Asleep: A Six-Session Discussion Guide

A free companion to Asleep: A Lutheran Word at the Graveside *by Larry Herzog Jr. For Bible classes, grief groups, adult forums, and congregational study. May be copied freely for church use.*

For the Leader

Who this is for. This guide works for three kinds of groups: a congregation studying death and the Christian hope before anyone needs it, a group of people who are grieving now, and a mixed group of both. Know which one you are leading. A Sunday morning class and a Tuesday night grief group need different pacing, even with the same questions.

Length. Each session is built for 60 to 75 minutes. If your group meets for 45 minutes, choose three or four questions and leave the rest.

Before each session. Ask members to read the assigned chapters. Tell them plainly that anyone who could not read is still welcome. People in grief often cannot read more than a page at a time. The *At the Graveside* lines at the end of each chapter are short enough to read aloud in the room, and you can begin each session that way.

Each session includes:

- **The Aim:** one sentence on what the session is for.
- **Open:** a Scripture passage to read aloud and a gentle first question.
- **Talk It Over:** questions that follow the chapters.
- **From the Confessions:** read the chapter's *From the Confessions* section aloud and discuss it briefly.
- **Sing or Read:** a hymn stanza from the book.
- **Pray:** a short closing prayer. Leaders are free to use their own.

A word about care. Someone in your room has buried a parent, a spouse, a child, or a friend. Someone may have lost a loved one to suicide or overdose and has never said so in church. Let people pass on any question. Do not push for personal stories. When someone weeps, do not hurry to fix it; Jesus wept at His friend's grave. If a conversation turns toward a particular person's eternal state ("Is my brother in heaven?"), keep the book's own rule: speak with full confidence about Christ and His promises, and with humility about hidden hearts. If someone is in serious distress, involve your pastor. Session Five carries a special note.

Crisis resources (U.S.). Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988. SAMHSA National Helpline (substance use): 1-800-662-4357. In an emergency, call 911. Outside the United States, use your local emergency number or crisis service. Consider printing these on the handout for every session.

Session One: Fallen Asleep

Read before: Opening; Chapter 1, "Fallen Asleep"; Chapter 2, "The Last Enemy"

The Aim: To hear why Scripture calls Christian death sleep, and why that word never makes death small.

Open. Read John 11:11–14 aloud. Ask: When you were growing up, how did the adults around you talk about death? Did they speak of it openly, softly, or not at all?

Talk It Over

1. The disciples misunderstood Jesus because they thought *sleep* meant ordinary rest. What do people misunderstand about the word today? Does it comfort you, or does it sound like a way of avoiding the word *death*?
2. The early Christians called their burial grounds *sleeping places*. Next time you drive past a cemetery, what is its name preaching to you?
3. Chapter 1 notices that the New Testament says Jesus *died*, while believers are often said to *fall asleep*. What does that contrast tell you about what He did for you?
4. Chapter 2 insists that death is still an enemy. Why is it important to say both things at once: death is sleep for the Christian, and death is the last enemy?
5. Jesus was deeply moved, even angry, at the tomb of Lazarus. What does it mean for your own grief that the Lord who was about to raise His friend still wept?
6. "You already died." Read Romans 6:3–5. How does your Baptism change the way you look at your own death?

From the Confessions. Read the *From the Confessions* sections of Chapters 1 and 2. Note the words from the Small Catechism: *me and all the dead*. Ask: Why does it matter that the resurrection has your name on it?

Sing or Read. The stanza at the end of Chapter 1, "Jesus lives! The victory's won!"

Pray. *Lord Jesus Christ, You called death sleep and then went to wake Your friend. Teach us to hate death as You did and to fear it less than we do, because You have gone into the grave and come out again. Keep us in our Baptism until the morning. Amen.*

Session Two: Where Are They Now?

Read before: Chapter 3, "Where Are They Now?"; Chapter 4, "Heaven Didn't Gain an Angel"

The Aim: To confess with confidence where the believing dead are now, and to replace the kind untrue things we say with better words.

Open. Read Luke 23:39–43 aloud. Ask: When you picture someone you love who has died in the Lord, what do you picture?

Talk It Over

1. The thief on the cross was told "today." What does that one word rule out about the state of the believing dead?
2. Chapter 3 says the departed believer is "far better, not yet best." Put that in your own words. What is still to come?
3. Many people find comfort in believing the dead are watching over them. What does the chapter say instead, and who is watching over you?
4. Make a list as a group of the things people say at funerals: angels, a better place, living on in our hearts, everything happens for a reason. Which have you said? Which have you heard?
5. Chapter 4 calls becoming an angel "a demotion, not a promotion." Why would it be a loss, not a gain, for a human being to become an angel?
6. Chapter 4 also says you do not need to correct a grieving mother in a receiving line. When is the right time for better words, and how would you say them?
7. Practice: from the list of *True Things to Say* in Chapter 4, which sentence would you be most comfortable saying at a visitation this week?

From the Confessions. Read the *From the Confessions* sections of Chapters 3 and 4. Ask: What does it mean that God "still preserves my body and soul"?

Sing or Read. The stanza at the end of Chapter 3, from William Walsham How.

Pray. *Lord God, You keep our loved ones who have died in the faith, and they are at rest with You. Keep us from words that sound kind but take away our hope. Give us Your words instead, that we may comfort one another with them. Amen.*

Session Three: The Body and the Funeral

Read before: Chapter 5, "The Body in the Box"; Chapter 6, "Celebration of Life or Service of the Word"

The Aim: To see the body of a Christian as God's creation awaiting the resurrection, and a Christian funeral as the place where Christ is preached over it.

Open. Read 1 Corinthians 15:42–44 aloud. Ask: What is the most meaningful funeral you have attended? What made it so?

Talk It Over

1. Chapter 5 says the body is "not a shell." Why does it matter what we believe about the body when we bury it?
2. Paul compares burial to sowing a seed. How does that picture change the way you see a grave?
3. The book counsels that burial is worth preferring, while cremation is permitted in Christian freedom. Why might burial confess the resurrection with particular clarity? How should a congregation teach this without legalism?
4. Chapter 5 notes that if the church commends burial, it should also help poorer families afford it. What could your congregation do?
5. What is the difference between a sermon and a eulogy? Why does Chapter 6 say the funeral is not chiefly about how good the person was?
6. Where do photographs, stories, and favorite songs belong? What would you want at your own funeral, and what would you want left for the luncheon?
7. The pall over the casket recalls the white garment of Baptism. What would you want your family to understand about that moment?

From the Confessions. Read the *From the Confessions* sections of Chapters 5 and 6.

Sing or Read. The stanza at the end of Chapter 6, from Lina Sandell.

Pray. *Lord Jesus, You were laid in a tomb, and You sanctified the graves of all Your saints. Teach us to honor the bodies of those who sleep in You, and when our own time comes, let Your Word be preached over us and Your promise be spoken at our grave. Amen.*

Leader's note: Appendix A, the Funeral Planning Worksheet, fits well with this session. Consider sending it home and inviting members to bring questions next time.

Session Four: Grief That Has Hope

Read before: Chapter 7, "Grief That Has Hope"; Chapter 8, "The Ones We Aren't Sure About"

The Aim: To give the grieving permission to grieve, and to hold together hope in Christ and humility about what we cannot know.

Open. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14 aloud. Ask: Paul does not tell the Thessalonians not to grieve. What does he tell them?

Talk It Over

1. Chapter 7 says that Christian grief does not have to look serene. Have you ever felt you were grieving "wrong" as a Christian? What does Scripture say about that?
2. The psalms of lament speak to God with anger, confusion, and tears. Why do you think God gave His people prayers like that?
3. Grief is long. What happens to grieving people in your congregation two months after the funeral, when the casseroles stop? What could you do differently?
4. From the section "How to Help Someone Who Grieves," which counsel was most helpful to you? Which have you gotten wrong in the past?
5. Chapter 8 names two ditches: declaring that everyone is surely in heaven, and declaring that someone is surely lost. Why are both a temptation at a funeral?
6. Luther wrote that we do not know what God may do in a person's final hour. How does that comfort you, and what does it *not* allow us to say?
7. Chapter 8 turns from the dead to the living: you are not the judge, but you are a witness. Who in your life still needs to hear the gospel while there is time?

From the Confessions. Read the *From the Confessions* sections of Chapters 7 and 8.

Sing or Read. The stanza at the end of Chapter 7, from Katharina von Schlegel.

Pray. *Merciful Father, You do not despise the tears of Your children. Hear us when we cannot find words, and comfort us with the promise that we will see again those who sleep in Jesus. Where we do not know, teach us to trust Your mercy and Your justice, and to speak Your Word to the living while it is today. Amen.*

Leader's note: If your group includes people whose grief has become overwhelming, Chapter 7's final section, "When Grief Becomes More Than Grief," commends pastors, doctors, and counselors. Say so out loud.

Session Five: The Hard Graves

Read before: Chapter 9, "The Smallest Graves"; Chapter 10, "When They Took Their Own Life"; Chapter 11, "Sudden and Violent Deaths"

The Aim: To bring the promises of Christ to the deaths that seem to have no words: the deaths of children, suicide, addiction, and sudden or violent death.

A special note to the leader. This is the heaviest session. Consider splitting it over two meetings (Chapter 9 in one; Chapters 10 and 11 in the next). Assume that someone present has suffered a miscarriage, lost a child, lost someone to suicide or overdose, or has had an abortion. Assume also that someone may be struggling with thoughts of suicide right now. Before you begin, say plainly: *If you are thinking about ending your life, please talk to me or the pastor tonight, or call or text 988.* Have your pastor's phone number ready. Do not ask anyone to share how their loved one died.

Open. Read Romans 8:38–39 aloud. Ask no opening question this time. Let the passage stand, and then pray briefly before going on.

Talk It Over

1. Chapter 9 insists that a child who died before birth is a real child, and that the parents' grief is real. Why do families who lose a baby early so often grieve alone? How can the church change that?
2. The chapter distinguishes the confidence we have at a baptized child's grave from the humble hope we commend for a child who died before Baptism. Why is it important to keep that distinction, and how does Luther's comfort to grieving mothers help?
3. Chapter 10 explains why many people have believed suicide is unforgivable. What does Scripture actually say, and what does it not say?
4. Luther spoke of the person who takes his own life as one overcome, like a traveler overpowered by a robber. What comfort does that give, and what caution did Luther attach to it?
5. Chapter 10 counsels survivors: do not take responsibility for another person's final choice. Why is that hard to believe? What should a survivor do with real regrets?
6. Chapter 11 reads Luke 13 and the tower of Siloam. What does Jesus forbid us to conclude from the manner of someone's death?
7. For families who lost someone to addiction: how does the chapter speak about both bondage and grace?
8. Chapter 11 distinguishes personal forgiveness from the government's duty to bring justice. Why does that matter for someone whose loved one was killed?

From the Confessions. Read the *From the Confessions* section of whichever chapter your group has spent the most time on.

Sing or Read. The stanza at the end of Chapter 11, from Georg Neumark.

Pray. *Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, You gather the lambs in Your arms and You do not break the bruised reed. We bring You the graves we cannot explain and the griefs we cannot carry. Hold the ones we love, hold us, and keep anyone here who is in darkness. Amen.*

Session Six: Dying Well and Waking

Read before: Chapter 12, "Dying Well"; Chapter 13, "The Morning"; Closing, "Dismissed in Peace"

The Aim: To prepare for our own deaths in faith and to fix our eyes on the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Open. Read Job 19:25–27 aloud. Ask: Have you ever been present when someone died? What do you remember?

Talk It Over

1. Luther compared dying to being born through a narrow gate. How does that picture change the way you think about your own death?
2. Chapter 12 lists practical ways to put your house in order: a will, medical directives, funeral plans. Which of these have you done? What is keeping you from the rest?
3. Is there anyone you need to forgive, or whose forgiveness you need to seek, before your last day comes?
4. Confession and absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the commendation of the dying are given for the end of life. Would your family know to call the pastor? Would you?
5. The chapter says that fear, confusion, or a lack of visible peace at death does not tell you whether a person died in the Lord. Why is that comforting to those who watched someone die afraid?
6. Job says, "in my flesh I will see God." What do you most look forward to about the resurrection of the body?
7. Chapter 13 describes a new heaven and a new earth rather than an escape to the clouds. How does that change what you hope for?
8. The Closing turns to the Song of Simeon. Why do Lutherans sing it after receiving the body and blood of Christ, and what does it have to do with dying?

From the Confessions. Read the *From the Confessions* sections of Chapters 12 and 13.

Sing or Read. The stanza at the end of Chapter 13, from Philipp Nicolai. If your group knows the *Nunc Dimittis*, sing it together.

Pray. *Lord, now You dismiss Your servant in peace, as You have promised. Teach us to number our days, to live in our Baptism, and to die in Your Word. And on the Last Day, call us by name and raise us up, with all who sleep in You, to see Your face. Amen.*

After the Study

Consider these next steps for your group or congregation:

- Hand out Appendix A, the Funeral Planning Worksheet, and offer to help members file a copy with the church office.
- Copy Appendix B, *What to Say and What Not to Say*, for ushers, deacons, and anyone who serves at funeral luncheons.
- Put Appendix C, *Readings for the Dying and the Grieving*, in the hands of those who visit the sick and homebound.
- Make a list of members who have been bereaved in the past year, and plan to remember them on the anniversary of the death and on All Saints' Day.