

“Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?”

Investigative Bible Discussions by Mark Ashton

I just wanted to include a few notes at the beginning to help you get the most out of these studies. The studies are designed to expose an individual or group of non-Christians with the person of Jesus and the basics of the good news of salvation. Therefore, the studies are focused on the life of Christ in passages where elements of the gospel message (eternal life, sin & forgiveness, atonement etc.) come out most clearly.

I have written them to be used in a series of either 4 to 8 weeks, depending on the needs of your group. If you start out asking people to commit to only 4, it is very natural for the group to continue on with 5 & 6... if they desire to do so. Every group will be different, so when using the studies feel free to change or adapt questions to fit the specific needs of your group. Know the study well enough so that you can skip questions that may have been previously answered or ask further questions if they did not understand the main point of the question.

Hopefully, you have received some sort of training in leading IBDs. If you have never led an IBD and have not received training, ask your staff for some information or training on how to do so. May God bless your faithfulness in following his command to spread his word to every corner of the earth!!

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“Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?”

Investigative Bible Discussions by Mark Ashton Jesus Teaches the Professor - John 3:1-21

Introduction

- Describe a time when you felt like you needed a fresh start. Were you given the opportunity to wipe the slate clean and start over?

Discussion Questions

- Read John 3:1-21
- What are some of the things that we can gather about Nicodemus from v1-2?
 - *Pharisee of Ruling council = Member of Jewish governing body with both spiritual and political power. Also respected as a religion professor.*
 - *Afraid for his reputation - came at night*
 - *Teachable and curious*
- Jesus initial response does not seem to go with the flow of the conversation. Why would he respond as he did?
 - *He saw through to the real needs and questions of Nicodemus and began to talk about them.*
- Compare Nicodemus' and Jesus' ideas of what “Born Again” means.
 - *Note: If there are questions about verses 13 and 14 the OT account of Moses and the bronze snake can be found in Numbers 21:4-9. You should be sure that you are familiar with this as well as its parallels to Jesus in case someone asks you about it. However, you should not purposely delve into it because of the limitations on time.*
- According to Jesus, what is his identity and purpose? v16-17
- How is it that one can gain eternal life?
- If a person truly believes in something, how is it reflected in his/her life?
- What does a person's lifestyle look like if he truly believes in Jesus and follows him?
 - *Note: If their thoughts are way off on this question, you may wish to challenge them to read the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7 during the week.*
- What happens to those who do not believe in Jesus?
- What do light and dark represent in these verses?
- What must people do to come into the light?
 - *You may wish to refer to John 14:6 at this point.*
- Why don't people in the darkness move to the light?
- Where are you in your understanding of spiritual life? Still in the dark? Moving closer to the light?

Review Questions:

- According to Jesus, what must happen in order to have eternal life and enter into the kingdom of God?
- How would you compare your own search for God compared to Nicodemus? More straightforward? More intellectual?

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Investigative Bible Discussions by Mark Ashton Jesus and the Falling Roof - Mark 2:1-12 & 12:28-31

Introduction

- What is the most that you have ever done to get tickets to a concert, get into a play or go to see a famous person?

Discussion Questions

- Read Mark 2:1-2:12
- In Mark chapter 1 we learn that Jesus is getting a reputation as a great teacher and healer. How do the people of Capernaum respond to him when he arrives?
- Imagine you are a person in the house where Jesus was teaching. Describe the sights, sounds, smells and emotion in the atmosphere.
- What extreme lengths were the friends willing to go through in order to get the paralytic to Jesus? What does this tell you about their attitude toward Jesus?
- Judging by Jesus' reaction to the paralytic being let down, what did he see as the paralytic's greatest need? Does all of humankind have this same need?
- Why were the teachers of the law irritated by what Jesus said?
- In verse 9, Jesus asks a rhetorical question. “Which is easier to say...” Of the two options, which will be easier to see whether it came true or not?
- Does the evidence of this passage lead you to believe that Jesus in fact does have the authority to forgive sins? (see verse 11-12)
 - *Note: If your group has problems answering this question, help them to see that Jesus' authority over paralysis (miracles which can be seen) lends credibility to his claim to forgive sins (a miracle which cannot be seen).*

Transition

- Many of us think that we do not need forgiveness for sins because we have never murdered anyone or stolen much or slept with someone's spouse. However, when we really take a close look at ourselves and God's commands, we realize that we fall way short of God's standard for our lives. Let's take a look at a couple of those commands.
- Read Mark 12:28-31
- What are the 2 greatest commandments that Jesus gives here?
- What would a person's life look like if he followed these commands completely?

Reflection Questions

- Can anyone here say that they have followed these for their whole lives? For the past year? for the past week?
- Certainly all of us have sinned and Jesus saw the forgiving of people's sin as his greatest mission on earth. During the next week, try to keep in mind the two greatest commandments and keep track of how your life compares to them.

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Investigative Bible Discussions by Mark Ashton Coming Home to Jesus - Luke 15:11-31

Introduction

- When you picture God, what image comes to mind? A distant inventor? A cosmic sheriff waiting for you to do something wrong? A paramedic that you call on when you are in trouble? A loving father?

Discussion Questions

- Read Luke 15:11-31
- How would you feel if you were the father and your son wanted his inheritance before you were even dead?
- Describe what you think the son did when he was in a distant country.
- Have you ever felt like you were in a distant country from God?
- What kinds of things were you doing?
- Why did the son come to his senses?
- From what you know about the father, what do you think he was doing while the son was away?
- Does the reaction of the father surprise you when you think about what the son has done to him?
- Describe all of the actions of the father when his son comes home.
- How would you feel if you were the son and you got this kind of reception?
- How do you think that heaven reacts when a person decides to be a follower of Jesus and his sins are forgiven?
- Do you think that the older brother responded appropriately?
- How would you respond if you were in his shoes?
- Even though he shared the same house as the father, did the older son share the father’s love for the younger son and outlook on life? Do you think that the older son ever goes in and rejoices with everyone else?
 - *Note that the people that Jesus is trying to represent by the older son are the pharisees and religious leaders of 15:2. There may be people in your group who are religious, but do not have a relationship with God. Focus on the older son a little more if this is the case.*

Reflection Questions

- If you were to describe your spiritual journey in relation to the younger son, where would you be? Still at home? In a distant country? Coming to your senses? On the way home? Partying with Dad?
- What would it take for you to “come home” to the heavenly Father represented by the earthly father in this passage?

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Investigative Bible Discussions by Mark Ashton Jesus’ Mission Fulfilled - (Various Passages)

Introduction

- You may wish to review the challenge given at the end of last week if you studied Mark 12.
- Have you ever been to a funeral? How would you feel and react if you saw the dead person walking around, talking and eating a few days later?
- This study is different than all of the rest because it moves around from passage to passage much more. You may wish to explain this to the group before you begin.
- Read Mark 8:31-33
 - *If the group asks about Jesus calling Peter “Satan”, explain that Satan wanted to get in the way of God’s ultimate plan (Jesus’ crucifixion). Peter was not possessed by Satan, but saying things that were more in line with Satan’s plan than God’s.*
- Did Jesus know ahead of time that he was going to be killed?
- Did he do anything to avoid this?
- What does this tell you about his purpose for coming to earth?
 - *If this is not clear to the group, it may be good to explain that somehow Jesus’ mission is related to His death and that is why he never tried to avoid this destiny. The specifics will become clear as we continue the study.*
- Read Mark 15:37-41
- Were unbelievers as well as Christ’s followers able to verify the fact of Jesus’ death? Name some of the witnesses mentioned here.
- Read Romans 5:6-9
- According to these passages, why did Jesus need to die?

Transition

- Jesus’ followers made the incredible claim that they saw him after he rose from the dead. The reactions to this claim were as varied in their day as they are today. (Some threw those who believed this to the lions and others were willing to be thrown to the lions!) Let’s take a look at the historical accounts of these claims.
- Read Luke 24:36-43
- Was the resurrected Jesus just a spirit or did he physically rise?
- Which of the 5 senses could verify this?
- Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-8
- Who were all of the people who saw Jesus risen from the dead?
- According to this passage, why did Jesus need to die and what was the response of the Corinthians who heard it?

Reflection Question

- Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins and then was raised from the dead?
- You may wish to wrap up by reading Romans 10:9.
- When confronted with such an abundance of evidence for the resurrection, many skeptics will challenge the reliability of the New Testament. If you think this may become an issue, prepare to defend the reliability of the NT in a discussion after the study. If nobody challenges its reliability, there is no need to bring it up.

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Investigative Bible Discussions by Mark Ashton Following Jesus - Luke 9:18-26 & 18:18-30

Introduction

- If you asked the average person “Who do you think Jesus is?”, what would they say? A good teacher? A lunatic? A myth? The Son of God?

Discussion Questions

- Read Luke 9:18-26.
- In comparison to today, who did the crowds of Jesus’ day say that Jesus was?
- Perhaps the most important question ever asked is in this passage. Let’s find out what each of us would answer to it: Who do you think that Jesus is?
- What does Jesus say will happen to him in the future? Does he seem to shy away from this destiny?
- In Jesus’ day, the cross was a symbol of suffering, pain, and even death. Describe in your own words the lifestyle that Jesus is calling his followers to in verse 23.
- What does Jesus mean by his mysterious statement in verse 24? What kind of life is he talking about?
- You have probably heard the statement “you can’t take it with you”. How does Jesus’ question in v.25 amplify this idea?
- According to Jesus can you be a “closet Christian”? What happens if you are?
- Summarize what Jesus asks of his followers in this passage.

Transition

- Following Jesus is certainly a radical pursuit. Jesus asks us to be willing to give up everything to follow him and not to be ashamed about it. Let's take a look now at how Jesus interacted with a man who wanted eternal life, but loved something else more than Jesus.
- Read Luke 18:18-30.
- What did the ruler think was necessary to inherit eternal life?
- Was the ruler a very moral man? Was good morality enough for eternal life?
- Was the man willing to give up everything to follow Jesus?
- Which did he love more - his money or Jesus?
- Why is it difficult for rich people to get into heaven? Is it impossible?
- What type of life does Jesus promise for his followers here on earth? How about in heaven?
- What would be the most difficult thing for you to give up in order to follow Jesus?
 - Note that Jesus does not always ask us to give up our most important things to follow him, but we must be willing to give up these things. Jesus will ask you to give up anything that is sinful, or gets in the way of following him.

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

- Jim Elliot, missionary

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Investigative Bible Discussions by Mark Ashton The Return of Jesus - Matthew 24:36 - 25:13

Introduction

- Have you ever ignored a warning? What happened?
- *Note: The leader should also be familiar with the account of Noah in Genesis 6-9.*

Discussion Questions

- Read Matthew 24:36-25:13
- What are the parallels between the days of the flood and Jesus' return? Does this look anything like the days of Noah?
 - *Note: Jesus is not against eating, drinking and marrying, but going about life without any concern for the things of God.*
- According to what we have learned in previous studies, what will be the criteria for who will be taken and who will be left?
- Jesus tells 2 stories next - one of a thief and house owner (v. 42-44), and one of a master and servants (v45-51). What is the main point of these 2 stories?
- What would Jesus want us to be doing when he returns?
- In biblical times, a man and woman would get engaged and then the man would go to make preparations for their life together (such as building a house and gaining financial stability). After this was accomplished, he would return one night after dark to find his bride and bridesmaids (virgins) for the wedding. How were the 10 women in this story alike? Different?
- What would be the wise thing to do in awaiting the return of Christ?
- If Christ returned today, would you be ready?

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Investigative Bible Discussions by Mark Ashton The Key to Life and Death - John 11:1-44

Introduction

- Have you ever had a time when you needed a friend and they did not come through? How did you feel?

Discussion Questions

- Read John 11:1-44.
- What can you gather about Jesus' relationship with Mary, Martha & Lazarus from this passage? (v. 3, 6, 21-2, 35)
- How do you think they felt when Jesus waited two days to see Lazarus?
- What are the disciples reactions to going back to Judea? (v. 8, 16)
- Why is Jesus not as concerned?
- *Note: In verse 9, “The connection of thought here is that the hours of the day are not affected by external circumstances. They are there to be used. The implication is that Jesus' hour has not come (i.e. the 12th hour) and until God wills that it should come, the only course to adopt is to go about one's mission.” Donald Guthrie, The New Bible Commentary: Revised, John, Eerdmans, 1970, p. 953.*
- What do Martha and Mary's reactions to Jesus in v. 21-2 and 32 show about their knowledge of his power?
- After Jesus tells Martha that her brother will rise, he makes a startling claim. (v. 25-6) What is the double meaning of this claim?
- Jesus cries when he sees Mary and her friends, but he didn't when he first got news of Lazarus - Why do you think that is? If the group has trouble with this question, point them to v. 4, 15, 23, 33 & 42.
- What does the fact that Jesus wept say about him?
- Describe the situation as Jesus prays in v.41. i.e. what are the sights, sounds, smells? What is the mood of the people?
- How do imagine the mood would change as Lazarus came out of the tomb?

Review Question

- Read v. 25-26a.
- Jesus' claim and promise here are not just for Martha, but for all people at all times. Comparing your spiritual life to the story of Lazarus, where are you right now - Still in the grave? Watching the stone being rolled away? Alive but still in the grave clothes? Alive and unwrapped?

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Investigative Bible Discussions by Mark Ashton Jesus and the Extortionist - Luke 18 and 19

Introduction

- Have you ever had a “brush with greatness”? (i.e. met or came in casual contact with someone famous?) What were the circumstances? What was he/she like? How did he/she treat you?

Discussion Questions

- Read Luke 19:1-10.
- List all of the facts that we learn about Zacchaeus from v1-4.
 - *Note: Tax collectors were among the most hated people in all of Israel. They were not nearly so friendly and professional the today's IRS agents. They were Jews hired by the occupying Roman Government to collect a certain tax from each family. They were also given permission and the authority of Rome to tax any amount above the standard tax and keep the extra. They levied huge taxes and got rich off all of the people. Tax collectors were known extortionists and thieves who were wealthy, but were also despised by the community.*
- Based upon what we know of Jesus from past weeks, what do you suppose Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus that made him so interested?
- Describe the scene of the gathering crowd and parade of Jesus with his followers as they walked down the road and approached Zacchaeus.
- How do you think that Zacchaeus felt when Jesus stopped, singled him out of the crowd and decided to stay the night at his place?
- How would you feel if the person in your “brush with greatness” story wanted to stay overnight with you?
- Why do you suppose all of the onlookers disapproved? (v. 7)
- Why was Jesus’ attitude different from the crowd? (v. 10)
- What is so amazing about Zacchaeus declaration in v. 8?
- What would this action do to his lifestyle? What does this action show about the sincerity of his newfound devotion to Jesus?
 - *Note: It was not Zacchaeus’ works of giving away money that brought salvation, but it was his faith that was demonstrated by turning from his wrongful ways that saved him. His faith was shown to be genuine by his actions.*

Discussion Questions

- Read Luke 18:9-14.
- To whom is Jesus addressing this story? Why would this make them angry?
- Compare and contrast the Pharisee and the tax collector.
- Why was the tax collector justified?
- What would the Pharisee’s actions and prayer need to look like in order to be saved?

Reflection Question

- What universal principles do we learn from Zacchaeus and the tax collector about coming to God for forgiveness and salvation?