

CREATING LIVING TRUSTING

HEBREWS 10:16 

This is the covenant that I will make with them.

*After these days, says the Lord,
I will place my laws in their hearts
And write them on their minds.*

TRUSTING

JEREMIAH 31:33b CEB

*I will put my instructions within them
and engrave them on their hearts.*

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

LIFE, AS WE KNOW ALL TOO WELL, IS IMPERFECT. Trials are inevitable. That’s why the final eight-week module, **Trusting the Covenant**, looks at the crises that sometimes call covenant life into question, and how we are restored to trust in God when troubling things happen.

This module discusses the loss of hope, and how it is restored by faithfulness in the midst of suffering. From the story of Job, to the Hebrew exile, to the apocalyptic visions in Daniel and Revelation, we learn how faithful love is at work in everything—to restore hope, freedom, and wholeness to our lives.

TRUSTING

EPISODE 17

John; 1, 2, and 3 John

Leader Guide

Participant Guide

Meditation Guide

John; 1, 2, and 3 John

LIFE TOGETHER

Abundant, eternal life with others

Bible Readings

Day 1: John 1:1-18; 3-4

Day 2: John 5; 9; 11

Day 3: John 14-17

Day 4: John 18-21

Day 5: 1 John 2-4; 2 John; 3 John

Day 6: Covenant Meditation on John 15:9-13

Day 7: Group Meeting Experience with John 13:1-17

Covenant Prayer

For those who walk in darkness

The word was life, and the life was the light for all people. (John 1:4)

For those who flourish for others

This is the testimony: God gave eternal life to us, and this life is in his Son. (1 John 5:11)

OUR LONGING FOR RELATIONSHIP

We are created to be in relationship— with God and with God's creation. Our tendency to separate from God and others disrupts the rhythms of life and leaves us unsettled, undone, and unsure.



JOHN'S GOSPEL

John's Gospel points us to an authentic community characterized by trust, intimacy, love, and abundant, eternal life. The purpose of the Gospel is clearly stated in John 20:31: "These things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name." The fourth Gospel is a narrative, not a newspaper account. John writes not simply to convey information but to draw you into an encounter with the risen Christ, into a relationship that from then onward will shape every minute of your precious life—every thought, deed, habit, and desire.

John's Gospel was written in stages over decades, taking its final form in approximately 100 CE. This makes it the last Gospel of the four in our New Testament, and right away you'll notice that it's quite different from the other three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), called Synoptic Gospels because they share many phrases and stories in common. (A good tool for comparing the phrases and stories in these books is *CEB Gospel Parallels*.) We avoid trying to force John into the framework of the Synoptic Gospels. More than 90 percent of John's content doesn't appear in the Synoptics. Many of the dearly loved stories about individuals who encounter Jesus (Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Lazarus, Thomas) appear only in John. Sometimes we see characters who appear elsewhere, but the particular stories about them told in John are stunningly unique (Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, Peter, Thomas). Events sometimes even occur in a different order: In John, the "temple tantrum" occurs at the beginning, not the end, of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus also dies on a different day in John. Don't fret over the differences, but instead ask what John is trying to signify through his way of presenting the story.

John is obsessed with the power of words, so much so that he identifies Jesus as the Word (Greek *logos*). Words can surely lead to life. In John 6, Jesus speaks difficult words that cause him to lose many disciples. At that point he turns to his other disciples and asks them if they, too, would like to leave their committed community. Peter responds, "Lord, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

But words can destroy, as well. That's why any responsible study of the fourth Gospel requires a word of warning about the role of "the Jews" in the narrative. Obviously, Jesus and all of the first disciples were Jewish, as was the early Johannine community. Before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, Christianity was another form

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of Judaism. But after the destruction of the temple, Christianity began the lengthy process of becoming a separate tradition. As that happened, sadly, this separation sometimes led to Christians using John's Gospel to insult or harm Jews because the original historical context of the Gospel's composition wasn't properly and intelligently tended. To avoid anti-Semitism, unintended or otherwise, the CEB translates the phrase *the Jews* as "Jewish leaders" or "religious leaders" to indicate that the debate was between the Jewish establishment and the Jewish reformers (for example, Jesus of Nazareth).

When the Gospel reached its final draft, the community that read John's story consisted of an amazingly diverse population in terms of culture, religion, race, and ethnicity: Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, John the Baptist's former followers, Greeks, and Romans. Such diversity is always a gift and sometimes a challenge.

The fourth Gospel engages us with a masterful literary design:

Prologue: John 1:1-18 This rich text reveals much about who Jesus is and who we are in relation to God and each other. Think about how Genesis begins (covered in Episode 1). The prologue establishes all of the major themes that matter to John; everything after 1:18 fills in the details.

The Book of Signs: John 1:19-12:50 This section tells about Jesus' public ministry. He performs seven signs in John (as compared to approximately twenty signs in Mark), and they are never called miracles or deeds of power. They are signs, and signs point to something. In John, they point to the fact that Jesus is equal to God and, therefore, has power to grant life even in the face of death, especially in the face of death.

The Book of Glory: John 13:1-20:31 At this point in the narrative, Jesus turns inward to train his closest disciples as he prepares for his crucifixion, exaltation, and glorification on the cross. The words *glory* and *glorify* appear forty-two times in John, far more than in any other book of the New Testament, and they congregate in these later chapters. Jesus is not a victim—he knows what he has come to do and does it all with calm and peace.

Epilogue: John 21:1-25 John's Gospel has two endings. The first occurs at John 20:31. Chapter 21 was probably added later, perhaps by the same author or perhaps by a later editor. The last chapter is deeply poignant and speaks to our various diverse callings, including our tendency to get into competition with each other even as disciples; the importance of love in action; and the potential sacrifice and humility involved in answering Christ's call.

.....
*As you move forward in
accordance with God's
will, do you proceed
deliberately with calm
and peace? Jot down
some thoughts about
when you proceeded
with confidence in
helping others or
standing up for the
right thing.*
.....



1, 2, and 3 John The letters of John reflect a later phase of the community that produced and read John's Gospel. We don't know whether all three letters were written by the same person (the elder) or whether that person had a hand in writing the fourth Gospel. Thematically speaking, the letters care about many of the same issues that we saw in the Gospel: testifying to truth, believing in Jesus as the incarnate Word, and unity among believers. Upon what should that unity be based? Doctrine, behavior, or love? How are those three related?

Optional: *A bonus video on incarnation and abundant love is available for download from www.CovenantBibleStudy.com.*

But most importantly, the letters announce God's love for us (1 John 4:19), the call to love each other (1 John 4:11), and the promise that fear is not our fate: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18).

Day 1: John 1:1-18; 3-4

God's children love the light.

When you read John 1:1-18 in the CEB, you will see that it's indented and presented in poetic form because it's a hymn. If you compare John's opening to those of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), you will see that John goes back farther than anyone else, to the very beginning when God and Jesus created every single thing that exists. Jesus is presented in terms of Woman Wisdom, whom John would have known from Proverbs 8. She tries to teach wisdom through the Instruction (Torah), but people tend to prefer foolishness, even though that path never leads to life. But those who do listen to Wisdom, to God's Word, become enlightened by the light of the world and enjoy life as children in God's household.

Optional: *A bonus video retelling the story of Nicodemus is available for download from www.CovenantBibleStudy.com.*

Not long after the prologue we meet Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus “by night” and hears about being born from above. He misunderstands and is stuck at the literal level, wondering how he might be born again, a second time. But Jesus is speaking metaphorically. He appears again in John 7:50 and John 19:39-42 (where he is once again identified as the one who came by night).

Does Nicodemus ever see the light? If not, what stands in his way? If so, how does it affect his life?

The next individual to encounter Jesus is the Samaritan woman in John 4. Unlike Nicodemus, she encounters Jesus in the brightest light of day, at noon. Notice that she engages Jesus in a theological debate and, as a result, receives a revelation that Jesus is God (John 4:26). She then immediately testifies to her neighbors and invites them to encounter Jesus for themselves.

Why is the time of these meetings, night or day, a crucial detail, given what has been said in John 3:17-21?

Day 2: John 5; 9; 11

From healing to discipleship

These chapters share the idea that Jesus provides healing, but the stories differ in certain ways. Compare the behavior of the man in John 5 to the behavior of the Samaritan woman one chapter earlier (John’s placement of material isn’t accidental) and the behavior of the blind man in John 9. Both the Samaritan woman and the blind man are models for the kind of discipleship that John has in mind. John 9 opens with the disciples revealing their assumption that illness is caused by sin. Throughout the chapter, Jesus reorients our vision to show us what true sin and true blindness are: the willful rejection of God and of abundant life, and resignation to existence in a dark, dank spiritual tomb where fear, death, and violence reign.

What makes the blind man an exemplary disciple? First, he is open to the creative power of Jesus: When Jesus spits and makes mud and wipes it on the man’s eyes, we are supposed to remember the Genesis



story where God uses the earth to create human beings. Second, the man tells his truth as he knows it, and he never allows anyone—the neighbors, the educated or powerful religious authorities, not even his own family members—to deny his own experience. He keeps his integrity throughout, no matter what the cost. Third, he publicly testifies to his healing relationship with Jesus. Fourth, the more he encounters Jesus, the deeper his knowledge and faith become. He first calls Jesus just a man (John 9:11), then a prophet (John 9:17), and finally he proclaims, “Lord, I believe,” and worships him (John 9:38).

Compare this story about the blind man with John 11.

Day 3: John 14–17

So that they will be made perfectly one

John 14–17 is known as the farewell discourse. Here Jesus teaches the disciples everything they will need to know to be mature Christian leaders who can create spaces for healthy, authentic, and fruitful communities of dearly loved disciples. In John 14 he assures them that though he will no longer physically be with them, he is always present, as is the Companion. Against the notion that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are “up there” somewhere, and that we will all eventually get a room in God’s heavenly resort, Jesus once again insists that the movement is always in the other direction. God has always come to us and is always coming to us. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is described as “the one who is coming into the world” (John 11:27). There is no separation between heaven and earth (see John 1:51). As Jesus says of himself and God in John 14:23, “we will come to them and make our home with them.”

In John 15, Jesus warns the disciples that their future won’t be easy, but as long as they love each other and stay connected to him, they will experience peace and joy, even in the midst of the world’s hatred. The discourse concludes with Jesus’ prayer on behalf of his disciples, then and now, that we may all be one in Christ expressly for the sake of the world (John 17:20-21)—the very world that may hate them.

Think of a difficult time in your life. Did you experience peace and joy by loving someone else and staying connected in thought and prayer to Jesus?

Day 4: John 18–21

Resurrection community

In John 14:6, Jesus confidently declares himself to be the way, the truth, and the life. Yet by John 19:30, the truth is put on trial and killed at the hands of the same Pilate who had recently wondered aloud to Jesus, “What is truth?” After birthing the church at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27), blood and water come out of Jesus’ side—and one is reminded of all the language in John about birth and wombs (John 3:4; 7:38; 16:21). Then one thinks of our rituals for baptism and holy communion. All the makings of being in God’s family are there, but Jesus’ followers are too blinded by grief and fear to move forward into their future story. Only Mary Magdalene ventures to the tomb and finds it empty. Peter and the dearly loved disciple come to see for themselves, but they go back home. Mary remains, stays put, and, by doing so, she receives the first vision of the resurrected Christ and becomes the apostle to the apostles, proclaiming the good news to her community. The disciples fearfully lock themselves in a room, but nothing can separate us from Christ, so Jesus appears to grant them peace and the gift of the Holy Spirit that he had promised earlier. So what do the disciples do? They go back to living their pre-Jesus life. Again, Jesus comes to them. He frees Peter from his shame and infuses them with a sense of calling. They answered it, and the world hasn’t been the same since.

If we acknowledge that each person can find a calling or purpose in life, what calling gives you purpose? What type of service or ministry is engaged through that calling?



Day 5: 1 John 2–4; 2 John; 3 John

Hospitality is Christian love in action.

The Johannine letters worry about Christians who deny the incarnation, the fleshly nature of Jesus, preferring to keep him an abstract doctrine. The author knows that the minute we deny the true humanity of Jesus and the scandal of that uncomfortable, messy truth, we are also likely to turn our eyes away from the true humanity of each other. Incarnation means that Jesus had flesh and blood like us and that we, too, live on this earth embodied and located in very specific circumstances, including our gender, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, and levels of able-bodiedness.

*Do we value certain bodies more than others in our society?
In our church?*

Surely the Letters teach us about Christian hospitality, which is love in action. We see this in 1 John 3:17: “If a person has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need and that person doesn’t care—how can the love of God remain in him?” Compare 3 John 5: “Dear friend, you act faithfully in whatever you do for our brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers.” Since there was no hotel system in the New Testament era and certainly no welfare system, Christians depended on each other for sustenance, and Christian travelers stayed with other Christians as they traveled.

But the letters display a real tension between hospitality and hatred, between orthodoxy and tolerance. For every verse that commands hospitality, one finds a verse that commands one to refuse hospitality to those who don’t subscribe to proper belief (see 2 John 1:10-11). The letters reveal the tendency for disagreements to lead to schism. It is clear from 1 John 2:18-19 that this church has experienced the painful loss of some of its members. The author goes on the attack and declares those who left to be antichrists and deceivers.

*Is it inevitable that Christians (or even human beings)
consistently choose sides over issues so that the choice
is either/or? Reflect on a situation where someone left a
church or a group where you participated. What might
have prevented that separation?*

Instead we can rely upon the truth expressed, ironically, by the very same author just a few verses earlier: “The person loving a brother and sister stays in the light, and there is nothing in the light that causes a person to stumble. But the person who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and lives in the darkness, and doesn’t know where to go because the darkness blinds the eyes” (1 John 2:10-11).

Day 6: John 15:9-13

Covenant Meditation: Living well for others

Today’s practice focuses on reading scripture in a structured, prayerful way in order to grow more attuned to God’s presence in our daily lives. The classic name for this ancient pattern of praying the scriptures is *lectio divina*, which in Latin means “divine reading.” Traditionally in *lectio divina*, there are four key movements through which we listen to a brief selection of scripture: reading, meditating, praying, and resting (contemplating) in God’s word.

Our passage for today is John 15:9-13, in which Jesus addresses the essence of living well for others by experiencing God’s love. Open your Bible to this scripture and mark its location. Get comfortable where you are seated, placing both feet on the ground and letting your breathing calm.

Read the passage slowly, aloud or silently, paying attention to the whole text—every sentence, phrase, and word. Approach the scripture as though it is new to you. When finished, wait in a minute of silence.

Read the passage again, now listening for one word or phrase that catches your attention. Try not to analyze why a specific word or phrase stands out to you, but receive it as something God invites you to hear. If desired, write this word or phrase in your participant guide. Take three minutes of silence to reflect on what has caught your attention. What does this word or phrase bring to mind for you? Let your mind engage with the word or phrase, and consider what it means to you right now. Resist editing your thoughts.

Read the scripture one last time. Now reflect on feelings or memories your word or phrase evokes. Does your word or phrase point to something that you or someone you know longs for or needs? In as much or as little



silent time as you need, write down any reflections that come to your mind or heart.

When you are ready, offer back in prayer to God all that you have heard, thought, and felt in this spiritual reading practice. Entrust to God any insights, questions, worries, and longings that this scripture brings to light for you. Before you end this time of praying the scripture, ask yourself if you sense an invitation from God to act or respond in some way. There may be a small invitation (to check on a friend) or a broad one (to begin to recycle), or you may not yet sense an invitation. Stay open to the possibility that in the days ahead, an invitation may be revealed through this reading. Offer God thanks, and end the practice with “Amen.”

Group Meeting Experience

John 13:1-17 | Foot washing

We noted in the introduction that John 1–12 can be called the book of signs. That’s where Jesus performs his public ministry. Chapter 12 ends with the story about Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (not Mary Magdalene and not the sinful woman from the other Gospels), anointing Jesus’ feet as a foreshadowing of his burial, using her hair to wipe his feet. In John 13–14, Jesus wipes the feet of his disciples as he prepares them for his departure, calls them to become mature disciples who serve others in the name of Jesus, and equips them to do greater works than he himself did (John 14:12).

1. Compare the foot washing to John 12:1-6. What do you think about all of the physical touch present in these stories and many others in John’s Gospel? Did you realize that the dearly loved disciple is reclining upon Jesus’ chest, not next to Jesus? Who is touching whom in each story? How would the same kinds of interactions go over in your community today? How does the Gospel’s intimate touching relate to recognizing Jesus as a human being among us?
2. In biblical times, it was usually the job of a Gentile (not Jewish) slave or of a woman to wash the feet of her husband. Why does Peter resist having his feet washed by a person considered

to be his superior? What is Jesus trying to teach his disciples about power in this story? How does this relate to Jesus' proclamation in John 15:15: "I don't call you servants any longer. . . . Instead, I call you friends." Do you think of yourselves as a community of Jesus' friends or as servants submitting to a master? What difference does it make for relating to God and each other in covenant relationship?

3. In John 13:15 Jesus says, "I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do." Have you ever participated in a foot washing? If so, what was it like? Does your community practice foot washing? If so, what effect does that practice have?

SIGNS OF FAITHFUL LOVE

The signs pointing to Jesus (who serves and lives for others, who brings about new birth) are visible through the intensity of personal actions, such as foot washing.

