Bread on the Water

SMALL GROUP STUDY ... SIX SESSIONS

A companion to the book by Alan Bailey. Free to copy, free to run without asking anybody.

How this study works, and why it is built backwards

Most small group studies end with discussion questions. This one does not, and the difference is the whole point of the book.

Every chapter of Bread on the Water ends with an act. Not a question to sit with. A thing to go do, usually within a day, usually costing something.

So this study is built around those acts. Each session has a short discussion, and then it hands the group an act. The next session opens by asking who did it.

That opening is the load-bearing part. Do not skip it and do not let it become a shame exercise. Some weeks nobody will have done it. Say so out loud, without punishing anybody, and go again. A group that does two of the six acts has gotten more out of this than a group that discussed all nine chapters beautifully.

For the leader. You are not teaching this material. The book teaches it. Your job is three things: get the reading done, keep the discussion off theory, and ask the report-back question every single week without flinching.

Six sessions, sixty to seventy-five minutes each. If your group would rather run nine weeks, one chapter per week, the acts are already in the chapters and this guide will still work.

Session One ... Cast It Anyway

Read before you meet: Chapter One.

Open with this. Go around the room and have each person say, in one sentence, what they are currently waiting for before they will be more generous. Money, margin, a season to settle, the right person to be worth it. One sentence each, no fixing, no commentary.

The text. Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 out loud, all six verses, one person reading the whole thing.

TALK ABOUT THIS.

Four times in six verses Solomon says you do not know. And then he tells you to throw bread in water. Why does he put the instruction after the uncertainty instead of before it?

The chapter says careful people do not feed anybody. Where is that true of you, specifically, and not in general?

The Hebrew says send, not cast. What changes when you hear it as sending something out instead of throwing something away?

THE ACT, BEFORE YOU MEET AGAIN.

Do one good thing for somebody who cannot pay you back and will probably never know it cost you anything. Not a project. Something ordinary and immediate, inside the next twenty-four hours.

Leader's note. Somebody will try to negotiate the act into something they were already going to do. Let them, this first week. The pattern matters more than the purity, and next week will be honest on its own.

Session Two ... Good People Drowned

Read before you meet: Chapter Two.

Open with this. Who did the act? Not what did you learn from it. What did you do, and what happened.

The text. Genesis 6:8, 6:9, 6:22, and Genesis 7:16.

TALK ABOUT THIS.

The chapter says somebody in that flood was a good neighbor. Does that land as true or as unfair? Say which, honestly.

What is the passing score? Push on it as a group. Sixty percent? Does a lie cancel a kindness? Who holds the card? Do not resolve it quickly. The point is that it cannot be answered.

Grace in verse 8, character in verse 9, obedience in verse 22. What breaks if you reverse that order?

Where have you been generally good as a way of avoiding one specific thing you already know you are supposed to do?

THE ACT, BEFORE YOU MEET AGAIN.

Do the specific thing. The actual one, with a name and a date attached. The call. The apology. The money you said you would send. The conversation you keep rescheduling in your head.

Leader's note. This is the hardest act in the study and it comes early on purpose. Do not soften it into a category. If someone names theirs out loud, do not let the group talk them into a smaller version of it.

Session Three ... The Name and the Warning

Read before you meet: Chapters Three and Four.

Open with this. Who did the specific thing? If you did not, say that too. No explaining required.

The text. Acts 10:38, then Matthew 7:21-23, then Matthew 25:37-39.

TALK ABOUT THIS.

Peter had one sentence to describe three years and he reached for a verb. Why a verb and not a character description?

Anointed, then He went. Where has your church culture treated the anointing as the destination?

Matthew 7. These people had works, real ones, done in His name, and the verdict was depart from me. Does that verse frighten you or clarify things for you?

Put the two crowds side by side. One could itemize everything they did. The other could not remember doing anything. What does that tell you about a life that is actually connected to Him?

THE ACT, BEFORE YOU MEET AGAIN, AND DO IT IN THIS ORDER.

Ten minutes, on the clock, with a timer. No Bible study, no list, no requests, no prep. You and Him with nothing to bring.

Then go do one good thing in the least spiritual place you go. Your job. The shop floor. The supply room. Somewhere nobody thinks of you as a church person.

Leader's note. The ten minutes is the part people skip, and it is the part the whole book depends on. Ask about it specifically next week, before you ask about the good thing.

Session Four … Already an Altar

Read before you meet: Chapter Five.

Open with this. Who took the ten minutes? Then, who did the good thing at work?

The text. Hebrews 13:15-16, then Romans 12:1, then Revelation 4:8-10 with Matthew 6:10.

TALK ABOUT THIS.

Hebrews calls doing good a sacrifice. Not evidence of worship. A sacrifice. What does that do to your categories?

The chapter warns against the cheap version, where everything is worship and therefore nothing is. Hebrews names two things, not everything. Why does that distinction matter?

If your church had to cut a budget line this month, which would go first, worship or outreach? Be honest about it, and then say what Hebrews 13:16 does to that instinct.

Earth is practice for heaven. If heaven's normal condition is unbroken worship, what is a compartmentalized week actually rehearsing?

THE ACT, BEFORE YOU MEET AGAIN.

Do one good thing that costs actual money. Not your time. Money, in an amount you will notice on Friday.

Then walk away from it the way you walk away from the offering plate. You do not follow the plate down the aisle to see where your check lands.

Leader's note. Do not set an amount for the group. The moment there is a number, it becomes a fee and the act dies. "An amount you will notice" is the whole instruction.

Session Five … Mountains and Kindness

Read before you meet: Chapters Six and Seven.

Open with this. Who spent the money? And, harder: did you check on where it went?

The text. Psalm 50:9-10, Leviticus 25:42-43, Ezekiel 34:4, then Romans 2:4 with Titus 3:4-5, then Ephesians 6:12.

TALK ABOUT THIS.

The mountains are already G-d's. What changes about how you stand in your workplace or your school if the ground was never contested?

The first time dominion shows up after the garden, it is a restriction, and the fence is a Person. Fear thy G-d. Why does authority need a Person and not a policy?

Romans 2:4 says kindness is what leads a man to repentance. Not fear. Where have you reached past kindness for something with more horsepower?

Paul never once names a person on the target list. Powers, rulers, strongholds, reasonings. Where have you had that backwards, gentle with the ideology and hard on the person?

The guardrail. A theology of kindness that cannot call anybody to repent has not out-loved anything, it has just stopped talking. Which ditch are you personally more likely to land in?

THE ACT, BEFORE YOU MEET AGAIN.

Pick the person. You already know the name. The one you have a position on, the one you would describe accurately and unkindly if nobody were listening.

Do one concrete good for that person. Not a prayer. A thing, with your hands or your money or your time. Attach nothing to it. No correction, no hint, no gentle observation at the end, no verse.

Leader's note. The hard part is not the kindness. It is removing the correction, which is how people keep their dignity while being kind. Name that out loud when you give the act.

Session Six … All Nations and the Residue

Read before you meet: Chapters Eight and Nine.

Open with this. Who did it, and did you manage to attach nothing?

The text. Mark 11:15-17, then Luke 6:35 and 6:38, then Hebrews 11:13.

TALK ABOUT THIS.

The market stood on the only ground a foreigner was allowed to pray on. Who were the tables actually turned over for?

Fear as a mechanism versus consequence as a reality. Where have you seen a preacher use the first and call it the second?

He used force in one place only, His Father's house, and never on a sinner outside it. What does that do to the impulse to swing at the culture?

Luke 6:35 promises the return and forbids the motive in one sentence. The return is not the reason, it is the residue. Where have you been quietly running a transaction?

Hebrews 11:13. These all died in faith, not having received. Who in this room has done good and bled for it? Do not rush this part of the evening.

THE ACT, AND THIS ONE DOES NOT END WITH THE STUDY.

First, send the book to somebody who would never go looking for it. Text it. Forward it. Put the link in front of one person today. Do not recommend it. Give it.

Second, tomorrow morning, before anything has come back, do it again.

Leader's note. Do not close this session with a summary. Close it with the second act read out loud, and then stop talking. The book ends on tomorrow morning and so should the group.

After the six weeks

There is no session seven, and that is deliberate. The study ends the way the book ends, with something to do the next morning.

If the group wants to keep meeting, the honest continuation is not more material. It is the same opening question, once a month, with nothing else on the agenda.

Who did something good this month that nobody paid you back for?

That question will outlast this study by years.

Do Good. Everywhere. Always.

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