

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 on paper 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.

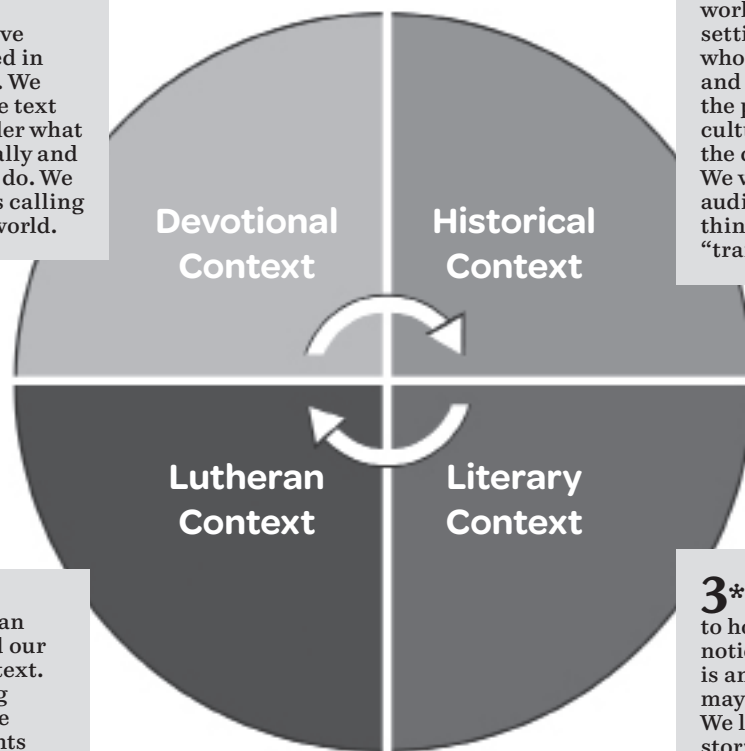
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience 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.

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.



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.

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 p. 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.

Together in Faith Series

Throughout its history, the church has established lists of Scripture readings appropriate for each Sunday and festival day of the church year calendar. These lists, called lectionaries, identify the Scripture readings used for worship in many congregations. While a lectionary-guided connection with the Bible typically occurs in the context of corporate worship, the thematic approach of Together in Faith can link the gathering of small groups around the Book of Faith with the congregation's gathering around the Word in worship. Online worship helps are provided so that preachers and worship planners can create congregation-wide experiences around each of the Together in Faith units. The flexibility of the Together in Faith online helps makes the units useful for any time of the year. The small group session materials are also designed to serve as stand-alone studies for anytime use.

Heaven on Earth: Studies in Matthew Unit Overview

Pop singer Belinda Carlisle reminds us in her 1987 hit "Heaven Is a Place on Earth" that "in heaven love comes first." That's what we want, isn't it—in a cruel and broken world—for love to come first? This is the core meaning of Jesus' most important words in the Gospel of Matthew, describing for us the importance of love, so that "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17).

We do not have to wait to experience heaven after we die. Our baptisms ground us in a heavenly way of life, not just in an eternal assurance. Baptism into Christ calls Christians to be responsible for helping to bring wholeness to a hurting world: to create heaven on earth. So throughout this six-week study, we will delve deeper into what it means for heaven to come to earth: studying Jesus' words, his way of life, and the manner in which he loved. As we engage in conversation around the "Sermon on the Mount," hopefully we will also discover that we are the change agents Jesus is calling forth to make the kingdom of heaven a reality on earth.

Session One: Who wants heaven on earth?
(Matthew 4:12-23)

Jesus' disciples were interested in the idea of heaven coming to earth, so much so they were willing to leave their comfort zones to make it a reality in the world in which they lived.

Session Two: What does the kingdom of heaven have to do with us? (Matthew 5:1-12)

As part of God's kingdom, we are called to bring heaven on earth to others.

Session Three: Are we the right ones to bring heaven to earth? (Matthew 5:13-20)

Since it's possible to bring about heaven on earth, Jesus asks us the question, "do you want to be a part of it?" As we learn more about what the kingdom of heaven looks like, we come to see that we are the instruments God uses to bring about this new reality. It's up to us to make daily decisions that help the kingdom come.

Session Four: If this is heaven on earth, what's up with all the laws? (Matthew 5:21-37)

The kingdom of heaven has laws about how to live with God and each other. The key to making heaven a reality on earth is that love always precedes the law. In fact, love is the reason for the law. With Jesus' help we are able to look deeper within God's laws to see how "love comes first" when it comes to fulfilling heaven on earth.

Session Five: Bringing heaven to earth sounds hard—do we have what it takes? (Matthew 5:38-48)

Jesus asks for our faithfulness when it comes to creating heaven on earth. It may not be easy, but as we grow in understanding of the love and compassion that is offered to all people in the kingdom of heaven, we will find we are strengthened to live it out.

Session Six: Will you trust God for help in bringing heaven to earth? (Matthew 6:24-34)

Heaven on earth is all that it is cracked up to be and more! There's no turning back now. Encouraged by what the kingdom of heaven means for us and for all people, we are able to work alongside God to make it happen.

Matthew 4:12-23

Leader Session Guide



Focus Statement

Now is the time for us to follow in Jesus' footsteps and bring heaven to earth.



Key Verse

Immediately they . . . followed (Jesus). Matthew 4:20



Focus Image



Where might that be? © Image Source / SuperStock

Who wants heaven on earth?

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

Throughout Scripture we repeatedly hear the term “kingdom of heaven/God” but may not really understand what it means. Most likely we have also heard the term “heaven on earth” but may have never thought of it in biblical terms. Take a moment to picture what it looks like to you to have heaven on earth, and then consider how that may mesh with God’s view of the world. What’s exciting is that heaven on earth is not that far away; in fact, Jesus tells us it has already “come near.”

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you’ll need, like chart paper, markers, newspapers and news magazines.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.

Session Overview

In Matthew chapter four, Jesus begins his ministry, and so this is also where we begin our study. Matthew addresses a Jewish audience familiar Old Testament prophecies in an effort to establish Jesus as the fulfillment of those **prophecies**. Fresh from setting the stage of Jesus’ place in the world, Matthew has the first words out of Jesus’ mouth, words of challenge and welcome into what God, through Christ, is already doing in the world, namely bringing heaven to earth.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In Jesus’ time, “good news” usually referred to military news about successful conquests by the Roman emperor. Ironically this usually was not good news to the Jews under Roman occupation. Jesus, however, came to turn the world upside down. This included encouraging people to look for heaven not as some faraway place, but to build heaven on earth right here and now.

Matthew paints a picture of the “**kingdom of heaven**” which looked very different from the kind of kingdom that the Romans revered and talked about as “good news.” God used Jesus as God used the prophets, to draw people back into relationship with God

SESSION ONE

? Prophecies:

Words made to address people's current life situations, "now." Prophecies were not predictions of end times as much as they were meant to provide a vision of that "end time" so that people knew how to fulfill that prophecy "now," such as bringing "heaven on earth."

? Kingdom of Heaven:

Does not have just one definition but is understood as God's gracious vision for the world.

? Prophets:

Human messengers uniquely called to invite people back into a close relationship with God, so that they can live out God's vision for the world. See "Prophets" in *Lutheran Study Bible*, pages 1088–1090, for more details.

? Synoptic:

a word which literally means, in the Greek, "seen together" or "seen along with."

and in healthy community with each other. Being the Christ, Jesus fulfills God's work in the world through the "law and the prophets" over countless years.

Often times prophets addressed monarchs, such as Nathan admonishing David (2 Samuel 11), Elijah confronting Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 18), or Isaiah uplifting Hezekiah (Isaiah 37). Prophets would guide monarchs to stay true to God's commandments. Many prophets did not find the role of speaking God's truth to powerful monarchies very easy. Think about how by the time of Jesus, the Roman emperors did not welcome prophecies in their courts that delivered anything but what *they* would consider "good news." Consider how challenging Jesus' words were to the Roman hierarchy. Simply referring to the "kingdom of heaven" as "good news" was seen as a direct threat to Rome's political status (John 19:13-16).

LITERARY CONTEXT

It is understood that Matthew was familiar with Mark's Gospel, the "shortest" of the Gospels. Matthew intended to enhance, even "correct," Mark's Gospel, and in doing so the author turned it into the "longest Gospel." Along the way Matthew used common literary devices that we still use today, frequently invoking quick action by using the word "immediately," which was also common in Mark's vividly written account of the life of Christ. Consider skimming both Gospels to familiarize yourself with just how many times this happens. (Matthew 8:3 is just one example.) If possible, search out a parallel Bible that lays out all three **synoptic** Gospels side-by-side so that you can see what stories are unique and which ones are conveyed in all three Gospels. When Mark and Matthew's Gospels are next to each other, it becomes even clearer how much Matthew "added," and it can serve as a useful visual for your group.

Matthew's Gospel can be one of the most confusing Gospels for modern-day Christians in that there are so many Old Testament references. Unique to Matthew's Gospel is chapter one's genealogy of Jesus with difficult names to pronounce and histories often lost on the modern reader. This serves as a "Once Upon a Time" literary technique while grounding us in real people and real histories. Origin stories weigh on us the enormity of God's hand at work throughout time and emphasize Jesus' unique role in this specific place and time as a prophet, nevertheless inviting us through Jesus' words to carry on this distinguished work "now."

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

“Heaven on earth” or the “kingdom of heaven” is not simply about personal salvation with the reward of heaven. Jesus means for the kingdom of heaven to be realized on earth. What we often think of heaven (no suffering, no weeping) is in fact happening “now” in Matthew’s text as “people are cured of every disease” and “every sickness,” not merely in some idyllic forever “after.” Lutherans understand that we are participants with God, in fact cocreators or partners with God, in making this happen. Martin Luther states in the Small Catechism’s treatment of the Lord’s Prayer that both the will of God gets done and the kingdom of God comes “without our prayer.” In other words, God will make it happen one way or another. But Luther urges every Christian to pray that it will “come about in and among us” (*ELW*, p. 1163)!

Lutherans understand God as a suffering God, wherein Jesus chose the life he lived and accepted death on the cross. He did not escape his fate but was willing to suffer along with us. We recognize in Jesus a God who does not “fix” the world for us, but who invites us to follow Jesus’ lead in bringing heaven to earth. As confusing as the term “kingdom of heaven” can be, Jesus gives us example after example and story after story, trying to explain this sense of people living in neighborly community, following the laws (specifically the Ten Commandments) so that all (widows, orphans, you name it) are cared for and looked after. In the end, just as Jesus didn’t “save himself,” “salvation” is not so much about “personal” salvation but about the wholeness we find living in right community with each other, a community that’s bringing about “heaven on earth.”

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

Finding ourselves in today’s text requires us to stretch our imagination of what it means to be following Jesus. Few of us are fishermen and fisherwomen. Few of us can imagine dropping our jobs or responsibilities as parents to go follow someone we just met. In fact we encourage our kids *not* to talk to strangers and would more than frown upon our teenagers skipping town with someone who said, “follow me.” Even if this passage is familiar to us, the situation is not.

Finding our way to live faithfully in our modern-day lives, learning what it truly means for us to follow Jesus today, requires us to pick apart the pieces of this text. We need to look first for its most simple meaning, or the “plain sense” as the reformers would say. We are not as much tied to the literal following of the

SESSION ONE

fishermen in this text as we are compelled to follow as sincerely. When our hearts search this text we see a commitment to prophetic work—a truth-telling that conveys God’s vision for the world. All of us are invited to see how we can continue Jesus’ prophetic ministry, so that within our sphere of influence we can help bring heaven to earth.

Facilitator’s Prayer

Holy Spirit, come. Come into our lives over the weeks ahead, and point out to us places of heaven on earth. Holy Spirit, guide my words, thoughts, and actions as I seek to follow you while leading this group. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Gather (10–15 minutes)

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group. Invite learners to share briefly what “heaven on earth” means to them. Use this as a way to begin breaking the ice—off the wall comments are welcome!

Pray

God, Creator of heaven and earth, we want to know you more. Unveil our eyes. Open our hearts. Create in us a deeper understanding of what it means to experience heaven on earth. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Focus Activity

Get to know the other people in your group by talking about your life circumstances—what is going on with you “right now.” In today’s session, we learn that now is the time for the kingdom of heaven—that it is not far from us, but nearer than we think. How does today’s Focus Image speak to this?



Tip:

Before your first session, when you are sending out reminders, you might invite people to bring one object representing something about their life as it is right now. That way they are prepared for this first introduction and can be creative about what they share.

Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

Read the text out loud together using a New Revised Standard Version Bible. Since there are some difficult and foreign words in the reading, consider putting some of those words up on the board as they are read so that people can clearly see them and absorb their meaning.

OR

Consider reading the text out loud at least two more times using a different version. The Amplified Bible or the King James Version would be great for this. You can use any Bible website to print off these verses ahead of time if you do not have copies of these Bibles.

Read Matthew 4:12–23.

- How does the mention of John the Baptizer’s arrest at the beginning of this text make you feel?
- In Matthew 4:15–16, we hear about how Jesus is fulfilling prophecy. Why is this important?
- Jesus’ first ministry words are, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17). Why do you think he chose these words to start his ministry? What are some other phrases you think Jesus could have used?

Join the Conversation (25–55 minutes)

Historical Context

In Jesus’ day, one-third of the children died before the age of six. “By the mid-teens, 60 percent would have died. By the mid-twenties, 75 percent were dead and by the mid-forties, the figure reached 90 percent. Perhaps 3 percent of the population made it to their sixties. Few ordinary people lived out their thirties . . . moreover, it is obvious that much of Jesus’ audience would have been younger than he . . .” (*Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (SSCG)* by Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh [Fortress Press, 2003], p. 327).

1. Matthew 4:12 in the New Revised Standard Version begins with a word that suggests “there’s no time like the present.”
 - What is that word?



Tip:

Remind the group that they are gathered together to have a conversation with Scripture. We are inheriting this “conversation” from a different time and place, from a different culture and language (Greek). We will need to rely on our good communication skills to stay open to what the text is saying and what we hear each other saying.



Tip:

Jesus has been recently baptized by John in Matthew 3:13–17. Soon after being baptized, Jesus repeats John’s exact words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2), picking up where the Baptizer left off. Jesus continues to expand upon John’s ministry while John is in prison. This makes it interesting when in Matthew 11:1–6, John sends word from prison asking if Jesus is “the one.” Could it be that Jesus was realizing heaven on earth in ways that even John found disconcerting?



Tip:

From Matthew 1:1 on we hear that Jesus is “the Messiah” who fulfills prophecy. The author demonstrates this using quotes from the Old Testament to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy (1:23; 2:6; 2:15; and so forth).