



IMMANUEL  
BAPTIST CHURCH

# I AM



## SERMON BASED CURRICULUM

March 1, 2020  
The Bread of Life

March 8, 2020  
The Light of the World

March 15, 2020  
The Good Shepherd

March 22, 2020  
The Resurrection  
and The Life

March 29, 2020  
The Way, The Truth,  
and The Life

The “I Am” statements of Jesus have always been powerful for me. In these short, powerful statements, Jesus leaves no doubt about who He is.



C.S. Lewis in his powerful book, Mere Christianity, put it like this:

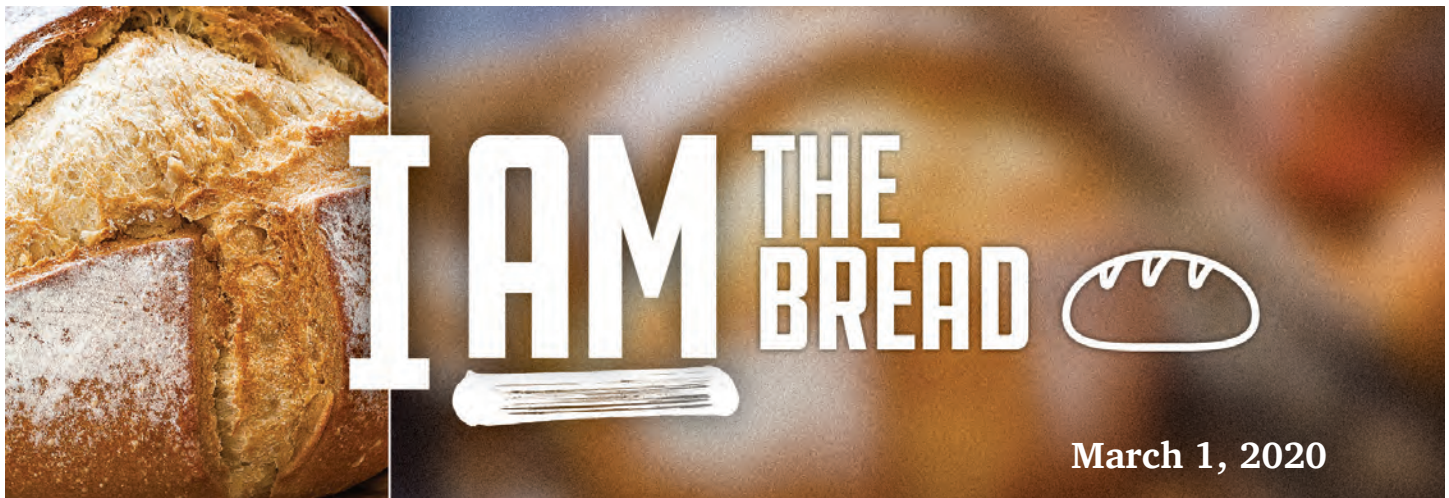
“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Jesus is either Lord, liar, or lunatic. Those are the only options.

Who is Jesus to you?  
Does your life reflect that?

*Bill*

Bill Ellis  
Assimilation & Discipleship Pastor



## INTRODUCTION

Q: Describe bread—its function, usefulness, nature, taste, necessity, etc.

Q: How is Jesus like bread? How is He not?

Each week in this series, we will look how “I AM determines who I am.” In other words, what does who Jesus says He is through these “I Am” statement mean for who we are? For example, if Jesus is the Bread of Life, that must mean that we are spiritually hungry and Jesus is the only thing that will satisfy our hunger.

Modern scientists have discovered that eating only bread every day wouldn't be good for you, but in pretty much every culture since the beginning of time, bread has been the main staple food. So much so that the word “bread” in Hebrew and Greek can also mean food. That's why Jesus used it as a metaphor. We need Jesus spiritually like we need our daily food physically. We are all born with a spiritual hunger. We may not realize or admit it, but we are. Some of us try to feed that hunger with things that won't satisfy us when what we really need is Jesus.

If you go to a nutritionist, they will tell you that if you fill your body with junk food or snacks that have no nutritional value, like Goldfish crackers or Twinkies, you won't be hungry when mealtimes come around, and you won't fill your body with the things you really need, like vegetables, whole grains, and protein. What a great metaphor for the way we treat Jesus. So many of us fill our lives with things that won't really satisfy us—money, sex, power, ambition, etc.—when what we really need to fill ourselves on is Jesus. No wonder we can feel so empty, so drained, so tired, so unhealthy spiritually. To be spiritually healthy, we need to choose the *right* fuel for our souls.

But just as eating healthy takes self-discipline, so does “eating” healthy spiritually. We have to pay attention and be diligent, or the junk food will creep right into our lives. Weight Watchers usually works for people simply because they finally start paying attention to what they eat. In the same way, sometimes in order to get spiritually healthy, we just need to start paying attention to what we're filling our souls with!

Q: In what ways has your relationship with Jesus satisfied your spiritual hunger?

Q: How did accepting Christ fill that emptiness for you and change your life?

Q: Do you hunger for Jesus the way you hunger for food? Do you have a hunger for righteousness and holiness and His Word?

**TALKING POINT #1:**  
**The Bread of Life came down from heaven.**

Read Exodus 16 and John 6:25–31.

Q: Why did God send the people manna in the wilderness (note: He also sent them quail and water)?

Q: What did the way He sent it to them teach them about God?

Q: Why was it important for them to not collect more than enough for one day? What did that teach the people?

Q: How does all of this connect to our experience of Jesus, the Bread of Life?

When Jesus called Himself the “Bread of Life,” He was referring explicitly to Exodus 16, which tells the story of the manna falling from heaven to feed the Israelites while they wandered in the wilderness. Jesus compared Himself to this bread in that He came down from heaven, from God. But instead of just giving life to the body for a day—sustenance—He gives *eternal* life.

In Exodus 16, the people had been wandering in the wilderness for a month and a half, and they were starting to get hungry. They grumbled to Moses and Aaron about taking them out of Egypt, where they said they “sat by the pots of meat and ate bread to the full.” They remembered things a little differently than they actually were, didn’t they? They were slaves in Egypt! They were forced to do hard labor and beaten when they didn’t perform well enough. They certainly weren’t “eating bread to the full.” But hunger does strange things to you. When they thought they would starve, it’s not hard to see how it would seem to make more sense to go back to Egypt and be a slave rather than stay in the wilderness and starve.

We do the same thing when following Jesus gets hard. We look back on our pre-Jesus life and paint it with rose-colored glasses. Maybe being a slave to sin wasn’t that bad. At least I had fun, at least I did what I wanted. It wasn’t perfect, but it wasn’t *this* hard. As Sara Groves’s song about this passage, “Painting Pictures of Egypt,” goes, “The place I was wasn’t perfect, but I had found a way to live. And it wasn’t milk or honey. But then neither is this.” What’s amazing about this story is that God didn’t say to them, “Fine, you ungrateful brats. Go back to Egypt then.” That’s probably what I would have said if I were God! No, He miraculously rained down bread from heaven. They were hungry and He gave them something to eat.

Why did He rain it down from heaven instead of leading them to a field of grain or flocks or a town where someone would offer them food? Because He wanted them to know it was God who provided for them (v. 6–7). That’s what the wilderness wanderings were all about—getting Israel to understand that God was their provider and learn to trust Him. So they would continue to trust Him even when things got better for them economically, when they got to the promised land. Everything God did in Exodus and in Numbers and Deuteronomy (since they ended up having to stay in the wilderness even longer) was so they would see how amazing He is and/or how much He loved them. He was revealing Himself to them. It’s all about relationship.

What’s even more significant is that when God rained down this manna from heaven, He really did give them “bread to the full.” They said they had eaten “bread to the full” in Egypt, which was not true. But when God rained down manna from heaven, they all had as much as they needed (v. 18). They weren’t given just a taste each day, just enough to survive. They were given *all that they needed*—enough to thrive. God isn’t stingy with His blessings. He pours out all we need to thrive.

Of course, God also used the manna from heaven to teach them how to trust in Him every day. They could collect and eat as much as they needed, but, each day, whatever they had left would rot. And God gave them more the next day, with the exception of the seventh day. On the sixth day, He gave them enough for two days so they wouldn't have to collect manna on the Sabbath. This was to prove to them that He would continue to provide what they needed *every day*. And they continued to receive this manna *for forty years*, until they came to the promised land. They didn't have to worry or stress. They knew it would be there for them. They knew He would give them what they needed.

Jesus didn't use this particular "I Am" statement at this time "just because." He had just performed the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, where again, the people ate supernatural food from God, and they ate as much as they wanted until they were full (John 6:11-12). And there were still twelve baskets left over, a nod to the twelve tribes of Israel who wandered in the wilderness.

What Jesus offers to us in calling Himself the Bread of Life is life to the fullest. Life that truly satisfies all our hunger because it comes from heaven, from God. Just as the manna came down from heaven and gave the people life while they were in the wilderness, so Jesus came down from heaven (John 1) to give us life (John 3). Not just survival, but life *to the fullest* (John 10). Life with Jesus isn't merely a slightly better version of the life the world offers. Or a holier version, a squeaky-clean version that doesn't drink or smoke. It's a *new* life. We are born again (John 3), made a new creation (2 Corinthians 5).

But this life isn't a perfect life. Just as God sent them manna while they were in the wilderness, Jesus gives us abundant life while we are walking through the wilderness that is life on this earth, before we get to the promised land that is heaven (Hebrews 4). Life with Jesus isn't a happy-go-lucky life where everything goes great all the time and you never have any struggles. Jesus doesn't take us out of the wilderness, out of the struggle, but He gives us everything we need spiritually to thrive in the wilderness. Life with Jesus isn't perfect. But it's real life, full life, abundant life. A soul-filled life, a satisfied life, a content life. A life of peace, joy, hope, and love when things are hard. *A spiritually full life.*

Q: Why does it matter that Jesus came down from heaven? What does this say about Him?

Q: When you think about eternal life, what do you imagine?

Q: What would a full and abundant life here on earth look like for you?

Q: In what ways are you not experiencing that full, abundant life? How can you get it?

**TALKING POINT #2:**  
**The Bread of Life gives life to the world.**

Read John 6:25-33 and John 3:16-21.

Q: What did Jesus say people were looking for from Him? What did He say they should be looking for from Him?

Q: Why is believing in Jesus "the work of God"? What does that mean?

Q: How does this connect to John 3:16-21?

It would be very simple to say that as bread/food brings people physical life, so Jesus brings people spiritual life. End of metaphor. Move on to the next “I Am” statement. But what does it really mean? Let’s dig a little deeper. Remember, the people had just seen the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 and they were amazed. After the miracle, Jesus went away from the crowds by Himself to a nearby mountain to pray because He knew they were so amazed by His miracles that they wanted to make Him king (v. 15).

The people missed the whole point of who Jesus was and why He came. They were expecting a Messiah who would fight Rome and restore the throne of David, making Israel its own kingdom again. But His kingdom is so much bigger than that. This is the attitude Jesus constantly dealt with from people. They came after Him, seeking what He could give them (materially) and He said, “I want to give you so much more than that.” Jesus escaped the crowds for a few days, but then, at the beginning of our passage, the people came to find Him again. And Jesus confronted them with a harsh reality—you aren’t looking for me because you want what I can give you spiritually (“because of the signs I performed”) but because “you ate the loaves and had your fill.” Jesus overtly used the feeding of the 5,000 to make a theological point. He told them, for you, it wasn’t a miracle, it was a parlor trick. You aren’t interested in getting closer to God. You just want to see what I can do for you.

He said He had so much more to offer. You just want bread, and I want to give you eternal life! In our prayers, what do we ask for? A boyfriend? A new job? A better apartment? Popularity? Status? A good hair day? God wants to give us the greatest gift of all time, and we’re the one-year-old who’s only interested in the wrapping paper. These people were seeking Christ, but for the wrong reasons. They weren’t really looking for *Him*, but for *what He could give them, what He could do for them*. Many people still seek Christ for the same wrong reason. Our faith isn’t about what Jesus can do for us, it’s about a relationship with *Him*. That’s why He didn’t say, “I can give you the Bread of Life,” He said, “*I Am* the Bread of Life.” It’s about Him and having a relationship with Him, not about what He can do for us.

The thought process of these passages is primarily controlled by the words “work” and “bread.” The discourse starts from the straightforward fact that these peasants must work to get their bread.<sup>1</sup> This is why cultural context is so important in understanding the Bible. It’s important to know that the people Jesus was speaking to were peasants who had to work hard even for “daily bread.” Jesus instead told them to “work” for bread that lasts forever. Jesus was speaking of a spiritual work that results in spiritual bread. The hearers, since they were Jewish, interpreted this “work” as the works of the Law (the works which God demands), which they believed would be rewarded with eternal life. He answered, “This is the work of God—that you believe in the one he has sent.” It’s not about works. It’s about believing in Jesus. The only “work” we need is to believe in Jesus. Faith, not works.

This is especially significant when you consider He was talking to peasants who really did have to work very hard just for the necessities. Just for their daily bread. Imagine telling these people they didn’t have to work for eternal life. It was simply a gift, sent down from heaven. Just like the manna in the wilderness, for which the Israelites did not have to work, we don’t have to work for our salvation! What an overwhelmingly generous God!

And Jesus didn’t just say this bread from heaven would give life to the children of Israel. He said it would bring life *to the world*. The manna in the wilderness only gave life to Israel. A restored throne of David would only bring life to Israel. But this Bread of Life brings life to the whole world. Of course, God’s vision all along was for Israel to be a blessing to the whole world (Genesis 12:1–3), to bear His image to the whole world (Deuteronomy 4:1–8). But the Jews missed it; they thought it was just about Israel. But Jesus makes it plain—the life He brings is eternal and it is for the whole world!

That oh-so-familiar passage of John 3:16–21 makes that clear too. For God so loved the world. God sent Jesus to save the world, not condemn it. In both passages, Jesus is unambiguous. All it takes to be saved is faith in Him, trust in Him, a relationship with Him. And this offer of eternal life is made to the whole world—to everyone who believes. What a generous God!

Q: What does it say about God that His salvation is for the whole world?

Q: What does it say about God that all you have to do is believe, not earn/work your way into heaven?

Q: How can you share this message of the generosity of God to the whole world with joy?

Q: In what ways do you want to grow in your relationship with Jesus? How can you?

**TALKING POINT #3:**  
**Whoever eats the Bread of Life will never go hungry.**

Read John 6:34–51.

Q: How did the people misunderstand Jesus again in this passage?

Q: Why did the people struggle to believe Jesus was really sent from heaven?

Q: Why do people today struggle to believe?

Q: What does it really mean that people who have Jesus will never be spiritually hungry again?

Again, the people misunderstood what Jesus said. They're like, "Awesome! Always give us this bread, please!" (v. 34). Again, they asked for the wrong thing. Again, they were only thinking physical, temporal. And He wanted to give them so much more! They asked Him to always give them this bread. How wonderful! What a blessing! They would no longer have to toil and labor for just the basics. God would provide bread for them every day, just like He did for their ancestors in the wilderness. Sounds great, Jesus! Sign me up! How many of us expect the same thing when we hear He came to give us an abundant life? That He will give us everything we need physically? That He will bless us with health and wealth and prosperity? Is that what He meant when He said you will never be hungry again?

Jesus told them again that they were missing the whole point. This is where the "I AM" comes in. It's all about Jesus. The person of Jesus. Our relationship with Him. Jesus is the only thing that can really satisfy, that can really fill us up. Like the coffee mug that says, "All I need today is a little bit of coffee and a whole lotta Jesus." This is the right order of things. Sure, we need food to survive. Sure, we need a home and clothes, and the Lord knows we need our coffee. But we just need that "a little." Just physically. What we really need a *lot of*, what will *really* satisfy us, is Jesus.

Every morning, when we're eating our physical food, we can also think about coming to Jesus's table for our daily spiritual sustenance. That's why we pray before we eat. It's why when people fast, they spend time praying and studying during the time they would have been eating. We can even think about it every time we drink our coffee—Jesus, not coffee, is the real "jolt" of life our soul needs. Every time we drink water, we can remember that Jesus is the Living Water. This is why Jesus used these every day, multiple-times-a-day, necessary things as metaphors for who He is and the role He should play in our lives. We need Jesus like we need the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe.

The people witnessed the miracle, but they did not believe because they saw nothing beyond physical bread and the supernatural power to do miracles. But there are those whom the Father "gives" to Jesus who do believe, who do have faith. Faith in the deeper provision of eternal life. Not everyone who sees God's miracles or hears His word will believe. Some try to explain His miracles away. They try to earn eternal life based on their works. Or try to manipulate Him into doing things for them. Some grumble and complain about what He does do for them, even

when it's as miraculous as bread raining down from heaven. What God wants is faith. Trust. Following. Relationship. All many of these people wanted was a full stomach. A full bank account. A full house, marriage. Fullness in the things of this world. Jesus says He wants to give you so much abundantly more than that. He wants to give you life and life to the fullest (John 10:10). He wants to give you spiritual life that will last forever. He wants to give you bread/food that will never spoil, water that will never run dry. This is the same metaphor God used through the prophet Isaiah:

*Come, everyone who is thirsty,  
Come to the water; and you without silver,  
come, buy, and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without silver and without cost!  
Why do you spend silver on what is not food,  
and your wages on what does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and you will enjoy the choicest of foods.  
Pay attention and come to me;  
listen, so that you will live.  
I will make a permanent covenant with you  
on the basis of the faithfulness of David.  
(Isaiah 55:1-3)*

“Why do you spend your wages on what does not satisfy?” Jesus made the same point here—“Don’t work for the food that perishes but for the food that lasts for eternal life” (v. 27). This is the question for us today. Why do we work and toil and strive for things that don’t last and don’t matter? When what we really need is right there before us, being offered to us *for free*?

Jesus said he who comes and believes will *never* hunger and *never, never* thirst. The negatives are very strong. This is an emphatic statement. This is forever, eternal. He was speaking of so much more than physical hunger and physical bread and physical sustenance. But when Jesus said those who believe in Him will never be hungry again, He didn’t mean we would never suffer or struggle. And that doesn’t just mean physically. It could mean spiritually or emotionally too. Just because you accept Jesus doesn’t mean you’ll never doubt or struggle with sin or that you will always be happy every minute of every day. It means you will have God with you and in you. That you will abide in Christ. And that is what will satisfy your soul (Matthew 11:28-30).

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11:28-30 NIV).

Or The Message version, which is even more poignant:

*“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”*

What Jesus promises us when He said we would never be hungry again is rest for our souls. That we can rest in Him. That when we abide with Him, when we walk by His unforced rhythms of grace, we will live freely and lightly. No matter what comes our way, we will be at peace. We will live free. That is what it means to be satisfied, to never hunger again. We won’t crave anything else anymore. We won’t hunger after that new car, new house, new sweater, new relationship, new experience. We can enjoy those things as gifts from God, but we won’t need them to be



happy. We won't crave them or lust after them. We will be satisfied in Jesus (Philippians 4:12). This is the two-fold promise of Jesus, of the already/not-yet of the kingdom of God:

- eternal life in the not-yet, future kingdom of God
- contentment/satisfaction in the already kingdom of God on earth

Contentment is elusive for most of us. And social media only makes things worse. A 2013 study showed that one-third of people feel worse about their life after using social media because they're comparing everyone else's filtered images to their own very real life.<sup>2</sup> They're comparing other people's highlight reels to their behind-the-scenes footage. Teddy Roosevelt said, "Comparison is the thief of joy."

But when you abide in Jesus, you find true contentment, true satisfaction, true joy. In Philippians, Paul writes, "I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need" (Philippians 4:12). This man was in prison when he wrote this letter. He didn't know if he would make it out or get the death penalty. And he could say he was content. So, what was the secret? He tells us in the very next verse—Jesus. "I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Often we hear this verse out of context and think it means something along the lines of "I can win this football game with Jesus's help—or get this job or fight cancer or whatever it is—because of the strength and power of Jesus. But this verse is really talking about contentment. Jesus gives us the strength and power to be content no matter what the circumstances. Even if we lose that football game or that job. Or even if we find out the cancer is terminal. We are satisfied/content in Him.

Q: Do you feel satisfied in Jesus? Why or why not?

Q: Do you feel content with your life? (Note: Contentment doesn't mean you don't have goals or dreams or things you want to change about your life. It means you aren't longing for the things that God doesn't have for you. You are satisfied in Him and His will for your life.) Why or why not?

Q: What things do you work and strive for? Which of those things are good things God wants you to focus on and which are not? How can you work with an eternal perspective?

Q: What things do you tend to crave or hunger for? What things are you prone to hold as more valuable than Jesus in your life?

## APPLICATION

### PRAY:

- For contentment with our lives and what God has for us.
- For satisfaction in Jesus instead of craving or hungering for other things.
- Thank God for eternal life and for an abundant, full life on earth.
- For the Holy Spirit to continue to work in us so we grow in the knowledge of Him.
- For passion for our relationship with Jesus, the Bread of Life.
- For that passion to spill out of our lives so other people will see it and want it too.
- For the words to tell others of this gift of eternal and abundant life.

### ACT:

Appreciate the Bread of Life. Every time you eat anything this week, whether it's bread or candy or anything in between, even when you grab a cup of coffee or water on a break, take time to thank Jesus for the gift of eternal life and for being with you in this life. Thinking about Jesus and/or talking to Jesus every time we eat any food will help remind us throughout the whole day to abide in Him, to find our joy and contentment in Him.

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<sup>1</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John* (Word Publishing, 1999), 91.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Holt, "Facebook causes envy 'on an unprecedented scale'" *The Telegraph*, Jan 23, 2013 -<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/9820910/Facebook-causes-envy-on-an-unprecedented-scale.html> (Also Chicago Tribune, Today Show, et. al.)



## INTRODUCTION

Q: Describe light - its function, usefulness, nature, how it affects the things on which it shines, etc.

Q: How is Jesus like light? How is He not?

You may remember that we mentioned S.A.D. and the characteristics of light in the first week of Advent, when we talked about Jesus as the “light that shines in the darkness.” Here is a quick summary of that information to introduce our lesson on our great need for Jesus, the Light of the World:

Did you know that a lack of light is a physical problem for people in the same way it is for plants? Our bodies produce vitamin D in response to sunlight. Vitamin D deficiency can lead to rickets and has also been associated with severe asthma in children, cognitive impairment in older adults, an increased risk of death from heart disease, and cancer. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a depressive condition triggered by low exposure to sunlight. Studies show that light affects the chemical in the brain that controls mood, energy, alertness, and productivity. During long periods of light deprivation, the neurons that produce pleasure start to die, which can lead to depression and even suicide. Sunlight is essential to our health and wellbeing. We need light just like we need food and water.

This “I AM” statement of Jesus shows us again just how much we need Him. The image of the light has some unique qualities that teach us about Jesus beyond just that we need Him to survive:

- Light brings life. Light causes plants to grow, and the life chain of animals and man depends on this process. Life itself is built on light (John 1:4).
- Light enables us to see. Imagine walking through a dark room. What kind of unseen dangers could be there? When the lights come on, dark places are exposed for what they really are (Ephesians 5:13).
- Light guides. Like flashlights, headlights, or reflectors on the road, light shows us the way to go (John 8:12).
- Light brings wisdom. When we are “enlightened,” we receive wisdom and understanding we didn’t have before (Colossians 2:3).
- Light is pure and radiant. In the light, there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). When light shines, it is beautiful and glorious (2 Corinthians 4:6).
- Light is powerful. One small candle brings light to a dark room. Even the smallest bit of light overtakes the darkness (John 1:5; 1 John 4:4).

When Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” He was saying He does all these things. He brings life, both eternal life and energy, joy, and abundance to our life here on earth. He enables us to see the world the way it really is and see the dangers we may not have been able to see before. He brings wisdom and guidance in the way we should go. He is pure and radiant and powerful. He shines in the darkness.

Q: How was coming to faith in Jesus like turning on a light in your mind and your heart?

Q: How does Jesus bring light into a world of darkness?

**TALKING POINT #1:**  
**Jesus is the Light of the World.**

Read John 1:1–4 and John 8:12–24.

Q: What does it mean to “walk in darkness”?

Q: How does knowing the Light of the World change our lives?

Q: How did the Light bring life in the beginning? How does He bring life now?

The Light of the World is one of the “I Am” statements of Jesus found in the book of John. In these eight sayings, Jesus speaks of Himself in various figurative ways, each image describing, as George Beasley-Murray says in his commentary:

differing aspects of His saving work, more explicitly the life of the divine sovereignty (the Kingdom of God), which Jesus brings into the world . . . they recall the unique name of God made known to Moses in the vision at the burning bush—“I Am” (Ex 3:14) and certain affirmations of God in the central chapters of the book of Isaiah . . . their appropriation by and for Jesus suggests not so much a direct self-identification of Jesus with God as a union with God, by virtue of which God speaks and acts through Jesus as His representative and mediator of salvation and judgment . . . time and again it is made clear by the evangelist that the relation of Jesus to God becomes the great issue before which people divide . . . Whereas there were those who were drawn to faith in Jesus then (v. 30), the implicit claims in the expression evoked the most violent hostility possible (v. 59).”

Several of the “I Am” statements specifically show us how Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish messianic hopes associated with aspects of the Jewish festival celebrations. Jesus said He is the living water at the exact time in the Feast of the Tabernacles when the priest traditionally poured out the water libation (John 7:37–39). Jesus said, “I am the light of the world” in the midst of the same Feast of the Tabernacles, when they performed the ceremonial evening lighting of four massive golden lampstands (John 8:12). In fact, Christ’s strong association with the Feast of Tabernacles, along with the significance of the word “tabernacled” in John 1:14, has led some scholars to believe that He was born during the Feast of the Tabernacles.

The context of this feast is vital for understanding its meaning. The Feast of Tabernacles was one of the three main festivals of the Israelite religious calendar, the three times a year the Israelites were commanded to make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. In Hebrew it is called *Sukkoth*, which means Feast of Booths, because it commemorates the time the Israelites lived in tents or “booths” in the wilderness while the Lord led them and supernaturally provided their food and water. In this way, it is related to the “I Am” statement we looked at last week, “the Bread of Life.” It is the same time period as when God rained down manna from heaven. Each of the three pilgrimage feasts has a dual significance, celebrating something *theological* and *agricultural* at the same time. Sukkoth is also called the Ingathering because it marks the end of the harvest and the agricultural year. It is celebrated on the 15th day of the 7th month of the Jewish calendar, which is late September/early October.

During the festival, Israelites were to build “booths,” walled structures covered with plants like palm leaves, as a temporary dwelling for the seven days of the festival (Leviticus 23:42–43). Jews today still do this, though they usually only take their meals in the booths instead of actually living in them. Each day of the holiday, the Israelites were to perform a ceremony of waving different tree branches—palms, willows, and leafy trees (Leviticus 23:40) as they sang psalms and shouted, “Hosanna” (save us now). For Christians, this should be a reminder of Palm Sunday.

Except on an intervening Sabbath, toward the end of each day of the festival, the people went down to the court of women where four seventy-five-foot golden lamps stood. There were four golden bowls on each lamp. Four young men from the priests climbed ladders to carry 120 jugs of oil to fill up the bowls. They made wicks from old clothing of the priests. The lamps were so large and bright that they lit up every court of the temple. Men of piety known for their good works danced before the crowd with torches in their hands, singing praises while the Levites played

instruments on the fifteen steps (representative of the fifteen psalms of ascent) leading down from the court of the Israelites to the court of women. The dancing and singing lasted until dawn and the pious did not sleep any night of the feast.

The night ended with two appointed priests slowly descending the steps to the court of women. At the Nicanor door they turned slowly toward the shrine and said, “Our fathers who were in this place turned their backs to the temple of God and their faces eastward and threw themselves down eastward before the sun, but we direct our eyes to Yahweh.” They repeatedly called out, “We are Yahweh’s, and our eyes are directed to Yahweh!” to ensure the people realized they weren’t worshipping the light or the sun but Yahweh who created light and sun. The celebration was a remembrance of the exodus, when God led them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night as He guided them through the wilderness—God’s light that led them, guided them, and showed them the way (Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 6:23). It was in this context that Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” So as in all the other “I Am” statements, Jesus was really saying that He *is* God, the one who guides His people and shows them the way.

In the book of John, the image of Jesus as the Light of the World begins in the very first chapter (John 1:1–13) and continues throughout the book (John 8:12–20; 9:1–12; 12:35–36). In John, the Light of Jesus enlightens, guides, and brings life—both physical life in creation and eternal life in the age to come. Jesus is the Light of the World and His followers will not walk in darkness. Just as none of the courts of the temple were in darkness during the Festival. Just as the people of Israel walked in God’s light in the wilderness. Jesus will guide them, and those who follow Him will walk in the light. So, walking in the light means being led by Jesus, as if by a flashlight through a dark world.

In other places, light and darkness refer to good and evil. Those who follow Jesus will not walk in wickedness/darkness but will walk in goodness/light (Ephesians 5:8–14; 1 Thessalonians 5:4–8). John says elsewhere, “If we say, ‘we have fellowship with him’ and yet we walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:6–7). So, to follow Jesus as the light means to walk in goodness, truth, and righteousness.

In John 8, it means to walk in life (light) rather than death (darkness). We can tell this from what Jesus chose to contrast darkness with and how He expounded upon His statement. The opposite of darkness here is “the light of life” (John 8:12). Therefore, darkness is *death*. Later in the passage, Jesus said, “If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). In this passage, Jesus was talking about eternal life. Just as Yahweh rescued them from death in the exodus, so Jesus rescues us from death and brings life. When Jesus says, “He who follows me will never walk in darkness,” He doesn’t mean those who follow Him will never do anything wrong or sinful, but that they will not walk in *death*. They will have eternal life (John 11:25–26).

We can see how light brings life when we look at a plant. The Greek word for “light” is *phos*, from which we get photography, photosynthesis, etc. It can mean light, the source of light or radiance. This is why John can emphasize how light brings life in the metaphor. All living things need light to grow, with very rare exceptions. Plants produce food by putting chemicals together with light. It is light that causes plants to produce and the whole life chain of animals and man depends on this process. Life itself is built on sunlight. Without it, our world would be cold and dark and dead. The same is true spiritually. We need the Light of the World for life—eternal life in heaven and an abundant, full life that bears much fruit here on earth.

Q: Why is it crucial to our understanding of eternal life to know that in His “I Am” statements, Jesus is claiming to be God? Why does it matter that Jesus is God?

Q: What does it mean to you that you do not have to walk in darkness/death?

Q: How does knowing we have eternal life, having that hope in our eternal future, affect how we walk/live on this earth?

#### TALKING POINT #2:

The darkness does not accept the Light of the World.

Read John 1:1–5, 9–13 and John 3:19–21.

Q: Why didn’t the world recognize the true Light? Why didn’t they receive Him?

Q: What does it mean to walk in darkness vs. the light?

Q: Why would people love darkness rather than light? How could you see perfect goodness and love and not be drawn to Him?

The first time John talked about Jesus as the Light, in his introduction, he stressed that Jesus, the Light of the World, came for all mankind (John 1:4). Not just for the Jews, but for everyone. So, instead of starting with the birth of Christ, John went back to the very beginning—to Genesis, to the creation of the world—to declare that Christ was not just the Messiah of the Jews, but that He came *for the whole world*. John specifically used the metaphor of Jesus as light several times:

- in John 1, when he described the incarnation
- in John 3, when Jesus explained salvation to Nicodemus
- in John 8–9 when Jesus called Himself the Light of the World at the Feast of Tabernacles
- in John 12, when Jesus told them to walk in the light

When Jesus first called Himself the Light of the World in John 8, He was at the Feast of Tabernacles, when they lit the candelabra to represent God’s presence among them. While this feast represented the time in the wilderness when God lived among His people, it also looked forward to Christ because Jesus is Immanuel (God with us). The word in John 1:1–5 for Jesus “dwelling” among us is literally translated “*tabernacled* among us.” All of it is interconnected!

In his theological opening about the incarnation of Jesus, John writes that Jesus was the light of men that shines in the darkness. “And the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). The word “overcome” is a compound of two Greek words, *kata* (down) and *lambano* (take hold of). When *kata* is used with *lambano*, it intensifies *lambano*, which gives it a sense of force—*aggressively* taking. This conveys a sense of a battle between light and darkness. Whether we realize it or not, we live every day in a spiritual battle between light and darkness, good and evil (Ephesians 6:11–12). Paul wrote that Jesus came to deliver us from “the domain of darkness” and to bring us into His kingdom of light (Colossians 1:13). Peter agrees, and even calls this light wonderful or marvelous, depending on your translation—“Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

But in Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus about being born again, He says some people *love* darkness and reject the light. Those of us who know Jesus may be floored by this. Why on earth, if you met the source of all goodness, light, and love, would you *choose* the darkness instead? Jesus said it is “because their deeds are evil,” and they do not come to the light “so that his deeds may not be exposed” (John 3:19–21). Some people may think they are happy in the darkness, in their sin. They enjoy their lifestyle and don’t want to change. They think coming to the “light”—to the good side—simply won’t be as fun. You probably know plenty of people who feel that way. They simply don’t want to do what is good, because the darkness seems so much more fun.

But for others, it’s more complicated. That’s where the fear of “exposure” comes in—vulnerability, fear of looking in the mirror and seeing yourself how you truly are. They know their deeds are evil, maybe they even wish they could stop, but they feel *trapped* in darkness. They fear they will be exposed. Think about anyone you know who has ever had an addiction. No one, for instance, *starts* drinking with the goal of becoming an alcoholic. They start because it’s fun, at first. But when they get to the point where they feel like they can’t stop, they try to cover things up. They pretend everything is okay. They don’t want to be exposed. But, at some point, they hit a rock bottom where the only two choices are to expose it—put it all out in the open and deal with it head on—or die. Imagine someone who *chose* death at that point. Someone who wouldn’t give up drinking, even if they knew it was going to kill them. It sounds crazy, but people do it. That is what rejecting Jesus is like.

It’s kind of like knowing you have a brain tumor but choosing not to do chemo or surgery because you’re afraid it might hurt. But cutting things open—exposing the tumor—is the only way to long-term healing. Of course, it’s going to hurt to cut your body open, but it’s the only way to get the tumor out. The only way to heal the sin in your life, the only way to be set free, is to *expose* the dark places to the light. When you have been sleeping or watching a movie or just sitting in a dark room for a long time and suddenly, someone turns on the light or the sun comes streaming through your windows or you walk out of that dark theater, it hurts your eyes at first. But as you blink and adjust, it is so much better to be out in the light, where you can see.

Yet much of the world rejects Jesus. Jesus said the gate that leads to life is narrow and there are few who find it (Matthew 7:13–14). The first chapter of John says that when Jesus came, even His own people rejected Him. Obviously, not all of them—He had some followers—but most of them. They didn’t just reject Him, they killed Him. They disliked His message so much that they crucified Him! It’s hard to hear the truth sometimes. We don’t want to hear it. It forces us to turn the mirror on ourselves and to expose the dark places. It’s much easier to just shut up the person who is trying to speak truth and shine the light into our lives.

But in both passages, Jesus said that those who come to the light are saved. They are healed from their sin, given new life, made children of God (John 1:12). They are born again, not of flesh, but of the Spirit (John 1:13; 3:6–8). When we choose the light over darkness, the light exposes the darkness, leads us to the truth, and brings us into fellowship with the Light. And when we walk in the light and practice the truth, when our deeds are exposed, instead of being evil, they will be “shown to be accomplished by God” (John 3:21). Instead of fearing exposure, we rejoice that our lives—the good, the bad, and the ugly—point to the glory of God and to the gospel. Think about all our testimonies and how the darkness of our past points to the light of Christ and Him working in our lives to save us. It doesn’t matter how dark your past is, when it is exposed to the light, all it does is bring glory to God! He turns your mess into a message and your tests into a testimony.

Q: Why is it sometimes hard for people to turn away from the darkness?

Q: How has your life changed since you met Jesus? How has He healed you by exposing the darkness in your life?

Q: Do you have friends who seem content to stay in the darkness? What can you do for them? How can you show them love?

Q: Do you have friends who feel trapped in the darkness? What can you do for them? How can you show them love?

### TALKING POINT #3: You are the light of the world.

Read Matthew 5:14–16; Ephesians 5:8–18; and Philippians 2:15–16.

Q: What is the purpose of our shining our lights to the world?

Q: When do we appear as lights to the world?

Q: Why is it important that the light exposes the darkness?

In Matthew, when Jesus called Himself the light of the world, He also added, “*You* are the light of the world,” with a command to His disciples to let their lights shine. Not so people would think they were amazing, but so their good works would bring glory to God. This is the purpose of being light in the world—to point people to Jesus, *the* Light of the World. From the very beginning, Adam and Eve were to bear God’s image to the world (Genesis 1–2). Then Abraham was to bear His image to the world and be a blessing to all the nations (Genesis 12:1–3). Then the nation of Israel was to show the world how wonderful God was by living as His kingdom, obeying His rules, being a “light to the nations” (Deuteronomy 4; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6). Now the church is to be the light of the world, to bear God’s image to the world and reflect His character and His nature by our good deeds.

Jesus is *the* Light of the World, but by belonging to Him and having the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, we reflect His light to the world. There is nothing great about us, but we can reflect God’s goodness to the world. Just like the moon’s light is not its own but a reflection of the light of the sun, we can reflect the light of Christ to the world. Because we bear the name “Christian,” our deeds will either bring honor or shame to the name of Jesus. When we do good deeds, it brings glory and honor to God’s name. Just as our doing good things would bring honor to our earthly parents, our good deeds bring honor to our heavenly Father. When we do good things, people may say to

our parents, “You really raised him right” or, “You really raised a great young woman there.” In the same way, our good deeds bring honor to our heavenly Father.

In Philippians, Paul writes that when we live in a blameless way among the wicked, we are lights of the world. His specific example is about doing things without grumbling or complaining, but there are many others. When Christians choose lives of purity instead of promiscuity. When Christians treat everyone with kindness and respect instead of being cruel or rude or gossiping. When Christians show selfless love and generosity rather than selfishness. When our lives look different than the world around us in a positive, godly way, we are shining the light of Christ. Actress Patricia Heaton said that as Christians we can shine our light just by doing our jobs well and behaving with integrity, because unfortunately, that’s a rare thing in our culture. When someone asked her about being a light in Hollywood, she said, “If you’re on a set everyday with twelve people, they get to know you and see how you treat number one on the call sheet and number forty-nine on the call sheet and how you act. Whether you act entitled or whether you are kind and generous and compassionate, and also, do you show up on time? Do you know your lines? Are you professional? All of that stuff speaks volumes.” Jesus said the world will know we are Christians by our love for one another (John 13:35). When we show radical, selfless, generous love to others, the world will take notice. Our lights will shine.

In his commentary on Matthew, Craig Keener focuses on the part of the passage about hiding the lamp under a basket, saying that the *purpose* of a lamp is to bring light to the house. Therefore, the purpose of a disciple is to be seen by the world, to bring light to the world. Keener writes:

A disciple whose life reveals none of the Father’s works is like invisible light for vision: useless. In this passage, Jesus reinforces his point with various images. A disciple should be as obvious as a city set on a hill (as most cities were), and a light in a home should be no easier to hide than a torchlit city at night . . . Matthew probably simply blends various images emphasizing the same point: a nominal disciple who does not function like one is worthless to the kingdom . . . But disciples cannot be content to remain the world’s light in a merely theoretical sense; they must “be what they are,” letting their light shine for their Father’s honor. While Jesus is opposed to doing good works publicly for one’s own honor, He exhorts his disciples to do these works publicly for God’s honor. This distinction—underlined by contrasting wording in the same Matthean sermon—is undoubtedly intentional. Jesus’ works in this Gospel “glorify” God.

Our faith should shine so brightly that it invites the world to taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8)! People should look at our lives, our families, and our communities and see love, joy, peace, and hope like they never imagined. Unfortunately, too many Christians portray the wrong kind of image of Jesus. Research shows that most Americans view Christians as “hypocritical, insensitive, judgmental, too political, and hateful of homosexuals.” Let’s let that last one sink in. Jesus said we would be known by our love. And one of the primary ways our culture describes us is *hateful*. Are we really shining the light of Jesus?

Some of us are, for sure! But there are a whole lot of people who claim to be Christians, claim to represent Christ, who are not shining His light. Some of them make a lot of noise for hate and division, not love and unity. The brightness of the light of Christ depends on *many of us* shining our individual little lights together, as one unified body of Christ. There is so much fighting and division in the body right now. Imagine the impact we could make if we all shone together as one. We would light up the world so brightly there would be no darkness in any place, even the shadows and corners and alleyways. However, you can no longer call a room “dark,” even if only one candle burns. Even if the rest of the Christians out there aren’t shining their lights, your one candle still makes a difference. Saint Francis of Assisi said, “All of the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle.”

Henry Ward Beecher, a Congregationalist clergyman during the Civil War and outspoken activist against slavery, said, “You have no right to be a secret Christian. You are *bound* to let your light shine.” The Christian life isn’t really a quiet one, lived to yourself and for yourself. Your relationship with God is a private thing, of course, but the results—the fruit of the Spirit—can’t be private. We are commanded to live our faith out loud, to shine our lights. Not just



to share the gospel with our words, but to shine the love of Christ in the way we live and the way we love others.

We know that people love darkness, so we will face opposition. Many will not accept us. Many will love the darkness and even try to blow out your light. So, raise it high. Let it shine. Salt and light are positive things, but this isn't an easy, happy-go-lucky kind of command. It is serious. It is a battle, a struggle—light against darkness, good against evil. The stuff Hollywood blockbusters are made of, times infinity. The stakes aren't just getting the girl or saving Metropolis but the salvation of the whole world.

Among ancient Greeks, the winner of a race was not simply the man who ran the fastest but the one who crossed the finish line first *with his torch still burning*. The sacred act of keeping the torch burning was more important than winning the race. It doesn't matter how fast or how slow you run this race of faith. It matters that you persevere to the end, that you keep your light burning.

Q: Do you feel like your light is bright and shining? Or are you hiding your light under a bushel?

Q: When people look at your life, would they immediately see the love of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit? In what ways?

Q: Why is it hard to let our lights shine today?

Q: How can we change the reputation of the church in our culture?

## APPLICATION

### PRAY

- Thank Jesus for being the Light—for enlightening us with the truth, for guiding us in the way, and for bringing life, both eternal life and abundant life on earth.
- For wisdom and guidance from the Light of the World.
- For the light of Christ to shine through you and draw others to Him.
- That the Spirit would grow His fruit in you so you would better reflect God's image to the world.

### ACT:

**Shine Your Light.** Think of some *public* act you could do to shine the light of Christ to your community. Not a *random* act of kindness but an intentional act of love. It may be as simple as bringing a meal to someone who is sick or listening to a friend who is struggling. It could be sharing the gospel or praying with someone. Maybe helping someone deal with conflict in a healthy way rather than gossiping about it. Or showing patience to your children when you really want to scream at them. Think through all the fruits of the Spirit that God is developing in your life and pray for an opportunity to use them to shine His love to the world.

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Conti, "How Light Deprivation Causes Depression: Neuronal Death May Be the Mechanism Underlying SAD" *Scientific American*, Aug 1, 2008 - <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/down-in-the-dark/>

<sup>2</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Themes: John* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Themes: John* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Helps Word-Studies: <http://biblesuite.com/greek/2638.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Billy Hallowell, "Actress Patricia Heaton Speaks on Media's Portrayal of 'Christians as Bad Guys'—and Shares a Surprising Fact about Hollywood," *The Blaze*, Feb 26, 2014 - <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2014/02/26/actress-patricia-heaton-speaks-on-medias-portrayal-of-christians-as-bad-guys-and-shares-a-surprising-fact-about-hollywood/#>

<sup>6</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 174–5.

<sup>7</sup> David Kinnaman, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> "Torch-Race" Ancient Olympics - <http://ancientolympics.arts.kuleuven.be/eng/TCoozeEN.html>





## INTRODUCTION

Q: When you think of a good shepherd, what qualities come to mind?

Q: How is Jesus like a good shepherd? How are we like sheep?

Sheep are followers by nature. They don't really think for themselves; they follow their shepherd wherever he leads them. In fact, sheep are such followers that a few years ago in the Middle East, an entire herd of 1500 followed a single sheep right off a cliff and 450 of them died—because the shepherds left the sheep alone and went off to have breakfast. No one stayed behind to take care of the sheep. They didn't have a good shepherd to follow, so when one sheep got distracted and went over a cliff, the rest followed right after him.

People hear stories like that and say sheep are the dumbest animals in the world. They'll blindly follow anywhere. That's why we call people sheep when they blindly follow a political candidate or a fashion trend. And it isn't a compliment. Yet, in the Bible, God tells us that we are like sheep. Because left to our own devices, without a good shepherd, we will follow the crowd right off a cliff. We need Jesus to lead us, guide us, and care for us. We need to listen carefully for His voice and follow His paths, not our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Q: How does it make you feel to hear that you (and all human beings!) are like sheep?

Q: Do you think it's true that people will follow the crowd, even to their own detriment, if they don't have a good shepherd to guide them? Give an example.

Q: In what ways is following Jesus different from following the crowd? In what ways can it be harder to follow Jesus?

### TALKING POINT #1:

**There are thieves and robbers and bad shepherds who will harm the sheep.**

Read John 10:1-18 and Ezekiel 34:1-10.

Q: Describe the negative characters in the John passage—the thief, the robber, and the hireling. How do they compare to the bad shepherds in Ezekiel?

Q: What happens to sheep (people) who do not have a good shepherd (leader)? Give some examples.

In this passage on the good shepherd, Jesus describes those who try to harm the sheep—thieves and robbers and wolves who try to kill, steal, and destroy the sheep. Also, the “hireling,” who is supposed to be caring for the sheep but isn't really committed to them because he doesn't own them. To him, shepherding is just a job. He's not invested in the sheep personally, so if a wolf or a robber comes, he'll abandon the sheep because they aren't really his. Jesus

contrasts Himself to all these negative images. Those who have come before Him are “thieves and robbers” (v. 8) and He is the Good Shepherd (v. 11), the *owner* of the sheep, not just a hired hand. For Jesus’s Jewish audience, this would have been a very clear statement of His divinity, saying He is God. He isn’t just a messenger sent from God. He is God Himself. This is why we later see the crowd trying to stone Him, which was the punishment for blasphemy (v. 31–33). All of the “I Am” statements point to Christ’s divinity (i.e. equality with God the Father) because by using “I Am,” which is God’s personal name (Exodus 3), and by using metaphors that were used of God in the Old Testament, Jesus equates Himself with God. But in this passage, Jesus explicitly said, “I and the Father are one.”

The concept of God as a good shepherd of His people had deep roots in the Old Testament. The audience in this passage were the Jews who had gathered around Jesus at the temple, including Pharisees, religious leaders, and laypeople. We can assume His disciples were there, though He was not explicitly speaking to them. These Jews knew the Old Testament well and would have immediately understood the metaphor of God as the good shepherd, contrasted with the “bad shepherds” of Israel, who had abused the people for their own gain rather than caring for them. The Old Testament teaches that:

1. God is a good shepherd who tenderly cares for His people.

- “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .” (Psalm 23:1).
- “We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep under his care” (Psalm 95:7. See also Psalm 79:13; Psalm 80:1; Psalm 119; Isaiah 53; Ezekiel 34).
- “He protects his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in the fold of his garment. He gently leads those that are nursing” (Isaiah 40:11, cf. 2 Samuel 12:3; Luke 15:3–6)

2. There are false, evil shepherds who try to steal and abuse His flock.

- “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” (Jeremiah 23:1)
- “Son of Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them, ‘Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Shouldn’t the shepherds feed the flock?’” (Ezekiel 34:2)
- “Woe to the worthless shepherd who deserts the flock!” (Zechariah 11:17).

3. The sheep *need* a shepherd.

- “. . . so that the Lord’s community won’t be like sheep without a shepherd” (Numbers 27:17).
- “Therefore people wander like sheep, they suffer affliction because there is no shepherd” (Zechariah 10:2).

4. The Son of David will be the one shepherd who reunites Israel.

- “I will establish over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will shepherd them. He will tend them himself and will be their shepherd” (Ezekiel 34:23, cf. Jeremiah 23:5).

His audience would have heard His statements about being the good shepherd as a bold statement that He was this Messiah who would be a good shepherd to the people like God was. They also would not have missed the fact that Jesus was implying that they—the Pharisees and religious leaders—were like the bad shepherds of Israel in the Old Testament. They didn’t really love the people and only used them for their own gain. There is a contrast in this whole section between Jesus and the religious leaders. This chapter is closely connected to the one before it. Jesus had just healed a man who was blind from birth and had called the Pharisees spiritually blind. Hendrickson writes:

The man born blind, a true sheep, had been excommunicated by the Jewish authorities; but Jesus, as the good shepherd, had sought and found him . . . Had the Pharisees—these religious leaders of the people—shown the least interest in the lame man (5:10, 12)? Had they manifested even a speck of pity for the woman taken in the very act of adultery (8:3, 6)? And see how they treated the man whom Jesus had cured of his congenital blindness (9:34). Instead of in any way defending Israel against the

spiritual dangers which surrounded it, they riveted all their attention upon themselves and their own ease. They were exactly like the hireling, who, when he sees the wolf coming, abandons the sheep.”

God had some harsh words for the bad shepherds of Israel in Ezekiel 34 and other passages. He prophesied “woe” against them and called them worthless. He said He would demand His sheep back and deliver His flock from their mouths. Jesus’s words to the Pharisees in Matthew 23 are strikingly similar to God’s words in Ezekiel 34, most notably pronouncing “woe” against them. He called them out for their hypocrisy, but also for the way they rejected true prophets, taught falsehood, led people astray, and put undue burdens on the people that they themselves were not willing to carry (Matthew 23:1–11). They were not leading their people. They were using them. They weren’t in it to serve. They were in it for power and prestige. These Pharisees thought they were following the law. They thought they were holy. But they were really just the next generation of bad shepherds. In contrast to those leaders who used and abused the sheep for their own gain, Jesus portrayed Himself as a servant leader. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matthew 20:28). Robert Greenleaf, who initially coined the term “servant leader” in 1970 wrote,

The servant leader is servant first . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions . . . The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? A servant leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. While traditional leadership generally involved the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the “top of the pyramid,” servant leadership is different. The servant-leader showers power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible.

Jesus contrasts Himself with the Pharisees. Hendrickson writes:

[The Pharisees] are strangers because they do not know the sheep. Thieves are there because they seek to gain possession of the sheep in an illegitimate manner. And now Jesus adds the figure of the hireling. Yes, the Pharisees are also hirelings. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not. They are hirelings because they have no concern, no love, for the sheep.

This passage is about Jesus being the good shepherd vs. the Pharisees, the evil shepherds, but we could also consider this metaphor as good advice for pastors today. The word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for shepherd. Although there is only one Good Shepherd, pastors are called to be good under-shepherds, to love the part of the flock under their care the way Jesus loves them. Not as bad shepherds who lord their authority over the people or use the people for their own gain, but as servant leaders who lay down their lives for the sheep.

There will always be leaders who abuse their people and try to use them for their own gain or abandon the people when they need them the most. But Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who lovingly cares for His flock, who gathers the lambs in His arms, who leads the flock by the still waters and restores their souls. His relationship with them is personal and intimate. He *knows* them and they know Him. The Greek for “know” means not just knowing about something intellectually, but *experiencing* it. It denotes an intimate relationship between sheep and shepherd. Following the Good Shepherd isn’t about following a set of laws, it’s about a relationship with Someone who loves us and wants to care for us and be our refuge and our strength. When the rest of the world wants to chew us up and spit us out, Jesus wants to know us and love us, because He is our Good Shepherd.

**Q: Describe the thieves, robbers, and wolves in our culture—people who are out to steal or destroy the sheep, both inside and outside the church. Without using names, describe what they are like and the kinds of things they say and do so we know how to look out for them.**

Q: How can we keep ourselves from following bad shepherds? From following the crowd?

Q: How does hearing the image of God/Jesus as a Good Shepherd, as in Psalm 23, make you feel?

Q: Do you feel this way about your relationship with Jesus—that it's intimate and personal, that you don't just know about Him, but experience Him? Why or why not?

Q: If not, what things in your life need to change to experience Jesus in this way?

### TALKING POINT #2:

#### The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.

Read Isaiah 53, John 10:14–18, and Romans 5:8.

Q: Why did Jesus lay down His life for His sheep? How did our “going astray” necessitate it?

Q: How does this kind of sacrifice show ultimate love?

Q: How is this different from the way the Pharisees and other leaders treated the sheep?

The good shepherd does not use the sheep for his own gain. In fact, he lays down his life for his sheep. In the passage from Matthew quoted above (that Jesus came not to be served but to serve), the very next words are “to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). When Paul describes Jesus’s humility he says its *ultimate* expression was His death on the cross (Philippians 2:8). Jesus didn’t come to serve just by washing feet and healing people and being humble and doing nice things for people. His ultimate act of service was sacrificing His entire life for us.

Jesus says that phrase, “lay down my life,” five times in just these eight verses. He lays down His life of His own accord. No one forces Him. He willingly lays down His life for His sheep because He *loves* them so much. Later, He would say to His disciples at the Last Supper, “No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

This is love, ultimate love—laying down your life for those you love (John 3:16). But Jesus’s love goes even further. He laid down His life for His *enemies* (Romans 5:8). This is the sacrificial love of the shepherd for the sheep. Even the “bad” sheep who wander off and go astray. Even the ones who don’t listen to His voice. Which, as Isaiah points out, is *all* of us. We *all* have gone astray like sheep; we all are sinners in need of a Savior (Romans 3:23). We all are the lost sheep Jesus would be willing to leave the other ninety-nine to pursue. The Good Shepherd loves sinners and He came for sinners, to seek and save the lost (Luke 5:32; 19:10). He pursues them and searches for them. He finds them and brings them home and cares for them (Luke 15).

While the Good Shepherd lays down His life for them, the hireling neither owns the sheep, cares for the sheep, nor defends them. When a wolf comes to attack the flock, the hireling runs off to save his own skin. But a good shepherd  *fights the wolf* for the sheep. The sheep (people) are unable to fight the wolf (Satan) for themselves. They would get ripped to shreds. But the good shepherd fights the wolf on behalf of the sheep. Jesus fought Satan on our behalf. He didn’t do it through a physical battle the way the people of Israel were expecting the Messiah to do. He did it through sacrifice, through laying down His life. That is why the good shepherd is such a great metaphor for Christ.

A good shepherd is willing to sacrifice himself to protect the flock, to lay down His life for them. This phrase, “lay down my life,” is connected to salvation and eternal life in this passage (v. 17–18). Jesus was contrasting Himself with all who claimed to be the shepherds of mankind but were powerless to save. He is the “good shepherd.” He is the one who is mighty to save. He lays down His life for the sheep and because of who He is, His sacrifice brings eternal life to them (v. 28). Jesus is both the Good Shepherd *and* the Passover Lamb. Because He was sinless and because He was God, He was the perfect, everlasting, once-for-all sacrifice. Because it was His precious blood and not the blood of goats and sheep, His sacrifice didn’t just cover sin temporarily, it defeated sin and death forever (Hebrews 9–10). By sacrificing Himself, He defeated the wolf completely.

Q: How does thinking of Christ's sacrifice as His laying down His life for you, like a shepherd does for his sheep, affect the way you think or feel about it?

Q: When you think about Christ's sacrifice for you, how does it make you want to respond?

Q: In what ways does Christ call us to sacrifice ourselves for Him? (hint: Romans 12:1-2)

Q: How does He call us to sacrifice ourselves for others?

**TALKING POINT #3:**  
**His sheep hear His voice and follow it.**

Read John 10:1-5 and 1 Corinthians 2:10-16.

Q: How do sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd? How can we recognize the voice of Jesus among all the other "voices" that compete for our attention?

Q: How does the Spirit help us hear God's voice and understand His Word?

Q: How can we have "the mind of Christ"?

As sheep, we need a good shepherd. As Jesus passed through cities and villages, preaching and healing, the Bible says He saw the crowds of people and "had compassion for them" because they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:35-36 ESV). That doesn't simply mean they were wandering aimlessly, not knowing where to go. "Harassed" here literally means "to skin alive." The image is a strong one, one of sheep not just sheared for their wool like a loving shepherd would do, but ravaged, abused, destroyed, torn apart. These sheep have not just been left alone, they have been abused and mistreated by thieves and robbers—because they didn't have a good shepherd to protect them. We are like sheep. We need a shepherd to care for us, guide us, and protect us from the thieves who want to steal, kill, and destroy us. If we want to make it through this world safely, we need to follow the Good Shepherd. Following Jesus is the path to freedom and life. Trying to walk through this life on our own only ends with being ensnared in the brambles of this world or skinned alive by thieves and robbers.

The sheep follow the good shepherd because they know his voice. In the Middle East, even today, flocks from many different shepherds intermingle with each other to graze. But at the end of the day, each shepherd, one by one, goes up different sides of the valley, calling out his own particular call or whistle. Then *just their own sheep* come out of the crowd to their own shepherd and follow him out of the valley as orderly as they came. The sheep follow their shepherd because they know his voice so well that they hear *their* shepherd out of all the other voices in the valley. They can always hear his voice when he calls, no matter what else is going on around them.

The literal translation of verse 5 is "in no way will the sheep follow a stranger." It's a forcefully strong negative, followed by the next phrase, "instead they will *run away* from him." The sheep-shepherd relationship is so strong and so intimate that they will recognize a false shepherd and run away from him. Is our relationship with Jesus so strong that we run away from false shepherds? Or do we allow them to lead us astray? Or worse, do we not even recognize that they are false shepherds because we don't really know the voice of Jesus? Even worse than that, do we not even try to listen? Are we so distracted by the things of this world that we don't even hear Him when He calls? So then, the question remains, how can we hear the voice of Jesus when a million other voices clamor for our attention?

First, we have to *know* His voice. In order to recognize the voice of Jesus among all the other voices in the world, we have to know what Jesus sounds like. Not literally, of course. Most of us don't hear an audible voice, at least not often. But the Holy Spirit does speak to us and lead us today, just as He led the disciples in the book of Acts (John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16). We can recognize the voice of God when we hear it by really *knowing* His written Word.

The Holy Spirit will never tell us anything that is contrary to His written Word, so if we know God's Word, we can test what we hear to know if it's from God (1 John 4:1). When federal agents are learning how to recognize counterfeit money, they don't study counterfeits. There are too many possibilities out there to study them all, and they could change at any time. Instead, they study the real bills so well that they can easily recognize fake money when they see it. As sheep of the Good Shepherd, we must do the same thing. It's not that sheep know the voices of the false shepherds, it's that they know the voice of their shepherd so *well* that they immediately recognize that a voice is *not* his. Dallas Willard said:

Our failure to hear his voice when we want to is due to the fact that we do not in general want to hear it, that we only want to hear it when we think we need it . . . It is much more important to cultivate the quiet, inward space of a constant listening than to always be approaching God for specific direction . . . Hearing God cannot be a reliable and intelligible fact of life except when we see his speaking as one aspect of his presence with us, of his life in us. Only our communion with God provides the appropriate context for communications between us and him."

If we live in communion with God every day, if we study His Word and abide in His love, we will recognize when false shepherds try to call us. Regular communion with God is like practice for hearing Jesus's voice in the middle of the noise. The seventeenth-century monk Brother Lawrence called it "*practicing* the presence of God." As we keep studying Scripture to learn to recognize Jesus's voice more and more easily, we also have to actively *listen* for His voice. We have to block out distraction and the noise of this world. The Spirit is always speaking to our hearts, but we have to be still and quiet and listen. This is why spiritual disciplines like meditation, silence, solitude, fasting, and journaling are so instrumental in hearing God's voice. If we expect to hear from God, we have to take *intentional* time away from the noise of the world. If we want to hear the quiet whispers of the Spirit, we have to quiet our hearts and minds. The more we *practice* spiritual disciplines that help us connect with the Holy Spirit in the quiet place, the easier it will be to *know* the voice of Jesus, even in the loud chaos of our daily lives. We grow in this ability over time. A. Z. Tozer wrote:

I think the average person's progression [of being able to hear God's voice] will be something like this . . . First, a sound as a presence walking in the garden. Then a voice, more intelligible, but still far from clear. Then, the happy moment when the Spirit begins to illuminate the Scriptures and that which had been only a sound or at best a voice now becomes an intelligible word, warm and intimate and as clear as the word of a dear friend.

As we said, the Greek word "know" used in this passage implies an intimate relationship between sheep and shepherd and carries a sense of knowing through *experience*, not just through head knowledge. We know God by walking with Him. We know Him through relationship, through experience. The more time we spend with Him in Scripture study, in prayer, and in spiritual disciplines, the more easily we hear His voice and recognize His Spirit leading us. As with a good friend, the more you spend time together, the more easily you can say, "Oh, that's something Jane would say," or, "That doesn't sound like Jim at all." The more time we spend with Jesus, the more we will be able to recognize His voice, His calling, His leading.

**Q:** What do you find difficult about hearing the voice of Jesus? Why is it hard for you specifically to hear His voice?

**Q:** What specific things distract you? What specific voices tend to "lead you astray"? Why?

**Q:** What spiritual practices or disciplines have helped you connect to God? How have they helped you hear His voice better in the everyday, among the noise and distractions?

**Q:** How can you make more time to get away from distractions to study, pray, and listen for His voice?

**Q:** What things do you need to change about your daily life so you can focus more on following Jesus's leading as your shepherd?



## APPLICATION

### PRAY:

- Thank Jesus for His incredible sacrifice in laying down His life for us.
- For wisdom and discernment to hear His voice among all the other voices competing for our attention.
- For strength and resolve to follow Jesus's voice even if the crowd/flock is going astray.
- For the self-discipline and focus to spend more time in prayer and meditation, listening to His voice in the quiet, so you are ready to hear His voice in the noise.

### ACT

**Meditate.** Spend an hour, a few hours, or a whole day this week in silence and solitude, perhaps even fasting for that time. Get away from all distractions and meditate on God's Word, practicing listening for His voice. Remember that Christian meditation (as opposed to Eastern meditation) isn't about calming breaths, it's about communing with Jesus. It isn't about emptying our minds, it's about *filling* our minds with the Word of God. Spend time reading God's Word and meditating on it. Maybe even read it out loud. Chew on it slowly like the food it is, letting it seep deep into your soul, filling your heart and mind with the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup>“450 Sheep Jump to their Deaths in Turkey” *USA Today*, July 8, 2005 - [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2005-07-08-sheep-suicide\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2005-07-08-sheep-suicide_x.htm)

<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 98, 112.

<sup>3</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, Center for Servant Leadership - <https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/>

<sup>4</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 112.

<sup>5</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John* (Word Publishing, 1999), 170.

<sup>6</sup> George Adam Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (London, UK: Fontana, 1901), 210–11.

<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur, *Reckless Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Best of A.W. Tozer, Book 1* (Camp Hill, PA: Wing Spread Publishers, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John* (Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1999), 170.



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