

THE SEVEN “I AM” STATEMENTS

One of the distinctive elements of the teaching of Jesus is the way he expresses important truths in terms of his own personal character and mission. Unique to the Gospel of John are seven statements Jesus begins by saying “I am.”

The phrase “I am” reflects Exodus 3:14, where God introduces himself to Moses with the expression “I am who I am.” This statement became a way to connect with God personally and was used throughout Israel’s history to convey that God always was, always is and always will be.

In using this expression, Jesus is explicitly identifying himself as God, and bearing God’s presence on Earth.

Each of these seven “I am” statements follows a basic pattern. They are written as metaphors in which one of the key elements is to be Jesus expressed as “I am.” Jesus always provides an explanatory statement with it, so there is no misunderstanding to its meaning and that it is clear to his listeners.

These metaphorical statements often complement Jesus’ miracles. The statement and a miracle contribute to the understanding of the other. Each of the miracles is interpreted by the metaphorical “I am” statement. Each statement is intended to give the miracle meaning for the ministry of Jesus. They show us that Jesus’ miracles were not just acts of power or mercy, but actions demonstrating the meaning of his ministry and teaching.

The “I am” statements found in the Gospel of John are the bread of life (6:35), the light of the world (8:12), the door (10:7), the good shepherd (10:11, 14), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way the truth and the life (14:6) and the true vine (15:1).

As we continue to reflect on Good Friday and Easter, there is an “I am” statement for each day. It is our hope that this will not only serve as a response to Easter, but an effective summary of John’s Gospel.

"I am the bread of life." - Jesus

The moment Jesus said "bread" his listeners would have been transported back thirteen hundred years into their national history. Each day, during a forty-year exile in the wilderness, God would provide bread from heaven to feed the Israelites. This heavenly bread was such a big deal that they made a point of celebrating it every year during the Passover meal.

Jesus pointed out in 6:26-27 that there are two kinds of food: food for the body, which is necessary but not the most important, and food for the inner man, the spirit, which is essential. Neither manna on the journey to the Promised Land in Moses' time (Exodus 16:13-18) nor loaves in the Promised Land in Jesus' time (John 6:1-15) could satisfy the core hunger which Jesus came to satisfy.

What the people needed was not food but *life*, and life is a gift. Jesus' contrast was that food only *sustains* life, but Jesus *gives* eternal life.

Today, more than two thousand years after these words, we're still starving. There is a hunger that lies within each of us and if we are not careful, we will look to be filled by something that could never satisfy. As with all hunger, what is quickest and easiest, may not be what is best. C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Weight of Glory* said, "*We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us.*" These three may not be what you pursue, but a short reflection on what you are most passionate about most likely will.

Jesus' bold declaration "I am the bread of life" connects the miracle of the loaves and the fish, to the significance of his life purpose. Jesus is the "bread of life" as he nourishes people spiritually and satisfies the deep spiritual longings of their soul. In that sense, those who trust in him shall not hunger; their spiritual longing to know God will be satisfied.

READ

John 6:25-40 (emphasis on 35)

REFLECT

1: When was a time you looked to something that you truly thought would satisfy and left you still wanting more?

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2: Do you think that Jesus, the bread of life, can truly satisfy you? How?

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3: If Jesus really does satisfy our hunger, why do we resist him?

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"I am the light of the world." - Jesus

The second "I am" statement certainly fits as you read the eleven verses that come before. You can almost hear the words ring out as the sun rises "at dawn" (8:2) in the temple courts. If we were to hear them ourselves, we would undoubtedly have drawn an immediate comparison between Jesus and the sun.

This comparison to the sun is powerful on its own. By referring to himself as the light, Jesus is making a direct claim to being the Messiah (see Isaiah 9:2). The teachers of the law and others present in the temple court would not have mistaken the meaning of his words.

This is even more evident by the conversation that follows and the emphasis on the word "witness" (8:13, 17, 18). The use of witness, when in reference to light as it testifies of the sun, who Jesus himself just referred to himself as, is incredible.

Light bears witness to itself. Every day when the sun rises, it tells you it is there. The only people who cannot see the light are those who are blind. If we return to the opening statements of the gospel of John, light and darkness were used as a contrast between belief and unbelief (1:9-13). Jesus was described as *"the true light that gives light to everyone"* (1:9). There were many who were able to see for the first time this day; and there were many who remained blind, no matter how bright the light.

To follow Jesus means to believe in and trust him, which leads to, as Jesus himself said, light and life. Those who follow Jesus are like travelers who follow the light in a dark night. You shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.

The light shows what we could not see, and guides our every step. We shall never be left alone as Jesus guides our way. Our part is to follow him, to submit ourselves to his guidance, and respond to his direction. It is not enough to *look* at his light, and to gaze upon it. We must follow it, and walk in it; for it is a light to our feet, not only our eyes.

READ

John 8:2-20 (emphasis on verse 12)

REFLECT

1: What is the brightest light you have ever seen? What is the darkest dark you have ever experienced? Take note of your emotions and experience for both. How does this help you connect to Jesus' statement?

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2: What promises does Jesus give those who walk in the light?

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3: In your relationship with God, what has Jesus shown you that has most impacted the direction of your life? Where or what would you be doing now if you didn't have the clear direction that Jesus gives those who follow him?

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"I am the door." - Jesus

In his final public address recorded within the Gospel of John, Jesus introduces two "I am" sayings within verses of one another. Growing out of a confrontation with Jewish leaders following their excommunication of a beggar (John 9), Jesus transitions from the image of light and darkness to that of a shepherd and sheep.

The first statement, "I am the door" may seem strange, since it is the only inanimate object of all the "I am" sayings. As we reflect on the image of the door, and the verses that surround it, something profound, insightful and beautiful happens.

For many shepherds, the sheepfold (where sheep slept overnight) was attached to their home. So, to enter the sheepfold was to come home. It would be hard to find a more powerful and contrasting analogy following an interaction for a man who was just kicked out by religious leaders. In keeping with light and darkness, the leaders were not able to understand the metaphor Jesus was sharing (10:6). They continued to be blind by their actions and the people they impacted.

As "the door" Jesus made it explicitly clear, he is the only means of coming home to God. He is the only way one can become part of the people of God. There is no other way. When you go through "the door," you are home, able to go "in and out" (10:9), where you find an abundant life, complete with fullness and freedom. What an incredible metaphor! Especially for a beggar who found himself alone and in need of a home.

Many of us spend our entire life searching for this. Either by choosing the wrong door, or when we find that what was promised is not what was delivered.

Today, we can walk through the door that Jesus has opened to us. He not only gave his life *for* us, but gives his life *to* us right now!

READ

John 10:1-10 (emphasis on verses 7-10)

REFLECT

1: We have all taken a wrong door. Is there one that is most notable to you? How did going through this door impact your life? Does it influence your perspective when Jesus says, "I am the door"?

2: Is your experience with Jesus an open door to opportunity and life or a closed door of limitation, blocking you from what you desire. Why?

3: Consider how a door is used. It gives access to something, provides a way through a barrier and prevents danger from the outside. How have you experienced Jesus in this way?

"I am the good shepherd." - Jesus

For many of us, the image of a shepherd, which is found throughout the Bible, can bring confusion since it is not a regular part of our life. For the original listener, a shepherd had profound cultural and historical implications. Shepherd imagery was common in many parts of the ancient world, with kings and gods alike described as shepherds.

For the Israelites, shepherds were integral to their origin as a nation and as the people of God (Psalm 23). As "shepherd" became synonymous with leadership, both political and spiritual, a reference to a *good* shepherd would serve as a deliberate and scathing criticism to those in leadership who were failing those they served.

In Ezekiel 34, God reprimands the people he had appointed to be the spiritual protectors and guides for his people, exclaiming that they had only sought to care for themselves and had left the people of God vulnerable and unprotected. This statement resonated again as a beggar who was healed was thrown out by his protectors and guides.

The word translated in English as "good", in its original language means "intrinsically good, beautiful, fair." Not only does Jesus claim that he will be a better guide and protector than those who came before him, he is speaking against present leaders. Luke, a physician and historian who speaks about Jesus' life, quoted Jesus saying: "[Y]ou load people down with burdens that they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them" (Luke 11:46).

Jesus is not only the door that welcomes us home to eternal life, but the one who leads (doesn't push) us along the way. He gave his life as the greatest demonstration of his love.

As those he loves, we are able to hear his voice and follow his leadership, knowing he is good. We are not asked to measure up to some impossible standard or earn his approval. He simply asks us to hear and follow, but that decision is ours to make. He will not force it upon us.

READ

John 10:11-21 (emphasis on verses 11 and 14)

REFLECT

1: Who are some people you have "followed" in the past?

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2: How would you feel if the one who was supposed to protect you ran away when physical or spiritual trouble came? How would you feel if someone stepped in to protect and laid down their life for you?

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3: Who would Jesus call thieves today? Why?

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RESPOND

Make a list of all the characteristics of the shepherd that this passage referenced. What stands out? What are you drawn to? Go through your list one by one, seeking to recall times you have experienced these characteristics in your life. Which of the characteristics you listed are most important to you at this point in your life? Why?

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PRAY

As you focus on a specific characteristic of the good shepherd most important to you, take this as an opportunity to pray. Set aside time, free from distraction, to be able to hear Jesus speak. His promise is not only that he is good, but that we will hear his voice.

"I am the resurrection and the life." - Jesus

As with the other "I am" sayings, this statement occurs in close proximity to a miracle performed by Jesus. The resurrection of Lazarus is the only one of its kind, and is only recorded within the book of John. As with the other physical miracles and "I am" sayings, this spectacular moment points beyond the event itself.

The Christian idea of *resurrection* is different from Greek and Jewish ideas—the two primary cultural influences in Jesus' time. The Greeks thought of the body as a hindrance to true life and they looked forward to the time when the soul would be free from its shackles. They firmly rejected the idea of resurrection (Acts 17:32). The Jewish people believed in resurrection, that the body would be raised from the dead at the end of time, but without transformation. Something Martha herself says to Jesus (11:24).

At its simplest, resurrection is a return to life; life as it should be and was originally intended. Resurrection from the dead and genuine eternal life in relationship with God are so closely tied to Jesus that they are embodied in him and can only be found as we believe in him.

Jesus does not merely say that he will bring about the resurrection or that he will be the cause of the resurrection (both of which are true), but something much stronger: *I am the resurrection and the life*. Jesus says that he has the power lodged in his own hands, and that even the dead will respond to his voice. Jesus only has to say "Lazarus, come out!" and "the dead man came out" (11:43-44). This was not a future event, it was a present reality.

Resurrection can be a concept that we can appreciate from afar. We can know its importance and accept its reality, but never really given time to pondering and sitting with it. As the resurrection and the life, Jesus is always writing better stories than we could ever pen. Martha and Mary would soon find this to be true in the most dynamic way. As we continue to reflect on Easter, so will we.

READ

John 11:17-27 (emphasis on verse 25)

REFLECT

1: What is your biggest fear when it comes to dying? How would you live your life if you were invincible and knew that no matter what happens, you would come back to life?

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2: Is there an area of your life that you find it hard to (completely) trust that Jesus understands and can make a difference? Why?

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3: Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? It is a question that has been carried throughout our study. As the end of our study approaches and the celebration of Easter moves further away, do you believe Jesus is the resurrection and the life?

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"I am the way and the truth and the life." - Jesus

This section opens and closes with Jesus' admonition, "Let not your heart be troubled" (John 14:1, 27). It's not a surprise that Jesus' friends were troubled. After all, Jesus had announced that He was going to die, one of them was a traitor and then he warned Peter that he was going to deny him three times.

Perhaps the heaviest blow of all was the realization that Jesus was going to leave them (John 13:33). Where was he going? Could they go with him? How could they get where he was going? These were some of the perplexing questions that tumbled around in their minds and hearts and were tossed back and forth in their conversation at the table.

In comforting his disciples, Jesus gives us an extraordinary summary of who he is and what he came from heaven to do on our behalf. In an incredibly concise way, it is able to encapsulate each of the "I am" statements that have come before it. Even though this verse is most often read at funerals, present relationship, comfort and security with Jesus is being emphasized more than the future. Jesus is preparing us for life long before we face death.

Jesus does not simply teach the way or point the way; he is the way. In fact, "The Way" was one of the earliest names for the Christian faith (Acts 9:2). Who better to show us the way and welcome us home than The Way himself?

He is not one version of the truth; Jesus is the truth. At a time when it can become easy to doubt what is said by most people, Jesus is not only true in every word he says, he is the personification of truth itself. He is true to all who trust in him, as true as truth itself.

He is not a version of living; Jesus is life itself. By following him, not only are our troubled hearts put at ease, our confidence increases knowing he is the initiator, sustainer and keeper of life itself.

READ

John 14:1-14 (emphasis on verse 6)

REFLECT

1: What are the things that rob you of peace?

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2: What are the different views about Jesus? How do they line up with what Jesus has said about himself?

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3: These claims seem so absolute. What is the implication to our life if we took them seriously and lived them out?

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RESPOND

Take a walk using a cement sidewalk near your home or work. As you walk, try to stay on the sidewalk the entire time. Ask yourself the following: What does this sidewalk provide for me? What does this sidewalk keep me from experiencing? Am I experiencing this sidewalk as negative and restrictive or as good and helpful? How does your experience on your walk mirror your experience of walking in The Way of Jesus? How does it differ?

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PRAY

Desiderius Erasmus was originally a Dutch priest who became known as the greatest scholar of the northern Renaissance during the 1500s. He wrote the following as a prayer based on John 14:6. May it serve you as a guide when you pray today: *“O Lord Jesus Christ, you have said that you are the way, the truth and the life. Help us not to stray from you who are the way, nor to distrust you who are the truth, nor to rest in anything other than you, who are the life.”*

"I am the true vine." - Jesus

This is the seventh and last of the "I am" statements of Jesus recorded in the gospel of John. With this one phrase Jesus presents an extended metaphor (15:1-8) and explains it (15:9-17), which lies at the very heart of the Farewell Discourse (13:31-16:33)—the last words of Jesus to his friends.

Many of us, at one time or another, have walked within the rows of a vineyard. Illustrious trees and a sprawling landscape are the first images that come to mind. Rarely is it a vine. Take in for a moment, the great humility of Jesus. One who has already been described as life itself, the light of the world, our guide home, the door to eternal life, the resurrection, the life, the way and the truth, is pleased to speak of himself with low and humble comparisons to a vine.

The cultivation of vineyards was central to the life and economy of Israel. Apart from their use in wine, grapes played an equally important role in the Palestinian diet. As we have seen from the other "I am" statements, Jesus was not introducing something new; it was familiar to every listener.

The centrality of vineyards to Jewish life is a comparison of Jesus' centrality in our lives. He is the center of our faith—the source of our life. The symbolism of the vine and branches is similar to that of the head and the body; we have a living relationship with Jesus and belong to him. We are unable to live on substitutes!

If Jesus is the true vine, the implication is that there are false vines that we can, or may be, connected to and continue in. As the true vine, Jesus encourages us to "live, remain and make your home in me." This invites us to having an ongoing, active connection to Jesus.

In the same way a vineyard is able to produce the finest quality fruit as it is cared for and tended, we too are able to produce "fruit" that reflects our connection to Jesus (Galatians 5:22-23). We become even more like him.

READ

John 15:1-8 (emphasis on verses 1 and 5)

REFLECT

1: What do you do to maintain important relationships in your life? Is this transferrable in how you maintain your relationship with Jesus?

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2: What are the practices you put into your life that help you maintain your connection to Jesus? Which spiritual disciplines from this study have you added? Which could you add?

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3: Purging is trending in homes around the country, as people are finding areas of excess and intentionally limiting themselves. With the metaphor of the vine, this would be considered pruning. How can you prune your life to bring more focus and clarity, especially as it relates to knowing Jesus?

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RESPOND

Wait until the end of your day, prior to completing this section. As a response, how were you able to draw strength from Jesus today? Were you able to create an active dependence on Jesus by staying connected to him? What helped you? What hindered you? In light of these responses, what can be different tomorrow? Make a commitment to take one step toward that being true.

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PRAY

There may not be a better prayer to pray as we conclude our study of the book of John, along with the "I am" statements, and Easter than to allow the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to be a part of our daily lives. Write each of the "I Am" statements down and as you look to each of them, form them into a prayer of your own. Apart from him we can do nothing. With him, we have all we need.