International Bible Studies in Mark's Gospel

Peter Teagle



With Tim Stanyon, Caleb Chen,
Helen Morrissey and Lynette Teagle

friends INTERNATIONAL

International Bible Studies in Mark's gospel

Study 1: Mark 1:1-13 – Jesus begins his public life

Study 2: Mark 2:1-12 – Jesus meets one man's greatest need

Study 3: Mark 7:1-7; 14-23 – What does it mean to be clean inside?

Study 4: Mark 8:27-9:1 – Following Jesus

Study 5: Mark 10:17-27 – What does it mean to be 'good'?

Study 6: Mark 12:28-34 – Rules for living

Study 7: Mark 14: 32-52 – Jesus chooses to suffer for us

Study 8: Mark 15:15-39 – The death of Jesus on the cross

Study 9: Mark 15:42-16-8 – Jesus rises from the dead

Study 10: Mark 4:1-20 – What should we do next?

Introduction

A nearly normal Bible study!

There are several seeker studies for students on the market today – some of them well-known, trusted and loved. So, why create another one? Why indeed! This series offers key differences that may make it especially suitable for groups primarily composed of international students, rather than those made up of 'home' students.

While I (Peter Teagle) am the main author, this has been a team effort, and several colleagues have contributed to the finished product (hence the use of 'we' and 'I' interchangeably!). It comes from many years of hands-on ministry among international students in the UK as well as having lived in Asia for some years.

Not just an 'English-made-easy" version

We have taken great care in this series to write the studies for people whose first language is not English. However, we recognise that most international students are already attending university lectures, tutorials and labs in English. Our goal is not to 'dumb down', or oversimplify the language, but to avoid unnecessarily complicated sentence structures, as well as British idioms and pop-culture references which may be unfamiliar to many internationals.

Biblical terminology is always a challenge for learners of English, or indeed anyone unfamiliar with the Bible. Words like 'Sabbath', 'blasphemy' and 'Pharisee' can be new even for native English speakers. We have used footnotes to explain such terms as they arise in the discussion. We encourage leaders to use these notes during the study but not get sidetracked by unnecessary detail.

Participants do not need to understand every word of the text or the discussion. Rather, they must be able to follow the main ideas. We have used the New International Version throughout, which provides an excellent balance of accuracy and readability, especially for these purposes.

When it comes to reading the Bible passages, it is generally not a good idea to 'read round the room', with students each taking a consecutive verse to read out. This distracts them from the flow of the story, and they may be more worried about their own pronunciation! Rather, either read it yourself, or split it into shorter sections (e.g. v15-20) read by more confident participants or co-leaders. It is also a good idea to give students time to read it back to themselves after they have heard it out loud, so they have an extra chance to take on board what happens in the passage.

Each study has been 'tested' for international students

I have used most of the passages selected from Mark's gospel in evangelistic talks for international students, often many times. Therefore, each study is based on a thorough understanding of the passage in its original context, and of how it relates to a range of cultures in our modern day.

An inductive Bible study... with differences

In any Bible study, it is important to let the Bible speak for itself (or rather, for the Holy Spirit to speak through his word). The inductive Bible study method is where participants are encouraged to investigate what the Bible actually says, rather than rely on the interpretations or doctrinal bias of the study leader.

To avoid this, and to get people to engage with the Bible text for themselves, the accepted method is a simple three stage approach (which you may be very familiar with):

Observation: what does the text actually say?

This is straightforward and is often just about reading what the text says. But it is actually an essential step which is too easily missed.

For example, in the Healing of the Paralysed Man in Mark 2:1-12, unless participants observe that Jesus tells the man first that, "Son, your sins are forgiven", they are likely to then later miss the main point of the passage as Jesus heals the man as proof of his authority to forgive.

Interpretation: what does the text mean?

This is slightly harder, especially for someone new to the Bible. We are not looking for weird and wild ideas about what people think it might possibly mean. Rather, the idea is to point people, hopefully, to what the Bible is showing us.

So, for example, using the same Bible story (Mark 2:1-12), the study asks, "why were the Teachers of the Law so angry?" This is asking us to interpret why something has happened. This may not be as obvious to answer as a simple observation.

I cannot say, "I forgive you, so you don't have to pay your speeding fine," unless I have the authority to do so. Even a police officer does not always have the authority to do that. Therefore, my saying this is either meaningless or offensive, because I have no authority to forgive someone for anything unless (a) the offense was against me, or (b) I have paid the penalty for that offence myself (or both). When Jesus said, "Son, your sins are forgiven", the Teachers of the Law knew that he was either claiming to be God Himself or speaking on his behalf.

We will come back to this shortly.

Application: what do we do about this?

We must always be looking to apply any Bible passage to ourselves. God's word is not to be treated lightly, or as an intellectual exercise or 'game'. So, we should always be asking, what do we do with what we are learning here? How should it affect my behaviour, as well as shape my beliefs and attitudes? And while some Bible passages do indeed mainly challenge our thinking and beliefs, our Bible study application should always seek to be as practical as possible.

For example: in Mark 2:1-12, we ask, "If Jesus could fix just one problem in your life, what would it be? Do you believe he has the power and authority to change things? Do you think he will if you ask him?" This allows students to reflect for themselves on how they ought to respond to Jesus in the light of what they have read.

How this study series differs

Although we believe this inductive Bible study method is very important and have largely followed it, as outlined above, there are two ways in which we have adapted this approach for use with international students:

a. Time restrictions

Although each study could, potentially, take over an hour, the need in most situations is to fit a study into a 30 - to 40 - minute time slot. We have tried to write each one with this in mind.

However, many international student seekers approach such a study with very little idea as to what is expected of them. Even if they do, they may have no Christian background, and so they may not have even basic knowledge of the Bible. They may also not share the assumptions common to a culture as long soaked in Christian influence as Britain is, even today. Basic ideas as to what we mean by terms such as 'God', 'sin', 'forgiveness' or even 'love' may be new to them, to say nothing of how these terms may be expressed in their own language.

It takes time to explain things carefully and kindly. And time is not on our side.

b. Cultural learning styles

While the inductive method is a proven, valuable way to study the Bible, observation, interpretation and application of a Bible text is not always an easy pattern to pick up for someone not familiar with Western learning styles. Nor is it always brief.

When I was still at university, I did a summer internship with a local pastor in a rural part of the Philippines. I was rather nervous to be asked to 'lead' a Bible study with the church elders and their wives. Being just twenty-one, it felt all wrong to be 'teaching' church leaders twice my age!

So, I did what I could, using exactly the same inductive Bible study method I had been taught at my university Bible study in England, only to find the participants uncomfortable and embarrassed that they could not answer any of my questions, even though they were very basic.

The pastor rather awkwardly thanked me at the end of the study "...for a very challenging Bible study"! When I told a local missionary about this, he pointed out that in many parts of Asia, it is intensely embarrassing for someone to be asked a question and fail to answer it correctly – especially for someone of rank, such as a church elder, when the person asking is half their age. They would rather keep silent and not risk a wrong answer (even when the question is, "What does Jesus say in verse five?"), which explained my difficultly and their discomfort.

Although most international students will not be nearly so concerned about 'face' (public reputation), as those church leaders were in rural Philippines, many have noticed that it is common for people from some cultures to be reticent to answer questions or offer opinions, and Bible studies can feel strangely slow and quiet.

All that is to say that, while the inductive Bible study method is highly valuable, it needs adjusting when running a study with students from other cultures, given the obvious time restraints.

Adjustments to the inductive method

Therefore, this series of studies seeks to find a compromise in the following ways:

a. We don't need to study the whole passage

Any Bible text we select for study will be incredibly rich and there will be a huge range of possible questions to ask. So, each study is designed to be quite streamlined, avoiding side-issues but keeping to the 'Big Idea'.

Study 3 is a good example of this. The issues in the passage are incredibly complicated, but we have chosen it because spiritual purity is a hugely important matter to many cultures and religions. Having introduced the topic, something of the context, and the question that Jesus leaves us with, long before we have explored the story as far as we would normally expect to, we 'cut to the chase' somewhat, ignoring normal inductive study protocol. Leaving behind much relevant and perhaps important detail in the passage, we go instead to Psalm 51:10 in order to ask, "can you pray and ask God for a clean heart?"

b. The study does much of the heavy lifting

By this we mean that we offer short, clear explanations that would normally be the work of the 'interpretation' questions. Because time is not on our side, we suggest that the leader familiarises themself with these, and reads them out as part of the study, as this shows you are learning together.

In an ideal world, we would not want to spoon-feed our participants, and they still need to learn to trust the Bible, not the Bible study resource, nor yet the Bible study leader. But we judge that since they are already encountering God's word, reading it, interpreting it and applying it to themselves – possibly for the first time – it does no harm, and hopefully much good, to assist with the interpretation part. It is no different from reading a commentary, only faster!

c. So, observation, interpretation and application questions are simply used in different amounts

Compared to other Bible study materials you may have seen, the proportions of the study and time allowed for each of the three types of question, will differ, even from one study to the next.

On the whole, you will probably find that:

a. The proportion of observation questions is much the same as other studies. For those who are new to the Bible, it is important they can see they can read and understand it for themselves. Study 9 (Mark 15:42-16:8) takes an unusual approach. Participants have to arrange events surrounding the resurrection into a timeline, using the passage as their guide.
b. The short explanations do much of the heavy lifting, so there are perhaps fewer interpretation questions than you may have seen in other studies.

c. The application questions are few but quite focussed. It is important that, if time is slipping away, you still get on to discussing at least one application question before you have to finish.

Study 1: Mark 1:1-13 – Jesus begins his public life

1. What do you know about Jesus? What stories have you heard, or what have you been taught about him before today?

Look at verses 1-8. The period that we are reading about in the Gospel of Mark is approximately 27-30AD. Over 700 years earlier, a prophet (a messenger from God) called Isaiah, wrote that one day another messenger would come. That messenger was a man called John the Baptist, whom we are reading about here[1].

So, then, Isaiah predicted the coming of John the Baptist (v2-3), and John the Baptist announced the arrival of Jesus the Messiah[2].

2. What did John the Baptist do (v4) and how did people respond? (v5)

3. Baptism (dipping someone in water or sprinkling them with it) is a sign of starting a new life, putting our past behind us. Has anyone in the group been baptised?[3]

4. Baptism is like a ritual of washing or cleansing. But water only washes the outside of a person. How did John's baptism encourage people to deal with the inside – i.e. what did people do when they were being baptised? (v5). What does this mean and why do you think this was important to do?

Elsewhere in the Bible (see Matthew 3:13-15) we see that Jesus did not need to confess his sins[4], because he had not done anything wrong. But he asked to be baptised anyway because it was an example for us to follow, and it was also a sign of a new beginning, the start of his public life.

5. John was considered by many people to be a great prophet, but how did he see himself compared to Jesus? (v7-8)

6. What happened to Jesus when was baptised? (v10-11) What did God (the voice from heaven) say about Him?

7. Today's passage is telling us that Jesus came to give people a new start – an end to our old way of living, the start of a new life, and the power to change. Do you find this idea attractive? What makes you believe it is / is not true?

[1] In v6, John's rough clothing and meagre diet were a sign of his being a prophet or holy man.
[2] Messiah (in Hebrew) or Christ (in Greek) means 'the One specially sent from God'
[3] Many Christian traditions will baptise babies and small children, which means the parents take responsibility for the child's faith until they are old enough to decide for themselves.
[4] The word, "sin", is widely used in the Bible to describe actions, thoughts, attitudes or even beliefs that go against God's values and His character. The term includes everything from a small lie to a terrible crime, but it is always taken very seriously by God, and every sin needs his forgiveness

Study 2: Mark 2:1-12 – Jesus meets one man's greatest need

1. What do you think is humanity's biggest problem? Look at the following list. As a group, discuss which should be the top three most important: Relationship with family / financial stability / relationship with friends / career and education / relationship with God / physical health / personal happiness / social status / peace / tolerance

Read Mark 2:1-12

Houses at the time of Jesus often had flat roofs made of mud and wood that were accessible by stairs at one side. Pictures of this kind of building can easily be found through an internet search for "type of house in Mark 2"

2. Describe the scene – what did the man's friends have to do to get him to Jesus and why?

3. If you had been there watching, what would you have said was this man's biggest problem?

4. What did Jesus actually say to the man first (v5), and why was that so surprising?

5. If you had to choose between peace with God and physical health, which would you choose? Why?

Read v6-7. Imagine someone has broken a laptop computer. You can forgive them if the laptop was yours. But you cannot do this if it was not your computer unless you have agreed to pay for the laptop to be replaced. In other words, the person who forgives must also be the person who bears the cost. So, too, Jesus could only forgive someone if (a) he is God, and/or (b) he is the person who will pay the cost of the offences against God. Later in this series of studies in the Gospel of Mark, we will see how Jesus is both of these.

In these verses, the teachers of the Law[1] were angry because by saying, "Son, your sins are forgiven", they knew that Jesus was claiming to be God or to have God's authority.

6. What did Jesus do to prove to them he had authority?

7. What did Jesus notice about the paralysed man and his friends that pleased Him? (v5)

8. If Jesus could fix just one problem in your life, what would it be? (You don't have to tell everyone if you don't want to!). Do you believe he has the power and authority to change things? Do you think he will if you ask him?

[1] That is, the Jewish religious law. These were religious leaders.

Study 3: Mark 7:1-7; 14-23 – What does it mean to be clean inside?

1. Different cultures view the idea of being "clean" very differently. But it is not always about hygiene; being 'clean' is a moral thing. Where have you noticed the link between "good" or "moral" and being "clean" in different cultures (where 'clean' people are 'good' people and the other way round)?

Many people may be surprised that Jesus was strongly critical about many aspects of religion, especially the way in which religious leaders of his time acted. This passage is about Jesus' criticisms of the Jewish religious teachers of his day, but his words are important for us to understand what really matters in life.

2. In different cultures and religions around the world, many people follow rules about what they can or cannot eat. What is the reason for these rules? Do you follow any of these rules? Why?

3. V1-5. The Pharisees (very strict Jewish religious leaders) criticised Jesus' followers for not doing something before they ate. What was it?[1]

4. What was Jesus' response? (v6-8)[2]

5. Jesus was quoting a Jewish prophet, Isaiah, who lived about 700 years before this time (so about 2700 years ago). How do these words describe people's attitudes to God and their religious activities?

6. Where else in life do you see people "honour [God] with their lips" (by what they say), but have little desire to really love God or do what he says?

7. Read v14-23 again. What religious things do people do to avoid evil and make themselves feel acceptable to God?

8. Where did Jesus tell us evil actually comes from? (v20-23)

9. How do we see that in our world, or in our own lives?

10. Here is a quotation from a 3000-year-old song, taken from the Bible (Psalm 51:10).

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

How can God give us a 'clean heart'? Is this something you feel you can pray?

As we will see in later studies, Jesus gave his life as a sacrifice to make us completely clean on the inside.

[1] Washing hands before eating was not for hygiene, it was a traditional Jewish ritual. It wasn't commanded by God – it was just a tradition that people had made up but which they now thought was very important.
[2] The word '*hypocrite*' describes someone who does not act in the way they claim to (for example: a doctor who smokes cigarettes, but who tells his patients to look after their health)

Study 4: Mark 8:27-9:1 – Following Jesus

1. From what you have learned so far, what do you now believe about Jesus? Who do you say he is? (or, who do people in your culture/community say he is?).

Today's Bible passage is a turning-point in the story of Jesus. Until now, Jesus has let his followers watch his life and listen to his teachings. He wanted them to reach their own conclusion about him. As the disciples said in v28, many people at the time thought Jesus might be a prophet – perhaps an ancient prophet returned from the dead, like Elijah. But now Jesus asks them, "Who do you say I am?"

2. What was Peter's answer? (v29)

For hundreds of years, the Jewish people had looked forward to the predicted coming of the "Messiah" (or 'God's specially sent One')[1]. But many hoped that this meant he would be a strong political leader who would free the Jewish people from Roman occupation. This may also have been the view of some of Jesus' followers at the start. But Jesus was not a political or military leader. His intentions were very different.

3. The disciples had followed Jesus for about two years by this point. They had seen Jesus do amazing things and he was very popular with ordinary people. But what did he now tell them about his future? (v31)

4. How did Peter respond to what Jesus was saying? (v32)

5. In v33, Jesus' response to Peter was very, very strong – "Get behind me, Satan!" Why? What was wrong with what Peter did?

Read v34-38. Jesus now explains a very different way of life, and a very different pattern of following him to what many expected. The picture is unmistakable. Anyone who was carrying a cross in those days was going only one way – to his death.

6. How did Jesus compare following him and not following him in terms of life and death?

7. What do you think Jesus meant when he said, "what good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit [lose] his soul"?

8. How does that make you feel about the direction of your life now?

[1] 'Messiah' is the Hebrew term, or 'Christ' in Greek.

Study 5: Mark 10:17-27 – What does it mean to be 'good'?

This passage is an account of when Jesus met a man on the road who came to him with a question. This conversation is recorded three times in the Bible, and from Mark and other eyewitnesses, we know that this man was young, rich, and a ruler or perhaps an aristocrat (see also Matthew 19:16-30 and Luke 18:18-30).

1. What is your definition of a 'good' person? What are the common ways in which people measure 'goodness' in each other?

2. What was the man asking for? (v17)

In v17, the man called Jesus, "Good teacher". That is perhaps not an unusual way to address a religious leader. But Jesus immediately challenged his words: 'Why do you call me good?' Jesus answered. 'No one is good – except God alone'.

Many people believe that Jesus was 'just a good man', a spiritual leader and nothing more. Indeed, this man seemed to think so, too. However, Jesus' words show us two things: (a) that the man's definition of 'good' is not 'good' enough, and (b), that by Jesus' definition of what 'good' is, Jesus is either not good, or he is God.

In v 19-20, Jesus then changed the conversation again and started listing what we now know as the Ten Commandments – rules given by God in the Old Testament which are like God's 'top ten rules for life', or a basic minimum standard of goodness which this man knew very well.

3. Which examples of rules did Jesus list? (v19) What was the man's response to this?

4. Most people have some minimum standards or rules by which they live – whether they believe in God or not. What are the rules by which you live? What's your 'minimum standard' of goodness?

5. Have we kept our own rules? Have we met our own 'minimum standard' of goodness?

6. In v21, what did Jesus tell him to do?

7. Why did the man walk away sad in v22? What does this show about the value he placed on money compared with what he was asking for in v17?

8. The story shows that, while the man considered himself to be a 'good person' (or hoped he was), there was a clear limit on how 'good' he was willing to be. He considered Jesus' words in v21 to be 'too much'. What holds us back from being completely good?

In the culture at the time, most people assumed that wealth was a sign of God's blessing. So, in v26, it was a big shock to Jesus' followers that ultimately, it was money that caused the man to turn away and not follow Jesus. But money is just one thing that can stop us from following Jesus and so receiving eternal life.

All this might seem rather sad and hopeless, except for two verses in this story: "Jesus looked at him and loved him" (v 21) ..."Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." (v 27)

9. How do these words help us not to be discouraged when we realise how much we fall short of God's standards?

10. The man clearly walked away before he really understood what he was walking away from. He did not seem to understand what Jesus meant by "treasure in heaven" or what it means to follow Jesus (v21). Why is it important to learn from this and not walk away from Jesus until you are sure you understand what Jesus is saying, what it means to follow Jesus and have eternal life?

Study 6: Mark 12:28-34 – Rules for living

1. Do you think there are 'rules for living' that most people from most cultures would agree with? If so, what are they (just name a few!)?

Read Mark 12:28-34. Earlier in Mark 12, Jesus was being questioned by people who opposed Him. They either wanted to trap him in his words and get him in trouble or get him to take sides in a controversial argument. In both cases, Jesus answers the questions wisely. Finally, then, here in verses 28-34, a man asks Jesus a genuine question:

"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (v28)

In the Jewish religion, they had 613 laws and rules, from 'Do not murder' to rules about eating and hygiene[1]. So, the man's question was something that religious Jews would have frequently debated.

2. What was Jesus' answer? The answer was in three parts:
    a. (v29) Know/believe that...
    b. (v30) Love ...
    c. (v31) Love...

3. Though he was asked for just one commandment more important than all others, Jesus did not separate, 'love God', from, 'love your neighbour', and considered them as part of the same 'package'. Why do you think he did this? How do all other moral rules for living relate to this one rule?

4. Note that the way Jesus talked about God is very relational. We are to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength". What would it look like for you to do this, this week?

5. The man agrees with Jesus' answer, saying that it is "more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." What do you think he means by this?[i2]

In many cultures around the world, people make sacrifices – they may sacrifice an animal, offer food or give away money – to please the god or gods that people worship. But the Bible makes it clear that since Jesus died on the cross, no more sacrifices are needed because Jesus gave his own life for us as a sacrifice to God. Jesus is the only Person who loved God and his neighbour perfectly, so God accepted his life in exchange for our life, so we can be forgiven.

6. Think about what you have learned from today's study. How has this changed your view about God and what he wants people to do so that we can live in a way that is pleasing to Him?

[1] *They also included many more traditions and customs which were not from the Bible (Old Testament). Jesus opposed these extra laws and rules, saying they were human ideas, not from God. (Mark 7:9-13)*
[2] Many of the 613 rules in the Jewish religion involved offering sacrifices to God.

Study 7: Mark 14: 32-52 – Jesus chooses to suffer for us

All this happened on the night before Jesus was killed. He had already predicted his death and, rather than running away, he went to Jerusalem with his disciples knowing that he would be captured and killed there.

At this point in the story, he had just finished a last meal with his followers and had gone to a garden near Jerusalem to pray.

1. Have you ever had to make a really difficult decision in your life – especially one where you have had to choose between what you want and what is good for other people? When have you seen anyone make great sacrifices for another person?

2. How was Jesus feeling at this time? How did his disciples feel?

3. In his prayer, how did Jesus speak to God? What title did he use?

4. A 'cup' was an expression sometimes used to describe the experience of suffering. To 'drink this cup' meant to accept this suffering. What did Jesus pray for? What was he willing to accept if it was necessary?

5. Read v37-42. Why did Jesus want the disciples to pray and not sleep? What sort of danger do you think they were in according to v38, and why?

6. Who had courage and faith in v43-52, and whose courage failed?

7. What courage and faith do you think it takes to be a follower of Jesus? What difficult decisions might there be for you if you followed Jesus?

The heart of this passage is the decision Jesus made – to accept the suffering that was coming, and not to avoid it or run from it. The reasons why Jesus did this will be made clear in the next two studies as we look at Jesus' death and resurrection.

8. We know that Jesus made this decision to accept suffering and death for us – to take away our sins so we can know God. Imagine that, as he was praying, he was thinking about you. How does that make you feel?

9. How does this passage help us understand the cost and the value of following Jesus?

Study 8: Mark 15:15-39 – The death of Jesus on the cross

This is a long passage, but Christians believe this and the next chapter describe the most important events in history. Today we will not be looking in detail at the events but rather looking at why these things happened.

1. What was happening between v15 and v20. How was Jesus treated?

2. Try to describe something of Jesus' physical and emotional suffering (v15-32). How would you feel if you had done nothing wrong but were arrested and punished as if you had?

3. In v16-20, how was Jesus shamefully treated? How does it make you feel that Jesus understands what it means to be totally humiliated?

4. The greatest moment of Jesus' suffering came between noon and three in the afternoon (v33-34). How do Jesus' words in v34 describe what kind of pain he was in?

5. There was darkness over the land for three hours. What does darkness represent to you?

IMPORTANT: Christian teaching throughout the New Testament tells us that Jesus' death was a substitution – that is, Jesus suffered in our place. Jesus was being punished for the crimes of humanity against God. In many cultures and religions, there is the idea of sacrifice – people sacrifice an animal or make an offering or do something else to get God's / the gods' attention, and prevent God / the gods being angry with them. But the Bible teaches that only one sacrifice has ever been necessary or sufficient. And this is what we are reading about today – the sacrifice of God's only Son on the cross.

6. Jesus was cut off from God so that we don't have to be separated from God for ever. How should we respond to that?

7. Which of these do you feel you need most?
    a. A new start in life
    b. Freedom from the past
    c. Someone to take your shame away
    d. To feel clean inside
    e. Forgiveness for doing wrong
    f. Help to become a better person
    g. To feel God close
    h. To know God's love and acceptance

Jesus died to give us all these things and much more. Is there anything to stop you believing in Jesus and receiving God's forgiveness through him?

In a previous study, we saw that all of us have failed to love and obey God as we should. Therefore, we have an impossible 'debt' that we cannot pay off by doing good things. Ultimately, therefore, Jesus' death on the cross was the only way our debt to God can be paid. But once we have accepted Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for us, God welcomes us into a full, close, joyful, everlasting relationship with him as his children.

9. Take a moment to discuss with your study leaders and the rest of the group what a "full, close, joyful, everlasting relationship with him as his children" really looks like in practice.

Study 9: Mark 15:42-16:8 – Jesus rises from the dead

1. If you were on a jury in a court of law, how much value would you place on evidence given by eyewitnesses? What sort of things would you look for that would suggest the witness is telling the truth?

2. The Sabbath, which runs from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, is the Jewish holy day of rest. It is very important in Jewish religious law that they must rest and do no work (no travelling, for example). Working in pairs or small groups, put these events in the right order from the passage, following from (A) 'Jesus died on the cross'... (answers, see Leader's Notes)

(A)
Jesus died on the cross

(B)
Roman Governor, Pilate, checked with his officer (centurion) that Jesus had died and gave permission for the removal of Jesus' body

(C)
The man in white clothes told them that Jesus has risen from the dead

(D)
The women ran out of the tomb, confused and afraid

(E)
Mary, Mary and Salome went out early on Sunday morning to go to Jesus' tomb

(F)
The women went in to the tomb and saw a 'young man' (an angel) dressed in white clothes

(G)
The women found the tomb opened, (the large stone had been rolled away)

(H)
Mary, Mary and Salome went out and bought spices (to dress Jesus' dead body)

(I)
Before the Sabbath began, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jospeh saw where Jesus' body had been placed

(J)
The angel told the women to give a message to Peter and the other disciples, to meet Jesus in Galilee

(K)
Joseph wrapped Jesus' body in a cloth, placed it in a tomb cut out of rock and shut the tomb with a large rock

(L)
Joseph of Arimathea asked the Roman governor for permission to take Jesus' body away

3. From the passage, how do we know that:

    a) Jesus actually died?
    b) Jesus was buried?
    c) Jesus rose again? (note: other accounts give far more details on this; see: Matthew 28, Luke 24, John 20-21, and Acts 1:1-11)

4. In the history of the world there have been many moral teachers, religious leaders and philosophers. What difference does it make to us that Jesus is the only one that rose from the dead?

5. If Jesus really rose from the dead, then...
    a) He is alive today and we can talk to him
    b) His words are true
    c) His teachings are more important than anything else
    d) He is worth following
    e) He is really able to give us hope
    f) He is really able to offer us forgiveness
    g) He is truly God.

Which of these seems most important to you? Why?

Study 10: Mark 4:1-20 – What should we do next?

1. Have you ever had a friend ask you for advice? What did they do with your advice – did they follow it or not? What happened?

2. In this story there are many, many people all wanting to listen to Jesus. What does Jesus have to do to make sure he can teach them so they can all see and hear him?

3. Once Jesus had gone out onto the lake, the crowds could hopefully hear him. However, even though they could now see and hear Jesus, do you think they would all listen to him (that is, accept and believe what he said)?

Jesus then tells them a parable – a type of story which is designed to teach something. In this story Jesus is describing how four types of people each respond to 'the word' – that is, the message about Jesus.

4. Type 1: Look at verse 4 and verse 15.
    a. What happens to the seed sown on the path?
    b. What do you think this means: "as soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them"?
    c. What happens to the people that this represents?

5. Type 2: Look at verses 5-6; and verse 16-17
    a. What happens to the seed sown on rocky soil? Why?
    b. Jesus says that these people 'quickly fall away', which means that they stop following Jesus. Why? What happens to the people that this represents?

6. Type 3: Look at verses 7, 18 and 19
    a. What happens to the seed that falls in thorns (weeds)? 'Choked' here means squeezed or crowded.
    b. What happens to the people that this represents?
    c. Why might 'worries... riches... desires for other things' make it hard to follow Jesus completely?

7. Type 4: Look at verses 8 and 20
    a. What happens to the seed that falls in good soil?
    b. What happens to people that this represents?

8. Verses 11 and 12 are a warning, telling us that we need to make sure we listen carefully to what Jesus is telling us. What can we do to make sure that the words of Jesus have maximum effect in our lives?

Leader's Notes

Mark International Study 1 Leader's Notes

Unlike Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Jesus' life, the Gospel of Mark gives no background or information on the first thirty years of Jesus' life. Nevertheless, Mark starts his account saying that this is, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."

One of the challenges with this passage – especially for those new to the Bible – is working out who all the different people are, namely: Mark, John the Baptist, and Isaiah[1]. These are all supporting characters, pointing us as readers to Jesus. Isaiah predicts John the Baptist, while John the Baptist announces the arrival of Jesus and Mark records his arrival.

You could say that these three supporting characters triangulate the arrival of Jesus and his place in history. Jesus was not simply a gifted person who rose to religious prominence in his time, his coming was predicted by God's prophets (c.700BC), announced by a respected prophet of his time (c.30AD), and recorded by eyewitnesses close to him (c.30-65AD).

If this is an issue, then you can turn to Isaiah 40:3 and Malachai 3:1, but most participants will probably take your word for it.

It is not included in the study, but you may mention that John's clothing and lifestyle indicated that he was a prophet, God's messenger, and that people would have recognised his 'uniform' at the time.

Q3. Try to put aside any personal strong feelings about infant baptism vs believer's baptism, and don't get into a debate about this. What you want is to get people talking. Indeed, many people who have been baptised as children or when they are older, have never truly repented and trusted in Jesus.

Q4. The answer you are looking for is "they confessed their sins". But this is 'Bible language' and will need explaining. What is 'confessing', and what is a 'sin'? If you have more time, this would be a good moment to discuss the ideas more deeply. (It is vital that you read the explanation in italics to ensure people know Jesus had no sin.)

Q5. Depending on their cultural background, some students may understand John's expression in v7 very well. You could translate it as, "...whose shoes it would be a privilege to clean". It shows us that Jesus is much more that a prophet.

Q6. Those of us familiar to the Bible will recognise v10-11 as a reference to the Trinity, but it is very unlikely that seekers will make that connection or know what the Trinity is. Leave this as an observation of the text for now, as they have only just begun the journey into God's word.

Q7. Give yourself time to reach this last question with time to spare as it is worth giving time to reflect on it. You may also wish to return to this question at the start of the next session.

[1] When the New Testament writers quote more than one prophet, as is the case here, they usually mention only one – the more prominent one. It was an accepted shorthand at the time.

Mark International Study 2 Leader's Notes

Q1. Split the group into pairs or threes, give them a little time to decide which of the options seems most important, and ask them to feedback one or two examples from each group. This should only take a few minutes.

The passage is designed to do two things: firstly, it is intended to show us the authority and power of Jesus. The chapter leading up to this includes examples of Jesus' power and authority over demons (1:27) and over sickness (1:34; 41-42). Secondly, it shows that our need for God's forgiveness is far greater than any other needs and challenges we might have. Thus, we see Jesus' authority over sin and his willingness to grant forgiveness.

Q2-5. Use the picture you have sourced and give students time to picture the scene.

In one of the trial studies of this series, a Japanese student responded to Q5, saying, "Because I am not a Christian, I don't know what peace with God really looks like, so I would choose physical health."

This honest answer was representative of several in the group who could see what the passage was teaching but were unable to imagine what a relationship with God really looks like. Many, such as the student mentioned above, may feel that forgiveness from God is not something they especially need right now, and they may say so. Don't be too concerned at this point, because if they answer like this it means they have understood what the passage is saying, and it has opened a door in their minds for the Holy Spirit to continue working.

Q6. Even with advances in modern medicine, most forms of nerve damage paralysis cannot be reversed. There is no naturalistic explanation as to how the man was healed, but there were plenty of eyewitnesses that he was. If God is God, then there is nothing he cannot do. Some may doubt the account, but that speaks more to our cultural bias than to whether it actually happened.

While forgiveness is harder to do, it is easier to say, because there's no physical change that would prove one way or another if it had happened. By commanding the man to get up (and thus showing that he has healed him) Jesus is showing that he can also do the harder thing of forgiving sins.

Q8. Participants may not be keen to say out loud what they would like to ask God to do in their lives, but if you can be ready to offer an example of what God has done for you, then that would help promote a discussion.

Remember that what Jesus demonstrated here was not that he has power to fix any problem, but that he forgives sins – that he has authority as God to forgive sins against God. Though we are still early in the study series, it would be helpful to describe what it means to you (or other Christian helpers in the group) that your sins are forgiven.

Mark International Study 3 Leader's Notes

Q1. Explain to students that they may already have noticed several differences between their culture and life in this country. If you need to, give examples such as whether taking your shoes off before entering someone's home is a strict requirement or not. People from hot countries tend to shower in the evening (or more than once in a day), to avoid bringing sweat and dirt into a nice, clean bed. People from cold countries may prefer to shower in the morning, as your bed is where you sweat the most.

Whatever our personal and cultural preferences, there is a universal link between being 'clean' and being 'good', and we are often quick to judge one another for it. It is no surprise, then, that in several religions and religious ideas, adherents are taught to avoid physical contamination to remain spiritually pure and holy. Indeed, we see many such features in the Old Testament. But they all point to a greater reality, which Jesus teaches in this passage.

Q2. Again, treat this question with care. We are not at this stage looking to critique kosher or halal, vegan or any other dietary rules. Rather, we just want to get people to think about their reasons for following them.

Q3-4. Once the students have looked again at the text to answer the question, draw their attention to the footnotes for further understanding.

Q7-10. The aim of the whole study is to follow the logic of Jesus' teaching to its conclusion in Mark 7:20-23, that evil is not something "out there" which we need to protect ourselves from, as if we were innocent. Rather, evil is in every person's heart. That being true, there is nothing we can do on our own to cleanse ourselves; we are dependent on the mercy and love of God.

Encourage people to take the question sheet away with them and pray Psalm 51:10 on their own. Better still, you may wish to print out the following set of Scriptures to take home with them:

We can ask God to forgive us and clean us on this inside if we trust in Jesus:

"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10 NIV).

"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24 NIV).

"At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savour." (Titus 3:3-6 NIV).

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9 NIV).

Mark International Study 4 Leader's Notes

Q1. Participants tend to come and go in seeker studies, so you may have people there for the first time who may not feel they can venture an opinion straight away. Nevertheless, it is usually an easy question to get people to respond to, if you start it more generally (who do people say Jesus is in your culture/community?), but when it comes to who you do say Jesus is? they may hesitate, not wanting to offend. They may also fear the reaction of those from their own country or religious background, so don't press people for an answer unless you are sure of your ground.

Q2-3. It is not important to the study to deal with v30, but participants may question why Jesus wanted to keep his messiahship a secret (for now). The simple answer is that the timing was not right. Because the disciples had watched him for months, they knew that he was not a political leader, and many would have tried to force Jesus to be the figurehead of a rebellion against Roman occupation. The title, messiah, was politically dangerous at the time. Also, Jesus had not finished his mission to suffer and die – a mission which even his own disciples would struggle to understand at first, as Peter's reaction proved.

Q5. Peter's reaction was dangerous because it tempted Jesus to avoid the cross. In this we get a glimpse of the humanity of Jesus similar to what we see in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Q6. It may be worthwhile taking your time over this question. Jesus' words will be unfamiliar and are easy to misunderstand. Remember that the common expression, "we all have our crosses to bear" is a misunderstanding of this passage and has nothing to do with what Jesus is really saying – don't allow anyone to take the discussion down a wrong track. But neither is Jesus calling us to a life of abject misery. Taking up our cross and following Jesus leads to abundant and everlasting life (v35b, c.f. John 10:10). Beware also traditional Christian ideas that tend towards thinking that we somehow earn God's favour through self-denial, fasting, mortification of the body etc.

Q7-8. Ultimately, this is where we want the discussion to 'land'. Make sure you leave enough time to explore people's thoughts about the future and the claim of Jesus on our lives.

Mark International Study 5 Leader's Notes

Q1. Be careful of time, but this opening question will show people's ideas about what a 'good person' looks like. People find it much easier to describe what a bad person is or does; the definition of a 'good person' is usually harder to pin down. Take care: different cultures define these terms very differently. Even people who were guilty of the most horrendous crimes of genocide and torture may be seen as national or cultural heroes by some. For that reason, avoid examples of real people (dead or alive) where possible, and speak using hypotheticals (e.g. "I think a good person is someone who...").

Q2. Most seekers will NOT really have a good understanding of 'eternal life' (indeed, the man in the story probably didn't, either). Give students time to answer, but don't entertain too much conjecture and ensure there is no confusion with reincarnation. What you need them to understand is that eternal life is living forever in a relationship with God that starts now; it means God's complete acceptance and forgiveness, so we can enjoy him forever.

Q4. People's idea of morality come from their religious background, culture, parents/family, friends, society and personal convictions. They can be very complex, but they usually come down to some basic code, such as "I try to be happy without hurting anyone". You might ask, "How did your parents describe good behaviour?" Or "What sort of things did you get into trouble for when you were a kid?" Be ready to give some examples!

Q5. If people struggle to answer this, don't push too hard. It may be sufficient to simply tell people that, from your own experience, most people find it hard to live up to their own standards (i.e. we break our own rules).

Mark International Study 6 Leader's Notes

Q1. As with all introductory questions in this series, Q1 is NOT supposed to take up too much time. It is just meant to get people thinking along the lines of the topic to be discussed. Although it seems like a 'yes/no' question, there is plenty of scope to discuss the subject. Just get a few sample responses from people and move on. You might want to say that, while different cultures have different views about right and wrong (our 'software'), the fact that we have the capacity to make moral judgements is universal (our 'hardware').

Q2-4. The answer to Q2a is "know/believe that... God is one / there is only one God." (v 29)

Because these studies are short, it is not possible to fully explore all three parts of Jesus' answer. However, depending on your group, you may need to explore more fully the first part – "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." Many will not raise it as an issue i.e. they do not want to contest it or risk contradicting you, even if they believe something different. Some will want to explore it further.

Muslim-background students may press you to agree that "The Lord our God, the Lord is one" means that Jesus did not believe in the Trinity. Don't get drawn into a debate on this. Remember, this is an English translation of a Greek text which is in turn a quote from a Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the original Hebrew text. In other words, it is not possible from this verse to say that Jesus agrees or disagrees with the doctrine of the Trinity, only that there is one God, which is a key part of what it means to be a trinitarian.

If a student presses the question, there are loads of great resources out there to help you think through the doctrine clearly. If you feel able, consider arranging a separate discussion to talk further. The classical Christian Creeds help to lay out what Christians believe about the doctrine, and documents like the Westminster Larger Catechism have some great summaries of trinitarianism (see especially Q.8-11) with connected Bible verses. Both Mike Reeves and Fred Sanders have accessible books that show how closely connected the doctrine of the Trinity is to the gospel. It is the gospel of the Father sending the Son and pouring out the Holy Spirit for our salvation. See Mike Reeves 'Delighting in the Trinity' and Fred Sanders 'The Deep Things of God'.

Q5. There is a clear link between Q5 and the notes in italics that follow. If you have read out the question and the footnote that is linked to it (#2) and your participants are still struggling to answer, then read the italics and return to the question. You may not get as far as you would like to on this, depending on how much of the Gospel they already understand, but hopefully they will understand more as the studies progress.

The scribe's answer is wise because he recognises that the sacrificial system (as it then was) or any ritual approach to God is not nearly as important before God as the state of our heart. On inspection, this presents us with a problem. Our hearts are so terribly broken and selfish, we often ignore God and reject him: we fail to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Once we've recognized this problem, we'll recognize that only a perfect sacrifice will do.

What's required for perfect union with God is a perfect human being who offers a perfect sacrifice. Nothing else will achieve that goal. Since Jesus was God-become-human, he could live a perfect human life of perfect love towards God and neighbour and so offer a perfect sacrifice that would bring perfect reconciliation between God and human beings. He perfectly deals with our guilt before God by dying in the place of those who trust him, and he lives a perfectly righteous life, so that those who trust him are made acceptable to God and made like him.

NOTE: experience has shown that students from certain cultures with a culturally theistic background (those who are culturally Christian, Muslims and others) will sometimes claim to truly 'love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength' and 'love [their] neighbour as themselves'. While this might show stunning lack of self-awareness, it is more likely to indicate a superficial understanding of sin and what it really means to 'love' – and the heart's hardness to accepting that we are truly sinners in need of forgiveness.

It may be necessary to gently challenge this, saying that no one is really, consistently, able to obey these laws to the extent that God requires of us. Study 5: Mark 10:17-27 – What does it mean to be 'good'? should cover this. Otherwise, see how Jesus responds to the same question in a different context in Luke 10:29ff.

Mark International Study 7 Leader's Notes

Q1. Many students will likely have stories of those in their families who have made sacrifices for them to come and study abroad.

Q4. For Old Testament imagery pointing to the cup, see Isaiah 51:22. However, many students will accept this explanation and won't require the cross-reference.

Some students may also ask how Jesus can be God and yet have a separate will to him (this sometimes appears in material by Muslims trying to 'debunk' the trinity). The answer to this lies in the fact that Jesus is one person with two natures. Having lived eternally with a divine nature, he added to himself a human nature at the incarnation. Included in this is a human will, alongside the divine will that he shares with the Father and the Spirit. There is a lot that could be (and has been!) said on this topic, but what is important to notice here is that Jesus desires to fully submit his will to the Father's. Looking at Jesus, we can see that, while on earth, Jesus experienced normal human fears, pain, and the natural preference to avoid suffering (especially on this unimaginable level). He therefore had to specifically decide to choose to submit to the Father's will. The fact that Jesus did so demonstrates the truth of Hebrews 4:15, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin."

It is important to realise that Jesus did not 'simply' suffer physically for a few hours. In which case, we might point to examples from history where people have suffered more and for longer. Rather, Jesus' true suffering was taking our sins upon himself, experiencing the divine condemnation that our sins deserve, experiencing the utter, terrible spiritual darkness no-one in this life experiences until after death (if they have not received Christ).

Q7. Make sure you give plenty of time for students to reflect on this. It is important that they consider the cost of following Jesus, and many may not have given much thought to what it would cost them in terms of relations with their wider family, employers, government officials etc.

Q9. If this has been sufficiently covered in Q7, it may not be necessary to dwell on this question. It is there so that we do not end on a 'how does this make you feel' question (Q8) without some practical application. This gives an opportunity to discuss the cost of following Jesus once they have had time to reflect more.

Mark International Study 8 Leader's Notes

These studies are aimed at university-level students. So, while there may be concerns in some groups about the length of this scripture passage, the authors feel that this ought not to be of major concern as long as it is handled wisely.

As mentioned in the introductory leaders' notes, it is generally not a good idea to 'read round the room', with students each taking a consecutive verse to read out. This distracts them from the flow of the story, and they may be more worried about their own pronunciation! Rather, either read it yourself, or split it into shorter sections (e.g. v15-20) read by more confident participants or co-leaders.

Q3. Take care as you discuss this question. It is very unlikely students will discuss their own experiences of shame and humiliation, but it could be triggering nonetheless. Jesus' public humiliation is part of the overall crucifixion experience of Jesus and may indeed speak into our experience of forgiveness – that Jesus bore our shame. Don't get bogged down in this, though. It may simply be best to explain and then let the students take this away to think on in private. In a 1-1 situation, this question might bring up serious matters that may need to be dealt with sensitively.

Q4. If there's time, it might be appropriate to look at places in the Bible where darkness represents God's judgement. If there's lots of time, then you can look at the plagues in Egypt, in Exodus 10:21-23. Amos 8:9 also talks about darkness during the daytime as a judgement brought by God. However, God was not bringing his judgement on the people who were crucifying Jesus, but on Jesus himself, as he suffered on the cross.

Q5. Note that, since this took place at Passover where there is always a full moon, a solar eclipse is not a possible explanation for this darkness. It is purely a supernatural phenomenon.

Q6. There isn't a right answer from this list – they are all good things to feel a need for! If appropriate, take some time to talk about how Jesus' death offers whatever the students selected from the list.

Q9. This is an opportunity to discuss more freely what living as a Christian is like in relational terms towards God. Don't be afraid to get subjective here but also don't forget that what Jesus has done for us is only partly experienced in this life (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:19 and 1 Peter 1:8-9).

Mark International Study 9 Leader's Notes

Q2. This activity is designed as a comprehension exercise to help students follow the order of the events in the text. You could also make a copy of the page with the boxes on and cut them out so students can rearrange them.

Answers: A (15:33-39); L (15:43); B (15:44-45); K (15:46); I (15:47); H (16:1); E (16:2-3); G (16:3-4); F (16:5); C (16:5-6); J (16:7); D (16:8).

Q5. You might want to take some time to explore the implications of the different truths on this list. If appropriate, you can share from your own experience of how these things have made a difference to you.

Mark International Study 10 Leader's Notes

The aim of this study is to return to a key part of Jesus' teaching, the Parable of the Sower, which Jesus used to underscore how important it is to not only listen to his teaching, but obey it – and continue in it. Jesus was faced with large crowds who were pressing forward to hear him (v1). But, although he was popular, he knew that many – or most – would fail to ultimately benefit from his teachings for various reasons.

More than anything, this is what needs to be brought across in this study – what are you going to do with what you have learned?

Q3. We have not focussed on the parables in this series. Some parables need more explanation, but the Parable of the Sower comes with its own explanation.

Q4. Different cultures have different ideas about who – or what – Satan is, so it might be worth taking some time here to explain that Satan is a spiritual creature who was once an angel, but who lost his position in heaven because he rebelled against God. Satan was originally part of the universe that God created; but as a created being, he is not and can never be an equal-but-opposite counterpart to God (God is uncreated and infinite; Satan is created and finite).

Q5. Remember that Israel/Palestine is a relatively hot country with rocky soil. So seeds that land on ground where the topsoil layer is thin have little chance of lasting very long. They will sprout quickly if given a little bit of moisture, but that will quickly dry up in those climatic conditions.

It is good to have prepared some examples of what it means for a Christian to give up following Jesus, when someone is faced with a difficult choice. V17 talks of having 'no root' – what does this mean in practice? And how might someone face "trouble or persecution [because of] the word" and decide to stop following Jesus?

In countries where opposition is more subtle and where overt persecution is rare, there are other ways in which someone might find themselves with a "make-or-break" decision between obeying and going on with Christ and not doing so (such as a career opportunity or relationship which forces a choice between putting Jesus first or not).

Q6. Likewise, it is good to have thought through some instances where someone might drift away from fruitful Christian living under circumstances that Jesus outlines in v19.

Q7. In v17 (see notes on Q5 above), Jesus speaks of having 'no root'. Here, the 'seed that fell in good soil' has plenty of room to put down roots. It would be really helpful to explain how YOU and others ensure you are growing spiritually through the word, prayer, fellowship, service etc.