

ADULT GROUP GUIDE

*The*

# GOD

We Can Know

EXPLORING THE “I AM” SAYINGS OF JESUS



ROB FUQUAY

A D U L T   G R O U P   G U I D E

*The*  
**G O D**  
We Can Know

EXPLORING THE “I AM” SAYINGS OF JESUS

**MARY LOU REDDING**

 **UPPER  
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NASHVILLE

The God We Can Know: Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus

Adult Group Guide

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Upper Room Books website: [books.upperroom.org](http://books.upperroom.org)

Cover design: Marc Whitaker / MTWdesign

Interior typesetting and design: PerfecType, Nashville, TN

Cover photos: Jonathan Woon (sheep, grapes)  
Shutterstock.com (bread)

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PDF #30

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# INTRODUCTION

This adult group guide is part of a seven-session worship and study series called *The God We Can Know: Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus* with pastor and author Rob Fuquay. This guide provides instructions for seven weekly sessions for adults based on the book with the same name. This worship and study series takes participants to the Holy Land to discover deeper meanings of Jesus’ “I Am” statements. The DVD includes seven brief videos featuring Fuquay’s travels to the places Jesus lived out his ministry. Looking closely at Jesus’ life helps us more fully see and experience the God we can know.

Each session includes viewing a video followed by discussion questions, in addition to experiencing a spiritual practice together as a group. As you lead this study, you will be more a facilitator than a teacher. Prepare for leading each week by becoming familiar with the material beforehand and by attending to your own spiritual disciplines during the week.

The sessions are designed for 45 minutes (the first session is a bit longer), but additional options are included if you have more time. The group guide is flexible and can be used during Sunday school, Wednesday night, or at other times when small groups meet.

Each session includes instructions for:

- Gathering and check-in
- Opening prayer and scripture
- Video and discussion
- Group spiritual practice
- Optional extended-time activities
- Closing prayer and litany

Be sure you are prepared each week with *The God We Can Know* DVD and a TV and DVD player on which to show it. Look through sessions beforehand for any special preparation needed or for possible handouts that need to be reproduced.

You can access this guide through the booklet included inside the DVD case, as a PDF file on the DVD itself, and on the website at [www.TheGodWeCanKnow.com](http://www.TheGodWeCanKnow.com), where you will find other helpful resources for this worship and study series.

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## WEEK 1

# Knowing the Great “I AM”

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### Introductory Meeting

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*The object of this introductory session is to build group familiarity, establish a group covenant, and set the rhythm for the next six sessions. Have copies of the book available for group members (to purchase, if your group handles resources for small groups in this way).*

*A newsprint pad or whiteboard will be helpful for the Practice portion of this meeting.*

### Gathering/Check-In (15 MINUTES)

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*This part of the session will be longer this week than in later weeks, to help group members get to know one another. In future sessions, the gathering activity will use only one check-in question. As group members arrive, hand out a pen or pencil and a 3 x 5 card or small piece of paper to each person.*

Invite group members to write a statement to describe themselves with a word or phrase that completes the sentence “I am \_\_\_\_.” Use a noun that names an object to complete the sentence (not a word that names a person—such as *mother, father, son, daughter, doctor, teacher, etc.*). Model this by giving some examples. Some options to get you thinking: “I am an ear,” if you feel as if you are always listening, or “I am a ping-pong ball” because you feel as if you are just bouncing around from one activity to the next. Encourage group members to be creative but emphasize that this doesn’t have to be incredibly deep or personally revealing.

When all have arrived, begin the session by praying this opening prayer or one of your own:

**Dear God, thank you for bringing us all here to this place. Help us to open our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our spirits to understand who you are and to know you. Please be with us as we draw near to you and closer to one another. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.**

After the opening prayer, invite the group members to go around the circle and read the “I am” statement they wrote about themselves. This will serve as a weekly litany but will change from week to week, depending on their responses.

## Introducing the Study

At this point, describe the structure of each of the weekly sessions. (You may want to list these elements on a board or flipchart so all can see them.) This introductory session is slightly different than the others. After this, each session will include:

- A gathering activity
- Opening prayer
- Scripture reading and response
- A video clip and discussion of video and book chapter
- Introduction to a spiritual practice
- A closing litany/prayer

### Possible script to describe the elements:

**Gathering:** Each week, we’ll do a quick check-in to hear about our week and voice prayer concerns.

**Opening Prayer/Scripture:** We will open with prayer and will read, hear, and respond to a passage of scripture that Rob Fuquay explores in his book *The God We Can Know*. This week the passage comes from the book of Exodus, in the Old Testament. The other weeks we’ll deal with passages from the Gospel of John.

**Video:** Our study is based on Rob Fuquay’s book *The God We Can Know*. We encourage you to read one chapter of the book each week to enrich our meeting. You don’t have to read the book to participate, but you’ll get more out of the session if you put more into it. Each week we’ll watch a video clip from *The God We Can Know* DVD. The videos were filmed on location in Israel and feature Reverend Rob Fuquay. He will introduce us to places that relate to the “I Am” saying we are focusing on for the week. (*Show the book to group members and tell them where it is available if you do not have copies on hand.*) Instruct them to read chapters 1 and 2 before the next meeting. After that, we will read one chapter each week.

**Video/Book Discussion:** In small groups of three or four, we will talk about the ideas in the video. We’ll provide questions to guide our conversation.

**Practice:** Each week we will be introduced to a spiritual practice such as the breath prayer, prayer walking, *lectio divina*, and so on. We’ll do this spiritual exercise as a group. (If your group is meeting for an hour or more each week, you may include the suggested additional experiential element.)

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## Scripture

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Ask for a volunteer to read scripture and invite her/him to be ready to read after you finish talking. This week, the scripture reading is from the Old Testament—Exodus 3:1-14.

**Possible script to prepare for scripture reading:** Before we hear the scripture, let’s review some information we’ve all probably heard but also probably forgotten. In English classes long ago, we heard about expressions called similes and metaphors. These are devices that we use to make comparisons. Similes are comparisons that typically use “like” or “as” to signal the similarity. Metaphors equate the two things being compared, making a direct connection. For instance, a simile would be “Life is like a roller coaster” because it compares the two without saying that life is actually a roller coaster. A metaphor makes this comparison an equation, saying, “Life is a roller coaster.” We know that life is not literally a roller coaster, but we understand the meaning of the statement when someone expresses a comparison in that way.

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks in a lot of interesting, cryptic, and sometimes confusing ways—especially when he’s talking about himself. In the Gospel of John, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples with several statements that begin with “I am. . . .” We are going to look at six of these in greater detail in the coming weeks. You may be familiar with some of them: “I am the Bread of Life.” “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” You may want to ask the participants if they can think of other “I Am” statements Jesus made.

Then continue: Rob Fuquay sets the stage for this study of Jesus’ “I Am” statements with a look at a similar statement from Hebrew scripture.

And then the scripture reader will read Exodus 3:1-14.

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## Video (10 MINUTES)

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**Introducing the video:** This video clip introduces us to Rob Fuquay, the writer of the book we’re studying. Rob takes us to Israel, to a spot near the Dead Sea to talk about Moses’ meeting God in the wilderness. He also interviews Dennis Sasso, senior rabbi of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in Indianapolis, Indiana, to help us understand why Jesus used images that related to his heritage and ancient Jewish tradition. (*Play the track for Week 1.*)

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## Video/Book Discussion (10 MINUTES)

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(You will probably not have time to discuss all of these questions; choose the questions you wish to use in the time allotted.)

1. What would you do if a burning bush (or any inanimate object) began speaking to you as God?
2. Do you think God wants to talk to us and tries to? What makes you say this?
3. How does this story about God and Moses connect with Jesus?
4. What do you think of God's response of "I AM WHO I AM"? What is God saying?
5. Do you think we learn more about God from this cryptic answer than we would have learned if the answer had just been "God"? Why? What is the difference between these two types of answers?

## Practice: Writing a Group Covenant (10 MINUTES)

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This week, the "practice" part of the meeting is more an administrative task to get the group started on the right foot than a spiritual practice such as we'll do in later weeks.

**Possible script:** This week's practice centers on creating a covenant that the group will agree to follow during our journey over the next weeks. Because we'll be spending a good deal of time together, we want to have a common understanding of how we will function as a group for the remainder of this series.

Tell group members that they will never be forced to answer a question or respond during an activity. They may choose not to speak at any time by saying "pass" when their turn comes. You may need to repeat this guideline during other sessions if you sense that anyone is reluctant to respond. The small group provides a safe environment where people feel free to remain silent if they choose without judgment or prying on the part of others. Be sure this idea is part of the group's common operating agreement.

Some questions to get the group started:

- What are we hoping to accomplish in this group/study?
- What will we do when there is disagreement?
- Other important values: being on time, taking the group seriously, listening without interrupting, cell phones on silent, keeping content of group discussions confidential, and so forth.

As the group responds to the questions, have someone take notes on a flipchart or board. After the discussion, allow the group to modify the notes as needed to reflect what they want to say.

Write your covenant as a promise to one another. You may want to use a theme or pattern such as "We covenant to. . . ." or "We promise to help one another to know God more fully by. . . ." (completing the statements using your agreements from the discussion). Post your covenant/promises in your meeting room each week as a reminder of the group's agreements.

## Closing Litany and Prayer (5 MINUTES)

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Remind the group to read chapters 1 and 2 of *The God We Can Know* before your next meeting.

Since the litany this week uses all seven of the "I Am" statements from the study rather than only one, provide copies and have one of the group members read the "One" statements, with the full group reading the "All" responses in unison.

One: Just as God spoke to Moses, God wants to speak to us. Let us open our hearts to God who wants to be known and who says,

**All: "I AM WHO I AM."**

One: When life pressures us to care more for things than for God, remember that Jesus said,

**All: "I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry."**

One: When we feel puzzled about which choices are right, we can ask for guidance from the one who said,

**All: "I am the Light of the World."**

One: When we feel vulnerable and lost, we can find comfort in knowing that we are continuously being sought by the one who said,

**All: "I am the Good Shepherd. Come to me."**

One: When we feel powerless and weary, we can find power offered to us by the one who said,

**All: "I am the True Vine. Abide in me."**

One: When we wonder who's in and who's out with God, we can find reassurance in the grace embodied in Jesus who welcomed all, saying,

**All: "I am the Way. Follow me."**

One: When we face loss and pain, we can find hope in the one who promised us renewed and abundant life, saying,

**All: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Live in me."**

## Closing prayer

Invite group members to remember to pray for one another in the coming week and ask them to name other concerns they'd like group members to pray about. Pray this closing prayer or one of your own:

**Loving God, we give thanks that you still want to speak to us personally in the midst of each day's concerns and busyness. During this coming week, help us to remember that you are reaching into all the situations and concerns close to us, especially . . . (*mention those named*). Open our eyes and ears to hear your voice in all the ways you try to speak to us. Amen.**

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## WEEK 2

# “I Am the Bread of Life”: Knowing God’s Satisfaction

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*The objective of this session is to ask the question, “What is enough?” and to explore how God meets our needs. We will also experience a practice of being still in God’s presence, realizing that God is enough.*

Leader: Each week, post the week’s “I Am . . .” saying so the group members can see it when they enter and during the session’s activities.

### **Special Preparation by Leader**

1. For this week, if at all possible bake bread, biscuits, or cookies in the meeting space so the aroma of baked goods is fresh in the room when group members arrive. This can be done with a countertop oven and prepared dough. (Bring butter and jam if you bake biscuits!) Invite people to enjoy what you’ve baked as they arrive.
2. Provide note cards or note paper and pens/pencils for recording responses to scripture (if you have time for this part). Note cards are less threatening than paper for most people because cards set the expectation that they’ll be writing very little. Review materials needed for extended session, if using that portion.

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### **Gathering/Check-in (10 MINUTES)**

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In turn, around the group, complete the phrase “I am . . .” with a few words to tell the group how you are feeling right now physically, spiritually, or emotionally.

Then, if you baked something in the room before the meeting, ask this question: Why might Jesus’ original hearers have had a strong personal response to his words “I am the Bread of Life”? Allow a minute of silence and then invite thirty-second responses.

If you didn’t bake bread or cookies in the room, ask, “When have you felt satisfied with your life, and how long did that feeling last?” Allow a minute of silence for reflection and then invite group members to comment aloud, if they wish, in thirty seconds or less.

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## Opening Prayer/Scripture (5 MINUTES)

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Opening prayer: Remind the group of the “I am . . .” saying for the session. Recap any needs or particular concerns mentioned in answer to the check-in question. Then pray this prayer or one of your own:

**O God, you are the true bread of life. But we nibble on all sorts of unsatisfying tidbits that leave us soon hungry again. Help us in this time together to open our ears to your invitation and our hearts to respond to your call to be filled with you. In the name of Jesus, the true bread that came down from heaven for the life of the world. Amen.**

Scripture: John 6:27-59

This is a long passage of scripture. To allow group members to appreciate the entire passage, divide the reading into sections: verses 27–34, 35–40, 41–46, 47–51, and 52–59. List these verse breaks where all can see them. Invite five group members to read aloud one of the sections in turn.

**If you have an extended session:**

Distribute the note cards/paper and pens/pencils before the scripture is read. After each section is read, ask, “What is the ‘big idea’ for you in this passage for your life right now?” Allow a minute of silence and ask group members to record their “big idea” before the next section of the passage is read. When all the passages have been read, invite group members to comment on what they heard in the entire passage or how they connect the parts of it.

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## Video (8 MINUTES)

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**Introducing the video:** This video segment is filmed near the Mount of Beatitudes in Capernaum and on the bank of the Jordan River. Rob will be talking about the context of Jesus’ words “I am the Bread of Life.” Listen for the Old Testament background about God’s providing manna to the Hebrews and for how Rob connects the Hebrews’ experience with Jesus’ words. (*Play the track for Week 2.*)

## Video/Book Discussion (10 MINUTES)

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(You will probably not have time to discuss all of these questions; choose the questions you wish to use in the time allotted.)

1. If Rob knew you well, what might he identify as one of “yesterday’s blessings” in your life?
2. When you think of the Hebrews’ complaining about the manna God provided in the wilderness, what reaction do you have? How do we compare to them when we complain?
3. What gives you satisfaction in life? How do you connect this source of satisfaction with God’s activity in your life? with God’s work in the world?
4. Why is lasting satisfaction hard to find?
5. In chapter 2 of the book, Rob comments on our culture’s obsession with more, newer, better. How can this attitude carry over into the spiritual life? Where do you see this attitude in yourself?
6. How would you answer Jesus’ question, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51) How would your answer to that question today differ from your answer ten years ago? Last month?

## Practice: “Be Still and Know” (10 MINUTES)

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This is an exercise in learning how to relax and rest in God’s presence, to let go of preoccupations and straining for more and better. You will guide the group members into deepening silence and rest, using a verse from Psalm 46: “Be still, and know that I am God!”

### **Possible script to use in explaining the process:**

We will be reflecting in silence on Psalm 46, verse 10. I will repeat a part of the verse and give you time to silently reflect on the words. Then I will repeat a portion of the verse and invite you to reflect again. We’ll do this several times. There is no right or wrong way to do this, and each of us will have a different experience. Just relax and listen. After several periods of silence, I will invite you to talk in pairs about your time of reflection.

Invite the group members to get into a comfortable position since they will be sitting for several minutes and to either close their eyes or find another way to shut out distractions. When all are ready, lead the reflection by saying the words below:

Round 1: Think about these words: “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Wait for 90 seconds of silence.)

Round 2: Think about this: “Be still, and know that I am.” (Wait for 90 seconds of silence.)

Round 3: And now: “Be still, and know.” (Wait for 90 seconds of silence.)

Round 4: Think about these words: “Be still.” (Wait for 90 seconds of silence.)

Round 5: And now: “Be.” (Wait for 90 seconds of silence.)

Quietly invite group members to find a partner and talk about the time of reflection using these questions: What did you experience? What does this activity suggest to you about allowing God to be enough?

## Optional practice for extended session (15 ADDITIONAL MINUTES)

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### Fasting, using Luke 12:14-29.

For this exercise you will need copies of current magazines that contain advertisements. Assemble a variety including some home magazines, some leisure/lifestyle magazines, some fashion magazines, some news magazines. Have enough magazines to allow each participant to choose two different kinds.

Direct group members to read the passage from the Gospel of Luke. Then have them look at the ads in the two magazines they chose, asking, “How do the ads compare with Jesus’ words in the Gospel reading? Where and how do the ads encourage readers to want more than they need?” Allow 8 minutes for this part of the exercise.

Direct participants to find a partner and discuss: In our daily life, how can we resist pressures always to want more? What strategies can we use to remember Jesus’ words about possessions? (5 minutes)

Invite the whole group to respond to this question: How does this exercise about possessions and desires connect to Jesus’ words “I am the Bread of Life”?

## Closing Litany and Prayer (3-5 MINUTES)

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Remind the group that this week’s “I am . . .” phrase will be their response at each pause in the litany. (Or provide copies of the litany and have group members read the “One” statements in turn, with the full group responding each time.)

- One: When we feel hungry for more of something—even when we’re not sure what that something is, we can remember that Jesus said,
- All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”**
- One: When we feel distracted by other means of fulfillment in the world, help us to remember that Jesus said,
- All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”**
- One: When we find ourselves feeling inadequate or incomplete in our daily lives, remind us that we fill ourselves up on Jesus’ sustaining words,
- All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”**
- One: When we look around at friends and strangers, assessing how we measure up to others, help us to remember that we are enough and are satisfied by God’s grace because Jesus’ words are true,
- All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”**
- One: When we worry that the satisfaction we have now may one day run out, let us rest in the truth and fullness of Jesus’ promise,
- All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.” Amen.**

## Closing Prayer

*Invite group members to name concerns that came to mind for them during the session, matters they'd like others to pray for them about in the coming week.*

Pray this prayer or one of your own:

**Dear God, we know that you give us our daily bread and continually offer the bread of life. You are our only reliable source for all that we need, but our memory is short, and we easily forget. Teach us what it means to depend on you daily, especially in the situations and concerns we've just named, and help us remember to pray for one another until we are together again. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.**

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## WEEK 3

# “I Am the Light of the World”: Knowing God’s Guidance

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*The objective of this session is to recognize the presence of God in our midst through the metaphor of light. The spiritual practice creates an opportunity to examine more deeply the scripture that invites us to remember that we are called to be the light of the world.*

### Special Preparation by Leader

Prepare cards or slips of paper with John 8:12 printed on them, a copy for each person in the group. Arrange the verse with short phrases on each line, like this:

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying,

“I am the Light of the World.

Whoever follows me

will never walk in darkness

but will have the light of life.”

—John 8:12

Post the week’s “I Am . . .” saying in a way that allows the group to see it.

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### Gathering/Check-in/Opening Prayer (5 MINUTES)

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Invite group members to say how they are feeling physically, spiritually, and emotionally by completing a sentence that begins “I am . . .”

Remembering any concerns revealed or named in the “I am . . .” statements, pray this opening prayer or one of your own:

**Creating God, shine your light on our time together and into our hearts. Open our eyes to understand how you are our light and how you want to guide us. We especially pray for your light to shine into the concerning situations that we have named. Shine your light into the places in our lives where we need guidance in deciding how to be faithful to your call. We pray in the name of Christ, our undying, unwavering light. Amen.**

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## Scripture (10 MINUTES)

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Scripture: John 7:2, 14 and John 8:12

Read the three scripture verses for this week twice, more slowly the second time. Allow silence for one minute.

Distribute the copies of John 8:12 and invite the group members to memorize the verse. Point out that the verse is divided into five phrases (not counting the book-and-verse citation) and that they have five minutes to work on memorizing. They may use any methods they can come up with. Suggest that some people find writing an effective way to commit words to memory; others find that repeating them aloud helps.

At the end of five minutes, invite the group members in turn to recite their “memory verse.” (Remind group members that now, as always, they may choose not to speak simply by saying “pass” when their turn comes.)

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## Video (8 MINUTES)

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**Introducing the video:** This video segment is filmed in Jerusalem at the time of *Sukkot*, or the Festival of Booths. Rob reminds us of what happened during *Sukkot* in the Hall of Hewn Stones, where the Jewish Sanhedrin met. Rob will be talking about our tendency to forget God in both the comfortable and the dark places of our lives. (*Play the track for Week 3.*)

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## Video/Book Discussion (10 MINUTES)

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1. How does thinking of life as a journey rather than a destination help us in the spiritual life?
2. What are the spiritual dangers in thinking we have “arrived”? What helps us to avoid them?
3. Rob says in chapter 3 of the book, “When God comes on the scene, there is light.” How have you experienced this? How has God’s presence brought light to you in a way that helped you see a situation or problem differently?
4. Unlike the Hebrews in the wilderness, we don’t have clouds and fiery pillars to remind us of God’s presence. So how can we know that God is with us?

5. Do you agree that humans naturally want to make “stopping places” into “staying places,” as Rob says in this chapter? Why do you answer as you do?
6. How does God’s guidance come to you? How has your understanding of this process changed over time?

### Practice: *Lectio Divina* (10 MINUTES)

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#### **Possible script to introduce this practice:**

*Lectio divina* is a Latin phrase that means simply “holy reading.” Since early times, before printed Bibles were widely available, believers have listened for guidance from God as they heard scripture and Christian writings being read aloud. The practice has four steps: listening for a word or phrase that “stands out” for you or gets your attention in some way, reflecting on how the word or phrase connects to your life right now, receiving a personal invitation from God as you consider that connection, and praying about what you heard.

We are going to experience a small taste of this practice in the next few minutes. We will hear a passage of scripture being read aloud, twice the first time. Then I will give you a question to consider during a time of silence. We’ll repeat this process twice, and finally I will ask you to talk with one other person about what you heard. Please get comfortable, and quiet yourself to listen.

*Before you begin reading, say, “As I read, please listen for a word or phrase in the passage that gets your attention in some way.”*

First reading and reflection: Read aloud Matthew 5:13-16 twice, more slowly the second time. Direct hearers simply to reflect on “their” word or phrase. Allow one minute of silence.

Second reading and reflection: Direct hearers to think about how this passage connects to their life right now, personally and specifically. Allow two minutes of silence. Read the passage again.

Third reflection: Direct hearers to reflect on what invitation they hear from God in this connection. Allow two minutes of silence.

Direct hearers to talk with one other person about the invitation God extended to them in their time of listening. Give each person one minute to talk, indicating time so the second person has time to talk.

Then pray, “O God, we ask you for courage and power to act on the invitations we heard in this time of reflection. Help us to be not only hearers but doers of your word. Amen.”

If there is time, debrief the practice by inviting the group to discuss these questions:

1. Did you see a connection between the passage and your life?
2. How did it feel to approach scripture in this way?
3. How is this way of approaching scripture different than other ways you have approached the Bible?

## Optional practice for extended session (15 ADDITIONAL MINUTES)

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### Deepening *lectio divina*

Instead of using the shortened form of *lectio* outlined above, allow 25 minutes for the *lectio divina* process, using the steps outlined below.

### Possible script to introduce the practice:

*Lectio divina* is a Latin phrase that means simply “holy reading.” Since early times, before printed Bibles were widely available, believers have listened for guidance from God as they heard scripture and Christian writings being read aloud. The practice has four steps: listening for a word or phrase that “stands out” for you or gets your attention in some way, reflecting on how the word or phrase connects to your life right now, receiving a personal invitation from God as you consider that connection, and praying about what you heard.

We are going to experience a group adaptation of this ancient way of approaching scripture. We will hear a passage of scripture being read aloud several times, twice on the first reading. Then I will give you a question to consider during a time of silence. We’ll repeat this process of listening and reflecting in silence three times, talking at each step with another person. Please find a partner, preferably *not* a spouse or someone you know well. Then get comfortable and quiet yourself as preparation for listening to what God has to say to you.

Before you begin reading, say, “As I read, please listen for a word or phrase in the passage that stops you, stands out for you, or gets your attention in some special way.”

Read aloud Matthew 5:13-16 twice, more slowly the second time. Direct hearers simply to reflect on “their” word or phrase. Allow one minute of silence. Then invite them to say their word or phrase to their conversation partner without additional comment. Say *only* the word or phrase.

Read the passage again. Direct hearers to be silent and think about how this passage connects to their life right now, personally and specifically. Allow three minutes of silence. Invite the partners to talk for 1 minute each about the connection they sense.

Before you read the passage a final time, invite hearers to listen this time for an invitation from God to them for their next few days. After the reading, direct them to reflect in silence on the invitation they heard. Allow three minutes of silence.

Direct hearers to talk with their partner about the invitation God extended to them in their time of listening. Give each person two minutes to talk, indicating when it’s time to move to the second person.

End this time of holy reading by praying, “O God, we ask you for courage and power for each of us to act on the invitation we heard in this time of reflection. Help us to be not only hearers but doers of your word. Amen.”

Debrief the process by inviting the group to discuss these questions:

1. How did it feel to approach scripture in this way? Did you feel that God spoke to you?
2. How is this way of approaching scripture different than other ways you have approached the Bible?
3. How could you use this way of approaching scripture as a regular spiritual practice?

## Closing Litany and Prayer (3–5 MINUTES)

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Remind the group that “I am the Light of the World” will be their response each time the leader pauses in the litany. Or provide copies of the litany and have a group member read the “One” statements, with the full group responding each time.

**One:** When we look around us and feel that only darkness and emptiness surround us, illuminate our hearts with Jesus’ words,

**All:** **“I am the Light of the World.”**

**One:** When we look for God in places of pain and suffering, pleading for that holy presence to be made evident even in the gloom, help us to see God at work through Jesus’ promise,

**All:** **“I am the Light of the World.”**

**One:** When we feel far away from God, even when we create that distance ourselves, remind us that the love of God is always touching us through Jesus’ words,

**All:** **“I am the Light of the World.”**

**One:** When we can’t figure out where to go next, what to do, or who to be, help us to hear God’s call and see the path illuminated for us by the one who says,

**All:** **“I am the Light of the World.”**

**One:** When we wonder how we will go out into the world and shine God’s light, sharing God’s love with all the earth, let us follow Jesus’ lead as he reveals himself to us, saying,

**All:** **“I am the Light of the World.” Amen.**

## Closing Prayer

Ask group members to name a situation or decision they will face this week where they want to receive God’s light and be God’s light for others. Then end the session with this prayer or one of your own:

**Holy God, we ask you to fill us with your light. Shine your light through us into the situations and encounters we have mentioned here. May others see you and your way more clearly because of seeing your light in our lives. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the Eternal Light, who shows us the way. Amen.**

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## WEEK 4

# “I Am the Good Shepherd”: Knowing God’s Care

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*The objective of this session is to bring God’s love into action in our lives, emphasizing that God’s love for us calls us to love one another, caring for and praying with our brothers and sisters as God cares for all of us.*

### **Note to Leader**

For this session, bring a list of those in your congregation and community who have asked for prayer or whom you know are in special need. Add to this list any local concerns such as elections or local people whose problems are known in the community. Have a copy for each person in the group. Also, look at the music options for the Scripture portion of the meeting.

Post the week’s “I Am . . .” saying so those in the group can see it.

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### **Gathering/Check-in/Opening Prayer (5 MINUTES)**

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Invite group members to say how they are feeling physically, spiritually, and emotionally by completing a sentence that begins “I am . . .”

Remembering any concerns named or revealed in the “I am . . .” statements, pray this opening prayer or one of your own:

**Lord Jesus Christ, loving shepherd, we thank you for watching over us, for laying down your life for us. Thank you for caring about us and about all the concerns and situations we have named**

here. During this time together, help us to see and to appreciate the ways your care comes to us and move us to follow you by showing that same care to those around us. Amen.

---

## Scripture (5 MINUTES)

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*For this session, bring recorded music or find someone to sing or lead the group in singing the hymn “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us” or another hymn, chorus, or praise song that focuses on the image of a shepherd and God’s tender care.*

Read aloud the John 10:1-10 passage and listen to or sing the song. After a minute of silent reflection, invite group members to respond to this question: What does thinking of Jesus as your shepherd say to you about the spiritual life?

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## Video (10 MINUTES)

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**Introducing the video:** This video segment includes visits to a sheep ranch in Tiberius, to Qumran in the Judean wilderness, and to the Sheep’s Gate in Jerusalem. Rob links the care Christ offers us now and continuously to Jesus’ acts of healing and care. (*Play the track for Week 4.*)

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## Video/Book Discussion (10 MINUTES)

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Note that there are too many questions here for the allotted time. Choose among them for your group.

1. What new ideas about shepherds and Jesus as a good shepherd did you glean from the video?
2. For you, what is a healthy balance between coming in—experiencing security and comfort—and going out—searching for excitement or the satisfaction that comes from meeting challenges? (See chapter 4 in the book.)
3. How do you experience Christ caring for you?
4. Rob says in chapter 4 that God believes in us and continuously works to help the image of God in us to shine. Ponder that for a few moments. (Allow silence.) How do you feel as you consider that God believes in you?
5. How might you live differently if you saw yourself as Christ sees you?
6. What objects, songs, or practices help you to remember Christ’s presence with you in difficult times?
7. What gives you a sense of security? In what ways can the search for and need for security hold you back in the spiritual life?

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## Practice: Intercessory Prayer (10 MINUTES)

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**Possible script to introduce the intercessory prayer exercises:** Just as Christ cares for us, we are called to show Christ’s care to others. One of the ways we do this is by praying for others, a kind of prayer called

“intercessory prayer.” The prefix *inter-* means “between.” When we intercede for someone, we connect them to God by spiritually holding on to them on the one hand and reaching out to God on their behalf with the other hand.

But how do we sort it out? How can we remember to approach God regularly on behalf of those we care about or those who have asked for prayers beyond a general “Bless the people I love (naming them) and those who are in need”? There are many patterns for interceding. We’re going to learn (for some of you, review) a simple one called the “five-finger prayer.”

Here’s how the five-finger prayer works. Hold your hand in front of you.

1. The finger closest to your body is the thumb. (Yes, technically it is not a finger; it’s a thumb). The thumb reminds us to pray for the ones closest to us: those dear to us and those physically near to us. These people are the easiest to remember to pray for. And as Pope Francis has said, praying for those near to us is “a sweet obligation.”
2. The second finger is the index finger or the pointer. This finger reminds us to pray for those who “point the way” for others, those who teach and guide us. This includes our spiritual friends, our pastors and church leaders, those who teach and work with young people, and so on.
3. The third finger is the tallest. It reminds us to pray for those who “stand tall,” who are most visible in our culture and our world. This includes our nation’s leaders and the leaders of all countries. We pray that God will guide them and give them wisdom, courage, and diligence to make the world more like God wants it to be. This can also include celebrities and others in the news who have the power to shape attitudes and actions.
4. The fourth finger, the ring finger, is the weakest of the five. This finger reminds us to pray for the weakest members of our society, those on the fringes, the poor, the sick, the frail and forgotten, the oppressed, those hungry and without other necessities. As we do this, we remember God’s special concern for “the least of these.”
5. The final finger, the smallest one, reminds us to pray for ourselves. After praying for the other four groups, we are able to pray for ourselves with new perspective on our needs and our blessings. We also pray to see how God is calling us to become part of answering the prayers we have prayed for those in the other four groups represented by our other fingers.

Invite the group members to spend five minutes in silent prayer using this model for the first three fingers.

At the end of five minutes, say “Amen” and distribute copies of the list of those in need from your community and congregation. Invite the group members to mention others they know who need God’s special care right now and have people in the group add these names to their list. Then direct the group to spend three minutes in prayer for these people and concerns and for their own. At the end of three minutes, signal the end of the prayer time by saying “Amen.”

## Optional practice for extended session (15 ADDITIONAL MINUTES)

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### Deeper Intercession

**Possible script for introducing the B-L-E-S-S model:** Another definition of intercession is “being *with* God, *for* others.” Many of us are willing to do that but are unsure how to go about it. Dr. Alvin VanderGriend offers us a structure for doing this using the acronym B-L-E-S-S.

Dr. VanderGriend explained this model in his book *Love to Pray: A 40-Day Devotional for Deepening Your Prayer Life* (Prayershop Publishing, 2009). In comparison to the general prayer prompts offered in the five-finger prayer, the B-L-E-S-S model guides us into specific intercession for individuals. Each letter reminds us to pray for a specific area of need.

*B–Body*

*L–Labors*

*E–Emotional*

*S–Social*

*S–Spiritual*

**Body:** We pray for the person’s physical needs to be met. For some people, this may include praying for healing, for a more healthy lifestyle, for release from addictions, even to break a destructive habit such as biting nails or consuming too much sugar or caffeine. The better we know a person, the more specifically we will be able to pray for these needs.

**Labors:** We ask God to help the person with the tasks that fill their days. For those who have jobs, this can include specifics of travel, special projects, and so on. For those in school, this may include help with their studies and any learning difficulties they may have. For those who are retired, this may include strength for daily tasks and direction in finding meaningful activities that stimulate them, honor God, and help others.

**Emotional:** We pray for the person’s emotional needs to be met. This may include praying for peace, hope, assurance, comfort if the one we are focusing on is enduring stressful times. We ask God to steady and support, to meet the person’s needs on deeper levels than we can know or reach, no matter how close we are or how well we know the other.

**Social:** We pray for the person’s social relationships and needs. We pray for them in their relationships with those in their households and those they see daily. If we know of relationship struggles such as loneliness or estrangement, we pray for God’s power to be at work. We ask for fulfilling and supportive friendships and for whatever else we know that the person needs.

**Spiritual:** We pray for the person’s spiritual life. We bring them before God and ask that they are able to respond to God’s shaping work. We pray for whatever they need in order to become more like Christ, without presuming that we know how they need to change. We may simply envision them being slowly filled with the Holy Spirit, not asking anything specific at all.

After we pray through the B-L-E-S-S process for a person, at the end of verbal prayer, we can spend time with God for them, simply holding them in the light of God's love, much as we might cradle a sleeping youngster, resting in God's loving presence.

After explaining this prayer acronym, direct the people in the group to list five or six people close to them for whom they want to pray. Then invite them to find a place for private prayer and spend ten minutes in prayer for these people, working through the B-L-E-S-S acronym for each one. Call everyone back at the end of ten minutes.

## Closing Litany and Prayer (3–5 MINUTES)

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Remind the group that “I am the Good Shepherd” will be their response each time the leader pauses in the litany. Or provide copies of the litany and have one of the group members read the “One” statements, with the full group responding each time.

One: When we find ourselves wondering how we are expected to navigate this confusing, intimidating world, help us to remember that we are not alone because of Jesus, who said,

**All: “I am the Good Shepherd.”**

One: When we feel tempted to stray from our communities, to try to make it on our own without the help of those who care about us, remind us that we are never out of your care because of the faithfulness and watchfulness of Jesus, who tells us,

**All: “I am the Good Shepherd.”**

One: When we take a risk and venture out alone, remind us that there is no distance we can wander that God is not still guarding and holding us close. As Jesus said,

**All: “I am the Good Shepherd.”**

One: When we're too tired to do or to think anymore, help us remember that we can rest and feel safe under the keep of Jesus, who says,

**All: “I am the Good Shepherd.” Amen.**

## Closing Prayer

End the session by praying this prayer or one of your own:

**Loving Shepherd, you know that we tend to wander and get ourselves into tight places. Help us to respond to your voice as you call us, over and over, toward the way that leads to life. Help us this week to listen to your whispers and to obey the Holy Spirit's small nudgings. We give thanks for your tender care that has kept us and carried us this far. In the name of Jesus, who faithfully and diligently seeks all wanderers. Amen.**

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## WEEK 5

# “I Am the True Vine”: Knowing God’s Power

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*The objective of this session is to continue interpreting John’s Gospel story of Jesus and applying it to our lives, specifically using the metaphor of being connected to God as branches are connected to a vine. Our practice will help us discover how to stay connected to God moment to moment.*

### Special Notes to Leader

1. Handouts: This session includes a handout about the breath prayer. If you meet for an hour and will be making personal To-Don’t lists, there is a second handout for that exercise.
2. Bring grapes for group members to eat during the time the scripture is being read.

Post the week’s “I Am . . .” saying in a way that allows the group to see it throughout the session.

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### Gathering/Check-in/Opening Prayer (5 MINUTES)

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Invite group members to say how they are feeling physically, spiritually, and emotionally by completing a sentence that begins “I am . . .”

Remembering any concerns revealed or named in the “I am . . .” statements, pray this opening prayer or one of your own:

Loving God, you know that sometimes we feel disconnected from you. You know that we want your power but often find it hard to draw on it when life is tough. We ask you to teach us what it means to abide in Christ and to help us learn how to do so. We give thanks for your power that is at work in us and in the situations and people we have named, especially \_\_\_\_\_, even if we don't see it or feel it. In the name of Jesus, the true vine. Amen.

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## Scripture (5 MINUTES)

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Invite group members to enjoy the grapes and to think about the vine from which the grapes were harvested as they listen to the scripture. Read or ask for a volunteer to read aloud the week's scripture passage: John 15:1-8. Ask group members to comment on any insights, associations, or memories that came to mind as they listened.

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## Video (10 MINUTES)

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**Introducing the video:** This video segment is filmed at a vineyard at the base of Mount Tabor, near a modern-day replica of ancient Jerusalem, and in the "upper room" where Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples. Rob interviews a vineyard owner who talks about the importance of pruning vines so healthier fruit can grow. (*Play the track for Week 5.*)

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## Video/Book Discussion (10 MINUTES)

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1. Is it possible to be surrounded by symbols and reminders of Christian faith and still feel disconnected from God? Where does the disconnect originate?
2. Which did you spend the most time focusing on today, the vine or the fruit you feel you "should" be producing? Is this typical of your focus most days?
3. Name some prayer practices or experiences that encourage you to abide in Christ. How does being connected to the vine help you produce good fruit?

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## Practice: The Breath Prayer (10 MINUTES)

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**Possible script for explaining the breath prayer** (You may summarize this or cover the content in your own words.):

The breath prayer is an ancient way of praying that traces its origin to a medieval practice described in a book titled *The Way of a Pilgrim*. This pilgrim wanted to find a way to obey the New Testament admonition to "pray without ceasing" (from 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Walking across Europe, the pilgrim began silently praying the familiar prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The man gradually began praying the prayer as two phrases, one as he breathed in and the other as he breathed out. Breathing in, he prayed, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God"; breathing out, he prayed, "Have

mercy on me, a sinner.” This practice of saying the prayer in rhythm with breathing caused it to come to be called a breath prayer. He prayed this prayer continually as he walked, until he found his heart praying it even when his body was at rest.

At this point, pause and invite the group to join you in praying the prayer. You will lead them into praying by saying the prayer aloud while they pray with you silently. Explain that you will pray the prayer aloud several times and then stop, leaving them to continue praying the prayer inwardly and silently. You will end the prayer time by saying “Amen.” Invite them to make themselves comfortable. When they are settled, begin praying the prayer quietly, with the rhythm of your breathing. Pray it aloud for five or six repetitions and then be silent. After another minute or 90 seconds, say amen to end this round of praying. Continue with explaining:

We can pray the breath prayer any time we find ourselves waiting—at a traffic light, waiting for the computer to boot up, or while waiting for someone to answer the phone. We can also pray it as we go about tasks that we can do automatically such as cleaning, folding laundry, or washing the car. This continuous praying is a way of turning our spirit toward God in the midst of daily activities. If you pray the prayer repeatedly, you may find when you wake during the night that your heart is praying the prayer without your conscious intent.

Over time, people (with less lung capacity, apparently) began shortening the parts of the prayer. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God” was shortened to “Lord Jesus Christ” and, eventually, to simply “Jesus.” “Have mercy on me, a sinner,” was shortened to “Have mercy” and then to the single word “mercy.” This form, praying “Jesus” on the intake of breath and “mercy” on exhaling led to its being called the “Jesus Prayer.” Many use the description the “Jesus Prayer” to mean the full breath prayer too.

The modern breath prayer is adapted from the ancient form. Modern breath prayers are individual and unique, and they may change as our concerns and situations change. A breath prayer is made up of an address for God followed by a short petition, each expressed in four or five syllables. The address for God should be one that has personal meaning for you; it may be linked to the subject of the petition. For example, a prayer for healing may be addressed to “God, our healer.” A prayer for help during grief might begin “God of all comfort,” and ask, “heal my broken heart.”

We are each going to write our own individual breath prayer. Distribute the handout and invite each person to take a few minutes to consider what he or she wants to pray about. Allow three minutes for this. When all have devised a prayer, invite everyone to pray his or her prayer, inwardly, telling them that you will end the time of prayer again by saying “amen.” This is meant to help them get started with the breath prayer.

Encourage group members to pray their breath prayer as often as they can during the coming week.

## Optional practice for extended session (15 ADDITIONAL MINUTES)

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### To-Don’t List

**Possible script to introduce exercise** (As always, summarize or paraphrase as you wish.):

We’ve all heard of To-Do lists. But instead of making a to-do list, we’re going to make To-Don’t lists.

In chapter 5, Rob tells about growing tomatoes and the advice he got from an experienced gardener to “pinch the suckers.” These are the little shoots between the vine and fruit-producing blooms. These shoots use up nutrients, sapping them from the rest of the plant and interfering with growing fruit. Rob says that we also have spiritual “suckers” in our lives, activities and even people who take our energy away from what is truly important.

Rob lists some possibilities for important, fruit-supporting activities that deserve our energy: self-care (physical, spiritual, emotional needs), our primary relationships, tasks that are part of our primary purpose and that use our gifts. He suggests that we assign a percentage to the amount of time we spend on each of these each week.

Then Rob says that other tasks and time-users that are not part of our primary purpose—such as times spent waiting, watching television, surfing the Internet; unnecessary and unproductive meetings; even negative people who sap our emotional and spiritual energy—don’t deserve our energy. Yet we may find ourselves spending as much time on these as on the truly important relationships. He suggests that we audit our usual ways of spending time to see if we are investing our time well. Like a vinedresser, we prune away these activities that use our time and energy but do not produce fruit for God and, often, for us. But this will not happen without our attention and intent. People are always ready to fill up our time with even worthwhile activities. The only one who can say no to them—who can and will “pinch the suckers”—is us. So the question is, will we say no? The first step in doing this is identifying how we are using our time. The second step is identifying the activities and tasks that steal time and energy from what is crucial, the things we need to stop doing. And the third is determining how we will say no.

This handout guides you through the process. Take some time to answer the questions, and then we’ll talk in pairs about the process.

Distribute the handout and ask for silence as the group members respond to the questions. Give the group ten minutes in silence with the handout.

Then ask for discussion using these questions or others of your own:

What did you discover about how you spend your time?

What are some possible ways to say no to the “suckers” in an average week?

Where will you need the most help in saying no, and how can this group support you in doing so?

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### Closing Litany/Prayer (3–5 MINUTES)

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Remind the group members that “I am the True Vine; abide in me” will be their response each time the leader pauses in the litany. Or provide copies of the litany and have one of the group members read the “One” statements, with the full group responding each time.

One: When we feel isolated, we can remember that Jesus said,

**All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”**

One: When we feel powerless, we can find strength in remembering that Jesus said,

**All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”**

One: When we are tempted to try to go it alone, we can reach out to other believers, remembering that Jesus said,

**All: "I am the True Vine; abide in me."**

One: When life becomes so busy that time with God seems impossible to find, we can regain our focus by turning our hearts and minds to the one who said,

**All: "I am the True Vine; abide in me."**

One: When we stress about the quality of the fruit we are or are not producing, we can relax and trust the source of our life and growth, the One who said,

**All: "I am the True Vine; abide in me."**

## **Closing Prayer**

Pray this prayer or one of your own:

**Dear God, show us how to abide in you. Free us from trying to produce our own fruit, and help us to trust that you are at work and will work through us and in us. Prune from our lives the tasks and activities that steal our time and keep us from growing as you want us to grow. We ask all this in the name of Jesus, the true vine. Amen.**

[HANDOUT]

# The Breath Prayer

“Pray without ceasing.”

—1 Thessalonians 5:17

The ancient breath prayer is “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,” (prayed while inhaling) “have mercy on me, a sinner” (prayed while exhaling). We breathe in God and what God wants for us as we inhale, and we let go of all that is not what God wants for us as we exhale. Shortened forms include “Lord Jesus Christ” (inhaling) and “have mercy” (exhaling), and simply “Jesus,” (inhaling), “mercy”(exhaling). These shortened forms have led to this being called the “Jesus Prayer” too.

Creating your personal breath prayer:

Read Mark 10:46-52 and consider Jesus’ question: “What do you want me to do for you?” What concern comes to mind?

Step 1: What do you need from God in relation to your concern? Peace? Hope? Healing? Joy? Patience? Help for someone you love? Say what you need in a phrase of four or five syllables. Write your petition in two or three ways:

Step 2: What names or images of God comfort you? “Giver of joy” (or Giver of life, hope, peace), “Loving Father,” “Loving God,” “Holy One”? List three or four ways you might address God:

Step 3: Combine ways of addressing God with your petition until you find a combination that appeals to you. This becomes your personal breath prayer for this time. Pray it whenever your mind is free, such as while waiting or doing repetitive tasks. Over time, your heart will begin praying your prayer even when you are not consciously praying. Your spirit will be praying “without ceasing.”

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[HANDOUT]

# Creating a To-Don't List

This process begins with an audit.

Step 1: List your most important relationships and tasks. (Be sure to include self-care such as exercise.)

Step 2: Looking back over the past several weeks, estimate how much time you have typically given to each of these:

Step 3: Does the amount of time given to each of these reflect its value?

Step 4: List activities or tasks that take up your time but do not nurture the relationships you value or move you toward your goals:

Step 5: What tasks and time wasters do you need to say no to in order to be free to say yes to what you value most? (This is your To-Don't list):

Step 6: Plan how you will say no to these in the coming week:

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## WEEK 6

# “I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”: Knowing God’s Way

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*The objective of this session is to consider the larger purpose of Jesus’ time on earth, discern what that means for us, and develop a practice to help us be intentional about walking closely in the way that Jesus shows us and invites us to follow.*

### **Note to Leader**

If your group meets for an hour or more and you will be doing the additional spiritual practice, see “Optional practice for extended session” for directions on preparing for praying with pictures.

Post the week’s “I Am . . .” saying so the group can see it during the session.

---

### **Gathering/Check-in/Opening Prayer (5 MINUTES)**

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Invite group members to say how they are feeling physically, spiritually, and emotionally by completing a sentence that begins “I am . . .”

Remembering any concerns revealed or named in the “I am . . .” statements, pray this opening prayer or one of your own:

**Loving God, be with us in this time together, that we may more clearly see the truth of who you are and who you want us to be. Show us how to be your people no matter where we are and how we feel. We ask this in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.**

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## Scripture (5 MINUTES)

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Read John 14:1-9 aloud twice, more slowly the second time. Ask group members to repeat a word, phrase, or idea that they noticed in the passage. Allow a minute for silent reflection before moving on to the video.

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## Video (10 MINUTES)

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**Introducing the video:** This video segment is filmed in several locations within Israel. Rob will be talking about the importance of roads and about the context for Jesus’ statement “I am the Way.” Listen to hear whom Jesus was speaking to and what the original context can add to our understanding of the meaning of this statement for us today. (*Play the track for Week 6.*)

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## Video/Book Discussion (10 MINUTES)

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1. If Jesus lived in our area in our time, how do you think he would relate to those of faiths other than Judaism and Christianity?
2. What would Jesus say to Christians who think that only their denomination teaches the truth about how to be “saved” or about what the Bible says?
3. John 10:16 gives us Jesus’ statement, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.” In light of “I am the Way,” what do you think John 10:16 means?
4. Rob says in this chapter of the book that this is the “I am” saying that challenges him most. Which of the “I am” sayings we’ve looked at so far challenges you most or stands out most in your mind, and why?
5. How do you respond to Rob’s explanation of how Jesus is “the way” and yet is not being exclusive in this saying?

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## Practice: Prayer Walking (10 MINUTES)

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Invite your group members to take a five-minute “prayer walk” around the sanctuary (outdoors if the setting allows it). Tell them their only assignment is to walk in silence and pay attention to their surroundings and to God as they do so. Signal the end of the time to call them back.

Debrief practice:

1. What did you experience during your walk? In what ways did it feel like prayer?
2. Do you think you would use this way of praying regularly? Why or why not?
3. What aspect of this way of praying could you transfer to your daily life? What might carry over?

(If your group has eight or more people, break into smaller groups of three or four to allow time for everyone to comment.)

## Optional practice for extended session (15 ADDITIONAL MINUTES)

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### Praying with Pictures

Assemble a number of pictures of roads and footpaths (cut from magazines or printed from online sources). Include modern superhighways and two-lane secondary roads, gravel and dirt roads, flat and mountain roads, cleared paths and rough ones, bike paths and hiking trails, parade routes, and so forth. Provide several more pictures than the number of people in your group. Adhere the images to 8½ x 11 sheets of heavy paper.

Explain to the group that they will be spending time in silence and personal prayer. Place the pictures face down, and ask each group member to choose a picture without looking at any of them. Invite the group members to spend three minutes looking at the picture they chose and reflecting on several questions. Post the questions for the group and signal when time is up.

What feelings, associations, and memories arise within you as you look at your picture?

What might God be saying to you through the picture and your responses to it?

How is Jesus “the way” as you reflect on the picture you chose?

Invite group members to spend three more minutes in silent prayer. Signal the end of prayer time and ask group members to talk with another person about their experience with this way of praying. Allow two minutes per person and signal time to change speakers.

Invite group comments on the experience.

## Closing Litany/Prayer (3–5 MINUTES)

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Remind the group that “I am the Way” will be their response each time the leader pauses in the litany. Or provide copies of the litany and have one group member read the “One” statements, with the full group responding each time.

One: When we face a complicated situation that challenges us to see what God wants us to do, we can remember Jesus saying to his friends,

**All: “I am the Way.”**

One: When we find ourselves wondering if we’re *really* accepted by God, we can take comfort in remembering the grace embodied in Jesus who said,

**All: “I am the Way.”**

One: When we are tempted to believe that we know who’s in and who’s out, we can remember that Jesus welcomed outsiders and outcasts and said,

**All: “I am the Way.”**

One: When we fall into the trap of thinking that faith is about rules, we can remember the call to relationship found in Jesus' words,

**All: “I am the Way.”**

One: When we wake in the morning and wonder what God asks of us in that day's encounters, we can find our model and our answer in the one who said,

**All: “I am the Way.”**

## **Closing Prayer**

Invite group members to speak a sentence about any new insights they have had into Jesus' words “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Close by praying this prayer or your own:

**Living Christ, thank you for showing us the way. Help us to understand that just as you have sought us and found us, you are seeking all those around us too. Teach us to live and to speak about our faith in such a way that other seekers will be drawn into relationship with you. Amen.**

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## WEEK 7

# “I Am the Resurrection and the Life”: Knowing God’s Possibilities

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*The objective of this session is to live into the celebration of God’s gift of life that we receive in every new day. As we explore God’s gifts to us, we are called to respond to that grace by living with gratitude and praise for God’s undying love and care for us that is demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ.*

### Special Notes to Leader

1. For this week, provide small notebooks (no larger than 5 x 7) and pens/pencils to the group members. They will use these during the Practice section to write responses during the *lectio divina* process. This will help offer them a chance to see how they may use lectio on their own to listen to God as they read scripture or other Christian reading materials.
2. Decide whether for the closing you will use the litany “I Am the Resurrection” or re-use the litany from the first session that recaps all seven of the “I Am” statements that we have looked at in the study.

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### Gathering/Check-in/Opening Prayer (5 MINUTES)

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Using the pattern of the past weeks, invite group members to say how they are feeling physically, spiritually, and emotionally by completing a sentence that begins “I am . . . .”

Remembering the concerns named in the opening statements, pray this opening prayer or one of your own:

God of life and renewed life, you know that at times we feel used up by our daily struggles. We ask you to lift from us the burdens that keep us from loving you and others as fully as you call us to. We pray for your life to flow into all the situations and people we are concerned about, knowing that this is your will for us, this day and every day. In the name of Jesus, who is our resurrection and our life, today and eternally. Amen.

We will read the scripture today as part of the Practice portion of our time together.

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## Video (10 MINUTES)

**Introducing the video:** This video segment is filmed near the traditional sites of Lazarus’s tomb and the garden tomb where Jesus was buried. Listen for how God offers us daily opportunities for new life and fresh possibilities. (*Play the track for Week 7.*)

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## Video/Book Discussion (10 MINUTES)

1. Have you ever said to God something like Martha’s words to Jesus, “If only you had been here, this would not have happened”? What was the situation? How did that event affect your faith?
2. What would you say to someone who believes that faith in God should guarantee that God will keep bad circumstances from happening to us, such as seeing those we love die prematurely?
3. Rob says that faith sometimes asks us to do things that don’t make sense. When has your faith caused you to do or say something that a nonbeliever might find hard to understand?
4. Are you a person who struggles with what does not make rational sense—such as resurrection—or one who is able to accept by faith without question? Why are you as you are? Were you always like you are now? If not, what changed you?
5. Rob says that hope is the essence of Christian faith. Do you agree? Why or why not? If not, what one word expresses the essence of faith for you?

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## Practice: *Lectio Divina* (15 MINUTES)

(See “Optional practice for extended session” for instructions if you are meeting for an hour or longer)

The passage of scripture for today is John 11:17-26.

**Possible script to introduce this practice:**

*Lectio divina* is a Latin phrase that means simply “holy reading.” Since early times, before printed Bibles were widely available, believers have listened for guidance from God as they heard scripture and Christian writings being read aloud. The practice has four steps: listening for a word or phrase that “stands out” for you or gets your attention in some way, reflecting on how the word or phrase connects to your life right, receiving a personal invitation from God as you consider that connection, and praying about what you heard.

We are going to experience a small taste of this practice in the next few minutes. We will hear today’s passage of scripture from John 11:17-26 being read aloud, twice the first time. Then I will give you a

question to consider during a time of silence. We'll repeat this process twice, and finally I will ask you to talk briefly with one other person about what you heard. Please get comfortable and quiet yourself to listen. Get out your notebook and pen so you can record your responses as we move through the steps.

Before you begin reading, say, "As I read, please listen for a word or phrase in the passage that gets your attention in some way."

Read aloud twice, more slowly the second time. Direct hearers simply to reflect on "their" word or phrase. Allow one minute of silence. Ask them to write "their" word or phrase in their notebook—nothing else; just the word or phrase.

Read the passage again. Direct hearers to think about how this passage connects to their life right now, personally and specifically. Allow two minutes of silence. Ask them to write about the connection they sensed.

Then direct hearers to reflect on what invitation they hear from God in this connection. Allow two minutes of silence.

Direct hearers to write in their notebook for one minute about the invitation God extended to them as they listened. After the minute is up, ask them to talk to another person about the invitation they heard, giving each person thirty seconds. Indicate when thirty seconds has passed so the second person has time to talk.

Then pray, "O God, we ask you for courage and power to act on the invitation we heard in this time of reflection. Help us to be not only hearers but doers of your word. Amen."

Debrief the holy reading by inviting the group to discuss these questions:

1. How did you feel about writing your reflection on scripture? Was it easier or more difficult than when we talked about our reflections?
2. How could you use this process on your own? Do you think you will try it? Why or why not?

## Optional practice for extended session (15 ADDITIONAL MINUTES)

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### Deepening *lectio divina*

Instead of using the shortened form of *lectio* outlined above, allow 25 minutes for the *lectio divina* process, using the steps outlined below.

#### **Possible script to introduce the practice:**

*Lectio divina* is a Latin phrase that means simply "holy reading." Since early times, before printed Bibles were widely available, believers have listened for guidance from God as they heard scripture and Christian writings being read aloud. The practice has four steps: listening for a word or phrase that "stands out" for you or gets your attention in some way, reflecting on how the word or phrase connects to your life right, receiving a personal invitation from God as you consider that connection, and praying about what you heard.

We are going to experience a group adaptation of this ancient way of approaching scripture. We will hear a passage of scripture being read aloud several times, twice on the first reading. Then I will give you a question to consider during a time of silence. We'll repeat this process of listening and reflecting in silence three times, talking at each step with another person. Please find a partner, preferably *not* a spouse or

someone you know well. Then get comfortable and quiet yourself as preparation for listening to what God has to say to you.

Before you begin reading, say, “As I read, please listen for a word or phrase in the passage that stops you, stands out for you, or gets your attention in some special way.”

Read aloud twice, more slowly the second time. Direct hearers simply to reflect on “their” word or phrase. Allow one minute of silence. Then invite them to say their word or phrase to their conversation partner without additional comment. *Just* say the word or phrase.

Read the passage again. Direct hearers to be silent and think about how this passage connects to their life right now, personally and specifically. Allow three minutes of silence. Invite the partners to talk for one minute each about the connection they sense.

Before you read the passage a final time, invite hearers to listen this time for an invitation from God to them for the next few days. After the reading, invite them to reflect in silence on the invitation they heard. Allow three minutes of silence.

Ask hearers to talk with their partner about the invitation God extended to them in their time of listening. Give each person two minutes to talk, indicating when it’s time to move to the second person.

End this time of holy reading by praying, “O God, we ask you for courage and power for each of us to act on the invitation we heard in this time of reflection. Help us to be not only hearers but doers of your word. Amen.”

Debrief the process by inviting the group to discuss these questions:

1. How did you feel about writing your reflection on scripture? Was it easier or more difficult than when we talked about our reflections?
2. How could you use this process on your own? Do you think you will try it? Why or why not?

## Closing Litany and Prayer (5 MINUTES)

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Invite the members into silence, asking them to think about these questions: How has your understanding of Jesus changed over the last weeks because of this study? How have you changed or how do you want to change because of it? Invite group members to say a sentence about their reflection.

**OR:** Invite group members to speak a sentence about what the statement “I am the Resurrection and the Life” means to them in their life right now.

Remind the group that “I am the Resurrection and the Life” will be their response each time the leader pauses in the litany. Or provide copies of the litany and have group members read the “One” statements in turn, with the full group responding each time.

One: When we find ourselves wondering why loss has come, we can remember Jesus’ words as he faced death:

**All: “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Live in me.”**

One: When we are tempted to give in to the lie that life will never change for us, Jesus says,

**All: “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Live in me.”**

One: When life’s disappointments cause us to stumble, Jesus reminds us,

**All:** “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Live in me.”

One: When we ask God to give us back something we’ve lost, Jesus reminds us to look forward, saying,

**All:** “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Live in me.”

One: God works on both sides of the grave, giving us life now and life yet to come, through Jesus who said,

**All:** “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Live in me.”

**OR: Reuse the litany from the first session:**

One: Just as God spoke to Moses, God wants to speak to us. Let us open our hearts to God who wants to be known and who says,

**All:** “I AM WHO I AM.”

One: When life pressures us to care more for things than for God, remember that Jesus said,

**All:** “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”

One: When we feel puzzled about which choices are right, we can ask for guidance from the one who said,

**All:** “I am the Light of the World.”

One: When we feel vulnerable and lost, remember that we are continually being sought by the one who said,

**All:** “I am the Good Shepherd. Come to me.”

One: When we feel powerless and weary, we can find power offered to us by the one who said,

**All:** “I am the True Vine. Abide in me.”

One: When we wonder who’s in and who’s out with God, we can find reassurance in the grace embodied in Jesus who welcomed all, saying,

**All:** “I am the Way. Follow me.”

One: When we face loss and pain, we can find hope in the one who promised us renewed and abundant life, saying,

**All:** “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Live in me.”

## Closing Prayer

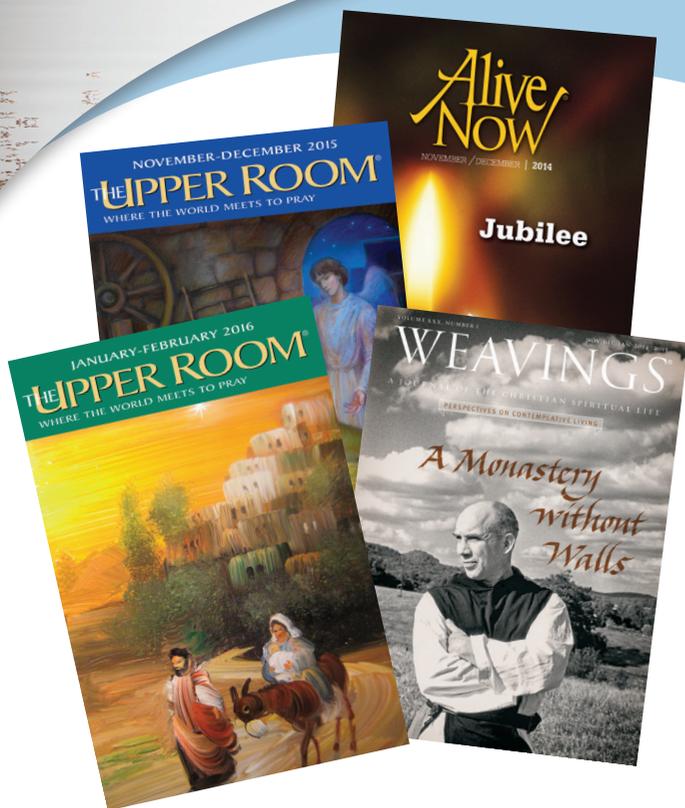
Close by praying this prayer or your own:

**Living Christ, thank you for your life that gives us life, now and eternally. Teach us how to leave the past behind and live in the power of your resurrection every day, as a witness to the new life we celebrate at Easter. Amen.**

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