

Uncover John Leaders' Notes

Leading Uncover Studies

An Uncover Bible Study is designed to help both the leader and the participant discover who Jesus is by examining the Gospel text. This 'inductive' approach means that the leader is not primarily a teacher but a guide, helping participants to engage with the text for themselves. The 'feel' should be that the Christian and non-Christian are discovering the Jesus of the text together. The questions in this study are designed to help with this.

It is not essential to insist on perfect theological answers from participants at every point. Rather, prayerfully trust the Spirit to work through the text. In this way, we believe that the Spirit will open people's hearts to believe as they 'uncover' the truth, goodness and beauty of who Jesus is and what he has done for them.

How should you prepare? Please do not start your preparation by just reading these notes! Read and reread the Gospel passage first. Take your time and pray for God's Spirit to help you understand the text. The passages in John are quite long so read carefully, and imaginatively, giving yourself time to notice the detail. The passages record real encounters between Jesus and real people. Put yourself in their shoes – how would they be feeling? What would they be thinking? What do you notice about Jesus as he engages with people? We must aim to get to the author's intended meaning of the text. But this doesn't mean flattening the text to a set of rational statements and so missing the real human encounter.

As you read, write down any questions that you have or that you think participants might have about the passage. This will help you prepare to answer their questions in the study. Then read the questions in the seeker study. Try and think of alternative ways of asking the questions in case participants seem confused or baffled. Be ready with supplementary questions that might open further the meaning of the text.

After prayer, reading, rereading the passage and working through the seeker study questions – only then use this leaders' guide. The aim of this guide is to help you gain deeper insight and clarity into the passage. They are not prescriptive teaching notes and should not be used as such. Remember, we are trying to help participants to engage with the text for themselves.

When working through the Uncover John studies, it is helpful to ask participants how their thinking is changing. Questions such as 'How does Jesus strike you?', 'What questions do you have?', 'What do you think of the course so far?' are helpful. At the end of the course, the final question of the final study asks whether there is anything that might be holding participants back from receiving life in Jesus' name. Please do ask this question and pray with your friends that they receive salvation. You will find a prayer you can use on page 124 of the Uncover John Gospel. Uncover is aimed at helping Christians lead their friends to faith in Jesus.

Above all, pray for participants during the course and that they enjoy uncovering Jesus in all his grace and truth in these studies.

Study 1: A Sign of What's Coming

John 20:30–31 & John 2:1–11

Purpose

To show that the life Jesus brings, contrary to the views of most modern people, is a life full of joy. The miracle at Cana has implications for Jesus' identity – is he more than a religious teacher?

General note

John states that Jesus performs many miraculous signs yet he chose to record just seven. The primary purpose of a 'sign' was to point to something greater. The disciples saw more to what happened in this miracle than Jesus just providing extra wine. They saw his glory, which is something of his God-like qualities, and they believed in him.

Leaders' Notes

The introductory question is intended to open a discussion about how people feel about the possibility of God's existence. Everyone who comes to an Uncover study will hold ideas about God's existence, his character and the effect faith might have on their lives. Try and move to talking about their personal opinion on this. If God does exist, what reservations might they have about his presence in their lives?

1. John's purpose in writing his Gospel was to present evidence that demonstrates something about Jesus, that he was, and is, the eternal Son of God and Messiah. 'Messiah' is the Hebrew word for the Greek word 'Christ', both words mean 'anointed one'. In the Old Testament, kings and priests were anointed with oil before beginning their service to God. The Jewish expectation was that God would send a special servant (or Messiah) to restore the fortunes of his people. John further describes Jesus as the Son of God, that is one who shares the divine nature of the Father (see for example John 10:37–38). John wants to persuade us that Jesus is divine, and has been set apart for the specific task of rescuing his people.

You might wish to address the issue of bias here. Does the fact that John is writing from the perspective of a believer in Jesus raise questions about the accuracy of his account? That John is a Christian does not necessarily mean that his account is inaccurate. To say that John's miracle stories must be unhistorical reveals an anti-supernatural bias in the reader. No one is a completely neutral observer.

2. Give people an opportunity to reflect on why they think what they think about Jesus and whether they have good reasons for the conclusions they have drawn.

3. This wedding feast would have happened at the groom's house and could last for up to a week. Running out of wine does not seem so disastrous to us, but, in Middle Eastern culture, hospitality is seen as a sacred duty, even today. For the groom, the shame of not providing hospitality at his own wedding would have been profound. Try and help participants feel his tension and imagine his fears. How would he ever live down the shame? Such a scandal would never be forgotten in a little town like Cana. The groom would forever be known as 'the guy who couldn't even provide for his own wedding party'.

4. Think about the different guests at the wedding and how this would affect them. How would the bride feel about her new husband failing in his sacred duty? How would her family feel?

5. Jesus acts in an incredibly kind way. He is aware that his life has a particular destiny (seen in his comments about his 'time' which will be fulfilled at the cross, see John 12:23–25, 27–28, 31–33) but he takes time to help this couple. He does not judge the groom for failing in his duty, he is concerned about their shame. Seeing their desperate need, he rescues them from disgrace and brings them honour. The wine is of such great quality that the groom is praised, rather than disgraced. He does all this without taking the spotlight away from the bride and groom.

6. The master of the banquet describes it as the 'choice wine', wine of the highest quality and there were litres of it. Those present would now never forget the wedding because of the generosity of their host.

7. The master of the banquet marvels at the generosity of the groom. Most hosts take advantage of the fact that people will be drunk at such occasions and so they provide cheap plonk towards the end of the celebrations. It's likely that the wedding would now be remembered for all the right reasons. Jesus has rescued the groom from a disgrace that would have haunted him for the rest of his life. Now he and his new wife will be forever remembered for their amazing wedding party. Needless to say they would have felt profound gratitude for what Jesus had done for them.

8. John mentions that there were six stone water jars, an extra detail that suggests John was actually giving us his eye witness testimony. In addition, using the water in these stone jars is significant. John notes in verse 6 that the water in the jars was used to fulfil the cleansing rituals prescribed by Judaism. Judaism involved a complex set of rituals that emphasised the need for moral purity or cleanness before God because God was considered morally perfect. Outward washing symbolised the moral purity needed to approach God and thus served as a continual reminder of our guilt before God. By turning the water in these jars into the best quality wine, Jesus is emphasising that he has come to bring something far better to us, something that will bring inner joy rather than a continual reminder of our uncleanness and guilt before God.

9. When God came to earth Isaiah said he would provide a rich banquet for all peoples, including the finest wines. He would end death. He would deal with our tears and he would remove our shame.

10. Jesus has just provided vast quantities of wine of the most astonishing quality. In so doing he has saved a young couple from a terrible disgrace. Could Jesus be the one who is fulfilling the promise of Isaiah 25? Could he be God on earth in human flesh? Could he be the long expected Messiah, the one who will remove our guilt and end death forever?

In verse 11, John records that the disciples of Jesus saw something more in what happened at the wedding. John says that his disciples saw Jesus glory in what he did. Therefore the miracle functions as a 'sign' that pointed to something greater, in this case it was a sign pointing to Jesus being divine. Glory is the visible outshining of God's presence and is a common Old Testament theme (see for example Exodus 40).

In witnessing this miracle the disciples see more, they see that Jesus is God with them.

So, what does this mean for us?

Try and help people see that this first semi-public event in the life of Jesus stresses that he comes to bring us rich, joyful, and abundant lives, rather than diminishing them. Instead of bringing guilt (often associated with religion), Jesus has come to remove our shame. This should suggest that he is at least worth listening to. This first incident might also point to Jesus being more than a moral teacher or religious leader; certainly his followers saw more in what he did.

Study 2: Do You Come Here Often?

John 4:1–28

Purpose

To show that Jesus offers life to all, regardless of who they are or what they have done. This life satisfies us at the core of our being and for all eternity. The life Jesus offers is received through turning away from life lived without him and following him.

General note

In study one, we saw that in covering our shame, Jesus brings joy. We now see this worked out in the life of a Samaritan woman.

It is important to emphasise the concept of thirst in this study. Thirst is a metaphor for alienation from God in John's Gospel (see also John 7:37–39). This is the thirst that Jesus satisfies. This is also important in study five when Jesus cries out from the cross 'I am thirsty' (John 19:28). At that moment Jesus experiences alienation from God. Referring to this metaphor now prepares participants to understand what is happening at the cross when Jesus dies.

The text referred to in the 'historical context' section is *The Wisdom of Sirach 42:14*. This is a work of Jewish ethical teaching written between 200 and 175 BC.

Leaders' Notes

Zadie Smith is an English novelist, her most famous work being *White Teeth*, which she completed during her final year at university.

1. Drawing water in the heat of the day, and alone, suggests something unusual is happening. The sixth hour was noon, the day was reckoned to start at dawn, at 6am. Women were more likely to come in groups to fetch water for their protection and to do so in the cool of the dawn or evening (see Genesis 24:11, 1 Samuel 9:11). Encourage participants to speculate as to why the Samaritan woman is drawing water alone at this time of day, but try not to spoil the story by referring to verses 17–18, which suggest the real reason.

2. Jesus is clearly hot, tired and thirsty; he may have been walking since dawn. He is not some vague ephemeral figure, but was (and is!) fully human. The woman expresses surprise that he should ask her for a drink because religious Jews would not associate alone with a woman in a public place and because of the extreme racial tension that existed between Jews and Samaritans.

In speaking to the woman, Jesus reaches across centuries-old prejudices that were based on race, religion and gender. He is willing to do this because he loves her and wants her to receive the 'gift of God'. He refuses to see her as an 'unclean' Samaritan woman.

The background to this racial tension began in 721 BC when the Assyrian Empire invaded northern Israel. The Assyrians deported most of the Jews and settled other conquered peoples in the former Jewish territories. The remaining indigenous Jews intermarried with resettled Gentiles producing a people of mixed race that became known as the Samaritans. As well as no longer being seen as ethnically Jewish, the religion of the Samaritans was considered heretical by their Jewish neighbours.

Samaritans accepted the first five books of the Old Testament only and adopted some pagan practices. Samaritans considered the Jewish temple in Jerusalem a centre of false worship, even defiling it in AD 6 by spreading human bones in its outer courts. Not surprisingly then, it was common for Jews traveling to and from the north to Jerusalem to take the long way round to avoid passing through Samaria.

3. Jesus offers the woman 'living water'. Given the intensely dry climate of Palestine, this is a vivid image for Jesus to use. Jeremiah describes God himself as 'the fountain of living water' (Jeremiah 17:13) and Isaiah speaks of people in the future joyfully drawing water from 'the wells of salvation' (Isaiah 12:3). Jesus will make it clear that this living water is the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of every one who believes (see John 7:37–39).

Draw out the contrast between what Jesus offers and physical water in verse 14. 'Living water' will mean we will never thirst again. What Jesus offers 'wells up' from within. He speaks of a profound change within us that satisfies our thirst. This living water brings us eternal life. Eternal life in John means knowing God, a life that goes on forever (John 17:3). Lastly, this is not something that we draw up from a well by our own effort. Eternal life is God's gift that Jesus gives to those who believe in him (see verse 10). Therefore the deeper meaning hinted at by Jesus is that he offers the woman a deep, lasting, eternal satisfaction.

Jesus is speaking metaphorically about knowing God. We are thirsty, that is, we do not know God and are alienated from him. We try and satisfy this thirst but fail, like drawing the water every day, our attempts to find satisfaction do not last. Jesus has come in to the world to end our thirst by ending our alienation from God.

4. It is difficult to tell how the woman reacts to what Jesus is offering her. Is she being sceptical, sarcastic or flirtatious? Is she interested in what Jesus offers? Or perhaps just plain confused? Explore the range of possibilities. Her use of 'Sir' in verse 11 is respectful. Verse 11 suggests she is thinking in material terms. Verse 15 suggests that it is unlikely that she understands the deeper meaning Jesus is alluding to. Perhaps she is intrigued; does Jesus know of an alternative water source that would make life easier for her?

5. The woman may have answered Jesus with a half-truth in order to end this line of conversation. Having had five husbands, she is now living with another man, something considered immoral in her culture. There is only shame and disgrace for her if Jesus digs any deeper into her relational/sexual background. Her half-truth allows her to hold on to some semblance of respectability.

6. She probably draws water alone in the midday sun because the other women of the village do not want to associate with her, a 'sinner'. It isn't hard to imagine that the other women of the village would have treated her with scorn and derision; but in stark contrast Jesus treats her with love, compassion, dignity and respect.

7. She must have felt profound shame at being exposed in this way, so why does Jesus move the conversation on to her relationships? Jesus wants her to see the connection between her 'thirst' and her history of going from one man to the next. She is trying to find satisfaction in those relationships and it is failing her, leaving her empty, alone and shamed. Jesus is gently helping her to see this, to face the reality of her emptiness and so turn to him and find true satisfaction, living water.

8. The disciples are more than surprised, they are shocked to find Jesus talking to a woman alone – and she was a Samaritan. John records the questions they were murmuring among themselves but were nervous to voice in front of Jesus. In relation to the woman their question, ‘What do you want?’ suggests either derision or suspicion. Could they see what kind of woman she was by looking at her? Their question to Jesus, ‘Why are you talking with her?’ suggests incredulity. At the least they are asking what point there could be in conversing with a Samaritan woman, at worst they are wondering why Jesus would associate with (in their view) such an immoral woman.

9. The woman came out to the well at noon to fetch water. She now leaves her jar behind because her mind is so full of the possibilities that Jesus has opened up to her, ‘Can he be the Messiah? Can I find satisfaction in him? Can I know God as father and worship him from the heart?’. Given her past, her words are quite amazing – ‘come and see a man who told me everything I ever did!’. She is no longer carrying the shame of her past, perhaps she is starting to see that Jesus really is the way to lasting satisfaction. As we saw in study one, Jesus has delivered her from shame and brought her joy.

10. The people of the town come to believe that Jesus is the saviour of the world. They do so both on the basis of what the woman has said and on hearing the words of Jesus for themselves. They are clear that he is not a moral teacher but someone who saves, who brings rescue.

11. The gift of God, or the living water of verse 10, is a personal, intimate relationship with God as Father. Jesus has come to end our thirst, our alienation from God. Only this satisfies.

So, what does it mean for us?

There are a number of additional questions you might wish to ask at this point. The woman seemed to have believed that the key to satisfaction was being with someone, what do participants think will bring them lasting satisfaction? Are they conscious of a lack of satisfaction in their lives? Do they find Jesus and what he offers attractive? If participants have a belief in God, have they considered the possibility that he could be known intimately, personally to them, like a Father?

Study 3: Blind Faith

John 9:1–41

Purpose

To show how Jesus presented clear evidence that he was the Son of God, not only a moral/religious teacher. This evidence meets with two responses. The blind man sees physically and spiritually, worshipping Jesus at the end of the chapter. But the Pharisees, who think they see, refuse to believe, despite the evidence and are therefore blind.

General Note

In our last study, many Samaritans believed that Jesus was the saviour of the world. But Jesus' identity is causing controversy. In chapter 7 he went to Jerusalem to celebrate two of the annual Jewish festivals. The events in chapter 9 follow a fierce confrontation with the Jewish leaders. Jesus claimed to be eternal and equal with God (John 8:57–59), in response, the Jewish leaders try to stone Jesus to death for blasphemy.

As Jesus leaves the temple on the Sabbath, he passes a blind man begging. Jesus healing the man on the Sabbath sparks another controversy. Jesus is now considered a Sabbath breaker. Can he be from God if he is ignoring what was considered God's law?

Leaders' Notes

This question aims to open discussion about the relationship between evidence, rational thinking and faith. Sceptics like Richard Dawkins (the quotation is from an untitled lecture given at the Edinburgh Science Festival in 1992), argue that, at best, belief is unrelated to evidence and at worse, people believe in the face of contradictory evidence. Thus Christian belief is irrational and Christians are commonly accused of wish fulfilment. According to Sceptics, Christians believe in God because they want/need a god to be there.

There are at least two issues to explore in this opening question. Firstly, whether participants agree with Dawkins and to what degree. Is faith irrational? Is there any evidence for belief? Have participants ever considered these questions? What kind of evidence for God's existence might be persuasive and why?

The second issue relates to the fact that we are all capable of choosing the 'facts' to fit what we want to believe deep down and wish were true. Could this equally be true of sceptics who might filter out good evidence because it does not fit in to their beliefs?

In this passage, we will see a striking example of a group squirming desperately to evade the evidence presented to them because of the challenge it presents to their prior commitments.

1. The words, 'As he passed by' suggests the blind man was probably sitting in a public place, on the roadside. Verse 8 confirms he was begging. Practically, he would have been completely dependent on others for their aid, living a 'hand to mouth' existence. According to popular religious opinion, his blindness would have been due to either his own sin or that of his parents. We can only guess of the impact upon him emotionally but it is not difficult to imagine how little he must have thought of himself in a culture that valued him so little.

2. Receiving his sight must have felt like a new life, a new start. Imagine seeing for the very first time, seeing must have been overwhelming for him.

Perhaps whilst walking to the pool he felt stupid and full of doubt, 'why am I doing this? I've tried everything to restore my sight, why am I trusting the word of this stranger who has covered my eyes in mud?'. Or perhaps he remembered that in the Old Testament, God had made human beings from the dirt (Genesis 2:7) – could Jesus be making eyes that worked?

3. The miracle of giving someone sight, bringing them from darkness to light is an 'acted parable' of what Jesus has come to do for the world. People are in darkness (like the blind man) because they are alienated from God and live without reference to him, building their identity on someone or something else (see John 3:19–21). Jesus has come to restore our relationship with God. This is the light that Jesus has come to bring, pictured through the blind man seeing.

4. John emphasises the astonishment of the man's neighbours. What has happened is so incredible they find it hard to accept. The man has to say 'it's me' (see verse 9). The neighbours may have taken him to the Pharisees because they wanted the Pharisees to confirm that God had done such an amazing thing (see verses 31–32).

5. The Pharisees do not deny the healing; their attention turns to Jesus and whether he is 'from God'. Opinion is divided. Some think that Jesus cannot be from God and must be a 'sinner' because he healed on the Sabbath, which for them would break God's law. Healing was defined in their tradition (not the Old Testament) as a 'work' and therefore not permitted on the Sabbath unless the condition was life threatening. Others thought that since Jesus had performed such an amazing miracle he must be from God. Note their attitude to the formerly blind man, they have no concern for him or joy at his healing.

6. The Pharisees cannot believe that the man has been healed because only God could do such a thing (verse 18). But God would not break his own law. And so his parents are called in to verify their conclusion that the man could not have been born blind. The parents confirm that he was their son and that he was indeed born blind. They are afraid. The synagogue was the centre of religious and community life, expulsion from it would mean becoming social outcasts.

In verse 22 we are told that the Pharisees had already made up their minds about Jesus. No matter what the evidence might be, he cannot be the Messiah. The Pharisees therefore are intent on discrediting Jesus and any who disagree with them, rather than seeing the truth.

7. The Pharisees have made up their minds about Jesus – he cannot be from God, he must be a sinner. Perhaps they ask the man to recount his healing again (see verse 15) so that he might contradict himself and they can accuse him of being a false witness. The man assumes the Pharisees are open to believing in Jesus!

But, in their response, the Pharisees seek to discredit Jesus. What he does is (in their opinion) not consistent with the law given by God to Moses. Moses is of proven quality; he received the law from

God. But Jesus – they do not even know where he is from. Thus they refuse to believe that Jesus is from God. Even though the formerly blind man is a reliable witness and his neighbours and parents confirm his story, Jesus does not fit their preconceived ideas. Eventually they resort to scorning the man. They ridicule him (verse 28), insult him and they throw him out (verse 34).

8. The man responds with logic. Jesus opened his eyes; this is a miracle of creation, which only God could do. God listens to those who honour him and answers their prayers. Therefore, as verse 33 attests, Jesus has to be from God. The Pharisees are outraged, and even forgetting the Scripture they believe in. Isaiah saw a time when God himself would visit the earth (study one) and in Isaiah 35:1–7 God promised he would restore the sight of the blind.

9. The man is now even further alienated from his society than he was in his blindness because he has been thrown out of the Synagogue. Jesus cares for him but he also wants to lead him to faith. The title ‘Son of Man’ is from Daniel 7 in which a person, who is clearly human, shares the characteristics of God himself. Jesus identifies himself as the one who healed the man and he calls him to believe in him. The man who was blind now sees Jesus and worships him. Culturally this is astonishing since Jews believed that worship was worthy of God alone.

10. In verse 11 he describes Jesus simply as ‘the man’. In verse 17 Jesus is described as a prophet, one sent by God. Finally, in verse 38 the man believes that Jesus is divine and worships him. As the man has been called on to repeat his story, his understanding of what has happened to him and who Jesus is seems to grow to the point that he is able to confess that Jesus is divine.

11. The Pharisees claim to ‘see’, that is they think they understand the truth about God. But their rejection of Jesus shows them to be blind. They are guilty because, in claiming to see, they are actually rejecting God’s Messiah, the light of the world.

So, what does it mean for us?

What do participants, having seen Jesus claim to be the light of the world and receive worship from another, make of CS Lewis’ logic? Are these the actions of a good teacher? Is Jesus insane, a liar or demon possessed? Explore how their views of Jesus have changed (if at all) since beginning Uncover. Begin to explore John’s method. He is presenting us with evidence that Jesus is more than a man; he does the works of God, in this case, enabling the blind man to see. Explore what evidence would be needed for participants to believe? Is it possible to be so wedded to a particular set of fundamental beliefs that we, like the Pharisees, can be blind to what is actually the case?

Study 4: Dead Man Walking

John 11:1–46

Purpose

To show that Jesus' claims to give eternal life can be trusted, raising Lazarus from death demonstrates this. This miracle demonstrates his divinity since God is the one who breathes life into human beings.

General note

Having healed the blind man, Jesus is again embroiled in controversy. In Chapter 10 the Jewish leaders try to kill Jesus for blasphemy. Jesus argues that his works, because they are the works only God can do, demonstrate that he is of the same being as God. The Jews clearly understood what Jesus meant and attempted to stone him 'you a mere man are making yourself equal with God' (see John 10:29–39).

Jesus escapes from their attempts to murder him and leaves Jerusalem and Judea (10:40–42). After receiving news of Lazarus' illness, Jesus waits two more days until he knows (probably in some supernatural way) that Lazarus is dead. He then returns to Bethany and performs a miracle that if true demonstrates beyond doubt that his works point to him being divine. That Lazarus has been dead for four days is significant, Jews at the time believed that the spirit left the body after three days of death. There could be no doubt that Lazarus was dead and that Jesus gave life to him.

Leaders' notes

This introductory question gives you an opportunity to explore the issue of death with participants.

1. Jesus loved Lazarus and loved his sisters Martha and Mary. It is likely that they sent for Jesus when Lazarus was ill (the implication of verse 3) because they knew that Jesus had healing power.
2. Given that Jesus loved this family so much it is surprising that he waits two days and doesn't leave immediately. The disciples fear going back in to Judea (Bethany was two miles from Jerusalem) because on three occasions the Jewish leaders there had sought to kill Jesus (5:18,8:59,10:31 – each time because Jesus claimed to be equal with God).
3. It appears that Jesus waits for two days until he knows that Lazarus is dead verses 6, 11 and 14. We don't know how he knew this, perhaps it was revealed to him by God. The disciples take Jesus words literally, thinking that Jesus means that Lazarus has fallen asleep. This cannot be a good reason to go back to Judea where Jesus is likely to be threatened once more. Thomas then concludes that a return to Jerusalem is likely to lead to Jesus being killed and quite possibly his followers along with him. The situation is hopeless. There is no hope for Lazarus now that he is dead and it seems there is no hope for Jesus or his followers either.

4. Jesus is not being uncaring or callous in his comments. He seems to have deliberately stayed away from Bethany in order for the illness that Lazarus was suffering to take its course. His death will offer Jesus an occasion to reveal who he is. What he will do will reveal his glory, his splendour, something he shares with the Father. The disciples will see the visible manifestation of the person of God in what Jesus will do and so they will put their faith in him.

5. It was custom for burial to occur on the same day as death. Thirty days of mourning then followed, the first seven days were characterised by dramatic displays of grief. An essential obligation of Jewish culture was consoling friends and family, this explains why so many Jews had made the short journey from Jerusalem to Bethany (verse 19). A large grieving crowd would have confronted Jesus on his arrival at the home of Martha and Mary (see verse 33).

The sisters themselves must have been devastated at the loss of their brother. Lazarus is the only man named in the household, it is likely that he would have provided for the family and been their protector.

The sisters may have been confused, why did Jesus delay? Verses 35–36 suggest that the healing of the blind man was well known. Now there is no hope. John 11:39–40 suggests that the last thing Martha expected was that Jesus could raise Lazarus to life. Likewise Mary is full of sorrow. When Martha hears that Jesus is present she quickly goes to him, not in confidence but grief. In verses 21 and 31 the sisters say almost exactly the same thing; if Jesus had been present Lazarus would not have died.

6. Martha believed in a resurrection of the dead at the end of time, when faithful Jews would be raised to enjoy everlasting life. This was the view held by most Jews at the time. Jesus confirms her belief that death is not the end. But then astonishingly claims that eternal life depends on believing in him personally. Jesus is the one who raises the dead and gives eternal life. Everyone who believes in him will pass through death, never to die again.

7. Mary didn't know Jesus was there and she was observing the custom of receiving mourners whilst seated in her house. Hearing that Jesus has arrived and wanted to see her (perhaps Jesus remains on the edge of town to avoid controversy), she confronts him with her grief and hopelessness – if only Jesus had been there, now it is too late.

Notice that Martha calls Jesus 'The Teacher'. At the time Rabbis refused to teach women, but Jesus' approach was very different.

Jesus responds by being deeply moved by Mary's grief and weeps with her. In so doing, Jesus demonstrates profound identification and compassion for people in their grief and anguish.

8. Jesus shares the grief of his friends but he does so with a sense of outrage. He is outraged by the death of his friend and the grief he is witnessing. Sickness, death, despair and hopelessness are the result of human rejection of God. In turning away from God who is the source of all life, human beings now experience these painful intruders. They should never have been part of the human experience and Jesus is full of anger towards death.

9. The crowd knows that Jesus healed the man born blind but have no expectation that he can do anything for Lazarus now that he has been dead for four days. Likewise, Martha has no expectation that Jesus will do anything for her brother; she is concerned only with the bad smell produced by his decaying corpse.

10. Jesus reassures Martha that she is about to see the glory of God, the outshining of God's nature in what Jesus is about to do. This is why he stayed away, so that he may demonstrate his power over death. He commands Lazarus to come out. Lazarus then walks awkwardly out of the tomb. What Jesus claim about himself in verses 25–26 can be trusted. He really is the one who has power over death and through faith in him a person will pass through death to life forever.

11. This miracle is for those who were watching, to help them put their faith and trust in him. However, the raising of Lazarus divides those who see it. Some believe, but others side with the Pharisees. No amount of evidence will convince those who have already determined to reject Jesus. Rather than responding with belief that Jesus really has power over death some are hardened in their opposition. They fear the popularity of Jesus and the fear of Roman intervention was a justification they could use to arrest and condemn him.

What does it mean for us?

It is important to emphasise with the deep sorrow, pain, compassion and grief experienced by Jesus. He weeps at the tomb of his friend. If Jesus is divine then it suggests that God understands our pain and has compassion on us. He isn't aloof and uncaring. Nor does he try and distance himself from our suffering. Rather he enters in. Though suffering leaves us with many questions, this incident assures us that Jesus cares for us, and feels our sorrow.

But Jesus doesn't only empathise with us. He has come in to the world to deal with death. Death is the consequence of our rejection of the God who gives all life; it is our judgment, our punishment. Jesus is profoundly angry at the impact of sin and death in the world. This is what Jesus has come to deal with (as we saw in study one). By having faith in Jesus, we can not only find comfort but also hope in the face of death. How he defeats death is explored in the next study.

Study 5: The Great Exchange

John 19:1–42

Purpose

To show that in turning away from God and living without any reference to him, we are alienated from God. We are in darkness and are left with a thirst that cannot be satisfied. We saw in chapter 11 that death was never intended to be part of the human experience but results from our rejection of God who gives life to all. But in his love for the world, God has taken the initiative. Jesus Christ comes in to the world to deliver us from our dilemma. In this study we see how Jesus does this, by experiencing our alienation from God and the death we deserve, acting as our substitute.

General note

Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus has been subject to at least three murder attempts. Chapter 11 culminates with the Jewish leadership plotting to kill him once more. Jesus withdraws from Jerusalem, returning sometime later for the Passover festival. He is betrayed by Judas Iscariot, arrested, interrogated by the Jewish authorities and found guilty of blasphemy (John 19:7). They take Jesus to be tried by the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, who alone had the authority to sentence Jesus to death. But as the drama unfolds it is clear that Jesus is not an unwilling victim of circumstance. Jesus sees this moment as the fulfilment of his whole life, and in dying he accomplishes God's salvation for the world.

Leaders' notes

Alexander Solzhenitsyn (pronounced *Sol-zen-it-sin*, 1918–2008) was a Russian Christian and political dissident who protested against the abuses of the Soviet Union. Through his experience of Soviet prison camps, he came to the view that people could not be classified into 'good' and 'evil'. Rather we are all morally compromised, capable of both kindness and cruelty. Do participants agree or disagree with Solzhenitsyn? If so, why or why not?

The quotation comes from Solzhenitsyn's book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, which is his memoir about his life in Soviet labour camps.

1. The soldiers would have given Jesus a beating, to pacify Jesus' accusers and warn Jesus against making trouble. They mock Jesus because he is being accused of setting himself up as a king, which appears ridiculous. Jesus accepts that he is a King, but his Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:33–37).

The crown of thorns would have been made from the branches of a common thorn bush or a date palm. The thorns may have been up to twelve inches long and caused considerable pain and bleeding. The purple robe was probably a military cloak and was used as a mock royal garment. The soldiers' greeting mimics the cry of 'Hail Caesar' that would be extended to the Roman Emperor.

2. Pilate clearly believes Jesus to be innocent of any crime (verses 4 and 6). Note his impatient sarcasm, 'you crucify him', knowing that only he had the authority to impose the death penalty. When Pilate says 'behold the man' at the end of verse 5 he is effectively saying 'look at this pitiful man, can he really be guilty of leading a rebellion against Rome?' Jesus would indeed have looked pitiful covered in blood and bruises, wearing mock regal robes.

3. For Pilate the designation 'Son of God' would have been significant. 'Divine men' or 'heroes' were believed to have been the product of sexual liaisons between the Roman gods and human women. Such men enjoyed divine powers. Pilate may have reasoned that if Jesus was a son of one of the gods, he might incur the wrath of the gods for having Jesus beaten.

4. Although Jesus is facing an incredibly cruel death, Pilate is the one who seems afraid. His question 'where are you from?' was likely prompted by the accusation that Jesus was claiming to be the Son of God. But Jesus is silent, refusing to plead his case and protest his innocence. Jesus believes that he is the Son of God and in submitting to Pilate God's plan of crucifixion God's plan to save the world is being put in to effect (verse 11). God is in control and gives authority to Pilate to accomplish God's own purposes. The one guilty of greater sin is probably Caiaphas the High priest who should have welcomed Jesus as the Messiah but hands him over to Pilate (18:19–27).

5. The religious leaders persuade Pilate by threatening his own interests. Not being Caesar's friend would raise serious questions about Pilate's loyalty. He appeases the accusers of Jesus to protect his political position.

When the religious leaders say 'We have no king but Caesar' they are denying the confession at the heart of their faith, that God alone was their ruler. One of the Passover prayers even included the line, speaking of God, 'We have no king but you'. Explore why the religious leaders hated Jesus so much they were willing to contradict their own religious confessions in order to be rid of him.

6. Jesus has already been beaten by the Roman soldiers. Following the sentence of crucifixion, a second beating followed. This was normal procedure, called the *verberatio* and was the most terrible beating of all. The condemned person would be viciously whipped with leather thongs that were fitted with pieces of bone or metal in order to shred the flesh of the victim. Persons subjected to this torture sometimes died, whilst others were left in a dreadfully weakened condition, often with their bones exposed.

Beaten in this way, with a crown of thorns rammed on his head, Jesus would have cut a pathetic figure carrying the weight of the cross beam of his cross through the Jerusalem streets. The other Gospels tell us that Jesus was so weakened by the beating he received, that a man named Simon was plucked from the crowd and forced to carry the cross for him (Mark 15:21).

7. Crucifixion was a death filled with horror and shame and was only inflicted on slaves, bandits, prisoners of war and revolutionaries. A Roman citizen could be crucified only with the sanction of the Emperor himself.

Atrocious physical pain, length of torment and public humiliation, combined to make crucifixion a most horrible form of death. For hours, the victim would hang in the heat of the sun, stripped naked to further the humiliation. In order to avoid suffocation, a crucified person had to push themselves up with their legs and pull with their arms in order to breathe, triggering terrible pain as their flesh ripped against the nails.

A notice listing the specific crimes of the person was nailed to the cross in order to discourage anyone else from offending in similar fashion. It is likely that Pilate wrote 'King of the Jews' to demonstrate that Jesus was crucified for treason and to also anger the religious leaders further as they had hounded him in to crucifying someone he believed to be innocent. Aramaic was the most commonly used language in Palestine at this time, Latin was the official language of Roman law and Greek the international language.

We can only imagine the grief and sorrow that Jesus' mother and followers were feeling as they witnessed his death. Clearly this death, so final and so humiliating, spells the end of the Jesus movement. How could he be the saviour of the world when he could not save himself? How can his claim to bring life to the world be true when he is dead?

8. Jesus has consistently been aware that his life was following a clear plan. In our first study, he spoke about his hour. Jesus now knows that in his death all was finished, he had completed the work that he had come to do.

Jesus cries 'I am thirsty'. We have seen through our studies in John that thirst is a key metaphor for our alienation from God caused by our sin, an alienation that ends in death. Jesus is now suffering the alienation from God we experience, but why, when he has committed no sin? Finally, Jesus says 'It is finished' or 'It is accomplished'. Jesus chose the moment of his death, when the purpose for which he came had been completed. The innocent Son of God was dying in the place of sinful human beings, being punished in our place, suffering the alienation from God and death we deserve for our rejection of God. God's plan of salvation in which his innocent Son would be punished in our place was accomplished. Jesus' cry from the cross is one of triumph, not despair.

Two details in verses 31–37 make it clear that Jesus had died. In order to quicken death soldiers would break the legs of those condemned, which meant that they could no longer raise themselves to breathe. This is unnecessary in Jesus' case because he is already dead. Secondly, the emission of blood and water from his side suggests that the blood had already separated from the serum, indicating death had already occurred.

9. Isaiah 53 describes the suffering of one described as 'The Servant'. Isaiah looks forward to one who would suffer and die, not for his own sins, but for the sins of others. Jesus is innocent; he has not 'turned to his own way' but has always obeyed his Father. Jesus exchanges himself for us. He suffers the death and alienation we deserve for our rejection of God. God's punishment is laid on him, in our place, as our substitute.

10. Jesus' cry of 'It is finished' is not the whimper of the defeated, but the cry of the victor. He has finished or accomplished God's salvation. Any debt we owe to God for the things we do wrong is paid in full by Jesus.

11. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were both members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council. Both seem to be persuaded of Jesus claims. John 3:1–16 and 8:40–52 describe Nicodemus' journey to faith.

So, what does it mean for us?

After studying the chapter, the key issue to explore is -- why do participants think Jesus died? He is declared innocent; Pilate gives him opportunity to walk away. But he seems to see his death as God's plan (verse 11) and his great accomplishment of everything he came to do (verses 28–30). Jesus identifies with the alienated by crying 'I am thirsty'. What best makes sense of this fact? The quotation from Isaiah 53 explains what Jesus is doing, the innocent bearing the punishment for the guilty, Jesus having our sins laid on him and dying in our place. Have participants considered what Keller claims, that the essence of Christianity is not our efforts to be better and therefore acceptable, but God's action on our behalf through dying for us?



Study 6: See for yourself

John 20:1–31

Purpose

To show that some of the evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus and to encourage participants to see that what John has written is sufficient for someone to put their faith in Jesus and follow him.

General note

In this passage we encounter first-century sceptics. No one expected the resurrection to happen. As we have seen, the popular belief in Jesus' time was that the resurrection of the dead was to happen at the end of time. In this study, we see these sceptics becoming convinced of Jesus' resurrection, as different evidence is presented to them. At the end of this study, Jesus states that faith will not be based on seeing him. Seeing is, at best, an ambiguous pathway to faith in this chapter. Is faith therefore irrational? A blind leap? No, John anticipates that people will believe in Jesus because of the evidence he provides in his Gospel. What he has written about Jesus should convince us that what Jesus claims about himself and the life he offers is true. This is not irrational, this is faith that is based on evidence.

Leaders' notes

This question aims to open up a discussion about why people might be resistant to changing their beliefs. Reasons include: the fear of how others will react, simple irrationalism, a lack of openness to other possibilities and a tendency to either filter evidence or distort evidence to fit existing beliefs. A central claim of Christianity is that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead. You can ask participants to imagine for a moment knowing that this was actually true. How receptive to this truth do they think they would be? What evidence would they need to change their minds about it?

1. The disciples must have been experiencing crushing disappointment. They had placed all their hopes in Jesus. Now he lay dead. As we have seen, those who followed Jesus were excluded from the synagogue (John 9:22) so at the very least the disciples faced a future alienated from their community. Worse still, verse 19 suggests that they feared for their lives, what had happened to Jesus might happen to them next.
2. Jesus was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. The tomb was unused (John 19:41) and located in a garden. Mary had witnessed Jesus being laid in the tomb on the eve of the Sabbath, which was a Friday, the day of the crucifixion. Mary goes to the tomb on the first day of the week (Sunday morning) to finish embalming the body, something not permitted on the Sabbath. Mary thinks that someone must have taken the body. She has no thought that Jesus might be alive.
3. The possible explanations for the missing body include: a. Jesus hadn't died on the cross, but revived in the cool of the tomb and escaped; b. Someone had stolen the body, perhaps the Jews or Romans, or the disciples themselves; c. The tomb had been robbed by grave robbers; d. Mary and the two disciples went to the wrong tomb and assumed that Jesus was alive.

4. The other disciple, the one that Jesus loved (almost certainly John), describes in detail the burial cloths that were left in the tomb and how the linen head cloth was lying folded, separate to the other cloths. On seeing this arrangement he believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. For John this was the only explanation of the evidence. If this had been a grave robbery it is most likely that the cloths and spices would have been taken because these were the most valuable contents of the tomb. If the Jewish or Roman officials had ordered the body to be moved they would not have removed the grave clothes and folded them neatly. If Jesus had not died but only fainted on the cross, the remnants of a struggle would be expected in the tomb.

5. Standing at the entrance of the tomb, Mary is deeply distressed. The thought of Jesus' body being stolen and abused must have been a particular anguish. She doesn't seem open at all to the possibility of Jesus being alive. In verse 14 she mistakes Jesus for the gardener, even asking him where the body might be! Dead people stay dead – don't they?

Mary is only convinced when Jesus speaks her name. Only when he addressed her personally, in the voice she knew so well, did she realise the person in front of her was Jesus.

6. Still full of compassion, Jesus reveals himself in person to Mary first, comforting her in her anguish. We can see how thrilled Mary is; she grabs hold of him (see verse 17), perhaps to ensure that she does not lose him again!

It may be argued that the fact that it was Mary, a woman, who was the first to witness the bodily resurrection of Jesus, provides a further indication of the genuineness of the events and the historical accuracy of John's account. At the time, women were not considered reliable witnesses. What is more, for evidence to be accepted in a Jewish court, two witnesses were required. If this account of the life of Jesus had been written by someone intending to make the case for Jesus' resurrection seem more plausible, it is inconceivable that they would have made the first witness to the resurrection be a lone woman.

7. It is now Sunday evening; Jesus followers are locked in a house, fearing what would happen to them. Suddenly they see Jesus standing among them. They may have thought they were seeing his ghost (they had already thought this in John 6:19–20) or perhaps a hallucination.

Jesus shows them the ragged wounds of his crucifixion. The scars proved to them that the person they had witnessed being crucified and killed three days ago was the same person standing in front of them. He was no ghost; his body, with its scars, was tangible. Realising that Jesus had been raised from the dead filled them with joy.

In verses 21–23, Jesus speaks of what his disciples are to do after he returns to heaven. The Father sent the Son to save the world. He did this by suffering our alienation from his Father. Jesus then sends out his followers, helped by his Spirit, to take this message of forgiveness to the world. Those who receive the message of forgiveness will be forgiven, but those who refuse the message of God acting to save the world in the death of Jesus, by definition, cannot be forgiven.

8. Thomas was not present when Jesus came to the disciples in their locked room. He greets their claims to have seen Jesus alive with considerable scepticism. He won't believe on the basis of what they say they have seen. He needs to see for himself. Again it is clear that resurrection was the last thing the disciples expected and Thomas dismisses the claims of the disciples as fanciful.

9. It remains unsafe for the disciples, a week later and they are still hiding away. Jesus shows awareness of Thomas' objection and invites him to do what he said would be required for him to believe. Jesus then commands him to believe. Thomas didn't have to touch Jesus' wounds, seeing him was enough to persuade him of the resurrection.

10. Thomas moves from being sceptical to acknowledging Jesus to be divine. Jesus had been so obviously dead, now he is alive. God had promised to destroy death, remove the shroud that enfolds people. This is what Jesus has done and so he must be God. This is an astonishing confession for a Jewish man to make since the first two commands of the Ten Commandments forbid the worship of anything other than the invisible God.

11. Jesus doesn't reject the confession Thomas makes that he is God, rather he accepts it. Jesus is clearly comfortable with being described as Lord and God.

12. Try and establish an answer to this question, that seeing is just one form of evidence and it is not always reliable. Mary saw Jesus but didn't believe. John believed but he didn't see Jesus – he was persuaded by other evidence, the grave clothes. The disciples saw Jesus but they assumed he was a ghost. They didn't believe until he showed them his wounds.

Importantly, Jesus tells Thomas that he should have believed on the basis of the evidence he already had, what the disciples had witnessed and reported to him. Thomas is not a model of how someone starts to believe, quite the opposite. Jesus points to how people will believe and enjoy his blessing in the future and it won't be through seeing him as Thomas did (verse 29).

In John 20:30–31, John states that believing is based on evidence. John believes that he has provided sufficient evidence in his book to persuade us that Jesus is the Son of God and saviour of the world. His offer of life is something we can receive and enjoy.

So, what does it mean for us?

This final question gives you the opportunity to invite participants to put their faith in Jesus as their saviour, Lord and God, just as Thomas did. After discussing the question, you may wish to ask if they would like to become a Christian. If they want to do this, then first of all pray a simple prayer with them (you can find such a prayer on page 124 of the Uncover John Gospel). Then make sure you take them along to church and keep studying the Bible with them. You could use the follow on John studies available on the Uncover John website or look at another Gospel using Uncover Luke, available from www.ivpbooks.com/uncover.

Difficulties in believing tend to fall in to two categories. Firstly, there might be something specific that a participant is struggling to believe. They may not yet be persuaded that Jesus is who he says he is. Explore what it is that they might specifically find difficult. Suggest continuing to meet up to study using the further studies in Uncover John or you could use Uncover Luke for a different perspective on Jesus from another Gospel writer.

Alternatively, someone might not be ready to believe because they recognise that following Jesus will require a radical change of life for them. Perhaps they fear the reaction of others. Help participants explore what it is that is holding them back from believing. You might want to ask whether they have considered that knowing Jesus is a greater joy than what they fear losing and that eternally it is so worth following Jesus. Again, continue to meet up to study Uncover John or Uncover Luke together.