



PARENTING FIRST AID

HOPE FOR THE DISCOURAGED

MARTY MACHOWSKI

STUDY GUIDE

Parenting First Aid

Hope for the Discouraged
Study Guide

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LEADER'S NOTES

First Aid for Parents

All parents go through seasons of trial, and yet not everyone has a context to share their struggles and join with others in prayer. Parents think they are alone in their trials and do their best to bear up under their challenges. The result is that we have churches full of parents who feel they are the only family with struggles. Though parents have a desire to open up, it's hard to be the first one to share. *Parenting First Aid* and this accompanying study guide are designed to help parents get that conversation started. To make that a little easier, I've included many of my own family's struggles within these pages. Hopefully, that will help break the ice for others to share.

Your task as a leader is to foster the kind of small group discussion environment where people feel safe but not pressured to share their struggles. The best way to create a safe zone for sharing is by your example. When a leader shares their challenges and failures, it helps others feel more comfortable doing the same. It is only after we open up and share our challenges that people can comfort us in our trials with the comfort they themselves have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:4).

Parents often don't know who to ask for help or don't have relationships with other parents that are deep enough to overcome their reluctance to share. Pulling parents together for a study like this provides the ramp up for those parents and gives them the opportunity to benefit from the insights and biblical wisdom of the other participants in your group.

As long we keep our challenges to ourselves, folks won't know to pray for us. It is my desire that, with honest sharing about our struggles,

those who are going through seasons of parenting trial will discover God's grace and those who are walking in a season of blessing will be better prepared for the seasons of trial that are sure to come.

Some folks will share their struggles quickly while others may take weeks to open up. Your job is to foster an environment where people are comfortable and can share as much or as little as they like. It is also important to remember that some details are too sensitive to share with a group, and yet a lot can be communicated without disclosing the specifics of a situation. The important thing is that we all drop the façade of trial-free parenting and join in to pray for and encourage one another as we walk through one of the greatest challenges we face in life.

Stressing the importance of confidentiality and offering regular reminders will help folks who want to share but feel unsure. This will also encourage those who may be gossip-prone to protect their fellow group participants by maintaining strict confidentiality.

How the Study Works

Timeframe

Parenting First Aid, the companion book to this study, is designed as a devotional that you walk through slowly rather than just read cover to cover. So allow for time between small group meetings. Rather than meeting ten weeks in a row to complete the material, plan to allow at least two weeks between discussions. The discussions each cover two chapters from *Parenting First Aid*, so this will allow participants to read and review one chapter of *Parenting First Aid* per week. There are ten discussions in this study guide. This means you should plan on at least twenty weeks to finish the study, since you have two weeks between discussions.

Preparation

Each discussion has two main parts: preparation and the study session. Participants should prepare for each meeting by completing the preparation part beforehand. It will tell them which chapters in *Parenting First Aid* to read each week, give them a brief review of that material, and ask them to reflect on three to five questions. The questions are

designed to help them digest the material they read and begin to apply it to their lives. Encourage them to write down their answers. This will help them recall their thoughts later when the study group meets.

The Study

When you meet, plan to spend some warm-up social time before and after your discussion. If you set aside two hours for your meeting, you can allow for a half hour up front and again after the study. This time is important to allow participants to get to know each other, and it also gives them time after the study to ask questions privately of one another. One important purpose of any study is to foster relationships that will carry on long after the formal meetings have ended.

Begin your discussion by reviewing the previous lesson's action steps, and by going over some of the written answers that were part of everyone's preparation. There are more preparation questions for each chapter of *Parenting First Aid* than you will be able to cover during your discussion time. The primary benefit to the participants comes from having answered the questions, not discussing them. So encourage folks to answer their written questions honestly, for their own benefit, even if they are not comfortable sharing once the group meets. Pick and choose questions for discussion that you think will best serve your group. Having many questions makes it easier for you to ask folks to pick one answer to share with the group. Even the most reluctant person can usually find one question they are comfortable talking about.

Next, the **Refuel** section introduces a Bible passage on prayer not found in *Parenting First Aid*. The goal of this section is to regularly remind folks in your study of the importance of prayer. You should discuss at least one of the questions from this section each week of your study to help your parents maintain a healthy prayer life. There is no more important goal of this study than to connect parents to our God who reigns over their family.

The **Relate** section provides a portion of a chapter from *Parenting First Aid* that you can read together during your study. This lets someone who has fallen behind in their reading still benefit from part of the book and discuss it. You can read the excerpt yourself, invite someone to read it, or go around the room and have each person read a paragraph.

If you choose the latter, be aware that not everyone feels comfortable reading out loud in a group. So know your participants and ask folks ahead of time to let you know if they are uncomfortable reading out loud. If you are unsure, simply ask for volunteers to read aloud.

The **Respond** section is a time for group prayer, and also gives participants a few action steps to complete during the coming week to help put what they are learning into practice. Then, each lesson ends with a Scripture to memorize in the **Remember** section. Encourage folks to memorize each of the verses listed and give opportunity during your time together to test them. Most people can remember these verses with a little encouragement and accountability. Invite participants to write out an index card for each of the verses with the reference on one side and the Scripture on the other. People will say they “can’t memorize,” but that is only because they have never tried seriously or took on too great a memorization task. Encourage everyone to give it a try and set as a minimum goal to memorize at least half the listed verses.

Discussion Guidelines

Never call on a participant to share unless you’ve asked them if they are comfortable sharing. Instead, invite folks to contribute more generally with questions like, “Who would like to share their answer to one of the questions in this section?” or, “Who would like to share how well the action steps from the past few studies have served them?” Set up a pattern of moving on to the next question before everyone has had a chance to answer. That will keep folks interested and remove an awkward moment if one or more persons are uncomfortable answering a particular question. At other times, with more general questions, you can ask everyone to answer.

Not everyone in your group will be struggling with major parenting challenges. You may have new parents with young children whose biggest trial is getting their two-year-old to stay in bed in the evening. They may feel their struggle is too trivial to introduce to the group. Be sure to invite parents with younger children to share some of the challenges they are facing or share their fears and anxieties regarding a particular situation. On the other hand, one of your participants may

be going through an exceptionally difficult trial as compared to the others in your group. Be sensitive to their needs.

As the leader, if you are willing to open up your life and struggles and become vulnerable to the group, it will help create a safe atmosphere for sharing. It can also help to encourage a seasoned parent who has walked through trials to open up the sharing time with a testimony of some of the trials they've walked through. Christians thrive in an atmosphere of honest disclosure, but this requires the utmost of confidentiality. So remind your folks often that the discussions in the group are confidential.

Any time you draw together a group of parents who are sharing about their parenting challenges you must be prepared for how to handle a disclosure of abuse. It can be helpful at the outset to communicate with the group that while strict confidentiality must be maintained, the exception to that is when the life of a child is in danger or a report of child sexual abuse must be made to the proper authorities. If you explain this at the very start of the study, it will help position you to make a report should a participant reveal their child has been abused. Know your state's reporting laws ahead of leading your discussion group.

Measuring Success

One goal of a small group study is to help folks read the material and relate it to their lives. Consider it a huge success even if a person gets through the study without sharing once publicly, but they complete the questions and engage the book. The vast majority of people who purchase a book never open it or only read the first chapter before the busyness of life draws them away. Any extent that people open up and engage in biblical fellowship over their struggles is icing on the cake.

As your study ends, encourage folks to stay connected and continue praying for one another. Remind them that every book we read becomes a tool for us to use to encourage others. They will undoubtedly run into other parents who are walking through trials and could benefit from *Parenting First Aid*. Close out your time reminding folks of the importance of maintaining confidentiality.

May God bless your study through *Parenting First Aid* and encourage you with the truth that God is with you and his grace is sufficient.

DISCUSSION 1

A FAITH-FILLED PARENT

Main Idea

When we are tempted to give up, we can draw strength from knowing God rules over our lives and families and has not forgotten us.

To Prepare for Your Study Session

WEEK ONE

Read

This study guide and *Parenting First Aid* are designed to give you two weeks to prepare for each study session. Over the course of your first week, reflect on Psalm 139 by reading chapter 1 in *Parenting First Aid*.

Review

Life as a parent runs pretty smoothly during those seasons when our plans fall into place and things go well. But when our days don't go according to plan and those days turn into weeks, we can experience anxiety and fear. When we walk through these seasons of trial, we can be tempted to think things are running out of control. While our situation may get beyond our ability to control, it is never beyond God's control. Psalm 139 reassures us that God knows all and controls all, and that nothing happens beyond his rule and his reign.

Reflect

As you read through chapter 1 in *Parenting First Aid*, or when you finish, answer the following questions. Writing down your responses will help you think carefully and remember them. You'll have a chance to share some of your answers, if you want, when your study session meets.

1. Which truth in Psalm 139:1–12 is hardest for you to believe: that God is all present, that he knows your situation, or that he cares for you? Why?
2. What is most encouraging to you in this psalm?
3. How can you find comfort in knowing that God planned every one of your days and they are written in his book?

4. How have you seen God use the trials of your life for your good?
How have they shaped you?

WEEK TWO

Read

During your second week of preparation for the study session, read through chapter 2 of *Parenting First Aid*. It will help you think through Galatians 6:7–10.

Review

We become weary when our parenting challenges linger and don't resolve. We tire at the end of a long day of physical labor, but weariness is more than physical exhaustion; weariness is tiredness of soul. A good night's rest will cure an aching body, but weariness requires an added injection of faith. If left unchecked, our weariness can lead us to lose all faith for change and give up. Paul speaks to this condition in Galatians 6 and encourages the Galatians by reminding them of the harvest which comes to the person who refuses to give in to weariness or give up on God.

Reflect

Answer these questions as you read through *Parenting First Aid* chapter 2. You will have an opportunity to share some of your responses when the study session meets.

5. Where are you most tempted to give up because you haven't seen good fruit for your efforts or prayers?
6. Why do you hesitate to share your struggles with others? What excuses do you typically make for keeping your challenges to yourself?
7. Who are the people God wants you to share your trials with and ask for advice and prayer? Why are they a good choice?

Study Session

Spend the first part of your study going back over the reflection questions you answered during the past few weeks. Pick some of them to discuss, or let each participant share the answers that were most meaningful to them. Then continue with the rest of this study.

Refuel

The Psalms give us a wonderful window into the lives of the men who wrote them. We see their struggles and distress captured in the choice of their words. More importantly, we can see how men like King David trusted God through great difficulty and how they shared their struggles honestly with God. In the following example from Psalm 5, notice how David describes his trial, and be encouraged by his faith that God hears his prayers.

Give ear to my words, O LORD;
 consider my groaning.
Give attention to the sound of my cry,
 my King and my God,
 for to you do I pray.
O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
 in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.
(Psalm 5:1–3)

8. On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 indicating strong faith), how would you rate your trust that God hears your prayers and will answer them for your good? Explain the reasons for your rating.

9. How often do you share the struggles of your heart with God when you pray? Pick the answer below that's most true of you, and explain.

- “Always. I know God loves to listen and help.”
- “Often. I’m desperate.”
- “Whenever I think of it, but asking God for help doesn’t always occur to me.”
- “Sometimes, but my first instinct is to try to fix things on my own.”
- “Only when I feel a particularly big need.”
- “Occasionally, but admitting struggles isn’t easy for me.”
- “Rarely. I hate to pray and then be disappointed.”
- “Hardly ever. Prayer just isn’t a big part of my life.”
- Other (explain)

10. How could sharing more honestly with God in your prayers help comfort you in your trials?

Relate

Oma's story helped put my parenting trials into perspective. I've never had to start over with nothing. I can't begin to think what it would be like if I lost everything and had to start from scratch. *If God could help them*, I thought, when I first heard this story, *then surely God can help me through my present trials*. Read the story (reprinted from page 27 of *Parenting First Aid*) together, and then discuss the questions that follow.

Oma Petz (*Oma* means "grandmother" in German) was eighty years old when she told my wife and me this story from her childhood. She still remembered the terrifying moments and her uncle's frantic plea as though it happened yesterday. Heinrich Petz lived with his wife, Ida, and their family in a farmhouse he built for them by hand. Late one evening, the entire household, including the young Jewish girl who was staying with them, was awakened from a deep sleep by an uncle's heavy pounding on their front door.

"He told us, 'Move quickly; you must leave now. Take only what you can carry.' We grabbed what we could and climbed into his wagon, not knowing where we were going." The Second World War had finally intruded upon their lives.

When it was safe, Oma's family, along with their young Jewish boarder, returned to their farm to discover a pile of rubble where their stone farmhouse once stood. Shocked by their enormous loss, Heinrich gathered the family to encourage their flagging faith, "We may have lost everything, but we have not lost Jesus," he said. Then he led them in a prayer, thanking God for protecting them and asking the Lord for help and provision. With no place to go, the family slept among the stones that once made up their home.

A few days later, their Jewish houseguest spotted the silhouette of a man rounding a distant hill and immediately recognized his gait. "Papa!" she shouted, and ran to his arms. After hearing how the family had cared for his daughter, the wealthy businessman's heart swelled with thanks. He said to

Heinrich, “I will rebuild your home.” He smiled, adding, “On one condition, that you allow my daughter to continue living with you.” God had answered their prayer in a matter of days.

The Petz family rebuilt their home, but soon they were once again forced to leave the farmhouse. This time they were displaced by German troops seeking to billet there. Weeks later, when the soldiers left, the family was allowed to reclaim their property. Supplies were gone and the house left a mess, but nothing a week’s work couldn’t remedy. Later, they were forced out of their home a third and final time and bounced from farm to farm. Most families treated them kindly, but some did no more than toss them a few potatoes.

When WWII ended, they were left homeless because their property was taken from them. Once again Oma remembered her father gathering the family close with the same message: “We may have lost everything, but we have not lost Jesus.” Destitute, Heinrich and Ida sent out letters to every distant friend and relation, some in the United States, asking for help.

That was when my wife’s grandfather, Carl Rausch, got involved. Concerned about German Christians left destitute after the war, he sponsored them to come to the United States. Carl employed the men in his machine shop in New Haven, Connecticut, and welcomed the Petz family into his own home.

I left our time with Oma grateful for Carl’s generosity but even more amazed by Heinrich’s faith. Heinrich himself never made it out of Germany, but the prayer he offered in their darkest hour, “We may have lost everything, but we have not lost Jesus,” was forever etched upon Oma’s heart. Despite losing everything several times over, Heinrich never gave up. He trusted Jesus through it all and in his due season he reaped a wonderful harvest—children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and even great-great-grandchildren who love the Lord.

11. How does Heinrich's faith-filled response to his trial, "we may have lost everything, but we have not lost Jesus," build your faith to want to trust God for your life?

12. How can the members of your group be praying for you?

Respond

Take time now for group prayer. Pray for one participant's situation, and for other items springing from this week's study.

Before you leave, plan to take one or more of these *action steps* during the coming week. At the next study session, you'll have a chance to report on how it went.

- Reread Psalm 139:1–12 aloud as your prayer to God. As you read each phrase, make it your own and purpose to believe it in your heart.
- Where do you find yourself struggling most with feeling condemnation as a parent? Make a list of these areas. As you do, remember that as God is at work shaping your children; he is also at work shaping your heart through parenting. Reflect on the gospel, that Jesus died on the cross for all of our sins and

failures, taking the punishment we deserve. Then tear up your list, confessing your failures to God and asking for his cleansing forgiveness to wash away your sin.

- Think of three parents you could seek to encourage. (One sure way is to take a week to pray for them and then send an encouraging note to let them know that you did. Mention specific prayers so that your encouragement will sink deeply into their souls.)

Remember

Memorize Galatians 6:9. “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”