



**Date: 8<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024**

**Theme: Disciples of the Messiah**

**Bible Reading: Mark 8: 27-38**

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## PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

At the start of this new term, there may be some changes in the groups, or new people in the church. Please speak to your minister or pastoral leader if you have any concerns about your group, and they may wish to assign new people to your group. Please ensure that you have an accurate list of contact details for your group members, and try to get in touch with them with details for the new sessions. Ensure that any new members are given a good welcome and a chance to get to know everyone.

## PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS – for reflection at home

It can be useful to prepare and reflect at home, before the session. If you have time, please read **Mark chapters 7 and 8**. This will give you a good feel for the context of our readings. Mark 7:24-37 is the set reading for 8<sup>th</sup> September, but we won't be looking at it in this session. As you read these passages, ask yourself: *What do you make of the ministry of Jesus in these chapters? Does he say or do anything that seems strange? Imagine that you lived in those days, and Jesus was doing such things in your community. How would you describe him to people? What would you say about him?*

## STARTING THE SESSION: A PRAYER

Heavenly Father; Mother of all creation,  
You are the true and living God,  
and in the life of Jesus Christ your Son we see your glory reflected to us:  
with compassion, with justice, with suffering love and mercy.  
As we gather together again, help us by your Holy Spirit  
to listen to your word, to be attentive to your voice,  
and to hear you speaking to us in the people around us.  
May we be a blessing to one another, speaking and listening with your grace.  
In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

## FINDING OUR ROOTS

**Starter Question: What does Jesus mean to you? Who would you say he is, or was?**

Below is a list of just some of the titles or descriptions for Jesus given in the Bible. Try to **rank them** in order of importance to you. Put a number beside each one, from 1-10 (with 1 being most important).

(There is no 'right' answer, and you may find your answers vary with your feelings or faith day-by-day.)

**Messiah / Christ** (Mark 8:29)

**Prince of Peace** (Isaiah 9:6)

**Son of God** (Luke 9:35)

**Saviour** (Acts 5:31)

**Lamb of God** (John 1:29)

**Bread of Life** (John 6:35)

**Friend of Sinners** (Luke 7:34)

**Light of the World** (John 8:12)

**Good Shepherd** (John 10:11)

**King of Kings** (Revelation 17:14)

*In your group (or in a smaller group of 2-3 people), if you feel comfortable doing so, take it in turns to **share your top 3 answers** and try to explain why. (Or you might find other answers, in your own words.)*

## READING THE SCRIPTURES

Read together the Bible passage: **Mark 8:27-38**

(see also **Matthew 16:13-28**)

**Background Information:** This episode is widely seen as the central point in Mark's Gospel; a milestone or turning-point for Jesus. This is the point at which Peter actually 'hits the nail on the head' regarding the big question ("Who is this man?" – Mark 4:41). It is closely followed, however, by the same disciple being rebuked by Jesus for misunderstanding what kind of Messiah he would be.

Up until this point, Jesus' ministry around the towns and villages of Galilee had been exciting and varied, with great miracles in the midst of heated opposition. After this point (and the Transfiguration, which follows), Jesus seemed very determined to go to Jerusalem for the final confrontation and the cross.

This passage takes us on a retreat with Jesus and his disciples. To get away from the demands and crowds that have accompanied Jesus, they go on a 25-mile journey north, rising slowly to over 1,000 feet above sea level – to the region of Caesarea Philippi. It would take them about two days to get there – with lots of time for thinking and conversation – and the views would be fantastic!

**Caesarea Philippi** (current day Banias) sits at the foot of Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights, where the springs and waterfalls merge to form the start of the Jordan River. It is currently in a very tense region, where the borders of Israel, Lebanon and Syria meet. It was once called Paneas (or Panion), named after the Greek and Roman god, Pan. It was renamed when King Herod the Great built a temple there to honour the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, and then Herod's son, Philip, developed it as a city when he was ruler of that region. So, the disciples might have been reflecting on gods and devotion; especially since Augustus Caesar was believed by the Romans to have been 'divine'; a 'son of god'.

The title '**Messiah**' (or **Christ**) expresses Israel's hopes that God would send a new king to free them from their oppression. Jesus affirms Peter's declaration. But it's clear that when Jesus speaks about the necessity of his death, this does not correspond to anyone's expectations, either of what the Messiah would do, or what his followers must do also. Jesus points out that being a **disciple** is no easy choice.

## DIGGING DEEPER

Jesus asked the disciples, "**Who do people say that I am?**" (Mark 8:27). *Outside of church, what do you hear others say about Jesus today? Does he come up in conversation? Do you ever respond?*

They visited a place which was a shrine to pagan and imperial **gods**. *Where do we find the 'gods' of our age? What 'gods' have enslaved our society? Do people even know how much they are sacrificing?*

Jesus spoke to them about his **suffering and death** (before going on to the resurrection). *Are we comfortable with the suffering of Jesus? What does it mean to have a suffering saviour? What does it say about our own times of suffering, as Christians? What hope can Jesus offer to a suffering world?*

Jesus explains that those who follow him must be prepared to **sacrifice** much (verses 34-35). We might think of this as giving our talents, time or treasures to God. That is part of it. *But what does it mean to 'deny ourselves', 'take up our cross', or 'lose our life' for Jesus' sake? And how do you reflect on the words of the Covenant prayer: "I am no longer my own, but yours."?*

*What does **discipleship** mean to you? Would you call yourself a disciple of Jesus? How does being a disciples impact your life, your decisions, your free time, your attitudes to others, your prayers? **What do you find difficult?** And how can the fellowship of the church, or this group, help?*

## PRAYING TOGETHER

**Together as a group, using times of silence and spoken prayer, bring to God your prayers for the world and the church.** Here are some suggestions:

- Pray for all in ministry and leadership in your church, and for a growth in discipleship among all;
- Pray that we can be enabled to make new disciples, and support them, helping them to grow;
- Pray for those in your community who are in need, in sickness, in poverty, or bereaved;
- Pray for peace in the region we have thought about today – Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine;
- Pray that the church can proclaim and reflect Jesus, as both Suffering Messiah and Risen King;
- Bring the needs of any in your group; and finally share **the Lord's Prayer** together.