DISCUSSION GUIDE

One Life, Four Stories

Invitations to Faith & Wonder

by David Ourisman

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for Book Clubs and Study Groups

designed for one-hour conversations

A Note to Groups

These questions are designed for a group of about twelve people meeting for roughly an hour per session. They work equally well self-led or with a pastor facilitating. You don't need a biblical scholar in the room—some of the material in the book may be new even to ordained clergy.

The questions are intentionally open-ended. There are no right answers. The goal is inquiry and conversation: What surprised you? What made you curious? What questions does this raise? How might this help your faith grow?

A few practical suggestions:

1. Read each chapter before the session. These questions assume the group has read the assigned chapter, not just skimmed it.
2. You won't get to every question—and that's fine. Pick the two or three that seem most alive for your group, and let the conversation breathe.
3. Welcome tangents. A group that chases a question nobody expected is a group that's learning together.
4. Keep a Bible handy. The book references many specific passages, and looking them up together deepens the conversation.
5. Honor disagreement. The book itself argues that the early church preserved four different—sometimes contradictory—voices. Your group can do the same.

Introduction: Beyond a Cookie-Cutter Jesus

1. Ourisman suggests that most of us carry a "cookie-cutter Jesus" in our heads—a single, blended portrait drawn from all four gospels at once. Before reading this book, were you aware that you might be doing this? Can you think of a specific example where you may have combined details from different gospels into one story?

2. The book invites us to read each gospel as a complete, standalone story—the way we'd read a novel. Does this approach excite you, unsettle you, or both? What feels risky about it? What feels freeing?

3. Ourisman introduces three questions he'll track through every gospel: How does this community relate to its inherited tradition? What does discipleship look like here? What hope sustains this community? Which of these three questions feels most alive for your own faith right now?

4. The Introduction mentions that the four gospels were written between 70 and 110 CE, each for a different community facing a unique crisis. Were you surprised that the gospels were written that late? How does knowing this context change the way you hear these stories?

MARK: A GOSPEL FOR A TIME OF FEAR

Chapter 1 — Four Stories, Four Voices

1. This chapter sets the stage by walking through the history behind the four gospels. Was any historical background new to you? Did anything shift the way you think about how the Bible came together?

2. Ourisman describes the gospel writers as "pastors" addressing specific congregations in crisis. How does thinking of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as pastors—rather than just historians—change the way you read their stories?

3. The chapter introduces the idea that diversity among the gospels is a gift, not a problem to be solved. Where in your own faith journey have you experienced diversity (of opinion, of practice, of belief) as either threatening or enriching?

4. Ourisman invites readers to use a "Gospel Parallels" resource to compare how the same story appears in different gospels. Have you ever done this? If you tried it this week, what passage would you want to compare?

Chapter 2 — Fear Silences Faith

1. Mark's gospel ends with the women fleeing the tomb in terror: "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mk 16:8). Before reading this chapter, did you know Mark's original gospel ended this way? What's your gut reaction to a gospel that ends in fear and silence?

2. The chapter reveals that English translations systematically soften Mark's violent Greek—"opened" for "torn apart" (*schizo*), "led" for "drove out" (*ekballo*). Why do you think translators softened this language? What do we lose when we do?

3. Mark was writing around 70 CE, right after Rome destroyed the Temple. His community was traumatized and afraid. Can you think of a time in your life, or in the life of your church or community, when fear made it hard to speak about what you believed?

4. The chapter suggests that Mark's ending is intentional: since no character in the story proclaims the resurrection, the reader becomes the one who must speak. How does it feel to realize that Mark is turning to you and saying, "Now it's your turn"?

Chapter 3 — Peter and the Disciples Falter

1. Mark uses the Parable of the Sower (Mk 4) as a framework for the disciples' failure—rocky ground, thorns, and all. Have you ever thought of the Sower as a story about how discipleship fails? Does this reading feel true to your experience?

2. Peter says the right words — "You are the Messiah" — but Jesus immediately rebukes him. What might Mark be telling us about the difference between saying the right things about Jesus and actually following him? Can you think of ways the church today might "get the title right" but miss the point?"
3. The disciples in Mark start strong but fall apart under pressure. They misunderstand, argue about status, flee at the arrest, and Peter denies Jesus three times. Why do you think Mark tells the story this way? Is he being harsh, honest, or something else?
4. Mark's portrayal of the disciples might feel uncomfortable if we're used to thinking of them as heroes. Does this portrayal make them more relatable to you, or less? What might Mark be saying to his frightened congregation through these failures?

Chapter 4 — The Women: Faithful When Others Fled

1. The unnamed woman at Bethany anoints Jesus — and to anoint someone is to declare them king. "Anointed One" is what "Messiah" means. Peter confesses Jesus with words; this woman confesses him with an action. What does it mean that Mark treats her act as the truest confession in the gospel? What might that suggest about how faith is expressed — through what we say, or through what we do?
2. The chapter identifies two forms of "incomplete witness" in Mark: the male disciples proclaim but cannot stay, while the women stay but cannot proclaim. Does this framework help you think about different ways people show up—or fail to show up—in your own community of faith?
3. Mark's women are faithful all the way to the cross and to the tomb—but then they too are silenced by fear. What does it mean that even the most faithful characters in Mark ultimately fail? Is this a message of despair, or something else?
4. After reading all three Mark chapters, how would you describe "Mark's Jesus" in your own words? How is he different from the Jesus you grew up hearing about?

LUKE-ACTS: A GOSPEL FOR A GROWING CHURCH

Chapter 5 — Fear Transformed into Joy

1. Luke opens with a threefold "Be not afraid"—to Zechariah, to Mary, and to the shepherds—directly countering Mark's ending in fear. Once you see this pattern, it's hard to unsee it. Were you surprised to learn that Luke was deliberately "answering" Mark? What does this tell you about how the gospel writers related to each other?

2. The chapter reveals that Luke-Acts was originally one continuous work, split into two by the Council of Hippo in 393 CE. Does knowing that Luke and Acts were meant to be read together change anything about how you understand either book?

3. Ourisman makes the case that Luke was writing to Jewish Christians, not to Gentiles as is commonly assumed. He points to all those Torah-observant characters (Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna) as evidence. Does this surprise you? How does it change the way you hear Luke's story?

4. Luke builds his case for Gentile inclusion gradually — through devout characters, their speeches, and Jesus' parables. Consider the tender scene of elderly Simeon holding the infant Jesus in the Temple. What does Simeon actually say in his prayer (Lk 2:29–32)? Who is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles"? How does a gentle moment like this plant a seed for the radical claim Luke will make later in Acts?

Chapter 6 — Peter: The Reluctant Prophet

1. Luke completely transforms Peter from Mark's failure into a prophet figure whose call echoes Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. Compare Peter's call in Luke 5:1–11 with Mark's brief version in Mark 1:16–18. What do you notice about how Luke has expanded and reshaped this scene?

2. The chapter points out that Luke eliminates the "Triple Rebuke" (Mark 8:29–33), where Jesus rebukes Peter with the same word used for demons. Why would Luke make this editorial choice? What does it tell you about Luke's purpose?

3. Luke's parables of inclusion—the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Great Banquet—aren't just nice stories. Ourisman argues they're part of Luke's strategic case for welcoming Gentiles. Does this political reading of these beloved parables enhance them for you, or does it feel like it reduces them?

4. The Holy Spirit appears 54 times in Luke-Acts—far more than in any other gospel. How does the prominence of the Spirit change the flavor of Luke's story compared to Mark's?

Chapter 7 — Beyond Boundaries: An Inclusive Gospel

1. Acts 10—Peter's vision of the sheet descending from heaven with unclean animals, and God's declaration "What God has made clean, you must not call profane"—is the climax of everything Luke has been

building. Can you recall a moment in your own faith journey when a boundary you assumed was fixed turned out to be more open than you thought?

2. Ourisman notes that Luke-Acts ends with Paul preaching in Rome "without hindrance" (Acts 28:31)—the polar opposite of Mark's ending in fear and silence. Take a moment to hold both endings together. What does it mean that the Bible contains both?

3. Luke chose to tell a story rather than write a theological argument (like Paul's letters). Ourisman writes: "Rational prose speaks to the mind. Stories appeal to the heart." When has a story changed your mind about something that an argument could not?

4. After reading all three Luke-Acts chapters, what contemporary church conflicts come to mind that mirror the first-century debate over who belongs at the table?

MATTHEW: A GOSPEL FOR A TIME OF CONFLICT

Chapter 8 — The Law as Gift, Not Burden

1. Matthew writes: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law… not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law" (Mt 5:17–18). Ourisman argues this sentence only makes sense if someone was claiming Jesus did abolish the law—and the obvious candidates are Paul and Luke. Did this connection surprise you? What does it mean that two gospel writers took opposite positions on this question?

2. Many of Jesus' most famous sayings—"salt of the earth," "light of the world," "turn the other cheek," and the Golden Rule—are found only in Matthew. Ourisman argues these aren't universal wisdom but partisan Torah defense. How does it feel to hear familiar sayings in this new, more specific context?

3. Were you aware of the parallel between Pharaoh ordering the death of Hebrew infants and Herod ordering the massacre of the innocents? Matthew draws this and other deliberate connections between Moses and Jesus. Did you notice that Matthew organizes Jesus' teaching into five major discourses — echoing the five books of the Torah? What is Matthew claiming about Jesus by framing him as a New Moses?

4. Matthew presents the Torah not as a burden but as a gift of life and freedom. How does this contrast with the way you've heard the "Old Testament Law" discussed in church? Does Matthew's perspective challenge or confirm your assumptions?

Chapter 9 — Who Can Interpret Scripture?

1. This chapter deals with Matthew's harsh language about "scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." Ourisman argues this reflects Matthew's contemporary anger at the rabbis of Yavneh—projected back onto characters from Jesus' time. How does understanding this as a first century "family fight" change the way you hear Matthew 23?

2. The book points out that first-century Judaism had competing schools of interpretation — Hillel (more lenient, spirit of the law) and Shammai (stricter, letter of the law). Jesus' own teaching often aligns with Hillel, while Matthew portrays his opponents as taking Shammai-like positions. Why might Matthew frame the conflict this way? What does it tell us about who Matthew is really arguing with — and when?

3. Ourisman compares Matthew's anger to the experience of going through a painful divorce or church split: "People are not at their best in the midst of a separation." Have you witnessed this dynamic—in a family, friendship, or congregation? How does it help explain Matthew's tone?

4. Anti-Jewish texts in the New Testament — particularly in Matthew — have been used to justify centuries of persecution, pogroms, and the Holocaust. How does it feel to reckon with the fact that scripture has been weaponized in this way? What responsibility does the church bear for this history, and what responsibility do we carry as readers and teachers going forward?

Chapter 10 — Built on Peter, the Rock

1. Matthew adds material found in no other gospel: Jesus calling Peter "the Rock," giving him "the keys of the kingdom," and authority to "bind and loose" (Mt 16:17–19). Knowing that this is Matthew's distinctive contribution—not shared by Mark, Luke, or John—how does that affect the way you understand the authority claims built on this passage?

2. "Bind and loose" was rabbinic language for "permit and forbid"—deciding what the community could and couldn't do. Matthew later extends this authority to the whole church (Mt 18:18). What do you think Matthew is trying to accomplish by giving this authority first to Peter, then to everyone?

3. This chapter compares Peter across all four gospels: Mark's failure, Luke's prophet, Matthew's Rock, and (looking ahead) his diminished role in John. Which Peter do you find most compelling? Which feels most honest?

4. Ourisman's key insight: the Bible includes both Matthew and Luke—two contemporaries who took opposite positions on the Torah question. The early church could have picked a winner but chose to keep both. What does this choice say about how the church understood truth and authority? What might it mean for disagreements in the church today?

JOHN: A GOSPEL FOR A NEW WORLD

Chapter 11 — Born Again or Born from Above

1. The Greek word *anothen* has a deliberate double meaning: "from above" and "again." Nicodemus hears "born again" while Jesus means "born from above." How does knowing about this double meaning change the way you understand the Nicodemus conversation? Have you heard "born again" used differently in church than what John seems to intend?

2. John makes only 2 references to "kingdom of God," compared to 14 in Mark, 32 in Luke, and 37 in Matthew. For the synoptic writers, the kingdom is coming — a future hope on the horizon. For John, the kingdom already exists in the world above, accessible now through spiritual rebirth. What are you hoping for in your own life of faith — something that's coming, or something that's already here but hard to see? How does each version of hope speak to where you are right now?

3. The chapter uses the imaginative device of two women—Miriam (Jewish) and Helena (Greek)—in an Ephesian house church who hear the same stories differently. Which woman's perspective do you naturally identify with? Why?

4. By the time John writes (around 100–110 CE), the Torah debates that consumed Matthew and Luke have faded completely. John's community has moved beyond the synagogue. Does this feel like growth, loss, or both?

Chapter 12 — Engaging the Greek World

1. John's Jesus is strikingly different from the synoptic Jesus: he never hungers, never feels gut-level compassion (*splagchnizomai*), avoids physical touch, and gives up his life voluntarily. Which of these differences surprised you most? Do you find John's Jesus more difficult to relate to, or does he speak to a different kind of spiritual longing?

2. Ourisman uses Plato's Allegory of the Cave to explain John's worldview: most humans are trapped in a world of shadows, unable to see the light above. Jesus is the one who descends from the realm of light to show the way. Does this philosophical framework help you understand John's gospel in a new way?

3. In John, Peter is not the first disciple called (he's third), not the first to confess Jesus as Messiah (Martha is), and is seemingly replaced by "the disciple whom Jesus loved." What do you think John is saying about authority and leadership by diminishing Peter?

4. The "curtain call" ending (John 21) reinstates Peter after the story has already concluded: "Feed my sheep." Ourisman suggests this may be a diplomatic gesture toward churches where Peter was central. What do you make of a gospel that seems to have two endings—one theological and one political?

5. After reading about all four gospels, what has struck you most about the differences between them? Has this journey changed the way you want to read scripture going forward?

Chapter 13 — Journey of Discovery

1. Ourisman ends the book with an invitation: "Treasure your questions, for they open us to new learning, new avenues of exploration, new inspiration, and a deepened faith." As you reflect on the whole book, what is the biggest question it has opened for you?

2. The book identifies several types of readers—seekers, Jewish readers, disillusioned Christians, evangelicals, progressives. Did you recognize yourself in any of these? Was there a moment in the book where you felt it was speaking directly to you?

3. One of the book's core arguments is that if four ancient communities could tell Jesus' story in radically different ways to meet their unique crises, that freedom might be available to communities of faith today. What would it look like for your church to tell the story of Jesus in a way that speaks specifically to what your community is going through right now?

4. The book began with a "cookie-cutter Jesus" and ends with an invitation to "wonder." Has this study moved you from one toward the other? What's one thing you'll take with you from this experience?

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