

Experiencing God

Participant's Guide

S E S S I O N S

Session One: Who is God?

- Our Search for God? Or God's Search for Us?
- Let God Be God
- God the Creator

Session Two: What Kind of God?

- Is God Angry?
- Is God Father?
- God – Father, Son and Spirit

Session Three: Jesus: God's Surprise

- More Than We Expected
- God Was in Christ
- A Teacher and More

Session Four: Jesus: God With Us

- Beyond Tragedy
- Jesus, Once and Always
- The Great Reversal

Session Five: Who is the Holy Spirit?

- The Spirit and Spirituality
- The Spirit and the World
- The Spirit in the Bible

Session Six: The Spirit is Life

- The Spirit's Work
- Experiencing the Spirit
- Signs of the Spirit

F E A T U R I N G

Frederick Gaiser came to Luther Seminary as a lecturer in Old Testament in 1973 and was promoted to professor in 1991. He has served as acting dean of students (1986-88) and as registrar (1975-77).

Steven Paulson joined the Luther Seminary faculty as associate professor of systematic theology in the fall of 1998 after serving as assistant professor of religion at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minn., since 1993.

Diane Jacobson came to the Luther Seminary faculty as an assistant professor in 1982, and was promoted to associate professor in 1990. In 1999, she became professor of Old Testament. She was chair of the biblical division from 1993 to 1996.

Alan Padgett joined the Luther Seminary faculty in July 2001. Previously, he served as professor of theology and the philosophy of science at Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, Calif., since 1992.

Mary Hess joined the Luther Seminary faculty in July of 2000. She received her master of theological studies degree in 1992 from Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. In 1998, she received her Ph.D. in religion and education from Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Mass.

Sarah Henrich came to the Luther Seminary faculty in 1992 from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, where she had been assistant professor of New Testament (half-time) since 1989.

David J. Lose joined the Luther Seminary faculty in July of 2000. Previously, he had served as a pastor at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Princeton Junction, N.J., and as a teaching fellow and visiting lecturer at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, N.J.

Richard Wallace joined the Luther Seminary faculty in 1999 after serving as Director at the Lutheran Theological Center in Atlanta (LTCA), where he had been since 1997.

Matt Skinner joined the Luther Seminary faculty in 2002. He earned his graduate degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary, where he also served as a teaching fellow and visiting lecturer prior to accepting a call to Luther Seminary.

Lois Malcolm joined the Luther Seminary faculty in 1994 as assistant professor of systematic theology and became an associate professor in the fall of 1999.

Session One: Who is God?

Part One: Our Search for God? Or God's Search for Us?

“Seek the LORD while he may be found...” Isaiah 55:6

Discussion Questions

1. Which do you think is the more significant question: “Is there a God?” or “Who is God?” Which of these would be your question?
2. In the Bible, God encourages the search for God (“Seek the LORD while he may be found...” Isaiah 55:6). Think about this verse: What kinds of things does it imply?
3. Another form of the question, “Who is God?” might be “What kind of God is God?” Why does this question matter?
4. Jesus turned the “search for God” issue around: “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16). Do you hear this as good news?

Part Two: Let God Be God

“For I am God, and there is no other...” (Isaiah 45:22)

Discussion Questions

1. “I am God and you're not” is meant in the Bible to be good news, according to the last speaker in this segment. Do you hear it as good news? Philip Watson puts it a different way in the title of his interpretation of the theology of Martin Luther: “Let God Be God.” How does this sound to you?
2. One of the speakers says that we come to realize that we cannot save ourselves, that we need a savior. Isaiah put it this way, speaking of those who worship idols: “[They] keep on praying to a god that cannot save” (Isaiah 45:20). What are our “idols”? How is it that they “cannot save”?
3. So, if we need a savior, and only God can save, the question arises: Save us from what? And for what? What do you think?

Session One

Part Three: God the Creator

“The heavens are telling the glory of God...” (Psalm 19:1)

Discussion Questions

1. The writer of Psalm 8 looked at the heavens and felt overwhelming awe: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them?” (Psalm 8:3-4). Have you shared these feelings? How and where have you experienced God in creation? How has it made you feel?
2. “The heavens are telling the glory of God,” says the psalmist (Psalm 19:1), but “there is no speech, nor are there words” (Psalm 19:3). This is why the experience of God in creation is ambiguous, as the speakers repeatedly observe. How have you found an awesome creation to be both inspiring and frightening?
3. Because “there is no speech” in creation itself, Psalm 19 turns from the glories of nature to the praise of God’s word—the teaching or instruction (Torah) that introduces us to the loving God of the Bible in particular rather than deity in general, a teaching that is therefore “more to be desired” than gold and “sweeter than honey” (Psalm 19:10). Have you found some words of Scripture to be particularly “sweet”? Or, if you are new to Scripture, can you imagine words that might be more precious than gold? What would you want them to say?

Session Two: What Kind of God?

Part One: Is God Angry?

“How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?” (Psalm 79:5)

Discussion Questions

1. The psalmist’s questions are often our questions: “How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?” (Psalm 79:5); “How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 13:1). God sometimes seems angry and is frequently portrayed as angry. Many find God distant or vague. How have you experienced an “angry” God or a “distant” God?
2. The “wrath of God” is a term that occurs often in the Bible and in Christian conversation. Can you think of ways in which this is an appropriate notion?
3. If some religious conversation dwells too much on God’s anger, might other conversation have too “soft” a view of God’s love? What might this look like?

Part Two: Is God Father?

“[Jesus] said, ‘Abba, Father...’” (Mark 14:36)

Discussion Questions

1. Throughout history, it seems, the God of biblical faith has been imaged primarily as male, as our “heavenly Father.” As you choose or are able, discuss how this image has worked or not worked for you. Have you found other images that enhance your relationship with God or understanding of God?
2. Despite the broad use of male imagery, the Bible recognizes that “no form” can capture God, not “the likeness of male or female,” and that the attempt to do so will be idolatry (Deuteronomy 4:15-18). Is there a difference, do you think, between making an “idol” of a particular form and the use of personal imagery in language?
3. Jesus prayed to God as “Abba, Father” (Mark 14:36) and taught us to pray, “Our Father in heaven...” (Matthew 6:9). What does it mean that Jesus calls God “Father” (or even “Daddy,” which is one way of translating “Abba”)?

Session Two

Part Three: God—Father, Son, and Spirit

“...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19)

Discussion Questions

1. The Bible insists that there is one God, that God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). Why do you think this is important to biblical faith?
2. Yet the Bible speaks of God as Father and Son and Holy Spirit (see, for example, Matthew 28:19). Throughout Christian history, people have tried to make sense of this, as do the teachers in the video. What does this mean to you?
3. The Bible never uses the terms “Trinity” or “triune.” These terms arose as Christians tried to make clear what they understood the Bible to say about God. How might you find yourself “at home” with this important language of Christian tradition?

Session Three: Jesus: God's Surprise

Part One: More Than We Expected

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?” (Mark 6:3)

Discussion Questions

1. Where have you heard the word “Messiah”? In Handel’s oratorio? As a way to name a superhero? What does the word mean to you?
2. Jesus was God’s promised Messiah, according to the New Testament, but the people of his day saw him only as “the carpenter, the son of Mary” (Mark 6:3). What do you think went wrong here? Or did it go wrong? Can expectations get in the way of surprise?

Part Two: God Was in Christ

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself...” (2 Corinthians 5:19 NKJV)

Discussion Questions

1. What does God look like? What kind of images have you seen? Which ones work for you, or which ones do not?
2. Christians believe that God looks a lot like a first-century Jewish carpenter and teacher. Is this possible? What does this picture of God do for our understanding of God?

Part Three: A Teacher and More

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Discussion Questions

1. Think of pictures you have seen of Jesus. Which ones do you like best? Why do they speak to you? Do some bother you? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?
2. List some of the ways in which Jesus got into trouble. What do you think this indicates about God’s presence in the world?
3. The video asserts that forgiveness of sins was central to Jesus’ mission. For Lutherans and many other Christians, worship often begins with the confession of sin and announcement of God’s forgiveness. Have you experienced this as a positive thing or, like some, as a “downer”?

Session Four: Jesus: God With Us

Part One: Beyond Tragedy

“I am the resurrection and the life...” (John 11:25)

Discussion Questions

1. Many have observed that contemporary American culture is in serious denial about the reality of death. Can you think of ways that this is true?
2. Might religion also be another way to “deny” death? How, do you think, this might happen?
3. “I am the resurrection and the life,” said Jesus (John 11:25). Is this the same promise, do you think, as “pie in the sky when you die”? Why or why not?

Part Two: Jesus, Once and Always

“And remember, I am with you always...” (Matthew 28:20)

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus died. So did Shakespeare and Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. How is Jesus’ promise to be “with you always” (Matthew 28:20) similar to the ongoing “presence” of other great human beings? How is it different?
2. You may have heard Christians talk about the “real presence” of Christ in the Word of God and in the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. What do you think this means?
3. If someone told you that to meet Jesus you had to “go to church,” would you agree or disagree? Why?

Part Three: The Great Reversal

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me...to bring good news to the poor...”
(Luke 4:18)

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus promised “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Does the gospel have anything to do with poverty as we know it, or was Jesus only talking of the “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3)? What do you think?

Session Four

2. One of the speakers in the video used the language of Martin Luther, calling Christians “dutiful servants” of all. Most of us would probably not respond to a classified ad announcing “Servants Wanted.” Can you find a positive meaning in this terminology?
3. “Christianity: It’s Not Just for Sunday Anymore!” What do you think this slogan might mean? How do you see the relation between Sunday worship and weekday activities?

Session Five: Who is the Holy Spirit?

Part One: The Spirit and Spirituality

“God is spirit...” (John 4:24)

Discussion Questions

1. “Spirituality” has different meanings for different people. What has the term meant to you?
2. Sometimes Christians talk about “spiritual discipline.” Have you found meaningful ways to deepen your spiritual life? According to the video, what pitfalls might come with the practice of spiritual discipline?
3. “God is spirit,” according to the Bible, which means that we worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). What do you think this means? To worship “in spirit,” should we try to avoid “things” or involvements with time and place?

Part Two: The Spirit and the World

“Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it...” (Isaiah 42:5)

Discussion Questions

1. The word for “spirit” in the biblical languages also means “wind” or “breath.” What does this mean for your understanding of the Spirit of God?
2. For some people, religious devotion might include fasting or abstinence from other physical needs and pleasures. What do you think about this?

Part Three: The Spirit in the Bible

“...the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you....” (John 14:25)

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus promised that God would “send” the Holy Spirit after Jesus’ ascension into heaven (John 14:25). The Bible teaches that this happened on Pentecost, when believers were “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4). So, was the Spirit simply being kept by God “in reserve” before Pentecost?
2. The Bible says that the power of the Holy Spirit can produce amazing things like healings and exorcisms

Session Five

(driving out demons). Have you or Christians you know experienced anything like this? What do you think about it?

3. Read Acts 2:43-47, referred to in the video. According to this text, what does it look like when God's Spirit is present?

Session Six: The Spirit is Life

Part One: The Spirit's Work

"[The Spirit] will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you." (John 16:14)

Discussion Questions

1. With Psalm 51, Christians pray, "do not take your holy spirit from *me*" (Psalm 51:11). With Paul, Christians confess that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to *us*" (Romans 5:5). What is the relation, do you think, between the Spirit for *me* and the Spirit for *us*?
2. The Spirit "will glorify me," said Jesus, "because he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14). What is it that Jesus says is "mine" and how might the Spirit "declare" it to us?

Part Two: Experiencing the Spirit

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit..." (1 Corinthians 12:4)

Discussion Questions

1. Who has the gifts of the Spirit and what do they look like? That question can provoke active and sometimes unpleasant conversation among Christians. Must the "gifts of the Spirit" appear "out of this world" to others? Compare 1 Corinthians 12:1-31 with Romans 12:3-6.
2. After discussing other spiritual gifts, Paul goes on to speak of a "still more excellent way"—the gift of love (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13). If you have heard or read this passage, what has it meant to you? How does it contribute to our discussion of the experience of the Holy Spirit?
3. According to Acts 2:37, all who are baptized in the name of Jesus receive the forgiveness of sins and "the gift of the Holy Spirit." If you have been baptized, how do you think the Spirit has been working in your life?

Part Three: Signs of the Spirit

"...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23)

Discussion Questions

1. Think of the ways that we speak of "spirit." We can encourage "school spirit," but we can also be frightened by the "evil spirits" in a horror movie. Where is the Holy Spirit in all this? How can we "test the spirits" (1 John

Session Six

1:4)?

2. “The fruit of the Spirit,” says the Bible, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Imagine a church marked by such things! What would it look like? What would people be doing?
3. George Macdonald, a Christian poet, wrote, “Faith opens all the windows to God’s wind.” Talk about how you hear these words and what they mean to you.