

Belonging to God's Community: A Virtual Small Group Guide (pilot)

by Natalie Guajardo and Shannon Lamb

Introduction

As we each face, as everyone knows, unprecedented times, InterVarsity is still committed to building faithful communities and spreading the gospel of the kingdom of God. We hope this resource can be an aid in equipping you to do that through Small Groups. Our goal is to connect to each other, process well what is going on in our world and ourselves, remember God's sovereignty and healing in our lives, and share this good news with others.

There are many challenges to trying to keep a community connected while practicing social distancing, but there are also many advantages and exciting new opportunities. Made with a video chatting platform in mind (Zoom in particular), we worked to experiment with some of these positives and hope you try many others we haven't thought of! Make sure to see the Resources pages for tips and instructions on some of the practices we hope you try. I want to draw your attention to the page, Follow-Up Questions to Deepen Discussion, as this study is heavily discussion driven.

Each week has a similar framework that you can see below. You may find the activities and Discussion Questions to be very emotion-driven. They are. Well observed! It would be a shame to go through this time emotionally unaware, unprocessed, and hurting. Regularly checking-in emotionally with each other will allow for all of us to practice healthy rhythms of personal- and other- awareness, greater opportunity to care and pray well, and identify the much needed truth in Scripture that our emotions are good but it is God who rules.

We know that straying from a laboring inductive method of Bible study is a big 'WOAH' for InterVarsity, but we believe that in this time it is our priority to be diving deep into caring for each other, opening ourselves up so that the Spirit's word can speak potently, and creating a space (though virtual) open to welcoming others.

We hope you find this also in the varied prayer practices to bolster your own artillery of prayer for yourself and others. Finally, each chapter ends with a Blessing Challenge. We are people blessed by our God and our community so that we can be a blessing through witnessing to the healing, truth, way, and life of Jesus Christ to every nation. There is no better time than now to rise to God's invitation.

Know we are praying for great healing and flourishing in your lives and those you love. May the peace of Christ be with you always.



Intro to the Psalms

Each week includes a reading from the Book of Psalms. The Psalms is a collection of songs and prayers found in the Old Testament of the Bible. The poetry of the psalms doesn't involve specific rhythms or rhymes, but rather connects ideas and images in two- or three-line clusters. There are several themes found across the varied psalms that bring the full range of human experience into the presence of God. The sentiments range from praise, thanksgiving, wisdom, and lament (or complaint - in fact 40% of the psalms are prayers of lament).

As you study the psalms together, consider varying your approach. Sometimes you might want to screenshare and annotate together, read aloud or to yourselves, or at other times do a lectio divina style reflection.

For thousands of years people have looked to the psalms to give words for prayer when they don't know what to say or how to be with God. Today, God still invites his people to pray these prayers of trust and intimacy with our full range of experiences. We pray with faith that we can find the words to say to God for ourselves and our communities in the words we find in these sacred songs.

Basic Framework Each Week (approx. time suggestions)

- 1. Share about challenge from previous week (2 min)
- 2. 'My Home' (5 min)
- 3. Opener (10 min)
- 4. Discussion Questions (10-20 min)
- 5. Devotion from Psalms (10 -20min)
- 6. Prayer Practice (5 min)
- 7. Blessing Challenge (2 min)

Section One: Connecting to Each Other

Chapter 1: How Are You? Gathering Together

Chapter 2: How Are You Really? Lamenting Together

Chapter 3: Who Are You? Remembering We Are God's People

Section Two: Connecting to God

Chapter 4: Where is God? Finding God in Your Space

Chapter 5: What Does God Say? Hearing His Voice Together

Chapter 6: Does God Care? Praying in Difficult Times (...also finals)

Section Three: Connecting to Others [COMING SOON] *



Resources:

Video Example of Section One: Chapter 1 Tips for This Guide and Video Calls Follow-Up Questions to Deepen Discussion Activity Instructions

*Pending feedback and demand



Chapter 1: How Are You? Gathering Together

It may have been a while since we've gotten to be together. This time is for us to catch-up and start understanding the circumstances each one of us are in right now, find encouragement from God, and care for each other and others we know.

- 1. Check-In: How are folks? Where are folks? etc.
- Intro 'My Home': Each week 1 or 2 people will give us a virtual tour of their space and home. Consider sharing about What's important here? Who's important? What's a good story about your home? etc. Have 1-3 people (depending on the size of your group) go this week. Try to stick to no more than 5 minutes each, perhaps only sharing the room you are in to save more for later.
- 3. Discussion Questions:
 - Who are you living with?
 - What's it like where you are?
 - What are some thoughts and feelings you've had over these few weeks? Try doing this visually with an' Emotions Grid' or 'Whiteboard Drawing.' (See instructions on **Resources** pg. 19.)
- 4. Devotion: Read <u>Psalm 3</u>
 - What verse sticks out to you?
 - How does this psalm speak to your situation?
 - Who is God in this Psalm? What does that mean to you?
 - What is he inviting us into?
- 5. Popcorn Prayer: One person prays for one other person based on what you heard them share in discussion, that person prays for the next person, and so on. Try praying last for the person who prayed first to make it all the way around the "circle." If anyone is uncomfortable praying aloud, they can simply say, "I pray for [name]. [Pray silently.] Amen." Make sure no one is skipped!
- 6. Blessing Challenge: Call/message/facetime/etc. a friend outside of InterVarsity (or someone from Small Group who didn't make it this week. Check with each other on this so one person doesn't get several calls!). Ask how they're doing and try one of the reflective exercises we've done (house tour, emotions grid, or drawing) or asking one of the reflection questions we used. Thank them for sharing, and don't forget to share your own tour/grid/drawing/response with them.



Chapter 2: How Are You Really? Lamenting Together

Last week, we got to do an initial check-in. This week we hope to dig deeper into reflecting on how we're all doing, present that all to God, and bless others.

- 1. Who attempted the Blessing Challenge? How did it go? What was it like for you doing that?
- 2. My Home (1-2 share)
- 3. Opener: Find an object in your home that illustrates how you're feeling coming into this time. Share using your object as an illustration.
- 4. Devotion: Read <u>Psalm 13</u>
 - What verse sticks out to you?
 - How does this psalm speak to your situation?
 - Who is God in this Psalm? What does that mean to you?
 - What is he inviting us into?
- 5. Discussion Questions: In this time of pandemic...
 - What's been challenging?
 - What's been good?
 - What's been lost in all the change?
 - What are your initial emotional and physical responses in stress?
 - Who or what do you go to in times of stress?
- 6. Lament Prayer: Psalm 13 is a prayer of lament. Many Biblical laments follow a similar pattern of Complaint, Request, Motivation, Confidence, and Praise. (See illustration below and share with the group if it helps.) The faithful: *Complain* honestly. *Request* confidently. Speak what should *motivate* God to care (not to remind or tell God but to remind ourselves). Remember who God is and what he has done to give you *confidence* in his steadfast love and salvation. *Praise* God for these truths.

Write a prayer of lament together. Each person writes 2-3 lines from one of the sections. (These should be short - and do not need to rhyme.) Feel free to use Psalm 13 as an example. Then pray it aloud together in order.

7. Blessing Challenge: Invite a friend outside of InterVarsity to try one of our reflection activities (describing state with an object, lament, or any from previous week), or ask one of the reflection questions we used. Thank them for sharing, and don't forget to share your own response with them.



Pattern of Biblical Lament:



Visual by Xander Arroyo



Chapter 3: Who Are You? Remembering We Are God's People

Times of transition and ambiguity can expose things in us or reveal things about us. Sometimes, those are uncomfortable. Sometimes, they are delightful. Often, they are important. We're going to ask similar questions to last week but take them deeper to focus on what God may be doing in us and who he's calling us to be.

- 1. Who attempted the Blessing Challenge? How did it go? What was it like for you doing that?
- 2. My Home (1-2 share)
- 3. Discussion Questions: Share these things as you are willing. You may ask clarifying questions, but mostly try to listen quietly and simply say "thank you."
 - What has bugged you most or what have you missed most lately? What does that say about you?
 - How have your responses to stress impacted your relationships with others and God?
 - What have you enjoyed? What are you proud of? What might God be growing in you from that?
- 4. Devotion: Read <u>Psalm 16</u>
 - What verse sticks out to you?
 - How does this psalm speak to your situation?
 - Who is God in this Psalm? What does that mean to you?
 - What is he inviting us into?
- 5. Pray Scripture: Pray Psalm 16 over each other. Choose verses that address what people shared and pray the truth of those verses over each other.
- 6. Challenge: Call/message/facetime/etc. a friend outside of InterVarsity and ask what is something that gives them encouragement in this time. Share something from Small Group that gives you encouragement (psalm, prayer, reflection practice or questions, community). [Bonus points if you ask a family member in addition to a friend.]



Chapter 4: Where is God? Finding God in Your Space

As more time goes on, it's easy for many of these days to run together, and our ideas of what makes a 'good' or 'bad' day are changed and muddled. This makes it easier for us to let time pass without being in touch with how we are doing, agonizing over our challenges, missing connections with God, and losing our confidence in him. This week we will focus on seeking God where we are right now.

- 1. Who attempted the Blessing Challenge? How did it go? What was it like for you doing that?
- 2. My Home or Opener: Feel free to continue with home tours, but, if everyone has gone or is no longer interested, try this new opener. One or two people share a song (worship or not) that has brought you joy lately. Share your screen and audio to share with the group. Feel free to mute yourselves and sing-along if you know the words.
- 3. Devotion: Read Psalm 27

Share your screen with the psalm so that everyone can read through it together. Have everyone set their 'view option' (button should be at the top of the screen) to 'annotate'. Now, all can write their notes together on the screen. First, look at verses 1-6. Mark verses that stick out to you, places where you have questions, actions of the speaker and of God, and anything else you'd like. Discuss the following questions. 'Clear all marks' and repeat the process with vs. 7-14.

- What adversity does the psalmist face? What is the psalmist's attitude toward these challenges? What allows the psalmist to feel this way?
- How does the psalmist describe God?
- What actions does the psalmist take? What actions does God take?
- What does the psalmist ask for from God? What does waiting for the Lord mean for the psalmist? (v. 14)
- 4. Discussion Questions:
 - What challenges do you face right now? What is your attitude towards them?
 - What makes you feel connected to other people? What makes you feel connected to God? (If you haven't felt a connection to God that's okay simply "pass" and listen to others or share what you think of the idea.) Has any of that changed for your current location and circumstances?
 - How would you describe God right now? What do you need from him or for him to do?
 - What action do you need to take? What does it look like for you to wait for the Lord?
- 5. Daily Examen Prayer: The Daily Examen Prayer is meant to set us "high on a rock" by reflecting on what happens each day and where God was through



everything. Right now, pray along with an online led Examen like <u>this</u> (8 minutes) or <u>this</u> (5 minutes) to help see more clearly the challenges and gifts we encountered today and how God was present with us through the day, even if we were not attentive to seeking his face.

6. Blessings Challenge: a) Find a place at home where you can make a prayer space, somewhere you know you can comfortably and regularly meet with God. Consider adding things that will help all your senses connect to God (ex. Bible, journal, art/supplies, music, tea, cushions, candles). b) To fuel your prayer time, collect prayer requests from 1 or 2 friends who may not pray themselves. If they are comfortable, ask to pray with them right after you ask for their requests or text a prayer for them. What communities/group chats could you serve and bless by sending an invitation to pray and see what God does with it?



Chapter 5: What Does God Say? Hearing His Voice Together

While some of us may have more free time, somehow our time can still feel hectic and exhausting, leaving little motivation or energy to take this time of isolation as an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to be speaking and working in us. This week, we will practice a few ways in which we can lean into hearing what Jesus has to say to us.

- 1. Who attempted the Blessing Challenge? How did it go? What was it like for you doing that?
 - Take a minute to type summaries of the prayer requests you collected (use people's names or pseudonyms as appropriate) in the chat.
 - Everyone pick 1-3 people who aren't yours and spray for them together. If there are several people, this might be a good time to introduce "One Voice" prayer, where everyone prays out loud all at the same time. (Save the chat so you can pray for each other's friends during the week.)
- 2. My Home or Opener: One or two people do a home tour OR share the prayer space they created last week What did they do to make it a good space for prayer?
- 3. Devotion: Read Psalm 84

Share your screen with the psalm so that everyone can read through it together. Have everyone set their 'view option' (button should be at the top of the screen) to 'annotate'. Now, all can write their notes together on the screen. First, look at verses 1-11. Mark verses that stick out to you, things that repeat or connect, and type tensions you feel or your questions. Discuss the following questions. At the end, look at v. 12.

- How does the psalmist view God's dwelling place (vs. 1-4, 10-11)? Why? How does this affect him/her?
- The middle of the psalm describes a journey, the road to the dwelling place (note: Valley of Baka is a barren desert). What is the journey like? What do people on the journey need? What do these people do? What does that mean? How does the psalmist's view of the dwelling place affect their journey?
- Press into the image of making a desert a place of springs. What does that require or imply?
- For the psalmist, God's dwelling place was probably the Temple. When you hear "God's dwelling place" what do you think of? In what spaces/types of spaces have you met God? What about those spaces fosters that encounter? (If you haven't felt or encountered God - that's okay - simply "pass" and listen to others or share what you think of the idea.)



- Verse 12 talks about the person who trusts in God will be blessed how does this psalm help us understand what that trust is like? And what it means to be blessed?
- 4. Discussion Questions:
 - Sheltering in place, taking classes on Zoom, missing important events and our friends, and many other challenging circumstances may feel like a "valley of Baka." Where can you/do you "go" to meet with God?
 - How do you hear from God?
 - What could it look like to make the places you're "passing through" right now a place of springs? What's exciting about that?
- 5. Guided Meditation: (Feel free to ask your staff for coaching on how to lead this!) Lead saying something like this (you can simply read it): I'll lead us in a guided meditation, and at the end we'll have a little time to share what it was like. God is the one who created not just our thinking minds, but also our creative minds. And, just as he can speak to us through a rational process (like the Bible study above) he can also speak through our imaginations. So, we're going to experiment with listening with our "right brains" and take a few minutes to meet with God alone/together. First, we pray for God to speak and to block out any other voices (spirits). (Pray and begin as follows):
 - Get comfortable you can turn off video if that feels less awkward but remain able to listen. Take a few calming, centering breaths. Imagine breathing in God's love and breathing out worry. (pause)
 - Imagine yourself in "a place where God dwells:" perhaps a beautiful space or a holy space. Picture yourself getting comfortable there. What do you sit on? What do you see? What do you smell? What does the air feel like on your face? (They should <u>think</u> their responses rather than share them out loud.) (pause)
 - iii. Imagine Jesus entering that space. Where is he? What does he look like? What's he wearing? Can you see his expression? (pause)
 - iv. Invite him to be with you. How does he approach? When he gets near you what does he do? What does he say? (pause)
 - v. Take a minute to talk to him, maybe about the day, maybe about your longings, maybe about your frustration or pain in this journey. (pause)
 - vi. Now, let him speak to you. Don't worry or try to make things up. Often the first thing that pops into our heads is Jesus' voice - even if it doesn't sound very grand. Sometimes there are no words and it's just about being together. (pause)
 - vii. Tell Jesus thanks for being with you. (You might want to arrange another time to meet. \bigcirc) Then say bye for now.



If your group is bigger than 5, put people in breakout rooms of 3-ish people, so they can share what that was like for them and what they heard from God. Then come together as a whole group and let anyone who wants to share.

6. Blessing Challenge: a) Go back to the people you have been praying for and ask how it's going. Invite them to your next Small Group to pray with each other about finals or any other pressing matters. b) Spend time with Jesus in your prayer space - maybe do an imaginative reflection or study a psalm like we did together.



Chapter 6: Does God Care? Praying in Difficult Times (...also finals)

Our world, country, colleges, families and friends are encountering old difficulties and never-before-known hardships. In difficult times it is difficult to see how God cares. Today, we are going to reflect on and pray through Psalm 23. It may be familiar to you - that's fine. It may be new - that's fine. If prayer is new or uncomfortable - don't worry. We won't make you do anything embarrassing. Feel free to simply listen. In just as varied as our needs may be, we expect our God to meet us in varied ways now through our prayers.

- 1. Welcome anyone who is new! Have everyone introduce themselves Where are they? What is one thing they do for fun during this pandemic?
- 2. My Home: Have anyone with a pet find and intro their pet.
- 3. Discussion Questions: If your group is larger than 5, put people into breakout rooms to discuss the following questions. Come back together after a few minutes for anyone who'd like to share and continue with the devotional.
 - How/when have you felt cared for during this crisis?
 - What (if anything) are you feeling anxious about?
 - How/when have you felt directionless?
- 4. Devotion: Prayer Reflection with <u>Psalm 23</u>
 - i. Encourage people to have something to write on a journal or a piece of scratch paper. Share your screen of Psalm 23.
 - ii. <u>Read verse 1</u>: "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing." Ask, is that true? We may be keenly aware of many things we lack. That's fine. Take a moment on your own to list the things that are lacking in your life right now (you can write them or just think them). Now, reflect on the role of a shepherd one who watches over sheep, gets them to the resources they need, protects them. Take a moment to tell the Good Shepherd what you need. (If prayer is new for you you can simply give God permission to listen to your thoughts, or you can write them. If you aren't sure he's there that's fine just say something like, "Look, I don't know if you even exist but if you do, I want to tell you this.... ")
 - iii. Take a moment now to reflect on what you do have, the things you don't lack. Make a list of these and thank God for them.
 - iv. <u>Have someone read vs. 2-3</u>: Reflect on these images as a group How do they sound? What would that be like?:
 - Making me lie down in green pastures
 - Being led by quiet waters
 - Being refreshed
 - Being guided along the right path
 - v. Have everyone who is willing share which of these images they are drawn to, and why is it attractive to them now?



- vi. Pray for each other in light of this sharing. (Depending on the size of your group -and how comfortable people are with prayer- you might do this in different ways such as have everyone pray for one other person, everyone pray silently for someone else, or have one person pray for all the requests.)
- vii. <u>Have someone read v. 4</u>: COVID-19, social isolation, and finals- there are lots of things in our lives right now that could feel like (and maybe are) the darkest valley. How does a shepherd's rod and staff protect and comfort a sheep in dangerous places? How might Jesus do that for you/us even now?
- viii. Make breakout rooms of 2-3 people and have them share their "dark valley" and pray for each other. (Make sure to give people enough time to do this! It may be the most significant part.)
- ix. <u>Have someone read v. 5</u>: How has God cared for you in this crisis? What good things do you have? Pull up the 'Whiteboard' on Zoom and encourage people to write, type, or draw good things they have experienced in the last month. Have someone say a prayer of thanks for all the things on the board.
- x. <u>Have someone read v. 6:</u> Share that the phrase "will follow me" in the Hebrew is closer to "will track me down" or "will relentlessly pursue me." What does it mean to you that God is intent on blessing, taking care of, loving you? What does that mean for you as you approach finals, other hardships, or the unknown?
- xi. (Optional): Show the Psalm 23 image below. Encourage people to take a screenshot to keep as a reminder of God's love and goodness that pursue us (like determined dogs) in this season.
- 5. Blessing Challenge: a) Pass on something you heard in Psalm 23 to a couple friends (maybe the same friends you've been praying for if they didn't attend this study) and pray for them. b) Follow-up with someone new to the group this week and ask what they thought of the prayer time.





Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.



Resources

Video Example of Section One: Chapter 1 (link)

The first study done with a group of InterVarsity staff (maybe yours!). See section times to jump to below. Remember, because this was the first attempt (mess-ups and all) and we were trying to model a few options, this ran long. Try to keep it 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Check-In: 1:25

'My Home': 6:20

Discussion Questions: 10:18

Emotion Grid: 30:20 (intro), 35:35 (visual and share) Whiteboard Drawing: 40:45 (intro), 42:30 (share)

Devotion from Psalms: 44:03 (read), 46:15 (discussion)

Prayer Practice: 56:20 (intro), 01:08:52 (instructions for if someone is shy praying aloud)

Blessing Challenge: 01:09:27



Tips for This Guide and Video Calls

- Don't feel like you must go through all the questions or in the order they're presented. Go where the conversation naturally flows. Remember that the point of this study is to connect to each other and God. <u>Focus on deep conversation</u>.
- 2. Don't feel like you have to say everything word-for-word.
- 3. Try to share online access to the psalm every week in case someone doesn't have a Bible or isn't sure where to find the passage.
- 4. Remember that it is much more difficult to focus on a screen than in person. <u>Try not to keep meetings running longer than 45 minutes.</u> Don't worry if you can't get to everything. If people really need to talk to catch up, discussion takes a while, the psalm is landing well, <u>allow for the time needed for the section that gets people engaged the most</u>.
- 5. With an online format, you may need to <u>be more forward in asking people to share</u>. Ex. "We'll share in the order of the people I see on my screen." "If you share, call on the next person." "[Name] do you have anything to add?" It will help discussion flow, which is good for everyone!
- 6. Try to have everyone showing their face and remaining unmuted for better connection and verbal responses to each other.
- 7. If your group is larger than 5 or 6, consider experimenting with breakout rooms for part of the discussion and coming back together to share so that more people get time to talk.
- 8. Try experimenting with any features of the video format you are using. Ex. screensharing, annotating the psalm together, whiteboard, chats, etc. Let us know how it goes!
- 9. Encourage taking risks in sharing. Some people are not comfortable talking about emotions, it may feel too vulnerable, or they may not be in touch with their feelings. Encourage them to take a risk and share just a little bit more than they feel comfortable. If accessing emotions is very difficult, ask how they physically feel.
- 10. Give feedback on what's worked or what does not quite hit the mark. We're working to grow and improve this resource for you. Help us do that! Talk to your staff or email natalie.guajardo@intervarsity.org and shannon.lamb@intervarsity.org.



Follow-Up Questions to Deepen Discussion

Active Listening Questions

When we share vulnerably it is important to know that people understand us. We serve people by confirming what we hear. Rather than repeating what the person said, try to summarize it in a sentence or phrase (and, for our purposes, focus on the emotions). For example:

- It sounds like you felt frustrated with the lack of organization. Is that right?
- It sounds like you felt hurt when the children didn't listen to you tell the story. Did I miss anything?

Clarifying Questions

The goal of these questions is to help each other grow in awareness and understanding of our emotions, so we can better take them to Jesus. Ask these questions gently and as they seem appropriate. You do not need to ask them all!

- What prompted this emotion?
- Tell us a bit more about what made you so (angry, happy, anxious, etc.)?
- Why do you think this experience prompted this emotion and not another?
- What about the experience made your reaction so strong?
- How does this emotion / experience connect to other parts of your life right now?

Perspective Questions

As a group ask 3-5 appropriate questions to each person after they have shared. Ask gently. You do not need to ask them all!

- How are you experiencing tension?
- What about this experience bothered you? Why?
- What is being stretched in you?
- What, if anything, feels threatened?
- Where do you sense God is/was in this experience?
- What might God be trying to say to you?
- What might God be inviting you into?
- What might it look like to receive this experience as a gift?
- How would saying yes to God's invitation in this experience affect you?
- How would saying yes to God's invitation in this experience affect how you serve? How you view yourself? How you view others?



Activity Instructions

Emotions Grid Instructions

Make a copy and share this <u>Google Spreadsheet</u>. Have each person add their name and fill in (use 'paint bucket' button) the colors they felt at different parts of the past week. Explain why you were feeling that way if you can. If it is difficult for the group to remember or identify how they were feeling throughout a whole week, use the second grid, so that you only have to think about one day.

This can be a helpful tool to track and visually see and remember how people are doing. Use it to help you personally check-in with your fellow Small Group members.

Standard legend to know how people are feeling: **Red=Angry, Blue=Sad,** Green=Calm, Purple=Confidant/Determined, Orange=Happy, Yellow=Stressed/Nervous/Anxious, Pink=Excited, Grey=Numb/Unsure, Black=Grief/Fear

Week 1	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
Sally							
David							
Frank							
Joan							
Michel							

Example

Whiteboard Drawing Instructions

The Zoom host can screenshare using the Whiteboard feature. Everyone will see a white blank screen where they are invited to draw how they are feeling. Talent not necessary!