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LIGUORI CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY



The Gospel *of Mark*

REVEALING THE MYSTERY OF JESUS

WILLIAM A. ANDERSON, DMIN, PHD



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NOTE: The length of each Bible section varies. Group leaders should combine sections as needed to fit the number of sessions in their program.



Introduction to *Liguori Catholic Bible Study*

READING THE BIBLE can be daunting. It's a complex book, and many a person of goodwill has tried to read the Bible and ended up putting it down in utter confusion. It helps to have a companion, and *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is a solid one. Over the course of this series, you'll learn about biblical messages, themes, personalities, and events and understand how the books of the Bible rose out of the need to address new situations.

Across the centuries, people of faith have asked, "Where is God in this moment?" Millions of Catholics look to the Bible for encouragement in their journey of faith. Wisdom teaches us not to undertake Bible study alone, disconnected from the Church that was given Scripture to share and treasure. When used as a source of prayer and thoughtful reflection, the Bible comes alive.

Your choice of a Bible-study program should be dictated by what you want to get out of it. One goal of *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is to give readers greater familiarity with the Bible's structure, themes, personalities, and message. But that's not enough. This program will also teach you to use Scripture in your prayer. God's message is as compelling and urgent today as ever, but we get only part of the message when it's memorized and stuck in our heads. It's meant for the entire person—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

We're baptized into life with Christ, and we're called to live more fully with Christ today as we practice the values of justice, peace, forgiveness, and community. God's new covenant was written on the hearts of the people of Israel; we, their spiritual descendants, are loved that intimately by God today. *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* will draw you closer to God, in whose image and likeness we are fashioned.

Group and Individual Study

The *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* series is intended for group and individual study and prayer. This series gives you the tools to start a study group. Gathering two or three people in a home or announcing the meeting of a Bible-study group in a parish or community can bring surprising results. Each lesson in this series contains a section to help groups study, reflect, pray, and share biblical reflections. Each lesson also has a second section for individual study.

Many people who want to learn more about the Bible don't know where to begin. This series gives them a place to start and helps them continue until they're familiar with all the books of the Bible.

Bible study can be a lifelong project, always enriching those who wish to be faithful to God's Word. When people complete a study of the whole Bible, they can begin again, making new discoveries with each new adventure into the Word of God.



Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

BIBLE STUDY isn't just a matter of gaining intellectual knowledge of the Bible; it's also about gaining a greater understanding of God's love and concern for creation. The purpose of reading and knowing the Bible is to enrich our relationship with God. God loves us and gave us the Bible to illustrate that love. As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, a study of the Bible is not only an intellectual pursuit but also a spiritual adventure that should influence our dealings with God and neighbor.

The Meaning of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina is a Latin expression that means "divine or sacred reading." The process for *lectio divina* consists of Scripture readings, reflection, and prayer. Many clergy, religious, and laity use *lectio divina* in their daily spiritual reading to develop a closer and more loving relationship with God. Learning about Scripture has as its purpose the living of its message, which demands a period of reflection on the Scripture passages.

Prayer and *Lectio Divina*

Prayer is a necessary element for the practice of *lectio divina*. The entire process of reading and reflecting is a prayer. It's not merely an intellectual pursuit; it's also a spiritual one. Page 18 includes an Opening Prayer for gathering one's thoughts before moving on to the passages in each section. This prayer may be used privately or in a group. For those who use the book for daily spiritual reading, the prayer for each section may be repeated each day. Some may wish to keep a journal of each day's meditation.

Pondering the Word of God

Lectio divina is the ancient Christian spiritual practice of reading the holy Scriptures with intentionality and devotion. This practice helps Christians center themselves and descend to the level of the heart to enter an inner quiet space, finding God.

This sacred reading is distinct from reading for knowledge or information, and it's more than the pious practice of spiritual reading. It is the practice of opening ourselves to the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As we intentionally focus on and become present to the inner meaning of the Scripture passage, the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds and hearts. We come to the text willing to be influenced by a deeper meaning that lies within the words and thoughts we ponder.

In this space, we open ourselves to be challenged and changed by the inner meaning we experience. We approach the text in a spirit of faith and obedience as a disciple ready to be taught by the Holy Spirit. As we savor the sacred text, we let go of our usual control of how we expect God to act in our lives and surrender our hearts and consciences to the flow of the divine (*divina*) through the reading (*lectio*).

The fundamental principle of *lectio divina* leads us to understand the profound mystery of the Incarnation, "The Word became flesh," not only in history but also within us.

Praying *Lectio* Today

Before you begin, relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). Then practice these four simple actions:

1. Read a passage from Scripture or the daily Mass readings. This is known as *lectio*. (If the Word of God is read aloud, the hearers listen attentively.)
2. Pray the selected passage with attention as you listen for a specific meaning that comes to mind. Once again, the reading is listened to or silently read and reflected or meditated on. This is known as *meditatio*.

3. The exercise becomes active. Pick a word, sentence, or idea that surfaces from your consideration of the chosen text. Does the reading remind you of a person, place, or experience? If so, pray about it. Compose your thoughts and reflection into a simple word or phrase. This prayer-thought will help you remove distractions during the *lectio*. This exercise is called *oratio*.
4. In silence, with your eyes closed, quiet yourself and become conscious of your breathing. Let your thoughts, feelings, and concerns fade as you consider the selected passage in the previous step (*oratio*). If you're distracted, use your prayer word to help you return to silence. This is *contemplatio*.

This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

Many teachers of prayer call contemplation the prayer of resting in God, a prelude to losing oneself in the presence of God. Scripture is transformed in our hearing as we pray and allow our hearts to unite intimately with the Lord. The Word truly takes on flesh, and this time it is manifested in our flesh.



How to Use This Bible-Study Companion

THE BIBLE, along with the commentaries and reflections found in this study, will help participants become familiar with the Scripture texts and lead them to reflect more deeply on the texts' message. At the end of this study, participants will have a firm grasp of the Gospel of Mark and realize how that gospel offers spiritual nourishment. This study is not only an intellectual adventure, it's also a spiritual one. The reflections lead participants into their own journey with the Scripture readings.

Context

When each author wrote his gospel, he didn't simply link random stories about Jesus—he placed them in a context that often stressed a message. To help readers learn about each passage in relation to those around it, each lesson begins with an overview that puts the Scripture passages into context.

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Part 1—Group Study

To give participants a comprehensive study of the Gospel of Mark, the book is divided into 8 lessons. Lesson 1 is group study only; Lessons 2 through 8 are divided into Part 1, group study; and Part 2, individual study. For example, Lesson 2 covers passages from Mark 1:14–3:6. The study group reads and discusses only Mark 1:14–45 (Part 1). Participants privately read and reflect on Mark 2–3:6 (Part 2).

Group study may or may not include *lectio divina*. With *lectio divina*, the group meets for ninety minutes using the first format on page 16. Otherwise the group meets for one hour using the second format on page 16, and participants are urged to privately read the *lectio divina* section at the end of Part 1. It contains additional reflections on the Scripture passages studied during the group session that will take participants even further into the passages.

Part 2—Individual Study

The gospel passages not covered in Part 1 are divided into three to six shorter components, one to be studied each day. Participants who don't belong to a study group can use the lessons for private sacred reading. They may choose to reflect on one Scripture passage per day, making it possible for a clearer understanding of the Scripture passages used in their *lectio divina* (sacred reading).

A PROCESS FOR SACRED READING

Liguori Publications has designed this study to be user friendly and manageable. However, group dynamics and leaders vary. We're not trying to keep the Holy Spirit from working in your midst, thus we suggest you decide beforehand which format works best for your group. If you have limited time, you could study the Bible as a group and save prayer and reflection for personal time.

However, if your group wishes to digest and feast on sacred Scripture through both prayer and study, we recommend you spend closer to ninety minutes each week by gathering to study and pray with Scripture. *Lectio*

divina (see page 11) is an ancient contemplative prayer form that moves readers from the head to the heart in meeting the Lord. We strongly suggest using this prayer form whether in individual or group study.

GROUP-STUDY FORMATS

1. Bible Study With *Lectio Divina*

About ninety minutes of group study

- ✠ Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Scripture passage read aloud (5 minutes)
- ✠ Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3-5 minutes)
- ✠ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (30 minutes)
- ✠ Scripture passage read aloud a second time, followed by quiet time for meditation and contemplation (5 minutes)
- ✠ Spend some time in prayer with the selected passage. Group participants will slowly read the Scripture passage a third time in silence, listening for the voice of God as they read (10–20 minutes)
- ✠ Shared reflection (10–15 minutes)
- ✠ Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

To become acquainted with lectio divina, see page 11.

2. Bible Study

About one hour of group study

- ✠ Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Scripture passage read aloud (5 minutes)
- ✠ Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (40 minutes)
- ✠ Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

Notes to the Leader

- ✘ Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✘ Plan which sections will be covered each week.
- ✘ Read the material in advance of each session.
- ✘ Establish written ground rules. (Example: We won't keep you longer than ninety minutes; don't dominate the sharing by arguing or debating.)
- ✘ Meet in an appropriate and welcoming gathering space (church building, meeting room, house).
- ✘ Provide name tags and perhaps use a brief icebreaker for the first meeting; ask participants to introduce themselves.
- ✘ Mark the Scripture passage(s) that will be read during the session.
- ✘ Decide how you would like the Scripture to be read aloud (whether by one or multiple readers).
- ✘ Use a clock or watch.
- ✘ Provide extra Bibles (or copies of the Scripture passages) for participants who don't bring their Bible.
- ✘ Ask participants to read "Introduction: The Gospel of Mark" (page 19) before the first session.
- ✘ Tell participants which passages to study and urge them to read the passages and commentaries before the meeting.
- ✘ If you opt to use the *lectio divina* format, familiarize yourself with this prayer form ahead of time.

Notes to Participants

- ✘ Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✘ Read "Introduction: The Gospel of Mark" (page 19) before the first class.
- ✘ Read the Scripture passages and commentary before each session.
- ✘ Be prepared to share and listen respectfully. (This is not a time to debate beliefs or argue.)

Opening Prayer

Leader: O God, come to my assistance,

Response: O Lord, make haste to help me.

Leader: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit...

Response: ...as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Leader: Christ is the vine, and we are the branches. As branches linked to Jesus, the vine, we are called to recognize that the Scriptures are always being fulfilled in our lives. It is the living Word of God living on in us. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in us the fire of your divine wisdom, knowledge, and love.

Response: Open our minds and hearts as we study your great love for us as shown in the Bible.

Reader: (Open your Bible to the assigned Scripture(s) and read in a paced, deliberate manner. Pause for one minute, listening for that word, phrase, or image that you may use in your *lectio divina* practice.)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us pray as Jesus taught us.

Response: Our Father...

Leader: Lord, inspire us with your Spirit as we study your Word in the Bible. Be with us this day and every day as we strive to know you and serve you and to love as you love. We believe that through your goodness and love, the Spirit of the Lord is truly upon us. Allow the words of the Bible, your Word, to capture us and inspire us to live as you live and to love as you love.

Response: Amen.

Leader: May the divine assistance remain always with us.

Response: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Mark

Read this overview before the first class.

A disciple of a renowned and holy abbot borrowed a copy of an abbot's personal journal, read it, and returned it to the abbot, expressing his admiration for the abbot and boasting that he had memorized all the pages of the journal so he could repeat them to the other disciples. He believed the other disciples would certainly admire him for his ability to memorize the journal and admire the abbot for his deeply spiritual reflections. The abbot looked sadly on his disciple and said, "The journal was not meant to be about me, but about you. You missed the whole purpose of my sharing the journal with you."

Although the Bible is the Word of God, it's not only about God and God's dealings with the people of the past—it's about us. As we understand the Bible more fully, we understand its application to our lives more deeply. In this text, the commentary and reflection should be seen not only as a message about Jesus, but also as a message about our life in our relationship with God.

Who Was Mark?

"Mark my words" is an old expression. In a sense, it's easier to mark Mark's words than it is to mark Mark. The problem of knowing who Mark is comes from an acceptable custom in the early Church period of using the name of a famous disciple of Jesus to give more authority and credibility to a manuscript. The problem with naming the author of the Gospel of Mark is that he did not seem to have the authority of the other disciples mentioned as companions of Jesus. If an author other than

Mark wrote the gospel, he certainly wouldn't have chosen to call himself Mark, because that name would have carried little authority outside the circle of those immediately associated with him. So, surprising as it may sound, most commentators feel that Mark is the true name of the author of this gospel, simply because a writer with a different name would not have chosen Mark.

A second-century document written by a bishop named Papias quotes an earlier document written by a man named John the Presbyter, who identifies Mark as the author of this gospel. According to John the Presbyter, Mark was a companion and interpreter for Peter, who writes, "The chosen one at Babylon sends you greeting, as does Mark, my son" (1 Peter 5:13). Some believe Mark received his knowledge about Jesus from Peter. Mark's name, however, surfaces in other areas of the Scriptures. The Acts of the Apostles reports that Peter sought out the house of Mark's mother after being freed from prison by an angel (12:1–12). The house seemed to have been a gathering place for some members of the early Church community. From this passage of Acts, we know again that Peter had some contact with a man named John Mark.

Later in Acts, we read of young man named John Mark who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but Mark left them for some unexplained reason (13:13). When Mark sought to join them at a later date, Paul refused to accept him as a companion because of Mark's sudden departure during their first missionary journey. Barnabas and Paul had a heated argument over this and separated, leaving Mark as a companion of Barnabas (15:36–40). Later, in a letter to the Colossians, Paul named Mark as a companion and a cousin of Barnabas (4:10). In all these references to Mark, two questions arise. First, were these references to Mark all to the same person, and second, is he the one who wrote the gospel?

We can say that the name of the author may really have been Mark, but we still have the question "Who is Mark?" In the final analysis, all we can say is that evidence leans in the direction that someone named Mark is the author of this gospel.

When Was the Gospel of Mark Written?

Because we don't have a recorded date for this gospel, we must look at the gospel itself and try to discover references that might point out the date of its composition. Within the gospel, we find a reference to the desecration of the Temple, which took place during the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem (13:14). Mark seems to know something about the siege of Jerusalem, which lasted from 66 to 70, but he doesn't demonstrate as much knowledge of the destruction of Jerusalem as do the authors of Matthew or Luke. For this reason, commentators place the writing of the Gospel of Mark somewhere between the years 66 to 70, which makes it the earliest gospel written. The authors of Matthew and Luke, who wrote in about 85, were able to use Mark's Gospel as a resource for their own gospels.

Mark's Genius

For many years after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples traveled through villages and towns preaching about Jesus' life and message. Some told stories based on Jesus' actions during his life, and others shared Jesus' sayings. Mark listened to these messages and memorized many of them. If he was a companion of Peter's, he would have learned a great deal from Peter. If he was the Mark identified as the son of the woman named Mary who received Peter into her house after he escaped from prison, he would have learned from Peter and the others who had gathered to pray at Mary's home. If he was John Mark, the companion of Paul and Barnabas, he would have heard many accounts of Jesus' life and message and most likely would himself have preached about Jesus.

Before Mark wrote about the preaching of the early Church in an orderly presentation, the gospel consisted almost entirely of the spoken message about Jesus the Christ and his teachings. Mark did not and could not write a biography of Jesus because, like all gospel writers, he's proclaiming a message he received from other disciples who reflected as a community on Jesus' life and message after his resurrection. The genius of Mark is that he received a theological message about Jesus and placed Jesus' sayings and the events of his life in historical sequence. Therefore, Mark wrote the first gospel.

Why Did Mark Write His Gospel?

Shortly after early Church members began spreading Jesus' message, they encountered hostility and persecution, especially at home in Jerusalem and later in Rome. After Jesus' resurrection, the disciples—once a frightened group of Jesus' followers—suddenly became so enthused by Jesus' life, message, and resurrection that they were willing to travel far to spread his message.

They weren't always welcomed in many of the places they preached, and eventually they were persecuted and killed for preaching about Christ and rejecting the gods of the nations they visited. The Romans mistrusted these followers of Christ who refused to join the army, attend the killing games taking place in the Coliseum, or worship the gods of Rome, especially the emperor. The two outstanding leaders among the disciples, Peter and Paul, were killed in Rome around 64, shortly before Mark wrote his gospel. Many other martyrs joined Peter and Paul, accepting death rather than denying Christ. Unfortunately, as happens during periods of persecution, many people became *apostates*, preserving their lives by denying Christ. Mark wrote his gospel in the midst of this turmoil to encourage and instruct Christ's suffering and dying followers.

This persecution caused some members of the early Church to question the reason for this suffering. Mark, through his gospel, said their suffering was the path of discipleship. If Jesus suffered for the sake of the kingdom, his followers must do the same. The call to discipleship is a call to imitate Jesus even in his suffering and death. Mark has Jesus himself tell these disciples the full meaning of discipleship: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (8:34). The example and words of Jesus are not for his generation alone. Mark recognizes that they are meant for all generations. He encourages the people to make sense of their suffering and death by keeping their eyes on Christ, the perfect person who suffered and died for them. Mark understood the urgency of sharing this message with Jesus' followers, who were suffering in Rome and elsewhere.

Another reason for Mark to write a gospel was the aging of Jesus' original followers. At some point, the message had to be written before all Jesus'

followers died. The message of Jesus' life and teachings would be preserved more faithfully if someone recorded it. To help followers remain faithful to the original teachings and events of Jesus' life, Mark wrote his gospel. Because Mark was closer in time to the events of Jesus' life, he presents a more human—and even weaker—image of Jesus and his disciples than the other three gospel writers did.

What Are Some Characteristics of Mark's Gospel?

Because the Gospel of Mark was a source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (see “The Synoptic Gospels” in the introductory book of this series, *Introduction to the Bible*), many characteristics of Mark's Gospel appear in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but they sometimes emphasize a different message. In investigating how Matthew and Luke apply the Gospel of Mark to their gospels, readers can better understand the authors' purpose in writing their gospels (see “Redaction Criticism” in *Introduction to the Bible*).

The Messianic Secret

When Mark identifies Jesus as the Christ in the first sentence of his gospel, he reveals he's writing about Jesus as the early Church understood him after his resurrection. In other words, he is writing as a follower of Christ who already knows the end of the story. Because he is writing for a Greek audience, Mark chooses the Greek title for Messiah at the outset of his gospel, the title *Christ*. Mark is writing about Jesus *the Christ*, who suffered, died, and was raised.

Although Jesus was indeed the Christ, Mark notes Jesus' reaction to the demons who try to identify him. When Jesus casts out demons, the demons identify him as the Messiah, and Jesus immediately commands them to be silent. Mark writes, “He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him” (1:34). When Jesus heals someone, Jesus tells the person not to spread the news about the miracle, but unlike the demons who must obey Jesus, human beings have free will and spread the news of Jesus' miracles anyway.

Jesus' effort to keep his miracles and power over demons a secret is known to commentators as the “messianic secret,” which is found pre-

dominately in the Gospel of Mark. Why Jesus wishes to keep his identity hidden is a question many commentators have tried to answer. Many people expected a warrior-type Messiah, which Jesus was not. In Jesus' day, Roman authorities didn't look kindly on those who claimed to be the Messiah, because some of the people were awaiting a Messiah who would lead them in a battle against their enemies. Jesus would have wanted to freely preach his message without being a threat to religious leaders and Roman rulers. Mark recognized that Jesus became the Christ through his resurrection when he overcame death and brought spiritual salvation to all people.

Jesus, the Son of God

In the first line of his gospel, Mark identifies Jesus as the Son of God. Throughout the gospel, Jesus performs miracles that clearly belong to God alone—walking on water, calming storms, and forgiving sins. The great power over demons strongly underlines Jesus' divine power. Mark explicitly refers to Jesus as the Son of God in only a few sections (1:1, 9:7, 15:39), choosing instead to show Jesus in this light through his miracles and through the disciples' struggle to understand Jesus and his message.

The Meaning of Discipleship

Mark, who is writing closest in time to the lives of Jesus and his disciples, has no difficulty presenting Jesus' disciples as typical and weak human beings. They misunderstand Jesus, frustrate him, miss some of the obvious points of his message, and abandon him during his passion. In the later gospels, the disciples—although still identified as struggling human beings—receive a little more respect.

The true disciple is one who follows Jesus' example and who suffers and willingly accepts death for the sake of the kingdom. The disciples should not look for glory, but for a cross in this life. They should pick up their own crosses and follow Jesus. For those who remain faithful, an eternal reward awaits. The Gospel of Mark stresses the true notion of discipleship, a central theme of this gospel written for Christians suffering persecution in Rome.



LESSON 2

The Mystery of Jesus

MARK 1:14—3:6

This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel. (1:15)

Opening Prayer (SEE PAGE 18)

Context

Part 1: Mark 1:14–45 Jesus announces that the reign of God has arrived and prepares for the kingdom by preaching, choosing disciples, and healing. He invites Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him. He shows that the kingdom has arrived by preaching and healing with authority. The demons he casts out try to shout out his true identity, but Jesus silences them because it's not yet time. Jesus' healing of a man with leprosy inspires large crowds to follow him.

Part 2: Mark 2—3:6 Jesus' forgiveness and healing of a paralyzed man is a later sign that God's reign arrived with the coming of Jesus. When he calls the tax collector Levi to be his disciple, he enters the first of five conflict stories involving forgiveness of sin, eating and drinking with sinners, and answering questions about fasting, working on the Sabbath, and healing on the Sabbath.

PART 1: GROUP STUDY (MARK 1:14–45)

Read Mark 1:14–45 aloud.

1:14–15 The Beginning of Jesus' Galilean Ministry

Herod's arrest of John the Baptist signals the end of John's mission and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus comes to Galilee in northern Palestine, where he will fulfill most of his public ministry before he is arrested and condemned in Jerusalem. He declares that this is a time of fulfillment when he will bring salvation to the world. Jesus has confronted and overcome Satan in the desert, but his ministry will be one of continual confrontation against evil.

Unlike John the Baptist, who called the people to repentance and confession of sins, Jesus declares that the "kingdom of God is at hand," adding, "Repent and believe in the gospel." Although the gospels use the term *kingdom of God*, we should avoid seeing the kingdom of God as a place. The term actually encompasses a reign over all creation. When Jesus proclaims that the reign of God is "at hand," he declares that God is more active in creation through Jesus. Jesus' proclamation about the reign of God is central to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Like John the Baptist, Jesus doesn't simply call people to move away from their sins; he also calls them to move forward. The kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus becomes present with him and will reach its fulfillment at the end of time. Although Jesus' disciples continue to live in this world, their true goal is to live the gospel by following the example of Jesus' life and message. That's what is meant by the phrase "living in the kingdom of God."

1:16–20 The Call of the First Disciples

Now that Jesus has proclaimed the reign of God to be at hand, he must choose disciples to bring the Good News to the world. As he passes the Sea of Galilee he encounters two fishermen, brothers Andrew and Simon Peter. Jesus promises to make them fishers of human beings, and they immediately leave their nets to follow him. Jesus next calls to James and John, who are in a boat mending their nets. They immediately abandon not only their work, but also their families and hired workers. In writing

about these encounters, Mark teaches about discipleship, showing the unwavering, immediate, and total response of true disciples to Jesus' call.

Mark teaches that a disciple isn't one who chooses to follow Jesus, but one who is chosen by Jesus. In Jesus' day, a disciple would approach a religious teacher, but as Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel of John, "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you" (15:16).

Christians enduring suffering and death can find encouragement in this message. Knowing that Jesus has chosen them sustains Christians no matter how intense their suffering. Many of the early martyrs in the Church rejoiced when they were chosen to die for Christ. By their life and death, they considered themselves to be preaching a message about Jesus Christ. The author of Mark's Gospel was most likely well aware of the heroism and dedication of these early martyrs.

1:21–28 The Cure of a Man Possessed by Demons

Mark presents Jesus' typical day of teaching, healing, and confronting evil spirits. Jesus comes to Capernaum, which is where he settles during his ministry. On a Sabbath, he enters the synagogue and begins to teach. Perhaps the leaders of the synagogue, in recognition of his education or as a gesture of hospitality, called on him. Jesus astonishes his audience by preaching with the authority of a prophet rather than by quoting scribes and prophets.

Jesus confronts an unclean spirit who addresses him as "Jesus of Nazareth." The demon further identifies Jesus as the "Holy One of God." Many in Jesus' day believed that knowing and using someone's name would give a person power over the one named. Jesus commands the shrieking demon to keep silent and casts it out of the man. This is the first of many instances where we encounter the messianic secret in Mark's Gospel. Because Jesus is more powerful than the evil spirit, it must obey his command. Jesus' power over demons shows that the reign of God has begun.

As the demon leaves the man, the demon's last futile act is to cause the man to have convulsions and cry out. The drama of this event proves to the crowd that the evil spirit has clearly left the man. When Jesus casts out demons throughout the gospel, the person being healed lets out a loud cry, a last shriek from the fleeing demon. The astonished crowd views Jesus'

authority and power over the unclean spirit as another form of teaching with authority. In Jesus, a new and more powerful enemy of the unclean spirit has entered the world, giving hope to those under the power of such a spirit. The drama has many subtle characteristics.

According to Jewish Law, a good Jew avoids a possessed person lest he or she also become defiled. Possessed people defile the places they enter; if Jesus didn't perform an exorcism here, the synagogue would be defiled. Mark doesn't tell us how the possessed person was able to enter the synagogue; he simply puts the man in the midst of the assembly. The demon confronts Jesus to identify him and hold power over him, but Jesus is more powerful. Jesus shows the power of good over evil. Anyone who trusts in God and acts accordingly can overcome evil with goodness. To the eyes of the world, those suffering persecution and death seem to be losing, but a large number of witnesses to the early martyrs' heroism became followers of Christ.

Mark portrays the spread of Jesus' fame throughout the region of Galilee, an area far north of Jerusalem. Jesus must become more cautious about being identified as the Messiah, because the Roman authorities have dealt with others who identified themselves as the Messiah to overthrow Roman rule. Anyone identified as the Messiah would be suspected of inciting the people.

1:29–34 Peter's Mother-in-Law and Other Healings

After Jesus leaves the synagogue, he and James and John go to the home of Simon and Andrew and hear that Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. This short episode tells us that Simon was married and may have had children. Simon's mother-in-law lived with Simon and his family. Simon opens his house to Jesus, symbolically accepting Jesus into his life.

The people of Jesus' era believed that sickness was caused by demons. Jesus' disciples tell Jesus about the fever immediately, perhaps to warn him about the demon. Jesus grasps the woman's hand and the fever leaves her, symbolizing to the people that the evil spirit has left her. The episode tells us that Jesus brings healing not only with his words, but also with his touch. With the enthusiasm of a true disciple, Peter's mother-in-law rises

and begins to wait on them. Mark is telling us that the call to discipleship is a call to serve others.

The day ends with a summary of Jesus' ministry. The number of people coming to Jesus may have been large, but Mark exaggerates when he says the whole town gathered. When Jesus casts out demons and orders them not to reveal his identity, they must obey Jesus' command.

1:35–39 Jesus Leaves Capernaum

Early the next morning, Jesus goes off by himself to a deserted place to pray. The disciples rush out to find Jesus, and Mark significantly names Simon and adds “those who were with him” as finding Jesus. They are excited and proud of their relationship with their newfound friend, and they declare excitedly that everyone is looking for him. Jesus realizes that the people and even Simon misunderstand the meaning of his miracles. The miracles aren't publicity stunts; they point to the message he teaches by the manner in which he lives.

Jesus' actions again teach a lesson in discipleship. Discipleship demands periods of prayer that keep Jesus and his disciples focused on their mission as they seek strength and guidance from God. Mark ends the passage with a summary statement about Jesus' preaching in synagogues and casting out demons throughout Galilee. Synagogues, as the centers of worship and learning, were the gathering places for many Jews, and this is the second time Mark mentions that Jesus visited them.

1:40–45 The Cleansing of a Man With Leprosy

The Jewish people of Jesus' day linked a number of unexplained skin diseases with the dreaded disease leprosy. Religious Law forbade a person with leprosy to mix with the community.

A man with leprosy begs Jesus to heal him, saying Jesus could will him clean. Under the Law of Moses, people with leprosy could have no contact with the community until they underwent a ritual purification by the priests, but Jesus responds with compassion by touching the man and healing him. Then he orders the man to show himself to the priests in accord with the Law. This passage shows that Jesus, a good Jew, had respect for the Law of Moses.

Jesus orders the healed man not to tell others about the incident but unlike the demons, who must obey Jesus, the man has free will. He spreads the word of Jesus' miracle, and the crowds following Jesus increase. His rapidly growing popularity forces him to avoid public places and remain in the desert, where the crowds must come to him. By the end of chapter one, Jesus is already well known and acclaimed by the people.

The cleansing of the man with leprosy conveys a message about prayer. Although the man's condition is obvious, he begs Jesus to cleanse him. In recognition of Jesus' exalted position, the man humbly begins his request with "If you wish." The passage provides an insight into prayer, namely the necessity for us to express our needs even though God already knows them. It's also the humble acknowledgement that the type of response depends on God's will.

Review Questions

1. What does Jesus mean when he says the kingdom of God "is at hand"?
2. What is an example of Jesus' use of the messianic secret?
3. What is the message behind Jesus' healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law?
4. Why is prayer important to Jesus?
5. What lessons does Jesus teach by moving on to other towns to preach instead of remaining with those who recognize his great power?
6. What lesson about prayer can we learn from Jesus' healing of the man with leprosy?
7. What does the early part of the gospel tell us about discipleship?

Closing Prayer (SEE PAGE 18)

Pray the closing prayer now or after *lectio divina*.

Lectio Divina (SEE PAGE 11)

Relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

The meditations that follow are provided only to help group participants use this prayer form, but note that *lectio* is intended to bring one to a place of prayerful contemplation where the Word of God speaks to the hearer from his or her heart. (See page 11 for further instruction.)

The Beginning of Jesus' Galilean Ministry (1:14–15)

John the Baptist dies, but his message continues through his followers and through the message of Jesus, who brings it to fulfillment. Jesus preached about the reign of God on Earth, a reign of justice, peace, and love. No matter how strong evil appears to be, God is still in control. Jesus calls us to repent and live the Gospel—the Good News of Jesus Christ. We live the Good News when we reflect Christ's presence in the world. Jesus doesn't call us only to repent—he also calls us to live the Good News. We were baptized into Christ, and now we must live in Christ.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

The Call of the First Disciples (1:16–20)

In the year 107, Saint Ignatius of Antioch traveled from Antioch to face death in the arena in Rome because he openly professed faith in Christ. Certain Christians were plotting to free him, but he wrote and told them not to try to save him. He felt it was an honor and a gift to die for Christ. Because he believed Christ chose him, he was prepared to die for Christ.

Jesus has chosen us, and with God's help we will respond with the dedication and courage of the heroic and saintly people of the past. We may not have to suffer or die for our faith, but we face other struggles, especially the struggle to remain faithful to Christ in sinful environments.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

The Cure of a Man Possessed by Demons (1:21–28)

When Jesus confronted the possessed man, the demon tried to overcome Jesus by naming him, but Jesus stood his ground and cast the demon out. The man who would be considered unclean suddenly became the center of attention, forcing those in the synagogue to wonder who Jesus was. We can cast out demons in the world by supporting others who are being ridiculed, rejected, or oppressed unjustly.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Peter's Mother-in-Law and Other Healings (1:29–34)

Jesus, the Son of God, demands no special treatment. He doesn't visit a castle, but the home of Simon Peter's family. Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever and is too weak to serve them. Fevers in Jesus' era were not as easily treated as they are today and would have been a matter of grave concern for Simon and his family. Jesus relieves the situation by healing her. As a true disciple, Simon's mother-in-law immediately serves others as all disciples are called to do.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Jesus Leaves Capernaum (1:35–39)

God has a mission for us, but we have to give God time to speak with us each day in prayer. We don't hear God's voice, but we leave prayer with a truer focus on our mission. Jesus rose early in the morning to pray and focus on his mission, which was to share the Word of God—not to stop and enjoy the applause of the crowd. In prayer he found the energy, drive, and focus for his mission and decided he must move on to other villages. Prayer helps us focus on God's will.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

The Cleansing of a Man With Leprosy (1:40–45)

Jesus, moved with pity at the suffering of the man with leprosy, touches him, says "I do will it," and heals him. Paul the apostle tells us Jesus "is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). The passage about the man with leprosy teaches us that God has compassion for us as we pray and answers our prayer as he wishes. God, who knows all, may not answer our request as directly as Jesus did the sick man's, but God does respond in some manner each time we pray. God never ignores us. God responds as God wishes and for our good, because God loves us. The leprosy story is not a story just about Jesus' miraculous powers, but about God's care and concern for all people.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

PART 2: INDIVIDUAL STUDY (MARK 2—3:6)

Day 1: The Healing of the Paralyzed Man (2:1–12)

From 2:1 to 3:6, Mark strings together five conflict stories to show religious leaders' growing hostility toward Jesus. Each story is a *pronouncement story*—a story shared in the early Church showing Jesus' ability to discern a situation and reply (pronounce) with wisdom. Each conflict story follows a pattern in which (1) a situation is presented, (2) a protest is registered, and (3) Jesus replies to the protest.

Jesus returns to Capernaum. When people discover he's home, the crowd gets so large that the front door is blocked and a paralyzed man can't get in to see Jesus. In this first conflict story, Mark gives a colorful picture: As Jesus preaches, four men tear open the roof and lower the paralyzed man down to Jesus. When Jesus recognizes the great faith of the five men, he tells the paralyzed man his sins are forgiven. The miracle takes place because of the faith of all five men. It's a community act of faith.

Jesus addresses the paralyzed man as “child,” which implies that Jesus as God recognizes the man as a child of God. The word *child* connotes a parental love. Some scribes, knowing that only God can forgive sins, think Jesus' attempt to perform an act belonging to God alone is blasphemy. The theme of blasphemy later becomes a central accusation brought against Jesus at his trial before the Sanhedrin and the motive for declaring that Jesus deserves death (14:60–64). Jesus reads the scribes' minds and asks which is easier—to say to the paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven or to tell him to pick up his mat and go home. Jesus then tells the paralyzed man to pick up his mat and go home, which he does. When the crowd sees that the man is healed, they are astounded.

In Jesus' day, people believed that sickness signified God's displeasure, while health signified God's favor. The physical healing shows that Jesus has indeed performed the divine act of forgiving sins, leaving the crowd to declare that they've never witnessed anything like this.

Mark actually put two stories together in this narrative. He places a story about forgiving sin in the midst of a story about healing a paralyzed man. Note the pattern of this first conflict story, namely (1) the situation

of forgiveness is presented, (2) the scribes murmur within themselves in protest, and (3) Jesus rebukes the scribes and heals the paralyzed man.

Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. The pronouncement in this story is that the Son of Man (Jesus) has authority on Earth to forgive sins. In Jesus' day, the title Son of Man was often used to refer to oneself; that is, it was used in place of "I." When Mark was writing his gospel, he included the imagery of a "redeeming Son of Man" who brings redemption through his passion, death, and resurrection. Although Jesus may have used "Son of Man" instead of saying "I," Mark implies more by using the term in this passage. He is saying to his readers that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God.

Three times in the story we read about picking up a mat and walking. This could be Mark's implication of resurrection from sin in the act of forgiveness. "Pick up your mat and walk" could be a message like "Rise up and walk." The mat played an important role in a peasant's life in Jesus' day. Homeless peasants slept on mats, so in a sense the mat was the peasant's home. Jesus' concern isn't just with healing the man, but also with being assured that the man could take his much-needed mat with him.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

A man who spent more than thirty years away from the sacrament of reconciliation decided it was time to confess his sins, but he was afraid of the confessor's reaction. The man had committed every sin except murder. One Sunday morning he decided to enter the church building and, as he told it, he "was hooked." He approached a middle-aged confessor. After they finished, the confessor surprised the man by saying, "I want to thank you for coming to me. I'm happy you've confessed after all these years. God has blessed you, and I'm grateful to be part of that blessing." Jesus was a compassionate person who often revealed God's compassion for sinners.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 2: The Call of Levi (2:13–17)

Mark tells us Jesus again travels alongside the Sea of Galilee. The second conflict story occurs when Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. He identifies Levi as the “son of Alphaeus,” which may signify that Alphaeus is known to some members of the early Church. Because tax collectors paid a set fee for the right to collect taxes for Rome and would often overcharge for the sake of making a greater profit, people scorned tax collectors and looked on them as sinners. Jesus calls Levi to follow him in the same manner Jesus called his first disciples and, like the first disciples, Levi follows Jesus immediately.

The scene shifts to a meal at Levi’s home. Sharing a common table had great significance in Jesus’ time. To share with those viewed as sinners and tax collectors implies that Jesus willingly accepts their manner of life.

This sets the scene for the second conflict story: (1) Jesus eats with those considered sinners and tax collectors, (2) scribes and Pharisees question the disciples about this scandalous situation, and (3) Jesus responds to their objections with another pronouncement.

Jesus declares that those who are well don’t need a physician, while those who are sick do. The sinners are in need of spiritual health, and Jesus is a spiritual physician. The Pharisees, depicted as self-righteous in this story, are the ones Jesus didn’t come to call, mainly because they’ve already decided not to listen to Jesus. Sinners, on the other hand, are prepared to listen to Jesus. By eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus reverses the idea that we accept the lifestyles of people with whom we share a meal. The sinners and tax collectors share a meal with Jesus, in effect accepting his values and message. Jesus declares that just as the sick and not the well need physicians, Jesus calls sinners—not the self-righteous.

The Pharisees don’t complain to Jesus, but to his disciples. Not only does this conflict story teach that Jesus, as the Son of God, seeks out sinners to redeem them, it also shows that in addressing Jesus’ disciples, the scribes and Pharisees recognize that Jesus has become a leader. They identify those who follow him as his disciples.

When Mark was composing his gospel, members of the young Christian community found themselves at odds with each other concerning the place

of Jewish Law within Christianity. Within the Church, some vehemently wanted Jewish Law and custom preserved and some didn't want to burden converts with Jewish Law. Some went to extremes, like the apostle Paul, whose mission was challenged by Jewish Christians who wanted to preserve Jewish Law. Some on each side viewed the others as sinners.

Mark, however, can point to Jesus' example and the need for Jesus' disciples to have the same attitude toward each other. A true disciple of Jesus' forfeits the right to condemn another. In Jesus' day, not all those who collected taxes for Rome were cheaters, but all were viewed that way.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

In the New Testament, meals often imply a connection with the eucharistic meal. During the eucharistic celebration, saints and sinners alike have a right to sit at the table with Jesus. Just as Jesus ate with sinners during his lifetime, he expects to share with sinners in the Eucharist. In reality, when we approach Jesus in Communion, we're not declaring that we are sinless and worthy of the Eucharist—we're admitting that we are weak human beings in need of sharing the Lord's table.

✧ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 3: The Question About Fasting (2:18–22)

In the third conflict story, the people come to Jesus to express their concern about his disciples' lack of fasting. The people note that both John the Baptist's and the Pharisees' disciples fast. Pharisees didn't have disciples, so the reference must have been to the Pharisees themselves, who performed weekly fasts. Since John the Baptist was an ascetic who must have fasted often, it isn't surprising that his disciples would too.

In answer to the question about fasting, Jesus declares that wedding guests can't fast while the bridegroom is present, but that when the bridegroom is taken away—as Jesus will be through his death—the disciples will fast.

Mark seems to be explaining to the early Church community why they should fast. The marriage and banquet image is found in the Old Testament to express a nuptial celebration between God and God's people.

Mark and the members of the early Church recognize Jesus' divinity, and therefore view him as the bridegroom. It isn't appropriate to fast while the bridegroom is present; once he leaves, however, it's time to fast. During Jesus' lifetime, the disciples should rejoice and feast in his presence because they're living through the period of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Mark, knowing the end of the story, has Jesus proclaim that once the bridegroom "is taken away"—a reference to his death—the disciples will have reason to fast.

Mark wrote his gospel at a time when Christians were still conflicted about the need to remain faithful to all the directives of the Law of Moses. After Jesus' death his followers fast, but not for the same reason the Pharisees fast. The disciples' fast will take place in union with Jesus the Christ, the Son of God—not to the prescription of the Mosaic Law, but in memory of Jesus Christ.

In the two parables Mark adds to this third conflict story, Jesus states that the new law cannot be made to fit the old law. Like a new patch on an old cloth, it will pull away at the first washing when it shrinks, and the tear will be worse than before. The second parable speaks about new wine in old wineskins. The new wine will break the old wineskins, and the wine will be lost. The new law and reason for fasting fulfills the old, but it can't be made to fit into the old. Many other Jewish customs and traditions won't fit the new way of life flowing from Jesus' message.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

A woman at a wedding reception filled her plate with everything she could get on it. When she passed a friend, the friend said, "I thought you were on a diet." The woman answered, "I am, but I wouldn't insult the bride and groom by dieting at a wedding." Jesus uses a similar excuse for his disciples' not fasting. It's now a time for celebrating, but the time for fasting (our time) will come later. The Church today recognizes the value of fasting as a form of penance and prayer. We don't fast for the sake of fasting or to diet, but to be conscious of making a sacrifice for the sake of God.

✕ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 4: The Disciples and the Sabbath (2:23–28)

In the fourth conflict story, the Pharisees complain directly to Jesus when they see his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees apparently considered plucking to be equivalent to harvesting, so they judge the disciples to be violating the Sabbath. Jesus responds by alluding to an event in the life of David, who was revered by the Jewish leadership. He had entered the Temple with his army and eaten the Temple bread reserved for the priests (1 Samuel 21:1–7). Because of their need, David and his army were no longer bound by the Mosaic Law, but were actually bound by the higher law of nourishment for his troops. Mark mistakenly identifies Abiathar as high priest during the time of David, while Ahimelech, the father of Abiathar, was actually high priest at the time.

Mark includes two pronouncements in this story. The first—that the Sabbath was made for the sake of human beings, not vice versa—most likely belonged to the story. The second pronouncement, which is placed by Mark, states that the Son of Man (Jesus) is Lord, even of the Sabbath. This last statement emphasizes Jesus’ divine authority and reflects the faith of the early Church after Jesus’ resurrection. It’s unlikely that Jesus would at this point refer to himself by using the image of the Son of Man as a sign of his divinity.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

The author of the Book of Genesis tells us, “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation” (2:3). The Sabbath was meant to be a day for holiness, a day when human beings rest from their labor and praise God. God gave us the Sabbath rest for the sake of building a relationship between human beings and God, not for the sake of placing numerous burdens on human beings. Jesus, as God, is indeed the Lord of the Sabbath and has the right to correct false interpretations of the Sabbath rest.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 5: A Man With a Withered Hand (3:1–6)

In the fifth and final conflict story, Jesus sets the scene. In a synagogue, Jesus knows his adversaries are watching him closely when he invites a man with a shriveled hand to stand before him. The Pharisees seek to accuse Jesus of breaking the law that forbids healing on the Sabbath unless there is danger of death. Jesus has already challenged the Pharisees about their strict interpretations of Sabbath observance. They're seething over past conflicts with Jesus, and they're anxious to trap Jesus in an act of violating the Sabbath.

Jesus asks whether a person may perform a good deed on the Sabbath if not performing it would be evil. Since the Pharisees can't admit that refusing to cure a person on the Sabbath is indeed an evil act without contradicting their strict rules and condemning themselves, they remain silent. Jesus gets angry and grieves their refusal to answer him. His intent isn't to make fools of them, but to educate them about God's attitude toward Sabbath Law.

Jesus heals the withered hand. The shadow of the cross again falls over the narrative as an unlikely alliance forms between the Pharisees and Herod's followers, and they begin to plot Jesus' death. The religious leaders can condemn someone, but they don't have the authority to carry out the order. Only civil authorities can command someone's death. The Pharisees and Herod's followers are working together to carry out Jesus' death sentence.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

This Scripture passage speaks of mercy while condemning a rigidity that ignores the needs of the health of human beings. Like many other passages in Scripture, the law of love of God and neighbor supersedes every rigid interpretation of the Law. The Lord's Day is a day for doing good, not evil. It's a day for saving life, not destroying it. Jesus was angry and grieved that religious leaders distorted the meaning of the Sabbath.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Review Questions

1. Why is it important for Jesus to heal the paralyzed man?
2. Why do the scribes see Jesus as blaspheming when he claims to forgive sins?
3. Why do the Pharisees get upset when Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners? How does Jesus respond to their reaction?
4. Who is Levi?
5. What is the significance of the Pharisees' complaint to Jesus' disciples?
6. What reason does Jesus give for his disciples' not fasting?
7. What is the meaning of Jesus' parables about a new patch on an old cloth and new wine in old wineskins?
8. What is the problem with plucking grain on the Sabbath, and how does Jesus respond to the complaint?
9. Why does conflict arise when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath?
10. What is the significance of the Pharisees' and Herodians' plans for Jesus' death?