

STORM SHELTER

A STUDY IN PSALMS

THE SHELTER OF GOD'S ENCOURAGEMENT

BIG IDEA: God encourages me when I feel overwhelmed.

DATE: September 14, 2025

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

OPENING QUESTION

Play the Alphabet/Number Game: Lead your group in an exercise designed to remind them what it feels like to be overwhelmed. Gather together in a circle. As the leader, start by saying any letter of the alphabet out loud. Next, instruct the person to your right to repeat your letter and add a number. The next person should repeat both the letter and the number and then add another letter. Continue around the circle alternating letters and numbers until someone is unable to accurately recite the entire chain.

How did you feel as your turn was approaching? Were you starting to feel anxious, distressed, maybe even a little overwhelmed?

Today we are going to talk about how we can receive encouragement from God when we feel overwhelmed.

We'll be looking at two Psalms in this session. As we do, we will find that even the psalmist had times he was depressed, distressed and overwhelmed. But God's presence can give us the encouragement we need. He will help us look above our circumstances.

THE SETTING

The repeated refrain in Psalm 42:5, 11 and 43:5 leads many Bible scholars 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.

SCRIPTURE READING

PSALM 42:1-3, 6-8; 43:3-5 (NIV)

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? ³ My tears have been my food

day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

⁶My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar. ⁷Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me. ⁸By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me— a prayer to the God of my life.

⁴³Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. ⁴Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. ⁵Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

DISCUSSION

READ Psalm 42:1-3

- ° In your own words, how would you describe what the writer of the psalm experienced?
- ° What do you long for when you feel overwhelmed?

These verses describe an intense longing for God. It's like that moment as a child when 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.

In a similar way, 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. Maybe you've experienced such a time. Maybe you feel abandoned even now.

It's during these times that we need to become like the deer described in verse 1. The deer isn't looking for a cool drink of water on a hot day. It's panting, longing, aching for the refreshment only water can bring. The deer is desperate for satisfaction.

That's how we should long for God's presence in our lives. We must thirst for God. We must decide that, even in the midst of overwhelming circumstances, we would rather have God's presence than anything else.

On that note, here are some ways to assess your spiritual desires:

- ❖ **Do I desire God Himself?** The psalmist wanted God above all else; his grief was profound when away from God's presence.
- ❖ **Do I desire scripture?** The strength of your spiritual life is tied closely to your willingness to be a student of the Bible.
- ❖ **Do I desire to worship God?** Whatever receives your undivided attention is the focus of your worship. It takes an honest evaluation to determine what has your heart.
- ❖ **Do I feel sorrow away from God's presence?** When we are distant from God, we should have an unyielding desire to find Him quickly and be near Him again.

Think for a minute about your spiritual desires – your desire for God, your desire for Scripture, and your desire to worship God. (to be asked rhetorically, allow time for self-reflection)

°How often do you intentionally seek to connect with God each day? Rarely, sometimes, or regularly?

°How much time do you spend reading the Bible during a typical week? zero hours, a few minutes here and there, or several hours?

° How often do you feel your praise and worship of God is done in a meaningful way? Never, sometimes, or often?

In your own words, how would you describe what the writer of the psalm experienced?

READ Psalm 42:6-8

° This is a very poetic Psalm. What do the sights and sounds in this passage communicate to you?

Share/Summarize the following with your group:

Difficult times are all too real. The life we live on the earth is filled with hard, unexpected twists.

- ❖ The doctor calls with an unexpected diagnosis.
- ❖ Your boss announces you've been let go from your job.
- ❖ Your spouse tells you he or she doesn't love you anymore.

All these circumstances (and a thousand others) cause differing levels of spiritual depression. Make no mistake: depression is real, and it's awful. Even the psalmist admitted to it, and so should we. To be "depressed" is a phrase that paints a picture for us. A physical "depression" is when something is pressed down below the surface – it's where 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. (Note: we all get discouraged at times, but that's not the same as ongoing or clinical depression. The roots and causes of clinical depression can be varied and diverse, and God also works through medicine and counseling.) When we are depressed God wants us to seek His help and the help He has provided through doctors, counselors, pastors, and Christian friends.

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.

Even the depressing circumstances themselves can remind us of God's goodness. Notice that psalmist again uses water imagery 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 even for the difficulties of life because even those difficulties remind us of God's presence.

° When you feel overwhelmed, what truths about God help you put one foot in front of the other? (Encourage them to search beyond the designated text for this session and find other applicable promises from God.)

° How would you like to respond when trouble comes your way?

READ Psalm 43:3-5

When we feel overwhelmed, we can ease our feelings of abandonment by remembering that God is still with us – but that's not the end. We must also move from that thirsty place of longing for God's presence to the blessing of enjoying a deep encounter with Him. 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. Take a look at how the psalmist progressed:

1. 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.
2. 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 you.
3. In 43:4, the psalmist called God **"my greatest joy."** As his view of God changed, so did his relationship with God – and so did his outlook on his own life and circumstances.

Depression is the sense that the world has got you down and intends to keep you down. But when God is near, we can turn to worship. As the psalmist approached the altar of God – the place of worship – he was able to find joy and reject depression.

Worship has the ability to turn our turmoil into hope. By focusing on the King of heaven, the craziness of life loses its grip 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 a fundamental truth about our lives: that nothing rules over us but God – not even depression. Instead, God is the true King of your life and the true Savior of your heart.

° What are some ways to trust God when you don't know what to do? (*Encourage group members to be specific with their answers. Ask them to consider how their behavior reveals what they really believe about how trustworthy God is.*)

° How has God encouraged you through worship? (in times of praising Him, honoring Him)

° In what ways could worship have a greater influence on your everyday life?

SUMMARIZE & CHALLENGE

Whether or not you fight the January blues, you will feel overwhelmed at times – the waves of doubt will crash around you. But you don't have to drown. Depression will seek to embrace you, but you can choose the presence of God instead. Seek Him.

Live it Out: How will you respond when hard times arrive? Consider the following suggestions to prepare yourself even now.

- ✓ **Choose worship.** Make the decision to actively worship God both in public and in private. Seek Him at all times so you'll know how to find Him when you're overwhelmed.
- ✓ **Encourage others.** Be intentional about speaking words of encouragement to friends, family, and coworkers this week.
- ✓ **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.

PRAY: Praise God for His goodness and encouragement in your life. Pray that everyone present will choose to remember God's character in times of crisis and to lean on the Holy Spirit – our

helper – when life overwhelms us and to seek help from others.

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COMMENTARY

Psalm 42:1-3

[VERSE 1] 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 term *maskil* designates 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. The Hebrew term translated *longs for* also can be rendered “pants.” 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. *So I long for You, God* reflects the psalmist’s understanding 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.

[VERSE 2] *I thirst for God* calls to mind David’s words in the wilderness (Ps. 63:1). The psalmist longed for God and longed to come into His presence. *When can I come and appear before God?* suggests 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.

[VERSE 3] *My tears have been my food* finds parallels in 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. Loss of a job, financial stresses, the death of a loved one, strained relationships—all these can lead to a sense of overwhelming discouragement. 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.

Psalm 42:6-8

[VERSE 6] *I am deeply depressed* reflects the psalmist’s despair. The Hebrew word translated *depressed* 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. |

The **land of Jordan** certainly identifies the Jordan River valley, connecting the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Earlier, the psalmist had despaired since he could not worship God in Jerusalem (Ps. 42:2). A traveler in the Jordan Valley was at least 15 miles from Jerusalem, and from Jericho it was a serious uphill climb—over 3000 feet! Similarly, the **peaks of Hermon** marked Israel's northern border. Mount Hermon rises to a height of over 9000 feet and is about 120 miles from Jerusalem. The reference to **Mount Mizar** is uncertain; the Hebrew means "small thing" and may designate one of the smaller mountains in the Mount Hermon range. These references were likely intended as reminders that God was with the psalmist no matter how far away he was from Jerusalem or how far away he felt from God.

[VERSE 7] *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.

[VERSE 8] 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!

[VERSE 3] 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. He acknowledged his sorrow was great (Ps. 43:1-2). The psalmist began his final petition with **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**.

[VERSE 4] 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 **my 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"

(Ps. 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] 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 Hebrew word translated *turmoil* comes from a word that also can designate the roar of a crowd (Jer. 6:23) or of crashing waves (5:22). 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). When we put confidence in God, it naturally results in our praising Him. The psalmist affirmed, **I will still praise Him**, despite his overwhelming circumstances. Again, he affirmed the Lord as **my Savior and my God**.