

A FREE STUDY RESOURCE

That You May Believe

A Greek Word Study of the Gospel of John

“The Word became flesh and took up residence among us.”

JOHN 1:14

By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*

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A note on translations. Scripture quotations printed in the shaded text blocks are taken from the NET Bible (NET). The commentary regularly discusses the reading of the English Standard Version (ESV) and quotes brief ESV phrases where the exegesis turns on its wording. John is a Gospel where the NET's translation choices are often unusually instructive — “the Word was fully God” (1:1), “this is the way God loved the world” (3:16), “It is completed” (19:30) — and we stop at these as we come to them. Readers with both translations open will find the two easy to set side by side.

Greek citations. Footnotes cite the author's companion volume, *Just Enough Greek*, by headword (and, where available, by chapter). The Greek text underlying this study is that of the New Testament in its standard critical and Byzantine editions; significant variants are noted where they bear on meaning.

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A Word Before We Begin

The Gospel of John is the one book of the Bible that pauses, near the end, to tell you exactly why it was written. The other Gospels show you; John, having shown you, turns and says it plainly: “*these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*” (20:31). Everything in the book is bent toward those two words — *believe* and *life*. John is not a neutral biography. It is a sustained, deliberate, loving argument, built to do something *to* its reader: to bring you to your knees beside Thomas, confessing the crucified and risen Jesus as “my Lord and my God.”

It is also, of the four Gospels, the one that reads most like a word study already written. John does not have a large vocabulary; he has a small one, and he uses it like a bell, striking the same great words again and again until the reader cannot miss them. *Word. Life. Light. Born. Bread. Abide. Glory. The hour. Truth. I AM.* These are not scattered; they are structural. To learn John’s words is very nearly to learn John, and that is what makes him such a gift to a study like this one.

And he is the Gospel where a confessional Lutheran feels most immediately, almost startlingly, at home. The incarnation in the Prologue — “the Word became flesh” — is the ground beneath the whole Lutheran confidence that God comes to us in *things*: in water, in bread and wine, in the spoken word of absolution. The new birth “of water and the Spirit” in chapter three is the church’s baptismal charter. The bread of life in chapter six has stood at the center of five centuries of argument about the Lord’s Supper. The Spirit of chapters fourteen through sixteen is the answer to every “enthusiast” who would chase God apart from the external Word. And the cross, in John, is not the dark valley before the glory — it *is* the glory, the hour the whole book has been telling time toward. Theology of the cross, means of grace, justification finished and received by faith: John was preaching them before there was a Book of Concord to confess them.

This study works through the Gospel in ten sessions — not verse by verse, for John is far too long for that in ten sittings, but along the spine of his great words, following the discourses that carry them. You do not need to read Greek to use it. Every word is transliterated and translated, and where a translation choice or a real scholarly debate changes the meaning, it is flagged honestly rather than smoothed over. The aim is not scholarship for its own sake. The aim is to read John the way he asks to be read — *that you may believe* — and, believing, to have life.

How to Use This Study

Each of the ten sessions follows the same rhythm, so that after the first one you will know your way around:

The Text — the verses themselves, to be read aloud if you are in a group. **Orientation** — where we are in the Gospel and what is at stake. **The Greek** — two to five words that carry the weight, opened up without jargon. **Verse by Verse** — the unhurried walk through the passage. **What Confessional Lutherans Hear** — where the passage lands in the Book of Concord and in the life of faith. **For Reflection** — questions for the table or the journal. **Prayer** — a short collect to close.

A session can be read alone in twenty-five minutes or stretched across an hour of group discussion. The first three sessions — Word, New Birth, Bread — are the incarnational and sacramental heart of the book; do not rush them. Sessions four and five together make the great claim of the Gospel: that this man is God. Sessions nine and ten bring the whole story to its hour and its finish. Read slowly. John rewards it.

A Word on the Greek

A single Greek word can carry a whole Gospel. John proves it. If you want one key to put in your pocket before you begin, take this verb:

πιστεύω (*pisteuō*) — *to believe, to trust, to rely on*. It is the thread John strings the entire Gospel on, and the first thing to notice is that it is a **verb**. John uses it nearly a hundred times — and the *noun* “faith” (*pistis*), so common in Paul, he uses essentially never.¹ That is deliberate. For John, believing is not a possession you hold but an action you keep doing: coming, leaning, clinging, trusting, abiding. Watch the verb run. To all who believe in his name he gives the right to be God’s children (1:12). Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life (3:36). The one who believes has eternal life (6:47). “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” — “Lord, I believe” (9:35–38). “I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in me will live” (11:25). And then, at the end, the purpose of the whole book: *that you may believe, and believing, have life* (20:31).

Hold that verb together with its goal — ζωή (*zōē*, “life”) — and you have the Gospel of John in three words: *believe, and live*. When you meet *pisteuō* in this Gospel, you are touching its spine.

1. On *pistis/pisteuō* as trust that lays hold of Christ — and on John’s striking preference for the verb “believe” over the noun “faith” — see Larry Herzog Jr., *Just Enough Greek*, ch. 17 (“*Pistis*, πίστις”). John uses the verb roughly ninety-eight times and the noun essentially never; believing, for John, is something one *does*, continually.

Everywhere else, the method is simple: when a word does real work, we stop and look at it — its family, its range, the places you have met it before — and then we keep walking. No Greek is assumed. All of it is translated. None of it is wasted.

SESSION ONE

The Word Became Flesh

John 1:1–18 (the Prologue)

THE TEXT

JOHN 1:1–18 · NET

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God. ² The Word was with God in the beginning. ³ All things were created by him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind. ⁵ And the light shines on in the darkness, but the darkness has not mastered it. ⁶ A man came, sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify about the light, so that everyone might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify about the light. ⁹ The true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was created by him, but the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, but his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who have received him—those who believe in his name—he has given the right to become God’s children— ¹³ children not born by human parents or by human desire or a husband’s decision, but by God. ¹⁴ Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father. ¹⁵ John testified about him and shouted out, “This one was the one about whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is greater than I am, because he existed before me.’” ¹⁶ For we have all received from his fullness one gracious gift after another. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came about through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. The only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known.

ORIENTATION

John does not begin at Bethlehem. He begins before creation, with two words any Jewish reader would recognize at once — *en archē*, “in the beginning” — the opening words of Genesis. And then he tells you who was already there before the first “let there be.” The Prologue is the most theologically concentrated paragraph in the New Testament. It sets every major term the rest of the Gospel will use — Word, life, light, darkness, glory, grace,

truth, believing, receiving — and it makes, in its first sentence and its last, the claim the whole book exists to press: that this man Jesus is God.

THE GREEK

λόγος (*logos*) — *word, speech, reason, the self-expression of God*. John reaches for a term that meant something to everyone. To the Greek mind, the *Logos* was the rational principle ordering the universe. To the Hebrew mind, the *word* of the LORD was the agent of creation — “by the word of the LORD the heavens were made” (Psalm 33:6) — and the *word* that came to the prophets. John takes this enormous, resonant term and does the unthinkable with it: he says the *Logos* is a *Person*, who “was with God and was God,” and who “became flesh.” Greek philosophy never dreamed the *Logos* could have a face.

θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος (*theos ēn ho logos*) — *the Word was God* (1:1c). The NET renders it “the Word was fully God,” and the rendering is defending the verse against an old mistranslation. Some who would make Jesus less than God read it “the Word was a god,” seizing on the fact that *theos* here has no article. But Greek does not use the article the way English uses “a/the,” and when a predicate noun like *theos* stands *before* the verb — as it does here — the regular pattern of John’s Greek marks it as describing the *nature* of the subject: the Word is, by nature, everything God is. He is not “a god” (one of several); he is fully God — while remaining distinct from the Father, with whom he “was.” John has written, in seven Greek words, both the deity of Christ and the distinction of persons that the doctrine of the Trinity would later confess. Flag this for your class: 1:1c is the single most abused verse in the modern Christology debates, and the grammar, rightly read, settles it.

ἐσκήνωσεν (*eskēnōsen*) — *he tabernacled, pitched his tent, took up residence* (1:14). The verb is built on *skēnē*, “tent” — the very word the Old Testament used for the tabernacle, the tent where the glory of God dwelt among Israel in the wilderness. John is not saying merely that the Word *visited*. He is saying the Word *moved in* — pitched his tent among us — the way the glory once filled the tabernacle. “And we saw his *glory* (*doxa*).” The *Shekinah*, the dwelling-glory of God, now has a human face you could look at across a table.

μονογενής (*monogenēs*) — *one and only, unique* (1:14, 18). The older translations render it “only-begotten” (KJV), and the Nicene Creed leans on that sense to confess the Son “begotten, not made.” But the word is built from *monos* (“only”) and *genos* (“kind”), not from *gennaō* (“to beget”) — so its root sense is “one of a kind, unique, the only one of its sort.” Both readings confess the same Son: the Father’s *only, unique* Son. The modern “one and only” simply rests the weight on his uniqueness rather than his eternal generation. (A second, important flag: in verse 18 the earliest manuscripts read *monogenēs theos*, “the only one, *himself* God” — which the NET follows — rather than the later *monogenēs huios*,

“the only Son.” The harder, earlier reading is an even stronger statement of Christ’s deity, and it forms a perfect bracket with verse 1.)

ἐξηγήσατο (*exēgēsato*) — *he has explained, narrated, made known* (1:18). This is the word from which we get *exegesis*. “No one has ever seen God; the only one, himself God... has *exegeted* him.” The Son has *drawn the Father out*, told his story, made him legible. Jesus is the Father’s self-explanation. This is the Prologue’s last word, and the whole Gospel in miniature: to see Jesus is to read God.

VERSE BY VERSE

Verses 1–5. The eternal Word. Four claims in four lines: the Word *was* (he did not begin); the Word *was with God* (distinct, face to face); the Word *was God* (fully divine); and the Word *was the agent of creation* — “all things were created by him.” Then verse 4 turns from creation to redemption with two words that will run through the whole Gospel: *life* and *light*. And verse 5 strikes the first note of conflict — the light “shines on in the darkness, but the darkness has not mastered it.” The verb can mean both *comprehend* and *overcome*; John likely intends both. The dark neither understood the light nor could put it out.

Verses 6–13. The witness and the welcome. John the Baptist enters as a witness — “so that everyone might believe through him” (the spine word, already, in verse 7). And then the tragedy and the miracle, side by side: “he came to what was his own, but his own people did not receive him” (v. 11) — *and yet* “to all who have received him... he has given the right to become God’s children” (v. 12). Note how verse 13 guards the new birth against every human claim: God’s children are “not born by human parents or by human desire or a husband’s decision, but *by God*.” The second birth, like the first creation, is God’s own work. (We will spend all of Session Two here.)

Verses 14–18. The Word made flesh. The hinge of history: “the Word *became flesh*” — not *seemed* to, not *appeared* as, but truly *became* — “and took up residence among us.” Three gifts pour from his fullness: *glory* (we beheld it), *grace*, and *truth*. Verse 16’s lovely phrase — “one gracious gift after another,” literally “grace in place of grace” — pictures grace arriving in unbroken succession, like waves. Verse 17 sets the two covenants in order: the law *given* through Moses (a true gift, but a gift of demand), grace and truth *came about* through Jesus Christ (the gift of the Giver himself). And verse 18 closes the bracket opened in verse 1: the One who is “himself God” has made the unseen God known.

WHAT CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

A confessional Lutheran reads the Prologue and hears the Nicene Creed before it was written — “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.”² Every clause of that confession is already here: the eternal Word, the Word who is fully God, the Word through whom all things were created. The church did not *invent* the deity of Christ at Nicaea; it *confessed* what John had already written in his first sentence. And the Prologue guards the line the creeds would guard: the Word is *with* God (so, distinct in person) and *is* God (so, one in essence). Trinity, in seven words.

But hear, too, what the incarnation *grounds* — for this is where the Lutheran feels the Prologue press into everything else he believes. “The Word became *flesh*.” God has bound himself to a body, to matter, to the created and the visible. The Formula of Concord draws the astonishing conclusion: because the divine and human natures are united in the one person of Christ, the human nature truly shares in the divine majesty — so that this same incarnate Christ, true God and true man, can be present for us where and how he promises, including in his Supper.³ The Prologue is not abstract theology floating above the means of grace; it is their foundation. Because the Word took flesh, God now reaches us through fleshly, ordinary things: a human voice preaching, water poured, bread broken, wine outpoured. A faith that despises the physical means of grace has not yet reckoned with John 1:14.

And so the Prologue ends where the Christian’s comfort begins: “No one has ever seen God” — the hidden God, the God of terrifying majesty, remains unseen — “*but* the only one, himself God... has made him known.” We are not left to climb toward the hidden God in dread. He has *exegeted* himself in a Son we can look at, listen to, and trust. To see Jesus is to read the Father. There is no other God behind this one, frowning where Jesus smiles. The Word made flesh *is* the face of God.

FOR REFLECTION

1. John could have begun the story at the manger. Why does he begin “in the beginning” instead, and what does it tell you about the child who will be born?

2. The Nicene Creed (325/381): the Son is “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” John 1:1–3 is its principal scriptural ground.

3. *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration VIII (“The Person of Christ”): because of the personal union of the two natures, the human nature of Christ truly shares in the divine majesty (the *communicatio idiomatum*), which undergirds the presence of Christ’s true body and blood in the Supper. The incarnation of John 1:14 is the doctrine’s foundation.

2. “The Word became flesh and took up residence among us.” How does the incarnation change the way you think about God reaching you through ordinary things — water, bread, a spoken word?
3. Verse 12 says God *gives* the right to become his children, and verse 13 says they are born “not by human decision, but by God.” Where are you tempted to think you made yourself a child of God?
4. Jesus is called the One who “exegetes” the Father — God’s self-explanation. What does it mean for your fears that there is no hidden God behind Jesus, frowning where he smiles?
5. Read the opening of the Nicene Creed beside verses 1–3. Which phrases of the creed do you hear John writing first?

PRAYER

Eternal God, before the world was, your Word was with you and was you; and in the fullness of time that Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us, full of grace and truth. We have not seen you, but we have seen him, and in him we have seen you. Keep us from seeking you anywhere but in your Son, and let us receive him, and so receive the right to be called your children. Through that same Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit is one God, now and forever. Amen.

SESSION TWO

Born of Water and Spirit

John 3:1–17

THE TEXT

JOHN 3:1–17 · NET

¹ Now a certain man, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council, ² came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus replied, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time, can he?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must all be born from above.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹ Nicodemus replied, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you don’t understand these things? ¹¹ I tell you the solemn truth, we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I have told you people about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” ¹⁶ For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him.

ORIENTATION

A respected teacher comes by night with a compliment, and Jesus cuts straight past it to the one thing Nicodemus cannot do for himself: be born again. This conversation hands us the language of the new birth, the most famous verse in the Bible, and a baptismal text the church has argued over ever since. Notice that Nicodemus never gets a fourth line;

after “How can these things be?” he falls silent, and Jesus’ words run on into the gospel. The teacher of Israel has met the one subject he cannot master.

THE GREEK

ἀνωθεν (*anōthen*) — *again / from above* (3:3, 7). One word, two meanings, and John exploits both at once. Nicodemus hears “born *again*” and pictures the absurd — a grown man climbing back into the womb. But Jesus means “born *from above*” — a birth that comes down from God. The NET chooses “from above” and notes the double sense; the misunderstanding is the whole point. The new birth is not a second human effort but a gift from heaven, and the man who trusts his religious résumé cannot even *imagine* it. You do not arrange to be born. It happens to you.

γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος (*gennēthēnai ex hydatos kai pneumatos*) — *to be born of water and spirit* (3:5). Here is the baptismal crux. Confessional Lutherans read “water and the Spirit” as the new birth God works in Holy Baptism — the Word and water together, the Spirit doing the begetting. Others read “water” as natural birth (the waters of verse 4), or as a figure for the Word, or take the whole phrase loosely. Be honest that the debate is real — but notice how naturally Jesus’ words fall into the Lutheran hearing: a birth “from above,” worked by the Spirit, *through water*. This is not faith that decides to get baptized; it is the washing in which the Spirit gives the new birth and the faith together.

πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) — *Spirit, wind, breath* (3:8). One word for all three, and Jesus puns on it: “the *wind* blows wherever it will... so is everyone born of the *Spirit*.” You hear the wind; you cannot command it; you do not decide where it goes. So with the new birth — it is monergistic, God’s sovereign work, as free and uncontrollable as weather. Nicodemus wants a *method*. Jesus gives him the *wind*.⁴

ὑψωθῆναι (*hypsōthēnai*) — *to be lifted up* (3:14). Another deliberate double meaning that returns later (8:28; 12:32). As Moses *lifted up* the bronze serpent and the dying who looked were healed, so the Son of Man must be *lifted up*. The word means both “raised up on a cross” and “exalted in glory” — and for John they are the same event. To be hung on the tree *is* to be enthroned. (We come back to this in Session Nine.)

οὕτως (*houtōs*) — *in this way, thus* (3:16). A small word with a famous mistranslation. “God so loved the world” has been heard for generations as “God loved the world *so much*” — a statement of *degree*. But *houtōs* means “in this *manner, thus, in this way*” — and the NET captures it: “*this is the way* God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son.” The verse is not measuring the *size* of God’s love so much as naming its *shape*: the love is the *giving of*

4. On *pneuma* as Spirit, wind, and breath — and the discernment the one word requires — see *Just Enough Greek*, ch. 36 (“Pneuma, πνεῦμα”).

the Son. You do not learn how much God loves the world by looking inward at a feeling; you learn it by looking at the cross.

VERSE BY VERSE

Verses 1–8. The new birth. Nicodemus opens with flattery — “we know you are a teacher come from God” — and Jesus answers a question he did not ask, because it is the question beneath all his questions: you must be born *from above*. Verse 5 grounds it in water and Spirit; verse 6 explains why it must be so — “what is born of the flesh is flesh,” and flesh cannot upgrade itself into spirit. The whole man, the *sarx*, must be born anew, not improved. And verse 8 names the manner: like the wind, sovereign and free. The teacher of Israel is told that the kingdom is not entered by learning or effort but by a birth he must *receive*.

Verses 9–15. From earth to heaven. Nicodemus’ last words — “How can these things be?” — mark the end of his understanding and the beginning of the gospel. Jesus moves from the new birth (“earthly things”) to its ground (“heavenly things”): the Son of Man, who alone descended from heaven, must be “lifted up” like the serpent, so that everyone who *believes* may have eternal life. The cure for the snakebite was not effort but a look of faith at the lifted-up remedy. So here.

Verses 16–17. The heart of the Bible. “This is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son.” The love is defined by the gift; the gift is the Son; the purpose is “that everyone who believes... will not perish but have eternal life.” And verse 17 guards it against fear: the Son was sent “not to condemn the world, but that the world should be *saved* through him.” Judgment is real in John, but it is not why he came. He came to rescue.

WHAT CONFSSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

No verse stands closer to the Lutheran doctrine of Baptism than John 3:5, and Luther puts it at the center of his teaching on the sacrament. In the Large Catechism he insists that Baptism “is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended in God’s command and connected with God’s Word” — and he points straight to being “born of water and the Spirit” as the new birth God works there.⁵ The Small Catechism asks the child’s question — “How can water do such great things?” — and answers: “It is not the water indeed that does them, but the Word of God which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts

5. Luther, *Large Catechism*, Holy Baptism: Baptism “is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended in God’s command and connected with God’s Word.” Luther grounds the new birth “of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5) and the “washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5) in this Word-joined water.

such Word of God in the water.”⁶ Nicodemus wanted to know *how*. The catechism answers: the Word, in and with the water, worked by the Spirit who blows where he wills.

Hear the monergism the wind is teaching. “What is born of the flesh is flesh” — the natural man cannot generate his own new birth any more than he could arrange his first one. He must be *born*, passively, “from above.” This is the very heart of the Lutheran confession against every theology that makes conversion a human decision or contribution: the second birth, like the first, is something done *to* us by God. The wind blows where it wills. You did not choose the day of your natural birth; you do not engineer the day of your new one. Both are gift.

And hear, finally, where the Lutheran is told to look for assurance of God’s love — not inward, to the strength of his feeling, but outward, to the *giving of the Son*. “This is the way God loved the world: He gave.” On a gray morning when love feels absent, John 3:16 does not send you to inspect your heart; it sends you to the cross and to the font, where the love took a shape you can see and a water you can be washed in. The Word became flesh (Session One) so that the new birth could come to you through water and the Spirit (Session Two). The incarnation and the sacrament are one gospel.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Jesus tells the most accomplished religious man in Israel that he must be born “from above” — something done *to* him, not *by* him. Why is that good news and not an insult?
2. “The wind blows wherever it will.” How does the image of wind protect us from thinking we can manufacture or control the new birth — our own or anyone else’s?
3. The NET reads “*this is the way* God loved the world” rather than “God loved the world *so much*.” How does seeing God’s love as the *giving of the Son* change where you look for assurance?
4. Nicodemus’ last words are a question — “How can these things be?” — and then he goes quiet while the gospel runs on. Where do your questions need to give way to simply receiving?
5. Read the question “How can water do such great things?” from the Small Catechism beside verse 5. What does the catechism say actually does the work?

PRAYER

Father, you have not left us to be born only of the flesh, which can give us nothing but more flesh. By water and the Spirit you have given us a second birth from above — not by

our decision but by your free wind, blowing where it wills. We did not arrange it; you gave it. And this is how you loved the world: you gave your only Son, lifted up that we might look and live. Let us look to him and believe. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

6. Luther, *Small Catechism*, Holy Baptism, Fourth Part: “How can water do such great things? It is not the water indeed that does them, but the Word of God which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts such Word of God in the water.”

SESSION THREE

The Bread of Life

John 6:35, 47–58

THE TEXT

JOHN 6:35, 47–58 · NET

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never go hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty. ⁴⁷ I tell you the solemn truth, the one who believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that has come down from heaven, so that a person may eat from it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats from this bread he will live forever. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” ⁵² Then the Jews who were hostile to Jesus began to argue with one another, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ Jesus said to them, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves. ⁵⁴ The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood resides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who consumes me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the bread your ancestors ate, but then later died. The one who eats this bread will live forever.”

ORIENTATION

The morning after Jesus feeds five thousand, the crowd comes looking for breakfast. He offers them himself instead. This is the first of the seven “I am” sayings, the most eucharistic chapter in the Gospels, and the home of one small verb that has helped divide the Western church. Tread carefully here, and confessionally — the temptation to oversimplify in either direction is strong, and the Lutheran path runs precisely between two ditches.

THE GREEK

ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς (*artos tēs zōēs*) — *the bread of life* (6:35). “I am the bread of life; the one who comes to me will never go hungry.” The crowd wanted the miracle repeated; Jesus tells them the miracle was a *sign*, and he is what it signified. He is not the caterer who provides

the bread. He is the bread. To “come” to him and “believe” in him (note the spine word, twice in one verse) is to eat.

ἐγὼ εἰμι (*egō eimi*) — *I am* (6:35, 48, 51). The first of the seven predicate “I am” sayings, which we will gather in Session Four, and behind which stands the absolute “I AM” of Session Five. Here, simply notice that the One offering bread names himself with the language God used of himself.

τρώγω (*trōgō*) — *to gnaw, munch, chew* (6:54, 56, 57, 58). Here is the gem of the chapter, and you will have to point it out, because no English translation can fully show it. Through verse 53, Jesus uses the ordinary Greek verb for eating (*phagō*, the verb behind “ate the manna,” “eat this bread”). Then — exactly as the language turns to “*my flesh*” and “*my blood*” — John switches verbs to *trōgō*, a blunt, physical, almost crude word: to *chew*, to *gnaw*, the verb you would use of an animal at its feed. The shift is deliberate and jarring. Jesus refuses to let “eat my flesh” evaporate into a tasteful metaphor; he presses the scandal of a real, bodily feeding. Your readers have read this chapter many times and never seen the seam. Show it to them once and they will never unsee it.

ἡ σὰρξ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ οὐδέν (*hē sarx ouk ōphelai ouden*) — *the flesh profits nothing* (6:63, just past our passage). This is the verse pressed against any bodily eating of Christ, so meet it head-on. Read carefully: “the *flesh*” here is the fallen human way of seeing and judging — the same *sarx* Paul uses for the old nature — *not* Christ’s flesh, which Jesus has just called “true food” and given “for the life of the world” (6:51, 55). Jesus is not retracting verse 53 two breaths later. He is saying that the natural mind, the *flesh*, cannot receive *any* of this; it must be given “from above” (Session Two again). The Spirit gives life; the flesh — the carnal mind — profits nothing.

μένω (*menō*) — *to abide, remain, reside* (6:56). “The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood *resides* in me, and I in him.” The feeding is not a transaction but a mutual indwelling — the same verb that becomes the whole subject of Session Seven. To feed on Christ is to abide in him, and he in you.

VERSE BY VERSE

Verses 35, 47–51. Bread better than manna. Twice Jesus says “I am the bread of life,” and he frames it against Israel’s wilderness story: your ancestors ate manna *and died*; this bread is such that “a person may eat from it and not die.” The manna sustained mortal life for a morning; this bread gives eternal life. And then the line that turns the crowd’s stomach: “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is *my flesh*” (v. 51). The eating he means will cost him his body.

Verses 52–55. The scandal pressed, not softened. The crowd recoils — “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” — and Jesus, rather than reassuring them it is only a figure, *intensifies*: “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life.” Then “my flesh is *true* food, my blood is *true* drink.” A teacher trying to defuse a misunderstanding does not pour fuel on it. Jesus means the offense.

Verses 56–58. Feeding as union. With *trōgō* now in play, Jesus names the result: the one who feeds on him “resides in me, and I in him,” and “will live because of me,” just as Jesus lives “because of the Father.” This is not magic and not metaphor merely; it is *life by union* — the life of the Father flowing through the Son to all who feed on him by faith. “The one who eats this bread will live forever.”

WHAT CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

Here a Lutheran must speak with the same care the Confessions use, because John 6 has been pulled in two wrong directions and the Lutheran path runs between them. On one side, Rome read this chapter as proof that receiving the sacrament is necessary for salvation. On the other, the Reformed read verse 63 (“the flesh profits nothing”) as proof that Christ’s body *cannot* be truly present and eaten in the Supper. The Formula of Concord answers both — and, importantly, it does *not* base the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper primarily on John 6 at all. The Real Presence and the oral eating of Christ’s true body and blood rest on the plain **Words of Institution** — “this is my body... this is my blood” — not on this discourse.⁷ (We take this up fully in the excursus.)

What, then, does John 6 chiefly teach? It teaches *feeding on Christ by faith* unto eternal life — the believing of our spine word. “The one who *believes* has eternal life” (v. 47) stands at the head of the passage and interprets the eating: to come, to believe, to feed, to abide are all one act of faith laying hold of Christ. And when the Reformed press verse 63 against the Supper, the Formula answers as we did above: “the flesh” there is the carnal mind, not Christ’s life-giving flesh, which he himself calls “true food.”⁸

And yet — and here the Lutheran will not be embarrassed — the harmony with the Supper is unmistakable, and the church has always heard it. The flesh given “for the life of the world,” the blood that is “true drink,” the *trōgō* that will not be spiritualized away, the abiding “in me, and I in him”: this is the same Christ, the same gift, the same union the Supper delivers. John 6 is not the *proof* of the Supper, but it is its richest *commentary*. So

7. *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration VII (“The Holy Supper”): the doctrine of Christ’s true presence rests on the Words of Institution (“this is my body... this is my blood”), not primarily on John 6. See the excursus to this study.

8. *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration VII: “the flesh profits nothing” (John 6:63) refers not to Christ’s flesh — which he calls “true food” — but to the carnal manner of understanding; the Sacramentarians’ use of the verse against the Real Presence is rejected.

give your people both, in order: first, the primary and saving call to *believe and live*, to feed on Christ by faith; and then, with joy, the resonance with the table where this same Lord still gives his true body and blood, “for you,” for the forgiveness of sins. The bread of life and the bread of the Supper are not two breads. They are one Christ.

FOR REFLECTION

1. When the crowd is scandalized by “eat my flesh,” Jesus intensifies rather than softens. What does his refusal to back down tell you about how literally he means to be taken?
2. John deliberately switches to a verb that means “chew.” Why might Jesus refuse to let “eat my flesh” become a comfortable metaphor — and what does that refusal protect?
3. The Reformed read “the flesh profits nothing” (v. 63) against any bodily eating of Christ. How does seeing “flesh” as the *carnal mind* rather than Christ’s flesh answer that?
4. John 6 teaches feeding on Christ by *faith*, and the Supper rests on the Words of Institution — yet the two illumine each other. How does holding both together keep us from error on either side?
5. To feed on Christ is to “reside in him, and he in you.” How is that different from merely admiring him or learning about him?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you are the living bread that came down from heaven, and the bread you give for the life of the world is your own flesh. We cannot live on the manna of this world, which fills us for a morning and leaves us to die. Feed us on yourself; let us come and believe and never hunger, abiding in you and you in us. And at your table, give us your true body and blood for the forgiveness of all our sins, that we may live because of you, as you live because of the Father. Amen.

SESSION FOUR

I AM — The Seven Sayings

John 10:7–18 (with 6:35; 8:12; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1)

THE TEXT

JOHN 10:7–18 · NET

⁷ So Jesus said again, “I tell you the solemn truth, I am the door for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters through me, he will be saved, and will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come so that they may have life, and may have it abundantly. ¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not a shepherd and does not own sheep, sees the wolf coming and abandons the sheep and runs away. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ Because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep, he runs away. ¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not come from this sheepfold. I must bring them too, and they will listen to my voice, so that there will be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ This is why the Father loves me—because I lay down my life, so that I may take it back again. ¹⁸ No one takes it away from me, but I lay it down of my own free will. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it back again. This commandment I received from my Father.”

ORIENTATION

Seven times in this Gospel Jesus says “I am” and completes the sentence — *I am* the bread of life (6:35), the light of the world (8:12), the door (10:9), the good shepherd (10:11), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way and the truth and the life (14:6), the true vine (15:1). Each is a gift wrapped in a self-disclosure: he tells you what he *is*, and always what he is *for you*. We anchor the session in the richest of them — the Door and the Good Shepherd of John 10 — and gather the rest around it.

THE GREEK

ἐγώ εἰμι (*egō eimi*) — *I am*. In Greek the verb already contains “I”; you do not normally add the pronoun. So when Jesus says *egō eimi* — adding the emphatic “*I myself am*” — the words

land with deliberate weight. In the seven predicate sayings he names what he is *for* his people: food for the hungry, light for those in the dark, a door for the shut-out, a shepherd for the lost, life for the dying, a way for the wandering, a vine for the fruitless. Each “I am” is a promise before it is a title.

θύρα (*thyra*) — *door, gate* (10:7, 9). “I am the door. If anyone enters through me, he will be saved.” A door is not admired from a distance; it is *gone through*. Christ is not a destination to be contemplated but an entrance to be used — the one opening into the safety of the fold, into “pasture,” into salvation itself. There is a door, it is a Person, and it stands open.

ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός (*ho poimēn ho kalos*) — *the good shepherd* (10:11). The adjective *kalos* means good in the sense of *beautiful, noble, model* — the shepherd as he ought to be. And what makes him the *good* shepherd is named at once: “the good shepherd *lays down his life for the sheep*.” He is contrasted with the *misthōtos*, the hired hand, who runs when the wolf comes because the sheep are not his. The Good Shepherd owns the sheep, knows them by name, and dies for them.

τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν (*tithēmi tēn psychēn*) — *to lay down one’s life* (10:11, 15, 17–18). The phrase tolls five times in this passage like a bell. And notice verse 18: “No one takes it away from me, but I lay it down *of my own free will*.” The cross is not a tragedy that befalls Jesus; it is a self-offering he chooses, with “authority to lay it down and authority to take it back again.” The Good Shepherd is not overpowered. He gives himself.

VERSE BY VERSE

Verses 7–10. The Door. Against the “thieves and robbers” — false shepherds who exploit the flock — Jesus is the one true entrance: “if anyone enters through me, he will be saved.” And he names his purpose against the thief’s: “the thief comes to steal and kill and destroy; I have come so that they may have *life*, and have it *abundantly*.” The spine words again — life, and life to the full. False religion takes; Christ gives.

Verses 11–15. The Good Shepherd. The center of the saying is the cross — “lays down his life for the sheep” — and the depth of it is *knowing*: “I know my own and my own know me, *just as* the Father knows me and I know the Father.” The mutual knowledge of the Shepherd and his sheep is patterned on the mutual knowledge within the Godhead itself. To be Christ’s sheep is to be known by him with the same intimacy the Father and Son share.

Verses 16–18. One flock, freely gathered. “I have other sheep” — the Gentiles, the church not yet gathered — “they will listen to my voice, so that there will be *one flock and one shepherd*.” The mission is the Shepherd’s own. And the closing note returns to the cross as free gift: he lays his life down and takes it up again by his own authority and his Father’s command. The Shepherd dies on purpose, and rises on purpose.

WHAT CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

A confessional Lutheran hears in the seven “I am” sayings the gospel’s deepest grammar: Christ is never merely *teaching about* salvation; he is *offering himself as* salvation. This is exactly the shape of the Second Article of the Creed in Luther’s Small Catechism — “I believe that Jesus Christ... is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me.”⁹ The Good Shepherd who “lays down his life for the sheep” is the Christ who “purchased and won *me*... with his holy precious blood.” The “I am” is always, in the end, *for me*: the bread *I* eat, the door *I* enter, the shepherd who dies *for me*.

Hear, too, the comfort hidden in the Shepherd’s *knowing*. “I know my own and my own know me.” Lutheran assurance does not finally rest on the strength of *my* grip on the Shepherd but on the certainty of *his* grip on me — he knows his sheep by name, the way the Father knows the Son. When your own knowledge of him feels thin, his knowledge of you does not waver. And note that the sheep are gathered by a *voice*: “they will listen to my voice.” The Shepherd calls his flock through the spoken Word — the preached gospel — which is precisely where the Lutheran always looks for Christ. Faith comes by hearing the Shepherd’s voice.

And the “other sheep, one flock” is the catholic church in a sentence: not many flocks with many shepherds, but one flock gathered from every fold by one Shepherd’s voice. The unity of the church is not an organization we build but a flock he gathers — by dying for them, calling them, and knowing them by name.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Each “I am” saying names something Jesus *is for us* — bread, light, door, shepherd, resurrection, way, vine. Which one meets you where you are this week, and why?
2. A door is meant to be *gone through*, not admired. What would it look like to *use* Christ as the door rather than merely respect him from a distance?
3. The Good Shepherd “lays down his life of his own free will.” How does it change the cross to see it as Jesus’ free self-offering rather than a tragedy that overtook him?
4. Your assurance rests on the Shepherd knowing *you*, not only on you knowing him. How is that a comfort on a day when your faith feels weak?
5. Jesus gathers “one flock” by his *voice*. Where do you go to hear the Shepherd’s voice, and how does that shape where you look for him?

⁹ Luther, *Small Catechism*, Creed, Second Article: Jesus Christ “has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil... with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.” The “I am” sayings always offer Christ *for us*.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, good Shepherd, you laid down your life for the sheep of your own free will, and you know your own by name as your Father knows you. We were scattered, and you have gathered us; we were shut out, and you are the open door. Make us hear your voice in your Word and follow, and bring your other sheep also, that there may be one flock and one Shepherd at the last. Amen.

SESSION FIVE

Before Abraham Was, I AM

John 8:48–59

THE TEXT

JOHN 8:48–59 · NET

⁴⁸ The Judeans replied, “Aren’t we correct in saying that you are a Samaritan and are possessed by a demon?” ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, “I am not possessed by a demon, but I honor my Father—and yet you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ I am not trying to get praise for myself. There is one who demands it, and he also judges. ⁵¹ I tell you the solemn truth, if anyone obeys my teaching, he will never see death.” ⁵² Then the Judeans responded, “Now we know you’re possessed by a demon! Both Abraham and the prophets died, and yet you say, ‘If anyone obeys my teaching, he will never experience death.’ ⁵³ You aren’t greater than our father Abraham who died, are you? And the prophets died too! Who do you claim to be?” ⁵⁴ Jesus replied, “If I glorify myself, my glory is worthless. The one who glorifies me is my Father, about whom you people say, ‘He is our God.’ ⁵⁵ Yet you do not know him, but I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him, and I obey his teaching. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham was overjoyed to see my day, and he saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷ Then the Judeans replied, “You are not yet fifty years old! Have you seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “I tell you the solemn truth, before Abraham came into existence, I am!” ⁵⁹ Then they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus was hidden from them and went out from the temple area.

ORIENTATION

Seven times Jesus said “I am” and finished the sentence. Once he says “I am” and *stops* — and the stones come up off the ground. This is the most naked claim to deity in the Gospels, and the crowd understands it perfectly. The whole session turns on two words: *egō eimi*, with nothing after them.

THE GREEK

ἐγώ εἰμι (*absolute*) — *I am* (8:58). “Before Abraham came into existence, *I am*.” Hear what Jesus does *not* say. He does not say “before Abraham was, *I was*” — which would only claim great age. He says “*I am*” — the timeless present, existence with no beginning. And these are the very words God spoke from the burning bush: “I AM WHO I AM... say to them, ‘I

AM has sent me” (Exodus 3:14), rendered in the Greek Old Testament with *egō eimi*. They are the words God speaks through Isaiah to declare that he alone is God: “I am he... before me no god was formed” (Isaiah 41–43, LXX *egō eimi*). Jesus takes the divine Name onto his own lips and lays it over himself.

ἐλίθασον (*elithazon*) — *they were picking up stones* (8:59). The reaction is the interpretation. The crowd does not puzzle over a riddle; they reach for stones, the prescribed penalty for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:16). They understood him exactly. To their ears he had just claimed to be God — and either he was a blasphemer to be stoned, or he was telling the truth. There is no third option, and John means us to feel the force of the choice.

πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι (*prin Abraam genesthai*) — *before Abraham came into existence* (8:58). Notice the two different verbs John uses, and the gulf between them. Abraham “*came into existence*” (*genesthai*, the verb of created, beginning-to-be). Jesus “*am*” (*eimi*, the verb of timeless being). Abraham *became*; Jesus simply *is*. The grammar itself confesses the difference between a creature with a birthday and the Creator who has none.

VERSE BY VERSE

Verses 48–53. The escalating exchange. The crowd accuses Jesus of being demon-possessed; he answers that he honors his Father and seeks not his own glory. Then he makes a staggering promise — “if anyone obeys my teaching, he will never see death” — which his opponents take as proof of madness: Abraham died, the prophets died, “who do you claim to be?” The question is exactly the right one, and Jesus is about to answer it without flinching.

Verses 54–56. “Before Abraham — my day.” Jesus says he knows the Father whom they only claim to know, and then drops a hint of his eternity: “Your father Abraham was overjoyed to see my day, and he saw it and was glad.” Abraham — dead two thousand years — somehow *saw* Jesus’ day. The claim is already enormous: Jesus is the One toward whom Abraham looked.

Verses 57–59. “I am.” The crowd seizes on the impossibility — “you are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?” — and Jesus answers not by adjusting the math but by exploding it: “*before Abraham came into existence, I am.*” Not “I existed before Abraham,” though that is true; the words are the divine Name. And the stones come up. He has, in their hearing, claimed to be God. The session ends with a choice no reader can avoid: stone him, or fall down before him.

WHAT CONFSSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

A confessional Lutheran hears in “I am” the full deity of Christ that the ancient creeds were written to guard — and that the Athanasian Creed states with unflinching precision:

the Son is “God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds,” “equal to the Father as touching his Godhead,” “uncreate... eternal.”¹⁰ “Before Abraham came into existence, I am” is the Athanasian Creed in five words on the lips of Jesus himself. The deity of Christ is not a doctrine the church bolted on later; it is the claim Jesus makes in the first person, the claim that got him nearly stoned in chapter eight and finally crucified in chapter nineteen. He died, in part, for saying *egō eimi*.

This matters for everything the Lutheran confesses about the person of Christ. The Formula of Concord insists that the one who walked the roads of Galilee, hungered, wept, and died is *the same person* who is true God — that in the one Christ the divine and human natures are personally united, so that we may rightly say *God* was crucified and *God* shed his blood for us.¹¹ The whole weight of redemption rests on this: only if the Good Shepherd of Session Four is the “I AM” of Session Five does his death avail for the sheep. A merely human shepherd, however noble, could not lay down a life that ransoms the world. The “I am” is what makes the cross worth anything.

And there is comfort in the Name. The God who said “I AM” to Moses — the One who simply, eternally, unconditionally *is* — is the One who became flesh, knew his sheep by name, and laid down his life for them. The unchanging “I am” is not a distant abstraction but the Good Shepherd. The same eternal Being who has no beginning bent down into time, took a body, and died for you. That the eternal “I AM” should be *for me* is the heart of the whole gospel.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Jesus says “I am,” not “I was” — the timeless present, the very words God spoke at the burning bush. Why does that one verb change everything?
2. The crowd reaches for stones; they understood him exactly. C. S. Lewis pressed the same choice Jesus forces here — liar, lunatic, or Lord. How does John 8:58 close off the option of “merely a good teacher”?
3. Abraham “came into existence”; Jesus “am.” How does the difference between those two verbs guard the line between the Creator and every creature?
4. The Good Shepherd of Session Four *is* the “I AM” of Session Five. Why does the value of the cross depend on the deity of the One who dies?

10. The Athanasian Creed: the Son is “God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds,” “equal to the Father as touching his Godhead,” “uncreate... incomprehensible... eternal.” “Before Abraham came into existence, I am” (John 8:58) is this confession on Jesus’ own lips.

11. *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration VIII: in the one person of Christ the divine and human natures are so united that the properties of each may be ascribed to the whole person — so that it is rightly said that God suffered and God redeemed us by his blood. The deity confessed in John 8:58 is what gives the cross its saving worth.

5. The eternal “I AM” became flesh and died for you. How does it steady you to know that the One who simply *is*, without beginning, is also your Shepherd?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, before Abraham was, you are. You are the great “I AM,” the eternal God who has no beginning and no end — and you stooped into our time, took our flesh, and laid down your life for us. We do not pick up stones; we fall down and worship. Be for us forever what you are in yourself: the God who simply *is*, now and to all eternity. Amen.

SESSION SIX

The Light of the World

John 8:12; 9:1–7, 35–41

THE TEXT

JOHN 8:12 · NET

¹² Then Jesus spoke out again, “I am the light of the world! The one who follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

JOHN 9:1–7, 35–41 · NET

¹ Now as Jesus was passing by, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who committed the sin that caused him to be born blind, this man or his parents?” ³ Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but he was born blind so that the acts of God may be revealed through what happens to him. ⁴ We must perform the deeds of the one who sent me as long as it is daytime. Night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶ Having said this, he spat on the ground and made some mud with the saliva. He smeared the mud on the blind man’s eyes ⁷ and said to him, “Go wash in the pool of Siloam” (which is translated “sent”). So the blind man went away and washed, and came back seeing. ³⁵ Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, so he found the man and said to him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” ³⁶ The man replied, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” ³⁷ Jesus told him, “You have seen him; he is the one speaking with you.” ³⁸ He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. ³⁹ Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that those who do not see may gain their sight, and the ones who see may become blind.” ⁴⁰ Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and asked him, “We are not blind too, are we?” ⁴¹ Jesus replied, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin, but now because you claim that you can see, your guilt remains.”

ORIENTATION

John’s other great pair of words is *light* and *darkness*, struck first in the Prologue and now dramatized in an unforgettable story: a man born blind who receives his sight and his Savior in a single afternoon, while the men who were sure they could see go blind. The

chapter is a parable acted out — physical blindness healed becomes the picture of spiritual blindness healed — and it is one of John’s clearest portraits of grace.

THE GREEK

φῶς / σκοτία (*phōs / skotia*) — *light / darkness* (8:12; cf. 1:5). “I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will never walk in darkness.” For John these are not two equal cosmic powers locked in eternal balance — this is *not* the dualism of the philosophers or the Gnostics. The darkness is the absence and the rejection of the light; and “the darkness has not mastered it” (1:5). Light is revelation, life, and the presence of God; darkness is what flees before it. Flag this for your class: John’s light-and-dark language is *moral and revelatory*, not metaphysical — Christ is not one of two matched forces but the dawn the night cannot stop.

τυφλὸς ἐκ γενετῆς (*typhlos ek genetēs*) — *blind from birth* (9:1). The man was *born* blind — and Jesus pointedly rejects the disciples’ assumption that someone’s sin must have caused it. The blindness is not a verdict to be explained but a canvas for grace: “so that the acts of God may be revealed.” Watch the layering: a man *blind from birth* is the perfect picture of every sinner, who is born unable to see, and whose sight, when it comes, must be *given*.

Σιλωάμ (*Silōam*) — *Siloam*, “Sent” (9:7). John pauses to translate the pool’s name — “which means *Sent*” — because it is no accident. The blind man is healed by washing in a pool called “Sent,” at the word of the One whom the Father *sent*. The water and the Sent One belong together. (A Lutheran will not miss the baptismal overtone: sight given through washing at the word of the Sent One.)

κρίσις (*krisis*) — *judgment, separation, division* (9:39). “For judgment I have come into this world, so that those who do not see may gain their sight, and the ones who see may become blind.” The word means both a *verdict* and a *dividing*. The terrible irony of the chapter is the dividing it works: the beggar ends on his knees worshiping, and the Pharisees, so confident in their own sight, are exposed as the truly blind. The same light that gives sight to the humble blinds the proud who refuse it.

VERSE BY VERSE

8:12; 9:1–7. Light, and a man in the dark. “I am the light of the world” — and then Jesus *demonstrates* it on a man who has never seen. He rejects the question of blame (“who sinned?”) and reframes the blindness as the occasion for God’s work. Then, strikingly, he makes mud and sends the man to wash. The man does not first believe and then see; he obeys a command he does not understand, washes at the word of the Sent One, and “came back seeing.” Grace acted first; understanding came after.

9:35–38. The confession that grows. This is the heart of the session, and you should trace it word by word with your class, because the spine word *climbs* in the man’s mouth across the chapter: earlier he calls his healer “the man called Jesus,” then “a prophet,” then “a man from God”; and now, found by Jesus after being thrown out, he asks, “who is he, that I may *believe*?” — and at Jesus’ word, “Lord, I believe,” and *he worshiped him*. The man born blind ends where the Gospel wants every reader to end: on his knees, believing, worshipping.

9:39–41. The seeing made blind. And then the reversal. “For judgment I have come... that those who see may become blind.” The Pharisees, overhearing, bristle: “We are not blind too, are we?” Jesus’ answer is the law’s sharpest edge: “If you were blind, you would not be guilty; but because you claim that you *can see*, your guilt remains.” Their confidence in their own sight is precisely what damns them. The one who knows he is blind receives sight; the one who insists he sees stays in the dark by his own choosing.

WHAT CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

This chapter is John’s portrait of original sin and the bondage of the will — and a Lutheran hears the Confessions in it directly. The Augsburg Confession teaches that since the fall all are “born with sin... without true fear of God and without true faith in God,”¹² and the Formula of Concord describes the natural man in conversion as spiritually blind and dead, unable to cooperate in his own rescue, so that conversion is the work of God alone.¹³ The man born blind is that doctrine made visible. He did not partly see and ask for the rest; he was *blind from birth*, and sight was *given* — Jesus made mud and opened eyes that had never opened. We do not contribute to our new sight any more than this man contributed to his.

Hear the Law and the Gospel dividing the room. The Gospel does its work in the beggar: a man with nothing to offer but a confession that grows verse by verse until he worships. The Law does its work in the Pharisees: their confidence that they *see* is exactly what condemns them, for the one who will not admit his blindness cannot receive sight. This is the *krisis*, the dividing, that the light always works — not because the light wants to condemn (Session Two: he came not to condemn but to save), but because some love the darkness and will not come to the light (3:19). The same sun that opens the humble eye hardens the proud one.

12. *Augsburg Confession* II (“Original Sin”): since the fall, all who are naturally born are “born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence.” The man born blind (John 9) is original sin made visible.

13. *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration II (“Free Will”): in spiritual matters the unregenerate are blind, dead, and enemies of God, unable to cooperate in their own conversion; conversion is wholly the work of God’s grace. Sight is given, not achieved.

And do not miss the pool called “Sent.” Sight is given through a *washing*, at the word of the One the Father *sent* — and a Lutheran cannot help but hear, underneath the miracle, the shape of Baptism, where the blind are washed and given eyes to see Christ. The light of the world gives the light of life, and he gives it the way he loves to give all his gifts: through water and the Word.

FOR REFLECTION

1. The disciples want to assign blame for the blindness; Jesus reframes it as the occasion for God’s work. How does that change the way you read your own afflictions?
2. The man washes and sees *before* he understands who Jesus is. What does it mean that grace often acts first and understanding follows?
3. Trace the man’s confession as it grows — “the man called Jesus,” “a prophet,” “Lord, I believe.” How has confessing Christ *under pressure* deepened your own sight?
4. The Pharisees’ certainty that they “see” is what condemns them. Where might your confidence in your own spiritual sight actually be keeping you in the dark?
5. The pool is named “Sent,” and the man is healed by washing. How does this quiet detail point to the way Christ still gives sight — through water and the Word?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, light of the world, we were born blind and did not know it. You did not wait for us to see; you came to us in the dark, washed us at your word, and gave us eyes. Keep us from the proud blindness that claims to see and so stays in the night. Let us confess, like the man you healed, “Lord, I believe” — and fall down and worship you, the light of life. Amen.

SESSION SEVEN

Abide in the Vine

John 15:1–17

THE TEXT

JOHN 15:1–17 · NET

¹ “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. ² He takes away every branch that does not bear fruit in me. He prunes every branch that bears fruit so that it will bear more fruit. ³ You are clean already because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. ⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me—and I in him—bears much fruit because apart from me you can accomplish nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown out like a branch and dries up; and such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire and are burned up. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is honored by this, that you bear much fruit and show that you are my disciples. ⁹ “Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete. ¹² My commandment is this—to love one another just as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this—that one lays down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I no longer call you slaves because the slave does not understand what his master is doing. But I have called you friends because I have revealed to you everything I heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that remains, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you. ¹⁷ This I command you—to love one another.

ORIENTATION

On the last night, hours from the cross, Jesus gives his friends an image to live inside after he is gone: a vine and its branches. And it turns out that the whole secret of the Christian life — fruitfulness, prayer, joy, love, perseverance — hangs on a single, restful verb. This is the last of the seven “I am” sayings, and the gentlest.

THE GREEK

μένω (*menō*) — *to remain, abide, stay, dwell* (15:4–10, eleven times). This is John’s quiet keyword — nearly forty times across the Gospel, and it saturates this passage. The NET renders it “remain”; older translations say “abide.” “*Remain* in me, and I will *remain* in you.” Notice what abiding is *not*: it is not striving, achieving, or producing. It is *staying put* — remaining where you have been placed, in Christ. The branch’s entire task is to *not let go*. For a Gospel built on a verb of believing, this is believing’s restful face: to abide is simply to keep trusting, to stay.

ἄμπελος / κλήμα (*ampelos / klēma*) — *vine / branch* (15:1, 5). “I am the *vine*; you are the *branches*.” In the prophets, Israel was God’s vine — and a failing, fruitless one. Jesus is the *true* vine, the one that does not fail. And the relationship is all one direction: nothing flows from the branch into the vine; everything flows from the vine into the branch. The branch contributes nothing but its *connection*. “Apart from me you can accomplish nothing” (v. 5) is not an exaggeration; it is botany.

καρπός (*karpos*) — *fruit* (15:2, 4, 5, 8, 16). The branch does not *manufacture* fruit; it *bears* it — fruit is simply what happens when the life of the vine flows through a branch that abides. Set this beside Galatians 5: there, the *fruit* of the Spirit, not the *works* of the flesh; here, the fruit of *abiding*, not the works of striving. Sanctification is not a second project bolted onto grace; it is grace flowing through. You do not screw fruit onto a branch. You let the branch stay on the vine, and fruit happens.

ἀγάπη / φίλος (*agapē / philos*) — *love / friend* (15:9–15). “Remain in my *love*.” “No longer do I call you slaves... I have called you *friends*.” The abiding is not cold mysticism but the warmest relationship named in Scripture¹⁴ — and the love is defined two verses later by a Friend who “lays down his life for his friends.” To abide in Christ is to abide in a love that went to the cross for you.

VERSE BY VERSE

Verses 1–6. Vine and branches. The Father is the gardener; Christ is the true vine; believers are the branches; and the whole point is *remaining*. Verse 3 is pure gospel set in the middle of the horticulture: “You are clean *already* because of the word I have spoken” — the branches are not striving to *become* clean but are *already* clean by the Word, and now simply called to remain. Verse 6 sounds the warning — the branch that does not remain is thrown out and burned — and we will let it stand, unsoftened, in a moment.

Verses 7–11. The fruit of abiding. From remaining flows everything: answered prayer (v. 7), a Father honored (v. 8), love (v. 9), and — beautifully — joy: “that my joy may be in you,

and your joy may be complete” (v. 11). The abiding life is not grim duty; it is the branch flush with the vine’s own sap, and the fruit of it is gladness.

Verses 12–17. From slaves to friends. The command is love — “love one another as I have loved you” — and the measure of that love is the cross (v. 13). Then the astonishing promotion: “no longer slaves, but *friends*.” And underneath it all, the ground that makes the whole thing rest on grace: “*You did not choose me, but I chose you*” (v. 16). The branch did not graft itself into the vine. It was chosen, placed, appointed. Even the abiding begins with being *chosen*.

WHAT CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

A confessional Lutheran hears in the vine and branches the right ordering of faith and works that the whole Reformation fought to protect. We do not abide *in order to* be accepted; we are *already* clean by the Word (v. 3), grafted in by grace, and the fruit *follows* as surely as grapes follow from a living branch. The Formula of Concord teaches exactly this: good works follow justifying faith “necessarily,” freely and spontaneously, as good fruit comes from a good tree — not coerced by the law’s threat, but flowing from the Christ who lives in us.¹⁵ “Apart from me you can accomplish nothing” is the death of every works-righteousness; the branch produces nothing on its own, and everything by abiding.

Hear, too, the comfort of being *chosen*. “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” The Formula of Concord handles God’s election precisely as the Lutheran’s consolation — not a cause for anxious speculation about the hidden God, but the assurance that those whom God has chosen in Christ he also gathers, keeps, and brings to fruit.¹⁶ You are not a branch that scrambled onto the vine by its own initiative; you are a branch the gardener *grafted in*. Even your abiding rests on his choosing.

And then the warning of verse 6 — the fruitless branch thrown into the fire — which we handle exactly as the Jude study handled its warnings: *both* truths, held in the same breath, without collapsing either. The Lutheran does not teach a “once-grafted, always-fruitful” security that ignores the warning (the branch *can* fail to remain, and the warning is real and addressed to the church). Nor does he teach an anxious self-reliance in which

14. On *agapē* as the cross-shaped, self-giving love that lays down its life for its friends, see *Just Enough Greek*, ch. 39 (“*Agapē*, ἀγάπη”).

15. *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration IV (“Good Works”): good works follow justifying faith “necessarily,” freely and spontaneously, as good fruit comes from a good tree, worked by the Spirit who dwells in believers — not coerced by the threat of the law. John 15’s fruit-bearing branch is the picture.

16. *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration XI (“Election”): God’s eternal election is to be considered “in Christ” and received as comfort — those whom God has chosen he also calls, justifies, and keeps — while Scripture’s warnings against falling away remain serious and are addressed to the church. “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16) is election as consolation.

staying on the vine is finally the branch's own white-knuckled achievement. The security is real, and it is Christ's: "I will remain in you" (v. 4), "I chose you" (v. 16). The warning is real, and it is ours: "remain in me." Both stand. And the command "remain" turns out, gloriously, to be a command to *rest* — to stop trying to be your own vine, and simply stay where grace has put you.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Jesus' instruction for bearing fruit is, astonishingly, "remain" — stay, abide, don't let go. Where in your life are you trying to *produce* what you are only meant to *receive*?
2. "You are clean already because of the word I have spoken." How does beginning from *already clean* change the motive for obedience?
3. The branch contributes nothing but its connection to the vine. What does "apart from me you can accomplish nothing" do to your sense of what your spiritual life depends on?
4. "You did not choose me, but I chose you." How is election meant to function here — as anxiety, or as comfort?
5. Verse 6 warns of the branch thrown into the fire, and verse 4 promises "I will remain in you." How do you hold the warning and the promise together without letting go of either?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you are the true vine, and we are only branches; apart from you we can do nothing, and in you we bear much fruit. We did not choose you — you chose us, grafted us in, and made us clean by your word. Teach us the hardest and most restful of your commands: to remain. Keep us in your love, that your joy may be in us and our joy may be full, and that we may love one another as you have loved us — you who laid down your life for your friends. Amen.

SESSION EIGHT

Another Helper

John 14:16–17, 26–27; 16:7, 13–14

THE TEXT

JOHN 14:16–17, 26–27 · NET

¹⁶ Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept because it does not see him or know him. But you know him because he resides with you and will be in you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will cause you to remember everything I said to you. ²⁷ “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; I do not give it to you as the world does. Do not let your hearts be distressed or lacking in courage.

JOHN 16:7, 13–14 · NET

⁷ But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I am going away. For if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. ¹³ But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. For he will not speak on his own authority, but will speak whatever he hears and will tell you what is to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because he will receive from me what is mine and will tell it to you.

ORIENTATION

The disciples are about to lose him, and Jesus spends his last hours promising them Someone. The Spirit he describes is given a title found almost nowhere else in the New Testament — and everything Jesus says about the Spirit’s work is, quietly, a rebuke to anyone who would chase God apart from the Word. This is the most important session for understanding how a Lutheran reads the whole Christian life.

THE GREEK

παράκλητος (*paraklētos*) — *Advocate, Helper, Comforter, Counselor* (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). One Greek word, and no single English word holds it, which is why the translations all differ. It is built from *para* (“alongside”) and *kaleō* (“to call”) — *one called to your side*, and especially a legal advocate who stands up to defend the accused. “Comforter” (the old rendering) catches his consolation; “Advocate” (the NET) catches his courtroom defense; “Helper”

catches his nearness. The same word names *Christ himself* in 1 John 2:1 (“we have an *advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ”) — so the Spirit is *another* Advocate, continuing Jesus’ own work of standing alongside us.

ἄλλος παράκλητος (*allos paraklētos*) — *another Advocate [of the same kind]* (14:16). Remember the two Greek words for “another”? Here it is *allos* — another *of the same kind*, not *heteros*, another of a different kind. The Spirit is not a lesser substitute or a different sort of presence; he is Christ’s own kind of Helper, doing exactly what Jesus did. When the Spirit comes, the disciples are not downgraded from having Jesus to having a consolation prize; they receive Christ’s own presence in a new and universal way.

τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας (*to pneuma tēs alētheias*) — *the Spirit of truth* (14:17; 16:13). And what does this Spirit *do*? Look closely, because the answer is the heart of the matter. He will “cause you to remember everything I said to you” (14:26). He “will bear witness about me” (15:26). He “will not speak on his own authority... he will glorify me, for he will receive from me what is mine and tell it to you” (16:13–14). The Spirit’s entire ministry, by Jesus’ own description, is to point *away from himself* and *back to Christ and Christ’s words*. He does not bring a new revelation; he illumines the given one.

VERSE BY VERSE

14:16–17, 26–27. The promise of the Advocate. Jesus will ask the Father, who will give “another Advocate... to be with you forever.” The world cannot receive him, but the disciples know him, for “he resides with you and will be in you” (note *menō* again — the Spirit *abides*). And his work is defined: “he will teach you everything, and cause you to *remember everything I said*.” Then the gift that flows from the Spirit’s presence: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” — a peace “not as the world gives,” grounded not in circumstances but in a finished work.

16:7, 13–14. The advantage of his going. Astonishingly, Jesus says it is “to your *advantage*” that he goes away — because then the Advocate will come. The bodily Jesus could be in one place; the Spirit will bring Christ’s presence to all his people everywhere. And again the Spirit’s self-effacing work: “he will not speak on his own authority... he will *glorify me*, he will *receive from me what is mine* and tell it to you.” The Spirit is not a freelance source of new truths. He is the floodlight trained on Christ.

WHAT CONFSSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

This is the Lutheran answer to every “enthusiast” — Luther’s *Schwärmer*, the spiritual fanatic — who claims a hotline to God that bypasses the external Word. And it is the same error the Jude study met in the “dreamers” who grounded their authority in private revelation. The Spirit of truth, by Jesus’ own account, does not bring fresh revelations

untethered from Christ; he *reminds* the apostles of Jesus' words, *witnesses* to Jesus, *receives what is Christ's* and declares it. Luther draws the line as sharply as it can be drawn in the Smalcald Articles: "God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before."¹⁷ Everything that boasts of the Spirit *apart* from that Word — dream, vision, inner light, "new thing God is doing" — Luther treats as the old serpent's voice.

So where is this Spirit found? Exactly where Christ's Word is. The Small Catechism confesses that "the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith,"¹⁸ and the Augsburg Confession locates the giving of the Spirit precisely in the means of grace: "through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given."¹⁹ The Comforter comforts *through the gospel*. He is not found by climbing inward into private spiritual experience; he is given where Christ promised to give him — in preaching, in absolution, in Baptism, in the Supper. This is why a Lutheran is so stubborn about the external means: not because he distrusts the Spirit, but because Jesus himself told us what the Spirit does, and it is always to point us back to the Word made flesh.

And note the peace the Spirit brings (14:27): "not as the world gives." The world's peace depends on circumstances; this peace depends on a finished work — which is exactly where the next two sessions are headed. The Spirit of truth takes the accomplished work of Christ and presses it home to your troubled, fearful heart, saying: *it is finished; you are his; do not be afraid.*

FOR REFLECTION

1. The Spirit's work is to *remind* us of Christ's words and to point to Jesus, not to himself. How does that guard us from chasing spiritual experiences that have drifted loose from the Word?
2. The Spirit is "another Advocate *of the same kind*" as Jesus. How does that change the way you think about Christ's continuing presence with you?

17. Luther, *Smalcald Articles* III.8 ("Confession"), the classic rejection of "enthusiasm" (*Schwärmerei*): "God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before." Everything that boasts of the Spirit apart from that Word is to be rejected. The Spirit of truth (John 14–16) reminds of Christ's words; he does not bypass them.

18. Luther, *Small Catechism*, Creed, Third Article: "the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

19. *Augsburg Confession* V ("The Office of the Ministry"): "Through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel." The Paraclete is found where the Word is.

3. Jesus says it is to our *advantage* that he went away. Why might the Spirit's coming be better, for us, than having the bodily Jesus in one location?
4. If the Spirit always points to Christ and his Word, where should you go to find the Spirit — and where should you be wary of claims to find him?
5. The peace Jesus gives is “not as the world gives.” How is a peace grounded in a finished work different from a peace grounded in good circumstances?

PRAYER

Father, you have not left us as orphans, but sent us another Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to be with us forever. Keep us from seeking your Spirit anywhere but where you have promised him — in your Word, in the water, at the table — and let him do his proper work in us: to remind us of Christ's words, to glorify your Son, and to seal in our hearts the peace that the world cannot give and cannot take away. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

SESSION NINE

The Hour of Glory

John 12:23–33; 17:1–5

THE TEXT

JOHN 12:23–33 · NET

²³ Jesus replied, “The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ I tell you the solemn truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains by itself alone. But if it dies, it produces much grain. ²⁵ The one who loves his life destroys it, and the one who hates his life in this world guards it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone wants to serve me, he must follow me, and where I am, my servant will be too. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. ²⁷ “Now my soul is greatly distressed. And what should I say? ‘Father, deliver me from this hour’? No, but for this very reason I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd that stood there and heard the voice said that it had thundered. Others said that an angel had spoken to him. ³⁰ Jesus said, “This voice has not come for my benefit but for yours. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ (Now he said this to indicate clearly what kind of death he was going to die.)

JOHN 17:1–5 · NET

¹ When Jesus had finished saying these things, he looked upward to heaven and said, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, so that your Son may glorify you— ² just as you have given him authority over all humanity, so that he may give eternal life to everyone you have given him. ³ Now this is eternal life—that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me at your side with the glory I had with you before the world was created.

ORIENTATION

The whole Gospel has been telling time. Over and over John has noted that “his hour had not yet come” (2:4; 7:30; 8:20). Now, with the cross days away, Jesus says the words that turn the page: “The time has come.” And what that hour holds is the strangest glory in all

of Scripture — for the hour of his deepest humiliation is named the hour of his *glorification*.

THE GREEK

ὥρα (*hōra*) — *hour, time, the appointed moment* (12:23; 17:1). Not clock time but the destined moment the whole story has been bending toward — the hour of the cross. “The *hour* has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Everything before was approach; now the center of history arrives. And notice: the hour Jesus has been moving toward his whole ministry is not a coronation in the worldly sense but a crucifixion. That is the hour he was born for.

δοξάζω (*doxazō*) — *to glorify, honor, clothe with splendor* (12:23, 28; 17:1, 4–5). Here is John’s great paradox, and it is the theological heart of the Gospel. The “glorifying” of the Son is *his crucifixion*. The hour of his deepest shame — betrayed, stripped, nailed up between criminals — is the hour John calls his *glory*.²⁰ John sees the cross not as the dark valley before Easter’s triumph but as the throne itself, the place where the love and majesty of God blaze out most brightly. When Jesus prays “Father, glorify your Son” (17:1), he is praying his way to Calvary.

κόκκος τοῦ σίτου (*kokkos tou sitou*) — *a kernel of wheat* (12:24). “Unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and *dies*, it remains by itself alone. But if it dies, it produces much grain.” Jesus reads his own death in a seed. The way to fruitfulness runs through burial; the single grain multiplies only by going into the dark. His death is not the end of the harvest but its planting.

ὑψόω (*hypsoō*) — *to lift up, exalt* (12:32). The double-meaning verb from Session Two returns. “When I am *lifted up* from the earth, I will draw all people to myself” — and John adds the explanatory aside: “he said this to indicate what kind of *death* he was going to die.” To be lifted up on the cross *is* to be lifted up in exaltation, and from that lifted-up place he draws the world to himself. The cross is not only where he dies; it is where he reigns and gathers.

VERSE BY VERSE

12:23–26. The hour and the seed. “The hour has come” — and immediately the paradox: glorification by way of a buried, dying seed. Then Jesus turns it on his followers: “the one who loves his life destroys it; the one who hates his life... guards it for eternal life.” The pattern of the grain is not his alone; it is the shape of all discipleship. Life comes through death, for the Master and for the servant.

20. On *doxa* as God’s manifest glory — God revealed rather than an attribute of God in the abstract — see *Just Enough Greek*, ch. 8 (“*Doxa*, δόξα”). In John, that glory shines most brightly from the cross.

12:27–33. The troubled soul and the drawing cross. This is John’s Gethsemane, compressed into a sentence: “Now my soul is greatly distressed. And what should I say? ‘Father, deliver me from this hour’? No — for this very reason I have come to this hour.” Jesus does not flee the cross; he embraces it as his purpose. The Father’s voice answers from heaven (for the crowd’s sake, not Jesus’), and Jesus names what the hour accomplishes: the world judged, its ruler driven out, and — “when I am lifted up — I will draw all people to myself.” The cross is the magnet of the world.

17:1–5. The hour prayed. Now Jesus lifts his eyes and prays his way into the hour: “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son.” Eternal life is defined (v. 3) not as endless duration but as *knowing* — “that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent.” And verse 4 anticipates the cry of Session Ten: “I glorified you on earth by *completing the work* you gave me to do.” The work is all but finished; one word remains to be spoken from the cross.

WHAT CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

This is the theology of the cross, which Luther set at the very center of how God is known — and John 12 and 17 are its scriptural home. In the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther distinguished the “theologian of glory,” who expects to find God in power, success, and visible splendor, from the “theologian of the cross,” who finds God where God has actually chosen to reveal himself: in suffering, weakness, and the shame of the crucified.²¹ “That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in what has happened... He deserves to be called a theologian who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.” John says it first and most boldly: the hour of the cross *is* the hour of glory. God is never more glorious, never more fully revealed, than hanging on a tree for sinners.

A Lutheran clings to this because it tells him where to look for God — and where *not* to. Do not look for God only in the mountaintop, the triumph, the answered prayer, the impressive religious experience. Look for him where he promised to be found: in the crucified Christ, and in the lowly means — water, word, bread, wine — that deliver that crucified Christ to you. The God who chose to be glorified on a cross is not ashamed to come to you in humble, hidden things. The theology of glory always wants God in majesty; the theology of the cross receives God in the manger, on the cross, and at the font.

21. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), theses 19–21: the “theologian of glory” expects to find God in power and visible splendor; the “theologian of the cross” finds God revealed where he chose to reveal himself — “through suffering and the cross.” John’s identification of the crucifixion as Jesus’ “glorification” (12:23; 17:1) is the biblical heart of the *theologia crucis*.

And hear the comfort in “I will draw all people to myself.” The lifted-up Christ is not a spectacle to be pitied but a magnet that gathers. From the very place of his deepest weakness, he exerts the strongest pull in the universe — drawing sinners out of the dark and into himself. Your faith, your coming to him, is the cross doing its work: he is lifted up, and he is drawing you.

FOR REFLECTION

1. The hour Jesus was born for turns out to be the hour of the *cross*. How does it change the cross to see it as the goal of his whole life rather than its tragic interruption?
2. “Unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies...” Where in your own life have you seen fruitfulness come only through some kind of dying?
3. John calls the crucifixion Jesus’ *glorification*. How does the “theology of the cross” reshape where you expect to find God — and where you might be wrongly looking?
4. “When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.” How does it comfort you to know that your coming to Christ is the cross doing its drawing work?
5. Eternal life is defined as *knowing* the Father and the Son (17:3), not merely living forever. How does that definition change what you are hoping for?

PRAYER

Father, the hour came, and your Son did not turn from it; though his soul was troubled, he went to the cross for our sake and for your glory. Teach us to find you where you have chosen to be found — not in power and splendor, but in the crucified Christ and the humble means that bring him to us. And as he was lifted up, let him draw us to himself, that knowing you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent, we may have eternal life. Amen.

SESSION TEN

It Is Finished, and Risen

John 19:28–30; 20:24–31

THE TEXT

JOHN 19:28–30 · NET

²⁸ After this Jesus, realizing that by this time everything was completed, said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty!” ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was there, so they put a sponge soaked in sour wine on a branch of hyssop and lifted it to his mouth. ³⁰ When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, “It is completed!” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

JOHN 20:24–31 · NET

²⁴ Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he replied, “Unless I see the wounds from the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe it!” ²⁶ Eight days later the disciples were again together in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and examine my hands. Extend your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas replied to him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed.” ³⁰ Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

ORIENTATION

We come to the last word from the cross and the last confession in the Gospel — and they belong together. One Greek word, spoken in the dark of Good Friday, declares the work done; one cry, eight days after Easter, names the worker God. And then John tells us, in his own voice, why he wrote it all. The whole Gospel comes to rest here.

THE GREEK

ΤΕΤΕΛΕΣΤΑΙ (*tetelestai*) — *it is finished, accomplished, completed, paid in full* (19:30). One word, and everything is in the tense. It is the **perfect tense** — a completed action whose result *stands forever*. Not “I am finished” (a dying man’s exhaustion) but “*it has been accomplished, and it stands accomplished.*” Papyri show this very word written across a paid bill: *tetelestai* — *paid in full*. The work of salvation is *done*. There is nothing to add, nothing left owing, no balance for you to make up. The NET renders it “It is completed!” — and the exclamation point is right, for this is not a whimper but a victory shout. Set it beside Galatians: “if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing.” *Tetelestai* is *why* nothing can be added — the account is closed, in the Son’s own hand.

ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου (*ho kyrios mou kai ho theos mou*) — *my Lord and my God* (20:28). Thomas, the doubter, gives the Gospel its closing confession — and it is the highest in the entire book. “My Lord and my God.” John has come full circle: the Prologue declared “the Word *was* God” (1:1); now a man on his knees says it back to the risen Christ, face to face. The whole Gospel is wrapped between those two confessions of deity, an *inclusio* of worship — and Thomas’s possessive pronouns make it personal: not “the Lord and the God,” but “*my* Lord and *my* God.”

ἵνα πιστεύητε (*hina pisteuēte*) — *so that you may believe* (20:31). And then John tells us, plainly, why: “these are written *so that you may believe...* and that by believing you may have *life* in his name.” The spine word and its goal, one last time, naming the purpose of every page. (A flag worth a word: the manuscripts vary between the present subjunctive *pisteuēte*, “keep on believing” — written to sustain believers — and the aorist *pisteusēte*, “come to believe” — written to make believers of unbelievers. It is a small difference of a single letter, and a real question about John’s first audience. The best answer is probably *both*: a Gospel that creates faith and feeds it. Either way, the purpose is *believing* — and *life*.)

VERSE BY VERSE

19:28–30. It is finished. Even at the end, John notes, Jesus is in command — “realizing that everything was completed,” he speaks to fulfill Scripture, receives the sour wine, and then cries the single word: *tetelestai*. And only *then* — the work done, not a moment before — “he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” He is not killed before he is ready; he *gives up* his spirit, when the work is finished. The Good Shepherd lays down his life of his own accord (Session Four), and he does it the instant, and not before, the work is complete.

20:24–29. From doubt to confession. Thomas will not believe the reports — “unless I see the wounds... I will never believe.” Eight days later, Jesus comes through locked doors and offers Thomas exactly what he demanded: “Put your finger here... Do not continue in your

unbelief, but *believe*.” And Thomas, who asked for the least, gives the most: “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus speaks past Thomas to every later reader — to you: “Blessed are those who have *not seen* and yet have believed.” You, who will never put a finger in the wounds, are pronounced *blessed* for believing the testimony. This Gospel is that testimony.

20:30–31. Why it was written. John steps out from behind the curtain and addresses you directly. There were many more signs; he chose these. And he chose them for one reason: “so that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have *life* in his name.” The book is not a neutral record. It is an instrument aimed at your faith and your life.

WHAT CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS HEAR

A confessional Lutheran hears in *tetelestai* the ground of the entire doctrine of justification: salvation is *finished* — accomplished outside of us, by Christ, on the cross — and received by faith, not by works. The Augsburg Confession confesses that we “cannot obtain forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but... receive forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith.”²² And the Apology presses why this must be so: if anything remained for us to add, the conscience could never rest, never know whether it had added enough.²³ *Tetelestai* is the conscience’s deliverance. There is nothing left to complete. The bill reads *paid in full*, in Christ’s own hand, and faith simply receives the receipt. This is the same gospel as Galatians, sealed now with a single dying word: not “almost finished,” not “your part remains,” but *finished*.

Hear, too, the deity that frames the whole Gospel. Thomas’s “my Lord and my God” answers the Prologue’s “the Word was God” — and the Lutheran rejoices that the One who said *tetelestai* is the same “I AM” of Session Five, true God and true man in one person. Only because the One who died is *God* does his finished work avail for the world; and only because he is *man* could he die at all. The cry “it is finished” is worth everything precisely because the One who cried it is “my Lord and my God.”

And hear, finally, the purpose of the written Word. “These are written so that you may believe.” A Lutheran holds Scripture so dearly because of what John says it is *for*: not a relic to be admired but the instrument through which the Spirit creates and sustains faith. Jesus blessed those who “have not seen and yet believe” — and we have not seen; we be-

22. Augsburg Confession IV (“Justification”): we are justified “freely on account of Christ through faith,” not by our own merits, works, or satisfactions. *Tetelestai* (John 19:30) is why nothing can be added.

23. Melancthon, *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* IV: if justification depended in any part on our own works or satisfactions, the conscience could never find rest, never knowing whether it had done enough. The finished work of Christ, received by faith, is the only ground of a settled conscience.

lieve through this written testimony, by the Spirit working through the Word (Session Eight). John did not write that you may merely *know about* Jesus, but that you may *believe* — and, believing, *live*. That is why this study exists, and why the Gospel does: not that you may achieve, but that you may believe, and have life in his name.

FOR REFLECTION

1. *Tetelestai* is a perfect-tense word: done, and standing done, forever. What in your life are you still trying to finish that Christ has already declared complete?
2. Jesus gives up his spirit only *after* the work is finished — he is not overpowered. How does it comfort you that your salvation was completed on purpose, not interrupted by death?
3. Thomas asked for the least and confessed the most — “my Lord and my God.” Where has your honest doubt been met by Christ and turned into worship?
4. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” You are among them. How does it feel to be pronounced *blessed* for believing the testimony of this book?
5. John says he wrote “so that you may believe... and have life.” How does knowing the *purpose* of the Gospel change the way you read it?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, from the cross you cried, “It is finished” — and it was, and it stands finished forever. There is nothing left for us to add, nothing for our consciences to complete; you have paid it all. Risen Lord, we have not seen your wounds, yet by your Word and Spirit we believe, and with Thomas we confess you: my Lord and my God. These things were written that we might believe; let us believe, and so have life in your name, now and forever. Amen.

Excursus: Does John 6 Teach the Lord’s Supper?

Few chapters in the Bible have been pulled harder in opposite directions than the Bread of Life discourse, and a confessional Lutheran needs to know how to walk through it without falling into either ditch. The question is simple to state: when Jesus says “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves” (6:53), is he teaching the Lord’s Supper?

Three answers have been given. **Rome**, historically, read John 6 as teaching that sacramental eating is necessary for salvation — a reading that, pressed consistently, would condemn every believer who died before receiving communion, including the thief on the cross. **The Reformed**, in the other direction, used John 6 — especially verse 63, “the flesh

profits nothing” — to argue *against* any true bodily presence of Christ in the Supper: if the flesh profits nothing, they reasoned, then Christ’s body cannot be what we receive at the table. **The Lutheran** answer threads between them, and it is more careful than either.

The Lutheran Confessions decline to base the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper primarily on John 6 at all. The Real Presence — that Christ’s true body and blood are given and received in, with, and under the bread and wine — rests on the plain **Words of Institution**: “this is my body... this is my blood... given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” The Formula of Concord builds its entire treatment of the Supper on those words of Christ and Paul, not on the sixth chapter of John.²⁴ This is no accident; it is a deliberate safeguard. By grounding the sacrament on the Words of Institution rather than on John 6, the Lutherans avoided Rome’s error (the discourse is not making communion a condition of salvation) without surrendering the Real Presence to the Reformed.

So what is John 6 about, chiefly? It is about *feeding on Christ by faith* unto eternal life. The discourse opens and is interpreted by believing: “the one who *believes* has eternal life” (6:47); to “come” to Christ and to “believe” in him (6:35) is to eat the bread of life. The eating Jesus presses is, first and fundamentally, the eating of *faith* — receiving and resting on the crucified Christ, his flesh given “for the life of the world.” Luther himself, in the heat of the eucharistic controversy, often insisted that John 6 speaks primarily of this spiritual eating by faith, precisely so that the chapter could not be turned into a weapon — by Rome, to make the sacrament a work necessary for salvation, or by his opponents, to muddy the Words of Institution.²⁵

And what of verse 63, “the flesh profits nothing”? The Lutherans answer that “flesh” there does not mean Christ’s flesh — which he has just called “true food” given “for the life of the world” (6:51, 55) — but the *carnal way of understanding*, the natural mind that cannot receive spiritual realities (the same *sarx* Paul uses for the old nature). Jesus is not retracting verse 53 ten verses later; he is saying that without the Spirit, the fleshly mind makes nothing of any of this. To read “the flesh profits nothing” as a denial of Christ’s life-giving flesh is to set Jesus against himself in the space of a single paragraph.

Where, then, does this leave the relationship between John 6 and the Supper? Exactly here: John 6 is not the *proof-text* of the Lord’s Supper, but it is its richest *commentary*. The chapter and the sacrament sing in the same key. The flesh given “for the life of the world,”

24. *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration VII (“The Holy Supper”): the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is founded on the Words of Institution as recorded by the evangelists and Paul, not on John 6.

25. Luther, in the eucharistic controversies (see *Luther’s Works*, vols. 22–24 and 37), repeatedly treats John 6 as referring chiefly to spiritual eating by faith, distinct from the sacramental eating grounded in the Words of Institution — guarding the chapter against both the Roman claim that the sacrament is necessary for salvation and the Sacramentarian misuse of John 6:63.

the blood that is “true drink,” the blunt *trōgō* that refuses to be spiritualized away, the promise “the one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood resides in me, and I in him” — all of this illumines what Christ gives at his table, even though the doctrine of that table rests on his Words of Institution. The Lutheran can therefore preach John 6 with both hands open: with one hand, the primary and saving call to *come, believe, and feed on Christ by faith*; with the other, the joyful recognition that this same Lord, who is himself the bread of life, still gives his true body and blood “for you” at the altar. The bread of life and the bread of the Supper are not two breads. They are one Christ, received by faith — and, at his table, by faith *and* by mouth, exactly as he promised.

A Greek Word Index to John

The principal Greek words treated in this study, in the order they first appear.

- λόγος *logos* — word, speech, the self-expression of God (1:1, 14)
- θεός *theos* — God; “the Word was God” (1:1)
- ζωή *zōē* — life (1:4; 3:16; 6:35; 10:10; 11:25; 20:31)
- φῶς / σκοτία *phōs / skotia* — light / darkness (1:4–9; 8:12; 9:5)
- πιστεύω *pisteuō* — to believe, trust (*the spine word*) (1:12; 3:16; 6:47; 9:38; 11:27; 20:31)
- ἐσκήνωσεν *eskēnōsen* — he tabernacled, took up residence (1:14)
- δόξα / δοξάζω *doxa / doxazō* — glory / to glorify (1:14; 12:23, 28; 17:1)
- μονογενής *monogenēs* — one and only, unique (1:14, 18)
- ἐξηγήσατο *exēgēsato* — he made known, “exegeted” (1:18)
- ἄνωθεν *anōthen* — again / from above (3:3, 7)
- πνεῦμα *pneuma* — Spirit, wind, breath (3:5–8; 14:17; 16:13)
- ὑψόω *hypsōō* — to lift up, exalt (3:14; 8:28; 12:32)
- οὕτως *houtōs* — in this way, thus (3:16)
- ἄρτος *artos* — bread (6:35, 48, 51)
- ἐγώ εἰμι *egō eimi* — I am (6:35; 8:12, 58; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1)
- τρώγω *trōgō* — to gnaw, chew, munch (6:54, 56–58)
- μένω *menō* — to abide, remain, reside (6:56; 15:1–10)
- θύρα *thyra* — door, gate (10:7, 9)
- ποιμήν *poimēn* — shepherd (10:11, 14)
- τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν *tithēmi tēn psychēn* — to lay down one’s life (10:11, 15, 17–18)
- κρίσις *krisis* — judgment, separation (9:39; 12:31)
- ἄμπελος / κλήμα *ampelos / klēma* — vine / branch (15:1, 5)
- καρπός *karpos* — fruit (15:2, 5, 8, 16)

- ἀγάπη / φίλος *agapē / philos* — love / friend (15:9–15)
 - παράκλητος *paraklētos* — Advocate, Helper, Comforter (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7)
 - ὥρα *hōra* — hour, appointed time (2:4; 12:23; 17:1)
 - κόκκος *kokkos* — kernel, grain (12:24)
 - τετέλεσται *tetelestai* — it is finished, accomplished (19:30)
 - κύριος / θεός *kyrios / theos* — “my Lord and my God” (20:28)
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