



Becoming Children of God

JOHN 1:1-18

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

John 1:12-13

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- ✦ Read the entire Gospel of John, and encourage the participants to do so sometime during this study as well.
 - ✦ Be sure to read through the participant guide in preparation for facilitating each session.
 - ✦ For an accessible commentary on the Gospel of John, check out Karoline M. Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries (Fortress, 2014).
 - ✦ Be aware that for centuries the Gospel of John has been used against Jewish people. Citing texts like John 19:14-15, some people have accused Jews, in all times and places, of being responsible for Jesus' death. Today Lutherans and others reject this false teaching and the anti-Jewish bias it has perpetuated.

Quick Prep

John 1:1-18 is commonly known as the prologue to John's gospel. It sets out the major themes that will get unpacked as the narrative moves forward, such as Jesus' origin and identity, believers as children of God, light and darkness, life, grace, and abundance. For some, these opening verses of John can be off-putting in that they sound more like a poem or hymn than an introduction to a story about Jesus' life. Invite participants into the metaphors and imagery to appreciate the experiential components and consider how the poem stirs the imagination.

SUPPLIES

- ♦ Pens and pencils
- ♦ Sheets of paper
- ♦ Different translations of the Bible (in print, in an app, or on biblegateway.com)
- ♦ A candle and matches
- ♦ Copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*

Gather (15 to 30 minutes)

CHECK IN

Welcome participants. Share your excitement about and interest in studying the Gospel of John together and being the facilitator for the group. For this first session, have each person introduce themselves with their name, their favorite hymn, and why that hymn is their favorite.

OPENING PRAYER

Invite all to pray the following prayer together.

God of abundant grace, open our hearts to receive your word to us anew in your begotten Son, Jesus, in whom your love for the whole world is made known. Amen.

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

In this first session, take a few minutes to discuss the group covenant on page 8 (participant guide, p. 9). Is there anything participants would like to add? How will this group deal with conflict when it arises? Disagreement is inevitable, especially when it comes to our beliefs, but differences in opinion do not have to be confrontational.

Draw attention to the descriptions of the roles of the facilitator and participants (participant guide, pp. 7-8). In Together by Grace groups, the facilitator helps the conversation move along. Emphasize the guidelines for everyone to hear and respect every voice and to keep personal information confidential.

Next, ask participants to reflect on the two statements, and give everyone an opportunity to share their responses. For some, this group might be their first in-depth engagement with the Bible.

Dwell (20 to 40 minutes)

DWELLING IN THE WORD

For this first session, as the facilitator, read the text out loud yourself. Invite participants to underline or circle words or phrases that stand out to them as they hear this passage. Read the passage a second time in four sections (verses 1-5; 6-8; 9-13; and 14-18), with a pause after each section for participants to write down additional notes or reactions. After this reading, invite participants to share words and phrases in the text that stood out to them.

- ✦ For each session, there will be a question or a few sentences to which participants can respond as a way of checking in on everyone.
- ✦ Set a warm, welcoming tone by being the first to introduce yourself and briefly sharing about your favorite hymn.
- ✦ If your group is completely online, be sure each person has an opportunity to speak. If your group is hybrid, consider having those online introduce themselves before those on-site.
- ✦ Keep in mind that some participants may be acquainted with one another, while others may be new to the congregation and/or to Bible study. Make sure that all feel welcome and encouraged to participate.
- ✦ Jot down some notes for yourself about the responses to the two statements, in case you want to repeat this activity at the end of the study.
- ✦ Some participants might have negative reactions to the Bible or to being persuaded to come to this session. Allow space for these reactions to be voiced. Honesty is important to the functioning and health of the group. At the same time, you can reiterate your appreciation for everyone who has come today.

- ✦ Online and hybrid groups might jot down words or phrases in the chat feature as the session text is read.
- ✦ The Gospel of John contains some of the most well-known verses of scripture (1:1; 3:16; 11:35; 14:6). Keep in mind that much of what people assume about the Gospel of John will be connected to these verses.
- ✦ John is very different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but people tend to harmonize the four gospels. You may need to remind participants of material unique to John, not to cause alarm but to ask, Why does John include this story? How does it fit with the overall themes of the gospel?
- ✦ Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic gospels because they are very similar in chronology and material. The word *synoptic* means “seeing with” or “seeing together.”
- ✦ Open-ended questions, such as “How so?” or “Tell us more,” are key for encouraging conversation. Whenever possible, avoid asking questions that can be answered with a simple yes/no or another one-word response, unless the prompt specifically asks for this kind of answer.
- ✦ This first session sets a tone for future discussions. Some participants may be more hesitant to speak, especially if people are not already acquainted with each other. Don’t force anyone to speak. On the other hand, don’t allow one person to do all the talking. If that is happening, ask if anyone else wants to add something to the question at hand, or move to the next question or activity.
- ✦ If your group is large, have participants form trios to look up John 1:14 on their phones or in print Bibles.
- ✦ The Greek word for “heart” is *kardia*. It’s the root for terms having to do with the human heart, like *cardiology*.

John 1:1-18

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

CONVERSATION

1. Invite each person to answer one or both questions: What do you think these verses say about the meaning of Jesus’ birth? How do you hear these opening verses of John as a Christmas story?
2. Encourage participants to look at John 1:14 in different Bible translations. What differences do they find? How do these differences help in making sense of this verse?
3. As participants underline instances of the word *grace* in John 1:1-18, they will find that in verse 16 the promise is that through Jesus we receive “grace upon grace”!
4. Let the group know that in the NRSVue translation, a footnote for *heart* in verse 18 points to the Greek word for “bosom.” The same thing happens in John 13:23. Invite the group to use their phones to find images. Have paper available for those meeting on-site who want to sketch an image.

Engage (10 to 20 minutes)

WORD AND SERVICE

Have a volunteer read the Session Recap in the participant guide. Check to see whether there are any questions.

Let participants know they are welcome to bring a friend or family member with them to any or all Together by Grace sessions.

Give participants a few moments to complete the prompt that asks them to identify one thing they want to remember or do in the week ahead.

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Invite participants to name any prayer concerns they feel comfortable sharing. Ask them to get permission before sharing another person's name or concern with the group.

🕯 In online or hybrid groups, use the chat feature to list prayer concerns.

Light a candle to represent Jesus as the light of the world, and read again John 1:5: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it." Recall the prayer concerns, concluding with these words: **God of light, we entrust our prayers to you. Let your light shine in the lives of those for whom we pray. We trust in your mercy, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Pray together the closing prayer.

God of light and life, empower us this week to be bold in our witness to your light. As your love came down in Jesus, help us to embody that love in our own lives. Amen.

🕯 Keep the candle lit to remind people that Jesus' light will continue to shine in their lives.

LOOKING AHEAD

Review the Looking Ahead copy in the participant guide, and if time allows, invite brief initial responses to the topic. Make any necessary announcements about the time, place, and so on for the next session. Consider sharing a sending blessing such as, "Depart in the light of Christ!"

