

An aerial photograph of a city, likely New York City, showing a mix of residential houses in the foreground and a dense skyline of skyscrapers in the background. A large black circle with a white border is centered over the image, containing the main text.

LifeChange

A NAVPRESS BIBLE STUDY SERIES

*A life-changing
encounter with God's Word*

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

*God's Word gives us vision and hope for
what it means to be family in Christ.*

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A NavPress resource published in alliance
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Christian Community: A Bible Study on Being Part of God's Family

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

The topical guides in the LifeChange series of Bible studies cover important topics from the Bible. Although the LifeChange guides vary with the topics they explore, they share some common goals:

1. to help readers grasp what key passages in the Bible say about the topic;
2. to provide readers with explanatory notes, word definitions, historical background, and cross-reference so that the only other reference they need is the Bible;
3. to teach readers how to let God's Word transform them into Christ's image;
4. to provide small groups with a tool that will enhance group discussion of each passage and topic; and
5. to write each session so that advance preparation for group members is strongly encouraged but not required.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take forty-five minutes to complete.

Overview and Details

The study begins with an overview of Christian community. The key to interpretation for each part of this study is content (what is the referenced passage *about?*), and the key to context is purpose (what is the author's *aim* for the passage as it relates to the overall topic?). Each lesson of the study explores an aspect of biblical community, with a corresponding passage from the Bible.

Kinds of Questions

Bible study provides different lenses and perspectives through which to engage the Scripture: observe (what does the passage *say*?), interpret (what does the passage *mean*?), and apply (how does this truth *affect* my life?). Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don't let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God's Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do You want me to see here?”, “Father, why is this true?”, and “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember what you're learning.

Study Aids

Throughout the guide, there are study aids that provide background information on the passage, insights from a commentary, or word studies. These aids are included in the guide to help you interpret the Bible without needing to use other, outside resources. Still, if you're interested in exploring further, the full resources are listed in the endnotes.

Scripture Versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Other versions cited are the English Standard Version, the New Living Translation, the Revised Standard Version, and the New Revised Standard Version.

Use any translation you like for study—or preferably more than one. Ideally you would have a good, modern translation such as the New International Version, the English Standard Version, the New Living Translation, or the Christian Standard Bible. A paraphrase such as *The Message* is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and Meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return

to the passage as often as you can during the day for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For Group Study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other-sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and workplace Bible studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per meeting. This guide is formatted so you will be able to discuss each of the questions at length. Be sure to make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of the background and discussion questions to be covered. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray for one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another resist temptation, assure each other that each person's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. If you wish, you can spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons and discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow your time of sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down what others have shared, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about what they shared at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Taking notes during discussion will help you remember to follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and have clarity on an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating.

Some best practices for groups:

1. If possible, come to the group discussion prepared. The more each group member knows about the passage and the questions being asked, the better your discussion will be.
2. Realize that the group leader will not be teaching from the passage but instead will be facilitating your discussion. Therefore, it is important for each group member to participate so that everyone can contribute to what you learn as a group.
3. Try to stick to the passage covered in the session and the specific questions in the study guide.

4. Listen attentively to the other members of the group when they are sharing their thoughts about the passage. Also, realize that most of the questions are open-ended, allowing for more than one answer.
5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion—especially if you are the leader. Allow time for everyone to share their thoughts and ideas.
6. As mentioned previously, throughout the session are study aids that provide background information on the passage, insights from a commentary, or word studies. Reading these aloud during the meeting is optional and up to the discussion leader. However, each member can refer to these insights if they found them helpful in understanding the passage.

A Note on Topical Studies

LifeChange guides offer a robust and thoughtful engagement with God's Word. The book-centric guides focus on a step-by-step walk through that particular book of the Bible. The topical studies use Scripture to help you engage more deeply with God's Word and its implications for your life.

INTRODUCTION

Created for Community

CHRISTIAN AUTHOR and psychologist Dr. Larry Crabb once wrote this about the importance of community for our health and well-being:

Community matters. That's about like saying oxygen matters. As our lungs require air, so our souls require what only community provides. We were designed by our Trinitarian God (who is himself a group of three persons in profound relationship with each other) to live in relationship. Without it, we die. It's that simple. Without a community where we know, explore, discover, and touch one another, we experience isolation and despair that drive us in wrong directions, that corrupt our efforts to live meaningfully and to love well.

The future of the church depends on whether it develops true community.¹

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, millions of people worked from home rather than in an office. Church attendance dwindled, and many worship services were viewed from home rather than in person. The community group that my wife and I attend, which normally meets in homes for dinner, Bible study, and prayer, was held on an online video platform. It was better than nothing, but just barely.

The impact of the pandemic extended well beyond our physical bodies. As one article stated:

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has had significant psychological and social effects on the population. Research has highlighted the impact on psychological well-being of the most exposed groups, including children, college students, and health workers, who are more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and other symptoms of distress. The social distance and the security measures

have affected the relationship among people and their perception of empathy toward others.²

Social isolation has such a devastating impact because, as Larry Crabb observed, God created us for community. At its heart, the Christian life is about relationships—loving God, our neighbors, and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In this LifeChange study guide, we'll learn what life is supposed to be like in God's family. Each session in the guide will focus on a key passage of Scripture that explores an aspect of Christian community and the context. There will also be suggestions at the end of each session for studying related passages.

As Christians, we are called to community relationships that are patterned after the eternal relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This LifeChange guide will help us catch the vision for what it means to live as the people of God.

THE NEW COMMANDMENT

1 John 3:11-24

THE WORD *love* can often feel overused. People love their favorite flavor of ice cream, their new tattoo, their college- or pro-football team, their spouse's new outfit, and even their brand of coffee. With such a watered-down view of love, is it any wonder that saying "I love you" may mean just the opposite: "I want you because you meet my needs"?

Instinctively, we all know that love—actual love—is something more than just mild affection or enjoyment. But often we are content to stay with the safe version, something that doesn't ask anything of us or require us to risk anything. Especially in community, which can be unpredictable and messy and painful, the risk of real love feels too great. But for people who follow Jesus, the reward of real love, lived out in Christian community, is worth the risk.

In this passage, John provides a clear contrast between what love is and what it isn't. He also describes how the supreme example of love equips us to enter community with hearts set together on the way of Jesus.

-
1. Read 1 John 3:11-24. John tells us that loving one another is a message we have heard "from the beginning" (verse 11). What do we learn about that message from Matthew 22:36-40 and John 13:34-35?

Jesus' "new command" (John 13:34-35) is not merely a restatement of "Love your neighbor as yourself." First, it has a new object: "Love one another," meaning other Christians in the family of God. Second, Jesus raises the standard from "as yourself" to "as I have loved you." His sacrificial death has become the model of the kind of sacrificial service that defines the meaning of Christlike love.

Gary Burge tells us that "in Christian literature (Heb. 12:24; Pseudo-Clementine Homilies) the Cain and Abel story is generously used, particularly as a foreshadowing of the martyrdom of Christians. Abel's sacrifice was pleasing to God; Cain's was not. In the Christian church, the envy and revenge harbored by Cain were compared to the feelings of the opponents of Christians, whose sacrificial lives were pleasing to the Lord."¹

2. What does John tell us about Cain's actions, motive, and spiritual condition (see verse 12)?

3. How do we see attitudes and actions reflective of Cain and Abel in our society (see verses 13-15)?

6. The NRSV links verse 18 with what follows: “Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God. Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything” (1 John 3:18-20, NRSV). How does showing “the truth by our actions” reassure our hearts that we truly know God (see also verse 14)?

“John’s words of assurance are linked to the foregoing exhortation about love. ‘In this’ (NIV, ‘This then’) should be taken as pointing backwards to verses 11-18, so that when the crisis of self-examination comes, the first evidence of our security with God is our obedience to the command to love. The NIV makes the verb tense present (‘we know’) when it is actually future. In other words, John is equipping his church, planning for a future episode when self-doubt and self-incrimination might paralyze them.”²

7. When our hearts condemn us, John writes, we must realize that “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (verse 20). Why does the reality of God’s greatness and omnipotence help our hearts rest?
