



CHURCH IN WAITING

Studies for Advent, Year B

TOGETHER IN FAITH SERIES

Learner Session Guide

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CHURCH IN WAITING: STUDIES FOR ADVENT, YEAR B
Learner Session Guide

Together in Faith Series
Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies

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SESSION ONE

1 Corinthians 1:3-9;
Mark 13:24-37

Learner Session Guide

Focus Statement

We are awake and strengthened, because Jesus Christ through the word gives all the various gifts necessary for the church as it waits for his revealing.

Key Verse

For in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:5-7

Be Enriched and Strengthened

Focus Image



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Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group.

Pray

*Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Kent Gustavson, *Prayer of Good Courage* [Mountain Vespers, New York: Ninety and Nine Records, 2006])*

Focus Activity

Take a look at the Focus Image. Tell the group about your favorite catalog and why you like to page through it. How does it make you feel? Do you enjoy browsing the catalog as much as you like owning items you've purchased from it? Why or why not? How is this similar or dissimilar to enjoying the presence of Christ even as we wait for him to be more fully revealed?



Open Scripture

Read 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 and Mark 13:24-37. (We will concentrate on the epistle during most of this session, and turn to the Gospel text in the Devotional Context.)

- List everything Paul gives thanks for in the 1 Corinthians text.
- In what other contexts have you heard phrases or language like this?
- What catches your eye or alerts your ear as you read and hear these texts?

Join the Conversation

Literary Context

1. The text of 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 is a formal thanksgiving, and it follows a pattern typical of Paul in his other letters. Giving thanks to God is essential to a life lived in anticipation of “the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7). Paul uses considerable craft in his opening thanksgivings—they often hint at central themes he will address later in the body of his letters.
 - Compare this thanksgiving to the thanksgivings in Paul’s other letters, including Philippians 1:3-11; Colossians 1:3-12; Romans 1:8-15; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10; and Philemon 4-7.
2. Sing “I’m Going on a Journey” (ELW 446). Compose a fourth verse that continues the theme of this hymn, incorporating thanksgiving language from 1 Corinthians 1:3-9. If you would like to follow the pattern typically used by Paul, the structure is a) to give thanks, b) to God, c) always, d) for those receiving the letter, and e) for a variety of specific reasons.

Historical Context

1. Paul, the author of many letters in the New Testament, was a persecutor of the early church. But after Christ was revealed to him in a dramatic, Damascus road event (see Galatians 1:13-17; Acts 9:1-9), he understood that he was called to be an apostle to the nations of the world—that is, the Gentiles (non-Jews).

- Read Romans 15:20-21 and 2 Corinthians 10:15-16. Discuss Paul's motivation to preach the gospel in places that had never heard it.

2. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is actually the third in an exchange of letters between Paul and Corinth. It addresses a conflict between them. He is seeking to fortify his eroded authority with the community and hopes to change the people's theology and behavior, because he believes the very nature of the gospel is at risk in their context. Central to their theological difference is a question of what it means to be "spiritual" while awaiting and anticipating the coming Holy Spirit.

- Why would Paul open his letter by giving thanks for the strengths of the spiritual gifts in a community where the nature of spiritual gifts (and his own giftedness) has been called into question?
- Draft a thanksgiving letter to a neighboring congregation, giving thanks for an aspect of its spiritual life that you hope to simultaneously celebrate and challenge.

Lutheran Context

1. Lutherans tend to emphasize that even the thanksgiving sacrifice offered to God is inspired not by our own gratefulness, but by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So we can even be thankful for the gift of thankfulness itself, and we grow in thankfulness as we give thanks in the Spirit. This reminds us that we are not offering to God something that we already have, but instead offer only what has been first given to us, in faith.

- Retell the story of a time when you spontaneously gave thanks. How did it feel? Have you ever received being thankful as a gift?

2. Look at the Great Thanksgiving in the liturgy (for example, ELW pp. 107-112), and compare its language to the language of Paul's thanksgiving. What do you notice?



SESSION ONE



Notes

Devotional Context

1. Because Paul is living in anticipation of the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, he is strong in faith and thanksgiving. Waiting for Christ is a full and enriching activity for him because he trusts he has been given all the gifts necessary as he waits. Paul wants us to imitate him in this (2 Thessalonians 3:7-9); we are called to find creative ways to imitate Paul's encouragement, strength, resolve, faith, and thankfulness. We are also called to trust, even in the midst of Jesus' preaching of the imminent kingdom, that "heaven and earth will pass away, but [Christ's] words will not pass away" (Mark 13:31).

- Dance or pantomime your thanksgiving to God. (Seriously, try this!) It may be the most freeing and strengthening thing you do all day. How does expression of thanksgiving through our body open us to thankfulness in unique ways?
- List everything you are thankful for in your life and church community. Do you lack anything? Are you rich?

2. Finally, having thoroughly immersed yourselves in Paul's thanksgiving in 1 Corinthians, read Mark 13:24-37, the Gospel text for the day. How does the counterpoint of 1 Corinthians and Mark function? If the spiritual gifts are already playing in the community, how does Jesus' preaching of the not yet sound in harmony with them?

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work your group has done in this session.

Pray

God our Father, thank you for your grace. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank you for enriching us in speech and knowledge of every kind. Thank you for strengthening the testimony of Christ in us. Thank you for giving us spiritual gifts. Thank you for strengthening us. Thank you for your faithfulness. Thank you for calling us into fellowship with Jesus Christ as our Lord. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Amen.

Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the next session's Scripture texts: 2 Peter 3:8-15a and Mark 1:1-8.
2. Say thank you at least once an hour every day this week. Thank God, thank Jesus Christ; thank family, friends, neighbors, employees,

children, and even pets. Keep a list of these thanksgivings, and ask God to strengthen you in and through them.

3. Watch a movie this week, such as *The Road* (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2010) or *The Book of Eli* (Warner Home Video, 2010), with a story that takes place after a disaster. Discuss with others how this genre of movies differs in spiritual emphasis from Paul. Compare despair/hope, loss/gain, fear/hope, lack/abundance, and death/life.

Enrichment

1. Paul's thanksgiving in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 uses a "blessed be" construction rather than elements of his usual thanksgivings, and his letter to the Galatians contains no thanksgiving at all. Consider what Paul intends with the change in format in these letters.

2. Take the APEST gifts assessment (available for a small fee at <http://www.theforgottenways.org/apest/>), the ELCA spiritual gifts assessment (<http://www2.elca.org/evangelizingchurch/assessments/spiritgifts.html>), or another online spiritual gifts assessment in order to discern how God has strengthened you with spiritual gifts. Covenant to take such an assessment together as a small or large group.

For Further Reading

Lifekeys: Discover Who You Are by Jane Kise, David Stark, and Sandra Krebs Hirsh (Bloomington, Minn.: Bethany House, 2005).

On the Incarnation by Saint Athanasius (Yonkers, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's, 1996).

Available from www.augsburgfortress.org:

The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology by Jürgen Moltmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians by Tom Wright (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

