

# Why I Am a Lutheran

## Study Guide

**John T. Pless**

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Written by John T. Pless to correspond with the book *Why I Am a Lutheran* by Daniel Preus.

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**Study Guide for**  
*Why I Am a Lutheran: Jesus at the Center*

WRITTEN BY DANIEL PREUS

STUDY GUIDE BY JOHN T. PLESS

This study guide is offered to assist both individuals and groups in reading and discussing *Why I Am a Lutheran: Jesus at the Center* by Daniel Preus (© Concordia, 2004). Page numbers in parentheses refer to this book. It would be helpful to have a Bible and a hymnal (*The Lutheran Hymnal* or *Lutheran Worship*) at hand because this book makes rich use of the Bible as well as the hymns of the church. Readers also will note that the text of the *Small Catechism* is included in the back of *Why I Am a Lutheran* (201–21). All quotations from *Why I Am a Lutheran* are used by permission of Concordia Publishing House. All Scripture quotations in this study guide are from The Holy bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

# Jesus at the Center

(PP. 11–15)

1. How is Jesus identified in **John 1:14** and **Revelation 1:8**? Compare the Revelation text with **Isaiah 41:4**.
  
2. What is the significance of the word *dwell* (11) in **John 1:14**?

3. All of Scripture bears witness to Jesus. Pastor Preus writes: “Jesus uses the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet (*alpha* and *omega*) to describe Himself. Thus Jesus announces that from Genesis to Revelation, from the first letter of Scripture to the last, God’s Word witnesses to Him” (12). Read **John 5:39** and **John 20:31**. What do each of these texts tell us about the relationship of Christ to the Scriptures? Pastor Preus reminds us:

This profound message of salvation in Christ is the Good News that all of Scripture brings to us. Centuries ago, Johann Gerhard, a Lutheran pastor and theologian, wrote that every word of the Bible is to be read as if it were printed with ink that is the very blood of Jesus. God caused every single word of the Scriptures to be written with this objective in mind: to show us His Son, our Savior. By showing us Jesus, God brings us to faith in Him, and with faith comes life. (14–15).

How does this truth shape the way that we read and hear the Scriptures?

4. Read **Romans 3:23** and **Psalms 53:2–3**. How wide is the scope of the Law? How is the Law different from the Gospel? Why is this distinction crucial in understanding the content and purpose of the Bible? What results when the Law and the Gospel are confused?

5. This chapter concludes with three stanzas from Luther's Christmas hymn "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" (*Lutheran Worship* 37; *The Lutheran Hymnal* 85). How does this hymn confess the Gospel?

# Chapter 1

## I Am Jesus' Little Lamb

(PP. 17–24)

1. Pastor Preus begins this chapter with a reference to the well-loved children's hymn "I Am Jesus' Little Lamb" (*Lutheran Worship* 517; *The Lutheran Hymnal* 648). He writes, "The hymn connects Jesus' love with His identity" (17). Read **Psalm 23** and **John 10:10–15**. How does Jesus demonstrate His love and care for us?
2. How does the fact that Jesus is our Good Shepherd determine the mission of the church?
3. Where do we hear the voice of our Good Shepherd?
4. Read **Genesis 3:1**. How is Satan's deceptive question being asked in our day?
5. Read **John 18:38**. What evidence do you see that "Pontius Pilate's cynical question . . . seems to be the motto of our age" (19)?
6. How would you respond to a person who says, "You have your beliefs; I have mine. You have your truth; I have mine. Let's leave each other alone, and we'll both be happy" (19–20)?

7. What do each of the following texts tell us about the truth of Jesus and His Scriptures?

**John 8:31–32**

**John 14:6**

**John 17:17**

**2 Peter 1:16**

**2 Peter 1:20–21**

8. Pastor Preus writes:

We do not need to live in uncertainty regarding what is true about God and our faith in Him. God does not give us truth simply so we can be correct in what we believe. God does not give us truth so we can know that we are right and those who disagree with us are wrong. God does not give us truth simply so we can “win the argument.” . . . Jesus brings truth for the sake of grace, that is, for the sake of God’s undeserved kindness.” (22)

Read **Romans 8:38–39**. How does this passage demonstrate that truth and grace go together? Note Pastor Preus’s words:

But truth does not necessarily help us. We need truth that comes with grace, which is the kind of truth Jesus the Savior brings. The true grace Jesus brings covers every sin. What sins have you committed? What shameful deeds lie in your past? What hateful and harmful thoughts have you tried to ignore? What guilt haunts you in the dead of night? God forgives them all. He washes you clean. As John the Baptist cried, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). (24)

## Chapter 2

# A Matter of Mountains

(pp. 25–75)

1. The Bible speaks of the work of Christ in terms of *justification*. What is the significance of this word for the Gospel? See **Romans 3:19–26** and **Romans 8:31**.
2. Pastor Preus uses three mountains in Holy Scripture (Sinai, Calvary, and Zion) to unpack God's redeeming work in Christ. What do we learn about our sin, God's wrath, and the power of the Law from the following biblical passages:

**Hebrews 12:18–21**

**Exodus 19:12, 16, 18–19**

**Exodus 20:18–19**

3. Read **Genesis 3:10**. Why were Adam and Eve afraid?

4. Pastor Preus writes:

To exorcize this fear, our postmodern society has done everything possible to dilute God's Law. Society does its best to abbreviate, adumbrate, and eliminate God's Law. We live in an age in which people no longer wish to believe in laws that bind them because if they did, they would be guilty and afraid when they broke those laws. Thus almost every sin that God forbids—especially those actions that debauch the sanctity of the family—is justified today by those who wish to commit it. Abortion is justified in the name of love and individual choice. Homosexual behavior is justified in the name of acceptance. Adultery and fornication are justified in the name of freedom. (31)

See **1 Corinthians 6:9–10**; **Galatians 5:18–21**; **Ephesians 5:3–6**. With the above paragraph, Pastor Preus describes how our postmodern culture is given to relativism and the rejection of absolutes. How does this culture tempt Christians to compromise? Do you see evidence of this compromise in American Christianity?

5. Even among people who identify themselves as Christians, there is the tendency to speak of a “generic god” (32). This “god” is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is reported that Mark Twain once said: “In the beginning God made man in His own image. Ever since man has returned the compliment.” Gods made in our own image are deceptive and deadly because they are tools in the futile attempts to justify our sins. They will not stand in the face of the First Commandment. See **Exodus 20:3**. Why is self-made spirituality a poor substitute for faith?

6. Review the first three commandments and their explanations in Luther’s *Small Catechism* (201). How are these commandments broken by false worship? Also read the following biblical texts:

**Exodus 20:7**

**Exodus 34:14**

**Isaiah 48:11**

**1 John 2:23**

7. How have we “touched” the mountain of Sinai? See **Exodus 19:12** and **Romans 3:23**.
8. How does the Augsburg Confession describe original sin (35)? See **Psalms 51:5** and **1 Kings 8:46**.

9. As Pastor Preus points out, Mount Sinai can only bring death: “Standing on Sinai, we will never appear before our God as holy, pure, and just. We have laid our hands on God’s Law and we have broken it. We touch Sinai every day. There is no justification for the sinner on this mountain” (36). There is only one who can stand on Mount Sinai, and that is the Lord Jesus who “traveled from Mount Sinai to another mountain to take care of the consequences of sin for us” (36). Mount Sinai makes demands (see **Leviticus 19:2**) that we are unable to meet because of our sin. In contrast, Mount Calvary is “a mountain of forgiveness and triumph over death” (37). Read **Isaiah 25:8**. What does God do on Mount Calvary?
  
10. Jesus Christ is our substitute on Mount Calvary. He did for us what we could not do for ourselves. Pastor Preus writes: “Jesus was our substitute with every breath He took, with every step He walked, with every word He spoke, with everything He did. From the moment of His conception in Mary’s womb to the moment of His death, Jesus took our place” (41). Read **Isaiah 53:4–6**. What is the outcome of Jesus’ taking our place?
  
11. Read **Galatians 3:13**. How did Christ redeem us? Review Luther’s explanation to the Second Article in the *Small Catechism* (204–5).
  
12. Why does Luther focus on the phrase “for us” in his commentary on Galatians (see 41–44)?
  
13. What promise does God make in **Romans 8:1**? How is this promise connected to the righteousness of Christ? Read the hymn “Jesus, Your Blood and Righteousness” (*Lutheran Worship* 362; *The Lutheran Hymnal* 371). How does the hymn draw on biblical imagery to express the truth that God’s righteousness is a gift received by faith, not a status achieved by works of the Law? What comfort is there for us in the fact that this is “a righteousness that comes not from within us but from outside of us” (47)? See **Romans 7:18**. Also see the hymns “Blest the Children of Our God” (*Lutheran Worship* 370; *The Lutheran Hymnal* 391) and “Thy Works, Not Mine, O Christ” (*The Lutheran Hymnal* 380).

14. There is a third mountain. The Bible calls this mountain Mount Zion. It is the holy Christian church. How is this church described in **Hebrews 12:18, 22–24**?
15. Jesus Christ finished the work of redemption on the cross. See **John 19:30**. How does this gift become ours? Review Luther’s explanation to the Third Article in the *Small Catechism* (205). Also read **Isaiah 55:10–11**.
16. What is the church? How is the church “marked” (56)?
17. How do we come to Mount Zion?
18. Pastor Preus notes that “when people are not content to find salvation only on Mount Calvary and do not want to accept what the Bible teaches about how one comes to Mount Zion, confusion is the result” (59). How is this confusion seen today?
19. Our culture asserts autonomy and freedom of choice. Many churches teach “decision theology” as though human beings possess the spiritual energy to bring themselves to faith. This reduces faith to a human choice. This was the teaching of Charles Finney (64ff.) and his disciples. Evaluate Finney’s claim in light of **Psalms 51:5** and **Ephesians 2:1–2**.
20. Pastor Preus writes: “The Holy Spirit does not come to us in response to an act of our will. He is given to us as a gift of God’s grace. We do not grasp the Holy Spirit. God gives us the Spirit” (67). How does each of the following biblical passages emphasize this reality?
- 1 Corinthians 12:3, 9–14**
- 2 Corinthians 1:22**
- 2 Corinthians 5:5**

**Galatians 4:6**

**Ephesians 2:1–13**

21. Apart from faith in Christ Jesus, we are dead in sin. What can a corpse do to come to life? What has God done for us to bring us to life? See the following texts:

**Ephesians 3:14, 16–17**

**1 Thessalonians 4:8**

**Titus 3:3–8**

22. Read **Isaiah 62:1**. What are the blessings that belong to the residents of Mount Zion according to the prophet Isaiah?

## Chapter 3

# We Are Alive

(pp. 77–88)

1. In the Christian faith, being comes before doing. Our vocation, or calling, is simply to be children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. In Him we are holy and righteous. Good works flow from faith, and all that is apart from faith is sin. How does Paul make this point in **Romans 14:23b**?
2. Martin Luther once remarked, “We are daily bread to one another.” In other words, God uses us in our various vocations to serve the needs of the neighbor. In doing this, we are serving God. Pastor Preus writes: “When we love our neighbor, we love Jesus. When we serve our neighbor, we serve Jesus” (78). How does this insight shape the way that we look at the ordinary tasks of daily life?
3. How does the Formula of Concord describe the vibrancy of faith (81)?
4. Read **John 15:5**. What does Jesus tell us about the relationship of faith and good works in this text? See also **Philippians 4:13**; **Hebrews 11:6**; **James 2:18–19**.
5. Read **Romans 6:1–4, 11–14**. What does it mean to “die to sin”?

6. Pastor Preus states: “Christians are always sinners and saints at the same time. We do not stop being sinful when we become Christians. The more we understand the Law, the more we realize we cannot live up to its demands for perfection. We need a Savior no less today than the day on which we were baptized” (84). Read **Romans 7:21–24**. How does Paul describe the lifelong battle with sin in the believer?
  
7. Where do we find strength for this conflict? See **Romans 8:1**. Note Pastor Preus’s comment on this text: “Love is born not out of condemnation but out of forgiveness, not out of terror but out of faith, not out of despair but out of hope. Only the message of forgiveness in Jesus creates faith, hope, and true love” (88).

## Chapter 4

# Mount Zion and the Cross

(pp. 89–106)

1. Define “theology of glory.” How is this theology made manifest in contemporary religious thinking? Read **John 16:33**. How does Jesus correct this false theology? See also **Matthew 5:10–12; Matthew 16:24; Mark 13:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:6**.
  
2. Have you ever known anyone like Betty (94–95)? How is Betty an example of a Christian serving faithfully in her vocation?
  
3. How do the Scriptures teach us to pray in our distress and affliction? See **Psalm 77:7–9; Psalm 79:5; Psalm 88:14**.
  
4. What kind of help does God promise in times of temptation? See **Psalm 50:15; Matthew 7:7–8; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 4:15–16**.
  
5. In a sermon at the site of a church destroyed by a bomb in World War II, a famous German preacher proclaimed that “he who has the victory of the last hour can endure the next few minutes.” How does the “victory of the last hour” set our present sufferings in perspective? See **Romans 8:18, 28; 1 Peter 1:4; 1 Peter 2:9–12**.

6. What is the distinction between God's "alien work" and His "proper work" (98–99)?
  
7. Read Luther's explanation of **John 15:1–2** (99–101). How does Luther see God at work in the crosses that He sends us?
  
8. How do these crosses become occasions for Christian love to the neighbor? See **Matthew 25:34–40** and **1 Corinthians 12:25–27**.
  
9. Pastor Preus writes: "The cross of suffering has become a sign for all Christians, a sign of salvation, hope, and everlasting life" (104). How is it that the instrument of execution is now the sign of victory? See **Hebrews 12:2**.

## Chapter 5

# Mount Zion and the Sacraments

(PP. 107–43)

1. Pastor Preus writes:

The sacraments are not prescribed works of piety that Christians are to perform for God or two more commandments added to the second table of the Law. The sacraments are grace. The sacraments are the Gospel. The sacraments are forgiveness given, salvation, and life. They are not what we do for Jesus; they are what Jesus does for us. The sacraments bestow on those who receive them all the benefits Jesus earned in His life, death, and resurrection. The sacraments focus on Jesus Christ. (108)

How are the Law and the Gospel confused when the sacraments are defined as human rituals?

2. Read **Matthew 28:18–20**. How are disciples made?
3. How is the denial of Baptism to infants related to a denial of original sin? See **Psalm 51:5**; **John 3:6**.
4. Read **Acts 2:37–39**. How does this passage speak of the gifts bestowed in Baptism? Who are these gifts for according to v. 39?
5. What explicit blessing of Baptism is identified in each of the following texts:  
**Mark 16:16**

**Acts 22:16**

**Titus 3:4–7**

6. Read **1 Peter 3:21**. How does Baptism save us? See **Romans 6:3–4** and **Colossians 2:12**.
  
7. Pastor Preus notes that “when we understand that Jesus’ baptism was for us, it takes on a whole new meaning” (114). Read **Matthew 3:17**. How do these words originally spoken to Jesus now apply to us?
  
8. How is Jesus at the center of the Lord’s Supper? Pastor Preus states  
We cannot ascend into heaven and grasp God, but He comes to us in Jesus’ incarnation, He who truly was Immanuel—God with us. As true God and man, Jesus laid down His life and saved us through His death and resurrection. Now in the Lord’s Supper, He gives us everything His life, death, and resurrection accomplished. He brings heaven to earth. (121)  
How does Jesus bring heaven to earth in the Lord’s Supper?
  
9. What does Jesus say of the bread and the wine? See **Matthew 26:26–27**.
  
10. How did Huldrych Zwingli (123–24) interpret the words of Jesus? What is at the root of this erroneous interpretation?
  
11. What is the “cup of God’s wrath” in the Old Testament? See **Job 21:20; Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:7; Jeremiah 25:15–16**. What does Jesus do with this cup? See **Matthew 26:39** and **Matthew 27:46**. What cup does Jesus give us in place of the cup of wrath? See **Matthew 26:27–28**.

12. How did John Calvin (131) reverse the direction of the Lord's Supper?
  
13. The Lord's Supper is about more than Christ's presence. In this Meal, Christ bestows the forgiveness of sins won by His atonement. How is the Sacrament of the Altar tied to the cross?
  
14. How does the story of Helen (135–37) illustrate the gift that we receive in the Lord's Supper?
  
15. What are some of the central doctrines of the Bible that converge in the Lord's Supper?
  
16. Read **1 Corinthians 11:28–29**. How are we to examine ourselves in preparation for the Sacrament? Why is “open communion” a denial of the Gospel?
  
17. How is “close(d) Communion” an expression of true unity in Christ's teachings? See **1 Corinthians 10:16**.

## Chapter 6

# Font, Pulpit, and Altar

(PP. 145–51)

1. How does **Psalm 133** describe the unity of the church?

2. Pastor Preus writes:

To drive any kind of wedge between font and pulpit or between pulpit and altar—that is, to permit variety or disagreement in teaching expressed at font, pulpit, and altar—is to disparage the unity that King David and St. Paul ask us to treasure. Eventually a practice that does not honor the essential unity of confession in font, pulpit, and altar will destroy the church’s confession entirely. (147)

How does **Ephesians 4:3–6** teach us to guard the unity we have in Christ? How does false teaching pervert and destroy this unity?

3. **1 Peter 1:3–4** describes the inheritance that God has for us in Christ. How does this inheritance come to us?

4. How are preaching, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper the same, yet different?

5. Who does God wish to save? See **John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9**.

## Chapter 7

# We Will Live Forever

(PP. 153–63)

1. How would you answer Pastor Preus's question, "Why does the Son of God lie in a grave?" (154).
2. How does the Old Testament Passover point us to another Passover?
3. Read **1 Corinthians 15:12–20**. What does Jesus' resurrection guarantee for believers? See also **Romans 10:9**.
4. How does the resurrection of Jesus comfort us when we see that Satan is still writhing like a snake (158–59). See **Revelation 1:17–18**.
5. How do unbelievers view death? On the basis of the following biblical texts, what can we say about life beyond the grave?

**Ecclesiastes 12:7**

**Luke 16:22**

**Luke 23:43**

**John 11:25–26**

**John 10:27–29**

**Philippians 1:23**

**Revelation 14:13**

6. The hymn by Thomas Kingo “Like the Golden Sun Ascending” (*The Lutheran Hymnal* 207) is a beautiful summary of this chapter. As you read the hymn, note the language that the hymn writer uses to describe Jesus’ victory over death for us. Pay special attention to stanza 6. How does the hymn connect our joy in Christ’s resurrection with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper?
  
7. What are the two events recorded in **Matthew 27:51–53**? What do these occurrences tell us about the effects of Christ’s death and resurrection?
  
8. What do we know about heaven? See **1 Corinthians 2:9**. How do our hymns help us anticipate the joy of being with our Lord forever? See, for example, “A Multitude Comes” (*Lutheran Worship* 464).

## Chapter 8

# The Office of the Holy Ministry

(PP. 165–77)

1. Pastor Preus writes: “As the body craves food, the soul of the Christian craves grace and forgiveness” (165). Just as the human body must eat and drink to remain alive, so Christian life requires ongoing nourishment. Where do we receive this sustenance?
2. What is the relationship of the office of the ministry to faith according to the Augsburg Confession (166)?
3. If this statement is true: “Conflict and stress are all too common in the relationships between pastors and congregations” (167), how might such conflict be overcome biblically?
4. What does Luther mean when he says (of pastors): “Whenever you hear me, you hear not me, but Christ” (169).
5. What is the primary purpose of Christian preaching? See **2 Corinthians 5:19** and **John 3:17**.
6. What kind of preaching “sends hearers back to Sinai,” according to Pastor Preus (172)?

7. How is **John 3:30** descriptive “of every Christian pastor who knows his duty” (174)? See also **1 Corinthians 2:2**.

## Chapter 9

# Zion Sings

(PP. 179–91)

1. How does the liturgy express the unity of our faith?
2. Read **Psalm 145:18**. What does the psalmist teach us about the nature of Christ-centered worship? How is this reflected in the structure of the Lutheran liturgy?
3. What is the distinction between the “church militant” and the “church triumphant”?
4. In what way are we united in the liturgy with those who have died in the Lord? See **Revelation 7:9–12**. How is this truth conveyed in our hymns? For example, see “The Church’s One Foundation” (*Lutheran Worship* 289; *The Lutheran Hymnal* 473). Where is the unity of heaven with earth alluded to in the Divine Service?
5. Identify the part of the liturgy that is associated with each of the following biblical texts:  
**Numbers 6:24–26**

**Psalm 32:5**

**Mark 10:47**

**Luke 2:14**

**John 1:29**

**John 20:31**

## Conclusion

# Lord, in Your Mercy—Hear Our Prayer

(pp. 193–200)

1. Comment on Pastor Preus's statement: "I am a Lutheran for the same reason I am a Christian" (195).
2. How is being a Lutheran "truly all about Jesus" (195)?
3. Read **Matthew 28:18–20**. What is essential to the mission of the church? How is Jesus at the center of missions?

# For Further Reading and Study

The following books are suggested for those who want to grow in their understanding of Jesus Christ and how He truly is at the center of the Lutheran confession of the faith. These books are available from Concordia Publishing House, your local Christian bookstore, or most online bookstores.

- Engelbrecht, Edward, ed. *To All Eternity: The Essential Teachings of Christianity*. St. Louis: Concordia, 2002.
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