

WEEK 2

JESUS – WHO WAS HE?

BEFORE THE TALK

Welcome the course participants and suggest they take 20 minutes to work through the Study Guide section called GROUP DISCUSSION 1 with their group.

THE TALK

Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of the talk is to show from Mark's Gospel that Jesus acts with God's power and God's authority. It should challenge participants to trust him to have authority over their lives.

Good evening and welcome to Week 2 of *Christianity Explored*. It's great to see you again.

I hope you can remember what we said last week. It was very simple, yet incredibly important. Christianity is not about beautiful buildings and boring services; it's not about throwing your brain out of the window. It is all about Jesus Christ. That's why we began last week with Mark chapter 1, verse 1: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

The actor Noel Coward was once asked, "What do you think about God?" to which he replied, "We've never been properly introduced."

We saw last week that, according to the Bible, God has introduced himself to us through Jesus.

So who was Jesus? Was he a good moral teacher, a Galilean carpenter, a compassionate miracle worker, a great figure of history or what?

We've already seen that Mark's verdict goes far beyond that. Look again at Mark chapter 1, verse 1 on page ... of the Bible: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

The word "Christ" isn't Jesus' surname; he wouldn't come under "C" in the Nazareth phone book. It means "God's Anointed King." Now that was an outrageous thing for Mark to write. Writing such things could get you thrown to the lions, because everyone was supposed to worship the Roman Emperor Nero as the gods' anointed king. But, right at the start, Mark says that there *is* a higher authority than the emperor.

And what Mark does over the first few chapters of his book is stack up layer after layer of evidence to justify his claim that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

You will need to have the following headings ready for display, gradually revealing each of the headings as the talk progresses.

Jesus has power and authority:

to teach
over sickness
over nature
over death
to forgive sins

JESUS HAS POWER AND AUTHORITY TO TEACH

So let's look at the first block of evidence. Please turn with me to Mark chapter 1, verses 21–22.

Read aloud Mark 1:21–22.

What set Jesus apart from the other teachers of the law was the way he taught. The teachers of the law did not come up with their own material. There was nothing original in their teaching. They never taught without quoting other sources. They hid behind the great rabbis of the past and claimed no authority of their own. But Jesus did not teach like that. He didn't hide behind anybody else's authority; he claimed authority of his own. He said, "I tell you on my authority; you can take it from me."

Jesus not only *claims* that his words have as much authority as God's words; when he speaks, it's as if somebody has suddenly switched on the lights in a dark room. What people heard from the lips of Jesus explained their lives to them. So we see in verse 22 that the people were amazed at his teaching.

But then we have to ask: Was he all talk? Did Jesus actually live out what he taught? And the staggering answer is that he did.

I have to say this was the first thing I found so compelling about Jesus. At sixteen I started keeping a diary because I thought I was such a great guy that I owed the world a record of my life. What I found was my own selfishness. Also there was a total contradiction between what I said and did.

Most of us are aware of our own selfishness and the tension that exists between what we say and what we do. But Jesus was no religious hypocrite. He taught: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Later, as he is being killed, he prays for his executioners, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." So Jesus has power and authority to teach.

JESUS HAS POWER AND AUTHORITY OVER SICKNESS

But Jesus wasn't merely a teacher. Please look at chapter 1, verses 29–31.

Read aloud Mark 1:29–31.

Here Jesus demonstrates absolute authority over sickness. Just a touch of his hand and the fever is cured. And this is not an isolated incident. Three verses later, in verse 34, we read that Jesus cured whole crowds of sick people. A few days later his touch cured a man with leprosy, the ancient equivalent of AIDS in terms of its severity and the stigma attached to it. Then, in chapter 2, his word healed a paralytic: bones, muscles and tendons knitted together before people's eyes without a hint of surgery.

By verse 12 of chapter 2 everyone is amazed, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" The deaf hear, the blind see and the lame walk. There are, in fact, thirty healings recorded in the Gospels, all showing us that Jesus has power and authority over sickness.

And you may be interested to know that non-Christian sources of the day also speak of Jesus' healings. Josephus, the Samaritan historian, calls Jesus "a doer of wonderful works." Everybody was talking about his miraculous power – the only debate was where the power came from. So Jesus has power and authority over sickness.

JESUS HAS POWER AND AUTHORITY OVER NATURE

The third block of evidence is in Mark 4, verses 35–41.

Read aloud Mark 4:35–41.

Jesus and his followers are in a boat on the Lake of Galilee and, in verse 37, "a furious squall" blows up. Now the word translated "furious squall" actually means whirlwind.

As the waves break over the boat so that it's nearly swamped, Peter and the other hardened fishermen, who have spent their lives on the Lake of Galilee, say to one another, "We're going to die; we're dead."

Now I doubt you would pass the Galilee Lifeboat Safety exams if you said the best course of action in a whirlwind was to call the carpenter. But the disciples do. In their terror they wake Jesus, who was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. Note the eyewitness detail – he was sleeping on a cushion!

And they say: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" What does Jesus do? Grab the helm and steer them out of the whirlwind? No. He gets up and says: "Quiet! Be still!" Immediately, we read in verse 39, the wind dies down and all is completely calm. It normally takes waves days to calm down, but Jesus flattens them with a few words.

Try it next time you're on a boat in rough seas. I'd make sure you are on your own when you do this, but go out to the back of the boat and say, "Quiet! Be still!"

But this is what they saw Jesus doing. No wonder the passage ends in verse 41: "They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" Whoever he is, he has power and authority over nature.

JESUS HAS POWER AND AUTHORITY OVER DEATH

Then, in the next chapter, the disciples witness Jesus doing something even more astonishing. Because in the next chapter we see Jesus demonstrating power and authority over death.

Many people in our culture just block death out of their minds. They are like the poet Siegfried Sassoon, who wrote: "At the age of twenty-two I believed myself to be inextinguishable." The brevity of life doesn't cross their minds. It's easy to feel like that if we've never experienced the death of someone close to us.

I was certainly like that until my godfather was suddenly killed when I was a teenager. And I then discovered that death is so painful, so wrenching – not least because it severs relationships with loved ones.

Loving relationships are so hard to come by. That's why death is so painful, because it severs those relationships.

You may have come across bereavement cards that say things like: "those whom we have loved never really go away." But that's a lie. That's the whole problem. They *do* go away, and we miss them so much. It is the separation that is so hard to bear. Well, in the next block of evidence we see Jesus confronting death as its master, with total authority over it. Please turn with me to Mark 5, verses 21–24.

Read aloud Mark 5:21–24.

Here we have a religious leader, a synagogue ruler named Jairus, in agony because he is powerless to help his little daughter, who is dying.

Can you identify with this man? Imagine the desperation and powerlessness you would feel if you saw a little nephew, godchild or your own child dying. That is the emotional intensity of this passage.

Now let's pick up the story again in verse 35.

Read aloud Mark 5:35–36.

You can't get more shocking than that. His little daughter is dying and then he hears the terrible words in verse 35, "Your daughter is dead." But Jesus says that he shouldn't worry. Instead, he should just trust him. Now it is a brave man who says something like that to a distraught father. A brave man, or at least one who is supremely confident of his own power.

Let's see what happens next. Look at verse 37.

Read aloud Mark 5:37–42.

Jesus takes the corpse by the hand and says, "Little girl, get up!" And the father is reunited with the daughter he thought he'd lost forever. The message is clear: it is as easy for Jesus to raise a person from the dead as it is for us to wake somebody from sleep.

Jesus has power and authority over death. And not just over the death of a little girl but also over our deaths and his own, as we'll see over the next few weeks.

And if he does indeed have power over death, then it is insanity to ignore him, to say, "I'm just not interested," or "This is boring," or "That's fine for you to believe." One day you and I are going to die. The question is: would you be prepared to trust Jesus with your own death?

JESUS HAS POWER AND AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE SINS

But I have to tell you that "Quiet, be still!" and "Get up!" are not the most outrageous things Jesus says. Please turn back to chapter 2, verses 1–12, for Mark's fifth block of evidence – the passage we've just looked at briefly in our GROUP DISCUSSION.

Read aloud Mark 2:1–7.

I can't imagine what the owner of the house thought as his roof was ripped open. But what is extraordinary here are Jesus' words to the paralytic in verse 5: "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Why on earth does Jesus say *that* rather than immediately curing the man of his paralysis?

Well, we can only grasp this if we understand what the word "sin" means.

A few years ago, *The Independent* newspaper ran an article on the seven deadly sins. And the writer said: "In this day and age, sin has lost its sting. A bit of sinning is much more likely to be seen as a spot of grown-up naughtiness, the kind of thing that sends a delicious shock through the system."

That's what many people think of sin. It's not very serious. It's a bit of fun on the side. But rightly understood, in the way that the Bible describes sin, there is nothing nice about it. Jesus is saying that sin is humankind's biggest problem. It's not paralysis, or global warming, or terrorism, but sin.

Sin is not just doing naughty things. It is not just lust or laziness or whatever. No, according to the Bible, sin is ignoring God in the world he has made. It's rebelling against him by living without reference to him.

We may not have committed adultery or murder, but we have all said, "I will decide exactly how I live my life."

Now why is ignoring God in his world so serious? It's because if I insist on my independence in a world that God has made, then that has consequences. The Bible clearly links sin with death – and not just death here, but eternal death. That's why sin matters. And we'll be looking more at those consequences next week.

The staggering claim that Jesus makes in this passage is that he has authority to forgive sin.

The implications of this are not lost on the religious leaders. They don't mind the paralytic being called a sinner; they know everyone's a sinner. Their problem with Jesus is shown in verse 7: "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

They are saying to Jesus, "Who do you think you are that you can forgive sin?" Sin offends God. So only God has the right to forgive it. The question is: does Jesus *really* have the authority to forgive sin, or is he blaspheming as the religious leaders claim?

To answer that question, Jesus does something amazing. Let's read from verse 8.

Read aloud Mark 2:8–12.

As if to substantiate his claim to have God's authority and power, Jesus immediately cures the man's paralysis with a few words. The crowd that has crammed into this house to see Jesus is totally amazed.

But the healing is not an end in itself. Jesus doesn't do it with a flourish as if performing magic tricks at a circus. No, he cures this man – and countless others – in order to reveal his true identity. He is quite obviously acting with God's authority and God's power. And he expects us to draw the obvious conclusion.

As Jesus teaches, calms the storm, raises the dead, heals the sick and forgives sins he acts in God's world with God's authority.

Of course, if this is true, then it's not just an abstract idea. It gets very personal. Do I recognize who he is? Will I recognize that he is my teacher, whether I like it or not? Do I recognize that he has authority over my death, whether I like it or not? Do I see that he has the authority to forgive my sin or leave it unforgiven? These are good questions to ask – because if Jesus is who he claims to be, then it is a scandal that we haven't lived under his authority.

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 Jesus?
- What do you think of the five blocks of evidence Mark gives us?

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

AT THE END OF THE DISCUSSION

Please feel free to continue your discussions, but this is the “official” end of the evening. Before next time, use the HOME STUDY section in your *Study Guide* to help you as you continue to read through Mark.