

Encountering the God of Faith, Hope, and Love in the Bible

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with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome	7
What materials will you use?	8
How will you use these materials?	8
Lesson One (Faith and Hope in the God of the Family)	11
Lesson Two (Faith and Hope in the God of the Nations)	27
Lesson Three (Faith and Hope in the God of the World to Come)	41
Lesson Four (Faith and Hope in the Gospel)	57
Lesson Five (God's Love for Us)	71
Lesson Six (Our Love for God)	87
Praying with Your Group	101
Reflecting on Scripture	103



Wrap-Up Lectures and Discussion Tips for Facilitators are available for each lesson at no charge. Find them online at

Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

Encountering the God of Faith, Hope, and Love in the Bible

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into six lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book and the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet six times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.


Some groups choose to have an initial gathering before their regular sessions begin. This allows an opportunity to meet one another, pass out books, and, if desired, view the optional intro lecture for this study available on the "Resources" page of the Little Rock Scripture Study website (littlerockscripture.org). Please note that there is only one intro lecture for two-part studies.

Every Bible study group is a little bit different. Some of our groups like to break each lesson up into two weeks

of study so they are reading less each week and have more time to discuss the questions together at their weekly gatherings. If your group wishes to do this, simply agree how much of each lesson will be read each week, and only answer the questions that correspond to the material you read. Wrap-up lectures can then be viewed at the end of every other meeting rather than at the end of every meeting. Of course, this will mean that your study will last longer, and your group will meet more times.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- Scripture passages to be studied, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.
- Commentary by George M. Smiga.
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the Scripture passages being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by the author and staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the video lectures available online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is:

 Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.

- Read the assigned material for Lesson One (pages 12–22) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session.
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 23–25.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 26 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer on page 11 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- View the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (about 15 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. View the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

A note to individuals

- If you are using this resource for individual study, simply move at your own pace. Take as much time as you need to read, study, and pray with the material.
- If you would like to share this experience with others, consider inviting a friend or family member to join you for your next study. Even a small group of two or three provides an opportunity for fruitful dialog and faith-sharing!

Encountering the God of Faith, Hope, and Love in the Bible

LESSON ONE

Faith and Hope in the God of the Family

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

Lord God, help us listen with the ears of our hearts as we spend time with your word. Reveal yourself to us today as you have revealed yourself through the ages, and strengthen in us your gifts of faith, hope, and love.

Read pages 12–22, Lesson One.

Respond to the questions on pages 23–25, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 26 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION

When Christians hear of the triad “faith, hope, and love,” we usually think of three habits or virtues. This is understandable because our catechetical tradition presents them as such. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls faith, hope, and love “theological virtues” because they make us capable of participating in the life of God: “The theological virtues relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One and Triune God for their origin, motive, and object” (1812). Faith, hope, and love are the highest gifts because they have the highest purpose: They make our relationship with God possible.

The Bible also speaks of faith, hope, and love. It does not refer to them as virtues; nevertheless, the biblical understanding of this holy triad agrees with the *Catechism*: They are three gifts that allow the human person to know and serve God.

These three gifts are best understood together. When we first considered a Bible study on faith, hope, and love for Little Rock Scripture Study, we entertained the possibility of publishing three separate volumes, one for each gift. But as our discussion continued, it became obvious that in the Scriptures these three gifts are too intertwined to be presented separately. This volume is the result of that insight. It will present faith, hope, and love as three interconnected dimensions of the divine-human relationship. They are three essential ways we participate in the life of God.

Because faith, hope, and love enable our relationship with God, their significance is determined by how we understand God. The appreciation of who God is and what God has done deepens as we move through the Bible. Our ability to encounter God deepens as well. What it means to be in relationship with God is considerably different in the book of Genesis, for example, than in the First Letter to the Corinthians—although it will be a goal of this study to show that a profound continuity remains.

Studying faith, hope, and love in the Bible is not an abstract, philosophical effort. This holy triad offers three ways to understand a relationship—our relationship with God. Of course, this is a mammoth undertaking. Therefore, we must be satisfied simply to address the highlights and contours of its development. That is what this volume attempts to do. But before we begin, we will briefly discuss the focus of each of the three gifts and how they relate to one another.

Faith

There is no single word for “faith” in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). There is, rather, a cluster of words that carry the sense of reliability, trustworthiness, confidence, or belief. As verbs, they express being firmly set on something, having confidence in something, or holding something to be true.

When these words are directed toward God, they describe a relationship, because faith is directed to a person in whom we place our confidence. Faith, in the biblical sense, is not intellectual assent to a set of theological dogmas, like those found in a creed. It is entering into and clinging to a personal relationship with God, who is recognized as trustworthy.

*Faith, hope,
and love are
three gifts that
make our
relationship with
God possible.*

The New Testament employs the Greek word *pistis* to describe faith. The term carries forward the sense of the Hebrew Scriptures: entering into and holding on to a personal relationship with God.

Hope

The Hebrew Scriptures also use a variety of terms for “hope,” whereas the New Testament regularly employs one word (*elpis*) to describe it. What the two testaments share in common is the conviction that hope is essential to and is derived from a relationship with God.

Faith and hope are closely connected. If faith is entering into a relationship with God, hope describes what we expect from that relationship and what we believe God will give us. Hope, then, is directed less by our desires and expectations and more by God’s intention and power. The more we understand who God is and what God can do, the more hope expands.

As the biblical tradition develops over time, the awareness of God’s power increases and the scope of God’s intention for humanity is clarified. Faith and hope follow this development. As the appreciation of God and what we can expect from God increases, there is simply more in which to believe and hope.

We will follow the biblical development of faith and hope in the first four lessons of this study. Lesson One is “Faith and Hope in the God of the Family.” Here we will examine the beginnings of faith and hope in the narratives of Genesis concerning the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel. Lesson Two is “Faith and Hope in the God of the Nations.” Our focus here will be on the exodus, the covenant at Sinai, and Israel’s accounts of the creation of the world. Lesson Three is “Faith and Hope in the God of the World to Come.” Here we will explore the impact of Israel’s exile in Babylon, the growing desire for a better world, and the emergence of belief in the resurrection of the dead. Lesson Four is “Faith and Hope in the Gospel.” This lesson will examine how our understanding of God’s intention and power are enlarged and fulfilled by the mission of Jesus.

As we move through these first four lessons, we will also identify ten characteristics the Bible offers us to describe our relationship with the God of faith, hope, and love. Some of these characteristics emerge in the earliest passages that describe the divine-human relationship. Others are revealed later in Israel’s experience. But all ten continue as viable descriptions of our relationship with God today.

Love

The biblical concept of love is extremely wide. It can refer to affection, attraction, sexual activity, friendship, loyalty, covenant, kindness, or mercy. In the Bible, love calls forth qualities of intimate knowledge, devotion, loyalty, and responsibility. This study will focus primarily on theological love, the love that characterizes the divine-human relationship. Love is what grounds the relationship between God and us.

Lesson Five will explore God’s love for us. It will show how the Bible presents God’s love as inexplicable, scandalous, universal, and incarnate. Lesson Six will discuss love from the other side of the relationship: our love for God. We will discover a continuity within the Bible that links our love for God with our love for our neighbor, especially our enemies and those who are marginalized.

Contemporary Relevance

In my two other books for Little Rock Scripture Study (*Angels in the Bible* and *The Holy Spirit in the Bible*), I included sections entitled *Contemporary Relevance* that offer suggestions for how particular biblical passages might connect to our lives today. Because these sections were positively received by our participants, I have also included them in this study. As always, my suggestions in these *Contemporary Relevance* sections should not be considered complete or definitive. I offer them only to encourage further reflection on faith, hope, and love and their meaning for your life. I hope they will enrich your reading of these biblical texts and your discussions and faith-sharing with one another.



FAITH AND HOPE IN THE GOD OF THE FAMILY

The Relationship Begins with Abraham

We have described biblical faith as entering into and clinging to a personal relationship with God. Our relationship with God became possible at a specific moment in history. Where and when did it begin? Those who are familiar with the Bible might be inclined to turn to the creation stories of Genesis 1–2. After all, what is earlier than creation? But, as we will see in Lesson Two, these profound narratives of the world’s beginning derive from later periods of Israel’s history. The first scriptural recounting of faith in God is to be found in the narratives of Genesis 12–50. Although these stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, and Joseph were heavily edited by later biblical authors, most scholars recognize that the historical traditions within them mark the beginning of our relationship with God.

Enough historical material can be gleaned from these early narratives to suggest that our relationship with God began around 1,850 years before the birth of Christ, in Mesopotamia, in the city of Haran, a busy trade center located in what is today southeast Turkey. There, a man who had migrated with his fam-

ily from Ur, another city of Mesopotamia, heard the voice of God. The man’s name was Abraham (see 🔥 insert on p. 15). His communication with God initiated the faith tradition of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. So important was this encounter between God and Abraham that the Hebrew Bible provides three versions of it. We will examine two of them in depth, demonstrating how each narrative establishes important dimensions of our relationship with God that continue to be relevant to this day.

Abraham and the God Who Initiates, Creates Community, and Journeys with Us

Genesis 12:1-9

Abram’s Call and Migration. ¹The LORD said to Abram: Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.

⁴Abram went as the LORD directed him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. ⁵ Abram took his wife Sarai, his brother’s son Lot, all the possessions that they had accumulated, and the persons they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶Abram passed through the land as far as the sacred place at Shechem, by the oak of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said: To your descendants I will give this land. So Abram built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. ⁸From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel, pitching his tent with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. He built an altar there to the LORD and invoked the LORD by name. ⁹Then Abram journeyed on by stages to the Negeb.