



MATTHEW

BOOKS OF FAITH SERIES

Leader Session Guide

Troy M. Troftgruben

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
--------------	---

1 The Birth of the Messiah <i>Matthew 1:18—2:12</i>	9
---	---

2 This Is My Son, the Beloved <i>Matthew 3:13—4:11</i>	19
--	----

3 You Are the Salt of the Earth <i>Matthew 5:1-16 [17-20], 21-48</i>	30
--	----

4 You of Little Faith <i>Matthew 14:13-36</i>	40
---	----

5 Who Do You Say That I Am? <i>Matthew 16:13—17:9 [13]</i>	49
--	----

6 Where Two or Three Are Gathered in My Name <i>Matthew 18:1-22 [23-35]</i>	60
---	----

7 My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me? <i>Matthew 27:32-56</i>	69
---	----

8 I Am with You Always <i>Matthew 28:1-10 [11-15], 16-20</i>	78
--	----

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 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 has 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-orientated 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.

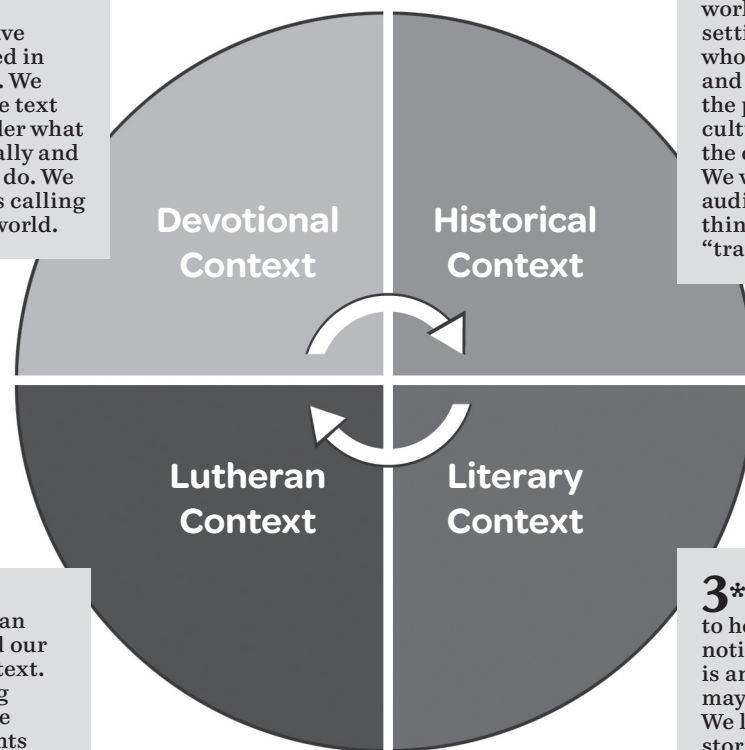
1 We begin by reading the Bible text and reflecting on its meaning. We ask questions and identify items that are unclear. We bring our unique background and experience to the Bible, and the Bible meets us where we are.

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.

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.

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.

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 page 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 help 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 Matthew 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.

Matthew Unit Overview

Throughout history Matthew's gospel has played a prominent role in Christian worship and practice, and to this day it retains a central place in most people's experiences of the New Testament and the Christian faith. Perhaps Matthew's most distinctive trait is its spotlighting of Jesus' Jewish heritage, making Matthew a fitting bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Another distinctive feature is the gospel's emphasis on discipleship. Not only does Matthew draw attention to Jesus as teacher, it also characterizes the twelve disciples as intentional learners. Their training from Jesus is holistic and formative in ways that empower them to make disciples of all nations.

Matthew's gospel speaks well to church communities today, identifying the church as founded by Jesus (16:18) and issuing practical instructions for practicing community (18:1-35). Matthew envisions the church as made up of sinners and doubters who struggle with faith, temptation, and forgiveness but who ultimately reflect the ministry and presence of Jesus.

Read as a whole, Matthew's gospel is not simply a biography of Jesus or a collection of his teachings. It is a story that invites us to become disciples of Jesus: to learn from, follow, and enter into a living relationship with Jesus the Messiah.

Session 1, "The Birth of the Messiah" (Matthew 1:18—2:12), introduces Jesus with stories surrounding his birth. Not only is Jesus a savior of his people, he is also a king worthy of homage.

Session 2, "This Is My Son, the Beloved" (Matthew 3:13—4:11), focuses on Jesus' baptism and his temptation. Jesus' identity and purpose are both

affirmed by God and tested by the devil in different but complementary stories.

Session 3, "You Are the Salt of the Earth" (Matthew 5:1-16 [17-20], 21-48), studies the opening portions of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' teaching envisions a way of life that is challenging, inspiring, and radically unconventional.

Session 4, "You of Little Faith" (Matthew 14:13-36), explores two miracles from Jesus' ministry: the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus' walking on water. While the reactions of Jesus' disciples vary, his faith in them never does.

Session 5, "Who Do You Say That I Am?" (Matthew 16:13—17:9 [13]), features two events that constitute a turning point in Jesus' ministry: Peter's confession and the transfiguration. Much to the disciples' consternation, the way of this messiah is counterintuitive to conventional human reasoning.

Session 6, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered in My Name" (Matthew 18:1-22 [23-35]), studies a teaching segment on practicing community. Jesus emphasizes caring for the overlooked, addressing conflict, and extending unbounded forgiveness.

Session 7, "My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:32-56), explores Jesus' death. In Matthew this death fulfills prophetic tradition, exemplifies a theology of the cross, and bears profound significance for believers today.

Session 8, "I Am with You Always" (Matthew 28:1-10 [11-15], 16-20), engages Matthew's account of Easter morning and the Great Commission. Christ is always present with his followers as they continue his work in the world today.

SESSION ONE

Matthew 1:18—2:12

Leader Session Guide



Focus Statement

The birth of Jesus is associated with various names, ideas, and events—each with profound meaning. In contrast to the other gospels, Matthew emphasizes that this messiah is foretold by the prophets, a king worthy of homage, and one who will save his people.



Key Verse

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” Matthew 1:23



Focus Image



Nativity Christmas scene ©
iStock/Thinkstock

The Birth of the Messiah

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

Matthew begins like no other gospel does. After an opening genealogy (1:1-17), Matthew narrates the birth of the **Messiah** from the vantage point of Joseph, followed by the arrival of unexpected visitors from a distant region. You may be very familiar with the “Christmas story” of Luke 2:1-20, but strive to block it out of your mind so that you can better experience the “the birth of Jesus the Messiah” (Matthew 1:18) just as Matthew’s earliest readers did.

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely. Highlight any points you want to emphasize during the session.
2. Note what supplies you’ll need, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.
4. In addition to the session text, read Matthew 1:1-17 and 2:13-23 for a clearer sense of the larger literary context of these first two chapters of the gospel.

Session Overview

You may have encountered books, movies, and so on that combine Matthew’s birth stories with Luke’s more familiar narrative, but this meshing of narratives overlooks some fascinating and distinctively new ideas. Matthew 1:18—2:12 features profound lessons regarding **righteous** action and social expectation, the unexpected ways God comes among us, the many ways we discern God’s presence, and the manner in which we ought to respond.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During this first session, help learners make a cross-cultural transition to a new world: 2,000 years ago among **Jews** in the land of historic Israel. Words and phrases like *messiah*, *son of David*, *prophet*, *righteous*, and **magi** (wise men) all signify a world very different from today and far more Jewish than many non-Jewish readers of the New Testament realize.

The story of Jesus’ birth raises understandable questions about the social dynamics surrounding marriage among first-century

SESSION ONE

? Messiah:

“Anointed one,” from the Hebrew word *meshiach* and the Greek *Christos*, from which the title *Christ* comes. Although originally in the Hebrew Bible the word referred to various anointed kings, patriarchs, priests, and prophets, in time—and certainly by the New Testament era—Jews associated it with the notion of a divinely appointed ruler expected to come and inaugurate a reign of peace (see Luke 2:26; 3:15-16; also Matthew 22:41-46; 26:63; John 1:19-28). The concept of a “messiah” is notoriously diffuse across scripture, but the idea is fostered in various ways by passages like Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-10; Jeremiah 33:14-18; Psalm 110; Zechariah 6:12-14; and Daniel 9:25.

? Righteous:

The word generally means “just” or “right,” but in Matthew’s gospel it seems to have the particular nuance of abiding by the law (Israel’s scripture). See Matthew 1:19; 3:15; 5:10, 17-20.

? Jews:

Ethnic people of historic Israel (Greek *Ioudaios*), often characterized by their distinctive religious traditions. Because the word *Jew* today can refer to many distinctions (ethnic, religious, socio-political, etc.), some interpreters prefer the word *Judean* for translating *Ioudaios* in the New Testament gospels. But since *Judean* is narrower in focus and primarily a geographical term, the term *Jew* is used throughout this study.

? Magi:

Various translated as “wise men” or “astrologers” (not “kings”). In ancient Persia, magi were followers of Zoroastrianism (an ancient Near Eastern religion), and later the word generally referred to court priests who practiced astrology and magic. Within Matthew’s gospel the word likely refers more generally to non-Jewish astrologers of uncertain geographical origins.

Jews. Marriages in this context were typically arranged by the couple’s fathers, or the bride’s father and the potential husband, with brides often 12 to 15 years old (sometimes older) marrying grooms 10 or 15 years older than them. In the gospels Joseph never appears alongside Mary during Jesus’ adult ministry, very possibly because Joseph was older and simply did not live long.

Engagement was a far more binding agreement than in many societies today. It was a formal prenuptial contract that ratified legal marital rights and could be broken only by a legal divorce. The terms *husband* and *wife* likely applied during the engagement period (see Matthew 1:16, 19, 20, 24). Only sexual relations, shared living quarters, and a second public ceremony separated engagement from finalized marriage. Joseph wants to “dismiss” or divorce Mary (Matthew 1:19), not because at this point it was a light thing, but because premarital pregnancy was a serious mark of shame. It would have been viewed as the product of adultery, which was grounds for divorce (Matthew 5:32; 19:7) as well as execution (Deuteronomy 22:13-21; John 8:4-5). The fact that Joseph desires not “to expose [Mary] to public disgrace” and wishes to divorce her “quietly” (in as nonpublic a way as possible) portrays him as a kind man, since conventional social constraints on “righteous” men would entail subjecting her to social shame for the sake of preserving his family’s honor.

Many questions also surround the identity of the “wise men” (Greek *magi*). Although elsewhere in the ancient Near East (Parthia, for instance), magi historically served as priests who practiced astrology, Matthew makes no such associations. He simply characterizes these individuals positively as wise astrologers “from the East” who come to worship Jesus (Matthew 2:1-2, 11). Within the narrative they signify foreigners who discern the Messiah’s significance and revere him long before the people of Israel do (see Matthew 8:10-12). Note also that Matthew 2:1-12 neither gives the wise men names nor numbers them. (The tradition of three wise men comes from their three gifts.)

LITERARY CONTEXT

In addition to reading the whole of Matthew’s gospel, another primary goal for this study is to see connections between the story of Jesus and that of Israel in the **Hebrew Bible** (or Old Testament). Matthew does not tell Jesus’ story out of a vacuum. He writes with an eye to how Jesus’ experiences resonate with, parallel, and fulfill ideas and events first associated with God’s historic people Israel. The narrative takes place squarely

in the shadow of the Hebrew Bible, and the opening chapter demonstrates this in several ways:

- Connecting Jesus' ancestry to Israel's history (Matthew 1:1-17; see Genesis 5:1-32; 10:1-32)
- Identifying Jesus by the Jewish term *Messiah* four times (Matthew 1:1, 16, 17, 18)
- Calling both Jesus and Joseph sons of David (Matthew 1:1, 20)
- Announcing Jesus' birth by an angel (Matthew 1:20-23; see Genesis 18:1-15; Judges 13)
- Portraying Joseph as the recipient of divine dreams (Matthew 1:20-24; see Genesis 37:1-11)
- Calling Jesus "Emmanuel" (Matthew 1:23; see Isaiah 7:14)
- Explicitly identifying Jesus' birth as the fulfillment of prophecy (Matthew 1:22-23)

In addition, both Matthew 1:1 and 1:18 use the Greek word *genesis* ("birth," "origin"), which alludes directly to segments in the book of Genesis (Genesis 2:4; 5:1).

There are also interesting parallels between Matthew 1:18-25 and 2:1-12. Both stories focus on a Judean man (Joseph, Herod) struggling with what to do, portray Jesus' birth as a surprise, imply a reaction of fear (Matthew 1:20; 2:3), and show the man resolving to act "quietly," "secretly." (In Greek, Matthew 1:19 and 2:7 use the same word.) The two stories contrast how one man (Joseph) ultimately embraces the child, while the other (Herod) tries to kill him.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

This session's scripture text coincides with a theme dear to Martin Luther's heart: Christ as God's gift to humanity. In his "Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels" (1521), Luther wrote: "The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own" (*Luther's Works* 35:119). Many readers today regard Jesus' teachings as central to his ministry, but Luther prioritized the **incarnation**—God's coming among us through a tiny child—over and above any ethical teaching. In fact, the response of the magi reflects a very fitting response to Jesus' birth: "they knelt down and paid him homage," or worshiped him (Matthew 2:11).



Hebrew Bible:

What Christians traditionally call the Old Testament. "Hebrew Bible" is language that modern Jews also embrace.



Incarnation:

The act of becoming human (or flesh). In Christian thinking the word refers to the notion that God became human in the person of Jesus.

SESSION ONE



Frankincense and myrrh:

Fragrant resins that in antiquity were among the most demanded and expensive spices in the Near East. Frankincense was used in offerings and perfumes (see Exodus 30:34-37; Isaiah 60:5-6; Jeremiah 6:20; Revelation 18:13), and myrrh was used for anointing (Exodus 30:23-32) and embalming (John 19:39-40; see Mark 15:23).

Another Lutheran emphasis appears in the contrast between judgment and grace (or law and gospel). Once made aware of Jesus' unexpected arrival, both Joseph and Herod face the dilemma of choosing between a response dictated by societal norms (judgment) and a more merciful response (grace). Joseph considers acting in line with being "righteous" (1:19) but finally chooses otherwise, whereas King Herod professes a benevolent response (2:8) but ultimately intends judgment. In both cases, the vindicated are those who show mercy—a theme that will be reiterated later in the gospel (Matthew 9:13; 12:7).

Finally, God's presence made manifest in the humble circumstances of the birth of Jesus illustrates Luther's theology of the cross. Luther believed that much of God's true nature is revealed through the cross of Christ, and that God often reveals God's self most profoundly amid darkness, difficulty, challenge, and pain. With that in mind, the juxtaposition of this child with the gathering of wise men is pregnant with meaning: dignified travelers from a distant country, bearing some of the costliest gifts known to the area at this time (gold, **frankincense**, and **myrrh**), kneeling in reverence before a peasant child. This picture itself testifies to a God who is made known in the last places we human beings would normally look.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

A natural entry point into the session text is to ask how we might have responded if we were in the shoes of particular main characters. For example, what if we were Joseph—a man committed to living justly and concerned with the social backlash that will come with marrying a pregnant woman and fathering a child born out of wedlock? Or what if we were Mary, whose pregnancy is virtually unexplainable, with the result that family and friends will ostracize us for the sake of deflecting social shame? Or what if we were King Herod, given news of a king born nearby, whose arrival poses a threat to our reign and stability? Or what if we were the magi, compelled to pursue a sign in the heavens without knowing more specific details about its significance or its destination? To respond to questions like these, it is helpful to block out what we know about the ensuing story and instead focus on the events as they first transpired. Not knowing the outcomes, how would we have reacted?

Another entry point into these texts is to reflect on the faith required of the characters in the story. In contrast to Luke's version—where angel messengers give clear words about Jesus' birth—Matthew's narrative reports simply that Mary was “found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (1:18) and that the wise men “observed his star at its rising” (2:2). Although Joseph receives an angelic message in a dream, and the wise men seem to know more than simply the observance of a star, there is still a great deal of faith required of various characters to invest so heavily of their lives in this little child. These stories make for interesting examples of faith that speak to some of our experiences with faith today.

Facilitator's Prayer

O God with us, Emmanuel, give me eyes to see new things in the scriptures, ears to hear the insights and questions of others, hands to prepare the things most needed for this conversation, and a heart open to new experiences of the divine. Keep me centered in the love of our Creator, the grace of Christ, and the presence of the Spirit. Amen.

Gather (10–15 minutes)

Check-in

Take time to greet each person and invite learners to introduce themselves to one another.

Pray

O God, who came among us by way of a peasant child, Emmanuel: we ask you to help us see the significance of your coming among us, to help us discern how best we may embrace you in our lives, and finally to help us respond in ways that honor you as royalty in our hearts. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Focus Activity

Sketch images or write down words and ideas that come to mind when you think about the birth of Jesus.



Tip:

Move through the session at a pace that fosters discussion and keeps the group interested and engaged. If it's not possible to cover all of the session material in the allotted time, ask for volunteers to do the remaining activities and report back at the next session.



Tip:

Strive to be present for others as they arrive in order to create an atmosphere of hospitality.



Tip:

Consider how well the participants know each other. Basic introductions are helpful as they encourage mutual sharing and general knowledge about each other as individuals.



Tip:

Consider asking a participant to lead the opening prayer. Also consider preceding the prayer with a moment of silence, which can provide a more authentic transition to the study at hand.



Tip:

Distribute paper and pens or markers. Encourage participants to sketch images or write down words that come to mind about Jesus' birth. Invite volunteers to share their responses.



Tip:

Consider using a playful video clip to trigger traditional ideas of the nativity, such as “If Jesus Were Born in Times of Google, Facebook, and Twitter” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gFYzErcweg>.

SESSION ONE



Tip:

People often bring different Bibles and Bible translations to a study, which can create confusion. Acknowledge the various Bibles that people have and point out how hearing the story through different versions can help us hear things in new ways.



Tip:

Encourage group participants throughout your time together to feel free to share their reactions, reflections, thoughts, questions, and ideas about the Bible passage. Let them know that they need not feel afraid, since no questions are “dumb” ones and questions help us learn and grow.



Tip:

Acknowledge to participants that many people feel intimidated about reading the Bible because they feel they do not “know enough” about it. When it comes to scripture, however, we are all learners, although at different places, and we will all glean new insights about the Bible and each other just by engaging the text together.



Tip:

Depending on participants’ interests, you may find it helpful to share some of the additional information from this Leader Guide regarding marital customs among first-century Jews.



Bonus Activity:

Jesus was a first-century Jew living in the Middle East. We do well to let this fact sink in. If you or any participants have traveled to or near the Middle East, share impressions of the area. Invite people to consider that the climate, customs, dress, skin tones, topography, food, flora, and fauna experienced by Mary and Joseph would have been closer to some things still normal in Middle Eastern countries than what is more common in the Western hemisphere.

Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

Light a candle and dim the room lighting before reading the text. The star plays a prominent role in Matthew 2:1–12, so a form of natural light as focal point and illumination can be very effective.

OR

Do a “double reading”: have one person read the text at a normal pace. Then observe silence for 30 seconds, followed by a second person reading the text again more slowly.

Read Matthew 1:18–2:12.

- What features of these stories stand out to you?
- What questions do these stories raise for you?
- What are your first impressions of Matthew’s gospel?



Join the Conversation (25–55 minutes)

Historical Context

1. The fact that Joseph and Mary are not yet married makes for a socially difficult situation. Although engagement itself was a formal and binding contract in this time and culture, Mary’s pregnancy out of wedlock inevitably would have been viewed as a sign of infidelity—a mark of great social shame and even grounds for execution.

- What does it mean to you that Jesus was born into a situation of social shame for his family?

2. As we read Matthew’s gospel, we quickly realize we are entering into a new world—a time long ago in the Middle East, in a realm heavily influenced by Jewish religious tradition. One example is the term “Messiah” or “Christ” in Matthew 1:1, 16–18. The word signifies an anointed leader whom Jews at this time expected to come from God to inaugurate a realm of peace. Precise definitions of the messiah are difficult to pin down, but certainly many Jews associated the messiah with a political and military leader who would free the Jewish people from foreign rule (such as the Roman Empire).

- Read Matthew 1:18–2:5 and list words and phrases that describe the purpose of Jesus the Messiah. (See especially verses 21–23.)
- In what ways does the story of Jesus’ birth in Matthew fit or contrast with the ideas people at this time had about the messiah?

3. Unlike the shepherds in Luke 2:8-20, the “wise men” (Greek *magi*) in Matthew are non-Jews who learn about Jesus’ arrival when a star appears. In response, they travel some distance to seek out the child. Despite the fact that Jesus is “king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2), these non-Jewish wise men kneel before him in worship, in a way worthy of a king.

- Matthew makes strong connections between Israel’s history and the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), but the first people to take notice of the Messiah in this gospel are not Jews but “outsiders.” How does Jesus’ welcome by non-Jews affect the meaning of the story?
- Several passages in the Hebrew Bible foresee the travels of non-Jews to Israel in order to worship Israel’s God. Look up Isaiah 60:1-7 as an example. How does this passage compare with the visit of the wise men in Matthew 2:1-12?

Literary Context

1. More than any other gospel, Matthew takes shape squarely in view of Israel’s history as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. This is especially true of the opening chapters. Matthew 1, for example, uses Jesus’ genealogy to connect his ancestry with Israel’s history.

- Look at the following passages together: Matthew 1:20-23 and Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 1:20-24 and Genesis 37:1-11; and Matthew 1:23 and Isaiah 7:14. What connections do you see between Matthew’s narrative and stories from Israel’s history? How do these connections shape how you read Matthew?

2. At first glance, the session text may look like a pairing of two very different stories (Matthew 1:18-25 and 2:1-12). But the two stories have much in common, making it interesting to read them alongside each other.

- Identify the similarities and differences between the stories in Matthew 1:18-25 and 2:1-12. (Pay attention to the main characters, how they react, and how events finally take place.) How do these two stories read when you look at them together?

Lutheran Context

1. When they are made aware of Jesus’ arrival, Joseph and King Herod both face a fork in the road. Each must choose between a path of judgment and a path of grace—following what society would expect or opting for a more merciful response. Although “righteous” (Matthew 1:19) or law-abiding, Joseph chooses the path of grace toward Mary and this extraordinary situation.



Bonus Activity:

To see further connections between the session text and the Old Testament, do Homework activity 3 as a group.



Tip:

Using a whiteboard or comparable writing surface, draw two parallel spaces and invite participants to shout out similarities and differences between Matthew 1:18-25 and 2:1-12.



Tip:

The notion of “law and gospel”—that is, of judgment and grace (or demand and gift)—is a core Lutheran idea that many Lutherans nonetheless do not fully understand. Although now is probably not the time for a thorough discussion, pausing to clarify this concept may be helpful.

SESSION ONE



Bonus Activity:

Elsewhere Martin Luther compares the scriptures to “the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies. . . . Simple and lowly are these swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them” (“Prefaces to the Old Testament” [1523], *Luther’s Works* 35:236). Invite participants to consider this analogy. What difference does it make that the real treasure we seek in scripture is not scripture itself, but rather Christ?



Bonus Activity:

Invite participants to share a word or phrase or picture that comes to mind when they think of “faith.” If web searching is available and readily visible to all, conduct a web search for images and explore those that surface within this conversation.

Meanwhile, King Herod claims he wants to worship the child but ultimately chooses merciless judgment (see 2:16-18).

- What can we learn from these stories about the way judgment and grace work in relationships? Or about the presence of Christ in unexpected circumstances?
- Later on in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13; 12:7; quoting Hosea 6:6), to show that his ministry is more about extending God’s mercy to those in need than about adhering scrupulously to religious regulations. Where is God’s mercy, rather than judgment, needed in today’s world?

2. Although many regard Jesus’ ethical teaching as central to his ministry, Martin Luther emphasized that receiving Christ as God’s gift to us is more important than any of his teachings. Luther wrote: “The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own” (“Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels” [1521], *Luther’s Works* 35:119).

- Consider the response of the wise men when they finally encounter Jesus (Matthew 2:9-11). How might we emulate their example in our own faith and lives today?
- Look at this session’s Focus Image. A group of dignified travelers from a distant land, bearing some of the costliest gifts available, kneel before the tiny child of a humble peasant couple. Such a picture makes little sense to the average bystander. What meaning or significance does this picture have for you and your understanding of how God works?

Devotional Context

1. Try to block out what you know about the rest of the story and focus on the events surrounding Jesus’ birth. If you were presented with the same situations as Joseph, Mary, Herod, the priests and scribes, and the wise men, how do you think you would respond?

2. Various characters in Matthew 1:18—2:12 are called on to act in faith without receiving much information. Joseph and Mary know very little about what lies ahead for them and the child. And the wise men simply see “his star at its rising” (Matthew 2:2) before they set out. How does this relate to your own experiences with faith today?

Wrap-up

1. If there are any questions or activities to explore further, write them on a whiteboard or chart paper. Ask for volunteers to work on these and report back to the group at the next session.
2. As a wrap-up question, invite participants to consider: Who is Jesus the Messiah, according to this session's Bible text?
3. Invite participants to read Matthew 1-4 during the upcoming week, jotting down ideas, questions, and realizations that surface as they do so.

Pray

O God in Christ: we thank you for all that we learn from the simple but profound event of your arrival among us. Help us to respond to Christ's presence among us today with mercy not judgment, with openness to the unexpected, with earnest seeking for signs of your leading, with generosity with the things we hold dear, and with reverence and worship for the Christ who draws near. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)**Homework**

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Matthew 3:13—4:11.
2. Several characters in Matthew 1:18—2:12 may be associated with particular paths or emphases of spirituality. Which of these four paths best characterizes your own spirituality?
 - Joseph (mysticism): engaged in direct experiences of the divine, discernment
 - Magi (activism): going and doing, gift giving, service
 - Mary (heart): engaged holistically with feelings and relationships
 - Priests, scribes, and Herod (mind): engaged in study, inquiry with experts, and logical reasoning
3. To explore further how Jesus' story in Matthew resonates with Israel's story in the Hebrew Bible, take a look at one or more of the following groups of passages in comparison with each other.
 - Matthew 1:18 (also 1:1) and Genesis 2:4; 6:9; 10:1; 11:27; 25:19; 37:2
 - Matthew 1:1-17 and Genesis 5:1-32; 10:1-32; 11:10-32; 25:12-18; 36:1-43
 - Matthew 1:22-23 and Isaiah 7:10-17

**Tip:**

If your group will meet weekly, encourage participants to read the whole of Matthew's gospel over the course of this study. Some may even want to read the gospel more than once!

SESSION ONE

- Matthew 2:1-12 and Isaiah 60:1-7 (also Isaiah 60:8-22 and 2:2-4 or Micah 4:1-3)
- Matthew 2:3-6 and Micah 5:2 (also 1 Samuel 16:1-13; 2 Samuel 5:2)

Enrichment

1. Read the whole of Matthew 1 and 2 as well as chapters 3 and 4 in preparation for session 2.

2. Look for ways that Jesus' birth and the wise men are portrayed in artwork, music, movies, social media, or other forms of media. How do these different kinds of media capture what Matthew 1:18—2:12 is truly about? In what ways do they seem to miss the boat?

3. Consider how traditional nativity scenes frequently place three wise men alongside shepherds and animals, with perhaps an angel and even a little drummer boy. After reading Matthew 1:18—2:12, what do you think of this common practice?

For Further Reading

"A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels" (1521) by Martin Luther. In *Luther's Works* 35:115-124, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960.

The Gospel of Matthew by Daniel Harrington. Sacra Pagina series. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002.

"The Magi" by Brent Landau. Available at <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/magi.aspx> (accessed February 24, 2016).

Matthew, by Donald Senior. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998.

Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Matthew 3:13—4:11.

2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.

3. Make a checklist of any materials you'll need to do the Bonus Activities.

4. Pray for members of your group during the week.

5. Read Matthew 2:13—3:12 (in addition to 3:13—4:11) and jot down questions and new findings you have in exploring Matthew's narrative.