

A LifeGuide® Bible Study

FRIENDSHIP

Growing Side by Side

10 STUDIES FOR INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS

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Contents

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF *FRIENDSHIP*

- 1 Needing Friends**
Ecclesiastes 4:1–12
- 2 David & Mephibosheth**
2 Samuel 9; 16:1–4; 19:24–30
- 3 Enjoying Our Differences**
1 Corinthians 12:12–31
- 4 Naomi & Ruth**
Ruth 1–2
- 5 Forgiving Friends**
Matthew 18:12–35
- 6 A Father & His Son**
Luke 15:11–32
- 7 Friends Accountable to Friends**
Galatians 6:1–10
- 8 David & Nathan**
2 Samuel 11:1–12:25
- 9 Loving Friends**
1 John 4:7–21
- 10 Forever Friends**
1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

Getting the Most Out of *Friendship*

I didn't have many friends when I was growing up. There were lots of reasons: I lived in a rural community without transportation; there were economic differences between our family and those around us (I was poor); my church emphasized separation; my family masked its fear of outsiders by intentionally closing itself off; my bookish nature—in a culture that valued action and practicality. (Students with A's were not welcomed in my high school—except by a few teachers who weren't welcomed either.) But lest I attach all blame for my friendlessness to outside influences, I now know that my own arrogance was insufferable to those few who might have been willing to climb the barriers toward friendship.

There were advantages to this early deprivation of friendship. I learned to enjoy solitude. I learned to find personal projects that bring me satisfaction. (I've never been bored for more than an hour or two in my life.) I learned independence. It mystified me in college that other students ran around trying to find someone to go to meals with them; I just went to the dining hall and ate. I also learned to think and act without being overly concerned about what other people thought of me.

But friendless people can become selfish people. If I had remained on the fringes of friendship, I think I might have become a rather rigid, self-pleasing person who rarely entered the painful grit of someone else's life—and experienced little support in my own painful grit. God, in his kindness, did not allow that to happen. College years brought people able to scramble over the barriers; I tasted the comradery of like-minded people and went out looking for more.

One by one God has broken down my barriers with an appropriate friend at just the right spot. Did I think that committed Christians were blind to intellectual rigors? God blessed my life with Mark Noll. Did I think that wealthy people were mercenary? God sent me "Alice." Did I think that serious Christians lacked creativity? God introduced me to Luci Shaw. Did I think that I could receive wise counsel only from those who shared my faith? God sat me down in Barry's office. Did I think I wanted to give but not receive? God introduced me to grief.

God created us as beings who thrive in the presence of each other. The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us in simple terms, "If one falls down, his friend can help him up." (Independence is great, but some of the tumbles we take in life are more than we can survive alone.) Later the passage adds, "How can one keep warm alone?" (A bed warmed by a spouse who is a friend or a warm cup of tea with a sisterly friend provides physical warmth and emotional comfort.) Proverbs adds, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." (Friendship brings abrasion, even real pain. But as we bump against each other in our conflicts, we rub off those edges that keep us from being all God has designed.) And that design doesn't end with this life. The God who knew us when we were still in our mother's womb is creating eternity for us where we will live together with him—as his friends.

The Bible talks about friendship, but it doesn't dwell on the subject. Instead, over and over the Bible shows us examples of friendship in practice.

May this work enrich your relationships here and encourage you about the life to come.

FRIENDSHIP *Growing Side by Side*

1 Needing Friends *Ecclesiastes 4:1–12*

¹ Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter. ² And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. ³ But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun. ⁴ And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ⁵ Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. ⁶ Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. ⁷ Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: ⁸ There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless—a miserable business! ⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: ¹⁰ If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. ¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? ¹² Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

People vary in their friendship patterns. Some have long-term friendships, relationships they have cherished from childhood. Others enjoy the challenge of frequent moves and shaping new friendships in each new home. Some people want a host of casual friends, a roomful of noise and laughter. Others choose only a few friends, preferring long talks and comfortable silence. But people without friends can usually be described with one word: lonely.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What is one of your favorite stories or memories about you and a friend?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. How satisfied are you with your current patterns of friendship? What areas do you think most need attention?

An ancient wisdom writer, who was questioning whether anything could bring meaning to life, discovered that friends were among the few worthwhile pursuits. *Read Ecclesiastes 4:1–12.*

1. What phrases here help you see the writer's view of the world?
2. What specific complaints does the writer have about society (v. 1)? about work (vv. 4–6)?
3. Note the number of times the writer says that life is meaningless. Why does he say this?

4. What statements in verses 1–6 do you agree with? Why?
5. If you were a friend to the writer of this text, what would you say to him?
6. Finally, in verses 9–12, the author poses one solution to his despair: a friend. What practical value does he see in friendship?
7. What are some ways that these small practical helps from a friend might dent the despair the writer expressed in verses 1–3?
8. Christian couples often choose the words of verse 12 as a wedding theme: “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” If two friends (or marriage partners) invite God as the third strand in their cord of friendship, what impact would that have on their relationship?

What impact would a three-stranded cord that included God have on the complaints raised in the earlier section of the chapter?

9. Many people today live with the same despair expressed in Ecclesiastes 4:2–3. Who among your acquaintances needs your friendship? What steps could you make in that direction?

Friends are a gift from God. As you pray, mention several of your friends by name, and tell God what you appreciate about each person.

Now or Later

The book of Proverbs offers short wise sayings on many subjects—including friendship. *Read Proverbs 27:6, 10 and 17.* What do you find to be wise in these words?

When and how have you experienced one of these sayings to be true?

FRIENDSHIP *Growing Side by Side*

2

David & Mephibosheth

2 Samuel 9; 16:1–4; 19:24–30

^{2 Samuel 9:1} David asked, “Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan’s sake?” ² Now there was a servant of Saul’s household named Ziba. They summoned him to appear before David, and the king said to him, “Are you Ziba?” “At your service,” he replied. ³ The king asked, “Is there no one still alive from the house of Saul to whom I can show God’s kindness?” Ziba answered the king, “There is still a son of Jonathan; he is lame in both feet.” ⁴ “Where is he?” the king asked. Ziba answered, “He is at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar.” ⁵ So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel. ⁶ When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honor. David said, “Mephibosheth!” “At your service,” he replied. ⁷ “Don’t be afraid,” David said to him, “for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table.” ⁸ Mephibosheth bowed down and said, “What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?” ⁹ Then the king summoned Ziba, Saul’s steward, and said to him, “I have given your master’s grandson everything that belonged to Saul and his family. ¹⁰ You and your sons and your servants are to farm the land for him and bring in the crops, so that your master’s grandson may be provided for. And Mephibosheth, grandson of your master, will always eat at my table.” (Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.) ¹¹ Then Ziba said to the king, “Your servant will do whatever my lord the king commands his servant to do.” So Mephibosheth ate at David’s table like one of the king’s sons. ¹² Mephibosheth had a young son named Mika, and all the members of Ziba’s household were servants of Mephibosheth. ¹³ And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king’s table; he was lame in both feet.

^{2 Samuel 16:1} When David had gone a short distance beyond the summit, there was Ziba, the steward of Mephibosheth, waiting to meet him. He had a string of donkeys saddled and loaded with two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred cakes of raisins, a hundred cakes of figs and a skin of wine. ² The king asked Ziba, “Why have you brought these?” Ziba answered, “The donkeys are for the king’s household to ride on, the bread and fruit are for the men to eat, and the wine is to refresh those who become exhausted in the wilderness.” ³ The king then asked, “Where is your master’s grandson?” Ziba said to him, “He is staying in Jerusalem, because he thinks, ‘Today the Israelites will restore to me my grandfather’s kingdom.’” ⁴ Then the king said to Ziba, “All that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours.”

^{2 Samuel 19:24–24} Mephibosheth, Saul’s grandson, also went down to meet the king. He had not taken care of his feet or trimmed his mustache or washed his clothes from the day the king left until the

day he returned safely. ²⁵ When he came from Jerusalem to meet the king, the king asked him, “Why didn’t you go with me, Mephibosheth?” ²⁶ He said, “My lord the king, since I your servant am lame, I said, ‘I will have my donkey saddled and will ride on it, so I can go with the king.’ But Ziba my servant betrayed me. ²⁷ And he has slandered your servant to my lord the king. My lord the king is like an angel of God; so do whatever you wish. ²⁸ All my grandfather’s descendants deserved nothing but death from my lord the king, but you gave your servant a place among those who eat at your table. So what right do I have to make any more appeals to the king?” ²⁹ The king said to him, “Why say more? I order you and Ziba to divide the land.” ³⁰ Mephibosheth said to the king, “Let him take everything, now that my lord the king has returned home safely.”

We all *need* friends, but some friends come with their own set of needs—some of those needs with risks attached. King David lived in an era when kings killed their competitors. He’d spent a decade or more on the receiving end of that threat. Saul, the first king of Israel, wanted David dead. David had dodged spears, hidden in caves, even endured Saul’s efforts to recruit his wife as a spy. But friendship softened (and complicated) this battle between king and future king. David had sworn eternal friendship to Saul’s son Jonathan. Yet Jonathan’s children would be Saul’s grandchildren as well—potential heirs to the throne. Political savvy said, “Forget the friendship; wipe them out!”

GROUP DISCUSSION. If you were experiencing a time of physical or emotional need, what kind of help would you want from a friend? What would you not want?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Reflect on one of your long-term friendships. When have you had an opportunity to serve your friend in a time of need? (Or, when and how has your friend served you?) How did those times of need impact the future shape of your friendship?

The kingdom of Israel had moved into a new era. Saul was dead and so was Jonathan. David reigned as king. How was David to keep his vow of friendship to Jonathan? *Read 2 Samuel 9.*

1. In what practical ways did David show kindness to Mephibosheth? (Draw information from throughout the passage.)
2. Mephibosheth referred to himself in verse 8 as a “dead dog.” What can you imagine would be difficult about his situation in that era?
3. What did David do that allowed Mephibosheth to maintain a sense of dignity in spite of his needs? (Find all that you can.)
4. If you were not able to walk, what kinds of help would you want and not want?

5. What did David risk by taking Mephibosheth and Ziba into his household?
6. Later David's kingdom suffered an internal rebellion—led by his own son Absalom. King David had to run from Jerusalem to keep from being killed. Just as he left, he met Ziba. *Read 2 Samuel 16:1–4.* How did Ziba return David's favors?
7. How did Ziba explain his presence and Mephibosheth's absence?
8. The rebellion ended. Absalom died. David returned, still in power, to the capital city. *Read 2 Samuel 19:24–30.* How did Mephibosheth's story differ from what Ziba had said?
9. Which story do you think David believed? Explain. (Compare 16:4 with 19:29.)
10. Being a friend to a person in need always involves inconvenience and sometimes real risk. What all might David have lost because of his friendship with Mephibosheth?
11. What inconveniences or risks would come with being a friend to some of the needy people you know?

Despite these obstacles, what sort of commitment do you think God might be calling you to?

Make a quick list of some of the needy people you know. These might be people with physical, emotional or financial needs, or even people who have special needs because of their life stages—a young mother, an aging relative, a person who has recently experienced grief or divorce. One by one, name these people before God in prayer.

Now or Later

Select one person from the list of needy people you prayed for above, a person you are willing to offer your friendship. As you consider what this could cost you (time, money, personal risk), what one or two steps can you take to be a friend to this person? If you need help, select two or three friends to join you in the project. Pray regularly for the person you are serving. Keep journal notes of the events. Look for ways that God is at work. Note any changes you see in yourself.

FRIENDSHIP *Growing Side by Side*

3

Enjoying Our Differences

1 Corinthians 12:12–31

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. ¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

City of Refuge in Houston is a church with a difference—lots of them. Its founders planted their church between two neighborhoods: one a mostly black slum, the other a mostly white medical community. The church meets in a homeless shelter straddling the two communities. Staff, elders, teachers, members all reflect that balance. So do the many ministries offered by this church. But no one would say it is easy. There is something about our nature that wants to cozy up to people pretty much like ourselves.

GROUP DISCUSSION. If you were choosing a church (or cluster of friends), what similarities to yourself would help you feel comfortable?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What differences from yourself would you accept—or even want? Why?

Paul opens this section of his first letter to the Corinthians by saying, “The body is a unit.” *Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–31.*

1. Verses 12–19 speak of both unity and diversity. What all unites?
2. Who among your circle of friends represents diversity: a foot, a hand, an eye, an ear?

What do you appreciate about each of these people?

3. Sometimes when we focus on ways we are different from other people, our gut feeling is, “I do not belong” (v. 15). When and why have you felt this way?
4. If your friends accepted the teachings of verses 12–19, what could (or do) they do to help you cope with the feeling of not belonging?
5. Focus on verses 21–26. How would you express what Paul is teaching here?
6. What situations tempt you to think of someone else, “I don’t need you” (v. 21)? (Consider your church or fellowship, business, friends, family.)
7. Focus on verses 22–23. How does Paul tell the Corinthians to deal with people who are “weaker,” “less honorable,” “unpresentable”?
8. What reasons can you find in verses 24–26 for relating to difficult people in this way?
9. Verse 26 speaks of suffering and honor. When has someone chosen to share your suffering—or when has someone allowed you to share his or her honor?
10. Verses 27–31 speak of how individual differences actually strengthen the church. Describe what you would expect to see in a church where these and other skills were seen as gifts from God to be used for the common good.
11. Look at 1 Corinthians 13:1. Why do you think Paul ends this section about diversity among believers with this question?

12. What do you appreciate about this passage that could help you become a better church member, a better worker, a better family member or a better friend?

Quietly read 1 Corinthians 13:1. Focus on your relationships with Christians who shape your own local “body” of believers. Sit in silence, allowing God to bring to your attention ways that you have given and received love within that body. Expect also that he will reveal relationships in which you need to think, speak and behave in a more loving way. Pray about what God reveals to you through this spiritual exercise.

Now or Later

Write a letter (or make a phone call) to a friend. Express appreciation for a particular strength that is different from your own.

FRIENDSHIP

Growing Side by Side

4

Naomi & Ruth

Ruth 1–2

^{1:1} In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. ³ Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. ⁶ When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷ With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. ⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? ¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—¹³ would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!" ¹⁴ At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." ¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. ¹⁹ So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" ²⁰ "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." ²² So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Ruth 2:1 Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." ³ So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek. ⁴ Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!" "The LORD bless you!" they answered. ⁵ Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, "Who does that young woman belong to?" ⁶ The overseer replied, "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi." ⁷ She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter." ⁸ So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. ⁹ Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." ¹⁰ At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?" ¹¹ Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. ¹² May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." ¹³ "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants." ¹⁴ At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar." When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. ¹⁵ As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Let her gather among the sheaves and don't reprimand her. ¹⁶ Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her." ¹⁷ So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. ¹⁸ She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. ¹⁹ Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said. ²⁰ "The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers." ²¹ Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'" ²² Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else's field you might be harmed." ²³ So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

Family as friends? Major contrasts lived out in close quarters can make “enjoying our differences” a bitter joke. Creating a sense of family is hard. Maintaining it is even harder. Yet many family members, with God’s help, overcome incredible odds and, somewhere in adulthood, become friends. Take, for example, two women from the ancient past: Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Describe one family relationship that you have enjoyed.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. If you were to create a visual design of your family’s relationships, where would you place yourself: hub? off to the side? linked strongly to some (who?) but not others? (why?). If you were to live by the previous study of enjoying our differences, how might that impact your place in this family design?

Differences within a family make a rocky road toward friendship, but some have walked it well. *Read Ruth 1–2.*

1. What scenes from this story stand out in your mind?
2. What hardships did Ruth and Naomi have to overcome in order to move from a family relationship to a friendship?
3. Study each person’s statements about God in the story. How did faith impact the actions of each character?
4. What all did Ruth do to act out the pledge that she made to Naomi in 1:16–17?
5. At the close of the story, Naomi’s friends described Ruth as “your daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons” (4:15). Whose friendship has blessed your life in similar ways? How?
6. In what ways did Boaz show himself as a friend to both Ruth and Naomi in chapter 2?
7. In-law relationships are difficult because they combine families with different values, interests and histories. (Ruth was from the country of Moab, ancient enemies of Naomi’s people.) How might family differences also enrich potential friendship? (Give some examples.)
8. What’s hard about being an in-law? (Consider the roles of parent-in-law, son- or daughter-in-law, brother- or sister-in-law.)

9. What do you think it would take to be an in-law who is also a friend?

10. Make a list of all your family members. (Include some relatives outside of your immediate family.) Who on this list have you learned to appreciate—in spite of their differences from you? Explain.

11. Which family relationship could be softened by steps toward friendship?

How could you begin those steps?

Gather photos of your family. One by one, cup a photo of each family member in your hand and pray for that person. Thank God for each. Allow God to draw your attention to particular needs.

Now or Later

Read Ruth 3–4. Notice the negotiations Boaz made with the men at the town gate (4:1–12). What all did he (and they) do to ensure that friendship among them would continue?

As they moved toward creating a new family, the characters in the book of Ruth lived out their faith in God in practical, everyday ways. How could you act on your faith in a way that would make you a better present or future family member?

FRIENDSHIP

Growing Side by Side

5

Forgiving Friends

Matthew 18:12–35

¹² “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. ¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. ¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” ²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. ²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ ³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

It was in *Love Story*, a sappy movie of the 1970s, that we first heard the now-famous line, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” It made some sort of sense in the context. The heroine

died a sighing death a few perfect weeks into the relationship. Had she lived longer, the writers would have had to create a different line. Friends can't stay friends without forgiveness.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Say one sentence about yourself using the word *forgive*.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. When has forgiveness (or lack of it) affected one of your friendships? Talk to God about what this reveals about you.

When Jesus taught his followers about forgiveness, he told stories. He also created a series of steps that makes forgiveness possible. *Read Matthew 18:12–20.*

1. Jesus tells of two different situations in these verses. What is your emotional response to each? Explain.

2. What similarities can you find between the parable of the sheep and Christ's instructions about a brother who sins?

3. Study the four opportunities for reconciliation presented to the person who sins (vv. 15–17). What is difficult about each step?

4. Why is it important to do the first step *before* taking any other action?

5. Notice that the goal of this procedure, according to verse 15, is that you may win the other person over. How might each of these steps help a person not to wander farther from God?

6. In verse 21 Peter follows the teachings about attempting to reconcile with people who wander by asking a logical next question, "How many times shall I forgive my brother?" What is risky about trying to forgive someone who has hurt you?

7. *Read Matthew 18:21–35.* Study the two examples of debt collection described here. Find all the similarities that you can (vv. 23–30).

8. What differences do you see?

9. In the first half of the servant parable, the amount owed is a large sum of money. Ten thousand talents represented the highest Greek number combined with the largest Roman unit of money. What does this suggest about the nature of our sin debt to God and the extent of God's forgiveness?

10. What all do you see in verses 31–35 that show how the master viewed lack of forgiveness in his servants?

11. Bring to mind a person that you have had trouble forgiving. In a brief time of silence, ask God’s forgiveness for your own lack of forgiveness.

What is one way that you could demonstrate your desire to forgive this person?

Mentally picture what would be of great spiritual, emotional and vocational value to the person you have considered above. One by one, name these gifts, asking God to bless that person with these spiritual riches. Then ask God’s help in creating genuine forgiveness within you.

Now or Later

Take a few moments to meditate on your own sins—past and present. What has God forgiven you? Remember that God is the loving shepherd who went out looking for a single sheep who had wandered away. He is the master who forgave his servant all that he owed. Bring your sins to him and ask his forgiveness. Read aloud God’s assurance to you as found in Psalm 103:8–13.

FRIENDSHIP *Growing Side by Side*

6

A Father & His Son

Luke 15:11–32

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

“You’re not my friend!” shouted five-year-old David, irate at some small prohibition. “That’s right,” a firm voice shot back. “I’m not your friend. I’m your mother.” A few moments later David was once again cooperative and smiling. A wise mom had established appropriate status differences for this stage, making eventual adult friendship more likely.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Recall a time during your growing-up years when you had a fight or serious disagreement with a brother, sister or other family member. What did you fight about and why? What did this event reveal about each of you?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What is one of your family relationships in which you have trouble forgiving yourself? Bring this person and your relationship with him or her to God in prayer.

In this Bible-era story, we meet a self-serving five-year-old who had grown to adulthood, still thinking mostly of self. If his family had any hope of continuing as a unit, someone would need to let go. And someone would need undeserved forgiveness. *Read Luke 15:11–32.*

1. Who in this story is most like you? Explain.
2. From the beginning, tell this story in your own words—as if you were the youngest son.
3. What do you think the older son would say about his brother’s version of the story?
4. Family forgiveness plays a major part in this story. Focus on each member of the family one at a time. What did each have to forgive in the other two family members?
5. What all did the father do to help the brothers forgive each other?
6. In what ways does the father in this story remind you of God?
7. Glance through this story one more time. If you were to write a continuation that begins five years later, what would you write?
8. If you were the father in this family, what would you want to see five years later?
9. What forgiveness do you hope to see in your own family in the next five years?
10. What one or two steps could you take that might lead toward that forgiveness?
11. Forgiveness can sometimes lead to friendship but not always. Do you think that it is possible for parents and their children ever to become real friends? Explain your response.

12. What do you personally need to forgive a parent, child or sibling for? (Or what does one of them need to forgive you for?)

Pray using the words of Psalm 32. When the words of the psalm touch needs for forgiveness within your family, pause and use your own words as you pray for the people and relationships that come to mind.

Now or Later

Who within your extended family feels most like a friend? Thank God for that relationship. Consider ways you can continue to nurture that relationship toward friendship.

FRIENDSHIP *Growing Side by Side*

7

Friends Accountable to Friends

Galatians 6:1–10

¹ Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³ If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. ⁴ Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, ⁵ for each one should carry their own load. ⁶ Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor. ⁷ Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸ Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. ⁹ Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Western culture is rooted in independence. We like to pay our own bills, find our own way, take charge of our own lives. This even extends to matters of the soul. We tend to see the state of our soul as between us and God—alone. Yet Scripture speaks often of God's people encouraging and admonishing each other. Living out our faith is something we do best together.

GROUP DISCUSSION. If you were making a report on your spiritual progress during the past week, what would you say? (Include at least one positive item and one area where you would like to improve.)

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What do you think might be reassuring about some form of spiritual accountability to a friend? What do you find troubling about that possibility?

Paul's letter to the Galatians is a book about Christian freedom. It has even been called the Christian Magna Carta. Yet it closes with instructions about spiritual responsibility for each other within the family of God. *Read Galatians 6:1–10.*

1. What attitudes are Christians to have when they help each other in these various ways? (Try to find something in almost every verse.)

2. If you were to live with a group of Christians who function in the way described here, what responsibilities would you expect to have?

What would you expect others to do for you?

3. Verse 1 gives particular responsibilities to “you who are spiritual.” What words of caution do you find in the rest of the passage?

4. Why do you think we must be careful when we try to help someone else get straightened out?

5. Verse 2 says that we are to carry each other’s burdens, yet verse 5 says that we should carry our own loads. Why might a responsible Christian expect to do both of these—depending on the circumstances?

6. What kinds of situations might lead you to ask a Christian friend for spiritual guidance?

7. What would be hard about letting someone check up on your spiritual progress?

8. Focus on verse 6. What give-and-take between believers does this verse suggest?

9. In verses 7–10 Paul speaks several times of sowing and reaping. What personal encouragement do you find here?

10. What are some ways that friends can help each other to continue in faith?

11. Consider again your response to question 1. If you were to report on your spiritual progress in the week to come, what would you want a friend to ask you at the end of that time?

If you are meeting with a group, divide into pairs and pray for each other about the spiritual progress you hope to make in the coming week. If you are alone, look at your calendar or date book for the week ahead. Bring each day to God in prayer. Ask that he reveal himself to you as you go about the duties of each day.

Now or Later

Galatians 6:2 says that when we carry each other’s burdens we fulfill “the law of Christ.” We can’t be sure which specific law Paul meant, but several statements from Christ may help us. Read Matthew 5:43–44; 7:12; Mark 12:30–31 and Galatians 5:14. If you wanted to help someone through a time of spiritual difficulties, what help for the coming week do you find in these laws?

FRIENDSHIP
Growing Side by Side

8

David & Nathan

2 Samuel 11:1–12:25

^{11:1} In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. ² One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, ³ and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴ Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) Then she went back home. ⁵ The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant." ⁶ So David sent this word to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent him to David. ⁷ When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. ⁸ Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him. ⁹ But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants and did not go down to his house. ¹⁰ David was told, "Uriah did not go home." So he asked Uriah, "Haven't you just come from a military campaign? Why didn't you go home?" ¹¹ Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!" ¹² Then David said to him, "Stay here one more day, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. ¹³ At David's invitation, he ate and drank with him, and David made him drunk. But in the evening Uriah went out to sleep on his mat among his master's servants; he did not go home. ¹⁴ In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. ¹⁵ In it he wrote, "Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die." ¹⁶ So while Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah at a place where he knew the strongest defenders were. ¹⁷ When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David's army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died. ¹⁸ Joab sent David a full account of the battle. ¹⁹ He instructed the messenger: "When you have finished giving the king this account of the battle, ²⁰ the king's anger may flare up, and he may ask you, 'Why did you get so close to the city to fight? Didn't you know they would shoot arrows from the wall?' ²¹ Who killed Abimelek son of Jerub-Besheth? Didn't a woman drop an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died in Thebez? Why did you get so close to the wall?' If he asks you this, then say to him, 'Moreover, your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead.'" ²² The messenger set out, and when he arrived he told David everything Joab had sent him to say. ²³ The messenger said to David, "The men overpowered us and came out against us in the open, but we drove them back to the entrance of the city gate. ²⁴ Then the archers shot arrows at your servants from the wall, and some of the king's men died. Moreover, your

servant Uriah the Hittite is dead.”²⁵ David told the messenger, “Say this to Joab: ‘Don’t let this upset you; the sword devours one as well as another. Press the attack against the city and destroy it.’ Say this to encourage Joab.”²⁶ When Uriah’s wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him.²⁷ After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.

^{12:1} The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle,³ but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.⁴ “Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die!⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”⁷ Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul.⁸ I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more.⁹ Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.¹⁰ Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.’¹¹ “This is what the LORD says: ‘Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight.¹² You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.”¹³ Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” Nathan replied, “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.¹⁴ But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the LORD, the son born to you will die.”¹⁵ After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife had borne to David, and he became ill.¹⁶ David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground.¹⁷ The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them.¹⁸ On the seventh day the child died. David’s attendants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they thought, “While the child was still living, he wouldn’t listen to us when we spoke to him. How can we now tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate.”¹⁹ David noticed that his attendants were whispering among themselves, and he realized the child was dead. “Is the child dead?” he asked. “Yes,” they replied, “he is dead.”²⁰ Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate.²¹ His attendants asked him, “Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!”²² He answered, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, ‘Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.’²³ But

now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.”²⁴ Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and he went to her and made love to her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon. The LORD loved him;²⁵ and because the LORD loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah.

“I’ve met someone else,” said the soft voice on the phone. “I’ve left the house; I thought you’d want to know.”

I felt as stunned as if I had been jolted by an electric current. Our families had been friends for a quarter of a century. We’d had babies at the same time, taken vacations together, attended each other’s family funerals. He was a leader in his church, the spiritual patriarch of his extended family. Now his marriage was at an end—or seemed to be—and maybe his walk with God as well. What were we to do, if anything?

GROUP DISCUSSION. What kinds of situations have led you to wonder if a friend ought to step in and point out what is wrong?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. When have you been thankful that someone confronted you about a potential spiritual lapse? This may have been in person (one-to-one) or through writing, teaching or preaching.

Confrontation is always difficult and sometimes dangerous—especially if the person confronted is a king. *Read 2 Samuel 11.*

1. What bothers you about David’s actions in this story?
2. Why do you think Uriah would not go home (11:7–13)?
3. What do Joab’s actions (11:14–21) say about his character?
4. If you had been Bathsheba’s friend, what would you worry about?
5. If you had been David’s friend, what (if anything) would you say to him?
6. This chapter ends with the terse statement, “But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.” *Read 2 Samuel 12:1–25.* What connections do you see between Nathan’s parable in 12:1–4 and David’s actions in the previous chapter?
7. Study Nathan’s description of David’s life in 12:7–9. What perspective did Nathan offer that David may not have seen (or wanted to see) until this point?

8. Once David recognized his sin (12:13), how did he express his faith?

9. How do you think this story would have ended differently if Nathan had refused to confront David with what he had done wrong?

10. Accountability among friends will at times lead to confrontation, and friendship may not survive this. What measures can we take in friendship that could make healthy confrontation possible?

11. In the closing scene of this story, God sends Nathan back to David one more time, where he names David and Bathsheba's newborn son Jedidiah, meaning "loved by God." What comfort does this scene offer you about your own life and the lives of your friends?

God is a redeeming God. He confronts the sin of his people, brings us out of it and restores us to himself. Reflect on ways and times God has done this in your own life—and thank him.

Now or Later

As you observe God in this story, what warnings or reassurances do you find in regard to your own actions? (Be as specific as you can.)

FRIENDSHIP

Growing Side by Side

9

Loving Friends

1 John 4:7–21

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. ¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis contrasts friendship love with other forms of love: “Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other,” writes Lewis; “friends side by side, absorbed in some common interest.” And later, “The typical expression of opening friendship would be something like, ‘What? You too? I thought I was the only one.’ ”

GROUP DISCUSSION. Who was your best friend during your growing-up years? How did you and your friend show that you cared about each other?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. As you consider your ability to give and receive friendship love, what are some of the barriers you cope with? When have you enjoyed (or missed) opportunities for loving friendship?

John’s first letter has sometimes been termed a “love letter.” But it is not romantic love that John speaks of. It is love between God and his people and between Christians who (because of God’s love) can love one another. *Read 1 John 4:7–21.*

1. Six times in this letter (twice in this passage) John uses the phrase “Dear friends.” Would you want to be a friend to a person who could write this kind of letter? Why or why not?
 2. John uses the word *love* twenty-seven times in this short section of his letter. What all does he teach us here about God’s love?
 3. Verse 19 says, “We love because he first loved us.” According to this passage, what impact should God’s love have on our own attempts to love? (Find all that you can.)
 4. What would you expect to see in a person who tries to imitate the love of God as it is described here?
 5. Why do you think John draws such a strong link between loving God and loving each other?
 6. Verse 10 describes God’s love as an “atoning sacrifice.” What sacrifices have various people made in their love for you?
 7. What kinds of sacrifices has your love for someone else required?
 8. Verse 16 says, “God is love.” How is that different from saying, “Love is God”?
 9. Verse 18 says, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.” Why are love and fear sometimes mixed in our human forms of love?
 10. As you think through love as it is described in this passage, what are you particularly thankful for?
 11. When has a friend offered you some aspect of love as it is described in this passage?
 12. What current relationship would you like to enrich by bringing some of the ingredients of love described here?
- How can you begin that process?

Review Christ's great commands to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Thank God for ways you have been able to give and receive love between friends. In prayer, confess any of your shortcomings that this standard of love brings to mind.

Now or Later

Read 1 John 3:1–10. Picture yourself as a child of God hearing these words of love for you. Thank him for what he offers you in these verses. Offer your own love in return.

FRIENDSHIP

Growing Side by Side

10

Forever Friends

1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

^{4:13} Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words. ^{5:1} Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Long-term friendships are special. Together we remember major life events: kindergarten, graduation, weddings, births. We've shared minutia: a favorite flavor of tea, a silly joke—or fear. We have disagreed, gotten angry and gotten over it. But Christian friendship brings new meaning to *long-term*.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Describe one of your long-standing friendships. (Who is it with? How did you meet? Why and how did you remain friends?)

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What is one of your favorite mental images of heaven? Who are you with? What are you doing? What changes do you see in yourself?

The Christians of Thessalonica had a question. They knew that Christ would return; he had told them so. But what about Christians who had already died? Would they miss his return? Does death separate Christians forever, or ...? *Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18.*

1. What visual images does this passage present?
2. Paul begins this passage by saying that Christians do not grieve like people who have no hope (4:13). What part does Christ play in the hope offered here?
3. Paul ends this section by saying, “Therefore encourage each other with these words” (4:18). What do you find encouraging in these verses?
4. Try to picture yourself with a dear friend (even one who has died), alive together in the scene described here. What images and feelings come to your mind?
5. *Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11.* What words and phrases suggest warning?
6. Paul speaks here of two kinds of people, those who belong to darkness and those who belong to light. How, according to the text, are these people different from each other?
7. In 5:8 Paul says that one of the protections against the warnings described here is “the hope of salvation.” What is salvation (5:9–10)?

Why is it a hope?

8. In view of the warnings and the promise here, what would you encourage a friend to do or to be?
9. First Thessalonians 4:17 tells us that we will be “with the Lord forever,” and 5:10 adds that we will “live together with him.” If some of your friendships are in fact eternal relationships, how might that affect the way you conduct them now?

Use this passage as an outline for prayer. Thank God for what he offers you throughout these verses.

Now or Later

During your ten studies on friendship, you have thought of many of your friends—past and present. Bring these friends to mind, one by one. Are there any who need the encouragement, comfort or warning that comes from this passage? Consider how you might live out this passage in actions or conversation as you continue these friendships.

Nystrom, Carolyn. [*Friendship: Growing Side by Side: 10 Studies for Individuals or Groups: With Notes for Leaders*](#). Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2004. Print. A LifeGuide Bible Study.