

Meeting Jesus

LEADERS NOTES

Week 1

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to lead a Group. All members of your group should get the notes for the study, ideally a week in advance. In addition there will be some leaders notes which are partly to help with some of the trickier answers, to clarify questions if they are not clear (which happens) and to give some background and to waffle about things there wasn't space to cover in the main notes.

The five studies

The aim is to look at people who met Jesus.

Whereas the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all give us quite a rapid overview of Jesus' ministry John records a smaller number of events in some detail.

The first two are Nicodemus and the woman at the well who are about as different to one another as chalk and cheese. The notes are intended to help us think about the sort of person they were and the barriers to faith, how Jesus dealt with them, and the significance of some of the things they said. I hope this will help us to think about evangelism.

The second two encounters are healings of the lam man in chapter 4 and the man born blind in chapter 9. We don't find out much about the former but we see clearly the latter coming to faith. However, both incidents stir up the religious leaders and we will look both at how Jesus responded to this and some of the amazing things Jesus said.

In the final meeting we will look at the raising of Lazarus and in particular at two disciples of Jesus, Martha and Mary, and how their faith in Jesus was tested, stretched and grew through adversity.

Notes on some of the questions

1 - 2. The Pharisees were a religious movement who began with good motives but drifted into spiritual pride and legalism.

Jesus had just stirred up things by his cleansing of the Temple and we know from the other gospels that opposition began early.

Nicodemus seems genuinely interested in Jesus both now and later in the gospel.

The Pharisees had sent people to question John the Baptist but Nicodemus comes alone and his coming at night suggests that he was slightly awkward about doing so. This could have been due to his fear of how his fellow Pharisees would react or it could be that being “a teacher of Israel” he was embarrassed about being by ordinary people going to talk to Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth.

3. I may be reading in to this too much but I think it is intriguing how Nicodemus the religious teacher comes and gives his considered opinion about Jesus and then a moment later finds himself utterly bewildered and unable to resist asking questions.

5-7. There are all sorts of barriers to faith but many are too full of their own opinions or proud of their own piety.

8-11. Whilst looking at these questions try to keep in mind what we can learn from Jesus example about conversations we have with people. We will think about the same thing next week but people will want to talk about particular things which are not where the real issues are.

13. Nicodemus believed his religion and piety made him acceptable to God. Jesus was not necessarily saying all he did was wrong but it would not allow him to enter the kingdom, for that he needed to be born again. This required a pretty dramatic change of thinking and we know it was quite difficult for people like him because Paul, another Pharisee, tells us so.

14. I think the problem with the term ‘born again’ is twofold. First, those who rely on religion rather than faith in Christ are offended, as Nicodemus was because it means we cannot bring about our own salvation, the initiative comes from God the Holy Spirit.

There is also the fact that the term ‘born again’ has been used freely as a label and often by people or churches who have not been good ambassadors for Christ. People have often equated being born again with going forward at a religious rally. I saw a statistic once that suggested that the total number of people reported by churches in a particular area of the USA as having been born again at revival meetings was greater than the total population of the area - in other words some seemed to believe in spiritual reincarnation, being born again, and again and again.

Surveys in the US have also shown that on moral issues ‘born againers’ seem to believe pretty much the same as atheists.

16. We know about these things because Jesus as the Son of God is able to reveal them to us, He alone is in a position to speak of these things from the inside as it were. These things are passed on to us in the Bible.

There is a significant theological issue lurking in the background of these questions. Are we born again because we make a decision to believe in Jesus, or are we born again by the initiative of the Holy Spirit and only then able to believe? To me the answer seems pretty obvious, without Christ we are dead in trespasses and sins, the dead cannot raise themselves. We need that new life, being born again, before we can respond to the grace of God. Faith is the gifts of God (Eph 2.8). So regeneration comes before calling and faith, though predestination comes before both. However, many find this very difficult to accept.

*David Phillips,
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