

CHAPTER ONE

THE DIFFERENCE
ONE WORD MAKES



IF STRENGTH IS SYMBOLIZED BY COLOR, the summer of 2007 I would have been invisible. That was the midway point of my husband's first deployment to Iraq, and a crumpled-up piece of paper in my wastebasket had more strength than I did at the time.

The Fourth of July had arrived and I was alone. All my friends had decided to go out of town that week, and so it was just my little boy and me, and I didn't want to do anything. While other families were out grilling in their back yards and enjoying the holiday, I was missing my husband, Cliff, and ruefully thinking about how our family's sacrifice was giving other families the chance to carry on with their carefree lives. I tried to put on a brave face for our son, but that day, it wasn't working very well. So I sent Caleb out to play in the bright sunshine with the neighbor kids while I sat on my couch with the curtains closed staring blankly at nothing in particular. I was done. I was worn out. I had nothing left to give. I tried to pray, but even that was hard.

Just a little over a year before, I sat in that exact same spot, thinking about the news Cliff had called with from

his AT (annual training). His Navy Reserve Seabee battalion would deploy at the beginning of 2007.

At the time, I was very optimistic about and even motivated by the deployment. Cliff had been in the Navy Reserves for a little over ten years, but I had never really felt like a true military wife. I didn't buy our groceries at the commissary; Cliff didn't wear his camouflage to work every day. In fact, my husband's Reserve center was in Millington, near Memphis, almost four hours from where we lived in Nashville. I could count on one hand the number of times I'd visited the base with him on a drill weekend during his first decade of service. I'd never met Cliff's commanding officer, never attended any special ceremonies or worried about any military formalities.

For our family, military life was never really the norm. We got used to the one weekend a month, two weeks a year that Cliff was "gone to Navy," as our little boy called it, and we liked the little bit of extra paycheck that came with it, but for the most part, Cliff's service as a reservist was never really part of our family's day-to-day. Until it interfered with a birthday or an anniversary or some other special event; in those cases, we definitely had something in common with active military.

Only when I traveled twice to Iraq in 2003 to cover stories of Christians in the military did I finally get a glimpse of what it means to be in the military, what it means for the families and spouses back home. I interviewed both service members and their families and wrote stories about how families can stay connected, how God can give hope in stressful times, and how service members can keep their faith strong. I shared with my readers the ups and downs of

deployment and the difficult challenges faced by military wives when they had to watch their husbands leave to fight a war. I admired the wives' quiet strength, their resilience, and their commitment to their husbands and their families through extremely tough circumstances. When we got word about our own deployment, I wondered if I could be like those wives I'd gotten to know. At the time, it felt like I was about to play dress-up, wearing a costume that wasn't made for me.

But now, fifteen months later, I definitely felt like a military wife. I knew what it was like to carry my cell phone with me everywhere, including to bed; I watched the news and wondered if my husband was in the area where they were reporting violence; I knew the pain of sitting by myself at church and feeling completely alone in a room filled with people; I sometimes cried when I saw a soldier in uniform; I knew what it was like to force myself to answer with a pleasant "I'm good" when someone asked me how I was doing, knowing they didn't want to hear how I really felt.

But sitting on the couch that day, worn out, spent, and ready to quit with no clear idea how I could do that, I came to another realization: that the strength I'd run on for so long was only my own and that already seven months into the deployment, I was missing what God was trying to teach me. That *my* strength had absolutely nothing to do with it.

This was a hard truth to swallow. I'd read everything I could get my hands on about the proverbial job description of a military spouse, and of all the requirements that people talked about, strength was the biggest. Strength was the most important. If you didn't have it, you wouldn't survive. You had to be strong for your husband. You had to be strong

for your kids. You had to be strong when you least expected it: when well-meaning friends made comments that made you want to wilt; when strangers told you exactly what they thought about the war your husband was fighting; when you saw couples out walking hand in hand. You had to be strong when the car broke down and your child got sick and the garage door wouldn't open and the dog threw up on your already not-so-clean carpet. You had to be strong for yourself, because there was no one else who would be.

I had thrown my military wife dress-up clothes on with such focus and determination that I hadn't put on the most important garment. My faith. Instead of wearing my faith in God as my favorite piece and depending on it each day, I had treated it like an accessory I sometimes picked up and often put down, counting on my own confidence, my own determination, and my own stick-to-itiveness to get me through. I was making it, but sometimes barely. I was determined, but there were major struggles. I was strong, but my strength was coming from one very weak source. Me.

TWO COMMON MISPERCEPTIONS

As military wives, we pride ourselves on making do. Hanging tough. Keeping it together. And when things don't go so well? We just bear down harder, work longer, and *make* it happen, right?

When you find yourself in a difficult situation or challenge — maybe your husband is out of town and you're dealing with sick kids and broken-down appliances, or you're struggling together over money and financial pressures — what-

ever finds you at the end of your rope, more than once you may hear yourself repeating, “God won’t give me more than I can handle. God won’t give me more than I can handle.”

“God won’t give me more than I can bear or handle.” Most of us are familiar with this saying, and we usually repeat it when we’re right in the thick of it. We’re talking with a friend about all of our troubles and then we shrug our shoulders and say it. As if that magic phrase will suddenly wipe away all of the difficulty; as if, obviously, we should be able to handle it, because if God says he won’t give us more than we can bear, then we should have no problem handling everything that gets thrown at us. Right?

What would you say if I told you that God never actually said that? That this saying isn’t even in the Bible?

Misperception 1: God doesn’t give me more than I can bear, so it’s up to me to handle it. The verse of Scripture that this saying gets its basis from is 1 Corinthians 10:13. Take a look: “No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he’ll never let you be pushed past your limit; he’ll always be there to help you come through it.”

Notice that this verse is referring to *temptation*. The New Living Translation puts it this way: “But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can’t stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it.”

This verse is talking about what happens when you're faced with another lonely night because your husband is away or working late and you are tempted to get online and strike up a conversation with a stranger. Or call up an old boyfriend you still occasionally talk to. Or at midnight, eat more of the double-chocolate cheesecake you had at dinner. Maybe all of it. Now *that's* temptation! This Scripture verse says God will never allow us to face temptations that we can't stand against, that we can't walk away from.

Notice, though, it never says God won't let you experience great stress in your life or deal with a great challenge or even keep you from being pushed to what feels like your breaking point.

When we buy into this misperception that God won't give us more than we can handle, we buy into the idea that it's up to *us* to make it work. And when it doesn't work, and we're exhausted and worn out, we blame ourselves, because obviously we're doing something wrong. And this is where we're missing it; it has very little to do with us.

Psalms 121:1 tells us “[our] strength comes from GOD.” Psalm 62:11 says it as well: “Strength comes straight from God.” God tells Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that his strength “works best” in Paul's weakness (NLT).

Do you see it? Do you get it? That it's not *our* strength that matters? We're not talking about our muscles or our sheer will or determination. We're talking about spiritual muscle. God's muscle. *God does the most when we can do only the very least.*

I was reminded of this important lesson the other day when I was sitting in the car line at my son's school. Yes, I confess. I'm one of *those* moms who will get to the school

an hour before classes actually end so I can be at the front of the line and leave first and avoid the tedious process of getting through the line and cars stopping and going. But I also love that hour of quiet because I can read or write on my laptop or even pray if I want with no real distractions to interrupt me.

I was sitting there in the car line this particular afternoon and a kindergarten class was outside flying kites, enjoying the beautiful weather. The sun was out, warming the air just right, and the skies were blue with just a few puffy white clouds floating around. The kids were taking turns flying the kites. I noticed one little boy who had bright yellow curls and one very red face. Each time it was his turn to fly the kite, he would grab the end of the string, get the kite up in the air, and run as fast as his little legs could take him. Around and around the yard he went, the kite flying blissfully up in the air behind him.

But I noticed something unusual. Not once did the little boy ever look back at the kite. Not once did he ever stop to let the wind take off with it and just watch it go. So intent was he on doing all the work to keep that kite up that he was missing the joy of seeing it in the air at all.

Just as that little boy will one day learn to trust the wind to keep his kite up in the air, we too must learn to trust in God's strength in all of our circumstances. But it's not always an easy task.

Why is it so hard for us to take our hands off the steering wheel and let God drive? Why is it so hard for us to fathom the idea of not even sitting in the passenger seat or pushing behind the car but actually putting ourselves in the trunk? Now *that* is fully relying on God's strength!

I think it has a lot to do with the second misperception that we have grown up to believe.

Misperception 2: God helps those who help themselves, so I should do as much of it as I can. This is another one of those sayings that we've quoted so much we think it's true, and we say it just as freely as we quote John 3:16. The difference, though, is that "God helps those who help themselves" can't be found in the Bible. This is actually a quote from Benjamin Franklin that first appeared in *Poor Richard's Almanac* in 1757.

The Bible teaches the opposite. That God helps the helpless. He delights in being our strength. Matthew 9:36 tells us that when Jesus was among the people, his heart broke for them. "So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd." They were helpless, as we are. But God wanted a relationship with us. Look what Paul tells us in Romans 5:6–8: "Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him."

"We were of no use whatever to him." Can you picture how that looks? We were of no use—weak and helpless, unable to help ourselves, certainly unable to help God.

And yet, as helpless and hopeless as we were, God still loved us enough to put his Son on the cross for us. Because as much as we resist asking for help—from others and from God—he wants to love us and be the strength and support we need.

I know a military wife whose husband is currently deployed for a year to eighteen months, and she is home with their six children, the youngest born just a month ago and the oldest just fourteen. Even though she was on bed rest for the majority of her pregnancy, I don't believe she ever asked anyone for help. And when I recently called her with an offer from a church community group that wanted to help her do some things around her house, despite sounding exhausted and worn out, she was still extremely reluctant to accept the help. And there are many of us just like her. But God wants to help the helpless! Sometimes that's in the form of sending others to share our problems and our struggles. We must come to a point where we can accept that depending only on our strength just doesn't work.¹

THE REAL SOURCE OF OUR STRENGTH

I know that by now you may be squirming. Me too! This idea of accepting that we're helpless doesn't make us feel so good. We certainly don't feel strong. And isn't that what this book is supposed to be about? Being strong? Yes. And no. Let me explain.

Strength is one of the recruitment themes the Army has used in recent years. "There's strong. And then there's Army

Strong.” You’ve probably heard it. The idea is that there are different strengths represented within the Army branch of the service, and when you’re a part of the Army, you are much stronger for it. This theme reinforces the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. As an individual, you are stronger as a part of the group than you are by yourself. Your strength is reinforced by the strengths of others, so you’re no longer just strong, you’re Army Strong.

Wives have given this theme a bit of a twist. There’s “Army Wife Strong” or “Military Wife Strong.” A “hooah” for the strength, determination, and just plain grit of the military spouse. Of course, there’s also the phrase that could have been created only by a military wife: “Put on your Big Girl Panties,” the more feminine version of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps. I first heard this when I spent a lot of time on military-spouse internet message boards. Many women use it as a reminder to themselves to be strong. To not give up. To roll with the punches, jump off the emotional roller coaster we find ourselves on, and just keep going.

The only problem is that Big Girl Panties can sometimes get lost. And often there may be no other military wives around to be Military Wife Strong and stand in solidarity with. You may really and truly be all by yourself. And then what happens to your strength? Your determination? Your hope?

When I buy into the misperceptions we’ve already talked about—that God won’t give me more than I can handle, so I must handle it, and that God helps me when I help myself, so I better do it all—I become so focused on my own willpower, my own resolve, and my own tenacity that I start running on borrowed time. Eventually that man-made

fuel burns up. Eventually you find yourself sitting on the couch with the curtains drawn, wondering how you can face another day. And though, just like a car, I can probably refuel, that energy source can be expensive and take a while to fill up.

There is a better way.

There is a better source.

There is Someone we're forgetting.

When we no longer rely on strength from within but instead rely on strength from above, it is no longer up to us to be the strong ones. Because it's no longer *about* us.

When we replace our strength with God's strength, we discover a major difference. The burdens and the problems and the heartaches we carry around with our own strength don't disappear, but they do feel a little lighter. We don't have to push and pull and lug and grunt our way through. Instead, we can walk with God and rely on his muscle to do the heavy lifting. It's like carrying a heavy large box up a flight of stairs. To do it by yourself is not just hard but exhausting. If you lift it with someone else who has the muscle power to carry most of the weight, it's better. It's easier. It's doable. We see a major difference, not just in actually moving the box but in our perspective.

Isaiah tells us that God "gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak" (Isaiah 40:29 NIV). He reminds us that when we put our hope in God, our strength is renewed. We can ride on the backs of eagles. We can run and not get tired. We can walk and not grow faint. We can become God Strong.

None of this can happen, though, when we try to do it ourselves.

BECOMING GOD STRONG

Since starting *Wives of Faith*, a faith-based support organization for military wives, I've had the privilege and blessing to meet a lot of military wives—active, reserve, National Guard, retired, and even several individual ready reserve (IRR). These women come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and have different personalities, backgrounds, views, and hopes and dreams for themselves and their families. Some love the military. Some hate it. Some put up with it. Some have a strong faith in God. Some are just feeling their way toward a relationship with him. There are a lot of differences. But there are also a lot of similarities. They share the same fears and worries, many of the same struggles and challenges, the same questions and concerns. And they love their husbands.

Whether you're a new Christian or a longtime spiritual warrior, there are nine spiritual truths that as military wives we need to know to be God Strong—nine truths I will be covering in the next nine chapters. Some of these truths address the negative aspects we bring into our lives, like fear and loneliness, worry, and the all-consuming idea of being superwomen. Other truths address the promises God gives us when it comes to joy and trust, hope and love. We will talk a little bit about our marriages and our children, but mostly we will focus on being the women God wants us to be, embracing the call he has given to each of us in our own specific seasons as military wives and learning all that he wants to teach us.

One of the benefits of connecting with other military wives through online message boards or groups like *Wives*

Survival Sisters

Little Purple Wildflowers

It has been a tough week. We're in the middle of my husband's deployment, and I've been feeling like I've reached a breaking point. It's hard to think I can keep going through this deployment, being separated from my love.

I'm a very young, newly married Army wife without children. While most of the time I view this as a blessing, not having to care for little ones without the help of my spouse, there are other times I am greatly aware of being completely alone. This week is one of those times, and depression has set in. I've slept in until ten, stayed in my pajamas, and watched movies, eaten ice cream, and cried a lot.

My husband really worries about me when I get like this, because really there's nothing he can do to help. He's always pushing and encouraging me to get out of the house, get sunshine, and do fun stuff while he's gone. To my shame, there are many times I resist and fight this encouragement. First of all, I'm just not a very energetic, outdoorsy kind of person. I also get frustrated because I feel a lot of guilt in enjoying myself without him, and sometimes doing fun stuff makes me less accessible to talk to him, which makes me feel horrible. But still, he encourages, and yesterday, I finally listened.

I took an adventure. I packed a bag with my Bible, camera, and a few books, and took off, my windows down, sunroof open, and radio off. I went back to a little country road I had discovered a few weeks ago quite by accident, and I drove until it dead-ended. As I was turning around in someone's driveway, right before me was an amazing view of the Texas hill country, so I decided to get out of the car to take a few pictures and capture the beauty.

On my way back, I noticed a deer in someone's front yard. Again, I snapped a few pictures. I was about to drive off when another deer came out of the clearing. I was so glad I took some time and didn't drive off so quickly! Continuing on my way, I turned right onto another country road I knew would take me out to Stillhouse Hollow Lake, a park area my husband and I had visited about a year ago.

The first thing I noticed was all the little purple wildflowers. I had to smile because just a few weeks ago Russ had told me he wanted me to "go somewhere where there are flowers," because he thought they would make me feel better. Well, they certainly did!

I love Stillhouse Hollow Lake because it is a man-made reservoir, so the water is extremely blue and very peaceful. I was reminded of the verse in Psalm 46 that says, "Be still and know that I am God" (v. 10). I sat there for a few minutes just basking in the sunlight and warmth of the day. It was nice to be able to sit and think, to pray, and to meditate on God's love. I then pulled out my Bible and God directed me to some of my favorite passages of Scripture in Isaiah 40 and 41. Take a moment to read those chapters if you're not familiar with them.

Sometimes it is easy for me to feel like God can't really see and know what is going on in my life, like my way is "hidden from the Lord" (Isaiah 40:27). Sometimes it's easy to feel like I honestly don't have enough strength to get through another day alone without losing my last shred of sanity. But I know if I keep waiting on the Lord, I will be okay.

It's hard not to struggle sometimes to be "Army Strong!" and get through it all, but I don't think that's what God wants from me. He says to me, "Aprille, it's okay to be weak today. Because when you are weak, I will be strong for you. Just wait on me and stop trying to hold yourself together. Let me help you. Let me be with you. Let me love you."

I am not alone, even when it feels like I am. God is with me, and he will help me get through this.

As I drove back home, I felt encouraged, happy, loved, and incredibly thankful for my husband. Sometimes I get frustrated by the differences between Russ and me, but God is perfect in wisdom and I find myself learning from Russ. Learning to try new things, to move out of my comfort zone and do things I normally wouldn't do. I'm a homebody and would love to just stay at home and watch movies all day, but think of just how much I would have missed yesterday! I would have missed a time of closeness with the only one who can give me strength for this deployment. I would have missed enjoying his creation. I would have missed his love.

- Aprille Donaldson,

Army wife

of Faith is sharing our stories with one another. When I hear from another wife about her experience, I realize I'm not so alone, and I'm reminded that if God can work in her life, he can work in mine too.

For this reason, I wanted to include stories from other wives, which you'll find in the "Survival Sisters" sections of each chapter. Consider these wives to be like the friends you go for walks with or meet at the gym to work out with. You'll also find "Strength Builders" and "Strength Trainers" for your personal use, as well as to use with a group, if you choose to read this book with others. My prayer is that these tools will help keep your focus where it needs to be: on God and his Word.

Look at what Jesus said when he was talking to the crowds one day: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly" (Matthew 11:28–30).

Receiving and relying on God's strength cannot happen overnight. We've been conditioned to do everything ourselves our entire lives, so it's impossible to simply flick a switch and turn over everything for God to handle right away. But as we spend more time in prayer and Bible study and develop and apply the spiritual truths we're going to be talking about, we will be able to lean more on his strength and less on our own. That's my prayer for all of us. Get ready for an exciting journey as we discover what it means to be God Strong.

STRENGTH BUILDERS

“God is good, a hiding place in tough times. He recognizes and welcomes anyone looking for help, no matter how desperate the trouble” (Nahum 1:7).

“Be strong. Take courage. Don’t be intimidated. Don’t give them a second thought because GOD, your God, is striding ahead of you. He’s right there with you. He won’t let you down; he won’t leave you” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

“God-devotion makes a country strong; God-avoidance leaves people weak” (Proverbs 14:34).

STRENGTH TRAINERS

1. What does it mean to be God Strong? If you could visualize a person who is God Strong, what does she look like?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the easiest, how easy is it for you to rely on God’s strength and not your own? If your answer is low, what can you do to change it?
3. Name one area of your life where you know you will struggle in leaning on God’s strength and not just on your own. Ask God to help you overcome this.
4. As a military wife, how hard is it to handle everything on your own? How would it feel to lean on God more? What would the difference be?