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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 have 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.

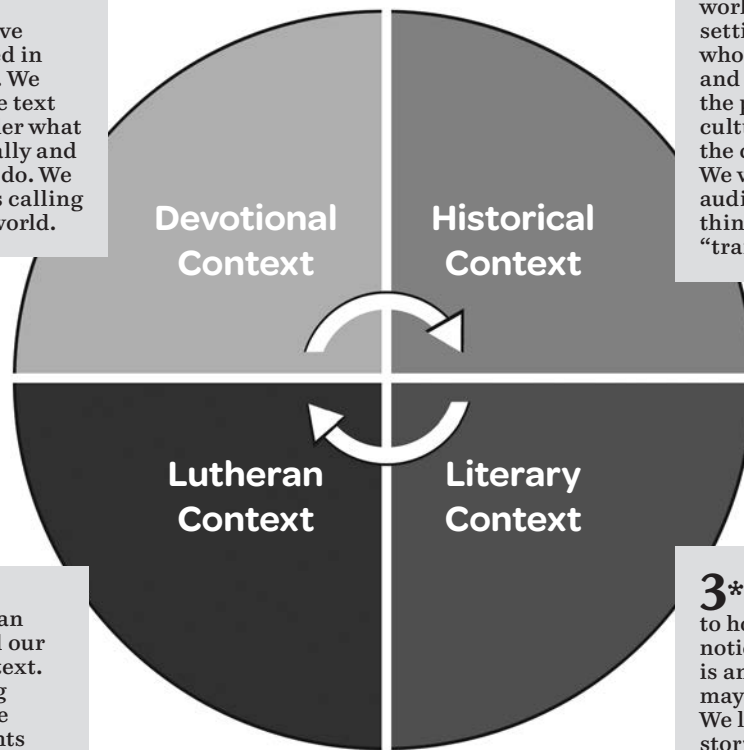
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience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

Complementing this approach is a commitment to engaging participants in active, learner-oriented 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 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.
- **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.

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 Ephesians 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 and 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.

Ephesians Unit Overview

Ephesians is an invitation into a world of grace, sweeping us into an all-encompassing vision of God’s eternal plan to redeem all creation. God labors in every moment of time and every spoonful of matter to draw all that is into the love God is. Human failure, cynicism, and determined resistance will

not deter the Divine Majesty from completing the plan that has been in force since before the birth of time.

God's pleasure is to reveal the mystery on which God has never ceased to work. God delights to tear down walls and create the loving unity for which we and all are intended.

This vision shatters the tunnel vision and narrow pieties that sour the souls and limit the imagination of too much of Western Christianity. God is more loving and present than we can possibly imagine. The grace of our all-loving God cannot be confined to human sanctuaries or limited by sacraments celebrated at our altars. Nor is it held captive by human boundaries or distinctions.

We are invited to joy, for even on our worst days our lives are bathed in unspeakable grace. There are no ungraced moments, no forsaken places. We live in the geography of grace where God labors to fulfill the mystery of the divine plan.

Ephesians begins with a doxological explosion of praise for the wonder of God. The entire letter radiates the exuberance of the overwhelmed. The author is knocked off his feet by the height and depth, the length and breadth of God's love. We are invited to a spirituality of knowing and living the peace of Jesus that is the destiny of the entire creation. The church is an incarnation of the loving unity into which the One who is Love is drawing all things.

Session 1, "Drawn into God," focuses on Ephesians 1:1-14, which establishes the theme of the letter: "the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure . . . to gather up all things in him." God is drawing all that is into the harmonious unity of flesh and Spirit revealed in our brother Jesus, the Christ.

Session 2, "Jesus Is Our Peace," examines Ephesians 2:1-22. God is creating a new humanity that transcends all the walls of race and culture, creed and clan that stir fear, hatred, and division. In Christ we are joined in a common heart, a common love, and a common mission.

Session 3, "Knowing the Unknowable," explores Ephesians 3:1-21. The spirituality of Ephesians is rooted in knowing what cannot be known (the all-surpassing love of Christ) that we may be filled with the fullness of God.

Session 4, "Imitating the Inimitable," reflects on the life of the church as described in Ephesians, 4 and 5. God has created a new and grace-filled community to reveal the mystery of God's eternal plan to draw all things into one love. As members of the beloved community of God's peace, we are called to live a life worthy of our calling by incarnating the mystery of God's plan in our common life.

Ephesians 1:1-14



Focus Statement

God has been active in every moment of history, constantly working to draw all things into the harmonious unity of flesh and Spirit revealed in our brother Jesus, the Christ. Ephesians invites us to see, celebrate, and share in this great work of God.

Key Verse

With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. Ephesians 1:8-10

Focus Image



Trinity
Andrei Rublev (ca. 1360/70–1427/30 Russian)
© Anatoly Sapronenkov / SuperStock

Drawn into God

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

Do you practice spiritual apartheid? Spiritual apartheid restricts God's presence and labor to certain people, places, and activities, as if God were not working in and through all things to accomplish God's plan. It limits our vision and impoverishes our souls. Ephesians moves us beyond spiritual apartheid to imagine God at work at all times and in all things. How do you describe the divine plan on which God constantly labors?

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, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.
4. Pray with the icon using the instructions in the Devotional Context section before the session, so you can effectively lead this part of the session.

Session Overview

Christians often think the Father sent Jesus into the world as a contingency plan. Human beings sinned, so God had to send Jesus to fix what went wrong. This fails to capture the grandeur of God's plan, which is eternal, not something made necessary by human failure. God has been working since before the dawn of creation and in every moment of time to gather all things into loving unity in Christ.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ephesians 1:3-14 is one sentence in its Greek original, making it the longest sentence in the New Testament, impossible to diagram and difficult to translate. But precision is not the point. This sentence is an ecstatic, **doxological** explosion of praise for the unsurpassable grace of God, who has revealed and is fulfilling the mystery of God's eternal will in the person of Jesus Christ. The

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? **Doxological:**

This translates as a word (*logos*) of glory (*doxa*) or praise. Paul's letters and pseudonymous letters written in his name typically include a doxology to God following an opening salutation and greeting. In Ephesians, the opening doxology is more developed than in Paul's own letters.

? **Universal:**

This means including or covering all. Ephesians pictures salvation as universal in scope, including the entire cosmos, which is to be filled with Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23).

? **Pseudonymity:**

The practice of writing under a fictitious name or the name of someone else. This was a common and well-accepted practice in the ancient Mediterranean world. Writers would expand upon the thought of their teachers to extend their wisdom to new generations, claiming the master's authority for the new work.

? **Deutero-Pauline:**

Literally, "second Paul." Several New Testament books are considered Deutero-Pauline, written pseudonymously by teachers deeply influenced by the apostle Paul, perhaps having been taught by Paul himself. The number of Deutero-Pauline books is debated, but Ephesians is widely considered among them, as are 1 and 2 Timothy, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and perhaps Colossians.

language is exuberant. The writer is overwhelmed, knocked off his feet by a mystery and grace beyond imagining. The mystery of God's plan unleashes our imaginations to see that our reality as believers is far better than we could have hoped. No language is too extravagant to express the wonder of God's good pleasure. The writer falls over himself trying to find words adequate to speak of the grandeur of God, the glory of grace, and the inebriation of joy.

Believers already are joined to the heavenly world. They can experience the wonder and ecstasy of their unity with Christ and each other in Christ (Ephesians 1:8-10). Experiencing this loving union gives rise to profound joy and illumines the heart and mind to understand the wonder of what God has in mind for all things. Salvation has a **universal** scope, encompassing all creation (Ephesians 1:10, 23).

God, too, revels in joy. The Holy One fulfills the "mystery of God's will" according to God's "good pleasure" (Ephesians 1:9-10). God takes delight in all that is happening to bring the eternal plan to fruition.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Some learners will not know of the widespread and wholly-accepted practice of **pseudonymity** in the ancient world. This is the practice of writing in the name of one's teacher or master to pass their witness and wisdom to new generations. Modern readers meet the idea of pseudonymity with suspicion, having been manipulated by phony biographies and writers making false claims. But we should not receive the witness of Ephesians with skepticism.

The idea that the letter did not likely come from Paul's own hand need not disturb us. We receive it as the witness to Christ of a late-first-century Christian leader who was deeply influenced by the apostle Paul. The important questions to ask as we reflect on its message are: How is God portrayed in this letter? Who are we as believers in Christ? What does the letter say about our lives?

Ephesians, like several New Testament letters, is sometimes called **Deutero-Pauline** (literally, "second Paul"). It reflects a time later than the letters written by the apostle Paul. The writer of Ephesians had likely been taught by Paul, meditated upon his letters, and developed some of his ideas, conscientiously passing

on the faith he received in the spirit of his master to meet the needs of a new generation.

The author knew Colossians and used it as a model, developing its ideas in his own way. Ephesians seems to be a **circular letter**, intended for reading in several congregations, encouraging them to hold fast to their identity against spiritual powers that would undermine their identity and unity as a community joined in Christ.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

To understand God’s grace, we do well to ask, “Who acts and who receives?” Martin Luther’s rediscovery of the gospel at the time of the Reformation unveiled the truth that God is always more kind and giving than we can imagine. Ephesians presents a God who is gracious and determined—choosing, blessing, and destining us to be joined with Christ, sharing all that Christ shares with the heavenly Father.

Luther called this sharing a “**happy exchange**” in which all that is ours—sin, fear, death, sorrow, and struggle—is taken into Christ, and we receive all that is in Christ. We enjoy the intimate loving union Jesus shares with the Father, in which we are transformed. All that is in Christ works in us so that we may embody the love and justice that is Christ.

Luther writes, “He pours into us all his gifts and graces and fills us with his Spirit, who makes us courageous. He enlightens us with His light; His life lives in us. His beatitude makes us blessed, and His love causes love to rise in us. Put briefly, He fills us that everything that He is and everything He can do might be in us in all its fullness, and work powerfully” (Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification* [Fortress Press, 2005] 21–22).

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

Andrei Rublev’s icon of the Holy Trinity (see Focus Image) is perhaps the most famous and revered of all Russian Orthodox **icons**. It pictures the three persons of the Holy Trinity as the heavenly visitors who appeared to Abraham and Sarah at Mamre to tell them they would have a child (Genesis 18:1–15). Rublev crafted the figures to reveal the mutual interconnection and sharing among them, showing the love that flows—actually **dances**—within the Holy Trinity. A chalice sits at the center of the table, a Eucharistic symbol of the immeasurable fullness

? **Circular letter:**

A letter intended for more than one person, place, or group. Typically, Paul’s letters were written for a specific community, such as the Galatians, the Philippians, the Corinthians, or the Romans. Ephesians is thought to have been a circular letter intended for a group of churches in Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey.

? **Happy exchange:**

Martin Luther wrote that in salvation Christ and the believer are one, sharing all that they have and are. What belongs to Christ—eternal life, love, unity with the Father—is now the believers’, and all that is ours—sin, fear, and death—is taken into Christ.

? **Icons:**

Icons are religious works of art, most commonly paintings, from the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. The Orthodox tradition considers them “windows into heaven.” Icons typically image a holy person (for example, Christ or one of the saints) or a biblical event (such as the baptism of Jesus or the Resurrection). The image represents the person or event and invites the viewer to enter the image meditatively and experience the blessing and truth of God it expresses.

? **Dances:**

Theologians of the early Christian church used the Greek term *perichoresis* (PAIR-ih-kohr-EE-sis) to describe the inner life of the Holy Trinity. The term can be translated “dancing around,” referring to the love that is the substance of the Trinity. At the heart of God is a joyful, dancing love that invites us to join the dance.

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of life and love at the heart of God. The front side of the icon is vacant—for you.

Our place is sitting in the current of love coursing through the inner life of the blessed Trinity, receiving and passing on the life and love that flow in and from the infinitely abundant heart of God.

This picture of God—and of our participation in the life of God—is communal, inviting us to take our place at the table of grace, which is not only the Eucharistic table but every place that the Love who is God draws us to receive and share.

Facilitator's Prayer

Grant us clear vision of your holy will, O Lord, that our hearts may be moved to praise you for all that you have done and continue to do to draw us home, into your unspeakable love. Amen.



Gather (10–15 minutes)

Check-in

Take time to greet each person and invite learners to introduce themselves to one another. Ask participants to share experiences with previous Bible studies. What was helpful for them? What did they enjoy? What could have been improved? What do they hope for in this study?

Pray

All-loving God, draw us so fully into yourself that we, like our brother, Jesus, may know that we are eternally beloved, blessed, chosen, and forever belonging to you. May the oneness we share with you and each other be a sacrament of the loving unity into which you are drawing all that is. Amen.

Focus Activity

Remember a table at which you sat and fully enjoyed just being there. What was happening? Who was there? What was the gift of being there? Describe the sense of unity or connection that existed among you and others at the table. How was this time an experience of salvation?



Tip:

Consider having name tags available for this first session.



Tip:

Prayer this prayer yourself, or ask a volunteer to share it.

Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

Slowly read the text aloud twice, pausing between the readings. For the first reading, encourage participants to close their Bibles and listen quietly, writing down words and ideas they notice or thoughts that come to them. During the second reading, encourage them to underline phrases that catch their attention or that are repeated in the text.

Read Ephesians 1:1-14.

- What words and phrases catch your attention? How do they affect you?
- What feelings come through the text?
- What ideas or phrases are repeated in the reading?

Join the Conversation (25–55 minutes)

Literary Context

1. Ephesians 1:1-14 pounds home our core identity. What element of that identity do you see in the following verses?

1:3-4

1:5-6

1:7-8

1:9-12

1:13-14

2. We are privileged to know the mystery of God’s will (1:9). What is that mystery? To what people or what human needs and wounds does this message appeal? What might it tell us about those for whom this book was first written? Compare 1:17-19; 2:1-3; 4:17—5:20; 6:10-20.

3. Look again at all the instances of the phrase “according to” in Ephesians 1:3-14. How does Ephesians picture God? Is this different from ideas and images of God you learned as a child or have heard in our culture or church?

4. The mystery of God’s plan is to draw all things into Christ, in whom God and creation dwell in perfect union (1:8-10). This is not an “oops, I gotta fix this” plan God thought up after human beings sinned. Nor was the plan dormant until the angel Gabriel made a house call on Mary, and she became pregnant with Jesus. The “mystery of his will” is an eternal plan on which God has always been working. In Jesus Christ,



Tip:

Supply a copy of Ephesians 1:1-14 on a separate piece of paper for each participant so they have the option of underlining and making notes, in case they don’t have their own Bibles. The sheet will allow them greater freedom to underline and record words that capture their attention.



Tip:

Consider jotting down some responses to the three questions, but don’t take time at this point to discuss these. Have these responses in mind as the session continues.



Tip:

We are blessed, already sharing the gifts of heaven, chosen before the birth of time, destined to be God’s children. We revel in God’s good pleasure, basking in the riches of grace. We also have the promise of the Holy Spirit (see also 1:18; 2:7; 3:8, 16).



Tip:

Encourage participants to underline or write out the “according to” phrases in Ephesians 1:3-14. Then read these phrases as a litany. Have one person or group say “according to” and others read the words that follow this phrase in each instance. What is the effect of hearing this? What is being said about what God is like? What image of God emerges? Is this different from images of God you learned earlier in your life or that you hear from other sources?



Bonus Activity:

Read Ephesians 1:15-23 and compare the tone of this section with that of the opening fourteen verses of the letter. The author of Ephesians emphasizes ecstatic spiritual experiences in which believers are illumined to see and know what God is doing. Encourage participants to pick out words in Ephesians 1:17-18 that point to the writer’s concern that his readers become more fully awake and alive to receive the blessings that are theirs. How do Lutherans respond to those who speak of spiritual experiences through which they say they have been enlightened?

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Bonus Activity:

Compare the beginning of Ephesians with the greeting, salutation, and thanksgiving sections that open Paul's letters to the Galatians, Romans, Corinthians, and Philippians. What differences do you notice? Is there anything that is more or less developed in the opening of Ephesians?



Tip:

Introductory sections in Bible commentaries covering Ephesians will provide numerous comparisons between this letter and those that are accepted as having come from Paul himself. For example, see *The New Jerome Commentary* (Prentice Hall, 1999, pp. 883-85) or "The Letters of Paul" introduction, *Lutheran Study Bible* (Augsburg Fortress, 2009, pp. 1849-50).

God reveals the plan and is bringing it to completion, drawing all things into loving union with the triune God and with each other.

- How does this idea expand your understanding of salvation?
- Where might you see God's plan becoming concrete in your congregation? What about outside the church, in the daily world of work, play, economics, and politics?
- How do you or your congregation resist God's plan to unite all things in Christ?

5. Themes of grace and peace are central in Ephesians. Examine references to grace (1:6-7; 2:5, 7-8; 4:7, 29); and to peace (2:14-17; 4:3; 6:15). What differences in meaning and usage do you notice?

Historical Context

1. According to the salutation of the letter (1:1-2), who is the letter's author and who is the intended audience?

2. Find the city of Ephesus on the map on page 7. Ephesus was an important center of the early Christian mission in Asia Minor. Paul visited the city on his journeys. What did Paul experience in Ephesus, according to Acts 18:18—20:1?

3. The actual authorship of Ephesians has been disputed for more than two hundred years. Many Bible scholars suggest that Paul was not the author, but rather the letter was written after Paul's death by a person appealing to the authority of Paul as a key apostle of the early church. This practice of writing in the name of someone else, such as one's master or teacher, was known as pseudonymity. Expanding upon the thought of a well-known teacher in order to address new generations was a common and well-respected practice in the ancient Near East. Several New Testament books are thought to be written in the name of key apostles of the early church, including Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1 and 2 Peter, and James.

Scholars point to certain clues in the Greek text of Ephesians to suggest pseudonymity. For example:

- ◆ Many Greek words and a number of theological viewpoints in Ephesians don't appear in Paul's other undisputed letters.
- ◆ Some sentences in Ephesians are unusually long. Ephesians 1:3-14 and 3:1-6 are each one long sentence in Greek.
- ◆ It is also uncertain whether Ephesians was intended only for the church in Ephesus. Our earliest Greek manuscript of this letter does not include the phrase "in Ephesus" (see the footnote for Ephesians 1:2).

- ◆ Paul’s letters tend to address very specific issues, while Ephesians appears to be a general teaching tract for several churches in Asia Minor, perhaps written between 80 and 100 C.E. It may have become associated with the Ephesians because of the importance of that church in Asia Minor.
 - What do you think of the idea that someone other than Paul himself may have written Ephesians? Does it undermine your trust in the message of Ephesians? Why or why not?
 - Proving authorship with complete certainty is difficult. How would you go about trying to determine whether Ephesians was written by Paul or by one of his followers? In the end, what do you think matters most—who wrote Ephesians or what the message of Ephesians is? Why?
4. “In Christ Jesus” (1:3) suggests incorporation into Christ (compare Colossians 1:2). Wherever believers are, they are “in Christ,” sharing the spiritual benefits of all that Christ is and has in the heavenly places (1:3). Our earthly existence is already joined with the invisible, heavenly world.
- Where and how do you think believers in the early church “tasted” these spiritual benefits? Where do we experience being “in Christ” today? What roles do Christian community and communal worship play?

Lutheran Context

1. “Grace alone” (*sola gratia*, SOH-la GRAH-tsee-ah in Latin) was a central cry of faith and praise to God for Martin Luther and continues to be so for the Lutheran understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ephesians makes God’s grace clear: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (2:8-9).
 - Slowly read Ephesians 1:3-14, noting the actor in each phrase. List all of the things God does. Who is the mover and shaker in the drama of salvation?
 - How is grace described in Ephesians 1:3-14? What is the proper human response? What experience of grace moves this response in you?
2. Martin Luther said, “[Y]ou are so cemented to Christ that He and you are one person, which cannot be separated but remain attached to Him forever . . . more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife” (Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*:

+ Bonus Activity:

Point out how Ephesians compares to other undisputed letters of Paul. Issues important to the apostle appear to have changed: debates about accepting Gentiles into the church appear to be settled (Galatians 2; compare Ephesians 2:11-22). Paul’s understanding of the church as the local community (1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:2) is superseded by the understanding of church as a cosmic reality encompassing all creation (Ephesians 1:21-23; 3:9-11). The body of Christ fills the universe (4:5-16; 5:23, 30). Christ is no longer the sole foundation of the church (1 Corinthians 3:1). In Ephesians, the apostles and prophets are the foundation (2:20-22), and Christ is the head (1:22-23; 5:23). Also, words like *mystery*, *plan*, and *fullness* (1:8-10) appear with different meanings from Paul’s own letters. Use a concordance to compare the different uses of these words.

Tip:

Slowly read Ephesians 1:3-14 aloud, having the group note the actor in each phrase. Ask what is the effect of hearing what God has done and is doing. Which phrase or which of God’s actions is personally the most important to participants?

+ Bonus Activity:

As an alternative way to encounter the text, follow a suggestion from Martin Luther: Read the text aloud slowly. Encourage the group to listen, and then ask four questions: What does it teach me? For what reason does it move me to praise God? For what need I ask forgiveness? What phrase might I use or paraphrase as a prayer?

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Tip:

Ask: What does the “happy exchange” suggest about the feeling, tone, or tenor of the Christian life? What does it suggest about human tendencies to emphasize guilt, shame, or feelings of worthlessness? How does the happy exchange suggest we should understand the good that we do? Compare Philippians 2:13; Galatians 2:20.



Tip:

Consider placing a larger image of the Focus Image (the icon of the Holy Trinity) at a central place in the classroom. Place the image on a stand or project it on a screen or wall where everyone can see it clearly.



Tip:

Encourage participants to give their imaginations free rein when meditating with the icon. It is not important to determine what the icon means or what each figure signifies. These questions are distractions. Encourage participants to have their own experience of being invited into the icon, to sit at the empty side of the table, and to receive or commune. Then ask: What was this experience like for you? Did you receive some blessing or insight? Help them notice what happened.



Bonus Activity:

For an imaginative reading and experience of seeing all things being drawn into Christ, see David L. Miller, *Friendship with Jesus: A Way to Pray the Gospel of Mark* (Augsburg Fortress, 1999, pp. 159-61). This section can be read aloud as a guided meditation, with group members sharing their responses following the reading.

Luther’s View of Justification, [Fortress Press, 2005], 41). In this “happy exchange,” all that is in Christ is mine and what is mine is taken into Christ.

- Compare Luther’s words about being united with Christ with the Ephesians description of God gathering up all things in Christ. Where and when do you experience this intimate union with Christ?
- What does the “happy exchange” mean about how we see ourselves—our guilt, shame, fears, struggles, and joys?

Devotional Context

1. God is creating a universe in which you and all the whirling elements of the universe are drawn into the harmony that is the inner life of the Holy Trinity, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell in perfect unity. Andrei Rublev captures an image of this loving unity in the Russian Orthodox icon of the Holy Trinity (1409). A constant current of love flows among the persons of the Trinity.

- View Rublev’s icon, the Focus Image on p. 5. Imagine the love flowing in the inner life of the Trinity. The figures welcome you to pull up a chair and sit at the fourth (the empty) side of the table. This is your place, sharing the life and love flowing through the heart of the blessed Trinity.
- What do you receive as you are joined in God’s triune life? What is it that you want to give or release into the flow of this love and life?

2. In John 12:32 Jesus echoes the description in Ephesians of the mystery of God’s will: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people [or all things] to myself.”

- Imagine Jesus lifted up on the cross, or ascending into heaven. See all things being drawn into him. Who do you see moving toward or being incorporated into him? What thoughts, feelings, hopes, and desires does this image awake in you? Who do you want to see being drawn in and made whole?
- Share an experience of feeling “drawn into Jesus” in which you felt utterly loved or completely one with him.

Wrap-up

1. If you wrote down some questions in the Open Scripture section, you could review and discuss them at this time. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on

chart paper or a whiteboard. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.

2. Ask: Which of the four contexts did you find most meaningful, helpful, or challenging? Was there a particular blessing you received from that context?

3. Ask: How has this session changed your understanding of God's will or of the mission of Jesus?

Pray

Lord Jesus Christ, turn our hearts from those things that separate us and cause division. Turn our eyes to see and celebrate all that joins us together, that we may surrender to the gravity of your grace as you draw us together and make us one in you. Amen.

Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Ephesians 2:1-22.
2. Pay attention to experiences of unity with God, self, others, and creation. Some may experience oneness with all things in nature. Experiences of unity might come as you work or play with others. In a journal, describe these experiences and how they affect your spirit and energy.
3. Do this same exercise paying attention to experiences of separation, tension, and division. How do these experiences affect you? Pray for help to know how you can live out the mystery of God's will amid a world of tension and division.
4. Practice a mysticism of everyday life. Pay attention to stories you read in the newspaper or receive through radio and television. Where do you notice God drawing things and people together in loving unity? Give thanks to God for these. Where do forces thwart God's plan? Be ready to share what you notice with the group.

Enrichment

1. Read the introductory article "The Letters of Paul," pages 1849-50 in *Lutheran Study Bible* (Augsburg Fortress, 2009). Or read an article on pseudonymity or Deutero-Pauline writings in a recent Bible dictionary or in a reliable one-volume Bible commentary.

SESSION ONE



Tip:

Give the group a handout explaining *lectio divina*, an ancient way of praying with Scripture. After quieting ourselves in God's presence, lectio teaches us to pray with the text through four movements:

1. Read the passage.
2. Turn it over in your heart and mind, noting the words that shimmer or speak.
3. Speak to God about what you notice, being utterly honest about your thoughts and feelings.
4. Rest quietly in God's loving presence, having said what you were moved to say.

2. Meditate on short sections of Ephesians 2. Find a comfortable chair and a place where you can be alone. Quiet yourself, reminding yourself that you are in God's presence; then read and listen to God speaking to and in you.

Day 1: Ephesians 2:1-5

Day 2: Ephesians 2:6-10

Day 3: Ephesians 2:11-13

Day 4: Ephesians 2:14-18

Day 5: Ephesians 2:19-22

Days 6 & 7: Return to the passages that spoke most deeply to you or troubled you the most.

3. Read the introduction and notes for Ephesians in *Lutheran Study Bible* or another study Bible. Use this resource to examine verses that most interest or confuse you. Share what you find with others in the group. Interpretations from various commentators will differ, which makes exploration more interesting.

4. Listen to music that draws you into it so that you feel oneness with yourself, others, and God. Music from diverse styles and eras can become an experience of and prayer for the completion of God's to make all things one.

For Further Reading

Available from www.augsburgfortress.org/store:
Lutheran Study Bible (Augsburg Fortress, 2009).

Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon by Tom Wright (Westminster/John Knox, 2004). Wright offers a fresh, contemporary translation with an engaging, readable exposition of the scripture text.

Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Ephesians 2:1-22.
2. Read through the Leader Session Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you will need in order to do any of the Bonus Activities.
4. Pray for members of your group during the week.