

STUDY GUIDE
TO

The
MESSAGE

OF

Hope

DISCOVER MEANING AND PURPOSE FOR YOUR LIFE

The Message of Hope

Study Guide

How to Use This Guide

The Message is a paraphrase of the Bible in contemporary language. *The Message of Hope* excerpts key sections of that translation: the Gospel of Mark, the first eight chapters of Romans, part of Colossians, the book of James, four Psalms, and a few paragraphs of 1 Corinthians that summarize the Message about Jesus Christ. These excerpts introduce a reader to the essence of the New Testament in a few hours.

This study guide enables you to lead a twelve-session discussion of *The Message of Hope*. You'll spend three sessions speeding through Mark to get a picture of Jesus: his identity, personality, priorities, teachings, and actions. Then you'll spend three sessions in Romans examining what Jesus accomplished and how that affects the way we live. Next, you'll explore what it means to worship God by looking at Psalms 8 and 51. In Colossians you'll see what difference it makes to us that Christ is supreme over everything. In James you'll find practical advice for living in a difficult world. Through Psalms 23 and 139, you'll discuss whether and how God is trustworthy. And finally, 1 Corinthians 15 will help you focus on why the resurrection is so important to each of us.

Permission is granted to download and photocopy the study guide for persons participating in a discussion of *The Message of Hope*. At the beginning of each session, give a copy of that session's study to each participant. Permission is granted to photocopy this leader's material for persons leading a discussion of *The Message of Hope*.

This guide is intended to be useful to persons with little or no background in the Bible. Instead of verse numbers, we refer to page numbers in *The Message of Hope*. People and terms that the average person probably won't recognize are defined briefly. We don't attempt to address all the questions a passage might raise; instead, we try to address those that are most relevant to participants who are encountering the Message of Christ for the first time. Early sessions assume no faith in Christ. Later sessions assume that at least some in the group have come to faith and want to know how to follow Christ, in practical terms, in a difficult, often confusing world.

We recommend that before you lead each session, you read through the relevant section of *The Message of Hope* and jot down your own answers to the questions for the session. We have not provided answers to the questions. If you are new to the Bible yourself and find some of the questions difficult to answer, ask someone with more experience for help. Don't be embarrassed; everybody begins as a beginner, and you are to be commended for your willingness to lead the discussion.

Allow a few minutes at the beginning of the session for participants to read the passage. If you know that some group members have trouble reading, ask those who read well to take turns reading sections aloud. It will take quite a bit of time to read large sections of Mark aloud, but it may be worth it.

Your role as leader is mainly to guide the discussion, not to answer the questions. Try to see that talkative members don't dominate the discussion and that quiet group members have a chance to speak. If necessary, direct questions to individuals by name.

Many questions ask participants to talk about their own lives. Provide a safe environment for such personal sharing by answering those questions yourself. Your level of honesty and vulnerability will tell the rest of the group how frank they should be in their own answers.

It's not essential to cover all the questions in a session. If you think the discussion is fruitful, there is nothing wrong with covering only a few of the questions. However, it's not necessary to thoroughly answer a question before moving on. Don't hesitate to cut a discussion short, leaving participants eager to talk more later, rather than allowing a discussion to drag.

We pray that your group members will find their lives transformed as you study *The Message of Hope*.

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

Mark 1:1-4:34
(pages 5-19)

Who is Jesus? Just a wise teacher who lived centuries ago? Or someone more? That's the central question of Mark's story and the central question of this first study.

1. Read pages 5-19 of *The Message of Hope* down to the heading "The Wind Ran Out of Breath." Try to follow the overall story line and get a picture of Jesus in action.
2. Jesus' message is that "God's kingdom is here" (page 7). How does he demonstrate that God's kingdom—God's rule—has arrived? (You might scan pages 8-10.)
3. How does Jesus want people to respond to what he says and does?
 - page 7
 - pages 11-12
 - pages 16-18
4. Look back over chapter 2 (pages 10-12). What did Jesus do to make the religious people angry at him?
5. From what you've read and discussed so far, what are your impressions of Jesus as a person? What's he like? What's important to him?
6. (*Optional*) Imagine yourself in the story, "A Paraplegic" (page 10). With whom is it easiest for you to identify?
 - The paraplegic (a paralyzed person who needs healing)
 - His friends who bring him to be healed
 - The religious scholars who say Jesus can't forgive or heal
 - The crowd who watch the scene
 - b. Why do you identify with that person/those people?
 - c. How do you think that person/those people felt in this situation?

John the Baptizer (page 6). John was a cousin of Jesus and the first publicly known Jewish prophet in 400 years. It was customary that when non-Jews converted to Judaism, they had to undergo a ritual bath called baptism to signify the washing away of their corrupt natures. John shocked the Jewish leaders by claiming that even good Jews needed this bath.

God's kingdom (page 7). The Jews believed they lived at the brink of the end of "this age" and the beginning of "the age to come." They were waiting for the Messiah, who would usher in the age to come, the prophesied time when God would defeat all evildoers and rule the world with peace, justice, health, and prosperity. This time of God's rule was called the kingdom of God." The Jews expected the Messiah to bring God's kingdom by forcibly overthrowing their Roman oppressors and putting Jews in charge instead.

Galilee (page 7). A northern region of Palestine populated by a mix of Jews and non-Jews. Jews from the south, near Jerusalem, considered Galileans to be backward and ignorant.

Jesus' Style of Messiah

Mark 4:35-10:52
(pages 19-46)

Jesus has been traveling around Galilee healing the sick, casting out demons, and challenging religious leaders at every turn. Is he the Messiah the Jews are expecting? Or is he someone nobody expected?

1. Read pages 19-46 of *The Message of Hope*. Try to get a feel for the kind of Messiah Jesus claimed to be.
2. Jesus heals the blind, conquers evil spirits, controls the weather, and walks on water. Why would it be attractive to follow a Messiah who does things like that?
3. a. Peter is certainly enthusiastic about a Messiah like this. However, how does he respond when Jesus says the Messiah must suffer and die (page 35)?
b. Put yourself in Peter's place. How would you feel if your spiritual leader said this?
4. What do you make of this statement (pages 35-36)?

“Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself.”

Does it make sense to you that embracing suffering is better than running from it, that self-sacrifice is smarter than self-help? Explain your thoughts on this.

5. The father of the demon-afflicted boy wants to believe Jesus and asks, “Help me with my doubts” (page 38). What do you think about that?
6. What is Jesus' mission? (See the middle of page 45.) Explain in your own words what you think this means.
7. What are the costs of following a Messiah like this? (Consider what you've already discussed and scan pages 42-45.)

Elijah (pages 25, 35, 37). Elijah was considered the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. The last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, predicted that Elijah would return to earth just before the Messiah and would prepare for his coming. Some people apparently wondered if Jesus might be Elijah the forerunner. But Jesus knew that John the Baptizer was his real forerunner. John wasn't literally Elijah reborn, but he fulfilled Elijah's job.

Son of David (page 45). It was prophesied that the Messiah would be a descendant of David, Israel's greatest king. Jesus was, in fact, a descendant of David.

The Final Week

Mark 11:1-16:6
(pages 46-70)

Jesus entered Jerusalem for the Passover feast, knowing what was in store for him. His disciples were forewarned but ill-prepared; only one woman really knew what to do.

1. Read pages 46-70 of The Message of Hope.
2. Why did the religious leaders want Jesus dead? (See pages 47-50, and recall pages 10-13.)
3. The crowd cheered Jesus as their Messiah when he arrived on Sunday (pages 46-47). They were ready to follow him in overthrowing Rome and ushering in God's kingdom. But by Friday they were siding with their leaders in calling for Jesus' death (page 66). What do you think made them turn against Jesus?
 - a. Jesus had told his men three times that he was going to die and then rise from death (pages 35, 39, 44). How did Peter think he would handle the crisis when it came (page 61)?
 - b. How did Peter and the other men actually handle the crisis (pages 61-65)?
5. a. One woman from Bethany took Jesus seriously when he predicted his death. How did she respond to this knowledge (page 58)?
 - b. How was her faith in Jesus different from the other disciples' faith at this point?
6. a. How did Jesus handle his coming death (pages 61-65)?
 - b. What does this tell you about him?
7. a. What do you make of the claim on pages 69-70 that Jesus came back to life Sunday morning after having been dead and buried since Friday afternoon? What would it take to convince you that this really happened?
 - b. If Jesus really did rise from the dead, what would it prove?
8. If Jesus is God's Son, God in the flesh, what do you learn about God from looking at Jesus?

Fig tree (page 47). Old Testament prophets used the fig tree as a symbol of Israel. In this unusual incident, Jesus cursed the fig tree to make a point about Israel's spiritually fruitless condition.

Heap of rubble (page 54). This was fulfilled in 70 AD when the Romans crushed a rebellion and destroyed Jerusalem. In this chapter, Jesus speaks simultaneously of that disaster and an even worse time at the end of history.

Covenant (page 60). A legal agreement about relationship, such as a marriage. God's old covenant with Israel was based on Israel obeying the Old Testament laws. It was confirmed with animal sacrifice. God's new covenant is based on faith in Jesus and is confirmed by the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood.

The next three studies in the book of Romans will explore what Jesus accomplished for us when he died on the cross and rose from death.

How Jesus Set Us Right With God

Romans 1-4 (pages 72-86)

Mark described in his gospel how Jesus was executed and then rose from the dead. This was no accident; even during his agonized prayer in the garden, Jesus knew God had planned it to happen this way. Why did God do this? In his letter to believers in Rome, the apostle Paul explains why.

1. Read chapters 1-4 of Romans (pages 72-86 in *The Message of Hope*).
2. Paul says his Message is about “God’s plan to rescue everyone who trusts him” (page 74). What do you think God wants to rescue them from?
3. Can you identify with anything Paul says in the section, “Ignoring God Leads to a Downward Spiral” (pages 74-76)? How have you seen these patterns in your own life or the lives of people you know?
4. In chapter 1 Paul confronts the corrupt pagan world. In chapter 2 he confronts the Jews, his own people who look down on pagans for their immorality. What are some of the things these nice religious people do that make God angry (pages 76-78)?
5. Do you agree or disagree with Paul’s claim that none of us is living a good life and all of us deserve God’s anger (pages 80-81)? Why?
6. Do you agree or disagree that we have all “proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us” (page 81)? Why?
7. Paul says we all have committed crimes against God that we could never repay, but God had Jesus pay the death penalty for our crimes because he loves us (page 81). Does that make sense to you? If not, what don’t you understand?
8. According to pages 81-82, how should we respond to what God has done by sacrificing his Son for us?
9. What do you learn from the example of Abraham (chapter 4, pages 82-86) about how to respond to what God has done?

Apostle (page 73). Literally, a “sent one.” A Jewish legal title for someone sent on a mission, an ambassador or a go-between in a negotiation.

Abraham (page 82). One of the Jews’ greatest heroes. His story is recorded in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Abraham was a coward and a liar sometimes, but God chose him anyway to be the first father of the Jewish race, the family through whom the Messiah would come. God promised that Abraham and his wife, Sarah, would have a son who would begin this great family, but God waited decades to fulfill that promise. Sarah was well past childbearing years by the time the baby came, so the couple’s faith in God’s trustworthiness was sorely tested.

Circumcision (pages 78, 84). Years after God promised a son to Abraham, God commanded that every male descendant of Abraham should be circumcised at eight days old, as a sign that the family was dedicating the baby to God. This surgery became the mark of a Jew. It became an especially important mark of ethnic identity by the time of Jesus and Paul.

Life as a Follower of Christ

Romans 5-6
(pages 89-91)

In Christ, God gives us what we don't deserve: a restored relationship with him and deliverance from the death penalty. All this can seem pretty abstract; how does it affect our lives day to day?

1. Read Romans 5-6 (pages 86-91 of *The Message of Hope*).
2. Paul says troubles can develop "passionate patience" in us (page 86). What do you think passionate patience looks like in a person's life?
3. "God put his love on the line for us by offering his son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him" (page 87). What does this say about God's character?
4. As you read Romans, do you get the impression that God is judgmental about your sin or compassion? What leads you to say that?
5. What reasons for trusting God do you see in pages 86-89?
6. Grace is God's "aggressive forgiveness" (page 89). God took action to forgive us before we even knew we needed it. How was God aggressive in forgiving us?
7. Why shouldn't we give sin a vote in how we live (page 90)?
8. What are some acts of so-called freedom that destroy freedom (page 91)? How do those acts destroy freedom?
9. Have you experienced the dead end of doing whatever you wanted? If so, describe what that was like.
10. Have you experienced the freedom of listening to what God wants and doing that? If so, describe what that is like.

Adam (pages 87-88). The first book of the Bible, Genesis, tells how Adam chose to disobey God. The immediate result was the death of Adam's friendship with God. The eventual result was that Adam died physically and that all of Adam's descendants inherited both kinds of death. Adam put us all at war with God, just as a president can declare war on behalf of his people. The same principle makes it possible for Jesus to put us at peace with God when we swear allegiance to Jesus as our leader.

The Struggle Between Old and New

Romans 7-8
(pages 92-99)

It would be wonderful if, once we committed our lives to Christ, we didn't have to worry about sin anymore. Unfortunately, sin keeps causing problems long after it ceases to have total control over us. How do we live with that—not just survive, but really live?

1. Read Romans 7-8 (pages 92-99 of *The Message of Hope*).
2. It's easy to get the feeling that God's moral laws are the problem, that if there weren't a standard of right and wrong, we wouldn't get into trouble. However, what's good about those rules (pages 92-93)?
3. On the other hand, the law has major limitations. Why can't the law make us good people (pages 92-94)?
4. Have you experienced the struggle Paul describes on page 94? Describe what that's like for you.
5. Because the law can't make us good people, it's necessary for us to die to the law and be reborn and married to Christ. Once we do that, we have a new, powerful resource: the Spirit of God inside us. Make a list of all the things Paul says the Spirit does (pages 95-98).
6. Give an example of what it's like—in practical terms—to focus and depend on God's Spirit rather than on yourself.
7. On page 97 Paul talks about "the coming good times." What do you know about the coming good times? What's going to happen?
8. When we look at Jesus, we can see the kind of person God intends to make of each one of us. From your reading in Mark's gospel, how would you describe the kind of people we are going to become?
9. What reasons does Paul give on pages 98-99 to be confident in God's love for us?
10. How does what you've read in Romans make you feel? How do you feel about yourself, your life, God?

Worship

Psalms 8 and 51 (pages 70-71, 99-101)

How do we respond to what God has done for us in Christ? The Psalms are a collection of songs written by many people over several centuries. Each psalm expresses a songwriter's emotions about who God is and what he is doing. *The Message of Hope* includes four of those songs; in this session we'll look at two of them.

1. Read Psalm 8 (pages 70-71). What hits you in this song?
2. What impression do you get of God when you think of the night sky full of stars, the moon, planets and galaxies?
3. a. Have you ever wondered why God bothers with humans? If so, talk about your thoughts.
b. Why *does* God bother with humans?

Genesis-charge (page 71). According to Genesis, when God made humans he gave them the assignment to manage the planet Earth on his behalf, to take care of his property with its plants and animals.

4. Read Psalm 51 (pages 99-101). What is this song about?
5. What emotions does David express in this song?
6. Can you identify with David's feelings about how he has disregarded God and gone his own way? Explain why you can or can't identify.
7. According to David, how does God respond when someone humbly admits his or her faults to God?
8. Why is God happier when our pride is shattered than when we think we're performing flawlessly?
9. Both of these psalms were written for groups to sing in worship to God. What do you learn about worship from these songs?

Genesis week (page 100). The week during which, according to Genesis, God created the world.

Zion (page 101). The hill on which Jerusalem was built. David the songwriter was king of Israel, and his capital was Jerusalem. The city's walls weren't literally broken down, but David knew that spiritually the city was as much a mess as its king and needed God to make worship possible.

Christ Holds It All Together

Colossians 1:13-3:17
(pages 102-109)

What does it mean to say Christ is supreme? For Paul, it's not just a heady doctrine; it means that Christ—not angels, not a list of religious rules—is sufficient to get us where we need to go.

1. Read pages 102-109 of *The Message of Hope*.
2. What do you learn about Christ from pages 102-103?
3. How is Christ different from Buddha, Muhammad, and other great religious figures?
4. People like to make the Message complicated, but basically it is, “Christ is in you, therefore you can look forward to sharing in God’s glory” (page 104). How do you know if Christ is in you?
5. The richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ. What are some other sources of wisdom and knowledge people often turn to instead of, or in addition to, Christ?
6. Paul wrote this letter from jail (page 104). Far from taking away all his suffering, following Christ actually added to it because Paul wouldn’t have been in jail if he hadn’t been serving Christ. Does it surprise you that Christ’s people are called to share in his suffering? Why or why not?
7. What are some of the things Paul says are not part of living in Christ (pages 105-107)?
8. In Paul’s day, many people considered what you ate to be a sign of your religious devotion. Not eating meat, for instance, was a sign of being a spiritual Green Beret. What are some of the things people today use to prove they are spiritual Green Berets?
9. What are some of the things Paul says are part of living in Christ (pages 107-109). Which items are hard for you to wear consistently right now?
10. Read Paul’s list of wardrobe items appropriate for a follower of Christ (pages 108-109).
11. In practical terms, how do you think a person goes about dressing in that wardrobe and killing off the remnants of the way of death? Is it a matter of gritting your teeth and trying hard?
12. How does focusing on Christ, rather than on ourselves, make it easier to wear love?

Practical Living

James 1:1-2:26
(pages 111-116)

Paul talked about living focused on Christ. James makes that practical in the day-to-day hassles of life.

1. Read pages 111-116 of *The Message of Hope*.
2. Why should we consider tests and challenges to be gifts (page 112)? (Doesn't that sound pretty outrageous?)
3. a. When we're facing a tough situation, what beliefs about God is it essential to be confident of (pages 112-113)?
 - b. Why are those beliefs so essential?
4. James is convinced that real faith in Christ affects what we value and what we do. What are some of the qualities and priorities of a real believer (pages 113-115)?
5. James views love in very practical terms. What are some practical ways in which you can show love to the people around you?
6. Why must we not separate good works from faith (pages 115-116)?
 - a. What's wrong with good behavior without faith in Christ?
 - b. What's wrong with faith in Christ without loving actions?

Isaac (page 116). God promised Abraham a huge family that would be a blessing to the whole world. Abraham was a hundred years old before his wife, Sarah, finally had the promised son, Isaac. Then when Isaac was a teenager, God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. When Abraham demonstrated his obedience to the point of raising the knife over his beloved son's throat, God intervened and provided a ram as a substitute sacrifice. Abraham had demonstrated his faith that God had his and Isaac's lives under control, and had acted on his faith even when he didn't understand what God was doing.

Rahab (page 116). God promised to give the land of Canaan to Israel. The first Canaanite city Israel needed to conquer was Jericho. Israelite spies snuck into Jericho to assess the situation, but they had to hide from Jericho's soldiers. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who believed the rumors she had heard about Israel's God enough to risk her life to protect the spies. Because she acted out her allegiance to her newly discovered God, her family was the only one in Jericho who survived the city's conquest.

Getting Serious

James 3:1-5
(pages 117-122)

James pulls no punches, but he also has a tremendous vision of what our lives can be like if we're serious about following Christ.

1. Read pages 117-122 of *The Message of Hope*.
2. How would you summarize James's point in "When You Open Your Mouth" (page 117-118)?
3. Do you find your tongue impossible to tame? What gives you that feeling?

It's impossible to tame a tongue because, like it or not, what comes out of our mouths reflects what's going on inside us. (A polluted water hole yields polluted water.) So James goes on to describe some of the inside attitudes and desires that pollute our speech and actions.

4. What are some of those polluting attitudes (pages 118-119)?
5. Describe a situation where you've seen one of these truths in action:
 - A healthy community requires that we do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with honor.
 - Fights happen because we want our own way and are willing to fight to get it.
6. What do you tend to do when you don't get your way?
7. What does God want us to do with our desires (page 119)?
8. What does God want us to do with our needs (pages 121-122)?
9. a. How do you feel about confessing your faults to someone else?
 - b. How do you feel about asking others to pray for you?

Trusting God

Psalms 23, 139
(pages 109-110, 122-124)

David's life was rocky. Enemies hounded him, he made some bad mistakes and paid for them, and so on. Through it all, though, what kept David going was his confidence that an amazing God was involved intimately in his life.

1. Read Psalm 23 (page 109-110 of *The Message of Hope*).
2. David was raised in a shepherding family. What did he believe about God, according to this psalm?
3. What are some of the things in your life that seem like traveling through Death Valley?
4. How is the way David handles those struggles different from the way you have handled them in the past?
5. Read Psalm 139 (pages 122-124). What does this psalm say about God?
6. Why do you think it's so important to David that God knows everything about him?
7. Why is it so important to David that there's nowhere he can go where God isn't?
8. What does this psalm say about how valuable each of us is to God?
9. Reread the last six lines on page 124. Why might this be a valuable prayer to pray on a regular basis?

Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:1-28 (pages 125-127)

Here Paul summarizes the essence of the Message about Jesus Christ. It sounds so simple, but the implications are staggering.

1. Read pages 125-127 of *The Message of Hope*.
2. What is the essence of the Message about Jesus?
3. Why is it so important that Christ's resurrection is verified as a historical event that actually happened and was witnessed by hundreds of people?
4. In what ways does the hope of resurrection affect the way we handle painful life circumstances?
5. An old beer commercial said, "You only go around once in life, so you have to grab for all the gusto you can." If the resurrection is true, then we have all of eternity to enjoy life. What difference should that make to our priorities in life? To the way we handle hard situations?
6. Think back over your study of *The Message of Hope*. What have you learned? What have you gained?
7. What questions do you have about what you've studied:
 - about who Christ is?
 - about what the cross and the resurrection accomplished?
 - about how to follow Christ in a difficult world?
 - About other issues?

No resurrection (page 126). There were apparently some people going around saying that the Bible doesn't mean it literally when it says we will one day rise from death. These people said Christ offers us only the chance to be spiritually alive right now, but we'll still grow old and die, and that will be the end of us. Paul says Jesus rose from death literally and physically—people touched him, saw him eat, and could tell he wasn't a ghost. Likewise, Paul claims, we will also rise from death literally and physically. Our bodies will be different than they are now—they won't age or suffer disease—but they will be bodies.

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