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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.

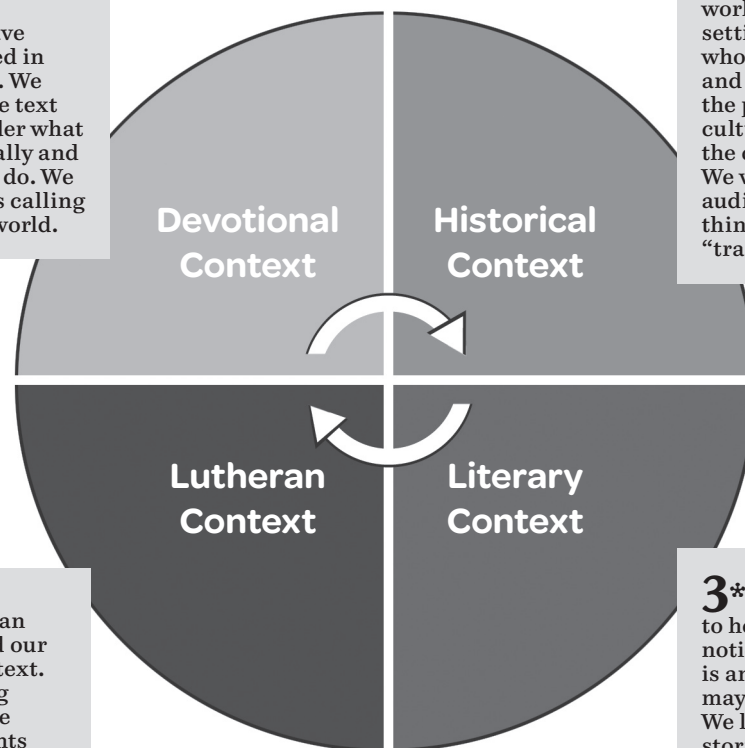
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience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

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.



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.

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.

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 for 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 the Together in Faith online helps makes the units useful for any time of the year. The small group session materials are also designed to serve as stand-alone studies for anytime use.

Songs of the Faithful: Studies in Psalms Unit Overview

Martin Luther wrote, "Beautiful music is the art of the prophets that can calm the agitations of the soul; it is one of the most magnificent and delightful gifts God has given us."

Music and poetry help create, shape, and inspire faith in ways words often cannot. The Psalms are the first hymns and prayers of the church. They represent poems, prayers, and hymnody sung by real people living with the pains and challenges of real human life. The Psalms are people's cries to God, hoping that God is listening to their shaky voices. They are also people's praise of God for all the grace and mercy God has showered upon them. The themes within the Psalms were not just lived by people long ago. They are found over and over in human life, as similar challenges are experienced throughout the generations.

This unit in the Together in Faith series of Augsburg Fortress' Book of Faith Bible studies invites you to enter into the earliest cries of faithful people who called upon God to help them

through great trials. Each session will pair the early Psalm with a more contemporary poem that will take you further into the soul-work enabled by spiritual reflection on the Psalms.

Session 1: Two roads diverged in a yellow wood . . . Which one will I take? (Psalm 1)

We are surrounded by choices in daily life. Being fed by daily streams of living water helps us stay alive in Christ and faithful to God's path.

Session 2: I have sunk so low . . . Is there help for me? (Psalm 51:1-10)

The writer of this Psalm was no stranger to despair. Encountering the grace of God in human life is our greatest gift and source of hopefulness.

Session 3: You have lifted me up . . . and I'm thankful (Psalm 113)

Throughout Scripture, God lifts people out of their ash heaps; they are healed and made whole. We are changed when touched by the holy. Praising God for such acts of grace in our lives is the response we are called to offer.

Session 4: What does it mean to place all your trust in the Lord? (Psalm 146)

Trust may be one of the most challenging emotions of our time. The conflicting voices of human leaders, ideas, and belief systems are all around us. Whose voice do we trust? Learning to truly trust in the Lord's voice above all others and in all times is God's countercultural call in our lives.

Session 5: Listen to your elders (Psalm 37:1-9)

We've all heard the saying, "respect your elders." We are called to pause and reflect on the wisdom given by generations of the faithful who have experienced trials, learned from them, and now have joined the great company of saints who have gone before us.

Session 6: Look at all the wondrous deeds God has done! (Psalm 111)

Learning to gratefully reflect on God's grace in our lives is a powerful source of inspiration and daily encouragement for our faith journeys. How are we expressing God's wondrous love?

Psalm 1

Leader Session Guide



Focus Statement

We are surrounded by difficult choices in life. Being fed by daily streams of living water helps us stay alive in Christ and faithful to God's path.



Key Verse

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.

Psalm 1:1-2



Focus Image



Which road for me? © Westend61/
SuperStock

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood . . . Which one will I take?

“The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel them both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

The Psalms are the first great songs and poems of the faithful. They embody some of the earliest prayers and hymnody of the church. They are the voices of people who, although living in difficult circumstances with great challenges in their lives, continued to praise God and turn to God for help. The Psalms speak from the depths of the human heart, with its great joy and sadness, faithfulness, and sinfulness. Sometimes the Psalms contain words of praise and thanksgiving; other times they speak of lament and regret. We will journey through six different Psalms during this study and hear each of these voices . . . adding our own to the conversation.

SESSION ONE



Robert Lee Frost

(March 26, 1874–January 29, 1963) was an American poet who received four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry during his lifetime.

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need. The supplies you will need to do the session activities include a candle placed in the center of the room with a large bowl for water next to it, a pitcher filled with water, small flasks for each person to take one home after the session, sketch and writing paper, pencils, a whiteboard or chart paper along with colored markers.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.
4. Each participant is encouraged to begin a personal journal to use throughout the study. Participants should be reminded to bring their journal each session in case there is an insight, question, or reflection from the previous week they wish to share with the group.

Session Overview

The pattern of our study in *Songs of the Faithful: Studies in Psalms* pairs an ancient Psalm with a “contemporary” poem and visual image. Like Robert Frost’s poem, Psalm 1 sets two paths before us. “The Road Not Taken” asks, “Which road will you take?” Psalm 1 encourages a specific path, “Take the way of the just and not the way of the wicked.” Note the themes of happiness and choice in this Psalm. Psalm 1 is the entry point into a great body of poetry, prayers, and hymnody. As such, it is a good example of the way many Psalms present contrasts for comparative purposes. Listen for its instructional tone. Focus on what Psalm 1 is attempting to teach us and on its role as the beginning of one of the most significant books in the Hebrew Scriptures.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are a variety of approaches to understanding the Psalms. Traditionally the personal/historical approach has been most common. This approach was championed by scholars who believed it was important to link a psalm with a specific author and tie the work to their historical context. Later biblical scholarship has found this approach limited, especially since specific authorship of each psalm is difficult to assert. For example, even though nearly half of the psalms are attributed to

King David, scholars agree the difference in language and tone within those 73 psalms implies a variety of authors. Might some have been written by David's sons, or servants, or temple leaders? How many were written by David himself? It is impossible to settle these matters with certainty.

What is clear is that Psalm 1 is categorized as **wisdom literature**. Its primary function is instructional. Wisdom literature is intended to both teach and inspire the reader to lead a God-filled life. Psalm 1 adds poetic flair to this teaching. Two clear paths are described, and it is evident these paths are familiar to both the author and reader. A good way to engage wisdom literature with participants is to ask them to consider examples of writing or teaching they believe to be helpful in instructing or passing life lessons on to others. Think about classical poems or children's stories that have underlying instruction in them, such as the prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep" or "Humpty Dumpty" who "couldn't be put back together again." The following biblical and **apocryphal** books are classified as wisdom literature: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Song of Songs, Wisdom, and Sirach.

Note the prevalence of "life" language in this Psalm—trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. Yet this life language is balanced by "death" language—the wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away. Indeed, Psalm 1 begins with the word *happy*—a word of life, and ends with the word *perish*—a word of death. In doing this, Psalm 1 reiterates the separation begun in the book of Genesis, where the harmonious and just life God intended for creation is eternally disrupted when human pride enters the story. Psalm 1:3 brings to mind the Garden of Eden where human beings lived in perfection before "the path that sinners tread" had become so well worn.

In Eden a stream would rise up from the dry ground and "water the whole face of the ground" (Genesis 2:6). This theme of living water emerging out of dry earth is found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Jeremiah 17:8 provides a parallel passage where a tree planted by the water is not anxious even in a year of drought—it continues to bear fruit during times of dryness. Scripture often reminds us of the role that meditation plays in counteracting such times of dryness: for example, see Joshua 1:8 and Deuteronomy 17:18-19. The prophet Daniel was someone who valued his quiet time with God, even in the face of lions, as we read in Daniel 6. In addition, Jesus continuously modeled

? **Wisdom Literature:**

a genre of literature common in the Ancient Near East. The key principle of wisdom literature is that, while techniques of traditional storytelling are used, these books also presume to offer insight and wisdom about nature and reality.

? **Apocryphal:**

the term "apocrypha" simply means hidden. This is also a reference to editions of the Bible that include a third section of sacred writings between the Old and New Testaments. Different churches and congregations have differing views on what constitutes their biblical canon.



God's Law:

in Luther's understanding of law and gospel, the law is generally understood as the commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and the law set forth in the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures—the Pentateuch.

how wisdom and strength for ministry could be found through meditation and prayer (Luke 6:11-12; 9:18-20; 11:1).

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Psalms are also poems. Poems can be used for individual devotions, but also for corporate and liturgical practices when the assembly gathers together in worship and song. Poetry is effective in teaching because its nuanced meaning encourages the reader/hearer to go beyond the words and move into a deeper understanding of what the author is trying to express. We often think of poetry as words that rhyme with perhaps a rhythmic cadence. Poetry in scripture is more concerned with structure, parallelisms and acrostics, than rhyming. However, scriptural poetry can follow a rhythmic cadence that adds tremendous impact when these words are spoken out loud, recited, or sung by a gathered congregation.

Psalm 1 is considered a didactic or instructional poem. The author intends to give instruction that both convicts and compels; we are convicted of our choice to follow the ways of sinners, but we are also compelled to “delight . . . in the law of the Lord.” We learn what it means to be planted by streams of living water; we are compelled to follow the Lord’s way so that we might bear healthy fruit, furthering God’s mission in the world.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

Luther’s understanding of law and gospel is quite helpful for us as we unpack Psalm 1. Luther took the law very seriously, but he never saw the law as being an isolated element of faith. The law is always paired with the gospel. The law convicts; the gospel frees. Psalm 1 sets forth a very high standard for the righteous—they meditate on **God’s law** day and night. Luther would likely agree that meditating on God’s law is quite important. Because Psalm 1:2 does not specify a particular law or code, the implication is that the whole of sacred tradition and God’s revelation are the “law” upon which our lives should be built and the focus of our meditation. But Luther would also stress that if the goal of the righteous person is to keep the law perfectly, he or she will never achieve that goal.

The presence of the gospel of Jesus in our lives, and our grateful response to the gift of undeserved grace we have received, creates a responsiveness and desire to uphold the laws of God and bear fruit in the world. Streams of baptismal water continue to water our lives, giving us a fresh start each new day. The goal is not to keep God’s laws perfectly and become depressed

when we fail, but to recognize we are always standing in a life-giving, baptismal shower! This is good news for us, and another reminder of why God's gifts of grace and mercy are so important.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

The beginning of Psalm 1 states that followers of the law are not only righteous, they will also be “happy.” Happiness is a subjective term. Everyone defines happiness differently. A dangerous distortion of a theology of Christian happiness can be found in the surge of “**prosperity gospel**” churches around the world. Prosperity theology claims if we follow God's path, the reward will be material prosperity in this life. We will become materially rich because of our faith. The understanding of life in Psalm 1 is in stark contrast to our society's glamorizing of living autonomous, self-sufficient lives. Such an understanding creates isolated selves who continue to search for happiness in ways of the world that never satisfy.

The happiness presented to us in Psalm 1 describes spiritual richness. This is a countercultural message, and one which might be unfamiliar to people. Prosperity theology is particularly compelling for those looking for a “quick fix” to their challenging or disappointing lives or a fast path to material and spiritual gain. This is not the message of Psalm 1. The happiness language of Psalm 1 goes along with the “life” language mentioned earlier. Psalm 1 invites the reader to choose the path of righteous living, one filled with fresh streams of living water that continually renew and restore. Meditating on God's law is one important part of living in the light and life of Christ, where the baptismal waters never run dry. Such a life creates happiness that might not always be seen with the eye, but is experienced through grace-filled and fruitful living.

Facilitator's Prayer

Holy God, give me insight as I lead this session. Help me teach the wisdom passed on to us through your Holy Word. Thank you for your wisdom passed from one generation to the next. Give me a listening ear and compassionate heart as I listen to others. Be with each person who is part of this group. May they hear a word of hope and be strengthened in their journey of walking in the path of the Lord. Amen.

? Prosperity Gospel:

is a religious belief centered on the notion that people who are favored by God will be materially successful, and materially successful people are such because God favors them. Prosperity theology has been criticized for being antithetical to traditional biblical teaching and exploitative of its adherents, and for the financial excesses of its leadership.

SESSION ONE



Tip:

Observe your group during this initial Check-in. Make note for yourself of those who jump in quickly and those who hold back a little. Note also those who share a lot of information and those who just share the basics. Being aware of these dynamics will help you to encourage more balanced conversations in the future.



Tip:

Learning to pray as part of a group is an important aspect of faith maturity. Yet it can be intimidating for people, especially if they are unfamiliar with group prayer. Encourage a different member to lead the opening prayer each week. Let the group know that prayer requests will be shared at the end of the session as part of the closing prayer.



Tip:

Give people a few minutes to read the contemporary poem silently or, alternatively, have one person read the poem to the group while others simply listen. Allow a few minutes of silent reflection on the poem before engaging the questions.

Gather (10–15 minutes)

Check-in

Take time to greet each person and invite learners to introduce themselves to one another. Rather than going around in a circle for Check-in, allow people to introduce themselves at will. By establishing a more open format of Check-in, you will not be forced into the “going around the circle” routine.

Pray

O God, we eagerly open your scriptures in order that you might speak a new word to us through them. Open our hearts that we might welcome your presence anew and see where we have taken a wrong path. Open our minds that we might understand why we find ourselves on wrong pathways again and again. Open our eyes to see how you are constantly at work, helping us get back on track and able to follow your steadfast path that does not disappoint. Amen.

Focus Activity

Read Robert Frost’s beautiful poem, “The Road Not Taken.” As you ponder the words of the poem and look at the Focus Image above, consider the following questions:

- Where in your life have you encountered two divergent paths and been unsure which one to take? What was the outcome of your choice?
- Do you think it’s possible to change course if you find yourself on an unexpected or undesirable path?



Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

Before you begin to read the scripture text, light a candle in the center of the group as a symbol that the Word of God is being opened anew in this moment. The Word of God is alive, on fire, and bringing light to each of us. In *The Book That Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* (Fortress, 2004), Walter Brueggemann makes the point that every time we open Scripture, God is speaking a new word through it. Urge the group to ready their hearts to hear the new word God intends for them.

OR

As an additional or as a separate devotional option, place a large basin next to the candle. After lighting the candle, fill the basin with water from a large pitcher. Let the water make splashing sounds to remind the group that our baptismal water is alive,

noisy, sometimes messy, but always calling us to new life in Christ. Ask participants to then close their eyes and listen as one person reads the text aloud. Then invite each participant to look at the text and read it silently. Allow a few moments of silent reflection before engaging the questions.

Read Psalm 1.

- How do you react to the word *happy* at the beginning of verse 1?
- After reading the entire psalm, do you feel uplifted, challenged, convicted, uncertain? Are there other words that better describe your initial reaction to Psalm 1?
- How do you react to the word *perish* at the end of the psalm?

Join the Conversation (25–55 minutes)

Historical Context

The Psalms are the first hymns and prayers of the church. They are the songs sung by real people, faithful people, living with the pains and challenges of real human life. We aren't sure who wrote Psalm 1, but scholars agree that this is a wisdom psalm used for instructional purposes. It reiterates the separation begun in the book of Genesis, where the harmonious and just life God intended for creation is eternally disrupted when human pride enters the story.

1. In what ways is Psalm 1:3 reminiscent of the Garden of Eden? Compare this verse with Genesis 2:6. In what ways does Jeremiah 17:8 provides a parallel to Psalm 1?

2. Water is a critical element throughout Scripture. It represents God's steadfast love for us, and it is a metaphor representing our constant, divine source of refreshment and nourishment. But water can also be devastating when it gets out of control. Consider the following passages and discuss how water serves divine purposes:

- Genesis 7: How is water used by God in response to humanity's sinfulness?
- Exodus 2: How is water used to fulfill a divine purpose?
- John 4:1-29: How is water used metaphorically to symbolize something greater than an ordinary element?



Tip:

This session's focus on Psalm 1 is a wonderful opportunity to briefly introduce the genre of wisdom literature to participants. Take a few minutes to talk about examples of wisdom literature in the Bible and encourage participants to study it further on their own.



Tip:

In the interest of time, consider dividing up the texts about water, having a few people report back to the group on each, rather than having each participant look at each one.



Bonus Activity:

Water activity: Each person is given a cup of water. Ask each person to pour some water into a large vase, stating an area of his or her life or in the world that is dry and needs God's living water. Bring small flasks with you and invite participants to take the flasks of water home with them. Remind participants to bring their flasks to the next session to be part of another collective activity.

SESSION ONE



Bonus Activity:

When astronauts venture to the moon or other destinations in space, their first priority is often searching for water. Why? How does this search for water connect with the stories above, especially John 4 and Acts 8?



Tip:

Invite the group to think quietly, meditating on meditation, before they share. You might want to use a mind mapping technique to deepen your group's understanding of meditation. Examples of this can be found online on sites such as www.mindmapping.com.



Bonus Activity:

Take a few moments and have each participant share his or her experience with poetry. Consider the following questions: What is your experience with poetry? Are you moved by the words of poetry, or not? What forms of writing are most compelling for you? Story? Narrative? Scientific research with supporting data? Drama?



Tip:

In poetry, less is more. Invite the group to choose one word from each verse in Psalm 1 that they believe captures the essence of that verse. Invite learners to share their words with the group by reading each one slowly in turn while the others listen.



Tip:

You might want to use a whiteboard or chart paper to write down key words that the poetic nature of the texts, such as “simile,” “metaphor,” “imagery,” and “language.” Ask the group if they can think of other examples of poetry in Scripture. What about Psalm 23?

- Acts 8:26-40: How is water used as a sign of God's promises?

How do these examples of God's presence and active work through water compare with the “streams of water” mentioned in Psalm 1?

3. Psalm 1:2 emphasizes the value of meditating on the law of God, but what does it mean to “meditate”?

- Brainstorm as many words or ideas related to meditation as you can.
- In what ways do Joshua 1:8 and Deuteronomy 17:18-19 add to your understanding of meditation in the Bible? Where else can you find models of meditation in Scripture?
- Is there something in Psalm 1 that can especially serve as a focal point for your personal meditation?

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Psalms are also poems—poems that can be used for individual devotions, but also for corporate and liturgical practices when the assembly gathers together in worship and song. Psalm 1 is considered a didactic or instructional poem that charts the path to happiness. Along with Psalm 2, Psalm 1 serves as the poetic introduction to the entire Psalter.

1. As a group, list the metaphors in Psalm 1 that enhance its poetic character.

2. Revisit Frost's poem. Explore what metaphors he uses to convey the central message of the poem. Where do you hear similarities between the metaphors in Psalm 1 and “The Road Not Taken”?

3. Compare Psalm 1:1 with Psalm 2:11. Why do you believe these two Psalms were selected to be the very first in such an important book?

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

Straying from the path he knew God desired for him, and his inability to correct this sinfulness on his own, was very much a part of Luther's own spiritual struggles. As a result of this, he came to the realization that there must be another way. This is where Luther's theme of grace alone through faith in Christ Jesus alone took on powerful meaning for him. Luther understood that the law is meant to help give our lives boundaries. Yet the gospel of Jesus meets us right where we fail in following the law and find ourselves on "the path that sinners tread."

1. What is your response to Luther's understanding of law and gospel?
2. Where do you hear the law in Psalm 1? Where do you hear gospel? Why are both important? Read Romans 8:1-17. Discuss the interplay of law and gospel in these passages.

Psalm 1 does appear heavy on the law, but being "planted by streams of water" reminds us of the power of baptism in our lives. Baptismal waters renew and restore, bringing gospel to every part of our lives that has failed miserably in keeping God's law.



Colorful Palms with Water and Marsh (2001) by Hyacinth Manning (b.1954 African-American). Acrylic on canvass © Hyacinth Manning / SuperStock

3. Read what Jesus has to say about water in John 4:14-15 and 7:37-39. Take a few moments to combine what you've read in Psalm 1 with these passages in John by way of a sketch.

+ Bonus Activity:

The following are other examples of the use of poetry in the Scriptures to instruct and shape faith. Read these texts and identify portions you find to be particularly poetic and meaningful:

- Psalm 19
- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
- Isaiah 55

What words of conviction and hope do you hear in these examples? Why is the poetic form uniquely useful in encouraging change in our lives?

Tip:

Hopefully you and/or your congregation are using this study as an outreach tool. If so, there will likely be people from outside the Lutheran tradition present. Note that the concept of undeserved grace might be new to participants. Don't assume the Lutherans in the group fully understand God's grace, either.

+ Bonus Activity:

Bring the law/gospel conversation closer to home by having participants think of examples from their contemporary lives where they have experienced law and gospel. For example, "Law is when I get pulled over for driving too fast. Gospel is when someone overlooks a mistake I have made or chooses not to draw attention to it, helping me not feel embarrassed or stupid because of my error."

Tip:

Ask the group where they see law and gospel, themselves and God in the Manning painting. Provide sketch paper and colored pencils or markers for your group. Encourage them to think about the way these passages reveal the various sources and purposes of "living water" as a metaphor of grace and an allusion to baptism.

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Bonus Activity:

Ask participants to think of areas in their lives where they can demonstrate balanced and life-affirming uses of law and gospel. Think in terms of one's dealings with family, coworkers, neighbors, and the strangers they encounter along life's way. For example, "Law is when I encourage my son to abide by our agreed-upon curfew. Gospel is when I choose to forgive my coworker who wronged me (again) and I truly let it go rather than bringing it up over and over again." Encourage them to log such expressions of healthy, embodied law and gospel in their journals in the weeks ahead.



Tip:

There is a lot of information available online about prosperity gospel churches. The *New York Times* ran an important article on these churches on August 15, 2009 entitled "Believers Invest in the Gospel of Getting Rich." Public radio and television have also done programming about prosperity gospel churches and theology (www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week10). It is possible some participants or their friends or family members have had direct experience with such churches. Be prepared to sensitively address the flawed and dangerous theology of the prosperity gospel movement.



Bonus Activity:

Bring a number of pop culture beauty, sports, and news magazines to the session and spread them around on a table or the floor. Ask participants to close their eyes and choose a magazine. Then ask them to pull out as many examples as they can of what current culture defines as happiness . . . in two minutes. How do their findings differ from what Psalm 1 defines as happiness?

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

The happiness spoken of in the first word of Psalm 1 is quite different from what our contemporary world calls happiness. Unlike today's proponents of "prosperity theology," prosperity for the author of Psalm 1 does not mean getting what we want. It means living fully connected to God and drawing from the streams of living water provided to us. A God-centered life creates happiness. A self-centered life misses the opportunity to place our lives fully in the hands of God and trust that God is walking with us.

1. Reread Psalm 1. What about this Psalm inspires happiness in you?
2. What provides the most happiness in your life? What creates the most sadness? Tell of a time in your life when you felt happiest. What about it created such happiness?
3. Psalm 1 begins with the word *happy* and ends with the word *perish*. The choice appears to be ours to make. Both paths are set before us. Revisit Frost's poem a final time. What is your response to the line, "Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back"?

Wrap-up

Closing questions to ponder in the week ahead:

1. Are there any remaining questions to explore further?
2. Two roads diverged in God's grace-filled wood—which one will we take? Why? How?
3. As we conclude the session, are there other insights you have from either Frost's poem or the Focus Image above you wish to share?

Pray

O God, thank you for opening up your word of life to us. Help me to ponder what brings true happiness to my life. Help me to learn to meditate on your word both day and night. Help me to seek your grace when I have fallen off the path you desire for me. Help me to be a source of love and life for others who have strayed from your ways and desire to begin again. Amen.

Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)**Homework**

1. Read the next session's Bible text, Psalm 51:1-10. As you do, reflect on its relationship to our conversation with Psalm 1.
2. Look at the text of the hymn "Light Dawns on a Weary World" (ELW 726). Reflect on how this hymn uses metaphors of water to indicate new life in Christ.
3. Start a Book of Faith journal for this study of the Psalms as well as your future conversations with God's Word. Over the week, reflect on today's text and how it speaks to your life. Use your journal to respond to these questions: How do I define true happiness? Where am I self-sufficient to the point of not fully placing my trust in God to help me? Where am I on a wrong path and need to seek God's grace to begin again?
4. Write a poem of instruction that addresses the following themes: happiness, God's path for your life, temptations that have led you to another path, places of living water in your life.

Enrichment

1. Read Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." It can be found online or in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, pp. 130-133). Consider how the misfit in the story represents the wicked in Psalm 1.
2. This week, every time you turn on water to use in some part of your life, think about God's baptismal promises. Care for creation by turning off water when not in use. Remind yourself that part of our baptismal covenant is caring for the earth and being good stewards of God's precious resources like water.
3. Plan a special event this week where you are the source of love and happiness to another person. Choose a coworker, neighbor,

**Tip:**

Make a note of any thoughts or questions you might want to revisit. If something came up you weren't prepared to answer, assign or personally do some research before the next session. Participants will appreciate your diligence in taking their questions seriously. You might want to create a social networking site for your group on www.bookoffaith.org so that you can share findings during the week.

**Tip:**

Collect prayer requests that can be shared during the closing prayer time. As the facilitator, lead the closing prayer time and lift up the names and concerns gathered from the group. Encourage participants to consider leading the closing prayer at some point during the six weeks together. End the session by saying the closing prayer together.

**Tip:**

If you opened with the water ritual, invite group members to fill small flasks to take with them from the basin as a reminder of Jesus' call for them to be a source of "living water" for others. Save the remaining water for use in Session Two.

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or other person in your life toward whom you can extend special kindness or unexpected grace. Visit a nursing home or special care facility to bring cheer, prayer, music, or quiet conversation to a resident in need.

4. Watch the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2008). Think about how the two brothers took different paths in life. Ponder how their two paths led them in radically different life directions.

For Further Reading

Available from www.augsburgfortress.org/store:

Martin Luther: Faith in Christ and the Gospel by Eric W. Gritsch (New City Press, 1996) Gritsch presents Luther at his best on the interpretation of Scripture, basic Christian affirmations of faith, spiritual and pastoral theology, and good humor that should characterize a witness of Jesus Christ.

Defeating Depression: Real Help for You and Those Who Love You by Howard Stone (Augsburg Books, 2007). A workbook of ideas for diminishing suffering and increasing happiness.

The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Simon and Schuster, 1996). Bonhoeffer explores how “the path of the righteous” is filled with great responsibility, challenges, and joys.

Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session’s Bible text: Psalm 51:1-10.
2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you’ll need to do the Bonus Activities.
4. Pray for members of your group during the week.