



INTRODUCING

Together by Grace: Bible Conversations

FACILITATOR GUIDE

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AUGSBURG FORTRESS

INTRODUCING TOGETHER BY GRACE: BIBLE CONVERSATIONS

Facilitator Guide

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ITEM 013946

Design and typesetting: Tory Herman

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Series Introduction

The Bible is the written word of God. God has spoken and continues to speak to us through the variety and richness of scripture. Exploring books of the Bible opens us to the great, overarching story of God bringing forgiveness, healing, and new life to all creation.

Inspired by God's Spirit, the writers of the books of the Bible wrote from a faith perspective. Their purpose was to pass on the faith. Through scripture, God speaks to us to create and sustain faith. As we read and study the Bible together, God works in and through us. We "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). The Spirit draws us *together by grace* and sends us into God's work of bringing all things *together by grace*.



God, who is rich in mercy, . . . made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. Ephesians 2:4-5

GOALS

Together by Grace: Bible Conversations has three goals for bringing people together.

1. Gather together regularly, building and strengthening relationships with one another.

Together by Grace builds community by strengthening relationships within the group and with others in the congregation and the surrounding neighborhood.

2. Dwell together in God's word, seeking what it means for us, our faith community, and the world.

Together by Grace enables adults, whether new or long-time Bible students, to read and discuss scripture together. Sessions focus on reading the Bible—not reading *about* the Bible—to spark stimulating thoughts, ideas, and conversations.

3. Engage faith together, loving and serving God and our neighbors in daily life.

Together by Grace inspires participants to respond to the good news of God's grace by loving and serving God and neighbor in the congregation, community, and world. Participants can invite others to attend a session and try it out.

To assist groups and congregations in meeting these goals, convenience and flexibility are built into the series:

- ♦ New groups as well as existing groups (for example, Bible study groups, church council, committees) can take part in the series.
- ♦ Facilitator guides are available in print and digital versions.
- ♦ Participant guides are available in print booklets and digital enlarged print versions.
- ♦ Sessions require no preparation by participants. Preparation time for facilitators is minimal.
- ♦ Sessions are suitable for time frames of 45 to 90 minutes.
- ♦ Groups can meet at times and locations (homes, coffee shops, meeting rooms at church, online, and so on) that are most convenient for them.

The facilitator guides provide tips in each session for time frames of different lengths and for groups that are held completely online or in a hybrid format (some participants online and some in person).

BIBLE TRANSLATION

Together by Grace uses the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue), although other translations may be used in the sessions. The most recent Bible translation, NRSVue reflects current scholarship and interpretation, including scholars and perspectives from marginalized communities.

If you have a copy of the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition or *Lutheran Study Bible, Second Edition*, read the sections called “To the Reader” and “Preface to the NRSV Updated Edition.” These articles provide insight into why and how this updated Bible edition came to be. Almost every Bible translation or version has this kind of introductory article. It’s important to know who is responsible for the translation and what it aims to be and do. You can also find out more about the NRSVue by exploring this website: friendshippress.org/pages/about-the-nrsvue.

The facilitator and participant guides include the full NRSVue scripture text for each session.

SESSION FLOW

The Bible conversations you share in Together by Grace sessions do not simply relay information—they provide opportunities for adults to engage with the Bible and to build relationships in ways that connect with daily life and transform lives. Together by grace, participants grow in faith and in love and service to God and neighbor.

Each session has three components: Gather, Dwell, and Engage. Sessions are designed for 45 to 90 minutes.

1. Gather (15 to 30 minutes)

Participants check in with each other, pray together, and enjoy community-building activities.

2. Dwell (20 to 40 minutes)

This is the heart of the session. Participants hear the text read, take time to reflect and respond, and then go deeper into scripture. After the scripture text is read aloud, the group spends a few moments in silence, then participants respond to open-ended questions that encourage them to share initial thoughts, feelings, and questions about the text. Sometimes called “dwelling in the word,” this practice is similar to *lectio divina*, a traditional monastic way of reading and reflecting on scripture. Each voice is heard and respected, creating a safe environment for learning and discussion.

Through this process, participants become engaged with the text and naturally begin to seek more information. The participant and facilitator guides provide information and questions that lead the group into further discussion about the scripture text.

Together by Grace and *Lutheran Study Bible, Second Edition* (Augsburg Fortress, 2025) view the Bible with four lenses. Together these lenses provide a unique way of engaging with scripture, helping participants to dig deeply into the texts and to hear what God is calling individuals, the group, the church, or the world to do or to be.



Faith reflection places everyone on a level playing field and requires no prior knowledge or experience with the Bible.



World of the Bible explores people, places, and events mentioned in the Bible, as well as why and when a particular book might have been written.



Bible concepts focus on broader themes and insights that appear throughout the Bible.



Lutheran perspectives use the teachings, insights, and practices of Martin Luther and others to help with reading and interpreting the Bible.

3. Engage (10 to 20 minutes)

“Word and Service” prompts help participants begin to integrate what they have learned into daily life.

“Worship and Prayer” prompts provide ways to wrap up conversation and send everyone into the week ahead.

“Suggestions for Going Deeper” provide ideas for optional activities, study, and journaling between sessions.

Group Dynamics

ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

The facilitator’s main role in Together by Grace groups is to guide conversation and to encourage everyone to participate in the activities and discussion. The facilitator guide provides background information, instructions, and tips for carrying out this role in each session.

Here are some general tips for guiding discussion:

- ♦ Seek balanced sharing across the group, giving everyone an opportunity to speak.
- ♦ Encourage and affirm all contributions to the discussion.
- ♦ Allow enough silence after questions or conversation prompts to give people time to think and reflect.
- ♦ Respect everyone’s right to pass on a question. Avoid putting anyone on the spot or pressuring someone to speak.
- ♦ Occasionally invite participants to discuss questions or conversation prompts in groups of two or three. This smaller setting is more comfortable for some and allows more time for each person to speak.
- ♦ Before moving on to another topic, ask whether anyone else has something to add.
- ♦ If someone is dominating the conversation, redirect discussion by raising a new question or inviting responses from others.

In addition, the facilitator ensures that a meeting space is available with comfortable seating for all, and that each session starts and ends on time. Often one or two participants are willing to take responsibility for preparing the meeting space and for timekeeping.

ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The Gather, Dwell, and Engage process follows five guidelines.

1. Love and respect one another as beloved children of God.

Participants maintain a friendly and respectful atmosphere and seek to better understand and learn from other points of view.

2. Balance our listening and speaking so that all voices may be heard.

Participants encourage everyone to join in the activities and discussion, listen respectfully when others are speaking, and avoid monopolizing the conversation.

3. Treat conversations in the group as sacred, meaning that what is shared helps build community and strengthens the faith of others.

Participants and the group as a whole are open to growing, healing, and changing through this experience and the encounter with scripture. Confidential information that is shared with the group is kept confidential.

4. Pray for one another as a caring community in Christ.

Participants pray for everyone in the group during the week, building community and growing in faith and in love for one another.

5. Invite and welcome others to join us on this journey.

Participants consider inviting others to sessions and welcome newcomers to the group.

IN-PERSON, ONLINE, AND HYBRID GROUPS

Together by Grace: Bible Conversations can be used by in-person, online, and hybrid groups. (Hybrid groups have some people who are in person and some who are online.)

Groups meeting in person: To encourage good conversation flow, we recommend sitting around a table or in chairs arranged in a circle.

Groups meeting online: Check to make sure everyone receives accurate instructions for how to join the meeting from their computers or mobile devices. Designate someone who will monitor the chat feature while the facilitator guides conversation. Agree as a group on some type of signal to use when you have a question or comment.

Hybrid groups: All the recommendations for online groups (above) apply here too. In addition, avoid the temptation to focus the conversation on those who are present in person. Make efforts throughout every session to draw in those who join the meeting online.



Group Covenant

OUR GOALS

- ♦ **Gather** together regularly, building and strengthening relationships with one another.
- ♦ **Dwell** together in God's word, seeking what it means for us, our faith community, and the world.
- ♦ **Engage** faith together, loving and serving God and our neighbors in daily life.

OUR GUIDELINES

- ♦ We agree to love and respect one another as beloved children of God.
- ♦ We agree to balance our listening and speaking so that all voices may be heard.
- ♦ We agree to treat conversations in the group as sacred, meaning that what is shared helps build community and strengthens the faith of others.
- ♦ We agree to pray for one another as a caring community in Christ.
- ♦ We agree to invite and welcome others to join us on this journey.



Bible Background

The two Bible passages in today's session focus on the purpose of scripture and what it does for those who hear or read it. These passages come from 2 Timothy and Ephesians.

The first text is 2 Timothy 3:16-17. This letter is similar in style to 1 Timothy, but quite different from the style, content, and vocabulary in Paul's undisputed writings. (The undisputed writings are those that scholars agree were written by the apostle Paul.) So, it is likely that a person who wanted to continue Paul's mission wrote these letters—a common practice at the time—near the end of the first century CE.

In 2 Timothy, Paul is in prison in Rome (1:8, 16-17; 2:9), awaiting his death (4:6-8). Most of his coworkers and friends have left him (4:9-16). In this time of personal suffering, Paul is shown writing an affectionate letter to “Timothy, my beloved child” (1:2), urging him to carry on with ministry. To do this, he will need to oppose false teachings, as discussed in 1 Timothy. One way to stand against these false teachings is to read and study scripture, which “is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (3:16). Reading and studying scripture is important “so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (3:17).

The “scriptures” mentioned in this passage are the Hebrew Scriptures, or what Christians often refer to as the Old Testament. At the time 2 Timothy was written, a New Testament was yet to be compiled. In 2 Timothy there is an emphasis on the use of scripture to support godly behavior, especially in the face of what the author calls “distressing times” when all forms of godlessness will threaten the followers of Jesus (see 2 Timothy 3:1-5).

The second passage you will read and discuss is Ephesians 2:4-8, in which you will hear echoes of the theme of this series of Bible conversations: God “made us alive *together with Christ—by grace* you have been saved” (2:5, emphasis added). A core tenet of Lutheran theology can also be found in this passage: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (2:8). In this and every session of the series, the Bible will be in conversation with key Lutheran themes and teachings.

Though Ephesians also claims to be from the hand of Paul, some scholars who closely study the Bible suggest that it may have been written later than Paul's undisputed letters. However, the passage in today's session does align well with Paul's other writings, where he emphasizes God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. Salvation is God's gift and not something we earn through doing good works (see also Romans 3:23-31). In saving us by grace as a gift, God frees us and empowers us to serve others.



Introducing Together by Grace: Bible Conversations

2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17; EPHESIANS 2:4-8

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching.

2 Timothy 3:16

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

Ephesians 2:4-5

Quick prep


This sample session introducing the Together by Faith: Bible Conversations series has three primary goals:

1. To guide participants in reflecting on the meaning and place of scripture in their lives.
2. To experience the series methodology for reading, discussing, and integrating scripture.
3. To explore what it means to study the Bible through respectful listening to and learning from others.

This series of Bible conversations draws on its partner resource, *Lutheran Study Bible, Second Edition* (2025), which views the Bible through four perspectives or lenses:

 Faith reflection

 World of the Bible

 Bible concepts

 Lutheran perspectives

Each session will engage these four perspectives, helping participants dig deeply into Bible texts, build community through meaningful conversation, and reflect on what God may be calling them, their faith community, the church, and the world to do or be.

SUPPLIES

- ♦ Name tags
- ♦ Bibles
- ♦ A candle
- ♦ Copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

Gather (15 to 30 minutes)

CHECK IN

After the group is settled, introduce the activity in this section of the participant guide. When participants have circled their choice, go around the circle and have each person introduce themselves and speak to their response. Make a mental note of how participants bring different levels of familiarity and comfort with the study of scripture.

OPENING PRAYER

Encourage a volunteer to read the opening prayer, or invite everyone to read the prayer aloud together.

Loving God, may your word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths. Open our hearts and minds to the riches of scripture that you have inspired and passed on through faithful servants across the ages. Guide our conversations and empower our service in the name of Christ. Amen.

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Review the group covenant (facilitator guide, page 8; participant guide, page 10). Point out that all conversations are intended to be sacred, meaning that what is shared is to help build community and encourage each person to greater faith.

Give each participant the opportunity to respond to one of the statements in the participant guide. If possible, make notes about the responses to guide you in later planning.

Dwell (20 to 40 minutes)

DWELLING IN THE WORD

The two passages in today's session focus on the purpose of scripture and what it does for those who hear or read it. These passages come from two different books, 2 Timothy and Ephesians.

✦ Consider purchasing a copy of *Lutheran Study Bible, Second Edition*, which uses the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Prior to this session, you might wish to read the introductions to the books of 2 Timothy (pp. 1859-1860) and Ephesians (pp. 1821-1822).

✦ The activities in this opening section of each session are designed to help participants build or strengthen relationships.

✦ Greet participants as they arrive. Begin learning the names of those you don't know. Consider using name tags in this first gathering.

✦ With an online or hybrid group, be sure everyone has an opportunity to respond during this time.

✦ An alternative way of doing this opening exercise for an in-person group would be to post the word pairs on three pieces of paper and put them on the walls around the room. Have participants stand near their word-pair choice and speak to why they are standing where they are. Those who have written their own word pair would stand in a spot you designate.

✦ If participants don't know each other well or seem hesitant about responding to these statements, you might respond first to get conversation started.

✦ This is the heart of every session—reading, listening to, and having conversation about the Bible.

Have a volunteer read each passage aloud slowly as participants close their eyes and listen carefully. Then have the texts read again as people follow along in their Bibles or participant guides. Encourage participants to consider what words or phrases stand out to them in these passages.

Consider having participants form trios so they can respond to the texts and the questions in a more intimate setting, perhaps allowing more time for them to share their responses. If you follow this methodology, stop at times to solicit responses from the trios so the whole group can benefit from these conversations.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Ephesians 2:4-8

⁴God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

CONVERSATION

1. Use a whiteboard, or the chat feature for online or hybrid groups, to list words and phrases that stood out to the group as the passage was read.

Turn to the question about what the word *scripture* means in this passage. Discuss how knowing this might help participants read the text and understand it from a historical perspective.

Then discuss what it means that scripture is “inspired by God.” Point out that sometimes the term *inspired* is interchanged with the term *inerrant*, meaning that scripture is without error or free of contradictions. This is not a Lutheran understanding of inspired scripture. See the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) statement about scripture in the next question.

2. Take a moment to read through the ELCA statement on the Lutheran understanding of the Bible, then ask participants to summarize the purpose of the Bible in their own words.

✦ A Together by Grace study generally explores one book of the Bible and one passage per session. This sample session looks at two shorter texts that are foundations for the Together by Grace series.

✦ If not all participants have the same version of the Bible, that is fine. In some cases, you may find it interesting to compare the wording in different translations.

✦ Conversation about 2 Timothy 3:16-17 will guide participants to consider the place and purpose of scripture in their lives of faith.

3. You might have a volunteer read Ephesians 2:4-8 again as the group listens for words associated with God's actions. Write words, phrases, and actions on a whiteboard or in the chat feature. How has God acted, according to this passage?

Next, compare Ephesians 2:8 to Romans 3:23-24. Participants will need to look up the passage from Romans in their Bibles. Have a different person read each text. This activity gets at the core of Lutheran theology. While it is common for people to think they are saved by being a good person, the gospel proclaims we are saved by grace as a gift. Faith and good works flow from this good-news promise.

Engage (10 to 20 minutes)

WORD AND SERVICE

With the full group, take a few moments to review the Session Recap in the participant guide. Then ask volunteers to share their reflections on the session by naming one important thing they are taking away with them.

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Form a circle if possible. Light a candle and place it in the center of the group. As you turn to worship, ask participants to observe a few moments of silence as each one lists concerns they will pray silently about during the closing prayer.

Distribute copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and sing together "God's word is our great heritage" (ELW 509). Invite participants to offer words or phrases that stood out to them, and why.

Ask a volunteer to read the closing prayer, reminding them to allow for some moments of silence (noted within the prayer), when participants will pray silently about the concerns they identified earlier.

Merciful God, we give thanks for the gifts of your grace and your word that comes to us in scripture. May your Spirit walk with us as we hear your word and live together by grace. Hear us now as we silently offer prayers for family, friends, neighbors, and your world. (Allow some moments of silence.) We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your living Word. Amen.

Draw attention to "Suggestions for Going Deeper" in the participant guide. These options are intended to deepen participants' awareness and experience of scripture. The Bible readings listed for this week focus on scripture and its purpose. Encourage participants to read and reflect on a passage each day of the coming week.

✦ The last section of each session encourages participants to integrate what they have learned with their faith and daily lives.

✦ With the exception of this sample session, each Together by Grace study is based on a book of the Bible, and scripture readings listed in this section draw on passages in the book that are not featured in the sessions.

LOOKING AHEAD

Let the group know about upcoming Together by Grace studies, which Bible book(s) will be studied, and when sessions will begin. Encourage participants to invite others to join these conversations.

- ✦ Provide a way for people to sign up for upcoming studies so you can get a rough estimate of the size of the group and the number of participant guides (print and/or digital) that you will need.

