

Friendship Ablaze!

Section 3

Bible Studies

All studies of effective outreach congregations continue to show that God uses families and friends to touch the lives of people with the Gospel.

This series of five Bible studies shares a practical, step-by-step way God's people can grow in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in their daily lives and friendships. We believe the Holy Spirit wants to set our friendships *Ablaze!* with the power of His presence and the love and hope of Jesus.

These *Friendship Ablaze!* Bible studies are adapted from studies written by Pastor Stephen Wagner for a Friendship Celebration packet produced by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Evangelism department. We thank Pastor Wagner for graciously allowing us to continue to use this study to equip God's people to set their friendships *Ablaze!* with Gospel power.

The five Bible studies are:

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|--|-----------|
| 1. Getting Ready for <i>Friendship Ablaze!</i> | page 3-2 |
| 2. <i>Friendship Ablaze!</i> Prays | page 3-6 |
| 3. <i>Friendship Ablaze!</i> Reaches Out | page 3-10 |
| 4. <i>Friendship Ablaze!</i> has a Message | page 3-13 |
| 5. <i>Friendship Ablaze!</i> Does Unsolicited Acts of Kindness | page 3-17 |

May God graciously bless all of us as we seek to grow in *Friendship Ablaze!*

Bible Study 1

Getting Ready for *Friendship Ablaze!*

You have just received some really good news. You are engaged to be married! You got the position for which you interviewed! You are going to be a grandparent! You are "ablaze" with desire to tell a friend the good news. Who would that friend be?

Think about your friend. What is the history of your friendship? What qualities in that relationship make the friendship special? Briefly write down your thoughts. If you are studying this in a group, take a moment to share your thoughts.

Consider one further question. Does the history of your friendship include a spiritual connection? Are you and your friend members of the same church? Did you have an influence on your friend coming to faith in Jesus Christ, or did the friend have an influence on your faith development? Did the words "lost" or "Christian," "unchurched" or "churched" enter into your thoughts about your friend?

The reality is that friends and family members significantly influence how most people become Christians and find a church home. To ignore the spiritual dimensions of a friendship is a significant oversight in terms of outreach and spiritual growth through the church. The Holy Spirit fills all our friendships with spiritual power and spiritual opportunities. The Spirit wants us to have friendships *Ablaze!* with His fire.

Let me share a personal assumption about friendship evangelism: It begins from the inside out.

Getting ready for *Friendship Ablaze!* begins with a relationship of faith in Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, I would suggest this might be thought of as a friendship. Read John 15:14-15.

Friendship with God begins and continues with a focus on the cross of Jesus Christ. It is



sustained by the confession of sins and the wonderful assurance of forgiveness. Read I John 1:8-10. It is the mercy, grace, and love of God which you have received that you also share with friends in order to make spiritual connections. This is truly *Friendship Ablaze!* with the Spirit's power. It is the source of all our friendships *Ablaze!*

Think about evangelism from the inside out as you read Isaiah 6:1-8.

1. In verse 3, how did God set Isaiah *Ablaze!* with the zeal to go and speak for Him?
2. Read Luke 11:1-13. How does Jesus emphasize the holiness of God in His teaching?
3. Read John 15:8. How is the glory of God seen in the world today?
4. How does Isaiah describe himself as he perceives the presence of God?

In verse 5, what does “Woe to me!” mean to you? Note: Many Bible commentators define “woe” as meaning “imperfect; not complete.”

5. In verse 5, how does Isaiah acknowledge his sin?

His general acknowledgment --

His specific acknowledgment --

His identification with his culture (with all people) --

6. In verses 6-7, what is God's response? What is the good news?

7. In verse 8, as a forgiven man, Isaiah discerns the Lord's purpose. God has a message for people. What is Isaiah's response?

8. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: gratitude for the complete forgiveness of his sins motivates Isaiah's response and sets him *Ablaze!*

Why?

9. What similarities do you see between this experience in the life of Isaiah and the experience of Peter in Luke 5:1-11?

What sets their hearts *Ablaze*?

10. *Friendship Ablaze!* begins from the inside out. Do you agree or disagree?

The good news I have received I want to share with a friend. Why?

Would you take a very practical step? Think through an acknowledgment of your own sins in the same three ways Isaiah did. Would you ask God to forgive you for Jesus' sake? Would you gratefully acknowledge your willingness to share that good news with a friend?

A closing prayer:

Father, I need Your forgiveness for the sin in my life. I know Jesus died for that reason. Thank You for that incredible expression of love. What good news! Holy Spirit, my friendships can be **Ablaze!** with spiritual power and opportunity only as You set my heart **Ablaze!** through Jesus' love. Fill me now with an excitement to share that news with a friend. Here am I. Send me to (name of friend). In the Name of my Friend Jesus, who created a **Friendship Ablaze!** with me. Amen.

Bible Study 2

Friendship Ablaze! Prays

The first step in *Friendship Ablaze!* is to pray for a friend who is spiritually lost or simply unchurched. It is God's gracious answer to your prayers on behalf of your friend that opens the door to sharing the good news of the Gospel and extending an invitation to be part of your church.

It is important to remember that it is not prayer alone that brings a person into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit sets our friendships *Ablaze!*

In his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in his Small Catechism, Martin Luther wrote: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel..."

In His grace the Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts of people as they hear the Gospel. Read Romans 10:17. A friend who is lost in sin, a friend who is unchurched, can be reached for Christ and His Church when a believing friend shares the truth of God's love and the Holy Spirit creates a response of faith.

Take a moment to remember the beginning of your own faith or a time when your faith was especially real to you. How did God's Word affect what was happening in your life or how did it help you understand what was happening? If you are studying this book in a group, take a moment to share your thoughts.

Though it is always the Holy Spirit working through the sharing of the Gospel that builds faith, it is prayer that prepares the way for your friend to hear and come to faith.

Think about the relationship of prayer and outreach as you read the following:

1. Romans 10:1. Why might Paul's prayer for the Israelites be called *Ablaze?*

2. Matthew 9:38. Who is the Holy Spirit calling to the “harvest”?

3. Acts 4:29-31. How did the apostles pray that they might be *Ablaze!* with the zeal to declare God’s Word?

4. Acts 16:25-34. How does this text show Paul was *Ablaze!* with seeing an opportunity to share the Gospel in unusual and unexpected circumstances?

5. Romans 10:9-15. How might you know that God has a passion for friendships *Ablaze!* and wants everyone to come to faith in Jesus Christ?

Summarize how these verses of Scripture become a prayer list for yourself as you seek to carry out *Friendship Ablaze!*

The Bible also helps us know how we can pray for a lost or unchurched friend to come to a place of interest concerning the Gospel or an invitation to your church. This “interest” is not faith. It is simply a time of change or disappointment or hurt when your friend has questions concerning the circumstances of life. You may want to pray that:

1. Your friend begins to ask “honest” (or thoughtful) questions. For example: How can you know there is a God? How can you be sure Jesus rose from the dead? How can you believe in creation instead of evolution? Read Psalm 19:1. How can this verse help answer “honest”/thoughtful questions?

2. Your friend will feel troubled because of sin. Examples might include feelings of guilt, fear, or anxiety, especially related toward God. Read Romans 2:15. How does the Gospel help calm feelings related to sin?
3. Your friend would ask, “How can I deal with my troubles?” Examples might include issues related to family: trouble with a child, trouble in a marriage. Read Luke 17:13. How does your experience of faith help you in similar situations?

What is the counsel of the Word of God for your friend’s difficulty?

4. God will open your friend’s heart and mind to the Holy Spirit’s work. Read I Corinthians 12:3. Why is this declaration of faith significant?
5. Satan's lies will not find intellectual acceptance. Examples include thoughts that represent cultural acceptance or personal rationalizations that are contrary to a relationship with Jesus Christ and the teachings of His Word: consensual sexual relationships outside marriage, substance abuse, pornography, abortion, etc. Read 2 Corinthians 4:4. How do you understand the mind as the battle ground of spiritual warfare?

Summarize how these verses might become a prayer list for your lost or unchurched friend. How do they help you focus on *Friendship Ablaze?*

Will you begin to pray for your friend each day about these things?

Will you be available to your friend for times of support, encouragement, and witness that bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the context of your friend’s life?

A closing prayer:

Father, I have a special friend who is lost (or unchurched). Bless this friend and our friendship. Help me to be ***Ablaze!*** with the zeal to serve my friend. Help me love that friend with such passion that I am available for the moment when my friend's heart and mind are open to receive my love and hear the wonderful Gospel of Your love. Let that moment be soon. May this friendship be a ***Friendship Ablaze!*** In the Name of my Friend, Jesus. Amen.

Bible Study 3

Friendship Ablaze! Reaches Out

Before you begin this *Friendship Ablaze!* Bible study, take a moment to write down the names of the first twenty people who come to mind when you think of friends or family.

Now review your list. How many are Christians who have a church home?

How many are unchurched?

How many are not Christians?

Most adult Christians know 8 to 20 people who are functionally unchurched. Developing friendships *Ablaze!* means we believe we can reach those unchurched people and lost people for Christ and His church. Those names go on your prayer list of unchurched friends.

Friendship Ablaze! sees relationships with the unchurched and the lost as valuable. Lost people matter to God. Read John 3:16. Your friendship with someone who is unchurched or lost can be a powerful spiritual connection and a pathway into the church. It can be *Ablaze!* with the Holy Spirit's power and presence.

It works like this. Read John 4:1-26, 39-42. Here you see *Friendship Ablaze!* at work. As you review verses 39-42, how do you understand the woman's friendships becoming spiritual connections? Did her relationships with friends become a pathway to knowing Jesus Christ? What happened along that path that introduced Jesus Christ?

Think about how Jesus valued relationships with the lost as you read Luke 7:36-50 (notice the comment in verse 39) and Luke 19:1-10 (notice the comment in verse 7).

1. Where did Jesus spend time with the lost?
2. What implication might that have for sharing Christ in friendships *Ablaze*?
3. Why do you think others criticized Jesus for his compassion for the lost?
4. What implication might that have for developing friendships *Ablaze*!?
5. In Luke 19:10, how does Jesus describe His purpose on earth?

As I think through this last question, I am impressed that Jesus was very intentional about His purpose. He actively sought out the lost. I believe lost people matter to God. Therefore, they must matter to me, and I will actively seek them out.

Let me share some practical thoughts with you about *Friendship Ablaze!* and the list of unchurched and lost friends you created previously in this lesson:

1. Pray for those friends daily. Review chapter two for suggestions on how to pray for them to come to faith. Prayer is a crucial part of Friendship Ablaze!
2. Contact those friends weekly. Take time to make a telephone call; meet them for lunch; play a round of golf together. Be part of their lives. Keep the blaze burning brightly.
3. Remember them monthly. Bake a loaf of bread; send a “thinking of you” card; send them a book or a tape. Let them know that you are thinking of them and value their friendship.
4. Invite them to church or an appropriate church activity. This means know them well enough to know their interests and needs. Perhaps a worship service is an appropriate place to invite your friends. However, a marriage enrichment class might be better, or a concert, or a social event, like a ball game. If they say, "No," ask again another time.

A closing thought: friendships *Ablaze!* take time, commitment and intentional effort. Learn to value your friendships with those who are unchurched or not Christians. If you have few unchurched or non-Christian friends, intentionally seek people out where you work, where you live, where you shop, or where you play. Be their friend. You will be following the pattern of Jesus. And God can use your relationship to bring that friend to faith in Jesus Christ and spiritual growth in His church. Begin now with the friends you listed. God wants your friendships *Ablaze!* with the Gospel's love and the Spirit's power.

A closing prayer:

Father, thank You for my friends. Today I especially thank You for those who are unchurched or simply lost in their understanding of who Jesus is and what He means for their lives. I think especially of (names from your list). In Your grace, empower me to make each of these friendships a *Friendship Ablaze!* with Your love. Use me to help them know You. In the Name of my Friend Jesus. Amen.

Bible Study 4

Friendship Ablaze! has a Message

Can you remember the first time you ever had to speak in front of a large group? Maybe you had a part in a Christmas program at your church. Perhaps it was a speech class in high school or college or maybe it was a PowerPoint presentation to colleagues.

How would you describe the experience? How did you feel? If you are studying this book in a group, take a moment to share your thoughts.

The feelings you just revisited are the same feelings many Christians get when they think of evangelism. Many people seem to be more concerned with what they will say than to whom they will speak -- and, of whom they will speak. So they say nothing at all. *Friendship Ablaze!* means we must carefully, prayerfully, with the Spirit's help, grow through those fears.

Read Acts 1:8. Think through this important verse. It is the last thing Jesus says to His disciples. That alone makes the words very significant.

1. What does Jesus say His disciples (followers) are?

2. What does this word mean to you?

3. What is the source of power for this sharing?

4. What implications does your baptism have for this empowerment?

5. What is the scope of this sharing?

6. Do you think the word “Jerusalem” implies only a specific geographic location or includes relational networks; in other words, the friends who are closest to you?

7. What are the implications of your conclusion?

8. Read Acts 2:47. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: the church began to evangelize where Christians had established “good will” (friendships ***Ablaze!***) with others.

The result was explosive numbers of people being saved. Why?

But many wonder: What do I say? What is the message or story that I have to share with others?

I want to suggest an exercise that is best completed when it is written out. The discipline of writing your answers to these three questions will help you focus on your story of God’s grace in your life. If you studying this book in a group and the group is just seeing these questions for the first time, allow a few moments for thought and then share answers to the first of the three questions below. If the group has prepared in advance, allow each member to pick the question whose answer they are most comfortable sharing.

If this is an individual study, I strongly suggest that you write answers to all three questions and, within 48 hours, share what you wrote with a close Christian friend. The sharing has two benefits. It allows the friend to give you positive feedback. You will appreciate that! It allows you to practice sharing your faith story. You need that!

Think of your story like this: Read John 9:1-7, and 18-25. This is the simple, very simple witness (story) that led to the conclusion that Jesus is God.

Could you possibly ask for more for a friend who would hear your faith story? Why?

A closing prayer:

Father, I ask that my friendship be friendships **Ablaze!** with Jesus' love and the Spirit's power. Please use my faith story to help my friends (names) to conclude that Jesus is God, their Savior and Lord. Prompt me to know when it is appropriate to share. Then help me share my faith story without hesitation--boldly! In the Name of my Friend Jesus. Amen.

Bible Study 5

Friendship Ablaze! Does Unsolicited Acts of Kindness

Remember this cliché: “People don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care”? *Friendship Ablaze!* recognizes that unsolicited acts of kindness (caring for others) opens the door and gives credibility to the message of God’s love that we bring.

Sometimes the very thing that keeps a person from coming into the church or considering the Christian faith is a perception that churches are self-centered, cliquish, and cold to outsiders. Unsolicited acts of kindness break down that stereotype.

Think about the importance of this as you consider the life of Jesus Christ. Read Mark 10:43-45. Do you think it is accurate to say that Jesus lived a life of care for others; did no miracle for Himself, only for others; died and rose again for others of all times and places?

Why?

Write down an unsolicited act of kindness that Jesus did for someone else. If you are studying this book in a group, share your example with the other group members.

What are the implications of these thoughts for your relationships with unchurched or lost friends?

What role do they play in *Friendship Ablaze!*?

Let me share an assumption about evangelism: It is more a cultivation of care, love, and trust with another person than a one-time encounter under awkward circumstances. As you read the following, think about unsolicited acts of kindness as seeds sown that produce the fruit of relationships which serve the purpose of ***Friendship Ablaze!***

1. Ecclesiastes 11:6. What does this suggest about unsolicited acts of kindness?

2. Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23. How do unsolicited acts of kindness help to “prepare the soil” to receive the seed of God’s Word?

And what is the result of “fertile soil”?

3. John 12:24-26. How does this picture of the seed relate to unsolicited acts of kindness?

4. I Corinthians 3:5-9. How does this text suggest Friendship Ablaze! is more a cultivation of relationships than a one-time encounter with a stranger?

In his book *Conspiracy of Kindness*, Steve Sjogren suggests the following formula: friendship evangelism = deeds of love + words of love + adequate time.

As you press forward in developing friendships ***Ablaze!***, think about the friends on your list who are lost or simply unchurched and for whom you are praying. What is happening in their lives that gives you the opportunity for an unsolicited act of kindness?

What could you do as an unsolicited act of kindness if a friend was:

1. Recently divorced --
2. Unemployed --
3. Single parent --
4. Parent of a teen --
5. Recently retired --
6. First year of marriage --
7. Grieving the death of a loved one --
8. Just moved into your neighborhood --

If you are studying this book in a group, share thoughts about unsolicited acts of kindness toward people in circumstances like these. This is especially important if people in the group have friends in these life situations.

Now is the time to take action! In your own worship and devotional life, your sins are forgiven and your faith strengthened by God's grace in Jesus Christ. You have identified unchurched and lost friends for whom you can pray. You have a basic action plan to pray daily, contact weekly, remember monthly and invite appropriately. You have thought through your faith story to share boldly. You are ready to consistently demonstrate thoughtful unsolicited acts of kindness, friend to friend, with those who need Jesus' love. It is time for **Friendship Ablaze!**

In closing, read John 13:12-17. Reread verse 17. Are you ready to begin?

A closing prayer:

Father, the greatest unsolicited act of kindness was giving your Son, Jesus, to die for someone like me. Through His death my sins are forgiven. Through His Resurrection I have the gift of eternal life. He truly is the source of all friendships **Ablaze!** Use my acts of kindness for my unchurched and lost friends to help them discover the same great reality. Help me begin today. May my every friendship be a **Friendship Ablaze!** In the name of my Friend Jesus. Amen.

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