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Discover Your Bible Series

Revised

Discover **PSALMS**

HOPE WHEN WE'RE HURTING



LEADER GUIDE

LEADER GUIDE

Discover
PSALMS

HOPE WHEN WE'RE HURTING



by
Carol Veldman Rudie



Grand Rapids, Michigan

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ISBN 1-56212-092-1

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To the Leader

Prepare the Lesson

This leader guide is meant to assist small group leaders, not to substitute for your own personal work. Always answer the study guide questions first, using the suggested basic steps of preparation. Then use the leader material to enrich your understanding of the passage.

Do not take the leader guide to the Bible study group. You do not want to give the impression that you have an answer book. The answers are in the Bible; you are a guide to help your group find the answers in God's Word.

Prepare thoroughly before each group session so that you can lead without frequent references to your notes. This will leave you free to concentrate on your leadership responsibilities. You will also be able to keep better eye contact and listen more carefully.

Get Ready to Lead

Learn to think in questions. As you prepare the lesson, ask yourself questions and discover your own answers. There is no better way to prepare yourself to anticipate the group's questions and help others discover truths from God's Word.

Lead with Questions

Use questions to direct the discussion. Draw out positive contributions with questions. Break down difficult or unclear questions with smaller, concise questions. Respond to wrong answers or problems with questions. If you learn to lead others to the truth by questions, you will be a good Bible discovery leader. The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can be used too.

Help to Apply

Gently help group members discover the meaning of God's message for their own lives. Be careful not to be judgmental of those who are not yet applying these truths. It's the Spirit's work to apply God's Word to the hearts of men and women. Tactfully let the group know how the Spirit is applying it in your heart and life. Pray faithfully for the Spirit's work in others.

Keep application low-key. Be careful not to put any personal pressure on group members to apply the truths. Simply try to help group members see that there is a relationship between the Bible and life. Avoid the use of direct pronouns in application. For example, instead of asking, "What does this

mean to you?” ask, “What does this mean in our lives?” or instead of asking, “What will you do?” ask, “What action does this passage suggest?”

Leadership Training

If there is more than one group, leaders are strongly encouraged to meet regularly for discussion of the lesson, for prayer, and for mutual support. Every leader should have a copy of the *Coffee Break Evangelism Manual with Director's Handbook*. This book is a basic “how-to” for establishing and leading a Bible discovery group. Reread the book or portions of it periodically and review it at the beginning of each season. *Leading with Love* in the Coffee Break Core Values series is another important tool for leadership development. Leaders will also find it helpful to attend one of the many leadership training workshops offered each year. For more information on materials or training write to Discover Your Bible, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560 or P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8 or visit www.crcpublications.org.

Introduction

This short study will lead you through several psalms of lament. Each one begins with the writer's personal situation of deep distress. Although the specific details of his difficulty are often unknown, the writer poignantly describes his own personal anguish. But the psalms never end without hope, and this progression—from anguish to joy—will become the real focus of your discussion.

Through these lessons you will learn a great deal about the faithfulness of God to his people. You will also see various ways people who love and trust the Lord have responded to difficult times in their lives.

These are a collection of song lyrics, in the form of Hebrew poetry, whose tunes are unknown. Strong language and vivid word pictures communicate the poet's emotion. You will notice that the poet often uses repetition to develop a poetic thought. Sometimes the initial idea is simply restated; other times the opposite is stated for emphasis; sometimes the idea is stated more intensely.

Because the emotions of these psalms run so deep, you will have many opportunities to talk about your personal experiences. With the help of others in your group and the witness of God's Word you will learn that life's pain can lead to spiritual birth and growth for the children of God.

Glossary of Terms

Almighty—a name for God often found in the first five books of the Bible.

angels—messengers from heaven who do God's will in the world and serve and care for us.

atonement—reconciliation with God that is made possible by the death of Jesus Christ.

burnt offering—a sacrifice that is laid on an altar and burned completely.

destruction—along with such words as *pit*, *grave*, and *Sheol*, describes death and an afterlife of oblivion.

exalt—to elevate in rank, honor, power, character, and so on.

grave—see **pit**.

Heman—grandson of Samuel the prophet who took a leading part in the vocal and instrumental music of the temple service during the reign of David. The eighty-eighth psalm is attributed to him.

Hermon—a mountain on the northern border of Israel near the headwaters of the Jordan River.

hyssop—a mint-like plant used for sprinkling in cleansing rituals.

iniquity—see **transgression**.

Jordan—the major river in Israel that marks its eastern boundary.

lament—to cry out in grief.

leper—a person suffering from leprosy, a scaly skin disease that was often regarded as an awful punishment by God. The leper was required to live outside of the camp or community.

mercy—compassionate kindness, grace, and favor.

Most High—a title frequently given to Canaanite gods, but here used as a title for God.

Mount Mizar—likely a hill or village in Israel; its exact location is unknown.

pit—along with such words as *grave*, *depths*, and *destruction*, describes deep human distress.

righteous—free from guilt or sin, perfectly conformed to God's will and standards.

sack cloth—cloth made of black goats' hair, coarse, rough, and thick; used for sacks and worn as a sign of mourning and repentance.

sacrifice—an offering given to God in order to regain God's favor.

saints—people who have put their trust for salvation in God alone and who live for God’s glory.

salvation—eternal deliverance from the punishment of sin, given by God to those who in repentance and faith receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Selah—a musical term that has lost its meaning. It probably meant much the same as our “interlude”—a pause in the singing while the instruments perform alone.

sin—an act against God’s will.

sin offering—an offering, usually an animal, used specifically to take away the sin of a person or of the entire nation of Israel.

soul—the real self that makes me who I am.

transgression—sin, disobedience to God’s will.

unfailing love—love without end, the nature of God’s love toward Israel and David.

Zion—used in the Psalms most commonly to denote the city of Jerusalem in general and sometimes God’s chosen Israel.

Lesson 1

Psalms 42 and 43

From Longing to Hope

Introduction

Although these two psalms are numbered separately, most scholars think that together they comprise one three-part song with a refrain. A strong theme unites the three sections. Psalm 42 begins with a deep longing for God; the section's final verses end with a song of joy and affirmation of hope in answer to prayer.

To prepare for this lesson, read both psalms as a unit. You might suggest this to your group as well.

The heading of Psalm 42 mentions the sons of Korah. These may be the musicians mentioned in 2 Chronicles 20:19. Apparently, they were a guild of singers who helped supply the music at the temple.

Optional Opening Share Question

What is one thing you waited a long time to receive? Did you ever receive it? How hard was it to wait?

1. Psalm 42:1-4

- a. *What is the poet's deepest need?*
- b. *How does the memory of the past contrast with his present situation?*

The question of verse 2 states the poem's main point, preceded by a powerful picture of the deep longing that drives the poet. Explore that intense picture with your group. **What do the images depict? What word pictures express the deepest desire of the poet? How is the poet like the deer? How essential is water here? What does it mean to thirst for God? What does the image of panting for water convey? How are the soul and deer the same?**

Notice especially the reference to water. The deer is looking for permanent streams of water that are constant in a dry climate. These streams never dry up, even in the heat of summer. The living God is like this kind of water supply. **Why is that a particularly powerful parallel? Why is God described as living? In what other ways can God be described?**

Soul in the Hebrew is the equivalent of *whole being*. The poet is saying that his entire self thirsts and longs, and only a living God (not an inanimate idol) will satisfy this thirst.

How can a person meet with God? Verse 4 ties this experience to going to the temple in Jerusalem. In the Old Testament the temple was the designated place where God met with the Israelites. To be in his temple was to be in God's presence. In this psalm, however, the poet expresses the deepest longing of the human being for fellowship with God.

In verse 3 the poet has to quench his thirst, not on the living God but on his tears. **Why are these inadequate?** As he pours out himself in tears, people taunt him with the rhetorical question: "Where is your god?" **Why might this increase his despair? Who are these enemies?** They are likely unbelievers who use this question to cast doubt on whether the poet's God can relieve the poet's deepest longings.

In desperation the poet turns to his memory of the past to help him overcome his despair. **What does he remember? What was the mood of his memory? How does that contrast with his present mood? What people surrounded him, and what were they doing? What people surround him now, and what are they doing? Do these memories help the poet's depression?** Joy and thanksgiving are a thing of the past. They don't seem to lead to present joy.

Grow groups may want to consider their own experience of going to the house of God. **In what ways do you express joy and thanksgiving when attending church services? Would you describe your congregation as a "festive throng"? Why or why not? How might regular church attendance be a source of hope for hurting people?**

2. Psalm 42:5

- a. *What does the poet ask?*
- b. *What is his answer?*

The first refrain comes at this point of despair and longing. Each time you come to this refrain, look at its meaning in light of the previous verses. For example, here the poet tries to talk himself into faith. In the context of the despair of the previous verses this refrain seems to be a bleak attempt to remind himself of a faithful God. **Why does the poet believe hope can be found in God? What has been his past experience?** In the earlier verses he described previous joy in the Lord, which he believes will be restored.

How does this refrain answer the problem of the preceding verses? On what does he base his hopes? How does he describe God? Note that the poet refers to God as "my Savior and my God." **Why do you think the poet emphasizes praise? How is praise to God an answer to his longing?** Praising God is a positive answer to the prayer that he might meet again with the God for whom he longs. Although at present the poet can only recall past experiences in praising God, he hopes for reason to praise again.

3. Psalm 42:6-7

- a. *How does the poet try to overcome his despair?*
- b. *How successful is he in doing so?*

Although interpretations of these verses vary, your group should focus on certain key elements. **What does the poet remember in this section?** Notice that he focuses on God rather than on his own past. **What does it mean to remember God? How is that different from the memory that he had in verses 1-4? Why might this new focus be important? What progress might this shift show?** As the poet moves from focusing on his own past actions to praising the Lord, he opens himself to two experiences. One is the intensification of his pain in his absence from the Lord. The other is that he becomes God-centered in his search. These two verses prepare for the affirmation of verse 8 and for a realization that the Lord has not left him. **How might the refrain of verse 5 have reminded him of this memory?**

Where is the poet while he remembers these things? The geographic setting is the mountainous region that forms the headwaters of the Jordan River. **How would you describe these waters?** The description is characteristic of mountain streams. **How are these waters different from those in verse 1?** Here the streams of water and the poet's tears turn into floods, similar to the floods of Noah's time. **Do they relieve his despair in finding God?** The swirling water described here is much like the meaningless chaos that existed at the creation of the world (see Gen. 1:1-2). This word picture is often used in the Bible—and the psalms in particular—to symbolize the chaos of life without God.

The poet also presents his case for God's help. As he begs for God's presence, he reminds God of his own history of praise and that he is remembering God as God has commanded. His plea is, "I have not forgotten you; please do not forget me."

4. Psalm 42:8

What does the Lord do in this verse?

This is the central verse in this psalm. Not only does it occur in the middle of the poem, but it also states the key element of faith. **How is the Lord described here? When does the Lord act?**

The word translated as *love* means steadfast love, devotion, or faithfulness that characterizes the special relationship the Lord offers his people. Even the poet's use of the name *the Lord* is significant. Up to this point the poet has used the generic name *God*. In this verse he uses God's personal name (often translated *Lord*), with which God identified himself to Moses at the burning bush (see Ex. 3). This is the living God whom the poet so desperately desires to meet.

5. Psalm 42:9-10

- a. *Why does the poet talk directly to God?*
- b. *Taking into account these verses, how would you characterize the poet's relationship to God?*

How do these verses further develop both the poet's suffering and God's solution? On the positive side the poet portrays God as a rock. **Why does he describe God in this way?** He suggests that God is the rock on which he can stand amid the swirling waters described in the previous section. With this affirmation he then has the courage to question God.

Explore with your group the poet's conversation with God. **Why is it significant that God has forgotten the poet when the poet has remembered God? Has God truly forgotten him?** This line of questioning, based on the pain of unanswered prayer, arises often in the psalms. But it also expresses the openness with which the psalmists expressed their pain to God. They were confident in their solid relationship with God. They knew that God's righteousness would require God to respond. If you have time, take a few minutes to note the psalmist's candor. Ask group members to think of times they have been direct in their conversations with God. Think in advance of examples from your own life and be ready to share. If you have newcomers, assure them that God wants us to come to him with our questions at any time—even when we think God has forgotten all about us. God always has a listening ear.

Why does the poet mention the taunts of his foes? What do they mean by asking where his God is? Why is their ridicule particularly hard for the poet to bear? How does his suffering increase? The psalmist is struggling with God's absence; now his enemies rub salt into his wounds by taunting him about it. Their comments only serve to increase the poet's longing for God.

6. Psalm 42:11

Compare this verse with verse 5. Taking into account verses 6-10, how do you think the poet's perspective might be different now?

The poet repeats his refrain. **Do you think the poet now is more hopeful in God? Does the poet seem to be moving toward resolution?** As you consider this second use of the refrain, look back at verses 6-10. **What affirmations of faith has the poet expressed? What words has he used to indicate his trust in God?** Note especially the poet's affirmation of faith and confidence in verse 8. Day and night the Lord is with him. Even the taunting of his enemies occurs in the context of God's presence.

7. Psalm 43:1-2

Why does the poet seek vindication?

This section continues the poet's conversation with God that began in Psalm 42:9. The line of thought is the same too. **What is the poet asking of God in these verses?** Vindication is a legal term; the poet addresses God as both judge and advocate in a court of law. The poet begs for God's direct intervention on his behalf. **How does this request aid our understanding of his situation? What seems to be the reasoning behind this request?**

How would you characterize the enemies that have appeared in 42:3, 9-10 and 43:1-2? They seem to be people from the surrounding nations. The poet suggests that in vindicating him personally, God will also assert his authority over the pagan nations. If God is truly faithful, then not even the least of his people should have to suffer his absence and the ridicule of those who worship other gods.

Explore also new insights into God. **What kind of God is capable of such vindication? Why does the poet describe God as his stronghold? Why might the psalmist need a stronghold? What makes his two questions (in v. 2) so despairing? Why is rejection by God such a terrible experience?** The Old Testament uses this language to indicate that a person is beyond God's circle of care. Notice how this verse leads to the poet's request in verse 3.

Note also the change in tone in this section. **What does the poet want from God here?** No longer is the poet merely describing his situation; he is calling on God for rescue. No longer is he accusing God of inattention; he is now stating his right to a defense by his own God. The use of "my stronghold" reinforces the "my Savior" of the refrain and the personal aspect of his faith. **Why might this be an important step of progress in the poet's emotional state? How has he arrived at this point? On what basis can he make this request of God?**

8. Psalm 43:3-4

- a. *Why does the poet desire truth and light?*
- b. *What results does he anticipate?*

"Holy mountain," "place where you dwell," and "altar of God" all describe the temple in Jerusalem. The poet, far away from the temple, anticipates the day when he will return to worship God there. **Why does the poet want to return to the temple?** God dwells there (v. 3). Remind your group of the poet's question in 42:2. The central cry of the poet is for a return to the presence of God. In the Old Testament that presence was found in the temple, but the cry is universal. Explore this longing with your group. **Why does the poet want to be in God's presence? How will he feel when he is**

there once again? What will he do? What promises does the poet make? How does he describe God in these verses?

Light and truth are God's messengers that will guide the poet to God's presence in the temple. These words capture God's blessing and faithfulness. They also echo 42:8. **Why might the poet note light and truth as guides to God? What might light and truth stand for in this context? What are the primary characteristics of light and truth? How might we say that God himself is light and truth? If you are leading a grow group, expand your group's understanding of these concepts. Ask, How does the Bible use the concepts of light and truth in other passages? What are the opposites of light and truth? How would the opposites of light and truth lead us away from God?**

Note, however, that the poet has not yet experienced God's answer to his prayer. His visionary joy is based on his future hope, and he moves confidently from longing and despair to joy.

9. Psalm 43:5

What changes have taken place in the poet's perspective?

After the vision of verse 4, the refrain carries a new meaning: one of triumph. The emphasis is now on the confidence that God will someday answer his prayer. Notice that this hope is for the future; he does not yet experience an actual change in his situation. **What gives him this hope? Why is hope enough for him?**

What might the poet mean by referring to God as Savior? From what does he need to be saved? How has he become confident that salvation will come? Why do you think the poet closes his poem by repeating these lines?

10. Summary

- a. *What are the various stages of the poet's experience as recorded in these psalms?*
- b. *What characteristics of God shine through the poet's experience?*

If you have time in your summary, read the two psalms together as a unit. Use the summary questions to trace the poet's progress. **Who is responsible for the poet's progress?** We see clearly the steps from longing to hope. **What characteristics are important in this progress?** This journey starts with a personal relationship with God. It concludes with an understanding of God's faithfulness. **What role did the poet's emotions play in his journey from despair to joy? How much should our emotions influence our relationship with God?** Note that the poet's understanding of the facts about God's character played a strong and lasting role in the recovery of his joy.

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ISBN 1-56212-196-0

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How to Study

The questions in this study booklet will help you discover for yourself what the Bible says. This is inductive Bible study—no one will tell you what the Bible says or what to believe. You will discover the message for yourself.

Questions are the key to inductive Bible study. Through questions you will search for the writers' thoughts and ideas. The prepared questions in this booklet are designed to help you in your quest for answers. You can and should ask your own questions too. The Bible comes alive with meaning for many people as they discover for themselves the exciting truths it contains. Our hope and prayer is that this booklet will help the Bible come alive for you.

The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can also be used.

Step 1. Read the Bible passage several times. Allow the thoughts and ideas to sink in. Think about its meaning. Ask questions of your own about the passage.

Step 2. Answer the questions, drawing your answers from the passage. Remember that the purpose of the study is to discover what the Bible says. Write your answers in your own words. If you use Bible study aids such as commentaries or Bible handbooks, do so only after completing your own personal study.

Step 3. Apply the Bible's message to your own life and world. Ask yourself these questions: What is this passage saying to me? How does it challenge me? Comfort me? Encourage me? Is there a promise I should claim? A warning I should heed? For what can I give thanks? If you sense God speaking to you in some way, respond to him in a personal prayer.

Step 4. Share your thoughts with someone else if possible. This will be easiest if you are part of a Bible study group that meets regularly to share discoveries and discuss questions. If you would like to learn of a study group in your area or if you would like more information on how to start a small group Bible study, write to Discover Your Bible, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560 or to P.O. Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8.

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Zion—used in the Psalms most commonly to denote the city of Jerusalem in general and sometimes God's chosen Israel.

Lesson 1

Psalms 42 and 43

From Longing to Hope

1. Psalm 42:1-4

- a. What is the poet's deepest need?

- b. How does the memory of the past contrast with his present situation?

2. Psalm 42:5

- a. What does the poet ask?

- b. What is his answer?

3. Psalm 42:6-7

- a. How does the poet try to overcome his despair?

b. How successful is he in doing so?

4. Psalm 42:8

What does the Lord do in this verse?

5. Psalm 42:9-10

a. Why does the poet talk directly to God?

b. Taking into account these verses, how would you characterize the poet's relationship to God?

6. Psalm 42:11

Compare this verse with verse 5. Taking into account verses 6-10, how do you think the poet's perspective might be different now?

7. Psalm 43:1-2

Why does the poet seek vindication?

8. Psalm 43:3-4

- a. Why does the poet desire truth and light?

- b. What results does he anticipate?

9. Psalm 43:5

What changes have taken place in the poet's perspective?

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- a. What are the various stages of the poet's experience as recorded in these psalms?

- b. What characteristics of God shine through the poet's experience?