

STUDY GUIDE

OVERVIEW

[The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem](#)

This book is co-authored by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

Borg and Crossan are careful to emphasize that their book is a commentary on the story of Jesus's life and death according to Mark. Mark's story is not a documentary. It is a weaving of early traditions, history remembered and "prophecy historicized." It reflects the response of the early community to Jesus's death and the meaning of it for a continuing community that has been rocked by a devastating loss at the hands of a violent and oppressive Empire.

The Gospel of Mark is the earliest of the canonical Gospel accounts. Marcus and Dom have focused on Mark's Gospel since the other Gospel writers drew upon Mark for their passion narratives. There are earlier non-canonical passion accounts. But this book deals with Mark's telling of the story. Here are some suggested prompts for conversation:

QUESTIONS

Possible conversations with others as you read **The Last Week**.

- The word "passion" is from the Latin noun *passio*, meaning "suffering." In everyday English "passion" is used for any consuming interest, dedicated enthusiasm, or concentrated commitment. In this sense, a person's passion is what she or he is passionate about. What was Jesus passionate about? And how is that related to his "suffering" and death? Perhaps that's the only question that need be asked!!
- Palm Sunday Chapter One: Discuss the importance of Palm Sunday and the **two** processions; what do they signify? What is your reaction to Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem being a "planned political demonstration"?
- Monday Chapter Two: "The Sunday demonstration (Palm Sunday) occurs at the entrance to Jerusalem, the Monday one at the entrance to the temple. Why are these two events paired?"

Note that Dom and Marc "insist once again that neither of those symbolic actions was an attack on Judaism as a religion, on the priesthood or even the high-priesthood as an institution, or on the temple as a location for blood sacrifice." (pg. 53)

- Tuesday Chapter Three: Tuesday covers three chapters in the Gospel of Mark. The longest day in Mark's story of Jesus's final week. Most stories underscore conflicts with the temple authorities who challenge Jesus's authority. How do these stories reflect the conflict between Caesar's kingdom and God's?

Scholars agree Jesus did not focus on himself or life after death but the "kingdom of God" that is here. The "exalted" terms in the Gospels are later additions. Give this some thought.

Consider Mark's "little apocalypse." "What has begun in Jesus will triumph, despite the tumult and resistance of this world." The author of Mark believed the end was coming soon. It did not. But the little apocalypse functions to say to the followers of Jesus your efforts are not in vain. Reflect on our confidence in our convictions in the midst of opposition and violent opposition. What functions today to give us hope for our world? Let us hope it is not the desire for an end!!

- Wednesday Chapter Four: Discuss this interesting quote, "Even if, *physically*, they [the disciples] do not pass through death to resurrection alongside Jesus in Jerusalem and thereby end their lives on this earth, *metaphorically* their through-death-to-resurrection mode of existence will be one of paradoxical leadership in their continuing lives here below." (pg. 101)
How do you understand this for "then" and "now"?

Reflect on atonement: substitution or participation? There has long been an understanding that Jesus's death was sacrificial and salvific. "It is not just that Jesus offered his life in atonement for sin, but that God demanded it as a condition for our forgiveness." (pg. 101) Dom and Marcus unpack and counter this default assumption. In this chapter, *participation with Jesus* and not *substitution by Jesus* is emphasized. This is an appointment conversation.

Why is this an important distinction? How does it affect your thoughts about the relationship between Jesus and God and us?

- Thursday Chapter Five: "Maundy Thursday" as it is called in liturgical observance. Maundy comes from the Latin for mandate. "Do this in remembrance of me" referring not only to the command to love your enemies but to continue the meal practice of Jesus. "Jesus's meal practice was about inclusion in a society with sharp social boundaries. It had both religious and political significance." (pg. 113) Reflect on the meal practice of Jesus and how "the Last Super" continues to be practiced in churches today. Is it reflective of the early meal practice of Jesus or has it become something else?

This chapter also discusses Jesus's arrest, failed discipleship and the term "the Son of Man." All important for conversation.

- Friday Chapter Six: The argument is made in this chapter that "Mark does not understand the death of Jesus as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin." Take time to review this and the implications for our understanding of the Jesus story. Does this shift our attention from faith in Jesus to having the faith of Jesus?

Note that the word "ransom" comes from the Greek *lutron* which mean liberation from bondage. It is not sacrificial language. With this in mind, what is suggested when we say that Jesus gave "his life as a ransom for many." (p. 155)

- Saturday Chapter Seven: This chapter discusses ancient narratives about Jesus descending to the dead and “the harrowing of hell.” Explore.

At the end of the chapter this statement: “...the already present kingdom of God...was not an instantaneous flash of divine light, but an interactive process between divinity and humanity, a joint operation between God and ourselves. It is not us without God, or God without us. It is not that we wait for God, but that God waits for us. That is why, from one end of Mark to the other, Jesus does not travel alone, but always, always with those companions who represent us all, the named ones who fail him and the unnamed ones who do not.” (pg. 187) What do you make of this as an ongoing description of the “already present kingdom of God” in our midst today?

- Easter Sunday Chapter Eight: “Easter is utterly central. But what was it? What are the Easter stories about?” What do you think the Easter stories are about?

Reflect on these two statements: 1) If “we are convinced that an emphasis on the historical factuality of the Easter stories, as if they were reporting events that could have been photographed, [then this] gets in the way of understanding them.” 2)“...focusing on the factuality of those stories often misses their more-than-factual meanings. When treated as if they are primarily about an utterly unique spectacular event, we often do not get beyond the question, ‘Did they happen or not?’ to the question, ‘What do they mean?’” Grapple with this.

What does it mean to see the Easter stories as parable, as parabolic narratives?

- From the preface of the book: “To narrow the passion of Jesus to his last twelve hours – arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion – is to ignore the connection between his life and his death.” Reflect on the importance of this statement.

A question for Church goers and liturgical planners: Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday have been merged. Mainly because most church goers no longer attend the liturgies of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. For someone to go from Palm Sunday to Easter misses the point....the reason for this book. Discuss the merit of the merge. Also discuss what is lost.

- Discuss what you have gained from Mark’s journey with Jesus in his last week.

FEEDBACK

We welcome your feedback. Give us suggestions, comments, what was helpful, what was not, so we can provide better study guides. No suggestion is too small. What other resources would be helpful for you? We appreciate your help. We would also like to know how you used these guides, for individual study or groups?

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