

# Recovery from Depression

## 6 studies for groups or individuals

by

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Jackie had never completely given up the hope that she and her ex-husband would get back together. She was a bit surprised, therefore, when she didn't feel much of anything when she first heard of his engagement to an old friend. Within a few days, however, she lost her appetite and she began to have trouble sleeping. She was easily irritated by her children. She refused social invitations from friends. She found it increasingly difficult to concentrate at work. She had very little energy or interest in anything. Sometimes she cried and cried. But moments later it seemed to her that she had no emotions at all. Jackie was depressed.

Depression is a common human experience. Jackie's experience is similar to many people who experience depression. When we are depressed we often have difficulty sleeping. We may experience a change in appetite or we may have trouble concentrating on work. We often withdraw from social activities, have decreased energy and feel anxious, sad and hopeless.

Depression is like living in the depths of a dark well. When we are in the well, we can see no way out. Negative thoughts about ourselves, about the future, about others and even about God make everything seem hopeless.

One of the core issues in depression is the experience of hopelessness. When we are depressed, life feels terrible in the present but, more importantly, we lose hope that things will get better in the future. For Jackie, the news of her former husband's plans to remarry shattered the hope that her marriage could be restored. In Jackie's mind, this loss of hope threatened all hope for any future happiness. She felt that she would always be alone, struggling and unhappy. The loss of hope as a part of depression is a critical matter, because hope is essential to life. Without hope we can literally "give up and die," or actively seek to end our lives. Without hope it may seem like there is no reason to go on living.

It is important to emphasize that it is possible to recover from depression. Hope can be regained. This does not mean, of course, that we can talk ourselves out of depression or that we can cheer ourselves up with some sort of mental gymnastics. It complicates our depression significantly when we shame ourselves for feeling depressed by saying "I shouldn't be so negative;" "I really have nothing to complain about;" or "If I trusted God I wouldn't be depressed." No one wants to feel depressed. If there was an easy way out of depression we

would take it. But depression is not something we can wish away. Hope is not something that we can force ourselves to feel.

The Bible teaches us that hope comes to us as a gift. It is a gift we can prepare ourselves to receive, a gift we can look for and wait for, a gift we can grow toward. But it is a gift given to us by the God of hope. It is our prayer that as you study the biblical texts in this guide you will begin to feel God's love breaking through the dark night of depression. We pray that "the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13)

May your roots sink deeply in the soil of God's love.

Dale and Juanita

### OUTLINE

1. Experiencing Hopelessness [Matthew 27: 41-56]
2. Waiting for Hope [Lamentations 3:17-24]
3. Making Room for Hope [Psalm 77]
4. Receiving Gifts of Hope [I Kings 19:3-9]
5. Growing toward Hope [Romans 5:1-8]
- 6 Focusing On the Source of Hope [Psalm 146]

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# 1. Experiencing Hopelessness

Susan was twenty-five when she underwent an emergency hysterectomy following the birth of her first child who was stillborn. In addition to the loss of her child, Susan was painfully aware of the loss of hope of ever having children that were biologically her own. In Susan's emotional experience, these losses meant the loss of all hope for future happiness. It was being the mother of John's children that Susan wanted more than anything else in life. To lose this felt like losing everything.

When friends tried to cheer Susan up with reminders of her successful career, or with thoughts of adoption, Susan felt even more alone with her hopelessness. The future stretched out in front of her like a bleak desert. She was unable to hope that life would ever feel good again.

The feeling of hopelessness is an intensely desperate feeling. Hopelessness is the expectation that nothing good will happen. It is the expectation that the painful feelings will go on forever. The fact that hopelessness is a giving up on the future is one reason why the struggle with hopelessness is fundamentally a spiritual struggle. When we feel that all hope is gone, we find ourselves wondering if God is a good God. Does God care? Do our needs matter to God?

The text for this study examines a day full of feelings of hopelessness. The day Jesus was crucified was a day when all hope must have disappeared for his followers. They had looked to him for deliverance from their oppressors and for hope in a better future. He was the Messiah in whom they had placed all their hope. Now he was dead. The world had gone mad. And where was God? How could God allow such a thing to happen? What hope could there possibly be in the face of this evil?

## Questions for Personal Reflection

1. When you feel hopeless what thoughts go through your mind? Write them out as specifically as you can.

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2. What events seem to trigger experiences of decreased hope?

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3. What has helped you to make it through times of hopelessness?

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## Bible Study

*In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.*

*From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

*When some of those standing there heard this, they said: "He's calling Elijah." Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." And when Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.*

*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.*

*When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"*

*Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. Matthew 27:41-56*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

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2. How might you have felt if you were at this scene as one of the women who had followed Jesus?  
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6. Think of a situation which left you feeling hopeless, but which turned out to be a time of significant growth or positive change in your life. What happened?  
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3. The religious leaders and the criminals mocked Jesus as he was dying, saying “He trusted in God, let God rescue him now if he wants him.” Yet God did not rescue him. Then Jesus cried out to God “Why have you forsaken me?” What is it like to feel that God has forsaken you?  
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7. How might it help you to remember that Jesus experienced a time of hopelessness?  
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4. When you feel forsaken by God how does this affect your ability to experience hope?  
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8. How might it help you to know that God is at work even in your times of hopelessness?  
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5. What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to all the happened after Jesus died?  
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## **Prayer**

What would you like to say to God about your experience of hopelessness?  
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# 2. Waiting for Hope

## Bible Study

Hope is necessary to life. Without hope we give up. We do not care what happens to us, we withdraw from others, we no longer feel pleasure, we have no interest in going about our daily lives, we may wish to die.

When depression can become intense it becomes difficult for us to remember that life once seemed meaningful or to imagine that life could ever again feel worthwhile. We have no past, no future. Just the intensely painful present. And the waiting. We're not sure exactly what it is we are waiting for. Are we waiting for something to change? For the rage and despair to dissipate? For God to speak?

This waiting for hope is one of the most difficult parts of recovery from depression. No matter how long it lasts, it is a stage that lasts too long. The process seems pointless to our conscious mind. [Why can't we do something? This is just waiting!] But depression is a battle at the spiritual core of our being. The transformations that are being worked are slow and cannot be hurried. We wait for a word from God. If God should speak too soon, it would just be more words added to the clamor of the multitude who have spoken too soon, too glibly and too cheerfully. There is a season of waiting for God that is a necessary part of our healing journey.

The text for this study shows the prophet Jeremiah waiting for God. Jeremiah was deeply depressed after his people were taken into exile and his city destroyed. Everything he knew and loved was lost. He sat in the ashes of the destruction and wept. He wept for his friends and for his city. And he wept for himself. The first glimmer of the possibility of hope came to Jeremiah in the midst of his deepest grief. That was all it was. Just a glimmer. A hint. An intimation of the possibility of hope. But it was enough. Enough to make it possible for him to wait for God.

### Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Sometimes it is difficult to allow ourselves the possibility of hope. What barriers make it difficult for you to allow for the possibility of hope?  
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2. Think of a time when you were surprised by something good happening that you had not been able to hope for. What happened? How did you feel?  
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*He has broken my teeth with gravel;  
he has trampled me in the dust.  
I have been deprived of peace;  
I have forgotten what prosperity is.  
So I say, "My splendor is gone  
and all that I had hoped from the Lord."*

*I remember my affliction and my wandering,  
the bitterness and the gall.  
I well remember them  
and my soul is downcast within me.  
Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:*

*Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion,  
therefore I will wait for him."*

*Lamentations 3:16-24*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?  
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2. Restate in your own words how the prophet describes his depression.  
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3. This text begins with the prophet's experience of disappointment in God. The prophet blames God for the terrible things that have happened.  
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a. What does the prophet say that God has done?

b. How might feeling that God had caused his suffering, have contributed to Jeremiah's hopelessness?

6. The prophet says "I will wait for him." Describe what you think it means to wait for God when your sense of hope is fragile.

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4. The prophet also makes statements of hope.

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a. Restate in your own words the things Jeremiah says help him to have hope.

7. When you are struggling with hopelessness, how might it help you to think of yourself as waiting for God?

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8. God's gifts of compassion are new every morning. Picture yourself sitting on a mountainside, facing east across a valley, looking at another mountain range. The sky that has been dark for a long time is growing light. Even though you cannot see the sun, you know that it is rising behind the distant mountains. A new day is about to dawn. Listen to God say "I have new gifts of love for you today." What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to this picture?

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b. What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to Jeremiah's perspective about God's love?

## Prayer

What would you like to say to the God whose compassion never fails?

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5. There is an obvious tension between the two paragraphs of this text. How is it possible to feel that God has failed you or hurt you and yet to find hope in God?

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# 3. Making Room for Hope

3. How might remembering this experience contribute to your sense of hope?

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Bill spent months grieving the losses he experienced growing up in an alcoholic home. And he spent many months depressed over more recent losses in relationships he had formed as an adult. There were times when it seemed to him that all there was to life was depression.

As he did the work of grief and as he waited, however, he gradually found himself better able to focus on the reality of the losses and to feel his feelings about them. He then experienced a season of being on an emotional roller-coaster. He would sometimes surprise himself by how much 'better' he felt and quickly plunge back into deep depression. He found this to be very confusing.

"I guess I'm not sure I want to let go of my depression," he said. "That really must sound crazy, I know, but the depression is all I have left to show that I really value the relationships I have lost. What I lost was important to me. I'm afraid that if I am not in pain, it will mean that I didn't really care or that I don't care anymore."

It is a normal and predictable part of recovery from depression to find ourselves hanging on to the depression. It is not crazy. Often it feels that if we give up our depression, we will have nothing left. The time comes, however, when we find ourselves experimenting with letting go. It is *not* that we come to a time when we 'should' let go. If 'shoulds' could fix depression, we would all recover from depression very quickly. It is, rather, that we come to a time in the recovery process when we have the resources to experience other emotions. Initially it may feel like we are being unfaithful somehow to the losses. But we are more than our depression. We are still capable of a wide range of emotions. These other emotions are making their presence known.

In the text for this study we see the psalmist beginning to make room for hope in the midst of his depression.

## Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Think of a time when you were aware of God's love and care for you. What was the situation?

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2. How did you experience God's care in the situation?

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## Bible Study

*I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.  
When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;  
at night I stretched out untiring hands  
and my soul refused to be comforted.  
I remembered you, O God, and I groaned;  
I mused and my spirit grew faint.  
You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.  
I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;  
I remembered my songs in the night.  
My heart mused and my spirit inquired;  
"Will the Lord reject forever?  
Will he never show his favor again?  
Has his unfaithful love vanished forever?  
Has his promise failed for all time?  
Has God forgotten to be merciful?  
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?  
Then I thought "To this I will appeal;  
the years of the right hand of the Most High."  
I will remember the deeds of the Lord;  
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.  
I will meditate on all your works and consider all your  
mighty deeds.  
Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our  
God?  
You are the God who performs miracles;  
you display your power among the peoples.  
With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,  
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.  
The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and  
writhed;  
the very depths were convulsed.  
The clouds poured down water, the skies resounded with  
thunder;  
your arrows flashed back and forth.  
Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit  
up the world;  
the earth trembled and quaked.  
Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty  
waters,  
though your footprints were not seen.  
You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and  
Aaron.  
Psalm 77*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

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2. How does the psalmist describe his depression?

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3. The psalmist says that his “soul refused to be comforted.” What do you think the psalmist meant by this?

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4. What might cause a person to feel that they do not want to be comforted?

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5. Restate in your own words the questions the psalmist asks of God.

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6. What questions have you asked God when you have been depressed?

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7. The questions we ask about God when we are depressed are urgent questions. What is the relationship between these questions and our search for hope?

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8. The psalmist struggle with depression leads him to actively seek hope by meditating on God’s mighty deeds. In this way, the psalmist begins to make room for hope.

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a. Restate in your own words some of the truths about God that the psalmist reflects on.

b. How might reflecting on God’s powerful interventions on behalf of his people help increase our capacity for hope?

9. Which of the statements the psalmist makes about God is particularly meaningful to you? Explain.

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## **Prayer**

What would you like to say to God about your desire to make room for hope?

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# 4. Receiving Gifts of Hope

When we are depressed, we lose interest in the things in life that normally give us pleasure and that can make life seem worthwhile. We don't have the energy to feel appropriate feelings when we are given gifts. Instead of experiencing gratitude, we may have confusing thoughts run through our heads: Is this gift supposed to make me feel better? Have you forgotten how much pain I feel?

In the process of recovery from depression, however, we find ourselves renewing our capacity to receive simple gifts like companionship, food and sleep. Depression may have deprived us of these things and we must learn afresh how to be with others and how to nourish our bodies with food and sleep.

In the text for this study the prophet Elijah has been threatened with death because he has challenged the worship of the god Baal. Elijah knows that the threats are serious. So he flees in fear, alone, to the desert. There he sinks into a deep depression. As the text shows, God finds ways to bring gifts of hope to Elijah in the midst of his depression.

## Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Think of a time when you were depressed and someone gave you a gift of caring that you were able to receive.

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a. What did they do?

b. How was it helpful?

2. What are some of the gifts of caring that are especially meaningful to you when you are depressed?

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3. How do these gifts of caring contribute to your ability to hang on to hope?

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## Bible Study

*Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.*

*1 Kings 19:3-9*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

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2. How does Elijah express his hopelessness:  
a. in his words?

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b. in his actions?

6. Picture yourself in Elijah's situation. Alone. Afraid. Exhausted. Giving up on life. Now picture someone bringing you simple, thoughtful gifts. Homemade bread. Cool, clear water. Their companionship. Picture yourself receiving these gifts. Let yourself take them in. What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to this image?

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3. Elijah "ran for his life" because of threats to kill him. The threats followed a series of events in which Elijah had risked a great deal and God had used him in powerful ways. What circumstances increase the risks that you will experience depression?

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7. What gift do you need the most at this time?

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4. How would you compare your experiences with depression to Elijah's?

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8. How might it help you to believe that God wants to give you the good gifts that you need?

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5. What significance do you see in the gifts which the angel brought to Elijah in his time of depression?

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What would you like to say to God about your need for gifts of hope?

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## Prayer

# 5. Growing Toward Hope

Mary's long and intense struggle with depression began five years ago when she moved to a new city. Today, over lunch with her best friend, Mary reviewed the last five years. "If I could go back in time" she mused "and choose whether or not to go through this, I would not hesitate for a minute. I would never choose to experience what I have experienced. It is true that I have grown enormously as a person because of this struggle. I am a more compassionate person now, less judgmental, more attentive to emotional pain. But no growth in my character could ever make up for the pain of this struggle."

"Don't get me wrong," Mary continued after a few minutes of silence, "I am grateful for the growth that has come. I'm glad I've grown. But I'm not glad for the losses or emotional pain."

Depression can be an opportunity for emotional and spiritual growth. Growth can come at the most unexpected times and in the most surprising circumstances. This does not mean that the depression is good. It does not mean that we would ever choose to go through this experience.

Growth can come in the midst of recovery from depression, however, and that is a good thing. God is able to take the pain and evil that we experience in this world and somehow redeem it for good in our lives. And for that we can be grateful.

## Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What positive qualities of character have your struggles with depression helped to develop in you?

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2. How have the positive changes that have come out of your struggles impacted your relationship

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a. with God?

b. with friends?

c. with people at work?

d. with your family?

## Bible Study

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5: 1-8*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

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2. What does this text say about the source of peace and hope?

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3. This text says that we rejoice in our sufferings not because our sufferings are good but because they lead to hope and hope doesn't disappoint us.

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a. What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to this suggestion?

b. How might sufferings produce perseverance and character?

4. We read that "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." How might growth in our character increase our capacity for hope?

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5. This text says that hope will not disappoint us because "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." What is the relationship between experiencing God's love and experiencing hope?

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6. Hope is both a gift of love that we can receive and something we grow toward. What experiences have you had in receiving hope and growing toward hope?

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7. What does the text tell us about God's love?

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8. Picture your heart as a beautiful, well crafted bowl. It has been carved deep by your suffering and made strong by God's gifts of care. Picture God pouring his love, in the form of crystal clear water, into your heart's bowl. His love fills your heart to overflowing. You hear God saying to you "I love you. I have always loved you. I will always love you." What thoughts and feelings do you have in response to this picture?

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## Prayer

What would you like to say to God about your journey of growing toward hope?

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# 6. Focusing on the Source of Hope

## Bible Study

“My own Mom and Dad failed me,” Linda said in her support group meeting. “Then my marriage fell apart. And then my health fell apart. Life has always been hard. I don’t see why I should expect it to ever get any better. If anything, it will probably get worse. How is it possible for me to have hope?”

Life seems to come with a guarantee of hardships and suffering. Human relationships seem to come with a guarantee of degree of disappointment and loss. Many of us have echoed Linda’s question. How is it possible to have hope? If hope is the expectation of good, how can we experience hope when we live on a fallen planet as fallen creatures?

The Bible teaches that there is more to the story of our lives than our experiences of loss and disappointment. The planet may be fallen, but it is not forsaken by God. He is actively present in our lives, bringing gifts of life and joy into the midst of our darkness. We can dare to hope because of who God is. Because God is a God of love and compassion who actively cares for us, we can allow ourselves to hope.

May God surprise you with good gifts of love as you focus on him as your source of hope.

### Questions for Personal Reflection

1. In what ways has your relationship with God been negatively impacted by your experiences of depression? Explain.

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2. In what ways has your relationship with God been positively impacted by your experiences of depression? Explain.

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*Praise the Lord.  
Praise the Lord, O my soul.  
I will praise the Lord all my life;  
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.  
Do not put your trust in princes,  
in mortal men, who cannot save.  
When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;  
on that very day their plans come to nothing.  
Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the Lord his God,  
the Maker of heaven and earth,  
the sea, and everything in them—  
the Lord, who remains faithful forever.  
He upholds the cause of the oppressed  
and gives food to the hungry.  
The Lord sets prisoners free,  
the Lord gives sight to the blind,  
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,  
the Lord loves the righteous.  
The Lord watches over the alien  
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,  
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.  
The Lord reigns forever,  
your God, O Zion, for all generations.  
Praise the Lord.  
Psalm 146*

1. What insights did you gain from your time of personal reflection?

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2. How does this psalm contrast the experience of hoping in God with the experience of hoping in people?

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3. The psalmist mentions eight kinds of circumstances that might seem hopeless. List these situations/conditions and the reasons why they might seem hopeless.

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7. Take a few minutes and allow yourself to picture God responding to you in the way this text describes God's response. What thoughts and feelings do you have to this image of God's care for you.

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4. Describe how God responds to people in each of these situations.

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8. Write a brief psalm of your own thanking God for being your help and your hope.

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5. What do these responses from God to people in hopeless situations suggest to you about God's character?

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## **Prayer**

What would you like to say to God who is the source of your hope?

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6. Which of the eight images of hopelessness do you most strongly relate to at this time? Explain.

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## Leader's Notes

### 1. Experiencing Hopelessness

Matthew 27:41-56

**Purpose:** To recognize the experience of hopelessness as an experience that Jesus understands and to see that even in our darkest hours, God is at work on our behalf.

**Question 2.** These women had probably been healed by Jesus. They had certainly been touched by his love. They had given themselves to following him. All hope for the future was placed on him. To stand at a distance and watch him die must have been a terrifying experience of helplessness and confusion. They must have felt deep shock and despair. It may have felt like the end of all hope.

**Question 3.** Some people may think that Jesus' experience of being 'forsaken' by God is so unique in its meaning and significance that it is not profitably compared to our own subjective experiences of abandonment by God. While this way of emphasizing the uniqueness of Jesus may seem honoring to some people, this text does not make this point. It assumes that we will empathize with Jesus' experience because we have experienced something of what 'forsaken' means. Suggesting that what Jesus' experienced is somehow too special or too unique to compare with our own experiences is a misguided attempt to honor Jesus. It reveals a view of Jesus which is foreign to the New Testament. The biblical record makes it very clear that Jesus' experiences are like our own in every way except 'without sin' (see Hebrews 4). Jesus knows what depression is like, because he experienced depression. Jesus knows what feeling abandoned by God feels like because he experienced it himself.

**Question 4.** When it seems that God has forsaken us it leads easily to despair. When we have trusted that God is with us and it suddenly seems that he is not with us or caring for us, we will ask ourselves, "What hope do we have?" A complicating factor in depression for many Christians is that 'hope' has several meanings. In times of depression, we may feel that our hope for the future is still safely in the hands of God because our eternal security is assured -we can still expect a welcome at heaven's gate. The practical importance of this beyond-the-grave kind of hope should not be minimized. It helps a lot to know that our eternal future is cared for. But, we still need to make it through this week. The struggle with depression for most Christians is not about whether God can be trusted with eternity but whether God can be trusted with this week.

**Question 5.** A great deal seems to have happened after Jesus died including: 1) The curtain in the temple which represented limitations on access to God was torn in half. While this image has less power for people not steeped in the culture of temples and priests, it is still a powerful dramatization of the fact that God was actively at work even when all seemed hopelessly lost. Jesus, as our high priest, was making it possible for us to

have direct access to God. 2) There was a significant earthquake. The Creator was making his presence felt. 3) Holy people who were buried in tombs around the city were raised to life and visited people in the city. What did they give witness to concerning God and this man Jesus? 4) The men who were directly involved in Jesus' execution responded with terror to all these events, realizing that they had just killed the Son of God. In this hour when all seemed lost, when God seemed to have disappeared and the world seemed to have gone mad, God was doing a mighty, unprecedented work. God was present. God was active. In this hour of despair God was filling the word hope with deeper, richer meaning than we can comprehend.

### 2. Waiting for Hope

Lamentations 3:16-24

**Purpose:** To explore the possibility of waiting for God to restore our hope.

**Question 2.** The prophet says, "The good things in life are gone. Hope is gone. I am bitter. I am wondering around, lost. My heart is heavy with sadness."

**Question 3.** Jeremiah says that God has broken his teeth and trampled him in the dust. Like all of us when we are depressed, the prophet is not concerned with theoretical details about what has 'caused' our losses. He is not concerned about the difference between what God 'does' and what God 'allows.' He is concerned only with the losses and emotional pain that fill his life. To be betrayed by a friend is painful. But God is powerful. If he chooses to hurt us we cannot defend ourselves. We are at God's mercy. If he is cruel, we have no hope.

**Question 4.** The Lord's love is great. His love never ends. Every day is a new gift of love from God.

**Question 5.** Our emotionally painful experiences rarely accommodate themselves to our preference for logical coherence. Few of us are 'wired' to be logically precise in times of emotional pain. In this text, the prophet honors two emotional experiences that are not easily integrated. He is confused by the suffering God allows - God has hurt him. Yet he needs God for hope. So, he has no one to turn to except the one who seems to be the source of the problem. Recovery from depression requires us to grow in our capacity to tolerate the confusion that comes from tensions of this kind. We have acquired distorted images of God and so when we approach the true and living God we do so with fear and hesitation. It will take courage to recover from depression because hope only comes from God and, when depressed, we are often afraid of God.

**Question 6.** It isn't easy for us to wait for God. We are in a hurry. We don't like to wait. We like to be in charge of our lives. Yet, waiting can have a calming effect. It can remind us that we are creatures in need of gifts from our Creator, that we

are not in charge, not responsible for everything, that it is necessary for us to be recipients of God's goodness, that it is a good thing to let God take care of us. It's also probably important to emphasize that waiting is not necessarily a passive activity. The goal is not to wait for God the way we might wait in line in a grocery store. To wait can also mean to pay attention or to watch for.

**Question 7.** This image of waiting for hope can help us to feel our emotions, rather than to shame ourselves for them. This image can also help us to remember that we don't have to pull ourselves up by the boot straps. It can help us to remember that we are sometimes powerless, and that the most significant thing we can do is to turn our lives over to a Power greater than our own.

**Question 8.** In order to do this in a group we recommend that (a) someone read the image presented to the group, (b) time be given for participants to write a response, and (c) participants be given time to share their written responses.

### 3. Making Room for Hope

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Psalm 77

**Purpose:** To look for ways to make room for the possibility of hope to return to our lives.

**Question 2.** The psalmist says that he is in distress, cries out to God for help, is awake in the night, groans, is spiritually faint, is too troubled to speak, refuses to be comforted, feels forgotten and rejected by God.

**Question 3.** There is a time in depression when it seems that all attempts by others to comfort us are simply proofs that they do not understand the depths of our pain. The loss and the sorrow we are experiencing are so overwhelming that comfort is not only out of our reach, it somehow feels like an insult. The primary issue is one of timing. There is a time for refusing to be comforted. And a time for receiving comfort. If comfort comes too early it feels like a minimization of our pain and loss.

**Question 4.** The psalmist asks: "God, are you always going to reject me? Is life always going to be this awful? Will it always seem like you do not care, that you do not love me? Are you angry? What happened to your mercy and compassion?"

**Question 6.** These questions are not academic questions. They are urgent questions about God and about his relationship to us. We need God to be attentive and compassionate and merciful to us. This is the basis of our hope in life.

**Question 7.** God is powerful. His deeds are mighty. He performs miracles beyond our imagination. He delivered his people from slavery by opening the Red Sea. The waters, the clouds, the thunder, the lightening, the earth all were under God's command. He provided help to his people "though his footprints were not seen." The picture is one of God the

Creator acting powerfully on behalf of his people, even though they could not directly see him. He didn't leave footprints, but he led his people to safety across the Red Sea. He provided in miraculous ways. And in ordinary ways (by the leadership of Moses and Aaron). Remembering God's acts of love and mercy in the past, can give us hope that he will act in love and mercy on our behalf in the present and in the future.

### 4. Receiving Gifts of Hope

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1 Kings 19:1-9

**Purpose:** To open our hearts and minds to the gifts of hope God may have for us.

**Question 2.** Elijah asks to die. He says to God that he has had enough. He is tired of life, tired of the struggle. And he thinks of himself as no better than his ancestors. He feels that God might as well kill him. Elijah isolates himself, going out to the desert alone, not even asking his servant to go with him. He lays down and goes to sleep. Both the isolation and the sleep are signs of depression.

**Question 3.** When we are exhausted and burnt out we are more vulnerable to experiencing depression. Ironically the experience of emotional highs can sometimes leave us more vulnerable to experiencing depression because of the mood shifts that take place after any intense experience. When someone in power threatens us in a significant way, the threat of loss can trigger depression. Elijah was experiencing all of these problems.

**Question 5.** The angel brought simple, practical gifts that would restore Elijah's physical strength and which would communicate in tangible ways that he was loved and valued by God. The angel does not deliver lengthy speeches, does not give advice, does not explain things, does not show how God is bringing 'good' out of things.

### 5. Growing Toward Hope

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Romans 5: 1-8

**Purpose:** To explore the possibility of growing toward hope.

**Question 2.** The writer states that "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" and that we "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." Both are gifts from God.

**Question 3.** Some people may be able to affirm this idea and think of many ways that this has been true for them. Others may feel that this is a way of minimizing their suffering and may not be at this point in their journey, because their suffering has been great, or their loss has been recent. Suffering can bring growth in: a) our capacity to experience life on a deeper level, b) our capacity to feel strong emotions c) our internal strength to continue the struggle during tough times, d) our sense of humility e) our capacity for courage f) our compassion and mercy toward ourselves and others and g) our awareness of

God's sustaining presence in our lives.

**Question 4.** When we see that we can not only survive, but grow, in times of great difficulty, we begin to realize that our hope in life is not based in the circumstances of our life. All does not have to be well for life to be worthwhile. Even when life is difficult there are gifts of growth and love and joy that are given to us.

**Question 5.** When we can hang onto God's love, it is possible to have hope in any situation. Hanging onto God's love requires a level of trust many of us find difficult because of early losses and traumas. But as we grow in our capacity for trust and love, we can grow in our ability to focus on God's personal care and attentiveness to us in all of life's circumstances.

**Question 6.** The text tells us that God pours his love into our hearts. And that God showed his love for us in the fact that he did not wait for us to make the first move or to get our act together. It was while we were powerless sinners that Christ died for us.

## **6. Focusing on the Source of Hope**

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Psalm 146

**Purpose:** To focus on God, our help and hope, as our source of hope.

**Question 2.** The psalm reminds us of human limitations and mortality and then contrasts this with God as the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth who is faithful forever. It is clear that if we are going to place our hope anywhere, we do well to place it in the God who made us and is faithful to us.

**Question 3.** The psalmist talks about: a) the oppressed who are powerless against injustices against them b) the hungry who experience direct threats to their lives and health. c) the prisoners who are locked up against their will d) the blind who are unable to be fully independent e) the bowed down who are emotionally discouraged and distressed f) the alien who is an outsider and is often treated as less than human g) the fatherless who may not have anyone to provide for them and h) the widow who may not have protection or companionship

**Question 4.** For the oppressed, God provides justice. For the hungry, God provides food. For the blind, God provides sight. For the bowed down, God provides encouragement. For the alien, God provides special attention. For the fatherless and the widow God provides for their needs. For those in prison, God provides freedom.

**Question 5.** God seems to have special concern for people in hopeless or difficult situations. He is attentive and personally involved in caring for them in ways which are responsive to their specific needs. God is pictured as gentle, powerful, compassionate.

**Question 8.** You may want to ask your group members to read or pray their psalms as a time of concluding worship and celebration.

# Making the Most of These Studies

## About This Series of Bible Studies

This series of Bible studies is rooted in four basic convictions.

First, we are in need of recovery. The word ‘recovery’ implies that something has gone wrong. Christians firmly believe this. Something has gone very wrong. Things are not as they should be. We have sinned. We have been sinned against. We are entangled, stuck, bogged down, bound and broken. We need to recover.

Second, recovery is a demanding process, and often a lengthy one. There are no quick fixes in recovery. Recovery means change. It means facing the truth about ourselves, even when that truth is painful. It means giving up our old destructive patterns, and learning new life-giving patterns. Recovery means taking responsibility for our lives rather than blaming, avoiding, minimizing or denying. It is not easy. It is sometimes painful. And it will take time.

Third, recovery is possible. No matter how hopeless it may seem, no matter how deeply we have been wounded by life or how often we have failed, recovery is possible. Our primary basis for hope in the process of recovery is that God is able to do things which we cannot do ourselves. Recovery is possible because God has committed himself to us.

Finally, these studies are rooted in the conviction that the Bible can be a significant resource for recovery. Many people who have lived through difficult life experiences have had bits of the Bible thrown at their pain as a quick fix or a simplistic solution. As a result, many people expect the Bible to be a barrier to recovery rather than a resource. These studies are based on the belief that the Bible is not a book of quick fixes and simplistic solutions. It is, on the contrary, a practical and helpful resource for recovery. We were deeply moved personally by these Biblical texts as we worked on this series. Our convictions have deepened that the God of the Bible can bring serenity to people whose lives have become unmanageable.

If you are looking for resources to help you in your recovery, we invite you to study the Bible with an open mind and heart.

May your roots sink deeply in the soil of God’s love

Dale and Juanita Ryan

## Getting the Most from this Study

These Bible study guides are designed to assist you to find out for yourself what the Bible has to say about different aspects of recovery. The texts you will study will be thought provoking, challenging, inspiring and very personal. It will become obvious that these studies are not designed merely to convince you of the truthfulness of some idea. Rather, they are designed to allow the opportunity for Biblical truths to renew your heart and mind.

We want to encourage realistic expectations of these discussion guides. First, they are not intended to be everything-the-Bible-says-about any subject. They are not intended to be a systematic presentation of Biblical theology. Second, it’s important to emphasize that these guides are not intended to provide a recovery program or to replace other important resources in recovery. If you are in a counseling relationship, we pray that these guides will enrich that relationship. If you are involved in a support group, it is our hope that these studies will enrich that resource as well. What these guides are designed to do is to help you study a series of Biblical texts which relate to the process of recovery. Our hope is that they will allow you to discover in a new way the Good News for people struggling to recover.

All of the studies in this series use a workbook format. Space is provided for writing answers to each question. This is ideal for personal study and allows group members to prepare in advance for the discussion. The Leader’s Version also contains leader’s notes. These notes provide suggestions on how to lead a group discussion, provide additional background information on certain questions, give helpful tips on group dynamics and suggest ways to deal with problems that may arise during the discussion. With such helps, someone with little or no experience can lead an effective discussion.

## Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study pray that God would bring healing and recovery to you through his Word.
2. After spending time in personal reflection, read and reread the passage to be studied.
3. Write your answers in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God’s Word. For the same reason, we suggest that you write out your prayers at the end of each study.

4. Share what you are learning with someone you trust. Recovery is empowered by experiences of community.

## Suggestions for Group Study

Even if you have already done these studies individually, we strongly encourage you to find some way to do them with a group of other people as well. Although each person's recovery is different, everyone's recovery is empowered by the mutual support and encouragement that can only be found in a one-on-one or a group setting. Several reminders may be helpful for participants in a group study:

1. Realize that trust grows over time. If sharing in a group setting is risky, realize that you do not have to share more than feels safe. However, taking risks is a necessary part of recovery. So, do participate in the discussion as much as you are able.

2. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they share what they have learned. You will learn from their insights. If you can, link what you say to the comments of others so the group stays on the topic. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

3. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to share what we have learned that we do not leave opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to do so as well.

4. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have a profitable time together.

5. We recommend that groups follow a few basic guidelines, and that these guidelines be read at the beginning of each discussion session. The guidelines, which you may wish to adapt to your situation, are:

a. Anything said in the group is considered confidential and will not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

b. We will provide time for each person present to talk if they feel comfortable doing so.

c. We will talk about ourselves and our own situations, avoiding conversation about other people.

d. We will listen attentively to each other.

e. We will be very cautious about giving advice.

f. We will pray for each other.

## About Leading a Group Study

You may be experiencing a variety of feelings as you anticipate leading a group using this study guide. You may feel inadequate for the task and afraid of what will happen. If this is the case, know you are in good company. Many of the kings, prophets and apostles in the Bible felt inadequate and afraid. And many other small group leaders share this experience. It may help you to know that your willingness to lead is a gift to the other group members. It might also help if you tell them about your feelings and ask them to pray for you. Realize as well that the other group members share the responsibility for the group. And realize that it is the Spirit's work to bring insight, comfort, healing and recovery to group members. Your role is simply to provide guidance to the discussion. The suggestions listed below will help you to provide that guidance.

### Preparing to Lead

1. Develop realistic expectations of yourself as a small group leader. Do not feel that you have to 'have it all together'. Rather, commit yourself to an on-going discipline of honesty about your own needs. As you grow in honesty about your own needs, you will grow as well in your capacity for compassion, gentleness and patience with yourself and with others. As a leader you can encourage an atmosphere of honesty by being honest about yourself.

2. Pray. Pray for yourself and your own recovery. Pray for the group members. Invite the Spirit to be present as you prepare and as you meet.

3. Read the text several times.

4. Take your time to thoughtfully work through each question, writing out your answers.

5. After completing your personal study, read through the leader's notes for the study you are leading. These notes are designed to help you in several ways. First, they tell you the purpose the authors had in mind while writing the study. Take time to think through how the questions work together to accomplish that purpose. Second, the notes provide you with additional background information or comments on some of the questions. This information can be useful if people have difficulty understanding or answering a question. Third, the leader's notes can alert you to potential problems you may encounter during the study.

6. If you wish to remind yourself during the group discussion of anything mentioned in the leader's notes, make a note to yourself below that question in the your study guide

### Leading the Study

1. Begin on time. You may want to open in prayer, or have a group member do so.

2. Be sure everyone has a study guide. Decide as a group if you want people to do the study on their own ahead of time. If your time together is limited, it will be helpful for people to prepare in advance.

3. At the beginning of your first time together, explain that these studies are meant to be discussions, not lectures. Encourage the members of the group to participate. However, do not put pressure on those who may be hesitant to speak during the first few sessions. Clearly state that people do not need to share anything they do not feel safe sharing. Remind people that it will take time to trust each other.

4. Read aloud the group guidelines listed in the front of the guide. These commitments are important in creating a safe place for people to talk and trust and feel.

5. Read aloud the introductory paragraphs at the beginning of the discussion for the day. This will orient the group to the passage being studied.

6. If the group does not prepare in advance, approximately ten minutes will be needed for individuals to work on the Personal Reflection section. This is designed to help group members focus on some aspect of their personal experience. Hopefully it will help group members to be more aware of the frame of reference and life experience which we bring to the text. This time of personal reflection can be done prior to the group meeting or as the first part of the meeting. The personal reflection questions are not designed to be used directly for group discussion. Rather, the first question in the Bible study section is intended to give group members an opportunity to share what they feel safe sharing from their time of personal reflection.

7. Read the passage aloud. You may choose to do this yourself, or someone else may read if he or she has been asked to do so prior to the study.

8. As you begin to ask the questions in the guide, keep several things in mind. First, the questions are designed to be used just as they are written. If you wish, you may simply read them aloud to the group. Or, you may prefer to express them in your own words. However, unnecessary rewording of the questions is not recommended.

Second, the questions are intended to guide the group toward understanding and applying the main idea of the study. The authors of the guide have stated the purpose of each study in the leader's notes. You should try to understand how the study questions and the biblical text work together to lead the group in that direction.

There may be times when it is appropriate to deviate from the study guide. For example, a question may have already been answered. If so, move on to the next question. Or someone

may raise an important question not covered in the guide. Take time to discuss it! The important thing is to use discretion. There may be many routes you can travel to reach the goal of the study. But the easiest route is usually the one the authors have suggested.

9. Don't be afraid of silence. People need time to think about the question before formulating their answers.

10. Don't be content with just one answer. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" or "Anything else?" until several people have given answers to the question.

11. Acknowledge all contributions. Try to be affirming whenever possible. Never reject an answer. If it seems clearly wrong to you, ask: "Which part of the text led you to that conclusion?" or "What do the rest of you think?"

12. Don't expect every answer to be addressed to you, even though this will probably happen at first. As group members become more at ease, they will begin to interact more effectively with each other. This is a sign of a healthy discussion.

13. Don't be afraid of controversy. It can be very stimulating. Differences can enrich our lives. If you don't resolve an issue completely, don't be frustrated. Move on and keep it in mind for later. A subsequent study may resolve the problem.

14. Stick to the passage under consideration. It should be the source for answering the questions. Discourage the group from unnecessary cross-referencing. Likewise, stick to the subject and avoid going off on tangents.

15. Periodically summarize what the group has said about the topic. This helps to draw together the various ideas mentioned and gives continuity to the study. But be careful not to use summary statements as an opportunity to give a sermon!

16. Each study ends with a prayer time. There are several ways to handle this time in a group. The person who leads each study could lead the group in a prayer or you could allow time for group participation. Remember that some members of your group may feel uncomfortable about participating in public prayer. It might be helpful to discuss this with the group during your first meeting and to reach some agreement about how to proceed.

### **Listening to Emotional Pain.**

These Bible study guides are designed to take seriously the pain and struggle that is part of life. People will experience a variety of emotions during these studies. Part of your role as group leader will be to listen to emotional pain. Listening is a gift which you can give to a person who is hurting. For many people, it is not an easy gift to give. The following suggestions

will help you to listen more effectively to people in emotional pain.

1. Remember that you are not responsible to take the pain away. People in helping relationships often feel that they are being asked to make the other person feel better. This is usually related to the helper's own dysfunctional patterns of not being comfortable with painful feelings.
2. Not only are you not responsible to take the pain away, one of the things people need most is an opportunity to face and to experience the pain in their life. They have usually spent years denying their pain and running from it. Healing can come when we are able to face our pain in the presence of someone who cares about us. Rather than trying to take the pain away, then, commit yourself to listening attentively as it is expressed.
3. Realize that some group members may not feel comfortable with other's expressions of sadness or anger. You may want to acknowledge that such emotions are uncomfortable, but say that part of recovery is to learn to feel and to allow others to feel.
4. Be very cautious about giving answers and advice. Advice and answers may make you feel better or feel competent, but they may also minimize peoples' problems and their painful feelings. Simple solutions rarely work, and they can easily communicate "You should be better now" or "You shouldn't really be talking about this."
5. Be sure to communicate direct affirmation any time people talk about their painful emotions. It takes courage to talk about our pain because it creates anxiety for us. It is a great gift to be trusted by those who are struggling.

**If you find this study to be helpful. . .**

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