

Small Group Guide: Discernment and the Longer Ending of Mark



Summary:

In this exploration of Mark's controversial ending, we're challenged to practice discernment in our faith. The passage, while disputed, aligns with other scriptures and historical accounts, reminding us of the importance of context in biblical interpretation. We're encouraged to dive deeper into God's Word, testing everything against the totality of Scripture. The story of Paul's encounter with a viper on Malta (Acts 28) serves as a powerful example of how God's protection can open doors for evangelism. This reminds us that even in life's unexpected 'snake bites,' God can use our experiences to further His kingdom. As we navigate the complexities of faith, let's embrace the Berean spirit, eagerly searching the Scriptures and allowing God's truth to transform our lives and witness.

Opening Question:

How do you typically approach difficult or controversial passages in the Bible?

Key Takeaways:

1. The longer ending of Mark (16:9-20) has been debated since early church history.
2. While it may not have been written by Mark, it was included very early in church history and likely comes from eyewitness testimony.
3. Most of the content aligns with other Gospel accounts and historical records.
4. The controversial elements (handling snakes, drinking poison) should be understood in context, not taken literally.
5. This passage teaches us the importance of practicing discernment when studying Scripture.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does knowing about the controversy surrounding the longer ending of Mark affect your view of Scripture? Does it strengthen or challenge your faith?
2. The sermon mentions "embarrassing details" in the Gospel accounts. Why are these important, and what do they tell us about the reliability of the Gospels?
3. How do you reconcile the idea that a passage might not be original to Mark but still be considered valuable for Christians?
4. Discuss the interpretation of the "snake handling" and "drinking poison" verses. How does looking at the broader context of Scripture (like Paul's experience in Acts 28) help us understand these difficult passages?
5. What does it mean to practice discernment when reading the Bible? How can we cultivate this skill?
6. The sermon quotes Dr. Sean McDowell saying "never read a Bible verse." What does this mean, and why is it important?

Practical Applications:

1. This week, choose a challenging Bible passage and practice studying it in context. Look at the surrounding verses, the book it's in, and other related passages.
2. Start a habit of fact-checking sermons or Bible studies you hear. Look up the passages mentioned and see if you agree with the interpretations given.
3. Share with the group next week about a time when you had to exercise discernment in your faith or Bible study. What was the outcome?
4. Commit to reading the entire book of Mark (or another Gospel) in one sitting to get a better sense of its overall context and message.

Closing Prayer:

Lord, thank you for Your Word and the opportunity to study it deeply. Give us wisdom and discernment as we seek to understand Your truth. Help us to approach Scripture with humility, diligence, and a desire to know You better. Amen.

5-day Bible reading plan and devotional guide:



Day 1: Trusting God's Word

Reading: Mark 16:9-20, Acts 17:10-12

Devotional:

As we begin this journey, we're reminded of the importance of discernment in our faith. The controversy surrounding the ending of Mark's Gospel teaches us to approach Scripture thoughtfully. Like the Bereans in Acts, we're called to examine the Scriptures carefully, not out of doubt, but out of a desire to truly understand God's message. Today, reflect on how you approach God's Word. Do you take time to study context and seek deeper understanding? Ask God to cultivate in you a heart that hungers for His truth and the wisdom to discern it rightly.

Day 2: Embracing God's Love Through Unlikely Messengers

Reading: John 20:11-18, Luke 8:1-3

Devotional:

The account of Jesus appearing first to Mary Magdalene reminds us that God often works through unexpected people. Mary, once possessed by seven demons, became the first witness to the resurrection. This speaks to God's transformative love and His tendency to elevate the lowly. Consider the "unlikely messengers" in your own life - those who have brought you closer to God despite their imperfections or past. How might God be calling you to be His messenger, even if you feel unqualified? Embrace the truth that God's love can work through anyone willing to serve Him.

Day 3: Finding Hope in the Midst of Doubt

Reading: Luke 24:13-35, John 20:24-29

Devotional:

The disciples' initial disbelief in Jesus' resurrection mirrors our own struggles with doubt. Yet Jesus met them in their uncertainty, just as He appeared to Thomas. This reminds us that doubt isn't the opposite of faith - it's often part of the journey. Reflect on times when you've wrestled with doubt. How has God revealed Himself to you in those moments? Remember that Jesus doesn't abandon us in our questioning, but gently leads us to deeper trust. Ask God to strengthen your faith, even as you honestly confront your doubts.

Day 4: Answering the Call to Share the Gospel

Reading: Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 1:6-8

Devotional:

The Great Commission echoes through both the ending of Mark and Matthew's Gospel. This universal call to share the Good News remains our mission today. Consider how you're participating in this calling. It doesn't always mean traveling to far-off lands; often, it involves sharing God's love with those in your immediate circles. Pray for opportunities to be a witness in your daily life. Ask God to give you courage to speak of His love and grace to those around you, trusting that He will work through your obedience.

Day 5: Trusting God's Protection in Trials

Reading: Acts 28:1-10, Psalm 91

Devotional:

The strange mention of handling serpents in Mark's ending finds a powerful parallel in Paul's experience on Malta. While we shouldn't seek out danger, this story reminds us of God's protection amidst life's "vipers" - the unexpected trials and dangers we face. Paul's miraculous preservation became a testimony that opened doors for the Gospel. Reflect on times when God has protected you through difficulties. How might your trials become a testimony of God's faithfulness? Ask God for the strength to trust Him even in life's most challenging moments, knowing that He can use all circumstances for His glory and the spread of His message.