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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.

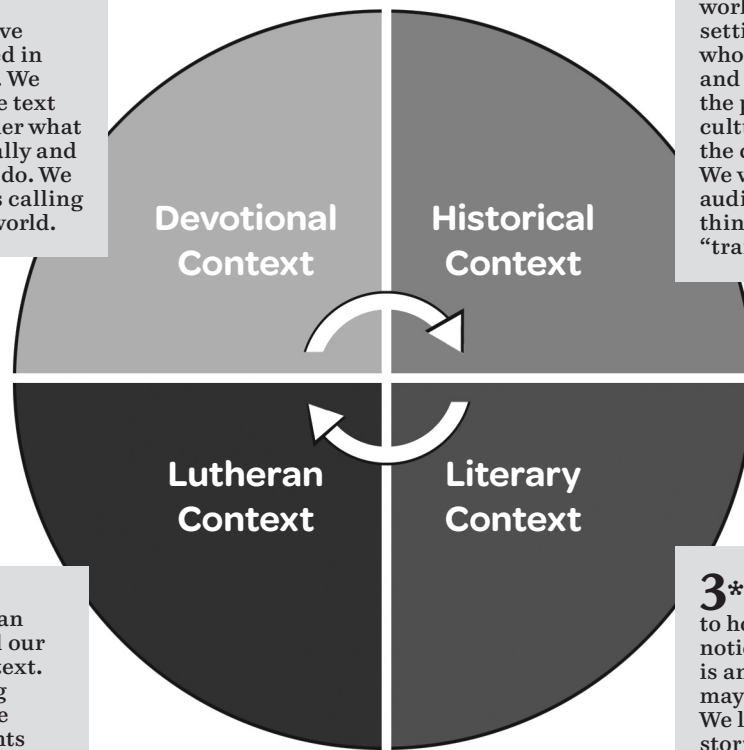
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience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

Books of Faith Series

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies includes several series and courses. This Romans unit is part of the Books of Faith Series, which is designed to explore key themes and texts in the books of the Bible. Each book of the Bible reveals a unique story or message of faith. Many core themes, story lines, and characters are shared by several books, but each book in its own right is a book of faith. Exploring these books of faith in depth opens us to the variety and richness of God's written word for us.

Romans Unit Overview

Paul's letter to the Romans is quite different than any of his other letters, in which he offers pastoral or theological advice to people he knows personally. Paul did not start or plant the church (or churches) in Rome. In fact, at the time the letter was written, Paul had not yet visited Rome. Therefore, in Romans Paul offers more "general" statements about the nature of sin, the promise of salvation, and the call to mission. In other words, Paul addresses many of the important questions that arise when one considers the relationship between God and creation. What must I do to be saved? What has God done for us through Christ Jesus? How do we respond to God?

Session 1 examines Romans 3:9-31 and the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Although we may look for ways to earn salvation through our actions, we are not justified by our deeds. Rather, we are saved by God's grace. While this is very good news, it is often met with some reservations or skepticism.

Session 2 explores Romans 5:1-11 and the question, "Saved by grace . . . isn't that too good to be true?"

Here Paul describes the nature of grace and tells us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for our sins.

Session 3 looks at Romans 6:1-23 and the question, "If what I do doesn't save me, does it matter how I live?" We are saved through God's grace in Christ, not to continue as slaves of sin but to have new life as slaves of God.

Session 4 focuses on Romans 8:18-39. The promise of eternal life is most certainly good news, but the reality is that we continue to experience suffering and brokenness in our lives. We ask, "Where is God when we suffer?"

Session 5, based on Romans 10:1-21, considers our call to mission. Paul encourages us to share the good news that we have received in Christ Jesus. When we have been so richly blessed, a hymn asks, "How can I keep from singing?"

Session 6 completes the discussion on mission. Romans 12:1-21 guides responses to the question, "What does God want from us?" Since we have been so loved by God, we are called to be the body of Christ in the world and let our love for others be genuine.

In many ways, Paul's letter to the Romans walks its readers through a full circle of theological inquiry. First, my deeds do not (in fact, cannot) "earn" my salvation. Second, God offers eternal life to all who call on the name of Christ Jesus. Third, this is very good news. While life is certainly still difficult, we are called to share this good news and to love our neighbors. All the while, we are saved, loved, and supported by God.

Romans 3:9-31



Focus Statement

We are not saved by anything we do, but by God's grace alone.



Key Verse

They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Romans 3:24



Focus Image



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What Must I Do to Be Saved?

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

Take a moment to reflect upon your own assumptions about salvation. What must we do to be saved? Also, consider popular images of heaven. Does heaven have pearly gates? Does St. Peter control admission into heaven? While facilitating the group discussion for this session, remain open to a variety of thoughts regarding this important topic.

Session Instructions

1. View the Session Prep Video.
2. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note also any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
3. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, if any.

Session Overview

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul discusses key topics for Christian faith, life, and mission. The session Scripture text looks at salvation and the gift of God's grace.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As this is the first session based on Paul's letter to the Romans, it is helpful to start with some general background information about this letter. Most importantly, it is necessary to understand that Paul did not start or plant the church (or churches) in Rome, nor has he, at the time of writing this letter, ever visited Rome. That means that while he is writing to very real people in a very real time and place, he does not seem to be addressing specific issues in the life of the Roman church. In contrast, Paul's other letters are written to people Paul knows well for the purpose of addressing situations with which he is quite familiar. So why does this matter? Quite simply, in Romans, Paul offers much more general statements about sin, salvation, and the Christian call to mission. While it would be a mistake to think that this letter was written to serve as a modern-day book of theology, it does reveal much about Paul's understandings of God and the work of Christ Jesus.

Knowing the historical **context** of a letter helps us better understand the text's meaning. For example, if we know who wrote the text, to whom it was written, when it was written, and under what circumstances it was written, we have a much better

SESSION ONE

? Context:

The particular setting, conditions, and circumstances surrounding a person or event.

? Justification:

The act of making things right or balanced again. We fall short of what God asks of us, but God makes things right again by grace through faith.

chance of understanding how it should be read and what it might mean. Unfortunately, this is not always easy. While we know that Paul wrote this letter, we do not know much about the specific circumstances under which it was written. Similarly, we do not know much about the members of the Roman church. So we use the text itself to reveal possible answers to these important historical questions. In the session Scripture text, Paul emphasizes universal sinfulness. He explains that both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin. Further, he explains that there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Finally, he notes that people are now justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Why might Paul have written these words? What are the possible circumstances surrounding the writing of this letter? What might these words reveal about the people to whom he was writing? Were they Jews? Were they Gentiles? Was the community a combination of both? How might one have viewed the other?

LITERARY CONTEXT

Your group will take another look at the text to note how the writer uses language. You will note that Paul tends to write very long sentences. In fact, many of his sentences are more than one verse in length. In addition, Paul's lengthy sentences can be quite difficult to understand. Therefore, when you come to a long sentence, attempt to locate the subject. Also, find the verb. Now, pay attention to the words and phrases Paul emphasizes. This process will help you locate Paul's key ideas.

You and your group will also look at Paul's use of Hebrew Scripture and the impact of his writing tone on his message in Romans.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

In this session, Paul focuses on the law. But what is the law? When most Lutherans hear this word, they immediately think about law and gospel (one of the main lenses through which Lutherans read Scripture). The Lutheran approach to the term *law* does not refer to a long list of "do's and don'ts." The law is what God asks of us. The Gospel is what God does for us. Your group will explore the function of the law in the session Scripture text.

The message of Romans led to a breakthrough for Martin Luther, and his insight on **justification** by grace through faith became a key part of Lutheran faith. You and your group will explore this insight and how it appears in the text.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

Everybody falls short. Everybody is under the power of sin. These words will be heard by group members in very different ways. For some, the words will be liberating. “Oh, it isn’t just me! Everybody else seems so perfect.” For others, the words will sound condemning and even offensive. “Who are you to point out my sins?” Either way, Paul’s words cannot be ignored. For Paul, we are not ready to hear the good news until we have fully acknowledged and accepted the bad news. The bad news is that we have all fallen short (and continue to fall short each day). The good news is that we have been justified by God’s grace as a gift.

Facilitator’s Prayer

Before you begin leading the session, consider praying this prayer silently:

Saving God, at times I question what I must do to receive salvation. Remind me that while I am tempted to place this burden upon myself, salvation is truly your free gift given to me. Use me as your instrument as I facilitate this discussion to again share this good news. Amen.

**Gather** (10-15 minutes)**Check-in**

Since this is the first session, you may wish to introduce the course and provide a very brief explanation of the theme of each session. After summarizing each of the session’s themes, or “big questions,” return to the theme of this session.

Take a few moments for people to introduce themselves to one another. Wearing name tags helps foster an open and welcoming environment. You may also invite each group member to share why he or she decided to attend this study on Romans. This will help in remembering names and building trust and a feeling of fellowship.

Introduce yourself and your role as the course facilitator. Share that you are not the “expert” who has all the answers. Rather, the course will encourage active learning, sharing, and participation from everyone in the group.



Tip:

Give each person a slip of paper to write down responses. (Let learners know you will collect and read their responses anonymously.) Collect and mix the slips of paper. Read them to the group. Offer a minute of silence for learners to reflect.



Tip:

Since this is the first session, you will want to summarize the course outline and make clear and smooth transitions between tasks. For example, you will want to clearly indicate when your group is moving from the gathering activities to Open Scripture.



Tip:

During the group discussion, affirm all thoughtful responses. Make sure all participants have the opportunity to share their thoughts, if they wish, and consider capturing them on chart paper or a whiteboard to revisit during Wrap-Up.

Pray

After each group member has introduced himself or herself, pray for each member by name, thanking God for his or her participation in this course.

OR

Offer to pray this prayer for the group:

Gracious God, thank you for meeting us here in this moment. We join this group for a variety of reasons and with a variety of emotions. But we all come together to better understand you and your Word. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Open our hearts and minds to the promise of your grace, which comes to us in many ways, but especially today in Paul's letter to the Romans. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Focus Activity

Some people picture salvation as a journey, and some think of it as a destination. Look at the Focus Image. List three things that come to mind when you see the words *saved* or *salvation*.



Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

As a volunteer reads the Bible text, invite learners to underline any words or phrases that stand out to them or that they'd like to know more about.

OR

Read the text from two or three different Bible translations.

Read Romans 3:9-31.

- What words or phrases in this Scripture text stand out to you?
- What confuses or concerns you?
- What gives you hope?



Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

Historical Context

1. Knowing the historical setting and background can help us better understand a Scripture text. Paul, a missionary who

worked throughout the Roman Empire, wrote this letter as well as several others. We do not know much about the members of the Roman church that Paul was addressing, however, or about the specific circumstances under which he wrote the letter. In this case, the text itself holds some important clues.

- Paul speaks about both Jews (God’s chosen people who had been promised a Messiah) and Gentiles (all people who are not Jews). What might this tell us about members of the church in Rome? How do you suppose they viewed each other?
- Read Genesis 17:9-14. How does this passage help you tell who the circumcised and uncircumcised are in the Romans passage (3:30)?

2. Paul emphasizes that all people have sinned.

- What might this tell us about the context or circumstances behind the writing of the letter?

Literary Context

1. Paul tends to write very long sentences—many are more than one verse in length. In addition, Paul’s lengthy sentences can be quite difficult to understand. Therefore, it helps to pay close attention to Paul’s use of vocabulary and grammar.

- List the words and phrases Paul seems to emphasize in this text. How did you choose these words and phrases?
- Choose a verse or sentence in the text and paraphrase it in your own words.

2. Notice the nine verses that look like poetry (3:10-18). These verses come from many places in Hebrew Scripture, including Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Isaiah.

- Why would Paul quote from Hebrew Scripture here and in many other places in his letters?
- What does this tell you about Paul?

3. A speaker’s tone of voice gives us clues to the meaning of what is said. A writer’s “tone of voice” gives us clues, too.

- Look at Romans 3:9-31 again, imagining how Paul might read it out loud. Describe Paul’s “tone of voice” in this section of Romans.
- How might the tone shed light on the text?



Tip:

As a facilitator of the discussion, it is often best to echo and paraphrase learners’ responses. This will encourage group members to share again and may also help to clarify what has been said. You may affirm difficult input with a simple thank you.



Bonus Activity:

Hand out a copy of a letter or email that you have recently received. Do not tell the group anything about the “historical context” of the communication. Ask the group to reconstruct the possible context from the content of the letter. How close did they get to the actual/known context?



Bonus Activity:

Paul emphasizes universal sinfulness. Do we hear this message in popular media? If so, where? Ask the group to consider how popular culture deals with the concept of sinfulness.



Tip:

List these words and phrases on chart paper or a whiteboard.



Bonus Activity:

Writers and speakers today use quotes to help make their points, too. Discuss: What kinds of quotes have the most impact for readers or listeners?



Bonus Activity:

Have volunteers take turns reading verses from the text out loud, using the tone of voice Paul would use.

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Tip:

In exploring Scripture, it is normal to experience a wide range of human emotions—serious moments as well as light and humorous moments.



Bonus Activity:

Lutherans say that the Commandments function in three ways. First, they have a political function. They maintain order in society. Second, they have a religious function. They show our need for the gospel. Third, they have an ethical function. They teach us right from wrong. Discuss: Does Paul's description of the law match any of these functions?



Bonus Activity:

Another main lens through which Lutherans read Scripture is "What shows forth Christ?" We ask, "Where do we see Christ in this text?" Or, "What does this text reveal about Christ?" Ask your group to consider how this text "shows forth Christ."



Tip:

Have learners form pairs to discuss the questions in this section. When they have worked through all the questions, reconvene and share responses in the larger group.



Bonus Activity:

Distribute copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* to learners. Read together one of the settings for confession and forgiveness. How does worship support or contradict Paul's understanding of universal sinfulness?



Bonus Activity:

Invite learners to consider their own prayer practices. How do they pray? What do they pray for? Where and when do they pray? Does their prayer include confession? If not, how might the session Scripture text change the way they understand prayer?

Lutheran Context

1. For Lutherans, one of the main lenses through which we read Scripture is law and gospel. In Romans 3:9-31, Paul focuses on the law. The law here does not refer to a long list of "do's and don'ts," but to what God asks of us. Gospel is what God does for us.

- Define the law, according to the session Scripture text. What is the function of the law? Is the law "good" or "bad"?
- Where does Paul discuss the gospel in this text?
- How do law and gospel relate to one another?

2. The message of Romans led to a turning point in Martin Luther's life, and his insight on justification by grace through faith became a key part of Lutheran faith. Justification by grace through faith means we are not justified or saved by anything that we do. Rather, through Jesus, God has acted on our behalf to forgive our sins, put us right with God, and save us.

- List what humans do, according to Romans 3:9-31.
- List what God and Jesus do, according to the text.

Devotional Context

1. Paul emphasizes that everybody falls short of what God asks of us. Everybody is under the power of sin. These words are heard by people in different ways at different times.

- How do you hear these words? Do you hear them as law? As gospel?

2. Role-play how you would respond if a close friend or family member asked, "What must I do to get to heaven?"

3. We are justified by God's grace as a gift through faith.

- How do you feel about this gift? Do you set it aside for special occasions or keep it out for daily use?
- Write a poem or prayer celebrating the gift of God's grace.

Wrap-up

1. Since this is the first session, offer a recap from the very beginning. Review each person's name. Next, recap the session's key moments. Start with the most energetic portions of the conversation and thank learners for their contributions.

2. Circle back to the group's initial reactions to the words "saved" and "salvation." Ask: How do those responses compare with what Paul says about salvation?

3. Invite learners to ask any unanswered questions they still might have. As the facilitator, you may offer to investigate these yourself during the week ahead and bring responses to the next session, or you may ask for volunteers to do this.

Pray

Creator God, thank you for responding to our sinfulness, our brokenness, with your loving grace. We understand that we have all sinned and have fallen short in your eyes. Yet, we also know that we are justified by your grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. We give you thanks for this promise. We give you thanks for this good news. Increase our faith so that we might more deeply understand and more completely respond to this gift. Help us to walk together as your children. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Homework

1. Read the Scripture text for the next session: Romans 5:1-11. If time permits, read all of Romans 1:1—5:11 (see below for a daily reading plan).
2. In a journal, note your thoughts or questions regarding the session Scripture text throughout the week.
3. Make a list of experiences you have with various laws throughout the week. What functions do the laws perform?
4. Romans is a letter Paul wrote to people he did not personally know. Revive the art of letterwriting this week. Write and send a hand-written note to someone with whom you have fallen out of touch.

Looking Ahead

1. Read the Scripture text for the next session: Romans 5:1-11.
2. Read the Leader Session Guide and mark any portions you wish to highlight in the next session.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you'll need to do the Bonus Activities.

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Enrichment

1. If you want a daily plan for reading through Romans during this unit, read the following sections this week:

Day 1: Romans 1:1-17

Day 2: Romans 1:18-32

Day 3: Romans 2:1-16

Day 4: Romans 2:17—3:8

Day 5: Romans 3:9-31

Day 6: Romans 4:1-25

Day 7: Romans 5:1-11

2. Do an Internet search on the terms *righteousness*, *justification*, and *sanctification*. Sort your results and assemble a one-sheet summary. Consider photocopying this summary to share with your group at the next session.

3. Watch the movie *Babette's Feast* (MGM, 1988). Where do you see grace? How do the characters respond to grace?

For Further Reading

Available from www.augsburgfortress.org/store:

Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 1: Chapters 1-8 by N. T. Wright.
Provides a guide to the first half of Romans and the author's translation of the Scripture text.