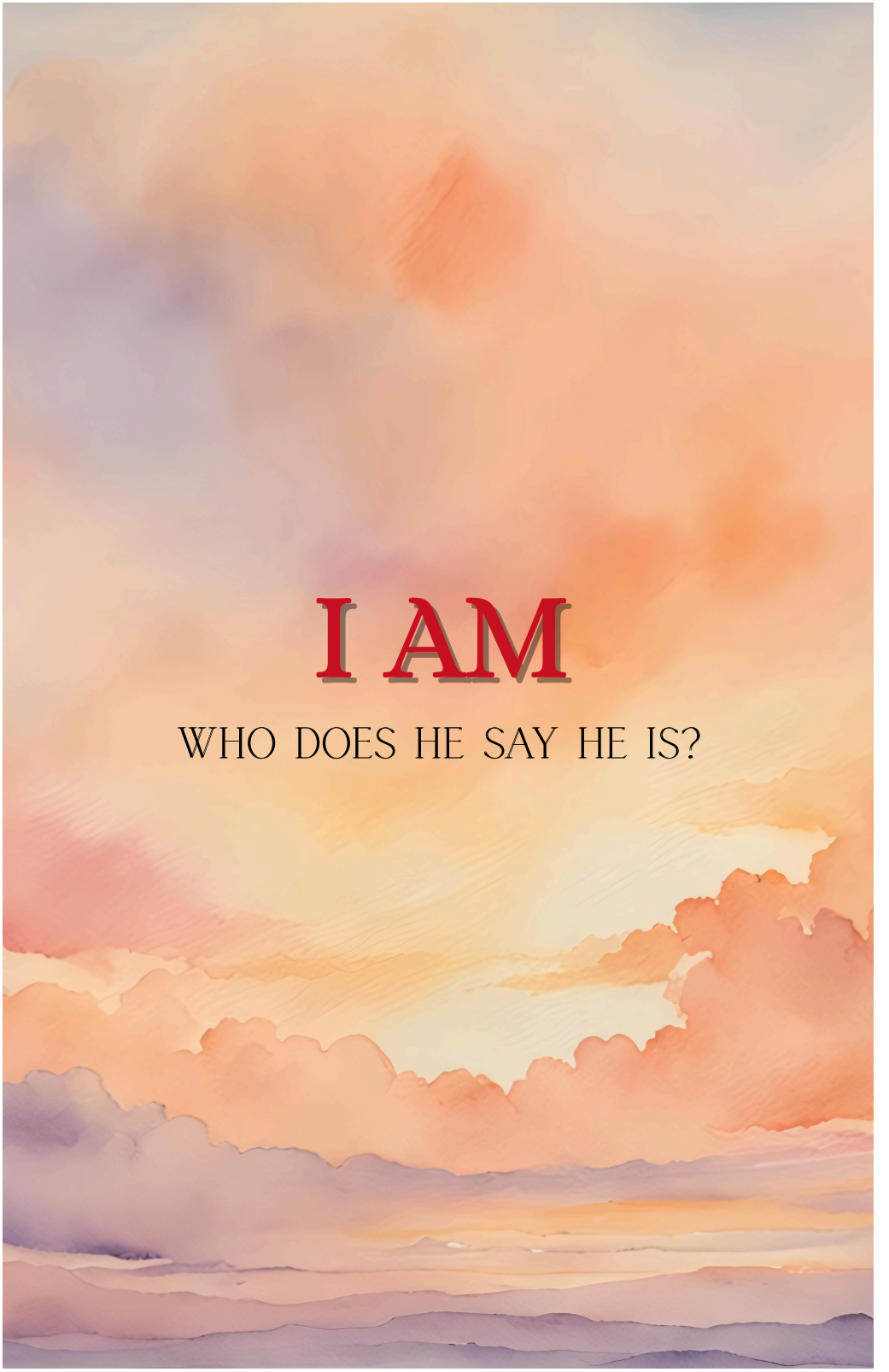
I AM
WHO DOES HE SAY HE IS?

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INTRODUCTION

That day in Acts, when the Holy Spirit came upon a group of Jesus' followers, was the continuation of an ancient story about God. The 66 books that make up the Bible detail the story of God's activities with people. From the very beginning, his journey with men and women— and young people—was punctuated by a common thread: God is faithful to his promises. The Bible contains the record of what this journey with people looked like as God works mainly through one unremarkable family in ways that impact all of history. They often failed God—that is a common theme as well. But God continued to unfold his plan to bring about his purposes. His plan continues to this day.

This study provides a detailed examination of the "I am" sayings of Jesus. Each week, we explore one of Jesus' "I Am" statements through a Scripture reading, reflections, and then applications to engage our own context. Feel free to make notes in the sections for prayer or further study.

It's hard to believe anyone would say what Jesus said and be taken seriously.

Picture this: you're in an office meeting or a Bible study, and someone stands up to declare, "I am the way; no one has access to God except through me." How would you feel if someone took the microphone at a funeral and proclaimed, "I am the resurrection and the life; if you believe in me, you will never die"? People would likely ask that person to sit down—or escort them out! Such bold claims might leave anyone questioning their sanity.
Yet, these are the very words spoken by Jesus in the Bible, and they resonate with truth.

Who is this man making such profound claims?

For those who first heard Jesus, his claims were even more astonishing. The phrase "I am" took them back to a significant moment in biblical history. Remember when God spoke to Moses from a burning bush and sent him to Egypt to free the Israelites? Moses worried the people might want to know who had sent him, so he asked God for his name. God responded, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). This name signified God's covenant with Israel, "I am." Now, many centuries later, the same words echo from the lips of Jesus, who isn't just anyone but is claiming to be the Lord God Himself. The same God who spoke to Moses seems to be speaking once more.

This study guide examines the "I am" declarations of Jesus in the New Testament. We will look at the context of each statement and examine Jesus' words as they were understood to those who first heard them. But the study needs to be applied to our current context for a new generation of listeners to understand what Jesus is saying to us. These words transform lives—in any generation. Be praying for God's Spirit to work in you as we consider this study together.[1]

[1] Connelly, D. (2007). I Am: Discovering Who Jesus Is: 8 Studies for Individuals or Groups: With Notes for Leaders (pp. 4–5). IVP Connect: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press.

Week 1: I am He

He is the One you have been looking for.
John 4:1–26 (ESV)

[1] Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus
was making and baptizing more disciples than John [2] (although
Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), [3] he left Judea
and departed again for Galilee. [4] And he had to pass through
Samaria. [5] So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the
field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. [6] Jacob's well was
there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting
beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. [7] A woman from
Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." [8]
(For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) [9] The
Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a
drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings
with Samaritans.) [10] Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of
God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you
would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."
[11] The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water
with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? [12]
Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and
drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." [13] Jesus
said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty
again, [14] but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will
never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become
in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." [15] The woman
said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or
have to come here to draw water."

[16] Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." [17] The
woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You
are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; [18] for you have had five
husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What
you have said is true." [19] The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive
that you are a prophet. [20] Our fathers worshiped on this mountain,
but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to
worship." [21] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is
coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you
worship the Father. [22] You worship what you do not know; we
worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But the
hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will
worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking
such people to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship
him must worship in spirit and truth." [25] The woman said to him, "I
know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he
comes, he will tell us all things." [26] Jesus said to her, "I who speak
to you am he."

Insights

Normally, the Jews would go out of their way to take a much longer but more acceptable way to get from Judea to Galilee. They made the longer trek because they didn't want to cross through the land of the Samaritans, hated enemies of the Jewish people. The feeling was mutual for the Samaritans.

The hostility between Jews and Samaritans in biblical times was rooted in deep historical, religious, and cultural differences that developed over several centuries. Here are the main reasons for their bitterness:

1. **Historical and Ethnic Differences**
   - **Origins of Samaritans:**
     After the Assyrians conquered Israel's Northern Kingdom (722 BC), many Israelites were deported. The Assyrians resettled the land with foreigners who intermarried with the remaining Israelites, resulting in a mixed group later known as Samaritans (2 Kings 17:24-41).
   - **Jewish Perspective:**
     Jews viewed Samaritans as ethnically impure, labeling them as half-breeds, and considered interaction with them as defiling.

2. **Religious Conflicts**
   - **Different Worship Centers:**
     Jews worshipped in Jerusalem, at the Temple on Mount Zion. Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim (John 4:20), claiming it was the true place designated by Moses.

- **Conflicting Scriptures:**
  The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses) as Scripture, rejecting the Prophets and other Hebrew writings revered by Jews.
- **The Samaritan Temple's Destruction:**
  In 128 BC, Jewish leader John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan temple, deepening the bitterness between the two groups.

3. Political and Cultural Rivalry

- **Political Tensions:**
  Samaritans and Jews often sided with opposing political forces. Samaritans sometimes cooperated with foreign rulers, intensifying Jewish resentment.
- **Cultural Separation:**
  Jews considered Samaritans culturally corrupted by pagan practices, thus further isolating and marginalizing them.

Biblical References Illustrating the Animosity:

- **John 4:** Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman shows the cultural taboo around interactions:
  "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:9).
- **Luke 9:51-56:** When Samaritans refused hospitality to Jesus and his disciples traveling to Jerusalem, disciples James and John asked if they should call down fire from heaven to punish them.
- **Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37):** Jesus purposely chose a Samaritan as the hero to challenge the deep-seated Jewish prejudice and redefine the meaning of neighborly love.

Questions:

1. Is there anyone who might be thought of in a similar manner to the Jews and Samaritans today in our context? Who are they and why are they considered in this way?
2. Is there someone you personally know who might function as a 'Samaritan' in your life? Who is he/she and why has it gotten to this point?

Discovery

Jesus crosses all kinds of barriers in his conversation with the Samaritan woman. She is a Samaritan and a woman with issues that would cause her to draw water at an unusual time so that she could avoid mingling with the others at this important community hub.

1. What barriers was Jesus willing to overcome to speak with this woman? What barriers hinder Christians today from engaging others in conversation about Jesus?
2. Jesus offers the woman living water in verses 10, 13-14. What does he mean and what does the woman think he means? (11-12, 15).

In verses 20-24, Jesus and the woman discuss worship. The woman is fixated upon worship being in a place, but Jesus has something different in mind. What is worship about to the woman, and what is Jesus trying to get her to see?

The term **Messiah** means "anointed one," referring to a figure expected by Jewish tradition to be anointed by God to fulfill specific roles. The Greek translation is Christos (Christ).

Who is the Messiah?

The Messiah, in Jewish belief, is seen as a special figure chosen by God to restore Israel and establish divine authority. Christians understand this figure as Jesus Christ, who fulfills Old Testament prophecies through His life, death, and resurrection (Matthew 16:16; John 4:25-26). Many Jews were looking forward to a strong leader who would free Israel from Roman control and restore national independence. They imagined a king like David, who would lead with strength and create a strong earthly kingdom (Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5).

How did Jesus fulfill or challenge these expectations?

While many Jews longed for a political or military leader, Jesus Christ fulfilled Messianic prophecies in ways that were quite different from these anticipations:

- Spiritual Liberation: Instead of overthrowing Roman rule, Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, stressing freedom from sin and spiritual renewal (Luke 17:20-21).
- Servant Leadership: Jesus embodied the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah 53, choosing to give Himself for humanity's redemption rather than seeking victory through force (Mark 10:45; Philippians 2:5-11).
- Universal Kingdom: Jesus' message invited all nations to experience salvation, challenging the idea of ethnic exclusivity (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

This difference between what was expected and what happened helps explain why many Jews struggled to see Jesus as the Messiah, even as some accepted Him with open hearts.

Questions:

1. **Do our own expectations of God sometimes blind us to how He is working today?**
2. **In what ways do people still struggle to recognize Jesus as the Messiah due to unmet expectations?**

Response

The discourse ends with Jesus introducing himself as the Messiah and the disciples returning. The woman was so excited by her conversation with Jesus that she left her jar and went to town to spread the news that she had met the 'Christ.'

Questions:

1. When we consider the whole event from the beginning, what are the key points that you think transformed her life?
2. What are the things we can take from this example to share with those around us today? (List them).

Weekly challenge: What is it about Jesus that attracted you to Him? Meditate on that/those things and find ways to share one of them with one person that you meet this week.

NOTES:

Week 2: I Am the Bread of Life

Survival
John 6:25-51 (ESV)

[25] When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" [26] Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. [27] Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." [28] Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" [29] Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." [30] So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? [31] Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' " [32] Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. [33] For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." [34] They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." [35] Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. [36] But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. [37] All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. [38] For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. . [39] And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. [40] For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

41 So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the
bread that came down from heaven." 42 They said, "Is not this
Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How
does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" 43 Jesus
answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. 44 No one can
come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will
raise him up on the last day. 45 It is written in the Prophets, 'And
they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and
learned from the Father comes to me— 46 not that anyone has seen
the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47
Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am
the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness,
and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven,
so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that
came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live
forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my
flesh."

Insights

In NYC, hunger is both physical and spiritual. On my walk to the office every morning, I pass by people who are hungry. For some, I recognize it through their position on the sidewalk with a collection cup. For others, it is a vacant stare as they hustle to get to work on time. Hunger takes all forms, and it is one of those things that is difficult to miss.

In this passage, John pulls back the curtain to show us the motivations of many of Jesus' followers. Jesus knows that people are following him not because of who he is but because of what he did—he fed them: 'they ate their fill of the loaves' (v. 26). In a culture where hunger was a regular part of life, Jesus was the answer that many thought would meet their basic need for food.

Jesus knew their real needs, but the crowd was never able to shift from their expectations to see what Jesus was truly offering.

Questions:

1. Do you have expectations of Jesus that don't match reality? If so, what are they?
2. Why did Jesus talk in such cryptic language? Why didn't he seem to be trying to gain more followers?

Discovery

There are many ways to "feed our souls," no matter where we live. In New York City, we have numerous options for entertainment and pleasure, from attending a show on Broadway to listening to a concert at the Met, Carnegie Hall, or Lincoln Center. Plus, other off-Broadway events offer even more choices than we can possibly experience. There are also sports events, conferences, and museums. What can sometimes feel like a blessing becomes overwhelming with so many options available.

Jesus helps to discern for those in the crowd that they are working for food that perishes, rather than laboring for "the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you" (v. 27). Religion tells us that we have to work to get ourselves to God. Jesus tells us that all that we need, he will give to us. When the crowd follows up with another question about what they must do, Jesus' response is straightforward: "Believe in him (Jesus) whom he (God) has sent" (v. 29).

The crowd continues to look for a sign that Jesus is the Messiah, but the answer seems obvious: They had recently eaten their fill through his provision of bread and they know that he somehow got across the sea of Tiberias to Capernaum without a boat.

What made them so insistent on receiving a sign from Jesus? What was their motivation?

Questions:

1. Consider that you were part of the crowd that day. What would stick out to you in how Jesus dialogues with the crowd?
2. Jesus makes some startling claims in this passage: to satisfy our deepest needs and desires, to come from God the Father, to preserve us as his children, to raise our bodies from the dead on the last day, to be the source of eternal life. How do these claims compare with what most people in our society believe about Jesus?

Response

It is easy for us to blame the crowd for missing Jesus, but we often do the same thing, even though we look back on this event and see all that Jesus has done. There may be ways that we could miss Jesus today in some of the ways he is at work.

How are we feeding our souls this year? Is there a particular bread that you are using to fill the gaps that exist? How will you create space for the bread that really satisfies? Are we getting our fill from the world without having room for the bread that truly satisfies?

Questions:

1. A passage in the Lord's Prayer tells us to pray that God will 'give us today our daily bread' (Mt. 6:11). How does that fit with the discussion here in John 6?
2. When the crowd asks how they can please God and do God's will, Jesus says, "Believe in the one he has sent" (v. 29). But their response is to ask for a miracle (v. 30). How is their response similar to our culture's response to Christ's claims?

Weekly Challenge: Spend time this week fasting from one thing (media, food, stress) and feasting on God's Word instead. Keep track of the process.

NOTES:

Week 3: I Am the Light of the World

True Light
John 8:12–30 (NIV)

12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of
the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will
have the light of life." 13 The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you
are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid." 14
Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony
is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But
you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. 15 You
judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. 16 But if I
do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand
with the Father, who sent me. 17 In your own Law it is written that
the testimony of two men is valid. 18 I am one who testifies for
myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me." 19 Then they
asked him, "Where is your father?" "You do not know me or my
Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father
also." 20 He spoke these words while teaching in the temple area
near the place where the offerings were put. Yet no one seized
him, because his time had not yet come. 21 Once more Jesus said to
them, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die
in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come." 22 This made the Jews
ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I go, you
cannot come'?" 23 But he continued, "You are from below; I am
from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. 24 I told
you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am
the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."

[25] "Who are you?" they asked. "Just what I have been claiming all
along," Jesus replied. [26] "I have much to say in judgment of you.
But he who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I
tell the world." [27] They did not understand that he was telling them
about his Father. [28] So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son
of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and
that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has
taught me. [29] The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me
alone, for I always do what pleases him." [30] Even as he spoke, many
put their faith in him.

Insights

When I was growing up, my bedroom was in the basement of our family home. It was the perfect place to house a teenage boy—dark, isolated, and incredibly quiet. It was like being in a cave, with the only natural light coming from a few small casement-type windows located at ceiling height in a different part of the basement. It was really dark! It was so dark that it almost felt alive—active darkness. It felt like it could wrap itself around you!

Jesus is light, a light that is active and drives out darkness. He is not just a light that creates shadows in a dark room, but he is the "Light of the world" (v. 12). He is the Light that causes darkness to flee. It is constant for his followers. They will "never walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (v. 12). You can imagine the darkness seeming to run when Jesus enters the room.

Questions:

1. What is your most vivid memory associated with a dark place?
2. What feelings do you associate with darkness? Why?

Discovery

Darkness is not only an absence of physical light, but it can also be an absence of spiritual light. There is a darkness in our society that feels almost tangible. People around us seem hopeless. They are anxious, unable to cope, morally confused, or fearful. They are trapped in addictions or destructive behaviors from which they are unable to escape. There is a deep sense of loneliness that, for many, feels overwhelming.

How does Jesus bring light to this darkness? How does Jesus' light clear up moral confusion?

We don't need to walk or drive very far to see the impact of darkness in our society. Homelessness and drug abuse are symptoms of dysfunction and the darkness that keeps people locked in their brokenness. When Jesus says that he is the "Light of the world," it also means that when he enters a situation, he brings light, true light. He illuminates the dark places and dungeons that hold people captive. His light casts out the shadows and lies that distort reality. We know what it feels like to walk down a dark street in an unfamiliar place, which evokes a sense of fear or dread.

When Jesus says he is the light of the world, it means not only that there is no darkness in him, but also that we can live in the Light he provides. That doesn't mean there will be no confusion or that we won't have times when we really don't know the way, but there is a sense that we will always have Light with us. Jesus' promises to never leave us nor forsake us are rock-solid! There is no place we can go where the Light will not be with us.

Have you ever felt that following Jesus is like having a light in a dark place? Explain.

Verse 17 refers to the Biblical law that required a person's testimony to be verified by the testimony of others. Witnesses to a claim were as important as the claim itself. (See Deuteronomy 19:15, for example.) The religious teachers try to use that requirement to challenge Jesus' claim to be the light of the world (v. 13). How does Jesus answer their challenge (vv. 14–18)?

Why do you believe the testimony of Jesus that he came from the Father?

Response

Darkness is a normal part of life, but Jesus dispels darkness.

Reflection: Where do you need God's light right now? Are there areas where you feel lost or uncertain?

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by darkness because it is often beyond our control. We can control the darkness when we walk into a room by turning on the light; the darkness leaves. But in our world, we can feel powerless to have any impact on the darkness. It seems at times to overpower us.

List things that fall into the category of darkness for you. Are these things having an impact on you? In what way(s)?

Weekly Challenge: Light a candle each evening this week to symbolize God's presence and ask Him to reveal His truth and clarity in one area of your life.

NOTES:

Week 4: I Am the Door of the Sheep

Security
John 10:1–21 (ESV)

[1] "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. [2] But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. [3] To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. [4] When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. [5] A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." [6] This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. [7] So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. [8] All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. [9] I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. [10] The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. [11] I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. [12] He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. [13] He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. [14] I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, [15] just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. [16] And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

[17] For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life
that I may take it up again. [18] No one takes it from me, but I lay it
down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have
authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my
Father." [19] There was again a division among the Jews because of
these words. [20] Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane;
why listen to him?" [21] Others said, "These are not the words of one
who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the
blind?"

Insights

Shepherds in the ancient world had a close bond with their sheep. The shepherd would call his sheep by name, and the sheep would follow him because they knew that protection and nourishment came from the shepherd's skillful care. The sheep also respond to the shepherd's voice because they trust him. Security and satisfaction came from staying close to the shepherd. The shepherd knows his sheep and they know him (v. 14). He lays down his life for the sheep (v. 15). No sacrifice is too great for his flock.

Jesus uses the familiar image of a shepherd and his sheep to illustrate his love for his followers and our value to him. The "hired hand" doesn't care for the sheep (v. 12), which leaves the sheep vulnerable to danger. We are his prized possession—a possession he guides and protects and cares for, just as a shepherd nurtures his flock. Jesus' words bring comfort and assurance to people who live in a very threatening and insecure world.

Questions:

1. When/How have you sensed that you are valued by the Good Shepherd?
2. Have you sensed him "showing up" when you felt afraid or insecure? Explain.

Discovery

This is a lengthy passage rich in meaning, but couched in language that requires some careful thought to comprehend many of the shepherding references. We live in a busy society that makes being the sheep in a pasture seem far off and out of touch. But the things Jesus is communicating to us through this passage are real and still resonate. It is worth figuring out what Jesus is saying to us here.

There are impostors who try to replace the shepherd without having the sheep's best interests at heart. Jesus calls them 'thieves' and 'robbers.' They operate under a cloak of darkness and sneak in where they can find an opening.

Who or what might some of these thieves and robbers be? What is their purpose?

In the first 6 verses, Jesus talks about the shepherd entering by the door and being let in by the gatekeeper. He calls it a "figure of speech" and the people did not understand what he was talking about. In verse 7, Jesus shifts from being a gatekeeper to being "the door of the sheep." And if we consider the previous passages in John, we need to recall what John has been discussing earlier. The question that dominated chapter 9 was: Is Jesus from God or not? Is he a prophet, the son of man, is he the Messiah?

The answer is that in the Bible, the picture of the shepherd with his sheep is frequently used to refer to the king and his people. We don't consider rulers or leaders in that way today, but in Scripture, the ideal king is pictured as a shepherd (Ezek. 34), modeled perhaps on the shepherd-boy David, who became king after God's own heart. In a world where they were aware of the intimate contact and trust between shepherd and sheep, this was their preferred way of considering kingship. You can tell the true king the same way you can tell the true shepherd. Anyone can claim to be a leader. But only the one who comes by the way God has appointed has the right to do so.

What are some benefits to the sheep derived from the shepherd's care?

Response

Another part of the shepherd's role is to be the gate, or the door. In many Eastern sheepfolds, the shepherd lies down at night in the gateway to stop the sheep from getting out and to keep predators from getting in. Here, Jesus seems to indicate the way in which the shepherd keeps the sheep safe and, like God himself in Psalm 121:8, watches over their going out and their coming in. The emphasis is on the safety and well-being of the sheep. The shepherd's priority is the sheep. If you find a king like that, you have found the Lord's anointed.

This "I am" statement of Jesus has gospel overtones throughout. He lays his life down for the sheep (v. 11) and has "other sheep that are not of this fold" (v. 16).

What is Jesus talking about, and why is it significant?

NOTES:

Week 5: I Am the Resurrection

Eternity
John 11:1–27 (ESV)

[1] Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. [2] It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. [3] So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." [4] But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." [5] Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. [6] So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. [7] Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." [8] The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" [9] Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. [10] But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." [11] After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." [12] The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." [13] Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. [14] Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, [15] and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." [16] So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." [17] Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

[18] Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, [19] and many of
the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them
concerning their brother. [20] So when Martha heard that Jesus was
coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the
house. [21] Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my
brother would not have died. [22] But even now I know that
whatever you ask from God, God will give you." [23] Jesus said to her,
"Your brother will rise again." [24] Martha said to him, "I know that
he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." [25] Jesus said
to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me,
though he die, yet shall he live, [26] and everyone who lives and
believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" [27] She said to
him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God,
who is coming into the world."

Insights

This is one of those situations in life where timing is everything. For Mary and Martha, Jesus' timing was horribly late. If Jesus had just arrived a few days earlier, their brother could have been healed before he got worse and died. For Jesus, the delay was part of his plan to answer Mary and Martha's prayer, but in a different way. Their hope was dashed at the death of their brother and Jesus knew that.

What was Jesus doing? I believe we can tell from the rest of the story that He was praying. He was struggling with the Father's will. The disciples were right in verse 8: the Judeans had been trying to stone Him, and it seemed risky to try to go back now. Bethany was a small town just a few miles from Jerusalem, and once you are there, you are close to the holy city. It's easy to imagine what might happen this time.

But this story is not just about Lazarus. It is also about Jesus, and the time of waiting was vital. Jesus needed to be in prayer, exploring God's will, and leaning into the intimacy and union with God that he often spoke about.

Questions:

1. Have you ever had a time when your prayers seemed to bounce off the ceiling? What was that time, and how did you feel?
2. Why does Jesus wait to answer in our lives?

Discovery

There are moments when we all wish we could turn back the clock and have things happen differently. If only he had studied a bit harder for the exam. If only we hadn't decided to go on vacation that week. Why did she need to leave at that moment? Life is measured sometimes in what-ifs or whys. But for Jesus, he knows exactly when it is best for him to act—or not act, even when we would like to turn back the clock.

Martha is in that place in verse 21: "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." She knows that Jesus could have restored her brother's health. She also knows that it took Jesus too long to arrive after he had been told of Lazarus' illness. But Jesus' delay is God ordained with a much bigger plan in mind, an event that plays a decisive role in Jesus' crucifixion. Lazarus' resurrection prompts the Pharisees to focus on eliminating two men: Jesus and Lazarus. How could you let a man resurrected by Jesus continue to live? There were bigger things at play than Mary and Martha had in their hearts.

Romans 8:28 says,

'And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.'

Our frustration and disappointment with the events in our lives can seem overwhelming when things don't go as we would hope. The pain of heartbreak is real and intense. But Jesus holds the hopes and wishes of our hearts against His desire to give us what is ultimately best—even though it can feel like devastation.

Questions:

1. Can you sympathize with Mary and Martha? How would you react to Jesus' delay?
2. Does knowing that "all things work together for good to those who love God" make things easier in our day-to-day lives? Explain.
3. Think of a time when what you wanted and what actually happened were vastly different in a positive way. How has that helped you to trust God's plan more fully?

Response

In verse 25, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha responds, but doesn't really answer Jesus' question. Why do you think she responded in a different way? How would you respond to Jesus?

Martha says she believes Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (Messiah). But what Jesus says is not very comforting. N.T. Wright says,

'*For Martha, the future has burst into the present. The new creation, and with it the resurrection, has come forward from the end of time into the middle of time. Jesus has not just come, as we sometimes say or sing, 'from heaven to earth'; it is equally true to say that he has come from God's future into the present, into the mess and muddle of the world we know. 'I am the resurrection and the life,' he says. 'Resurrection' isn't just a doctrine. It isn't just a future fact. It's a person, and here he is standing in front of Martha, teasing her to make the huge jump of trust and hope.'*

Many of us are like Martha. We want to tell Jesus what we think of Him and His strange ways. "If only. . . "

Put yourself in Martha's shoes. Run off to meet Jesus. Tell him the problem. Ask him why he didn't come sooner, why he allowed that awful thing to happen. And be prepared for a surprising response.

Questions:

1. What is on your heart that you need to tell Jesus about today?
2. Is your heart ready for how he might respond?

NOTES:

Week 6: I Am the Way

Direction
John 14:1–14 (ESV)

[1] "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.
[2] In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I
have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? [3] And if I go and
prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to
myself, that where I am you may be also. [4] And you know the way to
where I am going." [5] Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know
where you are going. How can we know the way?" [6] Jesus said to
him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the
Father except through me. [7] If you had known me, you would have
known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen
him." [8] Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough
for us." [9] Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you
still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the
Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? [10] Do you not believe
that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say
to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who
dwells in me does his works. [11] Believe me that I am in the Father
and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works
themselves. [12] "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will
also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do,
because I am going to the Father. [13] Whatever you ask in my name,
this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. [14] If you ask
me anything in my name, I will do it.

Insights

Jesus is leaving his disciples. The time for his departure is approaching quickly, like a freight train heading down the tracks, and the disciples are understandably anxious. They had dedicated their lives to the Messiah, and over the past few years, they had witnessed miracles, heard life-changing teachings, and even seen dead people brought back to life. They firmly believed that the moment was near when they would lead the charge against the Romans, with Jesus at the forefront, in the revolution to free Israel from tyranny.

But things seemed to be taking an ominous turn. The 'Hosannas' from the previous week in the approach to Jerusalem seemed like they came from some other place and time. And now Jesus was talking about leaving and that they would not be going with him.

Put yourself in the disciples' shoes. How would you feel at the news that Jesus was leaving?

Jesus promises that he is going away, but that it will be for their benefit; he won't forget them; he won't abandon them. But it reaches beyond the disciples on that dark spring evening and embraces all of us. These words are often used at funerals, and it's easy to understand why. We can't see the way ahead, and we need to know not only that there is a way into the unknown future, but that we will be able to find it.

There were many emotions stirring the disciples as Jesus relayed this news. We can imagine not only incredible sadness at their Rabbi's leaving, but also disappointment, possibly anger, and confusion. They had invested so much, and it was all slipping through their fingers.

Discovery

The disciples are confused by Jesus, and we understand why. Just like them, we can't see the way ahead and need to know that there is indeed a way into the unknown future and that we will be able to find it. Thomas asks the natural question: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Jesus' reply has haunted and confronted the world since that moment: "I am the way." If you want to get to the father's house, you must come with me.

Within the Western world of the last two hundred years or so, this controversial saying of Jesus has caused considerable challenge. "I am the way, the truth, and the life!" How dare Jesus say that! How can John or the church or anyone else put those words into Jesus' mouth? Isn't this the height of arrogance to imagine that Jesus or anyone else is the only way?

Can Jesus claim exclusivity? Is he unique among all of the other beliefs? If you dethrone Jesus, you enthrone something or someone else instead. The belief that all religions are the same sounds nice, but a study of religions quickly shows that it isn't true. What you are really saying if you claim that they're all the same is that none of them are more than distant echoes, distorted images of reality. God is unknowable, and that neither Jesus nor Buddha nor Moses nor Krishna gives us direct access. All of these 'ways' provide a way toward the foothills of the mountain, not the way to the summit.

It isn't just John's gospel that you lose if you head in this direction, but the entire New Testament. The whole of early Christianity affirms that the one true God, the creator, is the God of Israel; and

that the God of Israel has acted decisively within history to bring Israel's story to its proper goal, and through that, to address and rescue the world. It is impossible for multiple pathways to lead you to the correct destination.

What are some of the arguments you have heard about there being multiple ways to God? Do they seem plausible? How do you counter them?

Response

The truth, the life through whom we find the way, is Jesus himself. When people ask what God looks like, we can tell them that he looks like Jesus. The Jesus who washed his disciples' feet and told them to copy his example claimed to be God. If that is not true, then no one should follow him. He would either need to be labeled as mentally deranged, a deceiver and manipulator, or who he said he was—the son of God. We either should worship him or dismiss him, but we can't stay on the sidelines because he doesn't leave us that option.

Questions:

1. If you are a follower of Jesus, what was it that convinced you that what he claimed is true?
2. How would you share your faith in a few sentences that would recognize that you believe that Jesus is the Way?

NOTES:

Week 7: I Am the True Vine

Provision and Belonging
John 15:1–8 (ESV)

[1] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. [2] Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. [3] Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. [4] Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. [5] I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. [6] If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [7] If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Insights

Good gardeners understand what it takes to make things grow. Sunlight, healthy soil, nutrients, and water are some of the main ingredients in an excellent garden. It must be tended—weeds pulled, vines tied and trellised, and a watchful eye kept, ensuring insects and pests do not cause damage. When driving through vineyards in South Africa, you see the workers moving through rows and rows of grapevines, cutting off any shoots or branches that are growing so that all that is left is the gnarled trunk of the vine. It is a brutal process. The workers are making a decision: do I want to have beautiful, leafy vines or plump, juicy grapes? The reason you prune it is so that the vine won't waste energy and become unproductive. It is not the leaves that are the important part of the vine; it is the fruit.

The English language may not fully capture the intent of what John is trying to communicate here. The word he uses for 'prune' in verse 2 is unusual and is like the word for 'clean' or 'pure' in the next verse. That is likely why he uses it here: he is tying the 'pruning' of the vine with the 'clean' state of the disciples. They have already been 'pruned,' even though there is probably more to come. Jesus has been teaching them and training them, calling them to take up their cross and follow him. They have needed to submit to the pruner's knife, cutting away their other goals and ambitions. They have already borne some fruit; they can expect more pruning so they can bear more fruit.

Jesus uses the vine and branches as an allegory of the relationship he has with his followers.

If he is the vine and we are the branches, what does Jesus provide in the relationship?

Discovery

Within Jewish tradition, the vine was a picture of Israel. God brought a vine out of Egypt and planted it in the promised land (Psalm 80:8-18). It had been ravaged by wild animals and needed protection and re-establishment. Isaiah said the vineyard of Israel was carefully tended by the LORD, but the vineyard has borne wild grapes instead of good ones (Isaiah 5:1-7). Other prophets paint the same picture.

Now Jesus is saying he is the "true vine." This can only mean that he is, in himself, the true Israel. He is the one on whom God's purposes are now resting. And his followers are members of God's true people—if they belong to him and remain "in" him. The picture of the 'vine' isn't just a clever illustration from gardening. It is about who Jesus and his people truly are, and what will now happen to them as a result. Jesus has already spoken of them being "in him" as he is "in the father" (14:20). His people are to enjoy the same intimate relationship that he has with his father. But it must be cultivated. Branches that decide to "go it alone," to try living without the life of the vine, will wither and die and are unfit for anything except the fire (v. 6). But branches that remain in the vine, and submit to the pruner's knife when necessary, live and bear fruit.

How do we remain "in the vine?" What does it look like in practice?

Response

We must remain in the community that knows and loves him and celebrates him as its Lord. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. We can't "go it alone." But we must also remain people of prayer and worship in our own intimate, private lives. We must ensure that we are in touch and in tune with Jesus, knowing Him and being known by Him.

The most amazing promises about prayer (verse 7) accompany the sharpest warnings (verse 6). And although it always hurts, we must be ready for the father's pruning knife. God is glorified, and so will we be, by bearing good quality fruit, and lots of it. For that to happen, there will need to be pruning, things that need to be cut away, wasted effort or branches that are dead, going nowhere. N. T. Wright says that "the vine dresser is never closer to the vine, taking more thought over its long-term health and productivity, than when he has the knife in his hand." (John for Everyone, Part 2, p. 71).

Questions:

1. If we remain in Jesus, he promises we can "ask whatever you want and it will happen for you" (v. 7). Have you ever tested him in this? If not, why not? If so, what happened?
2. What was the result of a time of serious pruning in your life? What was the impact of your 'fruit yield ?'
3. What are some bold prayers that you would ask of God as you remain in him?
4. What is the fruit that the father desires for you?

NOTES:

Week 8: I Am the Alpha and Omega

Everything
Revelation 1:8; 22:12-16 (ESV)

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

12 "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. 16 "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."

Insights

The early Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth was, in person, the place where heaven and earth meet. By looking at him and especially contemplating his death and resurrection, they thought they could see directly into God's own world. Everything that is to come flows from the central figure, Jesus himself, and ultimately from God the Father. There is no beginning and no end—"he was, and is, and is to come." Alpha is the very first letter of the Greek alphabet—the beginning. Omega is the last letter—the end. Jesus is everything—before time began, he existed; and he will continue to exist after time ends, and we are all living in eternity. It is hard to wrap your head around such a thought.

We think about Jesus as the kind teacher who lived and worked in Jerusalem a few thousand years ago. What do these passages tell us about Jesus?

Discovery

Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, but what happens in the "in-between" time where we now live? He has not stepped away from his creation. What he began in the beginning, he has been a sustaining force throughout, an active participant in the day-to-day activities of his Kingdom. He intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Heb. 7:25), he is present through the Spirit (John 14:16-18), equipping us for witness, growth, and service. He is building His church (Matt. 16:18), gathering to Himself a people from every nation into His body (Eph. 2:19-22; Col. 1:18). He is ruling over history (Rev. 1:5, Matt. 28:18), bringing all things under his lordship (Phil. 2:9-11). He is preparing a place for his people (John 14:2-3), securing our eternal dwelling place in the Father's presence.

Jesus has been active in his world, from beginning to end, as he prays for and empowers his people to accomplish his will. We depend on him for everything we need, and he promises to provide.

As we finish up this study in the 'I am" statements of Jesus, which of his characterizations is the one you are leaning in to the most right now? How have you experienced each one at various times in your life? Take some time to think through how he has proven himself through each one of his statements of who he is.

Questions:

1. **How does Jesus' claim to be the sovereign Lord over history—and over your life—help you face the successes and tragedies of your daily experience?**
2. **What difference does knowing who Jesus is make in how we live each day?**

Response

Although there are many mysteries that we will not solve or understand this side of heaven, we can be comforted knowing that Jesus is the "I am" that is not only the creator of all that is but he sustains it and provides all that is needed for the world to continue spinning through the galaxy. And he also cares about you and me.

Spend time in worship this week celebrating who Jesus is and what he has done. Ask him to help you drive these "I am" statements deeper into the fabric of your life.

What are some concrete ways you can make this a reality in your life?

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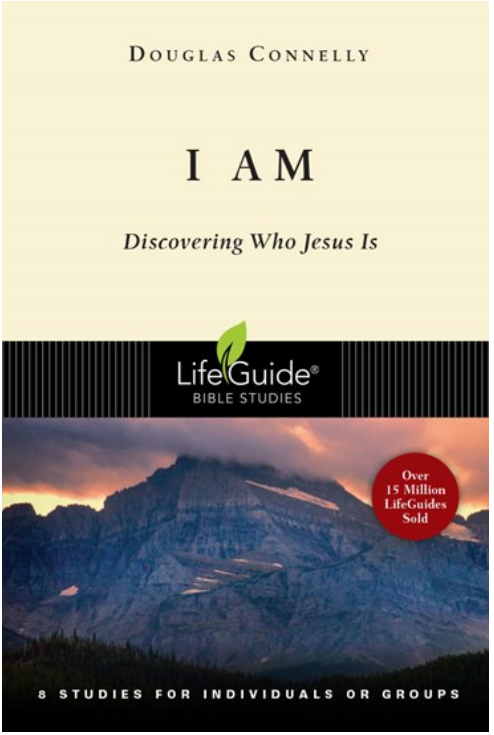

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Calvary Baptist Church
www.cbcnyc.org
live.cbcnyc.org

(212)975-0170
info@cbcnyc.org

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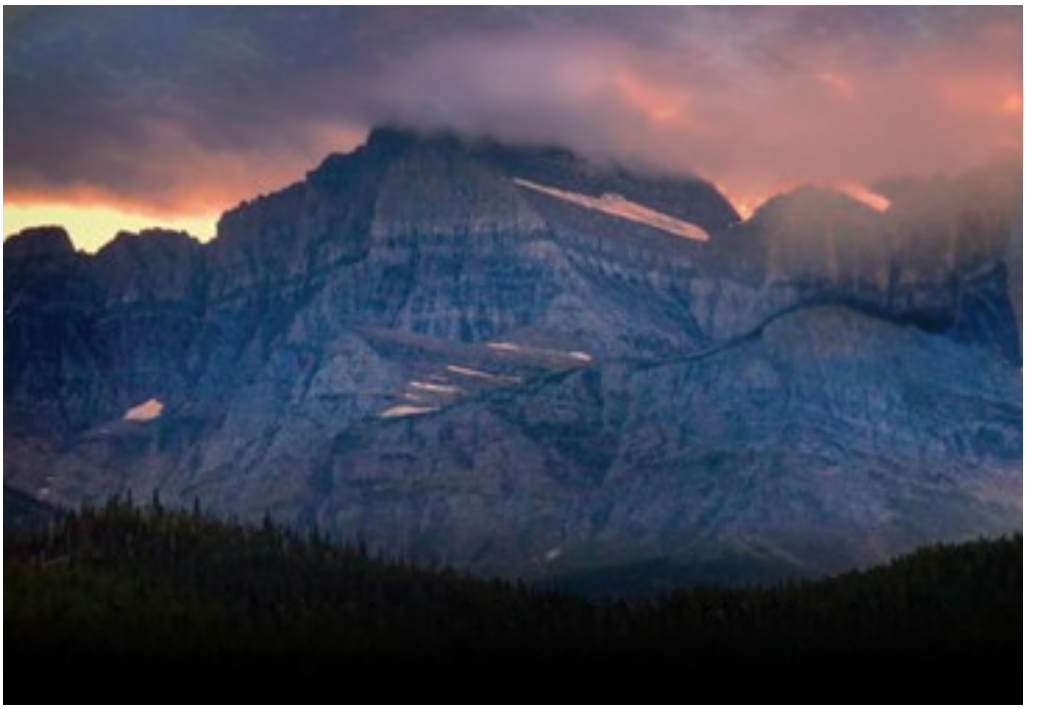
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