

A Cornerstone in Zion

Isaiah 28-35 • Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

DISCOVERY AIM

Participants resolve the stone thread planted in Session 3: the stone of stumbling (8:14) meets tonight's *"tested stone, a precious cornerstone"* (28:16), and they discover the New Testament passage that stacks Isaiah's two stones with Psalm 118 into one argument, written by the man who carries the keys. They also face Isaiah 29:13, the verse most often quoted *against* Catholicism, in its strongest form, and answer it. They close in chapter 35, where the desert blooms and the blind see, and find Jesus reaching for that chapter, together with Isaiah 61, as his ID card.

CATHOLIC TOUCHSTONE

Sacred Tradition rightly understood, and Christ the cornerstone on whom the Church is built (CCC 756). Isaiah 29:13, *"their heart is far from me,"* is not a Protestant weapon that Catholics must dodge; it is a prophetic scalpel the Church reads over herself at every Mass that risks becoming routine.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Chapters 28-33 are a cycle of six *woes*, spoken across the years when Judah's leaders were shopping for security, first flirting with Assyria, then, after Assyria turned predator, sneaking ambassadors down to Egypt with treasure on donkeys (30:1-7; 31:1-3). Isaiah's verdict on the Egypt policy is one of his flattest lines: *"The Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses are flesh, and not spirit"* (31:3). The whole cycle is Ahaz's temptation again at national scale: whom do you trust? Against the scramble stands 30:15, one of the great sentences of the Old Testament: *"In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. And you would not."* Read those last four words in the room and let them ache.

In the middle of the woe against the scoffers who boast of their *"covenant with death"* (28:14-15), God announces a construction project: *"Behold, I am laying in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'He who believes will not be in haste'"* (28:16). Set beside 8:14, where the LORD himself is a stone of stumbling to the faithless, you now have Isaiah's complete stone theology: one stone, two effects. Build on it and stand; trip on it and fall. The New Testament stacks these texts, with Psalm 118:22 (*"the stone which the builders rejected"*), into a deliberate catena, and the fullest stack is 1 Peter 2:4-8. If your group has studied the letters of Peter, tonight will feel like a homecoming; if not, it will feel like a discovery either way: the keeper of the keys building with Isaiah's stones.

Then 29:13, and prepare yourself, because this verse deserves both honesty and confidence: *"This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote."* Jesus quotes it against the Pharisees (Matthew

15:8-9; Mark 7:6-7), in an argument about *tradition*. It is probably the verse most frequently quoted at Catholics: rote prayers, human traditions, empty ritual. Tonight's steelman takes that case at full strength. The answer distinguishes what Jesus distinguishes: human traditions that void God's word (the corban dodge of Mark 7:11-12) versus the apostolic Tradition Paul commands Christians to hold, "*whether by word of mouth or by letter*" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). The Catechism itself makes exactly this distinction (CCC 83): Sacred Tradition, which carries the Word, versus changeable ecclesial customs, which serve it. And the deeper point: 29:13 diagnoses *hearts*, not liturgies; a spontaneous prayer can be rote in the heart, and a memorized one can burn.

Chapters 34-35 close the movement with maximum contrast: Edom becomes a wasteland (34), and then, without transition, the wasteland bursts into crocus (35). The desert blooms; weak hands are strengthened; "*Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God... will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart*" (35:4-6). A road runs home through it, "*and it shall be called the Holy Way*" (35:8). When John the Baptist sends from prison to ask Jesus, "*Are you he who is to come?*", Jesus answers with his morning's work, in words that echo this chapter together with Isaiah 61 (Matthew 11:2-6). Chapter 35 is on the Messiah's checklist, and the highway is a thread: hold it lightly tonight; a voice will cry about a highway five verses into next month's reading.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Roots. The cornerstone in Zion answers the false foundation of the scoffers' covenant with death (28:15): every generation builds on something. Psalm 118:22 supplies the catena's third stone. The quietness of 30:15 is Exodus faith: "*The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be still*" (Exodus 14:14). And 31:5 hides a Passover: the LORD will protect Jerusalem like birds hovering, "*he will spare and rescue,*" where *spare* is the Passover verb *pasach* (see the Dig Deeper).

Fulfillment. Jesus claims Psalm 118's rejected stone for himself at the climax of the vineyard parable (Matthew 21:42), your group's Session 1 text; Peter throws it at the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:11); Paul fuses Isaiah's two stones in Romans 9:33; and 1 Peter 2:4-8 builds the full structure: come to the living stone, be yourselves built into a spiritual house, and watch the same stone divide belief from stumbling. Isaiah 29:13 lands in Matthew 15:8-9. Isaiah 35's checklist is fulfilled item by item in the Gospels and cited by Jesus in Matthew 11:4-5, and the Catechism reads those miracles as messianic signs (CCC 547-549).

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine • *Epiphany Sermons (Sermon 204)*

St. Augustine loved the geometry of the image: a cornerstone is laid where two walls meet, and Christ is the corner where two peoples, Israel and the nations, are joined into one house at last. The stone does not merely support the building; it reconciles it, holding together in himself what history had set at angles.

St. Teresa of Ávila • *The Bookmark (traditionally attributed)*

The prayer traditionally associated with St. Teresa's breviary is Isaiah 30:15 distilled by a Doctor of the Church: let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you; all things are passing, God never changes; patience obtains all things; whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone suffices. Judah ran to Egypt because it could not sit still with God; Teresa learned the strength Isaiah offered and Judah

refused.

St. John Henry Newman • *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*

Newman, converting at the cost of everything familiar, examined whether the Catholic Church's tradition was a corruption of the Gospel or its living continuity, and concluded with a line that has unsettled comfortable arguments ever since: to be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant. The Tradition that carries Scripture to us is not a growth over the Word; it is the Word's own bloodstream.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 756.** The Church is God's building; the Lord compared himself to the stone the builders rejected, and on that cornerstone the Church is built by the apostles, with Christ holding the whole together (Ephesians 2:20 adds the apostolic foundation).
- **CCC 78 and 83.** The living transmission of the Gospel, Sacred Tradition, is distinct from Scripture though closely bound to it; and Tradition itself must be distinguished from the changeable theological, disciplinary, or devotional traditions of local churches, which can be retained, modified, or abandoned under the Magisterium. This is the precise distinction tonight's steelman requires.
- **CCC 547-549.** Jesus accompanies his words with mighty works to bear witness that the kingdom is present in him: the signs of Isaiah 35, freeing some from hunger, sickness, and death, announce the deeper liberation from sin.

THREAD WATCH

THREADS TONIGHT

The stone: resolved. Planted at 8:14 in Session 3 (sanctuary or stumbling), completed at 28:16 (tested cornerstone), stacked by Peter with Psalm 118. Let the group assemble the catena themselves in the discovery.

The highway (35:8). Planted tonight, one verse, do not explain: the Holy Way through a blooming desert, for the redeemed to come home on. It gets a voice crying about it in Session 8.

Quietness and trust. 7:9 (Ahaz), 30:15 (Judah), and next session a king finally does it under siege. Do not preview; just make 30:15 unforgettable tonight.

The sealed guess stays sealed.

SESSION GOALS

1. Frame the Egypt diplomacy as the Ahaz temptation at national scale, and plant 30:15 deep.
2. Resolve the stone thread: 8:14 plus 28:16 plus Psalm 118, assembled by the group in 1 Peter 2:4-8.
3. Run the Isaiah 29:13 steelman against Catholic tradition at full strength and answer it with Mark 7's own logic, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, and CCC 83.
4. Turn 29:13 into an examination of conscience rather than a dodged bullet.

5. Discover Matthew 11:2-6: Jesus answering John the Baptist from Isaiah 35's checklist.

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

SUGGESTED CLOCK

Gather and opening prayer, 5 min. Win, 10 min. Build, 55 min. Send, 10 min. Live It, memory verse, Take-Home, closing prayer, 10 min.

Pre-chosen cuts if running long: cut Question 2 (Egypt oracles detail) first; cut the Passover Dig Deeper second. Never cut the stone catena discovery, the 29:13 steelman, or the Matthew 11 discovery.

A Cornerstone in Zion

Isaiah 28-35 • Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord, you laid a stone in Zion: tested, precious, sure. Everything else we have ever stood on has moved. Tonight, sort our foundations. Show us where our lips have been near you and our hearts far, and do not let us leave with the distance intact.

In quietness and in trust, be our strength. Through Christ our Lord, the cornerstone. Amen.

WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS

1. When life gets uncertain, what is your honest default: act fast, secure allies, gather information, control what you can? What would *being still* cost you?
2. Describe a time a routine, a commute, a workout, even a prayer, went hollow on you: you were doing it, but you were not in it. What woke you up, if anything did?

BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY

Horses, Flesh, and Stillness (Isaiah 30-31)

1. Read Isaiah 30:1-3 and 31:1-3. Judah is sending ambassadors and treasure to Egypt for protection against Assyria. What is Isaiah's argument against the policy, in his own words, and what does 31:3 say is the actual category mistake?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

They set out on a plan “*but not mine*,” seeking shelter “*in the shadow of Egypt*” without asking God, and the shadow will become their shame. The category mistake, 31:3: “*The Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses are flesh, and not spirit.*” Judah is not being condemned for prudence; it is being diagnosed for worship. When you treat a creature as a savior, you have not found security, you have found an idol with a stable. Modern translation: name the Egypts, the accounts, alliances, plans, and platforms we quietly trust to do what only God can.

2. Now read Isaiah 30:15 aloud twice, including its terrible last clause. What does God actually offer, what does each word mean in a life, and what are the four words that follow?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

“*In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.*” Returning: repentance, coming home. Rest: ceasing the frantic self-rescue. Quietness: a soul not run by noise. Trust: weight actually placed on God. Salvation and strength are offered on those terms, and then the four words: “*And you would not.*” Not *you could not*. Judah preferred the anxiety it could manage to the stillness it could not control, and verse 16 is bitterly funny: “*We will speed upon horses... therefore your pursuers shall be speedy.*” Flee on horses and be chased by faster ones. St. Teresa's bookmark is this verse lived to the end: let nothing disturb you; God alone

suffices. Assign the room the hard question: which clause is your bottleneck, returning, rest, quietness, or trust?

The Stone (Isaiah 28:14-16)

3. Read 28:14-16. The rulers boast of a “*covenant with death*.” Against their refuge of lies, what does God announce he is doing in Zion, and read the stone's inscription at the end of verse 16.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

They believe they have hedged every outcome, a deal with death itself, probably their web of alliances. God's answer to a false foundation is a true one: “*Behold, I am laying in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation.*” Tested: it has borne load. Precious: costly. Cornerstone: the stone that sets every line of the building. And the inscription: “*He who believes will not be in haste.*” The person standing on this stone does not panic, does not scramble to Egypt, does not flee on horses. Faith's signature in Isaiah is unhurriedness. Now put 28:16 beside your Session 3 note at 8:14: the LORD as sanctuary to some, “*a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling*” to others. One stone, two effects, depending entirely on whether you build on it or trip over it.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Somewhere in the New Testament, one author gathers tonight's cornerstone (28:16), Session 3's stumbling stone (8:14), and a third stone from Psalm 118:22, and stacks all three into a single argument about Christ and about us. It is in a letter, by the man who carries the keys. Find the stack: 1 Peter 2. Pairs, 4 minutes.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

1 Peter 2:4-8. Peter builds the full catena: come to him, “*that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious*”; 28:16 cited and adapted (“*Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone... he who believes in him will not be put to shame*”); Psalm 118:22 (“*the stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner*”); and 8:14 (“*a stone that will make men stumble*”). Isaiah's entire stone theology, assembled by the steward of Session 5, and aimed at Christ: chosen and precious to believers, a stumbling block to those who disobey.

But do not miss Peter's twist in verse 5: “*like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.*” You are not spectators of the construction project; you are materials. The Church is the building whose cornerstone is Christ (CCC 756), and St. Augustine adds the geometry: a cornerstone joins two walls, and in Christ the two peoples, Israel and the nations, meet at the corner and become one house. Jesus himself claimed the rejected stone at the end of the vineyard parable (Matthew 21:42), the very parable your group discovered in Session 1. The threads are braiding.

Lips and Hearts (Isaiah 29:13-14)

4. Read Isaiah 29:13. State the diagnosis in your own words. Where does the sickness live, in the words, or somewhere else?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Mouths near, hearts far; reverence reduced to “*a commandment of men learned by rote.*” The sickness is not in the words, memorized or spontaneous; it is in the distance between the words and the heart. Note that carefully before the steelman: Isaiah is not auditing Israel's liturgy for being too structured. He is auditing hearts for being absent. A spontaneous prayer can be rote in the heart; a memorized psalm can burn. The question 29:13 asks every worshiper is not *did you compose this?* but *are you in this?*

STEELMAN • BUILD IT AT FULL STRENGTH

Now the argument as it is actually made, because your group will meet it, and some have already: **Jesus quotes this verse against Catholicism's whole way of life.** Build it with conviction:

In Mark 7 and Matthew 15, the Pharisees attack Jesus' disciples over the *tradition of the elders*, and Jesus fires back with Isaiah 29:13, adding: “*You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men... making void the word of God through your tradition*” (Mark 7:8, 13). Now look at Catholicism with honest eyes: rote prayers repeated by the decade, obligatory rituals, a mountain of traditions, rules about fasting and holy days, doctrines like purgatory and Marian dogmas that are not on the surface of Scripture, all defended by appeal to *Tradition*, the very word Jesus weaponizes. Sola scriptura exists precisely to protect God's word from being buried under men's accretions. Isaiah 29:13 is the Bible's own warning label, and it is addressed to churches like Rome.

Make it sting. Then press the texts with the next question.

5. Answer it in three moves: (a) what *kind* of tradition is Jesus actually attacking in Mark 7:9-13, look at the corban example; (b) what does Paul command in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and 1 Corinthians 11:2, and in what two forms; (c) who distinguishes good tradition from bad, and by what test?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

(a) Look at Jesus' own example: *corban*. A man declares his money dedicated to God, and the elders' tradition then *forbids* him to support his aging parents, nullifying the commandment *honor your father and mother* (Mark 7:10-12). Jesus' target is precise: human traditions that *void the word of God*. He does not condemn tradition as a category; in the same Gospels he keeps Passover, attends synagogue, wears tassels, celebrates Hanukkah (John 10:22), practices unwritten customs of Israel. The test he applies is not *is it a tradition?* but *does it carry God's word or cancel it?*

(b) Then hear the apostle: “*Stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter*” (2 Thessalonians 2:15); “*I commend you because you... maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you*” (1 Corinthians 11:2). The same Greek word, *paradosis*, that Jesus uses negatively in Mark 7, Paul uses positively for the apostolic deposit, and explicitly in two channels: oral and written. If all tradition were the Mark 7 kind, Paul just contradicted his Lord. The Bible itself forces the distinction the Catholic Church makes: Sacred Tradition, the apostolic transmission of the Gospel, versus human customs, which the Church can keep, modify, or abandon (CCC 78, 83). Even the table of contents of the New Testament reaches you by Tradition: no verse lists the canon.

(c) The test is Mark 7's own: does it carry the Word or void it? And there must be someone competent to apply the test, which is the Magisterium's service, not its self-exaltation. Newman put the historical version bluntly: to be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant, because the closer

you get to the ancient Church, the more Catholic her traditions look. Then close where Isaiah aimed: 29:13 is not deflected, it is *received*. It is read at Catholics in the Lectionary on purpose. Every rosary can be prayed from the far country of a distant heart; every Mass can be attended by a body whose soul stayed home. The verse is not Rome's accuser to be beaten; it is every worshiper's examination of conscience to be prayed. Let it cut us first, and the steelman loses its footing without our losing its truth.

The Desert Blooms (Isaiah 35)

6. Read Isaiah 35:1-6a and 35:8-10. List the promises: what happens to the land, to weak human beings, and to the road home?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The wilderness blossoms like the crocus; glory and majesty flood the wasteland. Weak hands strengthened, feeble knees made firm, fearful hearts told: *"Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God... will come and save you."* Then the checklist: blind eyes opened, deaf ears unstopped, the lame leaping like a deer, the mute tongue singing. And through it all a road: *"a highway shall be there... the Holy Way,"* for the redeemed to walk home on, ending at Zion with *"everlasting joy upon their heads."* Mark the highway in your margin and leave it marked; this study will come back for it. And note what verse 4 makes salvation: not a program arriving, but *your God* arriving. Emmanuel again.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Years later, a prophet sits in a dungeon and sends messengers to Jesus with what has always sounded like the rawest question in the Gospels: *Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?* Jesus does not answer yes or no. He answers with a reading list, and tonight's chapter is on it. Find the exchange in Matthew 11. Pairs, 3 minutes.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Matthew 11:2-6. John the Baptist, in Herod's prison, sends his question, and Jesus replies: *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."* That is Isaiah 35:5-6 (with 61:1) read off as the morning's completed work. Jesus' messianic ID card is Isaiah's checklist: he does not merely claim to fulfill the prophets; he performs the specific miracles the prophets said would mark God's own arrival, and lets John's disciples do the exegesis (CCC 547-549). And he adds a beatitude with a gentle edge. The Fathers divide on whether John asked for his own sake or for his disciples' sake, and Jesus' closing line leaves room for either: *"Blessed is he who takes no offense at me,"* the stumbling-stone warning, one more time, offered kindly.

DIG DEEPER • The Passover Hiding in Isaiah 31

Isaiah 31:5 promises: *"Like birds hovering, so the LORD of hosts will protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will spare and rescue it."* The Hebrew verb behind *spare* is *pasoach*: to pass over. It is the Passover verb of Exodus 12, and Isaiah may well have chosen it deliberately: the God who once passed over the blood-marked doors of Egypt will *passover* Jerusalem again when the destroyer comes. Next session, an Assyrian army surrounds the city, and in a single night the angel of the LORD goes out and strikes the enemy camp instead (37:36); the blow that fell on Egypt falls

on Jerusalem's besiegers, and Jerusalem is passed over. Isaiah told you the shape of the rescue one page early, in one verb.

SEND • TAKING IT OUT

1. Name your Egypt: the person, plan, account, or ability you reach for first when you are afraid, before you pray. What would it look like, concretely, to reverse that order for one month?
2. Take Isaiah 29:13 as your own examination rather than someone else's accusation: at what point in the Mass, or in your daily prayers, does your heart most reliably wander into the far country? What is one practical anchor, posture, a pause, praying one line slowly, that could close the distance this Sunday?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Memorize St. Teresa's bookmark alongside the memory verse; they are the same doctrine. Pray one of them in the moment you would normally reach for your Egypt.
- This Sunday, pick one fixed prayer of the Mass, the Gloria, the Sanctus, the Domine non sum dignus, and pray it as if you wrote it this morning. One prayer, fully inhabited, is worth more than the whole Missal recited from the far country.
- Build one still square into your week: fifteen minutes, no phone, no output, in returning and rest. Let quietness and trust do what horses cannot.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."

Isaiah 30:15 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, tested stone, precious cornerstone: everything else we stand on shifts, and you do not.

Draw our hearts as near as our lips. Take the prayers we have said a thousand times and set them on fire. And where our deserts are, where hope dried up long ago, send the crocus.

In returning and rest, save us; in quietness and in trust, be our strength. Amen.

Before next session: read Isaiah 36-37, a war story with a miracle at the end. It reads fast; read it like the thriller it is.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used tonight, in order

Primary Text

- Isaiah 30:1-3; 31:1-3 (the Egypt policy; men and not God, flesh and not spirit)
- Isaiah 30:15-16 (returning, rest, quietness, trust; and you would not)
- Isaiah 28:14-16 (covenant with death; the tested cornerstone; the inscription)
- Isaiah 8:14 (the stumbling stone; Session 3 cross-reference)
- Isaiah 29:13-14 (lips near, hearts far; the steelman text)
- Isaiah 35:1-6a, 8-10 (the desert blooms; the checklist; the Highway of Holiness)
- Isaiah 31:5 (the Passover verb; Dig Deeper)

Live Discovery Targets

- 1 Peter 2:4-8 (the stone catena: 28:16 + Psalm 118:22 + 8:14)
- Matthew 11:2-6 (Jesus answers John from Isaiah 35)

Supporting Passages

- Psalm 118:22 (the rejected stone; third stone of the catena)
- Matthew 21:42; Acts 4:11; Romans 9:33 (the catena elsewhere in the NT)
- Mark 7:1-13 and Matthew 15:1-9 (the corban argument; steelman core)
- 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 1 Corinthians 11:2 (hold the traditions, oral and written)
- John 10:22 (Jesus at Hanukkah; tradition observed)
- Exodus 14:14 (be still; the roots of 30:15); Exodus 12 (Passover; Dig Deeper)

Catechism

- CCC 756 (the Church built on the cornerstone)
- CCC 78, 83 (Sacred Tradition distinguished from ecclesial traditions)
- CCC 547-549 (the miracles as messianic signs)

Memory Verse

- Isaiah 30:15 (RSV2CE)