

SESSION 4

THE SHELTER OF GOD'S ENCOURAGEMENT

The Point

You can trust God when you don't know what to do.

The Bible Meets Life

We can often feel overwhelmed and let our circumstances get us down. Some of the most confusing times of our lives can be when we don't know what to do. In the Bible, we read the words of the psalmist, who also experienced a down time, but his words give us encouragement by pointing to the God who is above our circumstances.

The Passage

Psalms 42:1-3, 6-8; 43:3-5

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Psalm 42:1-3,6-8; 43:3-5

¹ As a deer longs for streams of water, so I long for You, God.

² I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God?

³ My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long people say to me, "Where is your God?"

.....

⁶ I am deeply depressed; therefore I remember You from the land of Jordan and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

⁷ Deep calls to deep in the roar of Your waterfalls; all Your breakers and Your billows have swept over me.

⁸ The LORD will send His faithful love by day; His song will be with me in the night—a prayer to the God of my life.

.....

³ Send Your light and Your truth; let them lead me. Let them bring me to Your holy mountain, to Your dwelling place.

⁴ Then I will come to the altar of God, to God, my greatest joy. I will praise You with the lyre, God, my God.

⁵ Why am I so depressed? Why this turmoil within me? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise Him, my Savior and my God.



THE SETTING

The repeated refrain in Psalm 42:5,11 and 43:5 leads many Bible students to conclude that initially the two psalms were actually united as one. Whether that was ever the case or not, both psalms reflect that the composer was distressed and depressed over his inability to worship God on His holy mountain. He repeatedly reminded himself to put his hope in God and to praise God as the remedy for his depression.

ENGAGE

(15 MINUTES)



ITEM
5

Leader Pack: Direct students to the *Trust God* poster as you discuss the session's point.

GET INTO THE STUDY

ENGAGE: Begin the session with one or more of the **Engage Options** on the next page. (This is optional. If you'd rather skip the **Engage Options**, just begin with the first discussion question.)

SAY: We can often feel overwhelmed and let our circumstances get us down. Some of the most confusing times of our lives can be when we don't know what to do. In the Bible, we read the words of the psalmist, who also experienced a down time, but his words give us encouragement by pointing to the God who is above our circumstances.

DISCUSS: Lead students to discuss the question, "When you feel discouraged, what is something that makes you smile?"

GUIDE: Call attention to **The Point**. Explain that this is the key idea to keep in mind throughout the session.

THE POINT

You can trust God when you don't know what to do.

READ: Read and summarize **The Bible Meets Life** for your group.

Have you ever heard of acute post-holiday depression syndrome? Also known as the "January blues," people often experience this condition around New Year's Day. It's the emotional letdown you feel when the holidays didn't work out right—when you didn't have as much fun as you hoped. Sometimes we get the January blues because we actually experienced the chaos we secretly feared. Even away from the holidays, it's common to feel overwhelmed. The craziness of preparing to have lots of fun can cause us to lose all sense of reason. Circumstances can completely overrun our lives. We'll be looking at two psalms in this session. As we do, we'll find that even the psalmist had times when he was depressed and distressed. But God's presence can give us the encouragement we need. He will help us look above our circumstances. As you explore these verses, look for the constant reminder to put our hope in God and worship Him in spite of what we face.

PRAY: Transition into the session by praying that students will remember to trust God when they feel their circumstances overwhelming them.

Engage Options

► Lead with Action

Place a long blanket out or unroll butcher paper to make a straight pathway. Call a student and a partner to the front of the group. Tell the student that he/she has to walk across the pathway without stepping on anything under the direction of his/her partner. Blindfold the partner that will be walking the pathway. Spread bags of potato chips on the pathway. It is the non-walking partner's job to encourage the friend to walk the pathway. Also have the crowd join in to loudly cheer on the student. Say, **"Sometimes all it takes is encouragement. When you can't see or don't understand fully what is going on, like when you are blindfolded, God can see the whole picture, like your friends could see the potato chips on the walkway. You can trust Him."**

OPTION: If potato chips are not easily available or are too expensive, substitute them something that students wouldn't prefer to step on.

► Lead with Atmosphere

Before the session starts, place a fortune cookie or capsule that has a Scripture inside it in every chair. The Scripture should be a variety that speak of God loving us, the privilege of being His children, and Him always being there for us. Inform the students to not open the fortune cookie or capsule until you tell them. At the end of the introduction or lesson, allow students to open their capsule. (Give them a second to open it and read it). Say, **"Hang on to these this Scripture verse and remember that God loves you more than you could ever imagine. Trust Him."**

OPTION: Place these words of encouragement on the walls of the room where your group meets.

► Lead with Media

Search the Internet for "Dad Helps Son Cross Finish Line At Olympics." Say, **"God loves you as His own child. He is there to cheer you on and carry you through when you don't know what to do."**

STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: You can trust God when you don't know what to do.

¹ As a deer longs for streams of water, so I long for You, God. ² I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God? ³ My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long people say to me, "Where is your God?"

—PSALM 42:1-3

PSALM 42:1-3

DISCUSS: Ask students to answer the question, **"When you feel overwhelmed, what helps calm you down?"**

READ: Read or have a volunteer read the following:

These verses describe an intense longing for God. It is like that moment when, as a child, you became separated from your parents in a big store. You looked all around, but you didn't see them anywhere. You started to feel frantic. Suddenly it hit you that you might be lost—or worse, that you might be abandoned.

Similarly, there are times when we wonder where God is. We want to believe He would never leave us as orphans, but we let life get in the way of our faith. We start to feel abandoned and scared.

It is during these times that we need to become like the deer the psalmist described in verse 1. The deer does not just want to have a cool drink of water. It is panting, longing, aching for the refreshment that water can bring.

SAY: The psalmist thirsted for the only true God. In the midst of the overwhelming nature of life, do you thirst for God? Would you rather have God's presence over everything else?

GUIDE: Lead students to assess their spiritual desires:

- ▶ **My desire for God Himself.** The psalmist wanted God above all other things; his grief was profound when he was not in the presence of God.
- ▶ **My desire for Scripture.** The strength of your spiritual life is tied closely to your willingness to be a student of the Bible.
- ▶ **My desire for worship.** To whatever you give your undivided attention is what you are worshipping.
- ▶ **My sorrow when I don't feel God's presence.** When we are distant from God, we should have an unyielding desire to find Him quickly and be near Him again.

Commentary

PSALM 42:1-3

Many Bible interpreters believe Psalms 42–43 was originally one united psalm. The repeated words of lament and confidence in Psalm 42:5,11 and 43:5 demonstrate a clear connection. The psalm is ascribed to “the sons of Korah.” Some interpreters believe this group composed many hymns, 11 of which are preserved in the Book of Psalms (Pss. 42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88). Psalm 42’s note in the heading “for the choir director” also suggests its use in public worship. Most interpreters believe the type of psalm, a maskil, designated either a teaching psalm, a reflective psalm, or a psalm requiring special skill to perform.

Water is scarce in the wilderness of Judah. Occasional patches of green or a few lone trees indicate a water supply—perhaps a spring or an underground pool. A deer in that region would know where water sources were. Streams of water flow abundantly at certain times of the year but run low during summer, when no rains come.

Water is essential to life. As the psalmist reflected on a deer seeking a drink in the wilderness, he observed a spiritual parallel. The psalmist understood that his relationship with the Lord stood above all else in life. The psalmist needed water to sustain him physically, and he needed the Lord to sustain him spiritually. All he needed—physical or spiritual—was in God’s hands.

The psalmist’s “thirst” indicates that he longed for God and longed to come into His presence. The psalmist asks when he could come before the Lord, suggesting that he currently could not appear before God, but gives no reason why. Perhaps he wished to appear at God’s temple in Jerusalem, but circumstances prohibited his travel there.

The psalmist’s tears have been his only food, which parallels Psalm 80:5 and 102:9. All three verses stress the extreme anguish and sorrow the worshiper felt, with nothing to sustain him but his own abundant tears. Perhaps we should not understand day and night literally, but as an indication that sorrow lingered without relief. The taunts of others multiplied the psalmist’s distress. All day long his opponents mocked him. Their question, “Where is your God?” really suggested God was nowhere near. The psalmist felt utterly abandoned.

Life’s circumstances may lead believers today to feel God has abandoned them as well. The Lord has promised never to leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5), but He does sometimes allow us to walk through dark valleys. In those moments, He teaches us about Himself and about ourselves if we have the courage and faith to listen and trust.

TIP: Ask your students to think about the thirstiest they have ever been. Lead them to understand what it really means to “pant” for something.

STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: You can trust God when you don't know what to do.

⁶ I am deeply depressed; therefore I remember You from the land of Jordan and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. ⁷ Deep calls to deep in the roar of Your waterfalls; all Your breakers and Your billows have swept over me. ⁸ The LORD will send His faithful love by day; His song will be with me in the night—a prayer to the God of my life.

—PSALM 42:6-8

PSALM 42:6-8

DISCUSS: Lead students to discuss the questions, “What are you like around other people when you are discouraged?”

SAY: Difficult times are all too real. The life we live on the earth is filled with hard, unexpected twists. Many circumstances cause differing levels of spiritual depression. Depression is real, and it is awful. Even the psalmist admitted to it and so should we.

READ: Read or have a volunteer read the following:

To be “depressed” is a phrase that paints a picture for us. A physical “depression” is when something is pressed down below the surface—a great force or weight has pushed hard against the normal plane of something flexible. Spiritual, mental, or emotional depression is similar. It’s when the weight of life overwhelms and presses down hard upon us. At that moment, when we feel stunned by life, we have a unique opportunity to remember the goodness of God. The psalmist leaned on his heritage of being a Hebrew. He sang about the promised land God had given His chosen people as a sign of His blessing. The Jordan River, Mount Hermon, and Mount Mizar were all recognizable landmarks to the Jewish people of his day. They were reminders that God never gives up on His promises—including His promise to be present in our lives. Even the depressing circumstances themselves can remind us of God’s goodness. In the first verses we read that the longing for God is likened to a deer as it pants for water. In these verses, the psalmist uses water imagery again to describe how the waterfalls, breakers, and billows that sweep over us are places where we can cry out to God. We can learn to be thankful for even the difficulties in life because of what they remind us about God.

DO: Direct students to complete the **Action Point**, “Your Top 5.”

Your Top 5

Who are the 5 most encouraging people in your life right now? Write out how you can be an encouragement to them this week.

Commentary

PSALM 42:6-8

The psalmist's announcement of his depression reflects the psalmist's despair. The Hebrew word translated *depressed* or *downcast* occurs four times in Psalms 42–43 (Pss. 42:5,6,11; 43:5) and ties the two psalms together. It brings the hearers back again and again to the psalmist's sense of being overwhelmed. The phrase "I remember You" is a turning point. *Remember* in the Bible frequently contains the sense of imminent action; that is, the rememberer is about to act on what is remembered. The Lord remembered Israel in Egypt then called Moses to lead them out of Egypt (Ex. 2:24). He remembered Hannah and gave her a son (1 Sam. 1:19). Here, the psalmist remembered the Lord, who was bigger than his discouragement. Likewise, when we experience discouragement or depression, we must remember God remains with us.

"Deep calls to deep" highlights a powerful reality during the winter rains in Israel. Above the Sea of Galilee, the streams that merge to form the Jordan flow down from the higher elevation near Mount Hermon. As they do, they form powerful waterfalls whose waters crash down wildly and noisily. Downstream, the water provides life-sustaining blessing, but in this region, the crashing waters promise only death. Breakers and billows likewise stress the crashing and rolling of the agitated waters. The psalmist felt entirely overwhelmed—as if he had fallen into the Jordan headwaters. But despite his sense of overwhelming dread, the psalmist somehow found courage to respond with confidence.

The Lord had not abandoned him. The psalmist knew God would send (literally "command") His faithful love (or "lovingkindness") to him. The psalmist had lamented that his tears had been his food "day and night" (v. 3). In verse 8, these times of day appear again, this time in a positive sense. The Lord's faithful love would come to him by day, and the Lord's song would be with him in the night as he rested. This song took the form of a prayer as the psalmist sang his meditation to the Lord. His further consideration of God's presence had changed his emotional state from one of discouragement to one of confidence. He described the Lord as "the God of my life." God had not abandoned him!

TIP: Remind students that encouragement should be a two-way street. We need to be ready to take encouragement with humility and to give encouragement generously.

STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: You can trust God when you don't know what to do.

³ Send Your light and Your truth; let them lead me. Let them bring me to Your holy mountain, to Your dwelling place. ⁴ Then I will come to the altar of God, to God, my greatest joy. I will praise You with the lyre, God, my God. ⁵ Why am I so depressed? Why this turmoil within me? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise Him, my Savior and my God.

—PSALM 43:3-5

PSALM 43:3-5

SAY: We want to get from that thirsty place of wondering about God's presence to enjoying a deep encounter with Him. The only way to do it is to trust in God's revelation to us. Ultimately, God's light and truth bring us into His presence. But we get there by faith in what God can do and what He reveals to us.

GUIDE: Lead students to understand how the psalmist progressed to get to where we all want to be.

- ▶ In 42:2, he referred to "the living God." This is a true statement, but it's broad and impersonal. It's the mental acknowledgement that there's only one true God.
- ▶ In 42:8, he moved to the phrase "the God of my life." This is the leap you have to make from knowing that God is there to believing that God is there for me.
- ▶ In 43:4, he said something astounding about God. He called God "my greatest joy." As the psalmist's view of God—and his relationship with Him—changed, his outlook on life and his circumstances also changed.

SAY: By focusing on Jesus, the craziness of life has less of a hold on us. Whether in private or in a church service, worship guides us to the hope that is found when God is near. Additionally, worship helps us to declare the truth about life. We are able to state clearly that depression does not rule us. Instead, God is the true King of my life and true Savior of my heart.

DISCUSS: Lead students to discuss the question, "What are some ways to trust God when you don't know what to do?"

Commentary

PSALM 43:3-5


The psalmist continued to struggle with his circumstances. In Psalm 42:9-11, it seemed perhaps God had forgotten him after all, and his enemies' taunts felt crushing. Still, he clung to his hope in God. He asked the Lord to vindicate him and rescue him from the ungodly and unjust, and affirmed the Lord as his ultimate refuge. Nonetheless, he acknowledged his sorrow was great (Ps. 43:1-2).

The psalmist began his final petition to the Lord asking, "Send Your light and Your truth." He affirmed that the Lord Himself is light (27:1). God had committed to guiding him; the truth of God's Word would lead him. They would bring him again to Jerusalem, site of the Lord's holy mountain, where the temple stood—God's chosen dwelling place.

"The altar of God" designates the altar of burnt offering in the court outside the temple. The priests offered sacrifices there. Worshipers could see the smoke of the offerings rising to the sky. Since all the sacrifices occurred on that altar, the psalmist linked his coming to the altar as coming to God. Nowhere else on earth did he feel as close to the Lord. Interestingly, the psalmist next described God as his greatest joy. Notice the shift in his perspective throughout Psalm 42–43. In 42:2, he described God as "the living God," in 42:8 as "the God of my life," and now, God was his greatest joy. As the psalmist's view of God (and his relationship with Him) changed, so did his outlook on life and his circumstances.

The term *praise* occurs commonly in the psalms. It carries with it the idea of thankfulness and often is translated "give thanks" (Pss. 136:1-3). The lyre was a common stringed instrument used by itself or to accompany singing. The psalmist's designation of the Lord as "God, my God" highlighted his personal relationship with God. As the psalmist began his lament (Ps. 42:1), God seemed more distant. Now, as his view of God deepened and grew, he recognized God's personal interest in him and God's personal guidance of his life.

Verse 5 once more echoes the refrain of Psalm 42:5,11. The psalmist raised two questions: Why am I so depressed? and Why this turmoil within me? The psalmist offered himself a solution—put your hope in God. Hope in the Bible is never wishful thinking; rather, it describes waiting in anticipation, confidence based on God's promise (Heb. 11:1; 1 John 3:3).



TIP: Encourage students to evaluate their view of God right now as opposed to what it was a year ago. What has changed?

IMPACT

(10 MINUTES)

TIP: Take some time this week to send your students personal and encouraging messages. Your encouragement means more to your students than you realize.

APPLY IT

SAY: We have a choice when hard times arrive. How will you respond when they do?

READ: Ask for a volunteer to read aloud a few ways students can take what they have learned and **Apply It**.

- ▶ **Choose worship.** Decide to renew your worship both publicly and privately.
- ▶ **Encourage others.** Identify Scripture that teaches what God says about the issue of depression and sadness in our lives so that you can share them with others.
- ▶ **Find help.** If you experience prolonged periods of depression, consider speaking with a close friend, pastor, or counselor about the deeper issues at the core of that struggle.

GUIDE: Lead students to consider which of the three suggested responses to the Bible study most closely applies to them and their current circumstances.

ASK: Which of these responses do you personally need to focus on most as you live this session out? Allow time for responses.

WRAP UP

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit that your students be overwhelmed with a thirst for God's Word and His presence.

ASK: Ask students about last week's **Live It Out** options. Discuss any responses and encourage students as they choose to apply the Bible to their lives.

GUIDE: Encourage students to complete one or both of the **Live It Out** activities for the week. Let them know you will discuss them next time you meet.



For **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/BibleStudiesForLife

LEADER LIVE IT OUT

Before the session, challenge yourself to grow with your students through this Live It Out.

Forward Thinking | Matthew 22:37-39

Be an encouragement this week to others. Choose three days where you encourage one person you know well, someone you don't know, and then someone who wouldn't expect to be encouraged by you. Devote one day to each person. Find creative ways to encourage all three people. You can even get your friends, family, and/or students involved. In the space provided below, brainstorm the people you want to encourage and ways you can be an encouragement on their designated days.

- ▶ **One Person You Know Well:**
- ▶ **Someone You Don't Know:**
- ▶ **Someone Who Wouldn't Expect To Be Encouraged By You:**

Notes:

ONE CONVERSATION™

Use these discussion starters to help foster a spiritual conversation with your family.

Scripture: Psalm 42:1-3,6-8; 43:3-5

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE: We can often feel overwhelmed and let our circumstances get us down. Some of the most confusing times of our lives can be when we don't know what to do. In the Bible, we read the words of the psalmist, who also experienced a down time, but his words give us encouragement by pointing to the God who is above our circumstances.

STUDENTS

THE POINT: You can trust God when you don't know what to do.

- Talk to your student about a time in your life when you had to trust that God was above your circumstances.
- What did you learn about God's character during this time?

Discuss the following quote: "Don't trust to hold God's hand; let Him hold yours. Let Him do the holding, and you the trusting."¹
—Hammer William Webb-Peploe

1. SearchQuotes.com, [cited 2 May 2014]. Available from the Internet: <http://www.searchquotes.com>.

LIVE IT OUT: Your student has been encouraged to do one or

both Live It Out activities in the Personal Study Guide. Here are some suggested ways to help your student:

*If your student chooses to do **Written Word**:*

- Encourage your student to look to Scripture when feeling discouraged.
- Suggest Scriptures to your student that you find encouraging.

*If your student chooses to do **Forward Thinking**:*

- Help your student find creative ways to be an encourager this week.
- Pray for your student to be an encourager to the people around him or her.