

## *Chapter 1*

# What's Different About the Strength-based Approach?

A few years ago my husband, a pastor, and I attended a weekend of meetings for leaders within our church district. At the lunch break, the pastors' spouses were asked to sit together. Feeling bold, I introduced myself to a table of three other pastors' wives and joined them. As we ate, one of the ladies, a young newlywed, continually made comments about things she believed she wasn't good at. In a short time she had a long list. As we closed in on dessert, she said something that made my ears perk up: "I'm not good at remembering a lot of details, but I write things down. I'm good at being organized."

I smiled at her. "Good for you. I believe it's important to use our strengths. Improving on the things we're already good at is what really matters in life."

I heard a sharp snorting sound. It had come from another woman at the table. She punctuated her disbelief of my statement by muttering, "Yeah, right. Whatever."

I bit into a cookie. "What's the better alternative?"

She waved a hand. "People need to work on the things they're not good at. If there's weakness in your life, you need to work to turn it into a strength."

I finished off my cookie and reached for my coffee. “I don’t think I’ll be doing that. There are too many things I’m not good at.”

The three women stared back at me.

I gestured to the room. “See all the people? Each person here has abilities, things he or she is good at—strengths, if you will. If I took all the strengths of all the people in this room and lined them up against the wall, there’d be hundreds of strengths I don’t possess: things I’m not good at—things I’d need to work to improve. I could spend my entire life trying to get better at all of those things. And those are just the abilities and strengths in this room.

“If I spent my time focusing on the few things I’m good at and worked at getting even better at them—well, life would be much easier for me. I believe God gave me wonderful gifts He wants me to use.”

The skeptical woman sipped her water and said, “But you said she shouldn’t even worry about the things she isn’t good at. I think the Bible tells us just the opposite.”

I shook my head. “Actually, I said she was doing a great job using her strengths to manage something she wasn’t good at. She’s not good at remembering things, but she’s good at writing things down. She doesn’t have to worry about having a good memory.”

This is the big advantage of the strength-based approach to making changes in your life. There is no expectation for you to fix everything you think is broken or improve your performance in areas you aren’t very good at. It’s time to stop overlooking your gifts, talents, abilities, and strengths. It’s time to start putting them to even greater use in your life.

It’s time to begin to see yourself for what you’re good at rather than what you think you *should* be good at. It’s time to begin seeing yourself for the miracle you are.

## ***How Versus What***

Have you ever seen a spiritual gifts inventory? They ask lots of questions about what you like to do and what things are important

to you. At the end there is a formula to help you determine what your spiritual gifts are.

I took one several years ago and found that, according to that test, my spiritual gifts are mercy, wisdom, discernment, pastoral, and helps—in that order.

*Cool! I thought. What neat gifts!*

Then I asked myself, *What do I do with them?*

Well, that wasn't covered by the test result formula. I was told what my gifts were and given a brief description of each gift, but I wasn't told how my gifts worked and what I could do to use them. Just knowing what my gifts were didn't help me jump-start my personal ministry.

I was taught in psychology class that three important elements are necessary for a test to be considered reliable:

1. **Does it test for what it says it tests for?** In other words, does it measure what it's supposed to measure? If you take an IQ test, for instance, it's important that the test actually measures your IQ—not your shoe size.
2. **Is it a consistent measure?** If the test was given to two groups of 1,000 people each, would the results show a similar pattern in each group? In other words, is it reliable?
3. **What are the limitations of the test?** The limitations of the spiritual gifts test I took were troubling.

The test was limited to determining which of the seven spiritual gifts listed in Romans 12:6-8 I possessed. There was no way to measure any gifts I might have that were not on that list. It was good information, but learning the names of the gifts I possessed didn't change anything for me.

Over the years I've read stacks of research papers, magazine articles, and books about making life changes. I usually ended up thinking *Good advice. But how should I go about doing it?*

If there was any advice given it was usually along the lines of "Do what I do" or "This is what worked for me." I would read and think, *I can't do that. It just isn't me.* Sometimes I tried to follow

the steps, but I usually grew weary of the effort and reverted to my old patterns, habits, and ways of thinking. I would become exasperated and exclaim, “It’s too hard; I can’t change!”

Then I discovered an important truth. It was as close as the skin I was in. The reason I couldn’t find the answers in the pages of those books and articles was because I was asking the wrong questions. I kept asking, “What’s wrong with me? How can I fix it?” I should have been asking “What’s right with me, and how can I build on it?”

When I began asking the right questions, things began to change.

## Dealing with Fear

When it comes to lifestyle changes, fear must be dealt with head-on. The most common fear I hear voiced is “I’m afraid I’ll try and fail.”

If you look closely at your fears, you will probably discover that they aren’t as big and scary as you think. Imagine walking along a narrow mountain trail. You hug the mountain and take each step carefully, eyeing the outside edge of the trail. What is it you’re so afraid of? Falling, of course! But you haven’t fallen. You’re on the path, moving along, making progress. Your fear of falling is based on the *possibility* of a future event. You’re afraid you *might* fall. When we give in to fear, we give away our present joy and instead focus on an event that hasn’t even happened—an event that may never happen.

The key to putting fear in its place is to focus your thoughts on the actual steps you’re taking right now, in this moment. If you’re walking a narrow mountain path, it’s reasonable to maintain a healthy respect for the edge of the cliff, to be aware of it, and to walk in such a way as to avoid going over the edge. However, there’s no need to fear it.

The same is true for making the change you want to make in your life. Yes, there are things you need to take into consideration—

things you must be aware of and will want to avoid if you are to succeed. But you don't have to be afraid.

There's another important reason not to give in to fear: God is with you. He has given you the ability to accomplish what you need to accomplish, and His desire is that you will live without fear (see Romans 8:15). God created you with care, and He wants to be active and involved in every aspect of your life. You can see how God is at work in your life—right this moment. He has given you everything you need to succeed; He's working with you as you make a change.

God.

Creator of all things.

King of heaven and earth.

Tell me, what is there to fear (see Romans 8:31)?

*Hope  
begins in the dark,  
the stubborn hope that if  
you show up and try to do the  
right thing, the dawn will come.  
You wait and watch and work:  
You don't give up (Anne  
Lamott).*

## Self-generated Solutions

In therapeutic conversations, counselors often focus on helping clients see important insights about themselves. These moments of insight occur when persons come to understand themselves or their situations in a new light or a new perspective. They're often referred to as “aha” moments. These are the times when we get it on a deeper level.

“Aha” moments are important. You've had them, haven't you? Think about a time when you were in school or in some type of learning situation. The instructor laid out concepts and ideas and explained them, but it was up to you to make sense of all the components. You had to pull together all the bits of information and make a complete picture out of them. When you did, that was an “aha” moment. You were smiling, and you thought, *I get it!*

Someone showed the way, but it was your effort—your ability to think it through—that brought you to that moment of insight.

That's where this journey is leading you. This book has resources, ideas, Bible references, and exercises for you to do. But there's another place, another expert source you'll be consulting: you.

You're on the journey of your life. This book is going to help you dig deep to find out exactly what is *in* you. You're the expert on your life, and, with some guidance, you're going to be able to find your solutions and make the change you want to make.

## I Know Better

It's been said that knowledge is power. That's true—sort of. I spent one year researching the “process of change” in people and studying dozens of programs created to help people make important changes in their lives. I noticed that each program began by giving the participant (the person using the program to stop smoking, drinking, doing drugs, or whatever the addiction) a long list of information, facts, and statistics. It included good, accurate, up-to-date, and relevant information. For someone trying to make a change in his or her life, the amount of information was overwhelming. I was overwhelmed, and I wasn't even trying to overcome an addiction.

So when I began to design a program to help people overcome addiction, I asked myself, *What do people really need to know?* The surprising answer was—not much. For the most part, people already have the knowledge and information they need in order to make a change. They may not know specific medical details, like the effects of smoking on a developing fetus. They may not know academic details such as how support systems work in hierarchies, but they know a lot. They know they hurt. They know things aren't working well, and they know their addiction is hurting them.

Let's look at a pastor with a secret addiction to Internet pornography. What could someone tell him that he doesn't already know? He knows what the Bible says about sexual sin (1 Corinthians 6:18; Galatians 5:19). He knows he'll lose his job if anyone finds out. He knows it's affecting his marriage relationship in negative ways. He

knows it's affecting his relationship with God in negative ways. He knows it's wrong. He knows he should stop. He could write a book about all he knows about this issue, but he still meets with his computer in the dead of night, gazing at images he knows are destroying the best parts of his life. What else does he really need to know?

Or take a young mother of three small children who smokes two packs of cigarettes a day. She knows smoking is bad for her. She knows it's bad for her children—harmful, even. She knows cigarettes have been linked to cancer. She knows her oldest has had a cold for six months that he just can't shake, but her life is stressful and she works so hard every day. Cigarettes are her only indulgence, her only consolation for all her hard work. She knows she should quit. What else does she really need to know?

There's a woman who can't stop eating. She's overweight, and she hates it, but she doesn't cut back on the amount she is eating. She thinks about her weight all the time. She's started to avoid public places where people stare at her. She's gone to different weight-loss groups, tried every diet book out there, but she can't stop eating. She knows she's at risk for all sorts of diseases because of her weight. She knows her blood pressure is climbing. She knows her knees ache all the time. She knows she's miserable. What else does she really need to know?

These people don't need to know more facts, statistics, or Bible verses. They need to know one thing: there's hope.

## Knowledge and Empowerment

Knowledge is critical. The more we know, the more ability we have to reason out problems, make decisions, and think logically. However, research has shown that knowledge by itself isn't enough to change us. As I researched, I started looking into the nature of knowledge. I knew the Book of Proverbs is a book in the Old Testament dedicated to the subjects of wisdom and knowledge, so I started there. As I read, it became clear to me that knowledge and wisdom are extremely important to people who want to live a life

that's pleasing to God (see Proverbs 1:7). However, I discovered that the nature of knowledge is a lot like the nature of love; it must be pursued in order to be useful. You need to go looking for knowledge. Only the knowledge you seek on your own brings change. Why? Because the knowledge you go out and look for is the knowledge you are most likely going to apply to your life. It's relevant to you. That's why you're looking for it.

The traditional approach to lifestyle change has, in my opinion, missed the first few steps needed to make a real, lifelong change. It usually jumps right to the information/knowledge/educational stuff. What we need to do is back up and begin, instead, with the person who is looking to make a change. You're about to learn how to find the knowledge you need, when you need it, in order to apply it to your change. It's called empowerment.

## How Empowerment Works

Empowerment isn't someone else telling you what to do and then you go out and do it. True empowerment is the desire and ability for you to seek knowledge and solutions for yourself. For example, let's say a drug house sets up in your neighborhood. Terrible things begin happening—frightening things. All you want is for these people to go away. You turn to the police. They set up surveillance, patrol the neighborhood, and make some arrests. They do everything they can, but they can't uproot the drug house from your neighborhood.

You decide something can be done. You don't know what, but you're willing to do just about anything to restore your neighborhood to the peaceful place it once was. You take a single step: you pick up the phone and talk to a neighbor. Then you speak to several other neighbors. Soon, a neighborhood council is formed. People begin to bring ideas, resources, and contacts to the group. A media campaign is launched. Assistance from City Hall is granted. People from the neighborhood take turns patrolling their streets and reporting suspicious activity to police. Everyone stands up to the drug

dealers, making life so miserable for them that they abandon your neighborhood. And it all started with one person making a single phone call with the belief that something could be done.

Notice that it wasn't one person doing everything and making everything happen. It was one person deciding that something could be done, then looking for the solutions himself or herself—making it happen, finding answers.

This is the journey you're about to take, the journey of empowerment, where you'll find the ability to go after the answers to your questions. Quite honestly, when you begin your journey through this book, you may not be able to clearly see how finding your strengths will help you make a lifestyle change. As in the story you just read, when you picked up the phone to talk to the neighbor, you didn't have all the answers, and you didn't know where exactly it would lead—you just knew you needed to do something.

A woman I was working with was using my strength-based program to try to kick an addiction. She told me that when she first saw the materials I had asked her to work through, she thought, *How on earth is this going to help me?* However, she was faithful to the process, and within *two months* she had not only kicked her addiction but also had made many other changes to her life. On my last visit with her, she told me, "Finding and using my strengths has made all the difference in the world."

What she managed to do was nothing short of incredible. While I worked with her exclusively on the issue of her addiction, she had made huge changes to other aspects of her life. She interviewed for—and got—a job (something she previously believed she was not capable of doing). She lost weight. She began communicating with her husband in new, more positive ways. She changed her circle of friends from people who shared her former addiction to people who were not addicts.

She made these changes on her own. I didn't help her make them. I didn't even know about some of them! That's empower-

ment. I helped her get started, but, in the end, she took control of her life and made the changes that mattered to her.

How did she do it? She didn't become Superwoman. She discovered and explored her strengths and learned how to apply them to her addiction. In the process, she found her true self—the one God had created her to be. She tapped into everything God had given her, and began to use them in an intentional way. Change was no longer difficult for her. Using her strengths, she was able to make several lifestyle changes simultaneously.

That's what your strengths are for. Part of the reason God gave you the strengths you have is so that you can live a victorious life, a healthy life, a full life (see John 10:10).