

Read Mark Learn

John's Gospel

St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate

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Foreword

The Read Mark Learn Bible studies at St Helen's have for very many years been central to our training programme for young Christians. I regard RML, as it is called, as one of the most significant initiatives ever taken in our church life together.

From the beginning, with the Mark studies, and now with these John notes prepared by my able successor, William Taylor, this material for group work has proved itself in the equipping of countless men and women for effective Christian witness.

I remain full of admiration for the staff and leaders who have made this course what it is by their labour, and I am profoundly grateful that, for many hundreds of people, attendance at RML has been the start of a growing love for the accurate study and the businesslike application of God's holy word.

Dick Lucas
Rector Emeritus of St Helen's

Introducing 'Read Mark Learn'

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

*(Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent
in the Book of Common Prayer)*

BEGINNINGS

Read Mark Learn is the title of a collection of small group Bible studies which has been developed, over a number of years, at St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate, in the City of London.

The original studies, undertaken for the first time in 1976, covered the whole of Mark's Gospel in one year. In subsequent years, studies in Paul's letter to the Romans were devised for those who had previously studied Mark; the aim was to provide a thorough training in Christian doctrine. Finally, a third-year study was established, consisting of a complete overview of the Bible. Thus, over three years, members of the church have the opportunity of gaining a firm grasp of how to read and understand the Bible. They are firmly grounded in Christian doctrine and practice from the scriptures, and so they are equipped for a lifetime in the service of Christ.

READ MARK LEARN

After some years it was felt that a change was needed, and so material for studies in John's Gospel was written. As with Mark and Romans, this material was written primarily for the leaders of small groups, to help them prepare, but it may, of course, be useful to any individual undertaking a study of John.

In all the Read Mark Learn studies there is a commitment to consecutive Bible study, with Bible passages being studied within the context of the scriptural whole. This is based on the conviction that when God's word is studied *in context*, God's voice is heard as His Holy Spirit speaks.

PRESENT ARRANGEMENTS

The format that we have found to work well is to have a pair of leaders for each small group, with eight to ten members in the group. The leaders are responsible for all the teaching over a period of three terms, each term running for about nine weeks.

Every member is expected to prepare for a study by reading the text carefully – there is no substitute for close and careful study of the text – and considering the discussion questions that have been handed out in advance. The leaders will do this preparation both individually and as a group, meeting together a week or so in advance of the study and using the study notes in this book. With the help of the suggested discussion questions, we study the passage that we will later teach. A key aspect of the leaders' preparation group is the time set aside for praying for each other and for the members of our groups.

TRAINING FOR LEADERS

We have found this preparation group to be a very helpful way of providing training for leaders, of supporting them in their ministry of leadership, and also, of course, of developing our understanding of the overall message of the book we are working on. In addition, there has been the long-term value of training people to lead house groups in the future.

The strength of Read Mark Learn depends, in human terms, upon the calibre of the leaders. Without the leaders' considerable

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degree of commitment – as indicated above – the whole enterprise would fail. And so a high priority is given to training and encouraging leaders on a continuing basis. Information on RML Leaders' Training Material may be found at the back of this book.

Introducing the Study Notes

These notes were written during the first three years of our studying John's Gospel as an RML study. They are the result of our studying the passages in groups, feeding back, and together correcting and revising our understanding. (This process of sharpening our understanding and our application of the message of John's Gospel is a continuous one, and we anticipate considerable revision following publication of this first set of notes!)

The notes are not intended to be a formal commentary on the Gospel; rather, the aim is to provide useful pointers to the main themes of each passage, and to show how these themes fit in with John's wider purpose in writing his Gospel. For more detailed comment we have found Don Carson's commentary *The Gospel According to John* to be the most helpful source.

STUDY PASSAGES

It will be noted that some of the earlier studies are quite long. The study divisions were made in accordance with Carson's helpful advice in the chapter on 'Preaching from the fourth Gospel' (pp. 100–103). Carson makes the useful point that since John's vision is more narrowly focused than that of the Synoptic writers, the preacher should 'proceed at a good pace through the text' to pick up the main points and to focus on Jesus Christ, thus avoiding both 'vain repetition' and a 'man-centred' interpretation.

John will frequently deal with just one main subject in an extended narrative passage. In studying these longer narrative passages we have found ourselves disciplined into concentrating on

the one main point, rather than seeking to read significance into the details of the narrative which may, or may not, have been intended.

Bible study leaders, however, may feel that some of the studies are too long for their groups. If this is the case there are two possibilities. One is simply to split the study – but beware the temptation to speculate on the narrative details, which may simply be matters of historical record without any intended deeper significance. The other is to select the core part of the passage and summarise the surrounding material. (Some of our RML leaders do this to good effect.)

SECTION NOTES

John's Gospel has three major sections, each with a distinct point to make. Like all the NT (New Testament) writers, John has carefully structured his material in order to drive home his main points. In the notes each section is given a summary, and then there are notes on the main themes covered in that section.

STUDY NOTES

Each study has the following headings:

Context: How the passage being studied fits in with the wider context of the whole Gospel.

Structure: How the text of the passage may be broken down into smaller parts. The main point of each part is stated and from the titles it should be apparent how each part relates to the overall main point of the passage.

Old Testament background: John's Gospel, written against the backdrop of the Old Testament, contains many Old Testament ideas and concepts that John assumes we will understand. Here the most important ones are introduced.

Text notes: A brief commentary on the passage. More difficult verses are touched on, but the main aim is to see how John develops the main ideas.

Key themes: A succinct summary of the key ideas raised in the passage. The ideas are grouped by theme, and are not necessarily in the order in which they occur in the passage.

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Application: One of the greatest errors in application is to apply the passage to ourselves immediately, without first thinking about the application that was intended for its first readers. The aim here is to identify the intended application then before driving that application through to the reader now.

Aim: The main point of the passage is taken as the aim of the study. The Bible study leader should enter the study itself with a clear aim and this aim ought to correspond to the main thrust of the passage.

Suggested questions: Suggested questions for leaders to use in the group study. They are only suggestions. They have been tried and tested on RML groups, but Bible study leaders will need to adapt them to suit their own groups. In addition to these questions, which leaders use to help them lead, there are preparation questions to help all members study the passage before coming to the group, and these may be found at the back of the book.

Introducing John's Gospel

THE AIM OF THIS STUDY

Almost at the end of his account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, John presents his readers with his aim:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30, 31

Everything that John has recorded contributes to his purpose, that of convincing his readers about the identity of Jesus Christ, and about the necessity of a right response to Him in order to have life. As we read the Gospel, therefore, it is important to keep asking three main questions:

- ↳ How does this passage enable us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?
- ↳ What does it mean to 'have life' in His name?
- ↳ What does a right response of belief in Him look like?

Each passage should be approached in this manner, with questions such as the following: What does this teach about Christ? What sort of 'Christ' is He? What does it mean to have life? What is a genuine and right response to this Christ?

AN OVERVIEW

The best way to get started in John's Gospel is to read it! Set aside some time when you can read the whole book at one sitting. Read fairly rapidly, trying to get a feel for the book as a whole: the main themes, the structure, the language. The point of this exercise is to take in the big picture, so don't worry about understanding all the details at this stage. At the end, note down your first impressions. If you struggle to make mental notes, jot down a few very brief comments with references as you read, but don't lose your momentum.

THE STRUCTURE

In chapter 16 verse 28 Jesus makes an astonishing statement: 'I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.' This statement summarises the two halves of the Gospel. In part one (chs. 1–10) Jesus describes Himself as the Christ and the Son who has come from His Father in heaven to reveal His Father. In part two (chs. 11–21) Jesus describes Himself as the Son who is returning to His Father in heaven to open the way to His Father. Elements of the main subject material of each part may also be found in the other part of the Gospel, but this division into two parts provides a useful structure.

This two-part division is further underlined by John's arrangement of his material around the 'signs'. As stated in chapter 20 verse 31, John deliberately selects a number of key 'signs' or 'miracles'. The signs are significant events – each one has a teaching point or meaning – and the sign's significance is pointed out by Jesus in the teaching that comes either just before a sign or just after it. So, the significance of changing the water into wine (ch. 2) is explained to us in verse 11 and also in the narrative of chapters 2–4; and the significance of the healing of the lame man (ch. 5) is made evident in the words of Jesus to the Jews later in the chapter.

John uses these signs in the Gospel to structure his material. The signs act as brackets, both introducing and concluding sections of teaching material; the material in between the signs expands on the themes that the signs introduce and also sum up.

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The structure of the Gospel, therefore, may be summarised as follows:

PART ONE CHAPTERS 1–10

Jesus is the Son who has come down from heaven to reveal His Father

Chapter 1

Introduction: the everlasting Word, the long-awaited King

Chapters 2:1–4:54

Jesus is the Christ, come from His Father to His people to bring life (the two signs at Cana bracket this material)

Chapters 5:1–10:42

Jesus is the Son, come from His Father, who is rejected by His people but who continues to offer life (the two healings on the Sabbath bracket this material)

PART TWO CHAPTERS 11–21

Jesus the Son and Christ is returning to heaven to open the way to His Father

Chapters 11:1–20:31

What Jesus' death has achieved: Life! (the two resurrection signs bracket this material)

Chapter 21

Conclusion: 'Feed My sheep!' (the unpaired sign leaves the book open and the reader looking forward)