

What Do You Seek?

Six Encounters with the One Who Asked First

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Six core sessions and six standalone deep-dives

An inductive study of the Gospel encounters, Seeker Edition

Catholic Armory

A Note for Leaders

Read this first, and keep this volume to yourself. This complete edition contains every leader guide, every answer, and the resolution of everything the study builds toward. Participants receive only the two-page Take-Homes, which are spoiler-free by design. If a participant reads this volume, Session 6 cannot land the way it was built to land.

Who this is for. This study was rebuilt from the ground up for seekers: people who have not made up their minds about Jesus, sitting alongside the Catholic friends who invited them. It teaches no devotional program and assumes no belief. Instead it does two things across six evenings: it walks six Gospel encounters inductively, and it presents, one piece per week, the core message of the Gospel, from the restlessness we were made with, through what stands in the way, to who Jesus is, what He did on the cross, and how His saving act is applied to a person: grace, which comes first and makes the free response possible; faith; and new birth, which the Church gives ordinarily in Baptism, all received as a free gift.

The frame. One conviction shapes every session, and it is named only at the finale: Jesus knocks, and it is our free invitation that opens the door for Him. In every encounter the initiative is His; in every encounter the response is genuinely free, free enough that one session on the shelf is about the door that stayed shut. The study never pressures, cold-calls, or collects a decision, because a love that was compelled would not be love, and the Church herself teaches that the response of faith must be free. Trust the architecture; it is doing the evangelizing.

The two standing rules. Stated aloud at the first session and kept without exception: nobody is ever called on, and nobody's answer is ever critiqued. These rules are not classroom management; they are the frame made practical, and your seeker guests will quietly test whether you mean them.

The sealed sheet. Take-Home 1 carries a private write-in: what am I actually seeking? It is folded, kept, and never shared, and it is opened privately, in silence, at Session 6. Remind the group to bring it during Week 5. It is the study's one piece of homework that matters.

The evening. Every session is built for a table: a meal or solid refreshments, then 75 minutes of content inside a 90-minute evening. Each Leader Preparation Guide includes a hosting section for the specific pastoral weather of that week, and a time note telling you what to cut first when the conversation runs long, which, if the study is working, it will.

How to Use This Study

The Core (run in order)

The six core sessions build one cumulative message through a segment called The Knock and the Door: a short proclamation, under three minutes, read aloud before discussion each week. The pieces assemble in order, the threads resolve at Session 6, and the finale depends on the reveal of whose question the title is. Run the core as a unit, in sequence, without skipping.

The Deep-Dives (any order, any time)

The six deep-dives are fully standalone: no threads, no sealed sheet, no dependencies. Use them as a second season for a group that finishes the core, as single evenings for groups that meet irregularly, or as insertions between core seasons. Each carries a spoiler-discipline note so that a group still inside the core is protected from the finale's frame. Two natural pairings: Zacchaeus with the Rich Young Man (two rich men, two answers), and Emmaus as a finale for any group headed toward a Mass.

Each Session's Anatomy

- **Leader Preparation Guide:** overview, the week's Gospel piece, background, Old Testament roots, three Voices of the Church, Catechism connections, hosting coaching, thread watch, goals, and the time note.
- **Discussion Guide:** a brief leader-led opening, the proclamation, Win questions, an inductive Build with answer boxes and one live Scripture discovery, a full-strength steelman of the strongest objection, Send questions, Live It This Week, and a memory verse.
- **Leader Reference Card:** every passage in the session, on one card.
- **Take-Home:** the only participant-facing document: two pages, spoiler-free, with the week's findings, voices, practices, and memory verse.

Scripture and Sources

Scripture quotations follow the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition. Patristic and magisterial material is quoted only where wording is secure; most Voices of the Church are presented as labeled summaries, and any uncertain attribution is flagged in the text itself. Catechism references are provided in every session for leaders who want to go deeper.

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What Do You Seek?

Session 1: The Thirst

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers, from John 4 itself, that Jesus initiates the encounter, that the woman's long search for something that would finally hold mirrors our own, and that the restlessness every honest person carries is not a malfunction but a clue about what we were made for.

Catholic Touchstone: The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God, and God never ceases to draw man to Himself (CCC 27).

The Knock and the Door: Piece One

The Gospel, Week by Week

This study replaces a prayer curriculum with something a seeker needs first: the message itself. Each week you will present one piece of the Gospel plainly, for about three minutes, before discussion begins. Nothing is assumed; nothing is pressured. The frame for the whole study is this: God always moves first, and He never forces the door. Grace knocks; freedom answers. You will not name Revelation 3:20 until the final core session; until then, let the group notice the pattern for themselves.

This week's piece, in one sentence: You were made for God, and the restlessness you feel when everything else falls short is not a defect; it is a homing signal.

A read-aloud script is provided in the Discussion Guide. Deliver it as a host, not a lecturer: unhurried, warm, and finished in under three minutes.

What You Need to Know

John 4 crosses lines the text itself flags: Jews and Samaritans kept apart (Jn 4:9), and the disciples are astonished to find Jesus speaking with a woman (Jn 4:27). This woman comes to the well at noon, the hottest hour; many readers infer she was avoiding the morning and evening crowd, though John does not say so. If she was managing her exposure, most seekers in your room are doing the same thing.

Notice who initiates. Jesus is tired, sits down, and asks *her* for a drink (Jn 4:7). The divine initiative arrives disguised as a need. He does not open with her sin or with doctrine; He opens by making Himself her guest. Only after she is curious does He raise the stakes: "If you knew the gift of God..." (Jn 4:10).

The five husbands (Jn 4:18) are usually read as a long search for something that would finally hold, though the text never says how the marriages ended; widowhood and divorce are both possible, and some of it may not have been her choice. Present this as a reading, not a verdict on her. Jesus names her history without humiliating her, and she does not run; she goes deeper, then runs to town saying "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did" (Jn 4:29). Being fully known and not condemned is itself the living water beginning to flow.

Handle the moral history the way Jesus does: truthfully and without a lecture. In a seeker group, the point of verse 18 is not her failure; it is that five attempts at the same solution did not work, which every honest adult recognizes.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Jeremiah 2:13. God's own diagnosis of the human condition: two evils, forsaking “the fountain of living waters” and digging “broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” Jesus’ “living water” language in John 4 strongly echoes this verse; Jeremiah is the sharpest of several Old Testament water texts standing behind the phrase. The group will find it live in session.

Psalms 42:1-2. “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” The psalter already knows the thirst is for a person, not an experience.

Isaiah 55:1-3. The invitation to “come to the waters” without money: satisfaction that cannot be purchased, offered freely. Background for the leader; it returns later in the study.

Voices of the Church

St. Augustine *Confessions, Book 1*

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Augustine wrote this as a man who had run the full experiment: pleasure, ambition, philosophy, applause. The sentence is his lab report.

St. Augustine on this very scene *Tractates on the Gospel of John, 15*

Commenting on the well, Augustine observes that He who was asking for a drink was thirsting for the faith of the woman herself. The scene runs both directions: her thirst for something that lasts, and God’s thirst for her.

St. Teresa of Avila *Lines found written in her breviary (traditionally attributed)*

“Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you... God alone suffices.” The tradition attributes these lines to her own hand. They state the session’s claim in the affirmative: the one object that finally holds.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 27:** the desire for God is written in the human heart; only in God will man find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.
- **CCC 30:** people may forget or reject this search, yet God never ceases to call every man to seek Him; quotes Augustine’s restless heart.
- **CCC 2560:** reads this very well scene: Christ comes to meet every human being; it is He who first seeks us and asks for a drink; Jesus thirsts for us.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week’s Coaching

Your friend is a participant, never a project and never the subject. Two standing rules govern every session of this study: nobody is ever cold-called, and nobody’s answer is ever critiqued. Say both rules out loud tonight before the Win questions; it changes the room. Do not ask your friend to read aloud, pray aloud, or report their sealed sheet. If they say something theologically wrong, receive it with interest, not

correction; the text will do the correcting over six weeks. Your job this week is simple: make them glad they came.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- **The First Word:** in every encounter this study visits, track who speaks or moves first. Do not point it out. The group discovers the pattern at Session 6.
- **Doors and Thresholds:** meetings at wells, blocked doorways, gates, keys, and one final door. Plant nothing; just protect the details when they appear.
- **The Sealed Sheet:** tonight's Take-Home carries a private write-in box: "What am I actually seeking?" It is folded, kept, and never shared. It is opened privately at Session 6.

Session Goals

1. Establish the room: meal or refreshments first, the two standing rules stated aloud, no religious performance expected from anyone.
2. Present Piece One of the Gospel: made for God; restlessness as signal, not defect.
3. Walk John 4:1-30 inductively, letting the group notice who initiates and what the five husbands represent.
4. Land the live discovery in Jeremiah 2:13 so the group connects living water to God's oldest diagnosis.
5. Send everyone home with Take-Home 1 and the sealed sheet instructions.

Time Note

Planned for 75 minutes of content inside a 90-minute evening with food. If you run long: cut the Dig Deeper box first, then trim Build questions 5 and 6 into one. Never cut the Knock segment or the sealed sheet instructions.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. Nobody else is expected to pray, tonight or any night of this study.

“God, thank you for this table and these friends. Whatever each of us walked in carrying, meet us honestly tonight. Amen.”

State the two rules: “Two rules for this whole study: nobody ever gets called on, and nobody’s answer ever gets graded. Everything here is voluntary.”

The Knock and the Door (read aloud, under 3 minutes)

Piece One: Made for More

“Before we open anything, I want to put one idea on the table, and over these six weeks the pieces will add up to a single message. Here is the first piece. Every person in this room has felt it: you get the thing, and the thing is good, and three weeks later the ache is back. The promotion, the relationship, the trip, the purchase. Tonight we are going to take that ache seriously instead of numbing it. The oldest Christian claim about you is not first about rules. It is that you were made, on purpose, for a relationship with God, and that the restlessness is what being made for something feels like before you have it. You do not have to believe that yet. Just test it against tonight’s story, and against your own history.”

Win

Tom Brady, freshly holding three Super Bowl rings, told 60 Minutes in 2005 that he still felt something was missing, that there had to be more than this. Asked what the answer was, he said he wished he knew.

1. What is your version of the third Super Bowl ring: the thing you were sure would settle it, and then it did not?
2. When the ache shows up, what do most people do with it? What do you do with it?

Build

Read John 4:1-9 aloud. (One volunteer reads, or the leader reads.)

1. Look closely at verses 6 and 7. Who starts this conversation, and what does He open with? What is surprising about that?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Jesus does. Tired and thirsty, He asks her for a drink. The encounter begins with Him making Himself the one in need, her guest rather than her judge. He crosses real social lines to do it: Jew to Samaritan, and a man speaking alone with an unknown woman, something that startles even His own disciples (v. 27). The initiative is entirely His, and it is disarming rather than demanding.

Read John 4:10-15 aloud.

2. Jesus says everyone who drinks “this water” will thirst again (v. 13). If the well stands for everything we use to satisfy the ache, what are some of the wells people your age keep returning to?
3. “Living water” is a loaded phrase from the Old Testament. Where have we heard God talk about water like this before?

Live discovery: *have the group find Jeremiah 2:13 and read it aloud. Give them a minute; do not rescue them early.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Jeremiah 2:13 is God's own diagnosis, six centuries early: my people committed two evils; they forsook me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water. Every well that fails us is a cracked cistern. Jesus is claiming, at this well, to be the fountain the cisterns were substituting for.

Read John 4:16-19, 25-26 aloud.

4. Five husbands, and the current arrangement is not marriage. Without piling on this woman, what does that history look like from the inside? What was she doing?
5. Jesus names all of it in one sentence, and she does not leave. Verse 29 says she later tells the whole town, "he told me all that I ever did." Why would being fully known feel like good news instead of exposure?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The text does not tell us how the five marriages ended; some may have been losses rather than choices. What the story does show is a life that has cycled through arrangement after arrangement without arriving at rest, and on that reading it is the Brady quote with different furniture. And when Jesus names her history, He does it without contempt and stays in the conversation; she experiences, maybe for the first time, being completely known and not discarded. That combination, truth plus welcome, is what she cannot keep quiet about. It is a preview of the whole Gospel.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Take the best version of the objection, and say it well: "Restlessness proves nothing. Evolution built brains that adapt to every gain and then want more; dissatisfaction kept our ancestors striving and alive. Religion just rents out the itch and sells a scratch." Grant what is true in it: hedonic adaptation is real and well documented. Grant also that the naturalist has more to say: imagination, social comparison, and culture can stretch appetite into open-ended longing, so an ache aimed past every finite thing is not, by itself, a defeat for the theory. Then put the honest question on the table: which account better fits what the woman's five attempts, and Brady's third ring, keep reporting, a thirst that no finite good has ever quieted? Moving from that desire to God is an inference, not a proof. The ache is not proof of God; be honest about that. It is evidence of a fit, the way hunger is evidence that food exists. A signpost, not a syllogism.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Ancient readers would catch something modern readers miss: in the Old Testament, when a man meets a woman at a well, a betrothal follows: Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 24), Jacob and Rachel (Genesis 29), Moses and Zipporah (Exodus 2). John places Jesus at Jacob's own well, meeting Samaria. Many commentators, ancient and modern, read the scene as a bridegroom motif: God coming to woo Samaria back. Some go further and give the five husbands a symbolic meaning tied to Samaria's history, but that step is disputed; keep to the betrothal pattern itself. Offer it lightly; it rewards the group's attention to detail.

Send

3. The woman left her water jar behind (v. 28) and went straight back to town, to the very people she had every reason to dread. What would it look like to take one honest step toward the ache this week instead of numbing it?
4. If it turned out the ache really was a homing signal, what would that change about how you read your own history?

Live It This Week

1. Complete the sealed sheet on your Take-Home tonight or tomorrow: “What am I actually seeking?” Fold it. Nobody will ever read it but you.
2. Once this week, when the ache shows up, do not reach for the phone for ten minutes. Just notice what it is actually asking for.
3. Read next week’s story in advance if you like: Mark 2:1-12. Watch what gets blocked, and what Jesus says first.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “God, if you are the fountain, we would rather have you than the cisterns. Give us an honest week. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst.” John 4:14

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 1 and point to the sealed sheet box. Fold it, keep it somewhere safe; we will need it, privately, at the end.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- John 4:1-30, the well, the request, living water, five husbands, the abandoned jar

Live Discovery Text

- Jeremiah 2:13, the fountain of living waters and the broken cisterns

Supporting Texts

- Psalm 42:1-2, the soul's thirst for the living God
- Isaiah 55:1-3, come to the waters without money (leader background)
- Genesis 24; Genesis 29; Exodus 2:15-21, well betrothal scenes (Dig Deeper)
- John 4:39-42, the town believes (leader background)

Catechism

- CCC 27, 30, 2560

Memory Verse

- John 4:14

The Knock and the Door

- Piece One: made for God; restlessness as homing signal; sealed sheet distributed

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home 1: The Thirst

Keep this sheet. The sealed box below stays folded until the final session.

What We Found

A quarterback with three championship rings told a national audience there had to be more than this. Then we met a woman in Samaria who had run the same experiment five times, coming to a well at noon, the hottest hour of the day. A tired stranger asked her for a drink, and by the end of the conversation she had left her water jar behind and was telling that same town, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did” (John 4:29). We found God’s oldest diagnosis behind the scene: forsaking the fountain of living waters and digging broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:13). And we put the first piece of a larger message on the table: you were made for God, and the ache when everything else falls short is a homing signal, not a malfunction.

The Story So Far

Piece One: You were made, on purpose, for a relationship with God. Restlessness is what being made for something feels like before you have it.

MY ANSWER (private, sealed)

In a sentence or two: What am I actually seeking? Write it below, fold this box closed, and keep the sheet. Nobody will read it but you. We open it, privately, at the final session.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Augustine *Confessions, Book 1*

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

St. Augustine on the well *Tractates on John, 15*

He who was asking for a drink was thirsting for the faith of the woman herself.

St. Teresa of Avila *traditionally attributed, from her breviary*

“Let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you... God alone suffices.”

Live It This Week

1. Complete and fold the sealed box above. Keep the sheet safe.
2. Once this week, sit with the ache for ten minutes instead of numbing it. Notice what it is actually asking for.
3. Optional: read Mark 2:1-12 before next time. Watch what gets blocked, and what Jesus says first.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst.” John 4:14

Before Next Session

Read **Mark 2:1-12**. A crowded house, a blocked door, four friends, and a sentence nobody expected.

Catechism references from tonight: CCC 27, 30, 2560.

What Do You Seek?

Session 2: The Deeper Paralysis

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that when Jesus finally gets a man lowered in front of Him with an obvious problem, He addresses a different problem first, and that His diagnosis, sin as real separation, is more hopeful than the modern alternative, which has no cure at all.

Catholic Touchstone: The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health (CCC 1421).

The Knock and the Door: Piece Two

This week's piece, in one sentence: Something in us is genuinely broken; the Bible calls it sin, means separation from God, and treats it as a sickness to be healed rather than merely a rule to be punished.

Sequence matters for seekers: last week established that we were made for God. Only against that backdrop does sin make sense, as the thing standing between us and what we were made for. Presented in this order it lands as diagnosis, not accusation. The read-aloud script is in the Discussion Guide.

What You Need to Know

Mark 2 opens with Jesus “at home” in Capernaum, and the crowd so thick that “there was no longer room for them, not even about the door” (Mk 2:2). The doorway is jammed. Four men carry a paralyzed man onto the roof, break it open, and lower him on his pallet in front of Jesus. Mark’s verb literally means they dug through it, which fits the packed-earth roofs and outside stairs typical of Capernaum houses; Mark does not call the four his friends, but everything they do says it. It is faith expressed as demolition.

Then the surprise the whole session turns on: with a paralyzed man in front of Him, Jesus does not say “rise.” He says, “My son, your sins are forgiven” (Mk 2:5). Either He has badly misread the situation, or He can see a deeper paralysis under the visible one, and treats the deadlier condition first.

The scribes object silently with flawless logic: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mk 2:7). Their premise is correct. Sin, whoever else it wounds, is finally against God, so only God can absolve it. Hold that premise; the group returns to it next week, when it becomes the hinge of the question of who Jesus is.

The healing (Mk 2:10-12) is then offered as evidence: “that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” The visible miracle authenticates the invisible one. And down the same chapter, at Levi’s dinner, Jesus states His own mission in medical terms: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mk 2:17).

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 103:2-3. The psalm pairs exactly what Mark 2 pairs: the God “who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.” The paralytic scene is this verse acted out in a living room. The group finds it live.

Isaiah 59:2. “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God.” Sin defined relationally before it is defined legally: a wall, not merely a violation.

Voices of the Church

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

“There is one Physician, of flesh and of spirit... Jesus Christ our Lord.” Writing on the road to his martyrdom, within living memory of the apostles, Ignatius already speaks of Christ in exactly the register of Mark 2: the doctor who treats the whole patient.

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew (summary)*

Preaching on this healing, Chrysostom draws the audience's attention to the order of Christ's words: the soul is treated before the body, because the soul's disease is the older and deadlier one. The paralysis everyone could see was the smaller problem in the room. This is a faithful summary of his homily rather than a direct quotation.

St. Augustine *Confessions, Book 2 (summary)*

Augustine spends a startling number of pages on a petty teenage theft of pears he did not even want, because it let him examine sin in laboratory conditions: he loved not the pears but the transgression itself. His conclusion, that sin is love bent out of shape, disordered love, is the classic Catholic account, and it explains why sin cannot be fixed by information alone. A summary of his analysis, not a quotation.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1849:** sin defined: an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; a failure of genuine love for God and neighbor.
- **CCC 1850: sin is an offense against God; it sets itself against His love for us and turns our hearts away from Him.**
- **CCC 1440: sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with Him.**
- **CCC 1421:** Christ the physician of souls and bodies, with this very healing of the paralytic cited.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

Sin is the week the room can go quiet, so watch your pronouns: it is always “we,” never “you.” If anyone confesses something real tonight, the leader receives it with gratitude and zero commentary; the two standing rules are doing their heaviest work this session. If your friend has been hurt by shame-heavy religion, do not defend the Church's worst messengers; point at the text, where Jesus leads with “My son” before anything else. And notice what this session never asks: nobody is asked to name their sins aloud. The diagnosis is offered; the appointment stays private.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- **The First Word:** note it silently: the friends act, but the first words spoken in the scene are Jesus' own, and forgiveness arrives before anyone asks for it. Nobody in Mark 2 requests absolution.
- **Doors and Thresholds:** the door is explicitly blocked (Mk 2:2) and they come through the roof. Protect the detail; do not connect it to anything yet.
- **The scribes' premise:** "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" is next week's hinge. Plant it firmly; resolve nothing.

Session Goals

1. Present Piece Two: sin as real separation and real sickness, in that order, after last week's made-for-God foundation.
2. Walk Mark 2:1-12 inductively, landing the surprise of verse 5 and the logic of verses 7-11.
3. Land the live discovery in Psalm 103:2-3, forgiveness and healing paired.
4. Steelman the strongest modern objection to the whole category of sin, and answer it from the text.
5. Close with Mark 2:17: the physician's own mission statement, which turns the diagnosis into an invitation.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper box first, then merge Build questions 4 and 5. Never cut the steelman; for a seeker this session's credibility depends on it.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. Restate the two rules in one sentence if any new faces are present.

“God, you see everything we carried in here tonight, the visible things and the other things. Be gentle and be honest with us. Amen.”

The Knock and the Door (read aloud, under 3 minutes)

Piece Two: The Deeper Paralysis

“Last week we put down the first piece: you were made for God, and the ache is a homing signal. Here is the second piece, and it is the hard one, so I want to say it carefully. Christianity claims something is actually wrong with us. Not that you are worthless, the opposite of that, but that something real stands between us and what we were made for. The word for it is sin, and the Bible's first definition is not a broken rule but a broken connection: separation. Here is why that is strangely good news. Most accounts of the ache on offer today say it is just how things are; there is no cure, only management. The Christian account says it is a sickness, and sickness is the one category that comes with the possibility of a physician. Tonight's story is about a man whose visible problem was not his biggest one, and about who noticed.”

Win

David Foster Wallace, no churchman, told a graduating class in 2005: “Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.” He went on to argue that whatever you center your life on, money, body, intellect, power, will eat you alive, not because it is evil but because it cannot bear the weight.

1. What do people actually build their lives around, whether or not they would use the word worship?
2. Have you ever watched something good become destructive because it was asked to carry too much? What happened?

Build

Read Mark 2:1-5 aloud.

1. Picture verse 2 literally: the house is packed and the doorway itself is jammed. What do the four friends do about it, and what does Jesus call what they did (v. 5)?
2. Here is the strangest sentence in the story. A paralyzed man is lowered in front of Jesus, and Jesus says, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” If you were the man on the mat, what would you be thinking?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

They dig through the roof, and Jesus “saw their faith”: faith, in Mark, looks like four friends and a demolition project. Then the shock: Jesus treats a problem nobody mentioned. Either He missed the obvious, or He sees a second paralysis under the first and triages the deadlier one. Note also the first word: “My son.” Tenderness before anything else. And nobody in the scene asked for forgiveness; it arrives first.

3. Where else in the Bible do forgiveness and healing show up as a matched pair? Let's find one.

Live discovery: *have the group find Psalm 103:2-3 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Psalm 103:2-3 blesses the God “who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,” in that order. Mark 2 is this verse performed live: forgiveness first, healing second. Jesus is stepping deliberately into a job description the psalm gives to God alone, which sets up the scribes’ objection perfectly.

Read Mark 2:6-12 aloud.

4. The scribes think: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Is their logic actually wrong? Why would forgiving sins be something only God can do?
5. Jesus then heals the man “that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” What is the miracle functioning as, in His own words?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The scribes’ premise is airtight: if I wrong you, my mother cannot forgive me on your behalf; only the offended party can absolve. Sin, whatever else it damages, is finally against God, so only God can wipe it. Their logic is perfect; hold onto it, because it becomes explosive next week. The healing, meanwhile, is offered as evidence: a visible sign authenticating an invisible claim. Jesus stakes the checkable on the uncheckable, in front of hostile experts, in public.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Say it at full strength: “Sin is manufactured guilt. Religious institutions invented a disease so they could sell the cure, and plenty of people have been genuinely damaged by shame-based religion. I don’t need forgiving; I’m a decent person.” Grant what is true: religious shame has been weaponized, and the wounds are real; the Church’s worst messengers deserve the criticism. Then look at what the text actually does. Jesus attaches sin not to control but to healing, and His first word to the sinner is “My son.” And run one honest experiment that needs no religion at all: take only your own standards, the ones you hold other people to, and ask whether you have kept them for a single month. The wall Isaiah describes (59:2) is not a priest’s invention; we hit it with our own codes. The question is not whether something is broken. It is whether there is a physician.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Down the same chapter, Jesus eats with tax collectors and answers the grumbling with a mission statement: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mk 2:17). Notice what this does to the entry requirements. The only qualification for Jesus’ attention is the disease. The people most disqualified by religion are, on His stated policy, first in line. Ask the group: who is this sentence good news for, in this room?

Send

3. The paralytic’s friends did the carrying when he could not walk. Who has carried you at some point? Has anyone ever been carried by you?
4. “Diagnosis, not accusation.” Does tonight’s account of sin feel different from versions you have met before? How?

Live It This Week

1. Try the honest experiment from tonight: your own standards only, one week. Just notice.
2. Think of the person who carried you, the friend, the parent, the stranger. If they are alive, thank them this week in any form.

- Optional: read Matthew 16:13-20 before next time. Jesus asks a question, and everything in this study hangs on it.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “God, if there is a wall, we did not build it alone and we cannot take it down alone. Send the physician. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” Mark 2:17

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 2; standing reminder to keep the sealed sheet from Week 1 safe and folded.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Mark 2:1-12, the blocked door, the roof, forgiveness first, the scribes' logic, the evidence healing

Live Discovery Text

- Psalm 103:2-3, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases

Supporting Texts

- Isaiah 59:2, iniquities as separation (steelman answer)
- Mark 2:13-17, Levi's dinner and the physician saying (Dig Deeper and memory verse)

Catechism

- CCC 1849, 1850, 1440, 1421

Memory Verse

- Mark 2:17

The Knock and the Door

- Piece Two: sin as separation and sickness; the scribes' premise planted for Session 3

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home 2: The Deeper Paralysis

Keep your Week 1 sheet safe, box folded. We will need it.

What We Found

The novelist David Foster Wallace told a graduating class at Kenyon College in 2005 that everybody worships something, and that most of the available options eat you alive. Then we watched four friends dig through a roof because the door was blocked, and heard Jesus say the strangest sentence in Mark's Gospel: with a paralyzed man in front of Him, "My son, your sins are forgiven" first, and "rise" second. We found the pairing already waiting in Psalm 103, the God who forgives all your iniquity and heals all your diseases, and we took the scribes' logic seriously: only God can forgive sins, because sin is finally against God. Jesus then healed the man in public, on the record, as evidence for the part nobody could see. Piece Two went on the table: something in us is genuinely broken, and calling it sickness is the hopeful option, because sickness is the one category that allows for a physician.

The Story So Far

Piece One: You were made, on purpose, for a relationship with God; the restlessness is a homing signal. Piece Two: Something real stands between us and what we were made for. The Bible calls it sin, an offense against God and a failure in love that separates us from Him, and it treats sin as a disease with a physician, not a verdict without appeal.

Voices Worth Keeping

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

"There is one Physician, of flesh and of spirit... Jesus Christ our Lord."

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on Matthew (summary)*

Preaching on this healing, he points to the order of Christ's words: the soul is treated before the body, because its disease is older and deadlier.

St. Augustine *Confessions, Book 2 (summary)*

His famous analysis of a pointless teenage theft: sin is love bent out of shape, which is why information alone never cures it.

Live It This Week

1. One week, your own standards only. Just notice.
2. Thank the person who once carried you, in any form you like.
3. Optional: read Matthew 16:13-20 before next time.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." **Mark 2:17**

Before Next Session

Read **Matthew 16:13-20**. Jesus asks the one question this whole study has been circling, and He asks it directly.

Catechism references from tonight: CCC 1849, 1850, 1421.

What Do You Seek?

Session 3: The Question He Asks Back

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that Jesus Himself forces the question of His identity, that “great moral teacher” is the one answer the sources do not permit, and that last week’s airtight premise, only God can forgive sins, now points somewhere the scribes never intended.

Catholic Touchstone: On the rock of the faith confessed by St. Peter, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, Christ built His Church (CCC 424).

The Knock and the Door: Piece Three

This week's piece, in one sentence: The answer to the ache is not a philosophy or a program; it is a person, and He asks each of us directly who we say He is.

Note the knock this week: Jesus initiates the identity conversation Himself. Nobody in Matthew 16 raises the subject; He asks. For a seeker, this reframes the whole investigation: Christianity is not us interrogating a historical figure; it is a living question aimed back at us. Keep the frame implicit; the pattern gets named at Session 6.

What You Need to Know

Caesarea Philippi is a deliberate stage: a pagan district at the foot of Mount Hermon, site of a grotto sacred to the god Pan and a center of Caesar worship. Surrounded by the market of religious options, Jesus polls the disciples: “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” (Mt 16:13). The crowd’s answers are all flattering and all inadequate: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, a prophet. Then the pivot on which the session turns: “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt 16:15). The question moves from survey data to personal verdict.

Peter answers: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16), and Jesus responds that flesh and blood did not reveal this, “but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17). Even the right answer is described as a gift received, not merely a conclusion computed. That balance matters for seekers: evidence is real and worth weighing, and the final step is still grace meeting freedom, which is this study’s frame in miniature.

“Son of man” sounds like modesty to modern ears. It is the opposite: in Daniel 7 the “one like a son of man” rides the clouds of heaven into God’s throne room and receives everlasting dominion from the Ancient of Days. Jesus chose the title Himself, and the group will find its source live.

Last week’s plant now pays off. The scribes reasoned: only God can forgive sins. In Mark 2 Jesus forgave sins and offered a public healing as evidence of the authority. Add John 8:58, “before Abraham was, I am,” echoing the divine name of Exodus 3:14, and the “just a teacher” reading has nowhere left to stand. The claims run through the whole Gospel witness, and the forgiveness scene stands in Mark, among the earliest strata of the sources; they cannot be trimmed away and leave a teacher behind.

Verses 18-19 give the session its threshold imagery: “the powers of death shall not prevail” (the Greek reads “the gates of Hades”) and “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Gates and keys. Do not develop the church-authority theme in a seeker core session; it is real, it is ours, and it belongs to a deep-dive. Protect the imagery for the thread and keep the session on the identity question.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Daniel 7:13-14. The source of Jesus’ favorite self-title: one like a son of man comes with the clouds of heaven, is presented before the Ancient of Days, and receives an everlasting dominion that all peoples should serve. The group finds it live.

Exodus 3:14. “I AM WHO I AM.” Background for John 8:58: Jesus does not say “before Abraham was, I was,” but “I am.” His hearers picked up stones, because they understood Him perfectly.

Isaiah 22:22. The key of the house of David laid on a steward’s shoulder: he shall open and none shall shut. Background for the keys of Matthew 16:19; developed in the Dig Deeper and later in the catalog.

Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch *Letter to the Ephesians, opening greeting (c. AD 107)*

In the early second century, within living memory of the apostles, Ignatius greets the Ephesians in the name of “Jesus Christ our God.” The divinity of Christ is not a later development the Church drifted into; it is the plain speech of the generation the apostles themselves taught.

St. Athanasius *On the Incarnation, 54*

“For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.” The famous exchange formula, quoted in the Catechism itself (CCC 460), states why the identity question carries such weight: what Christ is determines what He can do for us.

St. Leo the Great *Tome to Flavian (summary)*

In the fifth century, Leo gave the Church its enduring grammar for Peter’s confession: one and the same Christ, truly God and truly man, each nature intact. Not a demigod, not a costume, but God with us in full. A faithful summary of the Tome’s teaching rather than a quotation.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 424:** the Church is built on the faith confessed by Peter at this very scene.
- **CCC 464:** the Church confesses that Jesus is inseparably true God and true man; the belief the identity question is driving toward.
- **CCC 151:** for the Christian, believing in God cannot be separated from believing in the One He sent.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week’s Coaching

This is the intellectual objections week, so know your posture in advance: you are a host, not a debater. When your friend raises an objection, your first sentence is some honest version of “that is a real question,” because it is. If you know the answer, offer it briefly and return to the text. If you do not, say so, write it down where they can see you write it, and bring something back next week; a kept promise persuades more than a won argument. Never let the group pile on the one skeptic. And keep the goal

straight: the aim tonight is not that your friend concedes; it is that they leave believing the question deserves their adult attention.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- **The First Word:** Jesus raises the identity question Himself, unprompted. Note it silently; the count is growing.
- **Doors and Thresholds:** gates of Hades, keys of the kingdom. Two threshold images in two verses. Protect, do not connect.
- **Payoff logged:** the scribes' premise from Session 2 has now done its work. If anyone in the group makes the connection unprompted, enjoy it and confirm nothing beyond the text.

Session Goals

1. Present Piece Three: the answer is a person, and the person asks back.
2. Walk Matthew 16:13-17 inductively, moving the group from the crowd's answers to the personal question.
3. Land the live discovery in Daniel 7:13-14, converting Son of man from modesty to majesty.
4. Steelman “great moral teacher” at full strength and answer it from the sources, including the honest handling of the legend objection.
5. Close with the question itself left standing: who do you say that He is?

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then compress Build questions 1 and 2 into one. Never cut the steelman or the Daniel discovery; they are the session.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly.

“God, tonight we are asking the biggest question there is. Give us clear heads, honest mouths, and the patience to hear each other. Amen.”

The Knock and the Door (read aloud, under 3 minutes)

Piece Three: The Answer Is a Person

“Piece one: you were made for God. Piece two: something real stands in the way. Tonight, piece three, and it is the one that makes Christianity different from a self-improvement plan. The Christian claim is not that there is a technique for the ache, or a philosophy that reframes it. The claim is that the answer is a person, that he walked in history, and that the wall from last week was something he came to deal with personally. Which means the whole thing stands or falls on one question: who is he, actually? Tonight we are going to watch Jesus ask that question himself, out loud, to his closest friends, and then we are going to sit with the fact that he is still asking it.”

Win

Bart Ehrman is an agnostic New Testament scholar with no stake in defending Christianity, and in his published work he argues that the existence of Jesus and His crucifixion under Pontius Pilate are about as historically secure as ancient facts get. That is the skeptics' own floor: a real man, a real cross. The argument is about everything above the floor.

1. Before tonight, if someone asked you “who was Jesus,” what would you have said? Where did that answer come from?
2. Why do you think nearly everyone, including people with no religion, wants to keep some version of Jesus?

Build

Read Matthew 16:13-17 aloud.

1. Jesus asks two questions in three verses. What is the difference between “who do men say” and “who do you say”? Why does He refuse to leave it at the survey?
2. The crowd's answers, John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, a prophet, are all compliments. What do they all have in common, and what do they all avoid?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The first question costs nothing; it is sociology. The second is a verdict, and He aims it at persons, not crowds. The crowd's answers all classify Jesus inside an existing category, a prophet among prophets, which is precisely the safe move: honor Him enough to avoid deciding about Him. Peter's answer breaks the category: the Christ, the Son of the living God. And notice verse 17: Jesus says the Father revealed it. Evidence matters, and the last step is still a gift; both things are true at once in this scene.

3. Jesus calls Himself “the Son of man” here and dozens of times elsewhere; it was His favorite self-title. It sounds humble. Let's find where it comes from.

Live discovery: *have the group find Daniel 7:13-14 and read it aloud. Let them react before you say anything.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

In Daniel's vision, "one like a son of man" comes with the clouds of heaven, is presented before the Ancient of Days, and receives dominion, glory, and a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, with all peoples serving him. It is one of the highest scenes in the Old Testament. Jesus' "humble" title is a claim to the throne room. At His trial, when the high priest demands an answer under oath, He answers with this very scene, the Son of man coming with the clouds of heaven, joined to the enthronement at God's right hand from Psalm 110, and the court calls it blasphemy and tears its robes. The court that heard Him pair the title with Daniel's clouds knew exactly what it meant; the torn robes are the proof.

4. Now cash in last week's premise. The scribes said only God can forgive sins, and we agreed their logic was airtight. In Mark 2, Jesus forgave sins and healed a man as public evidence of the authority. Walk the logic: where does the scribes' own premise now lead?
5. One more data point: in John 8:58 Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am," and His hearers immediately pick up stones. What did they hear in that sentence? (Hint: Exodus 3:14.)

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The syllogism the scribes built now runs against them: only God forgives sins; Jesus forgives sins, and stakes public, checkable evidence on the authority; the conclusion writes itself, and it was their own premise. And in John 8:58 the grammar is deliberate: not "before Abraham was, I was," but "I am," the name God speaks from the burning bush (Ex 3:14). The stones prove the audience understood. These claims are not scattered decorations; they are load-bearing in the Gospel witness, and the Mark 2 forgiveness scene sits in the earliest stratum of it.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Give the objection its best form, in two layers. Layer one: "Jesus was a great moral teacher; the divine claims are later legend, added by devoted followers as the stories grew." It deserves a real answer, so here is one. Paul quotes an already-formed creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised, and appeared to Cephas and the twelve, and scholars across the spectrum, including skeptical ones, date that creed to within a few years of the crucifixion, because Paul says he received it, and his own timeline in Galatians puts the receiving early. There is no multi-generation gap for legend to grow in; the resurrection claim is the founding claim, not a late addition. Be honest about the scope of that point: it dates the resurrection proclamation, not every saying in every Gospel. But the same early letters of Paul already speak of Jesus in language Israel reserved for God alone (1 Cor 8:6; Phil 2:6-11), so the high view of Jesus is demonstrably early too, not a slow-growing legend. Layer two, then, is C.S. Lewis's famous fork, stated fairly: a merely human being who said the things the earliest sources report, forgiving sins, claiming the Daniel throne, taking the divine name, would not be a great moral teacher. He has not left us that option. Liar, madman, or Lord remain; be honest with the group that this narrows the field rather than mathematically closing it, and that next week we look at what He actually did about the wall.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Verses 18-19 hand Peter "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," and the image has an address: in Isaiah 22:22 the king lays "the key of the house of David" on the shoulder of his chief steward: "he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." A king appointing an office in his kingdom. There is a whole further conversation here about what Jesus built and why it is still standing; this study keeps tonight on the identity question, and that conversation has its own session in the deep-dive shelf for any group that wants it.

Send

3. “Who do you say that I am?” is grammatically a question you cannot answer with a poll. What would you need to see, or understand, to answer it with confidence either way?
4. Suppose, just as a hypothesis, that Peter’s answer is true. What in your life would that touch first?

Live It This Week

1. Write your current, honest, one-sentence answer to “who do you say that I am?” somewhere private. Date it. Nobody sees it; you may want to compare it with something later.
2. Bring one question about Jesus you have always wanted a straight answer to. We will collect them next week, no names attached.
3. Optional: read Luke 23:32-43 before next time. Three crosses; watch the man on the third one.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “God, the question is on the table and we are not going to fake our answers. Meet each of us where our answer actually is tonight. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“He said to them, But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” **Matthew 16:15-16**

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 3; standing sealed-sheet reminder.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Matthew 16:13-20, the two questions, Peter's confession, the revelation from the Father, gates and keys

Live Discovery Text

- Daniel 7:13-14, one like a son of man receives everlasting dominion

Supporting Texts

- Mark 2:5-12, recalled: the forgiveness premise from Session 2
- John 8:58 with Exodus 3:14, before Abraham was, I am
- 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, the early creed (steelman)
- Isaiah 22:22, the key of the house of David (Dig Deeper)
- Matthew 26:63-65, the Son of man answer at trial (leader background)

Catechism

- CCC 424, 464, 151

Memory Verse

- Matthew 16:15-16

The Knock and the Door

- Piece Three: the answer is a person, and the person asks back

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home 3: The Question He Asks Back

Keep your Week 1 sheet safe, box folded. We will need it.

What We Found

Even Bart Ehrman, a leading agnostic scholar, grants the floor: a real man, really crucified under Pontius Pilate. On that floor, at pagan Caesarea Philippi, Jesus took a poll and then refused to leave it there: “But who do you say that I am?” We found His favorite self-title in Daniel 7, where one like a son of man rides the clouds into God’s throne room and receives an everlasting kingdom; the title sounds modest to modern ears, but Daniel’s scene is a coronation. We cashed in last week’s premise, only God can forgive sins, against a man who forgave sins and staked public evidence on the authority, and we heard “before Abraham was, I am” land in a crowd that reached for stones because they understood. The “great moral teacher” option did not survive contact with the sources. Piece Three went on the table: the answer to the ache is not a technique; it is a person, and He asks each of us the question directly.

The Story So Far

Piece One: You were made, on purpose, for a relationship with God; the restlessness is a homing signal. Piece Two: Something real stands between us and what we were made for; the Bible calls it sin and treats it as a disease with a physician. Piece Three: The answer is a person. Jesus claimed the identity only God can hold, and He asks you directly: who do you say that I am?

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Ignatius of Antioch *Letter to the Ephesians, greeting (c. AD 107)*

Writing within living memory of the apostles, he speaks plainly of “Jesus Christ our God.”

St. Athanasius *On the Incarnation, 54*

“For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.”

St. Leo the Great *Tome to Flavian (summary)*

One and the same Christ, truly God and truly man: the Church’s enduring grammar for what Peter confessed.

Live It This Week

1. Write your honest one-sentence answer to His question. Date it. Keep it private.
2. Bring one question about Jesus you have always wanted a straight answer to; we collect them next week, no names attached.
3. Optional: read Luke 23:32-43 before next time.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“He said to them, But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” **Matthew 16:15-16**

Before Next Session

Read **Luke 23:32-43**. Three crosses on a hill, and a conversation between two of them.

Catechism references from tonight: CCC 424, 464, 151.

What Do You Seek?

Session 4: The Man Beside Him

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers the saving act itself through the eyes of the one man saved at the cross: that Christ died for our sins as the prophets foretold, that the offer reached a man with nothing left to give, and that two men in identical circumstances gave opposite answers to the same nearness.

Catholic Touchstone: By giving up His own Son for our sins, God manifests that His plan for us is one of benevolent love, prior to any merit on our part: He loved us first (CCC 604).

The Knock and the Door: Piece Four

This week's piece, in one sentence: The wall between us and God was not talked away; it was paid for, in person, on the cross, and the payment was love, not appeasement.

Thread note, leaders only: in every other encounter, Jesus speaks or acts first. On Calvary the thief speaks first, and it is no exception: the initiative here is positional rather than verbal. God arranged to die next to this man. It is the closest Jesus physically comes to anyone in this study. Log it silently; it preaches itself at Session 6.

What You Need to Know

Luke 23:32-43 gives us Christianity's whole grammar in eleven verses. Three crosses; the middle one is the innocent one. One criminal mocks: "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (23:39): salvation understood as escape. The other rebukes him with a criminal's honesty: "we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (23:41), then turns his head and asks: "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power" (23:42).

Weigh what the man does and does not have. No baptism, no catechesis, no restitution, no time, no good works possible; his hands are nailed down. He has honesty about his guilt, and one free ask, addressed to Jesus by name, in faith that a man dying beside him has a kingdom. And the answer outruns the request: he asked to be remembered someday; he is promised company today: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (23:43).

A translation note to disclose plainly: the RSV reads "when you come in your kingly power," with the familiar "when you come into your kingdom" as the variant Greek reading many know from the liturgy. Same request either way: he believes the dying man reigns.

The two thieves are the session's second lesson, and they are this study's frame in miniature: identical sentences, the same nearness to the same Christ, opposite responses. Nearness alone saves neither; the same knock is answered by one and refused by the other. Do not moralize this in session; let the geometry of the scene do the work.

On atonement, hold the Catholic balance and its honest latitude. The Church has never defined a single theory of how the cross saves; sacrifice, satisfaction, ransom, and victory are complementary lenses, not

competitors. What is fixed: this was God's own initiative of love (CCC 604), the Son's free self-gift, not an angry Father punishing an innocent third party. Say it that carefully, because the steelman turns on it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah 53:5, 12. Written centuries before: “he was wounded for our transgressions... and with his stripes we are healed,” and, astonishingly for tonight's scene, “he was numbered with the transgressors.” The geometry of Calvary, an innocent counted among criminals, sits in the text the group will find live.

1 Corinthians 15:3. The earliest creed, met in Session 3, states the meaning in one clause: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.” Paul does not name the passage, but Isaiah 53 is the scripture the Church has always heard first behind that clause.

Genesis 3:23-24. Eden's exit: the man driven out, and the way back to the tree of life guarded. Background for the Dig Deeper; the word Jesus speaks to the thief, Paradise, is the Greek word for that garden.

Voices of the Church

St. Ambrose *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke (summary)*

Ambrose lingers on the arithmetic of verse 43: the thief asked only to be remembered, and received Paradise, today, with Christ. The Lord, he observes, always gives more than He is asked. A faithful summary of his comment rather than a quotation.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechetical Lectures (summary)*

Teaching converts in fourth-century Jerusalem, within sight of Calvary, Cyril points his catechumens to the thief as proof of what Christ's mercy can give to repentant faith even at the last hour: a man entered Paradise from a cross on a single believing plea. A faithful summary of his teaching.

Commonly attributed to St. Augustine *attribution uncertain; the tradition is ancient*

“Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.” The line's exact source cannot be verified in Augustine's works, so we hand it on as the tradition hands it on: shorthand for the warning and the hope the two crosses hold together. The Church has never pronounced on the second criminal's final state; the line teaches against presumption and despair, not a verdict on one man.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 601:** Christ's redemptive death fulfills Isaiah's suffering-servant prophecy; “for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.”
- **CCC 604:** the cross as God's initiative of benevolent love, prior to any merit of ours: He loved us first.
- **CCC 1021:** the words of Christ to the good thief cited as the Church's teaching that each soul meets its Lord without delay.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

This is the heaviest night of the study, and heaviness is not a problem to be fixed. If the room goes quiet after the reading, let it; a leader who can sit in silence for twenty seconds teaches more about the cross

than one who fills it. Your friend may carry grief this session touches, a death, a diagnosis, a person they could not save; if tears come, kindness and normalcy, never a spotlight. And expect the fairness question in some form: what about people who never get a chance? Do not improvise a system. Point at the text: the thief had no resume, no ritual, no time, and one honest, believing sentence was met with mercy; the mercy on display is wider than our categories, and the Church has always said God is not limited by the ordinary paths He gives us. Park the rest for the walk to the car.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- **The First Word:** the apparent exception: the thief speaks first, but the nearness was arranged. Initiative by position. Log it; it becomes the most moving line of the Session 6 arc-trace.
- **Doors and Thresholds:** Paradise is the Greek word for the garden humanity was locked out of in Genesis 3. The guarded way reopens, today. Protect the detail in the Dig Deeper; connect nothing.
- **The two answers:** same knock, two responses. This is the free-will frame embodied; it gets named at Session 6, not tonight.

Session Goals

1. Present Piece Four: the wall was paid for in person, and the payment was love.
2. Walk Luke 23:32-43 inductively, weighing what the thief had and lacked, and what he was promised.
3. Land the live discovery in Isaiah 53: wounded for our transgressions, numbered with the transgressors.
4. Steelman the strongest modern objection to the cross and answer it with the Church's actual teaching, including its honest latitude on atonement theories.
5. Let the two thieves pose, without pressure, the question of the two possible answers.

Time Note

- 75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then trim Build question
2. Never cut the silence after the primary reading; budget for it on purpose.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly.

“God, tonight we are going to the hardest place in the story. Keep us honest, keep us gentle, and let us see what is actually there. Amen.”

The Knock and the Door (read aloud, under 3 minutes)

Piece Four: Paid in Person

“The pieces so far: you were made for God; something real stands in the way; and the answer is a person who claimed the identity only God can hold. Tonight, the fourth piece, the center of the whole message. Christianity does not claim the wall was explained away, or that God decided to grade on a curve. It claims the wall was paid for, and that God paid it in person. Not an angry deity taking it out on an innocent bystander; the One on the cross is the offended party Himself, absorbing the cost of forgiving. Anyone who has ever truly forgiven a serious wrong knows forgiveness is never free; the forgiver eats the debt. The cross is God eating the debt, in public, in history, on purpose. Tonight we watch it happen through the eyes of the one man who was close enough to touch it.”

Win

Steve Jobs, a year after his cancer diagnosis, told Stanford's graduating class: “Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life.” Mortality, he argued, burns away everything that does not matter.

1. Why do people mostly avoid thinking about death, and what happens to the ones who manage to face it?
2. If you knew your time was short, what would move to the top of the list? What would fall off it?

Build

Read Luke 23:32-43 aloud, slowly. Then let the room be quiet for a moment before the first question.

1. Two criminals, both justly condemned by the second man's own admission, same sentence, crucified on either side of the same Jesus. Listen to what each one says (vv. 39-42). What is the difference between the two men, at bottom?
2. Inventory the second thief. What does he have going for him: baptism, good works, time to reform, anything? What does he actually bring to this exchange?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The first thief wants escape: save yourself and us; God as a way out of consequences. The second begins with honesty, “we are receiving the due reward of our deeds,” then makes one free ask in faith: remember me. The only differences between the two men are truthfulness about guilt and the direction they turn their heads. And the inventory of the second is empty: no ritual, no record, no future, hands nailed down. He brings honesty and a request; everything else is Christ's gift. What the scene displays is not an entrance fee at all but gratuitous mercy, received in repentant faith by a man with nothing left to pay, which is either scandalous or the best news ever spoken, and possibly both.

3. Jesus answers, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Compare the request with the answer. What did the man ask for, and what is he given?

4. An innocent man dying between two criminals: the early Christians insisted this exact picture was written down centuries in advance. Let's find it.

Live discovery: *have the group find Isaiah 53 and read verses 5 and 12 aloud. Give them time with verse 12's last lines.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He asked to be remembered someday; he is promised presence today, and not admission but company: "with me." The answer outruns the ask, which the saints noticed early and often. Then Isaiah: "wounded for our transgressions... with his stripes we are healed," and the line that maps tonight's geometry exactly: "numbered with the transgressors," followed by "made intercession for the transgressors," which is precisely what the middle cross is doing for the man beside it. The earliest creed we met last week, "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3), has Isaiah 53 as the background text the Church has always read behind it.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Say the hard version out loud: "The atonement is divine child abuse. A father punishing an innocent son to satisfy his own anger is monstrous, and if God wanted to forgive, why not just forgive? Why does anyone have to bleed?" Grant the force of it: if the cross were a third party absorbing a tyrant's rage, the objection would win. But the Christian claim, said precisely, is that the One on the cross is God: the offended party Himself, freely taking the cost of forgiveness into His own body. And the second question answers itself from ordinary life: nobody just forgives. Forgive a real debt, a real betrayal, and you absorb it; the loss lands on the forgiver, always. The cross is that universal law at full scale: God forgiving, and paying what forgiving costs, in person. Be honest about the latitude too: the Church has never locked salvation's mechanics into one theory; sacrifice, ransom, satisfaction, victory are four windows on one act. What is non-negotiable is the direction of the love: He loved us first.

Dig Deeper (optional)

The word Jesus chooses, Paradise, is the Greek word for a walled garden, the Old Testament's word for Eden. Genesis 3 ends with humanity driven out and the way back guarded. So the last conversation Jesus has before dying is a promise to walk a criminal back up the one way that has been guarded since the beginning of the story, today. If your group has been noticing recurring images, protect your smile and move on.

Send

3. "Same nearness to the same Christ, opposite answers." What made the difference between the two thieves, and is that thing available to anyone in this room?
4. The man brought honesty and one free ask; everything else was gift. Which of those two comes harder for you?

Live It This Week

1. Try Job's tool once this week: make one decision as if your time were short, and notice what it clarifies.
2. Read Isaiah 53 in full, alone, once. Just read it; it is twelve verses.
3. Optional: read John 3:1-21 before next time. A respected man comes with his questions at night.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Jesus, remembered beside you is enough. Remember every one of us. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power. And he said to him, Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” **Luke 23:42-43**

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 4; standing sealed-sheet reminder: two sessions to go.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Luke 23:32-43, three crosses, two answers, one promise

Live Discovery Text

- Isaiah 53:5, 12, wounded for our transgressions; numbered with the transgressors

Supporting Texts

- 1 Corinthians 15:3, recalled: died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures
- Genesis 3:23-24, the guarded way back to the garden (Dig Deeper)

Catechism

- CCC 601, 604, 1021

Memory Verse

- Luke 23:42-43

The Knock and the Door

- Piece Four: the wall paid for in person; two thieves, two answers to the same nearness

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home 4: The Man Beside Him

Keep your Week 1 sheet safe, box folded. Two sessions to go.

What We Found

A dying man told a stadium of graduates that remembering death was the most useful tool he ever found. Then we stood at the story's hardest place: three crosses, and on the outer two, identical men making opposite answers. One demanded escape; the other brought the only two things he had left, honesty about his guilt and one free ask: "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power." The answer outran the request: not remembered someday but accompanied today, "with me in Paradise." Behind the scene we found Isaiah 53, written centuries early: wounded for our transgressions, numbered with the transgressors. Piece Four went on the table: the wall between us and God was not explained away; it was paid for, in person, and the payment was love. Forgiveness always costs the forgiver; the cross is God absorbing that cost Himself.

The Story So Far

Piece One: You were made, on purpose, for a relationship with God; the restlessness is a homing signal.
Piece Two: Something real stands between us and what we were made for; a disease with a physician.
Piece Three: The answer is a person, who asks each of us directly who we say He is.
Piece Four: On the cross, God paid for the wall in person. Two men hung the same distance from Him; only one asked.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Ambrose *Exposition of Luke (summary)*

The thief asked only to be remembered and received Paradise, today, with Christ: the Lord always gives more than He is asked.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem *Catechetical Lectures (summary)*

Teaching converts within sight of Calvary: a man entered Paradise from a cross, on a single believing sentence.

Commonly attributed to St. Augustine *attribution uncertain*

"Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned."

Live It This Week

1. Make one decision this week as if your time were short. Notice what it clarifies.
2. Read Isaiah 53 in full, alone, once.
3. Optional: read John 3:1-21 before next time.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power. And he said to him, Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Luke 23:42-43

Before Next Session

Read **John 3:1-21**. A respected teacher comes to Jesus at night, with the questions he could not ask in daylight.

Catechism references from tonight: CCC 601, 604, 1021.

What Do You Seek?

Session 5: Born Again at Night

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers how the saving act reaches an individual person: grace arriving first, faith that looks and lives, new birth in water and the Spirit, and a free coming-to-the-light that God invites and never forces. They also discover that John's Gospel gives the slow seeker explicit permission to move slowly, in the person of Nicodemus himself.

Catholic Touchstone: God's free initiative demands man's free response (CCC 2002): the whole frame of this study, stated by the Catechism in seven words.

The Knock and the Door: Piece Five

This week's piece, in one sentence: What Christ did on the cross is offered to each person as a gift: received by grace, through faith, in a new birth of water and the Spirit, and it can be received slowly.

This is the week the study says plainly, and without pressure, what Catholics believe about how salvation is applied: grace first, faith that receives, baptism as the new birth Jesus names, and a whole life of coming to the light. Present it as an open door, not a turnstile. The steelman handles the honest edges, including last week's thief, who reached Paradise with no baptism recorded.

What You Need to Know

Nicodemus is the most credentialed man to approach Jesus in John's Gospel: a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, "the teacher of Israel" (Jn 3:10). And he comes by night. Read that both ways at once: caution about being seen, and the honest hour when the big questions actually come. Every seeker in your room knows the 2 a.m. version of themselves; Nicodemus is that self, walking to the source.

He opens with a diplomat's compliment; Jesus answers the question underneath it: "unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3). The Greek *anōthen* means both "anew" and "from above," and John means the pun: a fresh start whose source is not us. Nicodemus takes it comically literally (a grown man entering the womb again), and Jesus specifies: "born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:5). The Church from the earliest centuries has heard baptism in that phrase; the Catechism cites this very verse (CCC 1257). Say so honestly as what Catholics believe, and let the imagery keep its welcome: birth is not an achievement; nobody births themselves. The metaphor itself carries the doctrine of grace.

Then Jesus reaches for a strange old story: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:14-15). The group finds Numbers 21 live: the bitten looked at the raised image and lived. Faith, in Jesus' own chosen picture, is a wound turning its gaze to the remedy. Then the sentence the whole Gospel funnels through: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16), with 3:17 guarding its tone: sent not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved.

Verses 19-21 give the free-will edge in door-and-light language: “the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.” The light arrives on its own initiative; coming to it, or not, remains ours. Do not press the point; the frame gets named next week.

Finally, the arc almost no one notices: John tracks Nicodemus across the whole Gospel. In John 7:50-51 he risks a procedural defense of Jesus before his peers. In John 19:39 he appears at the most dangerous possible moment, after the crucifixion, carrying about a hundred pounds of burial spices: an extravagant act of devotion, and since the burial had to be finished before the Sabbath began at sundown (Jn 19:31, 42), the man who once came by night now works in the light of day. John never records his confession; John records his trajectory. The slow yes is a real yes.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Numbers 21:4-9. The bronze serpent: the bitten look at the lifted image of the very thing that wounded them, and live. Jesus Himself selects this as the picture of the cross and of faith. The group finds it live.

Ezekiel 36:25-27. “I will sprinkle clean water upon you... a new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.” The prophets already pair water and Spirit for the remaking of a person; this is the background the teacher of Israel was expected to hear (Jn 3:10). Leader background.

Voices of the Church

St. Justin Martyr *First Apology (summary, c. AD 155)*

Describing Christian initiation to a pagan emperor in the mid-second century, little more than a century after the resurrection, Justin explains that converts are brought to water and reborn, and he cites Christ's own words that without this new birth one cannot enter the kingdom. He calls baptism illumination: the newly born receive light. A faithful summary of chapter 61.

St. Cyprian of Carthage *To Donatus (summary, c. AD 246)*

Cyprian describes his own adult conversion from the inside: what he thought impossible beforehand, a genuinely new start for a man already formed by his habits, he found actually happening in the water of rebirth; doubts settling, light entering, a second birth making a new man. One of antiquity's great before-and-after testimonies, summarized.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus *Oration 40, On Baptism (summary)*

Preaching in the fourth century, Gregory pours out names for baptism: gift, grace, illumination, garment of incorruption, bath of rebirth, seal. The pile of images makes one point: this is something received, not achieved; the vocabulary of baptism is the vocabulary of gift. A faithful summary.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1996:** grace defined: favor, the free and undeserved help God gives us to respond to His call.
- **CCC 1257:** the Lord affirms baptism's necessity in this very verse (Jn 3:5); and, in the same paragraph, the honest breadth: God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but He Himself is not bound by His sacraments.
- **CCC 2001: even the free response is prepared and carried by grace; our collaboration never precedes His initiative.**
- **CCC 2002:** God's free initiative demands man's free response: the study's frame, in the Church's own words.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

Your friend may be Nicodemus tonight: the real questions come privately, after, on the walk to the car or in a text the next morning. Be findable. Linger at the end; be the last to leave the parking lot. Whatever they ask you privately stays private; nothing is more corrosive than hearing your after-hours question repeated to the group as an anecdote. Two specific cautions: never ask anyone “have you been baptized” in front of the room, and if your friend was baptized long ago and has been away since, tonight's texts are not a club; the Church reads that baptism as still real, a seal not undone by wandering. And hand them Nicodemus's timeline explicitly if they seem to need it: John gives the slow yes three chapters and never once scolds it.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- **The First Word:** Nicodemus speaks first, and it is no exception: he comes because of the signs (Jn 3:2); the knock preceded the visit. Log it for the arc-trace.
- **Doors and Thresholds:** a night arrival at a threshold, and the session ends with light and the free coming-to-it (3:19-21). Protect; do not connect.
- **Next week is the finale:** confirm every participant still has their Week 1 sealed sheet. Send the reminder mid-week, cheerfully, without explaining why.

Session Goals

1. Present Piece Five: the gift and how it is received: grace, faith, new birth of water and Spirit, and the freedom to come to the light.
2. Walk John 3:1-21 inductively, keeping the birth imagery doing its own work: nobody births themselves.
3. Land the live discovery in Numbers 21: faith as the wound looking at the remedy.
4. Steelman the objection to ritual at full strength and answer it, including the good thief honestly.
5. Surface Nicodemus's full arc so every slow seeker in the room hears the permission John gives them.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then merge Build questions 1 and 2. Never cut the Numbers 21 discovery or the arc reveal; they carry the session.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly.

“God, some of us are here in broad daylight and some of us are here at night, and you receive both. Meet us at whatever hour we have actually arrived. Amen.”

The Knock and the Door (read aloud, under 3 minutes)

Piece Five: How the Gift Arrives

“Four pieces so far: made for God; a real wall; the answer is a person; and on the cross He paid for the wall in person. Tonight the piece everything has been waiting for: how does what happened on that hill two thousand years ago reach you, here, now? The Christian answer has a shape, and the shape is a gift. It starts on God's side, always, which is why the word is grace: undeserved, unearned, offered first. It is received by faith, which tonight's story will define better than any dictionary: a wound turning to look at the remedy. And Jesus names a doorway for it: being born again, of water and the Spirit, which Catholics have always understood as baptism, a birth, and notice what that image rules out: nobody has ever birthed themselves. The whole thing is receivable, not achievable. One more thing, and then the story: it can be received slowly. Watch the man who comes tonight with his questions in the dark, and where he ends up.”

Win

Markus Persson sold Minecraft for 2.5 billion dollars, and then posted from the far side of the finish line that hanging out in Ibiza, partying with famous people, able to do anything he wanted, he had never felt more isolated. The jackpot arrived; the new life did not.

1. If you could genuinely start over, a full reset with everything you now know, what would you do differently, and what makes you sure the reset would take?
2. Why do resolutions, reinventions, and fresh starts so often collapse back into the same person?

Build

Read John 3:1-8 aloud.

1. Verse 2: what do we know about who Nicodemus is, and what do you make of the hour he chooses? Is coming at night cowardice, wisdom, or something else?
2. Jesus says a person must be “born anew” to see the kingdom. Of all the images He could have chosen for starting over, why birth? What can you contribute to your own birth?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He is the establishment in one man: Pharisee, ruler, the teacher of Israel, and he comes in the dark, part caution, part honesty; night is when the real questions surface, and he takes his to the source, which is more than most of his peers ever did. And the birth image is doing doctrine: nobody attends their own birth as a contributor. A reset you perform on yourself is a renovation; what Jesus offers is a nativity, sourced from above (the Greek *anōthen* means both anew and from above; John intends the pun). The gift-shape of the whole thing is inside the metaphor before any theology is stated.

Read John 3:9-17 aloud.

3. Jesus specifies: “born of water and the Spirit” (v. 5), and then reaches for a story from the wilderness (vv. 14-15). Let’s find the story He is pointing at.

Live discovery: *have the group find Numbers 21:4-9 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

In Numbers 21 the bitten are dying of venom already in the bloodstream; the cure is not a task but a look: gaze at the lifted image and live. Jesus makes it His own diagram of the cross: “so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Faith, in His chosen picture, is not intellectual box-checking or moral achievement; it is the wound turning its eyes to the remedy. Then verses 16-17 give the engine behind it all: God so loved that He gave, and the Son was sent not to condemn the world but to save it. On the water: the Church has heard baptism in verse 5 from its first centuries, the new birth given a doorway; that is what Catholics believe, offered here as exactly that, and the birth image keeps it honest: a gift received, never a merit badge earned.

Read John 3:19-21 aloud.

4. “The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.” Notice who moves first, and notice what remains free. What do these verses say about how God treats human freedom?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The light arrives on its own initiative; nobody summoned it. And yet the verses speak of loving darkness, of coming or not coming to the light: the arrival is God’s, the approach is ours, though even our approaching is carried by grace; the Catechism says the very preparation of man for grace is already a work of grace (CCC 2001), and John states both without embarrassment. God, apparently, wants sons and daughters, not conscripts; a love that was compelled would not be love. Hold the thought; it has one more session to grow.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Full strength: “Water is water. A ritual cannot change anything real, and making salvation depend on a ceremony is arbitrary gatekeeping; what about everyone who never gets the ceremony?” Take the pieces in order. First, humans are not ghosts; we are bodies, and every serious human bond runs through physical acts that really change states: a signature makes a marriage or a citizenship, a handshake seals what words alone could not, and nobody calls a wedding ring arbitrary. A God who became flesh meeting embodied creatures through matter is not magic; it is consistency. Second, the Church’s own teaching carries the honest breadth the objection demands: God has bound salvation to baptism, and He Himself is not bound by His sacraments (CCC 1257). Exhibit A hung beside Jesus last week: the thief reached Paradise with no baptism recorded, no ceremony, nothing but a dying man’s plea of faith. The ordinary door is not the only door the Owner can open; but when the Owner has told you where the door is, walking toward it is not superstition. It is taking Him at His word.

Dig Deeper (optional)

John never records Nicodemus converting. He records something better: a trajectory. In John 7:50-51 the night visitor risks a procedural objection in Jesus’ defense before his own colleagues, and absorbs their sneer. In John 19:39, after the crucifixion, when association with Jesus is most dangerous, Nicodemus comes carrying about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes: a royal quantity, an extravagant, costly yes; and since the burial had to be done before sundown (Jn 19:42), the night visitor is now handling the body of Jesus in daylight. Three chapters, no scolding, one slow arrival. If anyone in this room needed permission to move at Nicodemus speed, the Gospel of John just gave it.

Send

3. “A wound turning to look at the remedy.” Where does that picture of faith sit with you, compared with the definitions of faith you grew up hearing?
4. Nicodemus got years. What would the next honest step look like at your speed, whatever your speed is?

Live It This Week

1. Find your Week 1 sheet and make sure you know where it is. Bring it next week, still folded. This is the only prep the final session needs.
2. Reread John 3:16-17 once, slowly, substituting nothing and adding nothing. Just let it say what it says.
3. Optional: next week we go back to the very beginning of the story. No advance reading; come as you are.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “God, some of us are at noon and some of us are at midnight, and you have never once turned away a night visitor. Give each of us the next step at our own honest speed. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 5, and repeat the one piece of homework aloud: find your Week 1 sheet, keep it folded, bring it next week.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- John 3:1-21, the night visit, born anew, water and the Spirit, the serpent lifted, God so loved, light and freedom

Live Discovery Text

- Numbers 21:4-9, the bronze serpent: look and live

Supporting Texts

- Ezekiel 36:25-27, clean water, new heart, new spirit (leader background)
- John 7:50-51 and John 19:39, the Nicodemus arc (Dig Deeper)
- Luke 23:39-43, recalled: the thief and the honest breadth of mercy (steelman)

Catechism

- CCC 1996, 1257, 2001, 2002

Memory Verse

- John 3:16

The Knock and the Door

- Piece Five: grace, faith, new birth of water and Spirit, the free coming to the light; sealed-sheet reminder issued

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home 5: Born Again at Night

One piece of homework: find your Week 1 sheet, keep it folded, bring it next week.

What We Found

A man who sold his game for 2.5 billion dollars posted from the far side of the jackpot that he had never felt more isolated: the reset arrived and the new life did not. Then we met the most credentialed man in John's Gospel carrying his real questions through the dark, and heard Jesus offer him something no reset can deliver: not a renovation but a birth, "anew" and "from above" at once, of water and the Spirit. We found the strange old story Jesus chose as His own diagram: the bitten in the wilderness who looked at the lifted image and lived, faith as a wound turning its eyes to the remedy. We heard the engine behind everything: God so loved the world that He gave, sent not to condemn but to save. And we watched the light arrive uninvited while the coming-to-it stayed free. Piece Five went on the table: the gift, and how it is received: grace first, faith that looks, a new birth Catholics have always found in baptism, and full permission, straight from John's Gospel, to arrive at Nicodemus speed.

The Story So Far

Piece One: You were made, on purpose, for a relationship with God; the restlessness is a homing signal.

Piece Five: What He did is offered to you as a gift: grace, faith, new birth of water and the Spirit. It can be received slowly.

Piece Four: On the cross, God paid for the wall in person; two men, same distance, only one asked.

Piece Three: The answer is a person, who asks each of us directly who we say He is.

Piece Two: Something real stands between us and what we were made for; a disease with a physician.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Justin Martyr *First Apology (summary, c. AD 155)*

Explaining the faith to a pagan emperor: converts are brought to water and reborn, and baptism is called illumination, for the newly born receive light.

St. Cyprian of Carthage *To Donatus (summary)*

His own adult conversion, from the inside: the new start he had thought impossible for a man already formed by his habits, actually happening in the water of rebirth.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus *Oration 40 (summary)*

His names for baptism: gift, grace, illumination, garment of incorruption, bath of rebirth, seal. The vocabulary of baptism is the vocabulary of gift.

Live It This Week

1. Find your Week 1 sheet. Keep it folded. Bring it next week.

2. Reread John 3:16-17 once, slowly. Let it say what it says.
3. No advance reading for the finale. Come as you are.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

Before Next Session

Next week we go back to the very beginning of the story, and we finish what we started in Week 1. Bring your sealed sheet.

Catechism references from tonight: CCC 1996, 1257, 2002.

What Do You Seek?

Session 6: The Door

A study for seekers, and for the friends who walk with them

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that the question this study is named for is the first sentence Jesus speaks in John's Gospel, traces for themselves the pattern that ran under every encounter, hears the assembled Gospel whole, and meets the verse the study has been quietly built on: He stands at the door and knocks, and the handle is on the inside.

Catholic Touchstone: God, infinitely perfect and blessed in Himself, in a plan of sheer goodness, calls man to seek Him, to know Him, to love Him with all his strength (CCC 1).

The Knock and the Door: Piece Six

This week's piece, in one sentence: The whole message is an invitation: He knocks and will not force the door; the yes is truly yours to give, and even that yes is His grace at work in your freedom.

Tonight the frame is finally named. Revelation 3:20 is read aloud for the first time, the threads are resolved by the group's own tracing, the sealed sheets are opened in private silence, and each person leaves with a response card nobody collects. Prepare the room accordingly: end the meal a little earlier, keep the lights warm, and rehearse the silences. This session is the reason the study exists; do not rush a minute of it.

What You Need to Know

John 1:35-42: the Baptist points, two of his disciples begin to follow, and then they reveal your group has been walking toward for six weeks: "Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, 'What do you seek?'" (Jn 1:38). These are the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John. The evangelist gives Him no sermon as an opener, no miracle, no title: a question, aimed at the seeking heart. The study's title was His question before it was ours.

Their answer is a location, not a doctrine: "Rabbi, where are you staying?" They do not want information about Him; they want to be where He is, which is what every ache in Session 1 was blindly asking for. His reply is the whole method of this study in three words: "Come and see" (Jn 1:39). And John adds the small, human timestamp, "it was about the tenth hour": the narrator remembers the exact hour of the afternoon his life changed. Eyewitness texture, worth a sentence in session.

The arc-trace is the session's centerpiece: the group, not the leader, walks back through all six encounters and answers one question per scene: who moved first? Jesus asked the woman for a drink. Forgiveness arrived before anyone in Capernaum requested it. Jesus raised the identity question Himself. On Calvary the initiative was positional: God arranged to die next to the thief. Nicodemus came at night, drawn by signs that had knocked first. And tonight Jesus turns and speaks first. Six scenes, one pattern, discovered rather than announced.

Then, and only then, Revelation 3:20 is read: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” Name what the group has already seen: the blocked door in Capernaum, gates and keys at Caesarea Philippi, the garden gate reopened from a cross, the night threshold, and now the door itself, which He knocks at rather than opens; the handle, as the old preacher’s image puts it, is on the inside. Note also what the verse promises on the far side of the door: a shared meal, which this group has been eating for six weeks. The image was never an abstraction; it was the room they were sitting in. Leader background: in its original setting this verse is addressed to the church in Laodicea, believers gone lukewarm, and its own wording then widens to each hearer: if any one hears my voice and opens the door. The invitation to a drifted church and the invitation to a seeker are the same invitation, but know the context in case someone reads the whole chapter and asks.

The private response: sealed sheets are opened in silence, each person alone with what they wrote in Week 1. Then the response card, distributed face down, filled out or not filled out, taken home by its owner, collected by no one. The card’s options are honest paths, including “not yet.” Freedom is not a concession this study makes reluctantly at the end; it has been the second half of the frame since the first knock. A love that was compelled would not be love, and the Church itself teaches that the response of faith must be free.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalms 27:8. “You have said, ‘Seek my face.’ My heart says to you, ‘Your face, LORD, do I seek.’” The final live discovery: even our seeking turns out to be a response; He said seek first. The psalm is the arc-trace in two lines.

Genesis 3:9. The first question God asks fallen humanity: “Where are you?” Leader background, and a quiet symmetry: the Bible’s first question to hiders, and John’s first question to seekers, are both God moving first.

Voices of the Church

St. Augustine *Confessions, Book 10*

“Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new; late have I loved you!... You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness.” The study’s first voice returns as its last: the restless heart of Session 1, writing from the far side of the opened door, and noting who called first.

Pope Benedict XVI *Deus Caritas Est, 1*

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” Six encounters later, the group can verify the claim from the text: it was never a system on offer. It was Him.

St. John Paul II *Homily at the inauguration of his pontificate, 1978*

“Be not afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ.” The sentence at the heart of a new pope’s inaugural homily is the sentence this study has been building toward: the knock is His; the door is yours.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1:** God calls man to seek Him, to know Him, to love Him: the study’s aim stated in the Catechism’s opening paragraph.

- **CCC 2002:** recalled from last week: God's free initiative demands man's free response.
- **CCC 160:** the response of faith must be free; nobody is to be forced to embrace the faith against their will. The response card is this paragraph in cardstock.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

Tonight's discipline is restraint. Do not watch your friend during the sealed-sheet silence; do not ask, tonight or ever, what they wrote or what they marked on the card. After tonight the program ends and the friendship continues, and the friendship is the delivery vehicle now: one coffee within two weeks, no agenda. If they want to keep going, tell them plainly what exists: this group's next study, the deep-dive sessions on the shelf, a Mass they can attend as a guest with you beside them, a pastor who will answer questions without a signup sheet. Offer with open hands. And if their card says not yet, believe them, stay their friend, and remember the man in Session 5 who took three chapters: the Gospel keeps a place for the slow yes.

Thread Watch (leader only): Resolution Night

- **The First Word:** resolved by the group in the arc-trace. Your only job is to ask the question, scene by scene, and stay out of the way.
- **Doors and Thresholds:** resolved when Revelation 3:20 is read. Name the five thresholds gently; let the room make the connections aloud.
- **The Sealed Sheet:** opened in private silence, never shared, never referenced afterward. The meal, the two rules, and the uncollected card are the study's final arguments: this whole thing was true to its word.

Session Goals

1. Land the reveal: the study's question is Jesus' first sentence in John's Gospel, and it was aimed at seekers.
2. Run the arc-trace so the group discovers the initiative pattern themselves, scene by scene.
3. Read Revelation 3:20 for the first time and let the door thread resolve in the room.
4. Present Piece Six: the assembled Gospel as a single invitation with the handle on the inside.
5. Hold the private response: sealed sheets in silence, response cards distributed and never collected.

Time Note

Budget differently tonight: Win stays short, Build is the arc-trace, and the final twenty minutes belong to the assembled Gospel, the silence, and the cards. If anything must go, cut the Dig Deeper; never compress the silence. End at the table, on purpose, with dessert.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly.

“God, six weeks ago we put a question on the table. Tonight, before we answer anything, let us find out whose question it was. Amen.”

Win

The last voice from the top is the oldest one. A celebrated professor of rhetoric on the imperial fast track ran the full experiment: pleasure, ambition, applause, philosophy, and found every cistern cracked. He wrote the conclusion as a prayer, and the Church put it near the front of her Catechism: “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” St. Augustine finished the sentence that Brady, Wallace, and Persson were each halfway through. Session 1's quote on a page has spent six weeks becoming a lab report.

1. Six weeks ago you named your version of the third Super Bowl ring. Has anything shifted in how you read your own restlessness since then?
2. Augustine ran the whole experiment before he turned around. Is there anything left on your list you still suspect might finally be enough?

Build: The Reveal and the Arc-Trace

Read John 1:35-42 aloud.

1. Verse 38 contains a piece of information this study has been saving for six weeks: these are the first words Jesus speaks in the entire Gospel of John. Sit with that. Why would John make this question the opening line of his whole account?
2. Look at what the two disciples answer. He asks what they seek; they answer with, of all things, an address: “where are you staying?” What are they actually asking for?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

John opens Jesus' public voice with a question to seekers because that is who the Gospel is for and what God has been doing since Eden, where His first question to hiding humanity was “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9). And the disciples' answer is the secret of the whole study: they do not request information or a doctrine; they want to be where He is. Every ache inventoried in Session 1 was this request, misaddressed. His answer is three words and it is the method of everything we have done here: “Come and see.” Then John, writing decades later, still remembers it was about four in the afternoon. You do not remember the hour of an idea; you remember the hour you met someone.

The Arc-Trace. *Leader: walk the group back through all six encounters, one question per scene: who moved first? Let them answer from memory; supply nothing unless truly stuck.*

3. The woman at the well. The paralytic in Capernaum. Caesarea Philippi. The thief on Calvary. Nicodemus at night. The two disciples tonight. Scene by scene: who moved first?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He asked her for a drink. Forgiveness arrived before anyone in the room requested it. He raised the identity question Himself. On Calvary the thief spoke first, but the nearness was arranged: God had positioned Himself to die within whispering distance of that man. Nicodemus walked through the night, drawn by signs that had already knocked. And tonight, Jesus turned and spoke first. Six scenes, one

pattern, no exceptions: in every encounter in this study, the initiative was His. We never once caught Him waiting to be found first.

4. One more discovery, the study's last. If the initiative was always His, what does that make of our seeking? Let's find Psalm 27:8.

Live discovery: *have the group find Psalm 27:8 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

"You have said, 'Seek my face.' My heart says to you, 'Your face, LORD, do I seek.'" Even the seeking was a response. He said seek before we sought; the restlessness of Session 1 was never a solo signal firing in the dark. It was an answer already forming to a voice already calling. The title of this study has been quoting Him all along.

The Knock and the Door: The Frame, Named

Read Revelation 3:20 aloud, for the first time in this study:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)

Then say, in your own words: "You have seen this verse acted out for six weeks without hearing it once. A door blocked in Capernaum, and faith went through the roof. Gates and keys at Caesarea Philippi. A garden gate, locked since Eden, reopened from a cross, today. A threshold crossed at night. And the promise on the far side of the door is a meal, which is what we have been eating together since Week 1. One detail in the verse is the whole reason this study is built the way it is: He stands and knocks. He does not pick the lock. The handle is on the inside. That handle is not a word in the verse; it is an old picture of what the verse shows, a Lord who asks for the door to be opened rather than opening it Himself. He has done everything, made you for Himself, named the wall, become the answer, paid for it in person, wrapped it as a gift, and still He will not force the door. The yes He waits for is truly yours; and when you give it, it will be His grace that steadied your hand on the handle, never a hand forcing yours."

Piece Six: The Assembled Message (read aloud, unhurried)

"Here is the whole message, in the order you received it. You were made, on purpose, for a relationship with God; the restlessness was the homing signal. Something real stood in the way; not a rule broken but a connection broken, a disease with a physician. The answer was never a technique; it is a person, who asked you to your face who you say He is. On the cross, He paid for the wall in person; two men hung the same distance from Him, and only one asked. What He did is offered to you as a gift: grace first, faith that looks, a new birth of water and the Spirit, receivable at Nicodemus speed. And now the last piece: all of it stands at your door and knocks. It does not break the door down. It knocked through six encounters, and it is knocking in whatever brought you to this table six weeks ago. The question He asked two men on a road, He is asking you: What do you seek? And His invitation is still three words long: come and see."

The Sealed Sheet and the Card

The sealed sheet: *"Take out your Week 1 sheet. In a moment, in silence, open it and read what you wrote when I asked what you were actually seeking. Compare it with what you have heard over six weeks. This is between you and the page; we will keep the silence for two full minutes." Keep the full two minutes. Do not watch anyone.*

The response card: *distribute cards face down. “This card is yours; nobody will collect it, tonight or ever. It lists honest next steps: keep exploring with this group when the next study begins; a private conversation with me or with a priest, questions welcome, no signup sheet; come to a Mass as a guest, with a friend beside you; begin the Church's path for those who want to enter, whenever you are ready; or, just as honestly: not yet. Mark it or pocket it blank. The door has a handle on the inside, and this card is proof we mean that.”*

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

One objection deserves the final word, so give it: “A decision reached in a warm room full of kind people is social pressure, not conviction. This whole study is a soft sales funnel.” Grant the premise entirely: a pressured yes is worthless, and Christianity itself says so; the Church teaches that the response of faith must be free, and that nobody is to be forced (CCC 160). Then point at the architecture: six weeks, and no one was ever called on, no answer was ever graded, the one written thing you produced was sealed and stays yours, and the card in your hand will never be collected. This study was built by people who believe the handle is on the inside because God built the door that way. If the knocking you may have felt these six weeks was only candlelight and good food, it will fade by Tuesday. If it does not fade, be honest about what that means, at whatever speed honesty takes.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Andrew's first act after the tenth hour is to find his brother: “He first found his brother Simon... He brought him to Jesus” (Jn 1:41-42). No argument is recorded, no sermon: found, told, brought. The brother he brought got a new name that afternoon, and the keys of Session 3 eventually landed on his shoulder. If someone brought you to this table six weeks ago, you have been living inside John 1:42 the whole time. There is no assignment here; just notice how the thing has always traveled: one person, walking beside another, saying come and see.

Send

3. Of the six pieces, which one will you still be thinking about in a month? Which one do you still argue with?
4. “Come and see” is an invitation with a next step inside it. Whatever you marked or did not mark tonight, what would come-and-see look like for you, at your speed?

Live It This Week

1. Keep the card where you will see it. Let it ask you its question once a day for a week.
2. Reread the six pieces on tonight's Take-Home once, aloud if you can, and notice which sentence lands differently than it did live.
3. If someone walked this study beside you, tell them one true thing about what these six weeks were like. They will want to know, and they promised not to ask.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Lord Jesus, you asked two men on a road what they were seeking, and they asked where you were staying, and you said come and see. Every person at this table has heard six weeks of knocking. Whatever each door does next, thank you for standing at all of them. Amen.” Then eat dessert; the study ends at the table on purpose.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” **Revelation 3:20**

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 6, announce whatever comes next for this group, and thank the room by name where you can.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Texts

- John 1:35-42, the first question, the address, come and see, the tenth hour, Andrew finds Simon
- Revelation 3:20, the door, the knock, the one inside opens, the meal

Live Discovery Text

- Psalm 27:8, seek my face; your face, LORD, do I seek

Supporting Texts

- Genesis 3:9, the first question to hiders (leader background)
- The arc-trace: John 4:7; Mark 2:5; Matthew 16:15; Luke 23:39-43; John 3:2; John 1:38

Catechism

- CCC 1, 2002, 160

Memory Verse

- Revelation 3:20

The Knock and the Door

- Piece Six: the assembled Gospel as invitation; frame named; sealed sheets opened privately; response cards distributed, never collected

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home 6: The Door

The study ends. The question, rightly heard, was His first. Keep this sheet.

What We Found

The last voice from the top was the oldest: a celebrated professor who ran the whole experiment, pleasure, ambition, applause, philosophy, and wrote the conclusion as a prayer: you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you (St. Augustine, Confessions 1.1). Then the reveal six weeks in the making: “What do you seek?” is the first sentence Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John, aimed at two seekers whose answer was an address, “where are you staying?” They wanted to be where He is; so did every ache we inventoried in Week 1. We traced all six encounters and found one pattern without exception: the initiative was always His, down to Psalm 27:8, where even our seeking turns out to answer a voice that spoke first: Seek my face. And we finally read the verse this study was built on: He stands at the door and knocks, He does not pick the lock, and the promise behind the door is a meal, like the one we have shared for six weeks. The handle is on the inside.

The Whole Message

Piece One: You were made, on purpose, for a relationship with God; the restlessness is a homing signal. Piece Two: Something real stands between us and what we were made for; a disease with a physician. Piece Three: The answer is a person, who asks each of us directly who we say He is. Piece Four: On the cross, God paid for the wall in person; two men, same distance, only one turned to Him and asked. Piece Five: What He did is offered as a gift: grace, faith, new birth of water and the Spirit, receivable at Nicodemus speed. Piece Six: All of it stands at your door and knocks. The handle is on the inside, and the invitation is three words: come and see.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Augustine *Confessions, Book 10*

“Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new; late have I loved you!... You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness.”

Pope Benedict XVI *Deus Caritas Est, 1*

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

St. John Paul II *Inauguration homily, 1978*

“Be not afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ.”

Where the Path Continues

- This group: ask your host what the next study is; you are already invited.

- A conversation: your host, or a priest, will take your questions privately; no signup sheet exists.
- A Mass: come as a guest, with a friend beside you; watching is a legitimate way to seek.
- The Church's path for those who decide to enter: it begins whenever you do.
- Not yet: also honest. Nicodemus got three chapters; Jesus asked him one pointed question (John 3:10), then kept teaching him into the night.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." **Revelation 3:20**

One Last Line

Keep this sheet with your Week 1 sheet. If the knocking does not fade by Tuesday, you know what it was, and you know the three words: **come and see.**

What Do You Seek?

Deep-Dive: The Guest (Zacchaeus)

A standalone session: any group, any order

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that Jesus invites Himself to the house of the most hated man in Jericho, that joy comes before reform and produces it, and that grace, while completely free, is never cheap: Zacchaeus pledged half his goods plus fourfold restitution, self-imposed.

Catholic Touchstone: Jesus not only forgave sinners; He made plain the effect of forgiveness by reintegrating them into the community and receiving them at His table (CCC 1443).

The Knock in This Encounter (leader only)

This deep-dive stands alone, but it carries the study's signature pattern in its most literal form: Jesus stops, calls the man by name, and invites Himself to the door of his house; Zacchaeus's freedom answers by coming down "with haste" and receiving Him "joyfully." **Spoiler discipline:** if your group has not yet finished the six core sessions, keep this framing to yourself; the pattern is theirs to discover there. If they have finished, expect someone to name it unprompted, and enjoy it.

What You Need to Know

Zacchaeus is not merely a tax collector; Luke calls him a *chief* tax collector, and rich (Lk 19:2): a franchise boss of collaboration with Rome, wealthy off his neighbors' backs, and hated with the special hatred small towns reserve for their own traitors. He is also short, and the crowd does not make room for him. So one of the richest men in Jericho climbs a tree like a child, because he "sought to see who Jesus was" (Lk 19:3). Curiosity undignified enough to climb is already something; honor it in your seekers.

Then the reversal the session turns on: Jesus stops under the tree, looks up, and calls him by name: "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today" (Lk 19:5). Nobody introduced them. And Jesus does not request hospitality; He announces it: "I must." The town's villain is publicly honored before he has reformed a single thing, and the crowd murmurs on cue: "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (Lk 19:7).

Watch the order of operations, because it is the Gospel's order everywhere: welcome first, transformation second, as fruit and not as fee. Zacchaeus receives Him joyfully (19:6), and then, standing at his own table, sentences himself: half his goods to the poor, and "if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold" (19:8). Fourfold is not a round number; it is the Law's own restitution rate for a stolen sheep, which the group will find live. The town's cheat voluntarily books himself under the statute's full rate for a stolen sheep, with every victim in town free to hold him to it. Joy did what shame never had.

Jesus' verdict names the day and the mission: "Today salvation has come to this house... For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (19:9-10). The seeker in the tree turns out to have been the sought.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 22:1. The Law's restitution table: a stolen sheep restored fourfold. Zacchaeus's number is not generosity plucked from the air; it is a legal self-sentencing at the statute's own rate; Exodus 22:1 requires five oxen for a stolen ox and four sheep for a stolen sheep. The group finds it live.

Ezekiel 34:11, 16. "Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep... I will seek the lost." God's own promise to do the shepherding in person; Luke 19:10 is Jesus claiming the verse as His job description. Leader background.

Voices of the Church

St. Cyril of Alexandria *Commentary on Luke (summary)*

Cyril notes that Zacchaeus's climb was small faith in a small man, and that Christ, who sees the hidden movement of every heart, met the flicker of curiosity with a self-invitation; the seeking of Zacchaeus was itself already Christ's drawing. A faithful summary of his homily on this passage.

St. Augustine *Sermons on the New Testament (summary)*

Preaching on this scene, Augustine delights in the indignity: a rich official scrambling up a sycamore, a fig tree of no reputation, and finds in it a picture of the Gospel itself: the man willing to look foolish to see Christ is the man Christ stops for. A faithful summary of his preaching on Zacchaeus.

St. Bede the Venerable *Commentary on Luke (summary)*

Bede reads the sycamore as the crowd's verdict overturned: the one the town would not make room for is given the best seat, and the house nobody respectable would enter becomes the address where salvation is announced by name. A faithful summary.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1443:** forgiveness made visible: Jesus reintegrates forgiven sinners into the community and receives them at His table.
- **CCC 2412:** commutative justice requires restitution of stolen goods, with Zacchaeus's pledge cited as the example.
- **CCC 545:** Jesus invites sinners to the table of the kingdom; the invitation itself is the mercy.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

Somebody in your room knows what it is to be pre-judged by religious people: the divorce, the job, the reputation, the family story. This is their session. The crowd's murmur in verse 7 is the sound they expect from church, and the session's whole force is that Jesus honors the town's villain publicly, by name, before any reform. Do not blunt that. Also watch the money talk: it is easy for a group to get comfortable auditing Zacchaeus's wealth from a safe distance. If the conversation turns smug, the leader's move is the honest one: every person at this table has a version of the thing Zacchaeus was clinging to, and Jesus invites Himself past all of them.

Standalone Notes

- No dependencies: this session can be run before, during, or after the six-session core, or on its own.

- If run after the core, the group may connect Jesus at the door of a house, the language of “today,” and the initiative pattern on their own; confirm from the text and add nothing.
- Pairs naturally with the deep-dive on the rich young man: two rich men, two answers; run them in either order and the contrast preaches itself.

Session Goals

1. Establish who Zacchaeus is and what his tree-climb costs him in dignity.
2. Land the reversal: Jesus initiates, by name, before any reform.
3. Walk the order of operations: welcome, joy, then justice as fruit.
4. Land the live discovery in Exodus 22:1: fourfold as self-sentencing at the Law's own rate for a stolen sheep.
5. Close on Luke 19:10: the seeker in the tree was the sought.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then merge Build questions 1 and 2. Never cut the Exodus discovery; the receipts are the argument.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. If new faces are present, state the two rules: nobody gets called on; nobody's answer gets graded.

“God, you know everything this town knows about each of us, and more. Come to our house anyway. Amen.”

Win

Jim Carrey, at the top of the industry, put it this way: he wished everyone could get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of, so they could see that it is not the answer. Zacchaeus had run exactly that experiment in Jericho, and it had cost him every friend he had.

1. What do people assume about someone before meeting them, based purely on how they made their money?
2. Have you ever wanted to see something badly enough to look ridiculous doing it? What was it?

Build

Read Luke 19:1-7 aloud.

1. Assemble the file on Zacchaeus from verses 1-4: his job, his wealth, his standing with the crowd, and what he is willing to do to see Jesus. What does the tree-climb tell you about him?
2. Verse 5 is full of surprises. Count them: what does Jesus do, what does He know, and what does He announce rather than request?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Chief tax collector: the franchise boss of collaboration, rich off his neighbors, and hated accordingly; the crowd will not even let him through. Yet one of the richest men in town scrambles up a sycamore like a schoolboy because he “sought to see who Jesus was.” Undignified curiosity is still seeking, and it is enough. Then verse 5: Jesus stops, knows his name with no introduction, and does not ask for hospitality but declares it: “I must stay at your house today.” The town's villain is honored by name, in public, before he has reformed anything, and verse 7 supplies the soundtrack: the murmur of every respectable person who has ever watched grace go to the wrong address.

Read Luke 19:8-10 aloud.

3. Look at the order of events across verses 6-8: what happens first, and what follows? What did the welcome produce that a lifetime of the town's contempt never had?
4. Half his goods to the poor, and fourfold restitution to anyone defrauded. Fourfold is a strangely specific number. Let's find where it comes from.

Live discovery: *have the group find Exodus 22:1 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Joy comes first: he received Him joyfully, and then, unprompted, the reform pours out of the joy. Contempt had decades to fix Zacchaeus and produced a chief tax collector; one welcome produced a philanthropist with a restitution schedule. And the number is a legal citation: Exodus 22:1 sets fourfold restoration as the Law's penalty for a stolen sheep (an ox costs five). Zacchaeus sentences himself at the statute's full rate, publicly, in front of the very people able to hold him to it. This is conversion with receipts: grace was completely free, and his public pledge committed him to more than any court would

have extracted.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Full strength: “Instant conversions are cheap theater. A lifetime of extortion, canceled over one dinner because the celebrity noticed him? He got swept up in a moment, and moments fade.” Grant the kernel: moments do fade, and religious emotion is not reform. Then point at what the text actually reports, because Luke seems to have anticipated the objection: the conversion here is not a feeling but a filing. Half his estate, out the door; fourfold restitution, self-assessed at the Law’s own rate, owed to the exact people best positioned to hold him to it. Every victim in Jericho becomes an auditor of this dinner-table pledge. If it was theater, it was theater with his entire fortune posted as bond. The honest question the story leaves is not whether the moment was real; a pledge this public and this costly answers that. It is why joy accomplished in an evening what shame had failed to do in a career.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Luke has a habit worth showing the group: the word “today.” Today a Savior is born (2:11); today this scripture is fulfilled (4:21); today salvation has come to this house (19:9); and to a dying man, today you will be with me in Paradise (23:43). In Luke, God’s mercy has a delivery date, and it is never “eventually.” Ask the group what it would mean to take the word seriously.

Send

3. “Welcome first, transformation second.” Where have you seen that order work on a real person? Where have you seen the reverse order fail?
4. The crowd murmured because grace went to the wrong address. Whose address would scandalize people today, and what does your answer reveal?

Live It This Week

1. Zacchaeus’s curiosity was undignified and it was enough. Take one undignified step of curiosity this week: the question you have felt silly asking, asked.
2. If there is a person you have written off the way Jericho wrote off Zacchaeus, do one small thing this week that treats them as callable by name.
3. Read Luke 19:1-10 once more, alone, and put yourself in the tree.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Lord, you invited yourself past everything the town knew. Do it again, here. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.” Luke 19:10

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Luke 19:1-10, the tree, the self-invitation, the joyful welcome, the fourfold pledge, the verdict

Live Discovery Text

- Exodus 22:1, fourfold restitution: the Law's own rate for a stolen sheep, self-imposed

Supporting Texts

- Ezekiel 34:11, 16, I myself will seek the lost (leader background)
- Luke 2:11; 4:21; 23:43, Luke's "today" pattern (Dig Deeper)

Catechism

- CCC 1443, 2412, 545

Memory Verse

- Luke 19:10

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home: The Guest (Zacchaeus)

A standalone deep-dive session

What We Found

The chief tax collector of Jericho, a rich man and, by every signal in the story, a despised one, climbed a tree like a child because he wanted to see who Jesus was, and he was too small to see over the crowd. Then Jesus stopped, knew his name with no introduction, and did not request hospitality but announced it: "I must stay at your house today." The town's villain was honored publicly before he had reformed anything, and all who saw it murmured on cue. What followed reversed everything shame had failed to do for decades: he received Jesus joyfully, and the joy produced justice: half his goods to the poor, and fourfold restitution to anyone he had defrauded, the penalty the Law set for a stolen sheep in Exodus 22:1, self-imposed. Grace was completely free, and what it drew out of him he pledged on the spot, gladly. The verdict named the day and the mission: today salvation has come to this house, for the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost. The seeker in the tree had been the sought all along.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Cyril of Alexandria *Commentary on Luke (summary)*

Christ, who sees the hidden movement of every heart, met a flicker of undignified curiosity with a self-invitation.

St. Augustine *Sermons (summary)*

The man willing to look foolish to see Christ is the man Christ stops for.

St. Bede the Venerable *Commentary on Luke (summary)*

The one the town would not make room for is given the best seat, and the house nobody respectable would enter becomes the address where salvation is announced by name.

Live It This Week

1. Take one undignified step of curiosity: ask the question you have felt silly asking.
2. Treat one written-off person as callable by name, in one small concrete way.
3. Read Luke 19:1-10 once more, alone, from inside the tree.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." **Luke 19:10**

If You Want More

This session stands alone. It pairs powerfully with the deep-dive on the rich young man. **Catechism references:** CCC 1443, 2412, 545.

What Do You Seek?

Deep-Dive: The Door That Stayed Shut (The Rich Young Man)

A standalone session: any group, any order

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers the Gospel's most sobering scene: a sincere, morally serious man receives a direct personal call from Jesus, is loved as he hears it, and walks away; and that the no is real, respected, and answered not with a chase but with the sentence that keeps the story open: all things are possible with God.

Catholic Touchstone: Jesus' answer to the rich young man draws the whole moral life toward its center: keeping the commandments, and then the invitation, addressed to freedom: come, follow me (CCC 2052-2053).

The Knock in This Encounter (leader only)

This is the study's shadow session: the encounter where the door stays shut. The man initiates by running and kneeling, but the decisive move is still Christ's: the look of love and the personal call (Mk 10:21). The freedom is so real that it can refuse, and Jesus lets it: no chase, no renegotiated offer, no withdrawal of the love. **Spoiler discipline:** if your group has not finished the six core sessions, keep this framing leader-only; if they have, this session is the frame's proof of honesty, and someone will likely say so.

What You Need to Know

Take the man's resume seriously, because Mark does. He runs to Jesus and kneels: eagerness plus reverence. His question is the right question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk 10:17). His claim stands unchallenged: the commandments, "all these I have observed from my youth" (10:20), and Jesus does not dispute it. This is not a hypocrite being exposed; it is the best version of the moral achiever, and every high-performing seeker in your room will recognize the type from the inside.

Handle verse 18 honestly, because a sharp seeker will raise it: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Jesus is not denying His divinity; He is auditing the man's premise. The man may have used "good" as little more than a polite address; Jesus makes him look at the word's actual weight: either stop using it casually, or follow its logic to where it leads. The verse is a raised stake, not a disclaimer, and it fits the pattern of a teacher who answers questions with better questions.

Then the verse the whole session must protect: "And Jesus looking upon him loved him" (10:21). Mark says this of no other individual in his Gospel. The hard call that follows, sell, give, come, follow, is spoken inside the love, not instead of it, and the man's refusal does not revoke it. When he goes away sorrowful, "for he had great possessions" (10:22), Jesus does not run after him, sweeten the terms, or condemn him. He lets a loved man walk, because a yes that cannot be a no is not a yes.

The call itself was diagnostic, not a universal tariff. "You lack one thing": the one thing was *his* one thing. Zacchaeus gave half and was saved; Joseph of Arimathea stayed rich and buried the Lord. But do not use that fact to defang the scene: Jesus really does say how hard it is for those with riches to enter

the kingdom, hard enough to astonish the disciples twice, and His resolution is not a loophole but a miracle: “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God” (10:27). Salvation was never purchasable, not even by renunciation; it is a gift that makes possible what men cannot do. That sentence is why the story, and every story like it, stays open.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 20:1-17. The live discovery: the group compares Jesus' commandment list in Mark 10:19 against the Decalogue and finds what is missing: the commandment against coveting (with “do not defraud” standing in the gap). The omission is striking, and many interpreters take it as deliberate: the one commandment the man could not honestly claim is the one Jesus leaves off the list, so that “you lack one thing” lands precisely on the wound.

Ecclesiastes 5:10. “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money.” Israel's own wisdom already knew the diagnosis. Leader background.

Voices of the Church

St. Anthony of the Desert *as recorded by St. Athanasius, Life of Antony (summary)*

Around the year 270, a wealthy young Egyptian walked into church as the Gospel of the rich young man was being read in Matthew's account, heard “go, sell what you have” (Mt 19:21), took it as addressed to himself, and did it. The great flowering of desert monasticism traces to one man declining to walk away from this passage; the Church calls Antony its father, though Christian ascetics lived before him. A faithful summary of Athanasius's account.

St. Francis of Assisi *early biographical tradition (summary)*

A millennium later, a merchant's son stripped himself of his inheritance before the bishop of Assisi and embraced total poverty; and when Francis and his first companion opened the Gospel book to learn their way of life, the first text they found was this very command, “go, sell what you have” (Mt 19:21), which the earliest Franciscan Rule quotes in its opening lines. The passage the rich young man refused has been accepted, and lived, more than once, and the results are on the record. A faithful summary of the early biographical tradition, including the Legend of the Three Companions.

Pope St. John Paul II *Veritatis Splendor (summary)*

John Paul II opened his great encyclical on the moral life with an extended meditation on this same encounter as Matthew tells it (Mt 19:16-21): the young man's question is every person's question, the commandments are the first answer, and the call to follow Christ is addressed to human freedom, which God's grace assists but never replaces. A faithful summary of sections 6-22.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2052-2053:** this very dialogue: the commandments as the first answer, and the call to follow Christ as the invitation beyond them.
- **CCC 1723:** true beatitude is not found in riches, fame, or power, but in God alone.
- **CCC 2002:** God's free initiative demands man's free response; this session shows the response withheld, and the initiative undiminished.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

For a seeker who has felt the whole study circling toward a decision, this is the most reassuring session on the shelf, and you should let it be: the no is real, it is spoken to a man Jesus loves, and nobody chases him down the road. Say that plainly if your friend needs it. Two cautions. First, the money conversation: do not let the group audit the rich from a comfortable distance; the “one thing” is not always money, and every person at the table has one. Second, resist tidy endings: the text does not tell us what became of the man, and neither should we. What we can say is what verse 27 says: the door he could not open is not therefore locked; all things are possible with God.

Standalone Notes

- No dependencies: run before, during, or after the core, or alone.
- Pairs with the Zacchaeus deep-dive as a deliberate diptych: two rich men, two endings to an encounter with the same Lord; either order works.
- If run after the core, expect the group to contrast this scene with the good thief unprompted: the man with everything refuses; the man with nothing asks. Confirm from the texts and add nothing.

Session Goals

1. Establish the man's genuine moral seriousness; this is not a hypocrite story.
2. Handle verse 18 honestly as a raised stake, not a denial.
3. Land the live discovery: the missing commandment in Jesus' list, and where “you lack one thing” strikes.
4. Protect verse 21: the call is spoken inside love, and the refusal does not revoke it.
5. Close on verse 27: impossible with men, possible with God; the story stays open.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then merge Build questions 1 and 2. Never cut the live discovery or the verse 21 question; they are the session's hinges.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. State the two rules if new faces are present: nobody gets called on; nobody's answer gets graded.

"God, tonight's story does not end the way we want it to. Give us the honesty to sit with it anyway. Amen."

Win

1. Think of something you could not put down even if you became convinced you should: a habit, a role, a possession, a grudge, an image of yourself. You do not have to name it. What makes some things impossible to release?
2. Is there a difference between admiring a way of life and being willing to live it? Where have you felt that gap?

Build

Read Mark 10:17-20 aloud.

1. Build the man's resume from these verses: how he approaches, what he asks, what his record is. Is there anything insincere here? What kind of person is this?
2. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Is Jesus deflecting a compliment, or doing something else with it?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The resume goes unchallenged and the manner is earnest: he runs, he kneels, he asks the biggest question there is, and his commandment-keeping goes unchallenged. This is the moral achiever at his best, the person who has done everything right and can feel that it has not been enough; many seekers know him from the mirror. And verse 18 is not a deflection but an audit: the man has perhaps used "good" as a pleasantry, and Jesus makes him weigh the word: only God is good, so either retract it, or follow its logic all the way to its conclusion. The stake is raised, not lowered.

3. Look carefully at the commandments Jesus lists in verse 19 and compare them with the Ten Commandments. Let's find Exodus 20 and check the list against the original. What is missing?

Live discovery: *have the group find Exodus 20:1-17, compare it with Mark 10:19, and name what Jesus left off. Give them time; this one rewards patience.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Jesus lists the commandments toward neighbor, but the commandment against coveting is missing, with "do not defraud" standing near its place. Many readers see the omission as a scalpel: the one commandment this man could not honestly claim is the one Jesus declines to let him claim. So when Jesus says "you lack one thing," the sentence lands exactly on the gap in the list. The man's possessions did not appear in his moral inventory because they were the lens he was taking the inventory through.

Read Mark 10:21-27 aloud.

4. Before the hard sentence comes a short one: "And Jesus looking upon him loved him." Mark says this about no other individual in his Gospel. Why does it matter that the call arrives inside that look?

5. He goes away sorrowful, and Jesus lets him. No chase, no better offer, no condemnation. What does Jesus' restraint tell you about how God treats human freedom, and what does verse 27 do to the story's ending?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The love comes first and is never revoked: the call is not a trap set for a hypocrite but a door opened for a beloved man, and the sorrow of verse 22 is the sorrow of a man who was loved as he heard the call. Then the restraint: a yes that cannot be a no is not a yes, and Jesus honors the refusal at the cost of watching a loved man walk. But verse 27 forbids us to close the file: what is impossible with men, including this man releasing his one thing, is possible with God. Mark never tells us the ending, and the Church has never presumed to. The door stayed shut that afternoon; the text refuses to say it stayed shut forever.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Two objections deserve full strength. First: "So Christianity demands poverty; this is hostility to human flourishing dressed as holiness." Answer from the record: the call was diagnostic, aimed at this man's one thing; Zacchaeus gave half and heard "salvation has come to this house," and Joseph of Arimathea stayed wealthy and used it to bury the Lord. The Gospel is not a flat tax on possessions; it is a demand for the throne, and it identifies whatever currently occupies it. Second, from the opposite side: "Then nobody really has to do anything; the bar was rhetorical." Answer honestly: tell that to Anthony and Francis, who took the words at face value and remade the world; and sit with the fact that Jesus let the astonishment stand: it is hard, camel-through-a-needle hard, for the rich to enter. The resolution is neither a loophole nor an achievable price. It is verse 27: salvation cannot be purchased at any price, including total renunciation; it is a gift that makes the impossible possible. Both objections assume the door is opened by payment. The whole scene exists to deny it.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Peter's reaction in 10:28 is wonderfully human: "Lo, we have left everything and followed you," in other words, we did the thing he would not; what do we get? And Jesus, instead of rebuking the accounting, answers it extravagantly: a hundredfold now, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, "with persecutions," and eternal life (10:29-30). The honesty of "with persecutions" in the middle of the promise is its own credential: this recruiter reads out the costs.

Send

3. If Jesus' "one thing you lack" were aimed at you with the same precision it was aimed at him, where would it land? You do not have to say it aloud.
4. The man walked away and the love did not. What does it change to know that a no is heard, respected, and not the end of the file?

Live It This Week

1. Name your one thing to yourself, privately, in writing if you can bear it. Diagnosis is not surrender; it is honesty.
2. Do one small act this week that loosens its grip: give something away, skip one indulgence of it, say one true sentence about it to someone safe.
3. Read Mark 10:17-31 once more, alone, and let verse 21 be about you.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Lord, you looked at him and loved him, and you let him walk, and you never said it was over. Look at each of us that way, and keep our files open. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.” Mark 10:27

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Mark 10:17-31, the question, the audit of “good,” the look of love, the one thing, the sorrowful exit, the astonished disciples, the open ending

Live Discovery Text

- Exodus 20:1-17, the Decalogue compared with Mark 10:19: the missing commandment

Supporting Texts

- Ecclesiastes 5:10, he who loves money will not be satisfied with money (leader background)
- Luke 19:1-10, Zacchaeus: the diptych partner (steelman)
- Mark 10:28-31, Peter's accounting and the hundredfold (Dig Deeper)

Catechism

- CCC 2052-2053, 1723, 2002

Memory Verse

- Mark 10:27

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home: The Door That Stayed Shut

A standalone deep-dive session

What We Found

A morally serious man ran to Jesus, knelt, and asked the right question, with what he said was a clean record behind it: all these, he told Jesus, he had observed from his youth. Jesus audited his casual use of “good,” and when He listed the commandments, one was missing: the commandment against coveting. Many readers have heard in that omission a quiet diagnosis, the commandment this man could least confidently claim; if so, “you lack one thing” landed exactly on the gap. Before the hard call came a sentence Mark writes about no other individual: Jesus, looking upon him, loved him. Then: sell, give, come, follow. And the man went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions, and Jesus let him go: no chase, no better offer, no condemnation, no withdrawal of the love. The disciples were astonished, and the resolution was not a loophole but a miracle: with men it is impossible, but not with God. The text never tells us his ending, and the Church has never presumed to. The door stayed shut that afternoon; nothing in the story says it stayed shut forever.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Athanasius, Life of Antony 2 (summary)

Around AD 270 a wealthy young Egyptian named Anthony heard this Gospel read, took “go, sell what you have” as addressed to himself, and did it. Monasticism traces to his yes.

St. Francis of Assisi Legend of the Three Companions (summary)

A millennium later the same words were drawn again. In the church of St. Nicholas in Assisi, Francis and his first companion, Bernard of Quintavalle, opened the Gospel book to learn God’s will, and the first passage they found was: if you would be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor. They took it literally and did it. The refused passage has been accepted, and the results are on the record.

Pope St. John Paul II *Veritatis Splendor* (summary)

His encyclical on the moral life opens its first chapter with this encounter: the young man’s question is every person’s question, and the call to follow is addressed to freedom, which grace assists but never replaces.

Live It This Week

1. Name your one thing to yourself, privately. Diagnosis is not surrender; it is honesty.
2. Do one small act that loosens its grip.
3. Read Mark 10:17-31 once more, and let verse 21 be about you.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.” Mark 10:27

If You Want More

This session stands alone. Before the Zacchaeus deep-dive, read Luke 19:1-10. **Catechism references:** CCC 2052-2053, 1723, 2002.

What Do You Seek?

Deep-Dive: Say the Word (The Centurion)

A standalone session: any group, any order

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that the faith Jesus marvels at belongs to the furthest outsider in the room, a Gentile officer of the forces holding Israel down, traditionally read as a Roman; that this faith is not a mood but a soldier's inference from evidence about authority; and that his one sentence is placed on the lips of the faithful at every Mass in the Roman Rite.

Catholic Touchstone: Before so great a sacrament, the faithful can only echo humbly and with ardent faith the words of the centurion: Lord, I am not worthy (CCC 1386).

The Knock in This Encounter (leader only)

The centurion approaches first, but the sequence behind the scene is the study's pattern intact: he comes because reports of Jesus reached Capernaum before he did; the word was out ahead of the asking. **Spoiler discipline:** if your group has not finished the six core sessions, keep this framing leader-only. If they have, the “meal with the outsiders” promise in verse 11 will land with extra weight; let them find it.

What You Need to Know

Measure the distance this man crosses. A centurion is Gentile military power in a uniform: a professional soldier of the regime holding Israel down (in Galilee, likely in the service of Herod Antipas, Rome's client), traditionally read as a Roman, the last resume in Capernaum you would nominate for a faith award. And his errand is for a servant: “my servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress” (Mt 8:6). A Gentile officer, publicly begging an itinerant Jewish rabbi, on behalf of a slave. Every line of the setup is upside down.

Jesus offers to come. The centurion declines the house call with the sentence the Church never stopped repeating: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed” (Mt 8:8). Then he explains his reasoning, and the reasoning is the session: “For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes” (8:9). He is not working up a feeling; he is arguing from his profession. A commander's word does not need his physical presence to be effective, because the word carries the authority of the whole chain above it. If Jesus commands with God's authority, distance is irrelevant. It is a soldier's inference from the reports of Jesus that had reached him, and it happens to be the most precise theology anyone has spoken to Jesus so far in Matthew.

Jesus' response is one of the very few places the Gospels report Him marveling: “Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (8:10). The record-setting faith in Matthew's Gospel belongs to the outsider's outsider. And Jesus widens the lens immediately: “many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (8:11): the table is going global, and this soldier's faith is the occasion for the announcement.

The Catholic payoff is direct enough to say plainly to seekers: at every Mass in the Roman Rite, moments before Communion, the congregation says this man's sentence, adapted by the Church: Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed. A seeker who visits a Mass will hear a Roman soldier's words in every mouth in the building. Few bridges from a living room study to a Sunday liturgy are this short.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 107:19-20. "He sent forth his word, and healed them." The psalm already knows what the centurion inferred: God heals at the range of His word. The group finds it live.

Genesis 1:3. "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." The deepest background: in Israel's scriptures, God's word does not describe reality; it commands it. The centurion's military logic lands, without his knowing it, on the Bible's first page. Leader background.

Voices of the Church

St. Augustine *Sermon 62, on Matthew 8:8 (summary)*

Augustine loved the paradox of verse 8: by declaring himself unworthy to receive Christ under his roof, the centurion showed himself worthy to receive Christ into his heart. Humility, Augustine argues, is not the opposite of bold faith but its foundation. A faithful summary of his preaching on this passage.

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew (summary)*

Chrysostom marvels at the marveling: the teacher astonished by the student. He points out that the centurion understood Christ's authority more precisely than the crowds who had seen the miracles up close, reasoning his way from his own command to Christ's, and that Jesus publicized the Gentile's faith deliberately, to teach Israel from an outsider. A faithful summary.

The Roman Missal *Communion Rite*

"Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." The Church judged one anonymous soldier's sentence so exact that she placed it, lightly adapted, on the lips of the faithful at every Mass in the Roman Rite, at the threshold of Communion.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1386:** the faithful echo the centurion's own words before receiving the Eucharist: the session's sentence, canonized by the liturgy.
- **CCC 543:** the kingdom is for all: what verse 11's east-and-west table announces.
- **CCC 153:** faith is a grace, and it is also a genuinely human act: the centurion's reasoning and God's gift are not competitors.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

This is the outsider's session, so know your room. The friend who was not raised in anything, who feels like the occupying army every time they walk into a church, needs to hear tonight's headline stated flat: the faith Jesus marveled at belonged to the person with the least religious standing in Capernaum, and the table in verse 11 was announced for people exactly like them. If there are veterans or service members present, the centurion's authority logic is their home turf; ask, do not lecture, and let them

explain chain-of-command to the group better than you could. And the Mass connection is your cleanest “come and see” bridge in the whole catalog: extend the invitation once, warmly, with yourself as the seatmate, and let it rest.

Standalone Notes

- No dependencies: run before, during, or after the core, or alone.
- Pairs well with the Zacchaeus deep-dive (two outsiders honored) or as a follow-up for a group heading toward a Mass visit, since the liturgy quotes this session.
- Luke 7:1-10 preserves a fuller version with Jewish elders as intermediaries; Matthew's compression keeps the exchange direct. If a sharp reader raises the difference, name it honestly: two evangelists, one event, different levels of narrative detail, no contradiction in substance.

Session Goals

1. Establish the full distance the centurion crosses: Gentile, occupier, officer, pleading for a slave.
2. Land the authority argument as reasoning, not mood: a soldier's inference from evidence.
3. Register Jesus' marveling and the east-and-west table: record faith from the furthest outsider.
4. Land the live discovery in Psalm 107:19-20: healing at the range of the word.
5. Make the Mass connection plainly: this session's sentence is said before Communion at every Mass in the Roman Rite.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then merge Build questions 1 and 2. Never cut the Missal connection; it is the session's bridge out of the living room.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. State the two rules if new faces are present: nobody gets called on; nobody's answer gets graded.

“God, some of us feel like insiders here and some of us feel like the occupying army. Tonight's story says the table is longer than we think. Amen.”

Win

1. Whose word do you trust so completely that you would act on it without checking: a doctor, a mechanic, a friend, a parent? What earned that trust?
2. Have you ever been the outsider in a room where everyone else belonged? What did it take to speak up anyway?

Build

Read Matthew 8:5-9 aloud.

1. Inventory the distance this man crosses to make this request: his nationality, his job, his rank, and who he is asking for. What does each detail cost him?
2. Jesus offers a house call, and the centurion declines it: “only say the word.” Then he explains his logic from his own profession (v. 9). Put his argument in your own words. Is this a feeling, or a deduction?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A Gentile officer of the power structure holding Israel down, publicly petitioning a Jewish rabbi, on behalf of a servant: every layer inverts the expected order, and each costs him standing with somebody: with Rome, with his rank, with the crowd. Then the argument, and it is an argument: a commander's word is effective at any distance because it carries the authority of the whole chain above him; he says go, and it happens, without his presence. If Jesus commands with God's authority, then presence, distance, and roofs are irrelevant: the word suffices. He has reasoned from what he has heard of Jesus to a conclusion about Jesus' authority, the way a soldier reads a chain of command. It is the most precise theology spoken to Jesus so far in Matthew's Gospel, and it comes from the last resume anyone would have picked.

3. “Only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” Israel's scriptures already knew about healing at the range of a word. Let's find it.

Live discovery: *have the group find Psalm 107:19-20 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

“Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he sent forth his word, and healed them.” The psalm describes exactly what the centurion requested: healing dispatched at the range of God's word, no house call required. And behind the psalm stands the Bible's first page, where God's word does not describe reality but commands it: let there be, and there was. The soldier's military logic landed, without his knowing it, on Genesis 1.

Read Matthew 8:10-13 aloud.

4. The Gospels almost never show Jesus astonished. Here He marvels: “not even in Israel have I found such faith.” Why does the record-setting faith in this Gospel belong to the furthest outsider, and what is Jesus announcing with the east-and-west table in verse 11?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The insider's familiarity can inoculate: those closest to the evidence had categories to file Jesus into, while the outsider looked with a professional's fresh eyes and drew the straight-line conclusion. And verse 11 turns one Roman's faith into a policy announcement: many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The kingdom's guest list is going global, and the announcement is made over the faith of a Gentile soldier. For anyone who has ever felt like the last person a church would want: this verse is the counter-evidence, spoken by the host Himself.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Full strength: “This story trains credulity. 'Faith healing' has killed people whose parents prayed instead of calling doctors; celebrating a man for believing a healing could happen at a distance is celebrating magical thinking.” Grant the real harm: treating belief as a technique that substitutes for medicine has done genuine damage, and the Church condemns it; Catholic Christianity built the hospital system precisely because faith and medicine were never rivals. Then look at what the centurion actually does, because it is the opposite of magical thinking: he does not visualize an outcome or work up intensity; he weighs what has reached him about a specific person's authority and acts on the assessment, exactly as he would evaluate an officer's commission. Christian faith is trust in a person, not confidence in a technique; it is a grace, God's gift, and at the same time a genuinely human act that the evidence makes reasonable (CCC 153, 156). The question the story leaves a skeptic is not “can believing hard bend reality,” which is superstition, but “what did this trained assessor of authority see in Jesus that produced this inference,” which is history, and worth investigating.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Say the Mass connection plainly, because for a seeker it is startling: at every Mass in the Roman Rite, seconds before Communion, the congregation says this anonymous soldier's sentence, adapted by the Church: Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed. The Church heard one Gentile outsider get the theology exactly right and decided everyone should say it forever. If anyone from this table ever visits a Mass, they will hear tonight's session in every mouth in the building; invite them to listen for it.

Send

3. The centurion's humility and his audacity arrive in the same sentence: not worthy, and, say the word. Which half comes harder for you?
4. He reasoned his way to trust from the evidence in front of him. What evidence about Jesus have these sessions actually put in front of you, and what would a fair assessor do with it?

Live It This Week

1. Once this week, act on a trustworthy word without triple-checking it, and notice what trust actually feels like as an act.
2. If you know someone who feels like the occupying army around religious people, tell them this story exists.
3. Optional: if you ever visit a Mass, listen for the centurion's sentence just before Communion. It has been waiting there for you.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Lord, we are not worthy that you should enter under our roof. Say the word anyway. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” **Matthew 8:8**

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Matthew 8:5-13, the request, the declined house call, the authority argument, the marveling, the east-and-west table

Live Discovery Text

- Psalm 107:19-20, he sent forth his word, and healed them

Supporting Texts

- Genesis 1:3, the commanding word (leader background)
- Luke 7:1-10, the parallel account with intermediaries (Standalone Notes)

Catechism

- CCC 1386, 543, 153

Memory Verse

- Matthew 8:8

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home: Say the Word (The Centurion)

A standalone deep-dive session

What We Found

A Gentile centurion, the outsider in a uniform, crossed every line in Capernaum to beg a Jewish rabbi's help for a servant. Offered a house call, he declined it with a soldier's logic: I say go, and it happens; a commander's word works at any distance because it carries the authority above it; so "only say the word, and my servant will be healed." Not a feeling, a deduction, and Israel's scriptures had already made it: he sent forth his word, and healed them (Psalm 107:20). Jesus marveled, one of the only times the Gospels record it: not even in Israel had He found such faith, and He announced the consequence on the spot: many will come from east and west to the table with Abraham. The record-setting faith in Matthew belongs to the furthest outsider, and the Church made it her own: at every Roman Rite Mass, seconds before Communion, the whole congregation says this man's sentence: Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Augustine *Sermons (summary)*

By declaring himself unworthy to receive Christ under his roof, the centurion showed himself worthy to receive Christ into his heart.

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on Matthew (summary)*

The outsider understood Christ's authority more precisely than the crowds who saw the miracles up close, and Jesus publicized a Gentile's faith to teach the insiders.

The Roman Missal *Communion Rite*

"Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." One soldier's sentence, on the whole congregation's lips, at every Roman Rite Mass.

Live It This Week

1. Act on one trustworthy word this week without triple-checking it; notice what trust feels like as an act.
2. Tell someone who feels like an outsider around religion, even like the enemy, that this story exists.
3. If you ever visit a Mass, listen for the centurion's sentence just before Communion.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed." **Matthew 8:8**

If You Want More

This session stands alone. If you want another standalone deep-dive, ask your leader about the Zacchaeus session (Luke 19:1-10). Catechism references: CCC 1386, 543, 153.

What Do You Seek?

Deep-Dive: Rise, He Is Calling You (Bartimaeus)

A standalone session: any group, any order

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers a blind beggar who out-shouts the crowd that tells him to be quiet, abandons his one possession before he is healed, and receives from Jesus the dignity of a question rather than an assumption: what do you want me to do for you?

Catholic Touchstone: The cry of the blind beggar, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me, was taken up by the Church's tradition of prayer and never put down (CCC 2616, 2667).

The Knock in This Encounter (leader only)

Bartimaeus cries out first, but track the sequence: Jesus' reputation reached the Jericho road before Jesus did; the beggar is answering news that arrived ahead of the asking. And the hinge of the scene is a summons: "Rise, he is calling you" (Mk 10:49). **Spoiler discipline:** if your group has not finished the six core sessions, keep this framing leader-only. Note also the resonance for groups that have: in a study named for one question of Jesus, this session contains His other great question, aimed at a seeker: what do you want me to do for you?

What You Need to Know

Jericho again, at the gate, on the road up to Jerusalem: Jesus is days from the cross, and Mark gives the road's last healing to a blind beggar with a name. That detail matters: Mark names almost none of the healed, but this man is "Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus" (Mk 10:46). Some scholars, most prominently Richard Bauckham, propose that named figures in the Gospels function the way citations did in ancient biography: this man was known in the community; you could ask him. Offer it as one serious but debated scholarly proposal, not a consensus and not a proof.

The crowd's role is uncomfortable and important: when the beggar cries "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," Mark says only that "many" in the procession "rebuked him, telling him to be silent" (10:48). The text does not identify them further, but they are people traveling with Jesus, and the resonance is worth surfacing as a reflection: those nearest the Lord can end up shushing the seeker. He cries out the more, and Jesus stops the entire Jerusalem-bound procession for him and overrules the crowd with three words: "Call him." The same crowd instantly changes tune: "Take heart; rise, he is calling you" (10:49). Let seekers see both halves: religious people sometimes block the road, and Jesus does not.

Verse 50 hides the session's costliest act: "throwing off his mantle he sprang up." A blind beggar's cloak may have been far more than clothing; many commentators suggest it was spread before him to catch coins, perhaps the nearest thing he had to property and security. Offer this as a likely picture, not a certainty. He abandons it, before any healing has happened, to get to Jesus faster. The rich young man, earlier in this same chapter, could not release his possessions with his eyes wide open; the blind man throws his one possession in the dust on the strength of a summons.

Then the question, and it is astonishing that Jesus asks it: “What do you want me to do for you?” (10:51). The need looks obvious; Jesus declines to assume it. He gives a beggar, whom everyone else has managed and shushed and stepped around, the dignity of stating his own desire. “Master, let me receive my sight.” The healing is immediate, the dismissal is freedom itself, “Go your way,” and the man’s first act with working eyes is to ignore the dismissal in the best way: “he followed him on the way” (10:52), the road that goes up to Jerusalem and the cross. One more note: “Son of David” is a messianic title, and this is the first time in Mark that Jesus accepts it shouted in public without silencing anyone; the secret is ending as the Passion begins.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah 35:5-6. The prophets’ checklist for the age of God’s coming: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened.” When John the Baptist later sends messengers asking if Jesus is the one, Jesus answers by pointing to this cluster of Isaianic signs, the opening of blind eyes among them. The group finds it live.

Psalms 146:8. “The LORD opens the eyes of the blind.” In Israel’s hymnal, this is God’s own job description; no prophet in the Old Testament ever performs it. Leader background, and quietly enormous.

Voices of the Church

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew (summary)*

Preaching on the blind men of Jericho in Matthew’s account, Chrysostom holds up their persistence as the model: rebuked by the crowd, they cried out the more, and Christ rewarded the very boldness the bystanders tried to suppress. Calling the crowd’s hushing the seeker’s final exam is this guide’s phrase, not his; the substance is Chrysostom’s. Note that he treats Matthew’s two unnamed blind men, the parallel to Mark’s named Bartimaeus. A summary, not a quotation.

St. Bede the Venerable *Commentary on Mark (summary)*

Bede, following the Fathers, reads the abandoned mantle allegorically: the old life and its securities thrown off so that nothing slows the run toward Christ. The comparison with the rich young man, and the picture of the cloak as the beggar’s whole apparatus of survival, are this guide’s application, not Bede’s own wording. A summary of the tradition’s reading.

The Jesus Prayer *the Church’s ancient tradition of prayer*

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The prayer of the Eastern Church, repeated for centuries as the heartbeat of Christian prayer, draws on this cry from the Jericho road; the Catechism notes that it joins the hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 with the cry of the publican and of the blind men begging for light (CCC 2667). The beggars’ shout became part of the whole Church’s breathing.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2616:** prayer to Jesus during His ministry, with the blind men’s cry, Son of David, have mercy, among its models: urgent faith answered.
- **CCC 2667:** the invocation of the holy name in the Jesus Prayer, a tradition that grew in part from this cry.
- **CCC 1505:** Christ did not heal all the sick; His healings were signs of the coming Kingdom, announcing a more radical healing, the victory over sin and death through His Passover.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

Two cares tonight. First, the shushed friend: many seekers have a story of asking their honest question in a religious setting and being told, in effect, to be silent; this session names that experience in the text itself, and shows Jesus overruling it. Say the headline plainly: the crowd told him to be quiet, and Jesus stopped the whole procession. Second, a dignity note: Bartimaeus is a blind man before he is a symbol, and if anyone in your group lives with disability, keep the discussion from treating blindness as merely a metaphor. Jesus' own approach is the model: He asks the man what he wants instead of assuming it, and the session should extend the same courtesy.

Standalone Notes

- No dependencies: run before, during, or after the core, or alone.
- Same chapter of Mark as the rich young man deep-dive; run them together and the mantle-versus-possession contrast preaches itself.
- Matthew's parallel (Mt 20:29-34) reports two blind men; Mark focuses on the named one. If a sharp reader raises it, answer honestly: the two Evangelists present the same event with differing narrative focus, and Mark preserves the name; a difference in emphasis and detail is not a contradiction in substance.

Session Goals

1. Establish the scene: the named beggar, the gate, the road to Jerusalem.
2. Land the crowd's shushing and Jesus' overrule: gatekeepers block; He calls.
3. Weigh the mantle: security abandoned before healing, on the strength of a summons.
4. Land the dignity of the question and the live discovery in Isaiah 35.
5. Close on verse 52: freed to go his way, he chooses the Way.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then merge Build questions 1 and 2. Never cut the question of verse 51; it is the session's namesake and its heart.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. State the two rules if new faces are present: nobody gets called on; nobody's answer gets graded.

“God, some of us have been told to keep our voices down. Tonight's story says shout. Amen.”

Win

1. Have you ever been told, directly or by atmosphere, that your question or your need was inconvenient: by a family, a workplace, a church? What did you do with the question?
2. What is the difference between someone helping you on their terms and someone first asking what you actually want?

Build

Read Mark 10:46-49 aloud.

1. Mark names almost nobody he reports healed, but this man gets a name and a father's name. What might that suggest about how this story reached us?
2. Look hard at verse 48: who exactly tells the beggar to be silent, and what does he do about it? Then verse 49: what does Jesus do to the crowd's verdict?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

“Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus” reads like a reference: some scholars, notably Richard Bauckham, propose that named figures in the Gospels function the way citations did in ancient biography; the community knew this man, and you could go ask him. Offered as one debated scholarly proposal, not a proof. Then the uncomfortable verse: it is many in the crowd traveling with Jesus who shush the seeker, and his response is the session's first lesson: “he cried out all the more.” And Jesus stops a procession bound for Jerusalem and the cross, for a beggar, and overrules the gatekeepers in three words: “Call him.” Watch the crowd flip instantly to “Take heart; rise, he is calling you.” Crowds follow whoever is actually in charge.

Read Mark 10:50-52 aloud.

3. Verse 50: a blind beggar's mantle may well have been his coin-catcher and his security, perhaps the only property he had. He throws it off, before any healing, to get there faster. Earlier in this same chapter, another man was asked to part with his possessions. Compare the two.
4. “What do you want me to do for you?” The need looks obvious. Why does Jesus ask instead of assume, and what does the question give the man that a healing alone would not?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The rich young man, sighted and secure, could not release what he had; the blind man flings his cloak in the dust on the strength of a summons. Mark records only the act, but the gesture invites the thought that he does not expect to need a beggar's cloak on the way back; offer that as reflection, not as the text's own claim. And the question is dignity itself: everyone else in Jericho has managed this man, stepped around him, spoken for him; Jesus makes him the author of his own request. Desire, stated out loud, is part of how God deals with free people. “Master, let me receive my sight.” Then note the ending's freedom: “Go your way” unties him completely, and his first act with working eyes is to choose: “he followed him on the way,” the road up to Jerusalem. The healed man's eyes and his feet agree.

5. "The eyes of the blind shall be opened" was on the prophets' checklist for the coming of God Himself. Let's find it.

Live discovery: *have the group find Isaiah 35:5-6 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Isaiah 35 describes the day God comes to save: then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame leap, the dumb sing. In the whole Old Testament, no prophet ever opens blind eyes; Psalm 146 assigns that act to the LORD alone. So when Bartimaeus walks seeing, Isaiah's checklist has a line crossed off, and the title he was shouting, Son of David, is accepted in public for the first time in Mark. The healing is not a wonder for its own sake; it is an identification.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Full strength: "Miracle stories are anecdotes from a credulous age. Blindness does not reverse on command, and no ancient report can be checked." Grant what must be granted: nobody can re-examine a first-century patient, and a single story compels no one. Then weigh what can be weighed. The account carries a name and a patronymic in a Gospel that names almost no one healed: a checkable source in its own day, on one serious scholarly proposal. Its texture is all restraint: no technique, no incantation, no fee, no staging; a question, a sentence, and a road. And the claim being made is not that optimism repairs optic nerves, which would be absurd; it is that this particular man had authority over what He had made, a claim that stands or falls with the larger question of who He is. That larger question is exactly what a study like this exists to investigate; this session's honest contribution is one named witness, at one city gate, whose neighbors could be asked.

Dig Deeper (optional)

One beggar's shout had a long afterlife. The Eastern Church wove her most repeated prayer in part from it, joining it with the hymn of Philippians 2 and the publican's plea (CCC 2667): Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner, prayed slowly, with the breath, thousands of times, for many centuries, and commended by the Catechism (CCC 2667). It is sometimes called the prayer for people who do not know how to pray, which is to say, for everyone. If anyone at the table wants a first prayer that requires no vocabulary and no standing, hand them Bartimaeus's sentence; it has an excellent record of stopping processions.

Send

3. "What do you want me to do for you?" Suppose the question were put to you tonight, with the same seriousness. What is your honest answer? You do not have to say it aloud.
4. The crowd's shushing was the seeker's final exam. What voice, outside you or inside you, tells you to keep your seeking quiet, and what would crying out all the more look like?

Live It This Week

1. Write your answer to verse 51's question somewhere private. Stating a desire is not weakness; Jesus solicited it.
2. Try Bartimaeus's sentence once, as a prayer, exactly as he said it. It requires no belief you do not have; it is a shout in the direction of the footsteps.
3. If someone once shushed your honest question, ask it again this week, to someone safe.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us. Every one of us is somewhere on the roadside. Stop for us. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“And Jesus said to him, What do you want me to do for you? And the blind man said to him, Master, let me receive my sight.” **Mark 10:51**

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Mark 10:46-52, the cry, the shushing, the summons, the mantle, the question, the road

Live Discovery Text

- Isaiah 35:5-6, the eyes of the blind shall be opened

Supporting Texts

- Psalm 146:8, the LORD opens the eyes of the blind (leader background)
- Mark 10:17-31, the rich young man: the mantle contrast (same chapter)
- Matthew 20:29-34, the parallel account (Standalone Notes)

Catechism

- CCC 2616, 2667, 1505

Memory Verse

- Mark 10:51

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home: Rise, He Is Calling You (Bartimaeus)

A standalone deep-dive session

What We Found

On the road out of Jericho, days from the cross, a blind beggar with a name, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, heard the footsteps and shouted a messianic title: Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. Many told him to be silent; he cried out all the more, and Jesus stopped and said: call him. He threw off his mantle, perhaps his coin-catcher and likely his only property, before any healing happened, and sprang up to come to him. Then the astonishing question: what do you want me to do for you? Everyone else had managed him; Jesus made him the author of his own request. Master, let me receive my sight. The prophets had named the opening of blind eyes as a sign of God's own coming (Isaiah 35:5), a healing the Old Testament never records of any prophet. Healed and set completely free, "go your way," his eyes and his feet agreed: he followed him on the way. His shout was never put down; the Church prays it still.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on Matthew (summary)*

Christ rewarded precisely the persistence the crowd tried to suppress; the shushing is often the seeker's final exam.

St. Bede the Venerable *Commentary on Mark (summary)*

The mantle is the old security thrown off so nothing slows the run toward Christ: what the rich man could not drop with his eyes open, the blind man dropped on the strength of a call.

The Jesus Prayer *the Church's ancient tradition (CCC 2667)*

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The blind men's cry for light, joined with the publican's plea, handed down in East and West as a simple invocation for praying always (CCC 2667).

Live It This Week

1. Write your private answer to His question: what do you want me to do for you?
2. Try Bartimaeus's sentence once, as a prayer, exactly as he said it.
3. If someone once shushed your honest question, ask it again, to someone safe.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"And Jesus said to him, What do you want me to do for you? And the blind man said to him, Master, let me receive my sight." Mark 10:51

If You Want More

This session stands alone. It shares a chapter with the deep-dive on the rich young man; read Mark 10 whole and watch the mantle answer the possessions. **Catechism references:** CCC 2616, 2667, 1504.

What Do You Seek?

Deep-Dive: The One Thing (Martha and Mary)

A standalone session: any group, any order

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that Jesus' word to an exhausted, overcommitted hostess is tenderness rather than scolding, that the target is anxiety and not service, and that the one needful thing is not another task but a seat: the portion that shall not be taken away.

Catholic Touchstone: Contemplative prayer is taking time to be alone with Him who we know loves us; and against the mentality that measures everything by productivity, prayer is not a flight from life but the wellspring of it (CCC 2709, 2727).

The Knock in This Encounter (leader only)

The house is Martha's and the welcome is hers: "Martha received him into her house" (Lk 10:38). She opened the door; the study's pattern holds in its gentlest form, an arrival received. What the session then examines is what happens after the door opens: whether the Guest, once inside, gets our presence or only our performance. **Spoiler discipline:** as always, keep the frame leader-only if your group has not finished the core.

What You Need to Know

Protect Martha from the sermon tradition that flattens her, because Luke does. She is the one who receives Jesus; her serving, *diakonia*, is the word the Church uses for ministry; hospitality is praised everywhere in Luke, and in John 11 it is Martha who runs out to meet Jesus and delivers one of the great confessions of His identity. The problem in this scene is not that dinner was being made. Luke's diagnosis is precise: she was "distracted with much serving" (10:40); the Greek suggests being pulled apart, dragged in different directions, and Jesus' own words complete the chart: "anxious and troubled about many things" (10:41). The disease is not the work; it is the state the work has put her in, which every overcommitted person in your room will recognize as their resting condition.

Meanwhile Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching" (10:39). Say plainly what a first-century reader would feel: to sit at a rabbi's feet is the formal posture of a disciple (it is how Paul describes his own formation, at the feet of Gamaliel, Acts 22:3), and the evidence we have suggests it was a posture rarely, if ever, extended to women. Mary has taken the student's seat in a world that did not expect to see her in it, and when Martha's complaint effectively asks Jesus to send her back to the kitchen, He instead ratifies her right to it, permanently: "Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (10:42). The scene is, among other things, Jesus defending a woman's place in the seminar room, and seekers should hear that stated without embarrassment.

Hear the tone of the reply. "Martha, Martha": in Scripture the doubled name marks an address of personal weight; often it is how God speaks to people He loves and is about to entrust with something (Abraham, Abraham; Moses, Moses; Samuel, Samuel), and even where it carries warning or grief (Simon, Simon; Jerusalem, Jerusalem) it is the language of a heart engaged, never of mere irritation.

Here it reads as tenderness; the correction that follows is real, but it arrives wrapped in affection. The sentence that follows is a diagnosis delivered with affection, and the famous phrase “one thing is needful” is triage, not a dishwashing exemption: of the many things pulling her apart, only one cannot be rescheduled, because He is sitting in the living room now. “Portion” is loaded Old Testament vocabulary, the word for an inheritance share, and the psalms had already given it its highest use, which the group will find live: the LORD Himself as one's portion. Mary has chosen the inheritance that outlasts the estate.

Do not let the session end as a verdict against action. The Church's synthesis, spoken best by a doctor of the Church who ran convents and wrote mystical theology in the same week, is that Martha and Mary combine: contemplation funds action, and action without the seat at His feet degrades into exactly the anxiety Luke describes. The question the scene leaves a busy person is not “should I do less?” but “what is my serving disconnected from?”

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalms 73:25-26. “Whom have I in heaven but you? ... God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.” The live discovery: the psalmist reaches Mary's conclusion centuries early, and “portion,” the inheritance word, lands on God Himself.

Deuteronomy 10:9. The Levites received no land “because the LORD is their portion”: the tribe whose inheritance was God. Mary sits down in their bloodline. Leader background.

Voices of the Church

St. Augustine *Sermons 103 and 104, on Luke 10:38-42 (summary)*

Augustine refuses to condemn Martha: both sisters chose good things, he insists; but Martha's good work belongs to this passing age, where there are hungry people to feed, while Mary's portion belongs to the age that does not end, where the feast is God Himself. Martha's task will one day be finished; Mary's has no ending, which is why it cannot be taken away. A faithful summary of his preaching in these two sermons.

St. Teresa of Avila *The Interior Castle (summary)*

The great mystic who also founded and administered seventeen convents gives the Church's balance: Martha and Mary must work together to host the Lord; contemplation that never serves is not yet mature love, and service never fed by His presence runs dry. She would know; she did both at full capacity. A faithful summary of her teaching in the seventh mansion.

St. Gregory the Great *Moralia and homilies (summary)*

Gregory, the monk dragged out of contemplation to run the Church of Rome, wrote with an exile's homesickness about the two lives: the active life is necessity, the contemplative life is desire; the first ends with time, the second begins here and is perfected in eternity. He governed like Martha and ached like Mary, and said so. A faithful summary.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2709:** contemplative prayer defined with St. Teresa's words: a close sharing between friends, taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.

- **CCC 2727:** the modern objection answered: a mentality that measures all by productivity calls prayer useless; the Catechism names the error and its cost.
- **CCC 305:** Jesus asks for filial trust in providence over anxiety about tomorrow: the Sermon on the Mount's medicine for Martha's condition, and ours.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

Look around your table: somebody there is Martha to the bone, and quite possibly it is the person who cooked what you are eating. Guard them twice. First, do not let the session curdle into a productivity scold; the exhausted do not need one more voice telling them they are doing life wrong. The text's tone is the doubled name, tenderness, and yours should match it. Second, if your seeker friend is the busy one, this session is the study's most direct gift to them: it says their exhaustion is seen, named gently, and met not with a new obligation but with a chair. And say the historical point out loud, because seekers rarely expect it from Christianity: when a woman took the disciple's seat, and the request came to send her back to the kitchen, Jesus said no, permanently.

Standalone Notes

- No dependencies: run before, during, or after the core, or alone.
- Pairs naturally with the rich young man deep-dive: his “one thing you lack” and this scene's “one thing is needful” are the same surgical arithmetic aimed at opposite conditions: possession and busyness.
- The Bethany household returns in John 11-12 (the raising of Lazarus, Martha's confession, Mary's anointing); groups that love these sisters have a natural next read.

Session Goals

1. Rehabilitate Martha: the target is anxiety, not service, and Luke's vocabulary proves it.
2. Say plainly what Mary's seat meant, and that Jesus ratified it permanently.
3. Hear the doubled name as tenderness, and “one thing” as triage rather than a verdict on work.
4. Land the live discovery in Psalm 73: the LORD Himself as portion.
5. Close with the Church's synthesis: Martha and Mary combine.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then merge Build questions 1 and 2. Never cut the tone question on the doubled name; the whole session's pastoral weight rides on it.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. State the two rules if new faces are present: nobody gets called on; nobody's answer gets graded.

“God, most of us ran here from something and will run from here to something. For one evening, let us actually sit down. Amen.”

Win

The philosopher Dallas Willard, asked by a younger pastor what he needed to do to be spiritually healthy, answered, as his friend John Ortberg has recounted many times: you must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life. Asked what else, he said there is nothing else.

1. “How are you?” “Busy.” When did busy become the default answer, and what is it doing to the people who give it?
2. What is the difference between a full life and a driven one? Have you lived on both sides of that line?

Build

Read Luke 10:38-42 aloud.

1. Start by building the case for Martha: what has she actually done here, and what is she doing while Mary sits? Is any of it bad?
2. Now find Luke's precise diagnosis in verse 40 and Jesus' in verse 41: what exact words describe Martha's problem? Is the problem the serving, or something the serving has produced in her?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Martha's resume in this scene is entirely honorable: she received Him into her house, the door was hers to open and she opened it, and her serving is diakonia, the word the Church would adopt for ministry itself. Nothing on the stove is the problem. The diagnosis is interior and Luke is surgical about it: “distracted,” a word suggesting being dragged apart in different directions, and from Jesus, “anxious and troubled about many things.” The scene's target is a state, not a task list: service that has become disconnected from the Person it serves, until the hostess is fraying in the kitchen of a house God is sitting in.

3. Verse 39: to sit at a teacher's feet was the formal posture of a disciple, and it was a seat the ancient world rarely, if ever, offered women. What is Mary doing, and what does Jesus do when Martha's complaint would send her back to the kitchen?
4. Listen to the tone of “Martha, Martha.” Where else does Scripture double a name like that, and what does the doubling usually mean?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Mary has taken the student's chair in a setting where women were rarely given it, and Martha's request, “tell her then to help me,” would restore the expected order. Jesus declines, and more than declines: “it shall not be taken away from her” ratifies the seat permanently. And the doubled name signals personal weight, not offhand annoyance: often it is the Bible's address of affection and commissioning (Abraham, Abraham; Moses, Moses; Samuel, Samuel), though it can also carry warning or lament (Simon, Simon; Jerusalem, Jerusalem). Jesus is correcting Martha, but the address tells her the correction comes from love. Jesus is not scolding an exhausted woman in front of her guests. He is doing what almost nobody does for the anxious: naming the anxiety tenderly, from inside a love she can hear.

5. "Mary has chosen the good portion." Portion is inheritance language in the Old Testament, and the psalms gave the word its boldest use. Let's find it.

Live discovery: *have the group find Psalm 73:25-26 and read it aloud.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

"Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you... God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever." The psalmist reached Mary's conclusion centuries early: the inheritance-word lands on God Himself. That is what Mary has chosen at His feet: not a break from the work but the estate that outlasts every estate, and Jesus' promise attaches precisely there: everything else in that house, the meal, the dishes, eventually the house, will be taken away by time. The portion will not.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Full strength, because every practical person in the room is thinking it: "Contemplation is a luxury for people without responsibilities. Somebody had to cook that dinner, and it was not Mary. A guest who accepts the meal and then critiques the cook has things exactly backwards; the world runs on Marthas." Grant the truth in it: the world does run on Marthas, Scripture honors work from its first page, and Jesus rebukes the serving nowhere: the target word is "anxious," not "busy." Then press what the objection misses. First, the arithmetic: "one thing is needful" is triage among competing goods at a specific moment: the Word of God was in the living room for one evening; the dishes were negotiable, and treating everything as equally urgent is precisely the disease. Second, the objection's own economics fail: service disconnected from its source does not stay generous; it curdles into resentment, audibly, in verse 40: "Lord, do you not care?" The complaint is the proof. The Church's verdict was never Mary instead of Martha; it is the one Teresa of Avila gave while running seventeen convents: Martha and Mary must combine, because action without the seat runs dry, and the seat, without ever replacing the work, is what keeps the work from devouring the worker.

Dig Deeper (optional)

Luke's placement is quiet genius: this scene sits immediately after the parable of the Good Samaritan. Back to back, Luke gives us a story where the religious men fail by not acting, and a story where the acting hostess is gently corrected toward sitting. Neither story cancels the other; together they close both escape routes: you cannot love God as a substitute for serving your neighbor, and you cannot serve your way out of sitting with God. The Gospel keeps both doors locked from the outside.

Send

3. Be honest about your default: are you Martha or Mary by temperament, and what does the opposite posture cost you?
4. "Anxious and troubled about many things." If Jesus named your many things tonight, doubled name and all, what would be on the list, and which one is actually the one thing?

Live It This Week

1. Once this week, sit down for ten minutes with nothing productive: no phone, no list, no multitasked podcast. If you pray, pray; if you do not yet, just sit. Notice how hard the chair is to stay in.
2. Catch yourself once answering "busy" and replace it with a true sentence about how you actually are.

3. If you are the Martha of your household, ask the Mary in your life what they see from the seat. If you are the Mary, do the dishes once, unasked.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: “Lord, you know each of our many things by name, and you have never once shamed a tired person. Give us the seat, and the nerve to take it. Amen.”

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.” **Luke 10:41-42**

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Luke 10:38-42, the welcome, the seat, the complaint, the doubled name, the portion

Live Discovery Text

- Psalm 73:25-26, God as the heart's strength and portion for ever

Supporting Texts

- Deuteronomy 10:9, the LORD as the Levites' portion (leader background)
- Luke 10:25-37, the Good Samaritan: Luke's deliberate pairing (Dig Deeper)
- John 11:20-27, Martha's confession (Standalone Notes)

Catechism

- CCC 2709, 2727, 305

Memory Verse

- Luke 10:41-42

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home: The One Thing (Martha and Mary)

A standalone deep-dive session

What We Found

The philosopher Dallas Willard's whole prescription for spiritual health, in an exchange his friend John Ortberg recounts, was to ruthlessly eliminate hurry, and there was no second item. Then we entered a house in Bethany where the hostess who opened the door, whose serving bears the Church's own word for ministry, was coming apart: distracted, dragged in different directions, anxious and troubled about many things. Her sister had taken the disciple's seat at the Lord's feet, a chair that formal discipleship in her world rarely offered women, and when the complaint came to send her back to the kitchen, Jesus ratified the seat permanently: it shall not be taken away from her. His correction of Martha began with the tender, urgent doubled name, and his arithmetic was triage, not a verdict on work: one thing is needful. The portion Mary chose echoes the psalmist's old discovery (Psalm 16:5): God Himself as the inheritance that outlasts every estate. And the Church has never said Mary instead of Martha. St. Teresa's counsel is that Martha and Mary must combine, because action without the seat runs dry.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Augustine Sermons 103 and 104 (summary)

Both sisters chose good things; but Martha's task belongs to the age that passes, and Mary's portion to the age that does not end, which is why it cannot be taken away.

St. Teresa of Avila The Interior Castle VII.4 (summary)

Martha and Mary must join together to host the Lord: the aim of prayer is the birth of good works, and love is shown not in delights but in deeds.

St. Gregory the Great *Moralia and homilies* (summary)

The active life is necessity, the contemplative life is desire; the first ends with time, the second begins here and is perfected in eternity.

Live It This Week

1. Sit for ten unproductive minutes once this week. Notice how hard the chair is to stay in.
2. Replace one "busy" with a true sentence about how you actually are.
3. Marthas: ask a Mary what they see from the seat. Marys: do the dishes once, unasked.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her." **Luke 10:41-42**

If You Want More

This session stands alone. The Bethany household returns in John 11-12; read ahead if you wish.

Catechism references: CCC 2709, 2727, 305.

What Do You Seek?

Deep-Dive: Stay with Us (The Road to Emmaus)

A standalone session: any group, any order

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers the risen Jesus walking unrecognized beside two people whose hope is in the past tense, drawing out their grief with questions before He explains anything, opening the scriptures until their hearts burn, and, at the decisive threshold, appearing to be going further until they freely ask Him in: stay with us.

Catholic Touchstone: The Mass has walked this road ever since: He explained the Scriptures to them on the way, and was known to them in the breaking of the bread (CCC 1347).

The Knock in This Encounter (leader only)

This session is the free-will frame at its most explicit anywhere in the Gospels: “He appeared to be going further” (Lk 24:28). The risen Lord, having walked seven miles beside them and set their hearts on fire, will keep walking into the dusk unless He is asked to stay, and everything turns on their “Stay with us.” The door is opened from the inside, freely, and only then is He known. **Spoiler discipline:** if your group has not finished the six core sessions, keep this framing leader-only; if they have, verse 28 will detonate on its own. Let it.

What You Need to Know

Easter afternoon, and two disciples are walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, which is to say, away: away from the city, the community, and the wreckage of the weekend. One is named Cleopas; the other is never named, which generations of readers have taken as an open seat. Their condition is stated in the most seeker-recognizable sentence in Luke: “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (24:21). Had hoped: hope in the past tense. Everyone at your table has conjugated that verb about something.

“Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (24:15-16). Note what the risen Lord does with His first afternoon: not a throne room, not a demonstration over Pilate’s palace, but seven anonymous miles beside two nobodies leaving town in the wrong direction. And note His method, because it is this study’s method: He asks. “What is this conversation?” He, of all people, does not need the answer; He needs them to say it, and He absorbs the small comedy of Cleopas explaining the crucifixion to the crucified: “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know...?” (24:18). Grief must be drawn out before it can be addressed; the risen Christ listens to the whole story of His own death before He says a word of interpretation.

Then the Bible study: “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (24:25-27). The rebuke is for slowness to believe the prophets, not for grief; and the claim underneath is enormous: the whole Old Testament, rightly read, concerns Him. Luke does not give us

the syllabus of that seven-mile seminar, so the session recreates a sample live, in Psalm 22, and lets the group feel a flicker of what made their hearts burn (24:32).

The threshold, verse 28, is the scene's hinge and this study's crown jewel: "He appeared to be going further." No bluff and no game: He will not invite Himself where He is not asked; the same courtesy that governed every encounter governs the risen Lord. "But they constrained him, saying, 'Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent'" (24:29). Only inside, at their table, does the guest become the host: "he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight" (24:30-31). Recognized in the breaking of the bread, and no longer needing to be seen across the table, because He has just shown them where He will above all be found from now on. The Church has read her own Mass in this structure from the beginning, and the Catechism says so in almost these words (CCC 1347): the Scriptures opened on the way, the bread broken at the table. Say it plainly to seekers: every Mass is this road, run in order, every week.

The ending is kinetic: "they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem" (24:33), seven miles back, into the night, to say what they now knew. Dead hope walks away from Jerusalem; met hope runs back toward it. The direction of a person's feet is Luke's last piece of evidence.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 22:1, 16-18. The live discovery, run as a miniature Emmaus: the psalm that opens with the very words Jesus prayed from the cross goes on, centuries before crucifixion existed as a Roman practice, to describe pierced hands and feet, the stares of a crowd, and garments divided by lot. The group reads it cold and reacts before the leader says anything.

Genesis 18:1-8 and Genesis 3:8-9. Leader background for the scene's deep grammar: the LORD received as a traveling guest at Abraham's tent, and the sound of God walking in the garden at the beginning, with man hiding from the voice that asked "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:8-9). Emmaus is the walking resumed.

Voices of the Church

St. Augustine *Sermons on Easter (summary)*

Augustine presses his congregation on the strange mercy of the hidden face: they possessed Christ beside them and did not know it, so that they would learn to find Him where He willed to be found. Where did the Lord choose to be recognized? In the breaking of the bread, Augustine answers, and adds the pastoral turn: whoever receives that bread with faith is not worse off than the two at Emmaus; the recognition is still on offer at the same table. A faithful summary of his Easter preaching.

St. Gregory the Great *Homilies on the Gospels (summary)*

Gregory fastens on the hospitality: the disciples did not recognize God in the explanation of Scripture, yet they came to know Him in the offering of a meal to a stranger. He draws the lesson without flinching: the Lord who is heard in His word chose to be known in an act of welcome; whoever would see Him must first set a table for someone. A faithful summary of Homily 23.

Pope St. John Paul II *Mane Nobiscum Domine (summary)*

John Paul II gave his last Year of the Eucharist the Emmaus disciples' own sentence as its title: stay with us, Lord. The whole Church, he wrote, is those two on the road: hearts slow, hopes bruised, joined by a

Companion whose word makes hearts burn and who is recognized in the breaking of bread; and the recognition sends her, that same hour, back toward the world with the news. A faithful summary of the apostolic letter.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1347:** the Eucharist unfolds on the pattern of this very meal: walking with them He explained the Scriptures; at table He took, blessed, broke, and gave.
- **CCC 1346:** the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist form one single act of worship: the road and the table are one event.
- **CCC 112:** the whole of Scripture is read rightly only in the light of Christ: the claim of verse 27, made doctrine.

Hosting Your Seeker Friend

This Week's Coaching

"We had hoped" may be your friend's exact tense: about God, about the Church, about a marriage, a diagnosis, a child. The stranger's method is your method tonight: draw the story out with questions and absorb all of it before explaining anything; the risen Christ listened to the account of His own death without interrupting, and you can listen to a disappointment without fixing it. Do not rush anyone's grief toward the happy ending of the passage. And the Mass bridge here is the strongest on the shelf, so make it concrete: if your friend ever sits through one Mass, they will watch this exact sequence, Scriptures opened, then bread taken, blessed, broken, given, and they should know the road came first, and that the sequence was designed for people whose hope was in the past tense.

Standalone Notes

- No dependencies: run before, during, or after the core, or alone. It is, however, the natural finale of the deep-dive shelf: the only post-Resurrection encounter, and the bridge to the Mass.
- The unnamed second disciple is a genuine feature of the text; the session uses the open seat lightly and does not build doctrine on it.
- If a reader asks where Emmaus was: the site is genuinely uncertain, with several candidates; say so plainly. The uncertainty of the village and the specificity of the road (sixty stadia, about seven miles) sit together comfortably in an honest account.

Session Goals

1. Let "we had hoped" be felt before it is fixed: the past tense of hope, named.
2. Show the method of the hidden Companion: questions first, the whole grief drawn out, Scripture opened only after listening.
3. Run the Psalm 22 discovery as a miniature of the seven-mile seminar.
4. Land verse 28 with full weight: He appeared to be going further; stay with us is freely spoken.
5. Name the Mass in the structure, plainly, and end on the direction of their feet.

Time Note

75 minutes of content in a 90-minute evening. If long: cut the Dig Deeper first, then trim Build question 2. Never cut verse 28 or the Psalm 22 discovery; the first is the study's frame at full power, and the second is the burn.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening

Leader prays alone, briefly. State the two rules if new faces are present: nobody gets called on; nobody's answer gets graded.

“God, some of the hope at this table is in the past tense. Walk with us anyway, the whole road, and let us decide about the door. Amen.”

Win

C. S. Lewis, after losing his wife, opened his rawest book with a sentence that has met many grievors where they are: “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.” The most honest hopes are the ones grief has handled.

1. “We had hoped.” Everyone has conjugated that verb about something. Without forcing anyone's story, what kinds of things put hope into the past tense?
2. When you were at your lowest, what actually helped: the people who explained things to you, or the people who walked and listened first? Why?

Build

Read Luke 24:13-24 aloud.

1. Map the scene: who is walking, which direction relative to Jerusalem and the community, and in what condition? What does verse 21's “we had hoped” tell you that “we hoped” would not?
2. Verses 15-19: the risen Jesus draws near, unrecognized, and asks questions He does not need answered, then absorbs Cleopas's explanation of His own crucifixion. Why does He make them tell it? What is His method with grieving people?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Two disciples, one named Cleopas and one left unnamed, an open seat readers have noticed for centuries, walking away: from the city, the apostles, and the wreckage, on Easter afternoon of all afternoons. “We had hoped” is hope autopsied: it existed, it was specific, and it died on Friday; the perfect tense of every disappointed seeker. And the method of the hidden Companion is the session's quiet astonishment: He asks, He listens, He lets them narrate His own death to His face, small comedy included, because grief has to come all the way out before anything true can go in. The risen Lord's first recorded pastoral act is seven miles of listening.

Read Luke 24:25-27 aloud.

3. The rebuke lands on being “slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken,” and then He teaches the whole scriptures “concerning himself.” Luke does not tell us which passages He opened. Let's recover a likely one and read it the way they first heard it.

Live discovery: *have the group find Psalm 22 and read verses 1, 16, 17, and 18 aloud, slowly. Let the reactions come before you comment.*

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Psalm 22 opens with the very sentence Jesus prayed from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” and then, written centuries before Rome made crucifixion its instrument, describes pierced hands and feet, bones on display, a staring crowd, and garments divided by casting lots: the mechanics of Good Friday, in Israel's hymnal, long in advance. Whatever the full syllabus of the seven-

mile seminar was, this psalm was almost certainly on it, and the group has just felt a flicker of verse 32 from the inside: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he opened to us the scriptures?” The claim of verse 27 is total: the whole Old Testament, rightly read, is about Him.

Read Luke 24:28-35 aloud.

4. Verse 28 may be the most delicate sentence in the Gospels: “He appeared to be going further.” After seven miles and burning hearts, He will walk on into the dark unless asked. Why? What does this tell you about how God treats a human threshold?
5. Only after “stay with us” is He known, and known in a specific gesture: took, blessed, broke, gave. What happens at that table, and why does He vanish the moment they recognize Him? Then look at verse 33: what do their feet do, and what does that prove?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Verse 28 is courtesy at divine scale: He has done everything except cross their threshold uninvited, and that one thing He will not do; the risen Lord with all authority in heaven and earth waits for two bruised travelers to say “stay with us,” and the whole scene turns on their freely saying it. Inside, the guest becomes host: the four verbs, took, blessed, broke, gave, are the verbs of the Last Supper, and their eyes open exactly there, in the breaking of the bread. He vanishes not to abandon them but because He has just shown them where He will above all be found from now on: the Church has read her Mass in this structure from the beginning, Scriptures opened on the road, bread broken at the table, one single act (CCC 1347, 1346). And the proof of what happened is kinetic: the same seven miles retraced that same hour, into the night, back toward the city they had given up on. Dead hope leaves Jerusalem; met hope returns that same hour.

Where the Skeptic Is Strongest (steelman)

Full strength, because this is the serious objection to Easter itself: “Bereaved people see their dead; grief hallucinations are common and well documented. Two heartbroken disciples on a lonely road are textbook candidates, and the resurrection appearances dissolve into grief psychology.” Grant the science: bereavement visions are real, common, and no embarrassment to anyone. Then test the fit honestly, feature by feature. Grief visions typically present the familiar face; here the process runs backwards: hours of non-recognition, then identification by a characteristic act. They are overwhelmingly private, individual experiences; the appearances are to pairs, to gatherings, to more than five hundred at once in a creed (1 Cor 15:6) dated by scholars across the spectrum to within a few years of the events. Nothing typical in the bereavement literature sustains a seven-mile expository conversation, shares a meal, or leaves behind a changed direction of travel; and above all such experiences tend to console rather than commission: hallucinations did not march these two back to Jerusalem at night, and they do not explain men going to their deaths for what they insisted they had seen. Be honest about the limit: no argument here compels; grief psychology explains some things, and the data of that first week resists being fully shelved under it. The question the road leaves open is the one this whole study keeps asking: who was He, actually?

Dig Deeper (optional)

The scene’s deepest echo is the Bible’s oldest: the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8), a walking interrupted at the Fall, when the first question to hiding humanity was “Where are you?” And at Abraham’s tent, the LORD once came in the guise of traveling strangers and received the meal a host set before Him (Genesis 18); the Church has long heard in that scene an early echo of a divine guest at a human table. Emmaus is the walking resumed on the far side of the cross: God and man on the same road again, and the recognition, then as now, at a table. Some journeys in Scripture

are very long, and this one, Eden to Emmaus, ends seven miles outside Jerusalem, at dinner.

Send

3. "He appeared to be going further." If it is true that He will not cross a threshold uninvited, what does that change about how you read the silence you may have mistaken for absence?
4. Their eyes opened at a table, doing something ordinary. Where, honestly, are the tables in your life where something more than dinner might be going on?

Live It This Week

1. Walk with someone this week, literally: a walk where your only job is questions and listening, the stranger's method, start to finish.
2. Read Psalm 22 whole, once, alone, and then read Luke 23 beside it. Let the two texts introduce each other.
3. If your hope about something is in the past tense, say the two disciples' sentence once, out loud or in writing, exactly as they said it: stay with us. It is a complete prayer, and it has an excellent record.

Closing

Leader alone, briefly: "Lord, it is toward evening and the day is far spent. Stay with us. Amen."

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread." Luke 24:35

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every Passage in This Session

Primary Text

- Luke 24:13-35, the road, the questions, the scriptures opened, the threshold, the breaking of the bread, the return

Live Discovery Text

- Psalm 22:1, 16-18, the crucifixion in Israel's hymnal, centuries early

Supporting Texts

- Genesis 3:8-9 and Genesis 18:1-8, the walking and the guest (Dig Deeper)
- 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, the early creed and the five hundred (steelman)

Catechism

- CCC 1347, 1346, 112

Memory Verse

- Luke 24:35

What Do You Seek?

Take-Home: Stay with Us (The Road to Emmaus)

A standalone deep-dive session

What We Found

On Easter afternoon, two disciples walked away from Jerusalem with their hope in the past tense: we had hoped. The risen Jesus drew near and walked beside them unrecognized, and His method was the astonishment: questions first, then a long stretch of the road spent listening, absorbing the story of His own death from their mouths before He explained a word. Then He opened the scriptures, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, the things concerning Himself, and we recovered a sample ourselves in Psalm 22: pierced hands, a staring crowd, garments divided by lot, written centuries before Good Friday, and felt a flicker of why their hearts burned. At the threshold came the most delicate sentence in the Gospels: He appeared to be going further. It was as if He would not cross uninvited; the evening turned on their free “stay with us.” Inside, the guest became host, took, blessed, broke, gave, and their eyes were opened in the breaking of the bread, the structure every Mass has walked ever since: the road, then the table, one act. And the proof was their feet: the same seven miles taken back that same hour, toward the city dead hope had abandoned.

Voices Worth Keeping

St. Augustine *Easter sermons (summary)*

Where did the Lord will to be recognized? In the breaking of the bread; and whoever receives it with faith is not worse off than the two at Emmaus.

St. Gregory the Great *Homilies on the Gospels (summary)*

They did not know God in the explanation of Scripture; when they set a table for the stranger, He was known to them in the breaking of the bread: whoever would see Him must first practice hospitality.

Pope St. John Paul II *Mane Nobiscum Domine (summary)*

The whole Church is those two on the road: hearts slow, hopes bruised, joined by a Companion recognized in the breaking of bread, and sent back that same hour with the news.

Live It This Week

1. Take one walk this week where your only job is questions and listening.
2. Read Psalm 22 whole, then Luke 23 beside it. Let the two texts introduce each other.
3. If your hope is in the past tense, pray the disciples' sentence once, exactly as they said it: stay with us.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread." Luke 24:35

If You Want More

This session stands alone, and it is the natural finale of the deep-dive shelf: the shelf's only post-Resurrection encounter, and the bridge to the Mass, where the road and the table run in the same order every week. **Catechism references:** CCC 1347, 1346, 112.