

Christianity
EXPLORED

One life. What's it all about?

Introduction

When we first started running *Christianity Explored* fifteen years ago at All Souls, Langham Place in London, we were uncertain how it would be received.

We were pretty sure that opening up the message of Jesus by walking through the Gospel of Mark would be a great thing to do. But we have been amazed by how God has honoured and blessed this simple approach to outreach.

We are so thankful that, since those early days, hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world have encountered the real Jesus as he walks off the pages of Scripture. The course has stimulated thought and discussion – and people have been challenged to consider the claim of Christ on their lives. *Christianity Explored* has been translated into over 20 languages and continues to grow.

What makes this course – and the Christian gospel – distinctive is its insistence on God's remarkable grace: the clear teaching that although we have rebelled against God, we are deeply loved by him. Loved with an outrageous, costly and incomprehensible love that was poured out for us on a little hill just outside Jerusalem.

This third edition has been reworked as a seven-session course. With a creative mixture of Bible studies, talks, DVDs, group discussions and home Bible-reading, group members will discover the identity, mission and call of Jesus – who Jesus is, what he came to do, and how he calls us to respond.

And you are an important part in bringing this good news to your friends, family or neighbourhood. Trust in the Holy Spirit's power to open blind eyes, because this ancient story with its many life-changing truths will find its way into the hearts and souls of those who hear it. And by the miracle of God's grace, you will be part of others coming to know the love and salvation that only Christ can give.

If you are running a *Christianity Explored* course, please register it on our website **www.ceministries.org**, so that we and others can pray for you, or even send other people along.

May God richly bless you in all you do with this course for the honour and glory of Christ.



Rico Tice, Barry Cooper, Craig Dyer

and the Christianity Explored Team, February 2011

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How to run the course



Two *Christianity Explored* websites to help you:

www.christianityexplored.org

For non-Christians whether or not they're on a course

www.ceministries.org

For leaders looking for information, downloads and resources

Getting started

Telling people about Jesus Christ is a stunning privilege and a huge responsibility. It's a stunning privilege because Almighty God is pleased to call us his "fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9) as he seeks and saves the lost. And it's a huge responsibility because it can be tempting to present a watered-down gospel that has no power to save and is "no gospel at all" (Galatians 1:7). Our evangelism must always be careful, prayerful and faithful.

Christianity Explored has been developed to let the gospel tell the gospel: it takes your group members on a seven-session journey through Mark's Gospel to discover who Jesus is, why he came and what it means to follow him.

To help your journey run smoothly, you will need to consider the following before the course begins.

STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

How and when you meet will depend on your situation. Many courses run on a midweek evening for seven weeks, with a day away on the Saturday between sessions six and seven. But your circumstances may be different. Eg:

- a daytime women's group
- a fortnightly homegroup
- a church houseparty
- a Sunday group running at the same time as the regular church service
- a college Christian Union or fellowship
- a few people meeting round a kitchen table

The course material can be adapted to suit your situation, including meeting one-to-one with a friend or neighbour. However, you will find it helpful to meet as regularly as possible – and please don't skip any sessions or change the order (including using the day away material between sessions six and seven).

The chart on the next page shows how the course is structured, and how the themes fit together.

	Session	Explore (Bible study)	Listen (Talk/DVD)	Discuss	Follow up (at home)
Identity	Session 1 What are we doing here? <i>We're here to explore the good news about Jesus Christ.</i>	Welcome	Good news	Discuss talk/DVD	Mark 1:1 – 3:6
Identity	Session 2 Who is Jesus? <i>Jesus is the Christ (God's only chosen King) and God's Son.</i>	Mark 4:35-41	Identity	Discuss talk/DVD	Mark 3:7 – 5:43
Mission	Session 3 Why did Jesus come? <i>Jesus came to cure our heart problem – our sin.</i>	Mark 2:1-12	Sin	Discuss talk/DVD	Mark 6:1 – 8:29
Mission	Session 4 Why did Jesus die? <i>Jesus died to rescue us from sin, by taking the punishment we deserve.</i>	Mark 8:22-33	The cross	Discuss talk/DVD	Mark 8:30 – 10:52
Mission	Session 5 Why did Jesus rise? <i>The resurrection proves that God accepted the ransom Jesus paid, that death has been beaten, and that Jesus will come back to judge everyone.</i>	Mark 14:27-31	Resurrection	Discuss talk/DVD	Mark 11:1 – 13:37
Call	Session 6 How can God accept us? <i>God accepts us not because of anything we've done but because of what Jesus has done. This is grace – God's undeserved gift to us.</i>	Mark 10:13-16	Grace	Discuss talk/DVD	Mark 14:1 – 16:8

	Session	Explore (Bible study)	Listen (Talk/DVD)	Discuss	Follow up (at home)
Call	<p>Day away</p> <p>1: Listen carefully <i>We must listen to Jesus, and act on what we hear.</i></p> <p>2: Ask humbly <i>Following Jesus is about service, not status. We need to ask Jesus for mercy, not a reward.</i></p> <p>3: Choose wisely <i>Ignoring Jesus' call to repent and believe will eventually earn us the rejection of Jesus.</i></p>	Mark 4:1-9 and 13-20	The sower James and John King Herod	Discuss talk/DVD	
Call	<p>Session 7</p> <p>What does it mean to follow Jesus? <i>A follower of Jesus "must deny himself and take up his cross". But what is given up is nothing compared to what is gained.</i></p>	Mark 1:14-15	Come and die	Discuss talk/DVD	

The first five weeks focus on who Jesus is and why he came – his *identity* and *mission*. Then during the final two sessions and the day away the emphasis is on what it means to follow Jesus – his *call*. In particular course participants will explore Jesus' words in Mark 8:34: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me".

STRUCTURE OF A SESSION

Below is the suggested structure for an evening session. See “During the course” on page 43 for a fuller description of each component. Of course, depending on your circumstances, you might want to change the exact times, or offer coffee and cake instead of a meal. Equally, you might want to run the course during the day if that is a more suitable time for those you’re trying to reach.

6:30 p.m.	Leaders’ prayer meeting
7:00 p.m.	Participants arrive for the meal
7:45 p.m.	Explore (Bible study)
8:05 p.m.	Listen (Talk/DVD)
8:30 p.m.	Discuss
9:00 p.m.	End of the evening – “One-to-One”

Note: All times are approximate. You can make certain sessions shorter or longer depending on your circumstances.

You can run *Christianity Explored* with Bible talks presented by the course leader or by using the course DVD, which is presented by Rico Tice, who works at All Souls Church, Langham Place in London.

If you decide to run the course with the talks, you will find talk outlines in the appendix on page 153. Delivering the talks yourself will lead to a more personal, more intimate experience for the participants. You can also download the talks as Word documents so that you can adapt them for your own situation. They are available from **www.ceministries.org**

If you decide to run the course with the DVD, please note that because it features on-screen Bible text, it is inadvisable to use the DVD with large groups unless you have access to a projection screen and projector.

WHERE SHOULD YOU MEET?

Many groups meet in their church premises. However you may like to experiment with some different locations. Avoid using a classroom, or somewhere that looks like one, so that people don’t feel they are back in school. A small group could be

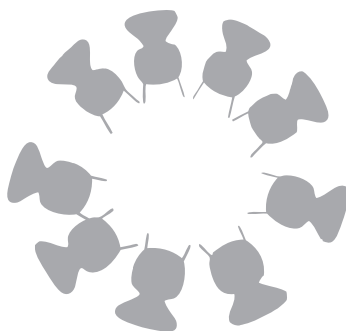
held in someone's home, or a small meeting room. Or you may be able to hire a space in a local coffee shop. A larger group could meet in a community hall, sports centre or local adult education centre. It's important to choose a place where you are unlikely to be interrupted and where you will be able to meet for every session at the same time.

The aim is to create a relational environment where people can listen to the Bible teaching while they enjoy the warmth of Christian friendship so that they feel sufficiently relaxed to ask their questions and express their doubts and feelings.

SETTING UP YOUR VENUE

It is important that participants feel relaxed and welcome, and the way you set up your venue will help you achieve that. The physical environment where you run *Christianity Explored* can have a big impact on people's willingness to get involved in discussion, so be creative in the way you set up the room.

With a small group, arrange the room so that everyone can see each other. Be careful that the group leader isn't sitting with their back to a window, which can make it harder for people to see them clearly. Ask any helpers to sit among the participants rather than next to the group leader. If your small group needs to meet in a large room, try to use screens and furniture to make a smaller, more friendly space in one corner.



If you are using the course DVD, place the screen where everyone can see it easily, and where there will not be reflections (eg: from windows) obscuring the picture.

If there are a large number of leaders and participants, set up a number of tables around which different groups can sit. Because each group will be engaged in separate discussions, try to leave plenty of space between tables so that participants and leaders can hear each other easily.

- You will need a way of displaying visual aids (eg: PowerPoint, overhead projector or flipchart).
- You may like to set aside a table with a selection of books for participants and leaders to buy or borrow. (See www.ceministries.org for recommended books on various subjects.)
- If you are meeting in a large premises, make sure that facilities and exits are clearly marked.

Everyone involved in the course – leaders, participants and the course leader – will need a copy of Mark’s Gospel or a Bible. It is important that everyone use the same version and edition so that page numbers will be the same. (The version used throughout the course material is the New International Version*.)

- Participants should each be given a Mark’s Gospel or Bible at the beginning of the course, preferably one they can keep when the course ends.
- They should also be given a copy of the Handbook.
- Pens should be made available to allow participants to make notes or jot down questions.

* **Note:** *Christianity Explored* uses the 1984 edition of the New International Version (NIV). The 2011 revised edition includes a number of changes to the English text in Mark’s Gospel. Where these changes involve significant words or phrases that are used within the course, there are notes in this Leader’s Guide to help you adapt the material if you are using the 2011 NIV.

Answering tough questions

OPEN TO QUESTION

One of the most important aspects of running a course like *Christianity Explored* is that it encourages participants to ask questions in an environment where they will be taken seriously, and not be ridiculed or belittled. You should encourage your group with words like: “No question is too simple, or too difficult – *Christianity Explored* is about you finding answers to the important questions of life.”

It is this atmosphere of open enquiry that encourages people to “open up” about spiritual things, and to approach the Bible not as a dead textbook, but as the source for answers. It is your job to help create this environment by your openness, honesty and willingness to talk in a relaxed way about things that group members may find particularly difficult to articulate.

WHY PEOPLE DON'T ASK QUESTIONS

There are a number of reasons why people won't ask questions:

- **Because they don't have any!** Some participants may not have thought much about spiritual things. It may be they grew up in a Christian home, and didn't question the things they have always been taught. However the word of God often provokes reactions and questions. So in the course of reading Mark, they are likely to come up with some. And if they are part of a larger group that is dealing with questions, then they will be encouraged to join in. Don't force the issue – let them develop in their own time.
- **Because they are frightened of appearing stupid.** This is a BIG issue for many people. If they think the question is simple, or that they will be belittled by others for asking it, then they will not speak up. The key here is to make sure you keep repeating the words: “No question is too simple, or too difficult – *Christianity Explored* is about you finding answers to the important questions of life.”
- **Because they are shy.** Some people just aren't good at speaking up in groups. And that is fine. Just make sure that you are able to talk with them personally about

their questions. Watch out for the tell-tale signs of a wrinkled forehead as they read or listen.

- **Because they need time.** Some people just need more time to get to the question. They may think of something later that evening or during the next week. So you should always give an opportunity to deal with questions from the previous session that have occurred to people, and don't make them feel that everyone is taking a step backwards because "all that was dealt with last time."

WHY DO PEOPLE ASK QUESTIONS?

It might seem obvious: "Because they want to know the answer" – but it often runs much deeper than that:

- **Because I want to test you.** The precise question they ask may not be of particular concern to them. It could just be that they have heard it expressed by others, or know that it is a tricky question for Christians to answer. What they are more interested in is how you handle it (*see below*). By not being rattled, and by taking the question seriously and demonstrating that you have given it some thought, you are answering "the question behind the question", which is: "Are these people trustworthy?" Always take questions seriously.
- **Because I genuinely don't understand.** There may be a huge variation in Bible knowledge in your group, and some will want to ask what you might consider to be really basic questions: "Who was Jesus?", "When did all this happen?", "What is prayer?" etc. Again, treat them seriously, and make sure the rest of the group do not look down on those with less knowledge than they have.
- **Because I have had a distressing personal experience.** There is a world of difference between someone asking: "Why does God allow suffering?" as an academic question, and someone who asks the same question having watched a close relative die of cancer recently. The way you answer the two may be completely different. And of course, you will not know if others listening in to your answer are carrying a burden of disappointment or personal pain. Always answer compassionately.
- **Because I have been let down.** The way a question is phrased may be the key to getting an insight here. So instead of "What is prayer?", asking "Why does God answer some prayers and not others?" may indicate that the questioner

has some specific disappointment in mind. Similarly, a question about Christians being hypocrites may relate to some bitter personal experience of a Christian or a church in the past. Always answer honestly.

- **Because I want to be sure it all makes sense.** The interest in a particular question may not be because it is a problem, but rather that they are seeking a sense that the Christian faith as a whole sticks together coherently. So answering in a way that connects the question with the big picture of the Bible's message is important. Answer from the Bible, not just from sensible reasons or philosophy.

HOW DO I ANSWER?

The following two appendices give you some suggested approaches to answering the substance of the difficult questions that people ask. But, as we have suggested above, it is equally important that we answer in the right way. 1 Peter 3:15-16 says:

"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord¹. Always be prepared² to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason³ for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.⁴"

Notice four things about giving answers:

1. **The person who answers the questions needs to be someone who is personally committed to the lordship of Christ.** This is important, because the answer to their unspoken questions is not your arguments or knowledge – it is your life. Many of their most important questions will remain unarticulated, like: "Is this relevant to me?", "What does this look like in a real person?" and "Could I be a Christian?" All these questions are answered by the way you live and model being a disciple and follower of Jesus. Are you displaying the joy, peace, love and contentment in life that comes from knowing Christ as Lord? If you come to *Christianity Explored* feeling resentful, angry and doubtful in your own standing with God, then you cannot hope to influence your group members for the gospel. They may hear convincing arguments from your mouth, but your life will speak much more loudly.
2. **You must be ready to answer.** Take time to think through the answers on the following pages, and come to your own conclusion about them. You should be as sure in your answer as the Bible is – no less, no more! For example, on the questions of the origin of evil, or the reason for suffering, we do not have final

and complete answers from the Bible, and therefore, we must be careful in what we say and acknowledge our difficulty with these issues, rather than insisting that we have it all sewn up.

3. **You must have a reasonable answer.** In other words, saying: “Just have faith in the Bible” is not enough – even if we cannot prove it with complete certainty, we have to show the reasonableness of our faith.
4. **You must answer gently and respectfully.** Even (perhaps especially) when people are hostile, we must model kindness, love and fairness in our attitudes, thinking and speaking. Only in this way will we win people for the gospel.

MORE TIPS ON ANSWERING QUESTIONS

- **Involve the group.** Resist the temptation to answer the question on your own. It is good practice to first ask: “Does anyone else find this a difficult question?” You can then address your answers to the whole group. It may also be that you have Christians in your group who will be able to help answer. So you might ask: “Has anyone in the group got an answer to that?” In this way you are also training and encouraging the Christians to get involved in the discussion. It has been the experience on many *Christianity Explored* courses that involving the group in answering questions often helps other “not-yet-Christians” start to see the wrong thinking in some of their doubts as they start to argue back with a questioner!
- **Go to the Bible.** The Bible is the sword of the Spirit, so we must have confidence that if we direct people to its answers, God will do his work through it. If you can, go to a Bible passage to read and then explain, especially if it is in Mark’s Gospel.
- **Empathize.** Don’t give the impression that you have everything figured out. If you have wrestled with this question in the past – tell them. If you still have areas that you wrestle with, say so, but also tell them why it is no longer a problem in the larger scheme of your faith. For example: “I find suffering (eg: a natural disaster such as a major earthquake) very difficult to understand, but I know that God weeps over it too and cares, because he sent Jesus into the world, and he has experienced the pain and suffering of our broken world.”

- **Give them time.** Don't assume that they will sort out everything right at that moment. Many of the ideas and arguments and thoughts from the Bible will take time to sink in and be processed. Leave the question open for another day, and encourage them to think about it seriously over the next week, eg: "There are some big things to think about there, and you might not feel this discussion has answered all your questions immediately, but can I ask you to think about it, and maybe we can return to it next time if you want to go into it in more depth."

And finally...

Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know the answer to a question. But do promise to find out before the next session.

You will find help in answering questions in the next two appendices (starting on pages 237 and 245). In addition, **www.christianityexplored.org** includes video clips giving answers to popular questions.

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Questions from Mark's Gospel

MARK 1:2-3

What are these strange quotes at the start?

Mark quotes from the Jewish Bible (what we call the Old Testament) – Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 (written 600 years before Jesus was born). They are quotes from passages that promise a messenger who will announce the arrival of a rescuer King – the Christ or Messiah, who will save God's people from judgment. The promise of a messenger is clearly fulfilled by John the Baptist in Mark 1:4–8. Even his clothing (Mark 1:6) was like that of an Old Testament prophet, in particular Elijah (2 Kings 1:8).

MARK 1:13

What are angels?

The word literally means "messenger". They are spiritual beings in the service of God, who particularly are sent to deliver messages. An angel delivers the wonderful message of the resurrection in Mark 16:5-6. He is described as looking like a young man dressed in a white robe. No mention of wings!

MARK 1:23-27

What are evil spirits and demons?

The Bible says that there is an unseen spiritual world, which includes angels and evil spirits. According to the Bible, Satan, or the devil, is a fallen angel who is in rebellion against God and hostile to God's

people. Demons are part of that fallen spiritual world, and serve Satan. Although Satan and his demons are powerful, the New Testament shows that Jesus has overcome Satan by the power of his death on the cross (see Colossians 2:15).

Note: If this topic comes up, deal with it briefly but don't allow it to dominate the session – some people are fascinated by "the dark side" and want to talk about it for hours. And make sure you explain to them that Christians have nothing to fear from the devil – Jesus has defeated him.

MARK 1:34; 7:36

Why did Jesus tell the people he healed not to tell anyone?

No one has ever healed people as Jesus did. It was instantaneous, spectacular and complete. People didn't just "start to feel a bit better". They were completely better immediately. Not surprisingly he drew huge crowds who wanted to see these amazing miracles, but who seemed less interested in his teaching. Jesus did not want people coming just to see signs and wonders. He rejected such people (Mark 8:11-13). In Mark 1:45 it becomes clear that he has to leave the crowds in order to teach. He probably told people not to tell anyone so that the crowds would not become a problem.

MARK 2:10

Why did Jesus call himself the Son of Man?

“Son of Man” is a Jewish term meaning simply “a man”. But “Son of Man” is also a well-known title used in the Old Testament for the Messiah – God’s promised King. See Daniel 7:13-14. The religious leaders would have understood that Jesus’ use of the title “Son of Man” was a claim to be the Messiah.

MARK 2:16

What is a Pharisee?

This group of strict Jews did not just obey the Old Testament but held to many strict traditions. They were seen as some of the most holy men in Israel. But Jesus called them “hypocrites”, which literally means “play-actors,” because of the way they showed off their religion and self-righteousness. He strongly condemns them in passages such as Mark 7:6-9.

MARK 2:19

Who is the “bridegroom”?

Jesus is making the point that, for the disciples, fasting (going without food) is totally inappropriate when he’s with them, just as it would be for wedding guests to be miserable at a wedding. Jesus is saying he is the bridegroom of God’s people. This is another claim to be the Messiah promised by the Old Testament (Isaiah 54:5; 62:4–5; Hosea 2:16-20).

MARK 2:21-22

What is the new cloth/old coat, new wine/old skins story about?

People complained that Jesus was not following the religious rules of his day

(Mark 2:18). Jesus says that the faith he has come to bring is not about rules at all. Jesus cannot be “fitted into” their “religion of rules”. He came to bring a living friendship with God, not rules. Jesus brings grace, love and peace, not religious rules.

MARK 2:23

What is the Sabbath?

The Sabbath was the special day of rest taken when no work was done. The Sabbath was an opportunity for God’s people to remember God’s creation and how he rescued them from Egypt.

MARK 3:6

Who are the Herodians?

These were supporters of Herod Antipas, the King of Judea, who depended on the controlling Roman Empire for his power. They would have seen Jesus as a threat to Herod’s rule.

MARK 3:13-19

Why did Jesus choose twelve apostles?

Jesus calls the twelve apostles on a mountainside. In the Old Testament God shows himself to his people on mountains (eg: Genesis 8; Exodus 19; and 1 Kings 18). There were twelve tribes of Israel – God’s people in the Old Testament. Jesus is making the point that God is calling a new group of people to himself.

MARK 3:22

What does it mean to be possessed by Beelzebub?

Beelzebub is another name for the devil. Note that the religious authorities don’t question whether Jesus is powerful or

whether the miracles happen. They simply ask where his power comes from. They say that Jesus is possessed by the devil and is driving out demons. Jesus replies that their claim is stupid – after all, if the “prince of demons” really was driving out other demons, then he would be fighting against himself.

MARK 3:29

What is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that will never be forgiven?

The religious leaders have seen Jesus perform wonderful miracles, and have heard his astonishing teaching. Now they claim that the work of the Holy Spirit is actually the work of the devil. Jesus’ warning has nothing to do with swearing at the Holy Spirit – in simple terms, it means rejecting the only way of forgiveness that God has provided. Of course, this sin is only unforgivable for as long as a person goes on committing it. Many of the same religious leaders changed their minds about Jesus later, and so were forgiven (Acts 6:7). This is vital to understand. There can be no forgiveness if we reject Jesus.

MARK 4:2

Why did Jesus teach in parables?

Jesus told these memorable stories to teach spiritual truths. Parables have a clear surface meaning, but also a deeper meaning (often just one main point), which Jesus explains to those who will listen (Mark 4:1-34). There is a spiritual principle here: “To everyone who has, more will be given” (Luke 19:26). The disciples are intrigued by the parables and draw nearer to Jesus to hear the

explanation. But, to the crowd, the parables are just curious stories. They hear, but do not understand (Mark 4:12). All people are like moths or bats. They are either attracted to Jesus’ teaching, or repelled by it.

MARK 4:40

Why does Jesus say: “Do you still have no faith?”

Despite all the evidence they’ve seen, the disciples still don’t have faith in Jesus (note: to “have faith” in someone means to trust him or her). The disciples express terror rather than trust both before and after Jesus acts. Interestingly, just before this miracle, Jesus has told three parables making the point that God’s word is powerful. He then calms the storm with a word. The disciples should have drawn the obvious conclusion.

MARK 6:3

Did Jesus have brothers and sisters?

These were the natural children of Joseph and Mary, conceived after the birth of Jesus. See also Mark 3:32. This answers the question as to whether Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus. In addition, Matthew 1:25 certainly implies that Joseph and Mary had a normal sexual relationship after Jesus’ birth.

MARK 6:7-11

Why did Jesus send out the twelve disciples?

Jesus sends out the twelve, telling them to expect some to accept and some to reject their message. They are to reject those who, by refusing to listen, reject them. The reference to shaking off dust

refers to what Jews did on returning to Israel from Gentile countries, which they viewed as “unclean”. For the disciples to do it in a Jewish village was like calling the village Gentile! It is a mark of judgment (see also Acts 13:51).

MARK 6:14-29

Why is there all this stuff about John the Baptist?

Mark tells us about the death of John the Baptist to make an important point. It answers the implied question of Mark 6:1–13: Why don’t people see who Jesus is? The answer is that people reject Jesus because, like Herod, they will not repent. In other words, they will not turn from their rebellion against God.

MARK 7:24-30

Why does Jesus call this woman a dog?

Mark tells us this incident to show that Jesus has come to rescue and save Gentiles as well as Jews. The woman is a Gentile (= non Jew) from near the city of Tyre. “Children” here refers to the Jews, and “dogs” was a common, unflattering expression that Jews used for any Gentile person. So Jesus is saying: “It isn’t right to take what belongs to the Jews and give it to you Gentiles.” In her reply (v 28) the woman is saying; “Yes Lord – I acknowledge that as a Gentile woman I have no right to ask help from you, the Jewish Messiah. But you have such great power and mercy that you must have enough to help me as well!” Jesus is impressed by her faith and her persistence, and grants her request.

MARK 8:15

What is the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod?

Yeast – the stuff you put in bread to make it rise – is used as a picture in the New Testament to refer to the bad influence of someone or something. Just as a tiny amount of yeast has a great effect on the whole batch of dough, so Jesus warns against being affected by the sinful attitudes of the Pharisees and Herod: specifically, these would be hypocrisy and worldliness.

MARK 8:17-21

Why do the disciples not understand?

Jesus has fed thousands in the desert (twice), healed people, forgiven sin, cast out demons and stilled storms with a word. What’s wrong with the disciples? As the next two stories show – they need spiritual help to understand what is staring them in the face. Spiritual truth can only be revealed by God’s Spirit.

MARK 8:22-25

Why is there a two-part healing?

Jesus hasn’t lost his touch, or found it difficult to heal this man. He is doing the healing as a kind of “acted parable”, to show what happens next. When Peter announces that Jesus is “the Christ” in Mark 8:29, he is like the man in Mark 8:24 (he has partial sight). It is clear from the verses that follow – where Peter rebukes Jesus – that although he has understood *who* Jesus is, he has not yet realized *why* Jesus has come (Mark 8:30–33).

MARK 8:32-33

Why does Jesus say “Get behind me Satan!”?

Peter had recognized that Jesus was the Christ, but he could not understand why Jesus had to suffer and die. Jesus recognizes in Peter’s words a temptation to reject God’s plan that the Christ should endure the cross. It is not that Peter is Satan, or that Satan has “taken control”. It is just that Peter is saying what the devil wants, which is to knock Jesus off course in his mission to rescue us by dying on the cross and rising to life again.

MARK 9:1

What does Jesus mean when he says that some “will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power”?

This probably refers to the transfiguration of Jesus, recorded immediately after (Mark 9:2-7), although it could also be a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:8).

MARK 9:4

Who are Elijah and Moses?

Both of these people represent the Old Testament: Moses was the law-giver and Elijah the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. The fact that they talk with Jesus demonstrates that he is the one the Old Testament is pointing to.

MARK 9:11-13

What does Jesus mean when he says “Elijah does come first”?

The disciples have failed to recognize that John the Baptist was the Elijah-like messenger promised in Malachi 4:5-6 who would be the forerunner of “the Lord”.

Elijah was a prophet in the eighth century BC who lived out in the wilderness, wearing animal skins and a leather belt (2 Kings 1:8). This is how John the Baptist is described in Mark 1:6. Jesus makes it clear that John was the fulfilment of the prophecy concerning Elijah.

MARK 9:43-48

Why does Jesus tell us to cut our hands off?

Jesus obviously did not intend that a Christian should physically cut off a hand or foot, or pluck out an eye. It’s not as if sin is localized in a particular part of our bodies. Jesus is exaggerating to make a point: “If anything is stopping you from entering the kingdom of God, it is better to take drastic action to rid yourself of it, whatever it is, than to end up in hell forever.” The most important thing is getting right with God. The logic is obvious: temporary pain is better than eternal punishment.

MARK 10:1-12

What does Jesus think about divorce?

Jesus makes it clear that divorce is always against the perfect purpose of God. God’s plan in creation is that married people should live together for their whole lives (see Genesis 2:24). Jesus says that if people seek a divorce because they have found an alternative partner, such action is adultery (Mark 10:11-12). It is only because people’s hearts are so hard (Mark 10:5) that divorce could ever be permitted. The danger is either that we use the concession of verse 5 as an excuse for deliberate sin, or that we think that divorce cuts us off from God forever. Christ came to die for all sin, including the failures of divorce.

Note: Be aware that you are likely to have people in your group who have experienced the reality of broken marriages. For some this may be a significant personal issue.

MARK 10:15

What does it mean to “receive the kingdom of God like a little child”?

The disciples need to understand that they have nothing to offer God, and must therefore depend fully on God, just as a little child depends fully on its parents. Jesus’ phrase here does not imply innocence or purity – neither of which are traits of most children!

MARK 10:38

What did Jesus mean when he said: “Can you drink the cup I drink”?

In the Old Testament, “the cup” was generally a reference to suffering. It also refers to the cup of God’s anger (see Jeremiah 25:15-16). In verse 38, Jesus is showing that the disciples don’t know what they are talking about. They, unlike Jesus, have their own sin to deal with and therefore cannot suffer God’s wrath on other people’s behalf; a sinless substitute is required. However, Jesus adds – in verse 39 – that they will suffer.

MARK 11:12-14, 20-21

Why did Jesus curse the fig-tree?

This can seem strange as it is Jesus’ only destructive miracle. Mark interweaves the cursing of the fig-tree with the events in the temple (Mark 11:15-19, 27-33). In the same way that Jesus curses the fig-tree for having no fruit on it, he condemns the “fruitlessness” of Israel’s religion (ie: the lack of genuine worship,

the failure to recognize Jesus as the Messiah etc).

MARK 12:1

What does the story about the vineyard mean?

The vineyard was a common Old Testament symbol of Israel. In particular, this passage is very similar to Isaiah 5, where the people of Israel are rebuked for the terrible way they have rejected God, and are told that God’s righteous judgment will come. Jesus’ hearers would have understood that the “man” in the parable was God, that the “vineyard” was the people of God, and that the missing fruit was allegiance to the Son.

MARK 12:10

What is a cornerstone?

This is the most important stone; the foundation stone. Here it means that although Israel’s leaders have rejected Jesus, he is still the Messiah, and will become the Saviour through dying on the cross.

MARK 12:18-27

What’s the point of the strange “one bride for seven brothers” story?

In Jesus’ day there were two major religious groups: the Pharisees, who believed in life after death, and the Sadducees, who said that death was the end. So the Sadducees came up with this question to trick Jesus. In his answer to them, Jesus says two things. First, there is life beyond the grave, but no married relationships in heaven. Secondly, he makes it clear that because God is the God of the living, and is referred to as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”,

it must mean that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still alive!

MARK 13:14

What is “the abomination that causes desolation”?

This is an example where a parallel passage helps! Luke 21:20 substitutes the words “Jerusalem surrounded by her armies,” for this phrase. It refers to the occasion in AD 65 when Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem after a political uprising. After a horrific five-year war, the Roman armies entered the city, desecrated the temple, and then proceeded to pull it down and destroy the city. Jesus’ words in Mark 13 came true.

MARK 13:32

Why does Jesus not know the date of his own return?

Some suggest that Jesus could not be perfect, or God, if he does not know this important fact. When Jesus was born as a man he “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7, NASB). As a child, Jesus had to grow in wisdom, just as all human children do. He was not born with complete knowledge built in. This is one of those things which helps to verify the trustworthiness of biblical history. If someone was making up the story of Jesus Christ, he would never have left in Mark 13:33!

MARK 14:12

What are “the Feast of Unleavened Bread” and “the Passover lamb”?

God commanded Israel to keep the annual feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread to remind them of how he had rescued them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:14-20). Israel could only be

saved from the tenth plague, the plague on the firstborn, by killing a lamb, eating its roasted flesh with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, and smearing the blood on the door frames. When the angel of death saw blood on a door, he “passed over” the house and spared the firstborn (Exodus 12:1-13). The meal eaten in Mark 14:12-26 takes place at Passover. Jesus’ death would be the true means of rescue from God’s judgment; it would be the true Passover. This is why Jesus is sometimes referred to as the Lamb of God.

MARK 14:24

What is the “blood of the covenant”?

Not only did Passover commemorate rescue from slavery in Egypt and from the wrath of God by the pouring out of blood (Exodus 12:23), but that rescue was followed by a covenant (an agreement made by God on behalf of his people) that was sealed by a blood sacrifice (Exodus 24:6). Jesus’ sacrificial death mirrors this. He bled and died to turn God’s wrath away from us and to start a new covenant.

MARK 15:33

Was the darkness an eclipse of the sun?

Not possible. Jesus was crucified at the time of the Jewish Passover, which is always at full moon. At full moon, it is impossible to have a solar eclipse. Physically there is no adequate explanation of the darkness, other than that it is a supernatural sign at the time of mankind’s darkest deed – killing the Son of God.

MARK 16:9-20

Why do we stop reading at Mark 16:8?

Most scholars agree that Mark's Gospel ends at chapter 16:8. The women run away terrified, not knowing what to think after being told that Jesus is risen. The ending provokes the question: Are you able to see who Jesus is, why he came, and what it means to follow him?

Verses 9-20 of Mark chapter 16 appear to be attempts by later writers to add a fuller resurrection ending to Mark. However, the oldest manuscripts do not include this section and its style and vocabulary are different from the rest of Mark. This does not mean that what is contained in this ending is made up. Most of the details also appear in the other Gospels. It just means that they were probably not in Mark's original.

Questions about Christian belief

How do you know that God exists?

- There are many philosophical and scientific arguments that you can get involved in that might show that belief in God is rational, even sensible. But these arguments lead to belief in some kind of creator, not specifically to the God of the Bible. It is usually much better to talk about Jesus and his claim to be God.
- We know God exists because He came to earth in Jesus. This is the substance of Jesus' answer to Philip's question in John 14:8-9 (it's worth looking this up and reading it if the question arises).
- "Have you ever seen God?" "No, but I might have if I'd been born at the right time. If I had been alive 2000 years ago, and living in Palestine, I could have seen God."
- Jesus claimed to be God (eg: John 5:18; 20:28-29) and his actions bore out that claim. If you'd been there, you would have seen and heard him. Check out his claims as you read through Mark and come to *Christianity Explored*.
- Believing in God is not "the easy option". If he is God, then you must serve him as God.

Why should we believe what the Bible says?

- Try not to get involved in defending passages that can be interpreted in a number of different ways. The best place to start is with the reliability of what the Gospels teach about Jesus, and then go on to his teaching and claims on our lives.
- Historical evidence in the New Testament is confirmed at a number of points by non-Christian writers – eg: Tacitus and Josephus – and also by archaeological evidence.
- The New Testament documents were written soon after the events they describe.
- This New Testament documentation is extensive, coming from as many as ten authors, eight of whom wrote independently of each other.
- The documents are historical in character as well as theological. They contain many verifiable details of the time and culture in which they were written.
- The text of these documents has come down to us intact from the era in which it was written.
- The writers were people who suffered and died for what they believed, and were also of very high moral standing. They believed in telling the truth. It is

highly unlikely they would make up these stories, or even “imagine” them.

- The Gospels are less than complimentary to the disciples who wrote them – another sign that they were not made up.
- We have good historical reasons for trusting that what we read in the Gospels is an accurate account of what Jesus did, said and claimed for himself.
- The next step is to work out what you think of Jesus – everything else flows from that.

Don't all good people go to heaven?

- What is “good”? How “good” is good enough?
- Some of us are better than others but no one meets God's standards (see Romans 3:23).
- We are not good, because our hearts are “sin factories”, Mark 7:21-22.
- People who rely on their goodness are deluded (Mark 10:17-22). There is always more we must do. We need rescuing.
- God is after friends, not “good” rebels. The issue is whose side you are on.
- The opposite is, in fact, true. Good people go to hell; bad people go to heaven. Those who think they are good and rely on that will be lost. Only those who know they are lost are able to receive forgiveness and eternal life from Christ.

Why would a good God send people to hell?

- God is utterly holy and good. His character is what decides right and wrong in the universe.
- God must judge everyone. He will judge fairly and well.
- Jesus is the most loving person who ever lived, but it is he who teaches most about the reality of hell. He does so because he knows it is real, and doesn't want us to suffer the inevitable consequences of our rebellion against God.
- Heaven and hell are defined by relationship. Heaven is enjoying all the good gifts of a Father, and being with him. Hell is the absence of his blessings – friendship, love, beauty etc.
- God has judged his Son, Jesus, on the cross. He went through hell, so we don't have to!
- If we understood how holy God is, we would be asking the opposite question: How can God allow anyone into heaven?

If God forgives everything, does that mean I can do what I like?

- God's grace is utterly free. Shockingly, he will save even the worst kind of criminals you can think of.
- Jesus saved a condemned thief who died on the cross next to him!
- If we properly understand how sinful we are, and how our sins have, literally, wounded God; and if we understand how amazing it is that Jesus died for us when we don't deserve it – then we want to live in a way that pleases him.

How can we be sure that there is life after death?

- People may come up with strange stories about “out-of-body experiences” but these prove nothing, and can lead to confusion.
- The Bible says that Jesus’ resurrection is the pattern for our own resurrection (eg: 1 Corinthians 15:20).
- Who do you trust for accurate information about life beyond the grave? The person who has been there and come back.
- If Jesus has been raised from the dead, then we will certainly be raised from the dead, and we must look to Jesus’ teaching for answers to the questions about what life beyond death will be like.

What about other religions?

- Sincerity is not truth. People can be sincerely wrong.
- If the different religions contradict each other (which they do at several major points), they cannot all be right.
- The question really is: Has God revealed himself, and if so, how? Jesus claimed to be the unique revelation of God. He claimed to be God in the flesh. Are his claims valid? If Jesus is God, the other religions are wrong.
- Jesus claims he is the only way: John 14:6.
- Religions can do many good things – provide comfort, help, social bonding etc. But they are manmade ideas about God, and generally teach that we must DO something to get right with God.

- Jesus claims that his teaching is revealed from God (John 8:28), and that his followers must abandon what they think they can DO, and rely on what he has DONE on the cross to bring forgiveness and new life to them.

What about those who have never heard about Jesus?

- We can trust God to be just; he will judge people according to their response to what they know.
- Everyone has received some revelation, even if only from the created world (see Romans 1:18-19).
- Those who have had more revealed to them will be held responsible (Matthew 11:20-24).
- You have heard – so you must do something about it – and leave the others to God, who will treat them fairly.

Isn't faith just a psychological crutch?

- There are different questions here, like: Do I just believe because my parents were Christians? Or: Do I believe because I have the need for some comfort from above? Or: Do I believe because I have had this or that experience?
- If our faith is based purely on experience (“Christianity works for me”), then there is no way of arguing against this objection. It might work because it's true or because of my particular upbringing or conditioning.
- However, Christianity is based on objective historical events (the death and resurrection of Jesus), and invites people to investigate and test them.

The truth of Christianity has nothing to do with our state of mind.

- The same could be applied to any belief – including atheism! (ie: I'm an atheist because my parents were; I have a deep need to be independent; I have had no experience.) None of this helps to establish whether belief in Christianity is based on truth or error.

Why does God allow suffering?

- We can't know for sure why God allowed evil into the world.
- Much suffering is a direct result of our own sinfulness (eg: that caused by drunkenness, greed, lust, etc.).
- But some is not (see John 9:1-2).
- All suffering results from the fallen nature of our world (see Romans 8:18-25).
- God uses suffering to discipline and strengthen his children (see Hebrews 12:7-11; Romans 5:3-5).
- God also uses suffering to awaken people to understand that there is a judgment coming to our pain-filled world (Luke 13:1-5).
- God knows our pain. He has done something about our suffering. Jesus suffered and died so that we could be forgiven and become part of the "new creation", where there will be no suffering. Jesus' death for us is the undeniable proof that God loves us.

Hasn't science disproved Christianity?

- Most people mean: "Hasn't the theory of evolution replaced creation and so disproved Christianity?" People usually are not talking about archaeology which, incidentally, backs up the Bible at almost every point.
- Start by asking what they mean by the question. They may have some specific point that needs addressing and that will require some research.
- Avoid having a technical discussion about evolution, carbon dating etc.
- Ask what conclusion they are drawing from evolution. It may be a description of how life has appeared on earth (although you may want to dispute that!). But it does not answer the bigger questions: Who produced the amazing design and order that we see in the universe? For what purpose does the universe exist?
- Did the world come into being by chance? How God made the universe is not as important a point as that he made it.
- Steer the conversation towards talking about God's existence (see above) and towards Jesus. If Jesus is God, it puts the creation/evolution debate in a completely different perspective.

If Jesus is God's Son, how can he be God too?

- Jesus describes himself as the "Son of God" – a term which can mean that he is the King of God's people, but can also be a claim that he is much more.

- Jesus acts as God does in the Old Testament. He speaks as God speaks, and does things that only God can do (raises the dead, forgives sins, controls nature, etc.). His words and actions show that he is making a claim to be God.
- Christians do not believe that there are many Gods, and that Jesus is just one of them. Christians believe that there is one God – who is a trinity. One God, three persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in a relationship of love and service with each other.
- This is complex and hard to completely understand – but why would we expect to fully understand God anyway?

Why does God hate sex?

- He doesn't. He invented it and thinks it is beautiful, wonderful and powerful.
- God knows best how we work, and his pattern for sex – between a man and a woman in a committed lifelong marriage – is the way he designed it to work best.
- Sex joins people together in a way that is more than physical. If we use sex in other ways, we will inevitably damage our ability to enjoy sex in the way it was intended.
- It may not appear damaging to enjoy this gift in other ways, but we must trust our Maker that it is.

Christians are hypocrites – so how can Christianity be true?

- The failure of many Christians to live according to their stated beliefs does not invalidate Jesus' claims to be God.
- The Bible says that Jesus alone is perfect, and it is honest about the failures and weakness of his followers. The disciples in Mark are constantly making mistakes.
- Jesus taught that there will always be false teachers and fakes (Mark 13:21-22) who pretend they are Christians but who are not. This is true today.
- Everyone is a hypocrite in some sense. But Jesus calls those who follow him to change and grow more like him. Don't be discouraged if you have met some Christians who are not yet perfect. They never will be this side of eternity.

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