

Jesus called twelve disciples—or learners—to walk with him. At the beginning, the Twelve thought they understood where their journey with Jesus would take them. However, Jesus often said puzzling things that they did not understand. The disciples had expectations that were not fulfilled. Yet, in spite of their misunderstandings and disappointments, they continued to walk with Jesus. As they did, they began to discover what it meant to truly follow him.

As you read this story, you also are invited to discover what walking with Jesus means and to observe the fullness of life he has to offer.

Who wrote this story?

Traditions from early followers of Jesus state that the author was Mark. This was most likely John Mark, an associate of Peter, one of the closest followers of Jesus. Peter likely provided the eyewitness accounts that Mark wrote down. While the most probable author is Mark, it is significant that the story itself seems unconcerned with who wrote it.

Why was this story written?

Mark's purpose is to highlight the importance of understanding the identity of Jesus, and its implication for our lives. Jesus interacts with several groups throughout the story. The demons or evil spirits understand immediately who Jesus was and cried out for mercy. The religious leaders may have known exactly who Jesus was, but they knew he was a threat to them and tried to get rid of him. The crowds of people were amazed at what Jesus said and did, and seemed to follow him merely out of curiosity. Jesus' disciples or learners—the ones who should have understood who Jesus was—never seemed to grasp all that Jesus was teaching.

Throughout this story, Mark highlights the miracles that Jesus performed, such as the healing of the deaf and mute man in the Decapolis and the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida. Jesus' actions symbolize what needed to happen to each person in the story—and indeed to each one of us—in order to understand him. As we walk with Jesus, he can work a miracle so that we can hear what he is saying, see who he is, and speak correctly about him.

Read Mark 1:1-13

1. What is the book of Mark “all about” (vs 1)?

[The Gospel of Mark wastes no time getting to the point. Mark, a first-century Christian, wants everyone to know the significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The book of Mark is most likely the apostle Peter's preaching, his memoirs, written down by Mark (2 Peter 1:13-15).]

2. Who is John “the baptizer,” and exactly how did John “prepare” people's hearts for the coming of Jesus?

[John held up God's standard (notice Luke 3:1-14, which provides more detail of John's message). As people realized how short they had fallen of God's standard, they confessed their sins, and changed their minds and actions (this is what the word, “repent,” means.)]

3. Why were the people baptized by John? Why are people baptized today?

[John preached that people should be baptized to show that they had turned from their sins and turned to God to be forgiven.]

4. What happened after Jesus was baptized (vss 10-11)? What did this mean?

[Jesus did not need to be baptized for forgiveness of his sin (He was without sin). Jesus' baptism was a way of saying "yes" to God—an expression of His willingness to accept and submit to God's mission for His life (Mark 10:45) and all that it entailed—specifically His death as God's way of making things right between us and Himself (Matthew 3:15 explains that Jesus' baptism was to "do every right thing," or to "do all things that are God's will").

After His baptism, God expressed His affirmation and approval of Jesus and His mission. In other words, Jesus is not acting on His own behalf, but rather God's. Notice two other instances of God's affirmation of Jesus and His mission—His transfiguration (Mark 9:7) and crucifixion (Mark 15:39).]

Read Mark 1:14-20

1. What did Jesus come to do? What was Jesus' message (vs 15)? What does "kingdom" mean?

[Jesus came to *proclaim* good news (vss 14-15) and *prepare* good men (vs 17). Jesus demanded that people turn away from their self-centered way of living, and embrace God's direction, or rule in their lives. Fundamentally, the kingdom of God is anywhere God's will is done.]

2. Initially, what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus (vs 17)?

[A follower of Jesus is one who does the will of God (notice Mark 3:35) and encourages others to do likewise. Jesus doesn't ask us to wait until we have our lives all put together before we follow. He asks us to follow Him where we are right now.]

Read Mark 1:21-45

1. What was it about Jesus that was attractive? How do you think you would have felt and reacted if you had seen and heard the same things?

[The people were amazed at what Jesus *said* (vs 22) and *did* (vs 27). Jesus taught and acted with *authority*. The people only recognized that Jesus had authority, but the man with an evil spirit recognized that Jesus' authority came from God, and that Jesus' mission was to destroy the work of Satan (vs 24). Notice Hebrews 2:14-15.]

2. Why is it important for us to understand the authority of Jesus?

[The word, "authority," is an important term in the book of Mark. Throughout the first half of the book, Mark is forcing us (the reader) to address the question, "Who is Jesus?" Recognizing Jesus' authority is vitally important, because as a follower of Jesus, it's unlikely that you will be obedient to what He says unless you recognize who He is—He is Lord.]

3. Why was prayer important to Jesus (vss 35-39)?

[Prayer was an opportunity to refocus and submit to God's will. Jesus could have stayed busy meeting everyone's physical needs, but busyness wasn't His Father's business! The people wanted mere *relief*, but Jesus' primary task was to call people to *repentance*.]

Read Mark 2:1-22

1. What surprises you about the way in which Jesus responds to the men who brought their friend to be healed (vs 5)? Why is this more important?

[Jesus initially forgave the paralytic, rather than healing him. Mark wants us to recognize that Jesus has authority to forgive sins. Our spiritual need of being reconciled to God is far more important than any physical need. Again, through the unspoken question on the minds of the religious leaders (vss 7-8), Mark is addressing the issue, "*Who is Jesus?*"¹

2. What made sinners and tax collectors want to eat with Jesus (vs 15)? What is Jesus' message to the self-righteous (vs 17)?

[Jesus offered people the possibility of a changed life. Unlike the religious leaders, Jesus did not "write off" people, but believed that the worst of sinners could become children of God. Jesus dealt with sinners as if being spiritually sick was only a current condition, not an unchangeable diagnosis. It's possible to be physically lost, and not know it. Recognizing that you are lost is actually the first step in finding the right direction. The same is true spiritually.]

3. What kind of people (i.e., cloth or wineskin) will accept the good news of God's kingdom, or rule (vss 21-22)? Would you qualify as one of His "wineskins?" How?

[God always comes through for those who recognize their need for His forgiveness and direction in their lives. Jesus said that you are blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule (Matthew 5:3). In fact, the more hopeless your situation, the more likely your salvation (Mark 2:17)!]

Read Mark 2:23-3:19

1. Mark contrasts the man whose hand was crippled, with certain religious leaders who were crippled in their hearts (actually "stubborn," Mark 3:5). From this passage, how would you characterize a "stubborn" or "hard" heart (2:23-3:6)?

[Throughout chapters 2-3, Mark records Jesus' growing conflict with the religious leaders of the day (notice 1:22; 2:6, 16, 18, 24; 3:2, 6). Their hardness of heart was reflected in a number of ways: 1) *A closed mind*—"Have you never read..." (vs 25). They were familiar with the story of David and the exception made about eating the consecrated bread (see 1 Samuel 21:1-6). 2) *A critical outlook*—"Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus..." (vs 2). 3) *A vengeful spirit*—"...went out and began to plot...how they might kill Jesus." (vs 6). Even more ironic than Pharisees and Herodians agreeing to work together was the fact that these religious leaders were guilty of what they were charging Jesus—doing evil on the Sabbath (notice vs 4)!]

2. What is most important to Jesus? What is most important to the religious leaders? Have you ever seen people hurt by religious rules or institutions?

[Jesus was interested in helping people. On the other hand, the religious leaders were interested only in the perfunctory keeping of their law, even if it meant hurting people. The religious leaders were so concerned to make God *consistent*, they wouldn't allow God be *merciful*. They had lost sight of the very reason that the Sabbath was given by God: as a way of blessing people (vs 27). In fact, Jesus said that the greatest command—to love God, and the second—to love others, basically summarizes the entire law (Matthew 22:37-40).]

Read Mark 3:20-30

1. The religious leaders attempt to discredit Jesus by accusing him of being in league with Satan (vs 22). Explain the logic of Jesus' response to their accusation (vss 23-27).

[The religious leaders were very hostile toward Jesus, and jealous of his popularity and authority. They attempt to discredit Jesus by linking him with Satan. Their conclusion is irrational, Jesus explains, because any entity divided against itself cannot stand, whether it be a kingdom (country), a house (household or family), or Satan himself. The religious leaders weren't genuinely confused or mistaken about Jesus' identity (notice Jesus' assurance in John 7:17). They were so fixed in their opposition of Jesus, that they would attribute the saving acts of God to the destructive power of Satan—and so were guilty of slandering God.]

2. What does Jesus' response reveal about his identity and mission, and what are the implications for your life?

[Jesus associates his ability to cast out demons as the binding of Satan ("a strong man") and the plundering of his possessions. Jesus is the enemy of Satan (notice the summary of Jesus' work in Hebrews 2:14-15). Jesus' warning (vss 28-29) is not a statement about God's refusal to forgive (notice vs 28), but about man's deliberate rejection of the identity of Jesus.]

Read Mark 3:31-4:20

1. According to Jesus, who is in the "family of God" (vss 31-35)? How does this relate to the story Jesus tells about the scattered seed (Mark 4:1-9)?

[Jesus' spiritual family consists of anyone who hears God's word and puts it into practice (vs 35). Jesus tells a story about a farmer who scattered seed. The seed represents God's word, and the various soils represent our hearts. Jesus used the story to teach that God blesses those who eagerly accept and respond to His word (vs 20).]

2. Why does Jesus say that understanding this story (parable) is absolutely necessary for understanding other parables (vs 13)? What kind of listener are you?

[Jesus' strong encouragement to "listen" (vss 3, 9) brackets this parable and reinforces the urgency of nurturing a receptive heart—one that is eager to respond to God. A *hard* heart (a stubborn or resistant spirit, either because of pride, fear or bitterness), a *shallow* heart (never getting beyond the "thinking about it" stage), or *crowded* heart (thinking more about money and "stuff" and what it can do than about God and what He can do) will prevent us from being able to hear and respond obediently to any of God's truth. Jesus used a different metaphor to teach the same truth in Matthew 7:24-27. You can always tell when a person is really hearing and accepting God's word. Invariably, there is good change in their life!]

Read Mark 4:21-41

1. What is the key to being able to hear and receive more of God's word (vs 24)? In what way is the kingdom of God (God's rule) like a mustard seed (vs 30)? What implication does this have for *your* life?

[Obedience to God's word is the key to receiving more of God's blessing in your life. His word is powerful. Any faith *in* God (trust to obediently take God at his word), no matter how small, is far better than any knowledge *about* God, regardless of how great. On the other hand, failing to apply what one understands will inevitably lead to spiritual atrophy.]

2. What was Jesus teaching his disciples by sleeping though the storm? By rebuking it?

[Teachers often test their students, not to fail them, but to bring out the best in them. Perhaps Jesus slept through the storm in order to bring out the best in his disciples—a confidence or trust in his provision rather than their own. Although the disciples failed the test initially (vs 40), Jesus calms the storm in order to beg the question that runs throughout the first half of Mark's gospel: "*Who is Jesus?*" (vs 41).]

Read Mark 5:1-20

1. Why were the people afraid after seeing the man "clothed and in his right mind" (vs 15)? Why did they react as they did? What does this story say about their values?

[They were fearful, and asked Jesus to leave their region (vs 17). At first, it's hard to comprehend by they responded this way, and yet in one sense we relate to it very well. Have you ever seen a friend undergo a dramatic change and feel threatened by it? Sometimes people don't like to see others change because they're threatened by the changes that it might imply for their own lives. However, the good news is that Jesus can give anyone, in any condition, the ability to change.]

Rather than telling the man to keep quiet (as he had done so many times earlier) Jesus encouraged the man to share what the Lord had done for him. Most likely this is because he lived in a predominately non-Jewish area, and people wouldn't not have been susceptible to Jewish misconceptions about the identity of Jesus. Later it is evident that the man's influence helped people become more receptive to Jesus (notice Mark 6:53-56).]

2. What did the disciples learn about Jesus on this day?

Read Mark 5:21-43

1. Why does Jesus single out the sick woman in the crowd (vs 34)? What does her story teach you about what is important to Jesus?

[Of all the people pressing for Jesus' attention, two get through to him in this story because of their faith. It didn't matter to Jesus that she came as a last resort (notice vs 26). It mattered only that she came. Jesus singled her out of the crowd as a way of giving her an opportunity of expressing her faith, and as a way of illustrating what most pleases God—faith expressing itself in action (Hebrews 11:1, 6). It's one thing to *throng* Jesus, another to *trust*.]

2. Although Jairus and the sick woman are different in many ways, what do they have in common? What does the conclusion of this story teach you about Jesus? About what it means to follow him?

[They have many things in common—a desperate need, fear (vss 33, 36), but most importantly, faith in Jesus. Faith is a conviction that God can and will do what is right (Hebrews 11:1, 6). Jesus has power even over death itself.]

Read Mark 6:1-6

1. What happens when Jesus returned home? How do people respond to his teaching? Why were some offended? In contrast, what does Jesus say is the reason for their failure to respond to his teaching (vs 6)?

[Many were amazed, yet some were offended by Jesus' apparent lack of credentials (vss 2-3). The problem, however, according to Jesus, was their lack of faith (vs 6). "Believing" (seriously pursuing God's will) wasn't a high priority in their lives, otherwise they would have accepted (and submitted) to the authority inherent in his teachings and miracles (notice John 7:17). All of us have our doubts. What we don't always realize is that the doubts we cherish are often arbitrary. We decide what we will doubt, what we will not doubt. We need to be careful about the doubts we allow to govern our lives.]

2. Is "believing" a high priority in your life? How has familiarity with Jesus prevented you from "really" seeing who His is?

[All of us have our doubts. What we don't always realize is that the doubts we cherish are often arbitrary. We decide what we will doubt, and what we will not doubt. It's often a moral issue—a matter of the will, not the intellect. We need to be careful about the "doubts" we allow to govern our lives.]

Read Mark 6:7-29

1. What two things did Jesus send the Twelve out to do? Why are the two indispensable?

[Jesus sent them out with a *message*, and mission of *mercy*. The world grants authority to people who show compassion (i.e., Theresa of Calcutta). Jesus' sending of the twelve is sometimes called "the limited commission," and is an example of what Jesus expects of all his followers. Disciples are called to share a life-transforming message with those around them, with genuine compassion.]

2. Why did Mark include this "flashback" to the story about Herod and John the baptizer?

[Mark "sandwiches" this flashback between the sending out of the disciples (vss 6-13) and their return (vss 30-31). It serves as an illustration of what faithfulness to God entails. In other words, What did it cost John to be faithful to God? What does this tell *you* about being faithful to God?

Herod provides a good reminder of the danger of hearing and knowing the truth, and yet never responding (changing one's ways). There's a big difference between *conviction* and *conversion*! When have you felt like Herod—attracted to the truth but afraid to follow through with it?]

Read Mark 6:30-44

1. What does it mean to be “like a sheep without a shepherd” (vs 34)? Is there any sense in which you can relate?
2. What do you learn from this story about Jesus’ ability to meet physical need? What are the implications of this story for your *own* life?

[Obviously, this miraculous feeding teaches us that “little is much, if God is in it!” Rather than saying, “we don’t have enough,” Jesus says “bring what you have” (vss 37-38). *Our* resources will never be enough; but *God’s* resources can never be exhausted. Besides the miracle itself, we’re reminded that the demands of serving people (ministry) don’t easily fit into a schedule (vss 30-34). When Jesus felt “squeezed,” genuine concern and compassion for people spilled out!]

Read Mark 6:45-56

1. The gospel of John informs us that the crowds (perhaps wrongly stirred up by Jesus’ own disciples) were so enthusiastic about the miraculous feeding, that they wanted to make Jesus a king (John 6:15). How does this explain why Jesus dismissed the disciples and the crowds so abruptly? Why do you think Jesus wanted to pray alone?

[John’s comment implies the strong likelihood that both the disciples and the crowds wanted to make Jesus a king. Of course, they had their own concept of what a king should be about—primarily that of a political liberator. However, Jesus’ kingdom (his rule) is spiritual, not physical. They had the right word, but attached the wrong concept. Understanding this helps to explain why Jesus initially told his followers not to tell anyone who he was, for fear they would attach the wrong meaning (notice Mark 1:24, 25, 34; 3:12). Jesus’ mounting popularity and the crowd’s clamoring for a king could be quite tempting. Again, Jesus retreats in prayer in order to focus on *God’s* will (as opposed to his own, or anyone else’s) for his life.]

2. What should the disciples have perceived in the “lesson of the loaves” (vs 52) that would have prepared them for the storm they encountered?

[Jesus’ miraculous provision the day before (feeding of the 5000), should have given them confidence in his ability to provide for any need (the storm). The disciples had witnessed the miracle but missed its significance. Like the disciples, we often experience God provision one day, only to despair the next.]

Read Mark 7:1-23

1. What concerns the religious leaders about Jesus’ disciples (vs 5)? Why? The religious leaders were obsessed about the outside (externals), while ignoring the inside (attitudes of the heart). What practice or attitude is condemned by Jesus (vss 6-13)?

[Jesus condemns those who profess to honor God, but whose hearts are far away from him (vs 6). Jesus mentions their practice of Corban, as an example of how they excused themselves from honoring their parents (one of the 10 commandments, Exodus 20:12). By declaring something “Corban,” it was devoted to God (technically speaking) and could not be used to meet the needs of their parents.]

2. What happens when someone follows the teachings (traditions) of men instead of the commands of God (vss 8-13)? What's the heart of the matter, according to Jesus (vs 14)? Do you agree?

[1. It *disgraces* the needy (vsv 10-17). People's needs are usually put last. 2. It *displaces* scripture (vss 8-9, 13). By making their own teaching normative, God's Word is emptied of its authority. 3. It *dismisses* the heart (vss 20-23). As long as their focus was on the external, their hearts remained pretentious and unchanged. The heart of the matter, according to Jesus, is the matter of our heart (vss 20-23). While we tend to focus on the outside, God is concerned about a righteousness that works its way from the inside—out! When you put something under pressure, for example you squeeze an orange, you get what's inside. The same is true of people!]

Read Mark 7:24-37

1. How would Jesus' critics (earlier in this chapter) have viewed his trip to this area—an area outside of Jewish territory? How does Jesus' earlier teaching (in Mark 7:14-16) relate to this trip? What part does their attitude play into the way Jesus handles his encounter with this Syro-Phoenician woman?

[The religious leaders would have considered this area "unclean," and questioned the propriety of such a trip. In Matthew's account (Matthew 15:21-28), even Jesus' own disciples didn't believe the woman deserved their time of day. Jesus used this trip as an "object lesson" in order to drive home a point: Its not the outside that determines a person's ability to have a relationship with God, but rather a matter of what is on the inside. The woman is a perfect example of how everyone should respond to Jesus—she takes Jesus at his word and acts on it. And so, Jesus tells this woman, "You have great faith!" (Matthew 15:28).

This story sometimes offends people because it appears that Jesus is speaking harshly with the woman. However, the particular word ("dog") Jesus used was one that referred to a household pet. In that culture, people ate with their hands, and would use bread to wipe the grease from their hands. At the conclusion of a meal, they would then give the bread to their pets. The allusion was simply part of Jesus' explanation that his first calling was to take good news to the people of Israel, and a way of "drawing" his disciples into the conversation and the larger point he was trying to make.]

2. What was Jesus really trying to accomplish through this encounter as well as next (vss 31-38)? What do these stories teach you about Jesus, and how could you apply that truth to your own life?

[Jesus healed the woman's child. She needed to show the depth of her faith. The disciples needed to know the depth of Jesus' love. Jesus also healed the deaf and mute man, also considered an "outsider" by many because of his race.] Again, it's not the outside, but what's on the inside that matters. Jesus had a way of seeing past externals (occupation, clothing, race, etc). There aren't certain types of people whom God's love cannot reach.]

Read Mark 8:1-21

1. Why do you think Jesus performs one miracle, but refuses to do another for the religious leaders (vss 12-13)? What does Jesus mean by his warning (vs 15)?

[People show up with a need, and Jesus has compassion on them. They've given three days of their lives to hear Jesus teach. On the other hand, the religious leaders show up, not to question Jesus' *ability* to perform miracles, but the *legitimacy* of his power or authority (vs 11). It wasn't a matter of their *intellect*, but of their *will*—they had chosen to ignore what Jesus' miracles had revealed. Miracles had only hardened their opposition to Jesus. Jesus warns his disciples about the influence of the religious leaders' refusal to accept Jesus' authority for their lives.]

2. What should the disciples have understood at this point (vs 21)? How are the disciples like and unlike the religious leaders (vss 11-12)? If we are coming to see who Jesus is, how will our lives be different, according to this story?

[Throughout the first half of the book of Mark, the question has been raised repeatedly (though not directly), "*Who is Jesus?*" The question is essential, because his *authority* in our lives depends upon his *identity*. Many recognize Jesus' power (authority) and seek him out in faith (most of whom would be considered "outsiders"—the demon-possessed man, Jairus, the sick woman, the Syro-phoenician woman, the deaf and mute man). In contrast, many who would be considered "insiders" fail to recognize or acknowledge who Jesus is—the home town folks (6:3-4), the religious leaders (7:1-23), and even Jesus' own disciples (5:31; 6:52; 7:17-18; 8:18, 21). The disciples, however, haven't hardened their hearts against Jesus and are still willing to follow Jesus, even if the implications aren't exactly clear to them.]

Read Mark 8:22-30

1. Why does Jesus heal the man in stages instead of doing it instantly? Can Jesus also heal spiritual blindness? Is spiritual blindness cured instantly?

[The Bible does not answer this question directly. Certainly Jesus could have healed the man instantly if he so desired. It would seem, then, that Jesus deliberately chose to heal the man in stages as a way of illustrating the progression of the disciples from a state of complete spiritual blindness (as to Jesus' identity) to a state of partial sight (limited understanding), which is evident in the narratives which "sandwich" this story (Mark 8:18, 21, 27-33).]

2. How are the varied opinions about Jesus' identity similar to the healing of the blind man (vss 27-28)? Why is Jesus most concerned about his disciples' response (vs 29)? What do you think Peter had seen or heard that made him decide that Jesus was the Christ—the One whom God chose to save His people?

[The various opinions about Jesus' identity—John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets—reflect that many people recognized that Jesus was an important and powerful person. But like the blind man initially, their insight was only partial. Peter recognized that Jesus was a special person, the "anointed One" of God. But it will be obvious from what follows that Peter's understanding was also limited. The word, "Christ," is a name referring to "the One whom God chose to save His people."]

Read Mark 8:31-9:1

1. What are the four things does Jesus say must happen to him? Why does Peter react so strongly to what Jesus said? In turn, why is Jesus so strong in his rebuke of Peter?

[Jesus explained that being the One chosen by God meant that he must “suffer, be rejected, be killed, and rise again.” Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection are central elements of “God’s right way of making people right with Himself” (notice various summary passages in Scripture: Romans 3:21-26; 1Peter 2:24; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 6:23). What Jesus says about himself, however, is exactly opposite of what Peter expects. Jesus responds so harshly because, as well-intentioned as Peter might be, his expectations of Jesus were opposed to Jesus’ primary purpose in life—giving his life for others (Mark 10:45). Peter’s “sight” needed further correction, which is the focus of the last half of the book of Mark. At this point in the book, Mark shifts his focus from, “*Who is Jesus?*” to “*What, exactly, does that mean(for Jesus)?*” In other words, what’s the implication for *our* lives, “*What does it mean (for me) to follow Jesus?*” Following Jesus doesn’t mean anything less for us than what it meant for Jesus.]

2. What happens when someone “sees” Jesus and decides to follow him (vs 34)? What do you think about the “cost” of discipleship (following Jesus)? Has Jesus impressed you enough that you are willing to follow him to this extent?

[Following Jesus (discipleship) demands *faith*—a perception that eludes most people. Following Jesus also demands a *death*. Like Jesus, one denies his own self-centered orientation and begins living for God. As disciples, our task is not to *fashion* Jesus—according to our own expectations or desires. Rather, our task to *follow* Jesus—whatever that entails. Jesus explains that the way to have real life is to give up our lives everyday for God and His causes, and points out the futility of pursuing anything less (vss 35-37).]