

Psalms, Teacher's Guide

Week 7: Hope When the Soul Is Downcast

Psalms 42–43

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Psalms 42 and 43 are best treated as a single lament in three movements, bound together by the threefold refrain. What is doctrinally at stake is the nature of assurance and the seat of our hope. The psalmist teaches that the believer's confidence rests not on the felt presence of God, which rises and falls, but on the revealed character of God, His steadfast love, His salvation, His unchanging reality as 'the living God.' This is a vital truth for anyone who has concluded that a dry season means God has departed or that they have lost their faith. Help students separate the fact of God's love from the feeling of it.

These psalms are also a master class in spiritual formation, and specifically in what older writers called preaching to oneself. The psalmist does not merely vent his despair, nor does he suppress it; he addresses his own soul and deliberately sets the truth of God before it. This is one of the most practical disciplines you can give your students, the habit of answering the despairing voice within with what is actually true about God. Model it, and help them name the specific lies and the specific truths involved in their own low seasons.

Read through Christ, the longing of these psalms finds its answer in Jesus. The thirst for the living God is satisfied by the One who gives living water (John 4; 7); the longing to come to the altar and into God's presence is fulfilled by the One whose death opened the way (Hebrews 10:19–22); and the refrain's confident 'I shall again praise him' is secured by His resurrection. Aim to send students home both clear that their hope rests on God's character rather than their feelings, and equipped to thirst for, and drink from, Christ when their souls are downcast. Note for the class that these two psalms are really one song, which is why the study treats them together.

Question 1

Student Question:

The psalm opens, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (42:1–2). What does it tell us about how we were made that the deepest thirst of the human soul is for God Himself, and how does this longing both expose our emptiness and point us to where true satisfaction is found?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open with the famous image: the deer panting for streams of water. This is not a gentle preference but a desperate, survival-level thirst. The psalmist says his soul thirsts for God 'for

the living God' with that same intensity. Help students feel the depth of the longing being described.

Teach what this reveals about human nature. We were made for God, and nothing less than God will finally satisfy the soul. Augustine's famous line captures the psalm: our hearts are restless until they rest in God. The chronic restlessness people feel, and try to quiet with achievement, pleasure, or distraction, is at bottom a thirst for God.

Show the double function of this thirst. It exposes our emptiness, every other well eventually runs dry, and it points us to the only spring that does not. The ache itself is a kind of mercy, a homing signal calling us back to the living God.

Set up the week. The psalmist is thirsty and feels far from the stream. The whole song is about how to thirst for God faithfully when you cannot yet feel His refreshment, and where that thirst is finally satisfied, which the New Testament names as Christ Himself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Humanity made for God, satisfied by nothing less (the restless heart).
- Soul-thirst as a survival-level longing, not a mild preference.
- The double function of thirst: exposing emptiness and pointing to the spring.
- Restlessness and craving as a misdirected thirst for God.
- The ache itself as a mercy calling us home.

Discussion Prompts

- What does our deepest thirst reveal about how we were made?
- What 'wells' do people try to satisfy this thirst with, and why do they fail?
- How can a season of spiritual dryness actually point us back to God?

Question 2

Student Question:

The psalmist's "tears have been my food day and night," and he remembers how he "used to go" to worship with "glad shouts and songs of praise" (42:3–4). When have you looked back on a season of closeness to God that you no longer feel? How did that memory affect you, with longing, with grief, with hope, or with a mix of all three?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the painful memory of verses 3–4. The psalmist remembers leading joyful worship, and the contrast with his present dryness deepens his grief. Many believers know this ache of remembered closeness.

Help students handle memory rightly. Remembering better days can cut two ways: it can deepen despair ('I'll never feel that again') or it can fuel hope ('the God who met me then is still real'). The psalmist lets memory become a spur to hope, not only a source of grief.

Normalize the dry season. Spiritual dryness is not necessarily a sign of sin or lost faith; it is a common experience of the faithful, and even great saints have walked through it. The point is not to panic at the dryness but to keep thirsting through it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The ache of remembering past closeness to God.
- Memory as a potential fuel for hope, not only grief.
- Spiritual dryness as a common experience, not necessarily a sign of sin.
- Continuing to thirst through the dry season.

Discussion Prompts

- When have you looked back on a closeness to God you no longer feel?
- How can remembering better days fuel hope rather than only grief?
- How does it help to know dryness is a common experience of the faithful?

Question 3

Student Question:

Three times the psalmist repeats the refrain, "Why are you cast down, O my soul... Hope in God; for I shall again praise him" (42:5, 11; 43:5). What does it teach us that he speaks truth to his own soul rather than simply listening to it, and why is hope here something he chooses and rehearses rather than merely a feeling he waits to receive?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the central discipline of the psalms, so dwell on it. Notice the structure: the psalmist addresses his own soul. 'Why are you cast down, O my soul?' He has become two voices, the despairing self that feels, and the believing self that speaks truth to the feeling.

Draw out the crucial distinction. There is a difference between listening to ourselves and talking to ourselves. Most of us passively listen to the running commentary of our fears and discouragements, letting it set the tone of our day. The psalmist does the opposite: he takes himself in hand and preaches truth back.

Note that hope here is commanded, not merely felt. 'Hope in God' is something the psalmist tells his soul to do. Biblical hope is not a mood that descends on us; it is a settled confidence we choose and rehearse, grounded in the certainty that 'I shall again praise him.'

Show the persistence. The refrain comes three times. He does not preach the truth to himself once and feel instantly better; he keeps doing it. Encourage students that this discipline often requires repetition, the same truths spoken to the same soul, again and again, until the heart catches up.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Preaching to oneself: addressing the soul rather than only listening to it.
- The difference between listening to our feelings and speaking truth to them.
- Hope as a chosen, rehearsed confidence, not merely a feeling.
- The persistence of the discipline (the threefold refrain).
- Grounding hope in the certainty of future praise.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between listening to yourself and talking to yourself?
- Why is hope something we can choose and rehearse, not just feel?
- Why does preaching truth to ourselves usually take repetition?

Question 4

Student Question:

The psalmist does not deny his feelings, but neither does he let them rule him; he answers them with truth. What does the despairing voice inside you tend to say when you are low, and what specific truths about God would you need to preach back to it? Be concrete about both the lie and the truth.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question makes the discipline concrete. Ask students to identify the actual script the despairing voice runs in them, 'God has forgotten you,' 'it will always be this way,' 'your faith is gone.' Naming the lie is the first step to answering it.

Then help them find the specific countering truth. Vague reassurance does not work; the psalmist answers despair with particular truths, God's steadfast love, his salvation, the certainty of future praise. Help each student pair their specific lie with a specific scriptural truth.

Encourage the practice as a habit, not a one-time exercise. Some find it helpful to write the lie and the truth side by side, or to keep a few key verses ready to speak the moment the despairing voice starts. The goal is a trained reflex of answering despair with Scripture.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming the specific lies the despairing voice tells.
- Answering despair with particular scriptural truths, not vague reassurance.

- Pairing each lie with a corresponding truth about God.
- Building a trained reflex of answering despair with Scripture.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the despairing voice inside you tend to say?
- What specific truth about God answers that specific lie?
- How could you keep that truth ready for the next low moment?

Question 5

Student Question:

Even in his lowest moment the psalmist preaches to himself, “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me” (42:8). How can a believer be sure of God’s steadfast love even when they cannot feel His presence, and why must our assurance rest on God’s revealed character rather than on the rise and fall of our emotions?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 8 is a shaft of light in the dark: even now, ‘by day the Lord commands his steadfast love.’ The psalmist asserts God’s steadfast love (hesed again) as a present fact while still feeling forsaken. Feeling and fact are not the same.

Teach the seat of assurance. Our assurance of God’s love cannot rest on our feelings, because feelings rise and fall with sleep, health, weather, and circumstance. It must rest on God’s revealed character and His promises, which do not change. The cross is the unanswerable proof that God loves us, regardless of how we feel on a given morning (Romans 5:8).

Apply this pastorally to the discouraged. A believer in a dry season often concludes, ‘I don’t feel God, therefore God has left me, or I have lost my faith.’ This verse dismantles that logic. The sun does not cease to exist on a cloudy day. God’s steadfast love is commanded even on the days we cannot feel it.

Note the night song. ‘At night his song is with me.’ The believer can have a song in the night, not because the night is not dark, but because the God of steadfast love is present in it. Worship is not only for the bright days.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Assurance grounded in God’s revealed character, not in feelings.
- The distinction between the fact of God’s love and the feeling of it.
- The cross as the unchanging proof of God’s love (Romans 5:8).
- Dry seasons as cloudy days, not the absence of the sun.
- A song in the night grounded in God’s steadfast presence.

Discussion Prompts

- Why can't our assurance rest on our feelings?
- Where do we look for proof of God's love when we cannot feel it?
- What would it mean to have 'a song in the night' during a hard season?

Question 6

Student Question:

The psalmist asks, "Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning?" (42:9), bringing his confusion straight to God. When God feels distant, do you tend to pull away from prayer and worship, or press into them? What would it look like to keep seeking God precisely when you feel least like it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes up the honest complaint of verse 9 and presses a practical choice. When God feels distant, our instinct is often to withdraw from the very practices that connect us to Him, prayer, worship, the fellowship of the church.

Expose the trap. Withdrawal feels natural but deepens the darkness; it cuts us off from the means God uses to refresh us. The psalmist does the opposite, he keeps crying out to God, keeps remembering, keeps coming. He presses in when he feels like pulling back.

Encourage the counterintuitive move. Sometimes the most faithful thing is to show up to worship, open the Scriptures, and pray precisely when we feel least like it, trusting that God meets us through these means even when our feelings lag behind. Encourage one concrete way to press in this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The instinct to withdraw when God feels distant, and its danger.
- Pressing into prayer, worship, and fellowship as the faithful response.
- The means of grace as God's appointed channels of refreshment.
- Faithfulness that shows up even when feelings lag behind.

Discussion Prompts

- When God feels distant, do you pull away or press in?
- Why does withdrawal usually deepen the darkness?
- What is one way you could press into God this week despite how you feel?

Question 7

Student Question:

In 43:3–4 the psalmist prays, “Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me... Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy.” He longs not merely for relief but for God Himself as his “exceeding joy.” What does it mean that God, and not merely the lifting of our circumstances, is meant to be our highest joy, and how does the New Covenant give us access to God’s presence the psalmist could only long for?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 43:4 is the heart of the matter: the psalmist longs to come to ‘God my exceeding joy.’ Note carefully what he wants. Not merely relief, not merely a change of circumstances, but God Himself. God is the joy, not just the giver of joys.

Press the diagnostic. Often what we really want in our distress is for the pain to stop, and God is valued mainly as the means to that end. The psalmist’s longing is purer: he wants God. Help students examine whether they want God’s gifts or God Himself as their exceeding joy.

Teach the New Covenant access. The psalmist longed to come to the altar and into God’s presence but was kept at a distance, separated by geography, by the temple system, by the limits of the Old Covenant. Through Christ, that distance is abolished. We now have ‘confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus’ (Hebrews 10:19). What he ached for, we have been given.

Apply the privilege. The believer no longer waits at a distance for access to God; the way is open, the veil is torn (Matthew 27:51), and we may draw near at any moment. This does not erase dry seasons, but it transforms them: even when we do not feel near, the way is genuinely open, and we are invited to come.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God Himself, not merely relief, as our ‘exceeding joy.’
- Wanting the Giver above the gifts, even in distress.
- The Old Covenant distance from God’s presence.
- New Covenant access to God through the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19; Matthew 27:51).
- The open way to God transforming, though not erasing, dry seasons.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between wanting relief and wanting God Himself?
- How does Christ give us the access the psalmist could only long for?
- How does the open way to God change the way we face dry seasons?

Question 8

Student Question:

The psalmist's hope is fixed on a future certainty: "I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (43:5). When you are in a dark season, do you live as though it will last forever, or do you hold on to the certainty that you will praise God again? What helps you keep that future hope in view when the present feels endless?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes up the forward-looking certainty of the refrain: 'I shall again praise him.' The psalmist anchors himself not in a changed present but in a certain future. Ask students whether they live as though their dark season is permanent.

Expose the lie of permanence. Depression and discouragement nearly always whisper that this is forever, that the darkness will never lift. The refrain answers with certainty: 'again.' There will be praise again. The night is real, but it is not the end of the story.

Offer practical anchors. What helps a person hold the future in view, a remembered promise, the testimony of others who have come through, the steady rhythm of worship that rehearses our certain hope. Encourage students to fix their eyes on the 'again' when the present feels endless.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hope anchored in a certain future, not a changed present.
- The lie of permanence that discouragement tells.
- The refrain's 'again' as the answer to 'forever.'
- Practical anchors for holding future hope in view.

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend to live as though a dark season will last forever?
- How does the certainty 'I shall again praise him' answer that fear?
- What helps you keep the future in view when the present feels endless?

Question 9

Student Question:

The psalmist thirsts for the "living God" and longs to come into His presence at the altar (42:2; 43:4), yet he is kept at a distance. How does Jesus answer the deepest longing of these psalms, both as the One who offers living water that satisfies the thirsty soul and as the One whose death opened the way into God's presence, and what difference does His resurrection make for the believer whose soul is downcast?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring the psalms' longing to its fulfillment in Christ. The whole of Psalms 42 and 43 is a thirst, for the living God, for His presence, for His joy, that the psalmist cannot fully satisfy under the Old Covenant. The New Testament presents Jesus as the answer to exactly this thirst.

Show Christ as the living water. To a thirsty woman at a well Jesus said, 'Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again' (John 4:14), and at the feast He cried, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink' (John 7:37). The deer's panting thirst of Psalm 42 finds its spring in Christ. He does not merely point to the stream; He is the stream.

Show Christ as the way into God's presence. The psalmist longed to come to the altar and into God's presence but was held at a distance. Jesus, by His death, opened 'a new and living way' into the very presence of God (Hebrews 10:19–20); the torn veil means the downcast believer is never barred from drawing near. What the psalmist ached for across a distance, Christ has brought near.

Show the difference the resurrection makes. The refrain's confident 'I shall again praise him' is not wishful thinking for the Christian; it is guaranteed by the risen Christ. Because He lives, the believer's future praise is certain, death itself cannot finally silence it (1 Corinthians 15:20–22). Our darkest season is bounded by an empty tomb.

Be careful, as in the lament weeks, not to use Christ's answer to shut down honest grief. The point is not 'come to Jesus and you will never feel downcast again.' The psalmist still preaches to a downcast soul. The point is that in Christ the thirsty have a spring, the distant have a way in, and the grieving have a certain future. We thirst, but not without water; we wait, but not without hope.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the living water who satisfies the soul's thirst (John 4:14; 7:37).
- Christ's death opening the new and living way into God's presence (Hebrews 10:19–20).
- The torn veil meaning the downcast are never barred from drawing near (Matthew 27:51).
- The resurrection guaranteeing the refrain's certain future praise (1 Corinthians 15:20–22).
- Honest grief honored, not erased, by Christ's answer to our thirst.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Jesus satisfy the thirst these psalms describe?
- How does His death give us the access to God the psalmist longed for?
- What difference does the resurrection make to a downcast soul?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across both psalms, from the panting thirst of the opening to the steady refrain, "Hope in God." Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through them. What is the single truth from Psalms 42 and 43 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone traces both psalms, from panting thirst to the steady refrain, and asks students to name one way Jesus is forming them. Give them quiet, and be especially sensitive; some in the room may be in a dark season right now.

Press toward the concrete and gentle. For some the formation is learning to preach truth to their own soul; for others it is pressing into worship when they feel nothing; for others it is coming to Christ as living water. Help each name their next step without pressure.

Close by lifting their eyes to the risen Christ, the spring for the thirsty and the open way to God. The psalms refuse to end in despair, and so should the lesson. There will be praise again, because the One who is our exceeding joy is alive.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Learning to preach truth to one's own soul.
- Coming to Christ as living water for the thirsty.
- Pressing into worship and prayer in the dark.
- Certain future praise grounded in the risen Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What single truth from Psalms 42 and 43 will you carry into this week?
- Where do you most need to preach hope back to your own soul?
- How will you come to Christ as living water when you feel dry?