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NEWS OF THE HOUR



10 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

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AND TONY PAYNE



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News of the Hour

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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God's word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of 'interaction'—interaction with the Bible, with the things we've written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

Each study contains five main components:

- short sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- a set of numbered study questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- an ‘Implications’ section that helps you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

» STUDY 1

AT THAT TIME, JESUS

[MARK 1:1-15]

WAS JESUS A GREAT PROPHET AND teacher? Was he merely one in a long line of inspired individuals, including Buddha and Mohammed? Did he travel to England as a child? Is he more popular than the Beatles?

These days, it seems possible to find as many different Jesuses as brands of soft drink. Every year there's another book about the 'authentic' Jesus. All the authors have their own theory and they all present it as the most obvious and plausible one. Most have this in common: they disagree with traditional

Christianity. How do we deal with this huge range of opinions?

Jesus was an historical figure who lived and died in the first century. He was also a powerful teacher who, in the centuries following his lifetime, has influenced the lives of millions of people from many different nationalities and personal backgrounds. No serious-minded person would disagree with these statements. Yet the full meaning and significance of Jesus remains a contentious issue. Who was he really? And what was he really on about?

-
1. What do people say about Jesus? What opinions do you hear in the media, at work, around about? On what do people base their opinions? Jot down a few answers.

IF WE WANT TO KNOW THE TRUTH about Jesus, there is only one place to turn. We must read and study the Gospels, for they are the only reliable source of detailed information about him.

The Gospel of Mark is probably the earliest of the four Gospels, and was written while many of those who were involved in the events (as participants or eye-witnesses) were still alive. It is a remarkable book, and not only because of its subject matter. The more we read Mark's account of Jesus, the more we are entranced by what a great story it is, and by how well it is told.

It must be said, at this point, that many of us are not used to reading Mark's Gospel (or any of the Gospels for that matter) as one continuous *story*. Instead, we are more used to regarding the Gospels as a collection of lots of different stories that don't have much to do with each other. We're familiar with stories about healings and exorcisms, about John the Baptist, about miracles

and parables, about arguments with Jewish leaders, and of course about Jesus' death and resurrection. Yet many of us have grown up with these Gospel stories without pausing to think that there might be a connection between all these different incidents, that the Gospel author might be trying to tell a big story of which all the different episodes are only part.

We can be like people who only know a movie by the trailers they see on TV. We have a rough idea what it is about, and have seen the highlights, but we haven't yet grasped how the whole thing holds together, and what the overall point is. In fact, we aren't even sure which movie the episodes come from, since there are four versions of Christ's life, each written from a slightly different perspective, and each containing particular emphases.

These studies are like a trip to see one of these 'movies': the Gospel of Mark. We're not going to simply look at

a grab bag of highlights. We're going to see how the whole story fits together, how the characters relate to each other, how one episode flows into the next, and how Mark presents us with a unique portrait of Jesus.

As we do so, we'll see that the Jesus of Mark's Gospel is not only surprising and intriguing—he also fulfils all our grandest dreams.

Let us begin where all stories begin: at the beginning.

The beginning of the Gospel

According to its opening words, Mark's book will tell its readers about “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. Mark is written for those living after the time of Jesus, to tell them how the Christian message originated. Where did it come from, this ‘good news’ about a crucified Messiah? What were the events that started it all? Who was this Jesus? What was he on about? And what was he supposed to have done?

Mark immediately identifies Jesus as ‘the Christ’ and ‘the Son of God’. We are so used to these words that we barely pause to consider what they mean. However, for Mark's original readers, these were words full of significance.

‘Christ’, for example, is not Jesus' surname. It is a title for the long-awaited King of Israel (‘Messiah’ is the same word in Hebrew.) In the Old Testament God had promised that this king would one day come to defeat all Israel's enemies, and to bring in a new age of prosperity and peace. The **‘Son of God’** basically means the same thing. It was another of the titles given to the Kings of Israel, and so is another way of referring to the Christ or Messiah.

From the outset, then, Mark tells his readers something that the characters in the story (like the disciples) will take some time to discover. We know from the start that Jesus—the central character—is the Christ (or Messiah), the Son of God. From the start, we know that this is no ordinary story, but concerns the king of all the earth!

Son of God or God the son?

The ‘Son of God’ is a somewhat confusing title for Christians. We are used to using it to refer to Jesus as the second person of the Trinity. However, this is not how it is used in the Bible. In places like 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2, the ‘Son of God’ is a title used to refer to the one who is the King of Israel, the Son of David, the Messiah. We rightly call Jesus ‘God the Son’ because he is indeed the second person of the Trinity, begotten and not made, who has been at the Father's side in all eternity. However it was only when ‘God the Son’ was born as a man, and lived and died and rose from the dead, that he *became* the ‘Son of God’—that is, the long-awaited Messiah or Christ of Israel.

What happens next ...

The royal coach, pulled by four immaculate horses, draws up to the entrance of the great hall. The red carpet is out. Dignitaries wait nervously in the hope of recognition, or even a handshake. The crowd strains forward to catch a glimpse. The footman opens the door and out steps ...

We all know what happens next. We all know whom to expect. The signs and trappings of royalty are unmistakable.

Yet when Jesus began his public ministry, what did people expect? What

were the signs? Was the red carpet out?

Jesus the Messiah certainly did not arrive in a vacuum, unexpected and unannounced. On the contrary, he had been expected for hundreds of years. And if we are to understand anything about Jesus, we must understand something of the expectations that surrounded his arrival, and the kingdom he would bring.

In fact, Mark begins his story by telling us from the Old Testament just who was expected, and what was meant to happen once he arrived.

What happens next ... according to the Old Testament?

Read Malachi 3:1-5.

Mark 1:2 is a quote from Malachi 3:1.

2. What does Malachi prophesy will happen first?

3. What is supposed to happen after that?

Read Isaiah 40:1-11.

Mark 1:3 is a quote from Isaiah 40:3.

4. What does Isaiah prophesy will happen first?

5. What is supposed to happen after that?

6. How would you summarize the promise of these Old Testament verses?

What happens next ... according to John?

As soon as Mark finishes quoting these prophecies, he introduces John the Baptist.

Read Mark 1:4-8.

7. Why did the people come to John? What were they looking for?

'Baptism in the Spirit'

Two common mistakes can be made here. The 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' is neither referring to Christian baptismal practices, nor to what pentecostals refer to as 'the second blessing'. Both mistakes try to read later church phenomena back into the Gospel. Instead, we must understand John's reference to baptism in the light of the situation in Jesus' time. Notice that John compares a symbol (what he does) with the reality (what the stronger one will do). 'Baptism' simply means a washing, which is a natural symbol for cleansing or purification. 'Baptism in the Holy Spirit' is the cleansing or purifying that God will do. This is what people wanted (1:4-5), and what the Old Testament had promised. Later on, Jesus will reveal that the 'baptism' he performs according to God's plan is his death (10:38, 45).

8. John is portrayed by Mark as the 'messenger' of the Old Testament prophecies. According to John's message, what will happen next?

9. According to the Old Testament prophecies we looked at above, who was supposed to come after him?

What happens next ... according to God?

THE WORDS ARE BARELY OUT OF John's mouth, when Mark introduces the very One John had been speaking about:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (Mark 1:9)

In a dramatic scene, Jesus is endowed with the Holy Spirit and hears a voice from heaven, saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased".

This short sentence seems a straightforward thing to say. God is declaring from heaven that he loves his Son, and that he is very pleased with him. But there is more to it than that. God is repeating words that he had spoken many hundreds of years earlier. Words that were recorded in two Old Testament passages: one about his Son whom he loves, and another about a 'servant' who would receive the Spirit and be well-pleasing to God.

Read Psalm 2.

10. What should happen once God's Son, the king of Israel, is established on his throne?

Read Isaiah 42:1–4.

11. When the Spirit-filled servant arrives, what will happen next?

12. There are three other passages about this servant in Isaiah. Quickly read them. What do they tell us about the ministry of the servant?

- Isaiah 49:1-7

- Isaiah 50:4-11

- Isaiah 52:13-53:12

What happens next ... according to Jesus?

IN THIS CLIMATE OF EXPECTATION, with all these promises and prophecies in the air, and with John the Baptist pointing to him as the One they'd been waiting for, Jesus begins to proclaim his message: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15).

According to Jesus, the time has finally come. The prophecies are about to be fulfilled. The long-awaited kingdom

is near. And since this is all about to happen, it is a time for urgent and immediate action.

According to Jesus, two things will happen next:

- 1) the kingdom will come
- 2) his hearers will have to make their minds up how to respond—either accepting his message (by repenting and believing) or rejecting it.

» Implications

- If someone asked you “Who is Jesus?” how would you reply? How has this study affected your answer?

- Imagine that you have never read Mark’s Gospel, nor even heard the story of Jesus. What do you expect to happen next as Mark’s Gospel unfolds?

- Why should every person alive take a good look at Jesus?

» Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for keeping his promises and sending Jesus to be the perfect king.
- Ask God to help you to get to know Jesus better as you read through Mark’s Gospel in the coming weeks. In particular, ask God to give you insight into how the whole story fits together, to give you a bigger picture of Jesus.