

I AM

LENTEN STUDY GUIDE

John's Gospel has a solitary mission: that we might believe that Jesus is the Son of God. This belief is meant to redeem us and to give us new life in Him. Throughout his narrative, John highlights seven signs that Jesus performs, such as changing water into wine and raising Lazarus from the dead. He also shares seven "I AM" statements, that we might gain a better understanding of the God who became flesh to save and redeem us.

In the book of Exodus, when Moses met God in the wilderness at the burning bush, Moses asked God His name. God replied to Moses, "I am who I am. Say this to the people of Israel: I am has sent me to you." So when Jesus says these "I AM" statements, the people understand that Jesus is claiming to be the same God that Moses met at the burning bush. This is the same I AM who comes to us today and invites us to follow Him. As we explore Jesus through these six lessons, we will see that this is a Jesus that we can trust and believe in . . . and that belief is calling us to come find true life—life abundant—in Him.

As Lent draws us toward the cross and the hope of the resurrection, we hope that you will use the study on the following pages to examine Jesus' words, to see who He is . . . and what He uniquely offers to those who accept His invitation to follow Him.

THE BREAD OF LIFE
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I AM

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THE BREAD OF LIFE

In John 6:22-59, Jesus uses the simplest of all metaphors to describe how He wants us to relate to Him: the way a hungry person relates to food. Earlier in John 6, Jesus miraculously multiplied bread to feed a hungry crowd, and in these later verses, Jesus redirects the crowd away from infatuation with His miracles and towards the *eternal life* that He alone offers (v. 27). Jesus makes a series of connections: manna in the wilderness is connected to his identity as the bread of life, which is connected to the work of His “flesh and blood” that will be poured out on the cross. And just like a hungry person eats bread to be satisfied, Jesus says that a spiritually hungry person will “believe” (v. 29) in Him to receive eternal life.

One important note: in the Gospels “bread” is used to refer not just to food baked from flour or wheat, but it also refers to food and nourishment *in general*. In John 6, it gets used in both ways.

Read John 6:22-59.

1. Much of the imagery Jesus uses in referring to Himself as the “bread of life” comes from stories of when God fed the people of Israel with miraculous bread called manna when they were in the wilderness after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Read Exodus 16: 1-16, 31-32 and Deuteronomy 8:3. What connections do you see between the miraculous manna God provided Israel and the way Jesus is talking about Himself?
2. Even though many of us do not wonder where our next meal will come from, we have likely found ourselves in need before (emotionally, physically, spiritually). What does it feel like to be needy? What is difficult about it?
3. In verse 28, the crowd asks Jesus, “What must we do in order to be doing the works of God?” What answers were they expecting Jesus to give?
4. If believing in Jesus is like eating daily bread when we are hungry, what does that illuminate for us about what “believing in Jesus” is really like?

5. In verse 55, Jesus says, “My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.” Based on the entire context of John, we know that He is referring to His work on the cross. How is Jesus giving Himself fully to us as “the bread of life” through His death and resurrection?

6. What are things other than Jesus that we treat like “bread of life”? What other things do we run to for nourishment, sustenance, support, or life? How is Jesus saying in John 6 that He is better than those things?

7. Jesus promises in John 6 that those who trust in Him (eat His flesh and drink His blood) will have eternal life and that He will raise them up at the last day. How does trusting in Jesus give us hope for the future? How does hope for the future impact the way we live here and now?

8. Many scholars believe that in John 6:53-58, Jesus is also referring to The Lord’s Supper, the meal Jesus gave His disciples that we share together regularly in worship. Laura Smit writes, “In Communion, the bread and the cup become for us a sort of door that the Holy Spirit opens in order to lead us into the presence of Jesus in heaven, so that our human nature gets joined to His in order to be made more like Him.” How might it enhance the way you practice Communion to think of it as a practice of growing in trust in Jesus as the “bread of life” for you?

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Creation begins in Genesis 1 when God said, “Let there be light.” God then separates light and dark. As John begins his gospel, he wants his readers to harken back to the beginning of the world. He wants us to see that Jesus is the one who created light and life.

Begin by reading John 1:1-9.

1. Compare and contrast light and darkness. Consider what you know about light and dark in your everyday life. How do we use light and dark as metaphors?
2. What does it feel like to walk in darkness? (Especially in a place you’ve never been before!) What does your life feel like when your soul and your relationships feel clouded with darkness?
3. What do we learn in John 1 about Jesus? What is the picture that John is trying to paint about Jesus, light, life, and the Word? (You can also look at Colossians 1:15-20.)

Read John 8:12. Beginning in chapter 7, Jesus has a series of encounters at the Temple during the Feast of Booths, which celebrates the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. During this feast, the Temple was gloriously illuminated. Gigantic candelabras stood within the court of the women; each of the four golden candelabras is said to have been about 75 feet tall! Each candelabra had four branches, and at the top of every branch there was a large bowl. Picture sixteen beautiful blazes leaping toward the sky from these golden lamps. Remember that the Temple was on a hill above the rest of the city, so the glorious glow was a sight for the entire city to see. The light was to remind the people of how God’s glory had once filled His Temple. Now in the person of Jesus, God’s glory was once again present in that Temple. Jesus used this celebration to announce that very fact! He was teaching in the court of women, perhaps standing right next to those magnificent candelabras, when He declared to all who were gathered there, “I am the light of the world.”

4. At this point of the Gospel, John has reminded us three times about the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. In chapter 6, John talks about Jesus as the “bread of life” and connects that to the manna that God provided daily in the wilderness. Next, he reminds them of the water that God provided from rock in the wilderness and how Jesus is our living water. And here, Jesus as the light of the world reminds us of how God led the people in the wilderness with a pillar of fire at night and a cloud during the day. Why do you think John is painting this parallel for us?

5. This image of God as the pillar of fire leading the Israelites in the wilderness and the psalmist saying, “Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path” give us two more pictures of Jesus as the light. What are some practical ways that Jesus shines His light to us? How have you personally experienced His light in the dark things you have faced?

6. Do you think people today feel they are “walking in darkness”? Give examples as to why or why not.

We often forget how strong sin is, how it manipulates and binds us. Our hearts, stubborn and longing for control, are filled with the darkness of bondage. When Jesus dies on the cross, He takes that darkness on himself, and then He overcomes it. He is the light of the world, “punching holes in the darkness.” While we are powerless to push against the gloom that closes in, this gloom is Jesus’ place of operation. Our hope is not that we can be strong enough to “bring light into dark places,” but that Jesus is powerful enough and willing to do something about it.

7. “Jesus punches holes in the darkness.” What image comes to mind as you think of that? What hope do you find in that idea?

8. Consider the dark places in your life that you need Jesus to shine His light. Spend some time with Jesus talking to Him about it.

THE GATE

In John 10, Jesus uses three metaphors to help us understand who He is for us. Jesus calls Himself the shepherd and the gate, which makes us, for better or worse, sheep. Sheep need a shepherd, and sheep need clear boundaries. They need to be led to safe pasture, and the shepherd must keep and guard the sheep to preserve their well-being. Not every place is a good or safe place for sheep. In calling himself the gate, Jesus is getting us to think about how He demonstrates the *hospitality* and *openness* of God's kingdom toward us *and* how He demonstrates the *boundaries* of that kingdom for the sake of our flourishing.

Read John 10:1-10.

1. To understand the context of Jesus' words here, go back and review some of the story in John 9, which culminates in verse 34 with a healed man being expelled from the synagogue because he believes in Jesus (who healed him on the Sabbath). In calling Himself the true gate, Jesus is contrasting Himself with the religious "gatekeepers" of His day. How is Jesus saying He is different than them?
2. In what ways are boundaries helpful for us? In what ways are they challenging?
3. How does following Jesus involve living within boundaries? How are those boundaries actually *freeing* to us and not merely limiting?
4. Read Matthew 7:13-14. How does that illuminate our understanding of what Jesus is saying here?

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

One of the most iconic images of Jesus is that of the Good Shepherd holding His staff and a little lamb. While that picture seems docile, our Good Shepherd loves and protects His sheep fiercely. He pursues us relentlessly. When we feel lost, He is already there waiting in our place of need. In our passage today, Jesus addresses the Pharisees, who see themselves as the shepherds of the sheep. Jesus sets them straight.

Read John 10:11-18.

1. When someone is asked, “What animal are you most like?” you never hear someone say a sheep. And yet that is what Jesus calls us. Why does Jesus call us sheep? What are characteristics of sheep in general?
2. How does Jesus characterize the Good Shepherd?
3. What are the characteristics of the sheep who belong to the Good Shepherd?
4. What steers us away from the Good Shepherd? In what ways do you resist the Shepherd’s leading?

5. Read Psalm 23. Considering that Jesus is Lord, read it out loud replacing the word Lord with Jesus. What stands out to you personally about Jesus being your shepherd?

6. Read Ezekiel 34:11-16 and Luke 15:3-7. How do these passages add to our picture of our Good Shepherd? What is the good news for you personally?

7. How would you describe the abundant life found in Christ? How does having Jesus as our Good Shepherd lead us into abundant life?

From Paul Miller, *Love Walked Among Us: Learning to Love Like Jesus*:

Earlier Jesus told his disciples, "I am the good shepherd . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:14-15). The good shepherd became the lamb. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Isaiah had described a "suffering servant" who would substitute his life for the sheep: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . . He was led like a lamb to the slaughter." This "suffering servant" would be wounded and crushed for our sins . . . beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped, and we were healed (see Isaiah 53:5-7). On the cross Jesus took our sin so that we could receive His goodness. He took our inability to love, our self-love, upon himself. He took our brokenness so that we could be healed. Jesus said His death would be for the forgiveness of sins.

8. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for us, becoming the sacrificial lamb for our sins. The words in Isaiah include suffering, slaughter, crushed. When placed in context of what Jesus endured for us, what is your response? How does understanding the depth of Jesus' sacrifice impact the reality of your sin and His forgiveness?

THE VINE

The night before His death, Jesus spent time having a meal with His friends. He shares an intimate moment with them and gets very honest about how life isn't necessarily going to be easy for them as they continue His mission in the world. He tells them the world will be against them; suffering will come; faithfulness will be hard; some days will feel defeating. And in the middle of that, He tells them what will be key to their resilience through the difficulty: abiding in Him, the way a branch abides in a vine. In this passage, the word translated as "abide" or "remain" is from the Greek word *meno*, which means to *stay with* someone or somewhere, to be committed, in a way similar to how a family in a household sticks together through thick and thin. *Meno* is a word people use to talk about where they live, where their home is. Jesus is essentially calling His disciples to *actively make their home with Him*.

Read John 15:1-8.

1. Gisela Kreglinger is a theologian who comes from a family of German vintners. She writes, "Of all the plants that serve as a source of food, the grape vine, like no other, can grow and be productive in the most adverse agricultural contexts. It thrives in stony soils and on the steepest hills and is most productive in places where little else can be grown." Why do you think Jesus identifies himself with a vine?
2. Jesus encourages His disciples to abide/remain in Him. What other ways are we tempted to relate to Jesus other than remaining?
3. What does your life look like when you try to bear fruit on your own, apart from remaining in Jesus?
4. What are habits that help you make your home in Jesus? (Hint: read John 15:7-12 if you want some ideas!)

5. Every time Jesus says “you” in John 15, He’s using the Greek first-person plural (“y’all” or “you guys”). How does it change the way you hear this passage to think about how abiding in Jesus is a fundamentally communal endeavor?

6. Read Galatians 6:16-25. Here Paul is contrasting the “fruit” of the flesh (our selfish, sinful nature) and the “fruit” of the Spirit. How have you seen the fruit of the Spirit grow in your life or another person’s life? How does abiding in Jesus nourish that fruit?

7. How does Galatians 6 and John 15 challenge our notions of what a “fruitful” or “productive” life looks like?

8. Read John 1: 1-14. One of the most beautiful things about John 15 is that Jesus is calling his disciples to make their home with him *after* he has already decided to make *His home* with us. How does this change the way you view abiding in Jesus?

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, & THE LIFE

This is the “I AM” statement that many find so troubling. Our culture wants to believe that all religions (including atheism) will bring you into eternal life—or at the very least that “good people,” no matter what religion, will enter heaven. Christianity is distinctly different than all other religions. The Bible clearly tells us it is not about what we do, but what Jesus has done for us. Other religions call you to work your way up to God, but Christ came down to us to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus did not come simply to give us fire insurance from hell; He calls us into a deeper life with Him **now**.

Read John 14:1-6.

1. What kind of things trouble your heart? What verses help you find comfort in the promises of God?
2. The disciples remain faithful to Jesus here, even in uncertainty. They say, “Where else are we going to go?” What or where are you tempted to turn to for comfort when faced with uncertainty or stressful situations?
3. What does it feel like to be lost? Look up the meaning of the word “way.” How does it help illuminate how Jesus is the way for us?

Read Isaiah 35:8-10. John’s audience would have immediately thought of this passage in response to Jesus’ words. The image of the Way of Holiness is such good news for us who have been redeemed by the blood of the lamb and rescued from our sins.

4. It can be easy to think of holy people as being serious, judgmental, and unhappy, but Isaiah paints a different picture of holy people in verse 9. How does the fruit of the Spirit give us a better picture of what true holiness is?

5. Some theologians say that Jesus is expressing His fulfillment of three roles in our life. How do you see Jesus as our:
 - A. Priest (Way)
 - B. Prophet (Truth)
 - C. King (Life)

6. The illusion of control often keeps us from trusting Jesus with the whole of our life. It's been said that you don't really know Jesus until you give up the illusion of control and let Him take you somewhere you don't want to go. Why do you think we so often resist giving up control to Jesus? What might happen if you did?

7. How has Jesus been the way, the truth, and the life in your own life personally? How do you practically fix your eyes on Jesus? (See Hebrews 12:1.) What are some practical steps to live this out more fully in your life?

For further contemplation, read this excerpt from Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*:

As much as we all know that there is only one true God, we still hunt for God-replacements. We all still tend to look horizontally for what we will only ever find vertically. There are times when we ask creation to be our Savior: We attach our identity to the respect of another. We draw too much of our sense of well-being from our physical appearance. We think material possessions have the power to make us happy. We attach our meaning and purpose to our achievements. We ask our jobs to make us content. We try to base our identity on our children. We attach our sense of spiritual well-being to the "perfect" church. We base our identity on our education. We ask our spouses to make us happy. We look to food and drink to satisfy and calm us. We continually say, "If only I had _____, then my life would be _____."

Jesus said it this way: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). With these words, he ends our need to search. He is life, so there is no need to look for it anywhere else.