

A CATHOLIC ARMORY INDUCTIVE STUDY

Born of Water and the Spirit

The Old Testament Springs of Baptism

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

John 3:5 (RSV2CE)

A fourteen-session inductive study for parish groups: the typology of Baptism from the waters of creation to the opened side of Christ.

Leader's Edition • complete with preparation guides, discussion guides, reference cards, and participant take-home masters

Using This Guide

What this study is. An inductive journey through the Bible's theology of Baptism, built for a mixed parish group: cradle Catholics, reverts, seekers, and the simply curious, side by side. Over fourteen sessions of 75 to 90 minutes, the group traces water from the second verse of Genesis to the pierced side of Christ, discovering for themselves, with their own Bibles open, why the Church believes what she believes about the sacrament. The study is apologetic in spine and devotional in tone: every major objection is presented at full strength before it is answered from the text.

The format. Every session has three parts. The **Leader Preparation Guide** is yours alone: background, the session's Old Testament roots, three verified Voices of the Church, Catechism connections, leader-only thread notes, goals, and a timed plan with pre-chosen cuts for a 75-minute night. The **Discussion Guide** is the script of the evening: opening prayer, two open Win questions, an inductive Build with numbered questions (each followed by a shaded ANSWER box, to be shared only after the group has discussed), live discovery moments where the group hunts down passages themselves, a steelman exchange pressing the strongest objection, optional Dig Deeper material, two Send questions, Live It This Week practices, a memory verse, and a closing prayer. The **Leader Reference Card** lists every passage used, in order.

Take-Home sheets. Each session has a two-page participant Take-Home, distributed AFTER the session ends, never before: it recaps what the group found, carries that session's Voices of the Church, the Live It practices, the memory verse, the Catechism references, and the reading for the next session. Take-Home 1 includes the sealed **My Guess** box: participants write their answer to a single question, fold it closed, and carry it until it is opened together at Session 7. Protect the seal; sealed questions do more work than answered ones.

Spoiler discipline. The study is built on discovery, so the leader materials contain things participants must not see in advance: ANSWER boxes, the passages of upcoming live discoveries, Thread Watch notes, and steelman texts. Print or share only the Take-Homes with participants.

Scripture and sources. All quotations follow the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (RSV2CE). Voices of the Church are either quoted from well-attested texts with their loci, or presented explicitly as faithful summaries ("teaches in substance that..."); no citation in this study is decorative, and every one is intended to survive checking against a critical edition. Catechism paragraph numbers are given throughout.

A word to the leader. Your task most nights is to stay out of the way of a discovery the study has already staged. Read the preparation guide early in the week, pray the session's passages before you lead them, and trust the threads: what is planted in Session 2 is harvested in Session 12, and the group's joy at the harvest depends on your patience with the planting. Warmth outranks completeness; if you must choose between finishing the plan and honoring a person, the plan loses.

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Participant Take-Home sheets (fourteen two-page masters, one per session) are provided as separate files for printing and are not part of this merged volume.

Sessions at a glance: 1 Creation • 2 Flood • 3 Red Sea • 4 Circumcision • 5 Jordan • 6 Naaman • 7 Ezekiel's Promise (the Unsealing) • 8 John the Baptist • 9 Baptism of the Lord • 10 John 3:5 • 11 Romans 6 • 12 The Pierced Side • 13 Acts and the Households • 14 One Baptism and the Sending

Session 1

Waters of Creation

Before God makes anything, water and the Spirit are already together.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers for themselves that the Bible opens with water and the Spirit of God paired together (Genesis 1:2), that God creates life *through* the waters, and that the New Testament describes salvation in exactly the same vocabulary: new creation, washing, rebirth, Spirit.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church reads the waters of creation as the first announcement of Baptism. The Catechism calls water the source of life and fruitfulness from the beginning of the world, overshadowed by the Spirit of God (CCC 1218), and the Easter Vigil blessing of baptismal water begins at Genesis 1:2 before it ever reaches the font.

What You Need to Know

This opening session sets the method for the whole study, so take it slowly. We are not going to start with a doctrine and hunt for proof texts. We are going to start where the Bible starts, watch a pattern emerge, and let the group name the pattern themselves. The pattern is this: in the Bible's great scenes of creation and rescue, water and the Spirit of God appear strikingly together. Tonight the group only needs to see the first instance clearly.

Genesis 1:2 gives us three things before a single creative word is spoken: a formless void, darkness over the deep, and *the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters*. The Hebrew verb pictures a bird hovering or brooding over its nest (the same verb describes an eagle over its young in Deuteronomy 32:11). Before light, before land, before life, the Spirit broods over water. Then notice where life actually comes from on day five: God says, *let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures* (Genesis 1:20). In the Genesis picture, water is not an obstacle to life; it is the element God chooses to fill with life.

Hold that picture next to the New Testament's salvation vocabulary. St. Paul calls anyone in Christ *a new creation* (2 Corinthians 5:17), reaching back to Genesis; and Baptism, Paul teaches elsewhere, is how a person comes to be *in Christ* (Galatians 3:27). Titus 3:5 says God saved us *by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit*: washing (water) and Holy Spirit, side by side, in a single sentence about how salvation actually reaches a person. The group will find Titus 3:5 themselves tonight; resist the urge to hand it to them.

A word about the room. This is a mixed parish group: cradle Catholics, reverts, seekers, possibly people whose children or grandchildren have left the faith and whose questions about Baptism are not academic. The apologetic spine of this study is real, but it should never feel like a debate club. The tone we want is discovery and wonder first; the arguments will land harder later precisely because the group has seen the pattern with their own eyes.

Expect one honest objection to surface early, and welcome it: is water not just an obvious religious symbol that every culture reaches for? Do not rush past this; it is tonight's steelman, and the answer (that Scripture pairs water with the Spirit as an instrument of God's action, not a generic symbol of cleanness) is the seed of everything the next thirteen sessions will grow.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Genesis 1:1-2 (RSV2CE)

The fulfillment texts keep this exact grammar. Water plus Spirit equals new life: at the Jordan (Session 9), in the Lord's words to Nicodemus (Session 10), and already here in the letters of Paul:

he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit

Titus 3:5 (RSV2CE)

Palingenesia means regeneration, rebirth: and the word's very shape, a genesis again, has always invited Christian ears back to the Bible's opening page. Paul tells Titus that salvation arrives as a washing joined to the Holy Spirit; the Church hears the waters of the beginning behind it.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

Tertullian • *On Baptism, ch. 1*

"Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life!"

With this sentence, verified word for word against the standard English translation, Tertullian opens the earliest surviving treatise on Baptism, written around the year 200: joy before argument. In the chapters that follow he teaches, in substance, that water has been the seat of the divine Spirit since Genesis 1:2, and that this ancient partnership is why water, of all creatures, is fitted to carry sanctifying power.

Leader note: Tertullian is a Father of the Church but not a saint; late in life he fell into the rigorist Montanist movement. The Church still treasures his early works. If asked, say so plainly; his complicated ending is a good reminder that the early Church contained real people, not statues.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose of Milan • *On the Mysteries; On the Sacraments*

St. Ambrose, catechizing the newly baptized of Milan in the fourth century, teaches in substance that the Spirit who *was moving over the face of the waters* at creation already pointed toward the font, and that water by itself heals no one: it is the Spirit's presence, invoked over the water, that makes Baptism a new creation rather than a bath.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Church's Liturgy • *Blessing of Baptismal Water, Easter Vigil (Roman Missal)*

Every Easter Vigil, before anyone is baptized, the Church prays over the font to the God “whose Spirit in the first moments of the world's creation hovered over the waters, so that the very substance of water would even then take to itself the power to sanctify” (Roman Missal, Blessing of Baptismal Water).

This is not a private theologian's opinion; it is the Church praying her faith aloud: the font's whole family history recited over the water in one prayer.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1213 defines the stakes for the whole study: Baptism is the basis of the entire Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. CCC 1217 and 1218 ground tonight specifically: in the Easter Vigil liturgy the Church solemnly commemorates the great events of salvation history that already prefigured the mystery of Baptism, and since the beginning of the world water, so humble and wonderful a creature, has been the source of life and fruitfulness, with Scripture seeing it as overshadowed by the Spirit of God.

CCC 694 adds the pneumatological key: in Baptism, water symbolizes not scrubbing but the Holy Spirit's action, since after the invocation of the Spirit the water becomes the efficacious sacramental sign of new birth. Keep that word *efficacious* in your pocket; the group will need it by Session 2.

Paragraphs for this session: 1213, 1217–1218, 694

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Planted tonight, resolved later. (1) *Why water?* This is the study's master thread and the sealed My Guess question on Take-Home 1; it resolves at Session 7 (Ezekiel pairs water and Spirit in prophecy) with full payoff at Session 10 (John 3:5). Do not answer it tonight, even if someone answers it well. (2) *Water plus Spirit, always together.* Name the pairing tonight as an observation only; the group should start spotting it on their own by Session 3. (3) *Life comes out of the waters* (Genesis 1:20) quietly sets up the font as womb at Session 11. Plant it with a single sentence and move on.

Sealed guess mechanics. Take-Home 1 carries the My Guess box: *Why do you think God chose water?* Participants write, fold, keep. Collect nothing. At Session 7 they will open their own guesses. Sealed questions do more work than answered ones; protect the seal.

Session Goals

1. The group can state what is present in Genesis 1:2 before anything is made: water, darkness, and the Spirit of God.
2. The group has personally located Titus 3:5 and noticed water and Spirit in one salvation sentence.
3. The group can say the phrase *new creation* and connect it to Genesis, not just to a feeling.

4. The steelman (water as generic symbol) has been heard at full strength and answered from the text.
5. Every participant leaves with Take-Home 1 and understands the sealed My Guess box.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Genesis 1:1–2 read aloud, observation questions Q1-Q3

10 min • Build: Genesis 1:20–22, life from the waters, Q4

15 min • Live discovery: hunting the pattern in the New Testament (Titus 3:5, 2 Corinthians 5:17)

10 min • Steelman: is water just a symbol every religion uses?

10 min • Send questions and Live It This Week

10 min • Memory verse, Take-Home 1 walkthrough with sealed My Guess, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q4 (Genesis 1:20 can be summarized by the leader in one sentence) and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the steelman or the sealed guess.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters, and you spoke light into darkness. Tonight we open the very first page of your word. Give us eyes to see what you have placed there, patience with our questions, and joy in what we find. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Where were you baptized, if you know? Who was there? What, if anything, do you know about that day?

QW2. When you hear the word *water*, what is the first image that comes to mind: something life-giving, something dangerous, or something ordinary? Why?

Build • into the text

Have someone read Genesis 1:1–2 aloud, slowly. Then read it a second time, and ask the group to listen for what already exists before God says a single word.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Genesis 1:1–2 (RSV2CE)

Q1. Before God speaks in verse 3, what is actually on stage? Make the list together.

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Three things: the formless void, darkness over the deep, and the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters. The point to draw out: the very first picture the Bible gives us of God at work over his world is God's Spirit paired with water. Genesis 1:1 has already said that God created the heavens and the earth; before his first spoken command, that created world lies unformed and dark, and the first thing Scripture shows us over it is this pairing.

Q2. The Hebrew verb for the Spirit *moving* pictures a bird hovering or brooding over a nest. What does a brooding bird expect to come out from under her?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Life. The verb pictures a bird hovering, fluttering over its nest: Deuteronomy 32:11 uses the same word for an eagle over her young. The strict claim is the hovering; but many readers have always heard expectancy in it, the way life is waited for, and the study will let that meditation breathe without leaning on it.

Q3. Skim down to Genesis 1:20–22. On day five, where does God command life to come from?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

From the waters: *let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures*. In Genesis, water is the element God commands to teem with life; later Christian reflection would love to call it the first womb of the living world, a typology rather than the verse's own claim. If the group is warm, plant one sentence and move on: hold onto that image of water as a womb; it will come back near the end of this study.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Now the hunt. Say to the group: somewhere in the New Testament, Paul describes salvation using this same Genesis furniture: water and the Holy Spirit in a single sentence, and the idea of creation happening again. Give them these two references cold and have them find and read both: **Titus 3:5** and **2 Corinthians 5:17**. Ask: where is the water? Where is the Spirit? Where is Genesis?

Let them make the connections aloud before you confirm anything. The discovery belongs to them.

Q4. Titus 3:5 says God saved us *by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit*. What two things does Paul put side by side in that sentence, and what does he say they accomplish?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A washing (water) and the Holy Spirit, and together they accomplish salvation: *he saved us... by them*. The Greek behind *regeneration* is *palingenesia*, literally a second genesis. Paul is not decorating; he is telling us the mechanism. And notice what Paul rules out in the same breath: not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy. Baptism is not our work climbing up; it is God's mercy coming down through water and Spirit, exactly the Genesis shape.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Read this objection to the group at full strength, in your own warm voice: many religious traditions use water. Hindus bathe in the Ganges; the ancient world was full of ritual washings; water suggests cleansing everywhere because everyone gets dirty. And the serious Christian form of the objection goes further: grant that God commanded Baptism as a covenant sign; the water is still a sign, picturing a cleansing God works directly in the soul. Genesis 1:2 mentions water because ancient people lived near water. Reading Baptism into it is wishful thinking.

Q5. Sit with it honestly: what is genuinely right about this objection?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede what is true: water is a near-universal religious symbol, and the Church is not embarrassed by that; grace builds on nature, and God chose a sign the whole human race could

read. But the objection misses what the group saw with their own eyes tonight. In Genesis, water is not a symbol of getting clean; nothing is dirty yet. Water appears paired with the Spirit as the element God works *through* to bring forth life. And Titus 3:5 keeps precisely that grammar: not water as picture, but washing-plus-Spirit as the stated means by which *he saved us*. And to the more serious form: the Church agrees entirely that Baptism is a commanded covenant sign; the question the rest of this study puts to the apostles' own sentences is whether the God who commands the sign also works through it. That claim cannot be tested from Genesis alone, which is why we have thirteen more sessions. Tonight's finding is narrower and solid: from its first verses, Scripture pairs water with the Spirit of God where life is given: whether God actually works through water is exactly what the coming sessions will test.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

If the group is strong, put John 1:1–5 beside Genesis 1:1–5. John deliberately reopens Genesis (*In the beginning...*) to announce a new creation in Christ. Ask: if John is rewriting Genesis 1 around Jesus, what should we expect to find within a few verses of his Gospel? (Answer, which the group will confirm at Sessions 8–9: water and the Spirit at the Jordan, in chapter 1, verses 29–34.)

Send • out of the room

QS1. You heard the objection tonight that water is just a symbol. Before this study, is that quietly what you believed about Baptism? What would it change in your week if Titus 3:5 is literally true?

QS2. Who is one person in your life whose Baptism you could pray for by name this week: a child, a godchild, someone drifting, someone never baptized?

Live It This Week

- Once this week, bless yourself with holy water slowly and deliberately, and as you do, say in your heart: *the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters*.
- Find out the date of your own Baptism if you do not know it (a parent, a baptismal certificate, the parish office). Write it somewhere you will see it.
- Read Genesis 1 straight through once, alone, listening for water.

Memory Verse

he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit

Titus 3:5 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord God, your Spirit hovered over the waters and the world woke into life. Hover over us. Hover over our families, over the baptized who have wandered, over every name we carried into this room tonight. Make us new creations, and bring us back next week with open eyes. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Genesis 1:1-2 • Opening reading: water, darkness, Spirit before creation

Deuteronomy 32:11 • Leader background: the brooding-bird verb

Genesis 1:20-22 • Life brought forth from the waters

Titus 3:5 • Live discovery: washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit; memory verse

2 Corinthians 5:17 • Live discovery: new creation

John 1:1-5 • Dig Deeper: John reopens Genesis

Session 2

The Flood

Eight persons were saved through water, and Peter says Baptism corresponds to this.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the New Testament itself, in 1 Peter 3:20–21, explicitly names the flood as the pattern of Baptism, and reads Peter's startling sentence with their own eyes: *Baptism... now saves you*. They wrestle honestly with Peter's qualification about the removal of dirt and the appeal to God, and see that the flood water both judges and carries.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism states it plainly: the Church has seen in Noah's ark a prefiguring of salvation by Baptism, for by it a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water (CCC 1219). This is not our clever reading; it is Peter's, and the Church has simply never stopped reading it.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study shifts gears. Session 1 showed a pattern; tonight an apostle interprets the pattern for us in writing. 1 Peter 3:20–21 is the only place in Scripture that uses the word *baptism* and the word *saves* in the same sentence with baptism as the subject, and it does so by pointing backward to the flood. For a study that is apologetic in nature, this is the load-bearing wall: whatever Baptism is, Peter says it *now saves you*. Every honest reading has to start there, including the objections.

First, the flood itself. Genesis 6–9 is a de-creation and re-creation story told in Genesis 1's own vocabulary. The waters above and below, separated on day two, collapse back together (Genesis 7:11); the world returns to the watery chaos of Genesis 1:2; and then God makes a wind, in Hebrew *ruach*, the same word Genesis 1:2 uses for the Spirit, pass over the earth (Genesis 8:1); the waters subside, and in time dry land stands out again (Genesis 8:13–14), as on the third day (Genesis 1:9). The verse itself says wind; the echo of the Spirit over the deep is the narrator's deliberate craft, and we present it as exactly that. Noah steps out into a washed world, receives the blessing of Adam nearly word for word (compare Genesis 9:1 with 1:28), and God hangs his bow in the clouds. The flood is Genesis 1 happening again: through water and wind-Spirit, an old corrupted world dies and a new one is born.

Second, the strange double character of the water. The same flood that destroys the corrupt world *carries* the ark. The water is simultaneously judgment on sin and the very thing that lifts Noah's family to safety. Peter noticed the preposition: they were saved *through* water, not merely from it. This double character is the deepest thing tonight teaches about Baptism: in the font, something in us really dies, and we are really carried. St. Paul will say it without imagery in Session 11: buried with him in baptism, raised with him.

Third, the sentence itself. Read 1 Peter 3:18–22 several times before the session, aloud. Peter's flow: Christ died and was made alive; in the days of Noah eight persons were saved through water; *Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God*

for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Greek word behind *corresponds to this* is *antitypos*: the flood is the type, Baptism the antitype, the reality the pattern pointed to. Peter is not decorating with an illustration; he is using the technical grammar of typology and then making a present-tense claim: *now saves you*.

Fourth, prepare for the objection, because it is strong and your group deserves it at full strength. Many serious Protestant readers say: Peter immediately clarifies himself. Not the removal of dirt from the body, that is, not the physical washing, but an appeal to God for a clear conscience, that is, the inner act of faith. And it saves *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*, so the resurrection is doing the saving, not water. On this reading Peter mentions baptism only to point past it. Hold that argument respectfully; the answer is in the session, and it is better because the objection was honest.

Finally, the dove. Genesis 8:8–12: Noah sends out a dove over the waters, and it returns with a freshly plucked olive leaf, the sign that the waters had subsided; Christians have always seen peace returning to the world in that image. File the image away and say nothing tonight beyond noticing it. The group will meet a dove over water again at Session 9, and it should feel like recognizing an old friend.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

and the dove came back to him in the evening, and lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.

Genesis 8:11 (RSV2CE)

The flood narrative deliberately replays creation: waters cover everything, a wind-Spirit (*ruach*) passes over them (Genesis 8:1), dry land appears, and a new humanity receives the old blessing (Genesis 9:1). The New Testament then closes the loop in a single sentence:

...in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

1 Peter 3:20–21 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr • *Dialogue with Trypho*

St. Justin, writing in the mid-second century, teaches in substance that the flood was already a mystery of salvation: righteous Noah, saved with his family through water and wood, prefigures the new humanity saved through the water of Baptism and the wood of the cross, and the eight persons point to the eighth day, the day of Christ's resurrection.

Leader note: Notice how early this is: barely a century after the apostles, Christians were already reading the flood exactly as Peter taught them to. Water and wood together also quietly foreshadow Session 12.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage • *Letters*

St. Cyprian, the third-century bishop and martyr, teaches in substance that the ark of Noah was a

type of the one Church: as those inside the ark were saved through the water that destroyed the world outside, so the saving water of Baptism belongs to the Church, the ark God has built for the salvation of the human race.

Leader note: If someone raises the hard edge of this (what about everyone outside?), do not improvise. The Church's mature teaching holds both truths: all salvation comes from Christ through his Church, and those who through no fault of their own do not know Christ or his Church, if they sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive to do his will as conscience makes it known, can still be saved (CCC 846–848). Name both, promise the topic returns in Session 14, and keep the room.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine • *City of God, Book 15*

St. Augustine teaches in substance that the ark is a figure of the Church sojourning through the flood of this age, and he lingers over one detail: the door set in the ark's side, through which every saved creature entered, signifies the wound opened in the side of the crucified Christ, from which flowed the sacraments by which those who believe enter the Church.

Leader note: Say nothing more about the side wound tonight. It is a planted seed; Session 12 (Blood and Water) will open it. If a sharp participant gasps at John 19:34, smile and say: hold that thought for a few weeks.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1219 makes tonight's typology official: the Church has seen in Noah's ark a prefiguring of salvation by Baptism, for by it a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. CCC 1220 adds the double character the group will discover: if spring water symbolizes life, the water of the sea is a symbol of death, and so baptismal water can signify the mystery of the cross; by Baptism the Christian enters into Christ's death. CCC 845 gathers the ark-and-Church image: the Church is the ark that saves.

CCC 701 quietly holds the dove for later: at the end of the flood, the dove released by Noah returns with an olive branch; when Christ comes up from the water of his own baptism, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, comes down upon him. Read 701 yourself before Session 9; tonight it stays in your pocket.

Paragraphs for this session: 1219–1220, 845, 701

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread): tonight adds a hard new datum to the sealed question. Water in the flood is not gentle; it judges *and* saves, kills *and* carries. If anyone wrote a soft answer in their My Guess box last week, tonight should quietly complicate it. Do not resolve.

Water plus Spirit: Genesis 8:1, the *ruach* over the flood waters, is instance two of the pairing. Let a participant spot it if possible; if not, point at it once and move on.

The dove (planted tonight, resolved Session 9): dove over water, returning with peace. One admiring sentence, no more.

The door in the side (planted tonight via Augustine, resolved Session 12): do not explain it.

Peter's sentence (resolved across Sessions 8–10): the group meets *baptism now saves you* tonight and will not fully digest it for weeks. That is by design; the sealed guess and this verse mature together.

Session Goals

1. The group can retell the flood as a re-creation story: waters return, the *ruach* moves over them, a new world emerges.
2. The group has read 1 Peter 3:20–21 aloud and can quote the clause *Baptism... now saves you* accurately, including its qualifications.
3. The steelman (Peter points past the water to inner faith) has been given at full strength and answered from the text.
4. The group can articulate the double character of the water: judgment and rescue in the same element.
5. The dove and the door in the side are planted, unexplained.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: the flood as Genesis 1 replayed (Genesis 7:11, 8:1, 9:1), Q1-Q3

15 min • Live discovery: 1 Peter 3:18–22, finding the apostle's own interpretation

10 min • Build: the double character of the water, Q5

15 min • Steelman: does Peter point past the water?

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q3 (Genesis 9:1 blessing parallel; summarize it in one leader sentence) and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the live discovery of 1 Peter 3 or the steelman.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, you did not abandon the world you loved, even when it filled with violence. You carried Noah through the waters and set your bow in the clouds. Carry us tonight through your word. Teach us what your apostle Peter meant, and give us honest hearts before hard sentences. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. When you read the flood story this week, what struck you that you had never noticed before, or what bothered you?

QW2. Have you ever had something painful turn out to be the very thing that carried you somewhere good? How do you tell the difference, in the middle of it, between drowning and being carried?

Build • into the text

Set the scene briefly: Genesis told us the world God made through water and Spirit was very good; by Genesis 6 it is filled with violence. Now watch *how* God renews it. Have three different readers take Genesis 7:11, Genesis 8:1, and Genesis 9:1.

Q1. Genesis 7:11 says the fountains of the great deep burst forth and the windows of the heavens were opened. Thinking back to creation (day two, the waters above and below), what is God allowing to happen to his creation here?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Creation is being un-made. On day two God separated the waters above from the waters below; here the separation collapses and the primordial deep swallows the world again. The earth returns to something like Genesis 1:2: water everywhere, and one wooden vessel with life brooding inside it. The flood is not random divine anger; it is de-creation, told deliberately in creation's own vocabulary.

Q2. Genesis 8:1: God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. The Hebrew word for wind here is *ruach*, the same word translated *Spirit* in Genesis 1:2. Where have we seen this exact picture before, and what happens next both times?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Genesis 1:2, where the *ruach* of God moves over the face of the waters; and both stories then run through subsiding waters to dry land and new life (Genesis 8:13–14 with 1:9). Genesis 8:1 itself says a wind; the echo of the Spirit is the narrator's craft, and the group may hold it precisely as that: creation's grammar replayed: water, the breath of God, a new world. The narrator wants us to understand that God renews the world the same way he made it.

Q3. Compare Genesis 9:1 with Genesis 1:28. What is God doing for Noah's family, and what does that make Noah?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God repeats Adam's blessing almost word for word: be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. Noah steps out of the water as a new Adam at the head of a new humanity in a washed world. Hold this: coming up out of the water as a new person in a new creation is precisely the shape the New Testament will give to Baptism.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Now the hunt. Tell the group: one of the apostles read this story exactly the way we just did, and wrote down what it means, and his answer is the boldest sentence about Baptism in the Bible. Give them only this: **1 Peter 3:18–22**. Have them find it, read it aloud twice, and underline every word connected to water.

Let the shock of Baptism... now saves you land in their own voices. Do not soften it and do not explain it yet.

Q4. Peter says eight persons were saved *through* water, and that Baptism *corresponds to this*. The Greek word is *antitypos*: the flood is the pattern, Baptism the reality it pointed to. According to the plain grammar of verse 21, what does Baptism now do?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It saves: *Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you*. Baptism is the subject; saves is the verb; you is the object; now is the tense. Whatever qualifications follow (and they matter, and we are about to take them seriously), any account of Baptism has to be able to say this sentence out loud without embarrassment.

Q5. Look at the flood water itself. The same water that destroys the violent world is the water that lifts and carries the ark. What does that double character suggest about what happens to a person in the water of Baptism?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Something dies and someone is carried. The water is judgment on the old corrupt world and rescue for the new one, at the same time, in the same element. Baptism is not a bath added to an otherwise unchanged life; in it the old self is drowned and a new self is carried to shore. St. Paul will say this without any imagery at all later in our study: we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that we might walk in newness of life.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Now the objection, and it deserves your best voice, because thoughtful Christians we love hold it:

Peter no sooner says *baptism now saves you* than he corrects any magical misunderstanding. Not, he says, the removal of dirt from the body: so not the physical water rite. But an appeal to God for a clear conscience: so the saving thing is the inward turn of the heart, faith reaching out to God. And it saves through the resurrection of Jesus Christ: so the real power is the risen Christ, not a font. On this reading, Peter mentions the ceremony only to point past it to what matters: personal faith in the risen Lord. Is that not the most natural way to honor the whole verse?

Q6. Before we answer: what is genuinely right in this reading? Name at least two things.

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Two things in it are simply true, and Catholic teaching insists on both. Baptism is not magic hygiene; a rite performed with no repentance and no faith, as a scrubbing of the flesh, is exactly what Peter excludes, and the Church requires faith around every Baptism: the adult candidate's own repentance and faith, or, for an infant, the faith of the Church, the parents, and the godparents professed at the font. And the power is entirely Christ's resurrection; the Catechism itself teaches that the baptismal water signifies that our salvation flows from the death and resurrection of Christ. The font has no voltage of its own.

But watch what the objection has to do to the grammar. Peter's contrast is not water versus faith; it is one description of Baptism versus a better description of the same Baptism. Not: baptism does not save, faith does. Rather: Baptism now saves you, and here is what Baptism is, not a removal of dirt from the body (which is all a mere washing could ever be) but an appeal to God for a clear conscience (which is what this washing actually is), and here is where its power comes from, the resurrection. The qualification tells us what kind of thing Baptism is; it does not transfer the verb to something else. Peter could easily have written *faith now saves you, of which baptism is the picture*. He wrote the opposite, in a letter, to churches, on purpose.

And the flood will not let us split water from faith anyway. Ask the group: was Noah saved by faith, or through water? Scripture says both without blushing: by faith Noah constructed an ark (Hebrews 11:7), and eight persons were saved through water (1 Peter 3:20). Faith built the ark; the water still had to carry it. Faith and the water rite are not rivals in the story Peter chose; they are exactly how God's rescue works: his gift, received in faith, delivered through the element he appointed. That is the Catholic doctrine of a sacrament, found intact inside a fisherman's sentence.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Genesis 8:4 notes the ark came to rest in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month. The group already saw that the eight persons made early Christians think of the eighth day, resurrection day. Ask: why might the early Church have loved numbering and dating details like these? (Not numerology for its own sake, but the conviction that the God who saves through water is also the Lord of time, and that patterns in the story are promises.) Keep it light; this is dessert, not dinner.

Send • out of the room

QS1. Peter says Baptism is *an appeal to God for a clear conscience*. If your Baptism was an appeal made for you or by you, what would it look like to renew that appeal, honestly, this week?

QS2. Where in your life right now does the water feel like it is drowning you rather than carrying you? What would trusting the ark look like there?

Live It This Week

- Pray for the dead of your family by name once this week, entrusting them to the mercy of the God who remembered Noah.
- Read 1 Peter 3:18–22 once more, alone, slowly, and sit for two minutes with the sentence *Baptism now saves you* without arguing with it in either direction.
- Next time you enter the church, touch the holy water and remember: this is ark water. Something drowns; someone is carried.

Memory Verse

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

1 Peter 3:21 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the true ark; in you God has made a way through the waters. Drown in us everything that belongs to the old world: our violence, our grudges, our despair. Carry everything you are saving. We hold up to you now, in silence, the people we most want inside the ark with us. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Genesis 7:11 • De-creation: the deep returns

Genesis 8:1 • The *ruach* over the waters; creation replayed

Genesis 8:8-12 • The dove and the olive leaf (planted, unexplained)

Genesis 9:1 with 1:28 • Noah blessed as a new Adam

1 Peter 3:18-22 • Live discovery: Baptism corresponds to the flood and now saves

Hebrews 11:7 • Steelman answer: faith built the ark; water carried it

Genesis 8:4 • Dig Deeper: dates and numbers as promises

Session 3

Through the Sea

All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that St. Paul explicitly calls the Red Sea crossing a baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1–2), and that he declares the events of the Exodus were written down *for our instruction* (10:11). In doing so they receive, from an apostle's own pen, the warrant for the method this whole study uses: typology is not our invention; it is how the New Testament reads the Old.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism singles this crossing out: above all, the crossing of the Red Sea, literally the liberation of Israel from the slavery of Egypt, announces the liberation wrought by Baptism (CCC 1221), and it teaches that the Church's reading of such figures rests on the unity of God's plan across the two Testaments (CCC 128–130).

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study defends its own method, and it does so from inside the Bible. Twice now the group has watched water and Spirit mark the birth of a world. A fair-minded person can still ask: fine, but who says these Old Testament stories are *about* Baptism? Tonight's answer: St. Paul says so, in writing, using the word itself. 1 Corinthians 10:1–2: our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were *baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea*. And 10:11: these things happened to them as a warning, but *they were written down for our instruction*. Typology is not a medieval decoration or a Catholic habit; it is apostolic exegesis.

Set the Exodus scene richly, because the drama matters. Israel is enslaved, powerless, unable to free itself; everything depends on God's initiative. At the sea they are trapped: Pharaoh's army behind, water ahead. God divides the sea, Israel passes through on dry ground between walls of water, and the same water that opened for the slaves closes over the slavemasters. On the far shore stands a free people who did nothing to earn the crossing, singing Israel's great Song of the Sea: *The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation* (Exodus 15:2).

Now watch Paul's two details. First, *the cloud*: the pillar of cloud and fire is God's own presence leading and guarding Israel (Exodus 13:21–22; 14:19–20 shows it moving between Israel and the army). Paul says Israel was baptized *in the cloud and in the sea*: divine presence plus water. The group has now seen this pairing three times, and tonight someone should say it out loud without prompting; if no one does, ask what two elements Paul lists and wait. Second, *into Moses*: baptism incorporates you into someone. Israel came out of the sea belonging to Moses, bound to the mediator God appointed. The Christian is baptized *into Christ* (the group will read Galatians 3:27 and Romans 6:3 in Session 11); Paul's grammar here is deliberately parallel.

The steelman tonight has two prongs, and both deserve full strength. Prong one, about method: is typology not just reading the ending back into the beginning, finding faces in clouds? Anything can prefigure anything if you squint. Prong two, sharper, from the text itself: Paul's whole point in 1 Corinthians 10 is a warning: nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; they were overthrown in the wilderness (10:5). Everyone was baptized into Moses, and most of them still died in the desert. So, the strong form runs: a warning to the sacramentally privileged settles nothing about what baptism effects; Israel's typological baptism was not Christian Baptism anyway; and a text about falling despite the gifts sits more comfortably with baptism as sign than with baptism as saving instrument.

Sit with prong two before the session until you love it, because it flips. The warning only has force if the gifts were real. Paul's argument to the Corinthians is: you have real gifts of God, and Israel had their very figures (a crossing Paul dares to call a baptism, the supernatural food and drink that prefigure the Eucharist), and those real gifts did not spare presumptuous Israel, so do not presume. If baptism were an empty symbol, do not presume upon it would be a strange sermon. You warn people not to presume on something precisely because it is real and precious. And this is simply Catholic teaching: Baptism truly saves and truly incorporates, and the baptized can still be lost through unrepented grave sin; the sacrament is a gift to be lived, not a talisman. Ironically, 1 Corinthians 10 is a harder text for once-saved-always-saved theology than it is for Catholic sacramental realism.

Pastoral note for a mixed room: the sea closing over the Egyptians can trouble tender consciences, and the Old Testament's warfare texts trouble many good people. Do not wave this away. Two honest anchors: the Church reads these narratives within God's patient pedagogy of an ancient people, and many Fathers, among them Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa, and Origen, read the drowned army spiritually, as the sins and slaveries drowned in the font, which is the reading tonight develops. What remains hard may honestly be named as hard; the study does not need to pretend otherwise, and Session 6 and Session 14 give further chances to revisit wounded questions.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

Exodus 14:21–22 (RSV2CE)

Notice even here the wind over the water, *ruach* in Hebrew, dividing the sea as at creation the waters were divided and dry land appeared: Genesis's vocabulary, deliberately replayed. The New Testament seals the reading:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea

1 Corinthians 10:1–2 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyril of Jerusalem • *Mystagogical Catecheses, Lecture 1*

St. Cyril, catechizing the newly baptized in fourth-century Jerusalem, teaches in substance that the Exodus is the map of every Baptism: as the tyrant Pharaoh pursued the people of old to the sea, so

the devil, the tyrant of sin, pursues each soul right up to the saving water; and as the one was drowned in the sea, so the other's power over us is destroyed in the water of salvation.

Leader note: Source-verified against the NPNF translation: First Mystagogical Catechesis, sections 2–3 (printed as Catechetical Lecture 19 in some collections, which fold the five mystagogical lectures in as Lectures 19–23): “the tyrant of old was drowned in the sea; and this present one disappears in the water of salvation.”

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory of Nyssa • *The Life of Moses, Book 2*

St. Gregory, the fourth-century Father, teaches in substance that the army drowned in the sea images everything that tyrannized the soul before Baptism: the passions, the habits of sin, the whole armory of the old slavery, plunged into the water and left there. What crosses with us is the free person; what pursued us was never meant to survive the crossing.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

Origen of Alexandria • *Homilies on Exodus*

Origen, the brilliant third-century interpreter, teaches in substance that the Egyptians pursuing Israel to the sea are the sins of our former life chasing us to the font, and that the one who comes up from the water may look back and see the old masters powerless behind him.

Leader note: Origen is a Father of enormous influence but not a saint; some of his later speculations were rejected by the Church, and she reads him with discernment while gratefully keeping treasures like this one. Including him honestly, with that caveat, models exactly the intellectual honesty this study wants to form.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1221 states tonight's typology at the highest level: above all, the crossing of the Red Sea, literally the liberation of Israel from the slavery of Egypt, announces the liberation wrought by Baptism. CCC 1094 confirms the pattern the group has been building for three weeks, naming the flood and the ark and the crossing of the Red Sea as figures of Baptism fulfilled in Christ.

CCC 128–130 is your method anchor if anyone wants chapter and verse for typology itself: the Church, as early as apostolic times and constantly in her Tradition, has read the unity of the two Testaments through typology, which discerns in God's works of the Old Covenant prefigurations of what he accomplished in Christ, while insisting the Old Testament retains its own permanent value. CCC 116 grounds all the other senses of Scripture on the literal sense, and CCC 117 places typology among the spiritual senses, itself naming the crossing of the Red Sea as a sign of Christ's victory and of Christian Baptism. If the phrase *the Old Testament retains its own value* comes up: yes, the crossing really happened to Israel and really mattered as Israel's liberation; typology adds meaning, it does not dissolve history.

Paragraphs for this session: 1221, 1094, 128–130, 116–117

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread): tonight's datum is liberation. The water is where slavery ends and a people is born free. Guesses in the sealed boxes are quietly gaining material; four sessions remain until the unsealing.

Water plus Spirit: instance three: the cloud (divine presence) and the sea; even the east *wind* dividing the waters echoes the *ruach*. By now the group should be spotting the pairing unprompted. If someone does, congratulate them and say only: keep counting.

Baptized into someone (planted tonight, resolved Session 11): into Moses now, into Christ then. Plant with one sentence when Q4's answer is shared; do not develop.

The warning thread (developed tonight, resolved Session 14): real sacraments, really given, must still be lived. This becomes Session 14's charge to live your Baptism.

Session Goals

1. The group has read 1 Corinthians 10:1–2 and heard Paul call the crossing a baptism, in his own words.
2. The group can state Paul's warrant for typology from 10:11: these things were written down for our instruction.
3. The group can name what the cloud is and what the pairing cloud-plus-sea repeats.
4. Both prongs of the steelman (typology as wishful reading; baptized Israel still fell) have been given at full strength and answered from the text.
5. The group can say what drowned in the sea and what walked out of it.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Exodus 14 read dramatically; the trap, the crossing, the closing sea; Q1-Q2

15 min • Live discovery: 1 Corinthians 10:1–11, Paul's own words

10 min • Build: into Moses, in the cloud and the sea; Q4-Q5

15 min • Steelman: both prongs

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q2 (the Song of the Sea; the leader can read Exodus 15:2 aloud in passing) and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the second prong of the steelman; it is the sharpest objection the study has met so far.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord God, you heard the cry of your people in slavery, and you made a road where there was no road. We come tonight with our own Egypts behind us and our own seas in front of us. Open your word as you opened the waters, and lead us through on dry ground. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Israel stood trapped: an army behind them, the sea ahead. Describe a moment in your life, as much as you are comfortable sharing, when the way back was closed and the way forward looked impossible.

QW2. What is something you were once enslaved to, in any sense (a habit, a fear, a screen, a grudge), that you are free of now? Do you remember crossing over, or did you look up one day and find yourself on the far shore?

Build • into the text

Have a strong reader take Exodus 14:10–14 (the panic and the promise), and another take 14:21–31 (the crossing). Read it like the rescue it is.

Q1. Before the sea opens, what can Israel actually do to save itself? Look hard at 14:13–14.

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Nothing. That is the point of the trap. Moses says: fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD... the LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be still. The crossing is pure gift, God's initiative from first to last; Israel's part is to trust and walk. Whatever Baptism is, the story Paul chose as its pattern is a story of salvation no one earned. (This matters for later: the Catholic claim that Baptism saves is not a claim that we save ourselves by a ritual work; the sea did the work, and God did the sea.)

Q2. Exodus 14:21: the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind, and the waters were divided, and dry land appeared. Where has the Bible shown us wind-over-water, divided waters, and emerging dry land before?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Genesis 1 (the *ruach* over the deep, waters divided, dry land emerging) and Genesis 8 (the *ruach*-wind over the flood, waters subsiding, dry land). Here the *ruach* is plainly an east wind; the point is the shared grammar, not a hidden identification: three stories in which, when God brings a world or a people to birth, wind-or-Spirit moves over water and a way through opens. Israel is not just escaping; Israel is being created, a nation born that night through the water.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: St. Paul read this story and made a claim about it so bold that he used a word we would not dare to use if he had not. Give them only **1 Corinthians 10:1–11** and ask them to find the word, and then to find the sentence where Paul tells us why these old stories are in our Bible at all.

The word is baptized (v. 2); the sentence is v. 11, written down for our instruction. Let them find both and read them aloud.

Q3. Paul says all were baptized *into Moses*. Not near Moses or with Moses: into him. What did Israel's crossing bind them to, and if the sea was a baptism into Moses, what does Paul want us to conclude our Baptism binds us into?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The crossing bound Israel to Moses as the mediator God had appointed: they came out of the water as his people, under his leadership, headed where he was headed. Paul's grammar is a loaded parallel: elsewhere he writes that all of us who have been baptized *into Christ Jesus* were baptized into his death, and that as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Baptism is not a certificate; it is an incorporation into a person. (One sentence, then move on: we will spend all of Session 11 inside that truth.)

Q4. Paul names two elements: in the cloud and in the sea. Look at Exodus 13:21–22 and 14:19–20. What is the cloud, and what pairing does cloud-plus-sea complete for the third week in a row?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The cloud is God's own presence: the pillar of cloud and fire that leads Israel and then stations itself between them and the army, presence as guide and shield. Cloud plus sea is presence-of-God plus water: the pairing that echoes Spirit-over-waters in Genesis 1 and the wind of God over the flood in Genesis 8. The language invites the comparison; many readers hear Paul writing with Genesis in his ear. Divine presence and water, together, making a people: count it, three.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Two objections tonight, both strong. First, about our whole method: is this not pattern-hunting? Read any ending back into any beginning and you will find foreshadowing everywhere; people find faces in clouds. Calling the Red Sea a baptism is poetry at best, wishful thinking at worst, unless the text itself authorizes it. Second, from inside tonight's very chapter, and this one has teeth: Paul continues, nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness (10:5). All were baptized into Moses, and a generation of the baptized died outside the promise. If baptism can be had by a whole nation that then perishes, what does this passage leave of the claim that baptism saves? A warning to the sacramentally privileged, the strong form runs, settles nothing about regenerative efficacy, and Israel's typological baptism was not Christian

Baptism anyway.

Q5. Take the first prong alone: what would it actually take for typology to be legitimate rather than wishful?

Q6. Now the second: read 1 Corinthians 10:5–12 again. What is Paul warning the Corinthians not to do?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Prong one answers itself the moment we ask who is doing the reading. If we had invented the Red-Sea-as-Baptism link, the objection would stand. But the link is Paul's, in an inspired letter, using the word *baptized*, capped with a general principle: these things happened to them as types (*typikōs*, the word behind the RSV's "warning"), and they were written down for our instruction. Typology done rightly is not our creativity; it is apostolic method, practiced under apostolic constraints: it builds on real history (the crossing really happened, really liberated), it centers on Christ, and it is anchored by the New Testament's own explicit links, of which this study is deliberately built. The Church did not license pattern-hunting; she canonized the patterns the apostles hunted.

Prong two flips in your hand once you ask what kind of warning Paul is giving. You do not warn people against presuming on something worthless; there is no epidemic of people presuming on empty symbols. The Corinthians were presuming precisely because the gifts were real: really baptized, really fed with the supernatural food (Paul's words for the figures of the Eucharist). Paul's logic is: Israel really received God's gifts through cloud and sea, and still fell through idolatry and grumbling; therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. The warning presupposes the reality of God's gifts, theirs in figure and ours in fullness; it demolishes only the presumption. (And yes, Israel's baptism into Moses was the figure, not the Christian sacrament: which is Paul's a-fortiori, not his equivocation: if even the figures were holy enough to make presumption fatal, how much more the realities they prefigured.) And this is, word for word, the Catholic position: Baptism truly saves, truly incorporates, truly frees, and the baptized can still be lost through unrepented grave sin, which is why the sacrament must be lived. If anything, this passage is a problem for once-saved-always-saved readings, not for sacramental ones: the baptized-into-Moses who fell were really God's people, really rescued, and really lost. A gift can be real and still be squandered; that is not a defect in the gift.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: read Exodus 15:1–2, the Song of the Sea, sung on the far shore: *The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation*. Ask: what is the first thing a people does when it comes up out of the water? It worships. Then note where the Church sings this: the Easter Vigil, the night of Baptism, where, in the Roman Rite, Exodus 14:15–15:1 is the one Old Testament reading never omitted, answered with this very song. The Church has never stopped standing on that shore.

Send • out of the room

QS1. Paul warns the baptized against presumption. Where in your own faith life have you been coasting on a gift instead of living it?

QS2. The Egyptians in the water were, for the Fathers, the old masters: the sins that once owned us. What old master still whispers to you from the far bank as though it had a claim on you? What would it mean this week to believe it drowned?

Live It This Week

- Each morning this week, before your feet hit the floor, say Exodus 15:2 once: *The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.*
- Identify one act of presumption in your week (a skipped prayer, an ignored nudge of conscience) and replace it, that day, with the thing it displaced.
- If you can, find the Easter Vigil readings in a missal or online and read the third Old Testament reading (Exodus 14:15–15:1) with the prayer that follows it: hear the Church pray Exodus 14 over the font.

Memory Verse

Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come.

1 Corinthians 10:11 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, you brought your people out of slavery through the sea, and in the waters of Baptism you have brought us out of a slavery older and deeper. Drown what pursues us. Teach us never to presume on your gifts and never to doubt them. And as Israel sang on the shore, put your song in our mouths this week. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Exodus 14:10-14 • The trap and the promise: stand firm and see the salvation of the LORD

Exodus 14:21-31 • The crossing and the closing sea

Genesis 1:2, 9-10 and 8:1 • Callback: wind over water, divided waters, dry land

1 Corinthians 10:1-11 • Live discovery: baptized into Moses; written down for our instruction

Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19-20 • The cloud: God's presence leading and shielding

Exodus 15:1-2 • The Song of the Sea; Dig Deeper and Live It

Session 4

Circumcision Made Without Hands

You were buried with him in baptism: the covenant sign has changed hands.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that entry into God's covenant has always come through a God-given sign, that St. Paul explicitly names Baptism as the *circumcision of Christ, made without hands* (Colossians 2:11–12), and that the prophets had already promised a circumcision God himself would perform on the heart.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism reads the Lord's own circumcision as a sign of his incorporation into Abraham's descendants and says it prefigures that *circumcision of Christ* which is Baptism (CCC 527). Covenant entry by a sign is not a Catholic invention; it is the Bible's constant grammar, and Paul tells us the sign's new name.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study turns a corner. Sessions 1 through 3 watched water: creation, flood, sea. Tonight there is almost no water in the Old Testament text at all, and that is deliberate. Before the group can understand what Baptism does, they need to see the older, deeper category Baptism belongs to: the covenant sign. God does not deal with his people as a loose crowd of individuals who feel sincere; he cuts covenants, and, in the pattern this session traces from Abraham forward, he marks entry into covenant with a sign he chooses.

Genesis 17 is the founding scene. God binds himself to Abraham with promises (descendants, land, and *I will be their God*), and commands a sign in the flesh: every male circumcised, and circumcised *at eight days old* (Genesis 17:12). Let the group feel how strange and how wonderful that is. An eight-day-old has done nothing, chosen nothing, understood nothing; he receives the covenant as pure gift, because covenant membership in Israel was never earned by comprehension. It was conferred, and then grown into. Say no more than that tonight; just make sure everyone sees it in the text. It will matter enormously in Session 13.

The prophets then deepen the sign inward. Deuteronomy 30:6 promises a day when *the LORD your God will circumcise your heart*: not Israel circumcising itself, but God operating on the interior person. Jeremiah repeats the summons to circumcise the heart, and Ezekiel will promise the new heart itself (the group will live inside Ezekiel 36 in three weeks; resist previewing it). The trajectory the Old Testament itself draws: an outward covenant sign, awaiting the day God himself performs it on the heart.

Then Colossians 2:11–12, tonight's summit. Paul, writing (on the common reading of the letter's situation) to baptized Gentiles under pressure to take on the old sign, answers: you already have the reality it pointed to. *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by*

putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism. Track the argument with the group slowly: you were circumcised (past tense, done), not by human hands, and the moment Paul points to is Baptism. Baptism is the new covenant's circumcision: the God-performed entry sign, cutting away not a scrap of flesh but the whole *body of flesh*, the old fallen self.

Prepare for tonight's steelman, which is genuinely strong: *made without hands* sounds like Paul is contrasting physical rites with a purely spiritual event, and verse 12 credits *faith in the working of God*. On that reading, Colossians 2 dissolves ritual rather than transferring it. The answer turns on what *without hands* means in Scripture's own usage, and on who the acting subject of a sacrament is. Master the answer box before the night; this is one of the exchanges your sharpest participants will remember.

One more seed, planted with a single sentence and no follow-up: Genesis 17 gave the covenant sign to eight-day-old infants, and in Session 2 the group met eight persons saved through water, and early Christians heard resurrection, the eighth day, in both. Just point at the pattern and smile. The doctrine waits for Session 13.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations...

Genesis 17:12 (RSV2CE)

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Deuteronomy 30:6 (RSV2CE)

Paul announces that the promised, God-performed circumcision has arrived, and names it:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:11–12 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr • *Dialogue with Trypho*

St. Justin, whom the group met at the flood, teaches in substance that Christians have received the true, spiritual circumcision promised by the prophets, and that we receive it through Baptism: the sign given to Abraham has found the reality it always pointed toward, and it is now open to every nation.

Leader note: Justin is arguing, respectfully and at length, with Trypho, a Jew, about covenant membership. If your group includes anyone sensitive to how Christians speak of Judaism, model Justin's better angels: the claim is fulfillment, never contempt, and the Church repudiates every reading of these texts that despises the Jewish people.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on Colossians*

St. John Chrysostom, preaching through Colossians in the fourth century, teaches in substance that Paul deliberately calls Baptism the Christian's circumcision: performed not by human hands but by the Spirit, and removing not a small piece of the body but the whole *body of flesh*, the old sinful self, stripped off and buried in the water.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Thomas Aquinas • *Summa Theologiae III, q. 70*

St. Thomas, treating circumcision directly, teaches in substance that circumcision was the figure and preparation of Baptism: a true covenant sign professing faith in the Christ who was to come, while Baptism is the sacrament of the Christ who has come. What the old sign promised from a distance, the new sacrament confers in fullness.

Leader note: If a precise participant asks whether circumcision *did* anything: St. Thomas holds that it truly benefited those under it through faith in the Christ to come, while Baptism confers grace with a fullness the old sign could not. The old covenant was real grace on the way to more grace, not an empty ritual era.

Catechism Connection

CCC 527 is tonight's anchor: Jesus' own circumcision on the eighth day is the sign of his incorporation into Abraham's descendants and prefigures that *circumcision of Christ* which is Baptism. CCC 1150 sets the wider frame: the signs of the Old Covenant, and it names circumcision among them, prefigure the sacraments of the New.

Hold in reserve, without citing it aloud tonight: the entire logic of tonight (covenant entry conferred by God's sign, given even to infants, grown into afterward) is the scriptural spine of the Church's practice of infant Baptism. The Catechism draws that conclusion where the group will draw it, in Session 13.

Tonight we only lay the rail.

Paragraphs for this session: 527, 1150

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread): tonight complicates the sealed question from a new angle: the covenant sign did not used to involve water at all. Whatever the answer to *why water* is, it now has to explain why the sign changed element. Do not say this aloud; let anyone who notices carry it.

Eighth day (developed tonight, resolved Session 13): eight-day-old infants (Genesis 17:12), eight persons through the flood, circumcision of Jesus at eight days (the discovery text). Touch, do not press.

Given to infants (planted tonight, resolved Session 13): the group must see Genesis 17:12 with their own eyes tonight; Session 13's argument stands on tonight's observation. Plant only.

Circumcise the heart (planted tonight, resolved Session 7): Deuteronomy 30:6 is the first half of a promise; Ezekiel 36 is the other half, and Session 7 is the unsealing night. Do not quote Ezekiel tonight.

Buried and raised (planted tonight, resolved Session 11): Colossians 2:12's burial language gets one admiring sentence tonight and a whole session later.

Session Goals

1. The group can define a covenant sign from Genesis 17: God binds himself with promises and marks entry with a sign he chooses.
2. The group has seen, in the text, that the old covenant sign was given to eight-day-old infants as pure gift.
3. The group has read Colossians 2:11–12 aloud and can say what Paul calls Baptism: the circumcision of Christ, made without hands.
4. The steelman (*without hands* means non-ritual) has been given at full strength and answered from Scripture's own usage.
5. The heart-circumcision promise (Deuteronomy 30:6) is on the table, unresolved, pointing toward Session 7.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Genesis 17:1–14; covenant and sign; the eighth day; Q1-Q2

10 min • Build: Deuteronomy 30:6; the promised surgery of the heart; Q3

15 min • Build: Colossians 2:11–12 slowly; Q4-Q5

10 min • Live discovery: Romans 2:28–29 and Luke 2:21

10 min • Steelman: does *without hands* dissolve the rite?

10 min • Send, Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q3 can be folded into the leader's framing of Deuteronomy 30:6 in one sentence, and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut Genesis 17:12 (the infant detail) or the steelman.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

God of Abraham, you made a covenant with our father in faith and marked his family as your own. Thank you for marking us. Open your word tonight, and circumcise our hearts: cut away whatever keeps us from loving you with everything we are. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. What is something you belong to that you were brought into before you could choose it (a family, a country, a name, a parish)? How do you feel now about having been given it rather than having chosen it?

QW2. Think of a ring, a uniform, a brand, a flag: why do we humans mark belonging on the body at all? What does a visible sign do that a private feeling cannot?

Build • into the text

Have someone read Genesis 17:1–8 (the promises) and someone else read 17:9–14 (the sign). Ask the group to listen for who initiates every single element.

Q1. List the promises God makes in verses 1–8, and then answer: what does Abraham contribute to this covenant besides receiving it?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God promises to multiply Abraham exceedingly, to make him the father of a multitude of nations, to give the land, and, the heart of it all, *to be God to you and to your descendants after you*. Abraham's contribution is to walk before God and receive the sign. The covenant is God's initiative, God's promises, God's chosen sign. This is the pattern to hold all night: covenants are entered on God's terms, through God's sign, as God's gift.

Q2. Look hard at verse 12. At what age does a male enter this covenant, and what has he done to qualify?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Eight days old, and he has done nothing: no faith he can articulate, no repentance, no understanding, no choice. He is carried into the covenant by his family and marked as God's, and then spends his life growing into what he already is. Whatever else we conclude in this study, the Bible's first covenant sign was, by God's explicit command, given to infants. (File that away; we will need it in Session 13. Tonight, just make sure you saw it in the text.)

Q3. Now Deuteronomy 30:6. Who performs this future circumcision, what is it performed on, and what is it for?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God performs it (*the LORD your God will circumcise*), on the heart, and its purpose is love: so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul, and live. The Old Testament itself announces that the outward sign was always awaiting an inward, God-performed fulfillment. The question the prophets leave hanging: when, and how, will God do this surgery? Hold the question; it is not answered tonight.

Now the summit. Read Colossians 2:11–12 aloud twice, slowly. Remind the group of Paul's situation: Gentile Christians in Colossae are being pressured to take on the old covenant sign. Watch what Paul tells them they already have.

Q4. Paul says *you were circumcised*: past tense, already done. With what kind of circumcision, and, tracking verse 12, at what moment does Paul say it happened?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A circumcision *made without hands*, the *circumcision of Christ*, and the moment Paul points to is Baptism: *you were circumcised... and you were buried with him in baptism*. Paul's answer to *do I need the covenant sign?* is not *signs are over*; it is *you have received the covenant sign, the greater one, the one God himself performs*. Baptism is to the new covenant what circumcision was to the old: the divinely appointed entry.

Q5. The old sign removed a small piece of flesh. According to verse 11, what does the circumcision of Christ remove?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The body of flesh: not a token of the old self but the old self entire, stripped off like a garment and buried with Christ in the water. The new sign does not do less than the old because it sheds no blood; it does immeasurably more. It is Deuteronomy 30:6 happening: God's own hands, on the heart.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt, in two quick finds. First: somewhere in Romans, Paul says who the *real Jew* is and what *real* circumcision is. Find it in **Romans 2:28–29**. Second: the Gospels record the day the Lord himself received the old sign, at exactly the age Genesis commanded. Find it in **Luke 2:21**. Read both aloud.

Draw the lines: real circumcision is of the heart (Romans agreeing with Deuteronomy), and Jesus received the old covenant's sign at eight days, the sign of his incorporation into Abraham's descendants (CCC 527), so that in him the sign could be brought to its fulfillment.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection, at full strength: *made without hands* is precisely how the Bible says *not a ritual*. Paul's whole point to the Colossians is to free them from external rites: no to circumcision, and, by the same logic, do not replace one physical ceremony with another. The circumcision of Christ is spiritual: God's inner work on the heart, received, verse 12 says plainly, *through faith in the working of God*. On this reading's strongest form, Baptism remains a commanded covenant sign, even a seal of grace received by faith; what it is not is the instrument that effects the burial and rising. Making the water do the work is exactly the mistake, external religion, that Paul is writing to correct.

Q6. Before we answer: what does this objection get right about the danger of external religion? Where does the Old Testament itself thunder against empty ritual?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The danger is real, and the prophets said it first: rites without repentance disgusted God (think of Isaiah 1). Catholic teaching agrees: a sacrament received without repentance and faith does not bear its saving fruit, and can even be received sacrilegiously. If the objection were merely *ritual without faith is dead*, we would only say amen.

But look at how *made without hands* works in the usages nearest this one. There the phrase does not mean *nothing happens*; it marks God's workmanship over human manufacture: The temple *made without hands* is a real temple, but God builds it; the resurrection body is called a building from God, a house *not made with hands*, and it is emphatically a body. So a circumcision made without hands is not a circumcision that does not happen; it is one performed by no human surgeon. And that is exactly the Catholic doctrine of Baptism: at the font, the minister's hands pour or immerse, but God's hands work. The acting subject of every sacrament is Christ. *Without hands* is not an argument against Baptism doing something; it is the reason Baptism can do what it does.

And notice: Paul does not set faith against Baptism; he locates them in the same event. *Buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God*. In it, through faith: the sacrament and faith are not rivals here any more than they were on the ark, where faith built and water carried. If Paul had wanted to say the rite is dispensable, this letter, written precisely to people being pressured about a rite, was his moment to say it. Instead he told them their rite had already happened, without hands, in the water.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Genesis 17:5 and 17:15. Entering this covenant changed Abram's and Sarai's very names. Ask: what happens to a person's name at Baptism, and why does the Church ask *what name do you give your child?* as the very first question of the rite? Covenant has a way of renaming people, and the Church still begins at the font with a name.

Send • out of the room

QS1. You were carried into the covenant, most of you, before you could choose it, and confirmed it later. Where are you right now in growing into what you already are?

QS2. Deuteronomy promises a circumcised heart *so that you will love*. What is one attachment, resentment, or fear you would ask God to cut away this week so that love has more room?

Live It This Week

- Pray one line each morning this week: *Lord, circumcise my heart; cut away what keeps me from loving you.*
- If you were baptized as an infant, thank (in person, by call, or in prayer if they have died) the people who carried you to the font.
- Read Colossians 2:6–15 once, alone, and underline every verb whose subject is God, not you.

Memory Verse

and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:12 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, you marked us as your own in a circumcision made without hands, and you buried our old selves with Christ in the water. Finish the surgery you have begun: circumcise our hearts, free our love, and raise everything in us that still lies in the grave. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Genesis 17:1–14 • Covenant promises and the sign; verse 12: eight days old

Deuteronomy 30:6 • God will circumcise the heart, so that you will love

Colossians 2:11–12 • Circumcision made without hands; buried with him in baptism; memory verse

Romans 2:28–29 • Live discovery: real circumcision is of the heart

Luke 2:21 • Live discovery: the Lord receives the old sign at eight days

Genesis 17:5, 15 • Dig Deeper: covenant entry as naming

Session 5

Crossing the Jordan

The sea took Israel out of slavery; the Jordan brings Israel home.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the Jordan crossing completes what the Red Sea began (out of slavery, into inheritance), that God's presence and the water pair up for the fourth time, and that when the New Testament opens the story of baptism, it deliberately opens it at this exact river.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism names tonight's type in so many words: Baptism is prefigured in the crossing of the Jordan River, by which the People of God received the gift of the land promised to Abraham's descendants, an image of eternal life (CCC 1222). Exodus and entry are two halves of one rescue, and Baptism is both.

What You Need to Know

Tonight completes a shape. The Red Sea was the water of exit: out of Egypt, out of slavery, out of the old life. But nobody is saved merely *from* something. Forty years later a new generation stands on the bank of a flooding river with the promise on the far side, and God parts the water again. The Jordan is the water of entry: into the land, into the inheritance, into rest. Baptism, the Church teaches, is both crossings at once: it takes a person out of slavery to sin and *into* something: the Church, the covenant, the life of grace, with heaven as the true promised land it points toward (CCC 1222 calls the land an image of eternal life).

Read Joshua 3 with your group's eyes open for the choreography. At the sea, the wind drove the waters back. At the Jordan, something better leads the way: *the ark of the covenant of the LORD*, God's own throne-presence among his people, carried by priests into the riverbed, and the moment the priests' feet touch the water, the flow from upstream stands and rises in a heap (Joshua 3:15–16). God's presence enters the water, and the water obeys. Count the pairing with the group: Spirit over the deep, *ruach* over the flood, cloud with the sea, and now the ark in the Jordan. Presence plus water, a fourth time, and a people passes through into new life.

Two treasures hide in the details. First, Joshua 3:16 says the waters rose up in a heap far off, *at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan*. The waters that blocked Israel's entry into the promise are cut off all the way back at a place called Adam: on the literal level, simply a town near Zarethan. The wordplay that follows is the Christian reader's reverent delight, not the narrator's stated point, and it is delightful: where is the blockage between humanity and its inheritance dammed? At Adam. Second, the man leading them in is named Joshua, in Hebrew *Yehoshua*, the LORD saves, and in the Greek Old Testament his name is written exactly as the New Testament writes the name Jesus: *Iēsous*. Moses, the lawgiver, could not bring the people into the promise; that was given to a man named Jesus. The early Church never got over this, and neither should we.

Then 2 Kings 2: the Jordan parts twice more in a single chapter. Elijah strikes the water with his mantle and crosses on dry ground; he is taken up; and Elisha, having asked for a *double share of your spirit*, takes up the fallen mantle, strikes the same water, and crosses back as a prophet in the fullness of that spirit. Watch the shape of the story: he will not turn back before the crossing; he passes through the water at his master's side, and on the far shore receives the spirit he asked for. The water did not confer it; God did. But the shape proved suggestive to Christian memory, and it grows more suggestive still at a certain riverbank in Session 9. Hold it as suggestion, never as a rule, and say only that much.

Tonight's steelman is aimed at our method again, and it is the honest question a careful reader should ask: Peter connected the flood to Baptism; Paul connected the sea; but no apostle writes *the Jordan crossing is a type of Baptism*. Are we now doing the freelance pattern-hunting we forswore in Session 3? The answer has real content: Scripture itself yokes the two crossings as one act of God (Psalm 114: *The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back*), and the New Testament does something better than comment on the Jordan: it stages the entire opening of baptism's story there (John's baptism of repentance, not yet the sacrament, as Session 8 will carefully distinguish). When God wanted baptism preached, he sent the Baptist to that river, of all the rivers on earth. Location is theology. And the Church's liturgy has prayed the Jordan into the font's family tree since the patristic age. We will also be honest about grades of evidence: an explicit apostolic identification (flood, sea) is the gold standard; a type the Church reads by the apostles' method, anchored in the Gospels' own staging, is solid silver. Teaching the group to weigh evidence honestly is itself formation.

Pastoral note: tonight's imagery is homecoming, and in a mixed parish room that word lands on tender places: people estranged from family, people who left the Church and returned, people grieving someone who died away from the sacraments. Let the Jordan be gentle. The promised land on the far side of the water is exactly for exiles.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

and the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap far off, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan... and the people passed over opposite Jericho.

Joshua 3:16 (RSV2CE)

Then Elijah took his mantle, and rolled it up, and struck the water, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground.

2 Kings 2:8 (RSV2CE)

And when the New Testament opens the story of the sacrament, it chooses its river with the whole Old Testament in mind:

Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Matthew 3:5–6 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory Nazianzen • *Oration 39*

St. Gregory the Theologian, preaching on the feast of the Lord's Baptism, teaches in substance that salvation history is strung together by baptisms: Moses baptized in water, in the cloud, and in the

sea, as a figure; John baptized unto repentance, a bridge; and Christ baptizes in the Holy Spirit, the perfection. The crossings of Israel were the schoolroom in which God taught the world what he would one day do at a font.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory of Nyssa • *Sermon on the Baptism of Christ*

The other Gregory, preaching on the same feast, teaches in substance that the Jordan's story was always pointing forward: Israel did not enter the promise until Joshua its guide had brought it through the Jordan's passage, and the twelve stones Joshua set in the stream anticipated the twelve disciples, the ministers of Baptism; while Elisha, washing Naaman the Syrian clean in this same river, clearly indicated what was to come. The river's history, for Gregory, is prophecy written in water.

Leader note: Yes, two Gregorys tonight: friends and contemporaries (Nazianzen and Nyssa, with Nyssa's brother St. Basil, are the Cappadocian Fathers). A fun aside for the group if energy is high.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

Origen of Alexandria • *Homilies on Joshua*

Origen, whom the group met at the Red Sea, teaches in substance that the book of Joshua is the Christian's own itinerary: having left Egypt through the first water, the soul must still cross the Jordan behind the true Joshua, Jesus, to enter the inheritance; the first crossing lies behind; the inheritance still waits across the second river, behind the true Joshua.

Leader note: Same honest caveat as Session 3: Origen is a towering early interpreter, not a saint, read by the Church with discernment and gratitude.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1222 is tonight's charter, and it is remarkably specific: Baptism is prefigured in the crossing of the Jordan River, by which the People of God received the gift of the land promised to Abraham's descendants, an image of eternal life; and it adds that the promise of this blessed inheritance is fulfilled in the New Covenant. The paragraph does the session's work in one sentence: Jordan, land, inheritance, eternal life, Baptism.

Keep CCC 128–130 in your pocket from Session 3 if the method question resurfaces: typology rests on the unity of God's plan, practiced by the apostles and the Church after them. Tonight's steelman answer leans on exactly that distinction between apostolic identifications and the Church's faithful extension of the apostles' method.

Paragraphs for this session: 1222, with 128–130 held over from Session 3

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread): tonight's datum is entry and inheritance. The water is not only what you are saved out of; it is what you are brought home through. Two sessions remain until the unsealing; do not resolve.

Presence plus water, instance four: the ark of the covenant standing in the riverbed. By now several participants should be counting unprompted. If someone recites the whole chain (Spirit/deep, *ruach*/flood, cloud/sea, ark/Jordan), let the room enjoy it, and say only: one more is coming, and it is the one everything else was practice for.

Joshua is named Jesus (planted tonight, resolved Sessions 9–10): plant the name, do not preach it yet.

Water, then spirit given (developed tonight via Elisha's double portion, resolved Session 9): note the order once and move on.

At Adam (tonight only, light touch): a textual jewel, not a doctrine. Present it as the text's own poetry; do not build weight on it.

Session Goals

1. The group can state the two halves of rescue: the sea takes Israel out of slavery; the Jordan brings Israel into the inheritance; Baptism is both.
2. The group has watched the ark enter the water and can name the fourth instance of presence-plus-water.
3. The group has met the name: Joshua and Jesus are the same name, and the lawgiver did not lead Israel home; Joshua did.
4. The steelman (no apostle names the Jordan a type) has been answered honestly, including an honest grading of kinds of evidence.
5. The group has seen that the New Testament opens the story of baptism at this river on purpose (Matthew 3).

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

20 min • Build: Joshua 3:7–17; the ark in the river; at Adam; Q1-Q3

10 min • Build: 2 Kings 2:6–14; Elijah, Elisha, mantle and spirit; Q4

10 min • Live discovery: Matthew 3:5–6, 13; the story opens at this river

15 min • Steelman: is the Jordan our invention?

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q4 (Elisha) can be compressed to a two-sentence leader summary, and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the ark's entry into the water or the discovery of Matthew 3.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord God, you did not rescue your people only to leave them wandering; you brought them home. We come tonight as people still on the road. Part what stands between us and the life you promised, and lead us through behind Jesus, our Joshua. Who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Describe a homecoming you have known: a return after a long absence, a place that received you, a door that opened. What made it home?

QW2. Forty years passed between the sea and the Jordan. Have you ever had a long wilderness between being freed from something and actually arriving somewhere? What kept you walking?

Build • into the text

Set the scene: the Exodus generation has died in the wilderness; their children stand at the Jordan at flood stage (Joshua 3:15 notes the river overflows its banks in harvest). Moses is dead. A man named Joshua leads. Have two readers take Joshua 3:7–13 and 3:14–17.

Q1. At the Red Sea, wind drove the water back. Here, what enters the water first, and what happens the moment it does?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The ark of the covenant, God's enthroned presence among his people, carried by the priests, and the instant their feet touch the water the river stops flowing and stands in a heap. God's presence enters the water and the water yields. This is the fourth time we have watched presence and water paired at the birth of a new chapter: Spirit over the deep, *ruach* over the flood, cloud with the sea, ark in the Jordan. The pattern is no longer a curiosity; it is the Bible's signature.

Q2. Joshua 3:16 records exactly where the waters were cut off: far upstream, *at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan*. The narrator did not have to tell us the town's name. Why might this detail have made the early Church smile?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Because the thing standing between God's people and their inheritance is dammed *at Adam*. On the literal level it is geography: a real town near the crossing. Christian readers, noticing the name, have loved the wordplay: the flood of separation between humanity and home dammed, of all places, at Adam, while a man named Jesus leads the people through. The connection is the reader's reverent delight, not the verse's stated claim; hold it lightly, a smile rather than a doctrine.

Q3. The leader's name: Hebrew *Yehoshua*, the LORD saves; in the Greek Bible it is written *Iēsous*, exactly the name the New Testament gives Jesus. Moses, who carried the Law, died outside the land. What is the Old Testament teaching us by *who* gets to lead the people into the promise?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The Law by itself brings you to the border; a man named Jesus brings you home. The early Church read this with awe: the first Joshua led Israel through the water into the earthly inheritance, and the true Joshua leads the new Israel through the water of Baptism toward the inheritance the land only pictured. (One sentence, then hold: we will stand on a Jordan bank with the true Joshua in Session 9.)

Q4. Now 2 Kings 2:6–14. Trace the order of events for Elisha: what does he ask for, what does he pass through, and when does he actually receive it?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit; he passes through the parted Jordan with Elijah; and only on the far side, after the crossing, taking up the mantle and striking the same water, does he walk back demonstrably carrying that spirit: the company of prophets says, the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha. The water did not convey the spirit; God gave it, after Elijah's taking up. But the story's shape, through the water and then the spirit received, proved suggestive to Christian memory. Hold it lightly, and keep watching.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: when the New Testament finally opens the story of baptism itself, it could have begun anywhere: the Temple courts, the Sea of Galilee, a city fountain. Find where it actually begins. Give them **Matthew 3:5–6** and **Matthew 3:13** and ask: which river, and who comes to it?

Let them say it: John baptizes in the Jordan, and Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized. The story's overture is staged, deliberately, at the river of entry.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection is our own Session 3 rule, pointed at us, and it deserves full strength: Peter explicitly linked the flood to Baptism. Paul explicitly linked the sea. No apostle anywhere writes that the Jordan crossing prefigures Baptism. So is this session not exactly the freelance pattern-hunting we renounced? If the method is *follow the apostles' explicit links*, we have just left the trail, and *the water parted here too* is not an argument; water parts in lots of stories.

Q5. Be honest first: what is the difference in the kind of evidence we have tonight versus Sessions 2 and 3?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede the difference plainly, because it is real and the group should learn to see it: an inspired apostle writing *this corresponds to Baptism* (flood, sea) is the gold standard, and tonight we do not have that sentence about Joshua's crossing. If that were all we had, the objection would win.

But we have three things. First, Scripture itself refuses to separate the two crossings: Psalm 114 sings them as a single act of God: *The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back*. The apostolic identification of the sea, in other words, arrives already yoked to the Jordan by the Bible's own poetry; Paul certified the pattern, and the psalm had long since put both rivers inside it. Second, the New Testament does something stronger than comment on the Jordan: it stages the story's opening there. Of every water in Israel, God sends the Baptist to the river of entry, and the Lord comes from Galilee to this river to be baptized in it. When the director sets the decisive scene on a famous stage, the location is part of the script. Third, the Church, reading with the apostles' method, has prayed the Jordan into the font's lineage from the patristic age to tonight's Catechism, which states the type outright (CCC 1222). So our claim is honest and graded: the flood and the sea are apostolically identified types; the Jordan is the Church's certain reading, anchored in the psalmist's pairing and the Gospels' staging. Teaching ourselves to say *this is explicit, and this is the Church's sure extension of what is explicit* is not a weakness of the method. It is the method.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Joshua 4, the twelve stones taken from the riverbed and set up at Gilgal, *that this may be a sign among you, when your children ask in time to come, What do these stones mean?* Ask: what are our twelve stones? What objects, dates, and habits has the Church given us so that children will ask about our crossing? (Baptismal candles, certificates, godparents, anniversaries: the Church still builds memorials on the far bank.)

Send • out of the room

QS1. Baptism is exit and entry: out of slavery, into inheritance. Which half is harder for you to believe about yourself right now, that you are really out, or that you really belong?

QS2. Elisha would not turn back before the crossing. Where is God asking you to keep walking toward a promise this season instead of settling on the near bank?

Live It This Week

- Once this week, read Psalm 114 aloud, ideally outdoors: sixty seconds of the Bible's own theology of the two crossings.
- Do one act of homemaking in the Church this week: greet a stranger at Mass, or return to a parish habit you have let lapse. You are not a visitor there; the Jordan is behind you.
- If you know a catechumen or a family preparing for a baptism, pray for them by name at the riverbank of your evening prayer.

Memory Verse

The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back.

Psalm 114:3 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, you parted the sea to bring your people out and the river to bring them home. Bring home everyone we love who is still in the wilderness. Stand your presence in the middle of whatever floods against us, and teach our feet to trust the dry ground you make. Through Jesus, our Joshua, who leads us into the inheritance. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Joshua 3:7–17 • The ark enters the Jordan; the waters stand; verse 16: at Adam

Joshua 3:15 • Leader framing: the river at flood stage

2 Kings 2:6–14 • Elijah and Elisha part the Jordan; the double share of spirit after the crossing

Matthew 3:5–6, 13 • Live discovery: the sacrament's story opens at the Jordan

Psalms 114 • Steelman answer and memory verse: sea and Jordan as one act of God

Joshua 4:1–7, 20–24 • Dig Deeper: memorial stones on the far bank

Session 6

Naaman and the Waters of Cleansing

If the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers in Naaman the perennial human objection to God's humble means (surely not *that* water), watches obedience to a simple appointed washing accomplish what greatness could not, and hears Jesus himself hold up Naaman's cleansing as a sign of what God does for outsiders.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism marvels that God saves through water, *so humble and wonderful a creature* (CCC 1218), and teaches soberly that God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, while he himself is not bound by his sacraments (CCC 1257). Naaman's story holds both truths in one narrative: the appointed water matters, and the God who appoints it remains free.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study meets its own objectors inside the Bible, and discovers that Scripture got there first. Naaman is a great man: commander of Syria's army, a victor, *but he was a leper* (2 Kings 5:1). The Hebrew narrative is a masterpiece of reversals: the mighty general learns of his cure from a captured servant girl; he arrives with silver, gold, and festal garments to purchase a miracle, and is told to wash; he expects the prophet to come out, wave his hand, and perform something dramatic, and Elisha does not even come to the door. Everything in Naaman that is offended, the group will recognize, because it lives in us: if grace is real, surely it comes through the impressive, the costly, the difficult. *Behold, I thought...* (5:11) is the whole carnal theology of religion in three words.

The instruction is almost insultingly simple: *Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean* (5:10). Naaman rages: are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? In his own estimation, certainly. And that is precisely the point his servants see: *if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, Wash, and be clean?* (5:13). Pride would have climbed a mountain; pride balks at a bath. The humble means is not incidental to the cure; it is the surgery on his pride that accompanies the surgery on his skin.

Then the verse the whole session turns on: *So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean* (5:14). Slow the group down over every clause. He obeyed the word; the appointed water, not the better rivers of Damascus; the appointed number, seven, a number that to biblical ears can evoke creation's completed week; and he came up with the flesh of *a little child*. The commander's scarred, diseased skin is not merely repaired; he is given a child's flesh, as though newly born from that river. File the phrase; do not preach it tonight. A man in Jerusalem will ask in Session 10 how a man can be born when he is old, and tonight's verse is the Old Testament's down payment on the answer.

And the New Testament anchor is spoken by the Lord himself: in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus says *there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian* (Luke 4:27). The group will find this themselves. Notice what Jesus does with the story: he makes the outsider's cleansing a sign of the Gospel's reach, and it nearly gets him thrown off a cliff. Grace through humble means, offered beyond the borders, offends twice.

Tonight's steelman is the sharpest form of the anti-sacramental instinct, and Naaman's story seems at first to feed it: obviously the Jordan's water had no medicinal power; God healed, and God could have healed with a word from any distance (he does exactly that for another foreign officer in the Gospels). So water is dispensable scenery, and requiring a rite confuses the instrument with the Actor, even adds a work to grace. The answer must concede everything true in this (no river magic, God's absolute freedom) while showing what the story actually teaches: God freely *binds his promise* to an appointed means, and the cure comes through obedient reception of that means, not around it. Naaman is not saved by water in general; Abana and Pharpar, the rivers he thought finer, carried no promise. He is cleansed by the word of God received in the water God appointed. Word plus element, promise plus washing: the group is looking at the shape a sacrament will fill. And the Church completes the balance with CCC 1257: God has bound salvation to Baptism, and God himself is not bound; his freedom (the baptisms of blood and of desire, CCC 1258–1260, and the hope the Church holds beyond them) is treated with full honesty in Session 14. Tonight establishes the other half, the half our age forgets: that his binding is real, and humility receives it.

Pastoral care, and this matters tonight more than most nights: Christian tradition has long read the leprosy in this story as a figure of sin; but suffering never licenses the inference to personal guilt, and your room may hold people with chronic illness, disability, or a child who is sick. Say the distinction out loud, unprompted, kindly: Jesus himself refused the inference from a man's suffering to his guilt (John 9:3). The figure runs from leprosy to *sin*, not from sickness to blame. Handled well, this session comforts the sick rather than wounding them: the God of Naaman stoops to bodies and touches real skin.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

My father, if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?

2 Kings 5:13 (RSV2CE)

So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

2 Kings 5:14 (RSV2CE)

And the Lord himself canonizes the story as a sign of grace reaching the outsider:

And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Eli'sha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Na'aman the Syrian.

Luke 4:27 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose of Milan • *On the Mysteries*

St. Ambrose, whom the group met at the waters of creation, sets Naaman before the newly baptized

and teaches in substance that the story exposes the eye's poverty: Naaman saw ordinary water and doubted; he obeyed, and was cleansed. Not every water heals, Ambrose insists, but the water that carries the grace of Christ; what matters at the font is not what the eye sees but what the word of God does.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

A fragment under the name of St. Irenaeus • *Fragments (no. 34 in the Ante-Nicene Fathers collection)*

An ancient fragment handed down under the name of St. Irenaeus reads Naaman as the Christian's own biography, teaching in substance: as Naaman the leper was cleansed of his leprosy by washing, so we, lepers in sin, are cleansed of our old transgressions by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, being spiritually regenerated as newborn babes.

Leader note: Honesty about the source: this survives only as a fragment attributed to St. Irenaeus in later collections, so we present it as the tradition handed down under his name rather than as certain Irenaeus authorship. The fragment's wording is verified against the Ante-Nicene Fathers text (Fragment 34), and it presses on to the very verse this study is named for: being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes, *even as the Lord has declared: Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.* Save that ending for Session 10; it is waiting for the group there.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Church's Lectionary • *Monday of the Third Week of Lent*

Each Lent, on a single weekday morning, the Church sets tonight's two texts side by side at Mass: the first reading is Naaman's cleansing in the Jordan (2 Kings 5), and the Gospel is Jesus at Nazareth holding Naaman up as the sign of grace reaching the outsider (Luke 4). The pairing this session builds is not the study's invention; it is the Church's own lectionary, praying the two scenes together over her people.

Leader note: If your group meets during Lent, check the calendar: you may be able to send them to the very Mass at which the Church reads tonight's session.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1218's phrase does tonight's heavy lifting: water, *so humble and wonderful a creature*. Naaman stumbled on the humble and was saved by the wonderful. CCC 1216 gathers the early Church's names for Baptism, the bath that washes and enlightens; Naaman's story is why bath is not a belittling word.

CCC 1257 states the balance the steelman demands, and you should quote it precisely if the discussion needs it: God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments. Tonight leans on the first clause; Session 14 gives the second clause its full, honest treatment (baptism of desire and of blood, and those who never had the chance). If someone in the room is carrying grief about an unbaptized person, do not make them wait eight weeks for comfort: give them the second clause tonight, gently, and promise the fuller conversation.

Paragraphs for this session: 1216, 1218, 1257

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread, final week before the unsealing): tonight's datum is humility. God chooses the element anyone can get, that costs nothing, that offends the proud precisely by being available to everyone. Next session the guesses are opened; tonight, if anyone tries to answer aloud, smile and say: one more week.

Like the flesh of a little child (planted tonight, resolved Sessions 10 and 13): the study's most delicate plant. Read 5:14 aloud twice and move on. When Nicodemus asks his question in Session 10, this verse should rise in the room's memory on its own.

The Jordan again (developed, resolved Session 9): third session running at this river. The group should feel the gravitational pull toward the event that gives the river its meaning.

God binds and is not bound (planted tonight via CCC 1257, resolved Session 14): plant both clauses; develop neither.

Seven (light touch): seven washings, a number that can evoke creation's completed week; many readers hear a new creation. One sentence; do not build a numerology.

Session Goals

1. The group can retell Naaman's near-miss: what almost kept him from cleansing was not the difficulty of the command but its humility.
2. The group has read 2 Kings 5:14 closely: the appointed water, the appointed number, according to the word, and flesh like a little child.
3. The steelman (God could heal without water, so water is dispensable) has been given at full strength and answered with both CCC 1257 clauses in view.
4. The group has found Luke 4:27 and heard Jesus make Naaman a sign of grace for outsiders.
5. The distinction between leprosy-as-figure-of-sin and real illness has been stated aloud, kindly, unprompted.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

20 min • Build: 2 Kings 5:1–14 read as drama; Q1–Q3

10 min • Build: verse 14 clause by clause; Q4

10 min • Live discovery: Luke 4:24–30

15 min • Steelman: is the water dispensable scenery?

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer; remind everyone to bring their sealed My Guess page next week

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: The Dig Deeper box, and Q1 can be absorbed into the leader's retelling. Never cut the pastoral distinction about illness or the verse 14 close reading.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, you resist the proud and give grace to the humble. We come tonight with our own ideas of how you ought to work. Wash our expectations in your word, heal what we have stopped believing you would touch, and give us the obedience of a second thought. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Have you ever almost missed something good because it came in a plainer package than you expected: a job, a friendship, an answer to prayer? What finally got you past the packaging?

QW2. Naaman heard about his cure from a captured servant girl, the least powerful person in his world. Who is the unlikely messenger God has used in your life?

Build • into the text

Read 2 Kings 5:1–14 as the drama it is: assign a narrator, and pause after verse 12 to let Naaman's fury hang in the air before the servants speak. Then work backwards through what almost went wrong.

Q1. Verse 11: *Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper.* What exactly is Naaman offended by? Make the list.

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

By everything except the cure. No personal audience (Elisha sends a messenger), no ceremony (no standing, calling, hand-waving), no worthy venue (the muddy Jordan instead of the crystal rivers of Damascus), no price worthy of his silver and gold. Naaman wanted a miracle proportioned to his importance. He is offended by grace's humility, which is to say, by grace. Before we smile at him: this instinct has a modern accent. *Surely God works through the profound spiritual experience, not through a parish font and a few words.* Naaman's *Behold, I thought* lives on in all of us.

Q2. The servants' question in verse 13 is one of Scripture's quiet masterstrokes: *if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it?* Why is the humble command actually harder for Naaman than a great one would have been, and what is the humble command doing to him?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A great task would have fed the very thing that is sickest in him: his sense that healing must be earned and proportioned to greatness. He could have conquered a mountain and kept his pride. The bath he can only receive. The command's humility is a second surgery: while the water works on his skin, the obedience works on his heart. God's humble means are not God being unimpressive; they are God being a physician who treats the disease under the disease.

Q3. Verse 14, clause by clause: *he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.* What do you notice about which water, what number, what authority, and what result?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Which water: the Jordan, the appointed one, and not the rivers he thought finer; the promise was attached to this water. What number: seven, which to biblical ears can evoke creation's completed week; many Christian readers hear his cleansing styled as a little new creation. What authority: *according to the word of the man of God*: the washing works as obedience to God's word, word and water together. And the result overshoots repair: not the restored skin of a general but *the flesh of a little child*. He does not merely get better; he comes up out of the river as if newly born. Hold that phrase in your memory. Weeks from now, someone in the Gospels will ask whether a man can be born when he is old, and you will think of Naaman dripping on the riverbank with a child's skin.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: this story mattered so much that Jesus himself preached on it, in his hometown synagogue, and the sermon nearly got him killed. Find it: **Luke 4:24–30**. Read it aloud and answer: what point does Jesus draw from Naaman, and why does it enrage the room?

Jesus makes Naaman (with the widow of Zarephath) proof that God's grace has always reached past Israel's borders to the outsider. The hometown crowd hears their special claim relativized, and grace for the foreigner offends them to the point of violence. Grace's humility and grace's reach: offensive twice.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection, at full strength, and Naaman's own story seems to hand it to us: the Jordan's water obviously had no power; leprosy is not cured by rinsing. God healed Naaman, and God could have healed him with a bare word from any distance, no river involved: in the Gospels he does exactly that for a Roman centurion's servant. So the water is dispensable scenery, useful for testing obedience, nothing more. (Its stronger Christian form concedes that Baptism is commanded, a sign and even seal of grace, and still insists the water is sign only, never instrument.) Apply it to Baptism honestly: God saves; God can save without water; therefore the water rite is not where the action is, and insisting on it confuses the scenery with the Actor, even smuggles a human work into salvation by grace.

Q4. First concede: what in this objection is simply true, and where does tonight's own story prove God's freedom?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede freely: there is no river magic, and God is absolutely free. The story itself strips away every prop: no prophet on scene, no ceremony, no payment, nothing but a word and water, precisely so that no one could credit the scenery. And the Church says the freedom part in her own catechism, in

one sentence you should hear in full: *God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments* (CCC 1257). Whoever the objection is defending, the man healed at a distance, the unbaptized person of good will, God's arm is not shortened, and Session 14 will honor that clause without flinching.

But now read what the story actually says about the water God appointed. If water as such were the point, Abana and Pharpar would have served; in his eyes better water, but carrying no promise. If obedience as such were the point, any arbitrary task would have served; climbing a mountain barefoot tests obedience splendidly. What Naaman received was neither water in general nor obedience in general: it was the word of God's promise attached to a particular washing, received in humility. The cure came *through* the appointed means, according to the word: word and element together, promise and washing together. That is not scenery; that is the pattern of a sacrament drawn in advance, and it is why the Church has never described Baptism as our work climbing toward God. In a sacrament the direction of travel is downward: God binding his own promise to humble matter so that grace has an address, a place where the poorest and simplest can reliably find it. A God who only ever acted unpredictably, without appointed means, would be free; he would also be impossible to find on purpose. In his mercy he is both: free beyond his sacraments, and faithful within them. Naaman's flesh testifies to the second, and our hope for those outside testifies to the first, and the Catholic faith refuses to amputate either clause.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: 2 Kings 5:15–19. Cleansed Naaman confesses the God of Israel, asks for two mules' burden of earth (to worship Israel's God on Israel's soil back home), and receives Elisha's *Go in peace* regarding his complicated official duties. Interpreters debate how much that answer concedes; what is certain is the new confession and the peace. Ask: what does the aftermath teach about conversion in an entangled life? (Grace begins where you are, and the newly cleansed carry holy ground into compromised places.)

Send • out of the room

QS1. Where is your Abana and Pharpar: the more impressive way you keep wishing God would work, while his humble appointed means (a Mass, a confession, a font, a rosary in a coat pocket) sits available and unglamorous?

QS2. Naaman's healing began with a servant girl's word to her captors. Who in your life needs you to be that servant girl this month: one humble, hopeful sentence about where healing can be found?

Live It This Week

- Go to Confession this week if you are able: the humblest appointed mercy in your reach. If it has been years, tell the priest exactly that; you will be received like Naaman at the river.
- Each day this week, pray the servants' question over one resistance of yours: *if he had commanded some great thing, would I not have done it?*

- Find your parish's baptismal font before or after Mass, put your hand on it, and thank God that grace has an address.
- Bring your sealed My Guess page next week. We open them together.

Memory Verse

So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

2 Kings 5:14 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord God, healer of Naaman, we bring you our leprosy: the ones we hide, the ones we have given up on, the ones we think deserve a grander cure than the means you have appointed. Give us the humility to go down into the water you choose. Restore in us the flesh of your little children. And send us home, like Naaman, carrying holy ground. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

2 Kings 5:1–14 • The whole drama: the servant girl, the rage, the washing, the child's flesh

2 Kings 5:11 • Behold, I thought: the carnal theology of the impressive

2 Kings 5:13 • The servants' question: the humble command harder than a great one

2 Kings 5:14 • Close reading and memory verse

Luke 4:24–30 • Live discovery: Jesus preaches Naaman at Nazareth

John 9:3 • Pastoral anchor: Jesus refuses the suffering-equals-guilt inference

2 Kings 5:15–19 • Dig Deeper: Naaman's entangled conversion

Session 7

Sprinkled Clean, A New Heart

The night the guesses are opened, and God announces his own answer.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group opens the sealed guesses from Session 1 (*Why do you think God chose water?*), then discovers that God, through Ezekiel, promised the very thing the question was circling: *I will sprinkle clean water upon you... a new heart I will give you... and I will put my spirit within you.* The water-and-Spirit pairing they have counted since Genesis 1:2 turns out to be a promise, spoken in the first person, waiting for a fulfillment.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism reads the prophets' promise of a new heart as the announcement of the Holy Spirit's coming (CCC 715), and the early Church heard Ezekiel's clean water at the font: the washing of regeneration is where God performs the surgery he promised, taking out the heart of stone.

What You Need to Know

Tonight is the hinge of the study, and it should feel different from every other night. Six sessions of Old Testament water are behind the group: creation, flood, sea, covenant, Jordan, Naaman. Tonight, for the first time in the passages this study has walked, the water appears not inside a story but inside a first-person promise. Ezekiel 36:25–27 is not a story in which water appears; it is God, in the first person, announcing what he intends to do with water: *I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean... A new heart I will give you... And I will put my spirit within you.* Every I will is his. The group has spent six weeks watching a pattern; tonight they learn the pattern was a promissory note.

The unsealing comes first, and give it room. Everyone brought their My Guess page from Session 1 (have blank slips ready for anyone who lost theirs or joined late; let them write a fresh guess in two minutes rather than sit out). Invite, never compel, people to read their guesses aloud. Receive every guess with honor: most will contain real fragments of the answer (cleansing, life, necessity, universality, drowning, birth), because the question was never a trick. The unsealing's power is not that anyone was wrong; it is that six weeks of Scripture have been quietly answering while the paper sat folded.

Then read Ezekiel and let God fold the fragments together. Notice the context the group read at home: Ezekiel 36:16–23 is bracing. Israel is in exile for its sins, and God announces he will act *not for your sake... but for the sake of my holy name* (36:22). The renewal is unearned, unprompted, and undertaken for the honor of God's own name: grace with no foothold for boasting. Then the sequence of 25–27, and walk it slowly, because it is the study's whole arc in three verses: clean water sprinkled (cleansing from uncleanness and idols); a new heart of flesh replacing the stone heart (the interior surgery Deuteronomy 30:6 promised, our Session 4 thread, resolved tonight); and *my spirit within you* (the pairing, at last, spoken as a promise: water, then heart, then Spirit).

Where did Ezekiel's sprinkling image come from? Not from thin air: Israel's liturgy already sprinkled water for purification (the waters of cleansing in Numbers 19 restored the defiled to the camp), and David begged, *wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow* (Psalm 51:7). Ezekiel gathers Israel's whole liturgical instinct for washing and puts it into God's mouth as an eschatological promise: one day I will do the washing myself, all the way down to the heart. Zechariah adds the image of a fountain opened for sin (Zechariah 13:1). The prophets leave Israel waiting for a washing God performs.

Tonight's steelman says all of this is poetry: Ezekiel promises inner renewal, dressed in purification imagery, and the return from exile fulfilled it; extracting a water rite from a metaphor is category confusion. The answer will concede the poetry and press the grammar: the promise is precisely not self-reform (every verb is God's), it is a washing joined to Spirit and heart, and when the New Testament announces fulfillment it does not spiritualize the water away; it points to a real washing. The discovery text is the study's quiet thunderbolt: Hebrews 10:22 invites us to draw near *with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*: Ezekiel's two levels, heart and body, sprinkling and washing, side by side, in the present tense, about Christians. And the group met the conscience language before: Peter called Baptism *an appeal to God for a clear conscience* (Session 2). The seams line up because the garment is one piece.

Do not overclose the master question tonight. The unsealing resolves the sealed guess, and the study's fullest answer still waits at Session 10 (*born of water and the Spirit*): tonight God states the promise; three weeks from now the group watches him keep it in person. Frame tonight's resolution exactly that way: the question is answered; the answer is still on its way to a river.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

Ezekiel 36:25–27 (RSV2CE)

On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.

Zechariah 13:1 (RSV2CE)

And the New Testament, speaking of the baptized in the present tense, keeps both of Ezekiel's levels, the heart and the body:

let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Hebrews 10:22 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyril of Jerusalem • *Catechetical Lectures, Lecture 3*

St. Cyril, preparing candidates for the font, teaches in substance that Baptism works on both levels the prophets promised: the water cleanses the body while the Spirit seals the soul, so that, hearts

sprinkled and bodies washed with pure water, we may draw near to God. For Cyril the font is not a picture of Ezekiel's promise; it is the appointment where the promise is kept.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage • *To Donatus*

St. Cyprian, describing his own adult conversion, teaches in substance that before his baptism he thought a new heart impossible: he despaired that a man so entangled in his habits could ever be different. Then, he says, the birth of the new man in the water of regeneration washed away the stains of his former life, light poured into a reconciled heart, and what he had thought impossible became, by God's gift, what he could do. The heart of stone was not persuaded out of him; it was taken out of him.

Leader note: This is the testimony to hold near anyone in your room who quietly believes they are too old, too habituated, or too far gone to change. Cyprian was a wealthy, skeptical, middle-aged rhetorician when he stood at the font.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Church's Liturgy • *The Sprinkling Rite (Asperges)*

On Sundays the Church may replace the penitential act by sprinkling the whole assembly with blessed water while they sing words drawn from tonight's promise-world, above all Psalm 51: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Week after week, the Church walks through her congregations recalling Baptism in Ezekiel's own gesture: clean water, sprinkled on the people.

Catechism Connection

CCC 715 gathers tonight's prophetic texts: the promises concerning the sending of the Spirit speak in the language of the new heart, and God will give his people a new spirit; the Catechism reads Ezekiel's promise as the announcement of Pentecost's Gift, reaching hearts through God's initiative. CCC 1215 supplies the name the Church gave the fulfillment: Baptism is called the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, Paul's phrase and Ezekiel's sequence in a single title.

Keep CCC 694 warm from Session 1 if the discussion needs it: the symbolism of water signifies the Holy Spirit's action in Baptism. Tonight the group learns that this was never merely symbolism-in-general: it was a specific promise with a specific grammar, water and Spirit and heart, and the Church's names for Baptism are built from its vocabulary.

Paragraphs for this session: 715, 1215, with 694 held over from Session 1

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread: RESOLVED TONIGHT, completed Session 10): the unsealing is the night's center of gravity. The synthesis to guide the group toward, in their own words, not yours:

water, because God promised it; water, because we are bodies and grace comes to bodies through matter; water, because it is the one element that cleanses, drowns, and gives life at once, and every guess in the room caught a facet of it. Leave the final facet unclaimed: the promise still has to be kept in person, and that is Session 10.

Circumcise the heart (planted Session 4: RESOLVED TONIGHT): Deuteronomy 30:6's God-performed heart surgery finds its operating room in Ezekiel 36:26. Draw the line explicitly; the group planted this seed themselves.

A clear conscience (Session 2 callback): Hebrews 10:22's sprinkled-clean conscience and Peter's appeal for a clear conscience are the same promise-world. Let a participant find the echo if possible.

Water plus Spirit (developed to promise-status tonight, resolved Sessions 9–10): the pairing is now a first-person divine promise. Two more sessions until it stands in a river.

Not for your sake (tonight, feeding Session 11): grace for the honor of God's name, with no foothold for boasting, prepares Romans 6's logic. Light touch.

Session Goals

1. Every participant's sealed guess has been opened and honored, and the group has heard the fragments gathered.
2. The group has read Ezekiel 36:25–27 aloud and can recite the sequence: clean water, new heart, my spirit within you.
3. The group has seen that the promise is entirely God's doing (every verb his, for the sake of his name), resolving the Session 4 heart thread.
4. The steelman (Ezekiel is only poetry of inner renewal) has been given at full strength and answered through Hebrews 10:22.
5. The group knows the resolution is staged: promise tonight, fulfillment in person at Sessions 9–10.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

5 min • Win question (one only tonight; the unsealing takes the second slot)

15 min • THE UNSEALING: My Guess pages opened, read aloud by volunteers, received with honor

15 min • Build: Ezekiel 36:16–27, the context and the three I wills; Q1-Q3

10 min • Build: where the image came from (Numbers 19, Psalm 51, Zechariah 13); Q4

10 min • Live discovery: Hebrews 10:22

10 min • Steelman: is it only poetry?

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q4 (the image's liturgical sources) can become one leader sentence, and the Dig Deeper box. The unsealing is never cut, never rushed, and never skipped for latecomers: it is the reason the study has a Session 7.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, six weeks ago you asked us, through a folded page, why you chose water. Tonight we open our guesses, and you open your promise. Give us new hearts as we read of new hearts: take out whatever has turned to stone in us, and put your Spirit within us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Before we open the pages: how has carrying a sealed, unanswered question for six weeks felt? Where else in your life are you carrying a question God has not answered yet?

Build • into the text

THE UNSEALING. Have everyone take out their My Guess page (blank slips and two quiet minutes for anyone who needs to write fresh). Invite volunteers to read their guesses aloud, exactly as written. Receive each one warmly; thank each reader by name. When the reading is done, say only this, and then move to the text: every one of these caught a real facet. Now let us hear God answer the question himself, in the first person, five and a half centuries before Christ.

Q1. Read Ezekiel 36:16–23 first, the context nobody frames. Why is God about to act: what has Israel done, and, according to verse 22, for whose sake does God renew them?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Israel has profaned the land and the name; they are in exile with no leverage, no merit, and no prospects. And God says the unnerving, liberating thing: *It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name.* The renewal is entirely unearned, undertaken because of who God is. Before tonight's promise says a word about water, it slams the door on boasting: whatever the clean water does, no one will ever have deserved it. (Hold this; it will matter when we reach Romans 6 in a few weeks.)

Q2. Now 36:25–27, slowly, twice. Count the I wills, and lay out the sequence in order: what does God promise to do, in what order?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Every verb is God's: I will sprinkle, I will cleanse, I will give, I will put, I will take out, I will cause. The sequence: clean water sprinkled, cleansing from uncleanness and idols; then the surgery, the heart of stone taken out of the flesh and a heart of flesh given; then *I will put my spirit within you*, with a life that finally walks in God's ways. Water, heart, Spirit. (Notice the two spirit-words: verse 26's *new spirit* renewed within us, and verse 27's *my spirit*, God's own, put within: renewal and indwelling, distinct and joined.) The pairing the group has counted since Genesis 1:2 is now out of the narrator's mouth and into God's: it was never a motif; it was a promise forming.

Q3. Session 4 left a thread hanging: Deuteronomy 30:6 promised that God himself would one day circumcise hearts, so that Israel would love him. What does Ezekiel 36:26 do to that thread?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It resolves it: same surgeon, same organ, same purpose. Deuteronomy promised God-performed heart surgery; Ezekiel schedules it and names the instruments: clean water and the Spirit. The Church has always read Colossians' circumcision made without hands (our Session 4 summit) as this promise kept: God's hands, on the heart, at a washing.

Q4. Where did Ezekiel's sprinkling image come from? Consider Numbers 19 (the water for purification that restored the defiled to the camp) and Psalm 51:7 (*wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow*). What is Ezekiel doing with Israel's existing prayer and liturgy?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He gathers them and aims them forward. Israel already knew ritual sprinkling that restored the excluded to the community, and already prayed for a washing only God could give. Ezekiel takes the nation's whole liturgical instinct for water and puts it into God's mouth as a future tense: one day I will do the washing myself, and it will reach the heart. Zechariah 13:1 adds the image of a fountain opened for sin. The Old Testament closes with Israel waiting beside promised water.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: somewhere in the New Testament, a single verse takes Ezekiel's promise, both levels of it, the heart and the body, the sprinkling and the washing, and says it about Christians in the present tense. Give them only **Hebrews 10:22**. Have them find it, read it aloud, and lay it side by side with Ezekiel 36:25–26.

Hearts sprinkled clean; bodies washed with pure water. Let them draw the lines themselves, and let someone (prompt gently if needed) remember 1 Peter 3:21: Baptism as the appeal to God for a clear conscience. Three texts, one promise-world.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection, at full strength: Ezekiel is a poet of the exile, and this is restoration poetry. The sprinkling is a metaphor for forgiveness, the new heart a metaphor for national renewal, and the fulfillment was the return from Babylon. The prophets constantly use washing language for repentance itself: *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean* (Isaiah 1:16): a summons to repentance, not a rite. Reading a church rite back into exile poetry is exactly the category mistake this study keeps promising not to make: extracting sacraments from metaphors.

Q5. What is right here? Where do the prophets themselves warn against trusting ritual washing?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede the true parts first: the prophets do thunder against ritual without repentance, and Ezekiel 36 is certainly about interior renewal; if Baptism were merely exterior, Ezekiel would be its critic, not its herald. And the return from exile was a real, initial keeping of the promise. All granted.

But watch three things. First, the grammar: Isaiah 1:16 summons Israel to repentant cleansing; Ezekiel 36 promises a washing God himself will perform. The difference is the subject of the verb, and it matters. A promise whose every verb is God's cannot be fulfilled by our self-reform, national or personal; it waits for an act of God with water in it. Second, the return from exile conspicuously did not exhaust the promise, and Israel knew it: centuries later, crowds were still streaming to the Jordan for a washing of repentance, and Jerusalem's priests were interrogating a man about why he baptized, as we will see in the coming sessions. Nobody in Israel thought the new heart had fully arrived. Third, and decisively: when the New Testament announces the fulfillment, it does not evaporate the water into metaphor. Hebrews 10:22 keeps both of Ezekiel's levels and adds a body: hearts sprinkled clean *and bodies washed with pure water*. Titus 3:5 calls salvation a washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit. And the Lord himself, in the verse this whole study is named for, will join water and Spirit in a single birth. The apostolic writers had every opportunity to say the water was only ever a figure of speech; instead they kept writing of bodies washed with pure water: language the Church from the beginning has heard at the font. We are not extracting a rite from a poem; we are watching a promise keep its own vocabulary.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Ezekiel 36:28 and the covenant refrain: *you shall be my people, and I will be your God*. Trace the refrain back through Jeremiah 31:33 and all the way to the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:7–8, our Session 4 text). Ask: what is the clean water for, finally? Not cleanness for its own sake, but belonging: the washing exists so that the ancient vow, I will be your God, can be said over you with nothing in the way.

Send • out of the room

QS1. God says: *I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone*. Where, honestly, has your heart gone to stone: a person, a duty, a hope, the faith itself? Tonight you heard God promise to operate. Will you let him?

QS2. Your guess from Session 1 caught a facet of the answer. Having heard God's own version, what would you write on that page now?

Live It This Week

- Keep your opened My Guess page somewhere visible this week (a Bible, a mirror, a dashboard) as a record that God answers carried questions.
- Pray Ezekiel 36:26 once each day over one specific stone in you, naming it: *A new heart give me, O God, here.*

- At Sunday Mass, if the sprinkling rite is used, or at the holy water on entering, receive the water deliberately as tonight's promise in motion.

Memory Verse

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36:26 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

God of the promise, you answered our question before we asked it: clean water, a new heart, your own Spirit within us. Thank you for honoring every guess in this room. Now keep the promise in each of us again: sprinkle, cleanse, take out the stone, and teach our new hearts to walk. We ask it for the sake of your holy name. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Genesis 1:2; Titus 3:5 • Callbacks woven through the night's framing

Colossians 2:11–12 • Callback: the circumcision made without hands

Isaiah 1:16 • Steelman: the prophets' summons to repentant cleansing

Ezekiel 36:16–23 • Context: exile, and renewal for the sake of God's name

Ezekiel 36:25–27 • The promise: clean water, new heart, my spirit within you

Deuteronomy 30:6 • Session 4 thread resolved: God-performed heart surgery

Numbers 19 (esp. vv. 17–19) • Leader background: Israel's purification sprinkling

Psalms 51:7 • Israel's prayer for a washing only God can give; Asperges

Zachariah 13:1 • A fountain opened for sin

Hebrews 10:22 • Live discovery: hearts sprinkled, bodies washed with pure water

1 Peter 3:21 • Callback: the appeal for a clear conscience

Ezekiel 36:28; Jeremiah 31:33; Genesis 17:7–8 • Dig Deeper: the covenant refrain

Session 8

The Voice in the Wilderness

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers John the Baptist as the hinge between promise and fulfillment: a nation streams to the Jordan expecting the promised washing, the priests interrogate him about why he baptizes, and John himself testifies that his water is preparation for One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Through Acts 19 the group discovers that the apostles treated John's baptism and Christian Baptism as different in kind, not merely in date.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism teaches that with John the Baptist the Holy Spirit begins what he will bring to fullness with and in Christ, and that all the Old Covenant prefigurations find their fulfillment in Christ Jesus, who begins his public life after being baptized by St. John (CCC 720, 1223). John is the last signpost, planted at the river's edge, pointing.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study crosses from the Old Testament into the New, and the crossing has a tollbooth: a wild figure at the Jordan in camel's hair. Everything the group has built converges on John. He appears at the river of entry (Sessions 5 and 6); his dress evokes Elijah, who parted that river (2 Kings 1:8: haircloth with a leather girdle; Mark 1:6: camel's hair with a leather girdle); and he does the thing Israel had been waiting for since Ezekiel: he washes people. Mark opens his Gospel by splicing Isaiah's *voice crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the LORD* onto John's appearance, and all Judea goes out to him.

Feel the strangeness the group should notice: why does nobody in the record ask John what a baptism is? Ritual washing was already legible to Israel; the live questions were about authority and identity. Crowds stream to a washing in a river as though they had been expecting one. They had. The delegation from Jerusalem (John 1:19–28) asks John three questions: are you the Christ? Elijah? the prophet? And then the tell: *Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?* (John 1:25). The delegation's question suggests an expectation in the air: that when the decisive figures arrive, baptizing may well be what they do. Israel already knew ritual washings, and the prophets had promised a cleansing from God himself; John's rite was legible against that whole background. Israel's leadership, reading Ezekiel 36 and Zechariah 13, expected the last days to open with a washing. John's baptism was legible to Israel because the promise had made it legible.

Now the precision, because tonight's apologetic hangs on it: John's baptism is real, God-sent (Jesus will later ask the chief priests whether it was from heaven or from men, and they dare not deny heaven), and yet John himself declares its limit in the same breath he performs it: *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Mark 1:8). Water, John says, is his whole inventory. The One coming after him will supply what Ezekiel's promise still lacks: the Spirit put within. John is the promise's last courier, and he knows it; his greatness (none greater born of women, the Lord will say) is

the greatness of a signpost that refuses to be mistaken for the destination: *he must increase, but I must decrease*.

The proof that this distinction is not our invention arrives in tonight's discovery, Acts 19:1–7, and it is one of the most quietly devastating texts in the New Testament for a merely symbolic view of Baptism. Some twenty-five years after the resurrection, Paul finds disciples in Ephesus who had received *John's baptism*. He asks whether they received the Holy Spirit; they have not so much as heard of him. And Paul does not say: no matter, a washing is a washing, the symbolism is the same. He explains the difference, and *they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*; and Luke completes the scene: Paul lays his hands on them, and *the Holy Spirit came on them* (19:5–6): water and the apostolic laying on of hands, the seed of Confirmation, given together as Christian initiation. The apostolic Church gave Christian Baptism to people who had John's washing, because Christian Baptism confers something John's could not: the Spirit. If Baptism were only a public symbol of repentance, John's version was already a perfectly good one, and Acts 19 is inexplicable.

Tonight's steelman is the modern form of that mistake, and it is enormously widespread among sincere Christians: Baptism is essentially what John's was, a public profession, an outward sign of an inward repentance that already happened. Jesus adopted John's rite; the Church added metaphysics later. The answer is that the New Testament itself draws the line the objection erases, in the Baptist's own sentence and in Paul's own practice, and that the difference is precisely the Spirit. Handle the objectors with honor: many of the people who hold this view love the Lord and take repentance more seriously than many sacramentalists; the correction is not that they value too much, but that they settle for too little.

Pastoral note: John's preaching is severe (brood of vipers, axe at the root), and severity has wounded people in your room; some grew up under religion that was all axe and no river. Let John be what he actually is: the severity of a man clearing a road for mercy to arrive faster. Repentance in John's mouth is not self-hatred; it is making straight the highway for God to come to you.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Isaiah 40:3 (RSV2CE)

The promise-shaped expectation is visible in the priests' own question at the river:

They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Eli'jah, nor the prophet?"

John 1:25 (RSV2CE)

And John states both his commission and its limit in a single verse, the hinge of the whole study:

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1:8 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on Matthew*

St. John Chrysostom teaches in substance that John's baptism stood between the Jewish washings and our own: more than ritual purification, for it summoned real repentance; less than the sacrament, for it could not yet confer the Spirit or remission. Its whole office was to lead people by the hand to the One who could, which is why John's constant preaching was not himself but the Coming One.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine • *Tractates on the Gospel of John*

St. Augustine, commenting on the Baptist's testimony that the Spirit's descent revealed *he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit*, teaches in substance that this is the standing difference between every minister and the Lord: John baptized in his own baptism, but no Christian minister baptizes in his own; whether Peter baptizes, or Paul, or even Judas, it is Christ who baptizes. The power of the font was never delegated away; the hands change, the Baptizer does not.

Leader note: This is also the Church's answer, learned through the Donatist crisis, to a fear someone in your room may carry: what if the priest who baptized me was unworthy? The sacrament's worth never rested on him. It is Christ who baptizes.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Thomas Aquinas • *Summa Theologiae III, q. 38*

St. Thomas, treating John's baptism directly, teaches in substance that it was a divinely given preparation rather than a sacrament of grace: it did not itself confer what our Baptism confers, but accustomed Israel to the rite, gathered crowds to hear of Christ, and disposed hearts by repentance, a schoolmaster's washing, walking its pupils to the font it could not itself be.

Catechism Connection

CCC 523 names John the Lord's immediate precursor, sent to prepare his way, and CCC 720 says the theology of tonight in one motion: with John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit begins the restoration to man of the divine likeness, prefiguring what he would achieve with and in Christ; John's baptism was for repentance, while baptism in water and the Spirit will be a new birth. Note how the Catechism's own contrast (for repentance versus new birth) is simply Mark 1:8 restated.

CCC 1223 sets tonight's forward edge: all the Old Covenant prefigurations find their fulfillment in Christ Jesus, who begins his public life after having himself been baptized by St. John. Read that sentence twice in preparation: it means the study's next session is the one every previous session has been about.

Paragraphs for this session: 523, 720, 1223

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Water plus Spirit (one session from resolution): John's sentence formalizes the gap the whole Old

Testament left open: he has the water; the Spirit is still future tense, standing in the crowd. Do not let tonight resolve what Session 9 exists to resolve.

Elijah and the Jordan (Session 5 callback, developed tonight): same river, Elijah-evoking dress, the forerunner's office; the Elisha story-shape the study has held lightly now wears a camel-hair coat. Let a participant make the clothing connection from 2 Kings 1:8 if possible.

Why did nobody ask what a baptism was? (tonight's quiet apologetic): the priests' question in John 1:25 proves the expectation; Session 7's promise built tonight's crowd. Make sure this lands; it is the seam between the study's two halves.

He must increase (planted tonight, echoed Session 14): John's self-emptying is the baptized life's template. One sentence.

It is Christ who baptizes (planted tonight via Augustine, developed Sessions 9–11): the acting subject of the sacrament. This quietly answers half the objections the study will ever meet.

Session Goals

1. The group can explain why crowds and priests treated a riverside washing as legible: Israel knew ritual washing, and the prophets had taught her to hope for God's own (John 1:25 read as suggestive evidence).
2. The group can state John's own distinction: I with water; he with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8).
3. The group has discovered Acts 19 and can say what the apostolic Church did with disciples who had only John's baptism, and why.
4. The steelman (Baptism as public profession, essentially John's rite) has been given at full strength and answered from the Baptist and from Paul's practice.
5. The Elijah connections (river, garment, office) are on the table, and the room is leaning toward Session 9.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Mark 1:1–8; Isaiah 40; the Elijah costume; Q1-Q2

10 min • Build: John 1:19–28; the priests' question; Q3

15 min • Live discovery: Acts 19:1–7

15 min • Steelman: is Baptism essentially John's rite?

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q2 (the Elijah garment parallel) can be a single leader aside, and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut Acts 19; it is tonight's load-bearing discovery.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, before your Son came to the river, you sent a voice to make the road straight. Send that voice through us tonight: level what is proud in us, fill what is hollow, and make a highway in our wilderness, so that when Christ approaches, nothing in us delays him. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Who has been a John the Baptist in your life: someone whose whole role, looking back, was to point you toward something greater than themselves? Did you recognize it at the time?

QW2. John drew crowds into the wilderness by telling them the truth about themselves. Why do you think people walked miles for that? When has severe honesty been a mercy to you?

Build • into the text

Have a reader take Mark 1:1–8. Ask the group to note everything Mark tells us about John before he speaks: the Isaiah quotation, the location, the clothing, the diet, the crowds.

Q1. Mark introduces John with Isaiah 40:3, the voice preparing the way of the LORD. In Isaiah, who is the way being prepared for? So what is Mark claiming about the one John precedes, before Jesus has said a word?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

In Isaiah the highway is for *our God*: the LORD himself returning to his people. Mark hands that verse to John's ministry, which means the One whose sandals John cannot stoop to untie is not merely a great teacher on his way; it is the LORD coming down his own road. The stakes of the next session are set in tonight's first paragraph: the person approaching the water is God.

Q2. Compare Mark 1:6 with 2 Kings 1:8. What is John wearing, who wore it first, and, remembering Session 5, what did that man do at this same river?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Camel's hair and a leather girdle: dress any Bible-formed reader would find evocative of Elijah, whose own description turns on the same leather girdle. And Elijah parted this very Jordan, after which his successor received the spirit he asked for on the far side. John appears in Elijah-evoking dress, at the river of Elijah's story, doing the forerunner's work, and Malachi had promised Elijah's coming before the great day of the LORD. The dress reads as a claim: the last preparation is underway. (Hold the typology with John's own precision: he denies being Elijah returned (John 1:21), and the Lord names him Elijah in the qualified sense of the promised forerunner (Matthew 11:14): the office, not the man.)

Q3. Now John 1:19–28. Jerusalem sends priests and Levites with three identity questions, and then verse 25: *Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?* What does that question accidentally reveal about what Israel's leadership expected?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It suggests the expectation this study spent last week reading: the questioners seem to assume the decisive figures of the last days might well baptize. Hold the inference with an inference's modesty and its force remains. Washing itself needed no explanation in Israel: ritual immersions had long made it legible; what Ezekiel 36 and Zechariah 13 had added was the hope of a cleansing from God's own hand. The crowds at the Jordan look like Session 7's promise generating Session 8's traffic: a washing at the hands of God's messengers read not as an innovation but as an appointment.

Now put John's own sentence on the table and leave it there for the rest of the night: *I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Mark 1:8). Water: present tense, John's whole inventory. The Spirit: future tense, someone else's gift. Ezekiel promised water AND Spirit; John, by his own testimony, carries half the promise and points at the Carrier of the other half.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: a quarter century after the resurrection, the difference between John's baptism and Christian Baptism came up as a live pastoral case, and what the apostle did about it settles tonight's whole question. Give them only **Acts 19:1–7**. Have them read it aloud and answer: what did these disciples lack, how did Paul diagnose it, and what did he do?

They lacked the Spirit, had never even heard of him; Paul's diagnostic question was about their baptism; and on hearing the difference explained, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and the Spirit came upon them. Let the group say the uncomfortable sentence themselves: the apostles gave Christian Baptism to devout men whose only washing was John's.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection, at full strength, and millions of sincere Christians hold it: Baptism is a public profession, an outward testimony of an inward repentance and faith that have already done the real work: The strongest form of the view knows John's baptism and Christian baptism differ: Christ instituted a new ordinance for his new covenant. But in essence, on this reading, the new ordinance remains what water always was: testimony: an outward sign of an inward grace received by faith; what changed was the covenant addressed, not the water's job. The believer repents, believes, and is saved; then baptism announces it, the way a wedding ring announces a marriage. All the later metaphysics (regeneration, infused grace, character) is the Church embroidering a simple, beautiful symbol of obedience.

Q4. Honor it first: what does this view take admirably seriously? Then test it: if it is correct, what should Paul have said in Ephesus?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Honor what deserves honor: this view takes repentance, personal faith, and public witness with a seriousness that shames many a lukewarm sacramentalist, and every one of those goods is genuinely in Baptism; the Church requires the faith it presupposes. If the correction were you value too much, we should stay silent. The correction is: you settle for too little, and the New Testament itself says so.

For if Baptism is essentially John's rite, testimony in water, then Ephesus destroys the theory. Those disciples had exactly that: a real washing of real repentance, God-commanded, received sincerely. On the symbolic view, nothing is missing; the ring is on the finger. Yet Paul's first diagnostic is *Did you receive the Holy Spirit?*, his second is *Into what then were you baptized?*, and his remedy is not supplemental teaching but Christian initiation: Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus, completed by the apostolic laying on of hands. The apostle treats the two washings as different in kind, and the difference has a name: the Spirit. Which is no innovation of Paul's; it is the Baptist's own advertisement: I with water, he with the Holy Spirit. The witness-theory of Baptism is, with unintended irony, a theology of John's baptism, held after the One John pointed to has come. And Peter's Pentecost promise seals it: repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, *and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*: forgiveness and Gift attached to the washing itself. A wedding ring announces a marriage; this water, on the apostles' showing, is more like the vows: God giving what the sign signifies. The full grammar of that arrives in two weeks with Romans 6; tonight it is enough to let John and Paul draw the line where they drew it.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: John 3:22–30, the last portrait of John: his disciples fret that everyone is going to Jesus, and John answers with the bridegroom's friend image and the sentence that fits every Christian vocation ever since: *He must increase, but I must decrease*. Ask: John said this about baptisms, his versus the Lord's. What would it look like for our parish's programs, and our own spiritual pride, to say it as freely?

Send • out of the room

QS1. John's whole office was making a straight road for someone else's arrival. Whose road are you positioned to straighten right now, and what crooked thing (a grudge, a silence, a bad example) is in the way?

QS2. The Ephesus disciples were devout and incomplete, and did not know it until someone asked a good question. What good question about your own sacramental life have you been avoiding?

Live It This Week

- Pray the Benedictus (Luke 1:68–79), Zechariah's canticle over the infant John, once this week, slowly: the Church prays it every single morning.
- Practice one act of decrease: give away credit, yield the last word, or let someone else be preferred, and offer it silently: he must increase.

- If you have never read your own baptismal rite, find the Rite of Baptism text this week and read what was actually said and asked over you.

Memory Verse

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1:8 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, John prepared your road and handed you his crowds, his disciples, and his river. Give us his honesty about what we are not, and his joy at your increase. Bring to completion in every one of us what the water began, and fill with your Spirit whatever in us is still only wet. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Mark 1:1–8 • John's appearance, Isaiah 40:3, the crowds; verse 8 the hinge sentence and memory verse

Isaiah 40:3 • The voice prepares the way of the LORD himself

2 Kings 1:8 with Mark 1:6 • Elijah's garment; Session 5 river callback

John 1:19–28 • The priests' question: verse 25, the expectation revealed

Acts 19:1–7 • Live discovery: Ephesus; John's baptism and Christian Baptism differ in kind

Acts 2:38 • Steelman answer: forgiveness and the Gift attached to the washing (full treatment in Session 13)

John 3:22–30 • Dig Deeper: he must increase

Luke 1:68–79 • Live It: the Benedictus

Session 9

The Baptism of the Lord

The heavens opened, the Spirit descended, and the Father spoke over the water.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers why the sinless One received a sinners' washing: not to be cleansed by the water but to sanctify it; watches every counted thread arrive at once (the Jordan, the dove, water-then-Spirit, the true Joshua); and hears the Father's voice reveal what Baptism will now mean: beloved sonship, declared over a man standing in a river, with the whole Trinity present.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism teaches that in his Baptism the Spirit who hovered over the waters of the first creation descended upon Christ, as a prelude of the new creation, and that through Baptism the Christian is sacramentally assimilated to Jesus in the water (CCC 1224, 537). What happened over the Jordan is what happens, really, at every font.

What You Need to Know

Tonight is the summit of the study's first movement, and the leader's main job is to stay out of the way. Nine weeks of preparation are about to pay off in a scene four verses long. Read Matthew 3:13–17 until you have it nearly by heart, and prepare to let the group find the threads themselves: they planted every one of them.

Begin with the scandal, because Matthew begins with it: Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan *to be baptized* by John, and John tries to prevent him: *I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?* (3:14). John's protest is the correct theology: his baptism is for repentance, and here is the One with nothing to repent. Jesus' answer, *Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness* (3:15), is the night's first depth. He is not confessing sin; he is taking his place, deliberately, in the middle of sinners, in their water, at the head of the line of the penitent. The sinless One stands in the sinners' river so that everything in that river becomes his. The Fathers loved to say it with a reversal the group should hear early: the water did not cleanse him; he cleansed the water. He goes down into the Jordan the way he will go down into death: not needing it, but filling it, so that for everyone after him, the passage is transformed from the inside.

Then the theophany, and here the group's nine weeks of counting detonates. *He went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened* (3:16): the heavens, closed over Adam's exile, standing open again over a man in the water. *He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him:* the Spirit over the waters of Genesis 1:2 (Session 1's brooding bird), the dove over the flood waters bringing news of a world at peace (Session 2), now descending in person, and John's Gospel adds the crucial verb and draws the conclusion: *it remained on him*, and therefore *this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit* (John 1:32–33). Not a visitation; an abiding. And the order the group has traced since Elisha: up from the water, then the Spirit given. *And lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased* (3:17): the Father's voice, over the water, declaring

sonship. Count what is present at this river: the Son in the water, the Spirit descending, the Father speaking. The Gospels' most public manifestation of the Trinity, all three Persons distinctly present in one scene, happens at a baptism. (The angel's words at the Annunciation had already named all three: Luke 1:35; here they are manifested together.) When the Lord later commands baptizing *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, the formula is not new information; it is the Jordan scene turned into a rite.

Why does this matter for our Baptism, and not merely as spectacle? Because the scene is the sacrament's blueprint, and the Catechism says so with precision: through Baptism the Christian is *sacramentally assimilated* to Jesus (CCC 537); what was manifested over him is conferred on us. The heavens open over the font; the Spirit descends and remains; and the Father's voice says over each baptized person the only sentence that finally heals a human being: you are my beloved son, my beloved daughter. Our adoption is real participation in his sonship, not a legal fiction: the group will get Paul's full grammar for this in Session 11 (baptized into Christ), but tonight they should feel its warmth. For everyone in your room who has spent a lifetime auditioning for love, human or divine, the Jordan announces the order of the Gospel: the voice speaks *before* the ministry, before the miracles, before any performance. Belovedness is the beginning, not the wage.

Tonight's steelman takes the scene's own facts and turns them: Jesus had no sins, so his baptism obviously was not regenerative; it was a commissioning, an identification with his people, an inauguration. Therefore baptism as such is commissioning and identification, and reading regeneration into our baptism from his is a category slip: his baptism and ours simply do different things. The answer concedes the asymmetry (he received nothing the water could give; we receive everything) and then shows that the asymmetry is the argument: his baptism differs from ours precisely as cause differs from effect. He did not need what the water gives; he entered its element and, as the Fathers and the liturgy confess, sanctified the water (the patristic and liturgical consensus), anticipating in the river his death and rising (CCC 536 reads the immersion as accepting his mission unto death and the voice as anticipating the resurrection). And the Gospel scene itself refuses the merely-functional reading: commissionings confer tasks; this scene confers identity: this is my beloved Son. What descends and remains is the Spirit, exactly the gift John said the Coming One would give through baptism, and exactly what Acts shows the baptized receiving. Our baptism does not copy his; it draws on his: he filled the water, and we are washed in what he filled it with.

Pastoral note: the Father's voice will be the most healing and, for some, the most painful moment of the night: people whose earthly fathers never said anything like it, people who cannot believe it could be said of them. Do not rush the Send questions. And note for your own preparation: every one of the baptized in your room has already had these words spoken over them sacramentally. Tonight is not an invitation to earn the sentence; it is an invitation to believe it was said.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Genesis 1:2 (RSV2CE)

and the dove came back to him in the evening, and lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.

Genesis 8:11 (RSV2CE)

Nine weeks of pattern arrive at four verses of fulfillment:

And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:16–17 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Antioch • *Letter to the Ephesians, ch. 18*

"For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary according to God's plan... He was born and baptized, that by his passion he might purify the water."

St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch and disciple of the apostolic generation, wrote this on the road to his martyrdom around the year 107: within living memory of the apostles, the Church already confessed that the Lord's baptism was for the water's sake, and ours.

Leader note: Translations of the final phrase vary slightly (purify the water, cleanse the water, sanctify the water); the substance is identical and the letter and chapter are secure. This is among the earliest post-biblical sentences about Baptism in existence.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Maximus of Turin • *Sermons on the Epiphany*

St. Maximus, a fifth-century bishop, teaches in substance that Christ went down into the Jordan not to be made holy by the waters but to make the waters holy: the river did not wash him; he washed the river, and in it every font to come, and the Church's Epiphany preaching extended the thought to the font: the water of Baptism carries the power of his sanctification.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Church's Liturgy • *Preface of the Baptism of the Lord (Roman Missal)*

On the feast of the Lord's Baptism the Church prays that in the waters of the Jordan the Father revealed with signs and wonders a new Baptism: by the voice from heaven we might believe the Word dwelling among us, and by the Spirit descending as a dove we might know Christ anointed to bring good news to the poor.

The Church's own prayer illuminates tonight's whole approach: the Jordan event revealed a new Baptism; CCC 537 completes the application to us.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1224 states the Genesis connection the group will make themselves: the Spirit who hovered over the waters of the first creation descended on Christ at his baptism, as a prelude of the new creation. CCC 536 reads the scene's depths: in his baptism Jesus accepts and inaugurates his mission as suffering Servant, allows himself to be numbered among sinners, and anticipates the baptism of his bloody death; the

heavens, closed by Adam's sin, are opened, and the waters are sanctified by the descent of Jesus and the Spirit, a prelude to the new creation.

CCC 537 then makes it ours: through Baptism the Christian is sacramentally assimilated to Jesus; in the water we are buried and rise with him, born of water and the Spirit. And CCC 701 closes the dove thread the group planted in Session 2: at the end of the flood the dove returned with an olive branch; when Christ comes up from the water of his baptism, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, comes down and remains on him. The Catechism was waiting for your group at the riverbank.

Paragraphs for this session: 535–537, 1223–1224, 701

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Water plus Spirit (RESOLVED TONIGHT): nine counted instances of presence-and-water were rehearsals; tonight the Spirit descends on the Son in the water in person, and remains. Let the group recite the whole chain if they want to; they earned it. Session 10 gives the Lord's own sentence making the pairing the law of new birth.

The dove (planted Session 2: RESOLVED TONIGHT): flood dove announcing peace; Jordan dove announcing the Beloved. Read CCC 701 aloud if the room wants confirmation the Church sees what they see.

The Jordan and the true Joshua (Sessions 5–6, 8: RESOLVED TONIGHT): the name over the river is *Iêsous*; the Lord enters the river of entry, and the inheritance it opens is sonship.

Water, then Spirit given (Elisha's order, Session 5: RESOLVED TONIGHT): up from the water, the Spirit descends. Hold it as fulfilled figure, a shape the Church's memory cherished, not as a rubric for every narrative (Acts itself varies the sequence).

Heavens opened (new tonight, echoed Session 14): closed over Eden, opened over the water; the baptized live under an open heaven. One sentence; do not develop.

This is my beloved Son (planted tonight, developed Sessions 10–11): sonship is what Baptism confers; Paul's adoption grammar arrives in Session 11. Tonight, let it be warmth rather than doctrine.

Session Goals

1. The group can answer the scandal in the text's own terms: he stood in the sinners' water to fulfill all righteousness, and the water did not cleanse him; he sanctified it.
2. The group has identified, unprompted or nearly so, the resolved threads: dove, Jordan, water-then-Spirit, opened heavens, the Trinity present.
3. The group can say what the Father's voice declares and what that means Baptism now confers: beloved sonship.
4. The steelman (his baptism was mere commissioning, so ours is too) has been given at full strength and answered as cause-to-effect, not copy-to-copy.
5. The group has connected the Jordan scene to the Trinitarian baptismal formula they were baptized with.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Matthew 3:13–15; the scandal and the answer; Q1-Q2

20 min • Build and live discovery: Matthew 3:16–17 beside Genesis 1:2 and 8:8–12; the threads arrive; Q3-Q4

15 min • Steelman: commissioning or cause?

5 min • Send questions

15 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer, and unhurried silence after the Father's voice

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: The Dig Deeper box, and Q2 can be folded into the leader's framing of verse 15. Never cut the side-by-side discovery or the silence at the end; tonight of all nights, do not fill every minute.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, you opened the heavens over the Jordan and told the world who Jesus is. Open them over this room. Let us hear the voice you have already spoken over each of the baptized, and give us the joy of watching every promise we have traced arrive at one river. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Think of a moment when someone publicly claimed you: stood up at a gathering, said *this one is mine, and I am proud of them*. What did it change in you? If it has never happened, what do you imagine it would change?

QW2. Nine weeks ago you wrote a guess about why God chose water. Tonight the study arrives at its central scene. What are you most hoping is true by the end of the night?

Build • into the text

Have a reader take Matthew 3:13–15, and stop there. Let John's protest hang: *I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*

Q1. John's baptism is for repentant sinners, and John knows exactly who is standing in front of him. Why is his protest good theology, and what does Jesus' answer, *it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness*, tell us about why he insists?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The protest is good theology because the premise is true: here is the one man with nothing to confess. And Jesus does not correct the premise; he overrules the conclusion. Fulfilling all righteousness means taking, deliberately and completely, the place the Father gave him: in the middle of sinners, in their line, in their water, as their head. He is not pretending to be a penitent; he is becoming the leader of the penitent, the new Adam standing where his race stands. Everything sinners must pass through, he enters first, and his entering changes what it is. The Fathers compressed it into one reversal, and it is tonight's key: the water did not cleanse him; he cleansed the water.

Q2. Hold that reversal. If the sinless One goes down into the sinners' water not to receive something but to put something there, what has the Jordan, and every font that draws on it, become?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A filled vessel. From this scene forward, baptismal water is not empty matter waiting for private faith to give it meaning; it is the element the Son of God entered, carried down into, and sanctified, the way he will enter death itself and leave it transformed for everyone who follows him through. St. Ignatius of Antioch, within living memory of the apostles, said he was baptized *that by his passion he might purify the water*. Our study's whole question, why water, gains its final facet here:

water, because he made it his.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Now the arrival. Read Matthew 3:16–17 aloud. Then, without commentary, have the group open two old friends side by side: **Genesis 1:2** and **Genesis 8:8–12**. Ask only this: what do you see at the Jordan that you have seen before, and where? Then be quiet and let them count.

They should find: the Spirit over the waters (creation), the dove over the waters (flood), the water-then-Spirit order (Elisha, Session 5), the Jordan itself (Sessions 5, 6, 8), the opened heavens, and, when someone names Father, Son, and Spirit, the Trinity present at the water. Confirm each find with delight and let the room have its moment. Nine weeks of planting is being harvested; do not harvest it for them.

Q3. John's Gospel adds one verb to the scene: the Baptist testifies, *I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him* (John 1:32). Why does *remained* matter?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Because so much before this was episodic: the Spirit came upon judges and prophets for a task, in empowerments that came and went. On the Beloved, the Spirit descends and stays. He is the bearer of the Spirit in fullness, and therefore, exactly as John promised, the one who can baptize with the Holy Spirit: you cannot give a residence you do not have. This is why Christian Baptism can do what John's could not (our Session 8 line): the One who owns the Gift has entered the water.

Q4. The Father's voice: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*. Notice when it is spoken: before a single sermon, miracle, or convert. What is the Father declaring, and why does the timing matter for every baptized person in this room?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He is declaring identity, not reviewing performance: sonship, belovedness, delight, announced at the water, before the ministry. And CCC 537 dares to say the scene becomes ours: through Baptism the Christian is sacramentally assimilated to Jesus, buried and rising in the water, born of water and the Spirit. Through Baptism, CCC 1265 says, we become adopted sons and daughters of God: not Christ's eternal Sonship transferred, but his filial life shared by grace. That reality was conferred at your font, adoption's own voice echoing the Jordan's: beloved son, beloved daughter, before you had performed anything, as the beginning and not the wage. Some of us have spent decades auditioning for a sentence that was spoken over us as infants. The rest of the Christian life is learning to believe our own Baptism.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection reasons from the scene's own facts, at full strength: Jesus was sinless, so whatever his baptism was, it was not cleansing and not regeneration; it was manifestly a

commissioning: the inauguration of his ministry, his public identification with the people he came to save. Very well: then baptism as such is commissioning and identification. Reading regeneration into our baptism is importing a meaning his baptism demonstrably did not have. His baptism and ours are simply two different things wearing one name, and building sacramental theology on the Jordan is building on an analogy.

Q5. Concede first: name the real asymmetry between his baptism and ours. Then ask: which way does the asymmetry actually cut?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The asymmetry is real and we concede it happily: he received nothing the water could give, and we receive everything. His baptism was not regenerative for him: no serious Catholic claims otherwise. If our baptism were a mere copy of his, the objection would land.

But the relationship is not copy to copy; it is cause to effect, and the asymmetry is the proof. Precisely because he needed nothing from the water, his going down into it can only have been for the water's sake, and ours: he entered the element to fill it, sanctifying the waters (the confession of St. Ignatius within a decade or two of the apostle John's death, of the Fathers after him, and of the Church's liturgy to this day), and anticipating in the river the death and rising he would accomplish (CCC 536 reads the immersion exactly so). Our baptism draws on his the way our resurrection will draw on his: not imitation, participation.

And test the commissioning theory against the scene it appeals to. Commissionings confer tasks; this scene confers identity: *this is my beloved Son*. What descends is not a mandate but the Spirit, remaining: the very Gift John said the Coming One would attach to baptism, the very Gift Peter attaches to it at Pentecost, the very Gift whose absence sent Paul's Ephesus twelve to Christian initiation (a Gift God remains free to pour out in surprising sequences: Acts 8; Acts 10: freedom the apostles answered by running for the water). If the Jordan teaches what baptism is, it teaches this: heavens opened, Spirit given and remaining, sonship declared, over a man standing in water. That is not a theory of regeneration imported into the text. It is the text, and the font is where the Church has always heard it spoken over the rest of us.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Matthew's Gospel places the temptation in the wilderness immediately after the baptism, and the devil's first two assaults both begin *If you are the Son of God...* (Matthew 4:3, 6): a direct attack on the sentence just spoken from heaven. Ask: why does temptation aim first at baptismal identity, and what does that teach the baptized about where their own battles will concentrate? The enemy rarely argues you into big sins first; he argues you out of belovedness first, and the sins follow the doubt.

Send • out of the room

QS1. The voice spoke before any performance. Where in your life are you still auditioning for what your Baptism already conferred? What would this week look like if you believed the sentence?

QS2. He stood in the sinners' line on purpose. Whose line, whose mess, whose water is Christ asking you to step into beside them, now that you know that is what his family does?

Live It This Week

- Find out or confirm the date of your Baptism (Session 1's assignment, now with its full meaning) and put it in your calendar as a yearly feast. If you found it then, tell someone this week what happened on it.
- Each morning, at water (a shower, a sink, a font), say once: I am a beloved son / a beloved daughter; heaven was opened over my Baptism.
- Read CCC 535–537 slowly once this week and underline every phrase that says the Jordan scene is about you.
- If there are children in your life, tell them the story of their own baptism day this week: who was there, what was said, how the water was poured. Give them a memory of the voice.

Memory Verse

and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:17 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, at the Jordan you tore the heavens open rather than leave them shut over us. Son of God, you stood in our line and filled our water. Holy Spirit, you descended and you remain. Speak the sentence again over everyone in this room, and over everyone we love who has forgotten it was said: beloved. And let us live this week as people over whom heaven stands open. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Matthew 3:13–17 • The whole scene: scandal, answer, theophany; memory verse at v. 17

Genesis 1:2 • Side-by-side discovery: the Spirit over the waters

Genesis 8:8–12 • Side-by-side discovery: the dove over the waters

John 1:29–34 • The Baptist's testimony: the Spirit descended and remained

2 Kings 2:9–15 • Callback: up from the water, the spirit given

Matthew 28:19 • Forward pointer: the Jordan scene become the Church's formula (Session 14)

Matthew 4:1–11 • Dig Deeper: temptation aims first at baptismal identity

CCC 535–537, 701, 1223–1224 • The Church reading the scene as the group read it

Session 10

Born of Water and the Spirit

The sentence the whole study is named for, spoken to a teacher at night.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers the Lord's own summary of everything they have traced: *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God* (John 3:5). They watch Nicodemus stumble where Naaman stumbled, hear Jesus expect Israel's teacher to recognize Ezekiel's promise, and discover from the chapter's own next verse what Jesus went out and did immediately after saying it.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism quotes John 3:5 as Baptism's charter and states its weight plainly: the Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation (CCC 1215, 1257), while holding with equal firmness that God himself is not bound by his sacraments. Tonight the study's title text arrives, and the master question receives the Lord's own answer.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study reaches the sentence it is named for, and the leader should feel the room's nine weeks converging on it. A ruler of the Pharisees comes to Jesus by night: Nicodemus, cautious, courteous, real. Jesus answers the question Nicodemus has not yet asked: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God* (John 3:3). The Greek *anōthen* means both *anew* and *from above*, and many interpreters hear John exploiting both senses: a second birth, whose source is heaven. Nicodemus hears only the impossibility: *How can a man be born when he is old?* And every member of your group should hear, underneath his question, a riverbank from Session 6: a scarred commander coming up out of the Jordan with *the flesh of a little child*. The Old Testament had already answered Nicodemus's question with a picture; tonight the Lord answers it with a law.

The law is verse 5, and read it with the care its grammar deserves: *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*. One preposition governs both nouns: born of water-and-Spirit, a single birth from a joined source, not two births from two sources. The pairing your group has counted since Genesis 1:2, watched become a promise in Ezekiel 36, heard split into present-and-future in the Baptist's sentence, and seen united over the Jordan in Session 9, is here pronounced by the Lord as the condition of entering the kingdom. The study's master question, why water, now has its final form: because the Lord joined water to the Spirit and made the pair the doorway of the new birth.

Verse 10 is the session's hidden hinge, and do not let the group miss it: *Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?* Jesus expects Nicodemus to recognize this. From where? Your group knows exactly where, because they sat in it three weeks ago: *I will sprinkle clean water upon you... a new heart... and I will put my spirit within you*. Water and Spirit making a person new is Ezekiel's promise, and Israel's teacher is being gently rebuked for not knowing his own prophets. Jesus' rebuke is the

study's method vindicated from the Lord's own mouth: the Old Testament was supposed to make this recognizable.

Tonight's steelman is the most important exegetical dispute in the entire study, and your group deserves it complete. Serious Protestant interpreters, refusing to let John 3:5 teach baptismal regeneration, read *water* three main ways: as natural birth (the water of the womb: born of water = born the first time, then born of Spirit), as a symbol of the Spirit himself (water-even-the-Spirit, leaning on John 7:38–39 where living water is glossed as the Spirit), or as inapplicable to Christian Baptism since Nicodemus could not yet have known of it. Give all three at full strength; the answer box takes them in turn, and its decisive move is tonight's discovery: the group finds John 3:22 themselves, the verse nobody quotes, where the very next thing Jesus does after this conversation is go into Judea and baptize. The evangelist placed the interpretation in the itinerary.

Carry the necessity question with both hands, as the study has since Session 6. CCC 1257 says the Lord himself affirms Baptism's necessity, and in the same paragraph says God is not bound by his sacraments. Tonight leans on the first clause because the text does; Session 14 will honor the second fully (baptism of desire, of blood, and God's freedom toward the unbaptized). If grief about an unbaptized person surfaces tonight, do not defer comfort: give the second clause immediately and gently, and promise the fuller conversation.

End preparation with Nicodemus's whole arc, because it is one of Scripture's great slow conversions and your mixed room needs it: he comes by night (3:1–2); he defends Jesus's right to a hearing before the Sanhedrin (7:50–51); and he appears at the end with Joseph of Arimathea, carrying a hundred pounds' weight of myrrh and aloes to bury the Lord (19:39), openly, at the most dangerous hour to be counted a disciple. John never records Nicodemus's baptism, but he shows us a man walking, across the whole length of the Gospel, from night toward the light. Somebody in your room is Nicodemus. Let the arc tell them the door stays open, and note where his story ends: at the cross, which is where this study goes in two weeks.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses... And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes.

Ezekiel 36:25, 27 (RSV2CE)

The teacher of Israel was expected to recognize the promise when its Maker restated it:

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

John 3:5 (RSV2CE)

Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?"

John 3:10 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr • *First Apology*, ch. 61

St. Justin, writing one of the earliest surviving accounts of how Christians baptize (mid-second century; the Didache's brief instructions are earlier still), teaches in substance that candidates are

brought where there is water and are regenerated there, born again as we were born again; and the warrant he gives Rome's pagan readers is the Lord's new-birth saying, in the compressed form Justin cites, that unless you are born again you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Leader note: Notice what this is: in the mid-second century, when the Church explains her water rite to outsiders, the saying she reaches for is the Lord's word to Nicodemus. The earliest recorded reading of the new-birth saying is the baptismal one.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on the Gospel of John*

St. John Chrysostom, preaching through this chapter, teaches in substance that in the font the water becomes to the believer what the womb is to the child: in it the new person is fashioned and formed, and what the Spirit works there is a true generation, not a metaphor for one. For Chrysostom, Nicodemus's mistake was not taking birth too literally but taking God too weakly.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Ambrose of Milan • *On the Mysteries*

St. Ambrose, catechizing at the font where this study began with him, teaches in substance that the Lord's sentence binds the two together: not water without the Spirit, and not the Spirit without the water, for the one birth is of water and the Spirit; whoever would divide what Christ joined must answer to the plain shape of his words.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1215 places tonight's verse at the center of Baptism's very name: this sacrament is called the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, for it signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit without which no one can enter the kingdom of God. Note the Catechism's two verbs, signifies and actually brings about: the whole sacramental claim in four words. CCC 1257 opens with tonight's weight: the Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation, and closes with the balance the study has carried since Naaman: God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.

CCC 1225 belongs to tonight's forward edge, and read it in preparation without quoting it to the group: it teaches that in his Passover Christ opened to all men the fountain of Baptism, and that the blood and water from his pierced side are types of Baptism and the Eucharist, so that from then on it is possible to be born of water and the Spirit and enter the kingdom. The Catechism hangs tonight's verse on an event the group has not reached yet. Two more weeks.

Paragraphs for this session: 1215, 1225, 1257

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Why water? (master thread: COMPLETED TONIGHT): Session 7 resolved the sealed question with God's promise; tonight the Lord pronounces the promise as the law of the new birth. The full arc for your own clarity: water, because we are bodies; water, because it cleanses, drowns, and births; water, because God promised it; water, because the Son sanctified it; water, because he joined it to the Spirit and made the pair the door. Let the group assemble this in the Send discussion in their own words.

Like the flesh of a little child (Session 6: RESOLVED TONIGHT): Nicodemus asks the question Naaman's skin already answered. The group should make this connection at Q2; if no one does, ask what Syrian commander they know who came up from a river with a child's flesh.

The teacher should have known (Session 7 callback: RESOLVED TONIGHT): verse 10 is Ezekiel 36 knocking. Draw it explicitly.

Lifted up like the serpent (planted tonight from 3:14–15, resolved Session 12): one sentence: the conversation that begins with water ends by pointing at a cross. Do not develop.

Nicodemus's arc (planted tonight, completed Session 12): he will be at the burial. Say only: keep an eye on this man.

Session Goals

1. The group has read John 3:1–21 aloud in parts and can quote verse 5 from memory by night's end.
2. The group can explain the single-birth grammar: born of water-and-Spirit together, one doorway, not two births.
3. The group has connected verse 10 to Ezekiel 36 and verse 4 to Naaman: the Old Testament made this recognizable.
4. All three steelman readings of *water* have been heard at full strength and answered, with John 3:22 discovered by the group as the context's own verdict.
5. The necessity of Baptism has been stated with both CCC 1257 clauses, gently and clearly.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: John 3:1–10; the night visit, the impossibility, the rebuke; Q1-Q3

10 min • Build: the grammar of verse 5 and the completed pairing; Q4

10 min • Live discovery: John 3:22 and 4:1–2

20 min • Steelman: the three readings of water, in full

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q1 can merge into the leader's framing of the night visit, and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the discovery of 3:22 or any of the three steelman prongs; tonight's steelman is the study's most consequential.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you received a cautious man at night and told him the truth in one sentence. We come with our own caution and our own night. Say the sentence again over us, and give us Nicodemus's stubborn patience: to keep walking toward the light until we are standing in it. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Nicodemus came with questions but came at night, where no one would see. Where in your life do you keep your seeking private, and what would it cost to bring it into daylight?

QW2. Has God ever answered a question you had not worked up the courage to ask yet? What did that feel like?

Build • into the text

Assign parts (narrator, Jesus, Nicodemus) and read John 3:1–15 aloud. Then return to the beginning and walk it.

Q1. Nicodemus opens with a compliment and a credential: *Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.* Jesus answers a question Nicodemus never asked. What does Jesus' abrupt *unless one is born anew* tell us about what Nicodemus actually came for, and about what entering the kingdom requires?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Jesus reads through the courtesy to the hunger: Nicodemus wants to know if the kingdom is arriving and whether his credentials will carry him into it. The answer razes the premise: entry is not by advancement but by birth. Nobody achieves being born; birth is received, done to you, the one event in your existence you contributed nothing to. Whatever the new birth is, it is grace before it is anything else: which is exactly what the group heard in Ezekiel's *not for your sake* and will hear in Paul in two weeks.

Q2. Nicodemus: *How can a man be born when he is old?* Before we let Jesus answer him, let the Old Testament answer him. Where has this study already watched a grown man come up from water with the flesh of a child?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Naaman: the scarred commander who went down into the Jordan under protest and came up with *the flesh of a little child* (2 Kings 5:14). Nicodemus's impossibility had already been pictured, in the same river where John was baptizing while he asked. The Old Testament had answered the question with a picture; Nicodemus is standing in front of the answer in person and cannot see it yet. Be gentle with him; it took the whole study for us to see it.

Q3. Verse 10: *Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?* Jesus expects the teacher of Israel to recognize new birth by water and Spirit. From which scroll? Your group already knows; say it together.

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Ezekiel 36: clean water sprinkled, a new heart, *my spirit within you*. The rebuke of verse 10 is the study's method certified by the Lord himself: the Old Testament was supposed to make tonight's sentence recognizable, and a teacher of Israel is answerable for the prophets he carries. Jesus is not inventing a novelty in verse 5; he is restating a promise and standing next to its fulfillment.

Q4. Now the grammar of the sentence itself: *born of water and the Spirit*. One birth or two? One source or two? And what has this study been counting for ten weeks that arrives, finished, in this phrase?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

One preposition governs both nouns, presenting a single birth from water-and-Spirit together: strong grammatical support for one joined birth, not two: though the argument's full weight rests on grammar and context and Tradition together, not grammar alone. Which is the arrival of everything counted since the Spirit moved over the face of the waters: creation, flood, sea, Jordan, promise, and the descent at the Lord's own baptism. The pairing was never decoration. It was the doorway being built, and here the Lord hangs the door.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt, and tonight it is a single verse away. Say to the group: whole books have argued about what *water* means in verse 5. The evangelist answered with an itinerary. Read what Jesus does immediately after this conversation: find **John 3:22**, and then **John 4:1–2** for the detail. What is the very next scene?

After this... Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there he remained with them and baptized (with 4:2 noting his disciples administered it). Fresh from saying born of water and the Spirit, the Lord goes out and runs a baptizing ministry. Let the group feel the force: context weighs heavily where controversy has obscured.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection comes in three serious forms, and each is held by Christians of real learning. First: *water* means natural birth, the water of the womb; Jesus contrasts first birth (water, flesh) with second birth (Spirit), as verse 6's flesh-and-Spirit contrast confirms; so the verse requires no baptism at all, only regeneration by the Spirit. Second: *water* is a symbol of the Spirit himself, water-even-the-Spirit; John himself glosses living water as the Spirit later in this very Gospel (7:38–39), so verse 5 names one reality twice, and dragging a rite into it misses Johannine idiom. Third: whatever it means, it cannot mean Christian Baptism, which did not yet exist and which Nicodemus could not possibly have understood; Jesus does not rebuke people for missing anachronisms.

Q5. Take them in order, and concede first: what does each reading get right about the text?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Each catches something. The first is right that verse 6 contrasts flesh and Spirit; the second is right that John elsewhere images the Spirit as water; the third is right that Nicodemus stood before Pentecost, and Jesus does not demand anachronisms. Now weigh each.

The womb reading has a lexical problem and a grammatical one. Born of water was not an idiom for natural birth: no one has produced ancient texts where it functions that way, and positing an otherwise unattested idiom carries a heavy burden of proof. And the grammar resists the split: verse 5 joins water and Spirit under one preposition as one birth's source, while verse 6's contrast runs between the two births (flesh-born versus Spirit-born), not between the two nouns of verse 5. The flesh of verse 6 corresponds to the first birth as a whole, not to the water of verse 5, which sits on the Spirit's side of the line, inside the birth from above.

The symbol reading proves too much and ignores too much. Yes, John can image the Spirit as living water; but in verse 5 water and Spirit are coordinated as two named terms, not glossed as one, and everything around the sentence is dripping with actual baptism: John baptizing in chapter 1, the Baptist's water-and-Spirit contrast, and, decisively, the verse your group just discovered: the Lord walks out of this conversation and baptizes. When an evangelist frames a saying about water-birth with baptisms on both sides of it, the burden of proof belongs to the reading that evaporates the water.

And the anachronism objection mistakes what Jesus expects of Nicodemus. He is not rebuked for failing to foresee the font; he is rebuked, as a teacher of Israel, for not recognizing Ezekiel's promise of water-and-Spirit renewal when its restatement stood in front of him. What Nicodemus could know is exactly what Jesus faults him for missing. And the Lord regularly spoke words whose full referent arrived later: destroy this temple; the bread I shall give is my flesh; this sentence too was spoken forward, and John wrote it down for a Church that, from her earliest surviving explanation of Baptism (St. Justin, in the mid-second century), heard in it exactly one thing. Add the weight the group can now feel behind it: a reading ancient, widespread, and constant: from Justin through the Fathers cited tonight into the Catechism, which says this sacrament *signifies and actually brings about* the birth of water and the Spirit. The Church did not force a rite into the verse. She was born from people who watched the verse's Speaker baptize, and never forgot what he meant.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: follow Nicodemus out of chapter 3. Read John 7:50–51 (he risks a procedural defense of Jesus before his peers) and John 19:39 (he comes with Joseph of Arimathea, carrying about a hundred pounds' weight of myrrh and aloes, to bury the Lord openly). Ask: what does John want us to learn from a disciple whose growth took years and whose boldest act came at the darkest hour? And notice where his arc ends: at the cross, with the body of Jesus, exactly where this study is headed in two weeks.

Send • out of the room

QS1. Birth is the one thing no one achieves. Where are you still trying to earn what can only be received, and what would receiving look like this week?

QS2. Nicodemus moved from night, to a nervous question in a meeting, to public devotion at the cross. Which stage are you honestly at, and what is the next smallest step into daylight?

Live It This Week

- Memorize John 3:5 completely this week; it is the study's namesake and the shortest summary of everything we have traced.
- Pray for one Nicodemus you know by name: someone circling the faith cautiously, at night. Ask for the chance to be safe daylight for them.
- Read the whole Nicodemus arc in one sitting (John 3:1–21; 7:45–52; 19:38–42) and write one sentence about what changed him.

Memory Verse

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

John 3:5 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, in one sentence your Son gave us the door: born of water and the Spirit. Thank you for every week it took to hear it. For the unbaptized we love, open the way; for the baptized who have wandered, renew them in the grace of their birth; and for each of us, let the birth we received become the life we live. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

John 3:1–15 • The night conversation; verses 3, 4, 5, 10 carry the session

2 Kings 5:14 • Callback: Naaman answers Nicodemus's question in advance

Ezekiel 36:25–27 • Callback: what the teacher of Israel should have recognized

John 3:22; 4:1–2 • Live discovery: fresh from the sentence, Jesus baptizes

John 7:38–39 • Steelman: living water glossed as the Spirit; weighed and answered

John 3:14–15 • Planted: lifted up like the serpent (Session 12)

John 7:50–51; 19:38–42 • Dig Deeper: the Nicodemus arc

Session 11

Buried and Raised

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers St. Paul's plainest statement of what happens in the water: real participation in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. They resolve the *baptized into someone* thread planted at the Red Sea, discover the clothing grammar of Galatians 3:27 and its echo in the white garment of the rite, and watch Paul answer the fear that grace makes holiness optional.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism teaches that through Baptism the believer enters into communion with Christ's death, is buried with him, and rises with him (CCC 1227), that the plunge into the water symbolizes and effects burial into Christ's death and rising with him as a new creature (CCC 1214), and that justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith (CCC 1992).

What You Need to Know

Tonight St. Paul says without imagery what every type has been saying with it. Romans 6:3–4: *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.* Read it until the prepositions astonish you again: into Christ, into his death, buried with him, raised with him. Not near, not in memory of, not as a picture of: into and with. Paul's claim is participation: the baptized person was actually joined to the actual death and resurrection of Jesus, so really that Paul can date the person's death: it happened at the font.

Notice how Paul argues. Romans 6 opens with an objection Paul puts in his opponents' mouths: *Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?* His answer is not a bare warning but an appeal to accomplished fact whose logic makes continued sin an absurdity: *By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?* The argument only works if something really happened. If baptism were a symbol of commitment, Paul's answer would have to be *you promised not to*: an appeal to consistency. Instead his answer is *you died*: an appeal to fact. The whole moral life of Romans 6 hangs on the ontological weight of the aorist: this occurred. Sacramental realism is not a rival to Paul's gospel of grace; it is the engine of his ethics.

The verbs' voice matters as much as their tense: *were baptized, were buried*: passive, received. Nobody buries himself. And the rising: *Christ was raised by the glory of the Father, we walk in newness of life* with resurrection promised (6:5, 8), while Colossians dares even the past tense of us: *you were also raised with him* (Colossians 2:12). The grammar's center of gravity is reception. This is where the study's long grammar of grace pays off: the sea Israel could only walk through, the circumcision made without hands, Ezekiel's string of I wills, birth that cannot be self-achieved. Baptism is not our work offered upward; it is God's work received, which is why the Church can say in one breath that we are justified

by grace through faith and that justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith (CCC 1992). Tonight's steelman lives exactly here, and it deserves its full strength: the claim that Paul the apostle of faith-not-works cannot have meant that a water rite effects union with Christ. The answer is that Paul is the one who wrote these sentences, that his readers all had one referent for *baptized* (no first-century category existed for an unbaptized Christian), and that a sacrament received is the opposite of a work performed.

Session 3 left a thread deliberately hanging: Israel was *baptized into Moses*, bound through the sea to the mediator God appointed. Tonight it resolves: we were *baptized into Christ Jesus*. Into a person: incorporated, made members, so that his story becomes the baptized person's legal and living history: his death our death, his tomb our tomb, his rising our rising, his filial life ours by adoption (the Jordan voice of Session 9, echoed over the adopted). Galatians 3:26–27 gives the same truth in clothing grammar, and the group will discover it: *as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*. The Church has dressed the newly baptized in white since antiquity, and still says over them: you have become a new creation and have clothed yourself in Christ. The rite wears the verse.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem gave the newly baptized the night's most compact image: the saving water was at once your grave and your mother. Tomb and womb: the study's two oldest observations (water that drowns, water that births) fused in one font. The flood killed and carried; the sea drowned the army and birthed a nation; Naaman's old skin went down and a child's came up. Paul is not adding a new idea to the types; he is signing his name to what they always showed.

Pastoral note: tonight tells everyone in your room that their decisive death is behind them. For the scrupulous, who live as though God's verdict on them is perpetually pending, this is medicine: the sentence was carried out at the font, and it was a death sentence on the old self, already served. For the discouraged, who confuse the daily struggle with the decisive battle: Paul distinguishes them too: consider yourselves dead to sin (v. 11) is the daily act of believing what already happened. And for anyone who hears tonight and thinks of grave sins committed since baptism: the Church's answer is not rebaptism but the sacrament the Fathers called the second plank after shipwreck; confession restores what baptism conferred. Say this plainly; someone needs it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea

1 Corinthians 10:1–2 (RSV2CE)

The thread planted at the sea resolves in Paul's greatest baptismal paragraph:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3–4 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyril of Jerusalem • *Mystagogical Catecheses, Lecture 2*

Explaining to the newly baptized what had just happened to them in the font, St. Cyril teaches that

the water was “at once your grave and your mother”: in the same moment, dying and being born, the tomb of the old self and the womb of the new. What nature keeps separate, a lifetime apart, grace accomplished in one immersion.

Leader note: Cyril is narrating the actual Jerusalem rite: candidates faced west to renounce Satan, turned east, and were immersed three times. If your group has only seen infant baptisms by pouring, describing the ancient choreography makes Paul’s burial language vivid; and note that the Church holds pouring to be fully valid, the sign compressed, not the grace.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Basil the Great • *On the Holy Spirit, ch. 15*

St. Basil teaches in substance that Baptism holds death and life in one action: the water receives the body as a tomb receives the dead, imaging the putting away of the old life, while the Spirit pours in life-giving power, renewing the soul from the death of sin into the life it was made for. Neither element carries the sacrament alone: the tomb without the Spirit would only drown; the Spirit uses the tomb to raise.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Church's Liturgy • *Rite of Baptism, the Clothing with the White Garment*

After the Baptism, following the anointing with chrism, the Church clothes the newly baptized in white and tells them why in Galatians’ own grammar: you have become a new creation and have clothed yourself in Christ. The garment is Scripture made wearable; returning at the end as the pall spread over the casket, it brackets the whole baptized life in the same sentence: this person put on Christ.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1227 states tonight’s doctrine in Paul’s own cadence: through Baptism the Christian enters into communion with Christ’s death, is buried with him, and rises with him. CCC 1214 grounds it in the sacrament’s very name: to baptize (Greek *baptizein*) means to plunge or immerse, and the plunge into the water symbolizes the catechumen’s burial into Christ’s death, from which he rises up with him as a new creature. The word Baptism is Romans 6 in miniature.

CCC 1992 guards tonight’s steelman frontier and should be quoted precisely if needed: justification has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ, and it is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. Grace’s gift, faith’s sacrament, God’s act: one sentence refusing every false either-or. And CCC 1265 names what rises from the water: not only purification from all sins, but a new creature, an adopted son of God, a partaker of the divine nature, member of Christ, co-heir with him, and temple of the Holy Spirit.

Paragraphs for this session: 1214, 1227, 1265, 1992

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Baptized into someone (planted Session 3: RESOLVED TONIGHT): into Moses through the sea, into Christ through the font. Let a participant say it before you do; the plant is eight weeks old and ready.

Tomb and womb (Sessions 1–2's double character: RESOLVED TONIGHT via Cyril): water that drowns and water that births, fused. This is also the delayed payoff of Session 1's life-from-the-waters observation.

Beloved sonship distributed (Session 9 callback): his death ours, his rising ours, his filial life ours by adoption. Connect once, warmly.

Not for your sake (Session 7 callback): the passive verbs are Ezekiel's I wills conjugated. One sentence.

The white garment (planted tonight, resolved Session 14): from font to pall, the garment brackets a life. Session 14's charge to live your baptism will pick it up.

Second plank (planted tonight, pastoral): confession restores what baptism conferred. Do not develop; just make sure it was said.

Session Goals

1. The group can restate Romans 6:3–4 in their own words with the prepositions intact: into, with, not near or in memory of.
2. The group can explain why Paul answers *shall we sin?* with *you died* rather than *you promised*: the ethics stand on an event.
3. The group has noticed the passive voice and connected it to the study's grammar of grace.
4. The Red Sea thread (baptized into Moses / into Christ) has been resolved aloud.
5. The steelman (Paul's faith-gospel forbids sacramental realism) has been given at full strength and answered.
6. The group has discovered Galatians 3:27 and connected it to the white garment they have seen at every baptism.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

20 min • Build: Romans 6:1–14 read whole, then walked; Q1–Q4

10 min • Live discovery: Galatians 3:26–27 and the white garment

15 min • Steelman: can the apostle of faith mean this?

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q2 (the objection Paul stages) can be folded into the leader's framing, and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut the passive-voice observation or the Galatians discovery.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, in the water you buried what we were and raised what you love. Teach us tonight what actually happened to us. Where we still live as though the old self survived, let your word read the death certificate aloud, and let us walk out of here in newness of life. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Is there a day you can point to when some old version of you ended: a diagnosis, a move, a marriage, a recovery date? How does having a date change how you fight the old life when it calls?

QW2. What is something you own that you wear or keep because of what it says about who you are: a ring, a jersey, a uniform, an heirloom? What does putting it on do to you?

Build • into the text

Read Romans 6:1–14 aloud, whole, one strong reader, no stopping. Then say: Paul just made a claim about every baptized person in this room, and he put a date on your death. Let us find it.

Q1. Verse 1 stages an objection to Paul's own gospel of abounding grace: *Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?* Look carefully at the kind of answer Paul gives in verses 2–3. He does not say *you should not*. What does he say, and why is that a different kind of argument?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He says *how can we?* : not a prohibition but an incongruity: dead men do not resume their old employment: which is why Paul still exhorts (6:11–13): the fact is real, and it must be lived: *How can we who died to sin still live in it?* And his evidence is an event: *do you not know that all of us who have been baptized... were baptized into his death?* If baptism were a pledge, the answer to sin would be consistency: keep your promise. Paul's answer is history: you died; dead men do not take up their old employment. The moral life of the baptized rests not on willpower reinforced by symbolism but on a fact to be believed and lived. Notice, too, whom Paul addresses: *all of us who have been baptized*: he assumes his entire audience shares one datable experience, and he builds his ethics on what it effected.

Q2. Collect the prepositions and the verbs of verses 3–5: baptized into Christ Jesus, into his death; buried with him; united with him. What kind of relationship do into and with describe, and what do the passive verbs, were baptized, were buried, have in common?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Into and with are the grammar of incorporation, not commemoration: joined to him so that his history happens to us: his death our death, his burial our burial, his rising our rising. And the decisive verbs are passive: were baptized, were buried: received, not performed; the united of verse 5 is literally grown-together; and the rising is first Christ's, ours in promise (6:5, 8) and, Colossians

dares to say, already ours in him (Colossians 2:12). Nobody buries himself; nobody raises himself. This is Ezekiel's string of I wills conjugated into our lives, and the study's oldest lesson in its final form: from the sea Israel could only walk through, to the circumcision made without hands, to a birth no one achieves: grace acts; we receive; and receiving is faith's whole posture, not a rival work.

Q3. Session 3 left a thread hanging on purpose. Israel, Paul said, was *baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea*. Say the resolution out loud: into whom have we been baptized, and what did Israel's version teach us to expect ours to mean?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Into Christ Jesus. Israel came out of the sea belonging to the mediator God appointed: his people, under his leadership, bound to his destiny. We come out of the font belonging to the Mediator: members of his Body, sharers in his death and rising, heirs by adoption in the Son: the voice over the Jordan echoed, by incorporation, over God's adopted children (CCC 1265). Baptized into is the most intimate preposition in Paul: not enrollment in a cause but grafting into a person.

Q4. Verse 11: *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus*. If we already died in baptism, why must we still *consider* it daily, and what does that distinction do for anyone here who confuses the daily struggle with the decisive battle?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The decisive battle happened at the font; the daily struggle is learning to live from it. Consider yourselves is not pretending; it is accounting: reckoning as true what God made true, then presenting your members accordingly (vv. 12–13). This frees two kinds of people in every parish: the scrupulous, who live as though God's verdict were perpetually pending (it was conferred at the water; and where grave sin has since intervened, confession, not re-auditioning, is the appointed door back), and the discouraged, who read every relapse as proof nothing happened (something happened; the struggle is its consequence, not its refutation). And for grave sin after baptism, the Church does not repeat Baptism: she opens what the Fathers called the second plank after shipwreck: confession, which restores the sanctifying grace and communion that grave sin forfeited (the seal itself was never lost).

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: Paul has one more image for what the font did, and the Church liked it so much she built it into the rite you have watched at every baptism you have ever attended. Find **Galatians 3:26–27** and read it aloud. Then answer: what does the Church put on the newly baptized the moment they leave the water, and what does she say while doing it?

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ: and the white garment, with the formula: you have become a new creation and have clothed yourself in Christ. Let someone in the room describe a

baptism they attended; the verse has been enacted in front of them for years.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection is the weightiest theological argument this study will face, and it deserves reverence: Paul is the apostle of justification by faith apart from works of law. Romans 4 stakes everything on Abraham believing God, not performing rites; circumcision itself, Paul insists, came after and added nothing to his righteousness. Is it credible that this same Paul teaches, two chapters later, that a water ceremony effects union with Christ's death and resurrection? Surely Romans 6 uses *baptism* as shorthand for conversion itself, the Spirit's inner work that water merely pictures (as 1 Corinthians 12:13, baptized in one Spirit, suggests). Otherwise Paul refutes Paul: salvation by grace through faith on one page, salvation by ritual on the next. Whatever Romans 6 means, it cannot mean that the rite does the work: that is the very religion of externals Paul spent his life dismantling.

Q5. Feel its weight first: why is guarding grace against ritualism a genuinely Pauline instinct? Then test the theory: what would Romans 6:3 have to mean to Paul's first readers?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Honor the instinct completely: if baptism were a human work performed to earn standing with God, Paul would be its fiercest enemy, and so would the Catholic Church, which anathematized that idea in her own councils. The objection guards something true: grace is not transacted. The question is whether a sacrament is a work: and everything tonight's text says answers no. Every verb is passive. The baptized person performs nothing: he is buried, he is raised, as a corpse is buried and as Christ was raised: by another. A sacrament is not our work climbing; it is God's work arriving, received the only way gifts are received: in faith. That is why the Church's own definition welds the objection's two loyalties into one clause: justification is conferred in Baptism, *the sacrament of faith* (CCC 1992). Faith and baptism are not competitors for the verb *saves*; baptism is faith's embodied reception of what it could never perform: exactly Abraham's posture, wet.

Now test the shorthand theory against Paul's first readers. When Paul writes *all of us who have been baptized*, every reader in Rome remembers a day: water, the threefold Name, coming up soaked into a new community. In the churches Paul addresses, baptism was the shared, datable initiation of every member; *baptism* had one lived referent, and Paul appeals to it as shared, datable experience precisely because his argument needs an event, not an experience-in-general. Nor does 1 Corinthians 12:13 offer a rival dry baptism: by one Spirit... baptized into one body is what the Church says happens in the water (born of water and the Spirit, one birth, one preposition: Session 10's grammar). Splitting Spirit-baptism from water-baptism to save the theory re-creates, ironically, the very split Acts 19 repaired: initiation's water and initiation's Gift belong together as the norm of Christian initiation, even where Acts records God's freedom varying the order (Acts 8; Acts 10).

Last, turn the objection around and let it bless what it feared to. It worried that sacramental realism would license sin or empty faith. Paul's own use runs opposite: he deploys baptism's realism to demolish sin's logic (you died: how can you continue?) and everywhere presumes the faith of the baptized. The rite without faith is exactly what Peter already excluded (not a removal of dirt:

Session 2), and faith without the rite is exactly what Paul never imagined. What God has joined, the study has spent eleven weeks watching him join. Let no theology put it asunder.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Romans 6:5's word *united*: literally grown together (*symphytoi*), a grafting image: and Jesus' own vine and branches (John 15:1–5). Ask: what does a graft receive from the stock, and what happens to a branch that decides it no longer needs attachment? The image holds both tonight's realism (real union, real life flowing) and Session 3's sober warning (real branches can be cut off for fruitlessness): grace, again, is a gift to be lived.

Send • out of the room

QS1. Paul puts a date on your death. What in your life is still living as though it never happened: a habit, a grudge, a fear, an identity? What would it mean this week to read it the death certificate?

QS2. You have put on Christ: you wear him like the white garment. Where this week will people see the garment: and where have you been changing out of it before certain company?

Live It This Week

- Pray Romans 6:11 each morning as an act of accounting, aloud if you can: I am dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.
- If anything grave stands between you and your baptism's grace, take the second plank this week: go to confession, and tell the Lord you are reclaiming the life the font began.
- At the next baptism or funeral you attend, watch for the white garment or the pall, and pray for that person by name in Galatians' words: they have put on Christ.

Memory Verse

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:4 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we were buried with you, and we did not stay buried. Teach us to believe our own baptism: to leave in the tomb what you put there, to wear in the daylight what you clothed us in, and to walk, actually walk, in newness of life. Who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Romans 6:1-14 • The whole argument: died, buried, raised, consider, present; memory verse at v. 4

1 Corinthians 10:1-2 • Callback resolved: baptized into Moses, into Christ

Galatians 3:26-27 • Live discovery: put on Christ; the white garment

1 Corinthians 12:13 • Steelman: by one Spirit baptized into one body, weighed and answered

Romans 6:5 with John 15:1-5 • Dig Deeper: grown together; the graft and the vine

CCC 1214, 1227, 1265, 1992 • The Church stating tonight's doctrine

Session 12

Blood and Water

One of the soldiers pierced his side, and at once there came out blood and water.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers where baptismal water ultimately comes from: the opened side of the crucified Lord. They watch John surround one spear-thrust with his most solemn witness formula, resolve the threads planted at the ark's door and Zechariah's fountain, meet the new Eve drawn from the side of the new Adam, and discover the same apostle naming the Spirit, the water, and the blood as God's abiding witnesses.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism teaches that the blood and water flowing from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus are types of Baptism and the Eucharist, the sacraments of new life: from then on it is possible to be born of water and the Spirit (CCC 1225); and that the Church is born from the wounded side, as Eve from sleeping Adam (CCC 766). Tonight the study stands at its source.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study arrives where every thread was always headed: Calvary. Prepare yourself first as a believer, then as a leader; this session should be led more quietly than any other. The text is John 19:31–37: the soldiers come to hasten the deaths; they find Jesus already dead; and one of them, instead of breaking his legs, pierces his side with a spear, *and at once there came out blood and water*. Then John does something he does nowhere else with such force: he steps out of the narrative to swear to it: *He who saw it has borne witness, his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth, that you also may believe*. And he seals the moment with two Scripture fulfillments: not a bone broken (the Passover lamb's rubric) and *They shall look on him whom they have pierced* (Zechariah). Solemn eyewitness testimony and a double citation for one detail: John is telling us, as loudly as an evangelist can, that the blood and water matter.

Why water from a wound? On the physical level, medical readers have long noted that a spear reaching the pericardium of the dead could release both blood and clear serous fluid; the detail is realistic, and it serves John's first purpose: against every denial that the Son of God truly died in a true body, here is a witnessed corpse with a witnessed wound. But John has spent his whole Gospel training us to hear more, and the group has read the training. In chapter 2 Jesus called his body the true temple; in Ezekiel 47, the prophet watched water issue from beneath the temple's threshold, passing the altar, deepening as it went, healing everything it touched, sweetening even the Dead Sea. In chapter 4 Jesus promised the Samaritan woman living water. In chapter 7 he stood up at the feast and cried, *If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink*, and promised rivers of living water: from his heart, on the reading the Church's tradition has cherished (the Greek can also be read of the believer): and John glossed the water himself: *this he said about the Spirit... for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified*. In John's Gospel, the cross is the hour of glorification. On that venerable reading, the evangelist wrote

himself a promissory note in chapter 7: water from his heart, when he is glorified. At 19:34 the note comes due, and John testifies we can trust the payout: the side of the glorified One is opened, and the water flows. This is not later piety decorating a medical detail; it is cross-referencing the Gospel itself invites, and your group can verify every link with the pages in front of them.

The Fathers received it exactly so, and two of their readings resolve threads your group planted weeks ago. St. Augustine, whom Session 2 heard on the ark, taught that the door in the ark's side, through which every saved creature entered, signified this wound: tonight that door opens. And the Fathers read Genesis 2 beside Calvary: as God cast a deep sleep on Adam and formed Eve from his opened side, so from the opened side of the new Adam, asleep in death on the cross, God formed the new Eve, the Church, in the blood and water of her sacraments. The Church is not an institution that administers the crucifixion's benefits at a distance; she is Calvary's daughter, born from the wound, and every font is filled from her birthplace. Zechariah's fountain (Session 7) is opened; the *Vidi aquam* the Church sings through Eastertide, water flowing from the temple's right side, and all to whom it came were saved, is Ezekiel 47 sung at the Easter-time sprinkling rite.

Blood and water: the Fathers heard the Eucharist and Baptism, and the Catechism agrees (CCC 1225): the two sacraments of the Church's ongoing life, both flowing from the one sacrifice. This study is about the water, and tonight the group should at least see the blood beside it: the same wound funds the font and the altar, which is why Baptism has always been ordered toward the Eucharist. (Leader aside: the Eucharistic half of tonight's scene deserves its own study; resist compressing it into a paragraph tonight, and simply point the hungry toward the altar half of the wound.)

Tonight's steelman is the sober historian's: John records blood and water as an anti-docetic proof of real death, full stop; the sacramental reading is centuries of imagination layered onto a forensic detail, and the double-meaning method proves anything, therefore nothing. The answer does not choose between the readings; it shows John insisting on both: the oath serves the real death, and the chapter-7 promissory note, the temple identification, and the fulfillment citations serve the sacramental spring; and the group's discovery seals it from the same pen: 1 John 5:6–8, where water, blood, and Spirit are not a crucifixion detail but the Church's three abiding witnesses. The author himself kept preaching the wound's contents.

Pastoral note: this is the study's Good Friday, and your room will include the grieving, and perhaps someone facing death. Lead slowly; permit silence; do not resolve every sorrow into a point. And keep watch for one small mercy the text offers: among those handling the Lord's body at burial is Nicodemus (19:39), the night visitor of Session 10, now openly, with a hundred pounds of spices. The man who was told he must be born of water and the Spirit ends his recorded story at the opened fountain. Some conversions take exactly that long, and end exactly that well.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman

Genesis 2:21–22 (RSV2CE)

On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.

Zechariah 13:1 (RSV2CE)

And at Calvary, after he had died, the fountain opens under a spear:

But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.
John 19:34 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine • *Tractates on the Gospel of John (Tractate 120)*

St. Augustine, closing the circle he opened for us at the ark, teaches in substance that here a door of life was opened in the side of the second Adam: as Eve was formed from the side of sleeping Adam, so from the side of Christ, asleep in death upon the cross, flowed the sacraments from which the Church, his bride, is formed. The door in the ark, through which the saved entered, was this wound's shadow; the wound is the door's truth.

Leader note: Session 2's plant, ten weeks in the ground, resolves here. If anyone in your group gasped at the ark's door back then and was told to hold the thought: tonight, hand it back to them and let them say it. Tractate 120 is source-verified: the opened-not-pierced observation, the gate of life from which the sacraments flow, and the door in the ark's side are all in its text.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom • *Baptismal Catecheses*

St. John Chrysostom, instructing candidates for the font, teaches in substance that the blood and water are the symbols of the Eucharist and of Baptism, and that the Church is born from both: as God formed Eve from Adam's side, so Christ from his own side formed the Church, giving her birth in the water and nourishing her with the blood. And his catechesis urges the baptized to revere the font and the chalice as gifts flowing from that side.

Leader note: The Church herself reads this catechesis at the Office of Readings on Good Friday (Baptismal Catecheses 3, 13–19): the day and the text belong together in her own prayer. Locus verified; the famous exhortation to approach the chalice as if drinking from his side circulates in his Homily 85 on John, which is why this voice keeps to what the Catecheses themselves say.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Church's Liturgy • *The Vidi Aquam (Eastertide)*

Throughout Eastertide, when the priest sprinkles the assembly with baptismal water, the Church sings Ezekiel's vision: I saw water flowing from the temple, from its right side, and all to whom that water came were saved. The antiphon names the temple; the Church's tradition, taught by John 2:21 (the temple of his body), hears Christ, and in the right side his opened wound: so the parish being sprinkled on an Easter Sunday stands, in the tradition's hearing, in the river from the wound.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1225 is tonight's charter, and it deliberately fuses this study's title verse with this scene: in his Passover Christ opened to all men the fountain of Baptism; he had spoken of his Passion as a baptism

with which he had to be baptized; and the blood and water that flowed from his pierced side are types of Baptism and the Eucharist, the sacraments of new life: from then on it is possible to be born of water and the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God. The Catechism hangs John 3:5 on John 19:34: the sentence of Session 10 is funded by the wound of Session 12.

CCC 766 gives the ecclesial depth: the Church is born primarily of Christ's total self-giving, anticipated in the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross, and it hands on the ancient reading (citing St. Ambrose; the group will hear its twin from Augustine): as Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam's side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross: the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church. When your group asks, someday, why the Church and not just me and Jesus: this paragraph is the answer's root: the wound's water is given in and through the Church born from it: the sacrament's ordinary economy, held together with God's freedom beyond it (Session 14).

Paragraphs for this session: 766, 1225

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

The door in the ark's side (planted Session 2 via Augustine: RESOLVED TONIGHT): the study's longest-held plant. Give the resolution to whoever gasped ten weeks ago.

A fountain opened (Zechariah 13:1, Session 7: RESOLVED TONIGHT): opened by a spear. Draw the line explicitly.

Water and wood (St. Justin's flood reading, Session 2: RESOLVED TONIGHT): saved through water and wood then; water from the wood now. One sentence.

Lifted up like the serpent (Session 10: RESOLVED TONIGHT): the conversation that began with water ended pointing here, and here we are.

Nicodemus (Session 10: COMPLETED TONIGHT): at the burial, openly, with a hundred pounds of spices. Let the room bless him.

Temple river (new tonight via Ezekiel 47 and the Vidi aquam, echoed Session 14): the river deepens as it flows; Session 14's sending will step into the current. Light touch.

Blood beside water (tonight, deliberately unexpanded): Baptism is ordered toward the Eucharist; point, do not develop.

Session Goals

1. The group can retell the scene and name the weight John gives it: solemn eyewitness testimony and two fulfillment citations for one spear-thrust.
2. The group has traced John's own promissory note: temple-body (ch. 2), living water for the thirsty (ch. 4), rivers from his heart when glorified (ch. 7, with John's Spirit gloss), paid at 19:34.
3. The threads have resolved aloud: ark door, fountain opened, water and wood, serpent lifted, Nicodemus openly.
4. The group can say what the Fathers and the Catechism hear in blood and water: Eucharist and Baptism, and the Church born from the side of the new Adam.

5. The steelman (forensic detail only) has been given at full strength and answered from John's own cross-references and 1 John 5.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: John 19:31–37, read slowly, the oath weighed; Q1-Q2

15 min • Build: the promissory note traced (John 2:19–21; 4:10–14; 7:37–39; Ezekiel 47); Q3

10 min • Build: the new Eve and the resolved threads; Q4

10 min • Live discovery: 1 John 5:6–8

10 min • Steelman: forensic detail or fountain?

10 min • Send, Live It, memory verse, closing prayer, and silence

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: The Dig Deeper box, and Q2's medical aside can be one leader sentence. Never cut the promissory-note trace or the closing silence.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, tonight we stand where Mary and John stood, and look on him whom we have pierced. Give this room the quiet of that hill. Open our eyes at the opened side, and let everything this study has taught us flow together there, blood and water, mercy and life. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Is there a place you have stood, a room, a grave, a shoreline, where something ended and, only much later, you understood something had also begun there? What made you finally see it?

QW2. When you look at a crucifix, what do you usually see first? What do you suspect you have been trained not to notice?

Build • into the text

Read John 19:31–37 aloud, slowly, once. Then read verses 34–35 a second time, alone, and let the room sit for a moment before the first question.

Q1. John does something at verse 35 he does nowhere else with this force: he stops the story to testify: *He who saw it has borne witness, his testimony is true... that you also may believe.* And he attaches two Scripture fulfillments to this one moment. What is the evangelist signaling about the spear-thrust and what came out of it?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

That it is not incidental. Writers spend oaths where doubt would be costliest and meaning is densest. John stakes his eyewitness credit on the blood and water and frames the moment with the Passover lamb (not a bone broken) and Zechariah's pierced one: sacrifice and fountain, in the citations themselves. Whatever we conclude tonight, we begin here: the beloved disciple, who stood close enough to see, considered this detail worth an oath, and aimed it at our believing.

Q2. On the plain level: soldiers verify a death; a spear opens the side of a dead man; blood and a clear fluid flow (medical readers have explained the mixture in various ways). Why does the real, physical death matter to John, and to us, before any deeper reading?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Because everything depends on it. If the Son of God only seemed to die, then nothing was paid, nothing conquered, and our baptism into his death (last week's whole session) joins us to a mime. John's oath guards the realism first: a true body, truly dead, truly opened, before witnesses. The deeper readings do not float above the history; they grow out of it, which is why the Church has never feared the medical plausibility of the detail: the fountain is only good news if the death was real.

Q3. Now collect John's own earlier promises, the trail he laid: John 2:19–21 (destroy this temple... he spoke of the temple of his body), Ezekiel 47:1–12 (the water from beneath the temple's threshold, deepening, healing everything it touches), John 4:10–14 (living water for the thirsty), and above all John 7:37–39 with John's own gloss. Assemble it: what did the evangelist promise would happen, from where, and when?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He promised water: living water, rivers of it: *out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water*, words the Church's tradition has read of Christ's own heart (some read the believer's; the font follows the tradition), and he told us plainly what the water is (*this he said about the Spirit*) and when it would flow (*for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified*). In John, the cross is the hour of his glorification, the lifting up he foretold, the climactic center of a glory that includes his rising. So, on that venerable reading, the Gospel has carried a promissory note since chapter 7: water from his heart at his glorification: and Ezekiel had drawn the blueprint: a river from the side of the temple, and Jesus had named his body the temple. At 19:34 the note is paid in front of a witness who swears to it. This is not typology imposed from outside; it is a trail the Gospel itself lays and the Church has followed from the Fathers to the Catechism. The study's method finishes where it started in Session 3: the New Testament reads this way because its authors wrote this way.

Q4. The Fathers put one more text beside the wound: Genesis 2:21–22, Eve formed from the side of sleeping Adam. What did they see, and what long-buried thread from our Session 2 resolves inside it?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They saw the new Eve drawn from the new Adam: as the first bride was formed from the opened side of the first man in his deep sleep, so the Church, Christ's bride, was born from the opened side of the second, asleep in death: born in the blood and water, the Eucharist and Baptism that constitute her life. And Session 2's oldest plant resolves: Augustine taught us the ark's one door, set in its side, through which every saved creature entered: tonight the door it signified stands open. Every font in the world is filled from a birthplace: the Church does not merely commemorate Calvary; she was born there, and she baptizes from her own birth.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: the Johannine pen wrote letters too: in the Church's tradition, the same John, and in one of them he names tonight's elements again, no longer as a moment on Calvary but as something ongoing in the Church. Find **1 John 5:6–8** and read it aloud. What three witnesses does John name, and what tense are they in?

The Spirit, the water, and the blood: and these three agree: present tense, abiding witnesses. The letter names them as present-tense witnesses, joined to the Spirit; the Church has always heard her font and her altar in them. Let the group say where the Church encounters the three today.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection speaks with the sober historian's voice, at full strength: John records blood and water as evidence of real death against early deniers that Christ truly died: a forensic detail with an anti-docetic purpose, exactly why the oath is there. Everything further, fountains and Eves and sacraments, is the devotional imagination of later centuries layered onto serum and gravity. And method matters: a reading that finds Baptism in a wound, a Church in a rib, and a font in a river vision is a method that can find anything anywhere, and a method that proves everything proves nothing. Honor the text by letting it be what it is: a witnessed death, soberly recorded.

Q5. Concede first: what does the anti-docetic reading get right, and why does the Church need it to be right? Then: whose cross-references are we actually following tonight, ours or the evangelist's?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The concession is total as far as it goes: the oath does guard a real death against real deniers, and the Church needs that reading to be true more than the objector does: no real death, no real redemption, and no real baptism into it. If the sacramental reading required the forensic one to be false, we would abandon it tonight. It requires the opposite: fountains flow from facts.

But the claim that everything further is later imagination has a documentary problem: the further readings are earlier than later: they are in the book. It was John, not a medieval allegorist, who identified Christ's body as the temple; John who recorded the promise of rivers of living water from his heart; John who glossed the water as the Spirit and dated its release to the glorification; John who marked the fulfillment with his most direct eyewitness testimony and a citation of the pierced one; and John who, writing again, named the Spirit, the water, and the blood as present-tense witnesses. We did not bring a method to this text; we followed a trail the Gospel itself lays, link by checkable link, as the Church has always followed it, with the group's own hands on the pages. That is precisely what distinguishes apostolic typology from finding-anything-anywhere: Session 3's rule, kept to the end: we read figures where the inspired authors read them, and here the trail is at its plainest.

As for the centuries: they testify against the layering theory, not for it. Within the Fathers' earliest generations, the wound was already the Church's birthplace and the sacraments' spring, and the reading is no party opinion: Chrysostom catechizes Antioch with it, Augustine preaches it in Hippo, the liturgy sings it Ezekiel's river over her fonts to this day. When independent witnesses across the ancient world all read one text one way, the economical explanation is not mass imagination. It is a common inheritance, handed down in the Church's teaching and worship rather than independently invented.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Ezekiel 47:3–5, the river's measurements: ankle-deep, knee-deep, waist-deep, then water to swim in, a river that could not be passed through. Ask: if the wound's river deepens as it flows through history, where is ankle-deep faith in your life, and where is God inviting you past wading depth: into what cannot be controlled, only swum? Christian tradition has often read the

deepening river as the sacramental life growing from Baptism toward the fullness of union with God.

Send • out of the room

QS1. Every font is filled from the opened side. When you next bless yourself with holy water, you now know its address. What changes when grace has a birthplace?

QS2. Nicodemus's walk from night to Calvary took the length of the Gospel. Whose slow journey have you been impatient with, including your own, and what does his hundred pounds of spices teach you about how late love is allowed to arrive?

Live It This Week

- Pray before a crucifix for ten minutes once this week, saying nothing for the first five: only looking on him whom we have pierced.
- Pray the short invocation the Church has long loved, once each day: Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
- If you can reach a Mass this week, receive the wound's other gift: and if you cannot receive, make the spiritual communion prayer at the moment of the chalice's elevation.
- Light a candle for someone who is grieving or dying, and entrust them by name to the opened heart.

Memory Verse

But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.
John 19:34 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, from your opened side came blood and water, the fountain of the Church, the spring of our baptism, the cup of our salvation. Hide us in your wounds. Wash everyone we have prayed for these twelve weeks in the river that flows from your heart, and let us live as people born from your side. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

John 19:31–37 • The scene, the oath, the fulfillments; memory verse at v. 34

John 2:19–21 • His body the temple

Ezekiel 47:1–12 • The temple river; the Vidi aquam; Dig Deeper

John 4:10–14 • Living water promised to the thirsty

John 7:37–39 • Rivers from his heart; John's own gloss: the Spirit, at his glorification

Genesis 2:21–22 • Eve from Adam's side; the Church from Christ's

Zechariah 13:1 • Session 7 thread resolved: the fountain opened

1 John 5:6–8 • Live discovery: the Spirit, the water, and the blood: three abiding witnesses

John 19:38–42 • Nicodemus openly; the arc completed

Session 13

Baptism in Acts

The promise is to you and to your children: what the apostles actually did.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers what the apostolic Church did with everything this study has traced: the urgency of water in Acts, forgiveness and the Spirit attached to the washing, and whole households baptized on the spot. The rail laid in Session 4 arrives at its station: the covenant sign given to children, and the question of infant Baptism answered from covenant grammar, apostolic practice, and the earliest Church's own memory.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism teaches that from the very day of Pentecost the Church has celebrated and administered holy Baptism (CCC 1226), that the sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism (CCC 1250), and that the practice is an immemorial tradition of the Church, with explicit testimony from the second century on, and quite possibly from the apostolic households themselves (CCC 1252).

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study leaves the upper room of doctrine and walks into the street of practice: what did the apostles actually do? The book of Acts answers with a pattern so consistent it becomes almost comic: someone hears the Gospel, and within hours, sometimes minutes, somebody is looking for water. Three thousand at Pentecost, baptized that day (2:41). The Ethiopian official, mid-chariot-ride: *See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?* (8:36). Saul of Tarsus, three days blind, and Ananias's first imperative: *And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name* (22:16). The Philippian jailer, baptized *at once... the same hour of the night* (16:33), wounds still wet. Cornelius's house, where the Spirit falls before anyone reaches the water, and Peter's conclusion is *not well then, no need*, but *Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people?* (10:47). Whatever the apostles believed about Baptism, they believed it was urgent, and urgency is doctrine wearing work clothes: notice, throughout, what the texts attach to it: sins washed away, forgiveness, the Gift.

Listen to what Peter attaches to the water in the Church's very first sermon, because it is everything this study has traced, in apostolic shorthand: *Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* (2:38). Forgiveness and the Gift: Ezekiel's clean water and the Spirit within, John's water and the Coming One's Spirit, the Lord's water-and-Spirit birth, now offered from a Jerusalem porch to a crowd that asked *what shall we do?* And then the next verse, the one this session turns on, and Peter chooses covenant grammar to say it: *For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him* (2:39). To you and to your children: at the very first proclamation of the Gospel, before the first font has dried, the promise is declared generational. Every Jewish hearer knew that grammar; it is Genesis 17's.

Then the households, which the group will discover: Lydia, whose heart the Lord opened, *baptized, with her household* (16:15), and the jailer, told *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household*, then *baptized at once, with all his family* (16:31–33). The text records Lydia's opened heart, then her household's baptism; for the jailer, the promise is spoken over him and his house, the word is preached to all in the house (16:32), the family is baptized, and the house rejoices at his belief (16:34). Acts never pauses to tell us the ages in these houses, and tonight's steelman will make honest use of that silence. But the *oikos*, the household, is not a random sample of individuals; it is the Bible's covenant unit since Abraham circumcised *all the men of his house* the day the sign was given. When Luke says household, his Bible-formed readers hear the covenant word.

Tonight's steelman deserves its very best presentation, because it is held by Christians of deep seriousness, and because a version of it lives in many Catholic pews too: every explicit conversion in Acts is an adult who repents and believes; infants can do neither; the household texts never mention a baby, so the argument is from silence; believer's baptism guards the sacrament's meaning; and even Tertullian, this study's own Session 1 voice, counseled delaying children's baptism. All of it must be said at full strength, including the Tertullian point, because honesty about our sources is this study's signature. The answer then comes in waves: Acts is missionary literature, so first-generation converts are adults by definition, and the real question is what the apostles' churches did with the children of the converted, which Acts answers in covenant grammar (2:39) and household practice; the silence argument cuts backwards, because a Church of converted Jews whose children had been covenant members from eight days old for two thousand years would have erupted if the apostles had suddenly excluded children from the covenant sign, and Acts, which faithfully records the explosive controversy about circumcision (chapter 15), records no controversy about children at all; Colossians 2 (Session 4) names Baptism the new circumcision, the sign whose previous administration was, by God's command, infant-inclusive; and the earliest Church's memory is unembarrassed: Origen calls infant baptism a tradition received from the apostles, the ancient church order under St. Hippolytus's name has parents answering for little ones who cannot speak, and St. Cyprian's council of sixty-six bishops debated only whether to baptize infants *sooner* than the eighth day. Even Tertullian testifies against his own advice: one does not argue for delaying a practice that does not exist; his objection was prudential caution, not sacramental denial.

Underneath the apologetics, keep the theology warm, because it is the study's own deepest lesson: an infant at the font is the purest picture of everything the group has learned. Birth is received (Session 10). The verbs are passive (Session 11). The sea was crossed by Israel's children alongside their parents (Exodus 12:37). The eight-day-old of Genesis 17 contributed nothing and was given everything. The Catechism says it without blushing: the sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism (CCC 1250). Believer's baptism intends to honor faith; infant baptism displays grace: and the Church, requiring the parents' and the Church's own faith around every font, refuses to make the two compete. The baptized infant will spend a lifetime doing what every one of us is doing: growing into what was given.

Pastoral notes, and tonight needs them: your room may include parents whose adult children have left the faith (Acts 2:39 is a promise to pray, not a mechanism that failed); grandparents anxious about unbaptized grandchildren (equip them with gentleness: an invitation opens more doors than an alarm, and Session 14 will give God's freedom its full hour); and possibly someone baptized in a Protestant community wondering about their own baptism: tell them plainly, and joyfully, that the Catholic Church recognizes as the one Baptism every Baptism conferred with water, the Trinitarian formula, and the

intention of doing what the Church does, and never repeats a valid Baptism. That fuller conversation is next week's; plant the reassurance tonight wherever it is needed.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations...

Genesis 17:12 (RSV2CE)

The covenant grammar of the old sign reappears, on the Church's first morning, attached to the new one:

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him."

Acts 2:38–39 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

Origen of Alexandria • *Commentary on Romans*

Origen, whom the group has met at the sea and the Jordan, writing in the early third century, heir to churches of apostolic foundation, teaches that "the Church received from the apostles the tradition of baptizing infants," and he reasons from the practice: those entrusted with the divine mysteries knew that there is in all persons the stain the water washes.

Leader note: Same honest caveat as always with Origen, and note what makes this testimony strong: he states infant baptism not as a party position to defend but as a received apostolic tradition to explain: the practice was the given; the theology followed.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage • *Letters*

St. Cyprian, with a council of sixty-six bishops gathered at Carthage in the year 253, answered a bishop who wondered whether infants should wait until the eighth day, as circumcision had: they teach in substance that the mercy and grace of God are to be denied to no one born, and that the infant, newly born, having contracted no sin of his own, should be brought to the washing without delay. When a council of that century took the question up, the debate was over whether eight days was too long to make mercy wait.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Apostolic Tradition • *the ancient church order under the name of St. Hippolytus*

The ancient Roman church order handed down under the name of St. Hippolytus, a document whose date, provenance, and authorship scholars debate (it is commonly placed in the early third century), directs in substance: baptize the little children first; those who can speak for themselves,

let them speak; and for those who cannot, let their parents or someone from their family speak for them. The rubric is unargued, the tone administrative: the rubric legislates for infants as a matter of course: an administrative witness to settled practice, whatever remains debated about the document itself.

Leader note: Honesty about the source: the attribution to Hippolytus and the document's exact date are debated by scholars; its witness to early practice is why we cite it, and we label it as the tradition labels it.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1226 anchors the whole night: from the very day of Pentecost the Church has celebrated and administered holy Baptism, and the paragraph quotes Peter's Pentecost imperative as its evidence: always Baptism is bound to faith, and always it was administered, not postponed into pure inwardness. CCC 1250 gives infant Baptism its two feet: children, born with a fallen nature, need the new birth; and the sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism; the Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.

CCC 1251–1252 completes the frame: Christian parents recognize the practice as their role of nurturers of the life God entrusts to them; and infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church, explicitly attested from the second century on, while it is quite possible that from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole households received baptism, infants may also have been baptized. Notice the Catechism's own careful honesty about the household texts: quite possible, may also: the Church does not overclaim the silence, and neither does this session. The argument never rested on the nursery census of Lydia's house; it rests on the covenant, the grammar of 2:39, and the unbroken early memory.

Paragraphs for this session: 1226, 1250–1252

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Given to infants (planted Session 4: RESOLVED TONIGHT): the study's longest apologetic rail. Genesis 17:12's eight-day-old, seen with the group's own eyes nine weeks ago, is tonight's foundation. Let them lay the rail's last section themselves at Q4.

Eighth day (Sessions 2 and 4: RESOLVED TONIGHT): eight persons, eight days, and Cyprian's council ruling that even eight days was too long to make mercy wait.

Acts 19 callback (Session 8): the same book that gave John's disciples Christian Baptism baptized whole households: Acts's precision about who needs what water is exactly why its household grammar carries weight.

Grace before (Sessions 10–11, applied tonight): birth received, verbs passive: the infant at the font is the study's whole theology in eight pounds. Name it once, warmly.

One baptism, never repeated (planted tonight, resolved Session 14): the reassurance to Protestant-baptized members is next week's doctrine; plant it wherever pastoral need appears tonight.

Session Goals

1. The group can describe the apostolic pattern in Acts: urgency, water, forgiveness, the Spirit, households.
2. The group has read Acts 2:38–39 aloud and heard the covenant grammar: to you and to your children.
3. The group has discovered the household baptisms of Acts 16 themselves.
4. The steelman (believer's baptism as the apostolic pattern) has been given at complete strength, Tertullian's hesitation included, and answered in waves: covenant grammar, the dog that did not bark in Acts 15, Colossians 2, and the early Church's memory.
5. The group can state why infant Baptism displays the study's deepest lesson: sheer gratuitous grace.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: the pattern of Acts (2:37–41; 8:36; 22:16; 10:44–48); Q1–Q3

10 min • Live discovery: the households of Acts 16

20 min • Steelman: believer's baptism, at full strength, answered in waves

5 min • Build: the infant as the study's theology; Q5

5 min • Send questions

15 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: Q2 (the Ethiopian and Ananias texts can be leader-summarized) and the Dig Deeper box. Never cut any wave of the steelman answer; tonight's objection is the one your group will meet most often in real life.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, on the morning of Pentecost your Church was born preaching, and by evening she was baptizing. Give us tonight the apostles' urgency and the apostles' welcome: for ourselves, for our children, and for all who are far off, every one whom you are calling. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Think of the moment you most wanted to act immediately on good news: a job offer, a birth announcement, a reconciliation. What does urgency reveal about how much we believe something?

QW2. What is something precious you were given as a child, long before you could understand it, that you spent years growing into? Who decided you should have it early, and are you glad they did?

Build • into the text

Set the scene: Pentecost morning, the Spirit poured out, Peter preaching to the crowd. Have a reader take Acts 2:37–41, and tell the group to listen for the crowd's question and every single thing Peter attaches to his answer.

Q1. The crowd is *cut to the heart* and asks: *Brethren, what shall we do?* List everything in Peter's answer (2:38): the actions he commands, and the gifts he promises. Where has this study heard each element before?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Two commands: repent, and be baptized, in the name of Jesus Christ. Two gifts, attached: the forgiveness of your sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The group has spent thirteen weeks meeting every element: cleansing from sin (Ezekiel's sprinkling, Naaman's washing), and the Spirit given through water (the whole counted pairing, the Baptist's promise, the Lord's sentence). Peter's first sermon ends by offering, at a font, exactly what the study traced: and note that he does not say baptism merely pictures these things; the forgiveness and the Gift ride with the washing, which is why about three thousand people got wet that day (2:41).

Q2. The pattern holds across the whole book: the Ethiopian shouts *See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?* (8:36); Ananias tells blind Saul, *why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins* (22:16); the jailer is baptized the same hour of the night, wounds just washed (16:33). What does the sheer urgency of Acts tell us about what the apostles believed the water did?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Urgency alone does not settle the question: a commanded sign can be urgent too, and our separated brethren obey it urgently. But watch what Acts attaches to the urgency: *be baptized... for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit; be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.* The book does not say hurry and testify; it says hurry, and names

what the washing brings. The apostles moved at the speed of what they believed the water carried.

Q3. Cornelius's house complicates the sequence beautifully: the Spirit falls on the whole household while Peter is still preaching, before any water (10:44–48). If baptism were dispensable, this is God's moment to dispense with it. What does Peter conclude instead, and what does that teach about God's freedom and God's sacrament?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commanded them to be baptized. God's surprising freedom (the Spirit ahead of the font, Naaman's lesson from Session 6, next week's full topic) does not cancel the appointed means; it accelerates them. Where the objector reasons the Spirit came, so the water is unnecessary, the apostle reasons the Spirit came, so bring the water at once. God's freedom serves his sacraments; it does not compete with them.

Now the verse this session turns on. Read Acts 2:39 aloud twice: *For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.* On the Church's first morning, before the first font is dry, Peter declares the promise generational, in grammar every Jewish hearer knew from Genesis 17: covenant promises run to you and your children. Hold that, and go hunting.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The hunt. Tell the group: when Acts shows us the Gospel entering Europe, it shows us two baptisms in one chapter, and neither is of an individual. Find both in **Acts 16**: the businesswoman by the river (16:11–15) and the jailer at midnight (16:25–34). Read both aloud and answer: in each case, whose faith does the text record, and who gets baptized?

Lydia: the Lord opened her heart, and she was baptized, with her household. The jailer: believe... you and your household, and he was baptized at once, with all his family. Have them note vv. 32 and 34 too: the word preached to the whole house, the house rejoicing. Let the group notice the pattern's shape without forcing a conclusion yet; the steelman is about to contest it, and the answer will use what they just found.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Tonight's objection, at complete strength, held by serious Christians who love this sacrament: every explicit conversion in Acts is an adult who hears, repents, believes, and is then baptized: repent AND be baptized; the Ethiopian believes and is baptized; the jailer believes and is baptized. Infants can do none of this. The household passages never mention a single infant: building infant baptism on them is an argument from pure silence: for all we know, every member of those houses was a believing adult. The apostolic pattern is believer's baptism, which guards the sacrament from becoming an empty cultural rite performed on the unconsenting; and the early Church itself was not unanimous: Tertullian, this very study's Session 1 voice, explicitly counseled delaying children's

baptism until they could know Christ and ask for him. Infant baptism honors family sentiment; believer's baptism honors what baptism means.

Q4. Concede first, honestly: what is true about the pattern of Acts, and about Tertullian? Then ask the question the objection skips: in a missionary book, who could the first converts possibly be?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede the surface freely: yes, every narrated conversion in Acts is an adult, and yes, Tertullian counseled delay: this study does not hide its sources' complexities, and it will not start tonight. But the adult pattern is exactly what missionary literature must show: Acts records the Gospel's first arrival in each place, and first-generation converts are adults by definition, in every era: the missions in Africa and Asia in living memory baptized adults first too, and their churches baptize infants today without contradiction. The believer's-baptism reading answers a question Acts's conversion stories were never asking. The real question is the next one: what did the apostolic churches do with the children of the converted? And Acts does answer it: in Peter's covenant grammar (the promise is to you AND TO YOUR CHILDREN), and in its household shape, where Lydia's recorded faith issues in her household's baptism, and the jailer's promised salvation is spoken over him and his house before his family is baptized at midnight, the word preached to all in the house and the house rejoicing (16:32, 34). Silence about ages, yes, and the texts are compatible with infants present rather than proof of them: but the *oikos* was Israel's covenant unit since the day Abraham's whole house received the sign, and Luke chose the covenant word.

Now the weightiest consideration: the dog that did not bark. Picture the first churches: overwhelmingly Jewish, whose sons had entered God's covenant at eight days old for two thousand years by God's own command (Genesis 17:12, the group's Session 4 discovery). If the apostles had taught that under the new covenant children must now wait outside the sign until adult profession, they would have been announcing a demotion of children unprecedented in Israel's history: and the New Testament, which faithfully records the ferocious controversy over whether Gentiles needed the OLD sign (Acts 15, Galatians entire), records not one syllable of controversy over children losing access to the new one. That silence is evidence to weigh rather than a formal proof: the absence of the very controversy the theory predicts, in a book that records covenant controversies in detail. Add Colossians 2 as Session 4 argued it: Paul joins the circumcision of Christ to Baptism so closely that the Church has always read Baptism as the covenant sign's fulfillment: a sign whose previous administration was, by God's command, given to covenant-born infants: and the weight of the argument shifts. The question was never why would the apostles baptize covenant children; it was who told the apostles to stop, and no one did.

The early Church's surviving memory, fragmentary as early sources are, runs the same way: Origen, raised in a Christian home in the generations after the apostles, calls infant baptism a tradition received FROM the apostles; the ancient church order under St. Hippolytus's name queues the little children first and has parents speak for those who cannot; and when a third-century council takes the question up, St. Cyprian's sixty-six bishops debate only how soon, ruling that infants need not wait even eight days: while the period's one recorded hesitation, Tertullian's counsel of delay, argues prudence about timing, not that the Church cannot baptize her little ones. Even Tertullian, read honestly, testifies for the practice while advising against it: no one campaigns to delay what no

one is doing; his worry was prudential (sponsors answering for a future they could not guarantee), not a denial that the sacrament works. And to the objection's best instinct, that baptism must not be an empty cultural rite: the Church agrees so fully that she celebrates every infant Baptism in the faith of the Church (CCC 1253), professed aloud at the font by parents and godparents who solemnly undertake the child's formation. The infant is not baptized without faith; the infant is carried by the Church's: as Israel's children were brought through the sea in the nation's crossing. Believer's baptism means to exalt faith. Infant baptism, the Catechism dares to say, is where the sheer gratuitousness of grace shines most: the recipient contributes nothing, achieves nothing, earns nothing, and receives everything: which, after thirteen weeks, your group can recognize as not the exception to how God saves, but the clearest picture of it.

Q5. Step back from the argument into the theology. After everything this study has taught: birth that is received (Session 10), verbs that are passive (Session 11), a sea Israel's children crossed with their parents: why is an infant at the font not an embarrassment to explain, but the study's whole lesson in miniature?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Because an infant can only receive: and receiving is the entire posture this study has watched God require and provide, from the sea Israel could only walk through, to the circumcision made without hands, to Ezekiel's string of I wills, to a birth no one performs on himself. Every adult at the font is trying to become what the infant already is: someone with empty hands. The eight-day-old of Genesis 17 grew into what he was given; so does every baptized baby; so, if we are honest, does every baptized adult, for the rest of their lives. Grace before understanding is not a concession the Church makes to families. It is the Gospel's own order.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group: Luke 18:15–17: *Now they were bringing even infants to him... Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God.* Luke's word is *brephē*: babies in arms. Ask: the disciples' instinct was to make the children wait until they could approach properly: whose instinct in tonight's debate does that resemble, and what did the Lord do with it? (Mark's parallel adds that he was indignant at the hindering and took them in his arms, laying hands on them (Mark 10:13–16); and he made their empty-handedness the kingdom's entrance shape for everyone.)

Send • out of the room

QS1. The promise is to you and to your children. Who are the children, literal or spiritual, whose place in the covenant you are responsible for: and what is one concrete step (a baptism long delayed, a conversation, a persistent prayer) this promise asks of you?

QS2. Three thousand people asked *what shall we do?* and did it that day. Where has God already answered that question in your life, while you have been scheduling the obedience for later?

Live It This Week

- If there is an unbaptized child in your family's orbit, commit this week to one gentle step: a conversation with the parents, an offer to help, or begin praying for that child by name daily.
- Thank your own godparents this week if they are living; pray for them by name if they are not. Someone once spoke for you.
- Read Acts 2 straight through in one sitting and count the verbs of urgency.
- If you were baptized in another Christian community and questions stir tonight, bring them next week: the study's final session is built for them.

Memory Verse

For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.

Acts 2:39 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Father, your Church was baptizing by her first sunset, and she has never stopped. Thank you for every hand that carried us to the water before we could walk to it, and every voice that answered for us before we could speak. Keep the promise running down our generations: to us, to our children, and to all who are far off. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Acts 2:37–41 • Pentecost: repent and be baptized; forgiveness and the Gift; three thousand; memory verse at v. 39

Acts 8:26–39 • The Ethiopian: see, here is water

Acts 22:16 • Ananias to Saul: be baptized, and wash away your sins

Acts 10:44–48 • Cornelius: the Spirit first, and the water commanded at once

Acts 16:11–15, 25–34 • Live discovery: Lydia and the jailer; the households

Genesis 17:12 • Session 4 rail: the covenant sign at eight days

Colossians 2:11–12 • Baptism the circumcision of Christ: the reversed burden of proof

Acts 15 • The controversy that did happen: and the one that did not

Luke 18:15–17 with Mark 10:13–16 • Dig Deeper: bringing even infants to him

Session 14

One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism

The seal that cannot be repeated, the mercy that cannot be bound, and the life that must be lived.

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group gathers fourteen weeks into Paul's seven-fold *one*: one Baptism, unrepeatable, sealing an indelible character; discovers the Great Commission as the Jordan scene turned into the Church's marching orders; receives, at last, the full and honest treatment of God's freedom (baptism of desire, of blood, and the hope for those who die without the sacrament); and is sent to live what the water gave: priest, prophet, and king, under an open heaven.

Catholic Touchstone. The Creed the group professes every Sunday carries tonight in one clause: I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The Catechism completes it: incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the baptized are sealed with an indelible spiritual mark that no sin can erase (CCC 1272), Baptism is the foundation of communion among all Christians (CCC 1271), and God has bound salvation to the sacrament while remaining unbound himself (CCC 1257).

What You Need to Know

The last session has three movements: gather, widen, send. Gather: what the fourteen weeks have built, under Ephesians' great *one*. Widen: the honest edges: other Christians' baptisms, and those who die without the water: the second clause of CCC 1257, promised since Naaman, paid in full tonight. Send: the study refuses to end as information; it ends as commissioning, and its closing prayer is the renewal of baptismal promises.

First, Ephesians 4:4–6: *one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all*. Baptism stands in the sevenfold foundation of Christian unity, between faith and God himself. One baptism means, first, unrepeatable: and here teach the Church's beautiful, strange doctrine of the character: Baptism seals the soul with an indelible spiritual mark, Christ's own seal, which no sin can erase (CCC 1272). St. Augustine reached for the military brand of his day: the deserter still carries the emperor's mark; his desertion changes his loyalty, never his belonging's stamp. This is why the Church has never repeated Baptism: not for the lapsed of the persecutions, not for the returning apostate, not the person who feels their first baptism happened before they meant it: the seal cannot be re-applied because it never left (the appropriate renewal is confession and a life reclaimed, and conditional baptism exists only for genuine doubt that a valid baptism occurred at all). For the scrupulous in your room, this is one of the most consoling doctrines the Church owns: your belonging to Christ is not maintained by the quality of your grip.

One baptism also means one across the Christian divisions, and say this with the joy the Catechism says it: Baptism constitutes the foundation of communion among all Christians, including those not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church; justified by faith in Baptism, they are incorporated into Christ and rightly called brothers and sisters in the Lord (CCC 1271, in substance). Every Baptism

conferred with true water, the Trinitarian formula of tonight's discovery, and the intention of doing what the Church does is the one Baptism; where validity is established, the Catholic Church receives converts without repeating it, because she recognizes her own Lord's seal. In a mixed parish room, with Protestant spouses and in-laws around half the tables, this paragraph heals: fourteen weeks of steelmanning our separated brethren's objections ends by honoring their baptism as fully as our own.

Then the discovery: Matthew 28:18–20, and the group should find in it the Jordan scene of Session 9 folded into a command: *baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*: the theophany become a formula: the Father's voice, the Son in the water, the Spirit descending, now the threefold Name spoken over every font. And *all nations*: Naaman's session promised that grace's reach beyond Israel would offend and prevail; here the reach becomes the errand. Note also the commission's grammar: make disciples by baptizing and teaching: the water and the formation belong together, which the group has lived for fourteen weeks.

Now the widening the study has promised since Session 6, and give it the unhurried honesty it deserves: God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments (CCC 1257). The Church names the unbound mercies she confesses: the baptism of blood, which she has always held (catechumens martyred before the font baptized in their own death for Christ, CCC 1258), and the baptism of desire, which her teaching states with careful precision (the catechumen's explicit desire, with repentance and charity, assures salvation's fruits, CCC 1259; and for those who, through no fault of their own, never knew Christ or his Church yet sincerely seek God and strive to do his will, salvation is a real possibility the Church states with care, CCC 1260). And the tenderest edge: children who die without Baptism: the Church entrusts them to the mercy of God, who desires all to be saved, and to Jesus' own tenderness toward children, which allows us to hope there is a way of salvation for them (CCC 1261): while the same paragraph makes the Church's call all the more urgent not to hinder little children from coming to Christ through Baptism. Someone in your room has been waiting fourteen weeks, or fourteen years, for this: a miscarried child, an unbaptized parent who died, a sibling who left. Keep the Catechism's own distinctions kind and clear (for children, 1261's particular hope; for adults, 1260's careful conditions and the commendation of each soul to the God who reads hearts), and give them the Church's real teaching: confident hope in an unbound mercy, without pretending to a certainty the Church herself does not claim, and without ever making the sacrament seem optional. Both hands, all the way to the end.

Tonight's final steelman lives exactly on that edge, and it is the sharpest of the fourteen: if desire can save, and mercy is unbound, then the exceptions swallow the rule: in practice baptism is optional, sincerity suffices, and mission urgency was always overwrought. The answer: the exceptions presuppose the rule they qualify (baptism of desire is desire FOR BAPTISM: you cannot even describe the exception without the sacrament at its center); the sacrament is covenant certainty while extra-sacramental salvation is real but uncovenanted hope (the Church knows no OTHER means that ASSURES: CCC 1257's own verb); and love has never aimed at minimums: the question what is the least God might accept? is not a question love asks about anyone it loves. The apostles, who knew God's freedom better than we do (they watched the Spirit fall on Cornelius), still ran for water every single time.

End with the sending, because Baptism is a commissioning as well as a birth: the baptized share Christ's threefold anointing as priest, prophet, and king (CCC 1268): worship to offer, truth to speak, service to rule by. Gather the study's images into the charge: the white garment to keep unstained to the end; the open heaven to live under; the sealed guess answered; the name spoken over them still true. The closing

prayer is the renewal of baptismal promises: fourteen weeks of study becoming five spoken *I do*'s. Let the room stand for it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses... And I will put my spirit within you
Ezekiel 36:25, 27 (RSV2CE)

The promise the study traced ends as the unity the Church confesses:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.
Ephesians 4:4–6 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory Nazianzen • *Oration 40, On Holy Baptism*

St. Gregory the Theologian, in the ancient Church's greatest sermon on Baptism, teaches in substance that the gift has as many names as it has splendors: we call it gift, grace, baptism, anointing, illumination, garment of immortality, bath of regeneration, seal: gift, because conferred on those who bring nothing; grace, because given even to debtors; bath, because it washes; seal, because it guards us and marks God's ownership.

Leader note: A lovely closing exercise if time allows: read Gregory's list slowly and ask the group which name the study taught them to love most, and why.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine • *his writings against the Donatists*

St. Augustine, defending the unrepeatable seal across his anti-Donatist works, teaches in substance that Baptism marks the soul as the military brand of his age marked the emperor's soldier: the deserter who flees the ranks still bears the mark; it convicts him while he wanders and identifies him when he returns; and no one re-brands a returning soldier. So the Church receives back the lapsed with penance, never with a second font: the seal outlasts every desertion, waiting.

Leader note: This doctrine is also why the Church recognizes Baptisms conferred in Protestant communities with water, the Trinitarian formula, and the requisite intention: the seal is Christ's, not the minister's or the denomination's, as Session 8's Augustine already taught: it is Christ who baptizes.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

The Creed of the Church • *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*

"I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

Sixteen centuries of Sundays, and the whole of this study, in nine words: one (Ephesians' unity, the unrepeatable seal), Baptism (the water God chose), for the forgiveness of sins (Peter's Pentecost

promise, effected, not merely pictured). The group has been professing the conclusion of this study aloud since before it began.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1272–1274 gives tonight's seal: incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the baptized person is configured to Christ, sealed with an indelible spiritual mark of belonging that no sin can erase (though sin can block the fruits): given once for all, Baptism cannot be repeated: and the seal of the Lord is the seal with which the Holy Spirit has marked us for the day of redemption, kept for the faithful Christian until the end as the condition and root of eternal life. CCC 1271 grounds the ecumenical joy: Baptism as the sacramental bond of unity among all who are reborn by it.

CCC 1257–1261 is tonight's honest widening, and read all five paragraphs in preparation until you can say them with both hands: necessity affirmed from the Lord's own words (1257, with its balancing clause); baptism of blood and of desire bearing Baptism's fruits without the sacrament (1258–1259); salvation possible for those who, without fault, never knew the Gospel yet seek God sincerely (1260); and the children who die without Baptism entrusted, with real grounds of hope, to the mercy of God and the tenderness of Jesus (1261). CCC 1268 sends: the baptized share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and royal office: the study's last doctrine is a job description.

Paragraphs for this session: 1257–1261, 1268, 1271–1274

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

Final inventory, for your eyes: every planted thread has resolved: why water (Sessions 7 and 10); water plus Spirit (9–10); the dove (9); the door in the ark's side (12); baptized into someone (11); the eighth day and the covenant children (13); circumcise the heart (7); the fountain opened (12); water and wood (12); Naaman's child-flesh (10); the Jordan and the true Joshua (9); water-then-Spirit (9); Nicodemus (12). Tonight resolves the last three: **the warning thread** (Session 3: real gifts must be lived: tonight's priest-prophet-king sending is its answer); **he must increase** (Session 8: the baptized life's posture); **the white garment and the open heaven** (11 and 9: gathered into the charge). If the group wants a victory lap, let them name threads from memory: it is a better review than any summary you could give.

One baptism, never repeated (planted Session 13): resolved tonight with the character doctrine and the ecumenical paragraph. Watch for the room member this heals.

God binds and is not bound (planted Session 6): the study's longest pastoral promise, paid in full tonight. Do not rush 1261.

Session Goals

1. The group can place Baptism in Ephesians' sevenfold one and explain both senses of one baptism: unrepeatable, and shared across Christian divisions.

2. The group can describe the baptismal character in Augustine's image and say why the Church never repeats a valid Baptism.
3. The group has discovered the Great Commission as the Jordan scene become formula and errand.
4. The group has received the full teaching on baptism of blood, of desire, and the hope for unbaptized children, with both CCC 1257 clauses intact.
5. The final steelman (the exceptions swallow the rule) has been given at full strength and answered.
6. The group has renewed their baptismal promises aloud, standing, and leaves commissioned: priest, prophet, king.

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

10 min • Win questions

15 min • Build: Ephesians 4:1–6; the seal and the character; Q1-Q2

10 min • Live discovery: Matthew 28:18–20

15 min • Build: God's freedom: desire, blood, and the little ones; Q4

15 min • Steelman: do the exceptions swallow the rule?

5 min • Send questions

15 min • Live It, memory verse, and the Renewal of Baptismal Promises as closing

If you must land at 75 minutes, cut: The Dig Deeper box, and Q1's Ephesians context can be compressed. Never cut the treatment of 1261 or the Renewal of Promises: the first is the study's tenderest debt, the second its true ending.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, fourteen weeks ago we stood at the waters of creation with a sealed question. Tonight we stand at the end with open hands. Gather everything you have shown us, settle it deep, and then do what you have always done with the baptized: send us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win • open the room

QW1. Looking back across the whole study: which single session, passage, or moment most changed how you see your own Baptism? Say why in one sentence.

QW2. What is a promise someone kept to you over a very long time? What did the keeping, not just the promise, teach you about them?

Build • into the text

Read Ephesians 4:1–6 aloud. Paul is begging a divided church toward unity, and he grounds it in seven ones. Notice where baptism stands in the list: between one faith and one God.

Q1. Why does Paul put *one baptism* into the very foundation of Christian unity, alongside one Lord and one God? After thirteen sessions, what can this group say that baptism makes us, that mere agreement never could?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Because baptism is not a shared opinion but a shared birth: the same water, the same threefold Name, the same death and rising, the same Body entered (one body and one Spirit heads Paul's list). Organizations are held together by agreement and dissolve when it fails; organisms are held together by common life. Paul grounds unity in baptism because the baptized are not allies; they are siblings: born of one womb, the font: which is why Christian division is not like a club splitting but like a family estranged: and why the path back always runs through remembering the one birth.

Q2. One baptism means never twice. The Church teaches that Baptism seals an indelible character: Christ's own mark on the soul, which no sin, no desertion, no decade of absence can erase (CCC 1272). St. Augustine compared it to the military brand that a deserter still carries. What does this doctrine mean for someone who abandoned the faith for thirty years: and for someone here who secretly wonders if their baptism took?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

For the deserter: the mark never left you, though the friendship did. Grave sin forfeits sanctifying grace and communion; what it cannot erase is the seal, which identifies you in the far country and at the door coming home. So the Church receives you back through confession, which restores the grace, and never through a second font, because the seal was never lost. For the doubter: your

belonging to Christ is not maintained by the quality of your grip, your memory of the day, or the warmth of your feelings since: it was his act, his seal, given once for all: which is why the appropriate response to a shaky faith is never rebaptism but reclamation: live what is already yours. (Conditional baptism is given only when, after serious investigation, prudent doubt remains whether Baptism was conferred, or conferred validly: a question of fact and form, not of feelings.) There is deep rest in a gift that cannot be un-given.

And one baptism reaches across the Christian divisions. Say it with the Catechism's own joy: Baptism is the foundation of communion among all Christians, including those not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church: justified by faith in Baptism, incorporated into Christ, rightly called our brothers and sisters in the Lord (CCC 1271 in substance). Every baptism conferred with true water, the Trinitarian formula, and the intention of doing what the Church does is the one Baptism: the Church never repeats a valid Baptism, wherever it was given, because she recognizes her Lord's own seal. Fourteen weeks of taking our separated brethren's arguments at full strength ends here: honoring their baptism as fully as our own.

LIVE DISCOVERY

The final hunt. Tell the group: the risen Lord's marching orders contain a scene this study stood inside five weeks ago, compressed into a formula. Find **Matthew 28:18-20**, read it aloud, and answer two questions: where have we seen the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit gathered at a baptism before: and who is the water now for?

The Jordan (Session 9): the Father's voice, the Son in the water, the Spirit descending: become the threefold Name spoken over every font. And ALL NATIONS: Naaman's foreshadowing (Session 6) become the errand: the outsider's cleansing that enraged Nazareth is now the Church's standing assignment. Note too the commission's own pairing: baptizing AND teaching: water and formation together, which is what this group has been doing for fourteen weeks.

Q3. Now the promise this study made in Session 6 and has carried since: *God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments* (CCC 1257). Tonight the second clause gets its full hour. What does the Church actually teach about the martyred catechumen, the sincere seeker who never knew Christ, and the child who dies without Baptism?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Three mercies, each ancient. The baptism of blood: catechumens martyred before the font have always been held by the Church to be baptized by their death for and with Christ: the water of the font and the blood of witness flow from the same side (Session 12). The baptism of desire: catechumens who die with the explicit desire for Baptism, together with repentance and charity, are assured the salvation they could not receive through the sacrament (CCC 1259). And those who, through no fault of their own, never knew Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and strive to do his will, MAY attain salvation: the Church holds it may be supposed such persons would have desired Baptism explicitly had they known its necessity (CCC 1260): a real possibility, stated in the Catechism's own careful mood. And the children: the Church entrusts children who die without

Baptism to the mercy of God who desires all to be saved, and to the tenderness of Jesus who said let the children come to me: which allows us, the Catechism says, to HOPE that there is a way of salvation for them (CCC 1261): a real, grounded hope, honestly named as hope rather than inflated into a certainty the Church does not claim: and the same paragraph turns the hope into urgency: all the more, do not hinder the little ones from coming through Baptism. If tonight this touches a grief you carry: a child lost before the font, a parent or friend who died unbaptized: hear the Church's actual voice: for the children, the grounded hope of CCC 1261; for adults, CCC 1260's careful possibility and the commendation of each soul to God who reads hearts: she does not consign; she entrusts, to a mercy she has spent fourteen weeks showing you is wider than its own channels. Hope is not a consolation prize. It is what love is allowed to do at the edge of what it cannot see.

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

The study's final objection, and its sharpest, at full strength: you have just taught that desire saves, that sincere seekers who never heard of Christ can be saved, that martyrdom saves without water, and that we may hope even for unbaptized infants. Then the exceptions have swallowed the rule. In practice, on your own showing, the water is optional: God's mercy finds everyone the sacrament misses. Why then the fourteen weeks? Why the apostolic urgency, the midnight baptisms, the missions? Sincerity suffices: which means the honest conclusion of your own final session is that this whole study documented, magnificently, something unnecessary.

Q4. Feel it fully first. Then examine the exceptions themselves: what does each one have at its center?

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Look at what every exception is made of. The baptism of desire is desire FOR BAPTISM: explicit in the catechumen, implicit in the seeker who would have desired it had they known: you cannot even state the exception without the sacrament at its center; it is not an alternative route around the font but the font's grace reaching those who were running toward it. The baptism of blood is dying with and for Christ: Baptism's own content (buried with him: Session 11) at maximum intensity. And the hope for the children rests on entrusting them to the very Christ the font unites us to. The exceptions do not compete with the rule; they orbit it. Abolish Baptism's reality and every exception dies with it: there is nothing left to desire, no death to share, no mercy with a face.

Second: the Church's word for what the sacrament gives is not possibility but assurance: she does not know of ANY MEANS OTHER than Baptism that ASSURES entry into eternal beatitude (CCC 1257's own language). This is the difference between covenant and hope: what God has bound himself to give through the sacrament: forgiveness, rebirth, incorporation: we know with the certainty of his promise (initial grace to be lived in persevering fidelity, not a guarantee of final perseverance: Session 3's warning stands to the end): the whole study's grammar, from Naaman's appointed river onward: grace with an address. What God does beyond his sacraments, we hope with real but uncovenanted hope. A father who promises his child dinner at his table has not thereby promised nothing because he might also feed a stranger at the door: and no child reasons from the father's generosity to strangers that the table is optional.

Last, and let the study end on this: minimalism is not a mode love has. What is the least God might accept? is not a question anyone asks about a person they love: love asks what is the most I can bring them?: and the most, this study has spent fourteen weeks unwrapping: forgiveness, the indwelling Spirit, incorporation into Christ, sonship declared, the seal that outlasts desertion, the open heaven. The apostles, who watched God's freedom outrun them at Cornelius's house, did not conclude that water could wait: they concluded, can any one forbid water?, and ran for it: three thousand times on the first day. God's unbound mercy is our hope for those beyond the font. It was never an argument for leaving anyone we love outside it. The study ends where Acts is still running: toward the water, with everyone we can carry.

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

For a strong group, one last treasure: Revelation 22:1-2, the Bible's final chapter: *the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb*, with the tree of life on its banks, its leaves for the healing of the nations. The Scriptures open with the Spirit over the waters and close with a river from the throne of the Lamb: the pierced one of Session 12, enthroned, the fountain never closing. Ask: where is Ezekiel 47's deepening river now, and how deep does the group intend to wade?

Send • out of the room

QS1. You are baptized: priest (worship to offer), prophet (truth to speak), king (service to order). Which of the three offices have you been leaving unexercised, and what is its first act this month?

QS2. Fourteen weeks ago you sealed a guess. Tonight, one last writing assignment, unsealed: finish this sentence for yourself: *Because I am baptized, I will...*

Live It This Week

- Celebrate your baptismal anniversary this year as a real feast: the date is in your calendar since Session 9; plan the meal, light your baptismal candle if you have it, tell the story.
- Exercise each office once this month: offer one intentional act of worship beyond Sunday (priest), have one honest conversation about the faith (prophet), take up one hidden act of service (king).
- Bless yourself with holy water at every entrance and exit of the church from now on, deliberately: you now know the water's whole biography, from Genesis 1:2 to the opened side to your own forehead.
- Pass it on: pray about leading, hosting, or inviting someone into the next study: baptizing and teaching belong together, and formation is how the baptized keep walking.

Memory Verse

one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:5-6 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

(Have the group stand. Leader asks; all answer. This is the Roman Missal's Renewal of Baptismal Promises, in the second form of the renunciations, with the profession of faith: the study's true conclusion.)

Do you renounce sin, so as to live in the freedom of the children of God? : I do.

Do you renounce the lure of evil, so that sin may have no mastery over you? : I do.

Do you renounce Satan, the author and prince of sin? : I do.

Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth? : I do.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered death and was buried, rose again from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father? : I do.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting? : I do.

And may almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us new birth by water and the Holy Spirit and bestowed on us the forgiveness of our sins, keep us by his grace, in Christ Jesus our Lord, for eternal life. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Ephesians 4:1–6 • The sevenfold one; memory verse at vv. 5–6

Matthew 28:18–20 • Live discovery: the Jordan become formula and errand

Acts 10:44–48 • Callback: God's freedom running ahead, and the apostles running for water

Luke 18:15–17 • Callback: let the children come; the ground of 1261's hope

Revelation 22:1–2 • Dig Deeper: the river from the throne of the Lamb

CCC 1257–1261, 1268, 1271–1274 • Necessity and freedom; the three offices; the seal and the one Baptism

The Nicene Creed • I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins