

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE REASON FOR GOD*

TIMOTHY KELLER

AND SPENCE SHELTON

JESUS

THE KING

EXPLORING THE LIFE AND DEATH OF
THE SON OF GOD

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STUDY GUIDE

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NINE SESSIONS

TIMOTHY KELLER

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Jesus the King Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

In the few years since the publication of *Jesus the King* (originally titled *King's Cross*), I've spoken to people who, in seeking to present and recommend Christianity to someone, prefer this book over another volume I wrote, *The Reason for God*. I agree. Christianity is Jesus Christ, in a way that Islam is not Muhammad, nor Buddhism Buddha. Other religions were founded by teachers who pointed to a body of truth, and a way to find life, but Jesus says "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." And so any book that simply summarizes the beliefs of Christianity cannot get us as close to the heart of it as a sustained look at Jesus himself.

I also believe that before many people will pay close attention to a case for why Christianity is true, they should first be brought to see why they might want it to be true. And there is no more rightful way to make Christianity deeply attractive than to display Jesus in all his wisdom, power, gentleness, and beauty. So ultimately I would say that this book and *Reason* are complementary. They need each other.

It is quite appropriate that this study guide should be written to facilitate group discussion of both *Jesus the King* and the Gospel of Mark. My book was based on a series of sermons preached on Sunday mornings at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City during 2006 and 2007. However, long before that, I wrote a series of Bible studies that my wife and I used for several years to lead weekly discussion groups.

There we came to trust that the straightforward accounts of what Jesus said and did have a remarkable power to work upon people. We didn't have to lecture, expound, and expostulate at length. Indeed, we learned a lot as members of our groups pointed out things in the text we had not noticed. The later sermons were filled with insights from those experiences of learning about Jesus in community. People's lives changed as they came into contact with Jesus the King.

I'm delighted that through this study guide that kind of experience will become available to so many others. And I'm grateful to be collaborating with Spence Shelton, whose experience as a pastor and study author with a deep understanding of the real-world dynamics of the gospel make him an excellent guide to this book.

Tim Keller, November, 2014

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

Welcome to the *Jesus the King* small group experience. Over the course of nine sessions you will read through the entirety of Timothy Keller’s book *Jesus the King* (Riverhead Books) as well as the full Gospel of Mark. Each of the nine sessions focuses on helping the group participants understand and apply one “big idea” brought out in *Jesus the King*.



Overview of the Session Format

Each session in this study guide is broken into three parts: *Pre-Group*, *Group Discussion*, and *On Your Own*. *Pre-Group* and *Group Discussion* are essential for a great group experience, while *On Your Own* is designed to help you dig further into the concepts if you so desire.

PRE-GROUP

(To be completed on your own prior to the group session)

Each session includes a Reading Assignment—a passage from the Gospel of Mark, chapters from the book *Jesus the King*, and the session Introduction—followed by a Personal Reflection assessment and a short set of Bible Investigation questions. Work through these before arriving at your group gathering so you can be prepared to share and learn from others.

GROUP DISCUSSION

(To be completed together during the group session)

This part of the session is to be done together with the other group members. You will review your Pre-Group work, then discuss and apply the key truths and ideas for the rest of the session. The group leader will facilitate this part, which is designed to be a thought-provoking, fun, interactive time together.

ON YOUR OWN

(To be completed individually after the group session)

The *On Your Own* section is an optional individual challenge to help you engage and apply your learning after the group gathering.

SESSION ONE



CALLED BY THE KING

Mark 1:1–20



Pre-Group

Work through the following readings, Personal Reflection assessment, and Bible Investigation questions to prepare for the group gathering.

READING ASSIGNMENT

Mark 1:1–20 and chapters “Before,” 1, and 2 of *Jesus the King* by Timothy Keller

INTRODUCTION

THE BIG IDEA

The gospel is not good advice; it’s a summons to follow a king.

THE CALL TO REPENT AND BELIEVE

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15 ESV)

The first words Mark records from Jesus’ mouth, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand,” define the message and actions that will unfold in the rest of the book. Jesus bursts onto the scene not with a new code of ethics but with a news bulletin about a new reality.

That’s why Jesus calls his message “gospel,” which literally means “good news.” In Jesus’ day, this was not just any daily news but life-altering news. A “gospel” was so important it would hold the front pages of the news outlets for weeks. Whatever Jesus is declaring demands our full attention, and Mark reinforces this by putting

it front and center: “The kingdom of God is at hand.” Mark builds the body of his whole story from this headline. Every move Jesus makes, as recorded by Mark, illustrates for his readers that the kingdom of God—a new regime of perfect, healing leadership over the world—is near. Jesus’ healings, his exorcisms, his mercy, his miracles, his authority over nature, his sacrifice, and his defeat of death are all filling out the story of this kingdom Jesus is announcing.

The Gospel of Mark’s power lies in its simplicity and directness. It is a refreshing and powerful breaking news item to those of us who live in a sea of lifestyle guides. Think of the difference between news and advice. Advice is counsel on how to improve your life. “You should try yoga” or “Don’t go to the one on 21st Street” or “You shouldn’t vaccinate your kids” are all examples of advice. News, however, is not there to improve your life; news is there to tell you what has happened and its significance for you now that you’ve heard it. Whether you choose to believe a news story is entirely your prerogative, but if it is true, then to ignore it will have practical repercussions.

For example, when the research linking sun exposure and skin cancer confronts the average beach vacationer, one can change his or her normal routine via sunscreens and umbrellas, or carry on as normal. Both reactions—changing the routine or keeping it—are decisions on how to deal with the news about the effects of sun exposure.

The bigger and more personally relevant the news, the more deeply it challenges us. Because this news is about God as the King of the world and his vision for our lives, to believe it will be to repent of (literally, to turn away from) some of the basic premises we’ve built our lives on. If this gospel—that the kingdom of God is at hand, that Jesus is its King, and that he has earned our way to God—is true, it changes everything for us. Jesus says that to believe it will change us so foundationally that our work, our families, our ambitions—everything!—will change as well. We cannot simply add this message to the collection of convenient wisdom guiding our lives. Instead we will lose our lives as we know them for something better than we could ever have imagined.

THE CALL TO FOLLOW THE KING

At once they left their nets and followed him. (Mark 1:18)

To believe Jesus' news will be to believe he is your King. This grabs our attention, because most reading this have never lived under the rule of a king. The idea of one person having total rule over everything in society is difficult enough, but Jesus doesn't stop there. He claims immediate authority over *your* life specifically.

It may be difficult to put yourself into the scene with the disciples gripping their drenched, fishy-smelling nets. But remember that fishing has likely been their families' livelihood for generations. Jesus is a stranger, walking into their workplace, telling them they need to leave their family business and follow him on the spot. Here you begin to experience the disruptive nature of Jesus' kingship that Mark wants you to feel. "Follow me" is a big statement.

At this point, Mark is scant on the content of the message because he wants us to see the authority of the messenger. When the one calling me reveals himself to be not just any king but *my King*, I am left with little choice but to obey him then and there. When I find out following him will fulfill everything I've looked for in life, his once disruptive command is now my source of joy. I follow this King not only because I have to, but because following him gives me true meaning and joy.

This King's good news—that you do not need to earn your way to God—is so far-reaching that it is certain to disrupt your life. The good news—that out of his grace Jesus has made a way for you to come to God—frees you from the tyranny of having to build your own life résumé to impress God.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

An important part of any learning process is self-assessment: to determine where you are in relationship to the material presented. The point of the Personal Reflection section is not to feel good or bad about yourself but to help you visualize how the ideas in this session could affect your life. This assessment is situated prior to the Bible Investigation section so you can be aware of your own thinking as you begin studying Scripture. On a scale of 1–5 (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), select the number that best represents your response to each of the following statements.

If surveyed in an anonymous poll about religion, I would identify myself as a Christian.

(strongly disagree) 1 2 3 4 5 (strongly agree)

I feel comfortable when a conversation among friends shifts to religion and faith.

(strongly disagree) 1 2 3 4 5 (strongly agree)

I believe I understand what it means to actively, willingly relinquish authority of my life to Jesus.

(strongly disagree) 1 2 3 4 5 (strongly agree)

I am actively, willingly relinquishing authority of my entire life to Jesus.

(strongly disagree) 1 2 3 4 5 (strongly agree)

BIBLE INVESTIGATION

The following questions are designed to help you understand what is going on in the selected Bible passage. Write down your best responses, and try to avoid reading what others have said about the passage until after you've completed this section on your own. (*An occasional study help, "Go Deeper," appears throughout the study guide.*)

1. Mark opens his account with a reference to an Old Testament passage. Read Isaiah 40:3, and then compare it to Mark 1:1–4. What is Mark claiming about the identity of Jesus?

GO DEEPER: Mark is quoting a passage talking about Israel's God. Isaiah 40:3 uses the holy name only ascribed to God himself. By quoting a verse about Jesus' coming, Mark is emphatically claiming that Jesus is the God of Israel that Isaiah was talking about. By connecting the work of John the Baptist to the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3, Mark is unambiguous that Jesus is our God who has come.

2. Mark introduces readers to several characters in 1:9–13. List these characters and give any *brief* description (a phrase or a couple of words) from the Bible you may know about them.

Called by the King

3. What is the significance of Mark including these scenes (the baptism and the temptation of Jesus) with so many supernatural forces at play?

4. Verses 14–15 include Mark’s first recorded words of Jesus, which set the trajectory for the rest of his book. What authority is Jesus claiming, and how does this claim inform the way you are to read the rest of the story? (*Read Colossians 1:15–20 for more help.*)

5. Having announced that the kingdom is at hand, Jesus calls his hearers to repentance and belief. Repentance is different than simply saying, “I’m sorry”—it means to completely turn away from something. So what does Jesus mean by repentance here?

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6. Why does Jesus say to repent *and* believe instead of just *believe*?
7. What do you think Mark wants us as his readers to believe about Jesus through the response of the fishermen to Jesus' call?



Group Discussion

After a time of welcome and opening prayer, spend a few minutes reviewing the Pre-Group study together (observations, questions, insights), and then jump into this session's application questions and group exercise.

REVIEW

1. In one sentence, how would you summarize Mark 1:1–20?
2. Look over your notes from the Pre-Group study. What stood out to you as the key point?
3. Which Bible Investigation questions, if any, did you have difficulty with or want to discuss further?

APPLICATION

These questions are designed to help you take the core ideas from the Pre-Group Study and introduce them into your own story.

4. Mark sets Jesus up as both God and King in the opening chapter. At this point in your story, do you believe this claim? *(Don't worry, this is only week one. The idea here is to honestly assess where you are spiritually right now, giving you something to look back to as you go through the study.)*

The gospel isn't advice: It's the good news that you don't need to earn your way to God; Jesus has already done it for you.

Jesus the King, p. 22

5. The gospel news is the core of the Christian faith, and yet Christianity often ends up cast as a set of behaviors, opinions, and positions. How have you viewed what it means to be a Christian up to this point? What “Christian behaviors” are you most inclined to feel proud of yourself for?

Called by the King

“Follow me because I’m the King you’ve been looking for. Follow me because I have authority over everything, yet I have humbled myself for you. Because I died on the cross for you when you didn’t have the right beliefs or the right behavior. Because I have brought you news, not advice. Because I’m your true love, your true life – follow me.”

Jesus the King, p. 24

6. Brainstorm together a short job description of a perfect king. Consider the king’s key roles and responsibilities and how he relates to those under his authority.
7. The disciples left their lifelong careers immediately to follow Jesus. To submit to Jesus as King is no small step for anyone. What do you perceive as the biggest obstacles to you personally submitting to Jesus as King and transferring authority of your life over to him? If you already have submitted to Jesus as King, where in your life are you most likely to rebel against his authority?
8. What would your life look and feel like if you fully surrendered to this perfect King? Your work life? Love life? Family life? Financial life? Social life?

EXERCISE

Mark claims Jesus is God and King. Break into groups of two or three people and each write a list of one-word descriptors of who *you* understand Jesus to be, based on your personal experience as well as this study. After about five minutes, compare your lists with each other and discuss.

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-
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Feel free to share with the larger group any insight you learn from hearing each other's lists. Then close your time together in prayer.



On Your Own

Reinforce and apply this session's learning by engaging in the Personal Challenge; then read ahead for next session.

PERSONAL CHALLENGE

The challenge is an individual exercise for you to complete at some point following this session but before the next, as a way to dig deeper into the application of the truths from this session.

The Gospel of Mark is the story of Jesus. On the next page, try writing down your own spiritual story this week. What are the high and low points in your story? Who are the main characters? For this particular exercise, keep it to 500 words or less. You will be coming back to this story in a later session.

READING ASSIGNMENT

Mark 2–3 and chapters 3–4 of *Jesus the King* by Timothy Keller

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MY SPIRITUAL STORY