

JESSE C MIDDENDORF

Small Group Discussion Questions



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Interior Design: Sharon Page

CONTENTS

Introduction

Session 1: Declaration (Chapter 1)

Session 2: I Am the Bread of Life (Chapter 2)

Session 3: I Am the Light of the World (Chapter 3)

Session 4: I Am the Gate & I Am the Good Shepherd (Chapters 4 & 5)

Session 5: I Am the Resurrection and the Life (Chapter 6)

Session 6: I am the Way and the Truth and the Life (Chapter 7)

Session 7: I Am the True Vine (Chapter 8)

INTRODUCTION

Welcome! We are so glad you've decided to make I AM a part of your small group or Sunday school class.

This book can be used at any time during the church calendar year, but the discussion guide has been formatted for specific use during the weeks between Lent and Easter.

The guide is formatted in such a way that the questions will not be useful or productive unless everyone has read the chapter associated with that session before discussion begins. It's up to you whether to ask
your participants to read before coming to class or to make the reading of each chapter a collective activity
during class, but for ease of recall and to enhance the discussion as much as possible, we suggest reading the
chapters together as a group before diving into the questions, since they are short enough for that purpose.

This guide is organized so that, if you're studying during Lent, the first session should occur on or before the first Sunday after Ash Wednesday. The final session would then occur on or before Easter Sunday. Chapters 4 and 5 have been combined into one session for discussion, since they cover the same chapter in John.

No answers have been provided for the leader because this isn't the type of discussion guide that seeks to generate *the right answer*. Instead, the purpose of this guide is to help you facilitate thought-provoking discussions and questions that will lead to closer community and more authentic relationships with Jesus Christ.



Chapter 1: Declaration

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- The God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush is the same God who comes as a Savior, in the form of Jesus, in the gospel of John (see John 1:1).
- Jesus uses the same "I am" language (ego eimi) in John as appears in Exodus because he knows that his hearers will recognize it and pay attention.
- The "I am" statements of Jesus in John have as much relevance and meaning for us today as they did when Jesus first spoke them—if we're willing to notice.

- How do the two scriptures Psalm 50:3 and Revelation 5:13 relate to chapter 1 and to each other?
- Why does the author draw the comparison between Jesus's "I am" sayings in John and God speaking to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus?
- The author refers to the divisions and tensions between Pharisaical Jews and Christian Jews at the time of the writing of the gospel of John. What might have led to these tensions?
- What does it mean for our faith journeys today to recognize and proclaim God as the I AM?



Chapter 2: I Am the Bread of Life

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- Jesus uses the opportunity of the hungry crowd to show everyone who he is and what he can offer them if they believe.
- The crowds and even the disciples are blinded to who Jesus is; they are dazzled only by what he can do.
- Jesus's declaration of himself as the Bread of Life gives new significance to our understanding of the Eucharist today.

- How do the two scriptures Deuteronomy 8:2–3 and Isaiah 55:1–2 relate to chapter 2 and to each other?
- How does Jesus calling himself the Bread of Life relate to the manna that God provided to the Israelites in the wilderness?
- Consider this quote from chapter 2: "Though they are willing to make Jesus a king, they are not willing to allow him to be what he has come to be. It is always hard to recognize God when God refuses to show up in the way we expect." How is Jesus different from what the Pharisees expected, and why do they struggle to accept him as he is?
- How has God defied expectations in your own life, and how have you responded?



Chapter 3: I Am the Light of the World

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- Light signifies both the ability of God to create from nothing, and the very character and being of who God is.
- Israel's mission was to spread the light of God to the world, and they failed.
- Because the Pharisees don't understand who Jesus is, they are unable to believe his claims of divinity.

- How do the two scriptures Psalm 36:9 and Isaiah 60:1–3 relate to chapter 3 and to each other?
- Have you ever had an experience of total darkness like the author describes about the cavern? What was it like?
- The author says: "It is dangerous when symbols that are intended to point to a greater reality become a substitute for the reality itself." What examples can you think of in the church today in which a symbol appears to be given more importance than the thing that symbol is supposed to represent?
- Reread John 8:17–19. Jesus levels a serious accusation at the Pharisees in verse 19. He claims that they don't even know God the Father. Do you think the Pharisees understand this accusation, or does it sail over their heads? What might prevent them from understanding what Jesus means? If they do understand, how might it make them feel?

- The author says: "What may be for some unbelief soon becomes for others refusal to believe, even in the face of overwhelming evidence." How does this assertion, made about people who lived more than two thousand years ago, echo our experiences in the church today? Where have you seen examples of Christians and Christian leaders who refuse to see or acknowledge the truth?
- The story told in John 9 is one of physical blindness. But how can we relate to the blind man metaphorically?



Chapter 4: I Am the Gate & Chapter 5: I Am the Good Shepherd

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- Jesus uses an illustration (the shepherd and his sheep) that the Pharisees and other listeners will easily recognize and relate to.
- The Pharisees are compared to robbers and thieves.
- The authority for determining who is allowed in the sheep pen belongs to Jesus alone.
- Jesus sets himself up as the Good Shepherd in contrast to the bad shepherds (or spiritual leaders) that the Pharisees have been for the Israelites.

- How do the two scriptures Psalm 100:4 and Isaiah 43:1, 3 relate to chapter 4 and to each other?
- Who is the gatekeeper referred to in John 10:3?
- If Jesus is both the Gate and the Good Shepherd, and the sheep are the Jews, and the "other sheep" are the Gentiles to whom Jesus has offered the gift of salvation, then what is the sheepfold, or sheep pen?
- We tend to more easily understand what Jesus means when he says he is the Good Shepherd. What does he mean when he calls himself the Gate?
- How do the two scriptures Jeremiah 31:10 and Isaiah 40:11 relate to chapter 5 and to each other?



Chapter 6: I Am the Resurrection and the Life

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- Our hope is in the person of Jesus, not the deeds of Jesus.
- Hope in Jesus can awaken and bolster our faith.
- The raising of Lazarus from the dead is meant to point us to the resurrection of Jesus himself. Lazarus's resurrection is temporary; he will die again. But when Jesus is raised to life after his death, he will never die again.
- We should put our hope and faith in eternal life with Jesus rather than in earthly things.

- How do the two scriptures Revelation 1:17–18 and Philippians 2:9–11 relate to chapter 6 and to each other?
- Why does Jesus weep over the death of Lazarus? Is he truly sharing their grief, or do his tears signify his sorrow over everyone's lack of understanding of Jesus's mission and purpose?
- It is reasonable to assume that Lazarus is the sole provider for Mary and Martha. What practical implications might raising him from the dead have?
- Reread John 11:16. What does Thomas's bold declaration about dying with Jesus remind you of? (See Matthew 26:33.)
- Why does Jesus delay instead of responding immediately when he hears that Lazarus is sick?
- Reread John 11:22, 11:24, and 11:27. What does Martha understand about who Jesus is? What does she not understand?



Chapter 7: I Am the Way and the Truth and the Life

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- In the beginning of John 14, Jesus attempts to prepare his disciples for the coming events—his death and resurrection.
- The words of Jesus are meant to comfort his disciples after his death, but for believers today, it is the promise and hope of our own resurrection that are supposed to comfort us.
- Jesus is the way to salvation and to God the Father.
- Jesus is the personification of truth.
- Jesus represents and grants life for all believers.

- How do the two scriptures Isaiah 30:21 and Psalm 37:5–6 relate to chapter 7 and to each other?
- The author says: "Jesus knows that, determined as they are to follow him through whatever lies ahead, the disciples are simply not prepared for what he will endure. And it is for that very reason that his journey is so utterly necessary." What does this quote mean?
- Reread John 14:4–6. How is Jesus's reply to Thomas in verse 6 an actual answer to the question? How much does Thomas likely understand about what it means for Jesus to "go to the Father"?
- In this chapter, the author characterizes both Peter and Thomas as disciples who are willing to question or disagree with Jesus. How are Peter and Thomas different from each other in their outspokenness? (If necessary, compare John 14:5 to Matthew 26:33.)

- The author says: "[The Pharisees] claim to be protectors of the truth while they live hollow and empty lives characterized by bitterness, hatred, and division." How is this description reminiscent of the world we live in today?
- Near the end of the chapter, a correlation is made to John 10:10. How does having life to the full relate to Jesus *being* the Life?



Chapter 8: I Am the True Vine

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- Jesus uses another agricultural illustration that he knows will connect with his listeners.
- The vine imagery is meant to prepare the disciples for life after Jesus's resurrection and ascension into heaven to be with the Father; they will need to call on this allegory to know the best way to handle the proceedings of the early church after Jesus is gone.
- Jesus intends to make it clear that he does not act alone; just as he asks us to be dependent on him, he is dependent on the Father. Jesus is the Vine, but God the Father is the Gardener.
- God the Father as Gardener, Jesus as the Vine, and believers as the branches are intended to work together to fulfill God's mission of redemption for all of humanity.

- How do the two scriptures Isaiah 55:10–11 and Psalm 67:6–7 relate to chapter 8 and to each other?
- The author talks about how Isaiah used the image of the vine to refer to the Israelites, with God as their Gardener. Now Jesus says *he* is the Vine, and the Israelites are merely the branches. How would this shift in thinking require a change in behavior for the Israelites? What does this shift mean for the Israelites?
- The author says: "Our ability to abide in the Vine is a gift of grace from the hand of the Gardener, who shapes and cares for the branches that are healthily embedded in the Vine." How does grace affect our responsibility to abide?
- The author says: "There is no secondary value to the discarded branches of a grapevine. They are not useful for any productive purpose, including fire. The wood burns quickly and produces little lasting heat. Aside from being united to the vine, fruit-bearing is everything!" If we view ourselves as the branches, what does this quote then mean? If we are not useful for anything but bearing fruit for the mission of God, how does that change our perspective on our lives and on the world?