

SESSION NINE

The Failing Rock

Matthew 16:21-23; Luke 22:54-62; Galatians 2:11-14

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants face Peter's failures with completely open eyes: rebuked as Satan five verses after being named rock, denying three times by the fire, and opposed to his face by Paul at Antioch. They discover that Scripture itself, not Catholic damage control, distinguishes the office from the perfection of its holder, and that Peter's failures are failures of conduct and courage, never official rulings that bound the Church to error.

Catholic Touchstone: Infallibility is not impeccability. Christ's minister remains a sinner whose weakness does not destroy what Christ guarantees through the office (CCC 1550): the peg of Isaiah 22:25, Moses' seat, and Christ's prayer for a faith, not a flawlessness, all converge tonight.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Tonight is the session the whole study has been promising, and its method matters: do not defend Peter. Read every failure at full volume, let the group feel the scandal, and then let Scripture itself make the distinctions. The Catholic position does not survive these texts by softening them; it is built out of them.

Failure one, Matthew 16:21-23: five verses after "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," the same voice says "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me." The word for hindrance is *skandalon*, a stumbling stone. Matthew has placed rock and stumbling stone within one paragraph on purpose: the foundation stone, speaking from "the side of men," can become a rock to trip on. The office was five verses old when Scripture taught the Church to distinguish the man's charism from the man's opinions.

Failure two, Luke 22:54-62: the denials, in the courtyard, beside the fire (the fire John's Gospel identifies as a charcoal fire, John 18:18, deliberately matched by the charcoal fire on the beach, 21:9), exactly as predicted at the table where the commission was given. Your group has already lived the restoration of this failure (Session Six); tonight they must feel its full weight first: the rock, publicly, three times, with oaths in Matthew's telling, denying he ever knew the man. And the detail that breaks the heart: "the Lord turned and looked at Peter" (22:61). Then the weeping that proved the faith survived the courage.

Failure three, and the crown jewel of every Protestant case: Galatians 2:11-14. At Antioch, Peter ate freely with Gentile Christians until "certain men came from James"; then "he drew back and separated

himself, fearing the circumcision party," and his gravity dragged others with him, "even Barnabas." Paul "opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned," publicly: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" Read it without flinching. A junior apostle rebuked the keeper of the keys, in front of everyone, and was right to do it.

Now the anatomy, and it decides everything: what exactly was Peter's Antioch error? Not his teaching. Peter's doctrine on this precise question was already on the record and already correct: the rooftop, Cornelius, "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10), all before Antioch on any chronology. And his declaration before the council that Jews and Gentiles alike "shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 15:11), after which "all the assembly kept silence" (15:12), confirms the same position rather than reversing it, whether the council fell before or after Antioch, a chronology scholars genuinely debate. Paul's own charge sheet confirms it: he accuses Peter of *hypocrisy*, *hypokrisis* is Paul's actual word (2:13), of not walking "in line with the truth of the gospel" (2:14). Hypocrisy means betraying your own true teaching with your behavior. Peter never taught circumcision was necessary; he caved to a lunch-table intimidation and his conduct preached what his doctrine denied. The distinction is not Catholic fine print; it is the plain grammar of Paul's accusation.

This is why the Church's claim was always narrower than her critics assume and narrower than some Catholics assume: no promise of sinless popes, prudent popes, brave popes, or pleasant popes. The claim, whose seed is Christ praying for Peter's *faith* (Luke 22:32) and the Father revealing Peter's *confession* (Matthew 16:17), concerns the protected official confession of the faith, and Session Twelve will define its exact, restrictive shape. Tonight's business is the ground under it: Scripture shows the first pope sinning against his own true doctrine and being publicly corrected by a colleague; every piece of that is in the text. Peter's acceptance of the correction is not narrated in Galatians; it is the verdict of the wider record: Peter never answers the charge, the churches preserved Paul's account, and Peter later calls Paul "our beloved brother" (2 Peter 3:15). What is certain in the text is that he remained the rock.

Be ready for the extension the group will rightly make: and the successors? Say it plainly: some popes lived scandalously, and Catholics should be the first, not the last, to say so; fraternal correction of popes is a Catholic tradition with saints in it, St. Catherine of Siena wrote letters to a pope that would curl your hair. The claim history must test is precise: that no pope, including the worst men to hold the office, ever bound the whole Church to heresy by an official definitive act. That is the Catholic claim, and it has been tested: the classic hard case is Pope Honorius I, condemned after his death for negligence in the monothelite crisis; Catholics answer that his private letters were not definitive acts binding the whole Church, the very distinction tonight's texts teach. Session Twelve will equip you for that case. That precise claim has held for twenty centuries through some spectacularly bad men, which is either a very long coincidence or Luke 22:32 doing what it says.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

2 Samuel 12:1-13. Nathan before David: "You are the man." The Lord's anointed king, guilty of adultery and murder, is rebuked to his face by a prophet, repents, and remains king. Israel already knew that God's offices survive God's rebukes of the men in them; David's psalm of repentance became the whole Church's prayer. Tonight's key live discovery.

Isaiah 22:25. The peg fastened in a sure place gives way: the steward's own oracle ends with the steward judged. Your group banked this verse in Session Three for exactly tonight.

Numbers 20:10-12. Even Moses, at Meribah, fails in faith before the people and is barred from the land, yet remains the mediator of the covenant to his last day. The pattern is ancient: God disciplines his officers without demolishing their offices.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Augustine *Letter 82, to St. Jerome*

In their famous dispute over Antioch, Jerome suggested the confrontation was staged for effect; Augustine insisted it was real, because Scripture does not lie, and then drew the lesson that settles tonight: Peter, by humbly accepting public correction from a junior colleague, left the Church a rarer and holier example than Paul's boldness in giving it. It is a greater thing, Augustine says, to be corrected well than to correct well.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage *Letter 71*

Cyprian points to Antioch as the office's true style: Peter, whom the Lord chose first and on whom he built his Church, did not answer Paul's challenge by insolently claiming his primacy and demanding obedience from a latecomer; he yielded to truth presented rightly. For Cyprian the scene disgraces neither Peter nor the primacy; it displays the humility that makes the primacy Christian.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Catherine of Siena *Letters to Pope Gregory XI*

A thirty-year-old laywoman and future Doctor of the Church wrote to the pope himself with astonishing frankness, urging him to return his see to Rome, to be a courageous man and not a coward, and to uproot the corruption around him, all while calling him sweet Christ on earth and never once wavering in reverence for the office. Catherine is the permanent Catholic proof that fierce correction and full communion are not opposites.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1550 says tonight's thesis outright: the presence of Christ in the minister is not to be understood as if the minister were preserved from all human weaknesses, from error, even from sin; the power of the Holy Spirit does not guarantee all the acts of ministers in the same way.

CCC 890-891 previews next session's precision: the charism that protects the Church's faith is bounded, specific, and ordered to the deposit of faith, not a general insurance policy on everything a pope says or does.

CCC 1429 points to St. Peter's conversion after his denial as a witness to the ongoing interior conversion every Christian needs. Tonight's reflection draws the thread further: the first pope is also the New Covenant's first great penitent.

THREAD WATCH

The Failing Steward thread resolves tonight. Every planting pays off: the peg of Isaiah 22:25, Moses' seat, the prayer for faith rather than flawlessness, the charcoal fires. Name each connection as the group finds it; this is the night the study's architecture becomes visible to them.

The Revealed Confession thread reaches its penultimate step. Tonight establishes what the charism is *not* (impeccability, wisdom, courage); Session Twelve defines what it *is*. End the night pointing forward explicitly: we have cleared the ground, next time we build the definition.

Pastoral watch. Someone in your group has been wounded by a priest, a bishop, or a scandal headline, tonight or long ago. This session can be the most healing of the twelve if the failures are named honestly, or the most damaging if they are minimized. Do not minimize. The Gospel writers did not.

SESSION GOALS

1.

Read all three failures at full volume without defensive softening: Satan, the denials, Antioch.

2.

Perform the anatomy of Antioch from Paul's own words: hypocrisy against Peter's own true doctrine, conduct versus teaching.

3.

Discover the Nathan-and-David pattern live: God's offices survive God's rebukes of the men in them.

4.

Distinguish precisely what was never promised (impeccability) from what was (a prayed-for faith and a protected confession), setting up Session Twelve.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, compress Build 2, the denials, since Session Six covered the restoration, and cut Build 8. Protect Build 4, the anatomy of Antioch, and Build 6, the steelman; they are the reason this session exists.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you built your Church on a man you would rebuke, restore, and rebuke again through a brother. Give us tonight the honesty of the Gospels, which hid nothing, and the hope of the Gospels, which despaired of no one. Where your Church's shepherds have wounded any of us, meet us in it. Your grace is sufficient. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

Who is allowed to correct you, really correct you, and survive? What did it take for them to earn that place?

2.

Has an institution you loved ever been disgraced by its leaders? Without naming wounds you would rather not, what did it do to your trust in the institution itself?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Read Matthew 16:18, then keep reading straight through 16:21-23 without stopping. Count the verses between "you are Peter, and on this rock" and "Get behind me, Satan." What is Matthew doing by placing these side by side, and what is Peter's actual mistake?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Five verses. The rock becomes, in Jesus' own word, a *skandalon*, a stumbling stone, "a hindrance to me," because Peter, horrified by the prediction of the cross, sets his mind "not on the side of God, but of men." His mistake is not malice; it is theology by human instinct: a Messiah too loved to be allowed to suffer.

Matthew's placement is deliberate catechesis: the Church was never given one verse to read without the other. The foundation stone, speaking his own mind from the side of men, can be a rock to trip over; speaking the Father's revelation, he is the rock to build on. The distinction between the man's charism and the man's opinions is as old as the office itself, five verses old, to be exact.

2.

You read Luke 22:54-62 this week. Someone read verses 60-62 aloud now, slowly. We already know the beach restores this. But tonight, before restoration: how bad is this, actually? And what does verse 61, the look, do to you?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Say it at full volume: the rock, publicly, three times, with oaths in Matthew's account, denies knowing Jesus at all, hours after "I am ready to go with you to prison and to death," while Jesus is being beaten within earshot. There is no softer reading; the evangelists, writing in the church Peter led, published it

anyway, which is itself remarkable: this church tells the whole truth about its first leader.

"And the Lord turned and looked at Peter." No word, just the face. And Peter "went out and wept bitterly," the weeping that separates him from Judas forever: contrition, not despair. The office's first holder is the New Covenant's first great penitent (CCC 1429), and the Church has been a communion of weeping-and-returning people ever since.

3.

Now Antioch. Read Galatians 2:11-14 aloud, all of it, and do not soften a syllable. Lay out the scene: what had Peter been doing, what changed, who got dragged along, and what did Paul do about it?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Peter, in Antioch, had been eating freely with Gentile believers, exactly what his rooftop vision taught. Then "certain men came from James," and Peter "drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party." His gravity did the rest: "the rest of the Jews acted insincerely with him... even Barnabas was carried away." And Paul "opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned," publicly, "before them all."

Feel the full scandal before anyone resolves it: the keeper of the keys, corrected in public by a colleague who had persecuted the Church while Peter was already an apostle, and the correction was *right*. If the Catholic claim cannot survive this passage read at full volume, it cannot survive. So now we do the anatomy.

4.

The anatomy. Two questions decide everything, so take them slowly. First: what was Peter's *doctrine* on Jew- Gentile table fellowship and salvation, on the record, before and after Antioch? Second: what is the exact word Paul uses for Peter's sin in verse 13, and what does that word suggest about what Peter actually believed?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Peter's doctrine was correct and public: "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28), "God shows no partiality" (10:34), both before Antioch on any chronology; and his council declaration that all "shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (15:11) confirms the same position, whether the council fell before or after Antioch, a chronology scholars genuinely debate. Peter never taught, ruled, or defined that Gentiles must judaize. On this question his teaching was the orthodox position Paul was defending.

And Paul's word is *hypokrisis*, hypocrisy, insincerity: "the rest of the Jews acted insincerely *with him*." Hypokrisis means play-acting: conduct at odds with one's real conviction. You can only be a hypocrite about a truth you actually hold. Paul's charge is not "you teach falsely" but "you are not walking in line with the truth of the gospel," the truth Peter himself had voiced. Read alongside Acts 10, the natural sense of Paul's own word is that Peter's behavior betrayed his own true position. Peter's failure at Antioch is cowardice at a lunch table, behavior preaching what his doctrine denied. That is grave, scandalous, and correctable, and it is not an official act binding the Church to error. The distinction is not Catholic fine print; it is the grammar of Paul's own accusation.

5.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Someone find and read 2 Samuel 12:1-7 and 12:13. Nathan and David: what does the prophet do to the Lord's anointed king, what does the king do, and, the question that matters tonight, what happens to David's *crown*?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Nathan walks into the throne room and tells the king a parable, then detonates it: "You are the man." Adultery and murder, named to the anointed's face. And David does the one thing that saves him: "I have sinned against the LORD," no defense, no execution of the prophet, just Psalm 51 for the rest of history.

And the crown stays. David is chastised terribly, but he remains the Lord's anointed, the covenant with his house stands, and the Messiah still comes from his line. Israel already knew what tonight teaches: God's offices survive God's rebukes of the men in them, because the office was God's idea and the rebuke is God's mercy. Antioch is Nathan-and-David in the New Covenant: prophet-like correction, penitent office-holder, office intact. And notice which role Augustine says was harder and holier: Peter's, the being-corrected-well.

6.

Full steelman, and give it teeth. Your friend says: "This settles it against Rome. Paul treats Peter as a peer to be corrected, not an infallible head to be obeyed. And notice Paul's own verb: Peter's withdrawal was "compelling the Gentiles to live like Jews" (2:14). A leader's public conduct teaches: if the first pope's example could compel the Church toward error, your conduct-versus-teaching distinction is a technicality. And nothing in Galatians suggests Paul thought Peter held a protected office. And history makes it worse: popes have been greedy, violent, and corrupt. An office that holy would not have holders that vile." Build it at full strength, then take it apart with tonight's texts.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Its strength is real: Paul corrects Peter with zero deference to rank; Scripture nowhere paints Peter as above rebuke; and the historical record of certain popes is genuinely disgraceful, and Catholics who minimize it embarrass the truth. Concede every inch loudly. Add St. Cyprian's observation as a gift: Peter did not answer Paul by claiming his primacy; he yielded to truth. And add St. Catherine of Siena, who wrote to a pope with a frankness Paul would have admired, while calling him sweet Christ on earth. Fraternal correction of popes is not a Protestant discovery; it is a Catholic tradition with Doctors of the Church in it.

Now the press, in four moves. One: notice what the rebuke *assumes*. Paul confronts Peter publicly precisely because Peter's example was dragging everyone, "even Barnabas"; nobody stages a public correction of a nobody. The scene's very urgency testifies to Peter's unique gravity. Two: the claim your friend is attacking was never made. The Church has never taught that popes cannot sin, err in private opinion, fail in courage, or govern badly (CCC 1550 says the opposite in so many words). The claim is narrower: that no pope has ever bound the whole Church to error by definitive official act, and Antioch, as the anatomy showed, is not such an act; it is hypocrisy against Peter's own true ruling. Three: run your friend's own test on history. Take the worst popes, the ones Catholics wince at, and find the

definitive teaching act where one of them bound the Church to heresy. Twenty centuries, some genuinely terrible men, and Catholics contend that specific thing has never happened; the disputed cases, Honorius being the famous one, turn on exactly tonight's distinction between negligent conduct and definitive teaching. That record is either the longest coincidence in institutional history or a prayer at the Last Supper doing exactly what it said. Four: compulsion-by-example is exactly Paul's point, and exactly not a definition. Paul's alarm at Peter's gravitational pull is the passage's own strongest evidence of Peter's unique standing; and the Church's claim has always concerned definitive acts, not gravitational pull. The distinction is not a technicality; it is why Paul could fix the problem with a rebuke instead of a schism.

DIG DEEPER · Why did Peter cave at Antioch?

Paul names the engine: "fearing the circumcision party" (2:12). Fear of men is Peter's signature weakness in every failure: fear of the cross-shaped future at Caesarea Philippi, fear of a servant girl in the courtyard, fear of hardliners from Jerusalem at Antioch. The pattern matters pastorally: the office's first holder did not struggle with heresy or ambition; he struggled with human respect, the most ordinary temptation there is, the one everyone in this room fought this week. Christ knew that when he chose him, prayed for him anyway, and built on him anyway. There is no reading of that except mercy, and no excuse left for waiting until we are brave to be useful.

7.

Turn it toward us, gently. The Church's honesty about Peter cost her something and bought her something. What does it do to your trust, in Scripture and in the Church, that the founding documents publish the founder's worst moments? And what does the whole pattern say to whoever in this room is carrying a public failure of their own?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Let the group work. The landing on trust: legends launder their heroes; witnesses tell what happened. A church inventing its own authority does not record its first leader cursing and denying, getting called Satan, and being dressed down at Antioch. The embarrassment is the fingerprint of honesty, and honesty about the rock makes the claims about the rock more credible, not less.

And to the one carrying a failure: the entire arc of this study is that Christ's response to Peter's worst moments was correction, restoration, and recommissioning, never revocation. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" is not a consolation prize; it is the operating principle of the office and of every baptized life in this room. The Church is not embarrassed by restored failures. She is built on one.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

Fear of men was Peter's recurring fracture: the servant girl, the circumcision party. Where does human respect currently bend your conduct away from what you actually believe?

2.

Augustine says being corrected well is rarer and holier than correcting well. Who has standing to Nathan you, and when they last used it, did they meet David or a defense attorney?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

Pray Psalm 51, David's psalm after Nathan, once each day this week, as Peter's psalm and as yours.

2.

Identify one place your behavior contradicts your stated convictions, one act of practical hypocrisy, and correct the conduct, not the conviction, this week.

3.

Keep the daily Our Father for the pope, adding this week: "Lord, when Peter's successor is weak, send him a Paul and a Catherine, and give him David's heart to hear them."

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you looked at Peter across the courtyard and did not look away. Look at us the same way: through our denials, our hypocrisies, our fear of men, with the gaze that produces tears and not despair. Keep your Church honest about her failures and confident in your prayer, which cannot fail. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9, RSV2CE)

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

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

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Build 1: rock to stumbling stone in five verses

Luke 22:54-62

Build 2: the denials and the look

Galatians 2:11-14

Builds 3-4: Antioch, read at full volume

Acts 10:28, 34; 15:11

Build 4: Peter's doctrine on the record

2 Samuel 12:1-13

Live discovery, Build 5: Nathan and David

Isaiah 22:25

Thread payoff: the steward's peg

Numbers 20:10-12

Leader background: Moses at Meribah

Psalms 51

Live It This Week, practice 1

2 Corinthians 12:9

Memory verse: power perfected in weakness

CCC 1550; 890-891; 1429

Catechism Connection