

Walking the Christian's Pattern

A Twelve-Week Companion

A small group and Sunday school study to accompany

The Christian's Pattern

by Pastor J. David Juliano

(Invite Press, June 2026)

First Sebring Methodist Church

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A Welcome Letter

From Pastor David

Dear friend,

Welcome to Walking the Christian's Pattern.

This is a twelve-week journey through one of the most influential books in Christian history — but most of you have never heard of it.

That's because Thomas à Kempis wrote it almost six hundred years ago, in Latin, in a medieval monastery. By 1735, John Wesley loved it so much that he translated the whole book into English and gave it to the people called Methodists. He titled his translation *The Christian's Pattern*, and he carried it with him for the rest of his life. So did countless Methodists for the next two and a half centuries.

Then we mostly forgot it.

A few years ago, I started reading Wesley's translation and noticed something startling: this book has not aged. It hits the same nerves now that it hit then. The diagnostic is just as sharp. The honesty is just as pastoral. À Kempis writes like he can see right through you — and somehow that's a gift, not an attack.

I wanted to put this in your hands. Not Wesley's 1735 English, which is hard to chew. A modern paraphrase, in plain language, with the Bible references showing — so you can see for yourself how soaked in Scripture these chapters are. The book itself is *The Christian's Pattern* (Invite Press, June 2026). Reading it alongside this study is optional, but it's a good companion.

This guide is not the book. This guide is what we'll do together.

Twelve weeks. Twelve sessions. We'll move through the four "books" à Kempis wrote — the examined life, the inner life, the pilgrim's life, and the table. We start with the question of what you're actually living for, and we end with the exchange that happens at communion. Every session is built around a Bible passage, a diagnostic question, and a short voice from the tradition — à Kempis as a conversation partner, never the centerpiece. Jesus is the centerpiece. Always.

A few hopes for you

I hope you'll come hungry. À Kempis only works on people who actually want to grow. If you're not particularly looking for transformation right now, this study probably won't do much for you. But if you **ARE** looking — if there's a part of you that's been quietly hungry for something more than what your spiritual life has been delivering — this guide will meet you there.

I hope you'll be honest. Not to me. Not to your group. But with yourself, before God. Most of these sessions ask one searching question — and the question only does its work if you let it. The leader notes

in the margin of every session keep returning to the same reminder: we don't fix anything by talking about it. We name it honestly and bring it to Jesus.

I hope you'll keep coming to the table. The whole journey lands at communion. If you've been treating communion as routine — a nice reminder to wedge in once a month — Wesley would say you've been settling for crumbs. Sessions Eleven and Twelve invite you back to a fuller vision of what's actually on offer when you come.

That vision is summed up in three lines I keep coming back to:

Come hungry.

Come expectant.

Come ready to meet Jesus.

That's the invitation of this study. I'm grateful you're walking it with us.

In Christ,

Pastor J. David Juliano

First Sebring Methodist Church

How to Use This Guide

The shape of a session, and the choices you have

Each session is designed to flex to the time you have. The same content can run for thirty, forty-five, or sixty minutes, depending on your group. Pick the format that fits your context and stick with it for the whole twelve weeks. Mixing formats week to week will make the rhythm harder for everyone.

Three Timing Options

30-MINUTE CORE

Use this for Sunday morning Sunday school slots, lunch hours, or any tight container. The thirty-minute core covers Gathering, Scripture, Opening Discussion, A Voice from the Tradition, Conversation, and Closing. It hits every essential beat of the session.

45-MINUTE EXTENSION

Adds a five-minute pair-and-share and a second discussion question after the core conversation. The pair-and-share opens up the room — people who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group. Don't skip it if you have the time.

60-MINUTE EXTENSION

Adds a second voice from the tradition and a more personal question. This is where the deepest conversation usually happens. If your group is willing and the trust is there, this is the version that lets the session do its full work.

In every session, clear navigation cues tell you when to stop and skip ahead to the Closing. You don't have to remember which version you're running — the document tells you.

The Shape of Every Session

Every session moves through the same eight beats, in the same order. Once you've led one, you'll know the shape of all twelve. That's by design.

1. Gathering (3 minutes)

Names and a one-sentence answer to a single warm-up question. Go first — your honest answer sets the tone.

2. Scripture (6–8 minutes)

Two or three Bible passages, read aloud by different voices, with thirty seconds of silence after the last reading. Don't fill the silence.

3. Opening Discussion (5 minutes)

A Bible-grounded question. This question stays in the Scripture you just read — it doesn't pull in À Kempis yet. We're letting the Word do its work first.

4. A Voice from the Tradition (3 minutes)

A short reading from À Kempis — always Pastor David's exact paraphrase from the book. Read it slowly. Don't rush. À Kempis is a conversation partner, not the centerpiece.

5. Conversation (10 minutes)

The diagnostic question. This is the question the whole session turns on. Ask it, then wait. Don't soften it. Don't fill the first ten seconds of silence.

6. Pair-and-Share + a Second Question (15 minutes, 45-min only)

Two minutes per person in pairs, then a second question for the whole group.

7. A Second Voice from the Tradition (15 minutes, 60-min only)

A second short reading and a more personal question.

8. Closing (4 minutes)

A practice for the week and a closing prayer. The closing banner appears in every session, regardless of which timing you're running. Don't skip it.

Reading the Leader Notes

Every session has a left-hand margin column labeled FOR THE LEADER. These notes are for you. They include suggestions for going first, follow-up questions if discussion stalls, warnings about questions that might land hard, and reminders about pacing. Read them before you facilitate. They're the difference between hosting and facilitating.

The notes are written in a slightly different voice from the body — more casual, more practical. They assume you're a real person leading real people, not a professional facilitator. Lean on them.

Optional: Reading the Book Alongside

Each session lists optional companion reading from The Christian's Pattern — a small range of chapters that match the session theme. Group members who want to go deeper can read those chapters during the week. People who don't read the chapters won't be lost; the sessions are designed to be self-contained.

If you have copies of the book to give out, encourage the reading. If you don't, don't worry about it. The sessions stand alone.

A Note About Scripture

Every session opens with substantial Scripture — usually two or three passages, sometimes more. We do this on purpose. À Kempis is a tradition voice, not Scripture. The Bible always speaks first. The Bible always speaks longest. The Bible always frames what À Kempis says next.

Have different members of the group read the passages aloud. Hearing different voices read changes the texture of the room. After the final reading, sit in silence for thirty seconds. This will feel awkward the first time. By session three, it will feel necessary.

A Note About À Kempis

À Kempis is not a saint to be venerated or a teacher to be quoted. He's a brother in the long line of the faithful, asking the same questions we're asking. The voice from the tradition is meant to remind us we're not making this up as we go. People have walked this road for centuries. Some of them wrote down what they learned. We get to listen.

If a particular voice from the tradition reading lands hard for someone in your group — if it stings, or surfaces something they've been carrying — don't rush past it. Sometimes the most pastoral move is just to let the room sit with what was said.

For Leaders

Hosting Your Group with Care

If you're reading this, you've agreed to lead a small group of people through twelve weeks of honest spiritual conversation. That matters more than you probably know.

You don't need to be a theologian. You don't need to have all the answers. You don't need to be at some advanced spiritual stage. The people you're leading don't need an expert. They need a host — someone who creates the room where honest things can be said and received.

Here's what hosting looks like in practice.

Setting the Tone

In the first session, the tone you set is the tone the group will keep. If you go first with a polished, churchy answer, the group will give you polished, churchy answers all twelve weeks. If you go first with something honest — something that costs you a little to say — the group will follow you there.

This doesn't mean oversharing or making the first session about you. It means picking the most honest version of your real answer to the gathering question and saying it out loud. Calibrate. But err on the side of more honest, not less.

Set one ground rule at the start of session one: what's shared in this room stays in this room. Then keep it.

Going First

The leader notes in nearly every session say "go first." This is a method, not a personality trait. Going first means: when a question is hard, when there's a long silence, when no one wants to volunteer, you answer first. You make it safe by being the first one to be honest.

If you can't answer a question honestly, that's a signal to take the question to God yourself before you bring it to the group next time. Don't fake it. People can tell.

Handling Silence

Silence is the most pastorally important tool you have. Most leaders fill it. Don't.

After the diagnostic question, the first ten seconds will feel like an eternity. Someone will speak. They won't speak if you fill the silence with rephrasing the question, adding qualifiers, or making suggestions. Just wait.

After the Scripture readings, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Time it on your watch the first few times if you need to. Thirty seconds in a small group feels longer than thirty seconds anywhere else. That's exactly why it works — it lets the Word actually land.

When Discussion Stalls

If discussion stalls, don't panic. Try one of these:

- Restate the question, exactly as written. Don't paraphrase — the question was carefully chosen.
- Use the follow-up question in the leader notes. Most sessions include one.
- Share your own answer. Then ask, "Anyone else?"
- Move to pair-and-share if you have a 45-minute or 60-minute slot. People who can't speak in a group of twelve can usually speak to one person.

If discussion still doesn't take off, that's okay. Some questions land in silence. Sometimes the silence IS the answer. Move on — the next session will be different.

When It Gets Heavy

These sessions are designed to surface things. Sooner or later, someone in your group will say something that catches you off guard — a confession, a grief, a question they've been carrying alone.

When that happens:

- Don't fix it. The fix is rarely yours to give.
- Thank them, briefly and sincerely. "Thank you for trusting us with that."
- Let the room hold it for a few seconds. Don't rush to the next question.
- Follow up privately after. A quick text or call later in the week is often more pastoral than anything you could say in the moment.

If something is genuinely beyond what a small group can hold — acute crisis, suicidal thoughts, abuse, marriage in collapse — connect them with Pastor David or with appropriate professional help. You're a host, not a counselor.

When One Person Dominates

Most groups have one person who fills silence with words. That's not a flaw in them — it's often nervousness, or genuine eagerness, or just personality. But it can shut down the rest of the room.

Try these, in order:

- After they share, look at someone else and ask: "Anyone else? What did this question stir up for you?" Don't name a person; let someone volunteer.
- If they jump in again, gently redirect: "Let's hear from a few more voices first — we'll come back to you."
- Talk to them privately after the second session. Thank them for their engagement. Ask them to help you draw out the quieter members. Most people respond well to being given a job.

When Someone Shrinks

Most groups also have a quieter person who never volunteers. Don't force them. Don't cold-call. Instead:

- Use pair-and-share. Quieter members often share beautifully one-on-one.

- Notice what they DO say. Reference it later. “Something Sarah said in week three has stayed with me.”
- Check in privately. “How’s the study landing for you?”

Don’t mistake silence for absence. Some of the most transformed people in your group will say almost nothing for twelve weeks.

When Someone Pushes Back

À Kempis is sharp. Sometimes a reading will provoke real disagreement. Someone may say, “That’s too harsh,” or “That’s not how I read the Bible,” or “I think À Kempis is wrong about that.”

Don’t defend À Kempis. Don’t dismiss the pushback. Both moves shut down honest conversation.

Instead, ask: “Say more. What’s landing wrong about it?” Then listen. Most pushback is actually a person processing something hard, not a theological argument. Receive it as the former unless they make clear it’s the latter.

If they make clear it’s the latter — if they’re genuinely arguing the theology — you’re free to say: “That’s a fair question. À Kempis isn’t Scripture. He’s a voice from the tradition we’re listening to. What does the Bible passage we read first say about this?” Bring it back to the Word.

Closing Well

End on time. Always. Even if conversation is going beautifully, end on time. People who get burned by going long won’t come back. People whose time is honored will.

The closing prayer in every session is meant to be prayed together. If your group is comfortable, invite spoken prayer requests after the written prayer. If your group is brand-new, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

After people leave, take five minutes to sit in the room. Notice who said what. Notice who didn’t speak. Notice what got skipped, what landed hard, what you want to come back to next week. This five minutes is the most underrated leadership move in the whole study.

Praying for Your Group

Pray for your group between sessions. Not just generally — specifically. Pray by name. Pray about what they shared. Pray for what they didn’t share. Pray that God will do in them what no facilitation skill can do.

This is the most important thing you do as a leader. Everything else — hosting, asking questions, holding silence — is in service of God doing his actual work in your people. He does that work in answer to prayer.

And pray for yourself. You’ll need it. Twelve weeks of honest spiritual conversation is harder than it looks. The same questions that work on your group will work on you. Let them.

Thank you for hosting.

Twelve Weeks at a Glance

The whole journey on one page

All twelve sessions, in order. Use this for orientation, for inviting people into the study, and for tracking where you are in the arc.

SESSION 1 · June 7

What Are You Actually Living For?

The Examined Life

Scripture: Luke 12:22–34; John 8:12

Companion reading: Book 1 · Ch. 1–6

SESSION 2 · June 14

The Most Countercultural Virtue

Humility in a Self-Promoting World

Scripture: Luke 14:1, 7–14; Philippians 2:3–8

Companion reading: Book 1 · Ch. 7–12

SESSION 3 · June 21

Finishing Well

Living with the End in Mind

Scripture: Hebrews 9:27–28; Luke 12:13–21; 2 Corinthians 5:6–10

Companion reading: Book 1 · Ch. 13–19

SESSION 4 · June 28

The Kingdom Is Within You

Where God Actually Dwells

Scripture: Luke 17:20–21; Matthew 6:5–13

Companion reading: Book 2 · Ch. 20–26

SESSION 5 · July 5

Do You Love Jesus or Just What He Gives You?

Loving Christ for His Own Sake

Scripture: John 6:60–69; Luke 14:27–33; Galatians 2:19–21

Companion reading: Book 2 · Ch. 27–33

SESSION 6 · July 12

When God Feels Distant

Speak, Lord — I’m Listening

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1–10; John 10:22–30

Companion reading: Book 3 · Ch. 34–37

SESSION 7 · July 19

God Is Enough

Contentment in Every Circumstance

Scripture: Psalm 73:21–28; Philippians 4:10–13; Hebrews 13:5–8

Companion reading: Book 3 · Ch. 38–49

SESSION 8 · July 26

Surviving the Dry Season

When the Well Runs Dry

Scripture: Psalm 22:1–11; Romans 8:22–28

Companion reading: Book 3 · Ch. 50–59

SESSION 9 · August 2

The Battle Within

The War Inside

Scripture: Romans 7:15–25; Galatians 5:16–25

Companion reading: Book 3 · Ch. 60–71

SESSION 10 · August 9

Put All Your Hope in God Alone

When God Is Your Only Hope

Scripture: Lamentations 3:19–26; Proverbs 3:5–8; Psalm 62:5–8

Companion reading: Book 3 · Ch. 72–75

SESSION 11 · August 16

Come Hungry

Recovering Wesley's Vision of Holy Communion

Scripture: Matthew 26:26–30; 1 Corinthians 11:23–29

Companion reading: Book 4 · Ch. 76–82

SESSION 12 · August 23

Give Me You

The Exchange that Happens at the Table

Scripture: John 6:32–40; Galatians 2:19–21; Romans 12:1–2

Companion reading: Book 4 · Ch. 83–90

Come hungry. Come expectant. Come ready to meet Jesus.

SESSION 1

What Are You Actually Living For?

The Examined Life

Primary Scripture: Luke 12:22–34; John 8:12

Companion reading (optional): The Christian's Pattern, Book 1, Chapters 1–6

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. Set the tone with your own brief, honest answer. Specific beats abstract — “I used to treasure being right on the internet” works better than “I used to treasure approval.”

FOR THE LEADER

Two passages, two different voices in the group. Luke 12:22–34 is the full setting for that famous line about treasure — Jesus is in the middle of teaching not to worry, pointing his disciples to ravens and wildflowers, and the climax is “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Read both passages slowly. Don't rush. After the second reading, sit with thirty seconds of silence. It will feel longer than it is. Don't fill it.

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

“What’s something you treasured ten years ago that you don’t treasure now?”

SCRIPTURE 6 minutes

Have two different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

Luke 12:22–34

Then Jesus said to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?”

“Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you — you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it.

For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

John 8:12

“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.’”

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the second reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Let people respond to what they just heard from Jesus before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: “What does it mean that ‘where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’? Is Jesus saying we control our hearts — or that our hearts follow whatever our actions are pointing at?”

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

“What stood out to you in these passages? What is Jesus pointing us toward — about treasure, about following him, about the difference between darkness and light?”

FOR THE LEADER

Thomas à Kempis was a 15th-century monk whose small book *The Imitation of Christ* became one of the most widely-read Christian books in history. John Wesley loved it so much he made his own English version in 1735.

The phrase “it’s all meaningless” is à Kempis deliberately echoing Solomon in *Ecclesiastes* — the wisest, richest king in the world looking back and saying it was all wind.

Read it slowly. Don’t rush.

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don’t soften it. Ask it, then wait.

The first ten seconds of silence will feel like an eternity. Don’t fill it. Someone will speak.

If the question lands too hard for some folks to answer aloud, that’s okay. Witness the silence. Don’t fix it. The question will keep working in them after they leave.

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

What good does it do to argue brilliantly about the Trinity if you lack humility and end up offending the very God you’re discussing? The truth is that impressive words don’t make you holy or righteous — a godly life makes you dear to God.

It’s all meaningless — everything is meaningless except loving God and serving him alone. It’s meaningless to set your heart on things that quickly fade away, instead of hurrying toward the place where joy lasts forever.

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question — it’s an uncomfortable one. Then read it aloud slowly:

“If someone examined your calendar and bank account this past month — no explanations allowed, just the raw data — what would they conclude you’re living for?”

Connect it back to Scripture: Jesus said where your treasure is, your heart will be also. Your treasure isn’t what you say you treasure. It’s what your time and money say you treasure.

Give the group time. Let people share what they’re willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

The second question moves from observation ("what would the data say?") to diagnosis ("what does my faith actually produce?"). It's a deeper cut. Some people won't answer aloud — that's fine. The question is doing its work whether they speak or not.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

"When in your life have you seen someone — maybe yourself — have all the right answers and still completely miss the point?"

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

"Does your faith produce increasing love for God and others, or is it just correct beliefs and religious activity?"

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 60-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading is from à Kempis's chapter 3 — "Living in Truth." He's drawing a hard line between knowledge that puffs up and knowledge that transforms. He's not anti-intellectual — he's anti-intellectualism-without-transformation.

Read it slowly.

John Wesley loved à Kempis so much that he made his own English edition in 1735, and he summed the whole message up in one line. That line follows the reading, and it lands like a punch.

The question that follows is the most personal of the night. Some people may not want to answer it aloud — and that's fine. The point is to plant it.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

"Blessed is the person whom truth itself teaches — not through symbols and passing words, but through direct, personal encounter. Our own opinions and assumptions often deceive us, and we see very little clearly. What's the point of debating obscure theological questions that won't even come up on judgment day?"

"If people worked as hard at rooting out their sins as they do at debating theological questions, there would be far less evil in the world! On judgment day we won't be examined on what we read, but on what we did; not on how eloquently we spoke, but on how faithfully we lived. Humble self-knowledge is a surer path to God than the deepest scholarship."

Then read this aloud:

John Wesley, who loved this little book so much that he made his own English version of it in 1735, summed up its whole message in one line: "An ounce of love is worth a pound of knowledge."

Then ask the group:

"Are you becoming more like Jesus, or just more informed about Jesus?"

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — **Session 2: The Most Countercultural Virtue**

Subtitle: *Humility in a Self-Promoting World*

Primary Scripture: Matthew 23:12; Philippians 2:3–8

Companion reading: Book 1, Chapters 7–12

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Look at your calendar. Move one thing this week to make room for what you actually say you believe.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

Lord Jesus, you promised that whoever follows you will not walk in darkness.

I confess I've been content with knowing about you rather than truly knowing you — with right beliefs but a cold heart.

Forgive me for pursuing empty things while neglecting what is eternal.

Give me a heart that loves you, not just a mind that understands theology.

Help me meditate on your life and let your character be formed in me.

Show me where I've been chasing vanity — wealth, status, pleasure, approval.

Reorder my loves so that loving and serving you becomes my chief endeavor.

Shine your light into every corner of my heart.

Deliver me from spiritual blindness.

Make me truly yours.

Amen.

SESSION 2

The Most Countercultural Virtue

Humility in a Self-Promoting World

Primary Scripture: Luke 14:1, 7–14; Philippians 2:3–8

Companion reading (optional): The Christian's Pattern, Book 1, Chapters 7–12

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. Don't be abstract — name a specific person and what specifically about them was humble. Maybe a parent, a teacher, a quiet old saint at church. Make it real, not theoretical.

FOR THE LEADER

Two passages, two different voices in the group. Read them slowly. Don't rush.

Luke 14 finds Jesus at a dinner party at a Pharisee's house. He's watching the guests scramble for the best seats. So he tells a parable that flips the whole social game upside down — the way to honor isn't to grab it, but to refuse it. Then he turns to his host and tells him to invite the people who can't pay him back.

Philippians 2:3–8 is what scholars call the Christ Hymn — Paul quoting an early Christian song about Jesus's downward journey from heaven to the cross. It's the gold standard for what real humility looks like.

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

“Who's the most humble person you've ever known? What did that look like?”

SCRIPTURE 7 minutes

Have two different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

Luke 14:1, 7–14

“One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched . . .

“When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ‘When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, “Give this person your seat.” Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, “Friend, move up to a better place.” Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt

After both readings, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Don't fill it.

themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

"Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be blessed at the resurrection of the righteous.'"

Philippians 2:3–8

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!"

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the second reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Let people respond to what they just heard from Jesus and from Paul before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: "Paul says Jesus 'made himself nothing.' What does it mean that the eternal Son of God made himself nothing? And what does it mean that Paul is asking us to have 'the same mindset as Christ Jesus'?"

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

"What stood out to you in these passages? What is Jesus showing us about humility in everyday life — and what is Paul showing us about Jesus?"

FOR THE LEADER

Thomas à Kempis was a 15th-century monk whose small book *The Imitation of Christ* became one of the most widely-read Christian books in history. John Wesley loved it so much he made his own English version in 1735.

This excerpt combines two of à Kempis's most pointed passages on humility — first about minding our own business, then about turning the diagnostic mirror on ourselves rather than others. He's doing here what humble people always do: pointing the spotlight back at the reader.

Read it slowly. Don't rush.

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don't soften it. Ask it, then wait.

The first ten seconds of silence will feel like an eternity. Don't fill it. Someone will speak.

If the question lands too hard for some folks to answer aloud, that's okay. Witness the silence. Don't fix it. The question will keep working in them after they leave.

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

"We'd have a lot more peace if we stopped sticking our noses into other people's words and actions — things that are none of our business. How does anyone expect to stay at peace when they're constantly in everyone else's affairs and never stop to examine their own?"

"Turn your eyes toward yourself and be careful not to judge others' actions. In judging others, we labor in vain, often make mistakes, and easily sin. But in judging and examining ourselves, we always labor fruitfully."

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question — it's an uncomfortable one. Then read it aloud slowly:

"When we're busy judging everyone else, we're usually avoiding looking at ourselves. What's something about yourself you've been avoiding by focusing on someone else's faults?"

Connect it back to Scripture: Jesus said the one who exalts himself will be humbled. Paul said to have the mind of Christ — who emptied himself, took the form of a servant, became obedient to death. Real humility starts with looking honestly inward. That's where the work is. Give the group time. Let people share what they're willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

The second question quotes John Wesley directly — a line from his journal that captures the heart of what à Kempis is teaching here. For a Methodist congregation reading Wesley's edition of à Kempis, this should land with extra weight. Wesley walked the talk: when in doubt, default to mercy.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

“When have your motives for doing something good been mixed — when you weren't sure if you were doing it out of love, or out of self-interest, or because it was just expected of you?”

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

John Wesley once wrote in his journal:

“I have often repented of judging too severely, but seldom of being too merciful.”

“What would change in your week if you took Wesley's wisdom seriously — if every uncertain judgment defaulted to mercy?”

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 60-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading reaches into another à Kempis chapter — his teaching on love as motive. He's exposing how often what looks like generous service is actually self-interest in disguise.

Read it slowly.

The question that follows is the most personal of the night. Some people may not want to answer it aloud — and that's fine. The point is to plant it. Let those who are ready speak; let those who aren't simply receive.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“Outward works without love accomplish nothing. But whatever is done out of genuine love — no matter how small or insignificant — is completely fruitful and valuable to God. God cares more about how much love motivates our actions than about how much we accomplish.

“Often what appears to be love is actually just natural inclination — self-interest, self-will, hope of reward, or desire for personal benefit masquerading as charity. These mixed motives are things we're rarely entirely free from.”

Then ask the group:

“How often have you done the right thing for the wrong reasons? Where in your life this past week could you tell — if you were honest — that your motives were mixed?”

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — **Session 3: Finishing Well**

Subtitle: *Living with the End in Mind*

Primary Scripture: Hebrews 9:27; 2 Corinthians 5:10

Companion reading: Book 1, Chapters 13–19

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Think of one person you've been quietly judging. Pray for them by name. And mean it.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

Lord Jesus, forgive me for how quickly I judge others while excusing myself.

My judgments are tainted by my preferences, my biases, my need to feel superior.

Teach me to turn my eyes toward myself first.

Help me examine my own heart with the same scrutiny I apply to everyone else.

Show me where I'm secretly seeking my own interests while pretending to serve you.

Give me compassion instead of criticism, mercy instead of judgment.

When my inclinations are opposed, let that reveal that you're not yet my ultimate desire.

Change my heart so that loving and serving you matters more than having things my way.

Amen.

SESSION 3

Finishing Well

Living with the End in Mind

Primary Scripture: Hebrews 9:27–28; Luke 12:13–21; 2 Corinthians 5:6–10

Companion reading (optional): The Christian’s Pattern, Book 1, Chapters 13–19

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. Don’t make this hypothetical — name a real person and what specifically about their final years or last days revealed something true. Maybe a parent, a grandparent, a saint of your church. Make it concrete. This question opens the door to talking about death without fear, which is exactly where this session needs to go.

FOR THE LEADER

Three passages this time, three different voices in the group. For a session about death and judgment, three biblical voices testifying together carries weight no single voice could.

Hebrews names the bare reality: we die once, then face judgment. Jesus tells a story about a man who didn’t see it coming. Paul tells us how to live so the day doesn’t catch us off guard.

Read them slowly. Don’t rush. After the third reading, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Don’t fill it.

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

“Tell us about someone you knew who ‘finished well’ — someone whose final years or last days revealed something true about how they’d lived.”

SCRIPTURE 8 minutes

Have three different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

Hebrews 9:27–28

“Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

Luke 12:13–21

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your

guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

2 Corinthians 5:6–10

“Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the third reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Three different voices just spoke into the room. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: “Jesus calls the rich man a fool. What made him a fool? He wasn’t evil — he was just storing up. He had a five-year plan. What’s the difference between wise planning and the kind of fool-storing Jesus is warning against?”

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt comes from à Kempis’s chapter on finishing well. It’s blunt. There’s no softening it, and we shouldn’t.

The medieval church practiced something called memento mori — “remember death.” It wasn’t morbid. It was clarifying. À Kempis is doing it here.

Read it slowly. Don’t rush.

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

“What did you hear in these passages? What does it actually look like — in everyday life — to live in a way that the end won’t catch you off guard?”

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“This life is almost over. Think carefully about where you stand for the next one. Here today, gone tomorrow — and forgotten faster than you’d expect. Live every day as if it’s your last. A clear conscience takes the fear out of death. Better to stop sinning than to spend your energy dreading the end.

“Tomorrow isn’t guaranteed — you don’t even know if you’ll see it. And what exactly does a long life accomplish if we barely grow? Length of life doesn’t automatically make us better people. Often it just gives us more time to accumulate regrets.”

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don't soften it. Ask it, then wait.

The first ten seconds of silence will feel like an eternity. Don't fill it. Someone will speak.

Some people will name funny small things — sports outcomes, social media, a grudge over a parking spot. Some will name bigger things — a career resentment, an old hurt they keep replaying. Both kinds of answers are honest and welcome. The point is to actually look at what we obsess over.

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question — it's an uncomfortable one. Then read it aloud slowly:

"What's something you're obsessing about right now — something that has real weight in your week — that you'd be embarrassed to be obsessing about on your deathbed?"

Connect it back to Scripture: Jesus called the rich man a fool not because he was evil but because he was busy storing up while his soul was about to be required of him. Paul says we'll all stand before the judgment seat. The writer of Hebrews says we die once and then face judgment. So what are you actually pouring your life into right now?

Give the group time. Let people share what they're willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

The second question is built around a story from The Christian's Pattern — a man crying out in anxiety, hearing God answer back. Setting up the story takes a moment, so read the leader cue carefully and don't rush.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

“What’s something you’ve been postponing — a relationship to mend, a phone call to make, an apology to offer, a step of faith to take — and what’s actually been holding you back?”

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Set up the question by reading this aloud:

There's a story in The Christian's Pattern about a man wrestling with terrible anxiety — caught between fear and hope — who threw himself down in prayer and cried, “If only I knew I would make it to the end!” And immediately he heard God answer, deep inside: “If you knew — what would you do? Do that. Do it now. And you'll be safe.”

Then ask the group:

“If you knew — with absolute certainty — that you would persevere with God to the end, that you would make it home . . . what would you do today that you're not doing? And what's stopping you from doing it anyway?”

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 60-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading reaches into à Kempis's chapter on facing judgment. He's not trying to terrify anyone — he's describing the great reversal: at the end, the people the world overlooked stand tall, and the things people chase now will be exposed as empty.

Read it slowly.

The question that follows uses Steve Jobs's famous Stanford line as a way in. It's actually startling to find a tech CEO and a 15th-century monk saying nearly the same thing.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“Grieve your sins now so you can stand with confidence on that day. Because the righteous will stand tall in front of the very people who looked down on them and laughed. The poor and the humble will hold their heads high. The proud will be terrified.

“That’s the day it becomes obvious who was actually wise — the ones who were willing to look foolish and be written off for Christ’s sake. Every hardship endured patiently will turn to joy. The people who denied themselves will be far happier than those who lived for pleasure.”

Then read this aloud:

*Steve Jobs, in his Stanford commencement address, said:
“Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure — these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.”*

Then ask the group:

“What are the ‘big choices’ in your life right now — the ones you’re wrestling with, postponing, or avoiding — that the tool of remembering your own death could clarify?”

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — **Session 4: The Kingdom Is Within You**

Subtitle: *Where God Actually Dwells*

Primary Scripture: Luke 17:21; Matthew 6:6

Companion reading: Book 2, Chapters 20–26

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Write down one thing death would clarify for you. Then live today like it's already clear.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

Lord, I don't like thinking about death. I avoid it, distract myself from it.

But I'm going to die. And I don't know when.

Help me live with that awareness — not in fear, but in wisdom.

Let remembering death clarify my priorities.

Forgive me for living like I have infinite time — for putting off repentance, delaying obedience.

Today is all I have.

Give me the wisdom to live now as I'll wish I had at the end.

Help me invest in eternal things rather than chasing temporary success.

Keep my conscience clear so I won't fear death.

Make me ready — not someday, but today.

Amen.

SESSION 4

The Kingdom Is Within You

Where God Actually Dwells

Primary Scripture: Luke 17:20–21; Matthew 6:5–13

Companion reading (optional): The Christian's Pattern, Book 2, Chapters 20–26

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. Tell a real story — not abstract theology, just a place or a moment when God felt close. Maybe a hospital room, a hike, a sleepless night, a moment in worship. Concrete beats lofty here. Stories invite stories.

FOR THE LEADER

Two passages this time, two different voices in the group. Both are Jesus speaking, but to very different audiences — Pharisees who think the kingdom is coming with signs they can see, and disciples who need to learn how prayer actually works.

Luke 17 is short and direct: stop looking out there. The kingdom is in your midst. Matthew 6 is the practical sequel: when you pray, go inward — your Father is there in secret, already waiting. The Lord's Prayer at the end is itself a prayer to a Father who sees in secret.

Read both passages slowly. Don't rush. After the second

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

“Tell us about a time you experienced God most clearly — a moment, a place, an encounter. Where were you, and what was happening inside you?”

SCRIPTURE 7 minutes

Have two different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

Luke 17:20–21

“Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, ‘The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, “Here it is,” or “There it is,” because the kingdom of God is in your midst.’”

Matthew 6:5–13

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you

reading, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Don't fill it.

pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“This, then, is how you should pray:

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’”

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the second reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Both passages just spoke into the room. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: “The Pharisees were waiting for the kingdom to arrive with signs and parades. Jesus says it’s already in their midst. What does it mean that they were missing what was right in front of them — and what might that mean for us?”

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt is from à Kempis’s opening of Book Two — the chapter literally titled “The Inner Life.” He’s building directly on the passages we just heard. Luke 17:21 and John 14:23 are both in the background here.

The image of Christ as Bridegroom comes from Revelation 3:20 — “I stand at the door and knock.” À Kempis is saying: he’s already at your door. Will you open it and clear the room?

Read it slowly. Don’t rush.

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

“What did you hear Jesus pointing to in these passages? Where does he say the kingdom is — and where does he say true prayer happens?”

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“The kingdom of God is within you,’ says the Lord. Turn to the Lord with all your heart, leave this miserable world behind, and your soul will find rest. Learn to turn away from outward things and give yourself to inward things, and you’ll see the kingdom of God come within you.

“He often visits the inward person, has sweet conversations with them, gives pleasant comfort, much peace, and amazing intimacy. Come, faithful soul, prepare your heart for this Bridegroom. Give Christ room and deny entrance to everything else. When you have Christ, you’re rich — he’s enough.”

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don't soften it. Ask it, then wait.

The image of "tenants" is helpful because it makes the abstract concrete. We don't usually think of ambition as a roommate. But that's exactly what à Kempis is naming: there are things living in us, taking up space, eating our groceries, that have no business being there.

Some people will be quick to name a tenant. Others will go quiet because they've never named the thing before. Both are real responses. Don't fill the silence.

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question — it's an uncomfortable one. Then read it aloud slowly:

"Christ comes to dwell in us — but we've installed other tenants in the place that should belong to him: ambition, approval-seeking, comfort-chasing, worry, control. Which of those tenants is taking up the most room in you right now?"

Connect it back to Scripture: Jesus said your Father sees what is done in secret. He sees the actual interior — not the version you show on Sunday morning. The kingdom isn't out there to be found. It's in here, waiting for room.

Give the group time. Let people share what they're willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

This pair-and-share question asks people to name what's LOUD inside them. The interior life is where this whole session lives, and most people aren't used to talking about it. Pairs make it safer to begin.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

“What’s the noisiest thing in your interior life right now — the worry that won’t stop, the anger that keeps replaying, the desire that pulls at you? What’s loud inside you?”

Bring the group back together. Don’t ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Read this aloud:

À Kempis writes: “First, keep yourself in peace, and then you can bring peace to others. A peaceable person does more good than someone who’s well educated. A hot-headed person turns even good into evil and easily believes the worst.”

“Where in your life are you trying to bring peace, fix things, or sort other people out — while ignoring your own interior chaos? What would it look like to deal with your own peace first?”

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 60-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading reaches into à Kempis's chapter on loving Jesus above all. He's naming something we don't want to hear: Jesus refuses to be loved alongside other things. He won't share us. He won't be one love among many.

Read it slowly.

The question that follows is the hardest of the night. It exposes how often we add Jesus to our existing devotions rather than letting him replace them. Some people may not want to answer aloud — and that's fine. The point is to plant it.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“Blessed are those who understand what it is to love Jesus and deny themselves for his sake. You must give up what you love for Jesus — for he must be loved above all. The love of created things is deceptive and unreliable; the love of Jesus is faithful and constant.

“Stay close to Jesus both in life and death, and trust his faithfulness — when all others fail, he alone can help you. Jesus won't share you with anyone else — he wants your whole heart and will rule there as king. Any love you give to anyone or anything other than Jesus is wasted.”

Then read this aloud:

It's easy to say we love Jesus. The harder question is whether we love him alone. We want Jesus plus our comfort. Jesus plus our success. Jesus plus our approval from others. Jesus plus whatever else we're clinging to. But à Kempis says he won't share us — he wants the whole house, not a guest room.

Then ask the group:

“What's the ‘Jesus plus’ you're holding onto right now — the thing you can't imagine being without, even if you knew loving Jesus alone meant letting it go?”

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — *Session 5: Do You Love Jesus or Just What He Gives You?*

Subtitle: Loving Christ for His Own Sake

Primary Scripture: Luke 14:27; Galatians 2:20

Companion reading: Book 2, Chapters 27–33

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Spend five minutes with God not seeking anything from him. Just be with him. No agenda.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

Lord Jesus, the kingdom of God is within me, but I keep looking for it everywhere else.

I chase outward things while neglecting the interior life. Forgive me.

Come and make your home in me — but help me prepare a worthy dwelling first.

Evict my little idols, my comfort-seeking, my need for approval, my clinging to control.

Teach me not to place my ultimate trust in people, who change and disappoint, but in you alone who stand by me faithfully to the end.

Help me see things as they truly are, not as they are valued by others.

Purify my heart from disordered attachment to created things,

and make me an interior person, deeply united with you.

Amen.

SESSION 5

Do You Love Jesus or Just What He Gives You?

Loving Christ for His Own Sake

Primary Scripture: John 6:60–69; Luke 14:27–33; Galatians 2:19–21

Companion reading (optional): The Christian’s Pattern, Book 2, Chapters 27–33

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. Don’t make this abstract — name a real person. A child, a parent, an old friend, a saint of your church. Loving someone for who they are (rather than for what they do for us) is not as common as we like to pretend, and naming it out loud is a way of training the heart to recognize it.

FOR THE LEADER

Three passages this time, three different voices in the group.

John 6 is the moment of truth in Jesus’s ministry. After he says hard things about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, many disciples turn back. He looks at the Twelve and asks, ‘Do you also want to leave?’ Peter’s answer is the heart of pure love.

Luke 14 is Jesus telling crowds the cost of following him — carry the cross, count the cost, give up everything. Galatians 2 is Paul’s answer to all of that: he’s already

GATHERING *3 minutes*

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

“Tell us about someone you love unconditionally — someone you love for who they are, not for what they do for you.”

SCRIPTURE *8 minutes*

Have three different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

John 6:60–69

“On hearing it, many of his disciples said, ‘This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, ‘Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you — they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to

*been crucified with Christ,
and now Christ lives in him.*

*Read all three slowly. Don't
rush. After the third reading,
sit with thirty seconds of
silence. Don't fill it.*

*say, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the
Father has enabled them.'*

*From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer
followed him.*

'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve.

*Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You
have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to
know that you are the Holy One of God.'*

Luke 14:27–33

*"And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot
be my disciple.*

*'Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit
down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to
complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to
finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, "This
person began to build and wasn't able to finish."*

*'Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king.
Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten
thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with
twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation
while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of
peace.*

*'In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything
you have cannot be my disciples.'*

Galatians 2:19–21

*"For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for
God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but
Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in
the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not
set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained
through the law, Christ died for nothing!"*

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the third reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Three voices just spoke into the room. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: “Peter said, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’ Notice what he didn’t say. He didn’t say ‘because following you is rewarding’ or ‘because we feel close to you.’ He said ‘where else would we go?’ What’s the difference between those reasons for following Jesus?”

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt is from à Kempis’s chapter literally titled “Few Truly Love the Cross.” He’s naming the kind of love that fails the test — love that’s really about comfort. We follow Jesus because of what we get from him. None of those things are wrong by themselves. But when they become the reason we follow him, we’ve made Jesus a means to an end.

Read it slowly. Don’t rush.

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

“What did you hear in these passages? Why do you think so many disciples in John 6 turned back — and what kept the Twelve from leaving with them?”

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“Jesus has many people who love his heavenly kingdom, but few who are willing to carry his cross. He has many who want comfort, but few who will accept suffering. Many want to celebrate with him, but few will fast with him. Everyone wants to rejoice with him, but few will suffer anything for him. Many love Jesus as long as things go well. Many praise and bless him as long as they’re receiving comfort. But when it seems Jesus pulls back and feels far away for a while, they either start complaining or fall apart.

“But those who love Jesus for Jesus — not for the comfort he gives — bless him in all tribulation and heartache, just as much as in times of great comfort. Even if he never gave them comfort, they would still praise him and give him thanks.”

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don't soften it. Ask it, then wait.

The first ten seconds of silence will feel like an eternity. Don't fill it. Someone will speak.

Some will name a season of dryness they're in right now. Some will name a season they came through years ago. Both are real and valuable. The question isn't designed to shame anyone for drifting — most of us have. The question is whether we've come back, and what brought us back.

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question — it's an uncomfortable one. Then read it aloud slowly:

"What happens to your faith when prayer feels dry, when God seems distant, when the community disappoints, when the blessing doesn't come? Do you keep following — or do you quietly drift?"

Connect it back to Scripture: many of Jesus's disciples turned back when his teaching got hard. Peter stayed — not because he understood everything but because he had nowhere else to go. "Lord, to whom shall we go?" That's the heart of pure love. It loves Jesus when he gives nothing because there is no one else.

Give the group time. Let people share what they're willing to share.

↓ *For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing* ↓

↓ *For 45-minute sessions, continue below* ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

This pair-and-share asks people to name a season of desolation — when even the spiritual comforts (worship, prayer, reading) didn't reach the place that hurt. Most of us have one of these stories. They're not failures of faith. They're where faith actually gets formed.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

“When has all your usual comfort failed — when even the spiritual comforts (prayer, music, books, friends) didn't reach the place that hurt? What did you do?”

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Read this aloud:

“Finding Jesus is finding the greatest treasure there is. Losing Jesus is losing more than everything. The poorest person on earth is the one without Jesus. The richest is the one close to him. Of everything you hold dear, let Jesus be what you hold dearest. Love everyone — but love them for Jesus' sake, and love Jesus for who he is, not for what he gives you.”

“What does it look like, practically, to love Jesus for who he is and not for what he gives you? Where in your life are you mixing the two up?”

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ *For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing* ↓

↓ *For 60-minute sessions, continue below* ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading is from à Kempis's chapter "The Cross Finds You." He's naming a paradox: the cross follows you wherever you go, because you carry it with you. You can change jobs, change cities, change relationships — and find the same cross waiting on the other side.

Read it slowly.

The line that lands hardest: "If you carry the cross willingly, it will carry you." Sit with that for a moment before reading the question. The unwilling cross crushes you. The willing cross holds you up.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

"The cross is always there, always waiting. You can't outrun it. Wherever you go, you take yourself with you — and you'll always find yourself there too. High or low, inside or outside, whichever direction you turn — the cross is there. And patience is required everywhere you go if you want the crown that lasts.

"If you carry the cross willingly, it will carry you. If you carry it unwillingly, you make it heavier — but you still carry it. Put one cross down and another shows up, probably a harder one."

Then ask the group:

"What's the cross you're carrying right now? Are you carrying it willingly — or are you fighting it the whole way?"

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — *Session 6: When God Feels Distant*

Subtitle: *Speak, Lord — I'm Listening*

Primary Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:9; John 10:27

Companion reading: Book 3, Chapters 34–37

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Be honest — are you following Jesus for Jesus, or for what comes with him? Sit with that question.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

Jesus, I have to be honest — I love the comfort more than the cross.

I love you when things are going well and struggle when they're not.

I follow you for what I get from you more than I follow you for you.

Forgive me for that.

Deepen my love.

Strip away the self-interest mixed in with my devotion.

I want to be the kind of person who blesses you in the hard times as freely as in the good ones — who would follow you even if you never gave me another comfortable moment.

Teach me to love you for you alone.

Amen.

SESSION 6

When God Feels Distant

Speak, Lord — I'm Listening

Primary Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1–10; John 10:22–30

Companion reading (optional): The Christian's Pattern, Book 3, Chapters 34–37

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. Don't make this hypothetical or theological — just name a real season. Maybe it was after a loss, or during a difficult life transition, or just a stretch of months when prayer felt flat. Be honest. This question opens the door for everyone else to be honest too.

FOR THE LEADER

Two passages, two different voices in the group. Read them slowly. Don't rush.

1 Samuel 3 opens with a striking line: "In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions." That's the When-God-Feels-Distant experience right there — even in the temple, even among the faithful. And then God speaks. To a boy. Three times before he's recognized.

John 10 is Jesus at the temple at the Festival of Dedication. People are pressing him to say plainly whether he's the Messiah. He answers by talking about who recognizes

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

"Tell us about a season in your life when God felt silent or distant. What was happening, and how long did it last?"

SCRIPTURE 7 minutes

Have two different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

1 Samuel 3:1–10

"The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.

"One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel.

"Samuel answered, 'Here I am.' And he ran to Eli and said, 'Here I am; you called me.'

him — his sheep listen to his voice.

After both readings, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Don't fill it.

“But Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down.’ So he went and lay down.

“Again the Lord called, ‘Samuel!’ And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’ ‘My son,’ Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down.’

“Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.

“A third time the Lord called, ‘Samuel!’ And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’

“Then Eli realized that the Lord was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, ‘Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

“The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’”

John 10:22–30

“Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon’s Colonnade. The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’

“Jesus answered, ‘I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.’”

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the second reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: “Samuel had to be told three times before he recognized God’s voice. Why do you think God didn’t just speak more clearly the first time? What might he be doing in the not-yet-recognized phase?”

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt is from Book Three of The Christian’s Pattern — the chapter “Hearing God’s Voice.” Book Three shifts into a dialogue format: a conversation between Christ and the Christian soul.

Notice the rhythm — a series of beatitudes, each one a different blessing on the soul that has learned to listen. À Kempis is doing what Jesus did at the Sermon on the Mount: blessing what looks unimpressive from the outside.

Read it slowly. Let the rhythm carry. Don’t rush.

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

“What did you hear in these passages? Notice that Samuel kept hearing the voice but didn’t recognize it as God’s. And Jesus says his sheep recognize his voice. What’s the difference between hearing God’s voice and recognizing it?”

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“I will listen to what the Lord God speaks within me. Blessed is the soul that hears the Lord speaking within and receives his words of comfort. Blessed are those ears that receive God’s whisper and don’t listen to the world’s whispers. Blessed indeed are those ears that don’t listen to external voices, but to the truth which teaches inwardly. Blessed are the eyes which are closed to external things but open to internal ones. Blessed are they that make time to be with God and free themselves from all worldly distractions.

“Consider these things, my soul, and close the door on your worldly desires, that you may hear what the Lord God speaks in you.”

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don't soften it. Ask it, then wait.

The first ten seconds of silence will feel like an eternity. Don't fill it. Someone will speak.

Most people will name external noise first — phones, news, podcasts, schedule. That's real and worth naming. But press in: there's usually an internal noise underneath — worry, ambition, resentment, fantasy, performance. The internal noise is harder to name. That's where the real conversation lives.

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question — it's an honest one. Then read it aloud slowly:

"Most of us have felt seasons where God has felt distant or silent. When you've been in that place, what's filled the silence? What were you listening to instead?"

Connect it back to Scripture: in Samuel's day, the word of the Lord was rare — and yet God WAS speaking. Samuel just kept missing it. Jesus says his sheep recognize his voice — implying many don't, even when they're standing right in front of him. The voice may not be the missing thing. The listening may be.

Give the group time. Let people share what they're willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

This pair-and-share asks people to remember the last time they actually waited for God to speak. Most can't remember a recent time — and that's the point. We've forgotten how. Naming it is the first step.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

“When was the last time you actually waited to hear God speak — not just prayed, not just read the Bible, but waited in silence with no agenda? What happened?”

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Read this aloud:

“Human teachers may speak words, but they cannot give the Spirit. They speak well, but if you're silent, they don't set the heart on fire. They teach the letter, but you open the meaning. They reveal mysteries, but you unlock their meaning. They declare your commandments, but you help us fulfill them. They show the way, but you give strength to walk in it.”

“Where in your spiritual life have you been living off other people's words about God — sermons, podcasts, books, conversations — without God himself speaking to you directly? What would change if you stopped settling for secondhand?”

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ *For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing* ↓

↓ *For 60-minute sessions, continue below* ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading is the famous “Speak, Lord” prayer from chapter 35 — picking up Samuel’s line from 1 Samuel 3:9 and praying it back to God. The contrast with Israel at Sinai is striking. When God came down on the mountain, the people said: ‘Speak to us, but don’t let God speak to us, or we’ll die.’ They wanted a buffer. À Kempis is praying the opposite — not me, Lord. Speak to me directly. Not arrogance. Hunger.

Read it slowly.

The question that follows is the hardest of the night. It surfaces the gap between what we already know God is asking and what we’re actually doing about it. We don’t need new revelation. We need obedience to the revelation we’ve already had.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. I am your servant; give me understanding so I may know your testimonies. Don’t let Moses speak to me, nor any of the prophets. But you speak, Lord God — you alone without them can perfectly instruct me, but they without you accomplish nothing.

“Don’t let me hear the word but not do it, know it but not love it, believe it but not obey it — or it will condemn me. Speak, therefore, Lord, your servant is listening; for you have the words of eternal life. Speak to me, to the comfort of my soul and to the transformation of my whole life.”

Then ask the group:

“Forget asking what God might say next. What’s the thing you already know God is asking of you — the thing you’ve been waiting for him to repeat in louder words — that you haven’t actually done?”

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — **Session 7: God Is Enough**

Subtitle: Contentment in Every Circumstance

Primary Scripture: Psalm 73:25–26; Philippians 4:11–13

Companion reading: Book 3, Chapters 38–49

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Set a timer for five minutes. Sit in silence. No agenda — just listen. See what happens.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

Lord, I don't want secondhand knowledge of you. I want you to speak.

Thank you for teachers, preachers, mentors — all those who water the seed.

But without you making it grow, all their words are just noise.

They can teach the letter, but only you can open up the meaning.

They can tell me your commandments, but only you can help me actually follow them.

Forgive me for being satisfied with external warning without internal transformation.

Speak to me on the inside.

Set my heart on fire.

Give me not just information but transformation.

Speak, Lord — I'm listening. You have the words of eternal life.

Amen.

SESSION 7

God Is Enough

Contentment in Every Circumstance

Primary Scripture: Psalm 73:21–28; Philippians 4:10–13; Hebrews 13:5–8

Companion reading (optional): The Christian's Pattern, Book 3, Chapters 38–49

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. This is a contentment session, but the gathering question stays light. Most of us have caught ourselves chasing the next thing — the new car, the right house, the bigger title, the next experience. Naming it without judgment lets the rest of the conversation breathe. People will be more honest later if you set the tone of honest-without-shame here.

FOR THE LEADER

Three passages, three different voices in the group. Read them slowly. Don't rush.

Psalm 73 is Asaph's testimony. He spent the whole psalm wrestling with envy of the prosperous wicked, then turned a corner: "as for me, it is good to be near God." That's the moment contentment lands.

Philippians is Paul writing from prison. He says contentment is something he had to learn — not a personality trait, not a

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

"What's something you wanted badly five or ten years ago — something you got — that you barely think about now?"

SCRIPTURE 8 minutes

Have three different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

Psalm 73:21–28

"When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

"Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

"Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I

circumstance, but a learned secret.

Hebrews 13 grounds contentment in God's presence: 'Be content because God said never will I leave you.' That's the foundation Asaph and Paul are both standing on.

After all three readings, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Don't fill it.

have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds."

Philippians 4:10–13

"I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

Hebrews 13:5–8

"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?' Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the third reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Three voices just spoke into the room. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: "Paul says he LEARNED contentment — it wasn't a personality trait or a circumstance. What might that learning have looked like for him? And what would it look like for us?"

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

"What did you hear in these passages? What do all three voices — Asaph, Paul, and the writer of Hebrews — agree on about where real contentment comes from?"

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt is from the chapter literally titled “God Himself Is Better Than Anything He Gives.” À Kempis is doing what worship does at its best: lifting our gaze past every gift to the Giver.

Notice the rhythm — the long list of ‘above all health, above all glory, above all power’. Don’t rush past it. Let each phrase land. The list is the point: he’s naming the things we actually trust to satisfy us, and then putting God above every one of them.

Read it slowly. Don’t rush.

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don’t soften it. Ask it, then wait.

Some people will name something concrete — retirement, a house, a kid getting their act together, a relationship. Some will name something more diffuse — ‘more peace,’ ‘less stress,’ ‘more energy.’ Both are real answers.

The follow-up question (‘what would fill the blank after that?’) usually surprises people. Most of us have lived through getting the thing we were sure would satisfy and discovering the next thing was waiting in line behind it. Naming that pattern out loud is half the work of breaking it.

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“Above everything and in everything, my soul, you must always rest in the Lord — for he is the eternal rest of the saints. Let me rest in you, gracious and loving Jesus, above all created things: Above all health and beauty, above all glory and honor, above all power and dignity, above all knowledge and wisdom, above all riches and skills, above all joy and happiness, above all hope and promise, above all merit and desire.

“For you, my Lord God, are best above all. You alone are most high, you alone are most powerful, you alone are completely sufficient, you alone are sweet and full of comfort. And therefore, anything you give me besides yourself, or reveal about yourself, or promise me — while you yourself are not fully seen and possessed — it’s all too little. For my heart cannot truly rest unless it rests in you.”

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question. Then read it aloud slowly:

“Most of us live by a quiet formula: ‘If I just had _____, then I’d be okay.’ What’s filling that blank for you right now? And if you got it tomorrow — what’s the next thing that would fill the blank after that?”

Connect it back to Scripture: Asaph wrote, ‘Earth has nothing I desire besides you.’ Paul learned the secret of being content in any circumstance. The writer of Hebrews said: be content because God said ‘Never will I leave you.’ All three of them broke the formula. What we keep chasing won’t satisfy. What we keep wanting won’t hold. The presence of God is the only ground that doesn’t shift.

Give the group time. Let people share what they’re willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

This pair-and-share invites people to tell a being-brought-back story. Most of us have one. Telling them aloud is itself a form of contentment-making — it reminds us that what we're really hungry for, we've already been given.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

"Tell each other about a time you wandered far from God and were brought back. What did the bringing-back look like?"

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Read this aloud:

"Say this in every situation: 'Lord, if this pleases you, make it happen. Lord, if it brings you honor, do this in your name. But if you know this will harm me and isn't good for my soul, take this desire away from me.' Whatever you desire should be asked for with reverence for God and a humble heart. And above all, you should surrender completely and say: 'Lord, you know what's best. Do whatever you want. Give what you want, how much you want, and when you want.'"

"What's a desire you've been holding tightly — something you really want — that you've been afraid to bring to God this way? What would change if you actually surrendered it to him?"

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 60-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading is from chapter 47 — “All Our Cares Should Be Cast on God.” It’s the most surrendered prayer in the whole book. Not resignation — surrender. There’s a world of difference between ‘I give up’ and ‘I trust you.’

Read it slowly.

The question that follows is the hardest of the night. It surfaces what we’re actually fighting against — what bitter thing we’ve been refusing to receive from God’s hand. Some people will name it quickly. Some won’t name anything aloud. Both responses are honest. Don’t fill the silence.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“Lord, you’re right. You care for me more than I can care for myself. Anyone who doesn’t give all their worries to you is on shaky ground. Lord, keep me committed to you. Then do with me whatever you want. Whatever you do with me can only be good.

“If you want me to be in darkness, I bless you. And if you want me to be in light, I bless you. If you comfort me, I bless you. And if you allow suffering, I still bless you.

“Lord, I’ll willingly suffer whatever you allow to happen to me. I’ll accept from you both good and bad, sweet and bitter, joyful and painful — and thank you for everything that happens to me.”

Then ask the group:

“What’s the bitter thing in your life right now — the thing you keep wishing weren’t there? Are you receiving it as from God’s hand, or are you fighting him every step?”

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — **Session 8:**
Surviving the Dry Season

Subtitle: *When the Well Runs Dry*

Primary Scripture: Psalm 22:1–2;
Romans 8:28

Companion reading: Book 3, Chapters
50–59

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Notice one moment when something besides God is promising satisfaction. Don't bite. Come back.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

Jesus, you're better than anything else I could have or achieve.

Better than success, money, health, happiness — better than anything this world offers.

I'm sorry for treating you like a vending machine, wanting your gifts more than you.

Create in me a deeper hunger for you yourself.

Help me stop chasing the next thing that promises satisfaction but never delivers.

I want you — not just your blessings.

Come close; without you nothing else brings real joy.

Thank you that you don't make me grovel — when I reach for you, you're already there.

You're worth everything.

Amen.

SESSION 8

Surviving the Dry Season

When the Well Runs Dry

Primary Scripture: Psalm 22:1–11; Romans 8:22–28

Companion reading (optional): The Christian's Pattern, Book 3, Chapters 50–59

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. Be honest — no need to make this triumphant. The honest truth is most of us have a story of just hanging on. The point isn't to wrap it in a bow but to name what actually got you through. Specifics matter here. Maybe a friend, a Psalm, a habit, a song. Concrete beats lofty.

FOR THE LEADER

Two passages, two different voices in the group. Read them slowly. Don't rush. Don't soften.

Psalm 22 opens with the line Jesus prayed from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' The honest darkness comes first. But notice what David does — right in the middle of the lament he keeps turning back: 'Yet you are enthroned... yet you brought me out of the womb.' He doesn't resolve the lament. He holds the lament and the trust together.

Romans 8 is Paul writing into the same darkness from the

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

"Tell us about the longest hard season you've walked through. How did you survive it — what got you through?"

SCRIPTURE 8 minutes

Have two different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

Psalm 22:1–11

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.

"Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

"But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults,

other side of resurrection. He says creation is groaning. We're groaning. We don't even know what to pray. But the Spirit prays for us through wordless groans. That's the dry season picture: we're groaning, the Spirit is interceding, and God is working all things together for good.

After both readings, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Don't fill it.

shaking their heads. 'He trusts in the Lord,' they say, 'let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.'

"Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God."

Romans 8:22–28

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God."

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the second reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Two voices just spoke into the room. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: "Paul says we don't even know what to pray for in the dry season — but the Spirit prays for us through wordless groans. What does it change to know that the Spirit is praying when we can't?"

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

"What did you hear in these passages? Notice what David does in Psalm 22 — he doesn't smooth the lament over, but in the middle of it he keeps remembering: 'Yet you are enthroned... yet you brought me out of the womb.' What does that 'yet' do?"

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt is from chapter 57, "God Will Restore Your Strength." It's Christ speaking directly into the dry season. He names the problem first — we're too slow to turn to prayer; we try everything else first — and then says something startling: 'When you think you're farthest from me, I'm often nearest to you.'

That line is the heart of the whole session. Read it slowly. Don't rush past it.

Read it slowly. Don't rush.

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don't soften it. Ask it, then wait.

People will name a range of comforts — phones, food, alcohol, work, scrolling, planning, fixing other people, fixing themselves. Some answers will be funny. Some will be heavy. Receive both honestly. The question isn't designed to shame anyone. Most of us have a default reach. Naming it is the first step in interrupting it.

If discussion stalls, try the follow-up: "What is that distraction actually trying to do for you? What is it trying to substitute for?"

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

"My child, I am the Lord who gives strength when you're going through hard times. Come to me when things aren't going well. Here's what blocks heavenly comfort: you're too slow to turn to prayer. Before you pray to me, you try everything else first — other comforts, external distractions. But now — catch your breath after the storm and get your strength back in my mercy. I'm here to fix everything, not just restore it but make it even better.

"Is anything too hard for me? Am I someone who promises but doesn't deliver? Where is your faith? Stand firm and stay steady. Wait for me. Wait for me. I will come and heal you. Don't let your heart be troubled or afraid. Trust me and rely on my mercy. When you think you're farthest from me, I'm often nearest to you. When you think almost everything is lost, that's often when the greatest opportunity for growth is right there."

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question. Then read it aloud slowly:

"When the well runs dry — when prayer feels flat, when life feels hard — what's the first thing you reach for? What's the comfort you turn to before you turn to God?"

Connect it back to Scripture: David in Psalm 22 doesn't reach for distraction. He reaches for God — even when the only words he has are 'why have you forsaken me?' Paul says when we don't even know what to pray, the Spirit prays for us through wordless groans. The dry season isn't solved by escape. It's solved by staying — reaching for the one we can't feel, with the words we don't have.

Give the group time. Let people share what they're willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

This pair-and-share goes one layer deeper than the conversation question — underneath the distraction is usually a longing. Naming the longing makes the distraction less powerful, because we can finally bring the longing to the only place it can be satisfied.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

"Tell each other about a distraction you reach for when life gets hard. What is it actually trying to do for you? What's the longing underneath it?"

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Read this aloud:

"Where you are won't help you much if you don't have the right attitude. You might change your circumstances, but you won't actually change yourself. When a chance to change comes and you take it, you'll find not only what you were running from, but a whole lot more."

"Where have you been trying to fix something internal by rearranging something external — changing the job, the city, the relationship, the schedule — hoping it would deal with the thing inside? What's the inside thing you've been trying to outrun?"

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 60-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading is from chapter 56 — “How to Call on God When You’re Struggling.” It’s the most raw, honest prayer in this part of the book. Not polished. Not tidy. Just an honest cry.

Read it slowly.

The question that follows reframes the dry-season question. Most of us, when we’re struggling, ask ‘why?’ À Kempis suggests a different question — ‘what are you doing in this, Lord?’ The first question demands an explanation. The second invites a relationship.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“Lord, thank you — even though you’ve allowed this trouble to come to me. I can’t escape it on my own. I need to run to you for help so you can turn this into something good for me. Lord, I’m struggling right now. I’m really troubled by what I’m going through. But maybe this is why I’m here — so you can be glorified when you lift me up from rock bottom. Lord, please save me. What can I do? Where can I go without you?”

“And now, in the middle of all this, what should I say? Lord, your will be done. I deserve this. I need to endure it. And I hope I can endure it patiently until the storm passes and things get better. But you can take this away from me or make it less intense, so it doesn’t completely overwhelm me — just like you’ve done for me so many times before, my merciful God. And the harder this is for me, the easier it is for you — because nothing is impossible for you.”

Then ask the group:

“What’s the question you’ve been asking God in your hard season — and what would it look like to change the question? Not ‘why is this happening?’ but ‘what are you doing in this, Lord?’ What might God already be doing that you haven’t seen because you’ve been busy demanding to know why?”

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — **Session 9: The Battle Within**

Subtitle: *The War Inside*

Primary Scripture: Romans 7:15–25;
Galatians 5:16–17

Companion reading: Book 3, Chapters 60–71

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Identify the distraction you reach for first when life gets hard. The next time, reach for prayer instead.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

God, I'm struggling right now, and I can't fix this on my own — so I'm running to you, which is probably where I should have started.

I need you to turn this into something good, because on my own I can only see the mess.

Forgive me for being so slow to bring my troubles to you.

Forgive me for trying every other solution first.

You are my helper and my deliverer, and I believe you can use even this for my good and your glory.

So, I'm giving it to you — the fear, the confusion, the grief, all of it.

Steady my heart. Show me what to do next.

And help me trust that you've already seen the way through.

Amen.

SESSION 9

The Battle Within

The War Inside

Primary Scripture: Romans 7:15–25; Galatians 5:16–25

Companion reading (optional): The Christian's Pattern, Book 3, Chapters 60–71

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. The point is to set the tone of honest-without-shame. We all have something — a habit, a pattern, a reaction — we've been trying to change for years. Naming it without despair makes it possible for everyone else to be honest too. The session is about the war inside. We start by admitting we're in one.

FOR THE LEADER

Two passages, two different voices in the group. Both are Paul — he's the apostle who names this war most honestly. Read them slowly. Don't rush.

Romans 7 is the most painfully honest passage in the New Testament about the inner battle. 'What I want to do, I do not do; what I hate, I keep doing.' Anyone who has tried to grow spiritually knows this language.

Galatians 5 is the answer. The flesh and the Spirit are at war. The acts of the flesh are obvious; the fruit of the Spirit

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

"Tell us about something you've been trying to change in yourself — for years — and still haven't quite cracked. What is it?"

SCRIPTURE 8 minutes

Have two different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

Romans 7:15–25

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

is the alternative. And the resolution: 'those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh.'

After both readings, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Don't fill it.

"So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

"So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin."

Galatians 5:16–25

"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

"The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the second reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: “Paul ends Romans 7 not with despair but with thanksgiving — ‘Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!’ Notice how the deliverance comes. Not through more willpower. Through Christ. What does that change about how you fight your inner battles?”

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

“What did you hear in these passages? Paul names something most of us know but rarely say out loud — the gap between what we want to do and what we actually do. Does that sound like the way you experience your own life?”

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt is from chapter 70 — the chapter on sinful nature and grace. À Kempis writes it as Christ speaking, and the structure is unforgettable: a series of contrasts, each one naming what sinful nature does and what grace does instead.

Read it slowly. Let each contrast land before moving to the next. Don't rush.

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“My child, pay close attention to the movements of sinful nature and grace, because they work in very subtle ways and can only be understood by someone who is spiritually aware. Everyone claims to want good things in their words and actions. That’s why many people are fooled by appearances of goodness. Sinful nature is sneaky, seductive, and entangling. It deceives many and always works for its own benefit. But grace walks in honesty, does everything purely for God, uses no deceit, and finally rests in God alone.

“Sinful nature refuses to die willingly, refuses to be held down, refuses to be defeated, refuses to submit. But grace practices self-denial, resists sensual desires, welcomes discipline, is willing to submit, and chooses not to demand her own freedom.

“Sinful nature fights for her own advantage. Sinful nature eagerly accepts honor and respect. Sinful nature loves comfort and physical rest. Sinful nature focuses on temporary things, celebrates earthly gain, grieves over loss, and gets angry at every little insult. But grace doesn’t focus on what benefits herself, but rather what helps many others. Grace faithfully gives all honor and glory to God. Grace can’t sit idle and gladly takes on hard work. Grace thinks about what lasts forever, doesn’t cling to temporary things, and isn’t upset by harsh words — because she has placed her treasure and joy in heaven.”

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don't soften it. Ask it, then wait.

People will name a range. Some will name something specific and concrete — a temper, an addiction, an envy, a tongue. Some will name something more diffuse — 'I keep being a worse parent than I want to be,' 'I want to pray more and don't,' 'I keep saying yes when I should say no.' Both are real. Receive both honestly.

Don't rush to fix anything. Sometimes the most pastoral thing a leader can do is let the room be honest about the war without offering a quick answer. The 60-minute extension goes to the answer (grace). The conversation is for naming the war.

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question. Then read it aloud slowly:

"Paul names something most of us know but rarely say out loud: 'I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.' What's the version of that battle in your life right now?"

Connect it back to Scripture: Paul doesn't solve this with willpower. He ends with thanksgiving — "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" The deliverance comes not by trying harder but by Christ. The same Spirit Paul talks about in Galatians 5 is the one who produces the fruit. We don't manufacture love, joy, peace, patience. The Spirit grows them in us as we walk with him.

Give the group time. Let people share what they're willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

This pair-and-share is intentionally hopeful. After naming the battle in the conversation question, this asks people to recall a time grace actually won. Most of us have a story — even if it's small. Naming the wins is part of how the next battle gets fought. Memory is a weapon.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

“Tell each other about a battle you’ve actually won — even partially — by grace. What did it look like to choose differently? What was God doing that you couldn’t do on your own?”

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Read this aloud:

“My child, let go of control, and you’ll find me. Stop trying to control everything and claim things as yours. Give yourself up completely without taking it back. Some people surrender, but not completely. They don’t put their whole trust in God, so they’re always trying to figure out how to take care of themselves. Some give everything at first, but when temptation hits, they take back what they gave up.”

“What’s the thing you keep giving to God and then taking back? Where in your life have you been waging the war on willpower instead of actually surrendering it?”

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ *For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing* ↓

↓ *For 60-minute sessions, continue below* ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading is from chapter 71. Listen for the echo: “There’s a law of sin at work in my body that fights against what my mind knows is right.” That’s Romans 7:23 paraphrased — the same passage we read at the start of the session. À Kempis is praying Paul’s words back to God.

Read it slowly.

The question that follows surfaces the deepest place of self-reliance — the place where we keep trying to win on willpower. The whole journey of this session is from ‘I should be able to do this’ to ‘Lord, I can’t. Help me.’

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“God, you created me in your image. Give me the grace I desperately need to overcome my sinful nature that keeps dragging me toward sin and destruction. I feel it constantly — there’s a law of sin at work in my body that fights against what my mind knows is right. It holds me captive in so many ways. I can’t resist it unless your grace, poured powerfully into my heart, helps me.

“Lord, I desperately need your grace to start any good work, to keep going, and to finish it. Without it I can do nothing. But with you I can do all things when your grace strengthens me. What an amazing gift grace is! It makes the spiritually poor become rich in virtues, and it makes those who are blessed with much stay humble in heart.”

Then ask the group:

“Where have you been trying to win the battle inside on willpower? What would change if you actually believed grace was enough — not just to finish, but to begin?”

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — **Session 10: Put All Your Hope in God Alone**

Subtitle: *When God Is Your Only Hope*

Primary Scripture: Proverbs 3:5–6; Lamentations 3:22–24

Companion reading: Book 3, Chapters 72–75

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

*Sometime this week: Name one place sinful nature is winning.
Ask God for grace to let grace win instead.*

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

God, I need your grace.

I can't overcome my sinful nature on my own. I've tried.

I keep doing what I don't want to do and failing to do what I should.

Pour your grace into my heart — I need it to start, to continue, to finish.

All my natural gifts are worthless without you.

Only grace can save me, transform me, make me holy.

Come down to me. Fill me before I collapse from dryness.

Your grace is sufficient, even when everything else is lacking.

Let it go before me, follow me, work in me — making me diligent in good works,

through Jesus Christ your Son.

Amen.

SESSION 10

Put All Your Hope in God Alone

When God Is Your Only Hope

Primary Scripture: Lamentations 3:19–26; Proverbs 3:5–8; Psalm 62:5–8

Companion reading (optional): The Christian's Pattern, Book 3, Chapters 72–75

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. Name something specific. A plan that fell through, a person who let you down, a system you trusted that failed you. The point isn't bitterness — it's honest reflection. Disappointment is one of the great spiritual teachers. It shows us where our trust was actually living, and how it has to keep moving.

FOR THE LEADER

Three passages, three different voices in the group. Read them slowly. Don't rush.

Lamentations is Jeremiah weeping over the destruction of Jerusalem. He's named the bitterness, the gall, the downcast soul. Then comes the turn: 'Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.' The mercies are new every morning. He doesn't skip the lament — he holds it together with the hope.

Proverbs 3 is the wisdom call to trust God with the whole heart, not your own understanding.

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

"Tell us about a time you trusted something or someone — a plan, a relationship, a system — and got disappointed. What did the disappointment teach you?"

SCRIPTURE 8 minutes

Have three different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

Lamentations 3:19–26

"I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'

"The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

Psalm 62 is David: 'Find rest in God; my hope comes from him.' Pour out your hearts to him — because God is the only refuge.

After all three readings, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Don't fill it.

Proverbs 3:5–8

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

“Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.”

Psalm 62:5–8

“Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge.

“Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.”

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the third reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Three voices just spoke into the room. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: “Jeremiah doesn’t skip the lament — he names the bitterness, the wandering, the downcast soul — and THEN he says ‘yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.’ What does it mean that the lament and the hope live together?”

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

“What did you hear in these passages? All three voices say something similar in different words — trust God, find rest in God, hope in God. What’s the difference between SAYING that and actually doing it?”

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt is from the chapter literally titled “Put All Your Hope in God Alone.” À Kempis is doing here what worship at its best does — stripping away every alternative until only one place remains where our hope can land.

Notice the list — friends, allies, counselors, books, wealth. He’s not saying any of those things are bad. He’s saying none of them can do what only God can do. Let each item land. Don’t rush past.

Read it slowly. Don’t rush.

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don’t soften it. Ask it, then wait.

Some people will say honestly, ‘No, I couldn’t pray that yet — not really.’ That’s a more spiritually mature answer than pretending. The point isn’t to bully people into pious-sounding agreement. The point is to let the prayer expose where our actual trust still lives — and to bring that to God.

If discussion stalls, try the follow-up: “Which is harder for you — ‘rather poor with you than rich without you,’ or ‘rather a wanderer with you than possess heaven without you’? Why?”

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“Lord, what do I trust in this life? What gives me the most comfort of all things under heaven? Is it not you, my Lord God, whose mercies are countless? When have things ever gone well for me without you? Or when could things be bad when you’re with me? I’d rather be poor with you than rich without you. I’d rather be a wanderer on earth with you than possess heaven without you. Where you are, there is heaven. And where you’re not, there is death and hell.

“In you, Lord God, I put all my hope and find my refuge. I rest on you in all my troubles and distress. Friends can’t help. Powerful allies can’t assist. Wise counselors can’t give useful advice. Books can’t bring comfort. Wealth can’t save. No hidden or peaceful place can protect me — if you don’t help, strengthen, comfort, teach, and keep me safe.”

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question. Then read it aloud slowly:

“Sit with this prayer: ‘I’d rather be poor with you than rich without you. I’d rather be a wanderer on earth with you than possess heaven without you.’ Could you honestly pray that — and mean it? Where does that test land hardest in your life?”

Connect it back to Scripture: Jeremiah is sitting in the rubble of Jerusalem when he says ‘the Lord is my portion.’ Not ‘the Lord plus a restored city.’ The Lord. Period. David in Psalm 62 says ‘my hope comes from him’ — from him alone. The whole arc of Scripture is moving us to a place where God himself is what we want, not what God can give us.

Give the group time. Let people share what they’re willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

This pair-and-share is intentionally hopeful. The conversation question surfaced where our trust falls short. This question pulls up testimony — the times God HAS proven enough. Memory of God's faithfulness is the fuel for tomorrow's trust.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

"Tell each other about a time you experienced God's presence as enough — even when other things weren't. What was happening, and how did you know it was God?"

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Read this aloud:

"My child, don't argue about deep mysteries or try to understand God's secret judgments. Why is this person left behind while that person is lifted up? Why is this person so troubled while that person is so greatly blessed? These things are beyond human understanding. So, when the enemy plants these questions in your mind, answer like the prophet: 'You are just, Lord, and your judgments are right.'"

"What's the question you've been demanding God answer — the one you keep coming back to and can't let go of? What would change if you stopped demanding the explanation and started trusting his character instead?"

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 60-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading is from chapter 73 — “Don’t Be Crushed By Your Weakness.” À Kempis names a pattern most of us recognize: we’re strong until we aren’t. We give great advice we can’t follow ourselves. We’re fine until trouble actually arrives at our door.

Read it slowly.

The question that follows surfaces a humbling truth: small things knock us down because our trust is in something smaller than God. The disproportionate reaction reveals where the trust actually lives. Naming that out loud is half the journey home.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“My child, patience and humility in hard times please me more than great comfort and devotion when things are going well. Why are you upset over every little criticism? Even if it had been much worse, you shouldn’t have been shaken. You’re brave enough when things are going well. You can give good advice and encourage others with your words. But when trouble suddenly comes to your door, you’re left with no wisdom or strength. So, see how weak you really are.

“I am still here, says the Lord, ready to help you and to give you greater comfort than before, if you put your trust in me and call earnestly on me. Learn to be more patient and prepare yourself for greater suffering. It’s not over if you often feel troubled or badly tempted. I am the one who will strengthen and heal those who are hurting and lift up to heavenly glory those who know their own weakness.”

Then ask the group:

“What’s a small thing that’s been disproportionately knocking you down lately? If a small thing is shaking you that hard, what does it tell you about where your trust is actually living — and where it needs to move?”

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — **Session 11: Come Hungry**

Subtitle: *Recovering Wesley's Vision of Holy Communion*

Primary Scripture: Matthew 26:26–28; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26

Companion reading: Book 4, Chapters 76–82

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Name one thing you've been using God to get. Surrender it. Then see if God himself turns out to be enough.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

Lord, I want both — you and the wealth, comfort, and success.

Forgive me for looking everywhere but you for help, for trusting in people, money, and my own cleverness when none of those can save me.

You are my hope, my confidence, and my comfort — the only truly reliable thing in my life.

Everything outside of you is temporary and ultimately disappointing.

So, I put all my hope in you.

Be my dwelling place.

Be my peace.

Be enough.

Amen.

SESSION 11

Come Hungry

Recovering Wesley's Vision of Holy Communion

Primary Scripture: Matthew 26:26–30; 1 Corinthians 11:23–29

Companion reading (optional): The Christian's Pattern, Book 4, Chapters 76–82

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

Go first. Name a specific time. Maybe a wedding, a funeral, a retreat, an ordinary Sunday that suddenly wasn't ordinary. The gathering question opens the door for testimony. Most people in the room have at least one moment when communion stopped being routine — even if it was years ago. Naming it pulls those memories forward and primes the room to take this session seriously.

FOR THE LEADER

Two passages, two different voices in the group. Read them slowly. Don't rush.

Matthew 26 is the first night of communion. Jesus is hours away from the cross, and he leaves his followers a meal. 'This is my body... this is my blood of the covenant... I will not drink from this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'
Communion is past, present, and future all at once — the cross remembered, Christ's presence now, the heavenly feast still to come.

GATHERING 3 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

"Tell us about a time communion really mattered to you — when it wasn't routine but actually meant something. What was happening?"

SCRIPTURE 8 minutes

Have two different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

Matthew 26:26–30

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.'

"Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

1 Corinthians 11 is Paul reminding the church what they've received. 'Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' And then the warning: 'Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat.' Paul takes this seriously. He expects the church to take it seriously.

After both readings, sit with thirty seconds of silence.
Don't fill it.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Two voices just spoke into the room. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: "Jesus didn't say 'this represents my body.' He said 'this is my body.' He said 'this is my blood of the covenant.' What's the difference between hearing those words as a memorial and hearing them as something more?"

"When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."

1 Corinthians 11:23–29

"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

"So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves."

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the second reading.

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

"What did you hear in these passages? Notice how seriously Jesus and Paul both take the table. What's actually happening when we eat the bread and drink the cup?"

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt is from chapter 78, "The Benefits of Frequent Communion." Wesley loved this chapter. He believed Christians should take communion as often as possible — not as a routine, but as a means of grace where Christ actually meets us.

Notice the phrase that gives this session its title: 'Don't send me away hungry.' That's the posture this session is calling people back to. Not duty. Not nostalgia. Hunger.

Read it slowly. Don't rush.

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session turns on. Don't soften it. Ask it, then wait.

Most people in the room have settled into communion as routine. Some will admit it. Some will deflect with the right answer ('well, OF COURSE Christ meets us there') without it touching their actual experience. The point isn't to shame anyone. The point is to surface the gap between what we've been taught and what we've been doing.

If discussion stalls, try this follow-up: "Wesley believed Christians should take communion as often as possible — not because it's a duty, but because it's where God meets us, forgives us, strengthens us. What's shifted in modern Methodism that we've mostly stopped expecting that?"

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

"Lord, I come to you to be fed — to delight in this holy feast you've prepared for people like me. You are everything I could need or want. You are my salvation and my redemption, my hope and my strength. My soul is thirsty for you. My heart longs to be close to you.

"Give me yourself and that's enough. Nothing else satisfies. I can't go on without you — without your presence in my life, I'll give out along the way. This is exactly what you promised when you said you wouldn't send people away hungry. Don't send me away hungry. You left yourself in this sacrament for people like me — weary travelers who can't make it on their own. You are the nourishment my soul needs."

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question. Then read it aloud slowly:

"Be honest: when you come to the table, what do you actually expect to happen? Do you come expecting Christ to meet you there — or just expecting to do something?"

Connect it back to Scripture: Jesus didn't say 'this represents my body.' He said 'this IS my body.' Paul says we proclaim the Lord's death 'until he comes' — the table holds the cross and the second coming together. Paul also takes the warning seriously: examine yourselves, discern the body. The Bible takes communion seriously. Wesley took communion seriously. We've often stopped.

Give the group time. Let people share what they're willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

This pair-and-share moves people from theory into practice. It's easy to talk abstractly about 'coming hungry.' Naming what would actually have to change makes the rest of the session land. Practical — prep on Saturday night, arrive ten minutes early, confess one thing first — not lofty.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two minutes to answer this question:

"Tell each other: what would it look like for you to come to communion truly hungry the next time? What would have to change about how you prepare?"

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Read this aloud:

"Noah was a righteous man — and he spent a hundred years building the ark just to be saved with a handful of people. How can I prepare myself in an hour to receive the Maker of the world? Moses built a sacred chest from imperishable wood just to hold the stone tablets. Solomon spent seven years building a temple just to honor your name. And I — how can I bring you into my house? How carelessly I come to your table."

"How carelessly do you come to the table? What would it mean to prepare for communion the way Noah prepared for the flood — with seriousness about what you're actually approaching?"

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 60-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This second reading is from chapter 79. This is the most directly Wesleyan passage in the whole book — the means-of-grace passage. À Kempis names what actually happens at the table: vices healed, passions restrained, temptations lessened, grace poured in, faith strengthened, hope confirmed, love kindled.

Then comes the breathtaking image: God is a fountain that never runs dry, a fire that never goes out. Even if we can't drink the whole fountain, we put our mouths to it. Even if we can't burn like an angel, we get close enough to feel the warmth.

Read it slowly. Let the gifts list land before moving to the imagery.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“This sacrament is the health of my soul and body — the remedy for everything that’s broken in me. Through it, old patterns are broken, temptations lose their grip, grace pours in, faith grows stronger, hope gets confirmed, and love catches fire.

“You give so much to those who come to you here, Lord. You lift them out of discouragement and into hope. You refresh and renew them so that the person who came to the table anxious and numb leaves feeling the difference. That’s not routine. That’s transformation.

“You are a spring that never runs dry, a fire that never goes out. So even if I can’t drink from the fullness of that spring, I’ll put my mouth to it and take what I can. Even if I can’t burn like an angel, I’ll get close enough to feel the warmth.”

Then ask the group:

“From that list — old patterns broken, temptations losing their grip, grace pouring in, faith strengthened, hope confirmed, love kindled — which one do you most need from God right now? What would change if you started bringing that specific need to the table next time?”

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

LOOKING AHEAD

Next week — **Session 12: Give Me You**

Subtitle: *The Exchange that Happens at the Table*

Primary Scripture: Galatians 2:20; John 6:35

Companion reading: Book 4, Chapters 83–90

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK *2 minutes*

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: Come to the table with one specific need. Expect something. See what God does.

CLOSING PRAYER *2 minutes*

Pray this prayer together, slowly:

Jesus, I need you. Not just want you — I can't make it without your presence.

So I'm coming to your table — not out of routine, but out of genuine need.

You are my salvation and my strength, my hope and my redemption.

Everything I need is found in you.

Give me yourself and that's enough.

I must often come to you, or I'll collapse along the way.

You said you wouldn't send people away hungry.

Don't send me away hungry.

My soul thirsts to receive you.

Like Zacchaeus, I'm inviting you in.

Come in. Bless me. Change me. Feed me with yourself.

Amen.

SESSION 12

Give Me You

The Exchange that Happens at the Table

Primary Scripture: John 6:32–40; Galatians 2:19–21; Romans 12:1–2

Companion reading (optional): The Christian’s Pattern, Book 4, Chapters 83–90

30-MINUTE CORE

Use everything below for a complete 30-minute session.

FOR THE LEADER

This is the final session. Take your time with the gathering. Names, then the question. Most groups will produce something tender here. Some people will name a question they’re still wrestling with. Some will name a moment when something cracked open. Both are gifts. Receive them slowly.

FOR THE LEADER

Three passages, three different voices in the group. Read them slowly. Don’t rush.

These three readings name three angles of the same exchange that happens at the table.

John 6: what Christ gives us — himself, the bread of life that satisfies forever.

Galatians 2: the result of the exchange — Paul’s testimony. ‘I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.’ The exchange has happened. The old self is gone.

GATHERING 5 minutes

Welcome the group. Have everyone share their name and a one-sentence answer to this question:

“Looking back over the past 11 weeks together, what’s one thing that’s stayed with you — a question, a phrase, a moment? Something that wouldn’t let you go?”

SCRIPTURE 8 minutes

Have three different people in the group read aloud, slowly, one passage each.

John 6:32–40

“Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’

“‘Sir,’ they said, ‘always give us this bread.’

“Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come

Romans 12: what we give back — ourselves, as a living sacrifice. That's our true and proper worship. That's the response to the table.

After all three readings, sit with thirty seconds of silence. Don't fill it.

down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

Galatians 2:19–21

“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

Romans 12:1–2

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Sit with thirty seconds of silence after the third reading.

FOR THE LEADER

This first question stays in the Bible. Three voices just spoke into the room. Let people respond to what they actually heard before we add anything else.

If discussion is slow, try this follow-up: “Galatians 2:20 isn't a metaphor. Paul is saying something has actually happened to him — the old self died, Christ now lives in him. What does it mean to live as if that exchange has already taken place in you?”

OPENING DISCUSSION 5 minutes

Open the conversation with this question:

“What did you hear in these passages? Three voices, three angles of the same exchange — Christ giving himself, the old self dying, the body offered back. What's the part of that exchange that's hardest for you to actually live?”

FOR THE LEADER

This excerpt is from chapter 83 — “The Offering of Christ on the Cross and Our Surrender to God.” À Kempis writes it as Christ speaking, and the line at the end is the heart of this whole session: ‘If you want to follow me — give me you.’

That’s the exchange. Not your gifts. Not your service. You. Read it slowly. Don’t rush.

FOR THE LEADER

This is the question the whole session — and the whole 12-week study — turns on. Don’t soften it. Ask it, then wait.

Some people will name something concrete: a fear, a grudge, an ambition, a relationship, an addiction. Some will name something more diffuse: ‘I keep wanting to be in control,’ ‘I keep withholding parts of myself I’m ashamed of,’ ‘I keep wanting to make Jesus prove himself before I trust him.’ Both are real.

Don’t rush to fix anything. The most pastoral move you can make is to let the room name what they’ve been holding back, and then to gently remind them: at the next table, give that to him.

A VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 3 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

“I gave myself completely to the Father for you — arms wide open, holding nothing back, everything offered. That’s what I’m asking from you: give yourself to me the same way. Not your gifts. Not your service. You. Whatever else you bring me means nothing if you’re keeping yourself back.

“It’s not enough to give me everything except yourself — just as having everything except me would never be enough for you. I gave my body and blood so that I could be fully yours and you could be fully mine. But if you hold back, that union stays incomplete. So — give yourself to God first, before anything else. This is exactly why so few people ever experience the deep freedom and inward light that’s available: they can’t let go of themselves. My word is clear: whoever won’t give everything can’t be my disciple. If you want to follow me — give me you.”

CONVERSATION 10 minutes

Take a breath before this question. Then read it aloud slowly:

“Christ says: ‘Give me you.’ Be honest — what’s the part of you you’ve been holding back? What’s keeping the exchange from being complete?”

Connect it back to Scripture: Galatians 2:20 isn’t a metaphor. Paul says he died — the old self is gone — and Christ lives in him now. The exchange has happened. Romans 12 says: offer your bodies as a living sacrifice. The exchange isn’t a one-time thing. It’s the daily posture we bring to the table — and to every moment after.

Give the group time. Let people share what they’re willing to share.

↓ For 30-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 45-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

Pair-and-share lowers the threshold for speaking up. People who've already said something to one person are far more likely to speak in the larger group later. Don't skip this if you have the time.

This is the final pair-and-share. Let it slow down. Let it linger. The whole 12-week journey is collected in this one question. Some pairs will need more than two minutes. That's okay — give them three or four. Don't rush.

Extension for 45-Minute Sessions

Add 15 minutes here, then go to Closing.

PAIR-AND-SHARE + A SECOND QUESTION 15 minutes

Pair-and-share (5 minutes):

Ask people to turn to the person next to them. Each person gets two or three minutes to answer this question:

"Tell each other about a moment in this 12-week study where God spoke to you — even quietly. What was it, and what has it changed?"

Bring the group back together. Don't ask anyone to report what their partner said.

Second question (10 minutes):

Read this aloud:

"Sometimes it's something small blocking grace from getting through — and calling it small hardly does it justice when it's keeping out something this good. Remove it and what you've been longing for will come. The moment you hand yourself over to God with your whole heart — not seeking your own way, not insisting on your own preferences, but fixing yourself entirely on him — you'll find yourself at peace."

"What's the small thing — sometimes embarrassingly small — that's still blocking grace from coming through in your life? What would total surrender look like, this week?"

Let the group sit with that. Open it up for discussion.

↓ For 45-minute sessions, skip ahead to Closing ↓

↓ For 60-minute sessions, continue below ↓

FOR THE LEADER

This is the final reading of the entire 12-week study. It's the closing crescendo of Book 4 — chapter 90, where À Kempis brings everything home with the praise of every saint, the humility of Mary, the joy of John the Baptist, and finally the truth that we come to this table together.

Read it slowly. Let the last line land: 'We come to this table together and we leave together — one body, united in you.' That's the picture this study has been pointing toward. Not solo discipleship. Not me-and-Jesus. The whole body, going forward together.

Read it slowly. Don't rush.

Extension for 60-Minute Sessions

Add 15 more minutes here, then go to Closing.

A SECOND VOICE FROM THE TRADITION 15 minutes

Have someone read aloud, slowly:

"My Lord God, my Creator and my Redeemer — I want to receive you today with affection, reverence, praise, and honor. With gratitude, faith, hope, and purity. The way your mother Mary received the news of your coming — humbly, devoutly, saying: 'I am the Lord's servant. Let it be done to me according to your word.'"

"I bring you the praises and gratitude of every devoted heart, the love of every holy mind. Let all who come reverently to your table find grace and mercy — and let them pray for me, a sinner. When they've received their desired devotion and joyful union, when they leave your table well fed and deeply renewed — may they think of me too. Because we come to this table together and we leave together — one body, united in you."

Then ask the group:

"We come to this table together. We leave together. One body, united in Christ. As you finish these 12 weeks, what's one way you want to keep walking with this group — or with this kind of community — going forward? Who are you carrying with you from now on?"

Open it up. Take whatever time you have left in this section.

FOR THE LEADER

The practice for the week: encouragement, not pressure. Some will do this; some won't. Don't shame anyone next week if they didn't. The practice is the seed; it will keep working.

Pray the closing prayer together, slowly. It's a prayer of confession that lets the morning's question become a conversation with God.

If your group is ready for it, invite spoken prayer requests after. If it's a brand-new group, the written prayer alone is enough — trust will deepen with time.

FOR THE JOURNEY

After this study

This study isn't meant to be read once and shelved. It's meant to be lived with. Come back to it. Let it read you. Keep coming to the table. Come hungry. Come expectant. Come ready to meet Jesus.

Closing

Always — for 30-, 45-, or 60-minute sessions.

A PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK 2 minutes

Read this aloud to the group:

Sometime this week: At your next communion, consciously offer yourself — not just receive. Say it internally: "Here I am. All of me."

CLOSING PRAYER — A BENEDICTION FOR THE JOURNEY 2 minutes

Pray this prayer together, slowly. This is the benediction for the whole journey:

Jesus, I've heard your voice in these pages.

Now give me the courage to respond.

I don't want to be a hearer only — I want to be a doer.

I don't want to just know about the spiritual life — I want to live it.

Give me grace for the failures.

Give me your presence, always.

Make me a person of deep spirituality and practical holiness.

Form Christ in me.

Use me for your glory.

And when I get to the end of my journey,

let me say with my whole heart:

It was worth it. You were worth it.

Amen.