

# What Does it Mean to be Lutheran? Holy Tensions

## SESSION 1: HOLY TENSIONS: IN JESUS ALL THINGS HOLD TOGETHER

### OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, all things hold together in You. Be present with us as we begin this study. Hold us together in Your Word and wisdom. Guide us in truth and knowledge by the Holy Spirit. And keep us, even in this world that is full of tensions, in your unending peace and power. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### Introduction

*How does this picture depict tension as a bad thing?*



Tension can be a very bad thing...

- Tense relationships with friends or parents
- Tension from stress and anxiety
- Tension from the push and pull of homework, job, sports, and friends

*How does this picture depict tension as a good thing?*



Tension can be a good thing...

- Violins can only play when the strings are under the proper tension.
- Runners cannot go any distance without their shoelaces tied tight.
- The solar system relies on the tension of gravitational pushing and pulling.

### POSSIBLE ACTIVITY

Take out your smart phones and do a quick internet search for “Definition of Tension.” What are some dictionary entries? Are the entries all negative definitions of tension or are there any positive definitions of tension? What are some tensions—good or bad—in your life right now? Consider discussing some of the tensions you are experiencing in your own life.

### Study: Tension, Psalms, and Jesus

The Psalms are full of tensions. Recognizing these “holy tensions” is vital to rightly understanding Scripture, God, and what it means to be Lutheran.

Read + Discuss:

Read Psalm 46.

***Looking at Psalm 46:1, how does “a very present help” and “in trouble” create a tension?***

***Is this a bad tension or a good tension? Why?***

***Discuss: Is the tension in this Psalm like a frayed rope about to break or a taut violin string ready to play beautiful music?***

***The historical context for this Psalm is thought to be an impending battle. That is, God is a very present help during the trouble of war. We may not experience the trouble of war, but we certainly experience troubles. How have you seen God present in the midst of your troubles? In what ways is God present in our daily battles through the troubles of school, friends, family, and life?***



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Read Psalm 110:1.

***Psalm 110 is quoted 17 times in the New Testament. Any idea why it was used so often?***

***Can you find a tension in Psalm 110:1? What is it?***

***What “holy tensions” do we see in Jesus? What differences or paradoxes are held together in Jesus?***

***What “holy tensions” come as a result of being a follower of Jesus?***

Read Psalm 22.

***This Psalm is full of tensions. What are some?***

***Jesus spoke part of Psalm 22 from the cross (Mark 15:34). How is this a sort of “holy tension”?***

***David wrote this Psalm a long time ago. Although it’s an ancient prayer, how does this Psalm still speak vividly to our own lives?***

Read Colossians 1:15-20.

***While not a Psalm, Colossians includes some “holy tensions.” What are they?***

***What are some key points of this section of Scripture? How might you paraphrase these verses?***

## Wrapping Up: Lutherans Live in the Tension

Some Christian tradition—such as the Reformed or Catholic traditions—try to resolve certain tensions of Scripture. For example, the Reformed tradition resolves the tension of Jesus’ presence in heaven and in Holy Communion by saying that He is only present in heaven and not present in Holy Communion. This teaching resolves the tension of how Jesus can be bodily present in both places, yet it ends up being contrary to Scripture. Lutherans, on the other hand, delight in the tensions of Scripture...even if it can be a challenge to hold these tensions together.

***Why is it so important to hold the tensions of Scripture together rather than always resolving them?***

***Can you think of any good movies or books that maintain a tension throughout rather than ending with a neat and tidy resolution?***

***Do you prefer movies and books that hold the tension or the ones with the neat and tidy ending?***

***Which is more realistic and closer to reality—the ones that hold the tension or the ones with the neat and tidy ending?***

***Why might other Christian traditions try to resolve the tensions of Scripture?***

Lutherans make a big deal about keeping Jesus front-and-center in our lives, our faith, and our churches.

***What else competes to be front-and-center in your...***

***Life?***

***Faith?***

***Church?***

***How do we know if we are all about Jesus or all about everything else?***

### TAKE HOME CHALLENGE

Open up your Bible to a random section and begin reading. Continue reading until you find a tension or paradox similar to what was discussed in this study.

### CLOSING PRAYER

Jesus, all things hold together in You. We ask that You would hold us together in Your Word and truth, mercy and love. Let nothing else in all of creation become the center of our lives, our faith, and our churches. Jesus, be front-and-center in all that we do. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.





# What Does it Mean to be Lutheran? Holy Tensions

## Session 2: Holy Tensions: Dead and Alive, Sinner and Saint

### OPENING PRAYER

Christ Jesus, we need You. Apart from You, we are dead in our sin, lost in our rebellion, and in need of a savior. Keep us ever mindful of our need for You. Yet, even more, keep us mindful of Your great love and mercy. You, Jesus, are our savior. Your Good News has made us sinless saints worthy to be in Your presence. Join us in this study. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### Introduction

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Question: Forward I am heavy, but backward I am not. What am I?

Answer: Ton (forward) / Not (backward)

This riddle demonstrates a sort of tension. One word has two very different meanings depending on which way you look at it.

This study is going to explore two important Lutheran tensions: "Law and Gospel" and "Sinner and Saint." As we learned and discussed in the last session, we must always hold onto both parts of these tensions. If we overemphasize one at the expense of the other, we have failed to hold onto the tension.

### Study: Dead and Alive, Sinner and Saint

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Cultural connection: Professional sports teams sometimes have what is known as a "player-coach." This one person is both player and coach at the same time. Rather than just a player or just a coach, a player-coach plays in the game while also making coaching decisions for the team. This connection shows us how two different things can occur simultaneously.

King David composed many of the Psalms. While David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), he also had many sins and failures in his life. David was both a man after God's own heart and a sinner at the very same time.

Read 2 Samuel 11:1-5, 14-15, 26-27.

**What were some of the sins that David committed in these verses? Which of the Ten Commandments did he break?**

**People often think that "things today are not like they used to be" and "people today are worse than people a long time ago." What do these verses have to say about that notion? In what ways are people today exactly the same as people long ago?**

Read 2 Samuel 12:1-13.

**The prophet Nathan confronted David and his sin. Was Nathan "judging" David? Can you find anything in these verses suggesting that Nathan was "judging" David? If he was not judging David, what was he doing?**

**Nathan confronts David on his sin. And David repents of his sin. What happens after that? Why is the order of this interaction so important? How would it have been different if Nathan proclaimed God's forgiveness to David first before he confessed his sins?**

Read Psalm 51.

**David composed this Psalm "when Nathan the Prophet went to him..." How does this context help us better understand this Psalm?**

**What tensions are present in Psalm 51?**

**How does this Psalm inform our own life of repentance? What can we learn or practice from this Psalm?**

**Have you ever heard parts of Psalm 51 in the Divine Service or worship? If so, where in worship have you heard parts of Psalm 51?**

Read Psalm 32.

**Like Psalm 51, this Psalm poses several different tensions. What tensions are present in this Psalm?**

**This Psalm affirms both sin and salvation, guilt and grace. How does the one side of this dynamic (sin/guilt) make the other side more wonderful (salvation/grace)? Could you appreciate God's salvation and grace without recognizing your sin and guilt?**



# What Does it Mean to be Lutheran? Holy Tensions

*Is David one who has “...sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Psalm 51:4) or one “whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (Psalm 32:1)?*

*What about us? Are we one who has “sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Psalm 51:4) or one “whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (Psalm 32:1)?*

## Wrapping Up: Lutherans hold the tension of “Law and Gospel” and “Sinner and Saint”

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*“Context matters.” What does this mean? What is context? Why is it important to understand context?*

*How does “context matter” as we think about “Law and Gospel” and “Sinner and Saint”?*

Imagine if David had been broken by God’s Law and Nathan left him by saying, “You’re right dude, you are a messed up sinner!”

Imagine if David had refused to repent of his sin and Nathan said, “It’s alright brother, God forgives you even if you remain in this sin.”

*How does “context matter” as we recognize when we need to speak or hear either God’s Law or God’s Gospel?*

*How does this conversation apply to our own lives? When do you need to hear God’s Law and be reminded that you are a sinner in need of a savior? When do you need to hear God’s Gospel and that you are a forgiven saint through faith in Jesus?*

*How does this conversation apply to our interactions with friends? How do we determine what to say and when? How do we know when to be like Nathan and call someone out on their sin? How do we know when to be like Nathan and remind someone that he or she is forgiven by Jesus?*

## TAKE HOME CHALLENGE

Throughout the week, be on the lookout for God’s Law and God’s Gospel. Look for a time in your week when you are painfully aware of your shortcomings and failures before God as one who has “...sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Psalm 51:4). Look for a time in your week when you are powerfully aware of God’s mercy and grace as one “whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (Psalm 32:1). Consider texting someone else in this study during the week to tell that person about what happened.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Teach us, Jesus, how to speak and hear the right words at the right time. We are sinners in need of Your salvation. And we are saved by You and made holy saints through your mercy. Guide us as we hear Your Word and share Your Word with others. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.



# What Does it Mean to be Lutheran? Holy Tensions

## Session 3: Holy Tensions: God's Glocal Presence

### OPENING PRAYER:

Christ Jesus, You are our Real. Present. God. Teach us to see how You are beyond this world and yet present in this world. Let us celebrate the ways in which You have drawn near to us in Your Word, through our Baptisms, and at the altar of Holy Communion. Lord, be with us now as You have promised to be when we gather in Your name. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### Introduction:

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#### ACTIVITY:

Imagine that you are a superhero. You need to find a superhero sidekick so that the two of you can take on the world. The way you will do this is...

Going around the room and combine some part of your name with someone else's name. Examples below.

Bobby + Jonathan = Bobathan

Sarah + Alex = Salex

Try doing this with several different people.

Who had the best superhero combo name?

This session will continue exploring what it means to be Lutheran. We will discuss more tensions that Lutherans hold together as they follow Jesus. In the spirit of this opening activity, we will begin by thinking about a combination word: Glocal.

**What two words do you hear in the word "glocal"?**

**What might this word mean? How might it be used? Can you put it in a sentence? What things in our world are glocal?**

### Study: God's Glocal Presence in Word and Sacrament

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Read Psalm 119:89-91.

**Psalm 119 extols the greatness of God's Word. What does Psalm 119:89-91 have to say about God's Word? Do these verses make God's Word seem lofty and transcendent or near and personal?**

Read Psalm 119:25-32.

**What does Psalm 119:25-32 have to say about God's Word? Do these verses make God's Word seem lofty and transcendent or near and personal?**

**How does Psalm 119:89-91 and Psalm 119:25-32 form a tension? What is this tension?**

Read Psalm 104:1-9.

**Recall that word "glocal" that we used at the beginning of this session. Which part of that word do these verses emphasize? Do these verses depict God as being global, transcendent, and other worldly? Or do these verses depict God as being local, near, and present?**

**What comfort or peace is there for you personally in these verses? How is it reassuring to hear of God's great splendor and majesty, power and might?**

Read Psalm 34:8-18.

**Which part of the word "glocal" do these verses emphasize? Do these verses depict God as being global, transcendent, and other worldly? Or do these verses depict God as being local, near, and present?**

**What comfort or peace is there for you personally in these verses? How is it comforting to be invited to taste and see that the Lord is good? How does it bring you peace to know that God is near to the brokenhearted?**

### Wrapping Up: Lutherans Believe that God is a Real. Present. God.

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Turn to Luther's Small Catechism.

*The Sacrament of Holy Baptism*

*What benefit does Baptism give? It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this as the words and promises of God declare.*

*The Sacrament of the Altar*





# What Does it Mean to be Lutheran? Holy Tensions

*What is the Sacrament of the Altar? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.*

*Confession + Absolution*

*What is confession? Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.*

**Using the selections above to guide your conversation, how do Baptism, Holy Communion, and Absolution take God's transcendent power and make it local and personal?**

***What is glocal about Baptism?***

***What is glocal about Holy Communion?***

***What is glocal about Absolution?***

***How do the Sacraments show us how God is our Real. Present. God.?***

## **CLOSING PRAYER:**

Holy Lord, You are mighty and lofty and transcendent. And yet, O Lord, You are near to us. Reveal how You are our real present God in and through the waters of our Baptism, Your body and blood in Holy Communion, and Your forgiveness in the words of Absolution. Come and be near to us, Jesus. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.



# What Does it Mean to be Lutheran? Holy Tensions

## Session 4: Holy Tensions: Living in Holy Tension

### OPENING PRAYER:

Father in heaven, You alone are worthy of our praise and worship. We come to You in prayer with great confidence knowing that You have invited us to speak with You. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit so that we can use our freedom in Christ Jesus to love and serve our neighbors. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### Introduction:

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*“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” (Martin Luther, On the Freedom of a Christian [LW 31:344])*

**What does Luther mean by saying that the followers of Jesus are “free” and “subject to none” but also “servants” and “subject to all”?**

**How is it liberating to know that we do not have to work to earn God’s love and favor?**

**How does being free in Jesus make us better friends, neighbors, siblings, and classmates?**

**This quote from Luther depicts one of the tensions that come with being a follower of Jesus. Can you think of other tensions that arise within the Christian life?**

### Study: The Tensions of Worship, Devotional Life, and Loving Others

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Read Psalm 121.

*The historical setting of this Psalm is the worship life of Israel. It would have been sung as worshippers approached Jerusalem for worship during a festival. In what ways does this Psalm depict God’s people worshiping Him? In what ways does this Psalm depict God serving His people?*

**How does it change things to think of worship as God serving us (Psalm 121:2) instead of us serving God? Does this make worship more about us or more about God? Is there a tension here?**

Read Psalm 119:97-104.

**This Psalm celebrates the great gift of God’s Word. Reading God’s Word is a great blessing and encouragement to us. In what ways does God’s Word “read” us? How does God’s Word lead to “understanding” (Psalm 119:99-100, 104) both God and ourselves? Is there a tension in that we read God’s Word yet God’s Word reads us?**

Read Psalm 86:1-7.

**This Psalm is a prayer of David. What tensions are there in this prayer?**

**If you think about it, prayer is a rather curious thing. The all-powerful God of all creation wants to hear about the insignificant and little things in the lives of His creatures. Though He already knows the future, the all-knowing God of the universe invites us to come to Him with our requests and petitions. What other tensions are there in prayer?**

**Is prayer about us changing God or God changing us? Is prayer about developing a relationship with God as we call upon Him in faith and trust?**

Read Psalm 100.

This Psalm is about serving the Lord with gladness.

**Consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:31-40. How is serving others also serving God?**

**How might Psalm 100:3 connect to loving our neighbors? How might this Psalm connect to evangelism and telling others the Good News of Christ Jesus? Consider the words of Jesus in John 10:11-18.**



# What Does it Mean to be Lutheran? Holy Tensions

## Wrapping Up: Lutherans Live as Dual Citizens

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Lutherans maintain the tension of being dual-citizens—being citizens of heaven who are not of the world but also being citizens in the world. Consider the words of Jesus in John 17:15-19.

A Lutheran theologian named Gustaf Wingren once wrote, “God doesn’t need your good works, but your neighbor does.” This statement captures how Lutherans approach the Christian life. Having been freed from sin, death, and the devil in Christ Jesus, we are free to genuinely love and serve our neighbors.

***Why is it easier to love God than it is to love others?***

***If loving and serving others does not improve our standing before God, why do followers of Jesus even bother?***

Martin Luther often read through the entire Bible twice per year. (We have a hard time reading through our Twitter feed...)

***What is your practice of Bible reading? Are you a daily Bible reader? Are you an “open up to a random page” Bible reader? What would it take for you to become more focused and intentional in your Bible reading?***

## TAKE-HOME CHALLENGE:

Pass out several stacks of sticky-notes to the class. Give the group a few minutes to write down various barriers to Bible reading. Each sticky note should have only one barrier. For example, “lack of time” would be a barrier to Bible reading and would constitute one sticky note. “Hard to read” might be another barrier to Bible reading and would constitute a different sticky note. After the group has written down all the different barriers they can think of, have one person put the sticky notes on the wall into categories/groupings. The first person is free to make up his or her own categories/groupings. Then have other students put their sticky notes on the wall by either (a) putting their sticky notes into the existing categories/groups or (b) creating a new category/group. Once everyone has put their sticky notes on the wall and they are arranged into various categories/groups, take some time to discuss these barriers to Bible reading and how we can work to overcome these and spend more time in God’s Word.

## CLOSING PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, send Your Holy Spirit and be present among us as we follow You. It can be a daily struggle to live in the tension of being in the world but not of the world. Forgive us of the times in which we have failed to live faithfully as Your people. And enable us to truly live as Your redeemed people everywhere we go. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.