

Session 9: The Way Back

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

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

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

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

What You Need to Know

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

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

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

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

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

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

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

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. John Chrysostom

On the Priesthood, Book 3 (4th century)

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

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

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. John Vianney

The witness of Ars (19th century)

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

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

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Faustina Kowalska

Diary (1930s)

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

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

Catechism Connection

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

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

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

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

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

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

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

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

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

Crown discipline holds. Session 14.

Session Goals

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

Time Note

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

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

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

WIN · Opening Questions

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

BUILD · Into the Text

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

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

ANSWER · share after the discussion

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

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

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

ANSWER · share after the discussion

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

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

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

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

ANSWER · share after the discussion

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

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

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

ANSWER · share after the discussion

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

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

Build, Then Press

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

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

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

ANSWER · share after the discussion

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

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

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

DIG DEEPER · The Second Plank

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

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

Returning: The Practical Minute

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

SEND · Taking It Out

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

Live It This Week

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

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

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

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

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

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

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

1 John 1:9 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

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