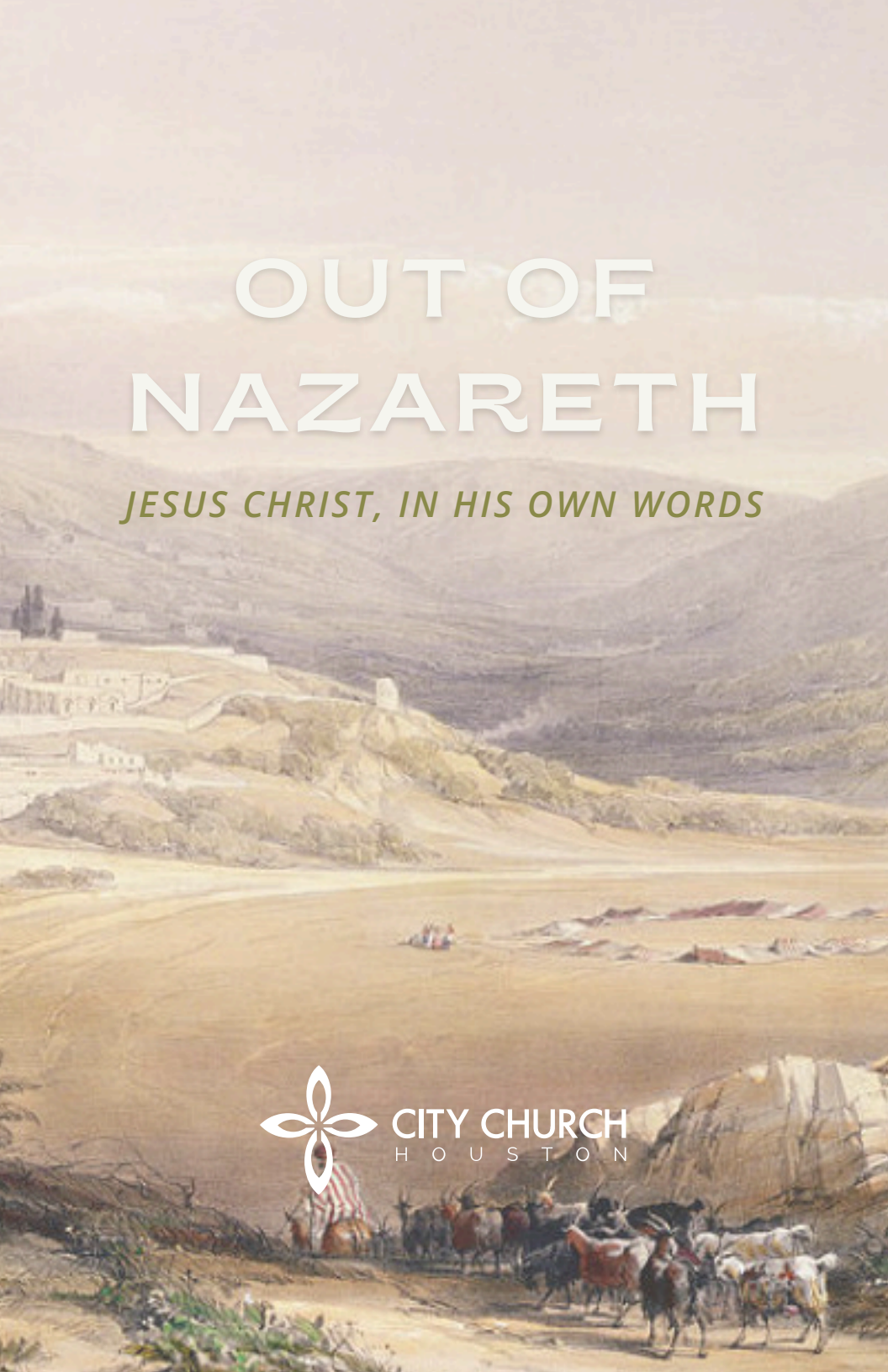


# OUT OF NAZARETH

*JESUS CHRIST, IN HIS OWN WORDS*



CITY CHURCH  
HOUSTON





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WORDS*

**Devotional & City Groups Curriculum  
Spring 2026**

# INTRODUCTION

## ***“Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?”***

How often do you think of Jesus Christ as “Jesus of Nazareth”—as a living, breathing person who furrowed his brow when someone said something confusing, who groaned and stretched out his back after a long day of work, who had a distinct sense of humor, and whose palate preferred one kind of fish over another?

History attests to this man named Jesus. Before the sun set on the first century, the famed Jewish historian Flavius Josephus was already reporting about the disruption caused to Pilate’s reign courtesy of a Palestinian man, who suffered the shame of crucifixion:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous [*sic.*] things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

Writing a little later than Josephus, the Roman senator Tacitus likewise wrote of a figure known as “Christus,” executed by the man Pilate in the first century. To silence the rumor that Rome’s fire was the product of divine disappointment in his reign, argues Tacitus,

Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Volume VIII: Books 18–19, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, 242 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), Book 18, §63–4, 49–51.

<sup>2</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, Volume V: Books 13–16, trans. John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library, 312 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), Book XV, §44, 283.

Some have naturally doubted the authenticity of these early reports and still others are dubious when contemplating the unlikelihood of Nazareth's emergence as a central place in the history of religious and philosophical thought. While no doubt a very small fishing village in Galilee, archaeological evidence has affirmed the presence of Roman and Jewish influence at the time of Jesus' life (even noted skeptics like Bart Ehrman have confirmed these findings).<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' own disciples, Nathanael most famously, remained suspicious of Nazareth as the origin point for the long-awaited Messiah: "'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?' Nathanael asked" (Jn. 1:46). Roman-occupied Galilee, second- and third-class citizens according to both the Roman and Jewish states—surely God's deliverance would have more auspicious beginnings!

*Welcome to the world of the gospel.* Expectations are there to be shattered. Presuppositions exist to be undermined. And what if that upside-down reversal of anticipation was as true for the people of our world today as it is for those in the first century?



*Drawing of First Century Nazareth*

This is not a study about Nazareth, per se. It is a study about the historical Jesus—the man who was also the Son of God, the human who was also fully divine. The good news for the suspicious skeptic and the bona fide believer is that addressing both our

<sup>3</sup>Bart Ehrman, "Nazareth in the Time of Jesus: The Archaeological Record," *The Bart Ehrman Blog: The History and Literature of Early Christianity*, December 27, 2023, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://ehрманblog.org/nazareth-in-the-time-of-jesus-the-archaeological-record/>.

doubts and our spiritual desire to grow boil down to the same, fundamental question: *Who was Jesus?*

And while we're at it, let's add one more question to the mix: Who did Jesus say he was?

### **"I AM": How Jesus of Nazareth Spoke about Himself**

Seven times in the Gospel of John, Jesus describes who he is through the use of a divine formula known as the *ego eimi* (the Greek words for "I am"). This may not seem like much. Surely, we use the phrase "I am" all the time: e.g. "I am from Texas," "I am an engineer," or "I am tired." But seven times in John's narrative of the Messiah's life, Jesus says "I AM" in a way that calls to mind God's famous self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 3. When Moses asks for God's name, the Lord responds, "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am'" (Ex. 3:14). God's name is the very definition of being—whatever it means to exist, that is God, the *am-ing one*.

Trying to adapt this revelation into language, the Israelites called God "Yahweh," from the verb "to be," and henceforth only wrote this holy name using abbreviated letters, YHWH. So revered was this divine name of their God that the word was outlawed in both writing and speech. So, when Jesus alludes to this divine name in describing himself, you might be able to understand why the devout Jewish people in his audience were moved to violence.

When Jesus of Nazareth uses the words "I AM," he is doing at least two things: he's revealing something essential about his mission and he's communicating his oneness with God, his (and our) Father. But with each successive phrase, he is helping his followers understand, in clearer detail, what he promises to do for us—and through us.<sup>4</sup>

Over the next seven weeks, this study will take each "I AM" statement on its own terms, providing context and application for each claim. In so doing, we will try to do what every generation of the church has done since the very first century: *seeking to understand Jesus of Nazareth by exploring what he said about himself.*

<sup>4</sup>According to Marty Solomon of the BEMA podcast, these "I AM" statements are a direct challenge to the religious world of the Greeks and Romans, since the gods of their mythology made similar claims to being these things for their followers. In other words, Jesus is throwing down a gauntlet when he says these words, and John intends them to challenge his non-Jewish readers. For more, see Marty Solomon, et al., "87: John - Grafted," *The BEMA Podcast*, October 4, 2018, accessed March 23, 2026.

The entire New Testament is nothing if not a commentary on the things Jesus said—so, even if these other books offer important clarification and expansion, they are utterly meaningless if not for the words, the teachings, and the actions that animated the historical life of Jesus.

### **How To Use This Study**

This seven-week study will explore each of Jesus' "I AM" statements. While these are generally short passages spread across the Gospel of John, and while each statement does build off the others, you can adapt the study to the number of weeks you have available. Our hope is that the introduction and opportunities for reflection give you a chance to spend at least one or two times each week reflecting on the passage. Here are the seven weeks of our study:

WEEK 1: The Bread of Life

WEEK 2: The Light of the World

WEEK 3: The Gate for the Sheep

WEEK 4: The Good Shepherd

WEEK 5: The Resurrection and the Life

WEEK 6: The Way and the Truth and the Life

WEEK 7: The True Vine

The best way to experience this material is getting the chance to discuss it in our [City Groups](#). You can find a group near you by [searching here](#), or you can always reach out to our Congregational Life Director, Kai Chen ([kai@citychurch.org](mailto:kai@citychurch.org)).

### **Beauty and Brokenness**

At City Church, our mission is ***Bringing Beauty to Broken Places***. If you've been around a while, you've heard that before. If you're new here, welcome! But no matter where you are in your life at City Church, we hope the words of Jesus are a pointed commentary on this mission of ours.

In fact, we have a three-week seminar prepared for this coming season, focusing on three aspects of our mission. Join us in April for "Beauty, Brokenness, and the City."

Jesus' "I AM" statements address real brokenness—hunger, darkness, spiritual confusion—by positioning himself as the beautiful redeemer whose life and work will rise to meet the need of every season of suffering in our lives. These divine formulas are more than metaphors. When Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (Jn.



6:35), we would be remiss to think that this means nothing more than “spiritual” food. What is the last thing Jesus did before his arrest and murder? He fed his disciples, and he washed their feet.

I am convinced nothing is more beautiful than the person of Christ, and nothing draws us closer to that beauty than his own words about his mission. Nothing helps us understand the Kingdom of God at work on this earth like the words of his gospel. And nothing can draw us to God except the words of this gospel: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” he informs us (Jn. 14:6).

City Church would not exist—clearly, no church would exist—were it not for the words spoken by Jesus of Nazareth. How can it be possible that a lowly carpenter from a marginalized fishing village in Roman-occupied Galilee would spend three years in public ministry that would change the course of human history? Among so many competing prophets claiming to be messianic figures (and some even asserting their status as “sons of God”), and among so many people led to a Roman cross for inciting political or spiritual revolution, only Jesus of Nazareth changed the world.

The reversal of expectation that lies at the heart of the gospel—this good news that the last shall be the first, the way up is down, the way forward is back into the heart of our Father—begins with the historical starting point of the Son of God. Human history turns on Nazareth, and our future turns on the words spoken by Jesus of Nazareth. How beautiful is that?

## A Note on Life at City Church

Exciting things are afoot at City Church! In the weeks after Easter, City Church's sermon series will be **Exploring Faith**, examining the early narratives in the Gospel of John that tell us so much about who Jesus was and why he came. This study is designed as a complement to these sermons, since these passages come immediately after these early narratives.

In other words, we're inviting people to see Jesus of Nazareth from two vantage points: how he introduced himself to the world and how he shared his divine purpose with those who were drawn in by his introduction. Jesus' own followers moved from exploring faith to sitting by his feet, waiting for the next image or parable that could animate the faith they'd found. We hope the same is true for all of us.



*PROGRAMMING NOTE: A special thanks to Travis Harry for writing two full weeks of this study, marked at the end of those weeks' introductions!*

## Week 1: "The Bread of Life" John 6:25-58

### The Context: Food for the Hungry

Jesus does not introduce the radical ethic of feeding the hungry and serving the poor. Those ideals are baked into the Word of God from the very beginning. The prophet Isaiah highlights this in a remarkable way, redirecting our religious expectation toward the work of taking care of the most marginalized among us. Rather than focus on "fasting" as a personal purification ritual, God tells Isaiah that he considers "fasting" an opportunity to, quite literally, serve the world:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?  
(Is. 58:6-7).

The pursuit of justice, the feeding of the hungry, the sheltering of the poor—these are pillars upon which the spiritual self is actualized. These are pillars on which the church was built.

Lest these words fill us with shame orienting itself only toward behaviorism and moralism, can we acknowledge that these challenges sometimes feel overwhelming? You might be tempted to think, *What difference can I make, really? Against the evils of poverty, injustice, and oppression, what could any action on my part accomplish?*

That's why Jesus is so important: "Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty' (Jn. 6:35). Once we see ourselves as the hungry and poor, were it not for the spiritual food provided by Christ, we approach the mission of serving the world on far more equal footing. We are not ourselves saviors tasked with redeeming the world. We are the saved, those who have been given the "bread of life."

Jesus intentionally links his mission to the provisions of the Lord in the Old Testament. When the Israelites wandering in the wilderness complained of hunger, God tells Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you" (Ex. 16:4). For the Israelites, this heavenly food was unknown to them—they gave it the name "manna," which sounded like the Hebrew expression, "what is it?" What they didn't understand we now do—they were being given the promised deliverance of mankind, the "bread of life" that would be fully realized in Jesus.

Thus, Jesus proclaims, "Here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (Jn. 6:50–51). Remarkable words. And sure enough, the word John records for "bread" (*artos*) is the same word the Greek translators of the Old Testament used when interpreting Exodus 16: that first "bread of life" provided for God's hungry people.

Naturally, the crowds are utterly shocked by Jesus' teaching, wondering if he is indeed proposing some form of cannibalism or occult practice. Again, hindsight is 20/20. John's Gospel will lead us to the scene of the first Communion, where Jesus lives out the promise of being our "bread for life," serving his friends—even and eventually to the point of death—to prove that he is the kind of Savior who practices what he preaches.

There is surely a reason that Jesus' first use of the divine formula "I AM" is linked to the idea of feeding the hungry. The beginning of any journey to know Jesus begins with an acknowledgement of our own hunger. Over and over again, the stories of the Gospels record men and women driven to meet Jesus because of spiritual hunger and thirst (and, in some cases, literal hunger and thirst). The definition of a "Christian" is not necessary someone who feeds the hungry—though that is a very good thing to do. (After all, plenty of people feed the hungry who are not "Christian.") The definition of a "Christian" is one who starts a journey toward Christ from the starting point of hunger, lack, *need*.

Discovering that Jesus is the true "Bread of Life" is joyful news for those who gripped with hunger pangs, searching for a warm meal as for a warm embrace.

## The Text: John 6:25–58

### Jesus the Bread of Life

<sup>25</sup> When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

<sup>26</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. <sup>27</sup> Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

<sup>28</sup> Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”

<sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

<sup>30</sup> So they asked him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? <sup>31</sup> Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

<sup>32</sup> Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

<sup>34</sup> “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

<sup>35</sup> Then Jesus declared, “**I am the bread of life.** Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. <sup>36</sup> But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. <sup>37</sup> All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. <sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup> And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. <sup>40</sup> For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

<sup>41</sup> At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." <sup>42</sup> They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven?'"

<sup>43</sup> "Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. <sup>44</sup> "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. <sup>45</sup> It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard the Father and learned from him comes to me. <sup>46</sup> No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. <sup>47</sup> Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life. <sup>48</sup> I am the bread of life. <sup>49</sup> Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. <sup>50</sup> But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. <sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

<sup>52</sup> Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

<sup>53</sup> Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup> Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. <sup>55</sup> For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. <sup>56</sup> Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup> Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup> This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."

### **The Time for Reflection**

In what area of your life right now are you *hungry*—for more, for something different, for truth, for hope? What comes to mind when you hear the word "hunger?"

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Jesus supports his claim to be the “Bread of Life” in many ways, and one way we haven’t yet considered is in the way his ministry literally fed people—most famously the 5,000 that joined him on the edge of the Sea of Galilee. Take some time with this painting called “Jesus Multiplies the Loaves and Fish,” produced a Christian community in Cameroon that goes by the name “JESUS MAFA.”



I love how the artist imagines the scene—the chaos of it, the helpers handing out food, the families and faces as far as the eye can see. It helps us experience how dynamic it must have been for Jesus to feed the 5,000. John describes

this very scene earlier in the same chapter we studied this week (Jn. 6:1–14).

It’s also clear that the artist is adapting the biblical scene to his African context—the clothes and the landscape more representative of Cameroon, perhaps, than Galilee. If you were to adapt the Feeding of the 5,000 to a context closer to your home and experience, what would it look like? **Describe it.**

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### **The Time for Response**

Spend some time in prayer asking what Christ’s claim to be “bread from heaven” means for you and your life. If you need a guide, consider the following meditation:

[*Deep inhalation. Moment of silence.*]

Jesus, Bread of Life, our daily provision. [*Deep exhalation.*]

Feed the hunger in our souls. Help us to know and feel that hunger so that we might long for the sustenance that you alone can bring.

[*Deep inhalation.*]

Jesus, Bread of Life, the manna in our wilderness. [*Deep exhalation.*]

Since you feed us so faithfully, so fully, grant me strength to feed others—to seek ways of serving the world you love so well, loved to

to the point of death, even death on a cross. [*Deep inhalation.*]  
Jesus, Bread of Life, the one who died so we might live. [*Deep exhalation.*]

### **The Time for Engagement**

We would love to help you find community to help you process these ideas and questions. Our City Groups, which meet on various days and in various neighborhoods in Houston, will be discussing this passage in person. To learn more, visit <https://citychurch.org/city-groups/> or email our Congregational Life Director, Kai Chen, for more information [kai@citychurch.org](mailto:kai@citychurch.org)

### **CITY GROUP QUESTIONS**

#### **Week 1 | “The Bread of Life”**

1. Define “hunger.” In what ways are you spiritually hungry right now in your life?
2. Jesus compares himself to the “manna” from heaven provided by God in Exodus (Jn. 6:51). In what ways is his ministry similar to God’s provision in Exodus? In what ways is his ministry different? [*Optional: Read Exodus 16:1–5, 13–15.*]
3. Surely, we can understand why the crowds were confused by Jesus’ claim to be food and drink for his followers, right? (Jn. 6:52–53). How do you make sense of Eucharist / Communion, since it clearly has caused confusion for Jesus’ followers from the start? Is it purely symbolic? Is it more than a symbol?
4. One of the most complicated parts of this passage is Jesus’ claim that “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (Jn. 6:44). What do these words mean? How does this statement affect your view of what it means to follow Jesus?
5. Together, make a list of the ways in which the person and work of Jesus aligns with the idea of feeding hungry people. Consider how the Gospels support the idea that Jesus is the “Bread of Life?”

## Week 2: “The Light of the World” John 8:12-29

### **The Context: Follow the Light**

Sometimes, Jesus mixes metaphors. This is less of an accusation than an observation. Jesus says that he is “the light of the world” but then links that idea to the “light of life.” In this way, he threads a needle that connects his first “I AM” statement to his second. The first statement emphasizes life’s connection to sustenance: Jesus’ mission is to feed the spiritually hungry. The second statement emphasizes life’s connection to light.

Without light, life cannot survive. There is, of course, some science behind this idea. And one cannot help but point out the English pun, which only God could have anticipated: that the *Son* of God is the *Sun* of our lives, the center point of our own spiritual galaxy. As legend has it, Saint Patrick pointed out something similar when he shared the gospel with the indigenous Druids. The Druids worshipped a sun god, connecting their life to the rhythms and seeming supernatural power of the sun. They explained this by drawing a circle in the sand. Patrick, trying to explain the work of his Savior, drew a cross through that circle. A cross enclosed by a circle: Christ, who in death, became the light of our lives. And thus, if you believe the legend, the world was gifted the Celtic Cross (*crois Cheilteach* in the old Gaelic).

Jesus’ claim to be “the light of the world” meets immediate opposition from the religious law keepers, called Pharisees, who reject the statement on the ground of lacking witnesses. It’s fascinating that the enormous claim that Jesus gives “the light of life” is contested merely on the grounds of numbers. The quality of his promise is met with quantitative quandary. Jesus, however, takes the challenge, citing his heavenly Father, the God of history, as his “other witness” (Jn. 8:18).

This continues Jesus’ rich teaching of his own oneness with both his Father and his Father’s will—as he’ll emphasize later in the same chapter. There he says, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught” (Jn. 8:28).

Surely, his listeners imagined this prophecy entailed “lifting up” Jesus in glory. But it is not the glory they could have possibly anticipated: for Jesus, the ultimate glorification was found in his

sacrificial death, his journey to and through the cross. That is why, in one of his last prayers to his Father before the events of the crucifixion are set in motion, he prays these words: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you” (Jn. 17:1). For Jesus, glory is found in following his Father’s will and in offering himself “up” on the cross in a way that challenged his followers’ assumption of what real victory looks like.

In their joyful anthem, “Light and Day,” the band Polyphonic Spree sings, “Follow the day and reach for the sun!” Those who want to follow Jesus are indeed reaching for the Son of God, the “light of the world.” When we follow the day of his goodness, the day defined by victory through sacrifice and glory through suffering, we see how bright his light shines in the darkness of our world.

That Jesus was “the light of the world” was an important point in John’s Gospel, to put it mildly. He wants to ensure we don’t miss it. That’s why he begins the entire story with this idea as a central theme. “In him was life,” John writes in the Prologue, “and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn. 1:4–5). The Greek verb “overcome” is *katalambano*, and it carries two major meanings: both the sense of overpowering and the sense of comprehension. It’s as if John is saying that the darkness both cannot defeat the light and, on some level, cannot even understand this beautiful source of dark-defying daylight. Jesus’ light overcomes us by changing our very understanding of what is possible—beginning with us. Our very vision of our lives transforms in the light of Jesus’ truth.

## **The Text: John 8:12–29**

### **Dispute Over Jesus’ Testimony**

<sup>12</sup>When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “**I am the light of the world**. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

<sup>13</sup>The Pharisees challenged him, “Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.”

<sup>14</sup>Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going.”<sup>15</sup> You

judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. <sup>16</sup> But if I do judge, my decisions are true, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. <sup>17</sup> In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. <sup>18</sup> I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me."

<sup>19</sup> Then they asked him, "Where is your father?"

"You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also." <sup>20</sup> He spoke these words while teaching in the temple courts near the place where the offerings were put. Yet no one seized him, because his hour had not yet come.

### **Dispute Over Who Jesus Is**

<sup>21</sup> Once more Jesus said to them, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come."

<sup>22</sup> This made the Jews ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I go, you cannot come?'"

<sup>23</sup> But he continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. <sup>24</sup> I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins."

<sup>25</sup> "Who are you?" they asked.

"Just what I have been telling you from the beginning," Jesus replied. <sup>26</sup> "I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from him I tell the world."

<sup>27</sup> They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. <sup>28</sup> So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. <sup>29</sup> The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." <sup>30</sup> Even as he spoke, many believed in him.

### **The Time for Reflection**

Jesus promises his disciples that they will face trial and tribulation

(Jn. 16:33), but he also promises that those who follow him will “never walk in darkness” (Jn. 8:12). What does this mean about the relationship between trial and darkness? Can we go through trial and still walk in the light? How so?

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Take a “Light Inventory.” If you consider yourself a follower of Jesus, where do you see the evidence of his light in your life? Even if you are in a place of skepticism, where is the light of your life right now? What do these places of light reveal to you about where you find hope in your life right now? Choose things that complete this sentence: *I experience light in / by / through ...*

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### **The Time for Response**

If you have time, practice this *Lectio Divina*. Follow the steps and close in prayer.

1. Read **John 8:12–20** again. This time, read it aloud.
2. Pick one word that stands out to you. Meditate on this word. Why did this word stand out to you? What might the Lord be telling you through this word?

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3. Read **John 8:12–20** again. Try to read it even slower this time.
  4. Imagine the darkest place you’ve ever been, literally. Can you remember what it felt like? What does the reality of the light of Christ mean in your life today?

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Pray these words, or choose your own: *Lord Jesus, Light of the World, and light of life, cast the rays of your goodness on the darkness in my life. Lead me to see suffering in the light of your*

*glory as preferable to a life of ease in the darkness of reality apart from you. In your name, and the name of your Father, and the name of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.*

### **The Time for Engagement**

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### **CITY GROUP QUESTIONS**

#### **Week 2 | “The Light of the World”**

1. Jesus promises his disciples that they will face trial and tribulation (Jn. 16:33), but he also promises that those who follow him will “never walk in darkness” (Jn. 8:12). What does this mean about the relationship between trial and darkness?
2. How does Jesus answer the Pharisees’ claim that his claims are not supported through the sufficient witnesses? What does his answer reveal to us about the relationship between Jesus and his Father?
3. The Pharisees also ask where Jesus’ Father is (Jn. 8:19). What is the subtext of their question, and why does Jesus respond the way he does? Why does Jesus move from the question of his Father’s location to whether or not the Pharisees “know” him?
4. John makes an interesting, little point at the end of the passage: “Even as he spoke, many believed in him” (Jn. 8:30). What do you think it was about these words, in particular, that proved so compelling for Jesus’ listeners?
5. Read John 8:27–29 again. What is Jesus telling them, and how does it appear that the crowds are misunderstanding him? What do these crowds hope will happen once the Son of Man is “lifted up” (Jn. 8:28)?

## **Week 3: “The Gate for the Sheep”**

### **John 9:35–10:10**

#### **The Context: A Way Forward**

When I was in school in San Francisco, I attended a historic downtown church. Founded by missionaries to the gold miners, the church had been a witness to the city through earthquakes, the hippie movement in the Haight-Ashbury, the rise of Silicon Valley, and more. It had seen everything, but the years before I arrived had been rough. The congregation had lost a long-time pastor to illness and struggled to find a new leader. Time and money were running out. The domed roof started to leak and the neon cross over the doorway began to flicker. Worship services grew somber and insular, and fewer and fewer people found their way in. The church was dying.

Then the church found an interim preacher to help stabilize things. Week by week, this preacher encouraged our congregation, giving us hope and a vision of what we could be for the community around us. I will never forget one Sunday in particular. As the worship band played “Did You Feel the Mountains Tremble?”, the song built to its chorus. “Fling wide you heavenly gates! / Prepare the way of the risen Lord!” The words reverberated among empty pews and damp rafters. The preacher crossed the stage, picked up a microphone, and called on the ushers, pointing to the exits. The song continued... “Open up the doors and let the music play / Let the streets resound with singing / Songs that bring Your hope...” The ushers opened the doors to the narthex and then those onto the street itself.

I could feel the mood of the church shift. The chill shook off as we sang hymns with full throats for all to hear. Opening the physical doors of the church reawakened us to our real mission of sharing the love of Christ with our neighbors. Focused outward rather than inward, the congregation filled with enthusiasm and confidence, and the church began to slowly recover. Over the next few years, new believers filled the pews, a full-time pastor was hired, and the body thrived once again.

There will be other places in this study where we will see Jesus as a path *into* something (“I am the resurrection and the life,” “I am the way and the truth and the life”). But this “gate for the sheep” passage tells us he is also the way out.

Sheep pens are a place for sheep to spend only the night. By day they would rather be grazing the open pasture. At night, the gate to the sheep pen offers protection, keeping them safe from thieves and predators. But when morning comes, that same gate is an avenue to the wider world. The flock needs this open grassland as much as it does the safety of the pen.

Believers must enter the church through Christ, but we cannot afford to stay shut up inside. We must go out and engage with the world. We must continually be moving in and out of the church building, in and out of our close-knit Christian communities, in and out of our interior meditations with God. This is how we live life “to the full”. We have a secure place to rest, but when we leave it to interact with the rest of the world we bring blessing to others and find nourishment for ourselves.

As the “gate for the sheep,” Jesus makes it possible for us to inhabit both spaces. He isn’t just the door. He is the opening itself. Every passage through him shapes us. When we engage the world, our interactions are formed by Christ from the very start. We exit through his narrow gate carrying his command to love. We encounter the world from his vantage point. Through this singular opening in the wall, we see as he sees - with compassion for those outside, with eyes no longer spiritually blind, with the knowledge that we carry salvation itself into a world desperate for hope. Jesus, our gate, is our one way to salvation and our one way to abundant life too.

- *Travis Harry*

## **The Text: John 9:35–10:10**

### **Spiritual Blindness**

<sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

<sup>36</sup> “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

<sup>37</sup> Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

<sup>38</sup> Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the

blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

<sup>40</sup> Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”

<sup>41</sup> Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

### **The Good Shepherd and His Sheep**

**10** “Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.” <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

<sup>7</sup>Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, **I am the gate for the sheep.** <sup>8</sup>All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

### **The Time for Reflection**

Make two lists: "Coming In" (spiritual practices that draw you to rest in God) and "Going Out" (ways you engage the world with Christ's love). Which list is longer? What does that reveal? What are some practices on which you want to focus more?

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

### **The Time for Response**

Lord Jesus, open our eyes to see you as the only way to salvation

and abundant life. Help us to enter through you, the Gate, and to find the protection you promise. Send us out with love in our hearts and help us to see the world through your eyes. Make us a blessing to those we find there. *Amen.*

### **The Time for Engagement**

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## **CITY GROUP QUESTIONS**

### **Week 3 | "The Gate of the Sheep"**

1. What does "abundant life" (or "life to the full") mean to you? Would you describe your current life as "abundant" or just "adequate"? Are you settling for less than what Jesus offers? What would abundant life look like practically in your context?
2. Are you more comfortable staying "inside the fold" or venturing "out to pasture"? What does that preference reveal about your spiritual life right now? What keeps you from the other movement?
3. If Jesus is the only gate, what "false gates" have you been tempted to trust for security or purpose? How do these good things become "gates" that bypass Christ?
4. How can we hold to the truth that Jesus is the only way to salvation without becoming arrogant? How do we share this exclusive claim in love with those who disagree?
5. What does it mean for you to "go out" through the gate of Jesus into cultural participation? In what ways might this freedom be limited or directed? Does this make faith feel liberating or restrictive? Why?

## Week 4: "The Good Shepherd" John 10:11-30

### **The Context: A Way Forward**

The image of God as Israel's shepherd runs throughout the Old Testament. Isaiah paints a picture of tender protection in the midst of exile: "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (40:11). And then there is the well-known Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul."

Shepherding served as a natural metaphor for leadership, and the Old Testament applied it to Israel's human leaders as well. Some shepherds were faithful; many were not. The prophets loved to pronounce woe on bad leaders through this imagery. Those who led Israel into the calamities of the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions earned scathing rebukes. "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" says Jeremiah (23:1). "Woe to the worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock!" says Zechariah (11:17). Seeing actual herdsmen fall asleep on the job or abandon their sheep in the face of danger must have been a common enough experience. The metaphor would have hit home, and the audience would have understood exactly the kind of danger in which that put the sheep.

God promises not just judgment, but hope. "'I will place shepherds over [the Israelites] who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,' declares the Lord. 'The days are coming when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior'" (Jer 23:4-6). Moreover, the nation will be shepherded not merely by a better human leader, but by God himself. Speaking through Ezekiel, God declares, "As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness" (34:12).

Jesus is the fulfillment of that promised shepherd. He is both the human leader raised up from David's line (himself a lowly

shepherd) prophesied in Jeremiah 23, and the divine savior of Ezekiel 34 who comes to rescue the scattered flock. When he declares, "I am the good shepherd," he claims both roles.

What makes this shepherd so good? The English word "good" is flexible and all-purpose, spanning everything from moral virtue to aesthetic beauty. Interestingly, Jesus chooses a word that leans toward the aesthetic. There is another Greek word, *agathos*, that emphasizes moral goodness, but Jesus doesn't use it here. Instead, he uses *kalos*, a word connoting beauty, nobility, and perfection. Jesus isn't just claiming to be the "kind shepherd." He's declaring himself the "ideal" shepherd.

He is the ideal shepherd for two reasons. First, he lays down his life for his sheep. Shepherding in ancient times carried genuine risks — wild animals and thieves creeping up in the darkness — but this laying down of life means something far more profound. Jesus isn't merely putting his life at risk for the flock. He goes forward with the certainty that he will lose it. The cross wasn't something that happened to him; it was something he chose, walking toward it with full knowledge and authority.

The second reason Jesus is the ideal shepherd is that his sheep will listen to his voice, and there will be "one flock and one shepherd." Jesus is the one who will finally reunite Israel, reversing the scattering that followed the Assyrian invasion (see Zechariah 11). But he goes even further: he calls all humanity to respond, breaking down the wall between Jew and Gentile. This power to reunite people across every division makes him the ideal shepherd.

Jesus speaks with the authority of God himself. He lays down his life with authority. He calls his sheep together with authority. These are acts that only God could perform, and Jesus does them perfectly. When we follow the good shepherd, we are trusting someone who loves us perfectly, someone who loves us more than his own life. Having heard his call, how will we respond?

- Travis Harry

### **The Text: John 10:11-30**

<sup>11</sup> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. <sup>13</sup> The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

<sup>14</sup> “**I am the good shepherd**; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. <sup>17</sup> The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

<sup>19</sup> The Jews who heard these words were again divided. <sup>20</sup> Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?”

<sup>21</sup> But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

### **Further Conflict Over Jesus’ Claims**

<sup>22</sup> Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, <sup>23</sup> and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon’s Colonnade. <sup>24</sup> The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

<sup>25</sup> Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me, <sup>26</sup> but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. <sup>27</sup> My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup> I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup> My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. <sup>30</sup> I and the Father are one.”

### **The Time for Reflection**

What voices compete with Jesus for your attention and allegiance? What leaders, movements, or ideologies promise to “shepherd” you? How do you test them? (Do they point to themselves or to Jesus? Do they lay down their lives or demand you serve them?)

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What has Jesus' sacrifice meant for you personally? What is He calling you to "lay down" for others? Where are you holding back when He's calling you to give? Write about one concrete way you can imitate the Good Shepherd's sacrificial love this week.

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### ***The Time for Response***

Jesus, thank you for choosing to lay down your life for me when you could have walked away. You didn't leave us to wander or to fend for ourselves. You came with all the authority of God himself to gather us back together. Help me to hear your voice today, and let it not be drowned out by the noise of everything else competing for my attention. Help me to humbly follow your call alongside others from all backgrounds, and be gathered together joyfully in one flock.

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## **CITY GROUP QUESTIONS**

### **Week 4 | "The Good Shepherd"**

1. Who or what have you been trusting to "shepherd" you besides Jesus? How do you distinguish between true shepherds (who point to Jesus and serve sacrificially) and hired hands (who serve themselves)? Have you experienced a "hired hand" who ran when things got hard? How did that affect your ability to trust?

2. Jesus laid down His life for you. What is He calling you to lay down for others? Who in your life needs you to be a "good shepherd" (not savior, but one who sacrifices for their good)? Where are you tempted to "run away" like a hired hand when loving others gets costly?
3. Jesus says His sheep know His voice. In practical terms, how do you recognize when Jesus is speaking to you vs. when it's your own thoughts or the voices of others? What competing voices are loudest in your life right now?
4. Jesus claims power to lay down His life and take it up again. What does this reveal about who He is? How does Jesus' authority over death change how you face your own mortality? If Jesus has this kind of power, what in your life can truly threaten you? What are you afraid of that His authority should calm?
5. How does this "Good Shepherd" image connect with Jesus being "the Gate" in the passage from last week? How do both images work together?
6. Jesus' claim that he is the Good Shepherd is followed by intense conflict (19-30). Why do you think his statement provoked such division?

## Week 5: "The Resurrection and the Life"

### John 11:17-44

#### The Context: Grave Clothes Consignment

I hope this isn't too controversial, but have you ever felt like there's something a little anticlimactic about the raising of Lazarus?<sup>5</sup> The life of Jesus builds up to one, hope-inducing, earth-shattering event: the death and the resurrection of the Son of God. For thousands of years, Christians have celebrated the holy days of Christ's "Passion Week" as the centerpiece of the spiritual and social calendar, culminating in Easter Sunday. If it was a mystery novel or action movie, surely any writer worth their salt would hold off on the jaw-dropping realization that Jesus has power over the grave until those final, heart-pounding moments. So, what about Lazarus?

Sure, a fictional story might hold onto the "resurrection card" in order to build clearer suspense and pen a more climactic conclusion. Followers of Jesus, however, do not consider the Gospels to be fictional. While it is the "greatest story ever told," it is far more than a "story." Actually, this is really good news. Jesus isn't privileging the power of narrative tension over sharing the purpose of his mission with the world. Through his encounter with Lazarus and his family, Jesus announces for all to hear, "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11:25).

On some level, even those who witnessed the miraculous raising of Lazarus did not yet realize what Jesus' words really meant—namely, that he himself would be a victim of mortal death and a living proof of the power of his resurrection power. But even without the fuller context, the promise is the same: "The one who believes in me will live, even though they die" (Jn. 11:25).

Facing both the power and the fear of death, Lazarus's sisters represent radically different responses (even if they say the exact same words to Jesus). These responses are what we might call paradigmatic. Martha seems to seek after theological or doctrinal clarity. To her, he pronounces the very clarity she pursues—"I am the resurrection and the life." She understandably misunderstands the immediacy of this promise, however. Mary, on the other hand, seeks emotional comfort and clarity. Jesus is moved by her genuine mourning and even—in the Bible's famously shortest verse—"weeps" himself (Jn. 11:35).

<sup>5</sup> And while we're at it, the other two resurrections Jesus performs—the son of the Widow of Nain (Lk. 7:11-17) and synagogue leader Jairus's daughter (Mk. 5:35-43). All told, Jesus resurrects three people before his own promised defeat of the grave.

To which sister do you most relate? If confronted with the confusion of loss and grief, do you seek doctrinal answers or simply someone you can cry with? Of course, even the very question proposes a false dichotomy. In Jesus we have access to both the fullness of God's wisdom and his compassion. To be made in the image of God, as Genesis insists, means that our hearts and minds are both reflective of that greater capacity we find in our Maker.

Thus, when Jesus uses that divine, ego eimi formula here—saying “I AM”—he indicates the fullness of God's divine character within him. He is both emotionally and intellectually up to the challenge. And defeating death requires both from him—the power of his understanding and the power of his compassion. His voice calls out to us in the graves of our broken lives—calls us out from the darkness within, into the light of his presence.

But let us not miss the next instruction after resurrecting Lazarus: “Take off the grave clothes and let him go” (Jn 11:44). If we hope to pass through the waters of mortality, tasting death but entering into his “resurrection and life,” then we bring nothing with us. We leave behind our grave clothes—the burdens of our past, the wounds we've endured as well as the wounds we've inflicted. We hand them over to Christ himself, we consign our past into the hands of our future life with Jesus.

For Jesus to say “I am the resurrection and the life” means that he alone has the power to end the grave and its clothes, the tomb and all its imprisoning power.

### **The Text: John 11:17-44**

#### **Jesus Comforts the Sisters of Lazarus**

<sup>17</sup> On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. <sup>18</sup> Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, <sup>19</sup> and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. <sup>20</sup> When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

<sup>21</sup> “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup> But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

<sup>24</sup> Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;<sup>26</sup> and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

<sup>27</sup> "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

<sup>28</sup> After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you."<sup>29</sup> When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him.<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.<sup>31</sup> When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

<sup>32</sup> When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

<sup>34</sup> "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied.

<sup>35</sup> Jesus wept.

<sup>36</sup> Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

<sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

### **Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead**

<sup>38</sup> Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.<sup>39</sup> "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

<sup>40</sup> Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

<sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

<sup>43</sup> When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” <sup>44</sup> The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

**The Time for Reflection**

Martha, always worrying, tries to stop Jesus from raising her brother because of the “bad odor.” Jesus lovingly rebukes her, redirecting everyone’s attention to the far greater reality: “the glory of God.” When you think about the anxieties that prohibit you from believing in the miraculous work of Jesus, what comes to mind? What gets in your way of “believing?”

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The crowds wonder why Jesus, who had done so many great works, would even allow his beloved friend to die (Jn. 11:37). What do we learn about Jesus by virtue of the fact that he by the time he arrived, a resurrection was necessary? And if we are like Lazarus—which I think Jesus implies by calling himself “the resurrection and the life”—what do we learn about ourselves in this episode?

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### **The Time for Response**

One of the things that is most striking (for me, at least) about Jesus' seven "I AM" statements in John is how they are always, in context, about his relationship with his Father. These seven phrases are actually wonderful opportunities to reflect on the glorious and mysterious doctrine of the Trinity—this one God in three persons. Today's prayer is simple: the short Gloria Patri, a prayer dating its roots to the Fourth Century!

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world  
without end. *Amen.*

What word strikes you most? What lights your imagination or curiosity? Write it here.

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## CITY GROUP QUESTIONS

### Week 5 | “The Resurrection and the Life”

1. Mary and Martha are such great “foils” of one another: their actions often contrast two different relationships with Jesus. How would you define their different approaches to Jesus, despite saying the very same thing. Do you resonate more with Mary or with Martha?
2. Why do you think Jesus performs resurrection miracles before his own resurrection? What was different about his resurrection? How is the scene with Lazarus a precursor to the miracle of Easter?
3. What does Jesus say to his Father before calling Lazarus out of the tomb? What are some of the implications of his prayer? (Put another way, why does Jesus equate miraculous power with God “hearing” us?)
4. In order for Lazarus to be set free, Jesus commands that they remove his “grave clothes” (Jn. 11:44). We cannot enter into Christ’s rest until we have let go of our metaphorical “grave clothes”—those things that tie us to our old life. What are things that prevent you from leaving the grave of your past? Or, what are things you’ve noticed prevent others from following Jesus into resurrection life?
5. One of the overriding themes of John—and of Jesus’ “I AM” statements—is the concept of glory (see Jn. 11:40). What is “glory,” in your view, and how does this scene reveal the reality of God’s “glory?”

## Week 6: “The Way and the Truth and the Life” John 14:1–14

### The Context: Faith for the Future

One of my favorite words in the English language is *polysyndeton*, which is the rhetorical technique of linking ideas in close succession through multiple conjunctions (“and,” “but,” “yet,” etc.) as well as close attention to rhythm. An example might be: “The night was damp and dark and deep.” (Bonus points for alliteration!) A more famous example could be drawn from Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*: “In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels.” Undoubtedly one of the masters of *polysyndeton* was the late Cormac McCarthy. Listen to the rhythm of these conjunctions pulled from his masterful novel, *All the Pretty Horses*:

They heard somewhere in the tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was and they rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under but among them and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing.

McCarthy’s sentence, pouring forth in ways that defy what grammar teachers would likely commend, begs for our attention. As it spins out further and further like a thread unspooling, we are beckoned to hold disparate ideas together in our minds and our imaginations. And, in some ways, this kind of sentence feels more like how our minds work, doesn’t it? My brain, at least, doesn’t tend to think in complete sentences and well-structured paragraphs.

Without a doubt, among the most famous moments of polysyndeton in world literature is uttered by none other than Jesus of Nazareth: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John. 14:6). Each of the three objects are single syllables—at least in English!—that pack a punch: “way,” “truth,” “life.” What connects these words? Are they simply big ideas that Jesus wanted to encapsulate in his person and work? Or do these three objects work together in some interrelated way? How does “way” relate to

“truth” and “truth” relate to “life?”

As with so many things in scripture, context is king. As much as we want to pull this out as a deep truth—and it is deep, to be sure—Jesus’ words are a response to his disciples’ fear of abandonment. As they process Jesus’ promise to be leaving, their immediate fear is that they will not know how to follow him once he’s gone. If you call yourself a follower of Christ, perhaps you can relate? We have seasons, typically toward the beginning of our life of faith, when Jesus feels near. But then there are seasons of distance, of longing, of uncertainty. We, like Thomas, often wonder, How can we know the way? (Jn. 14:5).

What if Jesus’ words are not just profound sounding but actually a meaningful piece of advice for any who can’t find “the way?” To say that Jesus is “the way” actually implies something very different about the life of faith. Thomas thinks the goal is to find the place to where Jesus is going. Jesus says the goal is simply to find Jesus. I wonder if you have ever been tempted to invest your energy in figuring out where Jesus is leading you rather than staying close to the Jesus who is leading you—wherever that may be?

However, Jesus doesn’t just leave it there. He adds two other titles to his identity. In addition to being the path we’re encouraged to follow, he is also the truth and the life we will find in the journey. Philip accepts the first part but then he has his own doubting-Thomas reaction: “Show us the Father and that will be enough for us” (Jn. 14:8). But Philip, too, misses the point: Jesus is one with the Father just as he is one with the concept of “truth” and “life.”

We seek the Father because he is the Creator of life (that’s how the Bible begins) as well as the arbiter of truth. Psalm 119:160 says, “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.” God’s words, put together, are the very definition of “truth.” And thus, Jesus as the coming of God’s Word in the flesh, is likewise the incarnation of truth.

In these final moments, the fears of Jesus’ disciples led to doubts about the reliability of his teaching. Jesus could not be more emphatic. With polysyndetonic assertiveness, he insists that he is the answer to their hearts’ deepest longings: in him is the road ahead, the truth we need to navigate the complexity of our human lives, and the life that we are promised to receive in the eternal care of our good and gracious king.

## **The Text: John 14:1-14**

### **Jesus Comforts His Disciples**

**14** “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. <sup>2</sup> My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. <sup>4</sup> You know the way to the place where I am going.”

### **Jesus the Way to the Father**

<sup>5</sup> Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

<sup>6</sup> Jesus answered, “**I am the way and the truth and the life.** No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup> If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

<sup>8</sup> Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

<sup>9</sup> Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ <sup>10</sup> Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. <sup>11</sup> Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup> Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup> And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup> You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”

### **The Time for Reflection**

What is Thomas really asking? What is he afraid will happen when Jesus leaves them?

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What is Philip asking for, really? What does it reveal about Philip's understanding of Jesus?

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If you were so fortunate to have known the incarnate Jesus, what question would you ask him if he was leaving your presence tomorrow?

### ***The Time for Response***

The Catholic Church has often penned beautiful prayers in the spirit of past saints and apostles. While it is not common in the Protestant tradition to pray "to" these departed figures of our spiritual history, these wonderful words help us see how the stories of scripture can animate our lives of prayer and contemplation. Take a moment to pray this adapted prayer inspired by the grief and doubt of Thomas.

O God, may we find an example in the figure of Thomas—seeking the strength to face our grief and doubt.

When tempted to lament our confusion concerning the road ahead, remind us that you are the way.

When we are tempted to question what might be true of the God of scripture, remind us that you are the truth.

When we are tempted to mire ourselves in the grief of death and the presence of sin in our lives, remind us that you are the life.

Thomas, whose grief for Jesus was such that it would not let him believe he had risen unless he actually saw him and touched his wounds. But this same disciple's love for Jesus was equally great and it led him to give up his life for him. We pray that we may grieve for our sins which were the cause of Christ's sufferings. Help us to spend ourselves in his service and so earn the title of "blessed" which Jesus applied to those who would believe in him without seeing him. Amen.

### **The Time for Engagement**

We would love to help you find community to help you process these ideas and questions. Our City Groups, which meet on various days and in various neighborhoods in Houston, will be discussing this passage in person. To learn more, visit <https://citychurch.org/city-groups/> or email our Congregational Life Director, Kai Chen, for more information [kai@citychurch.org](mailto:kai@citychurch.org).

### **CITY GROUP QUESTIONS**

#### **Week 6 | "The Way and the Truth and the Life"**

1. The word "truth" gets thrown around a lot, don't you think? How do you define the word "truth," and what do you think it means that Jesus calls himself "the truth?"
2. Thomas only asks about the "way" but Jesus adds two more terms to the mix. Why do you think Jesus included "truth" and "life" (Jn. 14:6)? How are these three ideas related?
3. Thomas and Philip both ask Jesus questions that stem from their doubts. How are these questions similar? How are they different? To which question do you relate more deeply?
4. The end of this passage can be hard to fathom. What does it mean that Jesus' followers will do "greater things than these" (Jn. 14:12)? What is Jesus' reasoning and how does that align with your sense of the power found in Jesus?
5. Go back to Jesus' statement in Jn.14:4. How does Thomas alter Jesus' statement (Jn. 14:5)? That is, how is his question different than what Jesus promises? What can we learn here?

## Week 7: “The True Vine” John 15:1–17

### The *Context*: From the Stump of Jesse

It is hard for me to hear the word “Abide” without thinking of the Coen Brothers’ cult classic film *The Big Lebowski* (1998). The main character of the film—Jeffrey Lebowski but better known, simply, as “The Dude”—lives by the life motto, “The Dude Abides.”<sup>6</sup> No matter what comes his way, well, he simply abides with the results.

While no theologian, the Dude unknowingly carries out one of Jesus’ final, and most famous, commandments. Describing himself as the “true vine” (Jn. 15:1), Jesus instructs his followers “remain,” or “abide,” in his life-giving care. As his “branches,” it’s our path to survival.

It makes good gardening sense, in my experience. The front gate of our house is wrapped with deep cords of jasmine. Rogue branches will sometimes reach out for a nearby tree or plunge themselves into the ground by the walkway—both guaranteed paths to sometimes aggressive pruning. If these branches would simply abide the fence line instead, hewing more closely to its root planted at the base of the fence, they could live unbothered.

Remaining in Christ means at least two things according to this passage. First, it tells us something about our role within the church. And secondly, it tells us something about the nature of our responsibility to others: in a word, *love*. To remain in Christ means to “love each other” (Jn. 15:17).

Surely, we grow within the coursing cords of other branches, navigating our place within the family of God, the church. Jesus does not insist that we remain in any one community, per se, but he does ask us to remain in him (Jn. 15:5). What does this mean, practically? Well, that is where the church comes in. As the “Body of Christ,” remaining in Christ means remaining within the movement of his kingdom work, which is carried forth by the church.

And yet, the church is broken, full of twisted branches and confusing directions. Many of us have experienced the hurt that can come from encountering, firsthand, the church’s brokenness

<sup>6</sup>He is also known, variously, as “His Dudeness,” “Duder,” and “El Dudarino” depending on the context. This is not an important detail. We’re just wondering if anyone really reads these footnotes.

and failure. To grow in Christ means to grow toward Christ, toward the root of our faith and life. Have you ever noticed how the branches closer to roots are wider, stronger? Both the individual follower of Christ and the church that supports those followers should orient their branch-like existence downward: toward the soil where the root of Christ is planted.

That means lowering ourselves. It means being humble, and self-forgetful. It means seeking not to rise above in a way that might bring self-glorification but to plunge ourselves downward into the messiness of human life and the deep purpose that we find in serving others in the name of Jesus. And hence, the second definition of remaining in Christ: loving each other. Not simply loving each other in a generic sense, Jesus clarifies, but loving each other to the point of “laying down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn. 15:13). Jesus speaks here with a poignant double meaning: he is guiding them toward the ethos of sacrificial love and forecasting his own sacrifice, which would be required of him before another sunset met the earth.

Isaiah prophesied what Jesus self-consciously teaches in these final moments before his arrest and crucifixion: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse” (Is. 11:1). Jesus is that shoot that comes up from the broken hopes of human leaders. The line of David cannot accomplish what Christ accomplishes: he brings life back to the soil. The dead stump suddenly becomes the source of all new branches—first and foremost Christ himself, this “true vine.”

The Greek word John uses for “remain,” or “abide,” is *meno*—and it can also carry the sense of “enduring, persisting.” Jesus does not ask his followers to obey any instruction that he himself is not prepared to bear out in his own life and death. He, too, remains in his Father, obedient to his will even when that meant suffering the shame and horror of the cross. To abide in Christ, therefore, is also to acknowledge that it was he who first abides with us, so committed to our reconciliation with his Father that he gave up his own life for us. As the hymn “Abide With Me” frames this abiding power within us:

<sup>7</sup> Henry Francis Lyte, “Abide with Me” (1847), Hymnary.org, accessed March 2, 2026, [https://hymnary.org/text/abide\\_with\\_me\\_fast\\_falls\\_the\\_eventide](https://hymnary.org/text/abide_with_me_fast_falls_the_eventide).

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes.  
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.  
Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee;  
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.<sup>7</sup>

The great paradox of the Christian faith rests on a promise of life secured by the poignancy of death. The cross is the centerpiece of this confounding paradigm. Jesus is our “true vine” because the vine that was his life passes through the terrain of death. And thus our lives are now grafted into his life because in him is resurrection: in him is lasting, light-filled life.

Of the seven “I AM” statements found in the Gospel of John, three of them are declarations that he is the very definition of “life.” And when we consider the “true vine” as a rich metaphor for being the source of all branches’ life, we might defensibly argue that four of Jesus’ “I AM” statements are mostly centered on the assertion that real life is found in him.

## **The Text: John 15:1-17**

### **The Vine and the Branches**

**15** “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

<sup>5</sup> “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

<sup>9</sup> “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy

may be complete. <sup>12</sup> My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup> I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. <sup>17</sup> This is my command: Love each other.

### ***The Time for Reflection***

In your life right now, what does it mean to “remain in the vine” (Jn. 15:4)?

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Once again, Jesus emphasizes that he will give us whatever we ask in the name of the Father (Jn. 15:16). Last week (Week 6), we saw that Jesus said he will give us whatever we ask in his name (Jn. 14:13–14). How do you make sense of these confident promises?

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For the third time in this study, Jesus assures his followers that anything asked in his name “will be done for you” (Jn. 15:7). As you've reflected on these promises of Jesus, has anything changed in your view of how to understand these assurances?

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## **The Time for Response**

Spend some time in prayer asking what Christ's claim to be our "true vine" means for you and your life. If you need a guide, consider the following meditation:

*[Deep inhalation. Moment of silence.]*

Jesus, True Vine, our source of life and our surest love. *[Deep exhalation.]*

I am grafted into the root of your love for me. *[Deep inhalation.]*

Jesus, True Vine, our source of life and our surest love. *[Deep exhalation.]*

The root of your love supports me in desert and storm, drought and flood. *[Deep inhalation.]*

Jesus, True Vine, our source of life and our surest love. *[Deep exhalation. Moment of silence.]*

Consider concluding this prayer with a reading: Romans 11:11–24.

## **The Time for Engagement**

We would love to help you find community to help you process these ideas and questions. Our City Groups, which meet on various days and in various neighborhoods in Houston, will be discussing this passage in person. To learn more, visit <https://citychurch.org/city-groups/> or email our Congregational Life Director, Kai Chen, for more information [kai@citychurch.org](mailto:kai@citychurch.org).

## CITY GROUP QUESTIONS

### Week 7 | “The True Vine”

1. This word *meno* (“remain,” “abide”) is so rich in scripture—and, obviously, especially so in this passage. What do you think it means to “remain in Christ?” What are some examples of remaining or abiding in him?
2. Let’s talk about this “pruning” metaphor. What does this mean or look like, practically speaking? Have you experienced anything like this in your spiritual life?
3. In Jn 15:9, Jesus clarifies what he means by remaining in him. How do these words help explain this concept in fuller terms, and how do the following verses help support this revised definition?
4. What is significant about Jesus referring to his followers as “friends” in this final passage before his betrayal and arrest (Jn. 15:15)? How does it reframe the commands that came directly before?
5. Think back on (or look back to) the seven “I AM” statements from this study. Which one stood out to you, or had the biggest impact on your view of Jesus? Why?

## **Coda: Could It Be?**

This was Jesus of Nazareth, in his own words. Casting out from a forgotten fishing village in a remote region of Palestine, Jesus changed the world. Among the many other figures who claimed Messianic or divine status, he alone shaped history thus indelibly. And lest we think that he was simply a profound teacher capable of stoking political and spiritual furor, his message was plain: he was the Son of God, the path to life everlasting, the hope of the nations.

As C. S. Lewis commented, claims like these usually lead a listener to assume that the one speaking is either a charlatan or a madman. But if we can doubt our doubts, if we can create a little room for mystery and curiosity, there is another conceivable option. Even if we can only crack a sliver of the door open to the possibility of it, could this Jesus of Nazareth really be the “way and the truth and the life?” Could he really be our “good shepherd,” calling us home? Could it be? Could he be precisely who he said he was?

At City Church, it may come as no surprise that we believe the answer is, “Yes, it can be.” We try never to underestimate the challenge that faith poses for a modern mind, so convinced, as it often is, that all scientific theories simply await their proofs and all of life’s mysteries simply await the right solution or diagnosis. At the same time, we try never to overestimate the power of Christ to overcome the challenge of faith—and the reality of hope to infuse our lives with daily purpose.

If you’re new to faith, or simply new around here, we hope you feel invited to take seriously the biggest questions of these lives we lead. We hope you feel encouraged to consider, or reconsider, the, by no means, demure words of Jesus of Nazareth. And we hope you feel welcomed into a community of people who don’t have all the answers but who do strive to “live the questions,” as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote. If you have any questions, or would like to learn more about this and other studies produced at City Church, please reach out to our pastor of spiritual and theological formation, Clint Wilson ([clint@citychurch.org](mailto:clint@citychurch.org)). Thank you for reading.



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