finding solutions or relief. How often do you lie awake at night thinking about your problems or other things that trouble you? How often do the same worries surface, with no resolution in sight?

I know this pattern well. When I'm facing a problem, my instinct is to try to solve it on my own. Often, that only intensifies my worry. When my son was in kindergarten, he jumped out of a tree and injured his foot. He wore a cast and rested (which was challenging for a six-year-old in the summer!), but when the cast came off, the pain wasn't gone. He struggled to walk normally, and no one could explain why. We consulted

physicians, physical therapists, podiatrists, and pediatric surgeons, but no one could identify a clear cause or solution.

I remember researching any possible avenue that might help—exercises, nutrition changes, supplements—and lying awake at night thinking about how this injury might impact my son’s future. I worried about whether he would be able to play sports, stay active, or even move without pain. My thoughts were intrusive, repetitive, and fixed on the worst-case scenario. This is rumination. Our brain begins to spiral, and we feel out of control with our problems. Thankfully, there are many wonderful Scripture passages that remind us where to go when we experience such worry.

Read the passage below to hear from the Word of God what we are to do when we feel anxious, frustrated, and overwhelmed, then answer the questions that follow.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6–7)

What does this passage tell us to do in everything?

What does it mean when something “surpasses all understanding”? Why is this an important reminder?

In verse 7, what will guard our hearts and minds? In whom will it guard our hearts and minds?

Along with the everyday worries and anxieties of life, some seasons can feel especially heavy. Serious health concerns, mental health struggles, financial hardship, or sudden loss can leave us feeling overwhelmed—not only by our own pain but by the emotional load we often carry for others as well.

When we are struggling, it can be tempting to downplay our pain. We tell ourselves we shouldn't feel this way or that others have it harder. While those thoughts may come easily, they rarely bring comfort. Instead, they can leave us feeling disconnected from our own emotions. At times, when I'm hurting, I think that no one could possibly understand all I'm carrying. At other moments, I'm embarrassed by my struggles, believing I should be able to handle them because others are facing more difficult circumstances. Neither of these responses brings peace. Both tend to push me further into isolation.

God's Word reminds us that pain is part of the human experience in our broken world and that it does not need to be justified, minimized, or compared. Pain exists because sin entered the world. Sometimes the amount of pain and suffering that we or others suffer seems unfathomable—the death of a child, chronic pain, a terminal diagnosis, an addiction over which there is no control. Still, amid our pain and suffering, our compassionate God is with us. He is with us in the words of Scripture. He is with us in the gifts of our Baptism (which

last forever!). God invites us to bring our anxieties to Him in prayer, trusting His peace to guard our hearts and minds.

Read the following passage to hear from the Word of God what we are to do when we feel an emotional burden, then respond to the questions below.

When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. (Psalm 34:17–18)

How does God respond when the righteous cry for help? What does He do for those who are crushed in spirit?

What role, if any, does comparing yourself to others play when you're feeling brokenhearted or crushed in spirit?

How can this passage help you when you feel this way?

When we are weary, brokenhearted, anxious, or overwhelmed, God invites us to come to Him. He draws us near to Himself and offers us rest. When we feel lost, alone, or weighed down by problems that feel too heavy to carry, the Holy Spirit reminds us that our compassionate God is near us—in His Word, in the reminder of our Baptism, and as we kneel at the communion rail. He alone gives us a peace so complete,

so powerful that it surpasses our human understanding. Each time I hear, “May the peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,” I’m reminded of just how profound the peace we have access to truly is.

Peace is not found within ourselves. It isn’t found in self-help, self-care, mindfulness, lavender candles, or even in the love of our family. This peace is found in Christ alone. Psalm 56:3 says, “When I am afraid, I put my trust in You.” With prayer and petition, we trust that God hears us and faithfully guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Psalm 4:8 reminds us, “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.” Our safe place is found in the Lord. We can trust Him and know that He will hear us and will protect us. When we are depleted, exhausted, burned out, afraid, and struggling with rumination, racing thoughts, anxiety, or depression, we know we can access a peace that is so powerful that we cannot logically comprehend it. Thanks be to God!

CLOSING QUESTIONS

What was your biggest takeaway from this session?

What is one thing that you will do this week if you feel weary, brokenhearted, or anxious?

CLOSING PRAYER

Dear heavenly Father, thank You for being with us in this time of learning and reflection. As we begin this journey together, remind us that You love us and are with us. Help us find peace in Your promises, courage in our struggles, and compassion for ourselves and one another. Guide our thoughts and actions with Your wisdom and love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Spend some time this week journaling about areas of life where you feel weary or burdened. Remember that you can bring these to God in prayer as often as they come to mind.

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