

Stitches and Scripture



This 4-session Bible study takes place over seven weeks and pairs seasoned knitting mentors with beginners. Novice knitters will learn several basic knitting techniques as the group makes scarves and dishcloths, perhaps to donate to others. Everyone will learn a bit about how knitting is frequently used in Scripture as a metaphor to describe God’s creative and intimate relationship with us.

Study overview

In the first session, participants will learn to cast on and knit. With those skills, they’ll get started on the scarf. For homework, they’ll complete the first part of the scarf in time for the next session, two weeks later.

In the second session, participants will learn to purl in order to complete the ribbed center section of the scarf and then go on to complete the last knitted part of the scarf.

In the third session, participants will learn to cast off in order to finish the scarf and then cast on again to begin the dishcloth. They will learn the yarn over increase.

In the fourth session, participants will learn to decrease using the knit two together method in order to finish the dishcloth. This is followed by a discussion of the value of the essential “tink” stitch—“knit” spelled backwards—when a mistake is discovered.

Leader notes

During the Bible study portion of each session, you may either encourage participants to keep knitting while you read the texts aloud or ask them to put down their needles and listen to the text. Encourage participants to keep knitting during the discussion part of the study.

If some, especially the learners, are too focused on their knitting to be able to contribute much to the discussion, that’s fine. As they grow accustomed to the task, they’ll be able to speak up more. The mentors can pick up the thread.

How to Use This Resource

This four-session Bible study is intended to last for seven weeks, with the group meeting every other week. The scarf is made during the first two sessions and the beginning of the third, and the dishcloth is made during the third and fourth sessions. Links to the instructions for the Seafarer's Scarf for the Christmas at Sea Project and a classic cotton washcloth or dishcloth are included.

Arrange to meet in a well-lit room (good lighting is essential!) with plenty of chairs that are easy to move around. Make sure each learner is seated next to a mentor. Left-handed learners should be matched with left-handed mentors.

These mentors are the heart of the program. Recruit a few patient and good-natured, experienced knitters who are willing to serve as encouraging teachers and mentors.

Schedule your sessions for a time when everyone can be present—Saturday mornings or Sunday afternoons might be good.

Announce the “Stitches and Scripture” group during worship, to the confirmation class, to the Women of the ELCA unit, to the youth group, to the Girl Scout and Brownie troops and to the mothers’ club. Knitting is popular among young women and teens these days! You might be pleasantly surprised at the response from those age groups.

As for supplies: You might decide to post the supplies list ahead of time and ask everyone to bring their own yarn, needles and notions, or you might ask for an advance sign-up fee (\$15 each would be sufficient) and use that to purchase supplies for everyone. Or you might supply the needles and notions and ask people to bring yarn of their choice. It’s up to you!

Arrange for refreshments at the end of each session—fruit, cookies, veggies and dip, coffee, soft drinks, juice, etc. (But not during—treats and yarn don’t go together!)

Knitting supplies

- 1 pair single-point knitting needles, size 7 (4.5 mm diameter), 9” or 10” in length, and 1 pair single-point knitting needles, size 10 (6 mm), 9” or 10” in length; many beginning knitters find bamboo or plastic needles easier to use than metal ones.
- 1 large plastic yarn needle.
- 2 rubber bands or knitting needle point guards.
- A tote bag or other project bag to keep everything together.
- A padded envelope and postage if you are going to mail the scarf to the Christmas at Sea program (see Session One sidebar)

Yarn and pattern for the scarf

5 oz. washable acrylic or wool-blend yarn, worsted weight, in a masculine color if you are going to knit scarves for Christmas at Sea (but not black or other very dark shades; those colors are difficult in artificial light). Smooth yarn is easier for learners to work with than fuzzy or crimped novelty yarn. Some widely available brands are Red Heart Super Saver, Caron Simply Soft, Lion Brand Wool-Ease and Patons Decor. Check the label on the skein; you may need two skeins to make 5 oz. If so, make sure they have the same dye lot number.

There are lots of scarf patterns on the Web. Try a Google search for “beginner scarf patterns.”

Patterns for the Christmas at Sea program should be downloaded from www.seamenschurch.org/christmas-at-sea

Yarn and pattern for the dishcloth

1 skein cotton yarn, worsted weight. Some widely available brands are Lion Cotton, Lily Sugar & Cream, Lily Peaches & Cream and Bernat Handicrafter.

The pattern can be downloaded for free from www.joann.com/static/project/0706/P148439.pdf



Session one: The scarf

Welcome everyone to the Stitches and Scripture knitting group and ask for introductions. Make sure each learner has a mentor next to her. Ask one of the mentors to demonstrate casting on and the knit stitch, and then ask the mentors and learners to cast on 32 stitches and begin to knit each row.

This session's Bible study text is **Psalms 139:1–18**. Read the text aloud slowly, and pause for a minute or two before turning to the discussion that follows.

Scripture

¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully
made.

Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

If you will be knitting scarves for the Christmas at Sea program, read aloud to the group the story of the program, as told in the Fall 1998 issue of "Interweave Knits":

One hundred years ago, during the Spanish-American War, a wonderful tradition was born. Through the efforts of a concerned citizen and a military chaplain, a program which now involves more than 3,000 knitters and serves more than 13,000 seamen began.

The Reverend Walter A. A. Gardner, chaplain of the North River Station in New York, noted in his annual report of 1898 that a Mrs. E. A. Gardner "conceived the idea of supplying 'our' warship with 'just what they needed.'" As a result, "Noble-hearted friends came to her assistance. The New York Herald and the Associated Press took it up, and thousands of [comfort] bags, medical supplies, delicacies, Bible prayer books, testaments and many cases of literature were sent to our men."

The seeds of the current Christmas at Sea program were planted, and soon the Seamen's Benefit Society, a ladies' auxiliary of the Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey, was established. One of the many functions of this auxiliary was to provide knitted pieces to the seafarers who stopped at the Institute.

By 1941, about 2,000 volunteers, including many from churches of all denominations throughout the United States, provided about 5,000 gift boxes containing handknit sweaters, socks, hats, mittens and scarves. These gifts were distributed by volunteers of the Seamen's Church Institute to the crews of freighters and tankers who spent Christmas Day at sea. In 1996, about 17,000 garments, including 6,000 scarves, were knit by nearly 3,000 volunteer knitters and given to merchant mariners who were at sea on Christmas Day.

The Christmas at Sea program provides volunteer knitters with patterns for knitting scarves, watch caps, sweaters, and socks. . . . Your donations may be sent to: Christmas at Sea, the Seamen's Church Institute, 241 Water Street, New York, NY 10038.



- ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
- ¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
- ¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

Discussion

1. Read verses 1–6 of the psalm aloud again.

How does the psalmist seem to feel about being known so completely—threatened? glad?

“You hem me in,” the psalmist sings. Our first reaction is to resist boundaries that hem us in. But consider: What’s the purpose of a playpen? When the lights go out and you’re in a dark room, what’s the first thing you grope for, if not a wall? That’s how you know where you are.

2. Read verses 7–12 aloud.

What might be threatening about not going anywhere where God is not? What is reassuring about that?

Our answer comes down to what we think of God. Is God an angry judge or a loving parent? If we primarily think of God as an angry judge, then it is scary to think of not being able to be anywhere that God is not. But if we think of God as a loving parent, then it is comforting.

Verse 12 sounds like what John said of Jesus (John 1:5): “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

3. Read verses 13–18 aloud. (Here comes the knitting part!)

Knitting patterns can be very simple or very intricate. For instance, we’ve all seen those Norwegian sweaters with those incredibly detailed patterns. Yes, people actually knit those by hand! But can you imagine knitting an actual Norwegian? (ha, ha!)

But God can knit a Norwegian, or anybody else, for that matter. God knits us together in our mother’s wombs. People have babies, but God is the one who knits them together. A pregnant mother doesn’t say to herself, “Okay, today I’m going to make a liver.” No, the baby just grows. God is doing the knitting.

We know quite a bit about the gestation process, a lot more than people knew when the psalmist wrote down this lovely text. Has science added or subtracted to the mystery of life? Many of us—even many scientists—believe that the deeper we go into the mysteries of nature, the more we discover just how awesome God’s mighty work of creation is.

What awesome works of creation can you think of? (Consider the sea and the winter storms that stir it up. Think of the skill and courage of the seafarers who guide ships across the sea, even through such storms, and bring them safely into harbor. The scarves you are making may help keep some of those seafarers warm during those winter storms.)

Closing session one

Ask participants to come to the end of a row, push all the stitches away from the point of the needle and either wrap a rubber band around the needle or put a point guard on to keep the stitches on. Remind them that their homework is to keep knitting every row until the work is 14 inches long, and the next session is two weeks away.

And now it’s time for refreshments!



Session two: Continuing the scarf

Today participants learn the purl stitch. Their homework will be to finish the full length of the scarf. The next session is two weeks away; we will cast off the scarf at the beginning of the next session.

Ask the mentors to demonstrate the purl stitch and lead the learners through 4K 4P ribbing.

The ribbed center section of the scarf is 18 inches long. Once the center section is complete, the pattern reverts to all knit for another 14 inches.

Scripture

The study text for this session is **Ephesians 4:11–16**. Read the text aloud slowly. Then pause for a minute or two before turning to the discussion that follows.

¹¹ The gifts [Christ] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Discussion

1. Read verses 11–13 aloud. Paul, the author of this letter, is using the image of a body to describe the church. The body has many parts, but it's still one body.

Paul says that we're being built up in the body "to maturity." How is a child's body different than

an adult's body?

"To the . . . full stature." Standing up to our full height. When we exclude someone as the church, it's as if we're missing a foot, or not able to stand up straight. We can't stand up to our full stature in Christ when we exclude others just because they don't fit our notion of who is part of our family of faith. In Paul's time, some Christians who came from a Jewish background wanted to exclude people who came from a different background.

Can you think of Christians today who want to exclude people from a different background of some kind—maybe a different language, color, education, side of town?

2. Read verses 14–16 aloud. (Here comes the knitting part!)

Look at the stitches in your work! It takes *all* of them to make a scarf. If we were to drop just *one* stitch, it would affect all the others. The piece would develop a run, and pretty soon the whole project would be a mess. To lose just one stitch weakens the fabric.

According to Paul, what knits us together as a community of faith? Jesus does. We heard before that God is at work knitting each one of us together before we are born. But God is a master knitter. And God knits together all the children of God together into a family of faith, into the body of Christ.

We need every one of us, every little stitch of us, for the body to be whole and strong and healthy.

What does that mean in our own community's life? Are there stitches that are missing? Who? Why?

Closing session two

Ask participants to come to the end of a row, push all the stitches away from the point of the needle, and either wrap a rubber band around the needle or put a point guard on to keep the stitches on. Remind them that their homework is to keep working in K4 P4 ribbing until the rib section is 18 inches long, and then knit every row until the end section is 14 inches long. Remind them that the next session is two weeks away, and we will cast off our scarves then.

And now it's time for refreshments!

Session three: Beginning the dishcloth

Today, participants will finish the scarf and begin the dishcloth. Casting off and weaving in ends are the new skills in the first part, and the yarn over increase is the new skill for the second part. The homework will be to finish half the dishcloth, and the next session is two weeks away.

Ask the mentors to demonstrate casting off the stitches of the scarf. As the participants come to the end of the cast-off row, ask the mentors to demonstrate weaving in the ends, using the plastic yarn needles.

And the scarves are done! Everyone deserves a big hand for completing a warm scarf for someone! (If you're knitting scarves for the Christmas at Sea program, tuck the scarves into stamped, padded envelopes and address the envelopes to: Christmas at Sea, the Seamen's Church Institute, 241 Water Street, New York, NY 10038.)

Then ask participants to bring out the cotton yarn and larger needles to start the knit dishcloth. Or, if they choose, they can stay with the size 7 needles. *It's up to them!*

Let participants know that, although the printed pattern calls for using a certain size needle and for increasing to a certain number of stitches, they don't have to follow it precisely! Different size needles will make a different size dishcloth. More or fewer rows mean a different size dishcloth. The piece doesn't even have to end up as a dishcloth. With the right

yarn and enough rows, it could be a baby blanket or even an afghan. For that matter, it doesn't even have to end up as a square or rectangle. If we were to keep increasing until the piece is wide enough and then cast off, it would be a triangle—a scarf or a shawl!

Knitting is about creativity, and if knitters have a better idea about something, they are certainly free to design. Designing is fun! If learners feel free to be flexible about following patterns right from the beginning, they'll enjoy drawing on their own creativity in the future.

The pattern simply says "Increase." We'll use the yarn over increase in this pattern.

Ask participants to cast on 4 stitches (mentors can help refresh learners' memories, if necessary). Ask a mentor to demonstrate the yarn over increase. Once participants have cast on 4 stitches and started working the increasing rows, begin reading the discussion and texts below.

Scripture and Discussion

Today we've cast off and cast on. So let's look at some examples of those phrases in the Bible.

1. First, let's talk about that word "cast."

Peter, James and John did what with their fishing nets? They *cast* them. Here, cast basically means throw.

The soldiers at the foot of Jesus' cross were going to divide up his clothes among them. How did they decide who would get what piece? They cast lots—they rolled dice, more or less.

When Moses went up the mountain to be with God and the people stayed below, they cast an image of a calf in gold—they melted the metal and poured it into a mold. What sorts of things do we cast for ourselves? What are the molds we use?

2. The word “cast” can also be used with other words.

Cast out. Jesus cast out demons. Perfect love casts out fear.

Cast up. When armies in Old Testament times made war against their enemies, they would cast up a siege ramp against the town walls.

Cast down. Our souls can be cast down. What do we mean when we say that?

3. Casting off

The Scripture text for this portion of the session is **Isaiah 41:8–10**. Read the text aloud slowly and pause for a minute or so when you’re done.

⁸ But you, Israel, my servant,
 Jacob, whom I have chosen,
 the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
⁹ you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
 and called from its farthest corners,
 saying to you, “You are my servant,
 I have chosen you and not cast you off”;
¹⁰ do not fear, for I am with you,
 do not be afraid, for I am your God;
 I will strengthen you, I will help you,
 I will uphold you with my victorious right
 hand.

When do we “cast off” in knitting? When we’re finished with whatever we’ve been working on. (And by that time, we may be tired of looking at it and ready to toss it into the back of the closet!)

When does God “cast off” in knitting us? The message from this text seems to be that God is never finished. (God isn’t going to toss us into the back of the closet and be done with us—thanks be to God!) How do you see this ongoing knitting by God happening in your life?

4. Casting on

When do we “cast on” in knitting? When we’re ready to start something new. Read 1 Peter 5:7 aloud:

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

In knitting, we cast the yarn onto the needle. When little kids have something and they want to keep it but they don’t want to hold onto it, what do they do with it? They cast it onto Mom or Dad: “Here, hold this!”

But when we’re adults, we don’t have another grownup around on whom we can cast things. So on whom can we cast things as an adult? On whom can we cast our adult problems? Onto God! We cast them *off* ourselves, and we cast them *onto* God.

Imagine our anxieties and burdens as a tangled pile of yarn. We look at the tangle and think, “It’s a hopeless mess! I can’t possibly straighten it out!” But God will take on the project.

Do you cast your problems onto God? How do you feel when you do that? How does God respond?

Cast it onto God: who knit us together in our mother’s womb, who knits the church together into one body, who knows what to transform our tangled ball of anxieties into!

Thanks be to God!

Closing session three

Once participants are comfortable with working the increase rows, remind them that their homework is to work the dishcloth to the desired width. We’ll start the decrease rows in the next session two weeks from now.

And now it’s time for refreshments!



Session four: finishing the dishcloth

In this session, we begin the decrease half of the dishcloth. The new skill in this session is decreasing; participants will knit two together. Ask a mentor to demonstrate this decrease, and once the group has settled down, turn to the Bible study.

Scripture

The text for this session is **Ecclesiastes 3:1–8**. Read it aloud slowly and pause for a minute or two before turning to the discussion that follows.

- ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
- ² a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
- ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
- ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

Discussion

We have learned quite a bit in these past few weeks: How to cast on, how to knit and purl, how to increase and how to decrease, how to cast off and how to read a pattern. We've learned all the essential skills of knitting but one—and we're going to talk about that one right now.

We all make mistakes in our knitting. All of us. Even the most expert, experienced knitters make at least

one mistake in every project. No knitting project is perfect from beginning to end; every one of them has a mistake in it somewhere.

Some mistakes you can live with. But there are other mistakes you can't ignore. They adversely affect the whole.

Let's look at verse 7 of the passage from Ecclesiastes again: "a time to tear and a time to sew."

When we discover we've made a bad mistake in our knitting, then it's "time to tear"! There are times when we have to take apart our hard work and get to the root of the problem.

How do you feel when you see a mistake and you know it's a bad one?

How do you feel when you have to rip out your work?

This ripping back, or tearing out, or knitting backwards, is symbolic of life. (Some people call this tinkering—knitting backwards ... think about it.) Knitting has become a metaphor for life for some people. There are great truths in knitting, and this is one of them.

There are times when we are making a mistake in our lives, even though we might have put a lot of work into our life design. But we discover that the mistake is systemic and must be addressed.

This realization that something is wrong and that this wrong thing must be made right is what we call repentance. It's hard work, but here's the beauty:

- After we take a deep breath and accept that we're going to have to rip back, we can start over. We can go back to the mistake, we can take it out, and we can *start over*. Our new design might not be the same as the old design, but we can *start over*.



- There are people around for guidance. We don't have to go through it alone. People have been there, and they can help us in the ripping and repairing process.
- And in learning from our mistakes, from our own painful and painstaking ripping back, we will someday be able to guide someone else through their own rough spots.

The wisdom of knitting!

Closing session four

When the group comes to the end of their dishcloths, it's time to cast off the last few stitches and weave in the ends. Mentors can help refresh learners' memories, if need be.

Remind participants that dishcloths like this make nice holiday gifts—three little washcloths in harmonizing colors and a bar of handmade spa soap can be tied up in a ribbon and given to a friend or relative.

Thank the mentors and learners, congratulate them on their work and encourage them to keep on knitting.

And now it's time for refreshments!

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It and several other similar studies are available on the Web site of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin Resource Center:
<http://synodresourcecenter.org>.

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