

Use this resource as a tool to help Christ-followers move forward in their spiritual growth. To do this well requires that the Small Group Leader is building a relationship with the individuals in the small group and has identified where the people are in their relationship with God. Are they Christ-followers? Are they growing in Christ? If so, in what areas do they need to grow further? As disciple-makers, Small Group Leaders shepherd people to know the truth of Scripture, to understand why it matters, and to apply it to their lives. Small Group Leaders come alongside those whom they disciple to discover how loving God, loving each other, and loving those not yet in the Kingdom should shape how they live. The structure of this resource coincides with moving people from knowledge (Main Truth) to understanding (Why It Matters) to application (Now What Do We Do?). Utilize this Small Group Guide as a flexible teaching tool to inform your time together and not as a rigid task list.

GETTING STARTED

Before Small Group

Readings for March 31-April 6, 2014

Leviticus 2-9

John 21

Psalms 1-10

Where We Are In The Story ~ Old Testament (Leviticus & Psalms)

Background of Leviticus: Everything in Leviticus points to the holiness of God. His perfection and man's sinfulness stands as the reason for all of the sacrifices, laws, and regulations included in this book, for Leviticus explains how a covenant between a righteous God and a sinful people practically plays out in everyday life in the era before Christ's resurrection. Written by Moses as Israel wandered in the wilderness, it contains divine speeches that Moses delivered to the people of Israel about how to worship God and how they should live. Modern readers of Leviticus may tire of reading the many laws and regulations, but for Israelites in the Old Testament era, Leviticus provided relevant information for how they were to go about their day-to-day lives.

Structure of Leviticus:

- Leviticus 1-7 explains the rituals of the different sacrifices.
- Leviticus 8-10 gives instructions for the priests of Israel.
- Leviticus 11-15 instructs the people on cleansing and purification.
- Leviticus 16 details the sacrifice and instructions for the Day of Atonement.
- Leviticus 17-27 provides directions regarding the festivals, the holy days, and how the people should live.

This Week in Leviticus: With this week's readings in Leviticus providing the foundation of Israel's sacrificial system, it is helpful to know how believers were saved in the Old Testament era and how the sacrificial system points to the realities of the New Testament.

- The sacrificial system looks forward to Christ (Heb. 10:3-4).
- It demonstrates that sinners cannot enter God's presence apart from God's provision.
- It highlights the holiness and righteousness of God, for sin is offensive because of Who is offended by it.
- It shows that humanity's access to God requires the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:18-22).
- The sacrifice of the animals themselves is not what saved the people from their sins (Heb. 10:1-4), for no one is saved by works. The sacrifices in the Old Testament were two-fold. They pointed to the salvation that would come through Christ, the ultimate sacrifice, and they were outward expressions of an individual's submission to God. The offerings were how believing people renewed and

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maintained their relationship with God. In his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem explains, “those who were saved under the old covenant were also saved through trusting in Christ, even through their faith was a forward-looking faith based on God’s word of promise that a Messiah or a Redeemer would come.”

The grain offering or the meal offering of Leviticus 2 acknowledged that everything an individual has comes from God and belongs to Him, and it was the worshipper’s way of dedicating what they have to God. When offered, the food was sacrificed after the burnt offering of Leviticus 1, but it could also be given by itself without any other sacrifice. There could be no leaven in this offering because it was to pure and without corruption.

The peace offering or the fellowship offering of Leviticus 3 and 7 was *not* given to make peace with God. Instead, it was offered as a *celebration* of the worshipper’s peace with God. Only the fat and the internal organs were burned on the altar. These organs represented the will and the emotions of the person, so by sacrificing them on the altar, the worshipper was symbolically offering themselves to the Lord. While the priests received the right shoulder and the right thigh, the rest of the animal was roasted in the courtyard and eaten as a communal meal that same day by those worshipping in the sanctuary. As the meat was roasting, the worshipper would grab the horns of the altar and praise God by declaring what the Lord had done. Through this sacrifice, the poor in Israel could come to the Temple and receive food to eat. The New Testament correlation to this offering is the Lord’s Supper, a communal meal that we eat to remember what Christ has accomplished as we look forward to His return.

The Old Testament often refers to things being either “clean” or unclean,” and a person could become unclean many different ways – skin disease, having a child, bodily discharges, coming in contact with a dead body, committing certain inadvertent sins, etc. (see Lev. 12-15). People who were unclean had to be cleansed in order to worship God in the sanctuary, and because sinners worshiped there, the sanctuary itself needed to be purified. The sin offering or the purification offering in Leviticus 4:1-5:13 was, therefore, the first sacrifice that was offered when a worshipper came to the sanctuary, for the blood of the substitute (the animal) provided purification with regard to the worshiper’s sin and to sin’s defiling effects in his life. This sacrifice in itself did not provide forgiveness of sin, for the worshiper also had to acknowledge and repent of the sin. But because sin disrupted fellowship between the worshiper and God, this sacrifice was necessary for restoring the relationship.

When an individual’s sin involved defrauding God or another person of something, the sinner was to offer a guilt offering or a reparations offering (Lev. 5:14-6:7). Therefore, this sacrifice was only offered as needed. This sacrifice indicates that the wrong committed had to be made right by the worshipper, so if a person was guilty of defrauding, then they had to give this offering *and* make full restitution. This offering necessitated that the sinner publicly confess their sin, make full restitution, and give an extra 20% of what they had defrauded as compensation.

Background & Structure of Psalms: God used many different writers to write Psalms: David, Moses, the sons of Korah, Asaph, etc. The book is arranged in five parts, and this arrangement occurred after the people of Israel returned to the land after the Babylonian exile. A doxology concludes each book or arrangement of psalms (Psalm 41:13 for Book 1, Psalm 72:18-19 for Book 2, Psalm 89:52 for Book 3, Psalm 106:48 for Book 4, and Psalm 150:6 for Book 5), and the entire book of Psalms climactically ends with a grand doxology of several psalms (Ps. 146-150).

- Book 1: Psalms 1-41
- Book 2: Psalms 42-72
- Book 3: Psalms 73-89
- Book 4: Psalms 90-106
- Book 5: Psalms 107-150

This Week in Psalms: Psalms 1-2 introduce the entire book of Psalms. Psalm 1 contrasts the righteous with the wicked and sets the stage for the entire book by describing the importance of living in alignment with

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Scripture. Thus, Psalm 1 functions as a wisdom psalm, and it emphasizes the connection between meditating on God's Word and living a righteous life. It also demonstrates the worthlessness of the ungodly life by comparing it to a chaff that is blown away by the wind, and it reminds the reader of the judgment that is to come, which reinforces that a person's choice to either live a righteous or an ungodly life has eternal consequences.

As a royal psalm, Psalm 2 declares the kingship of an unnamed ruler of Israel. Royal psalms (Ps. 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 144) reference important occasions in the life of the king such as his coronation, wedding, or a great military victory given by the Lord, and they point to the role of the human king as God's agent on earth. In particular, Psalm 2 reminds the nation of God's plan for Israel and His sovereignty over all earthly kings and kingdoms. No nation can stand if God is against it. Because Psalm 2 can apply to every Davidic king, it ultimately applies to Christ, and Hebrews 1:15 and Revelation 2:27 draw upon this psalm in describing the exaltation of Christ and the establishment of His reign on earth at the second coming.

Psalms 3-7 overwhelmingly express confidence in the Lord: confidence in Him and in His plan during times of adversity (Ps. 3), confidence in His care despite antagonism from others (Ps. 4), confidence in His deliverance and in His judgment of the wicked (Ps. 5 & 7), and confidence that God forgives the penitent (Ps. 6). Psalm 8 praises God for His majesty, and Hebrews 2:6-9 and 1 Corinthians 15:27 quote this psalm in reference to God's plan in sending Christ to be born as a man and to give Him dominion over all things. Psalm 9 gives thanks to God for punishing the wicked and for defending the oppressed, and Psalm 10 follows with a cry for God to defend the helpless and the fatherless.

Where We Are In The Story ~ New Testament (Matthew)

Background of John: John 20:31 gives the thesis of this Gospel: "but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." John stands distinct from Matthew, Mark, and Luke in his emphasis on eternal life and how it refers to both duration but also the quality of life that God designed us to have in Him. From John 1, this book establishes that Jesus is God in the flesh. He is fully God and fully human at the same time. Written by John who was one of Jesus' disciples, this Gospel does not follow Jesus' life chronologically. Instead, John 1-12 looks at the eight "I AM" statements of Jesus and at seven of His miracles in order to demonstrate by words and actions that Jesus is God, and it spends the remaining nine chapters on the night of Last Supper through Jesus' ascension.

This Week in the New Testament: The final chapter of John's Gospel includes three scenes that are not recorded in the other three Gospels: the catch of fish after Jesus' resurrection, the restoration of Peter, and Jesus' remarks about the "beloved disciple." The theme of this chapter focuses on mission. The events of John 21:1-14 reflect the circumstances of when Jesus first called Peter, James, and John to follow Him (Lk. 5:1-11), and both Jesus' conversation with Peter and His remarks about the beloved disciple focus on those individuals carrying out His work. Jesus' commands to Peter to "feed my lambs," "tend my sheep," and "feed my sheep" reflect that He is commissioning Peter for pastoral ministry. Tradition tells us that Jesus' prediction to Peter about His death in John 21:18-19 was fulfilled in that Peter carried his cross on his way to be crucified and that he requested to be crucified upside down because he did not feel worthy to die in the same way as Christ.

During Small Group

Welcome – Incorporate time for greeting one another, enjoying any refreshments, and making announcements. If guests are visiting, make introductions and help them feel welcomed. Ask for their contact information, so you can follow up with them.

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Looking Back – Provide an opportunity for small group members to share what God is teaching them, how they are applying what they are learning, and how He has given them opportunities to share the gospel with others. This can be done as a whole group or in smaller groups. Do the people know each other well enough to share more than surface level information? How can time together be used to foster deeper relationships among those in the small group? Also, what are the struggles and needs of the people in the small group? How can the people in the small group sacrificially serve each other?

Looking Up – Hold prayer as fundamental to small group time rather than supplemental to it. Give adoration and thanksgiving to God in prayer. Submit yourself to Him, confessing sin. Petition God for personal needs and other requests. Pray for the disciple-making efforts of those in the group and for the salvation of the lost in each other's families, spheres of influence, and in the world. The Weekly Prayer Focus below can also be incorporated in the group's prayer time.

Weekly Prayer Focus (from Our Worship Guide)

- *Pray for Our Lives:* Praise God for Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. Praise God for allowing us to be reconciled to Him through Christ, for grafting us into the Vine. Ask God to give us hearts of submission to His plans. Ask Him for the grace to give glory to God and to learn His goodness in times of trial and growth. Praise God for His nearness to us and for His forbearance with our frailty. Praise God for His infinite wisdom. Ask God to make His glory known in Birmingham and around the world. Confess your utter dependence on God to bear any lasting fruit. Ask God to receive great glory from the fruit that He bears in our lives.
- *Pray for Our City:* This week we are praying for Widows First, a Brook Hills partner ministry founded by Brook Hills Members Mike and Lynn Patterson. Widows First was formed to help meet the physical labor needs and spiritual and emotional needs of low-income widows and widowers who have no one in the area to help provide support. To learn more about Widows First, visit brookhills.org/careforwidows. We are also praying for Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church and Bob Flayhart, Pastor.
- *Pray for Our World:* This week we are praying for Brook Hills Mid-Termers Aaron and Erin serving in East Asia. Aaron and Erin were sent out this past year to live, work as English teachers at local schools, and help engage an unreached people group. Praise God for how He is raising up individuals and couples, like Aaron and Erin, from The Church at Brook Hills to serve Mid-Term. Pray for many to hear the gospel because of the extension of our faith family to all nations. This week we are praying for the Han Chinese. For more information and ways to pray, visit brookhills.org/weeklyresources.

MAIN TRUTH

Message Outline

“Abiding in Christ and Fruitful Christian Living” John 15:1-8

“Abiding” in John 15 has to do with deriving strength and life from Christ so that you bear fruit in a spiritual climate where the destruction of faith and the distraction of faith are everyday realities. (John 14:30-31; 15:18-21; 16:1; 17:12, 15-17)

The Vinedresser is God the Father.

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The Vine is Jesus.

The fruitful branches are genuine followers of Jesus.

The fruitless branches are those who appear to be joined to Jesus but in reality only have a superficial attachment to him.

The Proficiency of the Vine and Vinedresser (v1-2)

Jesus begins talking about fruitful Christian living not by pointing to something about the branches, but to something in the Vine and the Vinedresser.

Two Implications

There can be no boasting.

There can be no blame-shifting.

"The Vine is the problem."

"The Vinedresser is the problem."

The Properties of the Branches

Two Kinds of Branches

Fruit-Bearing Branches

The abiding branch bears fruit precisely because it is vitally connected to the Vine. (v5)

The Father wisely prunes every fruit-bearing branch. (v2)

Fruitless Branches

The fruitless branch lacks fruit precisely because it is not vitally connected to the Vine. (v2a, 4a, 6).

The Father, in his timing, cuts off every fruitless branch and casts it into the fire. (v2a, 6)

The Process of Pruning/Cleansing

Two Kinds of Cleansing (v2-3)

Are we clean "already" (v3) or is God continually cleansing us (v2)? Yes. (1 Cor. 6:11; 1 John 1:9)

Two Pruning Instruments

Scripture (John 17:17; Eph. 5:25-26; Heb. 12:6-8)

Trials (James 1:2)

God is careful to manage the trials we face so that instead of breaking us off from the Vine, His children cling more closely and bear more fruit.

The Prospect of Glory (and Joy)

God Gets Glory (v8)

There's no way to make the statement God is great when we live in disobedience to Him.

True Christians love to be reminded that their obedience brings glory to God.

We Get Assurance (v8)

Where is there some measure of fruit-bearing?

We Get Joy (v11)

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Christians don't manufacture their own joy. They get it from the Vine.

When Jesus thinks of the most thrilling gift He could give to His disciples and every Christian here, He prays, "Father, can we show them ... the glory I had with you before the world existed?" (John 17:5, 24)

Message Summary

John 15:1-8 is a familiar passage containing a well known illustration concerning the vinedresser, vine, branches, and fruit. However, in this "Farewell Discourse" of Jesus, the tone of Christ's words is sobering and almost militant. He knew He was headed to the cross, and in the hours before His arrest, He exhorted His followers to abide in Him for strength and life because "apart from me you can do nothing" (v. 5). God the Father (The Vinedresser) graciously gave us His Son (The True Vine) to redeem and restore His people (Branches) who glorify and enjoy Him forever (Fruit). We cannot bare fruit and praise God while living in prideful disobedience, making excuses of why we are not bearing fruit or have any lasting joy in our life.

It is important to ask ourselves whether we are fruitful branches connected to the True Vine of Jesus Christ or fruitless branches that God the Father will eventually cut off and burn up. True followers of Christ who are children of God the Father will be "pruned" primarily through trials in life that allow us to cling more closely and bear more fruit. What brings the true believer joy to endure trials is the hope and assurance we have of one day seeing the glory of Christ.

WHY IT MATTERS

Digging Deeper

As the leader, there are at least three directions the small group can take in light of the current Bible reading plan. Knowing the people in the group, prayerfully consider what would be the best route to help those in your group grow. The group's meetings could also vary with each week, so if one week's sermon prompts a lot of thought and discussion, option one could be what the group does that week while the next week could be different. As the leader, feel the freedom to take all or just some of the content in this guide and do what is best for your group.

- *Using the discussion questions below, the small group time can focus on discussing the sermon and how to apply it.*
- *The group can discuss the Bible readings from the past week. If choosing this route, ensure that the group does not simply discuss information but also focuses on how to apply what they have learned from the Bible readings. The information in the "Where We Are in the Story" section can assist the leader in knowing the background and context for the readings.*
- *Using the REAP (read, examine, apply, pray) outline for studying Scripture, the group can take one or both passages from that day's readings and discuss them. So if the group meets on Monday, then you could pick one or both of the passages for Monday. This also helps those who are new to studying the Bible or who struggle with reading it learn how to do so. To assist the group with REAP questions, download the Guide to Personal Worship from brookhills.org.*

Read the quote below from D.A. Carson as a form of reflection and conviction as you prepare your own heart for small group.

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“There is a persistent strand of New Testament witness that depicts men and women with some degree of connection with Jesus, or with the Christian church, who nevertheless by failing to display the grace of perseverance finally testify that the transforming life of Christ has never pulsated within them.” -**D.A. Carson**, quoted in *Play On Words* (John 15:2-3), Bill Mounce, March 30

Pray for God to reveal to those in your group what kind of “branches” they truly are and to respond accordingly.

Read **John 15:1-8** and ask this question, “Do I identify with the true followers of Jesus?” Reflect and discuss what describes a true follower of Christ according to Scripture. What fruit or evidence should be present according to Scripture? What sets them apart from those “posing” to be connected to The True Vine? What is on display in their lives that show the “grace of perseverance”? In the sermon, Matt Mason offered the questions below to aid in discerning whether there is some measure of fruit-bearing in a person’s life. How can you take steps to grow in any of the areas in which you might be weak?

- Is God’s Word a delight to you?
- Are you more loving and forgiving?
- Do you enjoy fellowship with Christ-followers?
- Are you engaged in His mission?
- Do you experience His conviction?

NOW WHAT DO WE DO?

Group Discussion & Application

Use the following questions to help review the application of God’s Word to our Head (What does God want me to know?), to our Heart (What does God want me to desire/value?), and to our Hands (What does God want me to do?).

- Read Psalm 16 as a form of prayer. Go around the room and have each person read 1-2 verses then pray, or one person can pray after reading the whole thing.
- What does it truly mean to abide in Christ?
- Read John 14:30-31. The tone of Christ’s Farewell Discourse was described as a militant call to action rather than just a sweet time in your devotional life. Discuss the importance of knowing the tone and context of this passage and how that may change what you draw from it.
- John 17 is a prayer to God the Father from Jesus on the behalf of His followers. He prays that His disciples would not abandon the mission-critical truths He has shared and showed them. Discuss why it is so important to abide in Christ given this critical mission. What are other reasons for why it is important to abide in Christ?
- What hinders believers from abiding? How can we be on guard against these obstacles or temptations? How should we respond if we find that we do not desire to abide in Christ?
- Jesus states that He is the True Vine. What are some examples of other “vines” that we might try to tap into to find joy and satisfaction? How do we identify these false vines? Discuss the consequences of pursuing these “false” vines.
- Read James 4:1-10. How can our pride, pursuits, and worldly passions negatively affect our relationship with God and each other?
- Where does the source of your anger and/or frustration come from? Discuss how the source of frustration can quickly turn into the vines that battle for your affection for the True Vine?
- What are some practical ways we can point to Christ and give Him glory for evidence of growth we see in our lives? Why is this an important exercise to do consistently?
- What are some excuses we can make for not bearing fruit or having lasting joy in our lives?
- Read Isaiah 5:1-7 and Psalm 80:14-18. Discuss the differences between the rotten root of the Old Testament vine and the promise found in the True Vine of Christ.

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- What are some signs or evidences that we are on the “throne of our own life.” What are the consequences of this self-reliance and self-centeredness? How can we faithfully address these tendencies in our lives?
- Read Hebrews 12:3-11. Discuss ways that God the Father prunes us as His children. Why does He do this? Why is pruning needed in our lives? What pruning needs to happen in your own life? How can you respond well when God does prune areas of your life?
- Why is it so important to remember that participating in religious activities does not necessarily connect us to the vine?
- What are the characteristics of a true Christ-follower? Do you identify with true Christ followers?
- How is the conviction of sin a gift of God’s grace?
- Read James 1:2-4. Why is it so hard to “count it all joy” while walking through trials? How can we pursue joy in such times? How do we persevere and continue in faithfulness even in trials?
- Often, we divorce joy from obedience to Christ. Discuss the dangers associated with obedience that lacks delight in Christ. How can we cultivate delight in Christ?