

SESSION NINE

The Three Witnesses

1 John 5:1-12

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants discover that faith in the incarnate Son is the victory that overcomes the world, that God has supplied courtroom-grade testimony through three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and that those witnesses still testify in the Church's sacraments. The verdict is stated in possession language: he who has the Son has life.

Catholic Touchstone: The sacramental economy from the pierced side. Blood and water flowed from the side of Christ on the cross, and the Church has long seen there the fountain of Eucharist and baptism, the Church herself born from the side of the New Adam (CCC 1225; 766).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The chapter opens by braiding the letter's three strands one final time: faith ("every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God"), love (of the parent and the child, of God and the brethren), and obedience, with a sentence that deserves its own evening: "his commandments are not burdensome" (5:3). Set it against Jesus' charge that the scribes "bind heavy burdens" (Matthew 23:4) and his own invitation, "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). The commandments are not burdensome, not because they are undemanding, they demand everything, but because they come with the birth: "whatever is born of God overcomes the world" (5:4). Children are not burdened by the family's way of life; it is simply how the born live.

Verse 4 gives the letter its battle cry: "this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith," the Greek *nikē*. The world of Session Three, the system of disordered desire, is not overcome by willpower, strategy, or withdrawal, but by faith in a specific confession: "that Jesus is the Son of God" (5:5). The victory is not a technique; it is an allegiance.

Verse 6 is the passage's crux and needs its historical key: "This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood." Why the strange insistence, not with the water only? Many commentators, ancient and modern, hear John answering the secessionists directly, and St. Irenaeus tells us John opposed Cerinthus, who taught that the divine Christ descended on the man Jesus at his baptism (the water) and departed before the crucifixion (the blood), leaving only a man to die. John's answer is surgical: the Christ came through both, baptism and cross, Jordan

and Calvary; the divine Son truly bled. "Not with the water only" is the whole Incarnation defended in five words. Hold the Cerinthus identification with a proper hedge (it is well attested but not certain), and hold the theological point with none.

Verses 7-8 summon the witnesses: "There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree." Two layers reward the group. Historically: the Spirit at the Jordan and at Pentecost, the water of the baptism, the blood of the cross, three events testifying to one identity. Sacramentally, and the Fathers loved this layer: the testimony did not retire when the eyewitnesses died. The Spirit still testifies in the anointing (2:20, 27), the water still testifies in baptism, the blood still testifies in the Eucharist. Every parish, every Sunday, is a courtroom where the three witnesses are still on the stand. And behind both layers stands one scene from John's own Gospel, tonight's summit live discovery: the pierced side, from which "at once there came out blood and water," attested with the letter's own courtroom formula: "He who saw it has borne witness" (John 19:34-35). Guard it until Build 5.

A textual honesty note the group deserves, delivered unprompted: some older translations (famously the King James) include at 5:7 the "three heavenly witnesses," Father, Word, and Spirit. That clause, the so-called Johannine Comma, is absent from the earliest Greek manuscripts and from the RSV2CE, and honest Catholic scholarship says so plainly. Nothing is lost: the doctrine of the Trinity rests on the whole fabric of Scripture and Tradition, not on a disputed late gloss, and the Church has nothing to fear from manuscripts. Modeling this honesty is itself catechesis.

Verses 9-12 close the case: if we accept human testimony (Deuteronomy 19:15's two-or-three-witness rule, tonight's opening live discovery), God's testimony is greater; to disbelieve it is to "make him a liar" (the escalation of 1:10 returning); and the content of the testimony is stated with total simplicity: "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life" (5:11-12). Life is not a substance dispensed at a distance; it is located in a Person, and the question of eternal life is therefore a question of possession: having him. The Bread of Life discourse said it from the same pen: "he who eats me will live because of me" (John 6:57).

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Deuteronomy 19:15. "Only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained." Israel's courtroom law: no verdict on a single voice. John summons exactly three witnesses because he is meeting the Torah's own standard of proof. Tonight's opening live discovery.

Ezekiel 47:1-9. Water flowing from the side of the temple, deepening from ankles to a river no one can cross, healing everything it touches. John's Gospel calls Christ's body the true temple (John 2:21); when the soldier opens its side, Ezekiel's river starts to flow. The Church's Easter antiphon, *Vidi aquam*, has sung the connection for centuries.

Zechariah 13:1. "On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David... to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness." The prophets promised an opened fountain; on Calvary, a spear opened it.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Irenaeus of Lyons *Against Heresies, Book III*

Irenaeus, whose teacher Polycarp knew John, records that John proclaimed the Gospel against the error of Cerinthus, who severed the heavenly Christ from the crucified Jesus. Against every fleshless Christ, Irenaeus insists on the one Jesus Christ who truly was baptized and truly suffered: the water and the blood belong to the same Person, or the Gospel is not good news at all.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom *Baptismal Catecheses*

Preaching to the newly baptized, Chrysostom points to the pierced side: from it flowed water and blood, the water a symbol of baptism, the blood of the holy mysteries, and as God formed Eve from the side of sleeping Adam, so Christ formed the Church from his own side in the sleep of death on the cross. The sacraments, he teaches, were purchased there; when you approach the font and the chalice, you approach that wound.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine *Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 120*

Augustine lingers over the evangelist's verb: the soldier did not merely wound Christ's side, he opened it, and Augustine hears in that word a door swinging: there the gate of life was opened, from which the sacraments of the Church flowed, without which no one enters into true life. The ark of Noah had a door in its side, he recalls; the new ark does too.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1225 teaches that the blood and water from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus are types of baptism and the Eucharist, the sacraments of new life: from then on it is possible to be born of water and the Spirit.

CCC 766 states the Fathers' image as doctrine: the Church is born primarily of Christ's total self-giving, anticipated at the Supper and accomplished on the cross; as Eve came from the side of the sleeping Adam, the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ asleep in death.

CCC 694 gathers the water symbolism of the Spirit: the water of baptism signifies that our birth into divine life is given in the Holy Spirit, an agreement of Spirit and water in which we can hear an echo of the witnesses of 5:8.

THREAD WATCH

The Knowing thread: one session out. Maximum vigilance. Next session opens with the verse this study is named for, and the whole payoff depends on nobody reading ahead aloud tonight. If a

participant's eye strays to 5:13, land the plane instantly: tell the group the letter's purpose statement is one week away, and it has been the study's secret since night one. Bring Take-Home 1 memories next week.

The courtroom motif crescendos. The letter opened with eyewitness testimony (1:1-3) and now formally calls witnesses to the stand under Torah rules. Name the arc; it makes 5:13's "that you may know" land as a verdict, not a mood.

The hilasmos and mercy-seat thread gets its liturgical home tonight: the blood that expiated (2:2; 4:10) is the blood that still testifies in the chalice. Connect Sessions Two, Eight, and tonight in one sentence at Build 6 and watch the study's architecture become visible.

SESSION GOALS

1.

Hear 5:3-5 rightly: commandments not burdensome because of the birth, and faith as the victory, an allegiance rather than a technique.

2.

Unlock 5:6 with its historical key: not with the water only, against every Christ who does not bleed.

3.

Discover Deuteronomy 19:15 and John 19:34-35 live, and let the three witnesses take the stand, historically and sacramentally.

4.

Deliver the Johannine Comma honesty note unprompted, and land the verdict of 5:11-12: life is a Person, possessed.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, compress Build 1 and cut Build 8. Protect Build 5, the pierced-side discovery, and Build 6, the sacramental layer; the session summits there.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Father, you did not ask us to believe without testimony. You sent the Spirit, you gave the water, you poured out the blood, and the three agree. Open the case to us tonight, and open our hands to receive the Life who is your Son. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

What is something you only came to believe because the evidence finally piled too high to ignore? What was the last straw?

2.

Name a rule or discipline in your life that outsiders would call a burden but you experience as freedom. Why the difference?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Read 5:1-3. John braids faith, love, and obedience one last time, then drops a sentence that half the room will silently doubt: "his commandments are not burdensome." Really? Set it against Matthew 23:4 (heavy burdens) and Matthew 11:30 (my burden is light). What makes the difference between a burdensome commandment and a light one?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The birth makes the difference. John's logic runs through verse 4: "whatever is born of God overcomes the world." The commandments are crushing when approached as an outsider's entrance exam, performance without power; they are light when they are simply how the born live, family traits flowing from family life. Session Five's begetting is the engine of Session Nine's obedience.

The scribes of Matthew 23 bound loads and lifted no finger; Jesus binds himself to the load with us, easy yoke, shared beam. Nothing about the demand shrank, it demands everything, but demand-with-birth is a different physics from demand-alone. Anyone still experiencing the faith as pure burden has likely been carrying it as an orphan; the remedy is not lowering the bar but remembering the birth.

2.

Read 5:4-5 and find the battle cry: "this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith." Recall Session Three's definition of "the world." Why is *faith*, of all things, the overcoming weapon, rather than willpower, strategy, or withdrawal?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The world of 2:15-17 is the system of disordered desire: the three lusts organizing life around what passes away. Willpower fights it retail, desire by desire, and loses on volume; withdrawal just relocates the battlefield indoors. Faith overcomes wholesale, because faith is an allegiance transfer: believing "that Jesus is the Son of God" (5:5) reorders what the heart treasures at the root, and the lusts starve when the heart's throne is occupied.

Notice the tense play: the birth "overcomes" (ongoing) because Christ announced the decisive past tense on the night before the cross: "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Our faith is victory the way a key is a door: it is participation in a conquest already won, which is why 4:4 could say "you have overcome them" to ordinary struggling believers.

3.

Read 5:6 and feel its strangeness: "not with the water only but with the water and the blood." Nobody writes "not with the water only" unless somebody is claiming water-only. Here is the historical key: St. Irenaeus tells us John opposed a teacher named Cerinthus, who taught that the divine Christ came upon Jesus at his baptism and departed before the cross. Now reread the verse. What exactly is John doing?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He is severing the escape route of every fleshless Christ. Cerinthus's theology let you keep a divine Christ while keeping him clean of the cross: the Christ arrives at the Jordan (the water) and exits before Calvary, leaving a mere man to bleed. John's five words demolish it: the same Jesus Christ came by water *and* blood; the One baptized is the One crucified; the divine Son truly bled. Hold the Cerinthus

identification with a scholar's hedge, it is well attested, not certain, and hold the theology with none.

And feel why it matters beyond ancient heresy: a Christ who does not bleed cannot be the *hilasmos* of 2:2 and 4:10; the mercy seat requires blood. Every modern version of the same move, Jesus as pure spirit-teacher, the cross as regrettable accident rather than mission, is Cerinthus in new clothes, and 5:6 answers it the same way. The whole letter has been this one battle: the Word truly came in touchable, woundable flesh.

4.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Read 5:7-9. John summons exactly three witnesses and says "these three agree." Someone find and read Deuteronomy 19:15. Why three? What courtroom is John convening, and what does verse 9 argue from it?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The Torah's standard of proof: "only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained." No verdict in Israel stood on one voice. John, arguing before hearers formed by that law, produces the full complement: the Spirit, the water, and the blood, three witnesses, in agreement, meeting the Torah's own bar for a sustained verdict.

Verse 9 then argues from lesser to greater: we accept properly attested human testimony every day, in courts, in history, in every fact we did not personally verify; "the testimony of God is greater." To reject it is not neutral suspension of judgment; verse 10 says it "makes him a liar," the terrible escalation of 1:10 returning. God has not asked for blind faith; he has filed a case that meets his own rules of evidence, and the letter opened with the deposition: we heard, we saw, we touched (1:1-3).

5.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Now the summit. The three witnesses, Spirit, water, blood, converge on one scene from John's own pen. Someone find and read John 19:34-35 slowly, including verse 35. What flows, from where, and what does John do immediately after reporting it? Then a second reader: Ezekiel 47:1, 8-9. What is the prophet's vision, and what has it to do with a spear?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water." And

immediately, the letter's own courtroom voice: "He who saw it has borne witness; his testimony is true... that you also may believe." The eyewitness formula of 1 John 1:1-3 was minted at the foot of the cross; on the Church's constant traditional reading, the man writing our letter is the man who stood there and watched the side open. Water and blood, from one wound, from one Person: 5:6 and 5:8 are Calvary remembered.

And Ezekiel saw it centuries early: water issuing from the side of the temple, deepening into a river that heals everything it touches. John's Gospel had already identified the true temple: "he spoke of the temple of his body" (John 2:21). When the soldier opened the temple's side, Ezekiel's river began to flow, and Zechariah's promised fountain "for sin and uncleanness" (13:1) was opened by a spear. The Church still sings it at Eastertide: *Vidi aquam*, I saw water flowing from the temple's side, and all to whom that water came were saved.

6.

The witnesses did not retire when the eyewitnesses died. Where, according to the Fathers and the Catechism, do the Spirit, the water, and the blood still testify, this Sunday, within a few miles of this table? And what did God make from the opened side, according to St. John Chrysostom's image?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

In the sacraments. The Spirit still testifies in the anointing every believer received (2:20, 27) and in confirmation's seal; the water still testifies in every baptism, where birth "of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5) continues; the blood still testifies in every Mass, where the expiating blood of 2:2 and 4:10 is the chalice on the altar. The Catechism says it plainly: the blood and water from the pierced side are types of Eucharist and baptism, the sacraments of new life (CCC 1225). Every parish liturgy is this chapter's courtroom, still in session, the three witnesses still on the stand.

And Chrysostom's image, which the Church made her own (CCC 766): as Eve was formed from the side of sleeping Adam, the Church was formed from the side of Christ asleep in death. Augustine added the verb: the soldier *opened* his side, a door, like the door in the ark's side, through which the sacraments flowed and through which we entered. You were not baptized near the cross; you were baptized out of it.

DIG DEEPER · The honest footnote: the Johannine Comma

Older translations, most famously the King James, read at 5:7-8: "there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost." That clause, the Johannine Comma, is absent from the earliest Greek manuscripts, entered the tradition late, and is omitted by the RSV2CE and virtually all modern Catholic editions; honest scholarship, Catholic scholarship included, says so without flinching. Nothing wobbles: the doctrine of the Trinity stands on the whole fabric of Scripture and Tradition, Matthew's baptismal formula, John's Gospel, the Church's creeds, not on one disputed gloss. The Church has never needed to protect God's word with a thumb on the scale, and saying so out loud is itself a lesson in how Catholics handle evidence.

7.

Read 5:11-12, the verdict: "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life." Notice the verb: *has*. Why possession language? What does it change to learn that eternal life is not a substance or a status, but the having of a Person?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Because life is located: "this life is *in his Son*," not dispensed at a distance like a benefit, but resident in a Person, so that the only way to have the life is to have him. John's Gospel said it in the hardest possible register: "he who eats me will live because of me" (John 6:57). Christianity's offer is not information about life, techniques for life, or even forgiveness as a standalone commodity; it is Christ himself, and everything else in him.

And possession language changes the diagnostic question. Not "have I done enough?" (the orphan's question) nor "did I pray a prayer once?" (the transaction's question) but "do I have him, am I abiding in him, now?", the letter's question all along. Which means eternal life is not merely a future destination; it is a present possession that death interrupts about as much as a doorway interrupts a road. One verse remains in this letter's argument, one sentence John has been saving since his first paragraph, and next week this study finally gets to say its own name.

8.

Bring it to the rail. If the three witnesses still testify in font, chrism, and chalice, then your own sacramental history is testimony you have personally received. What has their testimony been in your life, and where have you been treating the witnesses as scenery instead of taking the stand seriously?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Let the group speak from their actual histories: the baptism they cannot remember but live from, the confirmation they half-slept through whose anointing is nonetheless real, the hundreds of Masses where the blood testified whether they listened or not. The witnesses' testimony does not depend on our attentiveness, but its fruit in us does; scenery-Christianity receives the stand's testimony like courtroom wallpaper.

The practical turn: approach the chalice this Sunday as 5:8 in progress, the blood, testifying, agreeing with the water of your baptism and the Spirit of your anointing, that Jesus is the Son of God and that you, having him, have life. St. John Chrysostom's line is the week's posture: when you approach the font and the chalice, you approach that wound.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

"He who has the Son has life," present tense. If someone audited your week for evidence of a present possession rather than a distant policy, what would they find, and what is one thing you want them to find by next month?

2.

Which commandment in your life still feels like Matthew 23 burden rather than 1 John 5:3 birthright, and what would carrying it as one of the born-of-God change?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

At Mass this Sunday, receive with 5:8 deliberately in mind: the blood, still testifying. Arrive ten minutes early and pray the three witnesses over your own history: my anointing, my baptism, this chalice.

2.

Memorize 1 John 5:12 and pray it as a possession check each night this week: not "was I good today" but "do I have him, am I abiding, now."

3.

Read John 19:31-37 once this week beside Ezekiel 47:1-12, and write one sentence: what flowed out of the opened temple, and what of it has reached me.

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you came by water and blood, not with the water only. Your witnesses still speak: the Spirit in our anointing, the water of our baptism, the blood on the altar. We believe the testimony. Let us have you, and in you, life, for you live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse: "He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life." (1 John 5:12, RSV2CE)

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

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

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text, read in sections through the Build

Matthew 23:4; Matthew 11:28-30

Build 1: burdens bound versus the easy yoke

John 16:33

Build 2: I have overcome the world

Deuteronomy 19:15

Live discovery, Build 4: the two-or-three-witness rule

John 19:34-35

Live discovery, Build 5: the pierced side, the eyewitness formula

Ezekiel 47:1-9; Zechariah 13:1

Live discovery and background, Build 5: the temple's river, the opened fountain

John 2:21; John 3:5; John 6:57

Builds 5-7: the temple of his body; born of water; he who eats me

CCC 1225; 766; 694

Catechism Connection