

A LifeGuide® Bible Study

FOLLOWING JESUS

8 STUDIES FOR INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS

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LEADER'S NOTES

Getting the Most Out of *Following Jesus*

The Christian life begins with a *step* of faith. We put our trust in Jesus as our Savior and Lord and King. In that instant we are made new and we pass from death to life. But that first step of faith leads to a *walk* of obedience and trust and holiness. The process begins with a decisive act, but we don't remain just inside the door of God's kingdom. We go on in our walk with the Lord. We grow up into spiritual maturity. We launch out on a journey through life toward an eternity in Christ's presence.

All the images I have just touched on are pictures the Bible uses to describe the life of a Christian—a walk, a journey, growing up, entering a kingdom. This study guide explores what it means to follow Jesus. It's an exciting, challenging adventure! The journey leads through hard places sometimes, but we have an incredible Helper, the Holy Spirit, who gives us the energy and the desire to press on.

I've designed this guide especially for new believers, but it will revitalize any Christian at any stage in their spiritual journey. It's not a self-help program but instead shows how the Holy Spirit will move us in new directions and give us new goals in life. Get ready to see some changes! The challenge of following Jesus never ends.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.
2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.
3. Each study deals with a particular passage so that you can delve into the author's meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.
4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. *Observation* questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.
5. Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word.
6. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.
7. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.
8. You may want to go on to the suggestion under "Now or Later," or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

1

Carrying a Cross

Luke 14:25–35

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

Following Jesus sounds like a wonderful adventure—and Jesus does promise a life of incredible challenge and enriching purpose as we follow him. But the satisfying path is not necessarily the easy path. Several times during his ministry Jesus urged his followers to consider the cost of following him. Salvation in Jesus is free—a gift of God’s grace. Following Jesus as a faithful disciple, on the other hand, requires the willing sacrifice of all the things we hold most closely.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Have you ever volunteered for a job only to find out later that far more was being asked of you than you were originally told? Tell the group your story.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Have you ever thought that being a Christian required too much from you? How would you counsel a friend who thought they were paying too high a price to follow Jesus?

Jesus and a large crowd of followers were making their way to Jerusalem. It’s likely they came upon crosses standing along the road—crosses ready to be used if executions were needed. Jesus used that sobering symbol of death to call his followers to an all-consuming commitment to him. *Read Luke 14:25–35.*

1. What do you think of when you see a cross that is worn as a piece of jewelry or displayed in front of a church?

What do you think people in Jesus’ day thought of when they saw a cross?

2. How does carrying a cross illustrate what is required to follow Jesus (v. 27)?

3. What do you think “hate” means in this passage?

What would be a modern-day example of how a Christian may be forced to “hate” his family or his own life (v. 26) in order to follow Jesus fully?

4. How do you think the people listening to Jesus that day reacted to the demands he was making?

How do you react to Jesus’ demands reading them now?

5. What consequences result from not calculating the cost of building a tower or going to war (vv. 28–32)?
6. What point about discipleship is Jesus trying to communicate by using these illustrations?
7. What is a Christian like who loses his or her “saltiness” (v. 34)?
8. Which of the costs of following Jesus fully seem especially high to you?

What is it about following Jesus that makes the cost or sacrifice worth it?

Consider what you are willing to sacrifice in order to follow Jesus fully. Express the level of your commitment to Jesus in prayer.

Now or Later

Check out a short biography about a Christian who sacrificed deeply to follow Jesus. Elisabeth Elliot’s book *Through Gates of Splendor* is a classic; you could also search online for the story of John and Betty Stam or Bishop Polycarp, or watch the movie “Amazing Grace” about William Wilberforce. How did the person you learned about respond to the call of Jesus in their life?

2

Growing into Maturity

1 Peter 1:22–2:3

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

Our granddaughter Allison just turned nine years old. She's not the little baby we held so carefully or the bouncing toddler we helped to walk around the room. Instead of asking us to read a book to her, she reads to us! It's hard to see your children or grandchildren grow up, but it would be tragic if they remained children forever. We expect them to move steadily toward maturity and independence as an adult. We miss the joys of having a young child around but enter into new joys as we see them grow up.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What did you enjoy most about your childhood? What did you like least about being a child?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. In what areas did you have the most difficulty as you grew up? What would you identify as a continuing area of immaturity in your life?

Spiritual growth and maturity are just as important as growing up physically. It's easier, of course, to stay at the elementary levels of Christian growth; not much pain is involved and people don't expect much from you. But the Bible challenges us to grow beyond a foundational knowledge of Christian truth and beyond the initial experience with the Lord to the place of maturity and strength. The apostle Peter urges his Christian friends to break out of the spiritual nursery and to press toward adulthood. *Read 1 Peter 1:22–2:3.*

1. What evidence of genuine spiritual life does Peter see in these Christians (1:22)?

2. What does it mean to be “born again” or born anew (1:23)?

How do we receive that new birth according to Peter?

3. Would you say that you have had a new birth in Christ in your life? If you have, describe when and how that happened.

4. What do you learn about God's Word in 1:23–25?

Does any of Peter's testimony change your view of God's Word? Why or why not?

5. What is the “pure spiritual milk” that Peter urges us to crave (2:2)?
6. What will be the result of receiving this spiritual nourishment (2:2)?
7. Part of spiritual growth is putting off the remnants of the old life. Which of the old patterns in 1 Peter 2:1 are the most difficult for you to remove?
8. Where would you place yourself on the “craving scale” for God’s truth if 10 represented “I can’t go very long without it” and 1 represented “I can avoid it for weeks”?

What can you do to move yourself one or two notches higher on that scale—to increase your desire to hear, understand and obey God’s Word to you?

9. How would you communicate the importance of God’s Word in your life to a friend who doesn’t know Jesus?

Pray that God would give you the strength to get rid of the remnants of your old life that you struggle with, and then ask him to deepen your desire to listen to his voice and obey his Word.

Now or Later

One way to stimulate a desire for God’s Word is to pursue a regular Bible reading. You may want to start with one of the Gospels in the New Testament. Read one chapter of the Gospel of Mark, for example, each day. What is Jesus speaking to you about as you read? Talk to him about your desire to obey what God says. If you miss a day or two, don’t quit. Go back to the pattern and listen to God speak.

3

Keeping in Step with the Spirit

Galatians 5:16–26

[*https://www.biblegateway.com/*](https://www.biblegateway.com/)

I took a walk last winter in an orchard not far from my Michigan home. I'm not an expert on fruit trees, so I didn't have a clue what kind of fruit the bare trees normally produced. If I had returned to the orchard in the summer, however, I would have had no trouble identifying the trees. The fruit produced by the trees would have been hanging off every limb.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Tell the group what your favorite fruit is and how you most like to eat it. What would you need to grow the fruit yourself?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. If you could change one aspect of your personality, what would it be? Why would you want to change that particular aspect?

Before Jesus went back to heaven, he promised his disciples that he would send another helper to guide their lives and encourage their hearts—the Holy Spirit. Jesus still keeps that promise to his followers today. Following Jesus means that we live under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit desires to produce the character of Jesus in every believer. Christlikeness doesn't just happen, however. We are called to keep our lives in step with the Spirit's direction. *Read Galatians 5:16–26.*

1. What does Paul identify as the primary conflict within every Christian?

Scan through this passage again and explain how that conflict flares up in a Christian's life.

2. Describe how the conflict between the sinful nature and the Spirit emerges in your own life.

How have you tried to resolve that conflict in the past?

3. In your opinion, which “acts of the sinful nature” listed in verses 19–21 are most prevalent in our culture?

Which of these acts seem to entangle you most often?

4. Why does Paul refer to the qualities in verses 22 and 23 as the “fruit” of the Spirit?

5. What spiritual fruit is most obvious in your life—and which is least obvious?
6. What specific practices can a Christian engage in to nurture the development of the fruit of the Spirit in his or her life?
7. If we have “crucified the sinful nature” (v. 24), why do we still sense a conflict between the sinful nature and the Holy Spirit (v. 17)?
8. In what ways can a Christian discern the Spirit’s guidance in a situation or a decision?
9. What tends to distract you from keeping in step with the Spirit’s direction?
10. Describe to the group one specific step that you will take this week to “crucify” the sinful nature and its desires and to live in the realm of God’s Spirit. Ask the group to hold you accountable to do it.

Thank God for the Spirit’s work in your life—and ask him to help you in the areas where you feel out of step with him.

Now or Later

Talk to someone in your church or Christian fellowship in whom you see the mature fruit of the Spirit. Ask that person how they discern the Spirit’s direction in their life. Seek to implement some of their wisdom into your own journey with the Lord.

4

Running the Race

1 Corinthians 9:19–27

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

I started the race so well! At the 100-meter mark I was ahead of every other sixth-grade boy. At 200 meters I was still out in front but was fading fast. The problem was not my speed; the problem was the length of the race. I finally crossed the finish line but at the back of the pack. “That’s a big mistake most inexperienced runners make,” my teacher, Mr. Johnson, explained as he walked with me back to the school. “They have a lot of energy and run fast at first, but they have no endurance for the long haul.”

GROUP DISCUSSION. What “race” do you remember participating in—a gunnysack race, a three-legged race, a schoolyard challenge, an Olympic tryout? Did you win, fall down or choke?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. At what stage in a project do you tend to lose energy—halfway through, almost done, before it starts? Reflect on your endurance record.

The apostle Paul was a sports fanatic. If he were on earth today, he would love the World Cup soccer matches, the Stanley Cup playoffs and the Super Bowl. Most of all he would love those feats of strength and endurance we call the Olympic Games. Paul would enjoy the thrill of it all but he would also see in the athlete’s performance a powerful example of what it means to follow Jesus. *Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–27.*

1. What comparisons can you think of between a race and the Christian life?

Do you personally find it to be a helpful comparison? Why or why not?

2. Paul explains his motivation for running the race in verses 19–23. What present-day examples might be substituted for the groups Paul was burdened to reach with the message of Jesus?

3. Does “becoming all things to all people” (see v. 22) mean we participate in their sinful behavior? Explain your answer.

4. What is “the prize” Paul challenges us to run for (vv. 24–25)?

5. Do you think of gaining a prize or reward when you serve the Lord in some way? Why or why not?

6. What may be involved in the “strict training” (v. 25) of an athlete and how does that apply to the Christian race?

7. In verses 26 and 27 Paul switches from the image of running to the sport of boxing. How does this new picture broaden your understanding of what it means to follow Jesus?

8. What might disqualify an athlete from winning the prize?

What might disqualify a Christian from gaining the prize?

9. How would you honestly describe your personal fitness for the Christian race: have never really started? too out of shape to run? getting my second wind? feeling like I could run forever? ready to drop out?

If you are falling behind, what will it cost in your life to get back in the race, running for the prize?

Pray that God would help you to focus your life on Jesus and on pleasing him. Pray also that he would give you not only a passion to run the Christian race but also endurance to finish well.

Now or Later

As a group, think about or talk about people in your community who are not being reached very effectively with the gospel: the poor, an immigrant population, latchkey kids, the elderly. How can you apply the principles of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 and begin to reach one of these groups? What are your fears? What might be the rewards of such a commitment?

5

Constructing a Building

1 Corinthians 3:10–15

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

When my son Kyle wanted a fort for the backyard, my dad and I decided to build something that would stand up to hard play. After a couple weeks of work and several midcourse corrections, we finished a log fort that would light up any young boy's eyes. Last week we went past the house where the fort was first built. Four children now live there and the log fort still stands. I expect it will capture the imaginations of a few more generations of kids before it is torn down.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Tell the group about your most memorable “construction” project. It might be building a flowerbed, trying your hand at home improvement or constructing a science fair project.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. In what way is life like a building project? What “foundation” does your life rest upon?

The Bible uses the image of “building” to illustrate what it means to follow Jesus. Not only are we all involved in the project, but we will also all face an evaluation some day for our personal contribution. *Read 1 Corinthians 3:10–15.*

1. What kind of “building” is Paul talking about in this passage?

What helped you draw that conclusion?

2. How does it make you feel to think that you are one of the craftsmen working on God’s building?

3. Jesus Christ is the foundation of God’s building. How did Paul and the other early Christian leaders lay that foundation?

Why is this foundation so important for God’s building?

4. When and how was the foundation of faith in Christ laid in your life, and who were the people responsible for laying it?

5. What does Paul mean when he talks about building with gold, silver or costly stones?

What about wood, hay or straw?

6. Paul refers in verse 13 to a “Day” of evaluation that all believers will face. What will Jesus be examining on that Day?

7. If our building survives the fire of Jesus’ evaluation, we will receive a reward from him (v. 14). How do you envision that reward?

8. What will it mean to suffer loss of his reward (v. 15)?

9. Does this future Day of evaluation make you nervous or do you look forward to it with anticipation? Explain your answer.

Sit in silence for a few moments, asking the Lord to evaluate the quality of your work on his building right now. Then talk to him about what you sense him saying, and ask him to give you the courage to build in such a way that he is pleased.

Now or Later

Plan as a group to do something to build up God’s building. Help a senior adult with yard work, prepare a meal for a needy family, baby-sit for a young couple, buy clothes or toys for a family shelter. Do it in Jesus’ name, not for praise from others.

6

Fighting the Battle

Ephesians 6:10–18

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

Recently our church honored our two World War II veterans. As these men shared their stories about the assignments they had been given and the situations they had faced, we could almost see them as young GIs on a transit ship steaming across the ocean. The battles of that war changed their lives—and their generation.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Imagine yourself preparing for battle. What three things would you most want to take with you?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Do you ever sense that you are struggling against forces that are not physical? What is the source of that opposition in your life?

The Bible makes it clear that the Christian experience can be like a battle. Powerful spiritual forces are set against us and are determined to defeat or discourage us from following the Lord. We can't avoid the battle but we can take advantage of the spiritual protection God supplies. *Read Ephesians 6:10–18.*

1. Summarize what this passage tells you about the reality and nature of evil forces outside the realm of our sight or touch.

2. How have you as a believer experienced this ongoing struggle against “the spiritual forces of evil” in your own life?

3. Based on this passage, how strong are Satan and his demons?

What words and phrases reveal this?

4. How confident do you feel personally about facing Satan and his demons and why?

5. Four times in verses 10–14 Paul challenges us to stand our ground against Satan’s attacks. What might make a believer vulnerable to the enemy and in danger of falling when attacked?

6. If the battle is a “spiritual” one, what does that tell you about the nature of the armor God provides?

What is our responsibility in regard to that armor?

7. What area of life might each piece of God's armor protect or be used for?

Belt of truth:

Breastplate of righteousness:

Footwear of peace:

Shield of faith:

Helmet of salvation:

Sword of the Spirit:

8. In what way is prayer a resource in the spiritual battle (v. 18)?

9. Which piece of armor do you need to "put on" more consistently in your life and why?

Ask God to help you be more aware of the spiritual forces standing against you—and more prepared to meet the enemy's attack.

Now or Later

Think of a friend, Christian leader or missionary who may be under spiritual attack. Pray for God's protection for that person. If possible, contact them and tell them you are praying specifically for strength against the enemy.

Becoming a Servant

John 13:1–17

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

Our culture doesn't put much value on serving. We are much more impressed with fame or acclaim. No reality television producers are searching the land for “the next American servant.” Even in Christian circles, we tend to elevate the superstar preachers and the megahit musicians. Faithful men and women serving in small churches or visiting hospice patients don't get much notice.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Who would you nominate for the “servant of the year” award in your family or circle of friends for their selfless, compassionate service?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Do you find it easier to serve or to be served? Think of a recent example of selfless service. Did you give it or receive it?

Jesus made it clear that, in his kingdom, serving others is the key to exaltation. He told his disciples that he had not come to earth to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28). Those weren't just empty words either. Jesus consistently modeled that spirit of humility—even if it meant washing twelve pairs of dirty feet. *Read John 13:1–17.*

1. Imagine that you were one of the disciples in the room that night. What moods or emotions do you think were present as the evening unfolded?

How do you think you personally would have felt and responded as Jesus began to wash your feet?

2. Why do you think the disciples didn't wash the dust from their own feet as they entered this house?

3. What did Jesus know that the disciples did not know (vv. 1, 3, 11)?

Why does Jesus' knowledge make his act of washing their feet even more impressive?

4. What do you think Jesus' motives were in washing his disciples' feet?

5. How would you explain Peter's reaction to Jesus in verses 6 and 8?

Why did he eventually allow Jesus to wash his feet (see vv. 8, 10)?

6. How does Jesus expect his disciples (then and now) to follow his example (vv. 12–16)?

Does Jesus' command to "wash one another's feet" mean that the CEO of a company will be sorting mail and sharpening pencils for the employees? Explain your answer.

7. Imagine what Jesus might say to you if he bent to wash your feet today. What words of affirmation and blessing might you hear?

What words of evaluation or direction?

8. How will you put Jesus' teaching about servanthood into action in at least one relationship this week in your church, your workplace or your family?

Who can you ask to hold you accountable to carry through on your commitment?

Pray that Jesus would make your heart like his by giving you a deeper desire to serve others.

Now or Later

You may want to close your group session with an actual foot washing. One suggestion is for each person to wash the feet of the person to his or her right and then have that person wash the feet of the next person. If your group consists of married couples, you could also have spouses wash each other's feet. Or you may want to separate into two groups—males and females—for foot washing. In any case, after each washing, the person washing speaks words of encouragement and blessing to the one whose feet have been washed. You will need basins, water, towels—and humility! This can be a very moving experience for a small group.

8

Entering a Kingdom

Hebrews 12:14–29

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

I have family friends who are missionaries in a Third World country. What frustrates them the most is not ministry in a difficult place, but the difficulty of daily life. The system of government in that nation seems to be built on corruption, bribery, threats and constantly changing regulations. Sometimes it takes a whole day just to get a driver's license renewed or to obtain a building permit for a new fence. Sharing the message of the gospel is challenging enough in that culture, but the actual living in such a dysfunctional "kingdom" can be very disheartening.

GROUP DISCUSSION. If you could choose to live anywhere in the world for a year, what issues would be most important in your choice? Culture? Climate? Available activities? Government?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What do you like best about the national government you live under? What aspects of the government would you like to change?

When Jesus began his ministry, he announced that the arrival of God's kingdom was near. Christians are in the process of receiving that kingdom as Jesus rules in our lives as king. *Read Hebrews 12:14–29.*

1. What indications can you glean from verses 14–17 about what it means "to be holy"?
2. What effort do you make to live at peace with all (v. 14)?
3. Create a chart that compares the experiences of those who received the law at Mount Sinai (vv. 18–21) with the privileges of those who have received God's grace in Jesus (vv. 22–24).

Which side of the chart more closely reflects your experience and view of God?

4. No matter which side of the chart you identify with more, what do you think would help you learn to enjoy the privileges of grace more deeply in your own life?
5. What aspects of the description of heaven in verses 22–24 make you most excited about living there forever and why?

6. Why does the writer add the warning of verses 25–27 when he has just emphasized the blessings of verses 22–24?

7. What are the benefits of living as a citizen of “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” rather than simply as a citizen of a world that God will shake once more in the future (vv. 27–28)?

8. In light of vv. 28–29, share with each other one benefit of his kingdom you’ve experienced this week. Begin with the phrase “I praise God for his ...”

9. How should the fact that “our ‘God is a consuming fire’ ” affect our attitude toward him in worship?

How should it affect our attitude toward his Word, the Bible?

10. As you think back through the biblical images of following Jesus that we have studied in this guide, which image has affected you most deeply? Explain how it has strengthened your commitment to Christ.

Ask God to help you focus on living as a citizen of Christ’s kingdom rather than simply as a citizen of a shaky world.

Now or Later

Conclude your study with a time of reverent worship to God. Singing worship songs focused on God’s holy character might be a good way to begin. Expressing praise to God for his grace and his goodness might be another element to include. Even our body position in worship (standing, kneeling, etc.) can express the attitude of our hearts before the Lord. Try to envision your worship joined with millions of angels and millions of believers made perfect in heaven. Try to keep that perspective as you worship with your fellow Christians in church. Exalt God as the ruler over all and Jesus as the one who bridges the gap between sinful humanity and a holy God.¹

¹ Connelly, Douglas. *Following Jesus: 8 Studies for Individuals or Groups: With Notes for Leaders*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2009. Print. A LifeGuide Bible Study.