

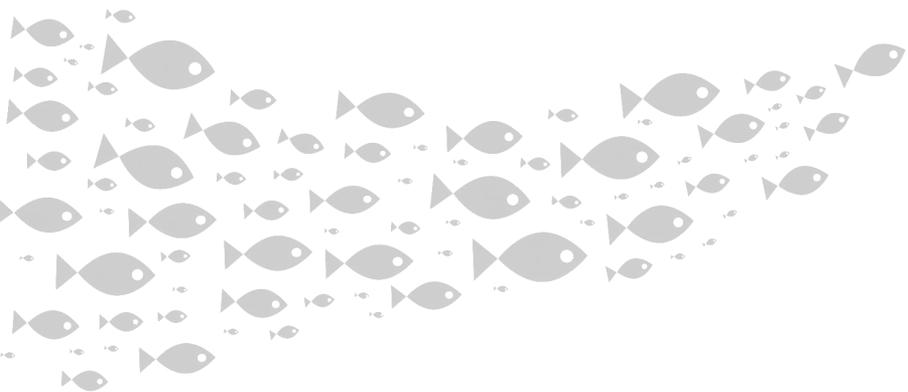
16 BIBLE STUDIES

FOR YOUR **SMALL GROUP**

INCLUDES:

- Icebreaker questions • Insightful study questions
 - Application points • Prayer prompts • And more
-

RYAN LOKKESMOE



16 BIBLE STUDIES

FOR YOUR SMALL GROUP

RYAN LOKKESMOE



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2020 by Ryan Lokkesmoe

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

ISBN 978-0-7642-3392-0 (paperback)
ISBN 978-0-7642-3827-7 (casebound)

Scripture quotations are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations identified ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Cover design by Dan Pitts

Author represented by Books & Such Literary Agency

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Contents

Introduction: <i>Ever Deepening</i>	7
1. Fellowship with God	11
2. Fellowship with Each Other	20
3. Love One Another	30
4. Keep Gathering	40
5. Put Each Other First	47
6. Build Each Other Up	55
7. Clothed in Christlikeness	64
8. Humble and Hospitable	71
9. Dodging Divisions	78
10. Givers of Courage	88
11. Judgmental No More	95
12. Sacrificial Sharers	106
13. Fellow Servants and Co-Heirs	114
14. Fellow Citizens and Soldiers	123
15. Fellow Workers	134
16. Fellow Prisoners and Co-Sufferers	144
Conclusion: <i>Being the Church</i>	153

Introduction

Ever Deepening

When we open the pages of the Bible, we encounter a rich set of ancient texts that have come down to us, by God's grace, through the centuries. These writings, originally copied by hand and read from scrolls, are now accessed on backlit screens, on mass-produced printed pages, and in audio format. The biblical texts were first composed in ancient Hebrew and Greek but are now available in most modern languages. In the early centuries of the Church, it was a rarity for any person or individual congregation to have a complete copy of the Bible because they were prohibitively expensive to produce and the process of copying and circulating was painstakingly slow. Today, by contrast, many people in the world have instant access to the entirety of Scripture, in their own language, at no cost. It has never been easier to engage with God's Word.

This does not mean, however, that the Bible is easy to engage. Despite having effortless access to the Bible today, many of us struggle to know how to approach it effectively and consistently. While the Bible was becoming more accessible to readers over

the centuries because of technology, it was also, in a way, becoming *less* accessible because of the widening gap between our modern culture and the ancient biblical context. As a result, we can easily read the Bible, but the biblical world we encounter in its pages can seem remote or confusing to us. Our ancient Christian brothers and sisters in Christ faced the opposite challenge: The language and cultural context of Scripture was more familiar, but few of them had personal access to a copy of it.

The good news is that with the Holy Spirit's guidance and the help of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we can grow together in our knowledge of and love for Scripture. But we must accept that we will never master the Bible. We cannot hold ourselves to that standard. Reading, understanding, and applying the Bible is an ever-deepening experience, because knowing God is an ever-deepening experience. The author and subject matter of Scripture is God himself. We could never dig deep enough into that topic to find the bottom of it, and we don't have to. God invites us into a personal, perpetually growing relationship with him. He has made himself known to us in the Scriptures, and most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. As the author of Hebrews put it,

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Hebrews 1:1–3

This book is a collection of short Bible studies designed to lead you through a meaningful engagement with God's Word. I

consider this to be a sequel to my previous book, *Small Groups Made Easy*, which was written to help small-group leaders grow in their practical leadership skills and basic theological knowledge. In this book, as a natural follow-up to the last one, we will dig beneath the subject of small groups to the bedrock below. We will explore the subject of Christian fellowship, which is the main biblical impetus for small groups.

Fellowship is something most Christians would agree is important and biblical, but many would struggle to define it. For some, the idea of fellowship is inspiring and comforting. For others, community with other Christians feels like a nebulous obligation. To the skeptics among us, the notion of Christian fellowship seems like a naïve aspiration. However you may feel about fellowship at the moment, the Bible clearly teaches that followers of Jesus are called into community with each other. Some of God's most precious gifts come only through relationships within the Church.

The term *fellowship* resists a simple definition, but it must be understood if we are to experience its joys. We must look to the collection of specific words used by the New Testament authors in order to gain a sense of it.* You will find that we spend most of our time in the New Testament, especially the letters, because they speak most directly to the subject of Church life.

I've written these studies with the assumption that you will be working through them alongside others in a Bible study or small group, but they certainly can be used for personal study as well. Each chapter will be organized into three sections,

*Much of this book is rooted in my study of community-oriented language in the New Testament, including *fellowship* (κοινωνία/*koinōnia*), *one another* (ἀλλήλων/*allēlōn*), *come together/gather* (συνέρχομαι/*synerchomai*), *gather* (συνάγω/*synagō*), and *congregation/church* (ἐκκλησία/*ekklesia*). The later chapters will explore additional Greek terms with the *syn-* prefix, which are usually translated as *fellow (something)* or *co-(something)*, e.g., *fellow worker* or *co-heir*. More detail will be given on those Greek terms when we reach those chapters.

corresponding to the three basic parts of a small group meeting: Social, Study, and Prayer.

- The **Social** section will include a few memorable icebreaker-type questions designed to deepen personal relationships within your group. One of the questions will serve as a lead-in to the subject matter of the study. If you are not doing these studies in a group, you can use these questions for personal reflection.
- The **Study** section will include Scripture, brief sections of teaching material, and several discussion (or reflection) questions. The questions arise from the biblical text and are usually open-ended.
- The **Prayer** section will include a suggested prayer for the end of the gathering, along with some ideas about how to handle prayer requests.

My hope is that this threefold approach (Social—Study—Prayer) becomes a familiar cadence for your Bible studies, and that you intuitively become familiar with the kinds of questions you should be asking yourself and your group as you prayerfully study the Scriptures.

By the end of these chapters, you will have a cumulative, biblical sense of how Christian community should look and feel. You will discover that Church fellowship is countercultural and often counterintuitive, and it is so much more wonderful than we often imagine it to be. As with the study of Scripture, Christian fellowship is an ever-deepening experience. My prayer is that these studies are helpful and hopeful steps in your journey of faith.

1

Fellowship with God

Social

A few questions to get your gathering started. This can be done during a meal or at the outset of your meeting.

- **Personal question:** If you had to summarize the state of your spiritual life right now, how would you describe it? (Everyone answers.)
- **Open-ended spiritual question:** What's something you feel God is teaching you right now? (A couple people share.)
- **Lead-in question to the subject of the study:** When you think about having fellowship with God, what comes to mind?

Study

Fellowship is one of those words that is familiar to most followers of Christ. We encounter the word in Scripture. Time spent with other believers is routinely referred to as fellowship. Some of our churches even have the word in their name. It's one of those words that is mainly used within the Church, so it generally has a religious connotation. The word fellowship does not appear much in contemporary secular usage unless one is referring to a certain work by J. R. R. Tolkien.

But how should we as people of faith understand this rich term, fellowship? I suspect that for most Christians, the word fellowship refers to the polite company of other Christians.

- How would you define the word fellowship?
- How is fellowship different from other types of social gatherings?

The biblical concept of fellowship is not merely social time spent with other Christians. Fellowship is, after all, an English word and therefore does not appear in the original text of the Bible. The term fellowship is a translation. For the deeper connotation of the word, let's go back to the original language of the New Testament, ancient Greek.

When we read the New Testament and encounter the term fellowship, it is usually a translation of the Greek word *koinōnia*, which appears nineteen times in the New Testament.* *Koinōnia*, at its most basic level, means to have something in common with someone else, or to share something. On a few

*κοινωνία; see Acts 2:42; Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:16; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:14; Galatians 2:9; Philippians 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Philemon 1:6; Hebrews 13:16; 1 John 1:3, 6–7.

occasions in the New Testament, the term refers to literally sharing something by giving a gift or making a financial contribution to a group in need.†

This ancient term, *koinōnia*, has been defined as “a close association involving mutual interests and sharing . . . association, communion, a close relationship.”‡ *Koinōnia*, therefore, means to be especially close to someone because you share something with them.

- How does this definition of *koinōnia* deepen your view of what Christian fellowship is?

The most amazing and overlooked aspect of the term *koinōnia* is that it is used to refer to not only our relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ (which is what we usually think of), but also our relationship with God. Because of Christ, the door has been opened for us to experience fellowship—*koinōnia*—with God Almighty. In this chapter, let’s explore some of the examples from the New Testament that describe our relationship with God as *koinōnia*. In the passages below, I will display in bold the English word that is a translation of *koinōnia*.

In the opening verses of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he writes,

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore

†See Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Hebrews 13:16.

‡Frederick W. Danker, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552–553.

you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into **fellowship*** with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:4–9

- What are these few verses about?
- At the end of this passage, we are invited into fellowship with God’s Son. How are we able to experience that fellowship?
- How does the invitation to fellowship relate to what Paul says earlier in the passage?

A little later in the same letter, Paul speaks about the observation of the Lord’s Supper as a form of *koinōnia*:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a **participation** in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a **participation** in the body of Christ?

1 Corinthians 10:16 ESV

- In what ways do you think observing the Lord’s Supper is sharing in or participating in the blood of Christ and the body of Christ?
- Read 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, where Paul quotes Jesus’s words about the Lord’s Supper. How does this passage help you understand what Paul means by participating in the body and blood of Christ?

*Throughout, any emphasis in quoted Scripture passages has been added.

In the final verse of his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul again uses the term *koinōnia*:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the **fellowship** of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 Corinthians 13:14

- What do you think it means to have *koinōnia* with the Holy Spirit—to be close to him because you share something together?

Read Romans 8:9–17 (ESV):

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

- How does this text illuminate what Paul means by fellowship with the Holy Spirit?
- How does knowing that we experience *koinōnia* with the Spirit change your view of God and your relationship with him?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul explains how this fellowship with the Spirit should affect our mindsets and behavior:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any **common sharing** in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2:1–4

- How should *koinōnia* with the Spirit change us, according to Paul?
- Is it possible to live this way without the Spirit changing us from the inside out? Why or why not?

In the same letter, Paul speaks about his own life of faith and about his desire to live in a way that honors Christ. In this text he mentions his desire to experience *koinōnia* in a way that might challenge us:

Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may

gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and **participation** in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Philippians 3:7–11

- Paul expresses that he wants to know Christ, and that part of that is participating in, sharing in, his sufferings. What do you think that means?

Read Jesus’s words in Matthew 16:24–25:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”

- How do Jesus’s words deepen your understanding of what Paul means in Philippians 3?
- How does suffering or taking up our cross to follow Jesus draw us closer to him?

In this chapter, we have focused on the *koinōnia* we experience with God because of Christ. In the next chapter, we will focus on *koinōnia* with each other. The two concepts are linked in the New Testament: Because God has invited us into fellowship with him through Christ, we are able to have fellowship with each other—not just polite social relationships—but genuine, Spirit-led *koinōnia*. Jesus’s disciple John put it this way in his first letter:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have **fellowship** with us. And our **fellowship** is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:3

Key Ideas in This Study

- *Koinōnia* is a word that refers to a closeness with someone because you share something in common.
- Fellowship with God is possible because he has invited us into that relationship.
- Part of our fellowship with Christ is reflecting on the meaning of his sacrifice.
- We have fellowship with God through his indwelling Spirit, which leads us to live a God-honoring life marked by humility and unity with other Christians.
- Part of our fellowship with God is sharing in his suffering, or as Jesus put it, taking up our cross each day.
- Fellowship with each other flows from our fellowship with God.

Prayer

1. Starting with yourself, ask the group for two things:
 - A quick update on any ongoing prayer requests
 - New prayer requests

2. Write down the prayer requests as people share:

3. Ask someone in the group to close your meeting with prayer.
 - **Sample prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for calling me into fellowship with you. I thank you that fellowship with you is not an abstract concept, but a true, deep, personal relationship. Help me to feel that, Lord, and to seek out true fellowship with my brothers and sisters in Christ. Holy Spirit, help me to sense your indwelling presence, and supernaturally enable me to humbly live in a manner that honors you. Help my fellowship with you, God, to be the catalyst and basis for my other relationships. I trust that you'll do this in me, because I cannot experience true fellowship with you or others apart from your leading. Amen.