

WEEK 1

INTRODUCTION

BEFORE THE TALK

*Welcome the course participants and suggest they take 5 minutes to work through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 1** with their group.*

Give a brief introduction. The wording below is intended only as a general guide.

Good evening, everyone, and welcome to ***Christianity Explored***.

As we begin, I want to reassure you that:

- You won't be asked to read aloud, pray, sing or do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable.
- We aren't going to take your phone number and pester you. If you decide you aren't going to come back, I'm still delighted you made time to come this week.
- You can ask any question you want, or alternatively feel free just to sit and listen.

Over the next ten weeks, we'll be exploring some tough questions:

- Does God exist?
- What is the meaning of our brief lives?
- Where are we going?
- Can we know contentment and happiness?
- Why is there pain and suffering in the world?

And we want to spend time addressing whatever questions are important to you.

THE TALK

Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of this talk is to confront participants' preconceptions about Christianity, show that Christianity is "good news" about Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1), and challenge them to discover what that "good news" is by making time to read Mark's Gospel.

The world around us makes us ask questions, doesn't it?

I remember watching the sun go down on Table Mountain in South Africa. Some cloud drifted in until we were looking down through it onto Cape Town. The memory of that sunset will stay with me till I die. It was so beautiful that for a full 15 minutes those I was with, including a little boy of eight, were speechless.

Maybe you can think of a time when you were overwhelmed by a sense of the wonder of nature. It makes us instinctively ask, "Where does it all come from?"

I wonder how you answer that question. Some people are convinced that the world sprang into being by chance, but others think that our universe – and everything in it – was deliberately created by God. Sir James Jeans, the famous British astronomer, once said: “The universe appears to have been designed by a pure Mathematician.” For him, as for many, the order of the earth and the solar system points to a master planner.

Take, for example, the fact that the earth is tilted at an angle of exactly 23 degrees. Scientists tell us that if the angle were even slightly different, the earth would gradually be encased by an ice cap. It has to be exactly 23 degrees to work.

Or what about the galaxy we live in? There are apparently 400 billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy alone, and there are estimated to be over 100 billion galaxies in the universe.

Now, in Psalm 8 King David wrote: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” These verses tell us that God has set this whole universe in place and holds it as you or I might hold a contact lens on our finger.

How do we know that we matter to God, and that he is “mindful” of human beings? Well, this immense and awesome God is not just concerned with the stars and the planets. He also created the molecules, the neutrons, the protons. He made the 75,000 miles of blood vessels in the human body that carry blood to over 60 trillion cells. In the woodpecker he created the tiny sponge-like pad between the bill and the head so that when he drills a hole he doesn’t knock himself out. That may not be important to you, but it’s very important to the woodpecker!

But what’s *your* picture of God? What do you think of him? What are your big questions? We want to start some discussion in your groups now and we’d like to find out three things:

Display the following questions and read them aloud.

- What’s your name?
- Why are you here?
- If you could ask God one question, and you knew it would be answered, what would it be?

The second question – “Why are you here?” – is not “I’m a piece of DNA stranded in the universe.” It’s just, “How did you happen to come along this evening?”

As for the third question, there’s a great John Travolta movie where someone tells him: “If my answers frighten you, then you should cease asking scary questions.”

Well, we’re not afraid of scary questions. Maybe you’ve had one on your mind a long time. So please be honest and don’t hold back.

If you turn to 12 in your *Study Guide*, there is room to write out your answer to this question.

Allow 15 minutes for groups to discuss these questions, making it clear that there will be more time for discussion later on.

OK, thanks everyone. I don't know what your questions are: some may be very personal, others quite academic, but I do hope we make some progress with them. If they are important to you, they are important to us.

I think it's fair to say that underlying most people's questions are two issues: firstly, is there a God? And second, if there is a God, what is he, she or it like?

Now, according to opinion polls, most people believe that there is a God. But the thing that really baffles them is, "If God *is* there, how can I know what he's like, and how am I supposed to relate to him?"

I had real difficulty with that question for a long time. When I was a child, my mother used to take us to church occasionally and I just found it so boring. If I was supposed to relate to God in some way, I couldn't see what on earth church had to do with it. I was so bored, I can remember sitting there and counting the bricks up the wall.

It may be that you've tried to relate to God in the past by going to church, but for one reason or another you've found it boring, so you've left with the impression that Christianity as a whole is boring.

Or maybe you think that the Bible is irrelevant. After all, it was written 2,000 years ago and 2,000 miles away. What relevance could it possibly have for us?

I thought it was just a book of rules. In fact it seemed so irrelevant to me that I used to amuse myself in religious education classes by trying to make it relevant. I spent my time looking for references to rugby football. The one I was particularly proud of was where John chapter 9, verse 1 talks about referees: "A man blind from birth."

Or maybe you think that Christianity is simply untrue.

I thought it was all a world of make-believe that belonged to the nursery, so Jesus walking on the water, the three wise men, the feeding of the five thousand, Santa Claus and Winnie the Pooh were all mixed up in my mind together.

But all of these preconceptions are wiped out by one verse in the Bible. Have a look at the book of Mark chapter 1, verse 1. You can find it on page ... of your Bible.

Open your own Bible and read aloud from it.

It says: “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

So Christianity is *not* primarily about:

- going to church
- obeying rules
- or getting baptized.

And it’s not about:

- beautiful buildings
- or a God whose only aim in life is to stop me from having fun.

No, it’s about Jesus Christ. The word “gospel” means “good news,” so Mark chapter 1, verse 1 tells us that the gospel – the good news, Christianity – is all about Jesus Christ. Mark 1, verse 1 doesn’t say the beginning of the gospel about keeping rules and being miserable. No, it says the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ.

Nor is this the beginning of the gospel about “throwing your brain out of the window.” You don’t have to suspend your mental faculties to believe in Jesus, because he is a real person who lived and walked and talked in human history. He is someone who can be investigated.

So back to the question: “How can I know what God is like and how am I supposed to relate to him?” One of the great things about Jesus Christ is that when we look at him, the guessing games about God stop. Because the Bible says that God has shown us what he is like by sending his Son, Jesus Christ. Colossians chapter 1, verse 15 says that Jesus is “the visible image of the invisible God.”

Imagine wanting to get to know the Queen personally:

- you could write her a letter;
- you could ring Buckingham Palace;
- or you could stand outside her gates with a big sign asking her out to lunch.

But of course you wouldn’t get very far with any of these approaches. Your only chance of getting to know her would be if *she* came out to meet *you*. And that is what the Bible says God has done by sending his Son, Jesus Christ. God wants to introduce himself to us, and Jesus is the way he’s chosen to do it.

I’m sure you’ve had the experience of walking down the main street in a busy city and being offered a leaflet which you ignore – or take and then ignore – because you don’t think it’ll do you any good. Well, the *Evening Standard* newspaper conducted an experiment. They got a man to stand outside Oxford Circus station offering people a leaflet. On the leaflet was the free offer of £5 for just bringing the leaflet back to the man. Hordes of people passed him, and in three hours only eleven came back for the £5. People assumed they knew what he was handing out and that it would do them no good, so they didn’t bother to take it or read it.

My plea is that you don't make the same mistake with the Bible, because it's our main source of information about Jesus. If you want to find out what God is like, and how you're supposed to relate to him, then this – is all you need.

Hold up a Bible.

However, like any relationship, this will take time. We live in an age of instant things, don't we?

- Instant credit;
- Instant coffee;
- Instant communication.

But relationships aren't instant. They take time. Please don't say, "I went one week and tried it but it didn't work." I know that, for many of you, time is a very precious commodity. The urgent is always the enemy of the important. So do please make time to find out about these things.

For the following illustrations, use books and personalities appropriate to your context and, if possible, hold up any books you refer to.

Bob Geldof entitled his autobiography *Is That It?*. At one point he had just raised £50 million for Live Aid and, while standing on the stage, he heard a fan shout, "Is that it?" Geldof writes, "It's a question I keep asking myself." In an interview with Mick Brown for *The London Times* newspaper we read this: "Ask Geldof whether he feels that his life is fulfilled, and he snorts with laughter. 'Not at all. I don't know what that would mean. I am unfulfilled as a human being; otherwise, why are these large holes here?' He thumps his chest. 'Everything I do is because I'm frightened of being bored, because I know that's what's down in those holes. I'm frightened of it; it makes me very depressed. So I stay active. Frenetically so, unfortunately. And that "freneticism" keeps me going all the time and allows me to think I'm not wasting time.'"

Barry Humphries, the Australian comedian, entitled his book *More Please*. He writes, "I always wanted more. I never had enough milk or money or socks or sex or holidays or first editions or solitude or gramophone records or free meals or real friends or guiltless pleasure or neckties or applause or unquestioning love ... Of course, I have had more than my share of most of these commodities but it always left me with a vague feeling of unfulfillment: where was the rest?"

Isn't it amazing how predominant this theme of discontent, of wanting something more, of being unfulfilled, is in music, film and literature? All around us we see people:

- setting their goals;
- achieving them;
- feeling euphoria for a while;
- and then feeling emptiness all over again.

So they set more goals to fill the emptiness, and the cycle begins again. But there is still something missing. It seems that lasting fulfillment never comes by simply getting what we want. Part of us is still not satisfied.

Thom Yorke, of the band Radiohead, was asked why he continued to make music, even though he'd already achieved the success he hoped for. He said, "It's filling the hole. That's all anyone does." To the question, "What happens to the hole?" Yorke paused a long time before answering: "It's still there."

In the movie *The Matrix*, Morpheus says to Neo: "Let me tell you why you are here. It's because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. There is something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad."

Augustine summed up the problem 1,500 years ago when he wrote about God, "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Could he be right?

Please take the time to find out.

AT THE END OF THE TALK

Let me leave you with the following questions for your groups:

Display the following questions and read them aloud.

- What is *your* view of Christianity?
- How do you feel about making time to read Mark?

*Allow 30 minutes for groups to work together through the Study Guide section called **GROUP DISCUSSION 2**.*

AT THE END OF THE DISCUSSION

This is the "official" end of the evening, although if you want to continue the discussion, you're welcome to do so. Please take the Bible and *Study Guide* with you. Each week, we'd like you to explore a few chapters of Mark before we meet again. The HOME STUDY section in your *Study Guide* will help you do this. By the end of Week 6, you'll have read through the whole Gospel of Mark. Thanks again for making time to come. Do work through the HOME STUDY section for Week 1 before next time, and I hope to see you then.