

Session 9: The Second Charcoal Fire

John 21:1-19 | 90 minutes by design | Young Adult Inductive Study

PART ONE: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that John 21 deliberately rebuilds two scenes: the call at the boats (Luke 5) and the night of denial (the charcoal fire), and that mercy heals the wound at its site. They watch three denials answered by three confessions of love, each answered with mission, and then they open their own sealed guesses from Session 1 and make their own surrender.

Catholic Touchstone: Repentance is completed in love. The Catechism reads Peter's whole conversion as one arc: the look of mercy, the tears, and, after the resurrection, the threefold affirmation of love (CCC 1429). Mercy does not merely cancel the past; it commissions a future: feed my sheep.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This is the study's summit, and it is built almost entirely of discoveries the group is now equipped to make themselves. Your job tonight is restraint: ask, wait, and let eight weeks of planted threads detonate in their hands. Plan for the full 90 minutes; tell the group at the start that tonight runs long and is worth it.

The scene: seven disciples in Galilee (the appointment kept), and Peter announces, "I am going fishing" (John 21:3). Read it with sympathy and clear eyes: the text does not condemn the fishing trip, but many readers hear in it a fallen man drifting back toward the old identity, and the echoes of the old life (the boat, the night, the empty nets) are hard to miss. Failure always whispers the same lie: go back to what you were before He renamed you. And the old life answers with the old result: "that night they caught nothing," the same empty nets as the first morning. At dawn, a stranger on the beach: "Cast the net on the right side of the boat," and the sea repeats the miracle that started everything. John recognizes the signature first ("It is the Lord!"), but watch Peter: the man who once cried "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" now throws himself into the sea toward Him (21:7). Nobody commands him. That distance, between "depart from me" and a man swimming to Jesus with his clothes on, is the entire study, and the group must be allowed to measure it themselves in Question 2.

On the beach: "a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread" (John 21:9). St. John's word is *anthrakia*, and he uses it exactly twice in his Gospel, exactly twice in the entire New Testament: the fire of the denial (18:18) and this one. Jesus has rebuilt the scene of Peter's worst hour: the fire, the early hour, and, coming, a question asked three times. This is the study's longest fuse, planted in Session 7

with instructions to say nothing, and it must detonate in the group's hands, not yours. Question 3 is engineered for it; if the room needs a nudge, the nudge is a question ("Where have we smelled this fire before?"), never a reveal.

Then the restoration. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Three times, matching three denials, and note the address: the exact formula of the first meeting (John 1:42), as if Jesus is deliberately taking Simon back to the beginning to re-lay the foundation. "More than these," on its traditional reading, gently retires the old comparison ("though they all fall away, I will not"); Peter, notably, refuses the comparative this time. His answer has moved its foundation: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (21:17). Not "I know myself and I am ready" (the boast that broke), but "You know." His confidence has migrated from self-knowledge, which failed, to Christ's knowledge of him, which never did. He is grieved that the question comes a third time, and the grief is the medicine reaching the bottom of the wound: one spoken "I love you" per denial, none of them wasted. And each confession is answered not with absolution language but with a shepherd's commission: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Mercy here does not merely cancel a debt; it hands over a flock. Restoration in Christ's economy is restoration to mission, and (Ezekiel 34 will show the group) to an office that belongs to God Himself.

Finally 21:18-19: the cost, disclosed with total honesty ("you will stretch out your hands..."; John's aside: "This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God"), and then the last two words, "Follow me," which echo the very first call (Mark 1:17). The arc closes where it opened, except now the man knows exactly what following costs, and follows. Note on the Greek verbs for love (*agapaō* and *phileō*): the shift is real and the Dig Deeper box handles it with the honesty this study owes the group: some hear Jesus stooping to meet Peter's humbled vocabulary; many scholars note John alternates synonyms freely elsewhere; the Church has not settled it, and the scene's power does not depend on it.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23 (the live discovery text; do not preview it). Against the false shepherds of Israel, God promises: "Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep," and then, astonishingly, delegates: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David." Shepherding the flock is God's own claimed office, and God's habit is to exercise it through a chosen shepherd. When the Good Shepherd (John 10) hands Simon the crook three times on the beach, Ezekiel is the deed of transfer behind the scene.

The first catch as the deliberate backdrop. Luke 5:1-11 functions tonight as the study's own Old Testament: the group rereads it side by side with John 21 and mines the parallels and reversals themselves (Question 2). Have both passages on hand for every participant.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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

On the threefold question, St. Augustine gives the Church her classic sentence: a threefold confession is rendered to answer a threefold denial, that the tongue might serve love as fully as it

had served fear. And he binds the confession to the commission: the proof of love Christ asks is not emotion aimed back at Himself but care for His flock: if you love me, it is my sheep you will feed, seeking in them not your own advantage but His glory. Love of the Shepherd is exercised as love of the sheep.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyril of Alexandria / *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book 12*

St. Cyril reads the scene as a formal healing and reinstatement: by the three confessions the three denials are annulled, and by the Lord's "Feed my sheep" the apostle is not merely pardoned but renewed in the apostolic office he might have seemed to forfeit, so that no trace of the wound is left to accuse him. Cyril's instinct matters pastorally: Christ's mercy is not content to leave a forgiven man haunted; it publicly re-entrusts to him the very stewardship his sin had touched.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory the Great / *Homilies on the Gospels, Homily 24*

Preaching on this dawn catch, St. Gregory dwells on the Lord who stands on the shore at daybreak after His friends' long, empty night: the sea's tossing and the night's futility belong to this passing world; the risen Christ stands on the solid shore of immortality, and He directs even the failed labor of His fishermen to an abundance they could not find alone. Gregory reads the meal He has prepared as pure gift: before Peter is questioned, he is fed. Mercy sets the table first and holds the conversation after breakfast.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 1429:** The Catechism completes tonight the sentence it began in Session 7: Jesus' look of infinite mercy drew tears of repentance, and, after the Lord's resurrection, the threefold affirmation of love to him. The Church reads courtyard and shore as one act of conversion.
- **CCC 553:** Jesus entrusted a specific authority to Peter... after his resurrection: 'Feed my sheep.' The shepherd's charge on the beach is read by the Church alongside the keys of Caesarea Philippi.
- **CCC 1428:** Conversion is not a single event but the uninterrupted task of the whole Church and every disciple; the second conversion, as the Fathers called it, is tonight's subject and Peter its patron.

THE WAY OF SALVATION (STUDY STRAND, LEADER ONLY)

MOVEMENT 9 OF THE KERYGMA: SURRENDER, REPENTANCE COMPLETED IN LOVE

Tonight the kerygma asks for its answer. The movements so far: God acts first; we cannot save ourselves; He is the Christ; the cross saves; faith clings; grace is received; sin is real; mercy pursues. Tonight: the response, which is not a performance of adequacy but a surrender of love: "You know

that I love you.” Luke 22:32 resolves before the group's eyes (the turning again has happened; the strengthening is commissioned). The response moment at the end of the session is the study's entire purpose gathered into ten minutes; protect it at all costs. Prepare: quiet instrumental music if that suits your group, pens, and the room arranged so writing is private. If Eucharistic Adoration is available to you, tonight is the night for it. Do not teach this strand aloud; tonight, live it.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY): TONIGHT THE THREADS RESOLVE

- **The charcoal fire detonates.** Anthrakia, John 18:18 and 21:9, the only two in the NT. The group finds it in Question 3. If they need a nudge: “Where have we smelled this fire before?” Nothing more.
- **The two boats close.** Luke 5 versus John 21 in Question 2: commanded into the deep versus leaping in unbidden; “depart from me” versus swimming toward Him. Let them measure the distance.
- **The name completes its arc.** “Simon, son of John” is the address of the first meeting (John 1:42). The rebuilding starts at the foundation.
- **Luke 22:32 resolves.** The group memorized it in Session 6 and stood on it in Session 7. Tonight, “when you have turned again” has happened; “strengthen your brethren” is handed over as sheep. Let them say it.
- **“Follow me” bookends.** The last words of the restoration echo the first words of the call (Mark 1:17). If the group hears the echo, the arc has landed.
- **The sealed guesses open tonight.** Full instructions in the discussion guide at Question 6. Have blank paper ready for anyone who lost their sheet.
- **Still holding:** 21:18-19 and “you shall follow afterward” resolve fully in Session 12; the third fire arrives in Session 10. Say nothing.

SESSION GOALS

1. The group discovers the Luke 5 and John 18 rebuilds themselves and articulates why mercy returns to the site of the wound.
2. The group traces the three confessions against the three denials and names where Peter's confidence now rests: not self-knowledge but Christ's knowledge of him.
3. The group discovers Ezekiel 34 and states what is being handed over with “feed my sheep.”
4. Sealed guesses are opened, compared with what it actually took, and each participant completes a written act of surrender.
5. The room leaves quietly, having responded rather than merely learned.

TIME NOTE

Plan the full 90 minutes and tell the group up front. If you must trim: cut both Dig Deeper boxes and shorten Win to one question. **Under no circumstances cut or rush** Question 6 and the response moment; if the discussion runs long, trim Question 5's report-backs instead.

PART TWO: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, risen and standing on the shore, you kept the appointment you made before we fell. Tonight we come back to Galilee with Simon: to the boats, to the fire, to the question you will not stop asking. Ask it of each of us, and give us the grace to answer from the only ground that holds: you know everything; you know that we love you. Amen.

WIN: OPENING QUESTIONS

Keep Win brief tonight; the evening's weight is ahead.

W1. After a real failure, what do you tend to go back to? What is your “I am going fishing”?

W2. Has anyone ever taken you back to the place where something broke, in order to fix it there? What was that like?

BUILD: INTO THE TEXT

READ ALOUD: John 21:1-14

1. Verse 3: Peter announces, “I am going fishing,” and six others follow him into the boat. Given everything we have watched happen to this man, what is he doing? And notice what the night gives him: “that night they caught nothing.”

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The classic pastoral reading, not the only possible one but the one the echoes invite, is that he is drifting back toward the old identity. It is not villainy; it is what failure does: it whispers that the renaming was a mistake, that you should return to what you were before He called you, that the boat at least never asked you a question by a fire. Give Peter his due: he is in Galilee, at the appointment (Mark 16:7), waiting; but waiting has slid into regression, and even here his leadership persists: he goes backward and six men follow, because influence does not switch off when direction fails. And the old life answers with the old result: empty nets, all night, the exact futility of the first morning (Luke 5:5). The group should hold the pastoral point: after our falls, the old life reliably underdelivers, and its emptiness is itself a mercy: it keeps us restless until dawn.

2. At dawn, a stranger on the beach, one strange instruction, and an unmanageable catch. We have been here before, almost exactly, and the differences are the point.

Live discovery: say: “Split in half. One half reread Luke 5:1-11, the other stay in John 21:1-14. Build two lists together: every parallel between the scenes, and every difference. The differences are the treasure.” Give this generous time; let both halves report fully before the answer box.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Parallels they should find: Galilee, fishermen, a night of nothing, a command against the evidence, obedience, a catch past managing, unbroken nets or nearly breaking nets, Peter singled out, a call at the end. Then the differences, which measure the whole study. In Luke 5, Jesus must command Peter into the deep, and Peter obeys reluctantly (“we toiled all night”); in John 21, the moment Peter hears “It is the Lord,” nobody commands him anything: he throws himself into the sea toward Jesus, clothes and all, and lets the boat catch up. In Luke 5, the miracle drives Peter away (“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man”); in John 21, the same miracle, recognized by the same man, now a worse sinner than he knew then, drives him toward. Ask the group directly: what happened to this man between those two boats? They have spent eight weeks watching the answer: he has learned who Jesus is toward sinners. The knowledge of sin that once said “depart” now says “get me to Him faster than this boat can go.” That reversal, unbidden, is what conversion is.

3. Verse 9: when they land, “they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish lying on it, and bread.” Jesus has made them breakfast. But look at that fire. Look at it very carefully, with eight weeks of memory. What has Jesus built on this beach, and why would He do that?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Wait as long as it takes; someone will smell it. St. John uses this specific word, anthrakia, a charcoal fire, exactly twice in his Gospel and exactly twice in the entire New Testament: the fire in the high priest's courtyard where Peter denied Him (18:18), and this one. Dawn, firelight, and, about to come, a question asked three times: the scene of Peter's worst hour has been rebuilt around him (John 18:18 tells us that night was cold and had this same charcoal fire). Why? Because mercy does not merely file the past away; it heals the wound at the site. Left alone, that courtyard would have owned a piece of Peter forever: every charcoal smell, every early cold, every triple anything would have dragged him back to the girl at the gate. So Jesus takes the scene away from the shame and gives it back rebuilt: same fire, same setting, same three, but now the script is love. This is sacramental logic, and it is how He still works: He does not ask us to pretend the courtyard never happened; He meets us in its rebuilt double and writes a new memory over the old coordinates. Notice, too, St. Gregory's detail: before one question is asked, Peter is fed. Mercy sets the table first.

READ ALOUD: John 21:15-17

4. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Three times, until Peter is grieved. Weigh everything: the name Jesus uses, the phrase “more than these,” the count of three, and, most of all, the shape of Peter's final answer: “Lord, you know everything;

you know that I love you.” What is being rebuilt here, and what has permanently changed in Peter's answer compared to his old boasts?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The name: “Simon, son of John” is the exact address of the first meeting (John 1:42), before the renaming. Jesus takes him back to the foundation and re-lays it. The phrase “more than these” is ambiguous in the Greek (more than these men love me? more than you love them? more than these boats and nets?), but on the traditional reading, “more than these disciples do,” it gently exhumes the old boast (“though they all fall away, I will not”), and watch Peter decline the comparison: no rankings this time, no “more than they do.” The count of three is the medicine matched to the wound: one spoken love per denial, and the grief at the third question is the treatment reaching the bottom; the tongue that served fear three times is conscripted three times by love, as St. Augustine says. And the foundation of the final answer has moved, permanently: not “I know myself and I am ready” (self-knowledge, which failed in the dark), but “YOU know everything; you know that I love you.” Peter has relocated his confidence from his own self-assessment to Christ's knowledge of him, and Christ's knowledge of him includes the courtyard and loves him still. That is the only ground that holds, for him and for everyone at this table: not the strength of my grip on Him, but His knowledge of me, all of me, and His refusal to leave.

5. Each confession gets an answer, and it is not the answer we would script. Not “you are forgiven,” not “let us never speak of it again,” but: “Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep.” Israel had heard about God and sheep before.

Live discovery: say: “Read Ezekiel 34:11-16 and verse 23 in pairs. Whose job is shepherding the flock, according to God Himself? And what does God say He will do about it?” Let pairs report before the answer box.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The pairs should find the astonishing claim: “Behold, I, I MYSELF will search for my sheep... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,” and then the delegation: “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David.” Shepherding Israel is God's personally claimed office, and God's stated plan is to exercise it through a chosen shepherd. Jesus has already announced Himself as that Shepherd (“I am the good shepherd,” John 10:11). So measure what happens on this beach: the Good Shepherd hands Simon Peter the crook, three times, over MY lambs, MY sheep. This is restoration past all our categories: not merely pardon, not merely reinstatement to the group, but public re-entrustment with the very stewardship his sin had touched (the Church treasures this scene alongside the keys, CCC 553). Here mercy's answer to confessed love is a commission. Peter's shepherding office is unique, but the pattern echoes through the whole Church: Christ characteristically restores the forgiven to mission (CCC 1429). Whatever He forgives in us, He loves to use.

READ ALOUD: John 21:18-19

6. “Truly, truly... when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go,” and John tells us plainly this signified the death by which Peter would glorify God. And then two words: “Follow me.” We have heard those words before, at the very beginning. Why does Jesus disclose the cost NOW, in the same breath as the restoration, and what has changed about “Follow me” between the first time and this time?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He discloses the cost now because this restoration is a real commissioning, and He does not recruit with fine print. The first call, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17; cf. Matthew 4:19), was answered by a man who imagined he knew the price and did not; this one is offered to a man who has watched the price crucified, has failed it once, and follows anyway. Same two words; entirely new depth of consent. And so the arc closes where it opened: nets, a catch, a call, except the man walking away from the boats this time carries no boast, one wound healed at its own fire, a flock on his shoulders, and a death in his future that he now knows will glorify God. That is what this study has meant by surrender. Now it is our turn.

THE SEALED GUESS AND THE RESPONSE MOMENT

OPEN THE SHEETS (LEADER SCRIPT, UNHURRIED)

Say: “Take out your Take-Home 1 sheet. Nine weeks ago, before any of this, you wrote a guess: what would it take for Simon to become the rock Jesus named him? Open it now. Read your own handwriting. Then let's hear some.” Let several be read aloud; honor every one. Then ask the room: “Now that you have watched it happen, what did it actually take?” Draw the contrast gently: most guesses involve Peter becoming stronger, braver, more disciplined. What it took was a fall that broke his self-confidence, a look of mercy, an appointment kept, a rebuilt fire, three questions, and a love that answered from new ground. It took surrender, sustained by grace, through failure. Not the rock becoming harder: the rock becoming His.

Then the second line. Say: “Under your guess is a second line you wrote to yourself: what would be hardest for YOU to leave in the boat? Read it silently.” Pause. “For nine weeks that thing has been sitting in a folded paper. Tonight you answer for it.”

The response moment (protect ten full minutes). Lower the lights or light a candle if that suits your group; quiet instrumental music is fine; silence is better than hurry. Say: “On the blank space of your sheet, or the paper provided, write a short prayer of surrender in your own words, handing that named thing to Christ. If you do not know how to start, start where Peter ended: 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you,' and go from there. Nobody will collect this. Nobody will read it. When you finish, sit with Him until the others finish.” If Eucharistic Adoration is available tonight, this is the moment to be before Him. Close the silence with the closing prayer, quietly, and dismiss gently; do not debrief the moment or ask people to share. Follow up one on one this week where the Spirit points you.

DIG DEEPER: TWO WORDS FOR LOVE

In the Greek, Jesus' first two questions use *agapaō* and Peter answers with *phileō*; the third time, Jesus asks with Peter's own word. Some readers, ancient and modern, hear a tender descent: the Lord stooping to meet a humbled man's more modest vocabulary. Many scholars counter that St. John alternates such synonyms freely elsewhere (as he does with words for sheep and for knowing in this very passage). The Church has not settled the question, and honesty requires saying so. What no reading can remove: the third question grieved Peter, and the grief was allowed to reach the bottom of the wound before the healing sealed it.

DIG DEEPER: ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-THREE

John counts the fish: 153, and untorn nets. The Fathers proposed many meanings (St. Jerome passed along the idea that ancient naturalists counted 153 kinds of fish, making the catch an image of every nation gathered; others found number patterns). Hold every theory loosely. The precise count reads like the memory of someone who was there and counted (cf. John 21:24), and on any reading the catch, abundant and the net untorn, suggests a mission with no one left out.

SEND: TAKING IT WITH YOU

S1. This week, where will you let Him rebuild a fire: what wound-site have you been avoiding that He may be asking to heal at its own coordinates (a conversation, a place, a confessional)?

S2. "Feed my sheep" was mercy's answer to love. Who are the lambs already in front of you, and what is one act of feeding them you will do before we meet again?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Keep your surrender prayer. Pray it once a day this week, word for word, especially on the day it stops feeling true.
2. If you are Catholic, strongly consider Confession this week: Christ's rebuilt fire for each of us, where mercy meets you at the site of the wound and restores you to communion and to mission, available every Saturday afternoon. If you are exploring, tell your leader one thing tonight's session made you want.
3. Do the one act of feeding you named in the Send question. Do it before Sunday.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you stood on the shore while we rowed through our long night, and you built the fire yourself. We have opened our old guesses and found your ways past all our guessing. Take now what we have written and what we have held back too long; we leave it in the boat. You know everything; you know that we love you. Feed us, and make us feeders of your flock. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

John 21:17 (RSV2CE)

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 9 quietly as they leave. No announcements after the response moment except next week’s reading, printed on the sheet.

PART THREE: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE IN THIS SESSION

Primary Text

- John 21:1-14, the return to the boats, the catch, the leap, the charcoal fire
- John 21:15-17, the threefold restoration and commission
- John 21:18-19, the cost disclosed; “Follow me”

Live Discovery Texts

- Luke 5:1-11, reread side by side with John 21 (Question 2)
- Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23, God the shepherd and the shepherd He sets up

Supporting Texts

- John 18:18, the first charcoal fire (the group finds it; have the reference ready)
- John 1:42, “Simon, son of John”: the address of the first meeting
- John 10:11, I am the good shepherd
- Luke 22:31-32, resolves tonight: turned again; strengthen your brethren
- Mark 16:7, the appointment being kept

Catechism

- CCC 1429, the arc of Peter's conversion completed
- CCC 553, feed my sheep alongside the keys
- CCC 1428, ongoing conversion

Memory Verse

- John 21:17

Materials Tonight

- Every participant's sealed Take-Home 1 (contingency paper for losses)
- Pens; blank paper; candle or quiet music if suited; Adoration if available