

## SESSIONSIX

# Feed My Sheep

*John 21:1-19*

## PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### SESSION OVERVIEW

**Discovery Aim:** Participants discover the fisherman's new job: beside a charcoal fire that answers the fire of his denials, Peter is asked three times for love and commissioned three times to feed and tend Christ's own flock. The study's title, and the first sealed guess, open tonight: the catcher of fish becomes the shepherd of sheep.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Peter the shepherd of the whole flock. Christ the Good Shepherd does not resign; he installs a vicar-shepherd over sheep that remain forever his own: "feed *my* lambs, tend *my* sheep" (CCC 553; 881).

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Tonight the title of this study finally explains itself, and the first sealed blank opens. Choreograph the reveal: the group reads the fishing scene cold, walks into 21:15-17 live, and only after "feed my sheep" lands do the sheets come out. The fisherman hired to catch men in Session One receives a different animal and a different verb, and participants who guessed "shepherd" months of story ago get their ceremony.

The setting is a deliberate return to the beginning: Peter announces "I am going fishing" (21:3), and seven disciples fish all night on the Sea of Tiberias and catch nothing, a deliberate echo of the Luke 5 call scene. A stranger on the shore, a command to cast again, an unmanageable catch, and recognition: "It is the Lord!" Jesus restarts Peter's story at its first frame, as if to say: we begin again, from the boats.

The charcoal fire is the Gospel's quiet masterstroke, and it is your live discovery: the Greek word *anthrakia*, charcoal fire, appears exactly twice in the entire New Testament. John 18:18, the fire in the high priest's courtyard where Peter stood warming himself and denied his Lord three times; and John 21:9, the fire on the beach where the risen Jesus cooks breakfast. Jesus rebuilt the scene of the crime: same smell, same light, same warmth on the face, and then asked three questions to answer three denials. The senses remember what the mind buries; Peter's healing had to happen beside charcoal.

The threefold question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Note the name: not Peter but Simon, son of John, the pre-commission name, as if the Lord goes underneath the office to the man. Peter is "grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?'" (21:17): the third question presses exactly on

the third denial. And each answer receives not absolution language but a job: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Restoration, in Christ's grammar, is recommissioning.

A famous wrinkle to handle honestly: in Greek, Jesus' first two questions use *agapaō* and Peter answers with *phileō*; the third time Jesus switches to Peter's own word. Preachers have built beautiful sermons on the shift (divine love asked, friendship love offered, the Lord stooping to Peter's level). Be honest with the group: John elsewhere uses the two verbs interchangeably, and many careful scholars read the variation as John's normal style rather than a theological ladder. The text's certain freight is elsewhere: three questions for three denials, and the flock handed over. Offer the word study as a possible grace note, not a load-bearing wall.

The possessive pronoun is the doctrine: feed *my* lambs, tend *my* sheep. The flock never becomes Peter's property. Christ, who called himself the Good Shepherd who lays down his life (John 10:11), does not resign the flock; he appoints a shepherd to tend what remains his. Peter understood this to the end of his life: "Tend the flock of God... and when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown" (1 Peter 5:2-4). The under-shepherd language Catholics use for the pope is Peter's own self-description.

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Ezekiel 34 stands behind the whole scene and is the night's second live discovery: God's furious indictment of Israel's failed shepherds, his promise "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep" (34:15), and then, without contradiction, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them" (34:23). God shepherding personally and God appointing one shepherd are the same promise in Ezekiel's mouth. Ezekiel's Davidic shepherd is fulfilled first in Christ himself (John 10:11, 16). But the pattern of the prophecy, God shepherding personally and God appointing one shepherd as a single promise, is exactly the shape of John 21: the risen divine Shepherd sets a vicar-shepherd over his flock.

The scene ends where discipleship ends: "you will stretch out your hands... (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, 'Follow me'" (21:18-19). The shepherd's job description includes the shepherd's death; the ancient and well-attested memory of the Church is that Peter followed to a cross in Rome, a thread Session Eleven will pull.

## OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

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**Ezekiel 34:1-16, 23.** The failed shepherds of Israel indicted, God's promise to shepherd his flock himself, and the appointment of "one shepherd, my servant David." Divine shepherding and a single appointed shepherd are one promise, not rivals: the blueprint of John 21.

**2 Samuel 5:2.** Israel's kings were shepherds by title: "You shall be shepherd of my people Israel." To be made shepherd of the flock in David's restored kingdom is royal-steward language in pastoral dress; Sessions Three and Six describe one office in two images.

**Numbers 27:15-20.** Moses, facing death, asks God to appoint a man over the congregation "who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep which have no shepherd," and Joshua is invested before the priest and the people. God's answer to shepherdless sheep is a visible, appointed, commissioned man, invested publicly before priest and people.

## VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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**St. Augustine** *Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 123*

Augustine hears in the threefold question the medicine for the threefold denial: a triple confession of love answers the triple fear, and the tongue serves love as fully as it had served dread. And he presses the pronoun: feed my sheep, as mine, not yours; seek in them the Lord's glory and not your own, for those who feed Christ's sheep as if the sheep were their own love themselves and not Christ.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH

**St. John Chrysostom** *Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homily 88*

Chrysostom reads the scene as the public restoration and elevation of Peter: the denial is wiped away, and Christ places into his hands the presidency over the brethren, entrusting to the one who loves him the care of the flock he purchased with his blood. If you love me, Chrysostom hears the Lord say, then shepherd what I love.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH

**St. Gregory the Great** *Pastoral Rule, Book I*

Gregory, himself a successor of Peter, calls the government of souls the art of arts, and insists no one takes it up worthily except through love: the shepherd feeds Christ's sheep by holy living, faithful teaching, and a compassion learned in his own weakness. The commission of John 21, for Gregory, is a lifelong examination of the shepherd's love, never a trophy.

## CATECHISM CONNECTION

**CCC 553** joins tonight's text to the keys: the power to bind and loose, given with the keys, was confirmed after the Resurrection when the risen Jesus, the Good Shepherd, made Peter shepherd of the whole flock: feed my lambs, feed my sheep.

**CCC 881** states the office in one sentence: the Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the rock of his Church, gave him the keys, and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock.

**CCC 1551** guards the pronoun: all authority in the Church is a service, exercised in Christ's name, over a flock that belongs to Christ; ministers are servants of Christ precisely in shepherding what is his.

## THREAD WATCH

**The Fisherman-to-Shepherd thread resolves tonight: open the first sealed blank.** Do it after Build 4, once "feed my sheep" has landed from the text itself. Honor the correct guesses loudly; the guess was planted five sessions ago, and the payoff is the study's title. Both blanks are now open; collect a moment of appreciation for the game and retire the sheets with ceremony.

**The Failing Steward thread takes its decisive turn.** The charcoal fire shows what Christ does with the failure Luke 22 predicted: he restores and recommissions. Session Nine still owns the full theological reckoning (denials plus Antioch); tonight is the mercy half of that evening's argument, so make it unforgettable.

**The Follow Me thread plants quietly.** "You will stretch out your hands" (21:18-19) points to Peter's death. Say only that ancient Christian tradition, attested from the first century onward, remembers Peter's martyrdom in Rome, by tradition a crucifixion, and that Session Eleven walks there.

## SESSION GOALS

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### 1.

Let the group discover the charcoal fire connection (John 18:18 and 21:9) with their own eyes before any explanation.

### 2.

Walk the threefold restoration: three questions for three denials, each answered with a commission, and open the first sealed blank at the summit.

### 3.

Discover Ezekiel 34 live: divine shepherding and one appointed shepherd as a single promise, fulfilled on the beach.

### 4.

Fix the possessive forever: my lambs, my sheep; vicar-shepherd under the Good Shepherd, with 1 Peter 5 as Peter's own confirmation.

## TIME NOTE

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75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, compress Build 1 and cut Build 8; the agapaō note in Build 5 can shrink to one honest sentence. Protect Build 3, the charcoal fire discovery, and the seal-opening after Build 4 at all costs.

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## PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Opening Prayer:

*Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, you know how to find us: back in our old boats, empty-handed before dawn. Come stand on our shore tonight. Ask us the only question that matters, as many times as we need, and give us work to do for the flock you love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

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1.

What is a smell or a sound that instantly transports you somewhere specific in your past? Where does it take you?

2.

After you have seriously let someone down, which is harder: their forgiveness, or being trusted by them with something important again? Why?

## BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

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1.

Read John 21:1-8. Where are the disciples, whose idea was this outing, and what does the whole scene deliberately remind us of? What are they catching before the stranger speaks?

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

They are back in Galilee, back on the water, and it is Peter's idea: "I am going fishing," and six others follow him, which is its own small data point about who the others follow even in limbo. They fish all night and catch nothing.

The scene strikingly echoes Luke 5: night toil, empty nets, a voice telling seasoned fishermen to cast again, and a catch too big to handle. The details differ; here Jesus is a stranger on the shore, and the recognition comes from the Beloved Disciple. But the shape is unmistakable. Jesus has rebuilt Peter's first frame. Whatever is about to happen to Peter happens where his story began, as a new beginning, not a scolding sequel.

2.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Read 21:9-14. Breakfast is waiting. Now the homework question: verse 9 mentions a very specific kind of fire, and you were sent to John 18:18 this week. What did you find, and why does it matter?

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

The word is *anthrakia*, a charcoal fire, and it appears exactly twice in the entire New Testament: the fire in the high priest's courtyard where Peter warmed himself and denied Jesus three times, and this fire on the beach where Jesus cooks breakfast for him.

Jesus reconstructed the scene of the crime: the same smell in the nostrils, the same light on the face. Smell is the sense most wired to memory; every one of Peter's senses is standing in the courtyard again.

The Lord does not heal by helping us forget. He walks us back to the exact place of the wound, with breakfast.

### 3.

Read 21:15-17 aloud slowly, one question per reader. Count everything: how many questions, what name Jesus uses, what Peter is asked, and what Peter is given after each answer. Why is Peter grieved at the third?

#### ANSWER · share after the discussion

Three questions, answering three denials, question for denial, and by the third Peter feels the arithmetic: "grieved because he said to him the third time." The name is not Peter but "Simon, son of John," the pre-commission name; the Lord goes beneath the office to the man, back to the day he was first renamed.

And the question is not "are you sorry," not "will you do better," but only "do you love me," the qualification Christ presses above every other, the indispensable heart of the office. Each answer receives not a pardon certificate but a job: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. In Christ's grammar, restoration is recommissioning. He does not merely forgive Peter back to neutral; he hands him the flock.

### 4.

Now stop and name what just happened to Peter's job description. In Session One he was hired to *catch* something. What is the animal now, and what is the verb? Leaders: sealed sheets out, open the first blank, and read the guesses aloud.

#### ANSWER · share after the discussion

The fisherman has become a shepherd. Fish are caught once; sheep must be fed, tended, guarded, led, every single day, for life. Evangelization brings them in; shepherding keeps and feeds them, and Peter is now given both ends of the mission.

Honor the correct guesses; this seal was written five sessions ago on the night the group met the fisherman. And notice that the study's own title has been the answer key on the cover the whole time: Feed My Sheep is not a slogan, it is the third sentence of the commission, the fisherman's new job in the Lord's own words.

### 5.

One honest wrinkle before we go deeper. In the Greek, Jesus' first two questions use *agapaō* and Peter answers with *phileō*; the third time Jesus switches to Peter's word. Some hear a drama in the verbs: divine love asked, friendship offered, the Lord stooping to meet Peter. What should we make of it?

#### ANSWER · share after the discussion

Hold it lightly and honestly: John elsewhere uses the two verbs interchangeably, and many careful readers judge the variation to be John's normal style rather than a hidden ladder. The sermon in the verbs may be real, and it is certainly beautiful, the Lord accepting the love Peter can actually offer, but it

is a grace note, not a load-bearing wall.

The certain freight of the passage needs no Greek: three questions answering three denials beside a rebuilt fire, and Christ's own flock placed in a restored denier's hands. Build on the certain thing.

## 6.

LIVE DISCOVERY. The pronoun is the doctrine, so press it: whose lambs? whose sheep? Then someone find and read 1 Peter 5:1-4, written by tonight's shepherd decades later. How did Peter himself understand the job for the rest of his life?

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

My lambs, my sheep, three times: the flock never becomes Peter's property. The Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep (John 10:11) is not resigning; he is appointing a shepherd to tend what remains eternally his. St. Augustine preached exactly this edge: feed them as mine, not yours, or you love yourself and not Christ.

And Peter got it. At the end of his life he writes: "Tend the flock of God that is your charge... not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples... And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown." Under-shepherds serving the chief Shepherd: the Catholic language of vicar is Peter's own self-understanding, in his own letter. The office holds the crook; the flock belongs to Christ.

## 7.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Someone find and read Ezekiel 34:11-16, and a second reader Ezekiel 34:23. God says "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep," and then says "I will set up over them one shepherd." Is that a contradiction? What is the beach scene doing with this prophecy?

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

In Ezekiel's mouth it is one promise, not two rivals: after indicting Israel's failed shepherds, God vows to shepherd the flock himself, and, in the same oracle, to set over them "one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them." Divine shepherding and a single appointed shepherd are how the one promise works.

Christ is the fulfillment of both halves, the divine Shepherd and the Davidic shepherd (John 10). And John 21 extends Ezekiel's pattern before our eyes: the risen Shepherd, standing on the shore in person, sets one shepherd over his flock under himself, in David's restored kingdom (2 Samuel 5:2 made kings shepherds by title). The pattern is even older: when Moses faced death, he asked God for a man over the congregation "that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep which have no shepherd," and Joshua was invested (Numbers 27:15-20). God's answer to shepherdless sheep is an identifiable, commissioned man, under God.

### DIG DEEPER · Follow me, all the way

The commission ends in a prophecy: "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go," which John glosses plainly: "This he said to

show by what death he was to glorify God." Then, the last word: "Follow me" (21:18-19), the same two words that started everything, now with a cross visible in them. The shepherd's job description includes the shepherd's death, and the Church's ancient and well-attested memory holds where Peter's following ended. Session Eleven walks to that spot; tonight, just feel the weight of a commission that costs everything and was accepted anyway.

## 8.

Last one. Jesus asked a public failure "do you love me" three times and then handed him the most precious thing he owns. What does that tell us about how Christ staffs his Church, and what does it demand of how we see the men who hold the office now?

### ANSWER · share after the discussion

It tells us the qualification is love, tested in failure and restored by mercy, not a spotless record; that Christ knowingly entrusts his flock to weak men because his own prayer and presence, not their perfection, secure it; and that the whole arrangement is designed to keep the shepherds humble and the flock's eyes on the chief Shepherd.

And it sets our posture: we owe the shepherds neither cynicism nor worship. We pray for them as men who will answer the beach question about us, and we remember whose sheep we are. The pronoun protects everything: his lambs, his sheep, his Church.

## SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

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### 1.

Where is your charcoal fire, the place, memory, or smell you avoid because a failure lives there? What would it mean to let Jesus make breakfast there?

### 2.

"Do you love me?" is still the only interview question. If Jesus asked you tonight, three times, slowly, what would happen to you by the third asking?

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## LIVE IT THIS WEEK

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### 1.

Pray with John 21:15-17 once this week, out loud, alone: let him ask you all three times, and answer honestly all three times. Write down what he gives you to do.

### 2.

Do one concrete act of feeding this week: bring a meal, catechize a kid, visit someone housebound. Shepherding is calories and time, not sentiment.

### 3.

Keep the daily Our Father for the pope, adding this week: "Chief Shepherd, give your under-shepherd love enough for the whole flock, and bring us all home."

#### Closing Prayer:

*Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, you own the flock and you know how to restore a shepherd. Ask us for love until we can finally say it. Put work for your sheep into our healed hands. And when you call us to follow where we do not wish to go, go with us all the way. Amen.*

**Scripture Memory Verse:** "Simon, son of John, do you love me? ... Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you. ... Feed my sheep." (John 21:17, RSV2CE)

## PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session Six, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

### PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text, read in units through the Build

#### John 18:18

Live discovery, Build 2: the first charcoal fire

#### Luke 5:1-11

Build 1 callback: the first frame replayed

#### 1 Peter 5:1-4

Live discovery, Build 6: Peter's own under-shepherd theology

#### John 10:11

Build 6: the Good Shepherd owns the flock

#### Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23

Live discovery, Build 7: one promise, one shepherd

#### 2 Samuel 5:2

Build 7: kings as shepherds of Israel

**Numbers 27:15-20**

Build 7: Joshua appointed over the congregation

**CCC 553; 881; 1551**

Catechism Connection