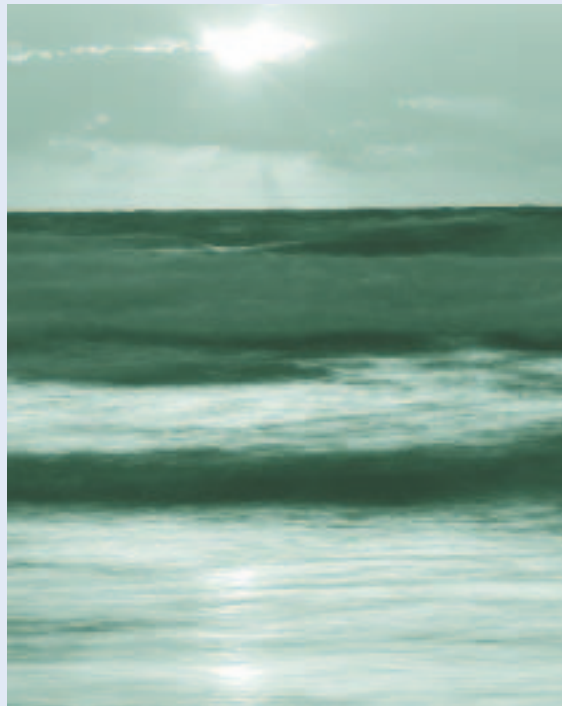


# THE GOSPEL OF MARK

## AMEN'S STUDY OF



# CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men  
by Ronald Edward Peters



# The Gospel A Men's Study of Christian Discipleship of Mark

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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# Mark

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# introduction

## Men's BIBLE Study

### The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,  
everywhere the giver and renewer of life. . . .*

*The same Spirit  
who inspired the prophets and apostles  
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture . . .*

These words from “A Brief Statement of Faith,” adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God’s Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word” to each of us (*Book of Order*, PC(U.S.A.), G-14.0516e(2)).

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says, yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

### The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men’s breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study cells in homes, and many others. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion, it assumes a small group of men (no more than twelve), one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective.

**1. We will treat no question as stupid.** Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

**2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study.** The group has gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas are.

**3. We will regard the leader(s) as “first among equals.”** Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

**4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak.** Presbyterians believe that the Spirit that spoke to the biblical writers now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

**5. We will listen for “the question behind the question.”** Sometimes a man’s gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

**6. We will agree to disagree in love.** Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

**7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study.** Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and from time to time sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the “right” answers.

### Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the foregoing seven “rules.”

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes to has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. The leaders might also alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of worksheets. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis for this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. If a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word, in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study you will find Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each study to suggest where it might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

# Mark

## INTRODUCTION

### The Gospel of Mark, Jesus, and Notions about Discipleship

A disciple is generally understood, within Christianity and in the broader culture, as one who is a “follower of Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> For most people today, however, notions about discipleship conjure up vague ideas related to religious devotion to Christ, a cause, or a personality, but surprisingly little that relates to attractive and meaningful lifestyles at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Talk about Jesus, discipleship, and the Bible among most men today is useful for bringing needed morality into the everyday issues of life (which is what religion, at its best, is expected to do); but these are not the typical ingredients of American definitions of manhood. It is not the images of Jesus or Bible stories about love that define our culture’s representatives of manliness or success, whether the examples are John Wayne, Michael Jordan, or Bill Gates.

In an era significantly influenced by pressure for increased effectiveness in productivity, time management, quick thinking under stress, and rugged self-sufficiency, how does a Bible study concerning the New Testament book of Mark fit a useful model of manliness in today’s American society? How should this ancient resource be approached by men who are searching for spiritual norms by which to live moral lives in a world where competing values seem in constant flux?

The second book of the New Testament jumps right into its subject matter unambiguously with the opening statement, “The beginning of the good news [gospel] of Jesus Christ . . .” From the first line, Mark presents the theology of the early church that forms the content of the book. The term *gospel* originally meant a reward to one who brought good news. By the time Mark was compiled, however, the term referred to the good news itself. If scholarly estimates are correct, Mark, the oldest of the four Gospels, was written (about A.D. 65–70).<sup>2</sup> By that time, several common impressions defined the early church’s beliefs. The author did not present his information as a documentary in the modern sense or as historical treatise. His purpose was clearly theological: to share the early church’s testimony of faith to an audience of Christian believers who faced serious persecution in the first century. As such, Mark’s Gospel strikes a meaningful chord in the life of any man in search of a substantive message concerning Jesus in a time of moral and spiritual flux.

1. Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, s.v. “Disciple.”

2. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 8.

### The Origin of Mark’s Gospel

No one can say with any authority who wrote this book. Among the first Christians, the highest esteem was reserved for writings bearing the names of apostles, other direct witnesses to Jesus in the flesh, or those closely involved with them. The authorship of Mark’s Gospel has been related throughout history to a few such figures, principally the apostle Peter. As the theory goes, the author was John Mark, whose mother (a woman named Mary who lived in Jerusalem) allowed her home to be used as a central gathering place of Christian fellowship (Acts 12:12). The apostle Peter was so well known around the house that his voice could be recognized without seeing him (Acts 12:12–17). According to this tradition, the author was very familiar with the apostles and with events surrounding Jesus’ earthly ministry. It is assumed that this is the same Mark mentioned in 1 Peter 5:13 with its coded reference to Rome (“Babylon”). As such, the Gospel of Mark is said to constitute the writer’s reflections upon reminiscences of Peter written after the apostle’s death in Rome.

The popularity of the Gospel’s association with the biblical character John Mark is also based on this man’s familiarity with the ministry of Paul. Mark and his cousin, Barnabas, traveled with Paul (Acts 12:25). Mark’s name is mentioned in several other places in Scripture related to Paul’s ministry (Acts 13:13; 15:37–39; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). It has even been suggested that Mark was referring to himself in 14:51–52 with the brief mention of the young man who fled at the arrest of Jesus.

While all of the above is circumstantial evidence concerning the origin of the Gospel of Mark, some facts are clear. In the Greek-speaking world of the Roman Empire, when first-century Jewish and gentile Christians were persecuted under Nero, various oral traditions and now-lost treatises concerning Jesus’ life and teachings emerged. These were probably written in Aramaic, the language of the Palestinian (Galilean) subculture from which the carpenter-turned-preacher and his disciples had come. Among these early Christians, there was strong consensus that the writer of the Greek manuscript titled “According to Mark,” whoever he was, had faithfully and accurately compiled those earlier traditions upon which he had drawn to produce this work.



## Issues of Discipleship

In Reverend Jeremiah Wright's introductory notes to Jawanza Kunjufu's helpful book *Adam! Where Are You?* he compared the spiritual situations of the first man Adam in the book of Genesis with that of men today. While his comments are directed to African American men, they are appropriate to the spiritual quest of many American men, regardless of ethnic identity:

When God asked the question "Where are you, Adam?" in the first book of the Bible, there were several factors that made the listening audience . . . a lot different from the reading audience at the end of the 20th century. First of all, the listening audience who first heard this story understood clearly that God already knew where the man (*adamah*) was. The problem was that the man did not know where he was.

Unfortunately, the circumstances are the same today as they were when this sacred story was first told. . . . Even more tragic, however, is the fact that although the circumstances are the same, the awareness is not! . . .

Man (who *thinks* he knows) in reality *does* not know! [Today] the reading audience is primarily female—especially when it comes to the reading audience who would be reading (or hearing sermons preached about) the book of Genesis.<sup>3</sup>

For decades, women have analyzed feminine issues and spirituality while men have been much slower to consider such matters in depth.<sup>4</sup> Many men today experience unhelpful feelings and pressure in their everyday realities. Yet the image of masculinity still encourages men to suppress their feelings and not complain lest they be viewed as wimps. Although many males may feel beleaguered, maligned, or demeaned by stress they experience, "real men" are still expected to be tough, independent, and analytical about their situation. Nuances like "sensitive," "nurturing," or "emotional" are less frequently applied to the ideal of the real man. Not surprisingly, men avoid counselors, therapists, physicians, or pastors in higher percentages than women.

This type of cultural manly posturing has its price, however. On average, men are involved in much larger percentages than women in violent deaths (automobile accidents, shootings, suicide). Incidences of negative social behavior are higher among men than women as represented in the statistics on domestic violence, chemical abuse and addiction, and arrest and incarceration. Men are generally more unaware and

uninformed about their health than women are. Men tend to be slack on disease prevention such as hypertension or early detection of testicular and prostate cancers unless prompted by women who are concerned about them. Men die about seven years earlier than women.

The picture of Jesus that Mark presents is that of a dynamic personality whose faith in God enables him to speak and act with authority, and one whose life energizes and inspires others to do likewise. The "authority" vested in Jesus is not seen as dominating control, but as a divinely originated capacity to help people realize God's capacity-building power within themselves through faith. Mark offers a vigorous and active presentation of Jesus' ministry that stresses more of what Jesus *did* than what he *said*. Jesus' lifestyle, actions, and teachings changed victims and objects of pity into whole and healthy persons. This portrait of Jesus could be a useful resource in assisting men to move beyond the sometimes limiting macho cultural stereotypes into more healthy and life-affirming notions about faith in God and Christian discipleship.

Mark provides a clear message concerning how disciples should live based on the model set forth by Jesus. Although this model of discipleship is a paradigm for human devotion to God that transcends gender characteristics, there is definitely a need for men to intentionally recognize their responsibility for creating spiritual wholeness and health in society. This study concentrates on implications of discipleship for men seeking to evaluate where they are spiritually in answer to God's question to Adam, "Where are you?"

## Outline of Mark<sup>5</sup>

### I. Introduction (1:1–13)

- A. John the Baptizer and Jesus (1:2–11)
  - 1. John the Baptizer (1:2–8)
  - 2. The baptism of Jesus (1:9–11)
- B. The temptation of Jesus (1:12–13)

### II. Jesus in Galilee (1:14–9:50)

- A. About the Sea of Galilee (1:14–5:43)
- B. Wider journeyings (6:1–9:50)

### III. Jesus in Jerusalem (10:1–15:47)

- A. On the way to Jerusalem (10:1–52)
- B. In Jerusalem (11:1–12:44)
- C. The apocalyptic discourse (13:1–37)
- D. The passion narrative (14:1–15:47)

### IV. The Resurrection (16:1–20)

- A. The empty tomb (16:1–8)
- B. The appearances and ascension of the risen Christ (16:9–20)

3. Jawanza Kunjufu, *Adam! Where Are You? Why Most Black Men Don't Go to Church* (Chicago: African Images, 1994), p. v.

4. This is a conclusion drawn by several authors writing on men's issues from a variety of perspectives including Philip Culbertson, *New Adam: The Future of Male Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992); Jawanza Kunjufu, *Adam! Where Are You?*; Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991); Bill Kauth, *A Circle of Men* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); and James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988).

5. Frederick C. Grant, "The Gospel According to St. Mark," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), pp. 645–46, 916–17.

## Some Additional Help

The only materials necessary for proceeding through this study are Bibles for all the group members and this study guide. While not necessary, some of the suggested references or commentaries listed below may be helpful:

- C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963).
- Philip Culbertson, *New Adam: The Future of Male Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
- Frederick C. Grant, "The Gospel According to St. Mark," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951).
- Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).
- Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1958).
- James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988).
- Paul P. Parker, ed., *Standing with the Poor: Theological Reflections on Economic Reality* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1992).
- Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Early Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984).
- Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1976).

# session

Mark 1:1–13;  
Isa. 40:1–5; Mal. 3:1;  
Phil. 4:10–13

## Good News for

## BAD SITUATIONS

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

— Mark 1:1

### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

Conditions prompting the creation of Mark's Gospel were rooted in practical realities facing believers in the early church. When this Gospel was written, Christians were being vigorously persecuted by the Roman Empire under Nero. The author was writing to a martyr church. Tradition has long associated the origins of the book with Rome, the conclusion being that the author put into writing a summary statement of the works and teachings of Jesus for a primarily gentile Christian readership. Jesus is presented as the mighty man of God who improved the quality of life for all who believed in God. Mark's purpose was to explain the meaning of Jesus' death, in light of the wonderful things he had done for people leading to his crucifixion, as a means of giving early Christians a thorough background concerning the resurrection of Christ. Indeed, nearly 40 percent of the Gospel is an intimate description of the last eight days of Jesus' life in the flesh, the harshness of his inglorious death, and the triumphant concluding note of the resurrection.

Like the Lord Jesus, these later followers of Christ would face indignities and injustices simply because they sought to be faithful to God. Terror governed their lives. Many believers had their families destroyed or even had to face hungry lions in the arena for public amusement. The great fire that destroyed much of Rome under Nero's reign was blamed on the Christians, who became public scapegoats for the fire. As a result, some believers were actually coated with tar and strung up as living torches in Nero's garden.<sup>1</sup> Not only was Jesus brutally crucified, but the great leaders of the early church became martyrs as well: the apostles Peter and Paul.

As such, Mark's purpose in writing his Gospel was overtly theological. He was writing to people whose lives were in the throes of deep crisis. His readers needed a theology that would buttress them in times of adversity. Not only did they face social hostility, but also loss of job or

financial security, political disenfranchisement, imprisonment, and possible loss of life. Because life's challenges and crises were in the forefront of Mark's thinking, he was selective in drawing from the various resource materials available to him as he compiled his Gospel. Only those details that related directly to his central purpose of preparing his readers to cope with crisis were included. There was no need, therefore, to include nonessential information (such as birth narratives about John the Baptist, background data concerning Jesus' birth or what happened when he was a boy, etc. For this information, turn to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke).

Mark's aim clearly was to encourage and strengthen his readers, primarily Gentiles, who were facing stress. His strategy was to emphasize for later disciples the manner in which Jesus handled crisis, threats, or other challenges established the pattern by which Jesus' followers should rely upon their faith in God to deal with life's trials. Mark sought to answer difficult questions for believers in distress such as the following: If Jesus was God's Son, why did he have to die? And why did he die such a shameful and tragic death? As the writer relates the events concerning Jesus and his message, he sets forth his information as good news in a context where most news was not generally perceived as "good."

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Is it possible to appreciate adversity more if one is convinced that there is moral good in suffering?*

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*What is the significance of John the Baptist to this introduction of the Gospel narrative?*

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1. Frederick C. Grant, "The Gospel According to St. Mark," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), p. 633.

How does Mal. 3:1 relate to the point that Mark makes in this opening section?

How does Isa. 40:1–3 relate to the point that Mark makes in this section?

## A “Good News” Response to the Human Condition

Mark began his Gospel narrative by reminding his readers that the prophet Isaiah proclaimed a message of good news and comfort during a time in Israel’s history when things looked bad. He noted that Isaiah called attention to “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” (1:3) as a herald of divine blessing to come and likened the ministry of John the Baptist as the fulfillment of this ancient prophecy. In the faith of the early church (represented in Mark’s Gospel) the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and the temptation of Jesus constituted the initiation of Jesus’ public ministry.

Being religious does not mean being apolitical or free from insecurities, biases, or flat-out temptations to do that which is wrong. The “good news” about Jesus Christ means that human beings are not totally defined or circumscribed by unfortunate realities. The good news about Jesus Christ suggests that there is more to being men than the physical, emotional, economic, social, vocational, psychological, cultural, or political realities that often define who men are.

What defines all of this as good news, however, are not the commonalities that Jesus shared with others of his environmental, social, economic, and political setting. The ingredients that characterize all of this introductory material as good news must rise out of the uniqueness of Jesus. According to Howard Thurman:

The historical setting in which Jesus grew up, the psychological mood and temper of the age . . . the economic and social predicament of Jesus’ family—all these are important. But they in themselves are unable to tell us precisely the thing that we most want to know: Why does he differ from any others in the same setting? . . . (A) after all, the most important question, since the thing which makes him most significant is not the way in which he resembled his fellows, but the way in which he differed from all the rest of them.<sup>3</sup>

As with Jesus, the uniqueness of Christian discipleship lies not in its commonalities with the masses of humanity, but in those distinguishing characteristics that set it apart. The essence of the good news of God’s involvement in the human condition as represented in the life, actions, and resurrection of Jesus is the difference the followers of Christ make in the real-life situations in which they find themselves. It does not take much to catalog all that’s wrong with society in general or in anyone’s life specifically. Shortcomings, blame, or weaknesses are eventually detectable. This is part of the human condition. “Good news” in this context is usually determined by the extent to which persons who fashion themselves to be Christ’s disciples are able to reach beyond the ethical average to aspire to a higher one.



### \* THEN AND NOW: A NEED FOR GOOD NEWS

Noted religious philosopher Howard Thurman wrote, “It is utterly fantastic to assume that Jesus grew to manhood untouched by the surging currents of the common life that made up the climate of Palestine.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, the fact that Jesus was a member of a minority group in the midst of a larger dominant and controlling group is often glossed over in reflections on his interactions with the disciples and others in the subculture of ancient Palestine. Nonetheless, this situation profoundly influenced the writing of Mark’s Gospel. Nearly sixty years before Jesus’ birth, Palestine had come under Roman control, and during the intervening years, the pain of its conquered status provided fertile ground for all manner of revolutionary rhetoric and activity. Even local authorities were hated. Herod Antipas, governor of Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 37, was an Israelite, and the cruelty of his reign was legendary. This fact was but one of several realities that reinforced the perception of many Israelites that little good was found in the political authorities.

Most information that is “news” today does not qualify for the adjective “good.” Whether the information is sufficiently sensational or can be cast as such seems to be a key determinant in deciphering what gets broadcast (or published) as news. Consequently, much of what parades as “news” is little more than police reports on the latest accidents, murders, robberies, or other villainies. These are interspersed with government or business press releases related to profits, losses, scandals, or constituency-based gyrations, and sports and entertainment press releases. Culture’s penchant for the sensational has left our news-sharing systems largely bereft of viable information to put forth as “good news.”

2. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 18.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

## Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*What are some of the ways that our reflections, as Christians, on biblical teachings about faith in God suggest that we minimize practical realities of everyday life?*

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*Would more background information on the life of Jesus (as compared to Matt. 1–2 or Luke 1–2) have strengthened the point that Mark was trying to make?*

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*What is the importance of Jesus' baptism by John?*

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*What is the significance of Jesus' wilderness temptations?*

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## Afterword

Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall

. . . Masses of [people] live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose need may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own needs.<sup>4</sup>

In the first verse, it is obvious that this Gospel zeros in on the work and person of Jesus as *Christ* or Savior. There is no question that this is good news to those whose circumstance in life is such that they need “saving.” Clearly, if one is not aware of any impending danger, the usefulness of the good news of a Savior will be of limited value. Because the challenges of life during the time of Jesus’ ministry on earth among the disciples were plain, the sufferings of first-century believers could readily compare to the plight of the twelve disciples. In a relatively affluent social context, it is easy to identify those material or physical situations that evidence need. What are some of the signs of a need for the good news of a Savior when deprivation is not so overtly evident?

4. Thurman, op cit., pp. 11-13.

# session *two*

## The Call to Powerful

## DISCIPLESHIP

Mark 1:14–20;  
3:13–35

And he appointed twelve . . . to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.

—Mark 3:14–15

### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

Jesus' public ministry, according to Mark's Gospel, was anything but anemic, low-key, or forgettable. Clearly, there was nothing mediocre about Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus and his ministry were vigorous, attracted much attention, and made deep impressions on people. Unlike the pedagogy of the scribes, Pharisees, or others claiming strong religious convictions, Jesus taught "with authority" (power, capacity to deliver, or ability to make a positive difference). Not only was Jesus a powerful figure in the sense of the good he accomplished, but those whose lives he touched also became powerful by accomplishing good things or acquiring positive characteristics previously beyond their reach. For Mark, the call to follow Jesus was not merely a call for a vague esoteric, spiritual, or other worldly transformation that left the rest of one's life basically unaffected. Jesus' call to repent (Mark 1:15) was primarily viewed by Mark as a potent invitation (a challenge) to forsake attitudinal and spiritual incapacity and to embrace the ability or power to make a positive difference in life.

It all began with the arrest of John, a powerful figure whose arrest signaled the dawn of a new era in the history of faith. John had baptized Jesus earlier, and at the baptism a curious validation of Jesus was manifested in the presence of a dove interpreted to be a sign of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was missing for a long time. It was said that he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness during this period, and afterward things changed dramatically. Jesus began an unavoidable display of God's presence and power through his deeds and teachings. He called his first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and began proclaiming the good news to people who were overwhelmed by their circumstances. Jesus undertook a powerful teaching ministry in the surrounding areas of Galilee, casting out evil spirits and healing many people. During this phase of his activities, he completed the calling of the disciples (3:13–19) and sent them out to proclaim, like himself, the message of the good news with an authority (capacity, ability, power) to cast out demons.

Understandably, a dramatic public response to Jesus' ministry began once word spread concerning the wholeness and health that came to those whose lives were touched by him. Disease was no match for Jesus (1:29–34; 1:40–2:12; 3:1–12; 5). Even demons recognized and acknowledged him but were completely unable to withstand his power and presence: He overpowered them, and with an order, they would submit and run (1:21–28). The power of God was so clearly evident in his life that even the forces of nature were obedient to his very command (4:35–41). Throughout this section, the Gospel alternates between Jesus' teachings and the miracles he performed as God's presence in his life became obvious to all with whom he came into contact.

Authority, the ability to influence or determine the outcome of a situation, is often viewed with ambivalence in our society. It is a capacity that is highly valued in the self. Outside the self, authority, as in being subject to influential factors outside of one's control, is viewed as bad and something to be resisted. Concepts of authority or power, especially those associated with rhetoric about the divine, are frequently confused with domination. Consequently, much of our religious rhetoric in society is in the context of do's and don'ts that are overwhelming and somewhat offensive. This is true of much of society's public discourse around the subject of power and authority.

Jesus' authority did not dominate or control the decision-making ability of the human spirit, but instead offered liberation: Persons whose lives were dominated by negative realities such as unclean spirits (Mark 1:23) or sickness (Mark 1:30–31, 40–42; 2:1–12) were emancipated from their limitations. Furthermore, Jesus was willing to share authority or power he possessed: He gave it to the disciples (Mark 3:15).

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Is the power of God as evident today as it was in Scripture?*

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As a believer in God, in what ways does your life evidence the miraculous power of God?

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It appears that the first disciples mentioned in Mark 1:14–20 (Peter, Andrew, James, and John) were very responsive to Jesus' call. What do you think enabled them to respond so enthusiastically?

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The active participation of women in the ministry of Jesus, both as supporters of the work he initiated (Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3) and those healed of disease, has been interpreted by several biblical scholars as evidence of a wider inclusion of women in Jesus' circle of discipleship than is mentioned in traditional listings of the twelve apostles. In examining the characteristics of the men identified in Scripture as the first disciples called by Jesus, remember that they represent only part of the picture. It was not their vocations, skills, or knowledge that were important, but their willingness to respond in faith to the good news message of empowerment for those whose lives were disabled (Mark 4:1–20). The characteristics of the first disciples called in Mark can be seen in the following:

1. The five men who were called were not idle men. They were industrious and were engaged in tasks associated with their trade when they received the call from Jesus.
2. The fact that it was Jesus who initiated the relationship suggests that those called were considered worthy of the honor being bestowed on them. The fact that Mark introduces Jesus as the Son of God in the first verse of his Gospel certainly enhances the impression the reader has of the first disciples since they were chosen by the Son of God.
3. The disciples were obedient. Their immediate acceptance of Jesus' invitation to follow him . . . speaks favorably of them.
4. The unquestioning and unhesitating response of these men to the summons of Jesus speaks positively of their comprehension. There is no evidence of prior contact between Jesus and these men, despite the claim of some, yet they understood the implications of his call and responded appropriately.<sup>5</sup>

Being a follower of Christ is not a matter of skill, resources, or membership as is inclusion on the roll of a club or a fraternity. Being a follower of Christ—a disciple—is a matter of understanding one's capacities of faith in Christ Jesus. It means following, being a student, being like a mentor, a guide, a teacher, one who sets an example of authority, not in a dominating sense, but in an empowering sense. Following Christ means learning to do what Christ did. Being a disciple means helping others recognize their capacities for improved lives through faith in Christ. It means bringing healing to those places that are sick and broken. It means bringing life to those places where only death reigns. People are "called" by God into a disciple relationship to have a positive influence in life. Mark 6:7 says that Jesus called the disciples, divided them into pairs, and then gave them *authority*.

5. Bertram L. Melbourne, *Slow to Understand: The Disciples in Synoptic Perspective* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), p. 44.



## \*DISCIPLESHIP CHARACTERISTICS (MARK 1:16–20)

Ordinarily, when the subject of Jesus' disciples is raised, mental images of names included in the list of the twelve men identified by Mark (3:16–19) traditionally come to mind. Often overlooked is the fact that the concept of discipleship is much broader than this. That the original cluster of Jesus' followers included women is even less frequently considered. The quest of women to be recognized as equal partners with their male counterparts in the adventure of life, while having attained great strides, is still far from achieving its goals. In the area of Bible study, this quest has been helped by the work of several feminist and womanist writers, such as Jacquelyn Grant,<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,<sup>2</sup> among others, who helped demonstrate a more inclusive picture of discipleship than had been traditionally reflected.

Regarding Christian discipleship, Schüssler Fiorenza suggested that Jesus' ministry really constituted a renewal movement within Judaism that was characterized by unique standards of relationships she defined as a "discipleship of equals."<sup>3</sup>

In this view, the disciples of Jesus did not respect patriarchal family bonds. Faithful discipleship was an eschatological calling for both women and men. Jesus' true family is defined in Mark 3:31–35 as those who do the will of God: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." The discipleship of women is again affirmed in Luke 11:27–28 . . . [wherein] women, like men, are called to faithful discipleship.<sup>4</sup>

1. Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

2. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Early Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

3. Quoted in Clarice J. Martin, "The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes)," in *Stoney the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 211.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Discipleship has nothing to do with domination, nor is it merely the old college try/power of positive thinking. Rather, the authority of true Christian discipleship is the faith to believe that God enables believers who have the capacity for good even when life's circumstances suggest otherwise. Powerful discipleship should not be associated with traditional notions of domination or control, but rather with a spirit of helpfulness that is liberating for self and others. It is the authority (capacity, ability) to be like Jesus by trying to do what Jesus did for other persons: heal, liberate, redeem, help, and assist others to recognize their God-given authority to be free from negative controlling influences. Powerful discipleship is the faith to take your relationship with God seriously and the faith to believe that because of that relationship, you have power and authority to be all you can be.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Read Mark 3:20–30. Not everyone viewed Jesus' activities as positive. What makes for differences in perception so that some see certain situations or events as positive while others view the same realities as negative?*

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*Is Jesus' parable of the sower descriptive of human behavior or prescriptive of divine judgment? Compare the group's answers and perceptions of this parable.*

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*In your opinion, what is the nature of the authority Jesus gave the disciples when he called them?*

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## Afterword

### The Authority God Has Given Us . . .

Martin Luther King, Jr.: One night toward the end of January I settled into bed late, after a strenuous day. Coretta had already fallen asleep and just as I was about to doze off the telephone rang. An angry voice said, "Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery." I hung up, but I couldn't sleep. It seemed that all of my fears had come down on me at once. I had reached the saturation point.

I got out of bed and began to walk the floor. Finally I went to the kitchen and heated a pot of coffee. I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.<sup>6</sup>

6. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1958), pp. 134–135.



# session *three*

## The Softer Side of

## FAITH'S AUTHORITY

## Mark 6:1—8:21

### Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Regardless of our society's rhetoric to the contrary, sensitivity to the needs of others (shall we call it compassion?), while noble, is not unilaterally seen as one of the premier manly characteristics. Happily, many men today are embracing less abrasive lifestyles and successfully cultivating behaviors that were once foreign to most notions about masculinity: cooking, caring for children in the home and other nurturing roles, sensitivity to issues of inclusiveness, sympathy for feminist and womanist critiques of historical patriarchy, and openness to mutuality. Such behaviors were considered signs of weakness or softness a generation ago. Nonetheless, concerns about men being too soft as a critique of displays of sensitivity or compassion stubbornly continue to be alive and well in society. Robert Bly, poet and key figure in a significant portion of men's movements in this country, once made the following observation:

I see the phenomenon of what I would call the "soft male" all over the country today. Sometimes when I look out at my audiences, perhaps half the young males are what I'd call soft. They're lovely, valuable people—I like them—and they're not interested in harming the earth, or starting wars or working for corporations. There is something favorable toward life in their whole general mood and style of living. But something's wrong. Many of these men are unhappy. There's not much energy in them. They are life-preserving but not exactly life-giving. And why is it you often see these men with strong women who positively radiate energy? Here we have a finely tuned young man, ecologically superior to his father, sympathetic to the whole harmony of the universe, yet he himself has no energy to offer.<sup>1</sup>

The association in Bly's statement of *softness* with *listlessness* and mediocrity is one with which Philip Culbertson disagrees and defines as part of a wider problem in society. It is the habit of identifying manly ideals with connotations that encourage socially

dysfunctional and self-debilitating behaviors in men: not showing emotion (except maybe anger or rage), vulnerability, sensitivity, and so on. Although appreciative of Bly's work in identifying and addressing the deep spiritual yearnings of many men, Culbertson is not convinced that all of the "wild man" implications involved in the *Iron John* mythological notions are helpful. The confusion of softness with mediocrity and lack of energy is unhealthy. Culbertson writes:

In the church, we have often sought leaders with these same softer characteristics, believing them to reflect the personality of Christ. But here again, even in the church, we have confused softness with mediocrity. All too often those called to leadership positions in the church have as their primary credential that they have offended the least number of people. This is not softness. It is a sad commentary that the church, like society, cannot recognize the combination of softness, passion, and integrity where it exists. One can be soft, pliable, flexible, pastoral, and sensitive—and still be brimming over with energy for life and for the good of one's community.<sup>2</sup>

Up to this point, Jesus was demonstrating the ability of God's love (compassion, gentleness) to produce dramatically positive results in the life of the believer. His ministry was focused in Capernaum and throughout Galilee (1:39; 4:35; 5:21). Compassion and sensitivity were defining characteristics of the "authority" (capacity) Jesus displayed to create positive change in individuals and society. Love, sensitivity, flexibility, or kindness were not revealed as qualities to be derisively avoided as signs of weakness or softness, but affirmed as manifestations of God's power at work. The willingness to acknowledge limitation, vulnerability, or weakness provided the context for the "authority" (power) of faith to be exercised (see also Isa. 40:28–31; 1 Cor. 1:26–30; 2 Cor. 12:7–10).

In chapter 6, a new division in the Gospel began with Jesus' rejection in Nazareth. From this point forward, Jesus' demonstration of faith's "authority" (ability) in the life of the believer was taken to a new level outside of Galilee. The phenomenon of capacity building in the life of the believer in God takes on new meaning as Jesus'

1. Quoted in Philip Culbertson, *The Future of Male Spirituality: New Adam* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 153.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

ministry encounters a variety of faith-challenging situations. The power of love and compassion to overcome evil is shown again and again not only in Galilee (6:6), but also in Bethsaida (6:45; 8:22), Tyre and Sidon (7:24), Decapolis (7:31), and Dalmanutha (8:10).

Of course, it is not axiomatic that sensitivity to those who are personally bereft and/or socially disenfranchised automatically engenders affirming responses from all of society. Not everyone, therefore, understood Jesus' genuine compassion as his real motivation. Unable to perceive an open and all-encompassing behavior as positive (not to mention of divine origin), some persons viewed Jesus' actions as evil (see Mark 3:20–30; Mark 6:1–6). Even without attributing sinister intent, understandable human tendencies toward selfish preoccupations sometimes interpret compassionate behavior, at the very least, as soft, less than desirable. This session examines five examples of Jesus' use of compassion to demonstrate the power of faith in God in the life of the believer.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Do you agree with Robert Bly's assessment of many young men today as "soft" (unhappy, lacking in energy, or lacking in creativity)?*

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*Are negative, domineering stereotypes of old-line male patriarchy really disappearing from public discourse, or are they being submerged in a veneer of political correctness?*

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*Is Culbertson's critique concerning patterns of leadership selection in some churches one with which men need to be concerned? If so, why? If not, why not?*

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*In your opinion, what elements of caring and sensitivity conflict with uncomplimentary connotations of being soft?*

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\* REVELATION AND REJECTION  
( MARK 6:1–5 )

"Where did this man get all this? . . . Is not this the carpenter . . . ?" And they took offense at him.

—Mark 6:2–3

Luke places Jesus' rejection in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:16–30) whereas Mark places the incident sometime after Jesus had worked in Capernaum. Remember that the Gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) were concerned, above all else, with conveying the message that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Redeemer of creation sent by God (Matt. 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:19; John 3:16). While the audiences to whom they were writing were different and the focus of their respective writings reflected sensitivity to those audiences, their fundamental purposes were the same: to provide documentation of Jesus' presence on earth as the Christ. Accordingly, in the selection and arrangement of events recorded in their respective Gospels, the writers' overriding motivation was always to provide theological and spiritual insight, not chronological documentaries.

While no one can say exactly when Jesus' rejection in Nazareth occurred, Luke emphasized the universal approach of Jesus. Therefore, he placed this incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, showing how he started at home and moved out to all the world. Matthew was especially sensitive to concerns of Jewish heritage, and John reflects the theology of his era. In Mark's Gospel, the dynamism of Jesus' ministry is unmistakable. The incident in Nazareth was one of a series of incidents in which, through faith, the power of God to enable believers to achieve the otherwise incomprehensible was made manifest. Since the people of Nazareth could not believe, God's willingness to give them "authority" over debilitating elements in their lives was not—indeed, could not be—revealed: "And he could do no deed of power there . . . And he was amazed at their unbelief" (6:5–6).

This story concerning Jesus' rejection by his hometown and kinfolk forms an ominous study of the human phenomenon of missing truth or divine opportunity, even when it appears in our midst. History is replete with such events as the death of Socrates, the reaction of Pope Leo X to Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses posted on a church door in 1517, the 1857 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in the Dred Scott case, the heinous events associated with the Third Reich in Germany, or the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstration suppression by the Chinese government; all represent the tragedy that can result from human blindness to truth and divine opportunity.

## Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*What prevents the perception of truth or divine opportunity?*

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*Are there really situations where God's divine power truly cannot be manifested?*

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## The Mission: Being Disciples (Mark 6:7–13)

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.  
—Mark 6:7

We return again to the topic of discipleship authority (discussed in Session 2) and what it means for men who believe in God. Overtly or covertly, consciously or subliminally, men constantly respond to tests of the integrity of their masculinity. Beginning early, society programs young boys to accept, affirm, and assume roles, attitudes, thought patterns, and perspectives that are thought to reflect manliness. To do otherwise in this “make or break/win or lose” social ethos is to risk being called a wimp, a sissy, or just plain weak. Central among acceptable masculine characteristics is the quality of being focused and goal-oriented. This quality is seen in the “macho” preoccupation with vocation, success, athletics, and all areas of social interaction in which men are evaluated by their ability to achieve, perform, produce, or create (clients, inventions, babies, or whatever). This standard of masculinity is based on what a man *does* rather than on who he is.

On the surface, it seems that this incident in which Jesus sends the disciples out in pairs adds support to this perspective. The disciples were not only sent on a mission, but they were also sent with divine “authority” (capacity, ability). They had divine authority and were expected to *do* something with it. Other teachings of Jesus chide those whose productivity is lacking because of loss of focus or lack of resolve (Matt. 25:1–13; Mark 4:3–20, 13:32–37; Luke 16:19–31; John 15:1–4). Jesus’ calling and sending the disciples out with authority involves more, however, than our typical twentieth-century “mission impossible” connotations of task assignment.

Frequently missed in reflections on these verses is that the capacity of the disciples to fulfill their roles had little relationship with their ability to *do* anything. Their success in completing the divinely assigned task, according to Jesus’ instructions (6:8–10), was contingent on their ability to *be* who God called them to be. In essence, they were instructed to exemplify certain behaviors. The passage suggests that their proclamation that all should repent (6:12) was as much a function of the manner in which they conducted themselves as anything they verbalized. The very demeanor of the disciples reflected their divinely given “authority” (capacity) to be environmentally sensitive and concerned about human need and openness to God’s will. They were to be examples of how people, motivated to enhance the quality of life with truth and righteousness, can respond to stressful challenge. Without being broken, they would be flexible and creative. Whether the environment was pleasant and welcoming or hostile, their very being constituted a message from God (6:11).

In the final analysis, the disciples were assigned to do nothing but *go* and *be* that which God had given them the “authority” (capacity) to be. They were given the authority to be their best selves in response to God’s claim on their lives. There was no need to perform or achieve anything according to standards external to whom God had created and called them to be. As such, the disciples would instinctively have the capacity to be supportive of others seeking to divinely improve the quality of life (“authority over demons,” 6:7). Their capacity to liberate people and environments from demons was vastly superior to what previously had been the case. All this, however, was the result of their faith: They believed Jesus, and thereby became perfect examples of what God does in the lives of the faithful. Consequently, the disciples’ focus and goal direction (which are not uniquely masculine, but *human* qualities) were directly proportional to their faith in God’s promises. Apparently, they met their goals (6:13).

## Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Is overemphasis on focus or goal orientation primarily a male characteristic? Please explain your response.*

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*Can a case be made for a difference between what a person does and who a person is (doing versus being)?*

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# session *four*

**Sight, Insight, and**

**FAITHSIGHT**

**Mark 8:27—9:50**

## Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

An old adage says that hindsight is always twenty-twenty, referring to the fact that what we see and understand in retrospect always reflects a greater degree of comprehension than when it was originally experienced. Accordingly, the postresurrection clarity with which the first Christians comprehended the meaning of Christ's teachings and life in the flesh undergirds the reporting of events covered by these chapters as vividly as anywhere in Mark's Gospel. In this session, the metaphor of physical eyesight provides a means to discuss the disciples' struggle to fully comprehend Jesus' message and ministry.

Chapters 8 and 9 of Mark's Gospel make an important transition as the ministry of Jesus shifts from the broader sector of Galilean society toward a more focused approach within the inner circle of the twelve disciples. Jesus candidly shares with the disciples his growing sense of impending death. Throughout, the disciples are repeatedly baffled by their inability to see or understand the interpretation of events as Jesus saw them. The disciples lacked what can be referred to as *faithsight*. Faithsight refers to a mental perspective, based on belief in God as revealed in Jesus, that empowers a believer to perceive the divine dynamic in a situation and thereby function in a manner that allows him or her to challenge evil without being dismayed by the experience.

## Faithsight: Seeing God's Activity

"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God."

—Mark 4:11

We have all heard the phrase "What you see is what you get." We also know that this is not always the case. Sometimes we get more than we thought we saw, sometimes we get less. Advertisers have made a science of convincing us that we get much more than we think we see at first glance in the products they promote than in those of their competitors. Whether the advertised products are sneakers, automobiles, or toothpaste, we are encouraged to believe that purchasing a particular brand will enable us to jump higher, drive better, or smile brighter because what we see (a shoe, car, or toothpaste) is more than we will get.

In relation to matters of faith, the principle also holds true that what you see is not always what you get. Understandably, human beings tend to rely on that which is directly observable. Scripture, however, consistently teaches that discernment of divine mysteries is achieved through faith: "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7; see also Mark 4:10–12; Rom. 4:1–12; 1 Cor. 1:21–25; Gal. 3:2ff). Physical vision (sight: the ability to see with the eye) is often used as a symbol for mental perception, intellectual mastery and understanding, or even clairvoyance. In Scripture, there are many instances where the physical capacity to see with the eye is a symbol for faith in God or spiritual vision (Job 42:5; Ps. 19:8, 119:18; Isa. 6:9–10; John 9:35–41; Acts 9:1–19).

In ordinary discourse, physical sight is commonly used in structuring how we refer to our comprehension of events with regard to time. Our reflections on what we have learned from history are referred to as *hindsight*. Observations of current events are spoken of in the present tense of the verb "to see" or the sights that inform our present knowledge base (as in "eyewitness news"). Thoughts, reflections, or perceptions concerning the future are what we call *foresight*. In general, recognition that some new bit of information has been grasped intellectually is known as *insight*. In chapters 8 and 9 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus begins to prepare the disciples for a new level of vision by which to comprehend their reality: *faithsight*. *Faithsight* is the capacity to see and perceive realities that are not only experienced physically, but are also understood in light of the dynamic of divine involvement in the universe and, more personally, in one's life situation.

## Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Reread Mark 8:11–30. Does faith in God require ignoring facts?*

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What do you think were the determining factors in Peter's ability to respond to Jesus' question in the way that he did?

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## \* COMPARISONS OF INSIGHT AND FAITHSIGHT

"They may indeed look, but not perceive."

—Mark 4:12

*Religiosity* is the term used by sociologists to refer to the commitment of individuals to a system of beliefs in the divine. In some cultures, the concept of the divine is so thoroughly incorporated into every aspect of existence that there is no way to differentiate those elements of reality that do not, in some manner, imply a deference to the divine, no matter how subtle. For example, in most precolonial African societies, no terminology exists for the concept of "religion." Yet individual and family names, a plethora of objects in society, and even the names of the days of the week typically have references to the divine incorporated in them.

Without question, most people hold to some sort of belief in the divine. Generally, the accumulated experiences and distilled truths of a culture over a period of time form the group's social norms, mores, values, and beliefs. Sociologically speaking, these are referred to in religious terms and form the core values that shape a culture's theological beliefs. As group's experience change, their belief systems are affected and, over time, these change also. The understanding of God evident in the history of the ancient Tribal Confederacy of Israel is different from that of the era of national life under the rule of a monarchy. Likewise, after the fall of the nation, during and after the period of exile, a different understanding of God's involvement with Israel is present in the Old Testament. With the coming of Jesus, a new understanding of Israel's covenant of faith is revealed. The key issue for the first disciples (and for Jesus' disciples today) is the ability to understand God's involvement in our lives not only from the gleaned *insights* of our cultural heritage, but also from the perspective of *faithsight*: perceiving the dynamic of the divine in our present situation. The difference between religious *insight* and *faithsight* is essentially the difference between faith rhetoric and faith realities.

If involvement with religious institutions is a reliable sociological index of belief in God (*religiosity*), then the United States is a very religious country. The United States has more than 1,300 different religious organizations. Our nation's collective faith insights are impressive according to this statistical criterion. At least

65 percent of the people in the United States identify themselves as members of a Christian or Jewish congregation, and over 90 percent profess belief in a personal involvement or relationship with God.<sup>1</sup> The critical issue, however, is whether religiosity qualitatively transforms society into a more healthy and happy spiritual environment. How does this abundant manifestation of religious insight translate into faithsight actions that benefit society behaviorally? With our society's claims about "being religious," for example, it is interesting that our nation has the highest prison population in the world, the highest number of violent deaths by gunshots among industrialized nations, and the largest accumulation of weapons of destruction on the face of the globe. Jesus' reminder of Isaiah's words concerning the ability to perceive divine realities (the difference between religious insights and faithsight behaviors) in our universe are frightfully troubling. "They may indeed look, but not perceive" (Mark 4:12; Isa. 6:9–10).

The uniqueness of what Jesus was doing in his Galilean ministry was his insistence on introducing a new element of divine/human oneness and cooperation for bettering the quality of communal life. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Brief Statement of Faith* puts the matter succinctly: "We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God." In Jesus, the demonstration of human capacity (authority) to collaborate with divine purpose to achieve positive ends in creation is without parallel. God was not some esoteric and remote entity, unsearchable and unreachable. In Jesus' ministry, God was very much involved with and participated in human events: casting out demons, feeding multitudes, healing leprosy, stopping hemorrhages, and even calming the forces of storms at sea. Jesus' ministry was not about the benign, perfunctory, or superficial recitation of ritualistic statements, resolutions, or legalisms based on perceived religious insight. His behaviors reflected interactive and forceful engagement of the holy and the human for the sake of existential and spiritual wholeness in community. Jesus' ability to *see* was the result of his ultimate confidence in his relationship with God, the Almighty Creator (faithsight). This is the paradigm that the disciples and Paul later used to challenge other would-be followers of Christ (for example, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Are there valid differences between faith in God and religiosity, or are we "splitting hairs"? If so, what are the differences? If not, why not?*

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1. Claire M. Renzetti and Daniel J. Curran, *Women, Men, and Society*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), p. 394.

*If God's power is real in the believer's faith and life, why is it sometimes so difficult to perceive?*

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## Faithsight as Confession

"But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

—Mark 8:29

In Mark 8:27–30, as in other Synoptic Gospel references, Jesus engaged the disciples in an evaluation of public response to his unique approach to faith in God before going to Jerusalem. Peter's confession of him as the Messiah resulted during this discussion. The actual event that prompted the writing of these verses may never be known, but biblical scholars are convinced that it was recast into Gospel narratives in light of the postresurrection faith of the early church. Whatever the origins of this particular vignette in Mark, the twin questions that Jesus posed in some form to his disciples ("What are other people saying about me?" and "What are you, as my followers, saying about me?") were not only appropriate to the first generation of disciples, but remain critical questions for today.

Interpreting the popular responses of society to ultimate questions about God and who Jesus is in relation to God can be distressing. Judging from a number of popular cultural indices, the question of a God who is sensitive to issues in human life can be left fairly open-ended.

What are others, outside the circle of believers (disciples) saying about the ultimate questions in life?

What are we, as believers (disciples) of Jesus, saying about the ultimate questions in life? What is the meaning of life?

How can I survive in a world that often seems impersonal and uncaring?

What can we do to make life for our families and loved ones better?

Is true happiness possible?

Are there people we can really trust in life who really care about us?

Is there a God who really cares and can make a difference in our lives?

What is the world saying about Jesus?

What men think about *who* Jesus is and what they say to others about *who* Jesus is are two very different things. The responses of the disciples to Jesus' inquiry indicate that they were perceptive enough to note the opinions of others concerning Jesus, but were wise enough not to allow the opinions of other people to be the determinants of their own conclusions about him. They

reported what others said: and "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." More important, Jesus responded, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah" (8:29). Just as Jesus wasn't concerned about what other people said about him when he walked the face of the earth, God is not concerned with what others outside the circle of believers are saying about him. God's primary interest is what those who call themselves followers of Jesus are saying about him. What has God revealed to you about Jesus?

## Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*What are some of the ultimate questions in life that you perceive are being suggested by society?*

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*Who is Jesus for you?*

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*What do you think you say about Jesus in your life?*

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*What do you think our church says about Jesus to society?*

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## Faithsight as Commitment (Mark 8:31—9:1; 9:30–32)

"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him . . ."

—Mark 9:31a

Commitment can be costly. People who are instrumental in bringing about positive systemic change in society are rarely unaware of the personal costs associated with challenging evil. There is a long list of household names associated with the emergence of positive changes in their respective environments: Moses, John Calvin, Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln, or Cesar Chavez. None of these leaders was unaware of the danger in which their lives were placed owing to their

commitments to justice and doing what they felt was right in God's eyes. How much more so was this the case with Jesus? With the persistent and growing opposition of the social, political, and religious status quo of his era, it was becoming obvious to him that there was no "middle ground" on which he could reach a compromise with them. He knew the end was not far away, and he began to prepare his disciples for this inevitability.

Peter's faithsight was quickly blinded by his personal priorities as he, once again, began to rely on the directly observable. He was determined to fight for Jesus' personal safety. For this reason he was rebuked by Jesus as being prompted by Satan (Mark 8:33). Jesus used this opportunity to begin instructing the disciples regarding the adoption of more inclusive value systems. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (v. 34). Here the cross is not the mantle and image of personal self-destruction, but the vision of God's ability to take the worst that life has to offer and transform its intentions into opportunities for health and wholeness.

The price of such transformation is serious commitment. Attempts to hold on to narrow concerns and selfish agendas without consideration of the broader welfare of the community is self-destructive. Too frequently, the cross is depicted only as the symbol of pain and martyrdom, without a deeper understanding of its usefulness as a representation of divine capacity in the midst of life's potential for negative complexities. Understood in this context, the cross becomes a symbol of how serious involvement based on hope in God yields creativity. Jesus' warning was repeated a second time in Mark 9:30–32. In both instances, the disciples' ability to understand what was being shared with them was limited by their dependence on what they saw with the naked eye and insights they were able to gather from a heritage of accumulated religiosity. Their faithsight had not fully developed at this point. They saw what Jesus was doing and heard his teachings, "But they did not understand" (9:32).

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Does self-denial imply masochism?*

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*What is the strength of Jesus' words about his death?*

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*Are Jesus' notions about self-denial useful in today's society?*

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*What heritage of beliefs (witness of the ancestors) informs your understanding of God today?*

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## Afterword

### The Limitations of Physical Sight

In this section, the disciples unfortunately provided several negative examples of what can happen when believers in God are consumed by distorted values and competitive desires for personal primacy and recognition. Mark 9 provides three of several uncomplimentary episodes of the disciples' inability to *see* with the eyes of faith. In 9:14–29, the disciples were overwhelmed by what they saw based on physical evidence. The viciousness of the demon-possessed boy was intimidating, although, according to Mark 3:14–15 and 6:7, the disciples had been given "authority" (the ability) to cast out demons. Clearly, Jesus expected them to have exorcised the demon and was disappointed by their failure to do so (expressed in 9:19; see also Matt. 17:19–20). Moreover, it appears that their inability to take advantage of their own divine capacities resulted in the disciples becoming competitive (9:33–37), as well as jealous and proprietary about God's power being manifested by persons outside their particular group (9:38–40). The significance of their critical lack of faithsight cannot be completely grasped, without noting the tenacious nature of Jesus' patience with them. In his demeanor with the disciples, Jesus set a "walk on water" standard for his followers to emulate in terms of forgiveness concerning the human frailties of others (see also Matt. 18:21–35).

# session

## From Competition to

## CAPACITY BUILDING

## Mark 10

And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

—Mark 10:37

“And whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

—Mark 10:44–45

### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” These were the words of Vince Lombardi, coach of the Green Bay Packers, a generation ago when that team had one of the best professional football records year after year. The spirit of competition represented in that statement is at the heart of the confrontational, individualistic, and competitive character that still defines much of the society in which we live. This type of Darwinian “survival of the fittest” mentality is common not only in sports, but also remains a fundamental element in American concepts of masculinity, even in the church. Beat or be beaten; win or lose; survival of the fittest.

In spite of the efforts of many men to embrace less-dominating roles, being manly in today’s society is still associated with patriarchal stereotypes of physical strength and size (bigger is better), goal orientation, virility, self-sufficiency, control, dedication to career. Qualities associated with femininity (emotional, nurturing, caring, etc.) are to be guarded against as possible signs of weakness. These cultural assumptions function simply as troublesome barriers to the free expression and exploration of male identity. Sam Keen acknowledges that it is easy to describe the problems, but the identification of useful solutions is the more difficult and needed activity:

We are much better at diagnosing pathology than reaching any commonly accepted definition of health. Clearly, the secular rites of manhood we have practiced since the industrial revolution are rapidly becoming obsolete, if not deadly. Our task is to create a new vision of manliness in a culture that no longer believes in saints, divinely revealed ideals, or absolute

values. We are trapped within modern, masculine madness and can’t find an exit; we live in the urgency of the moment, captive to quarterly profit reports and the trends of the day, but desperately needing an opening beyond the present to something that offers us more hope and dignity.<sup>1</sup>

Along the way to Jerusalem, several incidents are recorded in Mark that became instructional occasions. Jesus continued sharing with the disciples his definition of faith in God as capacity-building authority in the lives of believers and in the lives of those touched by believers in God. On these instructional occasions, there are glimpses of the new human paradigm Jesus attempted to convey and, therefore, glimpses of a new implied manhood paradigm. Three incidents are considered in this session. The topics are (1) Social Relationships and the Marriage Paradigm (10:1–12); (2) Faith-Deficit Disorder (10:17–31); and (3) The MVP Award (10:35–45, 46–52).

In all these situations, whether through conversation or by precept and example, Jesus shared his vision of the “authority” (capacity) believers in God have to create a cooperative, healthy, and spiritually viable social environment. Choose any two of these incidents and see if you can discern the images of a new manhood.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Discuss the virtues and the vices implied in the statement “Competition is a value that brings out the best in people.”*

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*Name three ways that you see the definition of masculinity improving in society.*

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1. Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991). p. 83.



Can being Christian be used as an incentive for promoting positive values in shaping a new American vision of the “ideal man”?

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**\*SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE MARRIAGE PARADIGM: DEFINING EQUITABLE, COOPERATIVE, AND MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL INTERACTION (MARK 10:1-12)**

The question put to Jesus by the Pharisees (10:2) was not an inquiry for enlightenment, but an interrogatory designed for entrapment. This question was not out of interest in the welfare of family, relationships, or the sanctity of marriage. The deceitfulness of the Pharisees in attempting to publicly discredit Jesus was not a surprise to him. He recognized their insincerity and responded to it, which, in turn, gave insight to the issue used as their pretext to request information (marriage and divorce).

“Hardness of heart” or insincerity prompted Moses to write divorce codes for people who could not recognize their mutuality and cooperation in relationships to achieve divinely appointed good ends. This is the spiritual basis of marriage: equality, cooperation, and mutual support for mutually beneficial ends. So much in society encourages people toward self-sufficiency, self-centered control, and independence that mutual respect and cooperation for mutually beneficial ends is sometimes difficult to establish. It was difficult for the Pharisees to envision a social reality wherein they and Jesus did not have to be adversarial. They were unable to see mutual benefit, cooperation, or support. This same “hardness of heart” or inability to see mutual cooperation and benefit occasioned the writing of divorce codes. Those who willfully pervert genuine efforts at morally upright mutual cooperation and respect are spiritual adulterers.

Men have not always been challenged as to be equitable and mutually supportive with women as possible. Women, in many cases, continue to encourage unhelpful behaviors. How can we be supportive of marriage and all life relationships? The issue is bigger than marriage, although the context in this instance is, in fact, marriage. While marriage is lifted up as the paradigm for human mutual respect and equity both in the church and in society, the issue confronting marriage and several other social relationships is the challenge of getting people to mutually affirm, respect and encourage, and be sincere in their love, passion, and commitment to each other.

**Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group**

*Is the pain of divorce a sign of lack of faith in God?*

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*What happens when relationships fail in general (spouse, children, neighbors, coworkers, or different social or racial groups)?*

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*What is the respect due to all human beings?*

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### **Faith-Deficit Disorder: The Man of Many Possessions (Mark 10:17–31)**

The human propensity toward selfishness is a limitation that can have dire consequences not only for individuals but for broader society as well. Preoccupation with the self undermines any real sense of relational connection. When matters of wealth and poverty are juxtaposed in the absence of faith, the exploration of human capacity building suffers and the plight of the human condition can seem ominous. Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, James Cone, put the matter of selfish greed this way:

Obsessed with its own power, [our world] tries to make right wrong, and wrong right. Although the oppressed have been struggling for freedom throughout the globe, oppressors have become much more powerful than they were in 1955 [when Rosa Park’s actions in Montgomery, Alabama, initiated the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s]. In control of the mass media, [powerful economic leaders] now can make lies sound factual and disseminate them further and faster than ever before. . . . Multinational corporations have become giants bigger than many nations and accountable to none. The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer, dying of hunger and malnutrition in a world that seems not to care.<sup>2</sup>

2. James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 192.

The “greed is good” mentality so characteristic of many baby boomers is finally giving way to a growing appreciation of a simple truth quoted long ago by Jesus in Deut. 8:3 (also found in Matt. 4:4 and Luke 4:3): “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” While Jesus’ statement that “you always have the poor with you” (Mark 14:7) is widely remembered, his corresponding observation that there would be an opportunity to help them is less frequently recalled. Jesus’ interaction with the young man of obvious wealth is a classic study on the debilitating effects that result from a lack of faith. The search for real meaning and joy in life can be thwarted by what may be called a *faith deficit disorder*. A *disorder* is any condition that causes the disruption of an orderly or normal function. God expects that human beings are able to understand the normal and orderly interaction of the material and spiritual aspects of their realities. The inability to comprehend this existential reality by reason of a lack of faith in God can be described as faith deficit disorder.

Again, the theme of “authority” arises. The context is one man’s search for ultimate meaning in existence. He raises the question of immortality: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 17). The dialogue is a statement about capacity, ability, authority, and power. Ordinarily, the fact that the man is described as having “many possessions” (10:22) is evidence of capacity, at least materially. In this instance, authority (capacity) has to do with the ability of faith to enable achievement of that which has been previously perceived as beyond one’s reach. While this incident has often been viewed exclusively as a discussion of preoccupation with material wealth, the incident really focuses on the *poverty of faith*. Because of the man’s faith deficit, he was unable to achieve the best investment of his many possessions.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Matthew 4:4 and Luke 4:3 note that Jesus quoted from Deut. 8:3 (“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”). What are the implications of this approach to life in Jesus’ response to the young man?*

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*Discuss Jesus’ reaction to the Pharisees (Mark 10:5), to the children (10:14–16), and to the wealthy man (10:21) in light of the “authority” (capacity, ability) each possessed.*

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*Does Mark 10:23–31 teach that poverty and the abandonment of family is a virtue?*

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\*THE MVP AWARD: JAMES, JOHN, AND BARTIMAEUS (MARK 10:35–45, 46–52)

**MARK 10:35–45**

The question of primacy, or who will be first, is one that surfaces on many levels the human community. This is not the first time the question surfaced among the disciples (see also Mark 9:33–37). The issue is about favoritism versus fitness, recognition versus responsibility, and visibility or virtue. A sad reality about the human condition is that many people do not mind accepting accolades even if they have done nothing to earn them. On the other hand, the spirit of competitiveness can become so consuming that misguided zeal for recognition can even make some people jealous of those receiving well-deserved tribute. The quest for vain recognition can also be a sign of deep insecurity wherein the individual evidences a perpetual need for visibility and acceptance from others, due to some perceived personal deficit. In such cases, people have been known to go to extraordinary, and sometimes inappropriate, lengths to achieve a dubious primacy and recognition (see also Matt. 6:33). Socially acceptable competitive incentives place people under stress daily. Who has the best sales record? the best level of profitability? the largest market share? the highest dividends? Which player has the highest point average per game? Who will win the most valuable player award?

**MARK 10:46–52**

Of all the beautiful miracle stories about Jesus, the healing of this blind man is impressive because of the indefatigable spirit of the man, Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus), in calling Jesus’ attention to his plight. While those in the crowd around the beggar sought to silence him, their efforts to curb his outbursts only gave him more zeal to shout even louder. He is a strong example of the authority and capacity that comes to those who have faith, especially in desperate situations with little

encouragement to believe. Bartimaeus had heard of Jesus, and, wearied by the weight of his blindness, did not let this opportunity for possible sight pass him by. With his vision restored because of faith and persistence, no doubt he became quite capable of sharing the good news with others concerning the authority that faith in God can create.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*What were the circumstances that made the request of James and John an understandable, if not appropriate, request?*

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*Having been with Jesus nearly three years, what prevented James and John from being able to perceive the inconsistency of their request in light of his ministry?*

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## Afterword

As the end of the twentieth century approaches, “then and now” reflections about the progress of society over the years are inevitable. Historians and other analysts will assess increases in our society’s knowledge base, military strength and defense capacities, and other technological advances that boggle the mind. Safer, faster, and more fuel-efficient automobiles are now taken for granted. Home appliances unimaginable in the previous century are commonplace throughout much of the industrialized world. The twentieth century has witnessed phenomenal increases in human ability to achieve ecologically responsible technology and the ability to speedily process and communicate information globally is without parallel in recorded history. For persons of faith, what are the corresponding indices of increased moral capacity for good evident today and where are the spiritual dividends of our progress evident in society?

# session

## SIX

### Strength in the Midst OF STRESS

### Mark 11—15

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body."

—Mark 14:22

#### Introduction

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

Mark ignores many details concerning the first thirty-three years of Jesus' life in human form. There is no discussion of his birth, early years, adult life as a carpenter in Nazareth, nor is there any mention of his family life. Little information is shared in regard to his interpersonal relationships with people he knew: Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Zacchaeus, or Mary Magdalene, for example. Yet, one-fourth of this entire Gospel is devoted to the last seven days of Jesus' life. Occurrence by occurrence is recorded, leading up to the tragic events of Good Friday. Most of the material in chapters 11 and 12 constitutes a series of conflicts between Jesus and his detractors. These conflicts set the stage for his apocalyptic discussion with the disciples in chapter 13, followed by the particulars of the passion events found in Mark 14 and 15. These situations provide continuous examples of increasingly stressful situations, and Jesus uses each one as a teaching moment in which to share another insight on the authority or capacity of faith in God to enhance the quality of life. One suggested chronology of events of Jesus' days prior to the crucifixion as recorded in Mark is as follows:

Sunday (Palm): Entry into Jerusalem and return to Bethany (11:1–11)

Monday: Cursing of the fig tree and cleansing of the Temple (11:12–19)

Tuesday: Discourses in 11:20–13:37

Wednesday: Anointing in Bethany and Judas' betrayal (14:1–11)

Thursday: Preparation for the Passover, Last Supper, Gethsemane, arrest, trial before Sanhedrin (14:12–72)

Friday: Trial before Pilate, condemnation, crucifixion, burial (15:1–47)

Saturday: Jesus in the tomb (15:42–47)<sup>1</sup>

The study of Mark's focused concentration on this last week of Jesus' life is divided into five topical discussions. Three of these can be examined independently. They are (1) Social Realities: Stress and Worry; (2) The Entry into Jerusalem (11:1–11); and (3) The Last Supper, Crucifixion, and Burial (Mark 14–15). Select one of the discussions, responding to the issues raised and compare notes with the group.



#### \* SOCIAL REALITIES: STRESS AND WORRY

A West African proverb says: "If you don't know what it looks like, you will not recognize it when you see it." This proverb speaks to the human *need* to dream. It points to the uniquely human quality of the ability to consciously reflect on an existing problem in a way that creatively envisions a better reality, wherein a solution has been effected. The poet Alfred Lord Tennyson expressed a similar concept in this fashion: "Some people see things as they are and ask 'Why?' I dream things that never were and say 'Why not?'"

In the stress-filled world in which we live, worry has become a way of life for many persons. Stress on the job, in school, in the community, and, not infrequently, at home has become part and parcel of existence. In such a competitive society the drive to earn a living is intense; the struggle to keep up with the proverbial Jones is always a challenge. For school-age children, stress can be part of the educational process. Not only must children strive to learn the subject matter as a means of increasing their knowledge, they are also taught (in not too subtle ways) to compete for the highest grades to secure valued scholarships and improve their chances for admission to select schools. For many children, the very educational environment is stress producing. Some children are forced to learn in inferior facilities where their physical safety cannot be guaranteed or where negative social influences are operating around them.

These stressful realities are mirrored in the lives of adults grappling with issues of economic survival in the unsettling trends of a global marketplace. It is not enough to do a job well, but one must be recognized as outstanding in a competitive society. It is not enough to have a job, investments, and securities; one must seek to

1. Frederick C. Grant, "The Gospel According to St. Mark," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), p. 825.

secure these in ways that will benefit our families in the future. What about social security and health-care costs beyond the “middle years” and into retirement? Indeed, stress and its companion worry are facts of life. The term *worry* could be associated with the concept of struggle. It means to be anxious, bothered, or concerned about something.

It is interesting that Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem, knowing the stress-producing realities that awaited him there. It is quite appropriate to wonder why Jesus would consciously place himself in such a stressful and dangerous context. His ministry of creating authority among believers in God through their faith (capacity building) remained unchanged. Preparing his followers to be purveyors of a good news message that believers in God can handle stress-producing and worrisome situations must have been a consideration.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps modeling his concepts of creating better human and environmental realities in a place like Jerusalem, with its intransigence and warped priorities, would be a powerful lesson for his disciples in faith-based stress management.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*What are some stress-producing (or potentially stress-producing) situations that you experience primarily as a man? Why are they stressful?*

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*Name two things that you do not now see in the life of your church, but which you dreamed could come true. Why can't they come true?*

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*Does poor handling of stressful or worrisome situations reflect a lack of faith in God?*

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2. In other teaching contexts not mentioned in Mark, Jesus advocated a faith posture that encouraged believers not to be overly concerned by stress-producing or worrisome circumstances. Some examples of these are found in Matt. 11:28–30 (“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”); Matt. 6:25–34; and also Luke 12:22–31.

## The Entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–11)

Large-scale public festivals and celebrations like New Year’s Eve festivities in New York City’s Times Square, many Fourth of July public activities, or New Orleans’ Mardi Gras celebrations often bring together crowds of people. Such events provide occasion for many smaller commemorations within a larger party atmosphere. It is not hard to imagine that in the celebratory ethos of a large gathering of Passover pilgrims, the sighting of Jesus coming into town riding on a donkey could prompt a spontaneous and joyous proclamation of his “kingship.” After all, a growing body of positive stories and rumors had been circulating about him owing to his activities in Galilee and Judea. Word had spread of the miraculous cures and tremendous events that happened when Jesus came ‘round.

John’s Gospel records this event in a significantly different context than does Mark, Matthew, or Luke. It is especially clear in John, however, that the excitement about Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem had to do with the testimony of those who had benefited from his ministry, including news about his bringing Lazarus back to life (John 12:12–19). Now that Jesus was coming to town for the Passover, the witness of history from the writings of the ancient prophets (Zech. 9:9; Isa. 62:11) and the expectant hopes of the present age could be ignored no longer. The aggregation of these stories from a variety of quarters, along with the resentment of the oppressed political and spiritual situation of Israel, and the propitious moment of the Passover were a perfect context to ignite the flames of coronation that engulfed the crowd when Jesus arrived. Characteristic of Mark’s brevity, he records the event without mentioning its surrounding aspects. By contrast, the Gospels of Luke and John indicate that deep resentment among some resulted from this incident (Luke 19:39–40; John 12:19).

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*What are the virtues and vices of popular acclaim (at work, recreational activities, and church or civic involvement)?*

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*Did Jesus provoke a reaction from his detractors by allowing this public display of public support, or should this have been discouraged?*

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## The Last Supper, Crucifixion, and Burial (Mark 14—15)

### MARK 14:1–9

The situation concerning Jesus' safety quickly deteriorated as local religious leaders lost no time in conspiring to hatch a plot against his life. Meanwhile, premonitions of his impending death began to weigh heavily on Jesus even as he was having a meal in the house of a friend who had been healed of a dreaded skin disease. A woman opened an expensive jar of perfume and anointed Jesus' head as a gesture of appreciation for his ministry, and the incident provoked controversy. Other people present saw this action as a huge misappropriation of resources, and the woman became the subject of severe criticism for what was identified as a wasteful, frivolous, and unnecessary act, especially in light of the needs of the poor.<sup>3</sup> In the Gospel of John, the woman was identified as Mary, Lazarus' sister, and the instigator of the criticism against her was noted as Judas Iscariot. Moreover, Judas' argument on behalf of the poor, according to John 12:6, was insincere and prompted by his own selfish and dishonest intent. Jesus defended the woman's actions and interpreted this activity as anticipation of his own burial.

### MARK 14:12—15:47

As close as he and his disciples were over the years, the gap in their understanding of his reality and their own could not have been wider. Judas, for reasons that defy comprehension, sought out Jesus' adversaries and made common cause with them against him. The observance of the Passover meal by Jesus and the

disciples was shrouded in anxiety and an uneasiness fermented by Jesus' perpetual conversation about unpleasantries of betrayal, sacrifice, and death. The wording of the institution of the Lord's Supper as found in 14:22–25 is very old (see also 1 Cor. 11:23–26). It is the essence of the new covenant theology that originated in the prophecy of Jer. 31:31–34. Jesus predicted their betrayal. Mark 15 describes Jesus' crucifixion and burial. The treachery, fear, and abandonment that characterized Jesus' predicament in this chapter is without parallel elsewhere in the Gospel.

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*Discuss the inability of the disciples to fully understand Jesus' appreciation of the anointing he received from the grateful and generous woman (14:1–9).*

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*Why do you think the disciples deserted Jesus? Were there other options?*

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*What is the central lesson gleaned from Jesus' behavior at the Last Supper and in the Garden that has practical application for men today?*

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3. In Luke 7:36–50, a similar event is described and placed at a different context in Jesus' ministry. Both Matt. 26:6–13 and John 12:1–8 report this incident in essentially the same way as Mark.

# session *seven*

## Witness to the RESURRECTION

## Mark 16

### Cataclysmic Events and Theology

*(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)*

Just two historical events, cataclysmic in scope, are found in the Scriptures that fundamentally explain why the great religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity evolved and the Holy Scriptures were written. The first event was the exodus of an indistinct group of former slaves from ancient Egypt (Ex. 1—12). This event was so dynamic in the history of a people that questions on the background of the event inevitably evolved: What happened? Who was involved? What were the participants (the former slaves) doing in Egypt in the first place? Where did they come from, and how did they get there? What were the circumstances of their emancipation from slavery? In response to those questions and others evolved a Jewish heritage and theology that explained these issues, including some notions about a promised Messiah, and prompted the writings of Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament).

The discovery of Jesus' empty tomb is the second cataclysmic event. This incident was dynamic in the history of the people directly involved and questions on the background of the event not surprisingly evolved: What happened? Who was involved? Why was this man Jesus crucified in the first place? Where did he come from, and how did he get into so much trouble? What circumstances surrounded his absence from the tomb? Who were all those people claiming that he was no longer dead, and gave testimony that they had seen him, talked, eaten, and fellowshiped with him (over five hundred in number according to some reports)? In response to those questions and others evolved the Christian church and a theology that explained these issues, including notions that Jesus was the divine Son of God, born to save the world from sin.

Once the fact of the empty tomb was augmented by the claims of Jesus' friends concerning their post-resurrection interactions with the risen Christ, things began to happen. The meaning of this cataclysmic event is, historically, the crux of the Christian Gospel and the foundation of the Christian church and its interpretation of God's involvement throughout the universe (see also Acts 10:37-43; 1 Cor. 15:3-8, 12-20, 29-32).

### Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

*When was the first time you understood the meaning of the resurrection?*

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*How has your understanding of the resurrection changed from your first perception?*

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### \*RECORDING THE RESURRECTION

As is characteristic of his discussions concerning other events, Mark is quite skimpy on details of the resurrection other than noting the initial witnesses: Mary of Magdalene along with Mary, the mother of James, and Salome. Biblical scholars generally agree that the oldest records of Mark's Gospel conclude at 16:8, almost as tersely as the book begins. The oldest ending of the book closes with the terrified women leaving the site of the empty tomb, having been informed by a young man dressed in white that Jesus had been raised from death. They rush off to carry the news to the apostle Peter and the other disciples without divulging this information to anyone else.

Additional information has been added to more fully "round out" Mark's original report in light of other facts that were gathered concerning Jesus' resurrection. Overwhelmingly, the bulk of the postresurrection events are recorded in much greater detail by other Gospel writers and the apostle Paul. Compare the differences with Mark and note the alternative approaches to dealing with the same event.

1. **Matthew 27:62—28:1–20 (Event and Cover-up)**
2. **Luke 24 (The Emmaus Road Walk)**
3. **John 20—21 (Investigations)**
4. **Acts 1:2–11 (Forty Days)**
5. **1 Corinthians 15:3–8 (Testimony)**

Although the twelve disciples named in Scripture were all men (Mark 3:13–19 and 6:7–11), women were also among a larger core of Jesus’ faithful followers (Mark 14:3; 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3; 10:38–42; 23:55; and John 11). It is from among this core that the first news of the resurrection is revealed. Among the faithful followers present at the crucifixion were three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome, two of whom were witnesses to where Jesus’ body was buried (Mark 15:40, 47). Even today in most churches, the largest percentage of active worshipers are typically women (in marked contrast to Islam, which overtly emphasized a preeminent role for men). Surveys also indicate that women seem to take religious values more seriously than to men.

**GENDER COMPARISONS REGARDING RELIGIOUS BELIEFS**

**Church Attendance**

*Question:* Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days?

*Answer:* Yes

Men: 36%                      Women: 44%

**Importance of Religion**

*Question:* How important would you say religion is in your life: very important, fairly important, or not very important?

*Answer:* Very important

Men 48%                      Women: 63%

**Confidence in the Church or Organized Religion**

*Question:* How much confidence do you have in the church or organized religion: a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little?

*Answer:* A great deal or quite a lot

Men: 64%                      Women: 69%

**Belief in Religion as an Answer to Contemporary Problems**

*Question:* Do you believe that religion can answer all or most of today’s problems, or that religion is largely old-fashioned and out of date?

*Answer:* Can answer most of today’s problems

Men: 50%                      Women: 65%

*What are the major similarities and differences in the reports among the six narratives (including Mark) concerning the resurrection of Christ?*

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*What is the significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ for society today?*

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*Is there significance in the fact that while the women were not listed among the core group of the twelve disciples, they were the first to learn about the risen Christ?*

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*List some of the reasons you feel that men tend to be more skeptical about faith realities than women?*

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**A Faith Perspective on Testing, Trials, and Tribulations**

The unavoidable observation which must be made following the resurrection is the enthusiasm displayed by the disciples that resulted from this event. What should have proven to be the “nail in the coffin” concerning their new doctrine actually ended up being a spiritual elixir, which motivated them toward more intensive activity—promoting Jesus of Nazareth as the risen Christ, Savior, and Son of God. They became insistent that, irrespective of the challenges, the risks to their lives and social standing were well worth taking, since the ultimate benefits to society in general, as well as to themselves personally, were too great to pass up. In spite of their frequent disappointment and lack of acceptance, the apparent joy, tolerance, and lack of hostility toward tormentors evidenced by believers was resolute.

Adapted from Claire M. Renzetti and Daniel J. Curran, *Women, Men, and Society*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995), p. 396.



It is the type of radical fidelity to faith in God that Jesus modeled throughout his life in the flesh, through his teachings, as well as in his death on the cross. This is the type of faith that Jesus' resurrection authenticated for his followers and became the message of the Gospel reflected in the behavior of the first Christians and in the Gospel of Mark. At many points, Paul's writings (Rom. 8:31-39; 2 Cor. 5:16-19; Phil. 2:4-11) express the conviction of the early church, reflected in Mark, that Jesus' resurrection ensures the effectiveness of his model of human devotion to God. It is a model that transcends gender characterizations, yet it definitely enables men at the close of the twentieth century to be intentional about recognizing their responsibility for creating spiritual wholeness and health in society. It responds to the question "Adam, where are you?" with a resounding "I'm a 'new creation' in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17).



**Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group**

*What is the difference between the response of the first Christians to the resurrection event as recorded in Scripture and the general responses of Christians today?*

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*What is the significance of the resurrection for you?*

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## Afterword

Raging mobs attacked him in Faneuil Hall, Boston, and at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. At Richmond, Indiana, he was rotten-egged. But everywhere he showed the spirit he had shown against Covey, the slave-killer. At Pendleton, Indiana, when a mob tore down the platform on which he was speaking, he fought back until his arm was broken and he was battered into unconsciousness but the same night with his arm in a sling, he was again on the platform. During the Draft Riots in New York, when the greatest massacre of Negroes probably known in American history occurred, he faced frenzied white mobs with the same courage.

As for jim-crow in the North, he never yielded to it. When the conductor of a train in Massachusetts sent him to the jim-crow section [in the back], he refused [to move]. The conductor sent for the train-hands to oust him but he held on to the seat so firmly that it came loose and [Frederick Douglass] was thrown off the train still holding [on to] it.<sup>1</sup>

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Lord, I want to be a Christian,  
In-a my heart, in-a my heart.  
Lord, I want to be a Christian  
In-a my heart.  
Lord, I want to be like Jesus,  
In-a my heart, in-a my heart.  
Lord, I want to be like Jesus  
In-a my heart.<sup>2</sup>

1. J. A. Rogers, *World's Great Men of Color*, vol. 2 (New York: J. A. Rogers, 1947), pp. 542-543.

2. "Lord, I Want To Be a Christian," in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), No. 372.

## THE WRITER

Dr. Peters joined the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary faculty in 1991 and is first director of the Metro-Urban Institute, the seminary's collaborative program of on-campus and field-based theological education. He teaches courses in church and ministry and brings more than eighteen years of pastoral experience to his post. The "parish outside the walls of the church" has always been a central focus in his ministry and writings. He has written and lectured on the role of the church in community ministry in the United States and in Africa. Some of his works include a study series titled *Christians Celebrating Kwanzaa* and *Afrocentricism and Mainline Denominations* (a paper examining church and culture). In 1995 he received a Fulbright-Hays Scholarship to research church and ministry issues in Namibia and Botswana for five weeks. A native of New Orleans, Louisiana, Dr. Peters received his bachelor of arts degree from Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, a master of divinity degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, and his Doctor of Education degree from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He and his wife, Mary Smith Peters, are the parents of two adult children and live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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