

Discovering the Real Jesus **Leader's Notes by Rebecca Manley Pippert**

Leading *Discovering the Real Jesus* Studies

I remember the first time I heard of running a Bible study that was geared for seekers and skeptics. I was a university student studying in Spain, and attended a Christian international student conference in a castle nestled in the Austrian Alps.

I went to a seminar on evangelism and the speakers, Ada Lum and Ruth Siemens, began by asking, "How do we arouse the interest of our skeptic friends in Jesus?" Most unbelievers are not ready to receive Christ after hearing the gospel only once, nor are they usually ready to come with us to church. Yet even those who are turned off by the church are still curious about the person of Jesus.

So what do you do after you've prayed and asked God to guide you to people he is seeking? First, you have some spiritual conversations, in which you listen to their questions and develop a friendly relationship. *But then what do you do?* Ada and Ruth said that the next step is inviting our friends to take a look at Jesus. Jesus is so different from what skeptics assume he will be like. He is so radical, beautiful, unpredictable and irresistible. The greatest shortcut in evangelism, they said, is allowing our friends to see the real Jesus!

Although I still had questions, I was hooked. It made sense to me—and I have been doing Seeker Bible Studies ever since! In our global evangelism ministry I have seen Seeker Studies started on all six continents with extraordinary fruit.

Perhaps you have some of the same questions that I had back then:

Will they come?

I was surprised to discover that people were interested when they realized the group was a "safe place," where they could come with their questions and wouldn't be made to feel embarrassed by their lack of Bible knowledge. For many it also helped if they realized that other seekers were coming as well. But we can also offer a one-to-one study if that would be more comfortable for the seeker. If it is a small group of unbelievers, then remember not to flood the group with Christians! *Discovering the Real Jesus* is a study geared for seekers and skeptics. Not everyone I've invited to a Seeker Bible Study has accepted, but I've learned that "no" doesn't mean "never."

But they don't accept the Bible is God's word, nor do they believe it's true!

We aren't asking them to! We aren't asking them to believe anything—rather, we are inviting them to look at the primary source material of the Christian faith and come to their own conclusions about who Jesus is. The aim, we tell them, is to be informed enough to make an intelligent decision.

How do you invite someone to come?

I often say after I've had a spiritual discussion with someone, "Your questions are so good. But may I ask you something? Have you ever actually read the Bible as an adult? How can you make an intelligent decision about Christianity if you've never looked at what Jesus says? I think it'd be fascinating to look at one story about Jesus so you can see what you think. Think of it like a book club, only the book is the Bible. If you like it, then we can look at other stories too." Depending on the seeker, I may invite other seekers to come too—or do a one-to-one study.

How do I prepare?

Remember always to read and re-read the passage first, carefully and prayerfully, without looking at the *Discovering the Real Jesus* Study Guide. Write down any questions you have, or questions you think seekers might have, about the passage. Then look at the questions in the Study Guide. Also, be sure to write some secondary questions to use after my questions. Be ready with alternative ways of asking questions in case your seeker friends seem stuck or puzzled.

After doing all of the above, only *then* should you read this Leader's Guide. The Leader's Guide is designed to help you gain deeper insight into and clarity about the passage. Remember that the Leader's Guide is intended to help you understand the passage at a deeper level, but it's not intended for you to teach with. Sometimes there may be something that you need to get clarity on—especially if it isn't immediately obvious from the text. Your primary job is to draw out the answers from the participants, not teach the passage to them. So learn from the Leader's Guide, but don't print it out or read from it to the group. This is an inductive study, meaning it uses an approach of self-discovery. We want seekers to grapple with the text (for this reason there are no leader's notes on the very straightforward questions where the answers can be found directly Bible passage). In a Seeker Study we won't be able to dot every "I" and cross every "t" in terms of theological clarity. Coming to faith is a process, and our prayer is that through the power of God's word and his Spirit, seekers will be drawn to the beauty, power and truth of who Jesus is. And one day, we trust, some will put their trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Besides leading a lively Bible study, and praying for group members privately, is there anything else I should do?

First, I don't begin my Seeker Studies with prayer because I've told group members to think of it as a book club. However, toward the end of the series I suggest we have a party after the study and ask everyone to bring food. Then, before we eat, I pray a simple prayer of thanksgiving, and thank God for each person in the group.

It is very important that you and your co-leader (if you have one) meet with each person in your group alone (for coffee or lunch, etc) sometime during the six-week study—preferably toward the final weeks of the study. Try to find a private, quiet place of meeting if possible. If you have four seekers in your group,

then you could meet with two and your co-leader with the other two (but alone, not together). As the conversation develops, ask the person something along these lines: "What do you think of the study so far? How does Jesus strike you? What questions do you have?"

Test the waters and see if they might be close to giving their life to Christ. If you sense an openness, you could ask, "Is there anything that would keep you from becoming a Christian right now?" Then be prepared to lead them to Christ if they are ready!

Session One: John 2 v 13-25

Profits or prophets?

1. This was the temple that Zerubbabel had built five hundred years earlier. But Herod the Great had begun remodeling it 46 years prior to this incident to make it larger and more beautiful. The project still wasn't complete but the temple was a magnificent structure, able to be seen from miles away. Part of the exterior was gold, and from a distance it seemed to glow. There were three parts: the outer court, the holy court (where no poor or maimed people or Gentiles could enter), and the Most Holy Place (where God symbolically dwelled and where, once a year, the high priest alone was able to enter to make atonement for the people). The pilgrims would have been buying their animals for sacrifice in the outer courts of the outer temple (the court of the Gentiles) but not in the holy court. When the pilgrims came, they created crude shelters to live in for the eight days of celebration. There would have been pilgrims from every country in the temple at that time, plus the priests and the temple police. One would have heard numerous languages and seen people dressed in different garbs.

2. At Passover, animals were sacrificed. Pilgrims purchased animals in the temple so they could offer them as sacrifices. Only temple coins could be used, so Greek, Roman and other coinage had to be exchanged. However, the priests charged exorbitant rates for their money exchange—essentially an extortion racket! The whole system was commercialized: worshipers from abroad were cheated by excessive rates, and the priests charged huge fees for the cost of animals. They made financial gain through this, especially the high priest. The poor people who had come to sincerely worship must have deeply resented it. Jesus objected not only to the dishonesty but also to the business conducted in the temple precincts. The temple was the ceremonial place of God's dwelling, and it was to be treated as holy and as a place for prayer—certainly not as a place to rip off economically poor pilgrims.

3. The fact that Jesus *made* a whip out of cords suggests that this took some time and was a deliberate, intentional act. Jesus didn't simply lose his temper. Consider how long it would take and where he would get the materials. This wasn't a case of uncontrolled rage but righteous indignation at the priests' flagrant disrespect for God and contempt for sincere but poor pilgrims.

4. In Jesus' description of the temple he implicitly describes God as his "Father." This intimate language was not how Jews commonly referred to God.

5. Jesus was motivated by zeal. In Greek the word *zeal* is synonymous with *jealousy*. Jesus was jealous for his Father's reputation.

7. In this statement Jesus is looking beyond the age of temple worship to the time when his body, offered up in sacrifice and raised in power, will be the new temple where God and humanity may meet face to face. In verse 19 Jesus is referring to himself as the *actual living presence of God* in their midst. This is no small claim.

Later the disciples understood that he was referring to his sacrifice of himself, which would end the need for temple sacrifices. But at this time everyone thought he was speaking about the massive temple structure, and they were dumbfounded.

11. See also Jeremiah 7 v 1-19. Jesus' action was motivated not only by a zeal for his Father's glory but also by a deep compassion for his people and the renewal of their worship. He no doubt hoped that the "severe mercy" of his shocking correction would cause the priests to repent. Instead they demanded Jesus' proof of authorization through a miraculous sign, rather than face Jesus' charge of having dishonored God.

Session Two: John 4 v 5-42

Water for a dry soul

2. Most women in the town would have drawn water early in the morning, when it was cooler. The fact that this woman comes to the well at midday—when nobody is around—suggests that she is avoiding people.

3. The Jews had a strong prejudice against the Samaritans, which had historical and religious roots. In 721 BC the Assyrians invaded the northern section of Israel and deported people living there. They left only a few poor Jews in the land. Then the Assyrians imported other conquered people and settled them in the formerly Jewish territory. The pagan Gentile population intermarried with the Jewish people and produced a mixed racial group called the Samaritans. Because of the Samaritans' mixed blood and mixed religion (their religion was a mixture of pagan idolatry and the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible), the orthodox Jews viewed the Samaritans as worse than Gentiles. It was the accepted custom that Jews would not drink from the same vessel as Samaritans. Jewish food laws would have considered the water in the woman's jar contaminated.

By asking for water, Jesus was intentionally crossing three cultural barriers. First, he spoke to a woman. Jewish men were instructed never to talk to any woman in public. Second, he spoke to an immoral woman who was living with a man she was not married to (v 18). Third, he spoke to a Samaritan. But Jesus loved her and was willing to breach age-old conventions in order to reach her.

4. This was a woman accustomed to being either judged and condemned or used for immoral purposes. Based on the disciples' reaction to her, perhaps it was clear from her appearance what kind of woman she was. Her self-esteem must have been very low. So it is significant that Jesus treated her with dignity—asking her to meet his need for a drink. Jesus refused to see her as a despised Samaritan, and instead related to her as a woman of worth in authentic friendship.

6. "Living water" is a vivid image in an arid land like Palestine. There are themes found in the Hebrew Bible that reference this, such as Ezekiel 36 v 25-27, and Jeremiah 2 v 13 and 17 v 13, where God himself is the "spring of living water." Later, in John 7 v 37-39, Jesus offers eternal life through the gift of the Holy Spirit to all who believe in him—this is what he means by this "living water."

7 & 8. Jesus does not hesitate to be persuasive in order to reach her, but he refuses to manipulate her. He knows she needs to see the connection between her "thirst" and what Jesus is offering her. He sees her moral history, going from one man to the next, as a cry for fulfillment that only God can bring.

9. Without allowing himself to be sidetracked, Jesus does not dismiss her question about worship. The fact that the Samaritans did not embrace anything other than the first five books of the Hebrew Bible limited their knowledge of God ("You Samaritans worship what you do not know," 4 v 22). Furthermore, it

meant that they did not accept that God had directed King David's decision to build the first temple in Jerusalem. So Jesus corrects her concern for where one should worship by saying that true worshipers worship in spirit and truth. Jesus teaches throughout John's Gospel that he is the truth and he dispenses the Spirit to all who believe in him.

Session Three: John 6 v 1-35

Soul food

2. Jesus was testing Philip's faith so that it would grow.
3. Philip was thinking only in terms of the limited resources, not God's powerful resources—despite what he had just experienced during his successful preaching tour. Jesus is never discouraged by what we have to offer, no matter how meager. God delights in revealing his power through our weakness.
7. The crowd, no doubt buoyed up in their nationalistic fervor as the Passover celebration approached, saw in Jesus the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18 v 15-19. But Jesus rejected their attempts to set him up as a political leader to liberate them from Rome, and departed abruptly.
9. Their main error is in being materialists. Their interest in Jesus lies in his ability to feed them.
10. Jesus is trying to help them understand that the true food that satisfies our deepest needs is found in relationship with him. Depending on the background of the people in your group, you might also want to draw special attention to verses 28-29. God does not require us to do good deeds or religious activity; he simply wants us to "believe in the one he has sent" (v 29)—Jesus Christ.
11. The metaphor for bread works on a number of levels. Bread is a basic necessity, essential for physical living—Jesus is spiritual bread, essential for eternal life. God has "set eternity in the human heart" (Ecclesiastes 3 v 11) and so each of us hungers to know God. Jesus is the bread that will satisfy our hunger for righteousness (Matthew 5 v 6), because he died to make us righteous in God's sight (2 Corinthians 5 v 21).

Session Four: John 9 v 1-41

I once was blind...

1. The rabbis believed that there was no suffering without the cause being the sin of the person or the parents. Since this man was blind from birth, this would have made his parents' suffering even more unbearable (although the rabbis believed it was even possible to sin in the womb). Not only did they have to cope with his disability but with the haunting shame of some wrong they might have done to bring about their son's blindness.

2. Jesus isn't teaching that the man and his parents are sinless, but rather, that we can't assume a one-for-one relationship between our present problems and our sins of the past. Because sin came into our world as a result of the fall in Genesis 3, we know that sometimes innocent people suffer and scoundrels get away with things they shouldn't. Regardless of the reasons for our suffering, Jesus has the power to help us deal with it. Whether he chooses to heal us physically (which, as we read on, he does with this man), or to give us his grace and presence to bear our affliction, it can all bring glory to God.

3. He would hear Jesus as he spat on the ground, he'd sense him stooping near him, he'd hear Jesus making a mud pie, he'd feel startled by the mud Jesus applied on his eyes and he'd hear Jesus' voice inches away telling him to go and wash the mud off.

4. We don't know for sure. Perhaps Jesus was awakening faith in this man by involving him in a process that required a simple act of obedience.

7. From the strictest pharisaical standpoint, Jesus had broken their tradition (but not Scripture!) on at least two points. He had healed on the Sabbath, which their tradition said was permissible only when life was in danger. And in making the mud, he had kneaded on the Sabbath, which was considered work and thus forbidden. The "tradition of the elders" was a body of work that was written to interpret the Scripture. Unfortunately, the authors continually added more rules and laws until it became painfully minute in its demands, intolerably burdensome, and often far from the original intent of Scripture.

8. This should have been a time of great rejoicing, not only for their son's release from the bondage of blindness and begging, but for their release from shame and guilt. Instead they had to hide their joy and kowtow to the religious authorities for fear of being booted out of the synagogue.

11. Jesus sought him out because he had been rejected from the synagogue. Jesus came to encourage him and also to lead him to faith. "Son of Man" was the title Jesus often used for himself. The reference here is to the figure of Daniel 7, which some Jews associated with the Messiah. What matters most is that Jesus is identifying himself as the one in whom the healed man should now believe.

13. Jesus shows that the real sin wasn't the man's physical blindness (as the Pharisees assumed) but the Pharisees' spiritual blindness, which was caused by

their stubbornness and hardness of heart. They refused to see their own sin and need for repentance.

Session Five: John 11 v 1-44

Dead man walking

2. Jesus had previously raised from the dead the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow of Nain. But in retrospect some people might have decided that they had simply been in a coma and that Jesus had only resuscitated them. In Lazarus' case it was unmistakably clear that he was dead, for his body was in the process of decay since it had been four days since his funeral—hence, Martha's concern that there would be an odor (v 39). Through this astonishing miracle Jesus is claiming to be the Lord of life and death for he showed his absolute authority even over decay and dissolution.

4. Regarding the phrase “twelve hours of daylight” (v 9-10), Jesus is saying in a veiled way that it would not be so dangerous to go to Bethany. This is a use of a double meaning, referring not only to living in physical light or darkness. In the spiritual realm, because Jesus lived by the will of God, he was safe. As long as he followed God's plan, no harm would come to him until the appointed time.

5. There is something delightfully pragmatic about Thomas's character. He is willing to zealously contend for Jesus yet he still doesn't quite trust Jesus' decision to return to a dangerous place (as evidenced by his fatalistic statement).

6. Martha clearly was eager to talk and be comforted by Jesus, but she also may have slipped out so that Jesus would not be endangered by any hostile Jews who were there to mourn her brother.

8. Here Jesus juxtaposes two contradictory statements. He is saying, *In one sense believers physically die and are raised to life; in another sense, they do not die at all!* When Jesus claimed that those who believe in him should not die (v 26), he was not saying that believers would never die physically. Rather, Jesus was declaring his ability to overcome spiritual death in our present life, and after physical death, to give everlasting life to those who put their trust in him (1 Corinthians 15 v 50-57).

Martha, like the Pharisees, believes that God will not leave faithful believers to pass into oblivion. Lazarus will rise when the messianic kingdom dawns at the general resurrection on the last day. “Martha believes in some such life at the distant horizon of history when the Messiah eventually appears. Jesus invites her to reshape her hope radically. Resurrection life which triumphs over death is not confined to the distant future, but is present here and now in him ... to believe in Jesus means that death lies defeated (Bruce Milne, *The Message of John* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press], p.163).

9. Jesus knew what he was about to do, but he wept because he entered into the pain of Mary and Martha. Jesus demonstrated the compassion of God, who hurts with us and for us. In Jesus' example we see that as his followers we need not fear death. However, this does not keep us from experiencing grief in the losses associated with death.

10. Death was not part of God's perfect world before the fall, and his plan is that it will not be part of his New Creation in the future. As well as sympathy for his friends' grief, Jesus feels rage at what Satan has introduced to the planet through tempting Adam and Eve and their subsequent disobedience. Romans 6 v 23 tells us that death is a result of sin. It is death that is the object of Jesus' wrath, and behind death, the evil one who caused it to happen in the first place.

11. In bringing Lazarus to life, Jesus is demonstrating why he has come: to defeat Satan, to destroy death and to offer eternal life to those who place their trust in him. He will accomplish this ultimately through his death and resurrection. This miracle is also the clearest evidence of the deity of Jesus, and it shows that for those who believe, physical death is not the end—they live on.

Live what you learn. Jesus' love is not that of an indulgent parent who rushes to meet a child's every need. His delay in coming to Lazarus was a painful experience for Mary and Martha; yet it produced the fruit of deeper faith and trust in God. Jesus' actions didn't make them happy in the moment, but they ultimately produced greater holiness and deeper faith.

Session Six: John 19 v 1-37

Death isn't the last word

1. Pilate was clearly impressed by Jesus—his calm, dignified manner and the confidence with which he made his claims—and he had no doubt heard about Jesus' signs and wonders. Pilate was probably also affected by a message from his wife, warning him that Jesus was innocent and that he should leave him alone because she had had a nightmare about Jesus (Matthew 27 v 19). Pilate was probably a superstitious pagan, and dreams were highly significant to Romans at that time. They would have a terrible dread of acting contrary to guidance in a dream.

2. Pilate clearly believes that Jesus is innocent (v 4, see also 18 v 38), and he should have known that flogging before sentencing for guilt was illegal under Roman law. But Pilate's previous attempts to free Jesus have failed, so perhaps he is trying a different tack—having Jesus flogged, presumably in the hope that this lesser punishment will appease his accusers.

Not only did Jesus endure the physical trauma of the flogging, but he was mocked and ridiculed as well (v 2-3). Perhaps Pilate brings Jesus out to the crowd, mockingly dressed as a king and clearly suffering physical agonies (the thorns of his crown consisted of jagged spikes of up to twelve inches in length, which had been rammed into his head), to elicit pity and to show how insignificant their case against Jesus was. Pilate underestimates their determination to see Jesus killed.

3. Pilate is alarmed by these references to Jesus' divine claims. Perhaps he wants to be sure that this Jesus isn't some "supernatural" visitor who will come back to haunt him.

6. They unequivocally charge Jesus with treason—that Jesus intends to usurp the authority of Caesar. If Pilate will not put him to death, he becomes implicated in Jesus' crime. And the Jewish priests will make sure Caesar Tiberius himself hears about it! Palestine had become so difficult to rule that it was regarded as a dreaded post. Furthermore Pilate had already done several extremely insensitive things in Judea that outraged the Jews. He could not afford to let one more complaint reach Caesar.

The kingship of God is an idea essential to the Jewish faith. So the statement in verse 15, "We have no king but Caesar," is true blasphemy—the very thing they are accusing Jesus of!

7. Physically, Jesus would have been very weak, having already lost a good deal of blood, having been repeatedly struck in the face and having not slept for 36 hours. He was under great strain, and he was no doubt contemplating what he was about to endure on the cross—not just physically but most of all spiritually.

8. Note that the three main languages of the day were Greek, Latin and Hebrew (Aramaic was a derivative of Hebrew), and they were all used on the sign.

Perhaps Pilate wanted everyone to know his contempt for what the Jewish leaders had done. Sadly, when it's too late to make a difference, Pilate is implacable about changing the title.

11. John tells us that Jesus' final triumphant cry was, "It is finished." The Greek meaning is closer to "It is accomplished." The task for which he came had been completed—the whole plan of salvation was accomplished.

Session Seven: John 20 v 1-31

The end of doubt

1. Previously, Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary (Luke 8 v 2-3). She was among the women who attended the Lord and his disciples during their Galilean ministry, providing for them out of their means. Mary's devotion to Jesus explains her clear distress in verse 2.

2. Peter and John run to the grave to check Mary's story. John (being considerably younger than Peter, we can assume) arrives ahead. When he peers inside, he sees the linen shroud but not the body! John waits for Peter before he goes inside; perhaps out of respect, for Peter had been the dominant character, under Jesus, in their team. Furthermore, it seems that John's nature was reflective and intense, and not impulsive like Peter's.

3. The position of the burial wrapping (v 6-7) is significant. First, if Jesus' body had been stolen, then the robbers wouldn't have taken the time to rewrap the linens so carefully; they would have been in too much of a hurry. Jewish burial practice involved wrapping the body in strips of linen from the shoulders to the toes. As the wrapping was done, a mixture of gummy spices was spread on the cloth to hold the binding. A large square of linen was wrapped over the head and was tied under the jaw.

What Peter and John saw when they investigated was that the linen burial cocoon was still in place, but the body was gone. Jesus had exited the shroud while leaving it nearly intact! The disciples knew that something supernatural had taken place (John "saw and believed"), but they hadn't understood from Scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead (v 9)—if they had understood these prophecies, and Jesus' own words, the resurrection would have been expected, and not a surprise. Perhaps the disciples thought Jesus had become a ghost in order to be able to exit the heavy shroud. Or perhaps they believed God had taken him.

5. The moment of recognition is portrayed beautifully (v 16). The one word Jesus spoke that totally transformed her life forever was her own name, "Mary." Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10 v 27). The Lord deals with each one of us intimately; he knows our name.

6. *Don't touch me.* There are several ways in which these words could be interpreted. First, Jesus is not objecting to Mary touching him. Rather, he could be saying, *You don't need to cling to me because you will see me again, and it's urgent that you go and tell the brokenhearted disciples that you have seen me and I am alive.* Or, alternatively, because Jesus would be ascending to heaven soon, Mary would have to learn a new kind of relationship with Jesus—one not through touch but through faith and through the Holy Spirit.

8. The Hebrew word for "peace" is *shalom* and has deep meaning in Hebrew. It encompasses a sense of wellbeing in its fullest sense. It gathers up all the

blessings of the kingdom of God. On a practical note, the disciples also needed peace in light of their terror at seeing Jesus!

11. Jesus was always with them, as much when they couldn't see him as when they could! This was one of the reasons for the termination of his appearances: so that they would rely instead on his presence with them through his Holy Spirit.