

HOLD FAST

Salvation from First Grace to Final Glory

A fourteen-session inductive Catholic Bible study
on justification, sanctification, and whether salvation can be lost

Complete Leader Guide

Catholic Armory · Scripture quotations from the RSV, Second Catholic Edition

How to Use This Study

The question. Can a true Christian lose their salvation? This study does not answer that question in Session 1; it hands it to your group sealed in an envelope, and spends fourteen weeks letting Scripture answer it inductively: the group reads, discovers, and concludes before any authority is quoted. The envelopes open in Session 8. Trust the sequence; it is the study's engine.

Each session has three parts. The *Leader Preparation Guide* is yours alone: background, the session's Old Testament roots, three Voices of the Church, Catechism connections, a leader-only Thread Watch, goals, and a time plan with pre-chosen cuts. The *Discussion Guide* is the night itself: opening prayer, two Win questions, the Build (numbered questions with boxed answers to share after the group has worked, live discovery moments, and one objection presented at full strength and answered from the text), two Send questions, Live It This Week, a closing prayer, and a memory verse. The *Leader Reference Card* lists every passage in order.

The Take-Homes. One two-page sheet per session, handed out as the group leaves: what was found, the session's three Voices, the week's practices, the memory verse, and the reading before next session. Take-Home 1 carries the sealed My Guess box; Take-Home 8 carries its answer.

The steelmans. Every objection in this study, Once Saved Always Saved above all, is presented in its strongest form, from its own best texts, before it is answered. Your group will meet these arguments from people they love; they deserve to meet them here first, at full strength, with the answer earned rather than asserted.

The threads. A sealed guess planted in Session 1 opens in Session 8. An Exodus map planted in Session 1 (saved at the sea, being saved in the wilderness, will be saved in the land) pays off in Sessions 3, 7, 10, 13, and 14. A verse parked in Session 1 is answered in Session 12. And the study's title is hiding in a verse your group will not read until the final night. Guard these; the Thread Watch boxes tell you how, week by week.

Sources. Scripture quotations follow the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition. Citations of the Fathers, Doctors, and saints distinguish direct quotation from summary ("teaches, in substance") and mark attributed sayings as attributed; Catechism references are given by paragraph throughout.

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Session 1: Saved, Being Saved, Will Be Saved

The three tenses of salvation

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers, in Scripture's own grammar, that the Bible speaks of salvation in three tenses: we *have been* saved, we *are being* saved, and we *will be* saved. Salvation is a past event, a present process, and a future hope, and every one of those is the Bible's own way of speaking.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church holds all three tenses together without flattening any of them. Justification is truly conferred (past), the Christian life is a real growth in grace (present), and final salvation is the object of hope, sustained by the grace of final perseverance for which the Church teaches us to pray (CCC 162, 2016).

What You Need to Know

This study exists because of one question, and tonight you will hand that question to the group in writing: **can a true Christian lose their salvation?** Many of your participants have been asked some version of it on a doorstep, in a dorm room, or by an Evangelical friend: "Are you saved?" Most Catholics freeze at that question, not because the faith has no answer, but because nobody ever showed them that the Catholic answer is the most biblical one available.

Resist the urge to answer the big question tonight. This session does something smaller and more important: it lets the group watch the New Testament use three different tenses for the same word. Paul says "in this hope we *were saved*" (Rom 8:24) and "by grace you *have been saved*" (Eph 2:8). He also says the word of the cross is power "to us who *are being saved*" (1 Cor 1:18) and commands a church he loves to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12). And Jesus says "he who endures to the end *will be saved*" (Mt 24:13), while Paul writes that "salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed" (Rom 13:11). None of these texts is obscure, and none is in tension with the others once you see the shape: salvation is a rescue already accomplished in Christ, applied to us and now unfolding in us, and completed in glory.

A grammar note you can hold in reserve (the Dig Deeper box covers it): the Greek verb is the same in all three cases, *sōzō*, "to save, rescue, heal." Ephesians 2:8 uses a perfect participle (a completed action with continuing effect), 1 Corinthians 1:18 a present participle (ongoing action), and Matthew 24:13 a simple future. The three tenses are not a Catholic gloss laid over the text; they are the text.

One pastoral note. Some in your group will have real anxiety underneath this topic: a fear that they are not "saved enough," or a wound from a tradition that demanded a datable conversion moment. Tonight is not the night to resolve that. Let the three tenses do their quiet work: the past tense is solid ground, the present tense is dignity (God is at work in you now), and the future tense is hope, not threat. The study will treat assurance honestly and at length in Session 12.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The Old Testament gives Israel one great salvation story, and the Church has long read it in exactly these three tenses: the Exodus. Israel *was saved* at the Red Sea, a finished rescue she did not accomplish herself. Israel *was being saved* through forty years of wilderness, fed with manna and water from the rock, learning to trust. And Israel *would be saved* in the Promised Land, still ahead of her, and not automatically: the wilderness generation itself fell short, a warning Paul presses and this study will read in full. The whole shape of the Christian life is drawn here first, limits included.

This three-tense reading is the Church's typological map rather than a scheme any single verse states outright, but it is anchored in the apostle's own use of the story: St. Paul makes the connection himself, and makes it as a *warning*. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 he runs through the Exodus (the cloud, the sea, the supernatural food and drink) and then says something that should stop the room: "with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness" (1 Cor 10:5). People who were genuinely rescued at the sea genuinely fell before the land. "Now these things happened to them as a warning... Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:11-12). Tonight the group only discovers the map; do not preach the warning. The wilderness will return in Session 7.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Augustine of Hippo

On the Gift of Perseverance (c. 428)

Near the end of his life, St. Augustine devoted an entire work to the question of persevering to the end. He teaches, in substance, that final perseverance, actually remaining in Christ until death, is a gift of God and not an achievement we can guarantee from our own resources. That is why, he argues, the Church begs God for it in her daily prayers: nobody asks God for what he already securely owns.

Notice what this does to tonight's three tenses: the greatest theologian of grace in the West treats the future tense of salvation as something to be *prayed for*, held in confident hope rather than carried in the pocket.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Gregory of Nyssa

The Life of Moses (4th century)

Reading the Exodus as the map of the soul's journey to God, St. Gregory teaches, in substance, that perfection in the Christian life is not a finish line we cross but a perpetual pressing forward into God, whose goodness has no limit. To stop moving, for Gregory, is the real danger. And to draw the application (ours, from his teaching): growth itself is what a saved life looks like.

Modern scholars call this his doctrine of *epektasis*, borrowing St. Paul's word for "straining forward" to what lies ahead (Phil 3:13). It is the present tense of salvation, "being saved," given its full dignity: not a sign that the rescue failed, but the rescue working.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. John Henry Newman

An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, ch. 1 (1845)

"In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

Newman is writing about the growth of doctrine, but the line names something true of every living thing in grace: in this life, standing still is not an option Scripture offers. The middle tense of salvation, the long "being saved," is not a defect in God's plan. It is where we live.

Catechism Connection

CCC 162. Faith can be lost; to live, grow, and persevere in faith to the end, we must nourish it with the word of God and beg the Lord to increase it. The Catechism says this plainly and without panic, which is exactly the register this study wants.

CCC 1996. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help God gives us to respond to his call. Every tense of salvation, including our cooperation, runs on this. Session 2 is built on it.

CCC 2016. The children of the Church rightly hope for the grace of final perseverance and the reward of God for good works accomplished with his grace. Hope, not presumption and not despair: the study ends here in Session 12 and Session 14, but the note is struck tonight.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Thread 1: the sealed guess (plant tonight). At the end of the session, every participant writes an answer on the Take-Home sheet's My Guess box: *"Can a true Christian lose their salvation? Why or why not?"* Fold, seal, name on the outside, collect them. They open in **Session 8**, after the group has read the warning passages and the mortal sin texts for themselves. Do not debate the question tonight, and do not tip your hand.

Thread 2: the Exodus map (plant tonight). Saved at the sea, being saved in the wilderness, will be saved in the land. It returns in Session 3 (the Red Sea and Baptism, 1 Cor 10:1-2), in Session 7 (the fall in the wilderness, 1 Cor 10:5-12), and resolves at the Promised Land in Sessions 13 and 14. Tonight the group should only see the *map*, not the casualties.

Thread 3: the crown (do not name it). The study's title comes from a verse the group will not read until Session 14. If anyone asks where the title is from, smile and say it will be the last thing we read together. Crown imagery surfaces on its own in Sessions 10 and 11.

Parked question: assurance. If someone quotes 1 John 5:13 ("that you may know that you have eternal life"), affirm it warmly as real Scripture that we will sit with properly in Session 12. Write it on the parking lot list where the group can see it. Do not resolve it tonight.

Session Goals

1. Every participant can name the three tenses of salvation and cite one verse for each.
2. The group discovers the Exodus, read with 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, as the Church's great map of the three tenses.
3. Each participant drafts a personal, biblical answer to the question "Are you saved?"
4. Every participant writes and seals a My Guess answer to the study question, to be opened in Session 8.
5. The anxious hear the night as good news: God is at work in you, now.

Time Note

Plan for 75 minutes: Win 12, Build 45, Send 12, prayer and sealing the guesses 6. If you are running long, cut **Build question 6** and the **Dig Deeper** box (it is on the Take-Home in spirit; the grammar survives without the Greek). Never cut the live discovery in questions 4 and 5, and never cut the sealing of the guesses: the whole study leans on that envelope.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you began a good work in each of us before we could ask for it, and you have promised to bring it to completion. Open the Scriptures to us tonight. Give us honest minds, humble hearts, and the courage to ask real questions. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- When you hear the word "saved," what picture comes to mind first: a moment, a process, or a destination? Where do you think that picture came from?
- Has anyone ever asked you, point blank, "Are you saved?" What did you say, and how did it feel?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: have three volunteers read Ephesians 2:8, 1 Corinthians 1:18, and Matthew 24:13 aloud, in that order, from their own Bibles. Ask the group to listen for one word that appears in all three.

1. All three passages use the same word: saved. Look closely at the *tense* in each one. What does each passage actually say about *when* salvation happens?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Ephesians 2:8 is past: "by grace you **have been saved** through faith." A completed gift. 1 Corinthians 1:18 is present: the cross is the power of God "to us who **are being saved**." Something ongoing. Matthew 24:13 is future: "he who endures to the end **will be saved**." Something still ahead.

Let the group say it before you do: Scripture itself speaks of salvation in three tenses. Nobody has to choose one verse and explain away the others.

2. Read Romans 8:24 and Philippians 2:12-13. Paul wrote both letters. How does he manage to say "we were saved" in one and "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" in the other without contradicting himself?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Because for Paul both are true at once. In Romans 8:24 he adds the key in the same breath: "in this hope we were saved," a past rescue whose completion is still hoped for. And Philippians 2:12 never says "achieve your salvation"; it says work *out* what God has worked *in*: "for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (2:13). The command to work rests on the promise that God is already working.

If the group lands on "salvation is a gift we have really received and are now living out toward its completion," they have found the session.

3. Romans 13:11 says "salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed." What does that sentence assume about salvation that surprises people?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

It assumes salvation, in its full sense, is still *ahead* of believers. Paul is writing to Christians, people who "first believed," and tells them their salvation is approaching. If salvation were only a past transaction, the sentence would make no sense. This is the future tense in Paul's own voice, spoken without any anxiety.

Live discovery. Say: "This three-part shape did not start in the New Testament. Israel lived it first, in her one great rescue story. Turn to 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 and read it slowly. Paul is retelling a story. Name every event he is pointing to, and find where each one lives in the Old Testament." Give them time with the text. They should surface: the cloud (Ex 13:21-22), the sea (Ex 14), the supernatural food (manna, Ex 16), the supernatural drink and the rock (Ex 17:1-7).

4. Lay the Exodus story over tonight's three tenses. Where was Israel saved? Where was Israel *being* saved? Where *would* Israel be saved?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Saved at the Red Sea: a finished rescue Israel did not achieve, only received (Ex 14:13-14, "the LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be still"). Being saved in the wilderness: forty years of being fed, led, tested, and taught to trust. Will be saved in the Promised Land: the goal of the whole journey, still ahead.

The Exodus is Scripture's own map of the three tenses. Tell the group to keep this map; the study will walk it to the end.

5. Notice what Paul calls the sea crossing in 1 Corinthians 10:2: Israel was "baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." Why do you think Paul reaches for *that* word? (Hold your answer loosely; we will earn it properly in Session 3.)

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Paul reads the Red Sea as a foreshadowing of Baptism: a rescue through water that begins a journey. Do not develop this tonight; just let the group feel the door open. Session 3 walks through it.

Build, Then Press

Leader: present this at full strength. Let it land before anyone answers.

A thoughtful Evangelical friend says: **"Scripture says you HAVE BEEN saved, past tense, by grace through faith. It is finished. And to be clear, we grant that Scripture speaks of salvation in past, present, and future tenses; our claim is that everyone truly justified and born again will certainly be preserved by God to final salvation. So when you Catholics say 'I hope so' or 'I'm working on it,' that sounds like you either doubt God's promise or think you can add to what Christ did. Which is it?"**

6. Feel the force of that before answering it. Then answer it, using only verses we have read tonight.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

First, grant everything true in it: Ephesians 2:8 is really in the Bible, the past tense is real, and salvation is by grace, not our own doing. A Catholic should say "I have been saved" without flinching.

But the same Paul wrote "to us who are being saved" (1 Cor 1:18), "in this hope we were saved" (Rom 8:24), "salvation is nearer to us now" (Rom 13:11), and "work out your own salvation" (Phil 2:12); and Jesus himself said "he who endures to the end will be saved" (Mt 24:13). The choice the question offers, past tense or unbelief, is a choice Scripture never makes. The fully biblical answer uses every tense the Bible uses: **I have been saved, I am being saved, and I hope with confidence to be saved.** That is not doubt; that is quoting the whole New Testament instead of one verse of it.

DIG DEEPER · The Grammar Under the Hood

The Greek verb in all three passages is *sōzō*: to save, rescue, heal. In Ephesians 2:8 it appears as a perfect participle, *sesōsmenoi*: a completed action whose effect continues, "you are in a saved state." In 1 Corinthians 1:18 it is a present participle, *sōzomenois*: "those who are in the process of being saved." In Matthew 24:13 it is a simple future, *sōthēsetai*: "will be saved."

Three inspired tenses of one verb. The Church did not invent the three tenses of salvation; she inherited them from the grammar of the New Testament.

SEND · Taking It Out

- Next time someone asks you "Are you saved?", what will you say? Try your three-tense answer out loud on the person next to you, right now.
- Which tense do you personally need to hear most this season: the solid past, the growing present, or the hopeful future? Why?

Live It This Week

Pray the verse. Once a day, pray Philippians 2:12-13 slowly, and rest a moment on "for God is at work in you."

Write the answer. Write out your own three-tense answer to "Are you saved?" in your own words, and keep it in your Bible.

Watch the tense. Once this week, notice yourself thinking of salvation as only past or only future, and gently supply the missing tenses.

The Sealed Guess

Leader: hand out Take-Home 1 now, but before anyone leaves, have everyone complete the My Guess box on the back: "Can a true Christian lose their salvation? Why or why not?" Two or three honest sentences. Fold it, seal it with tape, name on the outside. Collect them all. They will not be opened until Session 8, and no one, including you, discusses them until then.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord Jesus, you rescued us at a price we could not pay, you are at work in us now, and you have set a hope before us. Guard what you have begun. Teach us to hold fast. Through the weeks ahead, give us love for your word and honesty with each other. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

Philippians 2:12b-13 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
Ephesians 2:8	Opening reading: past tense, "you have been saved" (Build Q1)
1 Corinthians 1:18	Opening reading: present tense, "who are being saved" (Build Q1)
Matthew 24:13	Opening reading: future tense, "will be saved" (Build Q1)
Romans 8:24	"In this hope we were saved" (Build Q2, steelman answer)
Philippians 2:12-13	Work out / God works in (Build Q2, steelman answer, memory verse)
Romans 13:11	"Salvation is nearer to us now" (Build Q3)
1 Corinthians 10:1-4	Live discovery: Paul retells the Exodus (Build Q4-5)
Exodus 13:21-22	Discovery target: the pillar of cloud
Exodus 14	Discovery target: the Red Sea; v. 13-14 "the LORD will fight for you"
Exodus 16	Discovery target: the manna
Exodus 17:1-7	Discovery target: water from the rock
1 John 5:13	Parking lot only if raised; assurance treated in Session 12

Session 2: The Rescue We Could Not Stage

Grace comes first, last, and everywhere in between

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that in Scripture, God's saving initiative always comes first: he loves, chooses, and rescues people who were helpless to rescue themselves and did nothing to deserve it. Grace is not God's response to our goodness; our goodness is a response to God's grace.

Catholic Touchstone. "Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us" (CCC 1996), and even our preparation to receive grace is itself grace at work (CCC 2001). The Church condemned as heresy the idea that we can take the first step toward God on our own. Whatever this study says later about cooperation, warnings, and perseverance sits on this foundation and never leaves it.

What You Need to Know

This is the session that makes the rest of the study safe to teach. In Session 7 the group will read hard warnings, and in Session 8 they will learn what mortal sin is. If those sessions land on hearts that think salvation is a wage, they will produce either pride or terror. So before a single warning is read, plant the flag where the Church plants it:

everything is grace. The rescue was staged, paid for, and executed by God while we were incapable of contributing to it. "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6).

Be ready to name the classical error, because someone may voice its modern form. *Pelagianism*, associated with the fourth-century monk Pelagius, held in effect that human beings can take the decisive steps toward God by their own natural willpower, with grace as help for the willing rather than rescue for the helpless. The Church condemned this, and later also rejected the softer "semi-Pelagian" idea that at least the *first* step, the beginning of faith, is ours. The Second Council of Orange (529), whose canons received papal confirmation and shaped all subsequent Catholic teaching on grace, taught that even the beginning of faith comes from the gift of grace. When a modern person says "God helps those who help themselves" as if it were Scripture, that is the old error in a work shirt. It is not in the Bible. Tonight's texts say nearly the opposite: God helps those who *cannot* help themselves, and his prevenient grace then makes their free cooperation possible.

At the same time, do not let the pendulum swing into a different error. Grace does not bulldoze the person; it awakens and frees the person. Ephesians 2:8-10 makes both moves in three verses: salvation is "not your own doing," and yet we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Grace produces walkers, not passengers. The full grammar of cooperation is Session 5's work; tonight simply refuse to let anyone hear "all grace" as "so nothing matters."

Pastorally, watch for the participant who cannot receive this. Many people find unearned love harder to accept than a to-do list; a to-do list leaves us in control. The father in Luke 15 runs to a son who has rehearsed a wage-earner's speech ("treat me as one of your hired servants") and never lets him finish it. Some in your group are still rehearsing that speech. Let the text interrupt it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Two Old Testament texts carry tonight's weight. **Deuteronomy 7:7-8** gives God's own explanation for choosing Israel: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you." The reasons God states are his love

and his oath to the fathers (Deut 7:8): nothing about Israel's size or résumé. Love and promise-keeping are the whole ground, and God says so out loud.

Ezekiel 36:25-27 is God's promise to a people in exile precisely because of their sin, and every verb belongs to God: *I* will sprinkle clean water upon you, *I* will cleanse you, a new heart *I* will give you, a new spirit *I* will put within you, *I* will take out of your flesh the heart of stone. Israel's contribution to the passage is a stone heart. Let the group count the "I will" statements themselves; the discovery works better than the lecture. And note the pairing of *water* and *spirit* in God's promised cleansing. Say nothing about it tonight. The group will meet those two words again in Session 3, in the mouth of Jesus, and the ones who notice will feel the floor of Scripture holding together under them.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Augustine of Hippo

Confessions, Book X, ch. 29

"Give what you command, and command what you will."

Augustine's whole theology of grace fits in that one prayer: God's commands are real, and the ability to keep them is itself God's gift, to be begged for rather than assumed. Augustine himself later recounted, in *On the Gift of Perseverance*, that this very line from the *Confessions* infuriated Pelagius when he heard it read aloud: it conceded nothing to human self-sufficiency, and Pelagius knew it.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Ambrose of Milan

On Jacob and the Happy Life

The bishop who baptized St. Augustine teaches, in substance, that the Christian's boast is never his own innocence. He writes that he will not glory because he is righteous or free from sins, but because he has been redeemed and his sins are forgiven. Our standing before God rests on what we have received, not on what we have avoided.

This is worth hearing from Ambrose in particular: a man of formidable moral seriousness, and precisely not a man who thought moral seriousness was the ground he stood on.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Act of Oblation to Merciful Love (1895)

In the offering she composed and kept with her, St. Thérèse prays that in the evening of this life she will appear before God with "empty hands," asking him not to count her works, because she wants to be clothed in his own justice and to receive from his love the eternal possession of himself.

Empty hands are not empty piety here. Thérèse worked, suffered, and loved heroically; the Church made her a Doctor. But she refused to present any of it as a payment. The hands that hold nothing can receive everything. That is tonight's session in a single image.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1996. "Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call." Undeserved is the load-bearing word.

CCC 1998. Our vocation to eternal life is *supernatural*: it exceeds anything our nature could produce or claim. Not a boost to our efforts.

CCC 1999. Sanctifying grace is the gratuitous gift God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into the soul to heal it of sin and sanctify it. The study returns to this paragraph in Sessions 4 and 6; plant it now.

CCC 2001. The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace. The Catechism here quotes St. Augustine on our collaboration: God works in us so that we also work. This is the bridge paragraph to Session 5; you may quote it if the cooperation question surfaces early.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Ezekiel plant. Water and spirit in Ezekiel 36:25-27 pay off in Session 3 when the group reads John 3:5. Do not connect them tonight; if a participant does, congratulate them and move on without developing it.

Cooperation line (plant, do not develop). The phrase "grace produces walkers, not passengers" and Ephesians 2:10 both point at Session 5 (faith working through love). If someone presses "so do our works matter or not?", write it on the parking lot list for Session 5 and keep tonight on grace's priority.

Exodus map check-in. If anyone connects tonight to last week (rescue at the sea came before any wilderness obedience), affirm it: that is exactly the map. Sequence matters: rescue first, response after.

Sealed guesses. They stay sealed. If the group asks, tell them Session 8 and enjoy their impatience.

Session Goals

1. The group can state, from the texts, that God's saving initiative precedes any human deserving.
2. Participants discover the all-divine verbs of Ezekiel 36:25-27 for themselves.
3. The group can distinguish "salvation is all grace" from "nothing we do matters," and knows the second question is coming in Session 5.
4. Participants can name why "God helps those who help themselves" is not Scripture and not Catholicism.
5. Each participant identifies one place they are still rehearsing the hired-servant speech.

Time Note

Plan for 75 minutes: Win 12, Build 45, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 3** (John 6:44 still appears in the answer to question 6) and compress the **Dig Deeper** box to one spoken sentence. Never cut the Ezekiel discovery or the Luke 15 reading; they carry the session's heart.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you loved us before we were lovable and sought us before we were looking. Quiet in us tonight every voice that says we must earn our way to you. Give us the honesty to come with empty hands, and the joy of finding them filled. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- What is the biggest thing anyone has ever done for you that you could not repay? What did it feel like to receive it?
- Some people find it easier to give help than to receive it. Which are you, honestly, and why do you think that is?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: have someone read Romans 5:6-10 aloud, slowly. Ask the group to catch every word Paul uses to describe what we were when Christ died for us.

1. What three words does Paul use in Romans 5:6-10 for the people Christ died for? What do they have in common?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Weak and ungodly (v. 6), sinners (v. 8), enemies (v. 10). Each is worse than the last, and none of them can merit, initiate, or purchase the rescue; even our later cooperation is itself enabled by grace. "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." The rescue was staged entirely from God's side, timed by God, aimed at people who could not ask for it properly, let alone earn it.

Draw out verse 8: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." The proof of the love is its timing.

2. Read Deuteronomy 7:7-8. Israel asks, in effect, "why us?" What reason does God actually give for choosing them, and what reasons does he explicitly rule out?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Ruled out: size, impressiveness, merit ("you were the fewest of all peoples"). Given: "it is because the LORD loves you," and because he keeps the oath he swore. The reason for the love is the love. God goes out of his way to prevent Israel from ever constructing a résumé explanation for their election.

If someone finds this circular, agree cheerfully: it is. Every truly free gift is. The alternative, love with a reason underneath it, is a wage.

3. Read John 6:44 and John 15:5. According to Jesus, what can a person do toward salvation without God acting first?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (Jn 6:44): even the approach to Jesus begins with the Father's drawing. "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5): not "less," not "little," nothing. The initiative and the enabling both belong to God.

Hold the balance: being drawn is not being dragged. The Father draws; the person still comes. How our free response and God's grace work together is a question this study will honor properly in Session 5; tonight settles only who moves

first.

Live discovery. Say: "Now watch God describe a future rescue in his own words. Turn to Ezekiel 36:25-27. Read it twice. First time: count how many times God says 'I will.' Second time: find what, if anything, the people contribute." Let them work.

4. What did you count, and what did you find? Who does everything in this passage, and what is the people's contribution?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Every saving verb is God's: I will sprinkle clean water upon you, I will cleanse you, a new heart I will give you, a new spirit I will put within you, I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone, I will put my spirit within you. The people's contribution to the passage is the heart of stone. God even promises to "cause you to walk in my statutes": obedience itself will run on his gift.

Notice, without pressing it, that the promised rescue comes through *water* and *spirit*. File that pairing away; it returns next week.

5. Read Luke 15:17-24. The prodigal son rehearses a speech on the road home. What kind of arrangement is he proposing, and what does the father do with the proposal?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He proposes a wage arrangement: "treat me as one of your hired servants." Sonship is gone, he assumes, but employment might be negotiable; he will work off the debt. The father never lets him finish the speech. He runs (undignified for a patriarch), embraces, kisses, and orders the robe, the ring, and the feast: the regalia of a *son*, not a servant's contract. The son came proposing wages; the father restored a relationship.

Ask a follow-up if the room is warm: which speech are you still rehearsing with God?

Build, Then Press

Leader: present this at full strength.

A sincere voice, maybe inside your own head, says: **"This is beautiful, but be practical. God helps those who help themselves. Surely we take the first step, show some good will, clean up a little, and then God meets us. Otherwise, why would anyone even try?"**

6. Where does that sentence, "God helps those who help themselves," actually come from? And what do tonight's texts say to it?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Not from the Bible. It is a proverb of self-reliance, popularized in English by Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanack, with roots in older Greek sayings, and it expresses almost exactly the error the Church condemned in the Pelagian controversies: that the decisive first step is ours.

Tonight's texts answer it directly. Christ died for us while we were *helpless*, not while we were helping ourselves (Rom 5:6). No one comes unless the Father draws (Jn 6:44). Even the new obedient heart is something God gives, not something we bring (Ezek 36:26). The true sentence is: God helps those who *cannot* help themselves, and his help arrives first. And to "why would anyone try?": grace does not remove the trying, it creates it. "Created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph 2:10). More on that in Session 5.

DIG DEEPER · The Council That Guarded Grace

In 529, a council at Orange in southern Gaul, whose canons were confirmed by the pope, settled a question that had simmered for a century after St. Augustine: is at least the *beginning* of faith our own unaided doing? The council

answered no. Even the first movement toward God, the initial desire for faith, comes from the gift of grace. If anyone says we reach for God first and grace responds, said the council in substance, he contradicts the Scriptures.

The Catechism carries the same teaching today: "The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace" (CCC 2001). The Church has been guarding this door for fifteen centuries.

SEND · Taking It Out

- Where in your life are you still proposing the hired-servant arrangement: trying to earn what God wants to give? What would it look like to let him finish his sentence instead of yours?
- Who in your life believes they are too far gone, too "helpless," for God to want them? What could you do this week to carry Romans 5:8 to them, in deed if not in words?

Live It This Week

Empty hands. Begin each day's prayer with thirty seconds of thanks for graces you did nothing to earn, before you ask for anything.

Catch the proverb. If you hear or think "God helps those who help themselves" this week, silently answer it with Romans 5:6.

One undeserved gift. Do something kind this week for someone who has not earned it and cannot repay it. Notice what that teaches you about how God loves.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, while we were still far off, you saw us and ran to meet us. Thank you for a love that came first. Take from us the heart of stone, give us the heart of flesh you promised, and teach us this week to receive before we earn. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."

Romans 5:8 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
Romans 5:6-10	Opening reading: helpless, sinners, enemies (Build Q1)
Deuteronomy 7:7-8	God's reason for choosing Israel (Build Q2)
John 6:44	No one comes unless the Father draws (Build Q3, Q6)
John 15:5	"Apart from me you can do nothing" (Build Q3)
Ezekiel 36:25-27	Live discovery: the all-divine verbs; water and spirit (Build Q4)
Luke 15:17-24	The prodigal's wage speech and the father's answer (Build Q5)
Ephesians 2:8-10	Not your own doing; created for good works (leader background, Q6 answer)
Romans 5:8	Memory verse

Session 3: Born of Water and the Spirit

Baptism: where the rescue reaches you

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the New Testament speaks of Baptism not as a symbol of a salvation already received elsewhere, but as the moment God applies the rescue to a person: new birth, forgiveness of sins, union with Christ's death and resurrection, incorporation into his Body.

Catholic Touchstone. "Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit" (CCC 1213). Justification, the subject of the next two sessions, "is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith" (CCC 1992). This session is where the study's past tense, "you have been saved," gets a date and a place in each participant's own life.

What You Need to Know

Last week ended with God doing everything: I will sprinkle clean water upon you, I will put my spirit within you. Tonight's session opens with Jesus telling Nicodemus, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). Ezekiel's promise and Jesus's requirement use the same two words. Let the group make that connection themselves; it is the hinge of the night. The God who promised water and spirit through a prophet delivers water and Spirit in a sacrament.

Know the New Testament's baptismal grammar cold, because it is stronger than most Catholics expect. Peter's first sermon centers its response on a command and a purpose clause (his exhortation continues through Acts 2:40): "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" (Acts 2:38). Ananias to Saul: "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16). Paul: baptized into Christ's death, buried with him, raised to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3-4); "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). Peter again, in the sentence Protestant commentators wrestle with most: "Baptism... now saves you" (1 Pet 3:21). And Paul to Titus: "he saved us... by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). None of this language is decorative. The inspired writers talk about Baptism the way you talk about the thing that actually did something.

Two precisions keep the night Catholic rather than magical. First, 1 Peter 3:21 carries its own anti-magic clause: Baptism saves "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 water does not work like soap or like a spell; it works because God acts through it; in adults it engages the person's faith and conscience, and infants are baptized in the faith of the Church, professed on their behalf (CCC 1250, 1252). Sacraments are God's instruments, not our technology. Second, the effect can be received by an infant precisely because it is God's work and not the recipient's achievement: the whole of Session 2 was preparation for that sentence.

Finally, hold one distinction quietly in reserve; do not teach it tonight. Baptism confers an indelible spiritual mark that no sin can erase (CCC 1272), *and* the life of grace it confers is a life, which Scripture treats as something that can be wounded and even killed in the baptized. The Catechism itself says the mark remains "even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation." If a sharp participant asks tonight whether baptismal grace can be lost, do not dodge and do not lecture: say "the Church distinguishes the mark, which is forever, from the friendship, which is alive, and Sessions 7 and 8 are where we open that question with the texts in front of us." Then write it on the parking lot list. That question is the study.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The Old Testament is soaked in baptismal foreshadowing, and the New Testament authors do the connecting themselves, which makes for superb live discovery. **The flood:** Peter says Noah's family was "saved through water," then adds, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you" (1 Pet 3:20-21). **The Red Sea:** Paul says Israel was "baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor 10:1-2), the very passage your group read in Session 1; the Exodus map now pays its first dividend, because the rescue-through-water that began Israel's journey prefigures the rescue-through-water that begins ours. **Naaman:** the Syrian general, told to wash seven times in the Jordan, nearly refuses because it is too simple and the river too ordinary; when he obeys, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child" (2 Kings 5:14): restored like a child, in the Jordan, where John would one day baptize. **Circumcision:** Paul calls Baptism the circumcision "made without hands" (Col 2:11-12); since God commanded circumcision, the sign of entry into his covenant people, for infants on the eighth day (Gen 17:12), the group can discover for themselves why the Church has never seen infant Baptism as a departure from biblical religion.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Justin Martyr

First Apology, ch. 61 (c. 155)

Writing an open explanation of Christian practice to the Roman emperor, St. Justin describes how converts are "born again" through washing in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and says this washing is called *illumination*, because those who receive it are enlightened in their understanding.

This is one of the earliest surviving descriptions of Christian Baptism outside the New Testament, and there is nothing "merely symbolic" in it: within living memory of the apostles' students, the Church is speaking of Baptism as new birth and light.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Gregory of Nazianzus

Oration 40, On Holy Baptism (381)

Preaching on Baptism, St. Gregory piles up its names in wonder: it is gift, grace, anointing, illumination, the garment of immortality, the bath of rebirth, the seal, and everything that is precious. Baptism is called gift, he explains in substance, because it is given to those who bring nothing.

The Catechism quotes this very passage in its own teaching on Baptism (CCC 1216). Sixteen centuries later, the Church still cannot say it better.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · Tertullian

On Baptism, ch. 1 (c. 200)

The early Christian writer Tertullian (a witness of the early African church, though never canonized) opens his treatise on Baptism with a famous image: "we, little fishes, after the example of our *IXΘΥΣ* Jesus Christ, are born in water."

Ichthys, Greek for fish, was an early Christian acrostic: *Iēsous Christos Theou Huios Sôtēr*, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." The image says what the early Church ordinarily taught: Baptism, by Christ's own command, is the regenerating bath in which Christians come to life.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1213. Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through it we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God.

CCC 1263-1266. The effects, stated without hedging: all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins (1263); the baptized becomes a new creature, an adopted son of God, a member of Christ, a temple of the Holy Spirit (1265); sanctifying grace, the grace of justification, is infused (1266).

CCC 1257. "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments." The one-sentence answer to the good thief question, and a model of Catholic precision: the sacrament is truly necessary and God is truly free.

CCC 1272. Baptism seals the Christian with an indelible spiritual mark that no sin can erase, even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation. Leader background tonight; load-bearing in Sessions 7 through 9.

CCC 1992. Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. The bridge into Sessions 4 and 5.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Ezekiel payoff (let them find it). When John 3:5 is read, someone should remember last week's "clean water" and "new spirit." If no one does, ask innocently what tonight's two key words were promised through a prophet last week. This is the study's first full plant-and-payoff; let the group enjoy it, and tell them to stay alert, because the study will keep doing this.

Exodus map, second station. Session 1 planted the map; tonight 1 Corinthians 10:1-2 marks Baptism as the Red Sea crossing. The group is now *in the wilderness* on their own map. Do not mention what happened to the wilderness generation; that is Session 7's floor to drop.

The mark and the friendship (guard the door). If the "can baptismal grace be lost?" question surfaces, park it warmly for Sessions 7 and 8, using the mark/friendship distinction only as far as written in What You Need to Know. Do not preview the answer; the sealed guesses depend on the question staying open.

Sealed guesses. Still sealed. Session 8.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers the Ezekiel 36 / John 3:5 connection themselves: promised water and spirit, delivered water and Spirit.
2. Participants can cite at least three New Testament texts in which Baptism effects something (forgiveness, new birth, union with Christ), not merely signifies it.
3. The group works through the "just a symbol" objection at full strength and answers it from the text.
4. Participants can explain the good thief in one Catechism sentence (CCC 1257).
5. Each participant leaves intending to find and mark their own baptism date.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes; this is a full night. Win 12, Build 55, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (fold Acts 22:16 into your own summary after question 1) and compress the **Dig Deeper** box to one spoken sentence; Naaman already lives on the Take-Home rather than in the discussion, so he costs you nothing. Never cut the Ezekiel/John discovery, the steelman chain, or the circumcision discovery: those three carry the session.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, through water you saved Noah, through water you led Israel out of slavery, and through water and the Holy Spirit you have given us new birth. Tonight, teach us what you did for us in Baptism, and make us grateful for a gift most of us were too young to remember receiving. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- What do you actually know about the day of your own baptism? The date, the church, who was there, any stories?
- Why do you think water shows up in so many rescue stories, in Scripture and everywhere else? What is it about water?

BUILD · Into the Text

Live discovery, first thing. Say: "Last week we read God's promise in Ezekiel 36. Tonight we start with Jesus, at night, talking to a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Read John 3:3-5. Then somebody tell me why this passage should sound familiar." Wait. Let them find it.

1. What did Jesus say is required to enter the kingdom of God, and where have we heard those two words together before?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). Water and spirit: the exact pair God promised through Ezekiel: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you... a new spirit I will put within you" (Ezek 36:25-26). The promise made through a prophet in exile is delivered by the Son in person. From the earliest centuries the Church has heard John 3:5 as spoken of Baptism, and the surrounding chapter agrees: immediately after this conversation, Jesus and his disciples go into the Judean countryside and people are being baptized (Jn 3:22-23).

Also notice the stakes as Jesus states them: this is entry language. Born of water and the Spirit, or no entry into the kingdom. Whatever Baptism is, Jesus does not talk about it as optional decoration.

2. Read Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16. Peter is preaching to the crowd at Pentecost; Ananias is speaking to the newly converted Saul. In each case, what is baptism said to *do*?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Acts 2:38: "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." Baptism is *for* forgiveness and is joined to receiving the Spirit. Acts 22:16: "Rise and be baptized, and **wash away your sins**." Saul has already met the risen Jesus on the road, already believes, and is still told his sins are washed away in baptism.

Neither text says baptism *pictures* a forgiveness that happened elsewhere. Both attach the forgiveness to the washing.

3. Read Romans 6:3-4 and Galatians 3:27. What does Paul say happens to a person *in* baptism? Watch his prepositions.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Baptized *into* Christ Jesus, baptized *into* his death, buried *with* him, raised to walk in newness of life; "as many of you

as were baptized into Christ have **put on** Christ." Paul's prepositions are union language: baptism joins a person to Christ's dying and rising, the way being plunged under water and brought up again enacts a burial and a raising. This is why the Church says the baptized person is a "new creature" (CCC 1265). Something happened, in the strongest sense of the word.

Live discovery. Say: "Peter reaches back to the oldest water-rescue there is. Read 1 Peter 3:20-21. What Old Testament event is he pointing to, and what does he dare to say about it?"

4. What does Peter say Baptism does, and what does he immediately clarify that it is *not*?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He points to the flood: eight persons "saved through water," and then the astonishing sentence: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, **now saves you**." The Greek word behind "corresponds to" is *antitypos*: the flood was the type, Baptism the fulfillment. Then Peter guards it from magic in the same breath: "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 water is not soap and not a spell; it saves because the risen Christ acts through it and it engages the person before God.

That double move, "now saves you" plus "not as a removal of dirt," is the entire Catholic doctrine of sacraments in miniature: truly effective, never mechanical.

Build, Then Press

Leader: present this at full strength; it deserves it, because millions of sincere Christians hold it.

A Baptist friend, who loves the Lord, says: "**Baptism is an ordinance, not a means of salvation. It is the outward symbol of an inward faith, obedience after the fact, like a wedding ring: precious, commanded, but not the thing itself. Look at the evidence. Paul said 'Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel' (1 Cor 1:17); would he say that if baptism saved? And the thief on the cross was never baptized, yet Jesus promised him Paradise that very day. Salvation is by faith; water is the picture of it.**"

5. That is a serious argument from a serious Christian. Take its two proof texts in turn: read 1 Corinthians 1:13-17 in context, and Luke 23:39-43. Then answer from everything we have read tonight.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

First honor its strength: it protects grace from magic, and 1 Peter 3:21 itself makes the anti-magic point. The disagreement is not about whether God alone saves; it is about whether God has chosen to save *through* the washing he commanded.

On 1 Corinthians 1:17: read verses 13-16 and the problem comes into focus: Corinthian factions were branding themselves by their baptizer ("I belong to Paul... I belong to Cephas"). Paul thanks God he personally baptized few of them, precisely so no one could say they were baptized in his name, and he names exceptions he did baptize (Crispus, Gaius, the household of Stephanas). His point is about his role and their factions, not about baptism's power; the same Paul wrote Romans 6:3-4 and Galatians 3:27.

On the thief: the Church has an exact answer, and it is one sentence long: "God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments" (CCC 1257). The thief hung beside the Lord of the sacraments, who is free to give what his sacraments give. The Church has always confessed that the desire for Baptism, and martyrdom for Christ, bring its fruits to those who cannot receive the water (CCC 1258-1260). The exception is real, and it proves the rule rather than dissolving it: nobody argues from the thief that preaching or faith are optional; his case is extraordinary in every respect.

And to "symbol": ask the friendly question. If Baptism were only a picture, what do we do with "for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38), "wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16), "buried with him... raised" (Rom 6:4), "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27), "now saves you" (1 Pet 3:21), and "the washing of regeneration" (Titus 3:5)? A wedding ring is a fine image for what a symbol is; but Scripture talks about Baptism the way we talk about the wedding vows: the moment the thing

itself happens.

Live discovery. Say: "One more. Read Colossians 2:11-12. What does Paul compare Baptism to? Then read Genesis 17:9-12 and find the detail about when that older sign was given."

6. What is Baptism's Old Testament counterpart in Colossians 2, and what does Genesis 17 tell us about who received that sign? What follows?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Paul calls Baptism a circumcision "made without hands": in Baptism "you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God" (Col 2:11-12). Circumcision was the God-commanded sign of entry into the covenant people, and Genesis 17:12 commands it for infants on the eighth day. Children were never too young to be brought into God's covenant; their entry rested on God's covenant command, not their own comprehension; and so the Church baptizes her infants within her own professed faith.

This is why the Church baptizes infants and has from ancient times, and why Session 2 matters here: if Baptism were our achievement, an infant could not receive it. Because it is God's gift to the helpless, an infant is in some ways the *clearest* case: empty hands, receiving everything (CCC 1250 makes exactly this point: the sheer gratuitousness of grace shines forth in infant Baptism). Note honestly: Scripture nowhere narrates an infant's baptism by name; it narrates whole "households" baptized (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor 1:16) and gives us the covenant logic. The practice comes to us from the Church's living tradition reading that logic, which is exactly how the apostles expected the faith to be handed on.

DIG DEEPER · One Baptism, Confessed in the Creed

In the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), regularly professed at Sunday Mass, the Church confesses: "I confess one Baptism **for the forgiveness of sins**." The phrase is lifted straight from Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:38). When the Church wrote her creed, she did not say Baptism pictures forgiveness; she confessed it is *for* forgiveness, and she has said so at Mass ever since.

A good pocket fact: the earliest Christians argued about many things, but the broad early witness, East and West, held Baptism's saving efficacy in common.

SEND · Taking It Out

- You were probably baptized before you could remember it. How does it change things to learn that the biggest thing that ever happened to you happened before your first memory?
- Who could you tell this week about what your Baptism actually did? A godchild, a sibling, a friend who thinks Catholic baptism is empty ritual?

Live It This Week

Find the date. Call your parents or your parish and find the date of your Baptism. Write it in your Bible next to Romans 6:4, and consider marking it every year like the birthday it is.

Use the water. Each time you bless yourself with holy water entering a church this week, do it slowly, as a deliberate renewal of your Baptism.

Renew the promises. One evening this week, pray the baptismal promises: reject sin, profess the Creed, and thank God for the day he made you his own.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord Jesus, in the waters of Baptism you buried our old life and raised us into yours. Thank you for the day we

cannot remember, whose seal can never be lost; keep us faithful to the grace it planted. Make what you planted in us grow, keep us close to you, and bring to the font those who are still waiting at the water's edge. Amen.

SCRIPTURE 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)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
John 3:3-5	Opening live discovery: born of water and the Spirit (Build Q1)
Ezekiel 36:25-27	Discovery target: the promised water and spirit (from Session 2)
John 3:22-23	Context: Jesus's ministry moves straight to baptizing (Q1 answer)
Acts 2:38	Baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Build Q2)
Acts 22:16	"Be baptized, and wash away your sins" (Build Q2)
Romans 6:3-4	Baptized into his death, buried and raised (Build Q3, memory verse)
Galatians 3:27	"Put on Christ" (Build Q3)
1 Peter 3:20-21	Live discovery: the flood; "Baptism... now saves you" (Build Q4)
1 Corinthians 1:13-17	Steelman text read in context (Build Q5)
Luke 23:39-43	Steelman text: the good thief (Build Q5)
Titus 3:5	"The washing of regeneration" (Q5 answer)
Colossians 2:11-12	Live discovery: circumcision made without hands (Build Q6)
Genesis 17:9-12	Discovery target: covenant sign given to infants (Build Q6)
Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:16	Household baptisms (Q6 answer)
2 Kings 5:14	Naaman in the Jordan (leader background; on the Take-Home)

Session 4: Justified

God's verdict makes new

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers what justification is: God, by sheer grace, truly making a sinner right with himself, and discovers from Abraham's own story that Scripture shows justification really conferred at a beginning (Trent calls it a translation into the state of grace; CCC 1992 locates it in Baptism) and then genuinely increased and proved across a life: a living relationship, not a filing.

Catholic Touchstone. "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (CCC 1989, quoting the Council of Trent). When God declares a sinner righteous, his word accomplishes what it says: he does not merely file a new verdict about us; he makes a new creation of us (2 Cor 5:17). And this justification "is conferred in Baptism" (CCC 1992), which is why last week comes first.

What You Need to Know

The word "justification" makes people's eyes glaze, and it should not, because it names the biggest question a human being can ask: how does someone like me get right with someone like God? Tonight needs two moves. First, the group must feel the sheer gift of it, because Paul is relentless on this: "they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24); God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom 4:5); "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Rom 5:1). Nothing in Session 4 takes back a syllable of Session 2. Initial justification is utterly unearned; the Council of Trent opens its justification decree by saying exactly that, and anathematizes anyone who says we can be justified by our own works without grace.

Second, the group must see what the gift *is*. Here Catholics and classical Protestants genuinely differ, and you should be able to state both sides cleanly. In the classical Protestant account, justification is *forensic*: a courtroom declaration in which Christ's righteousness is credited (imputed) to the believer's account while the believer remains, in himself, a sinner; Luther's traditional tag is *simul iustus et peccator*, at once righteous and a sinner. (The classical Reformed add, emphatically, that God also regenerates and sanctifies everyone he justifies; their claim is only that this renewal is distinct from the forensic ground of the verdict.) The Catholic account agrees the language of reckoning and verdict is really there (Rom 4 uses accounting words), but holds that when God declares, reality obeys. The God who said "Let there be light" and got light does not issue verdicts that leave the defendant unchanged. So justification *includes* real interior renewal: "if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17); "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified" (1 Cor 6:11); Christ was made sin "so that in him we might **become** the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Become, not merely be counted.

Tonight's live discovery gives the group the biblical data that strains the single-instant courtroom picture: Scripture will not confine Abraham's righteousness-by-faith to one instant. Hebrews 11:8 praises the faith of his first obedience (Gen 12), before any reckoning is recorded. Genesis 15:6, quoted in Romans 4, says his belief was "reckoned... as righteousness." And James 2:21 asks, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?", citing Genesis 22, years later on the story's own timeline. If justification were a datable instant, Scripture has given us too many dates. The Catholic reading receives all three: a gratuitous beginning, a living growth, a costly proving. Do not weaponize this against Romans 4; Paul's point there, that Abraham was justified by faith *before and apart from* circumcision and the law's works, is a point the Church happily makes with him.

Keep tonight's steelman on the *nature* of justification (legal fiction versus real transformation). The "faith alone" question gets its own full night next week; if someone fires that gun early, park it visibly for Session 5.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Abraham is the Old Testament root tonight, on Paul's and James's explicit instructions; the discovery section walks his three moments (Gen 12:1-4, Gen 15:1-6, Gen 22:9-14). Two other roots stand behind the Catholic instinct that God's saving verdict transforms. **Psalm 51**: David, guilty and confronted, does not ask the judge for a favorable filing; he asks, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps 51:10). The Hebrew verb translated "create" here is the Genesis word, used in Scripture of God's own making. And **Ezekiel 36:26** returns for the third time in four sessions: the promised rescue was never a verdict alone but a transplant, the heart of stone out, the heart of flesh in. Your group has now met that verse often enough to say it with you.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Against Heresies, Book IV, ch. 20 (2nd century)

"The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God." (The line is often popularized as "the glory of God is man fully alive.")

A student of St. Polycarp, who knew St. John, St. Irenaeus's sentence, applied to tonight (the application is ours, drawn from his anthropology): God's glory is not in mere verdicts but in creatures made *alive*. What God gets out of justifying you, so to speak, is you, alive with his life and turned to behold him.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Thomas Aquinas

Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 113, a. 9

St. Thomas argues that the justification of the ungodly is, in one respect, a greater work than the creation of heaven and earth: creation's natural good passes away, but the good of grace in a single soul is greater than the natural good of the entire universe, and it endures unto eternal life.

Read that again slowly to the group if you use it: the quiet miracle that happened at your Baptism outweighs, in Thomas's sober judgment, the making of the galaxies. That is what "justified" means.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Leo the Great

Sermon 21, On the Nativity (5th century)

"Christian, recognize your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition."

Preaching on Christmas, St. Leo tells the baptized what they now are, and the Catechism opens its whole section on Christian morality with this very quotation (CCC 1691). Notice the logic of his warning: only a real change can be betrayed. Nobody warns a legal fiction not to go back.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1987. The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us: to cleanse us from our sins and communicate to us "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" and through Baptism.

CCC 1989. "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man." The Catechism is quoting the Council of Trent word for word. This is the session's spine.

CCC 1990-1991. Justification detaches from sin and reconciles; it is acceptance of God's righteousness, and with it, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts. The verdict comes with an infusion.

CCC 1992. Justification is merited for us by the Passion of Christ and conferred in Baptism. No prior work of ours merits it, and the adult's free assent is itself grace's gift; everything in the courtroom is real.

CCC 1995. The Holy Spirit is the master of the interior life; justification entails the sanctification of the whole being.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Abraham's three moments (handle with care). The discovery that justification language spans Abraham's decades quietly loads the study's sealed question: a righteousness that lives and grows is a different kind of thing from a verdict in a file. Do **not** say the next sentence out loud in any form: living things can also die. That door opens in Sessions 7 and 8. If a participant says it themselves, keep your face neutral, thank them for reading closely, and park it.

Ezekiel 36, third appearance. Sprinkled water (S2), water and Spirit (S3), and now the new heart as what justification actually confers. Let the group notice the verse is following them. That feeling, that Scripture is one fabric, is a study goal in itself.

"Faith alone" ceasefire. Tonight's fight is legal-fiction-versus-real-change only. If sola fide erupts, write it large on the parking lot list labeled SESSION 5 and promise the objection will get its strongest form next week, from you personally.

Sealed guesses. Still sealed. Four sessions to go; you may enjoy saying only that.

Session Goals

1. The group can define justification as God really making a sinner right with himself, gift first, transformation included.
2. Participants discover the three Abraham moments (Gen 12, 15, 22) and the three New Testament texts that attach faith and justification language to them.
3. The group can state the imputation view fairly and answer it from 2 Cor 5:17, 1 Cor 6:11, and 2 Cor 5:21.
4. Participants connect justification to their own Baptism (CCC 1992) and to the new heart of Ezekiel 36.
5. No one leaves thinking Session 4 revoked Session 2: the gift remains a gift.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes; the Abraham discovery needs unhurried page-turning. Win 10, Build 55, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Psalm 51 can be one spoken sentence in your summary) and compress the **Dig Deeper**. Never cut the Abraham sequence or the steelman; they are the night.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, we cannot stand before you on our own record, and you have not asked us to. Thank you for the gift of being set right with you in Christ. Tonight, show us how deep that gift goes: not a new file about us, but a new heart within us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Think of a time someone declared something about you that turned out to change you: a coach naming you a starter, a boss giving you the title, someone saying "I do." What did the declaration actually do?
- When you hear that God "justifies" a person, what have you always assumed that means?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: have someone read Romans 3:21-26 aloud, then Romans 5:1-2. Ask the group to catch every word that tells you what justification costs the one receiving it.

1. According to Romans 3:24, on what basis is a person justified, and what does it cost them? And what does Romans 5:1-2 say the justified person now has?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"They are justified **by his grace as a gift**, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24). It costs the receiver nothing, because it cost Christ everything. Paul even says God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom 4:5): the gift arrives before the improvement, exactly as Session 2 taught us to expect.

And the justified person has: "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" and "access to this grace **in which we stand**" (Rom 5:1-2). Justification ends the war and opens a standing place. Keep that phrase, "in which we stand"; the study will lean on it later.

2. Read Psalm 51:9-10. David has been caught in the worst sin of his life. Notice what he asks God to do about it. Is he asking for a verdict or for something more?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He asks for the verdict ("blot out all my iniquities") *and* for surgery: "**Create** in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." The Hebrew verb is *bara*, the Genesis word for God's own creating. David already knows what Ezekiel will promise and what the Gospel delivers: David's prayer coheres exactly with what the Church hears in justification: being set right with God arrives as being made new, not merely re-filed.

Someone may hear the echo of Ezekiel 36:26. Good. That verse is following us through this study for a reason.

Live discovery. Say: "Now the Bible's Exhibit A for justification: Abraham. We are going to read three scenes from his life, and then watch the New Testament talk about them. Keep a finger in Genesis." Read, in order, with different readers: Genesis 12:1-4 (the call and the leaving), Genesis 15:1-6 (the stars and the believing), Genesis 22:9-14 (the altar and the offering). Then read Hebrews 11:8, Romans 4:1-3, and James 2:21-23. Ask the group to match each New Testament text to its Genesis scene.

3. Match them: which moment of Abraham's life does each New Testament passage point to, and what does it say about him there?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Hebrews 11:8 points to **Genesis 12**: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out... and he went out, not knowing where he was to go." Faith, at the very first step. Romans 4:1-3 points to **Genesis 15**: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Faith, credited as righteousness, before circumcision and centuries before the law of Moses; that is Paul's whole point in Romans 4. James 2:21-23 points to **Genesis 22**: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?... and the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'"

Notice what James says Genesis 22 did to Genesis 15: it *fulfilled* it. The faith of the stars was completed on the mountain.

4. Here is the puzzle. Genesis 12, Genesis 15, and Genesis 22 are separated by many years, decades in all, on the story's own timeline. If justification were a single, datable courtroom instant, which of these is the instant? What kind of thing must justification be for Scripture to talk this way?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Scripture gives us a real beginning and then refuses to stop there, because it is not describing a filing. It describes a **living relationship of faith**: gratuitously begun (the call he did not request), reckoned righteous in trust (the stars), grown and proven in costly obedience (the altar). Abraham's righteousness has a biography.

This is exactly the Catholic doctrine: an utterly unmerited beginning, a real interior gift, and a life that grows, which the Council of Trent calls the *increase* of justification. Nothing here argues with Romans 4; Paul is proving that the beginning owed nothing to circumcision or the law, and the Church says amen. The full "faith and works" question is next week's whole night. Tonight, just keep the shape: righteousness, in Scripture, is alive.

Build, Then Press

Leader: present this at full strength; it is the classical Protestant position, held by serious Christians for five centuries.

A Reformed friend says: "**Justification is forensic: it is God the Judge declaring the believing sinner righteous for Christ's sake alone. Christ's perfect righteousness is imputed, credited, to my account; my sin was credited to his. Romans 4 is accounting language: reckoned, counted. The believer remains in himself a sinner, at once justified and sinful, but the verdict is what saves, and it is unshakable precisely because it rests on Christ's record, not my renovation. You Catholics confuse justification with sanctification, and turn God's verdict into a progress report.**"

5. State what is right in that before you answer it. Then answer it from tonight's texts.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

What is right, and precious: the verdict really is God's to give, it really rests on Christ and not on our performance, and Romans 4 really does use accounting words. Any Catholic answer that loses those truths has lost the Gospel's comfort, and Trent did not lose them: it teaches that nothing before justification, neither faith nor works, *earns* the grace of justification.

But watch what God's declarations do everywhere else in Scripture: "Let there be light," and there was light. God's courtroom is a delivery room. So when Scripture describes the justified, it refuses to stop at the file: "if any one is in Christ, he is a **new creation**" (2 Cor 5:17); "you were **washed**, you were **sanctified**, you were **justified** in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11), three verbs, one bath, one event; and the purpose of the great exchange is "so that in him we might **become** the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Become. Not "be regarded as."

And press the friendly question: if the renewal is real, as the best Reformed accounts insist, why must it stand outside the justifying verdict itself? And if anyone does hold the believer unchanged in himself, what was Psalm 51 asking for?

What was Ezekiel 36 promising? Why does St. Leo warn the baptized not to *return* to their former condition? The renewal these texts describe is real, which is precisely Trent's point. The Catholic claim is not that justification is a progress report instead of a verdict; it is that God's verdicts come true. "Not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (CCC 1989, quoting Trent).

DIG DEEPER · What Trent Actually Said

The Council of Trent's Decree on Justification (1547) is one of the most careful documents the Church has ever produced, and it opens where Session 2 opened: adults "are disposed to that justice" only through God's prevenient grace, "without any merits existing on their parts," and it condemns anyone who says a man can be justified before God by his own works without divine grace.

Its most quoted teaching describes what justification confers, in substance: that the justice of God by which he makes us just is poured into the heart, so that justification is not the mere remission of sins but sanctification and renewal of the interior man. Not a rival system to grace; the anatomy of the gift.

SEND · Taking It Out

- You were justified at your Baptism (CCC 1992), almost certainly before you could remember it. Abraham's righteousness had a biography after its beginning. What chapter is yours in right now?
- Where in your life do you still relate to God as a defendant managing a file rather than as a child given a new heart? What would change if you believed the verdict came true?

Live It This Week

Pray Psalm 51. Once this week, pray the whole psalm slowly, and mean verse 10.

Reread the mountain. Read Genesis 22:1-18 on your own, remembering it is the fulfillment of the stars. Ask what God has asked you to trust him with.

Say the sentence. Memorize this and try it on a friend: "Justification is not God calling me something I am not. It is God making me something I was not."

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you justified us freely, by grace, at a font we were carried to. You did not leave us as you found us: you gave the clean heart David begged for. Like Abraham, let our faith have a biography: called, believing, and proven on whatever mountain you choose. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Romans 5:1 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
Romans 3:21-26	Opening reading: justified by his grace as a gift (Build Q1)
Romans 5:1-2	Peace with God; grace in which we stand (Build Q1, memory verse)
Romans 4:5	God justifies the ungodly (Q1 answer)
Psalms 51:9-10	Create in me a clean heart (Build Q2)
Genesis 12:1-4	Live discovery, scene 1: the call (Build Q3)
Genesis 15:1-6	Live discovery, scene 2: the stars (Build Q3)
Genesis 22:9-14	Live discovery, scene 3: the altar (Build Q3)
Hebrews 11:8	NT witness to Genesis 12 (Build Q3)
Romans 4:1-3	NT witness to Genesis 15 (Build Q3)
James 2:21-23	NT witness to Genesis 22; "the scripture was fulfilled" (Build Q3)
2 Corinthians 5:17	New creation (steelman answer)
1 Corinthians 6:11	Washed, sanctified, justified (steelman answer)
2 Corinthians 5:21	"Become the righteousness of God" (steelman answer)
Ezekiel 36:26	Thread callback: the new heart (Build Q2 answer)

Session 5: Faith Working Through Love

The faith that saves is never alone

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers, from the text, that the faith which avails before God is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6); that in the RSV2CE the exact phrase "faith alone" occurs once in Scripture, with the word "not" in front of it (Jas 2:24; the Greek collocation of faith with "alone" likewise appears only there); and that Paul and James, read whole, are teaching one coherent thing.

Catholic Touchstone. "Faith apart from works is dead" (Jas 2:26; CCC 1815). The Church teaches both truths at full strength: no one earns justification (Session 2, Session 4, Trent), and the faith that justifies is a living faith, formed by charity, which acts. Love is not the price of admission; it is the pulse that proves the patient is alive.

What You Need to Know

Tonight you take the strongest engine of the Reformation head on, and you must do it with clean hands: no strawmen, no gloating, and no losing the ground won in Sessions 2 and 4. The Catholic position is not "faith plus enough works to tip the scale." Anyone who leaves with that has learned heresy. The Catholic position is that justifying faith is a certain *kind* of faith: alive, formed by love, and therefore working; and that a faith without love, however sincere its assent, is the kind of thing James calls a corpse.

Master the key distinction before you walk in: when Paul excludes "works" from justification, his target phrase is "works **of the law**" (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16): circumcision, food laws, the whole Mosaic apparatus by which his opponents wanted to make Gentiles into Jews before they could be Christians. Paul is not attacking the obedience of love; he *commands* it in the same letters, and in the same breath: the very verse that says circumcision avails nothing finishes "but faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). And it is Paul, not James, who writes that God "will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (Rom 2:6-7), and Paul who says that faith mighty enough to move mountains, without love, "is nothing" (1 Cor 13:2).

Be fair to Luther, because your steelman must be one his heirs would sign. When Luther rendered Romans 3:28 into German he added the word *allein* ("alone"), and when challenged he defended it vigorously as conveying Paul's sense in good German idiom. His deepest concern, that no sinner can buy God's favor, is a concern Trent shares and canonizes. The disagreement is real but precise: it is about whether the faith that justifies can exist in saving form without charity, and about what James means when he says a man is "justified by works and not by faith alone." Let the group *find* James 2:24; do not quote it at them. The hunt is the discovery, and it lands harder from their own Bibles.

Pastoral watch: two people in your group are listening on edge tonight. One grew up Evangelical and hears any works-talk as the gospel dying; keep Session 2 loudly in the room for them. The other is a scrupulous Catholic quietly keeping score of themselves; for them, stress that love is not a quota, and that the saints counted nothing (St. Thérèse's empty hands, two weeks ago). If the night goes well, both leave lighter.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

James reaches for two Old Testament witnesses, and the second is a surprise. **Abraham** on the mountain (Gen 22, last week's third scene): "faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works" (Jas 2:22). And **Rahab** (Jos 2), the Gentile prostitute of Jericho who hid the spies and was saved through the scarlet cord: "was not also Rahab

the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers?" (Jas 2:25). James's pairing is deliberate mischief: the patriarch of Israel and a pagan madam of a condemned city, and in both cases faith proved itself by risky, costly deeds. Rahab enters the genealogy of Christ himself (Mt 1:5). Behind both stands the Shema, Israel's daily creed: "you shall **love** the LORD your God with all your heart" (Deut 6:4-5). The faith of Israel was never bare assent; it was covenant love, and Jesus called that verse the first commandment of all.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Augustine of Hippo

On Faith and Works (5th century)

Augustine wrote an entire treatise against teachers in his own day who claimed that faith by itself, without a changed life, was enough for salvation. He teaches, in substance, that the faith which saves is the faith the Apostle describes, the faith that works through love; a faith that refuses to work is not the thing the Gospel means by the word.

Worth savoring: the man the Reformers claimed as their great forefather on grace had already met "faith alone" as a slogan, fourteen centuries early, and wrote a book against it.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Gregory the Great

Homilies on the Gospels, 30 (6th century)

Preaching on love for God, St. Gregory teaches, in substance, that the proof of love is shown in deeds: love of God is never idle, for it works great things if it truly exists, and if it declines to work, it is not love.

Gregory hands your group its take-home test, and it is mercifully not "do you feel saved?" but "is your love doing anything?" A question with an answer you can actually observe by Thursday.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. John of the Cross

Sayings of Light and Love (16th century)

"At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love." The Catechism quotes this line in its teaching on the particular judgment (CCC 1022).

Notice the Doctor of the Church does not say we shall be judged on our sincerity, our theology, or our religious feelings. Faith is the root, hope the reach, but love is what the exam covers, because love is what faith was *for*.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1814-1815. Faith is believing God and all he has revealed; but "faith apart from works is dead" (Jas 2:26): when it is deprived of hope and love, faith does not fully unite the believer to Christ and does not make him a living member of his Body.

CCC 1816. The disciple must not only keep the faith and live on it, but also profess it, bear witness to it, and spread it. Faith has hands and a voice.

CCC 1826. Without love, "I am nothing," and "I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13). Charity is superior to all the virtues; the Catechism simply repeats Paul.

CCC 162 (callback). Faith is a free gift that can be lost; to persevere in it we must nourish it and beg for its increase. Tonight explains one way faith dies: starved of the love that is its life.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Session 2 payoff. "Grace produces walkers, not passengers" and the parked question "so do our works matter or not?"

get answered tonight: yes, and the works themselves run on grace (Eph 2:10: prepared beforehand). Point back to the parking lot list visibly and cross it off; the group should see the study keeping its promises.

"Faith is dead" (guard this door). James's corpse language (2:17, 26) will tempt someone to ask the sealed question out loud: can a living faith die? Do not flinch and do not answer. Neutral face: "Hold that. You are three weeks early, and you are going to love Session 8." The phrase may sit in the room unresolved; that pressure is by design.

Crown check. Still unnamed. If anyone has googled the title, deflect with a smile; the verse waits for Session 14.

Sealed guesses. Still sealed. Session 8. You may announce, deadpan, that this is the last calm session before the study starts asking its real question. It is true, and it sells Session 7 attendance.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers by searching that "faith alone" appears in Scripture only at James 2:24, negated.
2. Participants can explain "works of the law" versus "faith working through love" in Paul's own letters.
3. The group hears the sola fide case at full strength and answers it from Paul as much as from James.
4. No one leaves believing the Catholic teaching is "earn it": initial justification remains gratuitous, and love is grace's fruit.
5. Each participant names one concrete work of love for this week, because St. Gregory's test is due Thursday.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes. Win 10, Build 55, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (fold the Shema into your Rahab summary) and trim the **Dig Deeper** to its first paragraph. Never cut the "faith alone" hunt or the steelman chain; and do not let the Matthew 25 reading be rushed, because it is the quiet heavyweight of the night.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you have given us faith as a gift, and you made it for love the way you made eyes for light. Tonight, let your word untangle what centuries of argument have knotted. Give us the humility to hear our separated brothers and sisters fairly, and the clarity to hear you plainly. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Someone tells you, "I have complete faith in my spouse," but never trusts them with a decision, a secret, or a set of car keys. What would you conclude about that faith?
- Growing up, did you think of being right with God as more about what you believed or more about what you did? Who taught you that?

BUILD · Into the Text

Live discovery, first thing. Say: "You have all heard the phrase 'faith alone,' sola fide. Somewhere in the Bible, that exact phrase appears: once. One time in all of Scripture. Find it. I will wait." Let them hunt; a concordance or phone search is fair. When someone lands on James 2:24, have them read it aloud slowly.

- Where is the Bible's only "faith alone," and what does the verse actually say?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"You see that a man is justified by works and **not by faith alone**" (Jas 2:24). The one time Scripture uses the Reformation's central phrase, it negates it.

Now be fair, out loud: this is not a gotcha that ends the conversation, because our Protestant friends have a serious reading of James, and we will hear it at full strength in a few minutes. But the plain fact belongs on the table first: "faith alone" as an affirmation is not a biblical sentence. It entered many Bibles by translation: Luther famously added "alone" to Romans 3:28 in German, and defended the addition as conveying Paul's sense. Whether it does is exactly tonight's question.

- Read James 2:14-26 whole. James asks a question in verse 14 that tells you what his subject is. What is he asking, and what are his two Old Testament exhibits?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

His question: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? **Can his faith save him?**" (2:14). The subject is salvation, not reputation; James is asking whether that kind of faith saves. His answer runs through the demons, who believe that God is one, "and shudder" (2:19), sincere assent, zero salvation, and lands on two exhibits: Abraham on the mountain, where "faith was completed by works" and the scripture of Genesis 15 "was fulfilled" (2:21-23), and Rahab of Jericho, a Gentile prostitute justified by the risky deed of receiving the spies (2:25; Jos 2). A patriarch and a pagan madam: faith at both ends of the social world, proving itself by action.

And his verdict on the alternative, delivered twice so no one misses it: "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17), and again, "faith apart from works is dead" (2:26).

3. Now Paul. Read Romans 3:28 and Galatians 2:16, and notice Paul's exact phrase for what does not justify. Then read Galatians 5:6. What is Paul excluding, and what does he say does avail?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Paul's repeated phrase is "works **of the law**": in these letters' immediate fight, the Mosaic system his opponents demanded of Gentile converts, circumcision above all. That immediate context does not exhaust what Paul excludes (no works of any kind, prior to grace, justify; Trent says so as loudly as Paul), but it does mean his target is not the obedience of love. Proof from his own pen, in the same letter: "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but **faith working through love**" (Gal 5:6). Faith avails; and the faith that avails is the working, loving kind.

Seal it with Paul's other voice: God "will render to every man according to his works," giving eternal life to those who by patience in well-doing seek glory (Rom 2:6-7), and "if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, **I am nothing**" (1 Cor 13:2). Paul and James are not opponents; they are shooting at different errors. Paul targets those who would earn God's favor by the law's works; James targets those who would coast on a workless creed. The Church condemns both errors, and keeps both apostles.

4. Read Matthew 25:31-40. On what basis does the King in Jesus's own judgment scene divide the sheep from the goats? What is conspicuously absent from the exam?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Food, drink, welcome, clothing, care, visits: "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." The judgment scene Jesus himself paints turns on works of love done, he reveals, to the King himself, and the word "faith" never appears in it. Not because faith is dispensable, the sheep's deeds are faith's fruit, but because love is what living faith looks like from the outside, and the Judge examines the visible pulse.

This is St. John of the Cross in one scene: at the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love (CCC 1022).

Build, Then Press

Leader: present this at full strength; millions of serious Christians live inside it, and it deserves its best voice.

A Reformed friend says: "**Slow down. James and Paul use 'justified' differently. Paul means the sinner's standing before God: by faith alone, apart from any works (Rom 4:5, Eph 2:8-9). James means vindication before men: Abraham's works demonstrated, to observers and to Scripture's readers, that his faith was real. Works are the fruit and evidence of saving faith, never its instrument. We say it in one sentence: we are justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies is never alone. Even your Galatians 5:6 agrees: the faith avails, and love is what it produces. So what exactly do you disagree with?**"

5. That is the strongest form of the position, and its final question is sincere. Answer it carefully: where is the real disagreement, and what does the text say to it?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

First, honor how much is now shared ground: that formula, "faith alone, but never alone," concedes what matters most to James, and a Catholic can bless every word of its second half. If every Christian lived that sentence, this session would be shorter.

But two things resist the harmonization. First, James's own question rules out the "vindication before men" reading as the whole story: he asks "**can his faith save him?**" (2:14): salvation, not reputation, is his stated stake. Grant the stronger Reformed form, that James means vindication before God and in Scripture's own record rather than before human spectators; even so, James's verdict language answers the question he actually asked, the saving one. Second, the sentence "we are justified by faith alone" still locates love *outside* justifying faith, downstream, as evidence. Scripture puts love inside: faith working **through** love (Gal 5:6), faith "completed" by works (Jas 2:22), faith without love profiting **nothing** (1 Cor 13:2). The Catholic claim, with St. Augustine and many medieval Catholic theologians, is

that charity is the *form* of living faith, its animating soul, not its receipt. Dead faith and living faith are not the same faith in two outfits; they differ as a corpse differs from a body.

So the real disagreement is small enough to state and big enough to matter: is love essential to justifying faith, or evidence after it? And notice, gently, what each reading does to assurance and to warning; but that is Session 7's business, and we will keep the appointment.

DIG DEEPER · An Argument That Softened After 450 Years

In 1999, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, declaring, in substance, that a consensus exists on the basic truths: by grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works. The mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century, both sides agreed, do not apply to the teaching as stated there. Real differences remain, tonight's among them, but the caricatures died on that page: Catholics do not teach earning, and Lutherans do not teach lawless faith.

Worth knowing when tonight's topic comes up at Thanksgiving: the two sides have said more to each other than most family arguments assume.

SEND · Taking It Out

- St. Gregory the Great's test: is your love doing anything? Name one work of love, concrete enough to schedule, that your faith will produce before we meet again.
- If a Protestant friend asked you tomorrow, "So do Catholics believe in salvation by works?", what is your one-minute answer, using tonight's texts?

Live It This Week

Do the named work. The one you just said out loud. Love that stays theoretical is tonight's corpse.

Pray Galatians 5:6. Each morning, ask: "Lord, give my faith its hands today."

Read Matthew 25:31-46 once more, slowly, alone, and let the King's exam questions read you.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord Jesus, you have given us faith; now give it breath and hands. Let it work through love this week: in our homes, our parishes, and toward the least of your brethren, where you have promised to wait for us. Keep us from a dead faith and from a fearful one, for you are the giver of both the root and the fruit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love."

Galatians 5:6 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
James 2:24	Live discovery: the Bible's only "faith alone" (Build Q1)
James 2:14-26	Full reading: can that faith save? demons; Abraham; Rahab (Build Q2)
Joshua 2	Rahab background (Q2 answer; home reading)
Matthew 1:5	Rahab in the genealogy of Christ (leader background)
Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16	"Works of the law" (Build Q3)
Galatians 5:6	Faith working through love (Build Q3, memory verse)
Romans 2:6-7	Paul: eternal life rendered according to works (Q3 answer)
1 Corinthians 13:2	Faith without love is nothing (Q3, steelman answer)
Matthew 25:31-40	The King's exam (Build Q4)
Romans 4:5; Ephesians 2:8-9	Steelman proof texts, granted at full strength
James 2:14, 22; Genesis 22:12	Steelman answer: can his faith save him; completed faith; God as Moriah's witness
Deuteronomy 6:4-5	The Shema: covenant faith is love (OT roots)
Ephesians 2:10	Works prepared beforehand (Session 2 payoff)

Session 6: Grown in Grace

Adopted, indwelt, and being changed from glory to glory

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers what God is actually after: not merely acquitted defendants but adopted children, "partakers of the divine nature," branches alive on a vine, being changed into Christ's likeness "from one degree of glory to another." Sanctification is salvation's present tense doing its work.

Catholic Touchstone. "Grace is a participation in the life of God" (CCC 1997). Sanctifying grace makes us really and truly sons and daughters in the Son, and that life is meant to grow (CCC 1999-2000 on the gift itself; CCC 2010 on growth in grace). Holiness is not the honors track for religious overachievers; it is the ordinary trajectory of baptismal life, and "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (cf. Heb 12:14).

What You Need to Know

This is the study's warmest night, and it is placed here on purpose: it is the last session before the warnings of Session 7, and everything tonight builds the room the warnings will land in. The group has learned that salvation is a rescue (S2), applied in Baptism (S3), constituting a real interior justification (S4), alive as faith working through love (S5). Tonight asks: toward *what*? And Scripture's answer is staggering: "he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may... become **partakers of the divine nature**" (2 Pet 1:4). Not fans of God, not clients of God: sharers in God's own life. The Christian East has said this out loud, long and prominently (they call it *theosis*, deification); the West says the same thing in the vocabulary of sanctifying grace and divine adoption. It is one Gospel.

Make adoption concrete. Romans 8:14-17 gives it a voice ("Abba! Father!"), a witness (the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit), and an inheritance (heirs of God, fellow heirs with Christ). And note Paul's quiet conditional in 8:17, "provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him"; read it as written, without stress, and move on. First John 3:1-2 adds the astonished tone the doctrine deserves: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; **and so we are.**" John heads off the deflation in four words: this is not a courtesy title.

The vine (John 15:1-11) is tonight's central image, and one verse in it is a landmine you must know about in advance. You will read the whole passage, because cutting Scripture mid-image is not how this study operates. Verse 6, the branch that does not abide, withers, and is thrown into the fire, belongs to Session 7, and tonight you will not develop it, comment on it, or linger on it. Read the passage whole; aim every question at abiding, fruit, and pruning; and if a participant's eyes snag on verse 6, the Thread Watch tells you exactly what to do. The dread that verse quietly plants tonight is doing its intended work.

On growth: 2 Corinthians 3:18 ("changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another") and 2 Peter 3:18 ("grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord") give sanctification its verbs. This is St. Gregory of Nyssa's territory from Session 1 (The Life of Moses), and tonight his voice gets its payoff: the perpetual pressing forward is the saved life. Growth is also ordinary: watering cans, not lightning bolts. St. Francis de Sales built a whole spirituality on devotion fitted to daily life, and your group's grocery-run holiness needs his blessing tonight.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Jesus's vine is not a fresh metaphor; it is a loaded one. **Psalm 80** sings Israel's story as a transplanted vine: "You brought a vine **out of Egypt**; you drove out the nations and planted it" (Ps 80:8), and then begs God to have regard

again for a vine burned and cut down. **Isaiah 5:1-7** is the dark verse of the same song: the beloved's vineyard, tended with total care, yielded wild grapes, "and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed." So when Jesus says "**I am the true vine**" (Jn 15:1), the Church has long heard him claiming to be, in himself, the faithful Israel that finally bears the fruit the Owner planted for; and his branches abide in him or bear nothing. Notice the Exodus map has quietly gained a station: the vine itself came out of Egypt. Israel's rescue, journey, and fruitfulness are all inside tonight's image.

For adoption's Old Testament root, **Hosea 11:1-4**: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son... it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms." God as the parent of a toddler, teaching steps, healing scrapes, leading "with cords of compassion, with the bands of love." Sanctification in one picture: a Father teaching a rescued child to walk.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Athanasius of Alexandria

On the Incarnation, ch. 54 (4th century)

"For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." The Catechism quotes this sentence in its teaching on why the Word became flesh (CCC 460).

The champion of Nicaea is not blurring the Creator-creature line he spent his life defending; he means what 2 Peter 1:4 means: by grace we are given a real share in the divine life, adopted into the Son's own relationship to the Father. The East calls it *theosis*. It is the ceiling of tonight's session, and it is load-bearing.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Francis de Sales

Introduction to the Devout Life (1609)

Writing for laypeople busy with families, trades, and obligations, St. Francis teaches, in substance, that devotion is genuine holiness fitted to every state of life: the soldier, the tradesman, the married woman are called to a devotion proper to their calling, and holiness practiced only in flight from ordinary duties is a counterfeit.

Sanctification, in other words, is not a second vocation competing with your life; it is your life, turned toward God. The vine grows where it is planted.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Carlo Acutis

Attributed sayings (d. 2006; canonized 2025)

The teenage computer programmer who built a website cataloguing Eucharistic miracles, canonized in 2025 as the Church's first millennial saint, is widely remembered for the saying attributed to him: "All of us are born originals, but many of us die as photocopies."

It is Session 6 in a teenager's idiom: God is not mass-producing acquittals; he is growing originals, each one conformed to Christ in a way no other soul will repeat. Sanctity is the least generic thing that can happen to you.

Catechism Connection

CCC 460. Quotes 2 Peter 1:4 and then the Fathers on its meaning, including Athanasius's sentence above and St. Thomas's echo of it. The Catechism plants deification in the heart of its Christology.

CCC 1997. "Grace is a participation in the life of God. It introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life": by Baptism the Christian participates in the grace of Christ as an adopted son.

CCC 1999. Sanctifying grace: the gratuitous gift of God's own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into the soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.

CCC 2000. The Church's working vocabulary: sanctifying (habitual) grace, the permanent disposition to live with God, versus actual graces, God's interventions and helps along the way. The Dig Deeper unpacks this; it answers more practical questions than any other distinction tonight.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

John 15:6 (the landmine, handled). You will read it and not discuss it. If someone raises it: neutral face, warm voice: "You have just spotted next session's text. Bring that exact question back in one week." Write it on the parking lot list labeled SESSION 7 where everyone can see it. Under no circumstances resolve, soften, or explain the verse tonight. If no one raises it, perfect; it is still in the room.

St. Gregory of Nyssa payoff. When 2 Corinthians 3:18 is read ("from one degree of glory to another"), remind the group of Session 1's voice: the perpetual pressing forward. The study's threads should be felt paying off; say it in one sentence, not five.

Exodus map, bonus station. Psalm 80's vine came out of Egypt. Let the group find the word "Egypt" themselves in the psalm; the map thread strengthens every time they catch it without you.

Romans 8:17's "provided." Read as written; do not stress it, do not skip it. If someone asks, say suffering-with-Christ is the family resemblance of heirs, and the study returns to endurance in Session 10.

Sealed guesses. Still sealed, and next week the study finally walks toward its question. Tell the group plainly: Session 7 is the hard one; come.

Session Goals

1. The group can say what sanctifying grace is: a real participation in God's own life, making us actual children of God.
2. Participants discover the vine's Old Testament backstory (Ps 80, Isa 5) and what "I am the true vine" therefore claims.
3. The group answers the "sanctification is optional extra credit" objection from Heb 12:14, 1 Thess 4:3, and John 15.
4. Participants can distinguish sanctifying grace from actual grace and say why the distinction matters on a Tuesday.
5. Each participant names where their branch is currently being pruned, and reframes it as tending rather than punishment.

Time Note

Plan for 85 minutes. Win 10, Build 50, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Hosea can live in your one-sentence summary of adoption) and compress the **Dig Deeper**. Never cut the vine reading or its Old Testament discovery, and never rush the closing prayer tonight; the group needs the warmth banked before Session 7 spends it.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you did not rescue us to leave us in the parking lot of your house. You brought us inside, gave us your name, and set about making us like your Son. Tonight, show us what we are and what we are becoming, and make us patient with the growing. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Who in your life have you slowly become like, without ever deciding to? How did it happen?
- If God's only goal were to get you legally off the hook, how would you expect the Christian life to feel? How is that different from what the saints describe?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: have someone read 2 Peter 1:3-4 aloud, twice. Tell the group: "Listen for the four most shocking words in the New Testament."

1. What has God's divine power granted us, and what do the promises make us? Say the four words, and then try to say what they can and cannot mean.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4). God's power "has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness," and the goal of the "precious and very great promises" is a real share in God's own life. It cannot mean we become God by nature, additional members of the Trinity; the Creator-creature line holds. It means what adoption at this altitude means: by grace we are taken into the Son's own life and relationship to the Father, alive with a life that is not natively ours. The Fathers called it *deification*; the Catechism calls sanctifying grace "a participation in the life of God" (CCC 1997) and quotes St. Athanasius without blushing: "the Son of God became man so that we might become God" (CCC 460).

If the room goes quiet here, let it. This is the ceiling of the whole study.

2. Read Romans 8:14-17 and 1 John 3:1-2, and Hosea 11:1-4 for the picture behind them. What do these texts say we are now, and what is still ahead? And catch John's four-word insistence.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Now: led by the Spirit, sons of God, crying "Abba! Father!" with the Spirit himself bearing witness; "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:17). John: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; **and so we are**" (1 Jn 3:1). The four words head off every deflation: not a courtesy title, not a legal alias; so we are. Still ahead: "it does not yet appear what we shall be, but... we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2), and the heirs' road runs with Christ, "provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:17).

Hosea gives the family photo: a Father who called his son out of Egypt, taught him to walk, took him up in his arms, led him with cords of compassion. Sanctification is God teaching rescued children to walk.

Live discovery. Say: "Jesus's biggest image for the growing life is a vine. But he did not invent it; he inherited it, loaded. First the backstory: read Psalm 80:8-16, and find where the vine came from. Then Isaiah 5:1-4 and 7, and find what went wrong with the vineyard." Let them work both texts. Then read John 15:1-11 whole, unhurried.

3. Where did Psalm 80's vine come from, and what happened to it? What did Isaiah's vineyard produce, and what was the owner looking for? So when Jesus says "I am the **true** vine," what is he claiming?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Psalm 80: "You brought a vine **out of Egypt**": the vine is Israel, transplanted by the Exodus, and by the psalm's end it lies burned and cut down, with Israel begging God to regard it again. Isaiah 5: the beloved's vineyard, given every care, yielded wild grapes; "he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed." Israel-the-vine was rescued and tended, and did not bear.

So "I am the true vine" (Jn 15:1) is an enormous claim: Jesus is, in his own person, the Israel that finally bears the fruit the Owner planted for. And the branches' whole job is stated with a farmer's bluntness: "Abide in me... As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me... apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:4-5), Session 2's verse, now wearing bark. Even the group's own map gains a station: the vine itself came out of Egypt.

4. Stay in John 15:1-11. What does the Father do to branches that ARE bearing fruit, and why? And what, according to verses 9-11, is abiding actually made of?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He **prunes** them: every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, "that it may bear more fruit" (15:2). Pruning here is not rejection; it is what a vinedresser does to branches he is pleased with. Invite the group, gently, to consider whether a current trial might be received as the Father's tending, without presuming to name the meaning of every suffering, and without denying that God also corrects his children (Heb 12:5-11). And abiding, per Jesus himself, is not a mood: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (15:10), kept inside "abide in my love" (15:9) and aimed at "that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (15:11). Commandments, love, joy: one motion. Session 5's faith-working-through-love, drawn as agriculture.

Leader: if anyone raises verse 6, follow the Thread Watch: park it, visibly, for Session 7. Do not discuss it tonight.

Build, Then Press

Leader: present at full strength. This one usually lives inside our own heads.

The comfortable voice says: "**Justification is what saves; sanctification is extra credit. God accepts me as I am, so growth is optional gratitude, wonderful if it happens, but nothing hangs on it. Pushing holiness as necessary just smuggles works back in and steals assurance. Relax: the vine metaphor is encouragement, not requirement.**"

5. Answer the comfortable voice from tonight's texts and last week's.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Grant its grain of truth: God does receive sinners as they are; Session 2 is not revoked, and growth is indeed grace, not a bill. But Scripture will not sign the rest. "This is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thess 4:3), will, not suggestion. "Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness **without which no one will see the Lord**" (Heb 12:14), a purpose clause with eternity in it. And tonight's vine: branches exist to bear fruit; the Father prunes so there will be *more*; abiding is keeping his commandments in his love. Nothing in the image is decorative.

The deep error in the comfortable voice is its picture of salvation as a status you hold rather than a life you live. But we learned in Session 1 that salvation has a present tense, and in Session 4 that justification plants a real new life, and life is made to grow. No one calls a child's growing "extra credit for being born"; sanctification is not optional, though its progress is not always visible or uninterrupted. Holiness is not the price of the Father's love; it is what the Father's love does to you if you stay in the sun.

DIG DEEPER · The Church's Grace Vocabulary

Two terms unlock most practical questions about grace (CCC 2000). **Sanctifying grace** (also called habitual grace) is the stable gift: God's own life infused in the soul, making you his child and pleasing in his sight; it is a stable state rather than a feeling, the "state of grace" Catholics speak of; forfeited by mortal sin, restored in the sacrament of Reconciliation. **Actual graces** are God's moment-to-moment helps: the nudge toward the confessional, the strength in the temptation, the sudden clarity in prayer; interventions, not a state.

Why it matters on a Tuesday: when you feel nothing, you have not necessarily lost anything; sanctifying grace is not a feeling. And when you receive a good impulse out of nowhere, that is not nowhere. Name the helps as they come; gratitude sharpens the eye for them.

SEND • Taking It Out

- Where is the Vinedresser currently pruning you? What would change this week if you treated that circumstance as tending rather than as abandonment?
- St. Carlo Acutis: originals, not photocopies. What is one concrete way the version of holiness God is growing in you does not look like anyone else's?

Live It This Week

Abide on schedule. Ten minutes daily in Jesus's company, John 15 open, no agenda. Branches do their growing attached.

Name the pruning. Write down the one you identified tonight, and pray for the grace to stop fighting the shears.

Watch for actual graces. Each evening, name one help God supplied that day. You are training your eye for Session 10.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you have made us your children, and so we are. Keep us on the vine. Prune what you must, feed what you have planted, and change us, degree by degree, into the likeness of your Son, until the day we see him as he is and find your joy in us made full. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."

1 John 3:1a (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
2 Peter 1:3-4	Opening reading: partakers of the divine nature (Build Q1)
Romans 8:14-17	Adoption: Abba, heirs, the Spirit's witness (Build Q2)
1 John 3:1-2	"And so we are"; we shall be like him (Build Q2, memory verse)
Hosea 11:1-4	The Father teaching Ephraim to walk (Build Q2)
Psalms 80:8-16	Live discovery: the vine out of Egypt (Build Q3)
Isaiah 5:1-4, 7	Live discovery: the vineyard's wild grapes (Build Q3)
John 15:1-11	The true vine, read whole (Build Q3-4); v. 6 parked for Session 7
1 Thessalonians 4:3	God's will: your sanctification (steelman answer)
Hebrews 12:14	The holiness without which no one will see the Lord (steelman answer)
2 Corinthians 3:18	From one degree of glory to another (leader background, St. Gregory payoff)
2 Peter 3:18	Grow in grace (leader background)

Session 7: The Warnings Are Real

Reading the passages both sides would rather manage

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group reads the New Testament's warning passages for themselves and discovers three things: the warnings are addressed to believers, they describe a real danger of falling away from real grace, and the writers deliver them without embarrassment. The group also hears the Once Saved Always Saved position at its full, formidable strength.

Catholic Touchstone. "To live, grow, and persevere in the faith until the end we must nourish it with the word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith" (CCC 162, in substance): the gift is real and the gift can be lost. The Church has taught since the Council of Trent that the grace of justification can be forfeited, which is precisely why she teaches us to hope and pray for final perseverance (CCC 2016) rather than to presume it.

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study stops circling and walks toward its question. You are not going to answer "can salvation be lost?" tonight; you are going to let the texts pile up until next week's answer feels less like a doctrine and more like an observation. Your discipline tonight is twofold: read the warnings without softening them, and present the OSAS case without weakening it. If your group leaves thinking the other side is foolish, you have failed them; the OSAS position is built from real verses, held by serious Christians, and your steelman must be one they would recognize as their own.

Know the warning texts cold. **John 15:6** is first because you promised it: the parked verse from last session. **1 Corinthians 10:5-12** is the Exodus map's dark station: the people who were "baptized into Moses," who ate and drank the supernatural food, were overthrown in the wilderness, "and these things happened to them as a warning... Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." **Romans 11:17-22** addresses Gentile Christians as branches grafted into the olive tree, sharing its rich root, and says without blinking: "provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off." **Hebrews 6:4-8** describes people "once enlightened," who "tasted the heavenly gift," "partakers of the Holy Spirit," and contemplates their falling away. **Hebrews 10:26-31** speaks of one who "profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified": the apostate the author fears is someone the blood really sanctified. **Galatians 5:4** says to baptized Christians seeking justification through the law: "You are severed from Christ... you have fallen away from grace"; the sentence is only possible about people who were in Christ and in grace. And **1 Corinthians 9:27** is the text that most directly undercuts the claim that warnings are only for the unconverted: Paul disciplines his own body "lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." Paul warns Paul.

Two honesty notes, both load-bearing. First, the assurance passages the OSAS position quotes are also really in the Bible, and tonight you will grant them out loud: John 10:28-29, Romans 8:38-39, Philippians 1:6, 1 John 5:13. The Catholic claim has never been that those texts are false; it is that they promise what they promise (no external power can seize Christ's sheep; God's faithfulness never wavers; confident hope is right) without promising that I cannot walk away. Session 12 gives assurance its own full night; say so, visibly, and keep the promise. Second, the pastoral temperature: tonight can frighten exactly the wrong people. The scrupulous will hear sirens; the presumptuous will hear nothing. Steer by this: the warnings in Scripture are addressed to the confident ("let any one who **thinks that he stands...**"), and the comfort is addressed to the trembling. Apply each medicine to its disease, and end the night on St. Alphonsus's remedy: the one who prays does not fall.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The wilderness generation is the master root, and it has been waiting since Session 1. The group planted the Exodus map (saved at the sea, being saved in the wilderness, will be saved in the land) and cashed its first station at Baptism (Session 3). Tonight the map turns dark: the condemned adult generation, all but Caleb and Joshua, genuinely rescued at the sea, genuinely died before the land (Num 14:22-23, 28-30), and Paul says these things were "written down for our instruction" (1 Cor 10:11). **Ezekiel 18:24-26** states the principle without narrative: "when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity... None of the righteous deeds which he has done shall be remembered." Ezekiel is describing real righteousness really abandoned; keep this text close, because it returns in mercy's direction in Sessions 8 and 9 (the same chapter runs both ways). And **King Saul** gives the danger a face: a man genuinely chosen and genuinely given the Spirit (1 Sam 10:6-10) from whom the Spirit later departed (1 Sam 16:14); it is why David, mid-repentance, begs "take not your holy Spirit from me" (Ps 51:11). David had watched it happen to his predecessor.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Cyprian of Carthage

On the Lapsed (251)

After the Decian persecution, St. Cyprian faced a church full of the *lapsi*: baptized, communicant Christians who had denied Christ under threat and now stood outside. His treatise grieves over them as over the wounded, teaches in substance that their fall was real and their peril mortal, and then spends its strength on the road back: penance, tears, and the Church's ministry of reconciliation.

Cyprian's church did not treat believers' falling as a theory; the Decian persecution buried it under names and faces, and the Church built the theology of mercy this study reaches in Session 9. The Church's penitential practice exists because the warnings were never hypothetical.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Augustine of Hippo

On Rebuke and Grace (c. 427)

Writing to monks confused about grace and correction, St. Augustine teaches, in substance, that some truly receive the grace of justification and yet do not persevere in it to the end; the gift of persevering is distinct, and no one may presume it of himself. This is why correction and warning are acts of love rather than insults to grace: God uses them.

Augustine, the Doctor of Grace, held both of tonight's truths at once: grace is entirely God's gift, and the warnings are entirely serious. If he could hold them together, so can your group.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Alphonsus Liguori

The Great Means of Prayer (1759)

The Doctor of moral theology compressed his teaching on perseverance into one blunt maxim about prayer and salvation, teaching in substance that prayer is the necessary ordinary means by which God sustains the believer in grace: the grace to stand is always offered, and prayer is how we go on receiving it.

Hand this to your group as tonight's exit ramp. The warnings are not a weather report about random lightning; falling has an anatomy, and so does standing. The one who keeps asking, keeps receiving. That is the whole Catholic answer to fear, three sessions early.

Catechism Connection

CCC 162. Faith is an entirely free gift, and "we can lose this priceless gift." The Catechism cites St. Paul's instruction to Timothy about those who have made shipwreck of their faith (1 Tim 1:18-19). To persevere we must nourish the gift and beg its increase.

CCC 1274. The baptismal seal is indelible, and the faithful Christian who has "kept the seal" until the end will die marked with the sign of faith. Notice the Catechism's own verb: *kept*. The mark cannot be lost (Session 3); the keeping is the Christian life.

CCC 2016. The children of the Church "rightly hope for the grace of final perseverance": hope, the middle path tonight must hold open between presumption and terror. Sessions 10 and 12 build on this paragraph.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Parking lot promise: keep it first. Open the Build section with John 15:6, announced as the kept promise from last week. The group must see the study honor its debts; it buys you the trust tonight spends.

Exodus map: the dark station. When 1 Corinthians 10 returns tonight, have the group physically recall the map from Session 1 (sea, wilderness, land) and locate tonight on it. We are wilderness people reading wilderness mail.

Do NOT define mortal and venial sin tonight. Someone will ask "so what sins do this?" That is next session's entire discovery, keyed to 1 John 5:16-17, and answering early collapses it. Say: "Exactly the right question. It has a session: next week."

Sealed guesses: announce the opening. Tonight ends with the announcement that next session the envelopes come out. Attendance instruction: nobody misses Session 8.

Crown discipline. Revelation 3:11 would fit tonight perfectly. That is exactly why it stays in the drawer; its night is Session 14. Do not use it, quote it, or allude to it.

Assurance texts. Granted out loud tonight inside the steelman, resolved in Session 12. If 1 John 5:13 resurfaces from the Session 1 parking lot, point to it there and renew the promise.

Session Goals

1. The group reads the six core warning texts and can state to whom each is addressed.
2. Participants hear the OSAS case at full strength and can repeat it fairly.
3. The group answers the OSAS case from the texts, including why the assurance passages do not cancel the warnings.
4. The Exodus map's dark station lands: rescued people really fell, and it was written for us.
5. The scrupulous leave with St. Alphonsus's remedy in hand, and everyone leaves planning to attend Session 8.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes; do not book this room for anything after. Win 8, Build 60, Send 10, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Ezekiel 18 gets a full return next session) and compress the **Dig Deeper** to one sentence. Never cut the John 15:6 opening, the steelman, or the closing St. Alphonsus turn: the night must end on the remedy, not the diagnosis.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, your word comforts us, and tonight your word will warn us. Give us ears for both, because both are love. Keep us from hearing lightly what you said gravely, and from despairing over what you said to make us watchful. Hold fast what you have begun in us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Think of a warning that changed how you live: a doctor's, a mentor's, a rumble strip on a highway. What makes a warning a gift rather than a threat?
- Be honest: coming into tonight, do warnings in Scripture make you anxious, or do you tend to assume they are for somebody else?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: keep last week's promise first. Say: "A week ago, one verse in John 15 was left sitting in plain sight, and I parked it. Tonight the study pays its debt." Read John 15:1-6 aloud, and let verse 6 land in silence for a moment before the question.

1. Jesus is speaking to the Eleven at the Last Supper: to branches, people already "in me." What does verse 6 say can happen to a branch, and what does the branch have to do for it to happen?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned" (Jn 15:6). The branch does not have to commit some exotic crime; it has to stop abiding. And the subject is not outsiders: only something attached can be cast forth. Jesus states this to his closest friends, the same night he washes their feet, because love warns.

Hold the group here briefly: the study's big question is not answered yet, but the reason it is a real question is now on the table in red letters.

Live discovery. Say: "Session 1 gave us a map: saved at the sea, being saved in the wilderness, the land still ahead. We cashed the sea at Baptism in Session 3. Tonight, find out what happened in the wilderness. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-12, all of it, slowly. Then tell me: where are we standing on our own map when Paul says 'take heed'?"

2. The people in verses 1-4 had real privileges. List them. Then verse 5: what happened to "most of them"? And verses 11-12: who does Paul say this was written for, and to whom is verse 12 addressed?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Privileges: under the cloud, passed through the sea, "baptized into Moses," ate the supernatural food, drank from the supernatural Rock, "and the Rock was Christ" (10:1-4). Paul could not describe them as more genuinely rescued. Verse 5: "Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness." Verses 11-12: "written down for **our** instruction... Therefore let any one who **thinks that he stands** take heed lest he fall."

And the map answers itself: we are wilderness people. Rescued at the font, fed on the way, not yet home. The mail is addressed to us, and it is addressed specifically to the confident.

3. Read Romans 11:17-22. Paul tells Gentile believers they are branches grafted into the olive tree, sharing "the richness of the olive tree." What condition does verse 22 attach, and what does the passage forbid?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, **provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off**" (11:22). The branches in question are in the tree, fed by the root; the cutting off is real and conditional on continuing. And the passage forbids exactly one attitude: "do not become proud, but stand in awe" (11:20). Presumption is the one soil this text will not grow in.

4. Read Hebrews 6:4-6 and Hebrews 10:26-29. The author piles up descriptions of the people he is warning about. What has genuinely happened to these people, according to his own words? Note especially the phrase in 10:29 about the blood.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Hebrews 6: "once enlightened," "tasted the heavenly gift," "partakers of the Holy Spirit," tasted the word of God and the powers of the age to come. Hebrews 10: they "received the knowledge of the truth," and the apostate has "profaned the blood of the covenant **by which he was sanctified**" (10:29). The author strains language, and Catholic tradition has commonly read him as meaning it: real recipients of real grace. (That justification can be lost is the Church's defined teaching; identifying each passage's warned persons is the tradition's reading, not a separate dogma.) Warning people that they might fall from something they never had would be warning no one.

Add Paul's two shortest witnesses: "You are severed from Christ... you have fallen away from grace" (Gal 5:4), said to baptized Christians; and "I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor 9:27). Paul includes Paul. The warnings have no exemption clause for apostles.

Build, Then Press

Leader: this is the study's most important steelman. Present it slowly, at full strength, from its own best texts. Many in the room have loved ones who hold it.

A committed Evangelical friend says: "**Listen to Jesus himself: 'I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand' (Jn 10:28), and the Father is greater than all. 'Eternal life' that can end was never eternal. Paul agrees: nothing in all creation 'will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38-39). 'He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion' (Phil 1:6). Believers are 'sealed' with the Spirit as a 'guarantee' (Eph 1:13-14). So what about apostates? John answers: 'They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us' (1 Jn 2:19). People who fall away reveal they were never truly converted. And the warning passages? They are one of the means God uses to keep his elect persevering: real warnings, really heeded, by everyone truly his. Your Hebrews 6 people had every experience except the new birth.**"

5. Grant everything in that which is true. Then answer it from tonight's texts. Where exactly does it fail?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Grant much, gladly: those verses are real, and what they promise is precious and true. No power in creation can snatch a sheep from Christ's hand; God never withdraws, never wearies, never breaks covenant; confident hope in him who began the work is exactly right (we will spend all of Session 12 on this). The Catholic quarrel is not with one syllable of what those texts promise.

It is with what they are made to deny. Read the assurance texts closely: John 10 describes the sheep before it promises them anything: "My sheep hear my voice... and they follow me" (10:27), and to these hearing, following sheep he gives eternal life, "and they shall never perish": gloriously true of the abiding, with no external force, wolf, or thief able to snatch them. Romans 8:35-39 is a list of external enemies: tribulation, persecution, famine, sword, death, angels, principalities, "anything else in all creation." One thing is absent from the list, and Scripture warns of it elsewhere:

"your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God" (Isa 59:2). God's love never ceases; communion with it, from our side, can. The sheep cannot be stolen; the question all night has been whether the sheep can wander, and Jesus tells a parable about exactly that.

Then test the "never truly converted" reading against tonight's descriptions. 1 John 2:19 accurately describes some apostates; but Hebrews' apostates were "partakers of the Holy Spirit," "sanctified" by the covenant blood; Romans 11's branches were **in** the tree sharing the root; John 15's branches were **in me**; Galatians 5:4's fallen had grace to fall from. To make OSAS work, every one of those descriptions must mean less than it says. And the "warnings as means" move, notice, concedes the practice entirely: it agrees the warnings must be seriously heeded by every believer, which is all the Catholic asks of your Tuesday; the difference survives only in the theory. But the theory has a cost: it must tell Paul that "lest I myself should be disqualified" was, strictly speaking, impossible, and Paul did not train like a man running an exhibition match.

DIG DEEPER · Trent's Quiet Anathema

The Council of Trent addressed tonight's question directly. Its Decree on Justification teaches, in substance, that the grace of justification, really received, can really be lost, and its canon 23 condemns the claim that a man once justified can sin no more nor lose grace. The same council, take note, also condemned the opposite error waiting in Session 12: that anyone can know with the certainty of faith, absent special revelation, that he will certainly persevere. The Church's teaching walks a ridge with a drop on both sides: no presumption, no despair, and hope holding the summit. This is not a Reformation-era novelty. It is St. Cyprian's third century, St. Augustine's fifth, and Paul's first, receiving conciliar grammar.

SEND · Taking It Out

- "Let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." Where in your life are you most confident, and what would taking heed there actually look like this week?
- The warnings are love with its voice raised. Is there someone God has placed in your life whose drift you have watched in silence? What would St. Cyprian's kind of honesty, grief and hope together, sound like from you?

Live It This Week

Pray daily for perseverance. One sentence, every day this week: "Lord, grant me the grace of final perseverance." The Church begs this gift because it is a gift; join her.

Walk the map. Reread 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 at home, and notice verse 13, which we saved for you: the warning chapter ends with a promise about temptation and the way of escape. Scripture warns like a Father.

Check the drift. Name, privately and honestly, the one place you have been coasting on "I stand." Bring it, unspoken or spoken, to next session, because next session is the one the envelopes have been waiting for.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord Jesus, true vine, we have heard your warnings and we believe they are love. Keep us abiding in you. When we grow confident, make us watchful; when we grow fearful, remind us that the one who asks receives, and that you are more ready to hold us than we are to be held. Grant us, we beg, the grace of final perseverance. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

1 Corinthians 10:12 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
John 15:1-6	The kept promise: the parked verse (Build Q1)
1 Corinthians 10:1-12	Live discovery: the wilderness fall; the map's dark station (Build Q2)
Numbers 14:22-30	The wilderness generation's sentence (leader background)
Romans 11:17-22	Grafted branches; "provided you continue" (Build Q3)
Hebrews 6:4-6	"Once enlightened... partakers of the Holy Spirit" (Build Q4)
Hebrews 10:26-29	"Sanctified" by the blood he profaned (Build Q4)
Galatians 5:4	"Severed from Christ... fallen away from grace" (Q4 answer)
1 Corinthians 9:24-27	Paul warns Paul: "lest I myself should be disqualified" (Q4 answer)
John 10:28-29	Steelman text: no one shall snatch (granted, answered)
Romans 8:35-39	Steelman text: the list of external enemies (granted, answered)
Philippians 1:6; Ephesians 1:13-14	Steelman texts: completion; sealed guarantee (granted; Session 12)
1 John 2:19	Steelman text: "they were not of us" (answered)
Isaiah 59:2	The one separator: iniquities (steelman answer)
Ezekiel 18:24-26	Righteousness really abandoned (leader background; returns Session 8)
1 Samuel 10:6-10; 16:14; Psalm 51:11	Saul and the departed Spirit; David's plea (leader background)
1 Corinthians 10:13	The promise after the warning (Live It This Week)

Session 8: Sin That Kills, Sin That Wounds

The night the envelopes open

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Scripture itself distinguishes deadly sin from sin that is not deadly (1 Jn 5:16-17), learns the Church's precise anatomy of that distinction (grave matter, full knowledge, deliberate consent), and then, with seven sessions of evidence in hand, opens the sealed guesses and answers the study's question out loud.

Catholic Touchstone. "Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law" (CCC 1855); it "results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace," and unrepented, "it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom" (CCC 1861, in substance). Venial sin wounds and weakens charity but does not kill it (CCC 1862-1863). The distinction is not a loophole; it is a diagnosis, and it exists so that the remedy (Session 9) can be applied to the right wound.

What You Need to Know

Everything in this study has been walking here. Tonight has two summits, and the order matters: **first the discovery and the doctrine, then the ritual.** The group must hold the biblical distinction and the Church's definition before the envelopes open, so that when each person answers the question aloud, they answer from evidence rather than from temperament.

The live discovery is 1 John 5:16-17, and it startles people who have read past it for years: "There is sin which is mortal... All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal." The mortal/venial distinction is not medieval bookkeeping; it is apostolic ink, in the same letter that says God is love. John even regulates intercession by it. And the distinction resolves a tension inside John's own letter that the group can find: 1 John 1:8 ("If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves") sits four chapters from 1 John 3:9 ("No one born of God commits sin"). Unless John contradicts himself, the two must differ; the Church's traditional resolution, which the Catechism roots in these very verses (CCC 1854), hears two gravities of sin: the daily wrongdoing every Christian confesses, and the deadly kind that is incompatible with abiding in God. The Church's vocabulary simply names what John's letter already does.

Teach the three conditions exactly, because precision here is mercy: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is **grave matter** and which is also committed with **full knowledge** and **deliberate consent**" (CCC 1857). All three, together. This is where the scrupulous get their lives back: the intrusive thought was not consented to; the half-asleep failure was not fully known; the small matter was not grave. And it is where the presumptuous lose their loophole: adultery does not become venial by being sincere. Jesus himself grades culpability, both in Matthew 5:21-22 (anger, insult, and "the hell of fire" as escalating liabilities) and in Luke 12:47-48 (the severe beating and the light one, by knowledge). James gives sin's embryology: "desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin **when it is full-grown** brings forth death" (Jas 1:15): sin has stages, and the fatal stage is the grown one.

The ritual: ring-fence the final twenty-five to thirty minutes and do not let the Build section eat them. The full script is in the Discussion Guide. Its shape: evidence first (each person states their answer *now*, from the texts), envelopes second (each opens their own guess and meets their former self), confirmation third (you, with CCC 1861 and Trent), and mercy last, spoken in almost the same breath: the study's very next session is The Way Back, and its two case studies both sinned gravely against the Lord on the same night. One of them is the first Pope. **Never let tonight end on the diagnosis.** The last note must be Session 9's doorway, and the memory verse is chosen to hold it open all week: Ezekiel's "so turn, and live."

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Ezekiel 18 returns from last session, and now the group reads it whole enough to see it runs in both directions: the righteous man who turns away dies in his sin (18:24, last week), and the wicked man who turns away from his wickedness "shall surely live; he shall not die" (18:21-22, 27-28). The chapter ends with God's own motive, and it is the tenderest sentence in tonight's texts: "For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live" (18:32). The same prophet who armed the warning armed the hope. **David** is the distinction with a face: the man after God's own heart committed adultery and arranged a murder, acts of objectively grave matter, the kind that destroys the soul's life when chosen with full knowledge and consent, and Psalm 51 is what turning sounded like. The group has been praying that psalm since Session 4; tonight they learn its occasion is the study's whole subject.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Augustine of Hippo

Enchiridion (handbook on faith, hope, and love, c. 421)

St. Augustine teaches, in substance, that the light daily sins no just man escapes have a daily medicine: the Our Father, "forgive us our trespasses," prayed with a forgiving heart, and deeds of mercy; while his wider penitential teaching, with the ancient Church's practice, reserved the Church's penance for grave crimes.

Notice the architecture: two gravities of sin, two remedies, one mercy. The Lord's Prayer for the daily dust; the Church's ministry of reconciliation for the deadly wound. Tonight names the wounds; next session opens the clinic.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Thomas Aquinas

Summa Theologiae I-II, qq. 71-89 (treatise on sin)

St. Thomas teaches, in substance, that the difference between mortal and venial sin is not a difference of paperwork but of what happens to charity: mortal sin turns the soul away from God as its last end, destroying charity, while venial sin stumbles over the means without abandoning the end, leaving charity alive though its fervor and act are impeded.

His analogy, in substance: some things injure a living body, and some things kill it, and no doctor treats the two alike. The distinction is diagnosis, and diagnosis is the beginning of every cure.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. John Paul II

Reconciliatio et Paenitentia (1984)

Facing a modern instinct to blur all sin into vague "sinfulness," St. John Paul II reaffirmed, in substance, the constant teaching: the mortal/venial distinction is rooted in Scripture and Tradition, and mortal sin, grave matter chosen with knowledge and consent, truly deprives the soul of sanctifying grace; and he warned equally against reducing mortal sin to a rare, almost impossible act. Both blurrings, he taught, cost souls the truth they need.

A pope of the group's own lifetime, saying to the twentieth century what John's first letter said to the first: some sin is deadly, and God has no pleasure in anyone's death.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1855. Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart by a grave violation of God's law, turning man away from God, his ultimate end. Venial sin allows charity to subsist even though it offends and wounds it.

CCC 1857. The three conditions, verbatim and non-negotiable: grave matter, full knowledge, deliberate consent. Teach all three every time; each one is somebody's freedom.

CCC 1861. Mortal sin "results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal

death of hell." This is the sentence the envelopes have been waiting for; read it exactly, and read the "if" in it exactly too.

CCC 1862-1863. Venial sin: committed in a less serious matter, or without full knowledge or complete consent; it weakens charity, merits temporal punishment, and, when deliberate and unrepented, disposes little by little toward mortal sin, yet "does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace." Not nothing; not death.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

The ritual is the thread. Everything planted in Session 1 pays off tonight; the mechanics are scripted in the Discussion Guide. Bring the envelopes, unopened, and do not surrender them early. If someone is absent tonight, hold their envelope sealed and give them a private version before Session 9.

Ezekiel 18, both directions. The group met the dark half last week. Let them discover tonight that the same chapter carries the hope; it teaches them to trust the whole counsel of Scripture, and it is the memory verse's home.

Peter and Judas: name them, do not tell them. In closing the ritual you will say next session studies two men who both sinned gravely against the Lord on the same night. Say no more; the contrast is Session 9's discovery.

Presumption and despair: plant only. Tonight's two failure modes (the loophole-hunter and the terrified) are Session 12's formal subject, where CCC 2091-2092 defines both sins against hope. Tonight, just steer individuals pastorally; the doctrine gets its night.

Crown discipline holds. Even tonight. Session 14.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers 1 John 5:16-17 and can resolve the 1 John 1:8 / 3:9 tension with it.
2. Every participant can recite the three conditions of mortal sin and explain why each one matters.
3. The group answers the "all sin is sin" objection from Jesus's own graded language.
4. The sealed guesses are opened by the full ritual, and every participant states an evidence-based answer aloud.
5. The night ends on Ezekiel 18:32 and the announced doorway of Session 9; no one leaves in the diagnosis.

Time Note

Plan for 95 minutes and defend the last 30 for the ritual with your life. Win 6, Build 45, Ritual 30, Send omitted tonight (the ritual is the Send), prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 4** (Luke 12:47-48 can live inside your Matthew 5 summary) and the **Dig Deeper**. The ritual is never shortened. If the Build threatens the fence, cut into Build, not ritual.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Tonight, give us the courage to call things by their names: sin, death, grace, life. Guard the anxious among us from fear you never sent, and the confident among us from comfort you never offered. And bring us all, turning, to live. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- In medicine, in law, in parenting: name a place where treating every offense as equally serious would itself be an injustice. Why do we grade?

BUILD · Into the Text

Live discovery, first thing. Say: "Somewhere in one short letter, the New Testament divides sin into two kinds by name, and tells Christians to pray differently over each. It is in 1 John 5. Find it, read verses 16 and 17 twice, and tell me what John just did." Wait for it.

1. What two categories does 1 John 5:16-17 establish, in John's own words? And what does John assume about who can commit the deadly kind?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"There is sin which is mortal... All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal" (1 Jn 5:16-17). John names two gravities: sin that kills and sin that does not, and he regulates the church's intercession by the difference. The Church's words "mortal" and "venial" are not a medieval filing system; John's own phrase is "sin unto death" (*pros thanaton*), which the RSV2CE rightly renders "mortal."

And notice the context: John is discussing what to do when "any one sees his **brother** committing" such sin. The deadly kind is a hazard he locates among the brethren. Which is exactly what Sessions 7's warnings led us to expect.

2. Now a puzzle inside the same letter. Read 1 John 1:8 and then 1 John 3:9. On the surface they collide. How does the distinction you just found resolve them?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

1:8: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." 3:9: "No one born of God commits sin." If "sin" means the same thing in both, John refutes John. But with 5:16-17 in hand, the letter reads whole: every Christian trips daily over the sin that is not deadly (1:8; "we all make many mistakes," Jas 3:2), and the one abiding in God does not commit the deadly kind, the sin incompatible with abiding, and must not, for it kills the life in him (3:9 with 3:15, "no murderer has eternal life abiding in him").

The mortal/venial distinction is not an escape from John's severity; it is the Church's time-honored reading, and it lets his whole letter be true at once. (Some read 3:9 of settled, practiced sin; the readings converge on John meaning something graver than 1:8's daily stumbles.)

3. Jesus grades. Read Matthew 5:21-22 and Luke 12:47-48. What escalates in each passage, and what does that tell us about how God weighs sin?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Matthew 5: anger, then the contemptuous insult, then "You fool!", with liability escalating from judgment to the council to "the hell of fire." Jesus, radicalizing the commandment, still grades within it. Luke 12: the servant who knew his master's will and defied it receives the severe beating; the one who did not know, the light one; "Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required." Knowledge changes culpability, from the Lord's own mouth.

Grave matter (Matthew's escalation), knowledge (Luke's principle), and will (James's "desire when it has conceived", Jas 1:14-15): these texts illustrate that Jesus grades culpability along exactly the lines the Church's three conditions name; the technical formulation itself is CCC 1857's.

4. Read Galatians 5:19-21 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Paul lists "works of the flesh" and warns that "those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." To whom is he writing, and what makes his Corinthian list end in hope?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

To baptized Christians, in letters read at their assemblies; the warning about inheritance is family mail, which is exactly what makes it sober. These lists are Scripture's sober register of kingdom-excluding conduct: examples of the grave matter the Church grounds principally in the Decalogue (CCC 1858), acts that, chosen knowingly and freely, are incompatible with the kingdom.

And the Corinthian list pivots on one glorious tense: "And such **were** some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified" (1 Cor 6:11), the group's Session 4 verse, now revealed as a before-and-after. Grave sin is not identity; it is history, for everyone who turns.

Build, Then Press

Leader: briskly tonight; the ritual is waiting. Full strength, then the turn.

A Protestant friend says: "**This ranking system is the problem. 'Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it' (Jas 2:10). Before a holy God, all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment (Isa 64:6); the smallest sin is cosmic treason deserving hell, which is why we need grace for all of it. Your mortal/venial chart just teaches Catholics to manage a sin budget: which ones they can afford this week.**"

5. What is right in that? And what do tonight's texts say to it?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Right, and worth keeping: no sin is trivial before God, every sin needs Christ's blood and not our minimizing, and any Catholic using the distinction as a budget has corrupted it; the Catechism itself says deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us "little by little" toward the deadly kind (CCC 1863). Deliberate venial sin is how souls rust.

But "all sin is equal" cannot survive tonight's texts: John names a sin that is mortal and sin that is not (1 Jn 5:16-17); Jesus grades liability by matter and by knowledge (Mt 5:21-22; Lk 12:47-48); James 2:10 in its own context teaches that the law is one seamless fabric, so you cannot keep the commandments selectively, not that a flash of impatience and an adultery are identical acts; the same James, earlier in the same letter, is the man who says sin "when it is full-grown" brings forth death, which is a gradation. And notice, gently, that everyone already knows this: no parent, no court, no conscience on earth treats all wrongs alike, because love itself distinguishes a scratch from a stab wound. The distinction does not shrink God's holiness; it takes seriously what different sins do to the life he put in us. A diagnosis is not a budget. It is the reason the patient goes to the doctor in time.

DIG DEEPER · Trent, Chapter 15: The Precision That Matters

The Council of Trent's justification decree includes a chapter written for exactly tonight: it teaches, in substance, that the grace of justification is lost not only by unbelief, by which faith itself is lost, but by **any other mortal sin as well, even though faith is not lost**. You can still believe every article of the Creed and be dead in grace: the demons of James 2:19 believe. This is why the Catholic question after a grave fall is never "did I stop believing?" but "have I turned

back?"

It is also why Session 5 mattered: if charity is the form and life of living faith, then the sin that kills charity kills the life of faith while leaving its skeleton standing. Trent is simply James, slowed down.

The Opening of the Guesses

Leader: ring-fence thirty minutes. Bring out the sealed envelopes, still sealed, and lay them where everyone can see them. Then follow this script.

1. The answer from evidence (10 min). Say: "Seven sessions ago you sealed a guess: *Can a true Christian lose their salvation?* Before anyone opens anything, we answer it fresh, from what we have read with our own eyes: the three tenses, the wilderness, the branches, the warnings, and tonight, the sin John calls mortal. Go around: your answer now, and the one text that most persuades you." Let every person speak. Do not correct anyone mid-circle.

2. The envelopes (10 min). Distribute each person's own sealed guess. Say: "Open it. Read your own words silently. Then, if you are willing: did you change your mind, sharpen it, or hold it? What changed it?" Volunteers share. Expect surprises; guard the ones who guessed "no" from any hint of gloating, because their instinct was protecting something true about God's faithfulness, and Session 12 will honor it.

3. The confirmation (5 min). Say: "Here is the Church's answer, and notice it is the one the texts have been giving." Read CCC 1861 aloud, slowly, including its "if": *if it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness*. Then say: "Yes. A Christian, truly justified, truly a child of God, can destroy the life of grace in his soul through mortal sin. The Council of Trent said it; John's letter said it first. That is the sober half of the truth. Now hear the other half."

4. The doorway (5 min). Say: "Next session, we study two apostles who both sinned gravely against the Lord, on the same night, within hours of each other. One of them is Peter, whom the Church honors as first of the apostles and names first among them in the Roman Canon. The difference between them is the entire rest of this study. The question was never really *can it be lost*. The question is *what does God do when it is*, and that answer has a door with a light on. Come and see." Then straight into the closing prayer; end warm, end forward.

Live It This Week

Keep your guess. Tape your opened guess inside your study Bible. It is evidence of something rare: a mind changed, or confirmed, by Scripture itself.

Pray Ezekiel's sentence. Each day: "You have no pleasure in the death of anyone, Lord; so I turn, and live." Notice it is present tense, and daily.

Do a gentle examen. One evening, review the three conditions honestly over your own week: matter, knowledge, consent. Not to torment yourself, but the way a sailor checks the hull, and knowing where the shipyard is: next session.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, we have called sin what you call it, and grace what you call it, and we have answered a hard question honestly in front of each other. Thank you for a Church that tells us the truth. Guard everyone in this circle from the death you take no pleasure in, and walk with us through the door you are about to open. We ask it through Christ our Lord, who did not lose one of those you gave him except the son of perdition, and who restored the one who wept. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord GOD; so turn, and live."

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
1 John 5:16-17	Live discovery: sin which is mortal, sin which is not (Build Q1)
1 John 1:8 / 3:9 (with 3:15)	The in-letter tension the distinction resolves (Build Q2)
James 3:2	"We all make many mistakes" (Q2 answer)
Matthew 5:21-22	Jesus grades matter and liability (Build Q3)
Luke 12:47-48	Jesus grades by knowledge (Build Q3)
James 1:14-15	Sin's embryology; death at full growth (Q3 answer)
Galatians 5:19-21	Works of the flesh; inheritance warning (Build Q4)
1 Corinthians 6:9-11	"And such were some of you" (Build Q4)
James 2:10	Steelman text: guilty of all (answered in context)
Ezekiel 18:21-32	Both directions; "so turn, and live" (OT root, memory verse)
2 Samuel 11-12; Psalm 51	David: the distinction with a face (leader background)
CCC 1861	Read verbatim in the ritual, including its "if"

Session 9: The Way Back

Peter, Judas, and the door Christ built for the fallen

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Christ anticipated grave sin among his own and built the remedy in advance: on Easter evening he breathed the Spirit on the apostles and delegated the forgiving and retaining of sins. And they discover, in the tale of two apostles, that the difference between Peter and Judas was never the size of the sin but the direction of the next step.

Catholic Touchstone. "Only God forgives sins" (CCC 1441), and the same Lord who alone forgives willed to exercise that forgiveness through his Church: Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance "for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin" (CCC 1446). Last session ended with a door and a light on. Tonight the group walks through it.

What You Need to Know

After the weight of Sessions 7 and 8, this session should feel like oxygen, and it will, if you let the texts do their startling work rather than defending confession as a Catholic custom. The claim tonight is bigger than custom: that the risen Christ, on the first Easter evening, with the wounds still on him, made the forgiveness of sins one of his first Easter gifts to the apostolic Church (his first word was "Peace be with you"). Read John 20:19-23 with fresh eyes: he shows them his hands and side, says "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you," **breathes on them** (an unmistakable echo of Genesis 2:7), and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The group's live discovery is a single question sitting inside that verse: forgiving *or retaining* requires a decision, and a decision requires knowing the case. The power Jesus gave, to forgive *or retain*, invites exactly what the Church's Tradition drew from it: the sinner tells the apostle the sins. Confession is not a medieval add-on to John 20; it is the verse's fitting, Tradition-confirmed operating logic.

Surround it with its supporting texts. Matthew 9:8: when the crowds saw the paralytic forgiven and healed, "they glorified God, who had given such authority **to men**", plural, and Matthew wrote that sentence for a Church that knew what it meant. 2 Corinthians 5:18-20: God "gave **us** the ministry of reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." James 5:14-16: the sick call the presbyters for prayer and anointing, and the letter continues, "confess your sins to one another... that you may be healed": distinct clauses that together fold confession and the Church's ordained ministry into one healing scene. 1 John 1:9, last week's doorway verse: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins."

Then the two apostles. Handle this with absolute precision, because the group's instinct will be that Judas's sin was worse. Keep the parallel tight: both were chosen apostles; both were warned at the same table on the same night; both fell within hours, Judas handing Jesus over, Peter denying him three times with oaths. Even repentance appears in both stories: Matthew says Judas "repented" (in the sense of remorse: the Greek is *metamelētheis*, regret) and even returned the money and confessed "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood", but he carried it to the chief priests, whose recorded answer was "What is that to us?" (Mt 27:4), and then went out alone (Mt 27:3-5). Peter "went out and wept bitterly" (Lk 22:62), but stayed with the brethren, and when the word came, ran to the tomb. The difference that decided everything: Judas's remorse curved inward, down what the Church has always read as despair's road; Peter's grief turned back toward Christ and the company of the Church. And Jesus, who had prayed for Peter in advance ("I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren," Lk 22:32), staged Peter's restoration with unbearable tenderness: a **charcoal fire** on the beach (Jn 21:9), the only other charcoal fire in John being the one Peter denied him beside (Jn 18:18), and three questions, "do you love me?",

traditionally heard as one for each denial, each answered aloud, each met with a commission. Jesus could have restored Peter with a silent glance. He chose audible, embodied, question-and-answer restoration beside a scene John's wording invites us to see as deliberately reconstructed. That is the pastoral logic of confession, played out by the Lord himself.

Pastoral note, and it is tonight's real cargo: someone in your group has been away from confession for years, and someone is carrying something they believe is unforgivable. You will not know who. Preach to them without looking at them. The night's one-sentence homily: no sin outruns Christ's mercy when repentance carries it back to him; only the final refusal to bring it stands outside, and even over Judas the Church does not pronounce, for God's mercy is not ours to measure. End with the practical: when confessions are heard at the parish, what to say if you have forgotten how, and the plain promise of CCC 1468, in substance: reconciliation with God, and for the devout, peace and serenity of conscience with deep spiritual consolation.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

David and Nathan (2 Sam 12:1-13) is confession's Old Testament blueprint, and the group has been circling it since Psalm 51 appeared in Session 4. Notice the shape: God does not forgive David through a private intuition; he sends a *man*. Nathan speaks the truth that breaks the concealment ("You are the man"); David confesses aloud, one sentence, no excuses ("I have sinned against the LORD"); and absolution comes back through the same human channel: "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die." Spoken sin, spoken mercy, through God's appointed man: a Davidic foreshadowing of the confessional's whole shape, a thousand years early. **Psalm 32** is David's own after-action report, and it adds the physiology: "When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long... I acknowledged my sin to you... then you forgave the guilt of my sin" (Ps 32:3-5). Concealment corrodes; confession heals. Every examined life already knows both halves.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. John Chrysostom

On the Priesthood, Book 3 (4th century)

Marveling at John 20, St. John Chrysostom teaches, in substance, that men who dwell on earth have been entrusted with the administration of things in heaven, and given an authority God gave neither to angels nor archangels: what priests do below, God ratifies above.

Chrysostom is not inflating the clergy; he is reading the delegation Christ actually made, and refusing to shrink it into a metaphor. If John 20:23 means what it says, then the confessional is the most understated room on earth.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. John Vianney

The witness of Ars (19th century)

The facts of his life are the teaching. Assigned to a village of a few hundred souls, St. John Vianney ended his life hearing confessions for a dozen and more hours a day, as pilgrims by the tens of thousands came to Ars each year for one thing: absolution from a priest who plainly believed in the mercy he was dispensing.

The Church made him the patron of parish priests, and his confessional, preserved at Ars, is the argument: a man does not spend his whole strength for decades on a task he believes futile, and penitents do not cross France for a burden. Mercy at the door was the report of his entire ministry. Let the group hear that from the far side of the screen.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Faustina Kowalska

Diary (1930s)

St. Faustina recorded in her Diary the words she understood from the Lord about confession: that the greatest miracles take place there, that it suffices to come with faith to the feet of his representative and reveal one's misery, and the miracle of Divine Mercy restores the soul in full.

She recorded it as private revelation, which binds no one; but what she describes is the Church's own teaching about the sacrament: a tribunal of mercy whose verdict is mercy for the repentant who come rightly disposed.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1441. "Only God forgives sins." The Catechism states the objection's premise as her own first principle, then teaches that Jesus, Son of God, exercises this divine power and wills the Church to continue it.

CCC 1446. Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church, above all those fallen into grave sin after Baptism. The Fathers' image, preserved here: a second plank after shipwreck.

CCC 1461. Since Christ entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to his apostles, bishops and priests continue to exercise it: the successor structure of John 20:23.

CCC 1468. In substance: the whole power of the sacrament consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in intimate friendship, and for those who receive it devoutly it is wont to bring peace and serenity of conscience with deep consolation of spirit. Read this one aloud tonight; it is the clinic's posted promise.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Ritual debrief. If anyone missed Session 8, run their private envelope opening before tonight's session, briefly and warmly, so no one walks into the mercy session still holding a sealed question.

Peter and Judas plant Session 12. Tonight's contrast (grief that turns back versus remorse that curves inward) is the lived version of hope's two opposite sins, presumption and despair, which get their doctrinal night in Session 12. Do not name the doctrine tonight; let the faces carry it.

Prodigal callback. When the group hears "confess aloud and be received," someone may remember Session 2's father interrupting the hired-servant speech. Bless the connection: the confessional is where that scene happens with a real voice answering.

Exodus map. Light touch if it arises: the wilderness had a tent of meeting in the middle of the camp. The way back was always pitched among the tents.

Crown discipline holds. Session 14.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers the operating logic of John 20:23: retaining requires hearing, hearing requires confessing.
2. Participants can trace the Peter/Judas parallel and name the actual difference between them.
3. The group hears and answers the "confess straight to God" objection with the Church's own premise (CCC 1441) intact.
4. Every participant knows practically how to return to confession, including after long absence.
5. The person in the room carrying the unforgivable thing hears the light left on, without being looked at.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes. Win 10, Build 55, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Psalm 32 folds into your David summary) and compress the **Dig Deeper**. Never cut the charcoal-fire discovery or the practical how-to-return segment; the second is why some people came tonight, whether they said so or not.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord Jesus, on the evening of your resurrection, you gave your Church peace and the forgiveness of sins. We come tonight as people who need it. Show us the door you built, give courage to whoever in this circle needs it most, and let none of us carry alone what you died to take away. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Think of a time you finally said something out loud, to a friend, a doctor, anyone, after carrying it silently. What changed the moment it left your mouth?
- What was confession like in your family growing up: regular, rare, feared, never mentioned? One sentence each.

BUILD · Into the Text

Live discovery, first thing. Say: "It is Easter Sunday evening. The tomb is empty, the doors are locked, and the risen Jesus has one piece of business he will not let wait until morning. Read John 20:19-23 slowly. Then tell me: what gift does the risen Christ give his Church before the evening is out, and what does he do with his breath?"

1. What does Jesus give the apostles in John 20:22-23, and why is the breathing significant? Then look hard at verse 23: what would the apostles need, practically, in order to forgive *or retain* anyone's sins?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He shows his wounds, commissions them as the Father commissioned him, **breathes** on them, an unmistakable echo of God breathing life into Adam (Gen 2:7): a new creation moment, and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Among the risen Lord's first acts, after "Peace be with you," is a standing ministry of forgiveness, powered by the Spirit.

And the operating logic hides in plain sight: forgive *or retain* is a judgment, and no one can judge a case he has not heard. A judgment of forgive-or-retain calls for hearing the case, and that is exactly the practice the Church's Tradition drew from this verse: sinners telling the apostles their sins. Confession is not an add-on to John 20; it is its natural operating logic, confirmed by the Church that received it. She did not invent the practice; she read the verse and did what it invites.

2. A thousand years earlier, God forgave the gravest sinner in Israel's story. Read 2 Samuel 12:7-13 and Psalm 32:3-5. Walk the sequence: who does God send, what does David say, and through whom does the absolution come? And what does David report that silence was doing to him?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

God sends a man, Nathan. The prophet's word breaks the concealment ("You are the man"), David confesses aloud in one unexcused sentence ("I have sinned against the LORD"), and mercy returns through the same human channel: "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Sam 12:13). Spoken sin, spoken absolution, through God's appointed man. And Psalm 32 gives the before-and-after from inside: "When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away... I acknowledged my sin to you... then you forgave the guilt of my sin."

The pattern the confessional fulfills is not medieval. It is Davidic.

Live discovery: the two apostles. Say: "Now the tale of two falls. Same table, same night, same warning, same Lord. Read Luke 22:31-34, then Luke 22:54-62, then Matthew 27:3-5. Build me the parallel: everything the two men have in common. Then find the one place the roads divide."

3. List what Peter and Judas share, honestly and completely, including what Matthew 27:3 says Judas felt and did. Then: where exactly do the roads divide?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Shared: both chosen apostles; both warned by Jesus at the table that very night; both fell within hours, Judas handing him over, Peter denying him three times with oaths; and, the detail that levels every smug reading, both felt the sin afterward. Matthew says Judas "repented," in the sense of remorse, confessed aloud ("I have sinned in betraying innocent blood"), and even made restitution, returning the silver. On paper, Judas's response has pieces Peter's lacks.

The divide: **direction and company**. Judas took his confession to the chief priests, whose answer was "What is that to us?", then went out from everyone, alone, down what the Church has always read as the road of despair. Peter "went out and wept bitterly", but stayed with the brethren, was still in the company on Sunday morning, and ran toward the tomb at the first word. And Jesus had already prayed for him: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22:32). The difference between the two was never the gravity of the sin. It was what each man did with the next hour: one curved inward and away; one turned back toward Christ and his Church.

4. Read John 21:4-17, and first find the detail in verse 9 that John wants you to smell. Why does Jesus restore Peter *this way*: out loud, three times, beside that fire, when a silent glance would have sufficed?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Verse 9: a **charcoal fire**. John uses that word exactly twice in his Gospel: the fire Peter denied Jesus beside (18:18), and this one. John's detail all but says it: the scene of the denial rebuilt, and three questions, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?", read by the Church from earliest times as one for each denial, each answered aloud, each met not with probation but with a commission: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

Because Peter was a man, and men sin out loud, in their bodies, in scenes they cannot forget, and mercy that stays theoretical never quite reaches the scene. Jesus chose audible, embodied, question-and-answer restoration. That is the pastoral logic of confession, staged by the Lord himself on a beach: not because God needs to hear it, but because we need to say it, and to hear the answer with our ears.

Build, Then Press

Leader: full strength; this objection lives in half the Catholic families in your parish.

A friend, maybe a lapsed Catholic, says: **"Why would I confess to a priest? Only God can forgive sins; even the Bible's villains knew that (Mk 2:7). 'There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim 2:5). John says if we confess our sins, HE is faithful and just to forgive (1 Jn 1:9): straight to God, no middleman. The priest is just a man, and honestly, some of them have been worse sinners than me."**

5. Start by granting its first premise completely. Then answer from tonight's texts.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Grant the premise; the Church grants it in writing: **"Only God forgives sins"** is the Catechism's own sentence (CCC 1441). The question was never whether God alone forgives; it is whether God, who alone forgives, has chosen instruments. He healed through mud and spittle, saved through water, and speaks through ink; instruments are his signature move.

Then read Mark 2 to its end: the scribes said "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" as an accusation, and Jesus healed the paralytic "that you may know that the Son of Man has authority **on earth** to forgive sins." Matthew's crowd drew the conclusion Matthew kept for his Church: they glorified God "who had given such authority **to men**" (Mt 9:8). Then

Easter evening: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven" (Jn 20:23), a delegation as explicit as language allows. Paul: God "gave us the ministry of reconciliation... ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:18-20). James sets confession of sins and the summoned presbyters side by side in one healing scene (Jas 5:14-16). And 1 John 1:9 is gloriously true, and the Catholic prays it daily; the question it does not address is the one John 20 does: what provision did Christ make for the *deadly* kind, the kind last session named? For that he built a tribunal of mercy staffed by exactly what the objection fears: mere men, breathing borrowed breath, which is the whole scandal of the Incarnation continued. As for unworthy priests: the power never was theirs, which is why it survives them; the charcoal-fire questioner chose, for his first confessor, a man fresh from denying him.

DIG DEEPER · The Second Plank

The early Church's nickname for penance, preserved by the Council of Trent and the Catechism (CCC 1446), comes from the ancient writer Tertullian: it is "the second plank after shipwreck." The first plank is Baptism, the ship God builds you. If sin wrecks the ship, God, who owes no one two rescues, throws a second plank into the water.

The image is honest about both halves of this study: the shipwreck is real (Sessions 7 and 8 were not a drill), and so is the plank. Nobody clinging to a plank critiques its varnish, and nobody who has grasped the image ever again calls confession a burden. It is flotation.

Returning: The Practical Minute

Leader: say this plainly, unhurried, to the whole room, because someone needs it verbatim. "If it has been years: you are the person the parish bulletin's confession times are printed for. Walk in. Tell the priest it has been a long time and you may need help; helping you is his happiest work, and nothing you say will be new to that room. The form is simple: how long it has been, your sins as best you remember, sorrow, and the words of absolution over you. The seal is absolute; he can never repeat a word. You will be inside for minutes, and lighter for years. And if you cannot remember the Act of Contrition, sorrow sincerely meant can borrow the publican's words: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner* (Lk 18:13); prayed from the heart, it went home justified."

SEND · Taking It Out

- Peter's difference was direction and company: grief turned toward Christ, inside the brethren. When you fall, which way do you instinctively turn, and who knows you well enough to turn you around?
- Who do you know that is one invitation away from the charcoal fire: a lapsed friend, a family member, yourself? What would the invitation actually say?

Live It This Week

Go. If you are conscious of grave sin, or if it has simply been too long: find this week's confession times and go. Take this Take-Home with you if it helps.

Pray Psalm 32. Once, slowly, and notice verse 1 is a beatitude: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven." David is describing how you will feel in the parking lot afterward.

Leave a light on. Reach out to one person who has been away, without agenda: a meal, a text, a seat saved. Peter stayed findable because the brethren kept him close.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord Jesus, you built the way back before we needed it, and you staffed it with men who know what falling is. Give the courage of Peter's tears to everyone here, and to everyone we love who has gone out into the dark, send someone with a light. When you have turned us again, make us strength for our brethren. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

1 John 1:9 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
John 20:19-23	Live discovery: Easter evening; breath, Spirit, forgive and retain (Build Q1)
Genesis 2:7	The echo behind the breath of Jn 20:22 (Q1 answer)
2 Samuel 12:7-13	David and Nathan: the confessional's blueprint (Build Q2)
Psalms 32:1-5	Concealment corrodes; confession heals (Build Q2, Live It)
Luke 22:31-34, 54-62	The parallel falls; "when you have turned again" (Build Q3)
Matthew 27:3-5	Judas: remorse, confession to the merciless, despair (Build Q3)
John 21:4-17	Live discovery: the charcoal fire; threefold restoration (Build Q4)
John 18:18	The first charcoal fire (Q4 answer)
Mark 2:5-12; Matthew 9:8	Authority on earth, given to men (steelman answer)
John 20:23; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; James 5:14-16	The delegation texts (steelman answer)
1 Timothy 2:5; 1 John 1:9; Mark 2:7	Steelman texts, granted and answered
Luke 18:13	The sufficient prayer (Practical Minute)

Session 10: Run So As to Obtain

Perseverance: the long middle of the race

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers the New Testament's master image for the Christian life after Baptism: a race demanding endurance, run inside a cheering communion, sustained by concrete means: prayer, the sacraments, and one another, with the eyes fixed forward on Jesus. Perseverance is neither presumed nor white-knuckled; it is received, daily, on the way.

Catholic Touchstone. The children of the Church "rightly hope for the grace of final perseverance" (CCC 2016), and prayer is the ordinary channel of that grace: the Catechism teaches that prayer and the Christian life are inseparable, and enshrines St. Alphonsus's maxim on prayer and salvation in its own text (CCC 2744). What Session 7 warned about, tonight equips for.

What You Need to Know

The heavy weather is behind the group: the warnings (S7), the diagnosis (S8), and the way back (S9). The last five sessions build the life. Tonight's job is to convert "salvation can be lost" from a lingering anxiety into a runner's focus. The New Testament does exactly this with its athletic imagery, and the imagery is everywhere once you see it: "run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Heb 12:1); "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it" (1 Cor 9:24); Paul at mid-course: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on... straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:12-14). Note what Paul refuses to claim mid-race, and note the participle: "straining forward" is the word (*epekteinomenos*) St. Gregory of Nyssa built on in *The Life of Moses* (Session 1). The study's oldest voice pays off tonight.

One crown note, leader only. Tonight 1 Corinthians 9:25 puts a wreath on the table: the athletes train "to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." Crown imagery is now officially in the study's bloodstream, and next session it becomes the subject. Do not connect it to the study's title; that door opens in Session 14.

Teach perseverance as *synergy*, or the group will hear tonight as either presumption's nap or anxiety's treadmill. Jude ends his letter with both truths in one breath: "keep yourselves in the love of God" (v. 21) and glory "to him who is able to keep you from falling" (v. 24). Peter has the same grammar: we "by God's power are guarded through faith" (1 Pet 1:5): guarded by God, through something we exercise. This is Philippians 2:12-13 (the group's very first memory verse) grown up: work out, because God works in. So the practical section matters as much as the doctrine tonight: the means of perseverance are unglamorous and utterly reliable: daily prayer (St. Alphonsus's remedy from Session 7, now with the Catechism's own seal), the sacraments as standing appointments with grace, and the community, "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today'" (Heb 3:13), "not neglecting to meet together" (Heb 10:24-25). Nobody finishes this race alone; the cloud of witnesses, read with the communion of saints, is not decoration; it is infrastructure.

On certainty: someone will ask tonight whether we can be *sure* we will finish. Give the honest preview and defer the full treatment: the Church distinguishes what is absolutely certain (God's fidelity and promises), what is morally discernible (my present state, by its fruits), and what is hoped and prayed for (my future perseverance). Session 12 is entirely devoted to this, and to the verse on the parking lot list since Session 1. Point at the list; the group should feel the study closing its accounts.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 95 is tonight's buried treasure, and your group is standing on the X: they read it as homework a month ago, before Session 7. The psalm sings, then pivots: "O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah," and swears the wilderness generation's oath: "They shall not enter my rest." Tonight the group discovers that Hebrews 3:7-14 quotes their homework psalm at length and squeezes one word for all it holds: **Today**. "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today'... For we share in Christ, **if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end**" (Heb 3:13-14). The Exodus map, the psalm, and the epistle all say one thing: perseverance is not a heroic future act; it is today, repeated. **Elijah under the broom tree** (1 Kings 19:4-8) gives the race its mercy: the great prophet, mid-course, praying to die, and God's response is not a rebuke but a nap, bread, and a touch: "Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you." Sustenance for the road, twice, and forty days' strength from it: Catholic tradition has long heard the Eucharist's shadow there, and your tired runners will hear their own name.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Polycarp of Smyrna

The Martyrdom of Polycarp, ch. 9 (c. 155)

Ordered to curse Christ or die, the aged bishop, a disciple of St. John himself, answered: "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Eighty-six years is the whole point. Polycarp's crown was not minted in the stadium that afternoon; it was the last step of a race his own eighty-six years imply began in his youth. The martyrdom is what a finished "today, and today, and today" looks like from the outside.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Benedict of Nursia

Rule, Prologue (6th century)

Near the end of his Rule's Prologue, St. Benedict writes, in substance, of a race: as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run the path of God's commandments with hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love; and he closes the Prologue asking perseverance in the school of the Lord's service until death.

Western monasticism's founding document is a perseverance manual, and its genius is its ordinariness: fixed prayer, shared meals, stability, beginning again. Benedict built civilization out of people who simply did not stop.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Teresa of Calcutta

Private letters, published as Come Be My Light (2007)

Her published letters revealed what almost no one knew: for roughly the last half century of her life, the saint of the Calcutta gutters served through a nearly unbroken interior darkness, feeling little of the presence of the God she served, and she did not stop: not the daily rising, not the Mass, not the poorest of the poor.

That documented fidelity is the voice. Perseverance, her life teaches in substance, is measured by faithfulness rather than felt success or consolation, which is good news for everyone whose lane looks like laundry, commutes, and Tuesdays.

Catechism Connection

CCC 2016. The children of the Church rightly hope for the grace of final perseverance. The study's recurring paragraph, now in its home session.

CCC 2742-2744. Persevering in prayer: pray without ceasing; prayer is a vital necessity; and the Catechism's own citation of St. Alphonsus on the bond between prayer and salvation. The remedy your group received in Session 7 turns out to be printed in the Catechism.

CCC 1810. The human virtues are acquired by education, deliberate acts, and perseverance ever renewed in repeated efforts, and are purified and elevated by grace. The runner's physiology, in catechism prose.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

The crown surfaces. 1 Corinthians 9:25's imperishable wreath is the crown thread's first open appearance. Let it pass tonight without comment beyond the text itself; next session it becomes the subject, and the title verse still waits for Session 14. If anyone asks about the study title again, same smile, same answer.

Psalm 95 payoff. The homework from a month ago detonates tonight in Hebrews 3. Let a participant make the connection if at all possible; ask "where have you read this psalm recently?" before you tell them. Long-range payoffs are the study's signature; savor this one.

St. Gregory of Nyssa payoff. Philippians 3:13's "straining forward" is the word behind Session 1's *epektasis* voice. One sentence when it lands; the group should feel the study's first session shaking hands with its tenth.

St. Alphonsus payoff. When CCC 2744 appears, remind the group where they first heard the maxim (Session 7's exit ramp). CCC 2744 teaches prayer's vital necessity, with St. Alphonsus's maxim cited in its support.

Certainty question: preview only. The full assurance treatment, and the 1 John 5:13 parking-lot debt from Session 1, is Session 12. Point at the list; do not settle it tonight.

Session Goals

1. The group can name the race as the New Testament's image for post-baptismal life, with texts.
2. Participants discover the Psalm 95 / Hebrews 3 connection themselves and can say what "today" does to perseverance.
3. The group can state perseverance's synergy from Jude 21 and 24 in one breath.
4. Every participant leaves with a named, scheduled means of perseverance: a daily prayer, a sacramental rhythm, and a person.
5. The tired runner in the room hears Elijah's broom tree as their own story, mercy included.

Time Note

Plan for 85 minutes. Win 10, Build 50, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Elijah folds into a sentence of your summary) and compress the **Dig Deeper**. Never cut the Psalm 95 discovery or the means-of-perseverance segment; the second is the night's cargo.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you have set a race before us and a cloud of witnesses around us. Lift what weighs us down, steady what has gone weary in us, and fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Teach us to run today, just today, and to trust you with all the other days. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- What is the longest thing you have ever stuck with: a sport, a job, a marriage, an instrument? What actually kept you in it on the ordinary days?
- When your faith has felt like a grind, what did you assume that meant? Were you ever told the grind might be normal?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: have someone read Hebrews 12:1-3 aloud, then 1 Corinthians 9:24-25, then Philippians 3:12-14. Ask the group to collect every athletic word they hear.

1. What does the race imagery, taken seriously, tell us about the shape of the Christian life? And what does Paul, of all people, refuse to claim about himself in Philippians 3:12?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

A race has a start (the group knows exactly where theirs was: the font), a course with length and resistance, a surrounding "so great a cloud of witnesses", read by the Church, with the communion of saints, as the finished encircling the running, a required virtue ("run **with perseverance**"), a focal point ("looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"), and a prize ahead, not in the pocket: "So run that you may obtain it" (1 Cor 9:24). And the athletes' wreath comparison: theirs perishable, ours "imperishable" (9:25); hold that image, it returns.

Paul, mid-course, refuses the finish-line claim: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on... straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil 3:12-13). If the apostle would not declare his race over while still running it, the middle tense of salvation from Session 1 has just been confirmed by its greatest runner. (And "straining forward" is the word St. Gregory of Nyssa built on in *The Life of Moses*, Session 1's voice: the pressing itself is the saved life.)

2. Read 1 Kings 19:4-8. Elijah, mid-race, sits down under a broom tree and asks to die. What does God do about it, and what does he pointedly not do?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

God does not rebuke, lecture, or replace him. He lets him sleep, sends an angel with bread baked on hot stones and a jar of water, touches him, lets him sleep again, and feeds him again, "for the journey is too great for you" (19:7 in substance). Forty days' strength from that food. Catholic tradition has long heard a shadow of the Eucharist in the bread for the journey, and every exhausted runner should hear the pastoral point: collapse at mile eighteen is not apostasy, and God's first response to a burned-out prophet was food and a nap.

The difference between Elijah under the broom tree and the wilderness generation at Meribah is the difference tonight turns on: weariness inside the journey versus hardening against the voice.

Live discovery. Say: "A month ago, your Take-Home assigned a psalm to read before the warnings session. Now read Hebrews 3:7-14 and tell me: whose homework is the author quoting, and what one word does he squeeze until it changes how perseverance works?"

3. What psalm is Hebrews 3 quoting, what did that psalm remember, and what does the author do with the word "today"?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Psalm 95: your own pre-Session-7 homework, quoted at length in the Greek-scriptural form Hebrews uses: "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion" (your RSV2CE psalter reads "O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah"), the wilderness generation, and the oath "They shall never enter my rest." The author then leans his whole weight on one word: "exhort one another every day, **as long as it is called 'today'**... For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end" (Heb 3:13-14).

"Today" changes the size of perseverance. Nobody is asked to be faithful for forty years tonight; everyone is asked to be faithful today, and to help somebody else be. Perseverance is not one heroic act at the far end of life; it is the smallest unit of faithfulness, repeated, inside a community that exhorts daily. The Exodus map's wilderness is crossed one "today" at a time.

4. Read Jude 20-21 and then Jude 24-25. Five verses apart, who does the keeping? Read also 1 Peter 1:5. How do you hold these together without dropping either?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Jude 21: **"keep yourselves** in the love of God." Jude 24: glory "to him who **is able to keep you** from falling." Same letter, same page, both commanded and confessed. 1 Peter 1:5 shows the mechanism: we "by God's power are guarded through faith": God's power does the guarding; faith, which we exercise daily, is the channel.

This is the study's oldest grammar: "work out your own salvation... for God is at work in you" (Phil 2:12-13, Session 1's memory verse, now fully grown). Perseverance is synergy: never our unaided grip, never a grace that grips for us while we sleep. Praying, receiving the sacraments, and staying inside the exhorting community are not works that rival grace; they are how grace is ordinarily received. The runner does not create the air; the runner does have to breathe.

Build, Then Press

Leader: present at full strength; this voice lives inside tired Christians, and it deserves an honest answer. Note the doctrine behind its envy, and grant it fairly: classical Reformed teaching holds that God preserves the regenerate through real means and gives real present assurance grounded in his promise; Session 12 engages that account at full strength. Tonight's voice is the tired heart's version.

The exhausted voice says: **"So it never ends. Decades of white-knuckled effort, and one bad season could still lose everything. How is that good news? At least the 'once saved always saved' folks get to rest. Your system sounds like salvation by stamina, and I do not have it."**

5. Answer the exhausted voice from tonight's texts. Be gentle; it may be your own.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

First, feel its truth: the race is long, and pretending otherwise is cruelty. But look at what tonight actually taught. The unit of perseverance is not decades; it is **today** (Heb 3:13), a size every exhausted person can still carry. The keeping is not yours alone; you are "guarded by God's power" (1 Pet 1:5), and "he who is able to keep you from falling" (Jude 24) is on duty tonight. The course comes with aid stations: bread for the journey when you cannot go on (Elijah's story is in the Bible precisely for mile eighteen), a shipyard when you wreck (Session 9), and runners on every side commanded to exhort *you*, daily. And stamina is precisely not the currency: fidelity is, the kind St. Teresa of Calcutta kept through decades of interior darkness, and faithfulness, unlike stamina, is renewed each morning by asking. That is St. Alphonsus's whole maxim, now with the Catechism's seal (CCC 2744): the one who prays receives; the one who keeps

asking, keeps standing.

And "rest now" is not actually what the alternative offers; it offers a certainty that must wait until the finish line to be verified, which is, on the ground, the same daily walk of faith. The good news was never "you will not have to run." It is "you will not run alone, unfed, or unforgiven, and the One at the finish is the same One carrying you down the course."

DIG DEEPER · Trent on the Gift of Perseverance

The Council of Trent's justification decree devotes a chapter to perseverance, teaching in substance: the gift of persevering to the end can come only from God, who is able to make the one standing stand firm; so let no one promise himself certainty about it with absolute certitude, though all ought to place the firmest hope in God's help; for God, unless men fail his grace, will finish the good work he began, working both the will and the accomplishment.

Read the balance: no presumption, boundless hope, and the finishing explicitly God's work "unless men fail his grace." Session 12 walks this ridge in full; tonight, notice Trent tells the exhausted voice exactly what Jude told it: he is able to keep you.

The Runner's Kit

Leader: make this concrete and personal; go around the circle if the group is willing. Every runner tonight names three things: **a daily prayer** (a fixed minimum that survives bad days: a morning offering, a decade, the perseverance sentence from Session 7); **a sacramental rhythm** (Sunday non-negotiable; a realistic confession cadence; and when the race gets heavy, remember Elijah's bread has a name and an altar); **a person** (who exhorts you "as long as it is called today," and whom you exhort back; names, not vibes). Write them on the Take-Home. A kit you have named is a kit you can check.

SEND · Taking It Out

- Which piece of your runner's kit is currently missing or rusted: the daily prayer, the sacramental rhythm, or the person? What is the first concrete step this week?
- Who in your life is at mile eighteen under a broom tree right now? What would bread and a touch, rather than a lecture, look like from you this week?

Live It This Week

Run today only. Each morning this week, pray: "Lord, faithful today." Do not negotiate with the decades; they arrive one today at a time.

Deploy the kit. Begin the three named pieces immediately: the fixed daily prayer, the calendar entries, the first message to your person.

Feed a runner. Do one concrete broom-tree kindness for a weary Christian: a meal, a ride, a "still praying for you." Aid stations are staffed by runners.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord Jesus, pioneer and perfecter of our faith, you ran this course first and you run it now beside us. Give us the grace of today's faithfulness, bread for the journey when it is too great for us, and companions for the road. Keep us, who cannot keep ourselves, and bring us, with all that cloud of witnesses, home. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our

faith."

Hebrews 12:1b-2a (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
Hebrews 12:1-3	The race and the cloud of witnesses (Build Q1, memory verse)
1 Corinthians 9:24-25	Run to obtain; the imperishable wreath (Build Q1)
Philippians 3:12-14	Paul mid-course; "straining forward" (Build Q1)
1 Kings 19:4-8	Elijah under the broom tree; bread for the journey (Build Q2)
Hebrews 3:7-14	Live discovery: Psalm 95 quoted; "today" (Build Q3)
Psalm 95	The homework psalm (Build Q3)
Jude 20-21, 24-25	Keep yourselves / him who is able to keep you (Build Q4)
1 Peter 1:5	Guarded by God's power through faith (Build Q4)
Philippians 2:12-13	Session 1 memory verse callback (Q4 answer)
Hebrews 10:24-25	Not neglecting to meet together (leader background, Runner's Kit)
Colossians 1:21-23	"Provided that you continue in the faith" (leader background)
Luke 9:62	Hand to the plow (leader background)
CCC 2744	St. Alphonsus's maxim with the Catechism's seal (Catechism Connection)

Session 11: The Crown He Crowns

Merit: God rewarding his own gifts

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers the New Testament's enormous, unembarrassed vocabulary of reward: wages, treasure, crowns, repayment, "well done", and then discovers Paul's grammar for it in a single verse: "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me" (1 Cor 15:10). Merit, rightly understood, is God crowning his own gifts.

Catholic Touchstone. "With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man" (CCC 2007), and yet, adopted as sons and moved by the Spirit, we can truly merit, for the merits of our good works are gifts of God's goodness (CCC 2008-2010, in substance). The Catechism seals its entire section on merit with St. Thérèse's empty hands (CCC 2011): the same prayer your group met in Session 2. Hold both ends and you hold the doctrine.

What You Need to Know

"Merit" is the most misheard word in Catholic theology, so build tonight in the right order: first let the group be startled by how much reward-talk is in the Bible, then give them the grammar that keeps it grace. The reward texts are not marginal, and most are red-letter: "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Mt 5:12); the Father "who sees in secret will reward you", said three times in one chapter (Mt 6:4, 6, 18); "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Mt 6:20); "Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your master" (Mt 25:21, 23); "each shall receive his wages according to his labor" (1 Cor 3:8); "God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake" (Heb 6:10); "Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him" (Jas 1:12); and Paul facing death: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Tim 4:7-8). A study that hid these texts to protect grace would be hiding Jesus to protect Jesus.

Then the grammar. The live discovery is 1 Corinthians 15:10, where Paul takes credit and hands it away inside one sentence: "by the grace of God I am what I am... I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me." Pair it with 1 Corinthians 4:7: "What have you that you did not receive?" That is the whole Catholic doctrine of merit in apostolic shorthand: the work is real, the worker is real, and the power, the calling, and the crowning all arrive as gift. St. Augustine gave it the Church's permanent formula, writing to Sixtus: when God crowns our merits, he crowns nothing other than his own gifts. Trent built the guardrails: nothing before justification merits justification (the group has known this since Session 2), and afterward, our good works are simultaneously truly ours and wholly grace's fruit.

The key that unlocks the objections is **sonship**, Session 6's cargo. An employer's wage is owed across a counter between strangers; a father's reward to his child moves inside a relationship the father himself created, toward a child whose talents, opportunities, and very existence came from him. When a father pays his daughter for chores, no economist calls it market wages, and no sane person calls it meaningless; it is love, training the child in real agency. God's rewards are that, at infinite scale. This also explains the vineyard parable (Mt 20:1-16), which your steelman will fire: the master's question, "do you begrudge my generosity?", destroys wage-*entitlement* thinking, exactly as the Church does; it does not erase the same Gospel's "your reward is great."

Also mark what Paul's two crown statements do side by side. Mid-race (Phil 3:12, last session): "not that I have already obtained." At the finish (2 Tim 4:7-8): "there is laid up for me the crown." Not a contradiction but a

biography: the confidence Paul refused to presume at mile eighteen he received with both hands in the last stretch, and he immediately universalized it: "and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing." The crown is not an apostle's exception. It is the family inheritance.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Abraham returns a final time. After the mountain, God speaks the Old Testament's great reward sentence: "By myself I have sworn... because you have done this... I will indeed bless you" (Gen 22:16-17); and earlier: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Gen 15:1). Notice the order the group already discovered in Session 4: the call and the promise came first, gratuitously; the rewarded obedience grew inside them. God rewards Abraham for a faith God himself planted, on a road God himself opened: crowning his own gifts, in Genesis. **Ruth** gives the doctrine its gentlest scene: Boaz to the Moabite widow gleaning his field: "The LORD recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (Ruth 2:12). Full reward, and refuge under wings, in one blessing, to a foreigner whose loyal love (hesed) God repays into the very genealogy of David and of Christ (Ruth 4; Mt 1:5). And **Psalms 62:12** states the principle the whole Bible assumes: "to you, O Lord, belongs mercy. For you repay a man according to his work", mercy and repayment in the same verse, because in God's economy the repayment is a form the mercy takes.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Augustine of Hippo

Letter 194, to Sixtus (418)

"When God crowns our merits, he crowns nothing other than his own gifts."

One sentence, and the whole dispute dissolves. The crown is real, the merits are real, and every ounce of both was grace first. The Church has repeated Augustine's line for sixteen centuries because no one has said it better, and the Catechism's merit section (CCC 2006-2009) is essentially this sentence with paragraph numbers.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Sermons on the Song of Songs (12th century)

St. Bernard teaches, in substance: my merit is the mercy of the Lord; I am not poor in merit so long as he is not poor in mercy; and if the mercies of the Lord are many, then many too are my merits.

This is not wordplay; it is the doctrine's emotional register. The saint does not carry his merits like invoices; he carries them like love-letters received, and finds that counting them and counting God's mercies come to the same arithmetic.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Thomas Aquinas

Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 114 (treatise on merit)

St. Thomas teaches, in substance: between God and man there is the greatest inequality, so no creature holds a merit claim against God by absolute equality; no one can merit the first grace for himself; but God has freely ordained that, moved by grace and charity, our works should truly count, even in justice as he has established it, toward the eternal life he prepared; so merit rests on God's own gracious ordination, not on any claim we bring.

The Angelic Doctor's architecture, in short: merit is real because God promised, not because we invoiced. A promise-keeping Father is the entire foundation.

Catechism Connection

CCC 2007. With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man; between him and us the inequality is immeasurable. Every objection's legitimate fear, conceded in the Catechism's first breath.

CCC 2008-2009. The merit of our good works is due first to God's grace, then to our collaboration; and filial adoption, making us partakers of the divine nature (Session 6's doctrine, doing tonight's heavy lifting), can confer true merit as a result of God's gratuitous justice.

CCC 2010. No one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification; moved by the Spirit and by charity, we can then merit the graces needed for sanctification and for the attainment of eternal life. The whole map of this study in one paragraph: free start, real growth, crowned finish.

CCC 2011. The Catechism closes its merit section by quoting, in full, St. Thérèse's Act of Oblation: appearing before God with empty hands, asking him not to count her works. The Church's last word on merit is the prayer your group met in Session 2. Show them; the symmetry preaches itself.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Crown thread: tonight is its coronation. The wreath (S10), the crown of life (Jas 1:12), the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8). The crown is now the study's open image. The title verse remains sealed; if anyone quotes Revelation 3:11 from their own reading, smile and say "three weeks of discipline left, and you will see why it was worth it." Do not confirm or deny.

St. Thérèse payoff. When CCC 2011 lands, take the group back to Session 2's empty hands explicitly. The study's grace-first foundation and its merit doctrine are the same teaching at two depths; the Catechism itself joins them, and your group gets to watch.

Sonship payoff. Every objection tonight is answered from Session 6 (adoption, partakers of the divine nature). If the group answers the steelman with "because we are sons, not employees" before you do, the study has worked.

Paul's two statements. Phil 3:12 (last week) and 2 Tim 4:7-8 (tonight): mid-race humility, finish-line confidence. One sentence connecting them; it inoculates against reading tonight as presumption.

Purgatory question: park it. Reward according to works may surface "what about being cleansed/tested by fire?" (1 Cor 3 sits near tonight's texts). Exactly right instinct, exactly two sessions early. Parking lot: SESSION 13.

Session Goals

1. The group can list five New Testament reward texts from memory of tonight, most in Jesus's own voice.
2. Participants discover Paul's merit grammar in 1 Cor 15:10 and can repeat it: real work, all grace.
3. The group can state St. Augustine's crowning-gifts formula and the sonship key.
4. The steelman (Lk 17:10, Mt 20, filthy rags) is heard at full strength and answered without weakening either grace or reward.
5. Every participant can say why CCC 2011's empty hands and tonight's crowns are one doctrine.

Time Note

Plan for 85 minutes. Win 10, Build 50, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Ruth becomes one sentence in your OT summary) and compress the **Dig Deeper**. Never cut the 1 Cor 15:10 discovery or the CCC 2011 reveal; the second is the night's standing ovation.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, everything we have, we received, and still you promise to reward what we do with it. Teach us tonight the arithmetic of your house, where mercy and repayment are one, where sons are paid in inheritance, and where the crowns you give are your own gifts, shining back at you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- When you were a child, did anyone reward you for something they had actually taught you, equipped you, and driven you to do? What was that reward really made of?
- Honestly: does the idea of God rewarding your works attract you, embarrass you, or worry you? Where did that reaction come from?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: rapid-fire opening. Assign six readers: Matthew 5:11-12; Matthew 6:1-4; Matthew 6:19-21; Matthew 25:20-23; Hebrews 6:10; James 1:12. Read them back to back without commentary. Then ask:

1. You just heard six passages, most from Jesus himself. Collect the vocabulary: what words does the New Testament use, without embarrassment, for what God will do with the works of his people?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Reward, great in heaven (Mt 5:12); the Father who sees in secret **will reward you** (Mt 6:4); treasures in heaven (Mt 6:20); "Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your master" (Mt 25:21, 23); "God is not so unjust as to **overlook your work** and the love which you showed for his sake" (Heb 6:10); "the **crown of life** which God has promised to those who love him" (Jas 1:12).

Sit in the surprise: this vocabulary is dense, deliberate, and mostly red-letter. Whatever the doctrine of merit must avoid, it cannot avoid these texts; a gospel too pure for reward-talk is purer than Jesus.

Live discovery. Say: "Now find Paul doing the impossible: taking credit and giving it away in the same sentence. Read 1 Corinthians 15:9-10 slowly, and 1 Corinthians 4:7. Underline every claim Paul makes about his own work, and every claim he makes about where it came from."

2. What does Paul claim for himself in 1 Corinthians 15:10, and what does he claim in the same breath? And what does 1 Corinthians 4:7 ask that settles the source of everything?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, **I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me.**" A real boast and a total surrender, welded. The work was really Paul's: sweat, shipwrecks, sleepless nights. And it was really grace's: the power, the calling, the perseverance, the man himself. And 4:7 closes every gap: "What have you that you did not receive?"

That sentence is the Catholic doctrine of merit before the word existed. St. Augustine gave it the permanent formula: when God crowns our merits, he crowns nothing other than his own gifts. The crown is real; the merits are real; the whole supply chain is grace.

3. Read 2 Timothy 4:6-8, and set it beside last week's Philippians 3:12 ("not that I have already obtained"). Same Paul. What changed, and what does he immediately do with the crown in verse 8?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

What changed is his position on the course. Mid-race, Paul refused the finish-line claim; now, "the time of my departure has come," and the man who would not presume at mile eighteen receives with both hands at the tape: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day." Not presumption ripening; hope arriving.

And then the doctrine's most generous move: "**and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.**" Paul universalizes the crown in the same sentence he claims it. It is not the apostles' trophy case; it is the family inheritance, promised to everyone in this room who loves his appearing and, by grace, holds course.

4. Sonship is the key that makes reward grace instead of wages. From Session 6 and tonight: why is a father rewarding his child fundamentally different from an employer paying a stranger?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The employer and the stranger meet across a counter as equals in a contract; the wage is owed, and paying it is mere justice. The father stands on both sides of the ledger: he gave the child existence, talents, training, the task, and the strength for it; his reward moves inside a relationship he created, and it is love wearing justice's clothes, training the child in real agency. No economist calls a child's chore money market wages; no sane person calls it meaningless.

That is CCC 2007-2009 in a kitchen: no strict right to merit exists between God and us, the inequality is immeasurable; and yet filial adoption, God really making us sons (Session 6), lets him freely ordain that our Spirit-moved works truly count. Merit rests on the Father's promise, not our invoice. He is not our employer. He is our Father, and he keeps his word extravagantly.

Build, Then Press

Leader: full strength.

A Reformed friend says: "**Merit is where Rome gives the game away. Jesus said: 'when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'' (Lk 17:10). Isaiah says all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment (Isa 64:6). And the vineyard parable buries wage-thinking forever: men who worked one hour received the same as men who bore the day's heat, because the kingdom runs on generosity, not timesheets (Mt 20:1-16). Any doctrine that has God owing you a crown for your works has left the gospel.**"

5. Grant everything in that which is true, and notice who else grants it. Then answer from tonight's texts.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Grant it loudly, because the Church signed it first: nothing we do before grace merits grace (Trent, and Session 2); with regard to God "there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man" (CCC 2007, nearly the objection's own words); Luke 17:10 is gospel truth: even completed duty grounds no claim; and the vineyard master's "do you begrudge my generosity?" demolishes entitlement arithmetic exactly as the Church does. If merit meant invoicing God, the objection would win, and Rome would be first to concede.

But now the objection must survive the same Gospel it quotes. The Jesus of Luke 17:10 is the Jesus of "your reward is great in heaven," "the Father who sees in secret will reward you," and "well done, good and faithful servant." Isaiah 64:6 belongs to a communal confession of Israel's sin; whatever its full reach, it cannot mean the Spirit's fruit in the justified counts for nothing, or Hebrews could not say "God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love you showed" (Heb 6:10), and the righteous Judge could not "award" a crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8). The resolution is not to mute one set of texts; it is Paul's own welded sentence: I worked; not I, but grace (1 Cor 15:10). Reward without

entitlement, merit as crowned gift, sons paid in inheritance. And if you want the Catholic doctrine's true face, look where the Catechism ends its merit section: with St. Thérèse, before God, empty-handed, asking him not to count her works (CCC 2011). A Church that closes her merit chapter with empty hands is not running a timesheet religion.

DIG DEEPER · Where the Catechism Ends Its Merit Section

Open a Catechism to paragraphs 2006-2011 and watch the architecture: no strict right to merit (2007); all merit due first to grace (2008); adoption confers true merit by God's gratuitous justice (2009); the initial grace absolutely unmeritable (2010); and then, as the section's final word, paragraph 2011, having taught that the charity of Christ is in us the source of all our merits, quotes from the Act of Oblation of St. Thérèse of Lisieux: that in the evening of this life she will appear before God with empty hands, asking him not to count her works, wishing to be clothed in his own justice.

Your group heard those empty hands in Session 2, when the study laid its grace foundation. The Church's official summary of merit ends on the same prayer. That is not a coincidence; that is the doctrine, whole: hands empty of claims, filled by Christ's charity, and then truly crowned.

SEND · Taking It Out

- "God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love you showed" (Heb 6:10). What hidden faithfulness in your life have you assumed God overlooks? What changes if he is keeping it like treasure?
- Whose unseen, unthanked work could you honor this week, the way the Father who sees in secret does? Name the person and the gesture.

Live It This Week

Work one thing in secret. Do one deliberate act of love this week that no one but the Father will ever see (Mt 6:4). Feel what it is to bank treasure.

Pray Paul's sentence. Each evening: "I worked today; yet not I, but the grace of God with me." Both halves, every time.

Reread the finish line. 2 Timothy 4:6-8, once, slowly, and pray to be counted among "all who have loved his appearing", because that love, persevered in, is exactly whom Paul included.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, what do we have that we did not receive? And still you promise crowns. Make us workers who labor hard and claim nothing, sons who trust the inheritance, and saints who arrive, at the last, with empty hands, to find them filled by you. Through Christ our Lord, the righteous Judge who loves to give. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness."

2 Timothy 4:7-8a (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
Matthew 5:11-12; 6:1-4, 19-21	Rapid-fire reward texts (Build Q1)
Matthew 25:20-23	"Well done"; enter into the joy (Build Q1)
Hebrews 6:10	God not unjust to overlook your work (Build Q1, Send)
James 1:12	The crown of life (Build Q1)
1 Corinthians 15:9-10; 4:7	Live discovery: Paul's merit grammar (Build Q2)
2 Timothy 4:6-8	The crown of righteousness; universalized (Build Q3, memory verse)
Philippians 3:12	Last week's mid-race refusal (Build Q3 contrast)
Genesis 15:1; 22:16-17	Abraham: reward inside prior gift (OT roots)
Ruth 2:12	"A full reward... under whose wings" (OT roots)
Psalms 62:12	Mercy and repayment in one verse (OT roots)
Luke 17:10; Isaiah 64:6; Matthew 20:1-16	Steelman texts, granted and answered
1 Corinthians 3:8	Wages according to labor (leader background; 1 Cor 3 returns Session 13)

Session 12: The Anchor Holds

Presumption, despair, and the assurance a Catholic really has

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers hope as a real theological virtue standing between two opposite sins, presumption and despair; discovers that Peter committed the first before his fall and Judas the second after his; and finally receives the answer to the verse parked on the very first night: what 1 John 5:13's "that you may know" gives a Christian, and what kind of assurance a Catholic really has.

Catholic Touchstone. "Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit" (CCC 1817). Its two opposite sins are defined with the Catechism's own precision tonight (CCC 2091-2092), and its promise is total: "In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere 'to the end' and to obtain the joy of heaven" (CCC 1821, in substance).

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study pays its oldest debt. On night one, someone may have raised, or you parked preemptively, 1 John 5:13: "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, **that you may know that you have eternal life**." Eleven sessions of honest warnings later, the group has earned the full answer, and it is better than either caricature. Read John's letter whole and watch what "know" is built from: John supplies tests, present-tense and observable: "by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments" (2:3); "we know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (3:14); "by this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit" (4:13). John's assurance is real, present, and *diagnostic*: you may know you **have** (present tense) eternal life, the way a healthy person knows they are alive: by the pulse, not by a certificate about the future. It coexists in one canon, and one apostle's worldview, with "let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall," because knowing you are alive today and presuming you cannot die are different acts of the mind.

Give the group the three-certainties framework; it resolves years of confusion in one breath. (1) **Certainty of God's promises: absolute.** God's fidelity, Christ's work, the efficacy of the sacraments: not probabilities. "Hope does not disappoint us" (Rom 5:5); hope is "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Heb 6:19), sure because of where it is fastened: "behind the curtain," in heaven itself, where Jesus has entered. (2) **Certainty of my present state: real and moral, by examination.** "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith" (2 Cor 13:5) is a command, so it must be possible; John's tests are the exam; absolution is its sacrament (Session 9: audible forgiveness is a datum, not a guess). (3) **Certainty about my own future free choices: this is hoped and prayed for, not possessed.** And name Trent's limits precisely: absent special revelation, no one has *certitude of faith*, the kind that cannot err, either that he presently stands in grace (Sess. VI, ch. 9) or that he will persevere to the end (ch. 13). What stands untouched is everything the second certainty named: real, examined, moral confidence about the present, and hope, commanded, about the future. Notice that honest Christians of every tradition live this distinction in practice: they too watch people leave, and can only re-file them afterward. The Catholic simply says in doctrine what everyone concedes at funerals and reunions.

Then the two sins, with the Catechism's real definitions and nothing homemade. **Presumption** comes in two kinds: man presumes upon his own capacities, hoping to save himself without help from on high, or presumes upon God's almighty power and mercy, hoping to obtain forgiveness without conversion and glory without merit (CCC 2091-2092, in substance). **Despair**: man ceases to hope for his personal salvation from God, for help in attaining it, or for the

forgiveness of his sins; it is contrary to God's goodness, his justice, and his mercy (CCC 2091, in substance). Note where the definitions bite: presumption is not confidence, it is confidence *without conversion*; despair is not sadness or dryness or depression, it is the willed verdict that mercy is closed. Say that distinction clearly and someone in your room will breathe for the first time in years: the person fighting dark feelings is not despairing; despair is a decision, and they have not made it.

The live discovery gives both sins the faces the group already loves. Read Matthew 26:33-35: "Though they all fall away because of you, **I will never fall away**... Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." Ask which sin against hope Peter commits *before* his denial. It is a fitting portrait of presumption: confidence grounded in self ("I will never"), refusing the Lord's explicit warning, and it walked him straight into the courtyard. Judas, the group knows from Session 9, is tradition's gravest warning about despair: remorse that stopped hoping for forgiveness, his final state left to God. And Peter is the whole session in one biography: presumption, fall, grief, hope, restoration, and then a lifetime, until, tradition holds, his own cross in Rome. The last note of the night is Proverbs 24:16: "a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again", plus Sirach's challenge across the ages: consider the ancient generations and see: has anyone trusted in the Lord and been put to shame? (Sir 2:10, in substance). Deuterocanon and all: no one, ever.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalms 42-43 (one poem in two psalms) is the soul arguing itself back to hope: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? **Hope in God**; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God", a refrain the psalmist needs three times, which is its realism: hope in the Psalms is not a mood that descends but a command the downcast soul addresses to itself, repeatedly, mid-tears ("my tears have been my food day and night"). This is the group's script for the dark weeks: talk back to your soul. **Sirach 2:1-11** is Israel's wisdom on the same road: "My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation... cleave to him and do not depart... Consider the ancient generations and see: who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame?" Trial expected, departure the one forbidden move, and the empirical case for hope: the entire history of everyone who ever trusted. And **Lamentations 3:21-26**, written in the ashes of Jerusalem: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning." Hope's Old Testament pedigree is not sunny; it is forged entirely in ruins, which is why it holds.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Letters (1890s)

The Doctor of the little way teaches, in substance and in her letters' own repeated refrain, that it is confidence, and nothing but confidence, that leads to Love; and that what pleases God is the blind hope she keeps in his mercy, even in her final trial of faith, when heaven itself felt closed to her.

St. Thérèse returns tonight on purpose: the empty hands of Session 2 and the crowned gifts of Session 11 resolve here, in confidence. Note her credentials for tonight in particular: she wrote these things while interiorly walking through darkness, which makes her the patron of everyone whose feelings have stopped cooperating with their faith.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Claude de la Colombière

Act of Confidence in God (17th century)

The Jesuit confessor of St. Margaret Mary composed an act of hope the Church has treasured since, praying in substance: My God, I hope in you for grace and for glory, for your mercies' sake, your promises, and your power; you have promised, and you never fail those who hope in you; my confidence itself I place in your keeping.

The move worth showing your group: he anchors hope entirely outside himself, in God's mercy, promise, and power, and then entrusts even his *hoping* to God. That is hope built to survive the hoper's bad days, which is the only kind worth having.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina

Counsels handed down (20th century)

Among the counsels widely handed down from his letters and direction: "Pray, hope, and don't worry." The saint who bore the wounds of Christ for fifty years, heard confessions by the tens of thousands, and battled darkness most of us cannot imagine, compressed the whole spiritual combat into those five words for his anxious children.

Not "feel better." Pray (the means, Session 10), hope (the virtue, tonight), and don't worry (the verdict on anxiety's usefulness). It is Sirach in a Franciscan accent.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1817. Hope defined: desiring the kingdom and eternal life as our happiness, trusting Christ's promises, relying not on our own strength but on the grace of the Holy Spirit. Read it aloud; every phrase was built for tonight.

CCC 1821. We can hope for the glory of heaven promised to those who love God and do his will; in every circumstance, each of us should hope, with God's grace, to persevere to the end. The Catechism commands the very confidence some fear is presumption; the difference is the phrase "with the grace of God."

CCC 2091. Despair, the Catechism's own definition: ceasing to hope for one's personal salvation, for help attaining it, or for forgiveness; contrary to God's goodness, justice, and mercy. A willed verdict, not a dark feeling.

CCC 2092. Presumption, both kinds: upon one's own capacities without help from on high, or upon God's power and mercy, hoping for forgiveness without conversion and glory without merit. Confidence is commanded; confidence without conversion is the sin.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

The oldest debt, paid. 1 John 5:13 has sat on the parking lot list since Session 1. Tonight, retrieve the physical list, read the entry aloud, answer it in full, and cross it off in front of everyone. Eleven weeks of kept promises cash out here; let it be slightly ceremonial.

The "no" guessers, honored. In Session 8's ritual you promised that those who guessed salvation cannot be lost were protecting something true. Tonight names it: God's side never fails; the anchor texts they loved (Jn 10, Rom 8, Phil 1:6) are tonight's certainty of the first kind, granted at full value. Say this explicitly and look at no one in particular.

Peter and Judas complete. Session 9 gave the contrast; tonight gives it doctrinal names, and adds the discovery that Peter's presumption preceded his fall. The study's two recurring faces are now fully lit.

Scrupulosity flag. The despair-versus-dark-feelings distinction is tonight's most pastorally explosive material. If anyone lingers afterward, the one-sentence version: struggling to feel hope while still praying IS hope; despair would have stopped asking. Suggest, gently, that persistent scrupulosity also deserves a regular confessor's care, not just a study group's.

Crown discipline: final week. Two sessions remain. Rev 3:11 stays sealed through Session 13. Almost there.

Session Goals

1. The group receives the full 1 John 5:13 answer and can explain John's own tests for "know."
2. Every participant can state the three certainties and which one Trent declined to promise.
3. Participants discover Peter's presumption in Matthew 26:33-35 themselves and can define both sins against hope in the Catechism's terms.
4. The despair-versus-dark-feelings distinction lands; the struggling hear that their struggle is hope, not its absence.
5. The "no" guessers from Session 8 hear their instinct honored by name.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes. Win 10, Build 55, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Lamentations folds into your OT summary) and compress the **Dig Deeper**. Never cut the 1 John 5:13 payoff, the Peter discovery, or the despair/feelings distinction; those three are why tonight exists.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you have anchored our hope behind the curtain, where Jesus has entered for us. Tonight, steady the anxious among us, sober the overconfident among us, and teach all of us the confidence that leads to Love. We hope in you for grace and for glory: you have promised, and you keep your promises. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Think of the most reliable person you know. What is the difference between trusting them completely and taking them for granted? Where is the line?
- On the spectrum from "I never worry about my salvation" to "I worry about it constantly," where do you honestly sit, and where did that setting come from?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: begin at the parking lot. Bring the physical list, point to the oldest entry, and say: "Session 1. Someone raises a verse; the study promises it a full night. Eleven weeks of IOUs, and tonight we pay the oldest one." Read 1 John 5:13 aloud.

1. "That you may **know** that you **have** eternal life." John means it. Now read his own letter for his own definition: 1 John 2:3, 3:14, and 4:13. What is John's "knowing" built out of, and what tense is "have"?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

John supplies tests, and they are observable, present-tense things: "by this we may be sure that we know him, **if we keep his commandments**" (2:3); "we know that we have passed out of death into life, **because we love the brethren**" (3:14); "by this we know that we abide in him... **because he has given us of his own Spirit**" (4:13). And "have" is present tense: you may know you have, now, eternal life, the way a healthy person knows they are alive: by the pulse, not by a certificate about the future.

So John's assurance is real, and it is diagnostic: examined, evidenced, present. It sits in the same canon as "let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" without strain, because knowing you are alive today and presuming you cannot die are different acts. The Catholic Church affirms every word of 1 John 5:13, at face value, tonight.

2. Read Romans 5:1-5 and Hebrews 6:17-20. What is hope anchored to, and where is the anchor physically located? Why does that location matter for the anchor's security?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5): the ground of hope is what God has already done, in us, verifiably. And Hebrews: God, "desiring to show... the unchangeable character of his purpose, interposed with an oath," so that we "have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. We have this as a **sure and steadfast anchor of the soul**, a hope that enters into the inner shrine **behind the curtain**, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf" (Heb 6:17-20).

The anchor's security comes from its location: not fastened to my mood, my streak, or my willpower, but lodged in heaven itself, in the presence of God, held by Jesus who has already entered. Storms happen at the surface, where we are. Anchors hold at the bottom, where he is. That is the first certainty: God's side of this is not a probability.

Live discovery. Say: "Now the two ways hope dies, and you already know both faces. Read Matthew 26:33-35, the table, hours before the courtyard. Peter is about to commit a sin against hope, tonight, before he ever denies anyone. Find it, and name what it is made of."

3. What does Peter claim in Matthew 26:33-35, on what basis, and against what warning? Which sin against hope is this, and what is its opposite twin, whose face the study met in Session 9?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Though they all fall away because of you, **I will never fall away**... Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." Confidence grounded in himself ("I will never"), overriding the Lord's explicit, detailed warning, and comparative ("though **they** all..."): read in light of that warning, this is a fitting portrait of **presumption**: relying on one's own capacities without help from on high (CCC 2092's first kind). Note the sequence with awe: Peter's presumption came *before* his fall, and walked him into the courtyard whose fire we already know. Presumption is not extra faith; it is hope with its anchor pulled up and stowed in the ego.

Its opposite twin is **despair**, and tradition has always read Judas as its gravest warning: remorse that stopped hoping for forgiveness (CCC 2091, in substance), his final state left to God: contrary, the Catechism says, to God's goodness, justice, and mercy all at once. Two apostles, two sins against hope, one night. And Peter's full biography, presumption, fall, tears, hope, charcoal fire, commission, a shepherd's long life, and at the last, tradition holds, his own cross in Rome, is the whole doctrine walking.

4. Crucial distinction: read Psalm 42:5, 11 and Lamentations 3:21-26. The psalmist's tears are his food; Jerusalem is ashes. Are these men despairing? What are they doing instead, and what does that tell us about dark feelings versus the sin of despair?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

They are doing the opposite of despairing, in the middle of feeling terrible: the psalmist *commands his own soul*: "Why are you cast down, O my soul?... **Hope in God**; for I shall again praise him", and needs the refrain three times, which is the realism; Lamentations *chooses its memory*: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases... new every morning." Hope in Scripture is not a weather system that happens to you; it is an act, addressable to your own downcast soul, performable mid-tears.

So mark the line in permanent ink: **despair is an act of the will, not a feeling**. The Catechism defines it as *ceasing to hope*, a willed verdict that mercy is closed, and culpability for it can be lessened where illness or anguish constrains freedom. Darkness, dryness, anxiety, even depression are not that; the person still praying through them is not despairing, they are hoping heroically, in the Psalms' own style. (And St. Thérèse wrote "confidence and nothing but confidence" from inside a trial of faith in which heaven felt closed. The Doctors of hope earned their doctorates in the dark.) If your struggle is persistent and punishing, add one more means: a regular confessor who knows you; scrupulosity deserves a physician, not just a support group.

Build, Then Press

Leader: full strength, and gently; for some of the room this is personal.

An Evangelical friend says: "**Here is my problem with everything since your Session 7. Assurance is the believer's birthright: 'that you may KNOW you have eternal life.' A child who wonders daily whether Dad will keep him is not in a healthy family; 'you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear' (Rom 8:15). Trent denied assurance, and the fruit is generations of anxious Catholics. Any system where you can't know you're saved until you're dead produces fear, and fear is not the Gospel.**"

5. Grant its pastoral heart entirely. Then answer with tonight's three certainties, and end by asking the friendly question about how assurance actually works on their side of the aisle.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Grant the heart first and mean it: God does not want his children in servile terror; Romans 8:15 is holy writ; and wherever Catholic culture has produced scrupulous fear instead of filial confidence, it has malformed the doctrine, because the Catechism *commands* hope in every circumstance (CCC 1821), and tonight the Church affirmed 1 John 5:13 at face value, tests and all.

Then the precision: Trent denied infallible *certitude of faith*, absent special revelation, on two points: that I presently stand in grace (ch. 9), and that I will persevere to the end (ch. 13). It never denied assurance itself. Everything else stands: God's promises, absolutely certain, the anchor behind the curtain; my present state, really knowable: John's tests, Paul's commanded self-examination (2 Cor 13:5), and, concretely, the words of absolution spoken over me, which are not a feeling but a fact with a timestamp (Session 9). What no one possesses, apart from special revelation, is a guarantee against his own future betrayal, and Peter's "I will never fall away" is the Gospel's own case study in claiming it.

Then the friendly question, aimed precisely: classical Reformed teaching grounds assurance first in Christ's promise, with self-examination's evidences subordinate, and that account deserves respect (Wesleyan Evangelicals, note, agree with Rome that apostasy is possible). But when a believer does walk away after thirty years, the perseverance account must re-file him: "he was never truly saved" (1 Jn 2:19). At exactly that point its claim about any *living* believer becomes verifiable only at the finish line, and today's walk rests on present faith and its fruits, examined, much as ours does. Functionally, we are both walking by hope; the Catholic is simply saying so in doctrine, and adding the equipment: a tribunal of mercy for the falls, the anchor texts at full value, and a command to hope that binds in every circumstance. That is not a fearful system. It is a father's house with the porch light always on and the door never locked from inside.

DIG DEEPER · The Two Thieves, and an Honest Footnote

A saying long attributed to St. Augustine, though not found in these words in his surviving works, holds the whole night in two sentences: **Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.** Whoever first minted it, the balance is exactly Calvary's: the same crucified Mercy hung between both errors, and one man's dying request was enough (Lk 23:39-43). (The Church, note, has never pronounced on the second thief's final state; the saying's force is warning, not verdict.)

We flag the attribution honestly because this study's promise is that every citation can be trusted; a beloved quote is not exempt. The doctrine, however, is not in doubt: it is CCC 2091-2092 with a cross in the middle.

SEND · Taking It Out

- Which side of the ridge do you naturally slide toward: presumption's "I will never fall," or despair's quiet verdict? What is one concrete practice from tonight that fences your side?
- Who do you love that is living under a closed-mercy verdict they passed on themselves? What could you say or do this week that smells like a porch light?

Live It This Week

Talk back to your soul. Once a day, pray Psalm 42:5 in the first person: "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Hope in God." Especially on the day you least feel it; that is the psalm working.

Run John's tests, gently. One evening: Am I keeping his commandments? Do I love the brethren? Is his Spirit's fruit anywhere in me? Whatever you find, respond with the matching gift: gratitude, or the confessional, never the closed verdict.

Memorize the five words. "Pray, hope, and don't worry." Deploy on contact with anxiety.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

My God, I hope in you for grace and for glory, because of your mercies, your promises, and your power. Guard us from the confidence that forgets you and from the verdict that forecloses you. Anchor us behind the curtain, where Jesus our forerunner holds fast; and in every circumstance, teach us to hope, with your grace, to persevere to the end. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

Romans 5:5 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
1 John 5:13	The parked verse, paid in full (Build Q1)
1 John 2:3; 3:14; 4:13	John's own tests for "know" (Build Q1)
Romans 5:1-5	Hope does not disappoint (Build Q2, memory verse)
Hebrews 6:17-20	The anchor behind the curtain (Build Q2)
Matthew 26:33-35	Live discovery: Peter's presumption before the fall (Build Q3)
Psalms 42:5, 11; 43:5	Commanding one's own soul to hope (Build Q4)
Lamentations 3:21-26	Hope forged in ruins; new every morning (Build Q4)
Romans 8:15	Steelman text: no spirit of slavery (granted)
2 Corinthians 13:5	Examine yourselves: assurance's commanded exam (steelman answer)
1 John 2:19	The re-filing move (steelman answer, friendly question)
Proverbs 24:16	Falls seven times, rises again (leader background)
Sirach 2:1-11	Who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? (OT roots)
Luke 23:39-43	The two thieves (Dig Deeper)

Session 13: Nothing Unclean Shall Enter

Purgatory: love's last mile

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers the biblical logic that makes purgatory necessary before they ever hear its name: heaven admits nothing unclean (Rev 21:27), holiness is required to see the Lord (Heb 12:14), most of the faithful die neither perfect nor having rejected God, and Scripture shows a Day when a saved man's work is tested by fire and he "will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor 3:15), a fire the Church has long read, and the Catechism cites (CCC 1031), as purification: not hell, not yet glory.

Catholic Touchstone. "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven" (CCC 1030). Read that sentence twice before you teach tonight: it begins with *assured of their eternal salvation*. Purgatory is a doctrine about the saved. It is sanctification's last mile, not condemnation's antechamber.

What You Need to Know

Order matters enormously tonight: build the problem before you name the solution, and the group will discover purgatory rather than defend it. The problem has three planks the study already owns. Plank one: heaven's door policy: "nothing unclean shall enter it" (Rev 21:27), and "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14, Session 6's verse, now load-bearing). Plank two: honest anthropology: the group settled in Session 8 that venial sin wounds without killing, and every honest Christian knows most of the faithful die as friends of God who are not yet perfectly conformed to Christ: still impatient, still vain, still clutching small idols. Plank three: God's stated method: he is "changing us into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18) and "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). Now ask the group's question for them: if the door admits only the perfect, and most of the saved die imperfect, and God finishes what he starts, then between death and glory, *something happens*. The Church's name for that something is Purgatory. The doctrine's core is exactly that thin: final purification of the imperfectly purified saved (CCC 1030-1031); the Church has defined almost nothing about its mode or duration, and images of fire are images.

The live discovery is 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, and it does tonight's heavy lifting because Paul supplies a category most Protestants and many Catholics do not know they have: a man whose foundation is Christ, whose sloppy work is burned up on the Day, who "will suffer loss," and who "will be saved, **but only as through fire.**" Walk the group through the inventory: he is not in hell (he is saved); he is not simply in heaven (he suffers loss, through fire); he is a saved man being painfully un-cluttered. Whatever a reader calls that, he has conceded the category, and the category is the doctrine. Support it with Matthew 12:32's strange clause (a sin that "will not be forgiven, either in this age **or in the age to come**"), which implies some forgiveness belongs to the age to come), and with the distinction the group met in David and in Moses: forgiveness of guilt does not always erase every consequence. Nathan tells David "The LORD has put away your sin" and in the next breath names a consequence that stands (2 Sam 12:13-14); Moses, who spoke with God face to face, bears Meribah's standing consequence, barred from the land (Num 20:12; Deut 32:51-52), and dies on Nebo overlooking it (Deut 34:1-5): an analogy for consequences that stand, while David's case carries the forgiven-and-still-chastened doctrine itself. The Church calls this the temporal punishment of sin, and insists it is not vengeance from without but the natural residue sin leaves in us, needing purification here or hereafter (CCC 1472, in substance). Notice the mercy of where Moses stands in the Exodus map: the study's wilderness ends within sight of the land, and even its greatest man needed God to settle one last account before glory. The map itself taught tonight's doctrine first.

On 2 Maccabees 12:39-45: use it honestly and it is strong. Judas Maccabeus finds his fallen soldiers wearing pagan amulets, and the community prays and takes up a collection for a sin offering in Jerusalem, "that they might be delivered from their sin"; the author calls it "a holy and pious thought" made "with a view to the resurrection." For Catholics this is Scripture. For your Protestant friends it is not; grant that without a fight, then point out what it remains even on their terms: an unimpeachable historical witness that devout Jews within two centuries of Christ prayed and offered sacrifice for their dead, that the Gospels record no correction of the practice from Jesus, who corrected so much (an observation, we grant, not a proof), and that the earliest Christians' practice is widely witnessed: in catacomb inscriptions, in the ancient liturgical traditions of East and West, and in a son remembered at an African altar (tonight's first Voice). Praying for the dead is not a medieval accretion; it is the family habit of God's people on both sides of the Incarnation. And here is the Church's rationale for her suffrages: prayer aims where help can land, and the ancient instinct to pray for the dead has always assumed someone between arrival and loss, being helped home.

Pastoral registers, both of them. Grief: someone in your group has buried a parent, a spouse, a child. Tonight hands them something to *do* with love that death interrupted: pray, have Masses offered, finish love's sentences. Do not let the night become an argument that forgets the graves in the room. And fear: purgatory has been preached as a torture chamber, and some carry that. Correct it with the saints: the souls there are saved, confirmed in love, incapable of losing him now, and their pain is the pain of love completing, not of love in doubt; St. Catherine of Genoa says their joy is second only to heaven's. The right emotional key for tonight is not dread. It is the relief of a traveler told: you will arrive clean.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Moses on Nebo (Num 20:12; Deut 34:1-5) is the map's own catechesis, as above: forgiven, beloved, and still owing a temporal account before entry. **David after Nathan** (2 Sam 12:13-14): guilt put away, consequence standing: the grammar of temporal punishment in one exchange. **The refiner's fire**: "he is like a refiner's fire... he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi... till they present right offerings to the LORD" (Mal 3:2-3): here God's refining fire is aimed at his own servants' purification, not their destruction; and Isaiah's lips are cleansed by a burning coal precisely so he can stand in the King's presence (Isa 6:5-7): pain, from the altar, unto fitness for glory: an analogy of divine cleansing, not a proof text. The Old Testament's fire imagery is the nurse's alcohol swab, not the enemy's weapon.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Monica, through St. Augustine

Confessions, Book IX, ch. 11 (c. 397)

Dying at Ostia, far from the tomb she had prepared beside her husband, St. Monica told her sons: "Lay this body anywhere... only this I ask of you: that you remember me at the altar of the Lord, wherever you may be." And Augustine, who recorded it, spent the rest of Book IX doing exactly that: praying, in writing, for his mother's sins to be forgiven, confident and tender at once.

The most famous mother-son story in Christian literature ends with a request for prayers after death, made by a saint, honored by a Doctor. Whatever the early Church believed about the dead, it believed they could be helped from the altar.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Catherine of Genoa

Treatise on Purgatory (15th century)

The mystic of Genoa teaches, in substance, that apart from the happiness of the saints in heaven, there is no joy comparable to that of the souls in purgatory: for they are confirmed in God's love, certain of their salvation, and their suffering is the suffering of love itself burning away, with their full consent, everything in them that resists it. They would not shorten the purification by an instant against God's will, because his will is now wholly theirs.

This is the doctrine's true face: not a debtor's prison bolted onto the Gospel, but what it feels like when Love finishes the job on someone who finally, completely, wants him to.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. John Henry Newman

The Dream of Gerontius (1865)

In Newman's great poem of a soul's journey through death, the soul of Gerontius is carried to the momentary sight of Christ, and its response, in substance, is not to beg admission but to beg purification: "Take me away", to the penal waters, gladly, because one glance at Holiness has made the soul unable to bear its own remaining stains, and unable to want anything but their removal.

Newman, who opened this study in Session 1 ("to be perfect is to have changed often"), closes its doctrine of purification: the soul that sees him asks for the fire. Purgatory, from the inside, is answered prayer.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1030. All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation, and undergo purification after death to achieve the holiness necessary for the joy of heaven. Read it aloud, leading with "assured."

CCC 1031. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, "which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned," and grounds it in texts including 1 Corinthians 3:15. The Catechism cites tonight's live discovery herself.

CCC 1032. From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers and sacrifice for them, "above all the Eucharistic sacrifice," citing 2 Maccabees 12. Tonight's practice paragraph: this is what the group can *do* by Thursday.

CCC 1472. The double consequence of sin: eternal punishment, remitted with the guilt in forgiveness, and temporal punishment, the residue sin leaves, "which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory"; and these are not vengeance inflicted from without but follow from the very nature of sin. The paragraph that makes David, Moses, and your own experience of forgiven-but-still-wounded make sense.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Exodus map: within sight of the land. Moses on Nebo is tonight's map station, and the map's teaching moment: even the friend of God settled a last account at the border. Next session the map completes; say only "one more station."

Parking lot: the S11 purgatory question. If "reward according to works / tested by fire" was parked in Session 11, retrieve and cross it off tonight when 1 Corinthians 3 opens. Keep the study's promise-keeping streak visible to the end.

Phil 1:6 redeployed. The verse granted to the OSAS steelman in Session 7 returns tonight as the memory verse and the purgatory doctrine's own comfort: he FINISHES what he begins. Point out the redeployment explicitly; it teaches the group that granting a text is not surrendering it.

Grief in the room. If the night opens graves, let it. The Send questions are built for it, and a group praying by name for its dead is the doctrine landing, not the session derailing.

Crown discipline: last week of the vow. One session remains. If ever you were tempted to preview the title verse, it is tonight, with Revelation open one chapter away. Hold. Fast.

Session Goals

1. The group can build the three-plank case (door policy, honest anthropology, God finishes) before hearing the word purgatory.

2. Participants discover the saved-through-fire category in 1 Cor 3:11-15 themselves.
3. The group can state the temporal-punishment distinction from David and Moses, and CCC 1472.
4. The "insult to the Cross" objection is heard at full strength and answered with purgatory as the Cross's application completing.
5. Every participant leaves with one concrete act for their dead: a prayer, a Mass offered, a name spoken at the altar.

Time Note

Plan for 90 minutes. Win 10, Build 55, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 2** (Malachi and Isaiah fold into one spoken sentence) and compress the **Dig Deeper**. Never cut the 1 Corinthians 3 discovery, the Moses station, or the closing prayer for the group's own dead: that prayer is the session.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you have promised to finish the good work you began in us, and your city admits nothing unclean. Tonight, teach us how your mercy completes what your mercy started. And for everyone we love who has gone before us: eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Have you ever arrived somewhere important, a wedding, an interview, a homecoming, not quite ready: wrong clothes, road dust, unfinished business? What did you want most in that moment?
- When you hear the word "purgatory," what picture did you inherit, and from whom?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: build the problem first; do not say the word purgatory until the group has cornered it. Have three readers give the planks: Revelation 21:27; Hebrews 12:14; Philippians 1:6.

1. Put the three planks together: what is heaven's door policy, what does seeing the Lord require, and what has God promised to do with the work he began in you? Now be honest about a fourth fact: how do most faithful Christians actually die? What must follow?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The door policy: "nothing unclean shall enter it" (Rev 21:27). The requirement: "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). The promise: "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). And the honest fourth fact: most of the faithful die as real friends of God who are not yet perfectly conformed to Christ: forgiven, yes; finished, no: still impatient, still vain, still holding small attachments that have no visa for that city.

So let the group say it: if only the perfect enter, and most of the saved die imperfect, and God completes what he begins, then between death and glory, *something happens*: a completion, a purification. The Church's name for it is Purgatory, and its entire core is that thin: "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed **assured of their eternal salvation**; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven" (CCC 1030). A doctrine about the saved, from its first word.

Live discovery. Say: "Now find the man the categories forget. Read 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 slowly, twice. Paul describes a builder on the Day of judgment. Take inventory of him: where is his foundation? What happens to his work? What happens to him? Then tell me: what state is this man in, because it is not hell, and it is not simply heaven."

2. Inventory the man of 1 Corinthians 3:15. What do we know about him, and what category does Paul hand us?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

His foundation is Christ (3:11): he is a believer, and no other foundation is in play. His work is tested by fire on the Day, and the shoddy parts, wood, hay, stubble, burn (3:12-13, 15). He "will **suffer loss**." And the verdict: "he himself **will be saved, but only as through fire**" (3:15). Not damned: he is saved. Not simply glorified: he suffers loss, through fire, in a purifying ordeal on the far side of death.

Here, the Church has long taught, is a third category: a saved man painfully un-cluttered on the way into glory. Paul does not name the state or place it on a map; but whatever a reader prefers to call it, the description is conceded, and

the description is the doctrine's core. The Catechism cites this very verse for Purgatory (CCC 1031). Add Jesus's strange clause: a certain sin "will not be forgiven, either in this age **or in the age to come**" (Mt 12:32): a clause St. Gregory the Great, quoted by the Catechism at this very point (CCC 1031), heard as implying that some faults can be forgiven in the age to come; we present the reading as the tradition's. (The debtor released only when "you have paid the last penny," Mt 5:26, has been read in the same key: a traditional Catholic interpretation, noted as such.)

3. Now the distinction that makes sense of your own life. Read 2 Samuel 12:13-14, and Numbers 20:12 with Deuteronomy 34:1-5. David is forgiven; Moses is God's friend. What remains in each case after forgiveness, and what does the Church call this?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Nathan to David: "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die", forgiveness, full and immediate, and in the next breath a consequence that stands (12:14). Moses, who spoke with God face to face, is barred from the land for Meribah, and dies on Nebo with Canaan spread out below him (Deut 34:1-5): forgiven friendship and a temporal account settled at the border. Every parent knows this grammar: the child is fully forgiven, and the window still gets paid for, not as vengeance but as love's honesty about what the throw did.

The Church calls it the **temporal punishment** of sin: distinct from eternal punishment (which forgiveness remits with the guilt), it is the residue and disorder sin leaves in us, "which must be purified either here on earth, or after death" (CCC 1472, in substance), and it is not vengeance from without but follows from the very nature of sin. Purgatory is where that purification finishes for those who die with accounts love still wants settled. And notice where our study's map has been all along: even its greatest man stood on Nebo. The wilderness ends within sight of the land.

4. Read 2 Maccabees 12:39-45. What did Judas Maccabeus and his men do for their dead, why, and what does the author call it? And, for friends who do not receive this book as Scripture: what does the passage remain even then?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Finding their fallen wearing pagan amulets, they "turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out," and Judas took up a collection and sent it to Jerusalem "to provide for a sin offering," acting "very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection"; the author's verdict: "Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (2 Macc 12:42-45, in substance with quoted phrases). Prayer and sacrifice, for the dead, unto their deliverance, in view of resurrection: the whole practice, two centuries before Christ.

For Catholics this is Scripture. For friends who do not receive it: it remains an unimpeachable historical witness that devout Jews prayed and offered for their dead, that Jesus, who corrected so much in the religion around him, never corrected this, and that his Church continued it from the beginning: catacomb inscriptions, every ancient liturgy East and West, and a dying mother's one request at Ostia. And the practice presupposes the doctrine: the blessed need no help and the lost can use none; two thousand years of praying for the dead assumes someone in between, being helped home.

Build, Then Press

Leader: full strength; this objection is sincere, biblical, and often personal.

An Evangelical friend says: "**Purgatory is the doctrine that finally made me leave. Jesus said 'It is finished' (Jn 19:30). 'The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from ALL sin' (1 Jn 1:7). 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). Paul expected to 'depart and be with Christ' (Phil 1:23), 'away from the body and at home with the Lord' (2 Cor 5:8), no fiery layover. If Christ's work needs my suffering to top it off, it was not finished; and historically, this doctrine ran the indulgence racket that broke Christendom. Purgatory is an insult to the Cross.**"

5. Grant every text and the historical grievance. Then answer from tonight, and watch what purgatory actually is.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Grant it all, loudly. "It is finished": yes, the atonement is complete, unrepeatable, and sufficient; purgatory adds not one drop to it. "No condemnation": yes, and CCC 1031 says purgatory is "entirely different from the punishment of the damned"; every soul there is uncondemned, saved, and certain of heaven. "Cleanses us from all sin": yes, and that is precisely what purgatory is: the blood's cleansing, applied to its last traces; the question was never whether Christ's work cleanses but whether his cleansing of you is already complete tonight. (Is it? Then Session 6's "from one degree of glory to another" is still mid-sentence, and God finishes his sentences: Phil 1:6.) Paul's longing texts are true of the purified, and say nothing about whether purification intervenes; Catholics may reasonably hope Paul departed straight into that presence, and the Church prays the same for our dead, which is why she prays at all.

And the sharpest point, gently: the objection's own Bible contains the man of 1 Corinthians 3:15, saved through fire with loss, and the age-to-come forgiveness clause of Matthew 12:32; those texts need a home, and "insult to the Cross" is not an exegesis of them. As for the indulgence corruption: real, shameful, and condemned by the Church herself at Trent, which reformed the abuse and kept the truth, because the abuse of a thing does not abolish its use; otherwise the Lord's Supper would have died at Corinth. Purgatory is not Christ's work needing your topping-off. It is Christ's work refusing to leave you half-washed. The doctrine's emotional truth is a traveler's relief: you will arrive clean, because he who began the good work does not abandon it at the door.

DIG DEEPER · The Church That Prayed for Her Dead

Long before the word "purgatory" had its Latin polish, the practice was everywhere. The catacombs of Rome carry scratched petitions for the departed: pleas that they have peace, refreshment, light. Every ancient liturgy, East and West, from the oldest surviving anaphoras onward, commemorates and pleads for the dead within the Eucharistic prayer itself, exactly where St. Monica asked to be remembered. The Fathers did not argue their way to praying for the dead; they inherited it, as Israel had practiced it (2 Macc 12), and theologized afterward.

A practice that universal, that early, and that liturgically central is not an accretion; it is apostolic-era Christianity's family habit. Doctrines can be debated. Habits of prayer are evidence.

SEND · Taking It Out

- Whom do you love on the other side of death? What would it mean to finish love's sentences for them this month: a prayer tonight, a Mass offered, their name at the altar?
- If you knew you would arrive at that door with your remaining clutter exposed, what attachment would you want God to start burning off now, on the near side, where it is cheaper?

Live It This Week

Pray for your dead, by name. Tonight, and each night this week: "Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them." Say the names.

Offer a Mass. Contact the parish office and have a Mass offered for someone you love who has died. It is simple, ancient, and it is CCC 1032 in action.

Start the purification early. Name one attachment you would rather surrender now than carry to the door, and bring it to confession or to prayer this week.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Leader: invite the group to speak aloud, or hold in silence, the names of their beloved dead. Then pray: Father of mercies, into your hands we entrust all whom we have loved and lost from sight. Complete in them, and in us, the

good work you began. Wash from us, here or hereafter, everything unfit for your city, and bring us all together, clean and shining, through the door where nothing unclean may enter and no one who loves you is turned away. Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

Philippians 1:6 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
Revelation 21:27	Plank one: nothing unclean shall enter (Build Q1)
Hebrews 12:14	Plank two: the required holiness (Build Q1)
Philippians 1:6	Plank three: he finishes; memory verse (Build Q1)
1 Corinthians 3:11-15	Live discovery: saved, but only as through fire (Build Q2)
Matthew 12:32	Forgiveness "in the age to come" (Q2 answer)
Matthew 5:25-26	"The last penny": a traditional Catholic reading (Q2 answer, noted as such)
2 Samuel 12:13-14	David: guilt gone, consequence stands (Build Q3)
Numbers 20:12; Deuteronomy 34:1-5	Moses on Nebo: the map's own catechesis (Build Q3)
2 Maccabees 12:39-45	Prayer and sacrifice for the dead (Build Q4)
Malachi 3:2-3; Isaiah 6:5-7	The refiner's fire; the coal from the altar (OT roots)
John 19:30; 1 John 1:7; Romans 8:1; Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8	Steelman texts, granted and answered
2 Corinthians 3:18	Glory to glory, mid-sentence (steelman answer; Session 6 callback)

Session 14: Hold Fast Your Crown

Glory, the title verse, and the sending

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group walks into the city the whole study has been walking toward (Rev 21-22), completes the Exodus map at the true Promised Land, and then makes the study's final live discovery: the verse the title has been hiding in for fourteen weeks, Revelation 3:11, and finds the entire study folded inside its four clauses. The night ends in commissioning: each participant speaks their three-tense answer from Session 1 and is sent.

Catholic Touchstone. Those who die in God's grace and friendship, perfectly purified, live for ever with Christ and "see him as he is," face to face (CCC 1023, in substance); heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness (CCC 1024). And faith, the Catechism says, already "makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision" (CCC 163): tonight's glory is not a rumor; the group has been sampling it for fourteen weeks.

What You Need to Know

Run the night in three movements and guard the third's time like Session 8's ritual. **Movement one: the city** (Rev 21:1-7; 22:1-5). Read these texts for wonder, not analysis; the group has earned a night of mostly gazing. Draw out the notes the study has tuned them to hear: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes" spoken by the God who had eyes wet at Lazarus's tomb; "He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and **he shall be my son**": Session 6's adoption, consummated as inheritance; "they shall **see his face**" (22:4): the beatific vision, the thing 1 John 3:2 promised ("we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is") and 1 Corinthians 13:12 sighed for ("then face to face"); the river and the tree of life: Eden reopened, better than before. Correct, briefly, the harp-and-cloud caricature if it surfaces: Scripture's last picture is not disembodied wisps but a *new heaven and a new earth*, resurrection bodies (1 Cor 15), a wedding, a city with a river: creation healed, not escaped.

Movement two: the map completes. Take the group physically back to Session 1: saved at the sea (the font), being saved in the wilderness (these years), will be saved in the land. Revelation 21-22 is the land: and notice how the geography rhymes: a river, fruit-bearing trees, God dwelling with his people, everything Eden had and Canaan promised, made permanent. One quiet grace note if the moment invites it: the man who led Israel over the Jordan when Moses could not was Joshua, Hebrew *Yehoshua* / *Yeshua*; and the name the angel gave to Mary's son, Jesus, is that same name in its Greek dress. The namesake finishes what Moses could only see from Nebo. The map the group has walked for fourteen weeks was always a map of him.

Movement three: the title, then the sending. This is the payoff of a fourteen-week discipline, so stage it. The group knows the study is called *Hold Fast* and has been refused the source all season. Tonight, have them open Revelation 2-3, the risen Christ's seven letters, and notice first (Dig Deeper territory) that every letter includes a promise "to him who conquers": the tree of life, the crown of life, the white stone, the throne: the Lord's own perseverance letters, warnings and prizes in the same breath, including the sentence "I will not blot his name out of the book of life" (3:5), whose comfort many have read as presuming a register written in ink that could be blotted: a possible reading, not a grammatical proof, and not one this study's case ever rested on. Then send them hunting: "Somewhere in chapter 3, the risen Jesus says the two words on the cover of your study guide. Find them. Read the verse aloud." **Revelation 3:11: "I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown."** Then let them do the final discovery themselves: the verse contains the entire study, one clause per movement. "*What you have*": salvation really possessed: the three tenses, grace, Baptism, justification, sonship (Sessions 1-6). "*So that no one may seize your crown*": really at stake: the warnings, mortal sin, the way back (Sessions

7-9). *"Hold fast"*: really keepable, by grace, in hope; perseverance, merit, the anchor (Sessions 10-12). *"I am coming soon"*: the horizon: purification and glory (Sessions 13-14). Fourteen sessions were an exegesis of one sentence of the risen Christ, and the group just performed it from memory. Let the room enjoy that.

Then the commissioning, scripted in the Discussion Guide: each participant speaks aloud the three-tense answer they wrote in Session 1 ("I have been saved; I am being saved; I hope with confidence to be saved"), names one text from the study they will carry, and names one person they will carry it to. Close by praying the title verse over the group and, if your parish's custom allows, ending with a blessing. Practical notes: bring the parking-lot list (it should be empty; display it empty, it is the study's receipt), and have next-step recommendations ready: the natural companion on the shelf is *Abide*, which fights this study's battles from the apologist's chair, and any group that formed real bonds should simply pick a next study and keep the night. Groups that end well begin again.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight the Old Testament's role is consummation, so let the echoes do the work. **Eden** (Gen 2:8-10; God walking in the garden, Gen 3:8; the flaming sword, Gen 3:24): a river, the tree of life, God with man: Revelation 22 is Genesis 2 with a city grown around it, and restored access that evokes the end of Eden's exclusion. **The Promised Land** (Deut 8:7-10): "a good land, a land of brooks of water... you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD": Canaan was always a type and foreshadowing of something; Revelation 21-22 is the something. **Isaiah's new heavens** (Isa 65:17-19): "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth... no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping": John's vision takes up Isaiah's new-creation hope and its very images, because glory was Israel's expectation before it was the Church's. The whole canon has been leaning toward tonight's texts since its third chapter went wrong.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Augustine of Hippo

The City of God, Book XXII, ch. 30 (426)

"There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. Behold what shall be in the end without end. For what other end do we have, if not to reach the kingdom which has no end?"

The last paragraph of Augustine's last great work, twenty-two books surveying all of history, and it resolves into four verbs and a rest. Read it slowly tonight; it is the study's destination in a Doctor's cadence.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Ignatius of Antioch

Letter to the Romans (c. 107)

Traveling under guard to the beasts of the arena, the bishop of Antioch begged the Roman church not to rescue him, writing in substance: it is better for me to die into Jesus Christ than to reign over the ends of the earth; him I seek who died for us, him I desire who rose for us; suffer me to attain the pure light, for when I arrive there, I shall truly be a man.

A disciple of the apostles, sprinting toward the finish line the study has spent five weeks teaching us to run for. Ignatius is what the crown looks like when a man wants it more than his life: not morbid, but magnetized.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. John Paul II

Homily inaugurating his pontificate (October 22, 1978)

"Do not be afraid," he told the world, summoning it to open wide the doors to Christ.

The words that opened a pontificate and helped crack an iron curtain are also, tonight, a commissioning: the study ends with doors: the door of heaven held open by grace, and every door in your week that Christ is asking you to open wide to him. The sentence was said to the whole world; tonight it is said to this room.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1023-1024. Those who die in God's grace, perfectly purified, live for ever with Christ and see him as he is; heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness: communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin, the angels, and all the blessed.

CCC 1028. Because of his transcendence, God cannot be seen as he is unless he opens his mystery and gives the capacity: the Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory "the beatific vision." The gift-shape of glory: even the seeing is grace, to the last.

CCC 1042-1044. At the end of time the Kingdom will come in its fullness; the universe itself will be renewed: a new heaven and a new earth in which God will have his dwelling among men. Tonight's anti-caricature paragraphs: creation healed, not discarded.

CCC 163. Faith makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, the goal of our journey here below. The study's last Catechism paragraph is about its first subject: the whole walk, font to crown, was one grace tasting itself forward.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

The title harvest is the night's crown; protect the staging. Do not let the verse slip early: no reading of Revelation 3 in movement one, no "we'll get to the title later" hints beyond what the group already knows. The hunt, the reading aloud, and the four-clause discovery belong to them.

Empty parking lot. Display the list with every entry crossed off (1 Jn 5:13 at S12, the purgatory question at S13, and whatever your group added). Fourteen weeks of kept promises is itself a catechesis: the faith holds up under questions. Say one sentence to that effect; no victory lap.

Session 1 bookend. Collect or remind participants of their written three-tense answers from Session 1 (many taped them in their Bibles per TH1). Tonight they speak them. If someone has lost theirs, they compose it fresh in sixty seconds; the words are in their bones by now.

Exodus map: final station. Complete it visibly: sea, wilderness, land. If you have drawn it weekly, draw the last arrow tonight and leave the marker down.

After the study. Have the next step ready before the night ends: the companion volume *Abide* for groups wanting the apologist's chair on the same doctrines, or the group's own pick. Commissioned people need a road, not just a wave.

Session Goals

1. The group gazes at Revelation 21-22 and can name the consummation of at least three of the study's doctrines in the text.
2. The Exodus map is completed at the true Promised Land, fourteen weeks after it was planted.
3. The group discovers Revelation 3:11 themselves and unfolds the whole study from its four clauses.
4. Every participant speaks their three-tense answer aloud, names a text to carry, and names a person to carry it to.
5. The group leaves commissioned, with a next step chosen, and the title verse prayed over them.

Time Note

Plan for 95 minutes and protect the final 30 for the title harvest and commissioning as fiercely as Session 8's ritual. Win 8, the City 25, the map 10, the harvest 15, commissioning 25, closing blessing 10. If running long, trim the City questions, never the harvest or the commissioning. Consider food afterward; fourteen weeks deserves a table.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, fourteen weeks ago we asked whether what you gave us could be lost. You have answered us honestly, warned us like a Father, forgiven us like a Father, and kept every promise this study made in your name. Tonight, show us the city. And when we have seen it, send us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- Fourteen weeks. What is one thing you believed about salvation in Session 1 that this study has changed, sharpened, or healed?

BUILD · The City

Leader: two readers, unhurried, with silence after each: Revelation 21:1-7, then Revelation 22:1-5. Tell the group beforehand: "Do not analyze yet. Just look."

1. Walk through what you just heard and find the study inside it: where do you see Session 6's adoption? Session 1's future tense? The reversal of every tear? And what, according to 22:4, is the center of it all?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Adoption consummated: "He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and **he shall be my son**" (21:7): the Abba of Romans 8, now an inheritance deed. The future tense arrived: "will be saved" has become "It is done" (21:6). The tears: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more" (21:4), a promise made by the God whose own eyes were wet at a friend's tomb. And the center: "they shall **see his face**" (22:4): the beatific vision, the very thing promised in 1 John 3:2 ("we shall see him as he is") and longed for in 1 Corinthians 13:12 ("then face to face"). Heaven's definition is a face.

And correct the caricature if it hovers: this is a **new heaven and a new earth**, a city, a river, fruit in season, resurrection bodies (1 Cor 15): creation healed and married, not escaped. Nobody floats. Everybody feasts.

2. Now finish the map. Session 1: saved at the sea, being saved in the wilderness, will be saved in the land. Read Genesis 2:8-10 and Isaiah 65:17-19 beside Revelation 21-22. What is the land, finally? And what became of Eden?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The land is this city: everything Canaan sacramentally promised ("a good land, a land of brooks of water," Deut 8:7) made permanent and unlosable. Isaiah saw it coming: "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth... no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping" (Isa 65:17-19); John's vision quotes Israel's own hope. And Eden is not merely restored but outgrown: the river runs again, the tree of life stands on both banks now, its leaves for healing, and the old exclusion is evoked as ended: Revelation 22 answers Genesis 3.

So the map completes: the sea was your font, the wilderness is these years, and the land is a face. One grace note as the marker goes down: the man who finally led Israel across the Jordan, when even Moses could only look from Nebo, was Joshua, Hebrew *Yehoshua*/*Yeshua*; and the name the angel gave to Mary's son, Jesus, is that same name in its Greek dress. The study has read this map, with the Church, as a map of Jesus all along.

The Harvest

Leader: now the fourteen-week secret. Say: "You have studied under a title all season, and every time someone asked where it came from, you were told to wait. The wait ends now. Open Revelation, chapters 2 and 3: seven letters from the risen Jesus to seven churches. Somewhere in chapter 3, he says the two words on your study guide's cover. Find them, and when you do, read the whole verse aloud, slowly." Wait. Let the finder read Revelation 3:11 to the room.

3. "I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown." You have just spent fourteen weeks inside this sentence. Unfold it: take each of its four clauses and tell me which sessions live there.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"What you have": salvation as real, present possession: the three tenses, the rescue we could not stage, the font, justification, faith working through love, sonship and divine life (Sessions 1-6). You have it. That was never in question.

"So that no one may seize your crown": really at stake: the warnings that were real, the sin that kills, and the seizure's one accomplice, since no one outside can snatch (Jn 10:28), only iniquity separates (Isa 59:2): Sessions 7-9, with the way back built before we needed it.

"Hold fast": really keepable, and not by white knuckles: today's faithfulness, the runner's kit, the crown he crowns, the anchor behind the curtain: Sessions 10-12.

"I am coming soon": the horizon that makes it all a homecoming rather than a treadmill: nothing unclean shall enter, and he who began the good work completes it, and then the city, and the face: Sessions 13-14. Fourteen sessions were an exegesis of one sentence of the risen Christ, and tonight you performed it from memory. That sentence is now yours to keep: it is the study's memory verse, and its name.

DIG DEEPER · Seven Letters, One Refrain

Every one of the seven letters in Revelation 2-3 ends with a promise "to him who conquers": the tree of life (2:7), the crown of life with "Be faithful unto death" (2:10), immunity from the second death (2:11), the hidden manna and white stone (2:17), authority and the morning star (2:26-28), the white garments and the unblotted name (3:5), the pillar in the temple (3:12), a seat on Christ's own throne (3:21). The risen Lord's only letters are perseverance letters: warning and prize in one breath, to churches he loves.

And note 3:5 with tonight's clear eyes: "I will not blot his name out of the book of life" is a comfort whose grammar presumes a register written in ink that could be blotted. The seven letters teach in miniature what this study taught at length: love warns because the crown is real, and promises because the Giver is faithful.

The Commissioning

Leader: form the circle. Say: "In Session 1 you wrote a three-tense answer to the question 'Are you saved?' and many of you have carried it in your Bibles since. Tonight, the study's last act is that you say it out loud, and take it out that door." Go around the circle; each participant does three things:

1. Speak the answer. "I have been saved; I am being saved; and I hope, with confidence, to be saved." (Their own wording is better than the formula, if they wrote one.)

2. Name the text you will carry. One passage from these fourteen weeks that is now theirs: the verse they will still be quoting in ten years.

3. Name the person you will carry it to. Everyone here knows someone living in the doorstep question, the courtyard, the far country, or the fear. Say the first name only. The group holds those names in silence for a moment.

Then the leader prays the title verse over the group, by name if the group is small: "N., the Lord is coming soon. Hold fast what you have, and may no one seize your crown." Close with the memory verse spoken together, and, where custom allows, a final blessing. Then feed them; fourteen weeks deserves a table.

Live It From Here

Keep the kit. The runner's kit from Session 10, the daily prayer, the sacramental rhythm, the person, does not graduate. It is the rest of your life's equipment.

Go to the person you named. Within two weeks, while the commissioning is warm. You are not bringing an argument; you are bringing a porch light.

Begin again. The natural next study for this group is *Abide*, the same battles from the apologist's chair, or whatever your group chooses together. Groups that end well begin again. Pick the date before you leave tonight.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Lord Jesus Christ, you have given us what we could never earn, warned us because you love us, restored us when we fell, and set a crown ahead of us that you yourself will award. We have been saved; we are being saved; we hope with confidence to be saved. Keep us abiding in you, running with perseverance, hoping without fear, until the wilderness ends and we see your face. You are coming soon. We will hold fast. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown."

Revelation 3:11 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
Revelation 21:1-7	The city: tears wiped, "he shall be my son" (Build Q1)
Revelation 22:1-5	The river, the tree, the face (Build Q1)
1 John 3:2; 1 Corinthians 13:12	The vision promised and longed for (Q1 answer)
1 Corinthians 15	Resurrection bodies; anti-caricature (Q1 answer, leader background)
Genesis 2:8-10	Eden: the river and the tree (Build Q2)
Deuteronomy 8:7-10	The land as sacrament (Build Q2)
Isaiah 65:17-19	New heavens, new earth, no more weeping (Build Q2)
Revelation 2-3	The seven letters; "to him who conquers" (Dig Deeper)
Revelation 3:5	The unblotted name (Dig Deeper, handled honestly)
Revelation 3:10-11	THE HARVEST: the title verse, discovered live (The Harvest)
John 10:28; Isaiah 59:2	Callback in the four-clause unfolding (Q3 answer)
Philippians 1:6	Callback: he completes (Q3 answer)