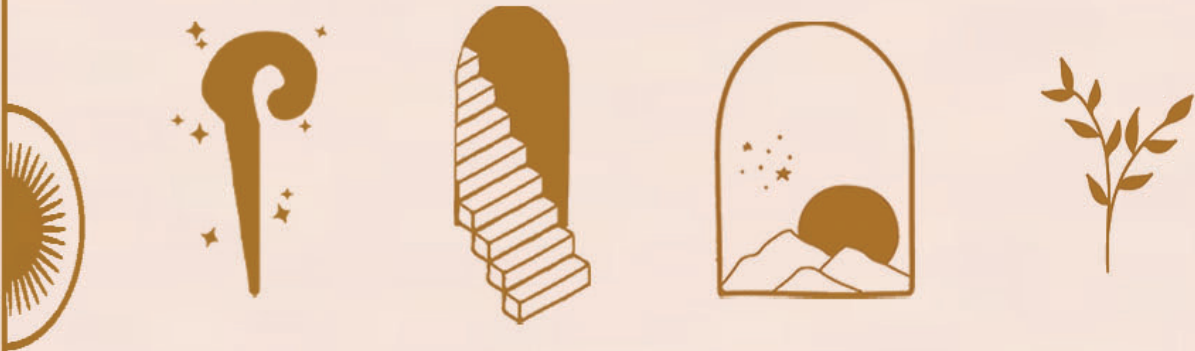


SMALL GROUP GUIDE



JESUS, IN HIS OWN WORDS

THE "I AM" STATEMENTS OF JESUS

CIRCLES 01/04: “I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD”

Who is Jesus? I know it seems like a simple question at first, but can you imagine all the ways to answer that? He was a carpenter. He was a rabbi. He was divine. His birth changed the world calendar from BC to AD. There are so many ways to describe Jesus, so let’s go right to the source. Over the next four weeks, we will journey through the Gospel of John to learn about Jesus in His own words.

Do you know what drives me crazy? When you have to go around the class and say your name and a weird fact about yourself. Is it just me, or do moments like this make you forget everything about yourself? I always freeze. Nothing comes to mind. My brain is a blank slate. How do you answer, anyway? Do you just answer with your age? Do you share your favorite hobbies? Do you give them your mother’s maiden name and city of origin? I never know. These open-ended icebreakers stress me out more than a text that reads, “We need to talk.”

How do we sum ourselves up in just one sentence? It’s hard because people are complex. No single statement can contain all the intricate details that make up your identity and personality. If it’s challenging for you to answer this question, imagine how hard it was for Jesus. Throughout His ministry, people asked Christ who He was over and over again. How did He answer them? By saying, “I AM” (John 4:26).

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus shared several power-packed sentences called the “I AM” statements. To us, these may seem confusing. To an ancient Jewish believer, they were groundbreaking. For context, God did this first. Jesus was mirroring His model. The most popular example is when God revealed Himself to Moses by simply saying, “I AM.” Over a dozen centuries later, Jesus mirrored God’s “I AM” statements by describing Himself the same way. Why? Every statement reveals His identity as Divinity. Jesus is saying, “I Am He,” as in “I am God in human flesh.”

Over the next four sessions, we will unpack four “I AM” statements from the Gospels. Each one gives us a peek into the supernatural nature of Jesus. They tell us about His character, conduct, and compassion. Let’s explore the first “I AM” statement found in the Gospel of John.

READ: John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and

scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

Do you see the parallel here? Jesus is the shepherd, and you are the sheep. Of all the animals on a farm, sheep are among the most vulnerable. Predators find them delicious. Thorns and thistles sink into their wool. Sheep are prone to get lost and even more prone to injury. They break limbs, scrape their legs, and get stuck in the silliest places. The life of a sheep is hard.

Fascinatingly, sheep are the most mentioned animal in the Bible, with a whopping 500 appearances on the pages of Scripture. Do you know the most common reason the Bible mentions sheep? As a metaphor for you. You are a sheep. How does it make you feel that the Bible calls you that? You may ponder, “Does God think I wander too much, experience a lot of injuries, and have mountain lions breathing down my wool?” Well, kind of, yeah.

Like sheep, you have been wounded in the pasture of life. You’ve experienced cuts, scrapes, wounds, and attacks. As life goes on, you will experience hurt, loss, betrayal, injustice, and illness. Deep hurts are inevitable. You need help. You need a good leader. You need a dedicated protector. You are a sheep. And fortunately, Jesus is a good shepherd.

We are the sheep, and Jesus is our protective Shepherd. Shepherds lead their flock to the safest places for the night. Shepherds fight off predators with their staff. Shepherds go to great lengths to save their sheep in times of danger. This means that our Good Shepherd does the same for us.

Jesus is our “Good Shepherd,” but what does that mean? This metaphor reveals three roles that Jesus performs for us.

Your Good Shepherd Knows You

Just like a shepherd keeps track of his sheep, Jesus knows us and watches over us. Jesus explains, “I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” Jesus sees you and keeps a close eye on you. Why? To protect you from the danger and damage that can come from the pasture.

If you wander off, Jesus will notice. If you struggle, Jesus will come alongside you. If you feel like you are just a face in the crowd, the eyes of Jesus meet yours. He remarks, “That’s my sheep; I love that sheep.” There are a few billion sheep in the world right now, and Jesus wants to know each of them deeply—including you.

Your Good Shepherd Protects You

In this sermon, Jesus intentionally points out the difference between a bad shepherd and a good shepherd. He points out that most shepherds will “see the wolf coming and abandon the sheep to run away.” You’ve inevitably had people leave you when you needed them most. Maybe it was during a difficult season, as you were mourning, or after a heartbreak that left you reeling. If that’s the case, I am truly sorry.

People let us down, don’t they? We may rub our tear-soaked eyes and look up to see that no one is sitting beside us. Jesus will never do that. Why? Because He is a good shepherd. A good shepherd protects at all times, sticks by your side, and never allows his gaze to leave you. Not even for a moment. In times of difficulty, follow your Shepherd. He is leading you somewhere safe and secure.

Jesus not only prevents injury but also heals it. Jesus healed the eyes of the blind, the wounds of the leper, and the broken hearts of the hurting. His protection goes beyond prevention. There is also action, which brings us to our next point.

Your Good Shepherd Laid Down His Life for You

A normal shepherd may abandon his post when things get dangerous. Imagine there is a flood or a pack of wolves. A bad shepherd will run for the hills and leave his sheep to struggle. On the other hand, a good shepherd will stand between his flock and the danger. That’s the route our Good Shepherd always chooses. Jesus is willing to lay down His life for His sheep. You read that right. He’s willing to fight to the death for you.

A story in a Chinese newspaper article from 2012 illustrates this well. It highlights a man named Deng Jinjie, who was declared a hero. The Sunshui River had flooded, and Deng noticed his family struggling in the current. When their heads disappeared beneath the

rapids, he pounced into action. He jumped into the river to save his family one person at a time. Tragically, his effort exhausted him, and he disappeared just after bringing his last loved one to shore. The current swept him away. Deng Jinjie drowned that day.¹ While deeply tragic, we can all agree that Deng was a true hero. His sacrificial act beautifully mirrored the love of our Good Shepherd.

When you were drowning, Jesus gave His life to rescue you. Jesus went to the cross with you on His mind. Why did He do it? He allowed His own execution because of His affection for you. He loved you that much! You were on death row, and He took the chair. You were in the line of fire, and He took the bullet. Jesus intentionally chose to die so that you don't have to. The cross isn't the sign of a vengeful God. Rather, it's the sign of a loving Savior who would rather sacrifice Himself than see you suffer. Our Shepherd is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for our safety.

The "I AM" statements are so powerful because they're the words **of** Jesus **about** Jesus. While each mention is a mere sentence, they all radiate profound truth about the identity of Jesus. Every statement is an invitation to know Him more intimately, deeply, and fully. Why is that important? Because knowing Jesus helps you know yourself. With Jesus as your Shepherd, you can be assured that you're safe, secure, and sheltered.

¹ 陈霞, "Rescued Family Regrets Ignoring Lifesaver's Death," China.org.cn, www.china.org.cn/china/2012-07/12/content_25887124.htm.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What stuck out to you from today's message?

Q2: Why does the Bible so often refer to us as "sheep"? How does that make you feel?

Q3: What's one thing you learned about Jesus from this passage about Him being a good shepherd?

Q4: Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He knows you, protects you, and laid down His life for you. What are some examples of Christ being a good shepherd in your life?

Q5: What kind of prayers can you pray to Jesus when you approach Him as your Good Shepherd?

Application: As we journey through the "I AM" statements of Jesus, please read the verses in the reading plan and write down all seven "I AM" statements.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

John 6:35-51

John 8:12

John 10:1-6

John 10:11-14

John 11:25

John 14:1-7

John 15:1-5

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLES 02/04: "I AM THE RESURRECTION"

When exploring the "I AM" statements of Jesus, a clear theme emerges. Jesus is so much more than a wise teacher or thoughtful rabbi. Jesus is God. He is a supernatural miracle worker who saves us. This truth is especially evident in the next "I AM" statement we will study together.

I remember picking up a phone call from my mother on a cold February afternoon. Shallow breathing and short sobs proved that she was in the middle of an emotional breakdown. "You have to get on the road now," she stuttered. "Your father is not going to make it."

My dad had been moved to a hospice home over 600 miles from where I was standing. My brother and I loaded up our car and began the journey from New York to North Carolina. We usually passed the time by telling stories, listening to podcasts, and playing the occasional game of "count the cows." We did none of that during this trip. With snow flying past our windshield, we drove 677 miles in complete silence. Ten hours with zero talking. Our situation left us speechless. We were only twenty years old. Nothing had prepared us for the loss of our father.

We pulled into the hospice home, and the sight of my dad made my stomach churn. Defenseless, he lay in a hospital bed attached to beeping machines and IVs pumping him full of painkillers. We each hugged my dad, kissed his forehead, and sat in silence while the infection moved through his bloodstream. Around 11:30 PM, he began convulsing and shivering. Within moments, my dad took his last breath while my family held onto his shaking hands. Right before midnight, my earthly father met my Heavenly Father.

My dad's funeral was a strange mix of awkward and heart-wrenching. I recall standing in the receiving line, wearing an uncomfortable black suit that couldn't button, and praying that I could teleport out of this situation. You could visibly see my discomfort. Anxiously, I would switch my weight from foot to foot, making my body rock back and forth. I did not want to talk to all these people; I just wanted to be left alone to process the loss of my father. We were speechless and directionless.

This was the same situation that two of Jesus's closest friends faced. Their brother had tragically died, and Jesus visited to comfort them after the funeral. What on earth was Jesus going to say to the speechless family? At first, the words of Christ came across as an empty platitude. That is until Jesus put supernatural action behind his expression.

What did He say? Take a look at John 11, where we see a fascinating exchange between Jesus, Mary, Martha, and a dead man named Lazarus.

READ: John 11:17-19; 23-26; 43-44

“On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ... Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ ... When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.”

These three individuals were beloved by Jesus. Jesus loved Lazarus. Jesus loved Mary. Jesus loved Martha. These people were not just His followers; they were friends. There was just one problem. One-third of his friend group was dead. After a devastating battle with illness, Lazarus passed away before Jesus could visit their village or attend the funeral.

Jesus traveled from the Jordan River to Bethany to comfort Mary and Martha. When they spotted Jesus, they ran to Him and embraced Him. I imagine Mary and Martha began sobbing into His chest. Their pain was palpable. They wailed and cried over the tragic loss of their brother. Jesus comforted them by saying, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

This “I AM” statement packs a two-part punch.

Jesus Is the Resurrection

I imagine the passing of Lazarus shook the entire community. He was a dear friend of the miracle worker from Galilee, after all. The passage teaches that “Jesus wept” while standing before a grave marked “Lazarus.” We can assume that Jesus imagined all their memories together. He looked at his mourning sisters and saw a future where Lazarus would join them for dinner again.

Jesus cleared his throat and shouted, “Lazarus, come out!” toward the tomb. Onlookers may have assumed that Jesus was in denial, but He was actually performing a miracle. Picture this with me. After the voice of Jesus, the sound of rocks moving and joints

popping echoed from inside the tomb. After an unsettling silence, Lazarus stepped out with bandages over his face. Jesus had just brought a man back from the dead!

Rumors likely spread that Lazarus had just been sleeping or unconscious. However, with a little historical context, we can infer that wasn't the case. There is no way Lazarus was merely napping because he had been dead for four long, soul-crushing days. The Bible explains that he was still bound in *tachrichin*, burial bandages used to prepare the dead.

There is a reason John includes this detail in his account. Lazarus was buried in Bethany, a city with deep Egyptian roots. Their embalming practices would be nearly identical to those used on ancient mummies. Meticulously, morticians preserved Lazarus's body in salt and wrapped his corpse in *tachrichin* linens. What can we derive from this? Lazarus was walking from that tomb looking like a mummy from a movie.

This shows that no one is too far gone to experience a miracle from Jesus. Not even after being mummified! The supernatural work of Jesus topples our notions of what's possible.

What Jesus did for Lazarus, He can do for you too. Without Jesus, every human is dead and decaying. Apart from Christ, our homes are mere tombs, temporarily housing the dead and directionless. At one point, every person is like Lazarus—spiritually dead and in need of intervention. We don't need someone to fix us up. We need someone to raise us up. Here is the good news: Jesus doesn't want you to decay in a metaphorical tomb because He is "the resurrection and the life."

When you became a Christian, Jesus stood before your grave and shouted, "Come on out!" We are the dead, and He is the defeater of death. We are the hurting, and He is the healer. We are helpless, and He is our helper. We are desperate, and He is the Savior.

Jesus Is the Life

I cannot prove this, but I imagine Jesus bear-hugged Lazarus. I love this passage because it reveals Christ's empathy and humanity. He was happy to see His friend breathing again, so he swept him up in jubilation. Jesus did have one request after the resurrection though. Grinning ear to ear, He said, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go" (John 11:44).

When Jesus demanded Lazarus "take off his grave clothes," He was saying that Lazarus needed to stop living and looking like the dead. After all, he was now alive! The guy had birthday parties to attend, meals to share with friends, and a full life ahead of him.

We should do the same thing. Jesus didn't just come to give you a better afterlife. He wants to give you a better life. Right now, in the present, take off the grave wraps and refuse to "live" like the dead. In the previous chapter, Jesus preached, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the fullest" (John 10:10). A full life comes from Jesus and Him alone.

We must live out our own resurrection stories. Don't look like the dead by surrounding yourself with sin, negativity, and despair. You have endless possibilities, positivity, and purpose pumping through your veins. Live a life that proves you're truly alive! Put on love, take off animosity. Put on hope, take off hopelessness. Put on joy, take off despair. Jesus has already done the work to give you a full life, so live like it.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life," so that means He is **your** resurrection and **your** life. The same miracle he performed for Lazarus He performs for all of His followers. According to Jesus in His own words, you have been raised so that you can have a life.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What stuck out to you from today's message?

Q2: What's one thing you learned about Jesus from today's message?

Q3: Read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus (John 11:17-44). What words or phrases interest you from this passage?

Q4: What do Christians have in common with Lazarus?

Q5: What are some ways we still "keep on grave clothes"?

Application: Thank Jesus for being the resurrection and the life in your own experience. Ask Him to expand your mind to understand the astounding truth within this statement.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Matthew 3:1-12

Matthew 4:1-11

John 2:1-11

John 4:1-26

Luke 4:14-30

Luke 5:1-11

Mark 7:24-30

Do the following with each passage:

ASK- God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ- the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT- on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND- to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLES 03/04: “I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE”

As the inventor of our brains, Jesus understands that every human is on a mission. We’re on a mission to discover meaning, discern direction, and develop a life worth living. Jesus knows that we are all looking for something, which is why our next “I AM” statement is so practical.

“What are you looking for?” my wife investigated while I tore the house to pieces. “I lost my favorite jean jacket,” I declared while dumping a basket of clothes onto the bed. For some reason, I found myself in a frenzy. I had it in my head that this was the only jacket I wanted to wear that night. Do I have a dozen other jean jackets? Yes. Do they all look the same? Sure. Did I need this specific one? You bet.

I threw shirts, flipped drawers, and took everything out of my closet. Our bedroom looked like it had been raided by the cops. Oddly enough, my jacket was nowhere to be found. It got personal at this point. I moved furniture and picked up our bed frame.

“It must have been stolen,” I snapped.

“Who would steal a Levi jacket with coffee stains?” my wife responded.

Sadly, I gave up. Donning a nearly identical jacket, I started the walk of shame down the stairs. We settled into the car, and I peered into the back seat. Safe and sound, my jacket was draped over the headrest. Embarrassed, I slowly reached back to retrieve my long-lost coat. I wouldn’t have to file a police report after all.

Walking back into my house that night, the evidence of my desperate search was all over the place. From upside-down drawers to dress shirts thrown about the room like streamers after a New Year’s party, you could tell that my search was serious.

This is what searching does, right? We start to deconstruct and tear up everything around us until we reach our solution. It makes a mess of our lives, surroundings, and minds. We are all searching for something in this quest called life. Sadly, most of us don’t even know what we’re looking for. We seek meaning. We strive for belonging. We hunt for fulfillment. Why? Because every single human has a God-shaped void in their heart.

In 1607, theologian Blaise Pascal explained this exact conundrum. He wrote, “[We] try in vain to fill with everything around [us], seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”²

² Pensées VII (425).

Everyone is a seeker and sojourner. It starts in infancy. From your very first breath, you have been on a quest for meaning. Tragically, humanity's search is often misguided or misinformed. Everyone is looking for answers, but I fear we are asking the wrong questions. We are asking, "What am I made for?" There's a better question though. Consider asking, "Whom am I made for?" The answer isn't elusive either. Take a look at the words of Christ in John 14.

READ: John 14:5-7

"Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'"

Jesus addressed the solution to our seeking with one of his final "I AM" statements. There is a reason Christ uses the language of "I AM." It's because—well—He is. He is the beginning and the end. He is the resurrection and the life. He is the Good Shepherd and the only pathway out of suffering. Life's questions find their solutions in Him. Jesus breaks it down into three categories: our route, our reality, and our reason for living.

I AM the Way: Our Route

Since life is a quest, we need directions. Your route is rooted in Jesus. He is the only way. He is the way to eternal life, authentic freedom, and truth. Christ came to this world so that we could know and experience the fierce love of God. The world is confusing, but Jesus is clarity. The world is scary, but Jesus is comforting. The world is broken, but Jesus puts our pieces back together.

Jesus often gets placed on the shelf with other religious teachers. Buddha, Confucius, Muhammad, and Joseph Smith were all gifted teachers. However, they were just that—teachers. That's all they claimed to be. Jesus didn't just claim to teach about God. Jesus claimed to *be* God. That's a significant distinguishing factor, which brings us to our second point.

I AM the Truth: Our Reality

Jesus didn't just tell the truth; He is the truth. All the truth in all the world culminates in the person of Jesus. Many people push back on this claim for obvious reasons. "Isn't Jesus of Nazareth all-loving? How can He be so exclusive?" For this reason, many

people say that Christ was a “great man” or a “good teacher” but nothing more. Unfortunately, this is a paradox.

C.S. Lewis explained, “I am trying here to prevent anyone from 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.’ You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.”³

Jesus is the ultimate reality, simply put. He claimed to be God and the only way to God. If it’s true, then He’s worthy of complete devotion. If it’s not, then He’s lying. Do you see the paradox? Therefore, we are left with only two logical conclusions. Either Jesus is the only way to God, or He was mad. For me, the sheer expansion of the Church, paired with billions of transformed lives, proves the first choice to be the most logical option.

So what should we do with this truth? He is our route. He is our reality. Lastly, He is our reason for living. Let’s unpack the final part of this verse where Jesus says, “I am the life.”

I AM the Life: Our Reason for Living

Every single person on the face of the earth is living for something. They’re striving and struggling to make their mark in their little corner of the universe. What do they live for? People often live for prosperity, popularity, influence, or family. All of these things are good, but they are not God. Jesus is our only reason for living.

So what should we do? Simple: live for Jesus. Why? Because He is the reason behind all reality. In Him, you will find meaning. In Him, you will find satisfaction. In Him, you will find wholeness. Everyone has a God-shaped hole in their soul. This void is strangely shaped and insanely large. You can try to force other things into the void, but they won’t fit. You will struggle, lose your stamina, and ultimately give up. Nothing can fill this void except the one who put it there.

When Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” He was saying that He is our route, our reality, and our reason for living. Thanks to Jesus, you have direction for every twist and turn life gives you. Thanks to Jesus, you know the ultimate reality that Jesus changes lives. Thanks to Jesus, you have a reason for living. He attaches eternal purpose to every single moment of existence. That’s who Jesus is.

³ Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. William Collins, 2012.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What stuck out to you from today's message?

Q2: Does it ever seem like you're searching for something more in life? How does that make you feel?

Q3: How do people try to fill the "hole" in their souls?

Q4: What does this message teach you about Jesus?

Application: As you search for deeper meaning this week, intentionally seek out little moments that trigger meaning (i.e., experiences that help you feel closer to God). Really focus on how those experiences make you feel, change your thinking, and reveal God's Truth to you.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Matthew 9:9–13 7

Luke 6:17–46

Psalms 22:1–8

John 2:1–11

John 4:1–26

Luke 4:14–30

Luke 5:1–11

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLES 04/04: “I AM THE VINE”

Throughout this study, we have learned that Jesus protects us, guides us, rescues us, and gives us meaning. As we close our study, we will see that Jesus calls himself a vine. Yes, you heard that right: Jesus called himself a plant. What does this have to do with you? It’s actually marvelous. As the vine, Jesus consistently grants you energy, stamina, and growth.

“Are they giving out free slushies or something?” I asked my friend while motioning to a 40-car line at the gas station. It was May in the South, so the weather was blisteringly hot. *It’s got to be free slushies*, I thought. *This is the only reason there’d be such a long line for gas at 8:00 AM on a Tuesday morning.* My train of thought was derailed by logic. *Who drinks slushies in the morning? Do they make coffee slushies? Actually, that would be delicious. Why has no one created that yet?*

“You didn’t hear?” My friend motioned toward his Twitter newsfeed. “There was a cyber security attack on the Colonial Pipeline yesterday. The attack shut down the flow of gas into our area completely.”

“You mean there’s no gasoline?” I pondered aloud.

“Not for long,” he replied.

Come dinner time, all of the gas stations in Raleigh were out of gasoline. If you hadn’t filled up, you were stuck.

Four days later, I noticed the little orange fuel pump light illuminating my dashboard.

“Time to find gas,” I said with a sigh. Usually, this was easy. In May 2021, it was nearly impossible. Every station was sold out. The pipeline hadn’t opened back up, so finding fuel was like finding a needle in a corn maze. While driving around town, my range meter dipped from 30 miles to 20 miles to 10 miles to 5 miles. Finally, just as I was about to get stranded, I saw a long line at a station. My car ran out of gas while waiting, but I was able to roll toward the pump using gravity.

If you want to move forward, you need fuel. This is true for our vehicles, and it’s also true for our lives. Sometimes our “low fuel” light illuminates on the dashboard of our hearts, souls, and minds. In these moments, we feel stuck, directionless, and stranded. So what do we do when our souls feel depleted? Jesus has an answer for that. He breaks down this principle in John 15.

READ: John 15:5-8

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

John’s fifteenth chapter takes place in the middle of mayhem. Jesus is explaining His rapidly-approaching death to his disciples. Feeling stuck and stranded, His faithful friends scramble for answers. With love in His eyes, Jesus shows His disciples that His presence doesn’t depend on physical location. There is something amazing in the works.

Leveraging the metaphor of a vine and branches, Christ teaches his disciples that they can still draw strength from Him even when they aren’t in the same space. “Remaining in Jesus” is not a physical practice but a spiritual one. Let’s unpack our last “I AM” statement in which Jesus teaches that He is “the vine.” What exactly does this mean to us today?

Jesus Provides Fuel

What does a vine do? It gives energy and nourishment to the whole plant. Thanks to vines, plants produce fruit. Thanks to vines, plants grow. Vines are the source of life-giving fuel to all living foliage. Jesus is your source of fuel as well. If you feel as though your spiritual tank is nearly empty, remain in Jesus, and He will energize you.

When life drains you, let Jesus fulfill you. According to this passage, you don’t have to do anything except “remain in Jesus.” Notice that “remain” is a passive verb. Jesus didn’t say you have to pray thirty times a day. Jesus didn’t say you have to do a certain ritual. Jesus didn’t say you have to solve all of life’s mysteries. If you’re feeling depleted, just embrace His presence, and He will fuel you. Drop to your knees, whisper a prayer, read the Word, or put on a worship playlist. Spiritual energy will be the result. Remaining in God’s presence rejuvenates your life.

Jesus Produces Fruit

Vines popped up all over the place in ancient Palestine. For the people of this time, twisting vine-like plants were the primary sources of food. That’s why Jesus’s audience would have understood the power of pruning. Gardeners had to prune the branches (cut off little sections) to ensure healthy and abundant fruit. When carefully pruned and

protected, Palestinian plants would produce sweet grapes, fatty olives, and juicy tomatoes. When left unpruned, the vines would crawl everywhere and kill everything.

Did you know that God prunes you as well? Why? To ensure that you produce healthy and abundant fruit. God is a good gardener. In this passage, Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. That means that Jesus is our source of life and we are the branches that produce fruit. What kind of fruit does God want to see in your life? The Apostle Paul laid it out for us by listing “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Good fruit requires thorough pruning. God picks up your branch on the vine of Christ and says, “I am going to clip away some of these unhealthy-looking leaves.” Those leaves may be sinful behaviors, dangerous thoughts, or unhealthy patterns. Whatever they are, God wants to cut them out of your life to ensure you produce the best fruit.

What does God the Gardener’s pruning process look like? He may allow your sin to be uncovered. He may snip away your selfish ambition. He may allow a relationship to fall to the ground and wither away. Yes, the process is painful, but the results are wonderful. Fruits like love, joy, and peace will come bursting forth from your branches. Embrace God’s pruning because it produces healthy fruit.

Jesus Pushes You to Flourish

God is at work in your life. Like a gardener, He’s removing weeds, tossing aside stones, slicing off diseased leaves, and stomping invasive insects. Jesus, the vine, is giving you fuel. God, the gardener, is helping you produce fruit. So what happens next? As the bad falls to the earth, the good bursts forth, and you begin to flourish.

According to Webster, flourishing means to “grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as the result of a particularly favorable environment.” Notice the second part of that definition. Flourishing requires a favorable environment. That’s why Jesus uses this metaphor in our last “I AM” statement. Christ is building the perfect environment for you to thrive in life. You, the branches, receive life-giving nourishment from the vine. Jesus, the vine, is your only source of life.

God wants to see you flourish in every facet of your life. That’s why He works so hard to protect your environment and provide your energy. Jesus is your true source of energy and the pathway to your destiny. Rest in Him, rely upon Him, and remain in Him.

Do you know why I love the “I AM” statements? They are Jesus talking about Jesus in His own words. As we’ve explored these passages, we have seen that Jesus is our Shepherd, our ultimate reality, our resurrection, and our route toward peace.

Do you notice how every promise is designed to bring you closer to the Father? That’s what Jesus came to earth to do. He came to shatter any divider between you and God. Ultimately, Jesus is saying, “I AM everything you need. Look no further because I AM already with you.”

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What stuck out to you from this message?

Q2: What are some indicators that your spirit may be running low on fuel?

Q3: If Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, what does that mean about our relationship with Him?

Q4: What are some places in your life you'd like to see flourish? How can you invite God into that process?

Q5: Of all the "I AM" statements we have studied over the last four sessions, what has been the most impactful for you? Why is that?

Application: Write down anything you need to cut out of your life to have a healthier relationship with Jesus. Ask God to help remove it from you, then embrace God's pruning. If there is anything God's trying to cut out from your life, welcome His work with an open heart.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

2 Samuel 15

2 Samuel 18

1 Kings 1

1 Kings 2

1 Kings 3-4

1 Kings 5-6

1 Kings 7-8

Do the following with each passage:

ASK- God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ- the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT- on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND- to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.