

Session 5: To Whom Shall We Go?

John 6:51-71 | 75 to 90 minutes | Young Adult Inductive Study

PART ONE: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: The group discovers the only recorded large-scale desertion of disciples over a teaching in Jesus' ministry, provoked by His Eucharistic teaching; that Jesus lets people leave rather than soften His words; and that Peter models the faith that stays: clinging to Christ's words before understanding them.

Catholic Touchstone: The Eucharist has been a stumbling block from the first hour it was announced; the Catechism itself places John 6:67 at the heart of its Eucharistic teaching (CCC 1336). Faith often says "I will stay with you" before it can say "I understand you," and that order is not a defect of faith but its shape.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This scene closes the Bread of Life discourse, the day after the feeding of the five thousand, in the synagogue at Capernaum. Read John 6:51-58 aloud yourself before the session and notice its trajectory: when the crowd balks at "the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh," Jesus does not spiritualize or soften. He intensifies: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53), and John's Greek even shifts verbs as the discourse climaxes, from the ordinary *esthlein* to *trōgein*, a word that can carry a blunt physical sense (to gnaw, munch), a much-discussed detail whose force is debated. Whatever school of interpretation one comes from, the narrative fact is stark: the hearers understood Him to be saying something scandalous and literal enough to leave over, and He let them leave rather than call them back with "I only meant a metaphor."

Verse 66 is one of the saddest sentences in the Gospels: "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him." Not the crowds: disciples. This is the only recorded large-scale departure of disciples over a teaching, and the teaching is the Eucharist. Then the question He turns on the Twelve, which the Church has never stopped hearing: "Will you also go away?" (John 6:67). He does not chase the leavers or renegotiate the teaching. Love that means anything permits leaving; the door He died to open, He refuses to lock behind anyone.

Peter's answer is the session's heart, and it must be read precisely: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69). Notice what Peter does not say. He does not say "we understand the teaching";

nothing suggests the Twelve grasped the flesh-and-blood words any better than the deserters did. He says something better: we have nowhere better to be, because the words we cannot yet digest are the words of eternal life, and we know WHO is speaking. This is clinging faith: staying with the Person when the teaching is over your head, believing in order to understand rather than demanding to understand as the price of believing. And catch the order of Peter's words in verse 69: "we have believed, and have come to know." The word order alone proves nothing grammatically, but the Church, above all St. Augustine, has long heard in it the shape of faith: believing in order to understand.

The scene ends with a shadow: "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" (John 6:70). John names Judas. Staying bodily is not the same as staying in heart, a thread this study will pull hard later. Do not develop it tonight; let it sit.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Exodus 16:2-4, 11-15 (the live discovery text; do not preview it). Bread from heaven has a history, and so does grumbling at it. Israel "murmured" in the wilderness and received manna; the crowd in John 6 "murmured" at the true bread (John 6:41 uses the same note). Jesus Himself draws the line: your fathers ate the manna and died; this bread gives eternal life. The manna was real bread and a real gift, and it was also a rehearsal.

Joshua 24:15. "Choose this day whom you will serve." The Old Testament knows the moment Jesus creates in verse 67: a free people put on the spot, loved enough to be allowed to walk away.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Antioch / *Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 7 (c. 107 AD)*

Within living memory of the apostles, on his way to martyrdom, St. Ignatius wrote of certain teachers he warned the churches against: they abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, the flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father raised. The scandal of John 6 was still dividing rooms seventy years later, and the apostolic churches were on the side of the hard saying.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine / *Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 27*

Preaching on this very desertion, St. Augustine turns Peter's answer into a rule for the life of faith: the deserters demanded to understand before they would believe, and so they left; Peter believed in order that he might understand, and so he stayed. For Augustine the sequence is everything: crede ut intelligas, believe that you may understand. The words that scandalize the mind from the outside feed it from the inside, but only staying gets you inside.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyril of Alexandria | *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book 4*

Commenting on the Bread of Life discourse, St. Cyril insists on the realism of the gift: the flesh of Christ is life-giving because it is the flesh of the Word who is Life, and by it He plants His own life in us, as fire spreads warmth into iron. Cyril has no patience with reducing the words to bare symbol; the scandal of the hearers, he notes, came from imagining cannibalism rather than sacrament, misunderstanding the mode, not overestimating the reality.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 1336:** The first announcement of the Eucharist divided the disciples, just as the announcement of the Passion scandalized them; the Catechism quotes “Will you also go away?” and calls the Lord's question one that echoes through the ages, an invitation of His love to discover that He alone has the words of eternal life.
- **CCC 1374:** In the Eucharist, Christ is present truly, really, and substantially: body and blood, soul and divinity, the whole Christ.
- **CCC 162:** Faith is an entirely free gift that can be lost; to live, grow, and persevere in it to the end, we must nourish it with the word of God, beg the Lord to increase it, and let it work through charity, abound in hope, and be rooted in the faith of the Church. (For the Eucharist as the food that preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace, see CCC 1392 and 1394.)

THE WAY OF SALVATION (STUDY STRAND, LEADER ONLY)

MOVEMENT 5 OF THE KERYGMA: FAITH THAT STAYS, AND THE FOOD THAT SUSTAINS IT

The kerygma calls for a response of faith, and tonight shows what that faith looks like when the teaching outruns the understanding: it clings to the Person. Didactic texts: John 6:68 itself; Psalm 34:8 (“taste and see that the LORD is good”: tasting precedes full seeing); Joshua 24:15. Quiet plant: salvation lands a person not in a private opinion but at a table; the study's final movements will make the Church and her Eucharist explicit. Do not teach this strand aloud.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY, NEVER REVEAL)

- **“To whom shall we go?” under pressure.** Peter's magnificent answer will be stress-tested in a courtyard later in this study. Fix his exact words in your memory; the group will need to recall them at the right moment, and it should be their discovery, not your reveal.
- **The Judas shadow.** Verses 70-71 introduce the betrayer within the Bread of Life discourse, the shadow that will later fall across the Eucharistic table itself. Staying bodily is not staying in heart. Let it sit unexplored tonight.

- **Bread thread.** Manna, Bread of Life, the breaking of the bread in Acts 2:42: the table runs the length of this study. Track silently.
- **Sealed guess.** Standing dismissal reminder only.

SESSION GOALS

1. The group names the narrative facts: the teaching, the desertion over it, and Jesus' refusal to soften it.
2. The group discovers the manna background and the murmuring echo in Exodus 16.
3. The group articulates Peter's model of clinging faith: staying with the Person before understanding the teaching, believing in order to understand.
4. Each participant locates their own hardest saying and chooses a Peter-shaped response to it.
5. Distribute Take-Home 5; standing sealed-sheet reminder.

TIME NOTE

Core session runs about 75 minutes. If long: cut the second Dig Deeper and one Win question. **Do not cut** the Exodus 16 discovery or the Send questions. Pastoral note: participants wrestling with Eucharistic faith may be quietly present; keep the tone of Question 6 warm and unhurried.

PART TWO: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, Bread of Life, you have words of eternal life, and some of them are hard. Give us tonight the honesty of the crowd, who at least admitted the saying was difficult, and the faith of Peter, who stayed anyway. Where our understanding runs out, let our trust keep walking. To whom else would we go? Amen.

WIN: OPENING QUESTIONS

Open questions; every answer is welcome.

W1. Has anyone you trusted ever told you something you could not accept at first, and only later found out they were right? What kept you in the relationship in the meantime?

W2. What makes people walk away from things they once loved: jobs, friendships, faith? What, in your experience, makes people stay?

BUILD: INTO THE TEXT

READ ALOUD: John 6:51-58

1. Track the conversation's escalation. The crowd balks at “the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh,” and asks how. Look carefully at what Jesus does next: does He soften the saying, explain it as a metaphor, or something else?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He intensifies it. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (6:53), and He repeats the point four more times, adding “my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.” John's Greek even shifts verbs as the discourse climaxes, to one that can mean to gnaw or chew, a detail many commentators find telling, though debated. The narrative facts are these: He repeats, intensifies, and lets people leave. When He does add a word about the Spirit, “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail” (6:63), the Church has never read it as a retraction into metaphor but as naming how the gift is given: by the power of the Spirit, not by carving a corpse. As St. Cyril saw, the hearers erred about the mode, not by overestimating the reality. Jesus does not retract; He never says the crowd took Him too literally, the way He clarifies elsewhere when disciples misread a figure. The hard saying was meant to be hard.

2. The crowd “murmured” at Him about bread from heaven (6:41). That word has a history.

Live discovery: say: “This is not the first time Israel has grumbled about bread from heaven. Read Exodus 16:2-4 and 11-15 in pairs: what does God give, how do the people respond before and after, and what does the manna teach Israel?” Let pairs report before the answer box.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The pairs should find: a murmuring people in the wilderness, and a God who answers grumbling with bread from heaven, morning by morning, teaching Israel daily dependence (“that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law”). Jesus stands inside this story and draws the line Himself: “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died... he who eats this bread will live for ever” (6:49, 58). The manna was real bread and a real gift, and it was also a rehearsal: God has always fed His people on the way through the wilderness, and the true Bread has now come down. The murmuring is part of the pattern too: the gift of heaven has always been grumbled at before it was received.

READ ALOUD: John 6:60-71

3. Verse 66: “After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him.” Not curious crowds: disciples. This is the only time in Jesus' ministry that disciples walk away in numbers over something He taught. Sit with what triggered it. What does it tell us that THIS teaching, of everything He said, is the one people left over?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

It tells us the hearers knew He meant something enormous. Nobody abandons a beloved teacher over an obvious metaphor; they left because the words, taken as He kept insisting on them, demanded more than they could give. It also tells us something about Jesus: He watched disciples walk away and did not run after them with a softer version. The teaching was not negotiable, which means it was not decorative. And it should quietly recalibrate our expectations: if the Eucharist scandalized the people who heard it announced in person, we should not be surprised that it scandalizes now, nor conclude that scandal proves the teaching false. It has been the hard saying since the first afternoon (CCC 1336 says exactly this).

4. Then Jesus turns to the Twelve with one of the most vulnerable questions in Scripture: “Will you also go away?” He does not chase the deserters, and He puts the door in front of His closest friends. What kind of love asks that question?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Love that refuses to keep anyone by force or by dilution. He wants disciples, not hostages, and He would rather be abandoned than misrepresented. There is something here the group should hold onto for every hard saying they will ever meet: Jesus does not lock the door, lower the price, or pretend the teaching away. He asks a free question and waits for a free answer, the same freedom Joshua gave Israel: choose this day. Faith that could not have left is not faith.

5. Peter answers for the Twelve: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” Read it like a lawyer: what does Peter claim, and, just as important, what does he carefully NOT claim?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He does not claim to understand the teaching. Nothing in the text suggests the Twelve grasped the flesh-and-blood words any better than the men walking home. What Peter claims is better and more honest: there is nowhere better to go, because the words we cannot yet digest are the words of eternal life, and we know who is speaking. This is clinging faith, and it is the session's treasure: staying with the Person when the teaching is over your head. Notice also the order of the verbs in verse 69: “we have believed, and have come to know.” Belief named first; knowledge following; an order the tradition, especially Augustine, has treasured as the shape of faith, even if the grammar alone cannot prove a sequence. The deserters found the saying too hard to accept and walked away; Peter, without claiming any better understanding, entrusted himself to the One speaking, and trust let him inside. Every believer eventually stands where Peter stands, holding some teaching they cannot yet metabolize; his sentence is the map for that day.

6. Bring it home before the shadow falls. The Church has heard “Will you also go away?” in every generation, usually standing exactly where the crowd stood: at the Eucharist, and at

the other hard sayings. What is YOUR hardest saying right now, and what would a Peter-shaped response to it look like this week?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Let this be unhurried and honest; the leader may need to name a hard saying of their own first. The Peter-shaped response has three moves the group can take away: name the difficulty honestly (the crowd's "this is a hard saying" was at least truthful); refuse the false ultimatum that says you must fully understand before you may stay; and re-anchor in the Person: "I do not yet understand this, but I know You, and You have never yet been wrong with me." Then stay close enough to keep listening: at the table, in the Scriptures, in the Church where the words are broken open.

Understanding tends to come to those who remain in the room. Close the question, then read verses 70-71 aloud without comment except one sentence: "John wants us to know that one man stayed in the room and was already gone. Hold that; we will need it."

DIG DEEPER: THE VERB THAT CHEWS

Through most of the discourse John uses the ordinary verb for eating (*esthien*). From verse 54 onward he switches to *trōgein*, a blunt, physical word: to gnaw, munch, chew. Many readers find it telling that the vocabulary gets more physical, not less, at the climax, though scholars debate how much weight the verb alone can bear. It is one thread among several (the desertion, the refusal to clarify, Ignatius' generation) that the Church reads together when she confesses the realism of the gift.

DIG DEEPER: CAPERNAUM

John 6:59 locates the discourse in the synagogue at Capernaum, Peter's adopted hometown, the town of his house and his mother-in-law and his boat. The hardest teaching was delivered on Peter's home turf, in front of his neighbors, and the mass desertion happened where everyone knew his name. Staying cost him socially before it ever cost him theologically. Ruins of that synagogue's successor, and of a first-century house venerated very early as Peter's, still stand there today.

SEND: TAKING IT WITH YOU

S1. "You have the words of eternal life." Where else, honestly, have you been going for words to live by (voices, feeds, philosophies)? What would it look like this week to route one of those needs back to Him?

S2. If Jesus asked you tonight, face to face, "Will you also go away?", what is your honest answer, and what is it based on: understanding, habit, or knowing Him?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Once this week, bring your hardest saying directly into prayer and say Peter's sentence over it, word for word: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Then sit in silence for five minutes.
2. If you are Catholic and able, go to one Mass this week on purpose (not obligation) and listen to the words of institution as the answer to John 6. If you are still exploring, read John 6:51-58 once more, slowly, and write down your honest questions; bring one to the leader or the group.
3. Notice this week when you are tempted to walk away from something good because it got difficult, and ask whether the difficulty is a wall or a door.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We bring you our hard sayings, our half-understandings, and our honest questions, and we choose tonight to stay. Feed us with yourself, strengthen what is weak in our faith, and keep us in the room until understanding comes. We have believed, and we have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

John 6:68 (RSV2CE)

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 5; standing reminder about the sealed Session 1 sheet.

PART THREE: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE IN THIS SESSION

Primary Texts

- John 6:51-58, the Bread of Life climax: flesh for the life of the world
- John 6:60-71, the hard saying, the desertion, "Will you also go away?", Peter's answer, the Judas shadow

Live Discovery Text

- Exodus 16:2-4, 11-15, murmuring and manna

Supporting Texts

- John 6:41, 49, the murmuring echo and the manna comparison
- Joshua 24:15, choose this day whom you will serve
- Psalm 34:8, taste and see (strand)

Catechism

- CCC 1336, the Eucharistic scandal and the Lord's question
- CCC 1374, the real presence
- CCC 162, persevering in faith

Memory Verse

- John 6:68