

Session 7

Sprinkled Clean, A New Heart

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

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

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

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

What You Need to Know

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

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

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

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

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

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

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

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

Ezekiel 36:25–27 (RSV2CE)

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

Zechariah 13:1 (RSV2CE)

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

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

Hebrews 10:22 (RSV2CE)

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

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

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

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

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage • *To Donatus*

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

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

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

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

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

Catechism Connection

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

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

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

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • LEADER ONLY

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

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

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

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

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

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

Session Goals

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

Timed Plan (85 minutes)

5 min • Welcome and opening prayer

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

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

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

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

10 min • Live discovery: Hebrews 10:22

10 min • Steelman: is it only poetry?

5 min • Send questions

10 min • Live It, memory verse, closing prayer

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

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

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

Win • open the room

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

Build • into the text

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

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

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

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

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

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

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

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

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

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

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

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

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

LIVE DISCOVERY

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

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

STEELMAN • PRESS THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

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

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

ANSWER • SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

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

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

DIG DEEPER • OPTIONAL

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

Send • out of the room

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

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

Live It This Week

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

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

Memory Verse

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

Ezekiel 36:26 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

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

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zachariah 13:1 • A fountain opened for sin

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

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

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