

# WORD

New Testament  
Highlights: The  
Gospel of Jesus





God's words are alive. He reveals Himself through them, and they transform us as we put our faith and confidence in Him and what He has said. These words are our lifeline; they sustain us and point us to Jesus. God says that if we align our thinking and lives with His Word, we'll be transformed from the inside out.

This personal study guide is produced as part of a companion study series to the WORD Bible magazine, which is available from Hillsong Resource.

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WORD Bible New Testament Highlights: The Gospel of Jesus

Reprinted with modification 2015

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Word personal study guide

ISSN 2053-6615

Printed by Vizability

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# Congratulations

on taking part in one of our

# Local Bible Studies

We're glad that you have taken this step to increase your Biblical knowledge, understanding and confidence. We want to help you to develop your skills in reading God's Word, understand it in context, and apply your lives to it wholeheartedly.

**The topics for each week will be:**

Week	Subject	Reference
One	The Birth and Preparation of Jesus	Mark 1:1-13
Two	The Ministry of Jesus	Mark 1:14-3:35
Three	The Parables of Jesus	Mark 4:1-8:26
Four	The Journey to Jerusalem and the Cross	Mark 8:27-13:37
Five	The Crucifixion of Jesus	Mark 14:1-15:47
Six	The Resurrection of Jesus	Mark 16:1-16:20

Have fun and all the best on your journey!



Phil and Christa Barnard  
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# Using this personal study guide:

This Personal Study Guide has been created for use within your Local Bible Study. It will help direct your study, highlight key things for you to think about and allow room for your thoughts and notes. Feel free to make it yours! Let us share with you what to expect along the way.

## **What to expect from this Personal Study Guide**

These Bible studies are designed to be largely inductive. By this, we mean that by their very nature they will be explorative, fairly open-ended and very discussion-led. We want you to actively engage with God's living Word, rather than sit there and be told to write down a bunch of things that you're likely to forget by the end of the night...

To help this, our learning philosophy is built around four key questions. Knowing this will help you get the best out of your Bible Study.

### **1. What do we already know?**

You – yes, even you – know something about the Bible (it might be as little as that it is a big, dusty book on Grandma's shelf). But you know something. Bring what you know to the table. Start on a win.

### **2. What would you like to know?**

You might want to know about a particular person or event – like when God rescued the Israelites from Egypt (what was all that about?). Or you might have a situation in your life that you'd like advice on, so you want to know what God says about it. All of us have something that we want to know, so don't be afraid to ask.

### **3. What does God want you to know?**

What's your blindspot? What is it that you don't even know that you don't know? While it's good to go looking for specific answers to specific questions, the power of God's Word often lies in the element of surprise – the way it manages to teach you something that you didn't realise you still needed to learn, but God did.

### **4. What is going to change now?**

We expect your life to change. The strength of today's reading is seen in tomorrow's actions. Make a decision to look for (and pray about) areas of your life that need to grow or die. The Word of God is alive and it can mess you up in so many good ways if you're prepared to let it change the way you think, speak and act.

## **What you will find in your Personal Study Guide**

Your Personal Study Guide has been crafted to help you along your journey. The Old Testament is massive, and we could not hope to cover every single piece of interesting information. So we'll help you with the general storyline, and then focus in on bits that are particularly interesting.

Use these headings to help you:

### **The story...**

Here we'll try to let you know the general story of what's been happening along the way. It's not exhaustive, but it will help you keep track of the action.

### **Focus in...**

This is where we focus in on something that is particularly good for you to know. It might be a specific person or event, or any other highlight that you just have to know about.

### **Read...**

Read the scripture. It's not rocket science.

### **Respond...**

Jot down the ideas and thoughts that are by now probably flooding into your head.

### **Discuss...**

Here's the chance to get into it. Chat. Share. Discuss. Maybe even argue (nicely). Just make sure it's ultimately encouraging.

### **Reflect...**

Take a moment to reflect on what this means to you. You can get as deep and philosophical as you like.

# Prelude to New Testament Highlights:

## The Gospel of Jesus

We left our study of the Old Testament at the conclusion of Malachi. The nation of Israel had been called through Abraham, established by Moses and strengthened under three successive kings – before turning from God, splintering into two kingdoms and being punished at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Following more than 50 years in captivity, the southern kingdom of Judah was released to return home to Jerusalem and the people began to rebuild their city, their temple and their faith.

The prophet Malachi was raised in the 4th century BC by God to stir His people back to true service of Him. The promise of the longed-for Messiah, who would usher in a new rule and a new kingdom, was still lingering in the air. Malachi even prophesied the coming of a new “Elijah” – another prophet who would prepare the way for this Lord (Malachi 3:1; 4:5).

But then God fell silent.

Unknown to the Jewish people at the time, the passing of Malachi ushered in a period of time unprecedented in Israelite history – silence from God. Though He had actively spoken and interacted with the people of Israel for over two millennia, God now became hushed. No significant prophet followed Malachi and no Jewish leader rose as a spokesperson for God. We know this period of time as the Intertestamental Period – or the “400 years of silence.”

Though the voice of God may have been silent, His hand was not motionless. As prophesied in Daniel (2:39, 40; 7:5-7), control of the land of Israel would change from the Medo-Persians (538 to 330 BC), to the Greeks (330 to 165 BC) and then to the Romans. In 166 BC, a Jewish elder and priest named Mattathias refused to offer a pagan sacrifice and led a short revolution against the ruling party. His son, Judas Maccabeus, led a victorious guerilla war and managed to secure a brief, though internally disastrous, period of independence for Israel (165 to 63 BC).

By the first century BC, Rome had overrun Greece as the new world power, and in 63 BC, the Roman general Pompey turned his attention to conquering Jerusalem. After a three-month siege, Jerusalem fell to



Rome, just as Daniel had predicted. To quell any Jewish unrest, Rome installed Herod the Great to be the king of Judea. He ruled Palestine from 37 to 4 BC, and was the “king of the Jews” when Jesus was born. It is important to know that all throughout this period, God was preparing the world for His Son’s arrival. There were a number of developments in both Jewish and Gentile worlds that would become significant throughout the life of Jesus:

- **The influence of Greek culture**

The impact of Greek rule a few centuries beforehand was still very prominent. Jesus was born into a world influenced by Greek thought and religion, and virtually all people would have spoken Greek (in addition to their local language). A common language would become advantageous as the early church sought to spread the gospel throughout the land.

- **The effect of Roman rule**

As the current ruling power, Rome was particularly influential. Rome established the governing powers, collected taxes and enforced peace (sometimes through violence). Yet they also allowed a degree of religious freedom that had not been tolerated under Greek rule. The Romans were also particularly advanced in connecting cities by roads, building a functioning postal system, and creating a systematic judicial system – all of which would eventually expedite the spread of the gospel.

- **The rise of Jewish sects**

Due largely as a response either to external influences or a desire to usher in the Messiah, a number of groups arose within the Jewish people. The Pharisees sought to distance themselves from the influences of the Gentile cultures. They interpreted the laws strictly, and expected other Jews to do likewise. The Sadducees were from the aristocratic high priestly line, and became the guardians of the temple policy and practices. They rejected all teaching that wasn’t directly from the Torah. The Scribes and Rabbis believed that the Exile had come from a lack of knowledge and obedience to the Torah, so they devoted their lives to studying the teachings and passing knowledge on to the people of Israel. Meanwhile, the Zealots and the Essenes rejected the rule of Rome, but in very different ways: the Zealots wanted to restore political power to Israel by force, whereas the Essenes purposefully separated themselves from the Roman world in an attempt to live pure and holy lives.

After 400 years of silence, we find ourselves at the turning point of history. The Gospels of Jesus Christ – written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – record for all time the teaching and actions of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God and God Himself.

The word ‘gospel’ derives from the Anglo-Saxon word ‘godspell’, which simply means ‘a story about God’ or ‘a good story’, and that’s exactly what the Biblical Gospels are: stories that share the good news about Jesus. The Gospels are not biographies in the modern sense of the word. They do not intend to present a complete record of the life of Jesus. Rather, they are better read as memoirs – fond records of His life, teachings and actions that help believers understand who He is and what He came to achieve. They provide theological insight that will strengthen our assurance regarding the reality of our faith.

In 1926, when reflecting upon the impact of the life of Jesus, Dr James Allen Francis commented:


*Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher.*

*He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself...*

*While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.*

*Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.*

*I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.*



The Gospels are our blessed recording of that one solitary life. In the next six sessions, we will walk through the Gospels, taking time to stop and ponder the most important and life-changing moments. In your background reading, you will read the entire book of Mark – the most concise record of the life of Jesus. In our group sessions, we will expand on Mark’s words by looking horizontally into the writings of Matthew, Luke and John. Each individual Gospel presents a unique and authoritative picture of Jesus, and when read together, they provide a complete portrait of Jesus, God in flesh.

Please feel free to use this page for your notes

# Week One

## Topic: The Arrival of Jesus

### **My Preparation**

Our Bible presents us with four individual memoirs of Jesus' life, as written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But why do we have four writings? Why don't we just have one record of Jesus?

Although many spurious Gospels were written, from the earliest times the church has only accepted the four as inspired Scripture. The first three in the New Testament – Matthew, Mark and Luke – are regarded as the 'synoptic gospels', which just means that they share a common view. They contain many similarities in both their style and their substance. John's Gospel, on the other hand, has a certain distinctive vibe, and this will become more obvious as we read on. Each author carried a personal reason for writing and a unique way of communicating their message. Let's take a moment to look at the more idiosyncratic features of each Gospel.

Matthew's Gospel by written by Matthew, a former tax-collector who became one of Jesus' disciples (Mathew 9:9). Matthew, a fellow Jew, wrote his Gospel between 60 and 65 AD. Matthew was evidently very keen to show Jesus' Jewish heritage and His position as the sought-after Messiah. While his writing is full of references to the Old Testament and draws heavily on established Messianic language (such as the phrase 'Son of David'), he frequently cites Jewish custom without explaining it, and he is very sensitive to using the name of God – all which suggests his audience were fellow Jewish readers familiar with Jewish culture. To Matthew, Jesus is his promised King and Messiah who fulfills Old Testament prophecies.

Mark's Gospel was written by John Mark, one of Paul's travel companions (Acts 12:25) and a close associate of Peter. This concise piece was probably the first of the Gospels written, and is usually dated 55 to 60 AD. It's very likely that Matthew and Luke used Mark's writing as a helpful resource when putting together their respective narratives. Mark was likely to be writing his Gospel to Christians in Rome – he uses the Roman system for time, carefully explains any Jewish customs, translates any Aramaic terms into Greek and omits material that would make little sense to anyone but a Jewish reader.

Mark is a true storyteller, stuffing his writing with actions more than words and bringing sharp focus to Jesus' miracles. To Mark, Jesus is the Servant of God, whose actions spoke louder than His words.

Luke's Gospel was written by Luke in 60 AD. Luke was a Gentile physician (making him the only non-Jew to pen a book in Scripture) and a close friend of Paul (Colossians 4:14). Luke had researched Jesus thoroughly in order to provide an orderly account to 'the most excellent Theophilus' (likely to be a well-known Roman dignitary). The writing is everything that you might expect from a doctor – the content is comprehensive, the language and vocabulary are scholarly, and there is great attention given to illnesses and diagnoses. Luke was also kindhearted: a running theme in his work is Jesus' compassion for Gentiles, women, children, tax collectors and anyone generally considered a sinner or an outcast. To Luke, Jesus was the Son of Man sent to bring the sinners and outcasts home.

John's Gospel was the last of the four to be written. Penned around 85 to 90 AD by John the Apostle (not to be confused with John the Baptist, who features prominently in the early chapters of the Gospel), this Gospel is a deliberate and uniquely spiritual addition to the prior three. Over 90 percent of John's Gospel is unique to John – he misses much of Jesus' childhood and preparation, the appointment of the disciples, His parables, His ascension and the great commission. Rather, John provides a theological apologetic, seeking to prove conclusively that Jesus is the Son of God and that only through Him is eternal life possible. It is likely that John wrote his Gospel for the wider Christian community, offering them a vital resource to understand that Jesus is God.

### **Read**

- Mark 1:1-13
- Compare Mark's introduction to the life of Jesus that written by Matthew (1:1-4:11), Luke (1:1-13) and John (1:1-28).

### **Respond**

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read this passage. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

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## **Our Discussion**

### **The story of the long-awaited Messiah**

Since humanity first fell into Satan's trap of slavery, God had promised a moment of time would come when a Redeemer would finally appear and crush the adversary. God foretold that this Redeemer would come on behalf of all humanity (cf. Eve in Genesis 3:15), through one special people (cf. Abraham in Genesis 12:3) and via one specific family (cf. David in Jeremiah 23:5). The Gospels give a compelling testimony that this Redeemer was Jesus of Nazareth, born approximately 4BC, in the small village of Bethlehem.

#### **Focus in...**

The nature of Jesus' birth adds immense weight to our faith in Him as the prophesied Messiah. The likelihood of the literal fulfillment of so many prophetic words – some recorded 2000 years before His birth – in one individual transcends mere coincidence and serves to validate that Jesus was who He said He was. It also gives strength to the very notion of Scripture being the inspired Word of God.

#### **Discuss...**

There are multiple prophecies throughout the Old Testament regarding the birth of Jesus. Use the verse pairs below to identify five of them.

- Genesis 12:3 and Matthew 1:1
- Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:19-23
- Genesis 17:19 / Numbers 24:17 and Matthew 1:2
- Micah 5:2 and Luke 2:1-7
- Jeremiah 23:5 and Matthew 1:6

#### **The story continues...**

Knowing your ancestral history has always been important, and it was especially so at the time of Jesus' birth. Besides providing their familial and cultural identity, a Jew's ancestral line would determine their inheritance, their right to land and their right to the priesthood or to the royal throne. If one was making a claim based upon their ancestry, they required a complete and accurate account of their genealogical record to support their claim.

A black and white ultrasound image of a fetus in a womb. The fetus is positioned horizontally, with its head to the right and feet to the left. The spine and limbs are visible. The text is overlaid on the upper left portion of the image.

Voluson  
E8

*The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."*

LUKE 1:30-33



We see in the Gospels that each author presents a unique genealogy of Jesus. This was purposeful, as each author was trying to present a case for a unique claim of Jesus.

### **Discuss...**

What was unique about each author's genealogy, and how did it meet the needs and interests of their initial reading audience?

- Matthew (1:1-1:17)
- Mark
- Luke (3:23-38)
- John (1:1)

### **The story of John the Baptist**

Mark's Gospel opens with a brief introduction to a man named John. Mark's depiction of John (1:4-8) is characteristically brief, but when we add pieces together from the other Gospels, the picture becomes more complete. We infer from Luke's account that John was the son of Zacharias (a priest) and Elizabeth. John was born approximately 6 months before Jesus, and he was 'filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb' (Luke 1:14-16). Though John's dress and habits were certainly rare – he wore clothes of camel hair and a diet of locusts and honey (Matthew 3:4) – his message was strikingly suggestive of Elijah, the old prophet of national judgment. With relentless vigor and fearlessness, John preached to an ever-increasing number of listeners.

### **Focus in...**

In the Old Testament, the prophets had told the Jewish people to expect a coming prophet who would 'prepare the way for the Lord' (Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 3:1). This phrase would have been well understood by the Israelites: it was customary for a monarch embarking on a journey to send forerunners who would make sure that the way for the king was prepared. The forerunner would check the roads to be taken and ensure that they were suitably ready for a royal visitor. If necessary, he would even level the ground, level off any high places and smooth over the rough patches. His primary goal was to remove any obstacles that would hinder the king's journey. It was a grueling and demanding job, but the forerunner was committed to the success of the one who was to follow. The forerunner that would go before Jesus is John (known as 'John the Baptist').

## Discuss...

As John preached in the wilderness of Judea, multitudes came to listen (Matthew 3:1-12).

- What was his primary message?
- Why would that message have been controversial?
- In what way(s) was John ‘preparing the way for the Lord?’
- Read Luke 7:28. How did Jesus view the life and work of John?
- What can we learn from John’s view of his role as a forerunner to Jesus?

## **The story of Jesus’ arrival**

Jesus was born to Mary (and Joseph) in a small manger in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-24). In accordance with Jewish tradition, He was circumcised when He was eight days old, and presented to the Lord in Jerusalem. A woman’s firstborn son was always dedicated to the Lord (see Exodus 13) and then bought back, or “redeemed” by the parents. This was to acknowledge that the child belonged to God, who alone has the power to give life. We see that Mary and Joseph offered a sacrifice of turtledoves or pigeons, which was an acceptable substitute for those too poor to offer a lamb (see Leviticus 12:8). Though Jesus was God’s Son, His family carried out all the ceremonies necessary under God’s law. He was not above the law; He just fulfilled it completely.

Following a sojourn in Egypt to escape the fury of King Herod, Jesus and His family returned and settled in Nazareth (Matthew 2:13-23). He grew up in wisdom and stature, and the favour of God and people was upon Him (Luke 2:39-52). The Gospels give us precious little further details of Jesus adolescence, with all four writers choosing to resume their memoirs when Jesus was around 30 years old.

The paths of John the Baptist and Jesus collide when Jesus was around 30 years old, and Jesus was being prepared for public ministry. John had spent six months preaching repentance and the coming judgment, and multitudes had flocked from Judea and Jerusalem, turning to him to confess their sins and be baptized. In itself, John’s ministry was experiencing an astonishing revival, yet the time was coming when One greater would be revealed. This meeting of John and Jesus, the forerunner and the coming King, was recorded to varying extents in all four Gospels (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22, John 1:24-34).

John's mission had always been one of preparation. He was preparing the way for One even greater than he; One so great that John felt unworthy to even be His slave (John 1:27). Yet in a move that must have been almost embarrassing for John, Jesus approached him and requested to be baptized (Matthew 3:13). Despite his protests, Jesus insisted, and John obediently agreed. As Jesus came up out of the water, we read that the heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and the voice of the Father declared: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased' (Matthew 3:16-17).

### **Discuss...**

- John's baptism was for repentance, yet Jesus insisted that He too should take part. Why was it important for Jesus to be baptised?
- What is significant about the moment that Jesus came out of the water?

### **The story of the Temptation**

The forerunner had prepared the way. The King had arrived with a rightful claim to the throne. The coronation had occurred. Heaven itself had declared Jesus to be 'the One'. Yet we shouldn't forget that lurking in the shadows there still exists a current ruler – a usurper king and the god of this age. Since the fall of man, Satan has ruled the world and he doesn't intend on handing over the keys to his domain without a fight.

The synoptic gospels tell us that following His baptism, the Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness, where He fasted for 40 days and nights (Matthew 4:1-2). Seizing the opportunity, the devil swoops in on Jesus and begins his first direct assault on the Son of God.

### **Focus in...**

If Jesus was to become the rightful King of this world, He would have to demonstrate power over the present monarch. The two had been at war since Satan was cast from Heaven. He had tried relentlessly to destroy the Messianic line to prevent Jesus from ever being born. Now he was facing Him in direct conflict.

Did Jesus have what it takes to defeat His adversary? Would He triumph over him and his weapons? If He fell at this point, then He wouldn't even be able to save Himself, let alone the world He came to rescue. However, if He could triumph over the full force of the rival, then He proves that He is worthy of redeeming sinners

and reconciling them with the Father. Nothing less than the fate of redemption is at stake as Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan.

**Discuss...**

- Why did the Spirit allow – in fact provoke – Jesus to be tempted?
- What were the three temptations Satan offered? How do they compare with the temptations we face today? How did Jesus respond?
- Compare and contrast this account with the first temptation of humanity in Eden (Genesis 3:1-7). What do you notice? What can we learn?
- Consider these two quotes regarding temptation. What do you think they mean? How do they relate to Jesus?

*‘If a man does not commit certain transgressions... it must be because he never felt the appeal of them.’ (A. E. Taylor)*

*‘The person who resists knows the full force of temptation. Sinlessness points to a more intense rather than a less intense temptation.’ (L. Morris)*

Through unwavering obedience to the Word of God, Jesus overcame the temptations and overcame the tempter. He had squared up with His adversary and came out with the points. His time of preparation was now complete, and His public ministry was about to begin.

**Reflect...**

What is ‘profitable’ for us from today’s readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?  
How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.

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Please feel free to use this page for your notes

# Week Two

## Topic: The Ministry of Jesus

### **My Preparation**

In the three years following His baptism, Jesus traveled and ministered to people throughout Israel and the neighbouring areas. He spent much of His time teaching (often through parables), confronting the religious leaders who had distorted God's laws, and showing His authority and compassion through many miracles. He gave the people a view of God that they had never seen before – this was God present in a physical body, and He walking on earth. The Word had put on flesh and now dwelt among them.

John's Gospel records His earliest movements, as He gathers His first disciples (1:35-51) and performs His first miracle at a wedding in Cana (2:1-12). He begins His public ministry in Jerusalem by attending the annual Passover celebration, but comes immediately into conflict with the religious leaders by clearing the Temple of corruption and injustice (2:13-22). Following Herod's arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus leaves Judea and returns to Galilee (Mark 1:14). On his way home, Jesus pauses to minister in Samaria – the area held in contempt by most Jews. He ignores the prejudices of common society and He brings the Gospel to the Samaritans. Many are saved (John 4:4-42).

Jesus now moved towards Galilee (the northern region of Israel around the Sea of Galilee), where the majority of His ministry would take place. Here, He performed many miracles, taught extensively (including the Sermon on the Mount) and spent a lot of time investing into the lives of His twelve chosen disciples. He would go from town to town, sharing His Gospel with anyone who would listen.

We will follow Jesus' ministry through Mark's Gospel, stopping at points to highlight aspects of Jesus' life and activities. This week's discussion will focus on four aspects of Jesus' ministry in Galilee (though it should be read as representative of His entire ministry). The four areas are His Message, His Messengers, His Miracles and His Messiahship.

## Read...

- Mark 1:14-3:35
- Also read Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount' in Matthew 5-7

## Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read these passages. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

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## Our Discussion

### The story of Jesus' Message

Mark tells us that after His temptation, Jesus went into Galilee and immediately began preaching the Gospel, saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel' (Mark 1:15). Preaching and teaching was a vital feature of Jesus' ministry, and He did it extraordinarily well: His teaching was authoritative (Mark 1:27), saturated with object lessons (Matthew 11:20-25), used questioning (Mark 8:17-19), leveraged the power of story (Luke 15) and conversation (Mark 8:27-30), and perhaps most powerfully, conveyed a deep love for His audience (Matthew 9:36). In fact, He taught with such authority that news of His teaching spread across the land (Mark 1:27-28), He was given the honourific title of 'Rabbi' by many (John 1:38), and one of the leading Rabbis in Israel came to Him to learn (John 3:1-21).

Jesus saw His teaching as a primary mission (Luke 4:43), and His primary message was to reveal God the Father (John 14:8-14), Himself as the Son (John 4:25-26), His mission (Mark 9:31), how people should live (Matthew 5:48) and what the future held (Mark 14:62). But perhaps His greatest message is seen in those first words in Mark: the Kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:14-15).

## Focus in...

Mark's writing tells us that Jesus' first and primary message was the 'Kingdom of God'. But what is the Kingdom, and what should we expect of it? To explore this 'kingdom' more, we will turn to Matthew's Gospel. Not surprisingly, Matthew as an author gives us the most comprehensive insight into Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God. Matthew alternates five substantial blocks of narrative (actions) with five significant blocks of discourse (teaching). The first of these discourses is commonly known as the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5-7), and is recognized as holding the central tenets of Christian discipleship and life in God's Kingdom.

In Matthew's Gospel, this sermon occurs just after Jesus calls His first disciples. He had begun to travel around Galilee, healing the sick and casting out demons. The crowds had begun to gather to hear of His exploits and had travelled great distances to hear Him. He truly was acting like there was a new King in town...

In a way, Jesus was taking this opportunity to teach on how this new Kingdom (the 'Kingdom of Heaven' in Matthew's Gospel) would operate. He spoke of the Kingdom's values and viewpoints, its ethics and expectations, its beliefs and its behaviours. In one sense, this was the new King's opportunity to deliver His manifesto on life in the new Kingdom.

## Discuss...

It has been said that the Sermon on the Mount addresses multiple aspects of a Christian's character and behaviour: the kind of actions expected from citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. The summary theme for each section has been given below.

- 5:3-12            A Kingdom Citizen's character.
- 5:13-16         A Kingdom Citizen's influence.
- 5:17-48         A Kingdom Citizen's righteousness.
- 6:1-18           A Kingdom Citizen's piety.
- 6:19-34         A Kingdom Citizen's ambition.
- 7:1-20           A Kingdom Citizen's relationships.
- 7:21-27         A Kingdom Citizen's commitment.

Do you agree with the summary theme? Why or why not? How can it help you understand Jesus' message and teaching better?



## The story of Jesus' Messengers

Immediately following Jesus' announcement of His message, Mark records that Jesus sets about selecting messengers, or people that would assist Him in carrying, communicating and revealing His message to the people of the world. The Bible calls these messengers 'disciples'.

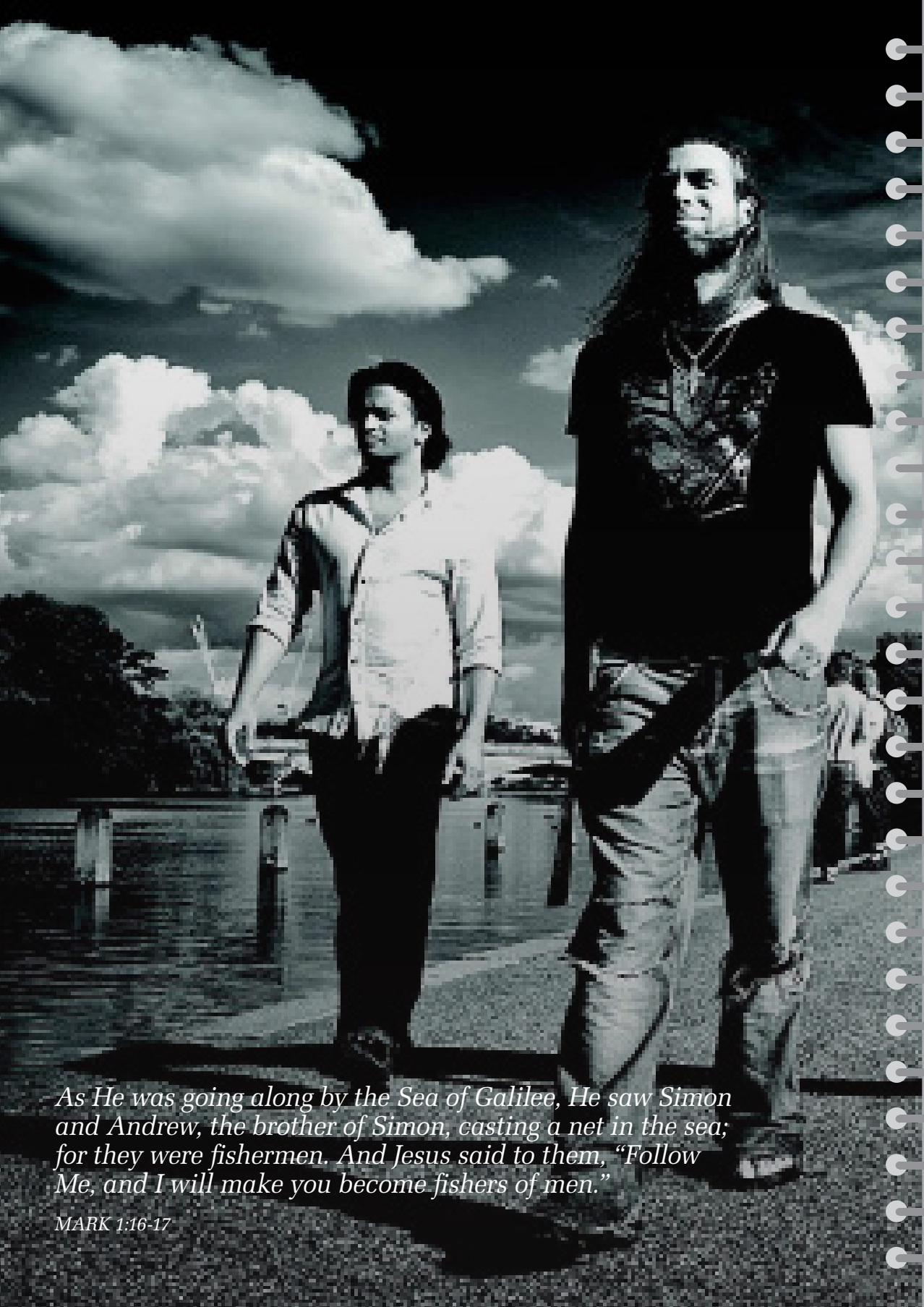
As Jesus arrived in Galilee, He spies Simon and his brother, Andrew, casting their net into the sea. He called out to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.' Immediately, they drop their nets and followed Him. All four Gospel writers record Jesus selecting His disciples. Some left John in order to follow Jesus (John 1:35-51), while some were called away from their trades (Luke 5:27-28) or fishing boats (Matthew 4:18-22). Mark and Luke give us a complete list of the 12 chosen to follow Him (Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6:12-16):

- Simon, also known as Peter
- Andrew, Peter's brother
- James and John, sons of Zebedee
- Philip
- Nathanael, also known as Bartholemew
- Matthew the tax collector
- Thomas
- James, son of Alpheus
- Thaddeus
- Simon the Zealot
- Judas Iscariot

Jesus' faithful disciples were ordinary men who became extraordinary because of Jesus. Despite, their confusion and lack of understanding during His lifetime, they became powerful witnesses to His resurrection and carried on His message into the Book of Acts and many of the letters.

### Focus in...

The Greek word for 'disciple' ('mathetes'), is only found in the Gospels and the Book of Acts, but the concept was known throughout Biblical times. Referring to any student or learner, a disciple was a younger person who committed himself to following a specific teacher in order



*As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men."*

*MARK 1:16-17*

to learn to replicate them. They would imitate their lives, seeking to emulate their teacher in every way. They would follow them so closely that they would eventually think like the teacher. An old Rabbinic blessing puts it this way: ‘May you be covered with the dust of your Rabbi’, meaning that the student would follow the rabbi so closely that they would be forever covered with the dust kicked up by their teacher. Discipleship, therefore, was far more than a transfer of information; it was the replication of a life.

In first century Judaism, most boys would attend school up until the age of thirteen years. If they then wanted to go on to become a judge, teacher or scribe, they would seek to study under a certain scholar. The scholar would either accept or reject the young man, depending on whether he thought they had what it took to be a successful disciple.

### **Discuss...**

- Jesus chose His disciples personally. How did that differ from popular custom? What message would that have sent to His disciples?
- How does Jesus’ call to ‘Follow Me’ differ from how we tend to learn now?
- In Luke 9:57-62, we read the account of others asking Jesus if they could follow Him. What do you notice about their requests? What was His response to them? What can we learn from this?
- Read John 5:19. Who was Jesus a disciple of?
- Reflect on your life as a disciple of Christ. What stands in between you and full discipleship? What improvements could you make?

### **The story of Jesus’ Miracles**

The first recorded instance of Jesus performing a miracle was at a wedding in Cana (John 2:1-12). The story is a familiar one: Jesus is attending a wedding feast when the hosts realize that they have run out of wine (a great embarrassment). Jesus’ mother seems to think that He could help, and she brings the matter to His attention. Jesus somewhat dismisses her, telling her that His ‘time had not yet come.’ Undeterred, His mother tells the servants to follow His instructions. Within minutes, the wine was flowing again – and Jesus’ glory could no longer be concealed.

Mark doesn't record this miracle, but rather records another miracle at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Following His initial calling of the disciples, Jesus goes to Capernaum, where He begins to teach in the synagogue (as the Temple in Jerusalem was too far to reach, many Jewish communities built synagogues, or local places of meeting and worship). During His teaching, a man with an 'unclean' spirit began to cry out towards Jesus. With one sentence, spoken with the authority of Heaven, Jesus commands the spirit out of the man. The man is released.

The Gospels then record a further 35 miracles performed by Jesus: in total there were 20 healings, 9 displays of power over nature, 4 exorcisms, 3 resurrections and 1 miraculous escape from a hostile crowd.

### **Focus in...**

A miracle is a less common kind of God's activity in which He provokes people's awe and wonder and bears witness to Himself. We say that it is a 'less common kind' of activity because we know that God preserves, controls and governs the world's affairs on a daily basis, but at times there are events that cause us to truly stand back and marvel at His glory.

Jesus' miracles are:

- **Unusual:** they stand in contrast to what you would expect. Nobody expects a dead child to sit up and start talking – that's unusual!
- **Powerful:** they demonstrate the awesome power of the Creator. Rather than removing natural law (which would cause chaos), they supersede the law in order to bring a truer peace and control to a situation.
- **Purposeful:** they are teleological, which means that God intends to achieve a goal. They are never for entertainment. Always ask yourself, 'What would this have meant to the person receiving the miracle, and to their community?'

## Discuss...

What is the purpose of miracles? Use the following verses to identify the reason(s) Jesus chooses to intervene in this marvelous way.

- Matthew 8:14-17
- Matthew 9:1-7
- Matthew 12:22-29
- Mathew 14:14
- John 3:1-2

In each of the above scenarios, observe How Jesus responded and addressed the situation (how did He act? How did He speak?). What can we learn about God? What can we learn about our Christian lives?

## **The story of Jesus' Messiahship**

Of course, Christians value Jesus' immense teaching ability, but let us never view Him as just another great spiritual teacher. Interwoven through His revolutionary teaching on ethics, justice, compassion, forgiveness and righteousness are remarkable claims about who He understood Himself to be.

In Mark 2, four men came to Jesus with their friend, a paralytic. In a much-loved narrative, Jesus looks favourably upon the friends' faith and He commands the man to pick up his mat and walk home (Mark 2:11). Before their eyes, this paralyzed man regains strength and control of his limbs, and he walks out the door.

We have already seen that miracles were a common part of Jesus ministry. But the unique (and controversial) aspect of this healing was why Jesus claimed to be able to heal the sick. What greater authority did Jesus' believe He had?

In one way, it was much easier for Jesus to say 'Your sins are forgiven', as no one could disprove that such a thing actually occurred. It's an act with invisible consequences. Commanding a paralytic to walk, on the other hand, would be more difficult to say convincingly. The paralytic would then very publicly verify the effect of your words and the authority of your voice.

By healing the paralytic, Jesus was telling His audience that He was going to do the seemingly difficult, in order to prove His claim to do be able to do the seemingly easy. But by claiming the authority to forgive sins, the Jewish observers knew that Jesus was indirectly claiming to be someone much greater than a healer or miracle-worker. He was claiming to be God Himself.

**Focus in...**

Jesus' claim to be God is unique among the leaders of the world religions. No other leader of a significant faith movement ever claimed to be God. They may have claimed to have heard from God, seen God, or know the way to God – but not one of them had the audacity to claim that they were God. Critics may say that the words 'I am God' never appear in the Gospels, and this claim may be, in the strictest of senses, correct. However, any observer of Jesus' life would find it difficult to conclude that Jesus understood Himself to be anyone else but God Himself.

**Discuss...**

Consider each claim that is being made in these passages. What does that tell you about His understanding of who He was?

- Matthew 16:13-20
- Mark 2:5-7
- Luke 22:66-71
- John 8:58
- John 14:9-10
- John 15:21-22

**Reflect...**

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?

How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.

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Please feel free to use this page for your notes

# Week Three

## Topic: The Parables of Jesus

### **My Preparation**

Mark's writing continues in chapter 4 with the first parable of his Gospel. Parables, or short stories designed to communicate a single truth, can be found across all four Gospels, though the synoptic gospels generally afford them a greater space than John's Gospel. Depending on your understanding of a parable, Jesus taught between 37 and 58 parables in His lifetime, which is about one third of His teaching.

Parables were a common form of teaching in Judaism. The Greek term for 'parable' appears 45 times in the Septuagint (an early Greek translation of the Old Testament). Before this point in His ministry, Jesus had frequently used graphic analogies (see Mark 3:24-27) and their meaning was fairly clear from His teaching context. But from this point forward, Jesus used the parable form more and more often – in fact, He typically spoke only in parables when addressing large crowds.

On the surface, the parables should be relatively easy to understand and pose very few problems. Who could misinterpret the Parable of the Good Samaritan or the Parable of the Lost Son? The very reading of these stories seems to prick our conscience and stir our hearts. Yet historically, the parables have been a source of misunderstanding and misapplication throughout the church. In our session, we will look at the purpose of the parables, the types of parables, the key themes explored in the parables and the healthiest way to interpret Jesus' parables.



### Read...

- Mark 4:1-8:29
- Focus particularly on Chapter 4, and the teaching on parables.

### Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read this passage. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

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### Our Discussion

#### The story of Jesus' Parables

In Mark 4, a crowd has gathered near the seashore to hear Jesus speak. The crowd was getting so large that Jesus pushed a boat into the water and spoke to the crowds from the shoreline. He told them a story about a sower who went to plant seeds into the field, but as the man was sowing, some of the seed fell by the roadside only to be eaten by birds. Other seed fell on rocky soil, and was soon scorched by the sun. Yet more seed fell among the thorns, and was soon choked. Finally, some seed fell on good soil. It grew strong roots and produced a very profitable crop.

At the end of this brief story, Jesus simply states: 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.' (Mark 4:9). Puzzled by this story, but perhaps not wanting to show their confusion in front of the crowds, the disciples pulled Jesus aside afterwards and asked Him about His parables.

#### Focus in...

The Parable of the Sower and the Soils is an example of a true parable. It is called a 'true' parable because it is accurate according to the definition of a parable: it is a story, with a clear beginning and end, something of a plot, and clearly identifiable characters. Other great 'true' parables include the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, the Great Supper and the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Jesus also spoke in parables that were more like similitudes. A

similitude is an illustration from everyday life that is similar to the idea that Jesus is trying to teach. The Parable of the Leaven in the Meal (Matthew 13:33) is one such example: the leaven is like the Kingdom of Heaven. In these parables, what is said of the leaven (or of the mustard seed) is always true of the leaven (or the mustard seed). The constant trueness of the physical object helps us to understand the constant trueness of the spiritual one.

Some also consider Jesus' teaching about the salt and the light (Matthew 5:13-16), and similar teachings, to be parabolic sayings. But in reality, they are metaphors or similes. At times they might seem to resemble a similitude, but their function is different.

The purpose of similitudes is largely as an aid to understanding.

The hearer should better understand a certain topic at the end. The purpose of a story parable, however, is to provide a call to action. Jesus uses the story to capture attention, bring notice to an area in deficit, and to cause His hearers to in some way respond to Him and His ministry.

### **Discuss...**

- When the disciples asked about Jesus' parables, what was His response? What does this mean?
- What are the keys to a healthy reading of Jesus' parables?

### **The story continues...**

The true parables are stories that include a variety of unique settings, many colourful characters and exceptionally intriguing events. Yet despite their diversity, there is one solitary thread that unites them: the mystery of the Kingdom of God (Mark 4:11). Jesus used each parable as an opportunity to teach about the Kingdom in three ways:

1. The Nature of the Kingdom
2. The Character of the King, and
3. The Actions of the King's subjects.

For the rest of this session, we will take a parable from each group and explore what they mean for us.

### **Discuss...**

Read the following parables of Jesus:

- Matthew 13:44-52, 20:1-16

- Mark 13:34-37
- Luke 10:30-37, 18:1-8

What do these three parables teach us about:

- the Nature of the Kingdom of God?
- the Character of the King?
- the actions of the King's subjects?

Write your responses here:

The Nature of the Kingdom is...	The Character of the King is...	The Actions of the King's subjects are...

Now let's study a parable in a little more depth. Choose one parable (either from those given or one of your choosing), and answer the following questions:

- What was the context of the parable? What caused Jesus to speak?
- Who was the audience?
- What, if any, interpretation did Jesus give?
- What was the point that the original audience would have heard?
- What can this teach you about the Kingdom of God?



*And He said, "A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.*

*LUKE 15:11-13*

**Reflect...**

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?

How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.

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**Beginning and End** John 1:1-3  
He is the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega.

**Life** John 1:4  
He is the life of the world, and he who has the Son of Life has the life of the world. **Righteousness** John 1:9  
He is the light of the world, and he who has the Son of Light has the light of the world.

**No One** John 1:14  
He is the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as if he had come into the world. before Him **Goodness** John 1:16  
He is the fullness of grace and truth, and he who has the Son of Grace and Truth has the grace and truth of God.

**Wisdom** John 1:17  
He is the true light who enlightens every man who comes into the world, and he who has the Son of Light has the light of life. You can't live without Him John 1:18  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

**Supreme** John 1:19  
He is the Son of God who has come in the flesh, and he who has the Son of God has the Son of God. John 1:20  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

**Glory** John 1:21  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him. **Rewarder** John 1:22  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

**His Grace is Sufficient** John 1:23  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

John 1:14 **Promise** John 1:24  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

**Deliverer** John 1:25  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him. **Above Every Name** John 1:26  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

John 1:27  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him. **Forgiveness** John 1:28  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

**King of kings & Lord of lords** John 1:29  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

John 1:30  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him. **Savior** John 1:31  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

**Purpose** John 1:32  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him. **The Good Shepherd** John 1:33  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

John 1:34  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him. **Knowledge** John 1:35  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him. **Delight** John 1:36  
He is the Father of the Word, and the Father of the life that was with him, and the Father who has given life to everyone who believes in him.

**Peace** He is the Prince of Peace **Healer** He is the Great Physician

**All Powerful** He is the Almighty **Wonderful** He is the Wonderful

Jesus came and told his disciples, I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Matthew 28:18

**Creator of All Things** He is the Creator **Cornerstone** He is the Cornerstone

He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, including thrones, dominions, powers, and authorities, whether created or uncreated. Colossians 1:16

**Servant** He is the Servant **Love** He is the Love

**Jesus** He is the Christ **His Word is Enough** He is the Word

**JESUS**

**Faith-Hope-Love** He is the Faith, Hope, and Love

**Eternal Life** He is the Eternal Life

**Unchanging** He is the Unchanging **The Way, The Truth, The Life** He is the Way, The Truth, The Life

**Son of God** He is the Son of God **Sinless** He is the Sinless

**Human/God** He is the Human/God **Resurrection** He is the Resurrection

**All Knowing** He is the All Knowing

**Advocate** He is the Advocate **He is Gentle** He is the Gentle **He is God**

Please feel free to use this page for your notes



# Week Four

## Topic: The Journey to Jerusalem and the Cross

### My Preparation

For three years, Jesus travelled throughout Jerusalem, Samaria and Galilee, preaching about the Kingdom of God and displaying His deity through miracles and healings. He gathered a small band of disciples who would learn from Him and be equipped to carry on His message throughout the land. Many times the crowds flocked and treated Him with esteem and honour, but on many other occasions He clashed with the leaders and teachers, with many of His followers deserting Him.

But His greatest rejection was yet to come. His enemies were slowly gathering into a crowd, and the time would soon come where He would be betrayed by those closest to Him, and delivered into the hands of those who wished to kill Him. This week's session begins at one of the most pivotal points in the Gospels – the moment when Peter acknowledges Jesus is the Messiah (Mark 8:27-30). From this point, Jesus begins to speak of His pending suffering and death, and from now, His focus is the road to Jerusalem, Calvary and the Cross.

### Read...

- Mark 8:27-13:37

### Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read this passage. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

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## Our Discussion

### The story of Peter's Confession

At the end of Mark 8, we find Jesus walking through the villages of Caesarea Philippi with His disciples. Caesarea Philippi was located several miles north of the Sea of Galilee, and was known as a pagan city devoted to its worship of Greek gods. As they made their way among the temples and statues dedicated to multiple gods, Jesus seized the opportunity to speak of His own deity, and asks His disciples two simple, but profoundly important questions: 'Who do others say that I am?' and 'Who do you say that I am?' All three synoptic writers record this moment.

The disciples share that many in the crowd believe that He is John the Baptist (who had been beheaded at the start of Jesus' ministry), while others thought He was Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets risen from the dead. When asked to voice their own convictions, the only disciple we know that had the courage to speak up was Peter, who replied, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God' (Matthew 16:16).

#### Focus in...

Why Jesus asked about the views of others, we do not know. Perhaps, it was just an appropriate question to lead into His real query. Regardless, it is the second question that was of importance to Him, and for good reason – it is the most important question that they would need to answer. Jesus had spent time with them and had made some bold claims about His identity and authority. It was time for them to now believe or deny His teachings.

Many people claim that Jesus was a lunatic or a liar. Others admire Jesus as a great moral teacher or a prophet. But Jesus' own claim about Himself was much higher than that. When He claimed the authority to forgive sins, and when He demonstrated His authority over sickness, death and the kingdom of darkness, He was making one claim – that He was God. Like the disciples, the choice is ours whether or not we want to believe Him.

### **Discuss...**

- Why would some of the crowd think that Jesus was John, Elijah or Jeremiah?
- What was the disciple's response? On what evidence did they make this claim?

(Hint: make notes of Jesus' teaching and activity PRIOR to this moment, i.e. before Matthew 16, Mark 8, Luke 9 or John 7)

### **The story continues...**

Jesus commends Peter for his answer, and acknowledges that his revelation had come from God above. He states that it is the revelation of who He is that will be the bedrock for His coming church. The phrase 'From then on...' (Matthew 16:21) marks the turning point in Jesus' ministry. Up until now, He was heralding the entrance of the Kingdom of God on earth. From here, His focus turns to His death and resurrection. For the first time, He begins to share that He must suffer many things, be rejected by the leaders and – much to the disciples' shock – He must be handed over and killed.

Jesus predicted His death three times. The first two occasions are recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels. The final one is only recorded in Matthew, and it specifically mentions death by crucifixion (Matthew 20:17-19). In each instance, Jesus tells His disciples that He would be killed, but that He would rise again in three days. Perhaps, because of their preconceived notions of the messiah, the disciples responded poorly to the news of His pending death: they either rebuked Him (Matthew 16:22), sat in grief (Matthew 17:23), or failed to understand the significance of what He was saying (Luke 18:34).

### **Discuss...**

After the first mention of His coming death, Peter rebuked Jesus. As a close friend and devoted follower of Jesus, he was seeking to protect Him from suffering. Yet he was severely reprimanded – to the point that Jesus paralleled his actions with those of Satan!

- Why do you think Jesus likened Peter to Satan?  
(Hint: think about the underlying message of Satan in both the original temptation of Eve, and the temptation of Jesus. What connections can you make between that message and the underlying message of Peter?)

Now read Jesus' own explanation about His own death (John 12:20-26).

- How did Jesus understand the purpose of His own death?

### **The story continues...**

Six days after these events, we read that Jesus takes Peter, James and John up to a mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed so that His face shone like the sun and His clothes became pure white (Mark 9:2-13). Both Moses and Elijah appeared beside Jesus, and the disciples became terrified. This event is what we know as 'The Transfiguration.'

### **Discuss:**

- What did Moses and Elijah represent?
- What did God say at this moment? Why was it important?
- In Exodus 19:9, we also heard the voice of God coming from a cloud. What is the significance of these two moments?

### **The story of the Triumphal Entry to Jerusalem**

Shortly after Jesus announced His pending death to His disciples, Jesus turned His attention to the road towards Jerusalem. He knew that He had a very specific mission during His ministry years, and He knew that it would culminate in that great city. His final week before the crucifixion would be spent in and around Jerusalem, teaching His disciples and challenging His opponents.

Mark tells us in chapter 11 that Jesus and His followers approached Jerusalem on a Sunday, the first day of the Passover Festival – the annual commemoration of the Israelite's liberation from Egypt. This means the city of Jerusalem would have been overflowing with people celebrating (all Jewish males over the age of 12 were required to attend the festival in Jerusalem). It was a prime opportunity for Jesus to display His Kingship.

He sent two of His disciples ahead to find Him a colt to ride (Matthew mentions a colt AND a donkey, in line with the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9). Jesus rode the colt into the city, and was greeted by cheering crowds who recognised that He was fulfilling Zechariah's messianic prophecy. The people lined the streets, laying their coats and palm leaves on the road ahead of Him, and they praised God for His arrival (Mark 11:7-10). Their long-awaited Messiah – the warrior king – was riding into the city as a peaceable and gentle sovereign. We celebrate this day as 'Palm Sunday'.

### Discuss...

- Considering all that you now know about the Jewish expectations and hopes for their messiah, discuss the significance of this moment.

### **The story of the rising tension between Jesus and the Pharisees**

The following day, Jesus once again entered the Temple, and once again drove the traders out of His Father's House (Mark 11:15-18). On Tuesday, two days after His arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus returned to the Temple and was immediately approached by the chief priests and scribes. They challenged Him on His authority, but He refused to entertain their interrogations (Mark 11:27-3).

### Focus in...

The relationship between Jesus and the religious leaders had frequently been tense. Notable clashes included when:

- He forgave and released the adulterous woman that they were trying to execute (John 8:1-11).
- He criticized their hypocrisy (Luke 11:37-54).
- He used the Parable of the Good Samaritan to humble them (Luke 10:25-37).
- He accused them of being spiritually blind (John 9:35-41).
- He healed a man on the Sabbath (a somewhat antagonistic action) in Luke 14:1-6.
- He accused them of always seeking places of honour at feasts (Luke 14:7-15) and threatens to exclude them from His banquet (Luke 14:16-24).
- He 'received sinners and ate with them', using the parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Lost Son to explain the Kingdom of God was open to all these people (Luke 15), much to the disgruntlement of the religious leaders.

Meanwhile, the Pharisees had:

- Attempted to arrest Him (John 7:32-53).
- Questioned a blind man about his healing (John 9:13-34).
- Plotted to kill Him (John 11:45-57).



*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!  
For you clean the outside of the cup and of the  
dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-  
indulgence.*

*MATTHEW 23:25*

The relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees deteriorated significantly from this moment in the Temple. In Mark 12:38, we read a direct and succinct account of Jesus' criticism of the religious leaders. Matthew's gospel, however, provides a far more detailed account of this criticism. In Matthew 23, Jesus openly slates their teaching and condemns their actions. He first attacks their hypocritical and burdensome religion (Matthew 23:1-12), and then, in the true spirit of a prophet, He denounces them with 7 'woes': short statements that are strong, unforgettable and powerfully attack the very core of the Pharisaical worldview.

**Discuss...**

- What are these 'woes' in Jesus' words, and what significance can we draw for our lives today?

Matthew	Jesus' Words	Significance for us
23:13		
23:15		
23:16-22		
23:23-24		
23:25-26		
23:27-28		
23:29-36		

- What can we learn from this?

This attack on the religious leaders was the most ruthless and complete of all of Jesus' teaching. It is also His final word on their beliefs and actions. It seems that this confrontation sealed their desire to have Him killed, and their plans became more resolute.

Perhaps because of this, Jesus begins to speak more decisively about His return and how His followers should live until He returns. In Mark 13, we read encouragements from Jesus to be watchful for His return, warning against false prophets claiming to be the messiah and foreseeing future turmoil. But most importantly, He declared the day and hour of His return to be unknown to anyone but the Father. His command to his followers was therefore simple – 'Be on the alert!'

The Parable of the 10 Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-3) tells us that we are responsible for our own spiritual condition, the Parable of the Servants (Matthew 25:14-30) shows the necessity of stewarding what God has entrusted to us, and the illustration of the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) reminds us that He is deeply concerned with not just what we believe, but also how we act towards one another – particularly those in need.

**Reflect...**

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected? How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.

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# Week Five

## Topic: The Crucifixion

### My Preparation

In the space of just five days, Jesus went from being the heralded and adored King, riding triumphantly into Jerusalem, to being betrayed, falsely arrested, tried before an illegal court and executed on a hill. The week (Sunday to Sunday) is known to Christians as the 'Passion Week', and the Gospel records of this time are arguably the most significant portion of Scripture that we have.

We have already read about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Sunday), His clearance of the Temple (Monday) and His conflict with the religious teachers (Tuesday). The Bible does not record what Jesus did on Wednesday. During this time, Jesus spent each night in Bethany, just two miles east of Jerusalem. It is likely that he stayed with Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

On the same day that Jesus confronted the religious leaders, the chief priests and the scribes plotted to have Jesus killed. Matthew tells us that Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples, approached the leaders and asked for a payment in order to betray Him. They offered him thirty pieces of silver to betray his Rabbi and led Him to death, and he accepted (Matthew 26:14-16).

On Thursday, Jesus and His disciples eat the Passover meal in the upper room of an unknown man in Jerusalem. We now know this meal as 'The Last Supper', and Jesus uses it to teach His disciples one final time. That evening He would be betrayed and arrested, and the following day He would be tried and executed.

### Read...

- Mark 14:1-15:47

## Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read these passages. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

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## Our Discussion

### The story of the Last Supper

In Mark 14, we read that Jesus and His disciples prepared to take the Passover meal in the upper room of a house in Jerusalem (only John records the instance of Jesus washing the disciples' feet before the meal, much to the confusion of Peter, in John 13:1-20). During the meal, Jesus boldly proclaims that one of the disciples sharing the food would soon betray Him. Matthew records Judas asking if it was him (26:25), whilst John says that Jesus dipped bread and gave it to Judas as an indicator (13:26). Luke's record says that the disciples argued over who would do such a thing – and that their argument quickly devolved into a squabble over which of them was the greatest (22:21-24).

During the meal Jesus took some bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to His disciples. He then took a cup of wine, gave thanks for it, and also offered it. He then made the startling claim that the wine represented His blood, which would be poured out for many to confirm a new covenant.

### Focus in...

According to Jewish custom dating back to Mosaic times (see Leviticus 23), all Jewish people (Jesus and His disciples included) would observe the Passover meal on the evening of the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Nisan (March/April). This meal commemorated the evening that ended the 400 years of Jewish captivity in Egypt. On that evening, God had promised to pass through Egypt and kill every firstborn child and animal in the land (Exodus 12:12). To avoid this death, all Jewish households were instructed to mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a lamb, which would be sign to the

Spirit of God to “pass-over” their house and spare the lives of their family. Only under the covering of the blood, would there be life.

In preparation for this meal, all families had to present a clean and spotless lamb at the Temple. They would then eat the meat of the lamb that night, and none of the meat could be left over in the morning. The Feast of Unleavened Bread followed immediately after Passover, and also remembered the time of the Exodus. Since there was not enough time for the dough to rise as the Jewish people fled Egypt, God instructed them to eat bread without leaven, or yeast (Deuteronomy 16:13). Whenever an Israelite participated in the annual Passover feast, he would remember that God delivered his nation out of bondage in Egypt. The Passover celebrated today still remembers that great historic deliverance, but tragically misses the greater deliverance that it foreshadowed – the cross of Christ.

### **Discuss...**

- When Jesus took the bread and wine and told His disciples to take them ‘in remembrance’ of Him, what was He implying?
- John the Baptist foretold this moment in John 1:29. What was significant about John’s statement?

### **The story continues...**

John is the only Gospel writer to record for us a final moment of teaching that occurs in the upper room. John 13:31 to John 17 is a deeply intimate passage, as Jesus bares His heart before His disciples. He unravels wisdom about Himself, the Father and the Holy Spirit. He reveals His ultimate purpose. He exposes humanity’s true needs. He explains the provisions and the preparations that He has made for us. And He explains more deeply how He intends our lives to ‘bear fruit’.

Read the passage in its entirety. In addition to your own observations, engage with the questions below.

### **Discuss...**

According to Jesus:

- What is the new commandment Christians should follow? How does this compare to the ‘greatest commandment’ of Mark 12:28-31?
- How do the Father and the Son relate to each other?
- Who will Jesus send as a Helper? What do we know of Him?

- What is the key to ‘bearing fruit’?
- What is the ultimate purpose of the coming ‘hour’?
- What is His prayer for us?
- What promises does Jesus make to His disciples?

Following the meal and the teaching in the upper room, Jesus and His disciples went to a small garden called Gethsemane (literally, an ‘oil press’), at the foot of the nearby Mount of Olives. The time is eventful: it is here that Jesus agonizes over His pending death (Mark 14:34-37) and is eventually betrayed by Judas and arrested at the instruction of the religious leaders (Mark 14:43-53).

### **The story of Jesus’ trial**

Jesus’ trial consisted of a series of hearings. Though the exact details differ among the Gospel writers, we gather that Jesus was tried before the Jewish rulers first: Annas (ex high-priest), Caiaphas (ruling high-priest), and the Sanhedrin (the high council), and the Roman leaders second: Pilate (highest Roman authority), Herod (ruler of Galilee) and Pilate once more (see John 18:13-23; Luke 22:54, 63-65; Luke 22:66-71; Luke 23:1-6; Luke 23:7-12 and Luke 23:13-25).

All four writers agree that the Jewish rulers ultimately condemned Jesus for blasphemy. The Gospels record that when Caiaphas asked Jesus whether He claimed to be the Messiah, He replied, ‘I am’ (Mark 14:62), ‘You have said it.’ (Matthew 26:64), or ‘If I tell you, you will not believe’ (Luke 22:67-8). John records that the Jewish leaders told Pilate that He should die for blasphemy (John 19:7).

As the Jewish leaders could not enforce the death penalty under Roman law, they sent Him to the Roman officials and accused Him of subversion and treason. Pilate seemed uninterested in getting involved in a Jewish matter, and passed the decision to Herod. Herod hoped Jesus would perform miracles for him but Jesus refused, and Herod returned Him to Pilate to deal with. Again, Pilate could find no crime for which to commit Jesus, but in order to satisfy the now blood-thirsty crowds, Pilate order Jesus to be flogged and handed Him over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified (Luke 23:1-25).

### **Focus in...**

The Jewish system of jurisprudence, law and judgment was primarily founded on one Old Testament passage: Deuteronomy 16:18-20.

“You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not distort justice, you shall not be partial, you shall not take a bribe for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice and only justice you shall pursue that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you.”

This was God’s bottom line standard for judgment and justice – local judges, judging the people with fairness and righteousness, never distorting what is true, not being partial, never taking a bribe. Justice, and only justice, was acceptable.

### **Discuss...**

- What evidence can you see in the Gospel accounts that might indicate that the trial of Jesus was unjust?
- What does this tell us about Jesus?

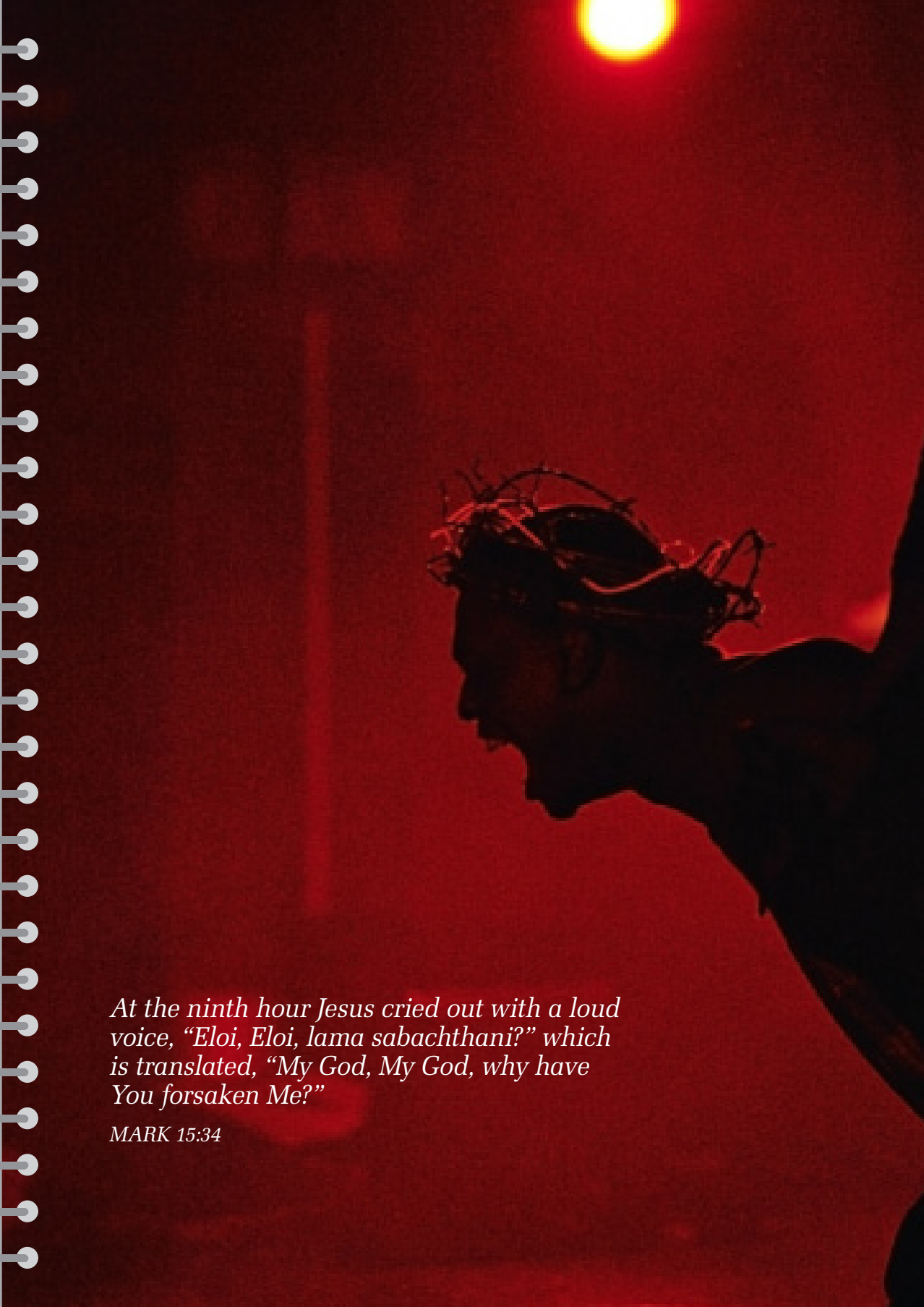
### **The story of Jesus’ preaching from the Cross**

Once Pilate had washed his hands of the decision to execute Jesus, the Roman soldiers took Him away. Matthew tells us that they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. They wove a crown of thorns and placed it on His head, and gave Him a reed as a mock scepter. As they taunted Him, they spat on Him and beat Him openly. As they led Him to be crucified, the soldiers seized a bystander named Simon, and forced him to carry the cross for Jesus.

They brought Him to a place called ‘Golgotha’ and gave Him a drink of wine mixed with bitter gall, but He refused to drink it. They then nailed Him to the cross, and erected it between the crosses of two criminals. A sign above His head read, ‘This is Jesus, the king of the Jews.’ At the base of His cross the soldiers gambled for His clothes and bystanders mocked Him.

### **Focus in...**

Crucifixion was universally recognised as the most horrible type of execution. Despite suffering incredible pain, Jesus still spoke words of grace and mercy to those around Him. Because of the physical

A dramatic, low-key photograph of a person's silhouette wearing a crown of thorns, set against a deep red background with a bright light source at the top. The person is shown in profile, looking towards the left. The lighting is very low, creating a somber and intense atmosphere. The background is a solid, deep red color, and a bright, circular light source is visible at the top center, casting a soft glow. The overall mood is one of suffering and sacrifice.

*At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"*

MARK 15:34

rigors of crucifixion, Jesus is recorded as speaking only seven fleeting statements, but every one of those seven reveals that Christ remained sovereignly in control of His own death. Each of those sayings is rich with significance and most worthy of our attention.

**Discuss...**

- What are 7 sentences spoken by Jesus upon the Cross? What message do they convey?

Verse	Jesus' Words	Message
Luke 23:34		
Luke 23:43		
John 19:26-27		
Matthew 27:46		
John 19:28		
John 19:29-30		
Luke 23:46		

- What can we learn from this?



It was on Friday that Jesus died. Scripture records that at the moment Jesus perished, the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and rocks split apart. Tombs opened and the dead walked (Matthew 27:45-56). A Roman officer confirmed that Jesus was dead, so His body was brought down from the cross and given to Joseph (a follower of Jesus) to lay in a tomb. To prevent the theft of His body, a stone was rolled in front of the tomb, and Roman guards were stationed to protect it.

**Reflect...**

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected?

How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.

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# Week Six

## Topic: The Resurrection

### My Preparation

Our final study will lead us through the events of Jesus' resurrection from the grave. The resurrection of Jesus is the fundamental tenet of Christianity. It witnesses to the immense power of God Himself. To believe in the resurrection is to believe in God. If we believe that God exists, and that He created the universe and has power over it, then we must also believe that He has power to raise the dead. If He does not have such power, He is not a God worthy of our faith and worship. In resurrecting Jesus from the grave, God reminds us of His absolute sovereignty over life and death.

The resurrection of Jesus authenticates His claims to be the Son of God. It authenticates our belief that He lived a sinless life, and that death had no right to hold Him captive.

The resurrection of Jesus is also a testimony to the resurrection of human beings, which is a basic tenet of the Christian faith. Unlike all other religions, Christianity alone possesses a Founder who transcends death and who promises that His followers will do the same. As Christians, we take comfort in the fact that our God became man, died for our sins, and was resurrected the third day. The grave could not hold Him. He lives, and He sits today at the right hand of God the Father in heaven.

### Read...

- Mark 16

### Respond...

Write down 2 or 3 things that came to mind as you read this passage. Include any questions that arise when you think about it closely.

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## Our Discussion

### The story of the Resurrection

Scripture tells us that on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene and another Mary came to Jesus' tomb to anoint His body. Instead of finding a decaying corpse, they were met by an angel of such dazzling stature that his face shone like lightning and his clothes were as white as snow. The angel proclaimed a message that is both exhilarating and comforting. It's the message on which the whole 'good news' of the Gospel hangs:

'He is not here, for He is risen, just as He said' (Matthew 28:6).

The women were asked to come and see the empty tomb, and then very quickly they were told to go and tell the good news to the other disciples.

#### Focus in...

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the very capstone in the arch of Christianity. When it is removed all else disintegrates. Because of its strategic weight to the Christian faith, every person who takes the sacred name Christian should be prepared to discuss and defend its authenticity against claims of fabrication or misinterpretation.

Critics of the resurrection usually cite one of six false theories to claim that Jesus' death and resurrection, as recorded in the Gospels, is not accurate:

- The Resuscitation Theory: Jesus did not actually die, He simply passed out, only to be revived in the tomb.
- The Hallucination Theory: Jesus post-resurrection appearances were not real, but hallucinations of the observers.
- The Impersonation Theory: The risen Jesus was an imposter. Someone was impersonating Him.
- The Spiritual Resurrection Theory: Jesus resurrection body was not a physical body, but a spiritual one.
- The Theft Theory: The body of Jesus was stolen (by thieves or the disciples) in order to promote the lie of the resurrection.
- The Unknown Tomb Theory: The disciples did not actually know where Jesus was buried, so they could not have located Him even if they wanted to.

### Discuss...

- How would you engage with the above theories?

### **The story of Jesus' appearances**

Following His resurrection, Jesus appears to multiple groups of people. In addition to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9-11), He appeared to the other woman at the tomb (Matthew 28:8-10), two believers travelling on the road (Mark 16:12-13), His disciples (Mark 16:14), Thomas (John 20:24-31), seven disciples while fishing (John 21:1-14), and the disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24:44-49). 1 Corinthians also tells us that He appeared to a crowd of 500 (1 Corinthians 15:6) and Jesus' brother James (15:7).

### Focus in...

It was a particularly gracious move when the angel at the tomb made a special request for the women to tell Simon Peter the good news (Mark 16:7). Peter and Jesus had somewhat of a turbulent history together. When they first met, Jesus gave Simon a new name: Peter. He was called and appointed for ministry and witnessed many of Jesus most spectacular miracles: the feeding of the five thousand, the resurrection of Jairus's daughter, the Transfiguration. Peter even walked on water! He was quick to declare his faith in Jesus being the Son of God, and pronounced that he would never leave Him or deny Him.

But true to human fallibility, Peter did deny Jesus. He denied that he even knew Him and he denied Him at His hour of most need, as He was being tried. He had completely failed the One who he had so doggedly committed his life to serving.

This makes the Peter's reunion with Jesus particularly exceptional. Read it in John 21:1-26.

### Discuss...

- What would Peter have learnt from this reunion with Jesus?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## **The story of the Great Commission**

The Bible tells us that Jesus remained on earth for 40 days after His resurrection, appearing to many people in order to verify that He was actually alive (Acts 1:3). Following His initial commission to Peter, He now charges all of His disciples with spreading the good news. Matthew and Mark report for us that it was in Galilee that Jesus told them:

‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ (Matthew 28:18-20)

### **Discuss...**

What do the following words and phrase teach us?

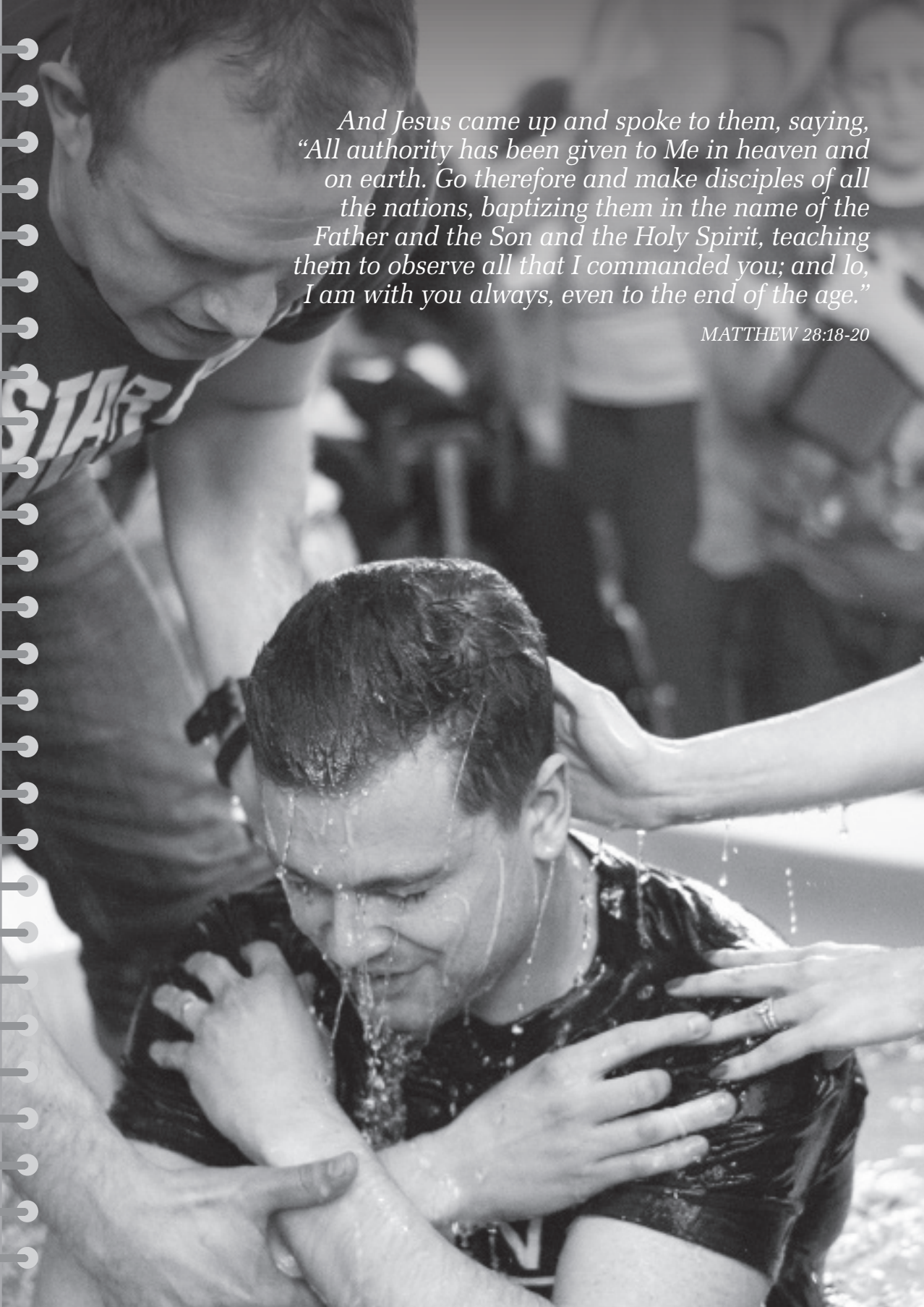
- ‘All authority...’
- ‘Go therefore and make disciples...’
- ‘Of all the nations...’
- ‘Baptizing them...’
- ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit...’
- ‘Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...’
- ‘I am with you always...’

## **The Gospels close**

Around this time, we read in the Gospels that Jesus then ascended to Heaven, leaving His disciples to now carry the weight of spreading the good news about the Kingdom of God. Of course, staying true to the style of memoirs, each Gospel writer chooses to finish their writing in their own distinctive way:

Matthew, who had sought to write a convincing account of Jesus as the promised Messiah-King, concludes with the resurrection (important to messianic claims) and a declaration of His authority (important to royal claims).

Mark, who had written an account focusing on Jesus’ actions (and stylistically written to hold the reader’s attention), finished his account with the ultimate climax – Jesus’ ascension.



*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying,  
“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and  
on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all  
the nations, baptizing them in the name of the  
Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching  
them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo,  
I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

MATTHEW 28:18-20

Luke finishes with Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit – a natural bridge to his sequel, the Book of Acts.

John finishes with a hint towards His Second Coming, which is also an appropriate prequel to his later writing, the Book of Revelation.

**Reflect...**

What is 'profitable' for us from today's readings?

What truths have we learnt? How have we been corrected? How will you outwork what you have learnt?

What is the game-changer? Write it in 10 words or less.

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# Wrapping it up...

Jesus' disciples carried the great commission with determination. From a small corner of Israel, their evangelism saw the Gospel spread across the Roman Empire and eventually the world. The story of how they spread His message, through His chosen vehicle (the Church), will be the topic of our next study: 'New Testament Highlights: The Acts and the Epistles'.

# My Appendix

## In ten words or less...

Describe these people. Include a Bible reference for where you can find them.

Jesus \_\_\_\_\_

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John the Baptist \_\_\_\_\_

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Peter \_\_\_\_\_

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The Pharisees \_\_\_\_\_

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Pilate \_\_\_\_\_

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Anyone else from your reading who caught your eye:

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**In ten words or less...**

Describe these events (in your own words). Include a Bible reference for where you can find them.

Jesus' Birth

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Jesus' Baptism

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Jesus' Temptation

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Jesus' Message

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Jesus' Miracles

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Jesus' Parables

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Jesus' Trial

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Jesus' Death

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Jesus' Resurrection \_\_\_\_\_

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**In ten words or less...**

Describe these books (in your own words). Write a full verse from the book that you think captures the essence of the writing.

Matthew \_\_\_\_\_

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Mark \_\_\_\_\_

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Luke \_\_\_\_\_

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John \_\_\_\_\_

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**What is the Good News of Jesus?**

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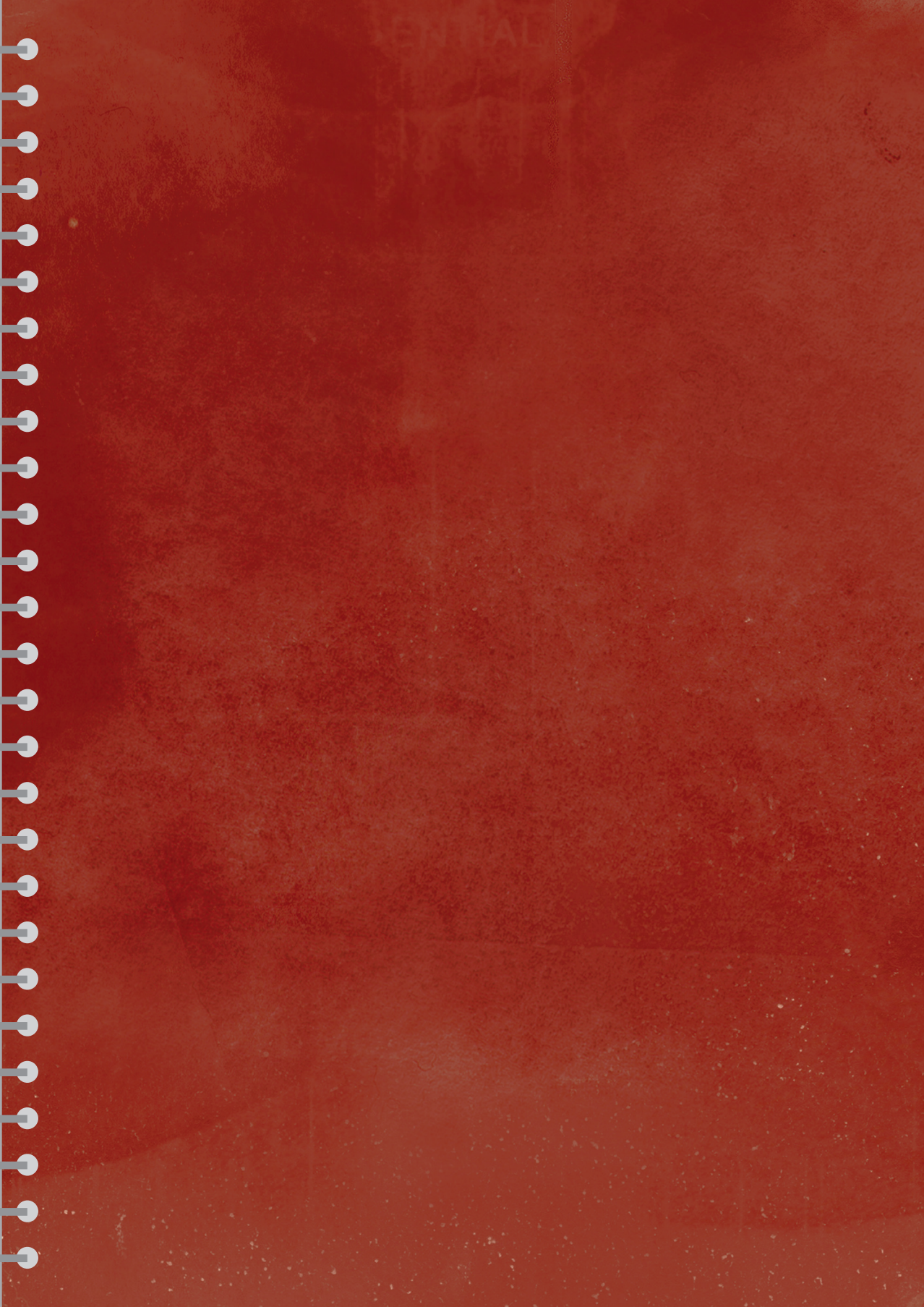
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