



A New Bible Study Series

FROM AUGSBURG FORTRESS

INTRODUCING A New Bible Study Series

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WHAT IF YOUR BIBLE STUDY COULD . . .

- ✦ Build community and relationships
- ✦ Invite questions, conversation, and introspection
- ✦ Connect the Bible to daily life
- ✦ Discover personal connections to people in the Bible
- ✦ Support any interested volunteer to facilitate (not just the pastor)
- ✦ Welcome participants at any point during the study
- ✦ Offer flexible adaptations that accommodate in-person, hybrid, and fully remote sessions

Together by Grace: Bible Conversations does all this and more. With a focus on invitation and conversation, this series walks through books in the Old and New Testaments while asking, “How can we approach these stories honestly, wrestle with tough questions, and build community along the way?”

Together by Grace studies are built around these goals that encourage participants to . . .

- ♦ Read and explore the Bible together, whether they are new to the Christian faith or long-time Bible study attendees.
- ♦ Build relationships with others in the congregation and community.
- ♦ Respond to God’s grace by inviting friends to sessions, and by loving and serving God and neighbors in the congregation, community, and world.

Three Components

Each Together by Grace session includes three parts that prompt reflection, conversation, and biblical connections to daily life.

✦ Gather

Through the activities of Check In, Opening Prayer, and Community Building, participants build or strengthen relationships.

✦ Dwell

Dwelling in the Word is the heart of the session. Participants hear the text, take time to reflect and respond, and then go deeper into scripture. They then respond to open-ended questions that meet them where they are and encourage them to share their initial thoughts, feelings, and questions about the text. Through this process, participants become engaged with the text and naturally begin to seek more understanding.

✦ Engage

Word and Service prompts help participants begin to integrate what has been 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 several ideas for integrating what participants have learned through additional conversations, service, journaling, recommended reading, and further study between sessions.

How It Works

Together by Grace: Bible Conversations does not simply relay information—it provides opportunities for adults to engage with the Bible and to build relationships in ways that connect with daily life and transform lives. Each aspect of the series was created to be compelling, relevant, and inviting in a way that builds and strengthens relationships with others.

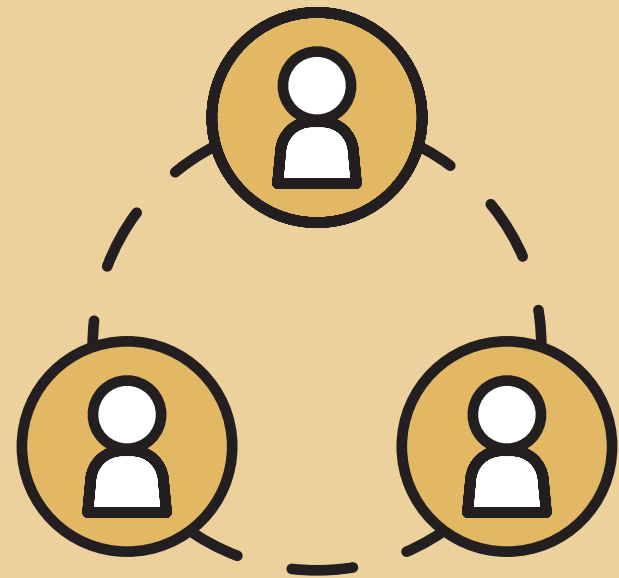
Other Bible studies may have taken more of a classroom approach, with the leader/pastor/presenter up front with participants watching, listening, and absorbing.



A study conducted in 2016 explored the effects on learning by a lecture model versus a discussion-based model.* It concludes that the discussion-based model leaves participants with a better grasp on the information covered, and greater retention of the knowledge. Together by Grace: Bible Conversations embraces this finding with its conversational, roundtable sessions.

Together By Grace encourages the definition of participant to be lived out—to actually participate in the conversation throughout the entirety of the session. A roundtable conversation focuses the discussion on the lives and understandings of every person participating. Time for prolonged deep thought and introspection is found in Journaling and Suggestions for Going Deeper that invite continued learning through the week.

This series is easily adaptable to in-person, hybrid, and online formats for ease of use. Downloadable facilitator guides and enlarged print participant guides make sessions accessible to all.



* Zhao Beiqun, Donald D. Potter, "Comparison of Lecture-Based Learning vs Discussion-Based Learning in Undergraduate Medical Students", *Journal of Surgical Education*, 73, no. 2 (March-April 2016): 250-257, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsurg.2015.09.016>.

✿ No surprises—the reader sees exactly what has been or is going to be asked and can follow along exactly. Allows participants to participate as much or as little as they want, but follow along either way

✿ Easy-to-follow scripture passages are included, or participants can look up verses in their Bibles

✿ Opening activities help bring people into the physical or virtual space and begin their time together

✿ Vibrant images offer a burst of color and perspective. Many images feature artifacts, works of art, or maps that relate to the reading and conversation of the session

✿ Context for Bible passages helps set the scene for the reader

✿ Conversation prompts include space for writing so participants can record and remember their thoughts

Gather

CHECK IN

Name someone who often encourages you. How do they encourage you—through their words, actions, or something else?

OPENING PRAYER

Good and gracious God, we have come to know you through the witness of many people. We thank you for those who have moved us toward faith, and pray that we in turn might encourage others toward faith. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Think about groups or communities you have participated in. Tell about one of these groups. (This might be a church group, but it could also be a team, a group of friends, or a club in which people gave and received encouragement.) How did members of this group mutually encourage and build up one another?

Turn to the group covenant on page 9. How do the guidelines set up your Bible conversations to be times of mutual encouragement in faith? Is there anything you would like to add to the group covenant?



Dwell

DWELLING IN THE WORD

The apostle Paul believed deeply that he was called to announce the gospel to those who were not Jewish. He is the author of Romans, a letter written to believers in Christ in the capital city of the Roman Empire (see map on page 21), the biggest political power of his day.

As you listen to this portion of Paul's letter, pay attention to clues about what matters to Paul and what kind of relationship he has with those receiving the letter. (If you have heard this passage before, listen as if you are hearing it for the first time.) Notice what speaks to you from God's living word *right now*.

14 • Romans

Romans 1:11-17

¹¹For I long to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened—¹²or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you, as I have among the rest of the gentiles. ¹⁴I am obligated both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, ¹⁵hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God's saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

CONVERSATION

1. Understanding the one who wrote this letter will help us better understand the letter itself. Sometimes people treat the words of the Bible as though they are abstract ideas, above time and place, but this is a message rooted in a particular person's experience. Paul makes himself ("I") the subject of the sentence a dozen times in today's scripture text.

• What words or images stood out to you as the text was read?

• What does this text tell you about Paul? What seems to matter most to him?

• What words would you use to describe Paul's relationship with the people he writes to in Rome?

Session 1: Mutually Encouraged in Our Shared Faith • 15

Each session includes tips in the margins to support facilitators with varying experience levels

✦ Ask for a volunteer to pray the opening prayer aloud, or set the tone by pausing for a few moments and then praying this prayer yourself.

✦ Ask for someone to volunteer to be the first person to share about an encouraging community. When that person is done sharing, ask who would like to be next. People who are a bit reluctant to speak will appreciate not being put on the spot.

✦ Note the importance for the group to allow people to share their thoughts without judgment and to keep personal information confidential.

✦ Dwelling in the word is at the heart of each session. Don't rush it. Set the pace by reading the text yourself today, followed by 10 seconds of silence for reflection.

✦ Tell the participants to trust that God will speak something new to them through this living word from scripture. Begin with the new insights they hear, rather than anything they recall from previous studies.

Prompts help facilitate group participation at each step and offer permission to be more introspective

OPENING PRAYER

Good and gracious God, we have come to know you through the witness of many people. We thank you for those who have moved us toward faith, and pray that we in turn might encourage others toward faith. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

In this section, you are laying groundwork for the way conversations will take place during the eight sessions of this study. The questions in the participant guide serve several purposes that you should keep in mind. First, they allow participants to get to know each other and their values. Second, these questions invite reflection on the similarities between Paul and his audience and the caring relationships participants have known and appreciated. Finally, the questions prompt participants to articulate the values they will use in mutually encouraging each other during this extended study of Romans.

After everyone has shared responses about an encouraging community, invite them to suggest guidelines that will help your time throughout this study lead to mutual encouragement in the faith. Suggest that the previously discussed communities of mutual encouragement might inform their ideas. Point to the group covenant (page 9 in the participant guide) and ask the group for any guidelines they want to add.

Dwell (20 to 40 minutes)

DWELLING IN THE WORD

Read today's scripture text aloud slowly. Encourage participants to notice which of Paul's words stand out to them. Some may wish to underline such words as they listen to the passage being read; others should feel free to close their eyes and identify words and images that stayed with them as the scripture reading came to an end.

Romans 1:11-17

¹¹For I long to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened—¹²or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you, as I have among the rest of the gentiles. ¹⁴I am obligated both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, ¹⁵hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Time estimations keep groups on track

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God's saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

CONVERSATION

1. Invite participants to share their initial thoughts about Paul and his audience. There are no wrong answers here, but these observations will have an impact throughout all eight sessions of this study.
2. Formulate an understanding of spiritual gifts together. For Paul such gifts always build up the community. Start a list of items that might be considered spiritual gifts. If participants would like to see one way Paul identifies spiritual gifts, you could look together at 1 Corinthians 12:7-10.
3. Ask participants to go through today's scripture text and circle all the times Paul uses the words *gospel* or *good news*. What themes run through these references? What new dimensions to these words arise in each repetition?
4. After verses 16 and 17 are read aloud, exchanging "trust(s)" for "believes" and "faith," encourage participants to share their responses to this reading.

Engage (10 to 20 minutes)

WORD AND SERVICE

Challenge participants to share their unforgettable thing with someone who wasn't present and invite that person to the next session.

Encourage the group to consider a ministry collaboration they could do in the weeks ahead.

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Distribute slips of paper and invite participants to each write down a prayer request. For this session, keep the names of those prayed for anonymous; in future sessions, names can be provided if the person(s) involved give permission.

Put the prayer requests in a bowl, mix them up, and have people draw a slip from the bowl. Have each person read the prayer request they chose.

Pray the closing prayer aloud together:

God of the good news, in Jesus you have come to us that our faith—our trust—in you might be strengthened. In this community we have shared what this means to us. Help our lives to be grounded in your good news.

Interactive prompts invite participants to engage deeply with the scripture text

Tips support the unique needs of hybrid and online meetings

✦ Write down the group's observations on a whiteboard with an in-person group, in the chat feature with an online group, or both for a hybrid group (recruit someone to type in the chat what you write on the board).

✦ Welcome and affirm all responses. Be sure to encourage people new to Bible study to give their reactions to hearing the text.

✦ Whenever possible, ask participants to be specific about where in the text they hear evidence for their responses. This conversation should be grounded in the scripture text.

✦ Some people come from a background that assumes one right answer to every question. Create a space where they can appreciate different angles on a theme under discussion.

✦ A ministry collaboration can provide wonderful opportunities for participants to serve others as they share their gifts and mutually encourage one another in faith.

✦ For an online or hybrid group, gather prayer concerns in the chat feature, then ask for a volunteer to read these concerns aloud.

About the writers



AMY LINDEMAN ALLEN | MATTHEW

Amy Lindeman Allen is an Indiana Christian Church Associate Professor of New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary (Disciples of Christ) in Indianapolis, Indiana and an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Her scholarship focuses on the synoptic gospels and, in particular, their portraits of Jesus' ministry as and among persons on the margins of the imperial world in which he lived. In this study on Matthew,

she has sought to highlight Jesus' role as a teacher among the people and the ways in which both Jesus and his followers lived and persisted amid persecution and hardship.



PHIL RUGE-JONES | ROMANS

Phil Ruge-Jones is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He learns large passages of scripture by heart and performs them word for word, most notably the Gospel of Mark. He has written multiple Bible studies and devotional content for Augsburg Fortress. He hopes that your conversations around Paul's letter to the Romans will inspire you to trust in God's deep grace and to love your neighbors well.

In this series

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Matthew

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