



INTRODUCING

Together by Grace: Bible Conversations

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Scott Tunseth



AUGSBURG FORTRESS

INTRODUCING TOGETHER BY GRACE: BIBLE CONVERSATIONS

Participant Guide

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Contents

Series Introduction	4
Group Dynamics.....	8
Group Covenant.....	10
Bible Background.....	11
Introducing Together by Grace: Bible Conversations	13

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 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 the 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 timeframes 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 timeframes 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.

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.

The facilitator also 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 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 on 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

Gather

CHECK IN

Circle the word pair that best describes your take on studying the Bible.

confusing and scary

inspiring and renewing

challenging and thought-provoking

If none of these pairs fits your situation, what other word pair might you choose?

Write it here.

OPENING PRAYER

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

Complete one of the following statements:

My favorite Bible book or story is _____ because _____ .

I have chosen to take part in this study because _____ .

Dwell

DWELLING IN THE WORD

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

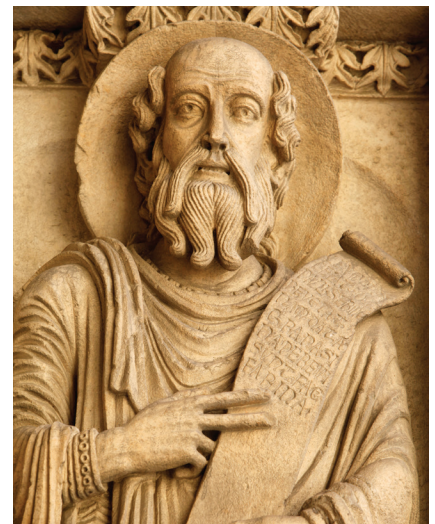
1. At the time 2 Timothy was written (near the end of the first century CE), no New Testament yet existed. The earliest Christians thought of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) as their scriptures. The books of what we call the New Testament were probably all completed by around 130 CE, and then it took more than two centuries before Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, put together the exact list of books that would formally become what we know as the New Testament.
 - ♦ What words or phrases stood out to you in 2 Timothy 3:16-17?

- ♦ The word translated as “scripture” in 2 Timothy 3:16 refers to the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians often refer to as the Old Testament). How might this have affected the way the original audience heard this passage? How does it affect your hearing and understanding of this passage?
- ♦ The Greek word translated as “inspired” in verse 16 can literally mean “God-breathed.” In this context the author of 2 Timothy is likely implying that by reading the scriptures available to the earliest Christians (the Old Testament), people would adopt godly behavior—that is, live righteous lives. What does it mean to you that all scripture is “inspired by God”?

2. The current model constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) states this about the Bible:

The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

- ♦ As you reflect on this statement of faith, how would you summarize, in your own words, the purpose of the Bible?



Sculpture depicting Paul on the facade of the Church of Saint-Trophime, Arles, Provence. A prolific writer, Paul is often depicted holding a scroll or book.

3. Some who study the Bible closely suggest that Ephesians may have been written later than the apostle Paul's other letters, and by someone other than Paul. They note differences in content, vocabulary, and writing style when compared to the undisputed letters of Paul. (The undisputed writings are those that scholars agree were written by the apostle Paul.) One of those undisputed letters is Romans.

- ♦ What words or phrases stood out to you in Ephesians 2:4-8? Name some ways God has acted, according to this passage.

- ♦ Look up Romans 3:23-24 in your Bible and compare it to Ephesians 2:8. On what point do these passages agree?

- ♦ Circle the statement below that seems more accurate to you.

I am saved because I do good works.

Because I am saved, I am free to do good works.

Engage

SESSION RECAP

Together by Grace: Bible Conversations invites you to encounter scripture along with others. God's inspired word calls us to listen for its message of wisdom so that we can be equipped to serve God and neighbor. Studying the Bible together calls us to respectful listening to and learning from others. Above all, the Bible reveals the good news of God's grace, which comes to us as a gift. By this grace God gives us new life together with Christ. This gift of grace frees us for action to bring healing and wholeness to a fragmented world.

WORD AND SERVICE

As I reflect on today's Bible conversation, one important thing I take away is the following:

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

List below a few concerns you want to pray for silently during the closing prayer.

Sing together the hymn “God’s word is our great heritage” (ELW 509). The tune may be familiar to you from Martin Luther’s famous hymn “A mighty fortress is our God.” Take a few moments to reflect on the meaning of the lyrics. What words or phrases stand out to you, and why?

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.



SUGGESTIONS FOR GOING DEEPER

- ✦ Read the introduction to your preferred Bible. 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.
- ✦ Consider creating a method for marking your Bible. (You’ll find several suggestions for marking your Bible in *Lutheran Study Bible, Second Edition*, p. 1493, or in an internet search.) For example, decide what symbols or colors you might use for the following:
 - ◆ Something that confuses me or raises a question
 - ◆ Something that brings me joy
 - ◆ A key idea I want to remember
 - ◆ Something that encourages me to pray
- ✦ Read more about the Bible and the good news of God’s grace. Pick and choose from this list, or read one passage a day.

◆ Psalm 119:105, 130	◆ Matthew 4:1-11
◆ Isaiah 40:8	◆ Romans 10:12-17
◆ John 1:1-14	◆ 1 Peter 1:22-25
◆ Hebrews 4:12	

- ✦ Think and wonder about what you experienced in this session. Here are a few prompts you might use in this reflection or journaling time.
- ◆ Write down two things that were especially helpful in the session and at least two ways you want to learn or grow through participating in more Bible conversations.
- ◆ Look through the table of contents in your Bible. Identify one book that is especially unfamiliar to you. Take some time to read or scan it. Write down questions the text raises for you or new insights you gain.
- ◆ Write a brief letter thanking God for the gift of scripture. How does the Bible impact your life in a positive and life-giving way?

LOOKING AHEAD

We encourage you to join a Together by Grace: Bible Conversations group, and to invite a friend to come with you! Your facilitator will let you know about available options.

