

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.

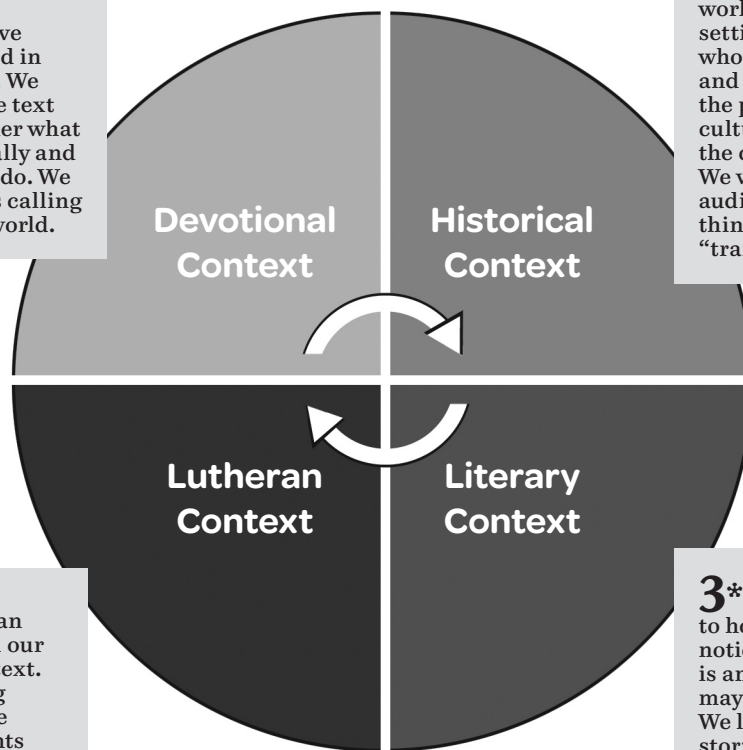
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience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

Mega-churches seem to catch everyone's attention these days. Bigger sometimes appears to be better. Ephesians reminds us that God enables us to build a wondrous church beyond our wildest expectations (Ephesians 3:19-20). Spiritual quality is always more important than worldly quantity when it comes to God's heavenly design. This book of faith is like a blueprint written to modern churches experiencing difficulties and transitions. Membership in many congregations today is declining. Some even consider the church to be an ineffective earthly institution. This series is an opportunity to experience divine guidance in our mission and ministry.

The word *church* appears nine times in Ephesians—more than any other book of the Bible. It challenges the church to welcome changes that unite people of faith throughout the world. Ephesians is filled with many words used in

building and construction: *plan, foundation, walls, cornerstone, joinery, dwelling, ownership*. But instead of mega-church constructions, Ephesians urges us to think in terms of building a meta-church. *Meta* is a Greek prefix that translates as “transform” or “go beyond.” It may be opposite of what we expect in a church-building program, but in Ephesians we learn that walls should come down, not up. We learn that the cornerstone is at the top, not the bottom. Christians themselves are the building materials and love is the mortar that joins us together. God's designs are simply heavenly!

This epistle, or letter, was first written to the people of ancient Ephesus; it is one of many letters that the early Christians preserved and passed around. Other letters address specific problems in the early churches, such as Paul's correspondence with fledging Christian congregations in the cities of Corinth, Philippi, and Thessalonika, as well as the entire province of Galatia! In this series, the apostle's up-building letter to the church in Ephesus comes our way. Its message is dedicated to helping the church grow God's way yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Session 1: Are We Building in Love? (Ephesians 1:3-14)

We dedicate the building of God's extraordinary church to our “Beloved,” Jesus Christ, through whom God's gracious designs are becoming a reality.

Session 2: Are We Building without Walls? (Ephesians 2:11-22)

God's grace through Jesus demolishes the walls of hostility that separate us. We are “joined together” in Christ, the great cornerstone of a living church.

Session 3: Are We Building beyond Measure? (Ephesians 3:14-21)

The life and growth of the church flows from the truly wondrous and infinitely immeasurable love of God in Christ.

Session 4: Are We Building as One? (Ephesians 4:1-16)

The Spirit binds us together to build up the church, uniting us in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

Session 5: Are We Building Up? (Ephesians 4:25—5:2 and 5:15-20)

As beloved children, we are learning to live in imitation of our heavenly Father, secure and joyful in God’s love for us through Jesus.

Session 6: Are We Built to Withstand? (Ephesians 6:10-20)

Find strength in the Lord. Be steadfast and prepared to withstand attack. Be bold in preaching the mystery of the gospel.