

PUSHING BACK the DARKNESS

Finding Hope in Life's Valleys

Study Guide

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Pushing Back the Darkness: Finding Hope in Life's Valleys
Study Guide

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Introduction

The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:5

If we were chatting over a cup of coffee, I might ask you, "How are doing?"

Initially you might say fine, which is an almost automatic, natural response for most of us. But if I asked you how you are *really* doing, you might share more.

Perhaps you would reveal how weary you are from taking care of an aging parent 24/7. Maybe you would tell me that you miss the life you had before Covid-19 overtook the world, politics became so polarizing, and social media became so combative.

You might share that you're fearful about the results of a medical test, or losing your job, or you might tell me about the anxiety you feel about how best to educate your kids and raise them in this crazy world.

Maybe you would share an even more traumatic experience. I would listen and silently pray for you as I nod my head. I know what it feels like to be in one of life's valleys and to feel the presence of darkness.

Life's valleys can wear us down and fill us with despair. All through the Bible we see the battle between light and darkness, and the darkness seems to thrive in valleys. But in John 1:5 we are told *the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

This is where I want to shout hallelujah! Because as scary and dark as the valley can be, the light shines the brightest in the dark. It is in the valley where my faith has grown the most. It

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is in the valley when all looked lost, God revealed Himself to me. He showed me why I can trust Him, how to push back the darkness, and how to cling to hope.

The hope I found in the valley is not a flimsy hope or a fragile wish, but a hope anchored in the one true God and the Light of the world, who is Jesus.

Through this study I'd like to invite you to dive deeper into the lessons in my valley journeys. My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will reveal more of God's character to you and reinforce various ways for you to develop hope. May you know how much God loves you and is with you in every step as He lights your path and guides you through and out of the valley. – In Jesus' name Amen.

To prepare your heart for this study you might want to listen to the worship song "Hills and Valleys" by Tauren Wells.

Love and Blessings,

Kris

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Session One - Sharing and Thankful

(Chapter 1)

In the first dark valley I journeyed through as an adult, the Holy Spirit taught me the power of sharing with others how I was feeling and focusing on being thankful. By sharing what I was feeling with David, he was able to help dispel the lies the enemy was whispering in my ear. It also made me realize others had gone through similar situations and not only survived, but their faith and trust in God increased.

When my mom was dying of cancer, it felt like my heart was breaking into a thousand pieces. However, when I sensed God say, "You have had a great mom for twenty-six years. Some people never experience that one day in their life," it made me shift my focus from how difficult it would be to lose my mom to all the wonderful times I had with her. I stopped yelling at God and instead prayed, "Thank you, Father, for giving me such an amazing mom. For our strong friendship. For all the great memories." My heart overflowed with gratitude.

The more I thanked God, the lighter my heart became, and it filled with peace. Everything was not suddenly all better. But something had shifted. I discovered when I focused on my blessings, it reminded me of God's goodness. It helped me sense the comfort of the Holy Spirit and experience God's presence and peace.

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1. When you are struggling, who do you share with, and why do you feel safe sharing with that person?
2. When you are isolated, what lies of the enemy do you tend to believe?
3. How does sharing your struggles with other safe people help you to dispel the lies?
4. Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. What are the advantages of sharing your struggles with others?

Throughout scripture we see the principle of giving thanks. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 Paul writes, “¹⁸ *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*” On the surface that command seems very, very difficult. There are some valleys that are so dark and painful it might seem impossible to give thanks to God. Yet, when you think about the fact that Paul wrote much of the New Testament while he was brutally beaten and imprisoned, it gives his words merit.

5. What is one thing you are thankful for in your life?
6. Why do you think Paul says to give thanks in all circumstances?

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7. What benefits have you experienced when you give thanks as you walk through the valley?

One person from the Bible who I think represents sharing with others and being thankful during difficult times is Mary the mother of Jesus. Most scholars believe Mary was a young teenager when she was betrothed to Joseph. According to William Barclay, betrothal “was absolutely binding. It lasted for one year. During that year, the couple were known as husband and wife, although they did not have the rights of husband and wife. It could not be terminated in any other way than by divorce.” (*The New Daily Study Bible*, 2001, Vol. 1, p. 22)

Becoming pregnant before the marriage was shameful, but according to Mosaic Law, having sexual relations during betrothal was considered immoral and brought about shame to the couple. However, when a couple was betrothed, they were considered husband and wife. Therefore, if a betrothed woman became pregnant by another man, she was guilty of adultery, which according to Mosaic law was punishable by stoning.

I don't know about you, but if I was Mary, I would have been more than a little concerned about how my family, Joseph, and my community would react to my pregnancy. Perhaps that is why Gabriel told Mary about the miracle Elizabeth was experiencing and why Mary decided to leave her home and go visit her cousin.

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Read Luke 1:1-56; Matthew 1:18-25

8. How do you think Mary felt when the angel Gabriel told her she was highly favored and would give birth to the Son of God?
9. What did Elizabeth say to Mary upon her arrival and how do you think it encouraged her?
10. How does Mary inspire you to share your struggles with someone else?

Scholars believe that Mary's hymn follows the common form of Psalms of Thanksgiving. The pattern for Psalms of Thanksgiving is to begin by thanking and praising God. Then, it transitions to stating why one is thankful.

11. How do you think Mary was able to make a Psalm of Thanksgiving and praise God while having the possibility of being charged with adultery?
12. How does Mary encourage you to thank God even when life is hard?

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ACTION STEPS – Complete one or two of the action steps over the next week.

1. If you have someone in your life you share your struggles with, send them a text or write them a note, and let them know how thankful you are for their friendship and how they encourage you.
2. Daily write down three things you are thankful for.
3. Read Psalm 136 every day for the next week.
4. Listen to the worship song “Grateful” by Elevation Worship

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Session Two - Trust and Hope

(Chapters 2 & 3)

In Chapter 2 of *Pushing Back the Darkness* I share how I was sitting in Andrew's pediatrician's office when I had this overwhelming feeling that he had leukemia, but that he was going to be okay. Then, I sensed the Holy Spirit saying to me, "Trust in the Lord."

Not long after Andrew was diagnosed, I was reading my Bible and came to Proverbs 3:5-6 - "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. Acknowledge Him in all your ways and He will make your path straight.*"

I was so excited to see that the words the Lord had whispered to me were in the Bible, and the *lean not on your own understanding* really encouraged me. As we spent most of that spring in the hospital, I clung to Proverbs 3:5. I knew in my heart the way through this was to trust God even when things were getting worse and I didn't understand. Sometimes we are rendered completely helpless. Trusting God is the only option.

Webster's dictionary defines trust as "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something and as one in which confidence is placed." Although I eventually grew to trust God, it was a process to get to the point where I could trust Him completely.

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1. On a scale of 1 to 5 how would you rate your ability to trust God when you are in a valley? (1 = It's easy to trust and 5 = It's difficult to trust)

2. What do you think determines how well you are able to trust God?

The more I grew in my relationship with God and began to grasp a better understanding of His nature, the easier it was for me to trust Him. First, I learned that God is eternal, which means He is a simple being and He never changes. Therefore, every attribute He has is completely part of Him. So, God is all good, all love, all faithful, all righteous, all holy, all powerful, all knowing, etc. If all this is true of God, then I concluded He is worthy of my trust.

However, it took some time for this head knowledge to make its way down into my heart. I had to spend time in the Bible, and I would pray, *Lord, please reveal yourself to me*. As I spent time in His presence worshiping Him, praying, and listening, I grew to know Him more. There are no shortcuts. You can't microwave your relationship with God. However, a good starting point is to begin to record everything you learn about God as you read the Bible, and then pray and ask Him to reveal what you recorded about Him.

3. Read Psalm 145 and record all you learn about God.

4. How does knowing God's attributes help you to trust Him more?

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After Andrew was diagnosed with leukemia, life was very hard. He was in the hospital for over six weeks straight, and we realized we were not going to be able to take our daughter, Amanda to Disney World for her birthday. We had already canceled the trip once when my mom was rapidly declining from cancer, so we asked David's parents if they would go in our place.

As I shared in Chapter 3, the night before they left on the trip, I had a full-blown pity party. Then I sensed God whispering, "Trust me. Keep your eyes on Me. Hold fast to Me. Find hope in Me."

I felt chastened. I silently prayed, "I'm so sorry, Lord. Please forgive me. Help me to trust you. Breathe hope into my tired soul. Everything just feels so difficult."

A peace washed over me, and a small spark of hope seemed to come alive. Hope is what kept me from drowning in despair.

Has your hope ever faded like mine did? Has discouragement crept into your soul? I think most of us have experienced despair at one time or another. I found when I feel hopeless it's important for me to try to remember who God is and what He says.

5. When have you struggled with hopelessness?

6. Read Psalm 25:3-10. How do these verses teach you about God and how does it impact the hope you feel?

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When I think of a biblical person who exhibited trust and hope in God, Daniel comes to mind. Although Daniel was exiled to Babylon when he was a young man and forced into service to the king, his trust and hope in God never seemed to waver.

Read the first chapter of Daniel.

The Babylonians usually gave the first portion of the king's table to idols, which in the Israelites' minds made the food unacceptable. In addition to this, the Babylonians did not prepare the meat according to the regulations of the law, and they also ate unclean animals.

7. In verse 8 we are told Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine. What do you think is the source of Daniel's resolve?

8. How do you see Daniel trusting God?

9. How did Daniel's trust in God impact his friends?

10. How do you see your trust or lack of trust in God impacting your life?

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Read Daniel 6

11. Why do you think Daniel was able to put His hope in God even when he was being taken to the lions' den?

12. Daniel was still thrown into the lions' den, but God protected him from the lions. When have you found yourself in a "lions' den"? What emotions did you experience? What was the outcome?

13. What was King Darius' response to Daniel surviving the lions' den, and what impact did it have on King Darius' view of God?

14. When you've found yourself in a "lion's den" how has showing your hope in God impacted others?

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ACTION STEPS - Complete one or two of the action steps over the next week.

1. Pick one of the following Psalms to read: Psalms 86, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, or 93. Journal what you learn about God in that psalm.
2. As you read the Bible write down in a journal or on an index card, any verses that encourage you or search on the internet for the promises of God or encouraging scriptures and write them down. Then when you need hope, read through the scriptures and see how they revive your soul and help you to trust God.
3. Take a pretty box or a glass jar and fill it with God's promises and encouraging scriptures. Give it to someone you know who is currently in a valley.
4. Listen to the worship song "Cornerstone" by Hillsong.

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Session Three - Meditate and Truth

(Chapters 4 & 5)

Sometimes we find ourselves in a valley, and despair sets in as we seem to be swallowed by darkness. It can be helpful when this happens to remember other times situations seemed bleak, but God intervened.

After Andrew completed all his rounds of chemotherapy, we had hoped that his leukemia would go into remission. It did not happen, and I immediately became discouraged. To help counteract this feeling, I tried to meditate on the three miracles we had already experienced.

These miracles were wonderful! First, the protocol for Andrew's treatment was changed the day he began chemotherapy with the brand new protocol dramatically increasing his chances of a cure.

Then we found that we only had to pay a \$250 deductible while all medical expenses for Andrew's treatment were paid at 100%.

Finally, it was discovered that I had double antigens so instead of Andrew getting half of mine and half of his dad's he had all of mine which made me a perfect match for his bone marrow!

I reminded myself that God does not care about percentages. Meditating on past miracles reminded me of God's faithfulness and power and gave me hope that He would once again work in miraculous ways.

Throughout scripture we see this principle being used. Psalm 145:4-5 says, "*One*

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generation will commend Your works to another; they will tell of Your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendor of Your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works.

When we share with others what God has done in the past or just meditate on how we've seen God work already in our lives, it breathes hope into our soul. The same God who spoke creation into existence, sent mana from heaven, made the walls of Jericho collapse, shut the mouths of lions, and raised Jesus from the dead is the one who still works miracles today.

1. Share either a time you saw God work in miraculous ways in your own life or in someone else's life.
2. How does meditating on those times encourage you?
3. Do you believe God is willing to work in your life in the same powerful way He worked in the people in the Bible? Why or why not?

When Andrew went into shock on Thanksgiving Day and we were told he might not make it through the night, I was devastated. I went home and cried out to God. Then Satan slyly chose that moment to feed me a lie, and I thought, "You see how the closer you get to God, the more that bad things happen?"

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I told God, "I am grateful for the miracles you have done, but I can't take any more of this, so I'm just going to step back from you for a little bit." I believed Satan's lie hook, line, and sinker, and for the next four months I ignored God and was absolutely miserable.

4. Read John 8:44 What does John say about the devil?

5. What lies of the enemy have you believed?

The night of Andrew's third birthday I had an asthma attack and ended up in the hospital. After they stabilized me, I was finally alone in the room with my own thoughts. I realized that even if Andrew died, it wouldn't be as painful as going through this broken world without God. I immediately prayed, "Lord, I am so sorry I have been ignoring you. Please forgive me. It is just so hard to watch my son suffer."

It was not an audible voice, but I sensed God saying, "I know. I watched my son suffer, and I could have saved Him, but I didn't because I love you as much as I love Him."

I laid there overwhelmed by the incredible truth that God loved *me* as much as He loves His own Son. That truth pierced my heart and changed everything. I had always known God loved me and sent His son to die for me, but I never grasped how painful and difficult it must have been for God to watch Jesus suffer, knowing He could stop it, until my own son was suffering. Now I felt it.

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Hearing God whisper truth to me changed everything. In John 8:32 it states, "*And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" I do not know what lie you may have heard or believed, but I do know where you can find truth---in the Bible.

6. What truth have you read in the Bible that exposed a lie you believed?

7. What truth do you need to repeat to yourself when you are in a valley and how does it give you freedom?

I love to study the life of King David. God called him a man after His own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). Throughout his life David showed love and trust in God and led the nation of Israel to worship the Lord. At least seventy-three Psalms are attributed to David as the author, and we see him continually reminding himself of the truth of who God is, what He has done, and putting his trust in God. You see this in Psalm 61, 62, and 63. We also see him meditating on past acts of God in Psalm 40:5 and throughout the Psalm stating the character of God and calling out for help.

When David was a young shepherd boy with no military experience, he believed in the power of God more than King Saul and all of Saul's soldiers. Saul and his entire army were terrified of Goliath. It seems they had lost confidence in the covenant promises of the Lord that stated Israel was never to fear her enemies but was to trust that the Lord would give them

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victory. However, David meditated on ways God had given him victory in the past, and boldly volunteered to fight the giant stating God would give him victory.

As much as David loved and trusted God, he was not perfect and at times believed the lies of the enemy. One such time was when his army was going out to fight a battle and he thought he was entitled to stay at the palace and relax. It was then that he saw Bathsheba, a beautiful woman bathing, that just happened to be the wife of one of David's mighty men. He believed a lie the devil whispered to him and decided he had a right to Bathsheba. After all, he was king. When she later notified him that she was pregnant, he believed the lie that he could cover up what he did and no one would know. But God knew and reminded David of truth through the prophet Nathan. David did repent of his sin, but he still suffered consequences for it.

I can relate to David in so many ways. I love God and delight in worshiping Him. However, at times I can believe a lie that's whispered to me and think and act on thoughts that are not true. I need to be in Scripture so God can remind me of truth, and I can repent of my sins. I love that God's mercies are new every morning and that the blood of Jesus washes me clean every time I repent and ask for forgiveness.

Read 1 Samuel 17:1-54

8. How do you see David meditating on God's faithfulness in the past to give him courage to fight the giant?

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9. The Israelites had the verbal tradition of sharing how God had rescued them out of Egypt and all the miracles God performed to provide for and protect the Israelites and bring them into the promised land. Why do you think the soldiers didn't find courage from God's past mighty acts?

10. What keeps you from believing God will work in miraculous ways in your life, especially when you find yourself in a valley?

Read 2 Samuel 11 through 12:25

11. What lie do you think Satan whispered to King David which caused him to commit adultery and then have Bathsheba's husband killed?

12. What was the truth that set David free?

13. What consequences did David suffer as a result of believing the lie?

14. What consequences have you experienced from lies you believed and how did you respond?

15. How have you experienced the truth setting you free?

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ACTION STEPS - Complete one or two of the action steps over the next week.

1. If you've seen God work in mighty ways in your own life, record them in a journal and then meditate on them. Ask God to continue to reveal Himself to you and to answer your prayers in miraculous ways.
2. Try to immerse yourself in truth by reading scripture daily. Read Psalm 23 every day over the next week. Each day pick out one truth to meditate on and ask God to implant that truth deep into your soul.
3. Listen to the worship song – “Do It Again” by Elevation Worship.

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Session Four - Persevere and Faith

(Chapters 6 & 7)

I don't know anyone who would choose to wait if they didn't have to. Right? Still, sometimes we have no choice and in those times we need to have patience, and we need to persevere. I imagine you have experienced seasons like this where it seems all you can do is put one foot in front of the other and just keep going and waiting for relief.

After Andrew lost almost all flexibility, I endured a long season of perseverance. If you've ever seen the movie *Groundhog Day*, you know the main character wakes up every day and repeats everything that happened the day before. That's how I felt for months.

During this time, I had to be intentional about reminding myself of things I was grateful for. I listened to music that encouraged me and tried to put things in my life that brought me joy.

For instance, I went for walks to enjoy God's creation, and every now and then I bought a little chocolate or a small bouquet of flowers. I re-read Bible verses that inspired me. I read books to Amanda and rocked Kelly to sleep. These small actions were little moments of joy throughout the long days working to help Andrew.

Sometimes to help push back the darkness we need to be intentional about finding joy and cultivating hope.

1. Share about a time you were in a season of perseverance and what motivated you to keep persevering.

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2. How did you interact with God during that season?
3. Were there any songs or scriptures that encouraged you?
4. Read Romans 5:3-5. How might this verse encourage you as you persevere through challenging times?

Sometimes in the valley, God will nudge you to be bold and not only have faith that He is at work, but He will ask you to work to make something happen too.

With Andrew's blood pressure problem, I really felt it was God giving me the words to convince the doctors to give Andrew the nifedipine in the hospital and to remove the cyst.

Trust what you sense the Lord asking you to do. When He asks us to be bold, He equips us to do the tasks.

Perhaps it is just me, but sometimes I find myself in the same valley I've journeyed through before and it's almost as if God is saying, "Here's another chance to learn this lesson."

As I shared earlier, when Andrew was two years old, he almost died on Thanksgiving Day, and I believed the lie of the enemy and put God on a shelf. I had a sense this time that God was giving me a mulligan to prove my faith.

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I don't believe God causes bad things to happen to us, but I do believe sometimes He chooses not to intervene in situations to grow our faith. If you are struggling to navigate your current trials, ask God to give you faith to trust Him and that He will work on your behalf. Pray like the man in Mark 9:23-25 who cried out to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief!"

5. Was there ever a time when you felt you had a second opportunity to show your faith in God?

6. Read Hebrews 11:6. Why do you think it is impossible to please God without faith?

7. Was there ever a time you sensed God saying your faith needed to be backed up by action?

Joseph from the Old Testament received a coat of many colors from his father, and his ten older brothers were very jealous. They sold him into slavery and told their father they found his coat torn to pieces and covered in blood. Joseph ended up in Egypt as a slave and then in prison as an inmate.

Joseph was only seventeen years old when he became a slave in Egypt. Pharaoh called Joseph out of prison and made him second in command when he was thirty. That's thirteen years of persevering in a foreign land, waiting for God to rescue him. However, all during that time and after, Joseph's faith remained strong.

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Read Genesis 37

Joseph must have felt like he was on a mountain top. He was his father's favorite, he had just been given a beautiful coat of many colors, and he seemed to be having prophetic dreams that indicated he would rule over his family. Can you imagine his shock when his brothers attacked him, threatened to kill him, and then ultimately sold him, and he ended up as one of Potiphar's slaves.

8. Have you ever had a time when everything was going great, and then, suddenly, you found yourself in a valley where you were forced to persevere for longer than you desired? How did you respond?

9. What was your relationship with God like during that time?

Read Genesis 39

10. What do you learn about God and Joseph in this passage?

11. Are there any ways you relate personally to this passage of scripture?

Read Genesis 45

12. What does Joseph's reaction to his brothers tell you about his character and his faith?

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13. How does Joseph's response challenge you?
14. Do you feel the Holy Spirit saying anything to you? If yes, write down what you sense the Holy Spirit saying.

ACTION STEPS - Complete one or two of the action steps over the next week.

1. Pray and ask God what He wants you to learn during your season of perseverance.
2. Do one thing that brings you joy this week.
3. Read Hebrews 11 and write down everything you learn about faith.
4. Pray and ask God to increase your faith for His glory.
5. Listen to the worship song "Give Me Faith" by Elevation Worship.

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Session Five - Obey and Remember

(Chapters 8 & 9)

I probably should have considered my struggle with obeying before I started praying, *Lord, help me to hear your voice*. At first it was great as I sensed God saying things like, *I love you, I will never leave you, and I will give you peace*.

But then I started to sense Him whispering things like, *Go ahead and make dinner for Carol. It doesn't matter that she is rude to you. And Pray blessings over Steve even though he is making things difficult. Or Forgive Jill even though she betrayed you*.

At first I wanted to just ignore these promptings, but God wasn't going to let me off the hook that easily. Verses like 1 Samuel 15:22 started popping up everywhere. In my devotions, on the radio, in my Bible study, and during sermons. I knew God was trying to get my attention. I still prayed, *Lord, help me to hear your voice*, but I finally started adding *and help me to obey*. Over time I obeyed more quickly, with less reluctance.

As I obeyed, sometimes I saw God work in mighty ways, but not all the time. The truth is, just because you obey what you sense God telling you to do, that does not obligate God to make your path smooth or to work in miraculous ways. Yet, blessings do follow obedience according to Psalm 128:1, and I found this to be true for me.

Just to be clear, I have never audibly heard God speak to me. However, He has given me thoughts or strong impressions that I know are from Him. As you continue to pray and ask God to help you hear Him, over time you will learn to discern when He is prompting or commanding

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you to do something. For me, a friend would be on my mind, and I would feel led to pray for them or give them a call or send a card to them. It never failed. Whenever I was prompted like this, it seemed that person indeed needed prayer.

Just recently I reached out to a friend who I felt led to pray for. She was so grateful for my prayers and told me soon after that two people in her extended family had tried to commit suicide. Some might say that this is pure coincidence, but I believe it is the Holy Spirit prompting.

1. Do you ever struggle to obey God? How? When?
2. Share a time when you did obey God. What was the result of your obedience?
3. Read each of the following verses, and write down what they say about obedience:

Deuteronomy 6:1-3

1 Samuel 15:22

Luke 11:28

John 14:15

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4. What do you sense God asking you to do anything in this present moment? Are there any obstacles keeping you from obeying Him and if so, what are they?

My heart broke as I watched the fear emerge in Andrew's eyes. No one wants to hear the words, "You have cancer," and it seemed so unfair that Andrew, who had battled a very aggressive leukemia as a baby and dealt with Graft vs. Host disease for years, had been healthy for a decade, was now looking at a kidney cancer diagnosis right as he neared graduating from seminary and starting his career.

David gave Andrew a big hug, and they both began to cry. I went over, and we all embraced. It was a hard moment. I began thinking of all the miracles God had done in Andrew's life, and I felt encouraged. I whispered, "Andrew, we have been through this before. I know it is scary, but the same God that healed you in the past will work in this situation too, and I believe God will heal you."

Everything can change on a dime. Knowing who God is and what He has done in the past can give you the glimmer of hope to help you regain some sense of balance.

5. Read Psalm 143:5. Why do you think it is important to remember what God has done in the past?

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6. Jesus established the sacrament of communion the night He was betrayed. How does remembering Jesus' sacrifice give you encouragement?

Another of my favorite Old Testament heroes is Joshua. Even as a young man it is obvious that he loved and obeyed God. He was one of the two spies who believed God would give them victory over the people of the promised land and obeyed the Lord. In Numbers 14:30 God tells Moses and Aaron to say to the Israelites, "Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun." Joshua was also Moses' aide. Moses taught him well, and throughout Joshua's life and leadership, he obeyed God fully.

Read Joshua 1:1-9

7. What does God say to Moses?

8. What command is the linchpin for Joshua to have success?

Read Joshua chapters 5 and 6

9. In what ways does Joshua obey God and what were the results?

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10. Why do you think Joshua was able to obey God even when what God told him to do did not logically make sense?

Read Joshua 23:1-23

11. What does Joshua command the Israelites to do and what are the results if they obey or disobey?

12. Read Joshua 24:31. According to this verse, how did Joshua influence the people?

13. How does Joshua encourage you to obey God?

Throughout Joshua's leadership we see God commanding Joshua to set up memorial stones to remember either what God has done or a covenant the people made with God.

Read Joshua 4

14. What did God tell Joshua to have the priests do with the stones, and what was the purpose of the stones?

15. What "memorial stones" do you have that remind you of God's faithfulness or words He has spoken to you?

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ACTION STEPS - Complete one or two of the action steps over the next week.

1. Pray – Ask God to help you *hear His voice* and *be obedient*.
2. Journal – Record the times you've seen God work in your life or the things you sense Him speaking to you. When you are discouraged, go back and remember His faithfulness in the past and be encouraged He will be faithful in your present situation.
3. Make your own memorial stones.
4. Listen to the worship song "Remembrance" by Hillsong Worship.

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Session Six - Praise and the Hope of Heaven

(Chapter 10 & Epilogue)

When Andrew was diagnosed with kidney cancer, we found ourselves in another deep dark valley. I knew the power in praising God so that first week I began playing praise music in Andrew's hospital room and reading psalms to him. Our entire family needed the reminder of who God is and what He has done. Because God had used Psalm 71 to speak encouraging words to me in the past, it was one of the first psalms I read to Andrew.

When I came to verse fourteen it seemed to jump off the page at me. It became my declaration, "As for me I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more!"

I know praise seems counter-intuitive when everything is going wrong, but when it feels like all is lost and that God has abandoned you, it's time for praise. Remember when Job was devastated by every possible bad thing that could happen to him? What did he say in Job 1:20? *"Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away, may the name of the LORD be praised."*

1. Why do you think there is power in praising God?
2. Share about a difficult time when you were able to praise God. What effect did praising God have on you?

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3. What obstacles keep you from praising God when you are in the valley?

Being in a valley is hard and even after we are through it, there can still be pain. Jesus wept after John the Baptist's death and when he was with Martha and Mary after Lazarus died, even though He knew He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. The truth is that we live in a broken world that is full of evil, sickness, darkness, and death. We need every little ray of hope we can find to help us from being engulfed by the darkness.

Ultimately, Jesus is our great hope. He is the only way to experience the hope of heaven where there is no more death, mourning, crying, or pain. If you don't already have a relationship with Jesus, I pray you will consider asking Him to be your Savior and forgive your sins.

He suffered and died so that one day you can be in eternity with Him where there are no valleys or darkness. I cannot imagine going through the struggles and heartaches of this life without Jesus. He not only helps us to have hope, but He is our Hope in this broken world. Jesus defeated death when he died on the cross and then rose. He will return one day. He will defeat darkness for all eternity! Then the glory of God will be our light and Jesus the lampstand.

4. What difference has knowing Jesus had in your life?

5. How does the Hope of heaven impact how you view your valley experiences?

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6. If you're struggling in your earthly circumstances what are ways you can develop more of an eternal perspective?

Prior to the Apostle Paul's miraculous conversion, he was a pharisee known as Saul. He violently persecuted Christians not only in Jerusalem but in other cities as well. However, after being blinded and encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus he became a missionary to the Gentiles and was given the title of Apostle.

Throughout Paul's ministry we see him worshiping God even during difficult times. In 2 Corinthians 11:25 Paul tells us five times he received forty lashes minus one, he was beaten three times with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked, and spent a day and a night adrift at sea. He wrote many of his letters while in jail. Yet throughout Scripture he continually praises God.

Read Acts 16:16 – 34

7. After being stripped, beaten, shackled and thrown in prison, why do you think Paul and Silas decided to pray and sing hymns?

8. What occurred while they were singing hymns?

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9. What impact does Paul's experience have on you?
10. How can praising God during difficult times influence others?
11. Read the following verses. What does Paul say in each one about his hope in heaven.

Philippians 3:7-12

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Titus 1:1-3

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Read Revelation 21:1-7

12. How does this passage of scripture encourage you, especially during times when you are in a valley?
13. What from this passage excites you the most?

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ACTION STEPS - Complete one or two of the action steps over the next week.

1. Read Psalm 100. Paraphrase the psalm in your own words.
2. Journal about how the hope of heaven encourages you.
3. Share your hope of heaven with another person who could use encouragement.
4. Listen to worship songs "That's Who I Praise" by Brandon Lake and "You're Beautiful" by Phil Wickham

May 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