

Welcome to BNEXT

I am excited to share this journey through God's Word with you. As we study Scripture, we see an unfolding revelation of who God is, the nature of Jesus, and how we can become stronger in our walk with Christ. It is important that we study Scripture for ourselves — allowing the Holy Spirit to enlighten us (Acts 17:11).

The Scripture covered by each lesson is listed on the top-right side of the masthead of the page. Read the Scripture passages and then begin working your way through the lesson. Each lesson in this series contains three pages of commentary, followed by three pages of questions that will assist you to dig deeper and reflect on God's Word.

We have also included a Leader's Guide that will enable anyone to facilitate a small group. Once you have completed this BNEXT study, I hope you will consider leading others through this material — whether it is a group of friends, your church, or as a ministry outreach. (See the Leader's Guide at the end of this study for more information.)

Again, thank you for allowing me to share this amazing journey with you.

Your brother in Christ Jesus,

Handwritten signature of William P. Campbell in blue ink.

William P. Campbell

Founder & President | Scripture Awakening

BNEXT Participant's Guide

Thank you for choosing BNEXT Bible study curriculum. To help you get the most out of your study, please take a few minutes to read this information before you begin. Studying the Bible is much like going on a journey — it takes us to new places in our understanding and our walk with God. The Word of God is transformative — it's living and active, can build up our faith, and call us to move beyond where we are.

Using this curriculum, you may journey alone, or travel with others in a small group, or even engage as an entire congregation (with small groups as part of the program). Groups gather once a week to review what was read, to share answers to discussion questions, and to deepen their understanding.

About This Study

This electronic version of the Participant's Guide contains the same material as the printed version. It allows you to electronically record your answers to the questions which are part of each lesson. Following each question, you will find a blue text box. Click or touch the box and the field within it will turn white allowing you to type in your answer. Your answer will automatically be saved when you exit the text box. Should you need more space for your answer, the text box will automatically expand and insert a scroll bar on the right-hand side.

Things to Know

These studies are designed to be used in many different settings— individuals, congregations (separating into small groups), Sunday school classes, prison ministries, military, business groups— virtually anywhere a small group can be formed. Experience has shown that participants find the small group experience to be greatly beneficial. The input and interaction with others will broaden your perspective and stimulate your thinking about Scripture.

The lessons are designed to be done throughout the week. Each lesson contains a few pages of commentary, followed by study questions. There are three types of questions: Devotion (Personal Questions), Discussion (Small Group), and Digging Deeper (Further Study). While participants may use any Bible translation they prefer, all of the Biblical quotations in BNEXT studies are from the New International Version (NIV).

Plan your daily reading. The Scripture readings are located on the right side of the masthead of each lesson. Some lessons may cover a few chapters of a book (such as Genesis 1-11 in the series, *In the Beginning*). Longer readings may be broken down into more manageable daily readings, which may take some thoughtful planning. Some readings are as short as a few verses and will not present any difficulties. Some topical studies do not have assigned Scripture readings.

If you are meeting in a small group, be sure to first read and complete the lesson before the gathering. Once a week, your group will meet to spend time (about an hour) discussing the lesson and sharing personal insights.

More of our resources and study aids can be found at ScriptureAwakening.com. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or comments at info@scriptureawakening.com.



I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.

John 15:5

The True Vine

Jesus and His disciples had finished the Passover meal together (John 13). The words of Christ's betrayal and departure weighed heavily on the twelve men's minds as they listened to their Master's promises about the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 14). It may have been then that they all slipped quietly through the darkened streets of Jerusalem, passed through one of the eastern gates, and trudged along the path that dropped into the Kidron Valley. Along the trail were grape vines, gnarled from recent prunings. One can visualize Christ kneeling down and lifting a vine as an illustration as He said, "I am the true vine..." (John 15:1).

The word "true" emphasizes reality and fulfillment; it also creates a stark contrast with the "false." The disciples were being warned, with all who would follow them, of the many spiritual diversions to a true and vital connection with God. Those who learn to draw life from the true vine, however, will experience the joy of life in its fullness.

Better Than Showy Religion

When Christ identified Himself as the "true vine," He was declaring the importance of a vital relationship with Him over the pretense of spirituality found in ostentatious religion. In His day, for example, the Jewish religious leaders made a great show with their dress, their prayers, their hierarchies and their rituals. Jesus, the true Son of God, could have revealed His infinite glory with pomp and ceremony that would have far outshined the rest. But that is not God's way, nor is it the way to God.

In Jerusalem stood the centerpiece of the Jewish religious system; the magnificent temple built by Herod. Designed with proportions and materials that surpassed the Jewish temples of old, it was perhaps the grandest and most impressive house of worship ever constructed. Historians tell of the fantastic grape vines, made of the finest gold, which gracefully adorned the gateway to the temple's inner sanctuaries. The Jews hated Herod, but appreciated the generosity that prompted the construction of every branch, tendril and leaf that adorned their place of worship. The grape clusters on this elaborate piece of artwork were said to have been as large as a human is tall. This was religion on showy display. It is possible that from the windows of the upper room, where the Passover meal took place, and from the trail that lead toward the Mount of Olives, the disciples could see the magnificent temple with the largest and most opulent grapevines in the world. The setting sun may have caused the golden vines to sparkle with brilliance as the Lord declared Himself the "true vine."

As it was in Christ's day, so today we humans easily fall into the error of assuming bigger and brassier is better. Where should you and I turn if we want to grow close to God? What kind of church will make the difference in our lives? Is there a correlation between the size and grandeur of a church's programs with the depth and richness of one's life with God? Is a bigger budget or a better building the key to unlocking the door to Divine presence? Certainly not!

The good news is that Jesus is the true vine. He met His disciples in the clothes of a common carpenter and taught His followers in the context of every day life. His teachings, His grace, His life are available to each of us. Whether you have a lot of money to give or a little, whether you are

The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7b

part of a stunning church choir with an accompanying orchestra, or whether you sing off-key to the Lord in the quiet of your bedroom, the simple truths in John 15 are available to transform your life. Better than showy religion, Jesus offers to each of us a dynamic relationship with the living God.

Better Than Empty Tradition

When the Lord declared Himself the true vine, the disciples would have naturally thought of the Biblical references to vines and vineyards that dominate the Old Testament. The prophets often described Israel as a vineyard that was meant to produce refreshing fruit but became barren. The Jews of the Old Testament era were God's chosen people, His precious possession, repositories of divine truth (Exodus 19:5-6). Over time they substituted the heart of worship for mere forms of worship. Their rites and religious dogma became more important than God Himself (Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; Ezekiel 15:1-6; 19:10-14). Eventually the nation was ransacked and God's vineyard was laid bare. Thus in rabbinical literature the vine became a picture of a restored Israel, with her destiny made complete through the anticipated Messiah.

Jesus taught that He was the true vine, the anointed one who would bring to pass the fulfillment of God's original plan. Those who held to religious traditions and rejected Christ, however, would miss the very source of God's life (Mark 12:1-12; Luke 13:6-9). Our Lord's most stinging words of rebuke fell upon those whose religious regulations barricaded others from the pathway to God. He called them "hypocrites," "blind guides," "whitewashed tombs," "snakes," and a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 23:13-36).

What would Jesus say today if He walked into the average church? Might He admonish us for sitting comfortably on the pew of our accumulated religious traditions while ignoring His commands and side skirting His plans? He tells us to feed the hungry and to help the poor (Matthew 25:31-46); we say "that's not how we do it here." He bids us welcome the unlovely, the rejected, the outcast (Luke 14:12-14); yet we snub them when they come to visit. He commands us to tell the Gospel to all people (Matthew 28:18-20); yet we sit quaint, prim, and proper. We say our creeds, coldly mouth our prayers, and sing our hymns. But how much of it is based on a living relationship with our God? Subtly, religious regulations grow in the deep soil of our hearts like insidious weeds, choking out the spiritual fervor that God desires. Christ, the true vine, offers a better way.

Better Than Earthly Celebration

When Jesus declared Himself to be the true vine, He was also contrasting the joy He offers with the short-lived high found from alcoholic drink. He and His disciples, in fact, had just partaken of the Passover meal, during which He upheld the "cup of the covenant" (Luke 22:20) and declared that they would not drink together of the fruit of the vine again until they met at the banquet hall of His Heavenly Father (Matthew 26:29). The Lord encouraged them to rejoice, for He was going to make a new home for them (John 14:1-3). All of His promises would be fulfilled at the great wedding feast to come for He is the Bridegroom of the Church (Matthew 9:15; John 3:28-29; Revelation 19:9).

This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples.

John 15:8

It is interesting that John records the first of Christ's miracles to have occurred around wine with all the trappings of a wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1-11). The disciples were invited to attend the wedding with Jesus. Wine was the primary beverage of the day and would be an important part of the celebration. The wine ran out, however, and Jesus was called upon by His own mother to meet the need. The Lord told the household servants to fill large washing basins with water and to draw some of the water out and bring it to the master of ceremonies. After tasting it, the banquet guide exclaimed, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now" (John 2:9-10).

The Scriptures add that this was the first of Christ's miraculous signs, and having "revealed his glory...his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11). In this first divine wonder recorded by John, the disciples watched Christ miraculously produce the best fruit of the vine. On His last night with His disciples, Jesus would describe Himself as the true vine. If Jesus began His ministry with such a miracle, His departure from the world would be the start of a new and greater work through all who believe. If He exceeded all hopes and expectations at the wedding in Cana, His ability to turn an ordinary life into a miracle of His grace, as described in John 15, would run right off the charts.

The Best For Last

If you are a child of God, recall the first great miracle you encountered when Jesus took an ordinary vessel and transformed it from the inside out. Eternal life. New joy! Now make the connection. Jesus saves the best for last. The latter part of your life is meant to be better than the former. Regardless of whether you are young or old the days ahead of you can be, in the sight of God, the best part of your life.

Do you believe that God can ignite a new fire of passion in the midst of your prayer life? Do you desire for God to give you a renewed love for Scripture as vibrant as the love of two college sweethearts about to be married? Do you desire God to lead your life to accomplish His divine purposes? That is what this series is all about: Growing closer to God than ever before by choosing the best!

Spending Time With God

This study series, "Growing Close to God" from John 15 is designed to supplement your personal and small group Bible study. The devotion questions are for your personal study. The discussion questions are especially for small groups. Members who answer the questions ahead of time can bring more insight into their small group meeting. The digging deeper questions are for those who wish for more personal or small group study. As you spend time with God, may His Word enrich your life and enhance your daily walk with Him. Begin by praying for special insight into God's Word.



Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of this study-guide. What one insight most encouraged or challenged you about growing closer to God?

4. a. Complete this thought, "I would really like to grow closer with God because..."

2. Read John 14:15-21 and 26. From this text, how does the Holy Spirit help us to draw close to God?

b. List below areas of your live in which you would like to grow closer to God.

3. From John 15:1-8, tell why intimacy with God is important for our lives.

Discussion (Small Group Study)

5. How does the image of Christ as the "true vine" (John 15:1) speak to you personally, if at all? Explain.



6. Read aloud the story of Christ at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). Does the idea of Christ producing wine (alcohol) trouble or concern you? Explain.

b. Entertainment?

7. What do you think was the main learning point from the wedding incident for the disciples? For us today?

c. Busyness or over-commitment?

8. Paul likens our current connection with God to a betrothal (engagement) and expresses concern about our losing intimacy with the Lord (2 Corinthians 11:1-3). What are some of the intimacy killers in your life in the following areas?

a. Showy religion or empty tradition?

9. What steps might you take to strengthen your connection with Christ, the true vine? Take time to pray as a group for God to help you along the journey of dynamic spiritual growth through this seven week study.



SERIES

GROWING CLOSE TO GOD | JOHN 15

LESSON 1

Choosing the Best | John 15:1

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

10. Read Isaiah 5:1-7. What problem was God confronting here for the Jewish people in the days of the Old Testament?

11. See Mark 12:1-12. What is the main point of the teaching Christ gave about the vineyard in this context?

12. If the Church were likened to a vineyard today, how might God describe it? Why?

Scripture for Meditation

I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener.

John 15:1



He cuts off every branch
in Me that bears no fruit,
while every branch that
does bear fruit He prunes
so that it will
be even more fruitful.

John 15:2

The Gardener

Immediately after stating that he was the true vine, Jesus introduced His Heavenly Father as the “gardener.” A tiller of the soil and caregiver of the plants does not fit with our usual images of the Almighty God ruler of the universe, who, “with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens,” and to whom “the nations are like a drop in a bucket” (Isaiah 40:12, 15).

Yet throughout Scripture the King of Creation steps into our world to show us His personal love and guidance. As a Shepherd, for example, God “tends his flock...he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart” (Isaiah 40:11). As a gardener, He cares for us as though we were His prize plants on display for the entire world to see. In this lesson, we will consider the practical implications of what it means to be a branch under the eternal Vinedresser's care.

Those Lifted Up

Jesus said of the heavenly Gardener, “he cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit...” (John 15:2). The image of a keeper of the vineyard cutting out fruitless branches was commonplace in the Middle East and still is today. Branches that did not produce needed to be removed lest they drained vital life away from the vine. So Christians who follow the Lord in word but not deed, who warm the pews but have no warmth of heart for God, are in danger of being removed lest their poor example saps life from God's Church. Paul, for example, warned the believers in Corinth that many had become “weak and sick” and that a number had even “fallen asleep” (died) as a result of their compromised spiritual condition and practice (1Corinthians 11:30). If we claim to be Christians, then we should live like one.

It is often the case that a single English word does not convey the full meaning of a Greek word in the New Testament. The Greek word *airo* (“cuts off”) has another meaning that also fits well with this vineyard analogy. It can mean “to lift up.” Vines left on the ground typically do not prosper or bear fruit. Hence the careful gardener would lift them up and tie them to trellises, fences, or even along their door posts. Some vinedressers simply propped the grapevines up with small forked sticks. Thus a fruitless branch would be “lifted up,” that it might be given opportunity to become useful.

This interpretation emphasizes God's tender care for all of His children. As a shepherd leads his sheep into green valleys and beside refreshing waters, so God provides for our every need (Psalm 23:1-2). When we stray, He restores us and guides us into “paths of righteousness” (Psalm 23:3). Jonah was given a second chance. Paul, the chief of sinners, became an instrument of God's amazing grace (1 Timothy 1:15-16). We are invited to step onto the path of our merciful God, enjoying His grace and inviting others on the journey (James 5:19-20; 2 Corinthians 2:5-8).

Thus the Greek word *airo* can mean either “cut off” or “lift up.” Jesus may have had both meanings in mind when he chose that word. A dedicated gardener tends each branch with meticulous attention. Where there is hope or remedy, God will offer it. When drastic action is needed, God will take it.

Before I was afflicted I
went astray, but now I
obey Your word.

Psalm 119:67

Those Cut Back

After describing how the keeper of the vineyard handles fruitless branches, Jesus stated, “every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:2). Vine growers spend much of their time pruning. Young vines are cut back drastically, often for three full years, before they are allowed to bear fruit. In this way, the vine stores essential life and energy assuring better quality grapes. Mature vines are also cut back regularly to maximize the quantity and health of the grapes.

There is no middle way with God. We either bear fruit for His glory and accept His hand of careful pruning, or we will eventually grow in all the wrong directions, becoming spindly and useless branches. We are not expected to enjoy God's pruning but to anticipate it. Our tendency is to resist the cutting back process; God tells us to accept it.

Why the Pruning?

We often wonder why trials and difficulties come upon us. If God is all loving and all powerful, should He not make life easier? The Scriptures tell us that we need to be cut back, whether we understand it fully or not.

The knife may be felt because of our own sin and rebellion. Even as a father disciplines the children he loves, so does God train us in the way we should go (Hebrews 12:5-11).

The cut of the vinedresser may be applied to help us mature. Even Christ Himself, sinless and perfect, endured trials from His Heavenly Father. It was part of the human factor; He had to grow in spirit and strength to fulfill His divine mission. (Hebrews 5:7-9).

It is often the case that we do not know and may never understand whether our trials are orchestrated by God or are merely the consequence of living in a sin-stained world. We can be assured, however, that our loving Vinedresser cares for us and will work through even difficult circumstances to help us become more fruitful.

When we forget God's overriding purpose and promise, we need to stop and remember to look to Him with prayerful hearts—that He will comfort us with the understanding that He still loves us and that His purpose is being fulfilled (James 1:2-5).

Those Already Clean

After describing the two kinds of branches, Christ spoke directly to His disciples, saying “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you” (John 15:3). The word *clean* here is the same Greek word translated “prunes” in John 15:2.

The disciples had been following Jesus for three years, hearing His teachings and striving to obey them. The purging influence of God's Word was having its profound effect on their lives. They were already cleaned. Matthew heard the words “follow me,” and set aside his tax collection agency to invest himself in the kingdom of God (Matthew 9:9). Peter heard that “many who are the first will be last, and the last first” and gave his life as a servant to the Church (Mark

It was good for me to be
afflicted so I might learn
Your decrees.

Psalm 119:71

10:28-31). James and John were rebuked for their fiery temperaments and become examples of patient love (Luke 9:53-55, Mark 3:17).

So it is today. Those who pursue God's leading in their lives do not require the bit and bridle but are responsive to the gentle nudge of their Master (Psalm 32:8-9). If we spend time in the Scriptures daily, allowing its commands to correct us and its lessons to lead us, the garden of our hearts will be under the constant care of the heavenly Vinedresser. The regular gentle prunings of the Spirit are less drastic than the forceful cuttings of the shears of circumstance often required for those who avoid the cleansing influence of regular time spent in Scripture.

Do you come before the Lord with Scripture reading and prayer each day, subjecting your life to His corrective influences? If so, God may be saying to you, "You are already cut back. Stay close to Me, and I won't need to use the clippers just now."

Pruned for a Purpose

God has placed us on the earth for a purpose; God wants to work in and through our lives. The over-arching theme of John 15 is God's desire that we bear fruit. Beginning with the Fruit of the Spirit and leading to the fruit of others who come to Christ for salvation, God is glorified through us (Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 1:6).

When our hearts are consumed with a sense of God's purpose, our minds are less distracted by God's pruning. Like the New Testament disciples, the very process of ministering for the Lord becomes our place of cleansing and purging. Better to face the challenges of active service for the Lord than be faced with challenges from the Lord designed to make us more active!

In what ways are you experiencing the biting edge of God's pruning shears? Are you in the thick of an overwhelming trial? Does your sense of call to serve the Lord run ahead of your ability to keep up? Have a myriad of small temptations ambushed you and threatened to bring you down? Are you facing depression, loneliness, hopelessness, or despair?

Yield yourself to the Lord. Ask Him to use the trials in your life to make you yet more fruitful in the days and years ahead. Then trust Him with the results. He is the vinedresser. You are a branch. There is no better place to be than under the loving care of the divine Gardener!

Spending Time With God

This study series, "Growing Close to God," from John 15 is designed to supplement your personal and small group Bible study. The devotion questions are for your personal study. The discussion questions are especially for small groups. Members who answer the questions ahead of time can bring more insight into their small group meeting. The digging deeper questions are for those who wish for more personal or small group study. As you spend time with God, may His Word enrich your life and enhance your daily walk with Him. Begin by praying for special insight into God's Word.



Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of this study guide. What one insight stuck with you about God's pruning in our lives?

2. Tell what image about God is brought forth in the following texts, and how each image speaks to you personally (if it does):

a. John 10:7

b. John 10:11

c. Matthew 23:9

3. Read John 15:1. Complete this thought: "The image of God as the gardener suggests the following to me":

Discussion (Small Group Study)

4. According to the commentary, what are two possible interpretations of the statement, "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit..." (John 15:2)?

5. Which of these two interpretations (or what other possible interpretation) do you favor personally?



Why?

8. Read 1 Corinthians 10:13. What truths or promises can you draw from this text?

6. What kind of “fruit” do you think God wants His branches to produce (Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 1:6)?

7. Jesus said of the gardener that “every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:2). Can you describe a circumstance or trial in your life that was difficult to endure but that in the end caused you to be more fruitful as a Christian?

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

9. Read Hebrews 4:14-16. What insight from this text is an encouragement for you?

Why?

Explain.



10. If Jesus had not been tempted in all ways (Hebrews 4:15), do you think He would be as fit to help us in our trials?

11. How might you answer someone who says, “Jesus never sinned. He can’t relate to our weaknesses, so He cannot really understand what we’re going through” (Hebrews 4:15).

Scripture for Meditation

He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

John 15:2-3



Remain in Me, and I will
remain in you.

John 15:4a

The Meaning

Jesus reminds us of the resources He offers as the “true vine” (John 15:1), His Father’s rights as the “gardener” (John 15:2), and our role as the “branches” (John 15:3). John 15:4 unfolds our responsibility. The key word describing our responsibility is “remain” (NIV), found first in John 15:4 and repeated 10 times through John 15:10.

Other versions translate the same Greek word *meno* as “remain” or “abide” (NASB, KJV), “live” (The Message), “stay joined” (Contemporary English), “go on growing” (Phillips) and “dwell” (Amplified). The original Greek carries with it all of these meanings. In Kenneth Wuest book, *An Expanded Translation*, the author captures the essence of *meno* with his rendering, “maintain a living communion.”

The branches of the grapevine must be connected firmly and continually to the trunk if they are to grow, prosper, and bear healthy grapes. So must we develop and maintain a living communion with the Lord if we are to glorify Him with lives of productive service and Christ like character. In this lesson, we will explore how we can strengthen our connection with the Vine. Before considering practical information about methods, however, we can benefit from spiritual inspiration through a model.

The Model

The world is filled with model Christians who live in communion with the Lord. The Bible, likewise, contains numerous outstanding examples of those who knew what it meant to abide in the vine. Abraham heard the call of God and followed His path right into what would become the Land of Promise. Samuel knew the voice of the Lord, even as a youth. Isaiah and the prophets kept so close to the Lord that they became God’s voice in their generation.

The twelve disciples walked with Jesus for three solid years. Once Christ ascended on high, the promise that all who believed would also enjoy such intimacy with God was fulfilled through the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 16:12-16; Acts 2:38-39). John, in his writings, highlighted this mystical communion more than other Biblical authors. He often did so by offering us a model... Jesus Himself. In John 5, for example, we read about the Lord’s ongoing connection with His Heavenly Father:

“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these” (John 5:19-20).

What an astonishing thought. Jesus recognized that He could “do nothing by himself.” Christ, the God-man, was totally dependent on His Father in Heaven. The very One through Whom the universe was made, the One who sustains all things by His own power, the only Son of the Almighty God, drew His life and strength through His connection on high (Colossians 1:15-17). This was reliance and trust refined to the nth degree. Perhaps the best analogy for this tight relationship between Father and Son is that of a branch, dependent on the vine for its very life.

...for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.

Philippians 2:13

Without the connection, the branch withers and dies.

Jesus did not begin His ministry until the call of God was crystal clear (Matthew 4:1-4). Our Lord refused to demonstrate His power unless so guided from above (Matthew 16:1-4). When the noise of life crowded the voice of the Spirit, Jesus withdrew (Luke 5:16). When His strength waned, Jesus pulled out of the fast lane and refilled His tank (Matthew 14:23). For Christ, the right connection with His Father was more important than food, and continual communion more vital than sleep (John 4:32-34; Luke 6:12).

The Means

The great marvel of the incarnation does not end with God becoming human. Our Lord left heaven for a time that He might be with us forever. God became man that man might unite with God. Thus Christ was both a model and a means. Through His coming to us, we now can come to Him everyday, always. As branches connected to the Vine, we are challenged to follow His example and draw on His power as we learn to depend on our Heavenly Father for our spiritual breath and life. Christ taught, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, emphasis added). That is a big "nothing."

Research scientists have long studied the sap that carries essential life and nutrients through the stem and branches of the grapevine. In the winter months, the vital flow abates, the vine becomes brown and hard, and its center fills with gas. Then come the rains and warmer temperatures, beckoning the flow of life through the stem and out to extremities, forming leaves, new growth, and eventually rich fruit. The connection between branches and the vine are critical to the life flow. Studies on grafting focus heavily on how to perfect these connections. In the same way, Christ urges us to learn how to be connected to Him that we might bear fruit for God. He is the source of our life.

We, as branches, can do nothing of eternal value unless the surge of God's life is flowing in and through us. Do we depend on God's leading as we pray? Do we ask God to teach as we listen to a sermon or read Scripture? Do we pray for God's power as we minister? Is prayer life as constant and regular to us as is breathing to our bodies?

The Methods

Great Christian classics have been written and cherished, telling of methods for maintaining a living communion with God. Some teach by example, others instruct line-by-line with specific steps and suggestions. All of these books have one thing in common; they draw their truths from the one book inspired completely by God, the Bible. No matter what approach we take to shore up our relationship with the Lord, let us keep Scripture central. Some of the essential practices for maintaining a living communion with the Lord are:

Meditation: The Gospel of John opens with Christ, the living Word, and closes with encouragement to read Scripture, the written Word (John 1:1; 21:24-25). We are to take Christ in, through Scripture, as our essential food (John 6:53-58). We can do so through meditation. For example,

Oh, how I love Your Law!
I meditate on it all day
long.

Psalms 119:97

in Joshua 1:8, we read, “Do not let this book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”

The Hebrew word for *meditate* here is drawn from the same root that makes up the word “ruminate.” Just as a goat or cow chews and swallows its food and brings it up to chew again and again, so are we to work on Scripture to draw its full nourishment for our hungry souls. In this age of fast food, we tend to expect a quick spiritual snack to get us through the day. But our success as Christians depends greatly on our commitment to spending significant time in Scripture each day, meditating on its meaning and application for our lives.

For the Christian, meditation is not primarily about emptying the mind but filling it with God's truth. As water fills a bucket to overflowing, it carries debris and dirt away. So those who fill their minds with God's promises are blessed as doubt and discouragement wash away.

Meeting with God: Most Christians pray to God at least some times and for some reasons. But how many have learned really to abide with God? Christ described the coming Holy Spirit as nothing less than His ongoing presence in the disciples' lives (John 16:5-16).

When we pray we should recognize God's presence with us and converse with Him, showing all due respect and honor. Simply handing God a grocery list of concerns is far too short of God's ideal for connecting through prayer. We should also listen for His advice, for the Spirit desires to speak to us and to help guide the conversation (James 1:5; Romans 8:26-27). When we strengthen our vital connection by spending quality time with the Lord, our anxieties will dissolve, and our sense of hope and joy will overflow (Philippians 4:4-7).

Living By Faith: The Bible calls us to respond to God's promptings and guidance by faith (Proverbs 3:5-6). What God shows us through daily meditation and how God leads us in regular times of prayer should become the basis for how we live. This is true vine life. By stepping out in faith, we grow. By walking in faith, we minister. By persisting in faith, we watch God do great and mighty things through us bearing wonderful fruit for God's glory.

The Measure

When warning His followers about false leaders and blind guides, Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:16). Paul challenges us to turn the standard inward and to examine our own lives (2 Corinthians 13:5). Do you have a living connection with Christ, the true vine? If so, the evidence will be seen around you through the fruit of ministry and blessing to others. Remember, real fruit comes naturally to the vine that maintains a living communion. We don't correct our lifeless spirituality by working harder and doing more, but by meeting with God, meditating on his Word, and choosing to live by faith.

Spending Time With God

This study series, “Growing Close to God,” from John 15 is designed to supplement your personal and small group Bible study. The devotion questions are for your personal study. The discussion questions are especially for small groups. Members who answer the questions ahead of time



SERIES

GROWING CLOSE TO GOD | JOHN 15

LESSON 3

Connection | John 15:4

can bring more insight into their small group meeting. The digging deeper questions are for those who wish for more personal or small group study. As you spend time with God, may His Word enrich your life and enhance your daily walk with Him. Begin by praying for special insight into God's Word.

Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of this study guide. Do any thoughts from your reading cause you to desire a closer connection with the Lord? Explain.

2. Read John 15:4. In your own words, what does it mean to “remain” in the Lord?

3. In John 15:5, what promise is given to those who maintain a living communion with God?

4. Thoughtfully list at least two action steps you will take in response to this text and the commentary to shore up your vital connection with God.

Discussion (Small Group Study)

5. Read John 5:19-20. If Christ was divine, why do you think He needed to remain so connected with His Heavenly Father?



6. What did Jesus mean in John 15:5, when He said that without abiding in Him we can “do nothing”?

9. From Matthew 6:5-8 and Philippians 4:6, tell why prayer is more than just bringing our laundry list to God.

7. From Joshua 1:8 and the commentary for this lesson, describe the practice and benefits of meditation.

10. If you can and are comfortable doing so, describe a time when you really connected with the Lord through meditation or prayer.

8. From Psalm 1, what promises are given to those who spend time meditating on Scripture?

Digging Deeper (Further Study)

11. From Romans 12:1-2, how do we move beyond prayer and meditation and into the life of faith?



12. Read Romans 12:3-8. In this context, what sort of fruit will appear for those who live by faith?

13. Can you describe a time when you sensed God's call to step out in faith, and in so doing, new fruit was produced for the Lord? Explain.

Scripture for Meditation

Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me.

John 15:4



This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples.

John 15:8

Love Tops the List

As we read John 15, Christ draws us into the abundance of a Middle Eastern vineyard. We can picture the master gardener climbing a terraced hillside, passing through row after row of trellises covered with woody stems and curled leaves. He pauses and grins, unable to contain his delight, as he lifts a branch laden with deep luscious grapes. So does our Heavenly Father delight to watch spiritual fruit grow and develop in our lives.

In John 15:8, Jesus says, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." In the next nine verses, He repeats the word "love" nine times. Love is the crowning evidence of a right relationship with God. In John 13:35, Jesus told His followers, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

When Paul describes the much desired Fruit of the Spirit, love tops the list: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

As love manifests its rich characteristics in our lives, all of the Fruit of the Spirit will abound. If love is the primary Fruit of the Spirit, all other spiritual qualities are the fruits of love. Evangelist Dwight L. Moody stated, "Joy is love exalted; peace is love in repose; long-suffering is love enduring; gentleness is love in society; goodness is love in action; faith is love on the battlefield; meekness is love in school; and temperance is love in training." Paul declared simply, "the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Love Described

It has been said that the longest and perhaps simplest love letter ever written came from the pen of Parisian painter Marcel de Leclure, in 1875. Writing to his sweetheart, the phrase *je vous aime* (I love you) through a scribe, he repeated the phrase 1,875,000 times (a thousand times the calendar year, 1875). He could have ordered his secretary to simply write the phrase incessantly, but rather insisted on saying the words himself, and then having them repeated by his scribe before they were recorded. Thus the words were uttered and written 5,625,000 times before they ever reached their destination.

While this often told story is difficult to confirm, an even more amazing love letter was written for each of us and is found in nearly every library in the world. God tells us through more than 780,000 words in the Bible that He truly loves us. Nowhere is it more clear than in John 15:9: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you."

Here Christ uses the word *kathos*, meaning "just as," or "in the same proportion as." As surely and purely as His Father, the very source of perfect and endless love cared for Him, so did He love and cherish His disciples. This imponderable reality reaches through time and encompasses every one who believes in Christ's name (John 17:20-23).

Our challenge is to comprehend how much the eternal God loves His only begotten Son and then to receive that very same love as our own. In Christ's words, "Now remain in my love" (John 15:9).

This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples.

John 15:8

Love Renewed

How do we know if we are “remaining” in Christ's love? This abiding communion is not sustained by our feelings but by our actions. Christ told His followers, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love” (John 15:10). We need only think back to the words Christ, on that same night, to understand His meaning: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34).

The word *new* selected by Christ was *kainos*, meaning “new in quality,” “fresh,” “unprecedented.” He could have selected the Greek word *chronos*, meaning “new in time.” Here Jesus was teaching that while the command to love God and neighbor had been around a long time, the ability to receive and give that love would become possible as never before. God's Son was ready to exhibit perfect love on the cross and to enact a new covenant through which we become channels of that love.

A New Challenge

With capability comes responsibility. Christ tells us we must love one another just as freely and fully as He has loved us (John 13:34). “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

The Greek word *kathos*, (meaning “as”) is used here once again. We have already seen that just “as” God the Father loves the Son, so does Christ love us. Now we are told that just as Christ loves us, so must we love one another.

The seventeenth century German poet Angelus Silesius once wrote, “Love is like a magnet is, it draws me into God, And what is greater still, it pulls God into death.” Affirming this truth before He fulfilled it, Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

Count Nicholas Von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), a rich young German nobleman, dedicated his heart and life to God after pondering the fact that Christ gave His life for us. The lad was gazing at a portrait of the crucified Savior, by Domenico Feti, titled *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)*, when he noticed the inscription below the painting which read, “This have I done for you—Now what will you do for Me?” Zinzendorf gave his life to sacrificial and loving deeds of service to others in response.

A New Reality

Words like “command,” “servant,” and “master” cause us to stiffen and recoil. Words like “love,” “compassion,” and “friendship,” warm our souls and open our hearts. Christ told His followers: “You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:14-15).

Masters control servants and bosses manipulate employees by withholding information. Work-

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

1 John 3:18

ers records are kept in secret files and company plans are locked in the minds and meetings of the company hierarchy. Not so with God. Christ freely discloses the Father's will to us. Scripture is replete with God's purposes and guidance for our lives, and the Holy Spirit is given to make it personal and practical (John 16:23-30). God treats us as His friends.

The realization that the Lord embraces us as His friends should make obedience to His commands a delight. Those who believe the Almighty is truly for them come to recognize difficulties as opportunities; trials can serve as platforms for the demonstration of God's matchless grace. Thomas À Kempis, a fourteenth century priest known especially for his classic writing, *The Imitation of Christ*, wrote: "Love feels no burden, thinks nothing of trouble, attempts what is above its strength, pleads no excuse of impossibility; for it thinks all things lawful for itself, and all things possible. It is therefore able to undertake all things, and warrants them to take effect, where he who does not love, would faint and lie down."

God is our friend. He does not command us and then leave us, but rather stands at our side to assist and walks ahead to guide. If you find it difficult to obey the great command to love God with your whole being and to love your neighbor as yourself, ask God for help. Recall the words of Christ: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other" (John 15:16-17, emphasis added).

Love Expressed Anew

The Koh-i-noor diamond is among the most spectacular in the world. Queen Victoria received it as a gift from a maharajah when he was a lad. Later as a grown man, this maharajah visited Queen Victoria again. He requested that the stone be brought from the Tower of London to Buckingham Palace. The maharajah took the diamond and, kneeling before the Queen, gave it back to her, saying, "Your Majesty, I gave this jewel when I was a child, too young to know what I was doing. I want to give it to you again in the fullness of my strength, with all of my heart and affection, and gratitude, now and forever, fully realizing all that I do."

So should it be with every believer in Christ. We come to Him for salvation. Then we grow into maturity and realize how truly great is the love of God to have given His Son for our salvation. Our love for God grows and deepens. Thus we come back to Him, offering our lives with more understanding, more sincerity of heart, and fuller surrender than ever before. As a result, God's love pours out to touch the lives of others.

Spending Time With God

This study series, "Growing Close to God," from John 15 is designed to supplement your personal and small group Bible study. The devotion questions are for your personal study. The discussion questions are especially for small groups. Members who answer the questions ahead of time can bring more insight into their small group meeting. The digging deeper questions are for those who wish for more personal or small group study. As you spend time with God, may His Word enrich your life and enhance your daily walk with Him. Begin by praying for special insight into God's Word.



Devotion (Personal Study)

1. Read the commentary portion of this study guide. Record one thought or promise that especially challenges you.

3. From John 15:9, how much does God love you?

Does the way you think and live demonstrate that you really believe this? Please explain.

2. Read John 15:8. Compare with John 13:35. What is the ultimate proof that we are God's children?

4. Compare John 15:9-10 with John 13:34. What does God command us to do?

Why do you think this is so?

Do you find this command to be exhilarating, overwhelming, encouraging, or what? Explain.



Discussion (Small Group Study)

5. If you can, describe an experience, a sermon, or a time in your life when the love of God became especially real to you.

7. Read verse 14. What are the implications of being a “friend” of God? (How do you treat your best friends?)

6. From John 15:13, what is the perfect measure of love?

8. What promise does Christ give to us in John 15:16? How will you apply this promise to your life?

In what new ways might you be able to strive to live according to this norm? Be specific.

9. If you can and are comfortable doing so, describe a time when you really connected with the Lord through meditation or prayer.



Digging Deeper (Further Study)

10. From Romans 12:1-2, how do we move beyond prayer and meditation and into the life of faith?

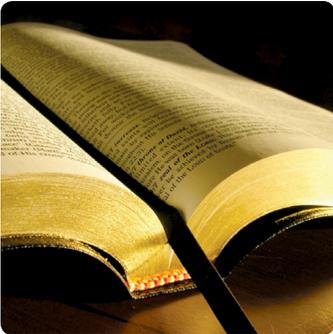
11. Read Romans 12:3-8. In this context, what sort of fruit will appear for those who live by faith?

12. Can you describe a time when you sensed God's call to step out in faith, and in so doing, new fruit was produced for the Lord? Explain.

Scripture for Meditation

Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me.

John 15:4



BNEXT Small Group Leader's Guide

This BNEXT Leader's Guide is for facilitator/leaders. Please read this information before you begin. As the facilitator of a small group, you will have the experience of not only sharing this journey through God's Word with others but of aiding them along the way. You do not need previous experience or special training to lead a group. (Your primary responsibility is to serve as facilitator, not to teach.)

MATERIALS NEEDED FOR A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCE

- Either the electronic version or a printed copy for each participant. (The electronic version of this BNEXT Study can be printed. When printed, the blue boxes that were visible in the electronic version will print as blank spaces for participants to record their answers.)
- Bible for each participant, preferably the same version (these studies use the NIV)
- Pen or pencil for each participant
- Watch or clock to monitor time

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This BNEXT study series is versatile and may be used by individuals, small groups, or even entire congregations. The use of a small group as part of the program will enhance each one's experience. BNEXT studies have successfully been used in a variety of environments, including home groups, churches, prisons, and businesses.

These lessons are designed for the individual to read the Scripture passages, read the three pages of commentary, and answer the questions throughout the week. The participants then attend a weekly meeting with the small group to share insights and discuss the material. Total time for each weekly lesson should be about 1 to 1½ hours in length. Suggested lesson plans with timing guidelines are found at the end of this Guide.

If you use this study in a large group or an entire church, there are two possible approaches. One approach is for the entire group to first gather for a welcome and opening prayer, after which participants can meet in small groups for discussion using the BNEXT questions. After a specified amount of time, all would reconvene into a larger setting to present highlights from each group, and for closing words of encouragement and prayer. The other approach is to begin together as a larger group for a welcome and then split into smaller groups for the remainder of the time/lesson.

ABOUT SMALL GROUPS

Group Size: Experience has shown that a group size of 10–12 people works best. If your group is significantly larger, we suggest that you create additional small groups.

Group Leaders: Each group should have its own facilitator/leader. It is good to also have at least one back-up facilitator in case the primary facilitator is absent. If you have several groups meeting at one time, decide who will be responsible for facilitating the larger group gatherings for the welcome time and so forth.

ABOUT FACILITATOR/LEADERS

These lessons are designed to easily be used by a first-time leader as well as an experienced leader. The ideal small group facilitator/leader should have:

- a hunger for God's Word and a deep desire to see others grow in their knowledge of God and His Word,
- a commitment to the group, emphasizing seeing the program through to the end,
- the ability to facilitate and moderate discussion rather than teach, and
- a willingness to follow the "Discussion Group Rules of Engagement" (found in this Leader's Guide).

As facilitator, pray for your small group. Spend time preparing your own lesson (you should attempt to answer all of the questions before the class) and be thinking about how to present the questions to the group. Group members should be encouraged to at least answer the first two sets of questions — Devotion (Personal Study) and Discussion (Small Group Study) questions — before each class, to enhance their learning experience. Even better, encourage them to find time to complete Digging Deeper (Further Study) questions on their own. One of the goals of this approach is to encourage participants to develop the habit of delving into Scripture and studying on a regular basis.

You are not expected to be a Biblical expert. You are a facil-

itator, so resist the attempt to teach. You are there to guide the group, keep them on track, and avoid getting caught up in doctrinal debates. If you want to facilitate the group with a broadened background knowledge, see our "Background Study Option" below.

Recognize that not everyone is comfortable answering questions. Gently keep discussion going by asking questions like, "Does anyone else have something to add?" It can be helpful at times to have a volunteer read Scripture texts that are referred to in the questions.

Recognize and affirm all who contribute to the discussion. Do not dismiss someone's answer as wrong. If an answer is obviously off-base, thank them for their answer, then ask what others think. Remind the group to let Scripture interpret Scripture.

If you feel that a certain statement or question is inappropriate for your group, you may omit it or at least recognize that not everyone needs to answer it. However, do not be afraid of letting the group tackle tough topics.

BACKGROUND STUDY OPTIONS

Again, facilitators are not expected to be Biblical experts. If the group looks to you for an answer you do not have, it is perfectly fine to say, "I'm not sure. Perhaps we can all think about that one and bring it up again next week?" Or, "Let's bring this one up to the larger group when there is time allotted for such discussion." Or, "Let's see if this doesn't answer itself over the weeks as we continue our study. Remember, the Bible interprets itself."

For extra study, you may wish to approach your pastor or to read commentaries and use other resources. The internet contains a wealth of information ... and also disinformation. Some internet sites that provide reliable (and free) commentaries and articles include: biblegateway.com, biblestudytools.com, biblehub.com, and blueletterbible.org.

Another useful source of general Biblical knowledge is *The Essential Bible Companion*, by the same contributors of our *Bible*

in 90 Days study series: John Walton, Mark Strauss, and Ted Cooper Jr., Zondervan Publishing (also available as an e-book).

LEADING THE CLASS (Suggested Lesson Plans)

First Class

Decide where you want to meet weekly and decide on a time. Once this has been done, actively publicize the *BNEXT* study throughout all your circles — at your church, workplace, friends, family, etc. There are some free publicity aids on our website at ScriptureAwakening.com/bnext/freebies/. (If the study is being done by the entire congregation, recruit facilitators for each group and have one facilitator designated to lead the closing session when all come back together.)

Be sure that every participant has downloaded the electronic version or has a printed copy of the study at least one week prior to the first small group meeting. Have everyone complete the first lesson's reading and answer the questions in preparation for the first gathering of the group(s).

The first class is unique in that a little more time is spent on introductions and explanations of how the classes will function.

1. Opening prayer, welcome, and introduction of members (13 minutes)

(NOTE: Entire church groups meet together for opening prayer only and then break into their small groups.)

 - a. Think of something brief each participant could say about themselves such as: "Tell us something unique about yourself." Or perhaps, "What do you hope to get out of this BNEXT study?"
 - b. Remind them to keep their answers brief (one minute or less).
2. Give an overview of the class and expectations (7 minutes)
 - a. Inform the class of how many weeks it will take to cover the study and the date of the last class.
 - b. Discuss the format of the BNEXT study and ask if

there are any questions.

- c. Review the "Rules of Engagement" which are located at the end of this Leader's Guide.
3. Discuss lesson questions (35 minutes)
 - a. Ask if there are any Devotion questions that anyone would like to discuss with the group.
 - b. Give primary attention to the Discussion questions, which are provided to promote dialogue and conversation.
 - c. If time permits, you may wish to use one or more of the Digging Deeper questions.

(NOTE: For an entire church, allow an extra 10-15 minutes to allow for the groups to come back together at a specified time. Allow each group to share a highlight of their small group discussion.)
 4. Closing prayer (5 minutes)
 - a. If time is short, then as the leader, pray for the group.
 - b. If you have more time, you may ask if there are any prayer requests and either pray on behalf of the group or open it up for the group to pray.
 5. If you are providing printed copies of lessons to participants, distribute the lesson for next week
 6. Dismissal

Subsequent Classes

1. Opening prayer, welcome, and introduction of any new participants (10 minutes)

(NOTE: Entire church groups meet together for opening prayer only and then break into their small groups.)

- a. If there are new members, have them introduce themselves. Remind them to be brief (one minute or less).
- b. Think of a good ice-breaker that somehow relates to the study. For example, if you are studying "The Ten

Commandments – Exodus 20,” you may ask, “Why do you think Exodus or the Ten Commandments are important?” Or, “How do the Ten Commandments relate to the cross of Jesus Christ?” Remind them to keep their answers short. Set a time limit for this opening section; not everyone needs to answer.

- c. If you think it's necessary, remind the group of the “Rules of Engagement” at the end of this Guide.

2. Discuss lesson questions (45 minutes)

- a. Ask if there are any Devotion questions that people in the group would like to discuss.
- b. Give primary attention to the Discussion questions, which are designed to promote dialogue and conversation.
- c. If time permits, you may wish to use one or more of the Digging Deeper questions.

(NOTE: For an entire church, allow an extra 10-15 minutes for the groups to come back together at a specified time. Allow each group to share an insight of their small group discussion.)

3. Closing prayer (5 minutes)

- a. If time is short, then as the leader, pray for the group.
- b. If you have more time, you may ask if there are any prayer requests and either pray on behalf of the group or open it up for the group to pray.

5. Dismissal

SMALL GROUP RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

It is important to treat one another in Christian love. These “Rules of Engagement” will be helpful, so read them aloud during the first class; thereafter, refer to them as needed by the group.

1. Begin each reading/study session with prayer, expecting God to speak to you through His Word.

2. Come prepared for each week's session by completing the reading and the study questions.
3. Your small group will have a facilitator. Please be respectful of the facilitator's leadership.
4. The facilitator's responsibility is to guide or shepherd the discussions. Do not expect your facilitator to be an expert on Scripture — each group member should seek the answers from Scripture on his/her own.
5. Each group member is invited to join the discussion but should not feel required to do so. If called upon, it is okay to say, “Thank you, but I would prefer to pass on answering that question.”
6. Alternatively, do not dominate a discussion. Time is limited, so please be sensitive to everyone in the group to help ensure that each person has the opportunity to participate.
7. Respect everyone's answers and views on Scripture. However, let Scripture interpret Scripture and expect the Holy Spirit to speak/teach through His written Word.
8. In preparation for each lesson, you are not expected to do extra study or research. If you wish to dig deeper, then here are a few helpful resources:
 - Go to ScriptureAwakening.com/bnext/ for key tips and guidelines for best use of BNEXT study series in your small group or whole church.
 - The internet contains a wealth of information (and sometimes disinformation). Some useful Bible study sites include: biblegateway.com, biblestudytools.com, biblehub.com, and blueletterbible.org.
 - *The Essential Bible Study Companion* (hard copy), by John Walton, Mark Strauss, and Ted Cooper Jr., Zondervan Publishing (also available as an e-book).