

## Uncover Mark Leaders' Notes

### Leading Uncover Studies

So you have some friends who are interested in finding out about Jesus! Reading Mark together is a great way to help uncover who Jesus is. Mark's account is fresh, fast-paced and riveting. The person of Jesus leaps off the pages as Mark confronts the readers with the revolutionary and earth-shattering message Jesus proclaims about himself.

The first thing to do is to put away these notes and the Uncover study guide and pick up the Gospel of Mark itself and start reading! You may want to set aside an hour to read through the whole of Mark in one go or just read from the beginning up to the end of the first bit you will be studying.

Once you get to the passage read and reread carefully and prayerfully. Write down any questions you have and any you think your friend might have about the passage. How might you answer these questions? Note down the key points you think the passage is about. What does this passage show us about Jesus and those who meet him? What implications might there be for us today? What questions does it leave us with?

Now you are ready to have a go at the questions in the Uncover study guide. Once you've worked through the questions for yourself think about how your friends might respond to these questions. Think about which bits of the study you want to really spend time on, and which bits you can skip past more quickly – the time always goes by quicker than you expect! It is very helpful to prepare some secondary questions or alternative ways of asking the same questions in case your friends seem stuck or puzzled.

After doing all of the above, then you should read this Leaders' Guide. The Leaders' Guide is designed to help you gain deeper insight and clarity into the passage. You should resist using these notes as a means to teach the passage. This is an inductive study, meaning it's an approach of self-discovery. We want seekers to grapple with the text.

In a seeker study we won't be able to dot every 'i' and cross every 't' in terms of theological clarity. Both understanding and faith are things we grow in and our prayer is that, through the power of God's Word and his Spirit, seekers will be drawn to the beauty, power and truth of who Jesus is. And one day, we trust, some will put their trust in Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

As the conversations and studies develop, make sure you take time to ask your friend, in private, something along these lines, 'What do you think of the study so far? How does Jesus strike you? What questions do you have?' Test the waters and see if they might be close to giving their life to Christ. If you sense an openness, you could ask, 'Is there anything that would keep you from becoming a Christian right now?' Then be prepared to lead them to Christ if they are ready. If you find it helpful you could use the simple prayer at the end of the studies.

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## Study A: The world we all want is nearly here

### Mark 1:14-45

**Purpose:** To glimpse the possibilities for our world that Jesus opens up with his announcement of the coming of God as king and his miraculous healing; to help the reader sense the strangeness of Jesus' reluctance to amass followers based on his miracles.

**Intro:** After reflecting on various popular sources of motivation and hope for the future encourage the group to share their own hopes and motivations by being open yourself.

1. This is an opportunity for the reader to digest what they have just read and to express their initial reactions. It is important, as a leader, that you help the reader feel free to express both negative and positive reactions to the passage. Acknowledge confusion and scepticism but try to avoid the temptation to resolve these points of tension at this stage. Mark is a master of 'creative tension' and so being faithful to the text will often mean maintaining the tension until Mark himself brings resolution.
2. This is an invitation to speculate and so it is important that the reader does not feel obliged to know the right answer. Mark will spend the whole gospel unpacking this theme. It will be helpful however to brainstorm ideas about what Mark might mean in order to get beyond the sense that this is merely religious jargon. In the process, you may bring to light associations (both positive and negative) that the phrase has for people. Note the ideas down as possibilities to test out as Mark brings more light to the topic.
3. Mark is giving us one of his snapshots. It is only as these snapshots begin to accumulate that we will start to form a clearer picture of Jesus. At this stage, we are again asking people to speculate. They may assume that the fishermen were particularly impressionable or discontented or that Jesus is a kind of charismatic leader able to command allegiance and amass followers. For many, the actions of the fishermen will seem dangerously cult-like. These suggestions should be acknowledged and framed as possible explanations to be tested against Mark's portrayal of Jesus and his disciples as the story unfolds.
5. It was Jesus' authority that amazed and alarmed those listening to him as seen through his teaching and his command over evil spirits (vs. 22 and 27).
6. Mark gives us a few clues here. First, we see the response his teaching inspired. At his call people left professions and families to follow him, and at his command evil spirits left those that they were oppressing. Second, the people contrasted Jesus' teaching with the 'teachers of the law' (v. 23). Whereas, teachers of the law derived authority from the divine law that they taught – people recognised in Jesus' teaching an authority all of its own.
7. Authority may not immediately seem to us to be a particularly attractive quality. Encourage reflection therefore on why people may have been drawn to Jesus – this one who taught with authority. How could Jesus' authority be a good thing that people are drawn to? Can you imagine yourself being drawn to Jesus based on what you've seen so far?

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8. Far from courting popularity, Jesus withdraws from the crowds in order to pray (vs. 36-37). Furthermore, when he hears of the excitement he has generated in Capernaum he decides to go out to the quieter surrounding villages so he can preach (38). Unlike the disciples who are revelling in this attention, or the conventional profile of a charismatic populist leader, Jesus doesn't seem particularly interested in amassing followers.
9. This is a puzzle. Jesus clearly has a message that he wants people to hear and a mission he is trying to fulfil (vs. 38), but at the same time seems very reluctant to win followers through his powerful healings or by revealing his true identity (the demons are saying only what Mark tells his readers in 1:1). Much is unclear. Your job here is to help people sense the strangeness of Jesus' secretiveness.

If Jesus' miracles show the way things should be, the implication is that the world as it is, is not as it should be. It needs healing and restoration. Most will acknowledge that the world is not as they would like it to be, but would you say that it is in some way unnatural or broken? Why/why not? Why might believing that the world is 'not as it should be' be a source of hope?

## Study B: Bursting bubbles

### Mark 2:1-22, 3:1-6

**Purpose:** To see how Jesus exploded long-held beliefs and expectations in his own day through the magnitude of the claims he made about himself; to encourage reflection on our own openness to having our own beliefs and priorities challenged

**Intro:** The idea of social ‘bubbles’ and internet ‘echo chambers’ is increasingly raised in discussions of extremism and political polarization. The metaphors describe our tendency to seek out confirmation of our existing beliefs and values from like-minded people, and our reluctance to having those beliefs challenged or questioned. While it is fairly easy to recognise the tendency in other people it may be harder to see it in oneself. Encourage reflection on the extent to which we each may live in a bubble. How easy is it to recognise? How might we seek to hide this possibility from ourselves?

1. Their actions speak of the desperation of the man’s situation, the great concern of his friends and their high expectations about what Jesus could do for him.

Note: A Palestinian roof was normally flat and made of beams covered with reeds and a layer of clay with external stairs or a ladder allowing access. Digging through the roof, though a desperate measure, would not have caused irreparable damage. Roofs in those days would be replaced or replenished annually before the seasonal rains.

2. Presumably confusion, maybe disappointment. Or maybe relief, Jesus addresses the man as ‘Son’ and his words are kind. Jesus’ words lay a challenge as to what this man’s greatest need in life was – the idea we all often entertain that, if we get this one thing, everything will then be OK (and who would blame a paralytic for thinking this about being healed!) Note: the Pharisees would have seen a very direct link between the man’s paralysis and his sin, but Jesus elsewhere criticises this view (John 9:2-3).
3. The Pharisees recognised the profound significance of what Jesus was claiming to be able to do for this man, but for them such a claim is blasphemy. Forgiveness is something only God can do because, fundamentally, sin is something that we commit against him.
4. Jesus’ question presents a tricky dilemma. From one perspective, it is easier to say ‘your sins are forgiven’ because that can’t be visually confirmed either way. From another perspective, it is harder because to grant forgiveness for sin requires God’s unique authority. Jesus resolves the dilemma in v10 by linking the two things together and so proving his authority to do the thing that can’t be seen by doing the thing that can be. It is quite a claim to make and quite a way to make it!
5. Though Jesus is under no illusions about who Levi was (he was at his tax booth when Jesus called him) by eating with Levi and his friends Jesus was making a powerful statement of his acceptance and forgiveness of Levi and those with him.

6. Choosing to befriend Levi and co. could give the impression that Jesus was not concerned about the immorality, corruption and betrayal that they represent. Jesus was increasingly being looked upon as a Rabbi or teacher and so his inappropriate choice of friends would have been seen as setting a bad example.
7. Jesus' words and actions challenged the Pharisees attitudes to their core. The Pharisees considered righteousness and reformed characters as being a precondition for God's coming as king. Jesus shows that God takes the initiative in grace, acceptance and forgiveness comes first and righteousness (healing) will follow. The sarcastic 'it is not the healthy that need' responds to the fact that the Pharisees will have seen themselves as 'healthy' and not in need of a doctor.
8. Jesus was associating himself with the prophet's image of a bridegroom coming to rescue and forgive his long-lost bride. This is remarkable, as the bridegroom was according to the prophets, God himself. The claim is that now, in Jesus, God has come to be with his people forever.
9. These are slightly puzzling images until you work out what is common to both – the inappropriateness of trying to make new things fit with old worn out structures. They expected Jesus to fast – which is what everyone waiting for the coming kingdom of God was expected to do (this was how you proved you were ready and waiting for the kingdom to come). But they weren't ready because according to Jesus the kingdom had come. "It is here because I am here" says Jesus! To require that Jesus fasts is about as inappropriate as it gets! This is the theme of the entire section as people try to fit Jesus into pre-existing categories (healer, holy man, rabbi) only to see the categories burst before their eyes.
10. The Sabbath appears to be Jesus' favourite day for healing people (cf. 1:21-34). This public healing is yet another challenge to the traditions and expectations of his day. Whereas the Sabbath was meant to be a foretaste of the day when God is king and the world experiences true rest, it had become a test of obedience. By healing on the Sabbath Jesus was both demonstrating what the Sabbath was really about and demonstrating that, because he's come, the rest that we've all been longing for is at last on its way.
11. We're told Jesus was angry and deeply distressed at their hardness of heart.
12. Jesus claims to have the authority to forgive sins, to have the right to welcome and accept the ungodly and the one who has come to heal and bring righteousness. Jesus applies the great promises about God in the Jewish scriptures to himself, and focuses the Jewish hope of the Sabbath on his own activities as healer and life giver. For the Pharisees, every single one of these claims was blasphemous because they made Jesus out to be equal with God.

Over the course of the course of the passage the puzzled and sceptical response of the Pharisees hardens into seething rejection. Trace this trajectory and consider how it develops. How can we maintain openness to enquiry in the face of initial doubt and scepticism? How can scepticism harden into a stubborn refusal to reconsider evidence? How hard or easy do you think this process of hardening is to recognise in oneself?

An encounter with Jesus' claims invariably presents a challenge to many of our own beliefs and priorities. Where do you feel this challenge most acutely? To what extent do you find yourself puzzled or sceptical about Jesus' claims? To what extent do you find yourself tempted to end your enquiries into the person of Jesus. Why do you think this temptation could arise?

## Study C: No one is beyond hope

### Mark 5:21-43

**Purpose:** To see Jesus' compassion and saving power for the marginalised and hopeless; to see the limits of our own abilities to help ourselves and the context and basis for placing faith in Jesus.

**Intro:** Many people confuse faith with positive thinking and 'believing in oneself'. The introductory questions encourage discussion and critical reflection on the reasonableness and limits of positive thinking and self-belief as an approach to problems. You may choose to move the discussion on to human limitations in the face of circumstances more broadly by asking – how much power do we have over what happens to us? What things do we look to, to improve our circumstances in life? How reliable are these things?

(Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* is a 20 million copy best seller based on a film of the same title promoting the power of positive thinking)

1. Jairus fell at Jesus' feet and pleaded earnestly with him (22-23). Jairus is helpless and desperate and approaches Jesus as his only hope.
2. What is striking is Jairus' confidence that if Jesus came with him and laid hands on his daughter she would be healed and live.
3. Despite Jesus' reluctance to become famous as a healer, Jesus continues to submit to people's pleas for help because he has compassion on them. Jesus is easily diverted by people in need – not because healing people served his own immediate purposes (cf, Mark 1:38-45) but because it served theirs.
4. As well as chronic illness, the woman's bleeding meant isolation, shame and exclusion from the life (i.e. religion) of the community. She was evidently desperate to be healed and had become destitute by spending all of her money on treatments, which had only made her condition worse. The woman, like Jairus, was approaching Jesus as her last and only hope. Her hope would likely been mixed with fear. Fear of being seen in a crowd, of being seen touching Jesus, perhaps also of being disappointed once again by another failed hope.
5. The woman was presumably awestruck about what had happened to her but also fearful of exposure and condemnation for trying to obtain healing secretly, for touching a holy man as an 'unclean' woman, perhaps even for being out in a public crowded place where so many people would come in to contact with her. Despite her fear the woman courageously steps forward and acknowledges what has happened before Jesus and the crowd.
6. The first word Jesus addresses to the woman is 'daughter'. Before everyone, he praises and affirms her for her faith, and tells her to 'go in peace'. She need fear no more, she is healed, known and cared for by Jesus.
7. The woman's desire to touch Jesus combined faith in Jesus' power with superstitious ideas ('if I just touch his clothes'). Jesus' insistence that the

woman identifies herself was in part to help the woman see that it was her faith in Jesus specifically that brought about her healing. It also provided the context for Jesus to affirm the woman publicly and so to overcome the shame that attended her actions.

8. Jairus was a well-known and respected religious and community leader, the woman was a poverty-stricken outcast whose name remains unknown to us. What is more, the situation of Jairus' daughter was urgent and life threatening whereas the woman's need would be characterised by many as an embarrassing inconvenience. It was something she had been living with for as long as Jairus' 12 year old daughter had been alive – surely she could wait in line a little longer. Yet despite these stark differences, they both came to Jesus in desperate need with faith in his ability to help them. Both had their needs met.
9. The mourners considered there to be no hope at all for the little girl now that she had died. Healers can bring health back from sickness, but not life back from death.
10. Jesus ignores the response of the crowd and directly urges Jairus not to abandon the faith he has already placed in Jesus - even in the face of death! It would be hard to think of a crueller thing to say to Jairus if Jesus was not going to be able to resuscitate the girl.
11. Jesus raises the girl as easily and gently as if arousing a child from sleep. He is tender with the girl and undaunted by death. Then, in all the excitement and confusion that follows the remarkable event, Jesus is aware that the girl will be hungry and requests for some food to be brought to her.

Faith is a term with lots of baggage associated with it. Spend some time using the account to try to understand what faith really is and what it looks like. We see that it arises out of being otherwise helpless. It doesn't appear particularly like a virtue - in the woman's case it was marked by desperation, furtiveness and superstition, and yet, her faith in Jesus led both to her being healed by Jesus and praised by him. Jesus is singularly worthy of our faith: being both unfailingly willing to meet us in our need, and powerful to save those who trust him, even from death itself.

In any discussion of faith it is important to recognise that we are all placing faith in something for our security and happiness. Try to help people articulate what they are looking to in order to supply their needs and desires. Perhaps it is their abilities, prospects, resources, or friends. Try to encourage reflection on how worthy of our faith these various things really are. How does placing faith in Jesus compare?

## Study D: Partially sighted

### Mark 8:22-33, 9:30-37

**Purpose:** To see with the disciples that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the promised all powerful king of kings; to find ourselves disorientated and confused by how Jesus describes the kind of King he will be – one who came to give up power, to serve the lowest of the low, to be rejected, suffer and die.

**Intro:** After discussing reasons for why it may be that so few people paused to listen to the famous violinist in the subway, reflect on how common it is to miss the significance of things. What other important, meaningful, beautiful, valuable things in life do people sometimes under-appreciate or even fail to recognise. Share experiences of ‘waking up’ to something’s value or importance that you hadn’t recognised before. Finally (and importantly), consider the things in our lives that prevent us from seeing, recognising or appreciating as we should.

1. We again see someone in desperate need plead with Jesus for help. We see faith in Jesus’ ability to heal with a touch and we again see Jesus’ reluctance for word of the healing to spread. What is unusual is that Jesus does more than just touch the man, he spits and makes mud and even then, the healing is partial and incomplete until Jesus puts his hands on the man again.
2. Perhaps the blindness of the man is a metaphor for the disciple’s failure to see the significance of who Jesus is. Perhaps Jesus is making the point that though they can see Jesus, like the man seeing trees, they fail to understand or recognise who Jesus is. Perhaps also it anticipates the disciple’s very partial understanding of Jesus the disciples begin to display in the following passage.

Note – there is a typo here. Q3 should come after reading 8:27-30 on the following page.

3. This is an opportunity to briefly review the story so far. Jesus’ actions, authority and teaching about himself make the question: “who are you?” (a strange question to ask someone you know) the obvious question to ask. Whatever you make of him Jesus’ actions and words demand some kind of explanation at the level of his very identity.
4. John Stott says this on this point:  
‘Without doubt the most noteworthy feature of the teaching of Jesus was its quite extraordinary self-centredness. He was, in fact, constantly talking about himself. True, he spoke much about the kingdom of God, but then added that he had come to inaugurate it. He also spoke about the fatherhood of God, but added that he was the Father’s ‘Son’....[The] prominence of the personal pronoun (‘I – I – I – me – me – me’) is very disturbing, especially in one who declared humility to be the pre-eminent virtue. It also sets Jesus apart from all the other religious leaders of the world. They effaced themselves, pointing away from themselves to the truth they taught; he advanced himself, offering himself to his disciples as the object of their faith, love and obedience.’

5. The disciples would probably have been confused by this and so, at least at this point in the story, should the reader. Encourage reflection and speculation on why Jesus is being so secretive about his identity and power, but take care not to try to resolve the confusion that Mark wants the readers to feel, or give away the story that follows. Note though, that Messiah (Christ in Greek) was a loaded term with strongly political and nationalistic connotations.
6. Rebuke is very strong – we might say Peter started ‘having a go at him’. The reaction is understandable. The Messiah was a powerful, victorious figure that was to bring in peace, reconciliation and fullness to God’s people. The idea of a suffering Messiah was nonsense. The Messiah was the ultimate winner – Jesus, in 31-32, was describing a loser; someone rejected by everyone who matters, and then killed!
7. The sharpness of the rebuke and the reference to Satan suggests Peter’s words against the necessity of the things that Jesus said ‘must’ happen to him, placed before Jesus a real temptation to disobey God.
8. It implies, first that these things are unavoidable, maybe even inevitable. The word ‘must’ also suggests, however, that there is a larger purpose behind Jesus being rejected and killed. The context implies that these terrible things are at the very heart of Jesus’ identity and what he came to do.
9. Jesus’ talk of rejection, betrayal and death would have made no sense to the disciples. It would also have seemed defeatist, and demoralising and totally inappropriate given who they believed Jesus to be. The Christ of popular imagination was going to be the king of kings, the one through whom God would crush Israel’s enemies and establish an everlasting kingdom. Maybe they thought he was being symbolic. They certainly hoped he would move on to something more upbeat.
10. As the Messiah’s inner circle the disciples were sure they were in for great things. As a result, they presumably began arguing and ranking themselves against one another over their respective claims to the top positions in Jesus’ - soon to be established - royal cabinet. Mark bluntly calls out the conversation for what it was.
11. By saying the greatest would be like a slave, Jesus was completely reversing all human ideas of greatness and rank. What is more he explicitly identifies himself with a child (the lowest social rank of all) by saying whoever welcomes a child, welcomes me. Whatever Jesus means by being a ‘king’, it doesn’t seem to correspond to anything anyone has ever meant by being a king before!

In his study guide on Mark, Tim Keller summarises how Mark, at this key turning point in his gospel, intends to leave the reader feeling dizzy and disorientated:

‘We see what a masterful writer Mark is! In the first half, he lulled us into thinking that we (the readers) are completely in the know. We are told in 1:1 that Jesus is the “Son of God” and then we watch as the foolish disciples and obtuse public slowly stumble to the truth that we already know. But now, unexpectedly, we are shown that he is not at all the kind of “deity” and “Messiah” we would ever expect! He came to give up power,

to lose, to become weak, to serve and suffer and die. Our prejudices and worldly wisdom is now completely confounded and challenged.'

Encourage people to reflect on what is confusing and disorientating about who Jesus says he is and what he has come to do. Try to help people to articulate the things about Jesus that it is hard for them to understand. Consider (with Q13) what barriers to understanding may come from our end. How could our own personal priorities or core beliefs prevent us from understanding Jesus and his significance clearly?

## Study E: Slave Master

### Mark 10:32-52

**Purpose:** To see that Jesus is the King who came, not so that we could serve him, but so that he could serve us by giving his life in our place in order to free us from our sinful self-centeredness.

**Intro:** Many people will be acutely conscious of how the freedom of some can lead to the abuse and oppression of others. It is a very contemporary theme. After briefly discussing examples of how this can be seen playing out in the world today (or in our own experience), try to reflect on why this might be. Why does the freedom of one person so often seem to conflict with the freedom of another? Why is being free to do as we want so often so destructive to others and to ourselves? Finally, encourage people to be open about what greater freedom would mean for them.

1. Flick back to the previous passages and observe how Jesus re-emphasise and intensifies his warnings of what will happen to him.
2. Daniel is describing a vision of a future ruler coming from God himself (on the clouds of heaven). This ruler has supreme authority and power given by God and the complete allegiance of every nation and people group who not only obey him but worship him. His rule is complete in every place and over all time – it will never pass away. If Jesus is claiming to be this future ruler than this is a remarkable claim indeed and even more remarkable given the context in which he makes this claim – his repeated predictions of suffering, rejection and death.
3. It's a cautious way to make a request. Presumably they had some thought to how they would make it and may have had misgivings the request. They are asking Jesus to essentially write them a blank cheque.
4. The disciples seem completely deaf to what Jesus is saying will happen to him. They are still under the impression that they are backing a winner and hoping to cash in on all the associated benefits. They are thinking of Jesus' messiahship in terms of the power and glory normally associated with positions of rule and authority.
5. James and John can't understand that tied up with Jesus' kingship is the necessity of suffering and death. Though, on the one hand it will become clear that Jesus' faces death 'for' those who follow him, i.e. in their place instead of them (and therefore they won't drink the cup or be baptised with the baptism Jesus faces); on the other hand, following Jesus means giving up power over others and serving them instead and this will come with great personal costs, including even death.
6. The disciple's indignation shows that they share James and John's attitude. They were simply annoyed that James and John had got in first with their request.
7. 10:45 is a very rich verse so try to spend some time unpacking it. 1) Jesus says first that he has '*come*' – this implies Jesus' presence in Palestine was because he had arrived from somewhere else (and yet Palestine was where he was born!?) 2) He has come '*not to be served*' – implies that being served is

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something that Jesus could legitimately expect. 3) He came rather *'to serve'* – if Jesus really is the promised King and the glorious ruler of Daniel 7 – then saying he came to serve (lit. become a slave) turns every idea of human rank and greatness on its head. 4) He came to *'give his life'*. Up until now Jesus has told his disciples that he will be delivered over to be killed. Here we now see that in his death Jesus will be voluntarily giving his life for the sake of others. It is to be understood in the context of humble service of others. 5) His life will be given *'as a ransom'*. The word ransom refers to the price paid to purchase someone's freedom. In Jesus' day the context would have normally been prisoners of war or those who had been enslaved through debt. More on this below. 6) *'for many'* implies that Jesus will be dying, literally, as a substitute in the place of God's people. The phrase is full of significance and evokes Isaiah's prophesy of the suffering servant (see below)

8. The word 'ransom' assumes that we (humankind – the scope of the OT background is humankind) are in slavery or bondage and need to be set free. It implies also, in the context of what Jesus is saying, that our freedom will be incredibly costly and that Jesus will bear the cost with his life. Encourage reflection on what Jesus might mean about being enslaved.
9. It implies 1) that by living self-centred lives (going our own way) we have lost our way, and 2) that through our sinful self-centeredness we have incurred a debt that we are now in bondage to. 3) Jesus' death accomplishes our freedom by bearing the terrible cost of our self-centeredness and the debt it has incurred upon himself as our substitute. He gives his life in our place in order to bear our guilt and to set us free from our self-centredness and the guilt it has incurred.
10. 'What do you want me to do for you?' is a question a servant would ask his master. Here it is Jesus asking it of his disciples and of a blind beggar on the side of a road. Jesus lives as servant of all (9:35). Mark presents Bartimaeus as representing an ideal for how someone is to approach Jesus. Bartimaeus recognises who Jesus is, calls out in faith and trusts in his willingness to serve him. The story acts as a corrective to the account of James and John. The problem with James and John's request was not necessarily its self-centredness, Bartimaeus' request was equally 'self-centred', it was rather their severe misunderstanding of all that Jesus was about.

The closing theme picks up again on the human condition of slavery. According to the Isaiah quote, it is not just the freedom of the wolves that leads to enslavement it is, ironically, our own persistence in 'turning to our own way' that leads us into bondage. For those who've struggled with addictions this will be very familiar. For others it may be harder to relate to. Discuss how self-centeredness can be self-destructive and diminishing. Why is that? What is the alternative to self-centeredness that Jesus shows us? What have you seen in Jesus that offers hope for a deeper kind of freedom?

## Study F: Only human after all

### Mark 14:27-72

**Purpose:** To see Jesus stand tall through his moment of trial amidst an all too human story of betrayal, corruption and moral failure.

**Intro:** Consider the saying first of all. What do people tend to mean when they describe themselves as 'only human'? What is being excused or explained? What does the phrase imply about what it means to be human? Why do you think falling short of our standards or ideals, for one another and/or ourselves, is so characteristic of being a human being?

1. Unlike previous predictions of his suffering and death, this prediction is about the disciples themselves and their own failure of Jesus.
2. Peter reacts strongly. He 'declares' that he will 'never' disown Jesus even if all the others do. Peter sets himself apart from the others as uniquely faithful, willing to face even death for his friend. Despite the relatively few verses we have about Peter in these studies, his personality comes out strongly as someone who wears his heart on his sleeve, speaking first and then thinking later! Encourage people to share their impressions.
3. Jesus has shown astonishing strength and composure throughout the gospel but here Mark speaks very strongly of the horror Jesus was experiencing in the face of what was coming. The unprecedented way Jesus speaks to God as Abba, (read Daddy or Papa), together with his understanding that he will soon be suffering under God's judgement is for Jesus more terrifying than the physical suffering he will undergo:  
'The dreadful sorrow and anxiety, then, out of which the prayer for the passing of the cup springs, is not an expression of fear before a dark destiny, nor a shrinking from the prospect of physical suffering and death. It is rather the horror of the one who lives wholly for the Father at the prospect of the alienation from God which is entailed in the judgement upon sin which Jesus assumes...Jesus came to be with the Father for an interlude before his betrayal, but found hell rather than heaven opened before him, and he staggered.'
4. 'Yet not what I will, but what you will.' Despite Jesus' terrible fear and sorrow he remains resolute in obeying his father even when his Father's face was hidden from him.
5. Jesus was looking to his disciples to support him, keeping watch and praying with him in his hour of need. James and John had told Jesus that they could drink the cup and face the baptism he was to face (10:39, Study E). Peter had assured Jesus that he would die with him (14:31). Yet though Jesus was open with them about his overwhelming sorrow, though he urged them three times to stay awake and pray, they slept. His three closest friends failed the test. Jesus was left all alone during the darkest night of his life.
6. Jesus knew what he had to do. He could have run away hours earlier but by now his resolve was set. He had won the battle of wills. 'The scriptures must be fulfilled', he says. He knew also that Judas would betray him, but to the last

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moment Judas could have stopped short. Jesus gave him right up until his kiss had reached his cheek to turn back, but he never did. Jesus was betrayed by Judas' kiss.

7. Repeatedly Mark makes clear that there was no justice in this trial. The verdict was decided even before any evidence could be found (55). The testimonies were false or contradictory (56, 59). Jesus was even called upon to testify against himself (60)!
8. Up until now the claim of Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God would have been misunderstood as a claim to power and inspired the nationalistic and political hopes that were tied with the figure of the Messiah in popular thinking. It is only when we see Jesus abandoned, rejected and facing death that we can begin to understand who he really is:  
'The placing of this claim, this breaking of the silence, is all-important. It is when Jesus is stripped of all hope, of all power, when he stands alone in the middle of this meaningless nightmare, with no hope of life, it is then and only then that he declares who he is... when you can be under no illusion about what faces Jesus...[t]hen and then only does God declare himself.'
9. Was Jesus guilty of the charge of blasphemy? Well, of course, it depends! If Jesus is telling the truth then he is not guilty. The irony is that if he is telling the truth then, it is they, the priests and the religious court, who committing blasphemy in the starkest possible terms, judging, accusing, spitting at and mocking the one who is God himself.
10. Mark has sandwiched Jesus' trial within Peter's story to encourage us to compare and contrast Peter's experience with Jesus. Tim Keller draws out the following five points of contrast:  
'First, Peter, like Jesus, is also being questioned. However, Jesus was being interrogated by the whole Sanhedrin and the high priest (vv. 55,61). Meanwhile Peter is questioned only by a mere servant girl (vv. 66, 69). Second, Peter, like Jesus, is being charged with something that will get him into great trouble. However, the charges against Jesus are false (vv. 55-57), while the charges against Peter are completely true (vv. 67, 69-70). He is a disciple of Christ. Third, Peter, like Jesus, responds to the charge. However, while Jesus professes and declares the truth (vv. 61-62), Peter denies the truth (vv. 68, 70-71). Fourth, Peter, like Jesus, is with the guards. However, Jesus tells the truth despite the consequences, and he is beaten by the guards (v. 65). Meanwhile Peter denies the truth for the sole purpose of avoiding consequences, and so he sits and warms himself with the guards (vv. 54, 67)! Fifth, Peter, like Jesus, is cursed. However, Jesus receives the condemnation (the "curse") of the Sanhedrin (v. 64) unfairly. Meanwhile Peter actually brings down the curse on himself (v. 71) e.g. "May I be cursed and condemned if I am his follower." Peter is self-condemned, and justly.'
11. Many will find it easy to sympathise and identify with Peter. Despite Jesus' warnings the disciples were unprepared for what was happening as they were simply unable to comprehend the idea of Jesus the Messiah suffering and dying. Peter's dreams of a glorious Messianic future for himself and the disciples were

disintegrating before his eyes and with that gone, he seemed to have had no higher purpose for his actions than the basic human instinct of self-preservation.

These stories depict starkly the dark side of human nature. While this is inevitably one-sided given the nature of the events – discuss how realistic this portrayal of humanity this is. How does Jesus' behaviour compare with those in the story? What sets him apart from those around him? What sets him apart from you and those around you that you know best?

## Study G: God forsaken

### Mark 15:16-41

**Purpose:** To see how Jesus is portrayed on the cross as the one who reveals what God is truly like and the one who was forsaken by God in our place so that we would never have to be.

**Intro:** Spend some time reflecting on Russell's description of being alone and abandoned in the face of darkness, suffering and death. If you are able, encourage openness in others by sharing about times in your own life when you have felt alone or abandoned by God or those around you.

1. Jesus was mocked by the soldiers (16-20), the people passing by (27-30), the chief priests and teachers of the law (31-32) and even those crucified with him (32). The content of the mockery relates to the claim that he was a King (18-19, 26), his claims about destroying the temple (29), his ability to save others but not himself (31). All these claims were seen as being utterly discredited by his crucifixion. They also urged him to prove he was Messiah by coming down from the cross (32).
2. By recording the mockery in such detail Mark is being deeply ironic. Careful readers of Mark will realise that everything that the mockers say are discredited by the cross are, in fact, the very things that the cross is finally achieving. In the previous study we saw that it was only when Jesus stood condemned that Jesus declared himself to be king, by becoming the very last and servant of all Jesus, by his own terms, was showing himself to be the greatest of all (cf. 9:35). We will see later in the account the importance of Jesus' death for the temple (15:38). We know from Mark 10:45 that it is only by not saving himself that he is able to save others.
3. There are several points of resonance to pick out. Notice: the piercing of Jesus' hands and feet, his bones out of joint (features of crucifixion) and the casting of lots for his clothing, as well as the hurling of abuse, and the mocking and gloating. The psalm also provides a powerful insight into Jesus' inner experience as he was hung up on the cross. We read of feelings of being dehumanised and humiliated, exposed, weak and fearful, and most of all, we will see, the experience of being completely and utterly forsaken (Mark 15:34 quoting Psalm 22:1).
4. This was a cry of agony and forsakenness. It shows that though incredibly Jesus was still clinging on in faith to God as his God (My God, my God) his experience of God was of utter forsakenness. God, his father, had turned his back on him and the darkness of God's judgement was turned against him: 'Up to this moment, though forsaken by men, he could add, "Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me" (John 16:32). In the darkness, however, he was absolutely alone, being now also God-forsaken.'
5. The mockers saw Jesus' weakness on the cross as a barrier to salvation – if he can't save himself then how can he claim to save others?! But Jesus became

weak precisely in order to save. It was only by submitting to the nails and giving up his life as a ransom (Mark 10:45) that he would be able to save others.

6. Though the Jewish temple served as a place to worship and meet with the God of the Jews, the temple curtains along many other aspects of the temple were symbolic of God's final separateness and hiddenness. At the moment of his death this old way of relating to God is destroyed and a new way of relating to God is opened up. One that is available to anyone of any nation, gender and class. (Jesus' sayings about destroying the temple (recorded in the accusations and, from Jesus, in John 2:19) relate to this moment and the temple's final destruction in AD 70.
7. It was possible that the centurion had been responsible for handling Jesus from when he was handed over to Pilate, in which case the centurion would have had an opportunity to watch Jesus and his behaviour for much of the day. It is remarkable that it was a hardened centurion who saw in the way Jesus died what no-one else around the cross had been able to see: 'That a Roman, for whom crucifixion was an unmentionable obscenity, declared a crucified Jew to be the Son of God is astonishing. Romans only applied that title to the Roman emperor... but this soldier applied it to Jesus – a poor, humiliated, crucified man... This represents an inconceivable reversal in values.'
8. Mark is explicitly recording the eyewitness sources he was relying upon for his account of these events. Take, for example, how he describes Simon as, the father of Alexander and Rufus. This implies that Alexander and Rufus were well known to Mark's first readers of his account and he is inviting his readers to verify with his witnesses that what he is recording is trustworthy and true. It also, of course, gives an indication of how soon after the events Mark compiled his account of Jesus' life.
9. Under the old temple system non-Jews and women were somewhat excluded from worship of God, yet now as the separating curtain rips from top to bottom it is a Gentile and a group women who stand and wonder at the death of Jesus.

Encourage people to reflect on the implications of Jesus' death – taking Mark's account at face value. What if the centurion was right about Jesus and that the cross really does reveal to us who God is? What would this say about what God is like? How could the cross speak to human suffering? John Stott is worth quoting on this:

'I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as "God on the cross." In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness. That is the God for me!'

Encourage reflection about the claim that, on the cross, Jesus was giving his life as a ransom. What do people think this means? What do they make of the claim that they needed Jesus to die in their place? What do they make of the claim that he was willing to?

## Study H: The opening

### Mark 15:42-16:8

**Purpose:** To help people hear and seriously consider the remarkable claim that Jesus, the one who was crucified, is alive.

**Intro:** Discuss what is involved in changing our minds and the resistance we often feel to doing it. When was the last time you changed your mind about something significant? How did it feel? How did it happen? Is it generally a good thing or a bad thing to be open to the unexpected? How open to the unexpected do you feel you are?

1. The focus is on the burial of Jesus. Mark details: 1) how the burial came about (through the bravery of Joseph), 2) the confirmation by the centurion of Jesus' death, 4) the details of the burial itself and, 5) the witnesses to the location of the tomb. These details confirm that Jesus died and was buried at a known location.
2. To show any kind of allegiance to a crucified criminal such as mourning their death, or ensuring their burial would have been a rather dangerous thing to do because of the real risk of guilt by association.
3. The body had been buried for two nights and a day before the women were able to access it. They had come to anoint the body in an act of devotion. The spices were to offset the smell of the decomposition that would occur rapidly in a Palestinian climate. The women therefore arrived as soon as they could after the Sabbath (when such work was forbidden) in order to anoint the body before decomposition progressed too far.
4. It is surprising to the reader, given Jesus' repeated predictions, that no-one showed up to see if anything would happen 'on the third day'. Reflect on whether you would have thought it worthwhile to go to 'look and see' if anything would happen at the tomb.
5. The fact that the disciples didn't visit the tomb (at least, on their own initiative) attests to the complete lack of belief or expectation that anything would happen to Jesus' body.
6. Various explanations would have rushed through their minds, were they at the right tomb? Was it grave robbers? Had the authorities changed their minds about allowing Jesus to be buried?
7. To find anyone unexpected sat in the dark of a tomb would be rather alarming! In this case the man is there instead of Jesus' body. He was sat on the right side (an eyewitness detail) and is dressed in white. He is an angel and the women are terrified!
8. The stranger shows considerable insight into what was happening. He knew who they were looking for and that Jesus had been crucified, but the heart of his message is that Jesus has risen and has gone ahead of them.
9. The care Mark takes to name his eyewitnesses can be seen from the fact that though Salome and the two Marys were named as witnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection, only the two Marys were named as witnesses of the burial. Salome we are to understand was not there and therefore was not named as a

witness for that part of the account. These details indicate that this isn't a mere legend that evolved over many years but is a real event grounded in eyewitness testimony.

These three events were important for Mark to confirm to rule out, 1) a resuscitation i.e. Jesus wasn't really dead (but women saw the burial, Joseph took the corpse down, and the centurion certified his death); 2) The wrong tomb (but the women were there as witnesses to see where he was laid). The evidence for multiple eyewitnesses also rules out the explanation that they experienced a hallucination. This is also supported by the clear evidence that they and the disciples were in no way expecting Jesus to rise – for example, the women's purchase of spices (which were very expensive) shows that they were in no way expecting to find Jesus raised from the dead.

10. Given the background the record of the female eyewitnesses is best explained by it being factual. If the resurrection was a fraud, you would not, in that time and place, choose a group of women as your star witnesses.
11. The women's overwhelming reaction to the angels news was terror. They fled from the tomb and their fear reduced them to silence. The women weren't expecting anything like this to happen and the encounter with the angel and the news that Jesus has risen utterly overwhelms them. In the long-term they experience the sheer joy of death overcome, but for now the magnitude and shock of the events leave them terrified.
12. The dramatic ending of Mark confronts the reader, in Mark's typically direct style, with a challenge. Like the women, we are in a position of having encountered the witness of the empty tomb and heard the angels message explaining what has happened. The question is what will we do with it? Jesus, we're told is alive today and waiting for us to respond. We know that the women didn't stay silent for long (which is why we're reading about what they saw) – but how will we respond?
13. You can imagine what Peter would have thought had the message been simply 'for the disciples'. That's not me, he would have thought. I've blown it. There is no way Jesus could possibly consider me to be a disciple! By naming Peter specifically the angel is making it clear that Jesus has forgiven Peter and is ready to receive him along with the other disciples in Galilee.

Mark's Gospel gives permission for the reader to find the idea of the resurrection hard to get your head around! It is completely frank about the earth-shattering nature of the claim and the confusion and fear such a realisation can cause. Try to encourage people to think carefully and critically about the historical claim of the resurrection. Take time to look back at details and encourage critical assessment of the evidence Mark presents.

Think again about Peter and the grace shown to him in the angel's message. Acknowledge the possibility of feelings of disqualification and inadequacy when thinking about following Jesus. Encourage people to consider what if anything is holding them back from accepting Mark's good news for themselves.