

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Last Week

What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem

by

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This study guide has two parts. Part One contains suggestions for using this book in a group, such as a class or reading group in a congregational setting. Part Two contains specific questions for each chapter and is relevant for individual readers as well as for groups.

PART ONE: A LEADER'S GUIDE FOR GROUP USE

This discussion is best done in ten sessions. Group leaders should not feel that they must be an “expert” on the Bible, the Gospels, Jesus, or Holy Week. Rather, the leader’s primary role is to facilitate discussion. We suggest beginning or ending each session with a “centering time,” which might include a prayer, song, reading, or a contemplative time.

FIRST SESSION

The primary purpose of this session is group formation through facilitating introductory conversations among participants. *Materials.* Each participant will need paper and pen/pencil for a writing exercise.

First Step: Introductions

Participants should introduce themselves briefly with the following information: *their name, where they grew up, the denomination in which they grew up, and whether church was an important part of their childhood.*

If the group is small enough to sit in a circle, you may wish to do this step within the group as a whole. If it is a larger group

(more than 25 or so), you may wish to divide into smaller groups for the sake of this exercise.

Second Step: A "Memory" Exercise

Total time: about 25 minutes

Give the group 3 or 4 minutes of silence to remember and write in response to the following "thought-starters:"

What is your earliest memory associated with Jesus? [The leader may want to suggest ways of "triggering" memories. A memory might be in connection with church or Sunday school, family, a Christian holiday, a song, a picture, or an experience.] If you can remember back to your pre-school years, that's great. But if not, describe an early memory, and how old you were.

Give the group another 3 or 4 minutes of silence to remember and to write about the following:

By the end of childhood (around age 10 or 12), what "package" understanding of Jesus had formed in your mind? If someone had asked you, "Tell me about Jesus," what would you have said? Who was he? Why did he matter? [The leader may wish to comment: Even if you grew up outside the church, everyone growing up in Western culture forms some impression of Jesus by the end of childhood.]

Then, if you have not already done so, break into small groups for 15–20 minutes of discussion. Tell them to do two

“go-arounds.” In the first go-around, have them respond to the first question. In the second go-around, respond to the second question. Tell them not to respond to what they’re hearing until they’ve completed both go-arounds; their “task” is to hear what each person has to say. When the two go-arounds are complete, they are then free (and encouraged) to engage in conversation with each other about what they’ve heard.

Sitting in a circle, have each group member respond in turn to the first question, and then go around the circle again and respond to the second question. Group members should hold their comments and listen to everyone’s responses. Then, they should feel free to engage in a conversation with one another about what they have heard.

If time permits, an additional memory exercise is provided below. Again, give them 3 or 4 minutes of silence for thinking and writing. They need not respond to all of the suggestions. Rather, the suggestions are intended to trigger memories.

What memories from your childhood or early teen years do you have about the season of Lent? Holy Week? Good Friday? Easter? What was this time of year about for you?

What does Lent mean to you now? Holy Week? Good Friday and Easter? What puzzles do you have about any or all of these holy days?

Then, follow with one of these three options:

1. If you have time, have them report their responses to one or both of the above questions in small groups.

2. If you don't have time for small groups, you might keep them in the large group and invite as many people to respond as you do have time for. For example: "We have about 10 minutes; let's hear from as many of you as we can in that amount of time."
3. If there isn't time for small-group conversation or large-group sharing, encourage participants to treat their memories and thoughts about Lent, Holy Week, and so forth, as a "self-awareness" exercise, to think about what they've come up with, and to bring this awareness to the readings and conversations for the rest of the course.

Finally, this first session should include information about what they are to read for each session and encouragement to consider the questions for each chapter in this study guide.

FOR EACH OF THE SESSIONS FOR WHICH THEY READ A CHAPTER OR CHAPTERS

In addition to thinking about the questions for each of the chapters in Part Two of this guide, encourage participants to consider the following general questions:*

1. What stands out for you? Did you learn something new? Or discover something that you perhaps knew before, but that has taken on a new significance?
2. Is there something from this chapter that puzzles you, either because it's not clear or because you wonder about the implications, that you would like to clarify?

3. What topics from this chapter would you like to discuss so you can hear other's perspectives?

CONCLUDING SESSION

The purpose of the final session is to have participants reflect on and share what this experience has meant to them. The following “menu” of questions provides suggestions for what they might be invited to think and write about, and then share, either in small groups, or in the large group, or both. If both: after the small groups have had time to talk, you could use a measured amount of time for people to share in the large group, even if this involves repeating what they may have said in their small group.

1. *What's something from the experience of reading and talking about the book that you want to take with you; that you don't want to forget?* This could be something very specific, or something more general. For example, it might be an insight or awareness about how to read the Bible; about the meaning of Holy Week, Good Friday, Easter; or about a particular text.
2. Has your understanding of Holy Week, or Good Friday, or Easter changed? If so, how?
3. Has your understanding of Jesus—your way of seeing Jesus—been affected by this experience? If so, how?
4. Has this experience affected your understanding of the Christian life and what it means to take it seriously? If so, in what way?

5. Is there anything you (the participants) want to say to the group as we end?

PART TWO: QUESTIONS FOR EACH CHAPTER

To the reader: *It is important to read the preface, pp. vii-xii, before reading Chapter 1. In particular, note the difference between a narrow understanding of Jesus's passion and a broader one. What is each made up of? And why did the authors choose Mark's account?*

CHAPTER ONE: PALM SUNDAY

In addition to treating Mark's account of the first day of Holy Week, this chapter also contains information essential for understanding this book and the events of Jesus's final week. If the book is being used in a group setting, you may wish to begin by inviting the group to share memories of Palm Sunday from childhood and what it meant to them.

1. What are the two processions, and what do they signify?
2. An important theme of the chapter is Jerusalem's role and ambiguity.
 - What is significant about this theme in the Jewish Bible and Jewish practice?

- What had its role and significance become in the time of Jesus?
 - What was Pilate's role in the governance of Jerusalem and Judea?
 - What was the economic situation in the Jewish homeland in the time of Jesus?
3. What role does Jerusalem play in the Gospel of Mark?
 4. What impression do you get of Jesus from this chapter?

CHAPTER TWO: MONDAY

1. How do you understand the method and meaning of the Markan *frames*?
2. Explain how those *frames* work in Mark 3:20–35.
3. Interpret what is at stake for Mark in the *frames* of 5:21–43 and 6:7–30.
4. Use your understanding of Mark's *frames* to explain why he wrote that Jesus cursed a fruitless fig tree out of season.
5. How does the derivation of the word *sacrifice* from the Latin *sacrum facere* ("to make sacred") explain the theory and practice of blood/animal sacrifice?
6. Why had the temple and high-priesthood become deeply ambiguous—both good and bad—for many first-century Jews?
7. Explain how both word and deed concerning the temple in Jeremiah 7 and 26 should interpret Jesus's words and deeds in Mark 11:15–18.

8. How do the Entrance incident and Temple incident create twin symbolic actions for Mark?
 - Were they both acts of nonviolent resistance?
 - If so, against what?
 - If so, were they intentional as a set?
 - Was Jesus deliberately seeking martyrdom?

CHAPTER THREE: TUESDAY

1. The first two episodes concern a question brought by the authorities and then a parable about the authorities. What does this suggest about the conflict of the week? Is there anything in particular that surprised you about these two stories, or that you want to highlight or underline?
2. The third episode is one of the most familiar texts from this part of Mark; as an older translation puts it, “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and unto God that which is God’s.” What have you understood this passage to mean, or how have you heard it interpreted? How do you understand it after reading this chapter?
3. What struck you about “the little apocalypse” in Mark 13?
4. How has this chapter added to your picture of Jesus or your understanding of his last week?

CHAPTER FOUR: WEDNESDAY

1. Why is Mark's emphasis that Jesus was protected from the high-priestly authorities by the Jerusalem crowd on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday so important for understanding the logic of his story?
 - Does that help you answer the last unit in Monday's Question 8: "Was Jesus deliberately seeking martyrdom?"?
 - Does that help you understand the importance of Judas's role in Mark's narrative?
2. Mark has Jesus give three clear prophecies of his death and resurrection as he journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem in chapters 8–10, and each has a similar triple sequence of *prophecy* from Jesus, *reaction* by his disciples, and *response* from Jesus.
 - Compare the main similarities and differences between the content of each triple sequence in Mark 8, 9, and 10.
 - What is the point of Mark's emphasis on the repeated failure of the disciples to react properly in those three sequences?
 - Do you find any past, present, and future warning from Mark to us in those three sequences?
3. Look carefully once again at those three *prophecy-reaction-response* sequences:
 - What does Jesus expect from his followers in terms of his death and resurrection?

- Is it about literal and/or metaphorical death and resurrection?
 - If it is about literal death and resurrection as a possibility and metaphorical death and resurrection as an actuality, what does that latter state entail?
 - In terms of death and resurrection, is Jesus announcing substitution by him or demanding participation with him?
 - And, once again, because literal martyrdom is quite clear, what does metaphorical martyrdom involve?
4. Explain why the Unnamed Woman receives such unique and supreme praise from Jesus at the start of Mark 14.
- What did she do to deserve that praise?
 - Was she the first follower to believe in Jesus's death and resurrection by faith in his word alone?
 - Explain Mark's frames of Male Traitor and Female Anointer.
 - Do we know the motives for Judas's betrayal of Jesus?

CHAPTER FIVE: THURSDAY

1. Compare the similarities and differences in Mark's and John's accounts of Holy Thursday evening.
2. Explain the complex web of meanings in Mark's version of the Last Supper.
 - How does it continue and climax the meal-practice of Jesus?

- How does it recall and reflect the multiplication of the loaves and fishes in Mark 6?
 - How is it a new Passover Meal and what does that mean?
 - What is the meaning of equating bread-and-wine with body-and-blood? For Jesus at Supper then? For us at Eucharist now?
3. How and why does the story of Jesus in Gethsemane differ in the accounts of Mark and John?
 4. The high priest asked Jesus if he was the Messiah and Son of God, but Jesus, while accepting those titles, affirmed himself, rather, as the Son of Man.
 - Explain the meaning and function of the phrase “one like a son of man” in Daniel 7.
 - What does the phrase “one like a son of man” have to do with the kingdom of God on earth?
 - Explain how Jesus is for Mark both the present and future Son of Man. What does that already-present imply?
 5. How does the presence of the Son of Man and the presence of the kingdom of God connect together for Mark?
 6. Explain the function and effect of Mark’s framing his account of Jesus’s confession with Peter’s denial.

CHAPTER SIX: GOOD FRIDAY

If the book is being used in a group setting, you may wish to begin by inviting participants to share memories of Good Fri-

day or their understanding of the death of Jesus from childhood and what it meant to them then: What do you remember about what Good Friday was like when you were a child? Did your family or church pay much attention to it? Do you recall particular hymns associated with it? What did the death of Jesus mean to you then?

1. A major theme of this chapter is “substitutionary atonement,” or “substitutionary sacrifice,” as a way of understanding the meaning of Jesus’s death. What do you understand this to mean? Were you taught this way of understanding Jesus’s death? Has it ever caused problems for you?
2. Who is involved in Jesus’s condemnation to execution?
3. What was the significance of crucifixion as a form of capital punishment?
4. The chapter suggests that the darkness from noon to 3 p.m. and the tearing of the temple curtain at the time of Jesus’ death are symbolic. What do you understand each of these to mean?
5. Did Jesus’s death have to happen? What does the chapter say? What do you think?

CHAPTER SEVEN: SATURDAY

1. How does the Nicene Creed differ from the Apostles’ Creed with regard to the Descent into Hell by Jesus? What is meant by the equivalent expression, the “Harrowing of Hell” by Jesus?

2. What are the two main ways in which God saves and vindicates the persecuted and condemned Righteous Ones in the Christian Old Testament?
3. What—first for Judaism and then for Jewish Christianity—was meant by eschatology and especially by apocalyptic eschatology? Is this still of any importance?
4. Why did some groups within Judaism claim there would be a bodily resurrection for the martyrs, the just, or all people? When and how did such a belief originate?
5. How and why did the belief in a general bodily resurrection connect with a belief in apocalyptic eschatology?
6. How was apocalyptic eschatology expected to transform the physical, the animal, and the social world here below upon the earth? Was that all useless dreaming about an impossible utopia?
7. In the Harrowing of Hell tradition, what is the connection between the bodily resurrection of Jesus and the general resurrection of the martyrs and the Just Ones?
 - In story? In hymn? In image?
 - Why was this eventually lost to Western Christianity? Should we mourn that loss?
8. Explain why the claim of already-present for the kingdom of God and the Son of Man is at the heart of the new proclamation of Jesus in Mark.
 - Are we waiting for God to transform the earth from violent injustice to nonviolent justice alone, or is God waiting for us to cooperate in doing it together?

- Is the revelation in Mark's apocalyptic eschatology about the imminence or the presence of the kingdom of God?

CHAPTER EIGHT: EASTER SUNDAY

Most of us have memories of Easter, as we have memories of Christmas. Thus, if the book is being used in a group setting, you may wish to begin by inviting participants to share memories of Easter from childhood and what it meant to them then: What do you remember about what Easter was like when you were a child? Did your family pay much attention to it? Do you recall particular hymns associated with it? What did Easter mean to you then?

1. What do you understand as the difference between seeing the stories of Easter as history or as parable?
2. What strikes you about Mark's story of Easter?
3. What strikes you about the stories of Easter in the other-Gospels?
4. According to the chapter, what are the central meanings of the stories of Easter taken together?
5. How is Paul's understanding of the meaning of Jesus' resurrection like that in the Gospels, and what does he add?
6. What does the chapter say about "Easter and Christian life today," and what do you think of the claims made in this section?
7. What does Easter mean to you?