



The Roller Coaster Called **Hope**

FOCAL SCRIPTURES:

- John 11:1-45
- Hebrews 13:8
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-4
- Matthew 5:4
- John 14:16
- John 15:26

SMALL GROUP OBJECTIVE:

Participants will be given the opportunity to express a time when hope seemed lost, receive comfort from God and comfort from one another. Participants will then be challenged to share the same compassion and care to others as a way to offer hope.

KEY TRUTHS:

When we encounter Jesus, His gracious care becomes sufficient for the ups and downs of our lives. This intimacy with Christ fills our hope and empowers our love of others.

We have a God who comforts us and then wants to involve us in comforting others.

We find hope in Jesus, who comforts us.

Notes to the Small Group Leader: Welcome to the *Contagious Hope Small Group Resource*. It is our deepest desire that through the experience of this resource, you and your group will come to a deepened love of God, one another and those around you.

Use the first few pages of every session for your own preparation. We then recommend copying and distributing the Participants' Pages for the entire group.

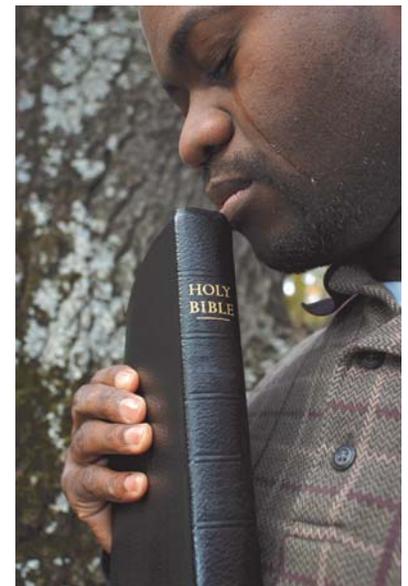
Be Sure to Be Real

As the leader, it will be important for you to take the lead during this small group experience. And in a strange way, leadership will mean going first with your own struggles and vulnerabilities. Communicating a hope that is contagious will require that we resist the common misconception that church people are to be self-reliant and closed, carefully concealing their imperfections and needs. In truth, people are inspired when they see God's strength made perfect in weakness. Vulnerability helps people know that we all struggle from time to time and need Christ's help. Furthermore, in order to effectively reach a hurting world for Christ, we have to be real about our own struggles and then give glory to the One whose grace we depend upon.

In case you need a little extra encouragement, the primary model for vulnerability comes from God himself. God became vulnerable, approachable, and knowable as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus, the Great Shepherd, modeled vulnerability by humbling Himself, leaving heaven, becoming not only a man, but a servant. Though sinless, He experienced the pain of rejection, loss, disappointment and loneliness, and in so doing, He can empathize with our pain.

Have Your Own Encounter with Jesus

A second key point of leadership during this session will require that you lead participants through a time of quiet reflection on Jesus. This is one of the most important elements of this session, so please make sure to allow time for Encountering Jesus. Read the *Encountering Jesus* paragraphs several times as you prepare for this session. Let the truths of this meditation impact you. Don't stay in your head. Let the love of Jesus impact your heart. After you have encountered Jesus' compassion for your hurts, let your gratitude be a big part of how you share the time of reflection with your group. Say the meditation in your own words or simply read it out loud. You might find it helpful to play soft, instrumental music during this time of reflection. Take your time. Invite Jesus to be the unseen source of comfort for your small group.





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Be First to Give Care

Finally, it will be important to lead participants in a time of sharing words of comfort for one another. After receiving comfort from God, your small group should be ready to share compassion with one another. As the leader, be sure to take initiative during this portion of the lesson. Model what it looks like and sounds like to give a compassionate, caring response to others.

Here's why this is so important: When Jesus said, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4, KJV), he spoke of comfort as God's remedy for the dark, disappointing moments of life that we all experience. During this session, you and your small group will have the opportunity to experience comfort from God directly and comfort from one another. Again, in a strange way, you will be offering participants the opportunity to live out Matthew 5:4 – the chance to receive blessing when a person mourns and then receives comfort. When people are properly comforted, they no longer face their struggles alone, and that inspires a hope that is contagious!



Here are a few guidelines for ministering comfort:

- **Separate comfort from counsel.** When others express sadness, too often we want to correct the problem ("The reason that happened to you is ..."), teach a lesson ("The next time this happens you should ..."), give a pep talk ("It will be all right. God is in control!"), or give advice ("If I were you, I would ..."). Hurt and disappointment are emotional needs that cannot be "fixed" through counsel or instruction. God's Word needs to be experienced in relationship with Him and others. So, whenever people express sadness, hurt, or loss, they most certainly need comfort – someone to mourn with them, feel their pain and just be there (Matthew 5:4).

contagious hope for small groups

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- **Learn the vocabulary of comfort.** Use or adapt phrases like these to communicate comfort to someone who expresses hurt: “I am so sorry that you are hurting”; “I hurt for you right now”; “I care for you and I want to pray for you right now.”; “I’m standing with you in this”; “I’m committed to help you through this tough time”; “It saddens me that this happened to you.” Words like these, along with an appropriate touch or embrace, will help ease the pain.



If counsel or exhortation is needed, be sure to minister the blessing of comfort first, and at a later time you will likely have a more receptive listener.

Getting From Here to There:

- Life brings joy and loss, whether we are followers of Jesus or not. Hope can seem like a roller coaster. So how do we cope?
- Because our lives can look so hopeless at times, it can often be difficult to see, hear or even believe in God. So how do we cope?
- Life is going to be hard at times, but hope comes when we realize God’s response to our pain. God’s response to our pain is revealed in Christ’s response to Mary and Martha (John 11:33-35). Christ is moved with compassion for our pain because He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).
- Since God has comforted us, we can give comfort to others (1 Corinthians 1:3-4, Matthew 5:4).

Letters to God Journal: The *Letters to God Prayer Journal* will be an essential ingredient for the small group experience. Each week, participants will be invited to write their own letters to God as a way of deepening their intimacy with God and connecting with one another during spiritual conversations. We encourage you to obtain *Letters to God Prayer Journals* for each member of your small group or invite group members to purchase their own. (*Letters to God Journal*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530).

Supplementary Ideas: We will provide supplementary media resources for each session of your small group. These videos (from the *Greatest Story Ever Sung*) may be helpful as an opening worship element or music that can be played during times of group interaction. For this session we suggest: *I Kneel Down* by Graham



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Exchanging Insights

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KEY TRUTHS:

When we encounter Jesus, His gracious care becomes sufficient for the ups and downs of our lives. This intimacy with Christ fills our hope and empowers our love of others.

We have a God who comforts us and then wants to involve us in comforting others.

We find hope in Jesus, who comforts us.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Scripture reminds us that we have a God who comforts us and then wants to involve us in comforting others.

1. Life brings joys and sorrows. Hope can sometimes feel like a roller coaster. There are times when life is “looking up” and hope fills our hearts. At other times, life takes a downward turn and hope seems hard to find. Think for a moment about a time when you felt a sense of loss or sadness, but God came through. Think of a time when hope was hard to find, but God brought someone or something that inspired hope.



[The leader of the small group will share the response first, followed by other members of the group.]

I remember a time when I was sad because ... but God came through ...
or

I remember a time when hope was hard to find ... but God encouraged me when ...

2. At our moments of loss, it's often hard to see, hear or even keep our belief in God. Do you remember a time when it was hard for you to talk to, see, hear or even believe in God?

I remember a particular time of sadness, struggle or loss when ...
or

It was particularly hard to see/hear or believe in God because ...

[This is a time when group members will need the greatest amount of acceptance, especially if they are currently struggling to see/hear or believe in God because of life's pain. When our pain is so intense, it is often difficult to hear or see the truth of God's care. It will be important to accept any individual who might be in “this place.” Simply offer words like: “We are here for you. We are committed to walking through this time with you”.]



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I remember a time when I prayed to God and yet ...



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3. The Scripture clearly reminds us of God’s response to our pain and loss (2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Isaiah 63:9). God revealed his heart for us through the miracle at Bethany. Read John 11:1-45. Read verse (v.6) again. God purposely reminds us that Jesus *loved* Mary, Martha and Lazarus, but “yet He stayed” Jesus didn’t respond in the way the sisters had hoped. Jesus didn’t respond in the way that Mary and Martha expected. Have you ever prayed to God and yet He answered in a way that was different than you had hoped? Have you prayed to God and yet He responded in a way that was different than you had expected?

I remember a time when I prayed to God and yet...

4. Mary’s response (v. 32) seems to indicate that she may have felt disappointed that Jesus wasn’t able to come? Her response may indicate that she could have felt that God let her down. Have you experienced something similar? Have you ever felt like God let you down? Tell about that time. [The small group leader will share first, followed by other members of the small group.]

5. Jesus wanted to be with Mary and Martha because He loved His friends so dearly. Jesus took time to hear the sisters’ grief and listen to their questions of faith. Christ accepted their expression of struggle and how they may have felt let down. Jesus didn’t respond with a lecture or correction of theology. He simply cared. Jesus knew that Lazarus would soon be alive and yet Christ was still moved with compassion because of Mary’s tears. Her pain moved His heart. Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) and 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 boldly declares that God is the God of all comfort and He gives His comfort to us. Therefore, your pain must move Christ’s heart with compassion. Imagine that Jesus cries for you when you hurt. He not only hurts for Mary, He hurts for you! What feelings does that prompt in you?

I feel _____ (humbled, blessed, grateful, amazed) that Jesus could hurt for me.



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Encountering Jesus

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Take a few moments to recall the time of loss, struggle or sadness that you mentioned to the group before. As you recall this time, let's consider the Savior's heart for you at those moments. Could it be that during times of sorrow, God cares about your pain? Listen quietly, as we meditate on a Jesus who comforts. The Bible reassures us that He does.

Pause to reflect on Jesus. Picture Him before you, His heart moved with compassion for you just as it was for Mary in Bethany. Imagine the tear-filled eyes of Jesus as He sees you at your point of pain. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that “in all our affliction He is afflicted” (Isaiah 63:9 NASB). Christ was afflicted, sorrowed and saddened as He looked compassionately upon you and your sorrow.

Imagine Christ's tender face and gentle embrace as He comes to you; He's here with you. Christ has made a special effort just to see you. Jesus deeply desires to show you compassion and let you know He cares. It's all right, if there are times when you may have doubts or uncertainties about Him. Christ hears your grief and He listens patiently to your questions of faith. He accepts your struggle with faith and how it's hard not to think that God has somehow let you down.

Imagine the words Christ might speak to you: “Precious child, My heart is sorrowed by your hurt. I am burdened by your pain and saddened by your sense of loss. My heart is deeply moved for you. I am here for you, to love you and to reassure you that I care.”

Take a few moments now to tell God what this truth does to your heart. Tell Him of your gratitude. Say a private prayer and thank Him for His comfort.

Dear Jesus, Thank you for Your compassion. It means so much to me that ...

I am so grateful that I have a God who hurts for me because ...

We find hope in Jesus, who comforts us!





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Experiencing God's Word

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“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).

Now that God has offered comfort to us, could we now express that same comfort to one another? (See 2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Consider each of the losses or struggles that have been shared earlier in the group. Also take a minute to recall the various spiritual questions that were shared by members of the group. Now express your words of comfort and care to members of the group. (Remember to express words of care and compassion. This is not the time to give advice, discuss theology, correct misconceptions etc.) This is the time to share words like:

*I felt saddened when I heard you describe ...
 My heart was hurting as you described your struggle with ...
 I am so sorry that you went through a time of ...
 I hurt for you because you have gone through ...*

...and I want you to know I care.

Remember, this is the time to offer words of comfort and compassion, allowing the Holy Spirit (who is the *Comforter*) to bring additional healing in hearts and lives through the blessing of God's comfort expressed through His people. **Be certain that each person receives comforting words during their small group experience.**

Enjoying Fellowship

Spend the next few moments in prayer. Pray with one or two other people in your small group.

Ask God to remind you often of the Christ who prays for you, weeps for you and is moved by your pain.

Ask God to remind your partner that: Although we all experience loss, God's heart is broken when we hurt. He cares deeply about us and He still responds



Express thanks that we find hope in Jesus, who comforts us!



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Expressing Contagious Hope

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Can you think of someone outside this room who is experiencing some kind of loss or struggle? (Perhaps you have a family member, friend, co-worker or neighbor who comes to mind? Someone close to you might be struggling with cancer, job loss, divorce or the recent death of a loved one.) Now that you have received comfort from God and other people, could you express that same comfort to someone outside the small group? Who could benefit from some of the hope that is now inside of you? Who might benefit from your words of comfort?

I'll look forward to expressing my words of comfort to _____ (name a specific person).

If time allows, consider praying about these opportunities of sharing comfort.

Preparing for the Next Session

Begin your own *Letters to God Journal*, as a part of your prayer life and devotional time for the next six weeks. Begin your journaling with a prayer.

Talk to God about the wondrous truth of John 11 – that we have a God who hurts when we hurt. Tell God about what this truth does to your heart. Your prayers might begin with these words:

Dear Jesus, Thank You, that You are One who comforts. It means so much to me ...

Dear God, I am so amazed that I have a God who cries for me because ...

Close the session in prayer

Dear God...