

Introduction

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies

Welcome to the conversation! The Bible study resources you are using are created to support the bold vision of the Book of Faith initiative that calls “the whole church to become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word.”

Simply put, this initiative and these resources invite you to “Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.”

We enter into this conversation based on the promise that exploring the Bible deeply with others opens us to God working in and through us. God’s Word is life changing, church changing, and world changing. Lutheran approaches to Scripture provide a fruitful foundation for connecting Bible, life, and faith.

A Session Overview

Each session is divided into the following four key sections. The amount of time spent in each section may vary based on choices you make. The core Learner Session Guide is designed for 50 minutes. A session can be expanded to as much as 90 minutes by using the Bonus Activities that appear in the Leader Session Guide.

• Gather (10-15 minutes)

Time to check in, make introductions, review homework assignments, share an opening prayer, and use the Focus Activity to introduce learners to the Session Focus.

• Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

The session Scripture text is read using a variety of methods and activities. Learners are asked to respond to a few general questions. As leader, you may want to capture initial thoughts or questions on paper for later review.

• Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

Learners explore the session Scripture text through core questions and activities that cover each of the four perspectives (see diagram on p. 6). The core Learner Session Guide material may be expanded through use of the Bonus Activities provided in the Leader Session Guide. Each session ends with a brief Wrap-Up and prayer.

• Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Lists homework assignments, including next week’s session Scripture text. The leader may choose one or more items to assign for all. Each session also includes additional Enrichment options and may include For Further Reading suggestions.

A Method to Guide the Conversation

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies has three primary goals:

- To increase biblical fluency;
- To encourage and facilitate informed small group conversation based on God’s Word; and
- To renew and empower us to carry out God’s mission for the sake of the world.

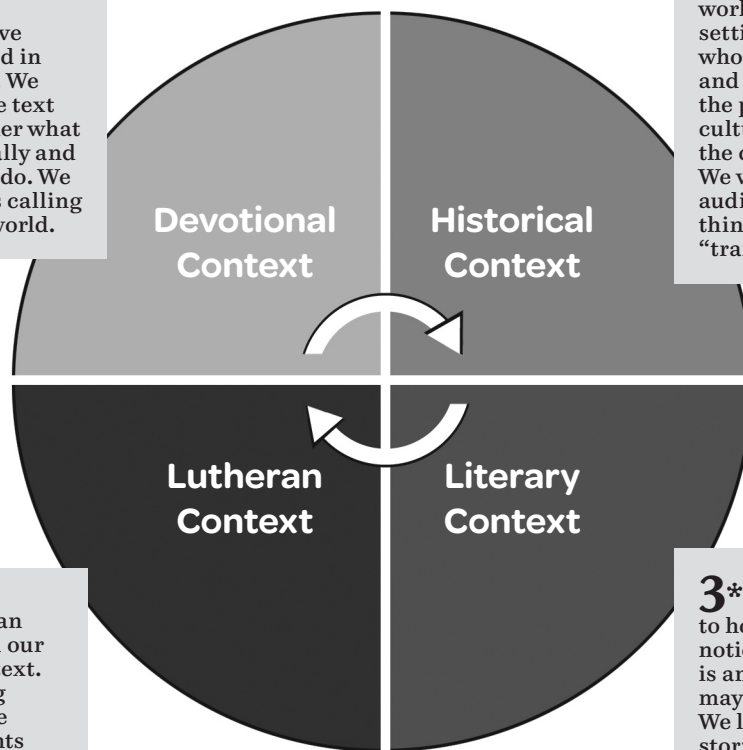
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience with the text.

Complementing this approach is a commitment to engaging participants in active, learner-orientated Bible conversations. The resources call for prepared leaders to facilitate learner discovery, discussion, and activity. Active learning and frequent engagement with Scripture will lead to greater biblical fluency and encourage active faith.

1 We begin by reading the Bible text and reflecting on its meaning. We ask questions and identify items that are unclear. We bring our unique background and experience to the Bible, and the Bible meets us where we are.

5 We return to where we started, but now we have explored and experienced the Bible text from four different dimensions. We are ready to move into the “for” dimension. We have opened Scripture and joined in conversation for a purpose. We consider the meaning of the text for faithful living. We wonder what God is calling us (individually and as communities of faith) to do. We consider how God’s Word is calling us to do God’s work in the world.

2* We seek to understand the world of the Bible and locate the setting of the text. We explore who may have written the text and why. We seek to understand the particular social and cultural contexts that influenced the content and the message. We wonder who the original audience may have been. We think about how these things “translate” to our world today.



4 We consider the Lutheran principles that help ground our interpretation of the Bible text. We ask questions that bring those principles and unique Lutheran theological insights into conversation with the text. We discover how our Lutheran insights can ground and focus our understanding and shape our faithful response to the text.

3* We pay close attention to how the text is written. We notice what kind of literature it is and how this type of literature may function or may be used. We look at the characters, the story line, and the themes. We compare and contrast these with our own understanding and experience of life. In this interchange, we discover meaning.

*** Sessions may begin with either Historical Context or Literary Context.**

The diagram on p. 6 summarizes the general way this method is intended to work. A more detailed introduction to the method used in Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies is available in *Opening the Book of Faith* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

The Learner Session Guide

The Learner Session Guide content is built on the four sections (see p. 5). The content included in the main “Join the Conversation” section is considered to be the core material needed to explore the session Scripture text. Each session includes a Focus Image that is used as part of an activity or question somewhere within the core session. Other visuals (maps, charts, photographs, and illustrations) may be included to help enhance the learner’s experience with the text and its key concepts.

For those subscribing to the Web version of Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies, the Learner Session Guides will be downloaded and printed in preparation for the session, or they may simply be projected for groups that decide to be paperless.

The Leader Session Guide

For easy reference, the Leader Session Guide contains all the content included in the Learner Session Guide and more. The elements that are unique to the Leader Session Guide are the following:

- **Before You Begin**—Helpful tips to use as you prepare to lead the session.
- **Session Overview**—Contains detailed description of key themes and content covered in each of the four contexts (Historical, Literary, Lutheran, Devotional). Core questions and activities in the Learner Session Guide are intended to emerge directly from this Session Overview. Highlighted parts of the Session Overview provide a kind of “quick prep” for those wanting to do an initial scan of the key session themes and content.
- **Key Definitions**—Key terms or concepts that appear in the Session Overview may be illustrated or defined.
- **Facilitator’s Prayer**—To help the leader center on the session theme and leadership task.

- **Bonus Activities**—Optional activities included in each of the four sections of “Join the Conversation” used by the leader to expand the core session.
- **Tips**—A variety of helpful hints, instructions, or background content to aid leadership facilitation.
- **Looking Ahead**—Reminders to the leader about preparation for the upcoming session.

Session Prep Video

(Available on the DVD that accompanies this unit.) To help you prepare to lead the session, Session Prep Video segments have been created. A guide will walk with you through a session overview and the key parts of the session flow. These segments can provide helpful hints, but they are not meant to replace your own deeper preparation.

Leader and Learner

In Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies, the leader’s primary task is facilitating small group conversation and activity. These conversations are built around structured learning tasks. What is a structured learning task? It is an open question or activity that engages learners with new content and the resources they need to respond. Underlying this structured dialog approach are three primary assumptions about adult learners:

- Adult learners bring with them varied experiences and the capability to do active learning tasks;
- Adult learners learn best when they are invited to be actively involved in learning; and
- Adults are more accountable and engaged when active learning tasks are used.

Simply put, the goal is fluency in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture. How does one become fluent in a new language, proficient in building houses, or skilled at hitting a baseball? By practicing and doing in a hands-on way. Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies provides the kind of hands-on Bible exploration that will produce Bible-fluent learners equipped to do God’s work in the world.

Together in Faith Series

Throughout its history, the church has established lists of Scripture readings appropriate for each Sunday and festival day of the church year calendar. These lists, called lectionaries, identify the Scripture readings used in worship in many congregations. While a lectionary-guided connection with the Bible typically occurs in the context of corporate worship, the thematic approach of Together in Faith can link the gathering of small groups around the Book of Faith with the congregation's gathering around the Word in worship. Online worship helps are provided so that preachers and worship planners can create congregation-wide experiences around each of the Together in Faith units. The flexibility of Together in Faith online helps makes the units useful for any time of the year. Small group session materials are also designed to serve as stand-alone studies for anytime use.

God's Will for Life: Studies in Mark Unit Overview

What's going on here, God? What does God want for our lives? What does God intend for the world? Rarely are these just academic questions, although some may prefer the emotional distance that might provide. Most often questions regarding the will of God arise out of personal circumstances that leave us wondering where God is and what God may be doing—if anything. Clarity about the will of God is diminished both when we think about it too personally and when we are tempted to dismiss it as something too great to fathom. The texts in this series provide significant insights into the will of God through the teachings and actions of Jesus. In each of the three texts we find Jesus identifying the will of God in ways that encourage God's people, empowering life and growth.

This Together in Faith unit will invite the learner to reflect on the way these texts from Mark address God's will for life. Through Jesus and his work, God's heavenly will for abundant life is being made known on earth as expressed in the phrase

“kingdom of God.” What Jesus teaches about the emergence of this kingdom in the first session text (Mark 4:26-34) is lived out and amplified in the next two events in his ministry (Mark 4:35-41 and 5:21-43). In these texts, we see how Jesus himself embodies the life-giving will of God. We see how the will of God moves from something hidden and mysterious to something that works itself out in Jesus' gracious reign over creation. We learn how human beings, as a part of creation, experience God's will in life's many changes and challenges, trials and tragedies—even death itself.

Session 1: Seeing God's Will for Life Embedded in Creation (Mark 4:26-34)

Jesus teaches us that insights into the will of God are embedded in the life-giving processes of creation. Through nature's organic growth and productivity, Jesus provides us with insight into the workings of the “kingdom of God” on earth.

Session 2: Trusting God's Will for Life When Nature Runs Amok (Mark 4:35-41)

Jesus himself embodies God's life-giving will to protect and preserve life, especially when the chaos and catastrophes of life in this world threaten to overwhelm us. God's promise is not that our lives will never be tested, threatened, or lost, but that enduring peace can be ours through faith.

Session 3: Laying Hold of God's Will for Life in the Face of Disease and Death (Mark 5:21-43)

While it is true that God's will for our lives includes wellness and the restoration of wholeness, life on earth is constantly interrupted by disease and death. This session explores God's will for restoration in Christ, pointing us to the central truth of the Christian faith that the eternal life-giving will of God is fulfilled in Jesus' resurrection.