1: GOOD NEWS

What are we doing here?



- Deliver Talk 1 using the notes below. These notes can also be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 6 of the participants'

 Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as they listen to the talk.

Aim

- To welcome people to the course.
- To recognize and challenge participants' preconceptions about Christianity.
- To show that Christianity is "good news" about Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1).
- To challenge the group to discover what that good news is by making time to come to this course and by reading Mark's Gospel.

Introduction

What's the most beautiful sight you've ever seen?

For me it was probably... (Give a personal story describing a staggering sight of natural beauty.)

What would it be for you?

And when you saw what you saw, I wonder if you asked yourself the same questions I did... what kind of power could have produced something so achingly beautiful that it reduces a human being to sheer, wordless wonder?

We live in an amazing world.

Millions of millions of miles above us, apparently, there are at least 100 billion stars. And those are just the ones in our own Milky Way galaxy. The better our technology gets, the more galaxies we see, but currently, scientists estimate there are at least 100 billion galaxies in the universe.

And it's not just the larger things in life that are truly remarkable – it's the smaller things too.

Did you know there are 75 thousand miles of blood vessels crammed inside us and there are at least 50 trillion cells. These are mind-blowing statistics! If the DNA from a single human cell were stretched out, it would measure about six feet in length.

So if the entire DNA contained within the cells of a single human being was stretched out and laid end to end, it would reach all the way to the moon. And back again. Eight thousand times.

Surely the sheer wonder of life should raise huge questions for us...

Does the mindlessness of blind chance explain this amazing world?

How did life begin, without life to create it in the first place?

And even if I do decide it all happened completely by chance, why is there anything here at all? Why is there something... and not nothing?

The Bible unashamedly says that all this natural beauty and amazing intricacy is meant to point us towards God, the one who created the extraordinary scale and complexity of the universe we live in, and the bodies we inhabit.

But this is the point at which many people switch off. They may have caught something of the marvel of creation, but Christianity leaves them cold.

Someone calculated that if you took all the people who sleep through church services on a Sunday, and laid them end-to-end on the floor... they would be a lot more comfortable!

Many people have cut the connection between life in all its wonder and the Christian faith. So it's important to say at the beginning of *Christianity Explored* that we are well aware that many people find Christianity incredibly dull, and entirely irrelevant.

You might be looking at Mark's book and asking yourself: "What's the point of reading something written 2000 years ago and 2000 miles away?" – especially if, as well as thinking it is boring and irrelevant, you are also pretty sure that the contents of the Bible are untrue.

The *Christianity Explored* course is designed by people who once felt that way too. The course exists to clear away all the misconceptions about Christianity so that you can examine the facts for yourself.

That's why we begin with the very first sentence of Mark. It says this:

"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ..." (Mark 1:1).

If you think Christianity is all about churches, and rules – leaving your brain at the door and then having all your fun spoiled – you have been misled.

That's not what it's about. The first sentence of Mark's Gospel says that Christianity is about **Christ**, Jesus Christ.

The word "Christ" there isn't a surname; it is a title, like President or Prime Minister. And it means "God's only chosen King". It was a dangerous word for Mark to use at a time when the Roman Emperor was worshipped as though he was a god.

To speak of *Jesus* as God's only true representative on earth was the kind of thing that got you thrown into the Coliseum to be torn apart by wild animals.

Actually, Mark's claim that Jesus is the Christ, God's only chosen King, is just as controversial today. I wonder what you make of it?

Mark says his book is "The beginning of the **gospel** about Jesus Christ". The word "gospel" means "good news."

I don't know how you answered the question about the best news you have ever heard, but when Mark uses the phrase good news, he is speaking about news that is so good, it is life-changing. It's like the news that war is over and you are on the winning side.

So Mark 1:1 tells us that the gospel – the exceptionally good news – is all about Jesus Christ.

I have to be honest and say that I understand those who find the Christian faith useless, meaningless, unappealing or unbelievable. But the problem is that, often, what they have written off is not the real thing.

I would be bored by some of the experiences on offer that go under the name of Christianity.

Include a personal example here – either of a boring or negative experience of Christianity you once had, or the experience of someone you know.

You may have had similar bad experiences of religion. If so, I hope you will stick around to see how un-religious Jesus is. You may well be surprised by the Jesus you encounter.

Christianity is about Christ

From this verse we know what Mark is **not** about. It doesn't say the beginning of the gospel about being religious, keeping rules and being miserable. No, it says the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ.

It doesn't say 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.

This is not the beginning of the gospel about "old, ornate buildings, dusty history and strange ways of dressing and speaking".

No, it's about Jesus Christ. And when we look at him, the guessing games about God stop. The God of the Bible is not someone we dreamed up! We aren't going to bore you with our theories about God. No, God has revealed himself to us. God has shown us what he is like by sending his Son, Jesus Christ.

Mark 1:1 is an invitation to read on and encounter the best news a person could ever hear. If, at the moment, you don't think that Christianity is the best and most thrilling news you have ever heard, can I say again that you must have misunderstood it. And there are many who have done so.

Now that is a bold statement for me to make, but let me reassure you that Christianity Explored isn't designed to indoctrinate people. We're running this course to give you an opportunity to see the facts for yourself.

Will you test Mark's claim?

The question is: Will you take the time to test Mark's claim? Will you see for yourself if he is telling you the best news ever?

■ The following true illustration shows how easily people can miss out on something that's great. If you have a personal illustration, or one that is local to your area or culture, do use that instead.

I'm sure you've had the experience of walking through (give the name of your town's main street) and being offered a leaflet which you refuse – or take and then ignore – because you don't think it'll do you any good.

Well, the British newspaper, the Evening Standard, once conducted an experiment. They got a man to stand outside Oxford Circus station in central London handing out leaflets. 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 their £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. If you want to find out what God is like, and how you're supposed to relate to him, then this (hold up a Bible or Mark's Gospel) is all you need.

On this course we will discover from Mark's Gospel who Jesus is, why he came into the world, and what it means to follow him. This is big news, and it is great news.

You could use this illustration:

It is rather like admiring a car that is for sale, and the person who is selling it hands you the key and says you can test drive it for a few weeks – to put it through its paces, see how it works, and discover if it is a car you would like to own.

On *Christianity Explored* we are saying: "Here is Mark's Gospel – here is the ignition key to Christianity. Take it for a test drive for seven weeks. Ask any questions you like, put the Christian world-view through its paces, see how it works, and discover if it makes sense of life in a way that nothing else does."

Where Mark begins

If you have already given the group Bibles or copies of Mark's Gospel, ask them to turn to Mark chapter 1. Give them the page number so that no one need feel embarrassed about trying to find it.

Let me put the key in your hand as I introduce you to the unfolding drama of Mark's Gospel...

The opening section of Mark's Gospel prepares us for an exceptional encounter. In chapter 1, verses 2-3, Mark quotes from the Old Testament – the part of the Bible which covers the history of God's dealings with humanity from creation right through to the period before the coming of Jesus into the world.

Read Mark1:2-3

These words were written over 700 years before Jesus was born! The point Mark wants us to see is that the coming of Jesus into the world was not an afterthought on God's part. These verses show that this was always the plan. As Jesus came into the world and began his ministry, God's plan was being fulfilled precisely and with amazing accuracy.

Mark introduces us to John – often known as John the Baptist, because he baptized people in the Jordan River. John came to prepare the way for Jesus, as verse 4 shows.

Read Mark 1:4

His was "the voice of one calling in the desert" that had been spoken about hundreds of years earlier. Then notice verses 7-8:

Read Mark 1:7-8

Mark's sudden leap into the Old Testament shows that people had been waiting a very long time for the person God was going to send. It is the equivalent to waiting at the airport for a long-overdue flight to arrive.

If possible include a personal example of waiting a long time for a flight that you really want to arrive. Eg: because it is bringing a family member or friend you've not seen for several years.

You have almost given up hope, and then the blank arrivals screen comes to life with an announcement of an expected arrival, in red; and then finally, in green, the word "landed" appears.

That's what Mark is telling us. God had promised to send a King. We have the Old Testament prophecies which point forward to the exact place and nature of his coming.

Mark shows us how John the Baptist came, quite suddenly, to say the arrival on earth of God's King was expected and imminent. And then verses 9-11 are the green "landed" sign.

What happens when God's King arrives

Read Mark1:9-11

This is an astonishing start. We are told that heaven gets torn open; the Holy Spirit comes down on Jesus like a dove; and God the Father announces: "You are my Son".

Clearly Jesus is the "more powerful" one of whom John spoke in verse 7.

I need to tell you that encountering God's promised King – Jesus – in Mark's Gospel takes us into a whole different realm. But I would encourage you to realize that exceptional events beyond human ability are bound to be part of the scene when God the Son steps into human flesh and comes to the world he has made.

If Jesus is just a human, then what we read is unbelievable. But if he is God in human flesh, then it should not surprise us when staggering things happen. Supernatural things.

The best news in the world

And don't miss the big point here. John the Baptist tells us in verse 8 that Jesus came to baptize people in the Holy Spirit. That means to bring ordinary people like us into the life-giving, life-changing power of God.

John's ministry had its limit – he baptized with water. Mark tells us that...

"The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him" (Mark 1:5).

The people flocked to John because if God was coming, they needed to be ready. They knew from their own experience that they were not the people they wanted to be, let alone the people God wanted them to be.

So John offered them baptism with water, as a sign of being washed clean, of being forgiven.

When the person was lowered into the water, it was a symbol of dying to their old way of living, and when they were lifted out of the water, it was a symbol of being raised to new life. But John knew that the Lord himself would offer them – and us – so much more.

"I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8).

What John is saying is absolutely stunning. He is claiming that Jesus Christ will not only offer complete forgiveness to all those who put their trust in him. He will also fill those people with God's Holy Spirit, who will radically transform their lives.

To those who know they are not the people they want to be, let alone the people God wants them to be, this is the best, the most remarkable news in the world.

And let me reassure you that if all this seems a bit too much for Session 1, in his first chapter Mark is giving us a glimpse of the end of the process,

God's Spirit coming to live in us.

It is as though he meets us at the factory gates where the finished product leaves. He shows us the end of the process. But he will take us along the assembly line and explain step by step who Jesus is, how much we need him and how we can have a full and joyful relationship with him.

And that is exactly what *Christianity Explored* is all about. At the heart of the gospel message is the astonishing truth that God has not remained distant but has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Christianity is Christ. The real Jesus is worth meeting. That's why Christianity is worth exploring.

So, how do you feel about taking a seven-week test drive?

2: IDENTITY

Who is Jesus?



- Deliver Talk 2 using the notes below. These notes can also be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 13 of the participants' Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as they listen to the talk.

Aim

- To help the group see the evidence for the unique identity of Jesus.
- To show that Jesus has the power and authority of God.
- To challenge group members to consider the implications of this for their own lives.

Introduction

Start with an illustration about how you have mistaken the identity of someone and it led to you treating them wrongly or ignoring them. If you do not have a story of your own, then use this true illustration:

Have you ever completely missed who someone is... until it's too late? The creator of Christianity Explored, Rico Tice, was once invited to a lunch. As he waited outside the room, he found himself opposite a young man who looked vaguely familiar. For five minutes neither said a word, although the young man looked as if he expected Rico to speak to him. But Rico didn't know who he was, so said nothing. It was only as the young man left that Rico discovered his identity – Prince William, the future king of England.

Rico stood opposite Prince William for five minutes and didn't say a word. Because he didn't recognize him, he just saw a young man. He didn't see the future king, so he didn't take the opportunity to relate to him.

If we get someone's identity wrong, we'll relate to them in the wrong way. This week on *Christianity Explored* we'll look at what Mark's Gospel tells us about the identity of Jesus, and why Mark is convinced that Jesus is God's only chosen King. And it's important for us to get *this* King's identity right – otherwise we'll relate to him in the wrong way, or even ignore him completely.

Last week we saw that Mark starts his book with the words:

"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1).

Mark is saying that the message about Jesus is "good news" about the "Christ", God's only chosen King. That's quite a claim, so Mark backs it up in the first few chapters of his book. He piles up the evidence for who Jesus is

We're going to look at five ways that Mark reveals Jesus' identity. Five examples of evidence that point to the conclusion that Jesus really is God's only chosen King.

1. Jesus had power and authority to teach

Mark tells us what happened when Jesus went to the Jewish place of worship, the synagogue:

■ Read Mark 1:21-22

What set Jesus apart from the other teachers was the way he taught. The teachers of the law didn't come up with their own material. They only ever dealt in second-hand goods. They relied on the great teachers of the past, and just quoted them or gave their opinions of what those previous teachers had said.

But when Jesus came along and began to teach, the people were staggered. He taught things they'd never heard before. Mark says they were

amazed at the personal authority with which he taught. They were hearing the word of God from the lips of the Son of God. And they were hearing it taught by someone who also lived it out. Listening to Jesus was like a light being switched on in the darkness.

That's why the people who heard him were "amazed" at his words, and asked each other: "What is this? A new teaching – and with authority!" (Mark 1:27).

Clearly, Jesus could teach – but did he also live out what he taught?

You could include an illustration here of someone who says one thing but is then found to have done something completely different. For example a religious leader who has an affair, or a politician who steals government funds.

We've all come across hypocrites who say one thing but do another. But Jesus wasn't like that. For example, he taught: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Later, as he was being killed, he prayed for his executioners: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Now that is practising what you preach.

Here was a teacher who taught with power and authority. And who also lived out what he taught.

But Jesus wasn't just a teacher...

2. Jesus had power and authority over sickness

We've seen what happened when Jesus went *into* the synagogue and started to teach. Mark then tells us what happened when he *left*:

™ Read Mark 1:29-31

Here's Jesus demonstrating absolute authority over sickness. Just a touch of his hand and the fever is cured. And this is not an isolated incident either.

The Bible has over thirty examples of Jesus healing people. And as a result: the deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are healed and restored.

Mark also tells us that Jesus cured people of spiritual suffering as well as physical suffering – releasing people from demonic oppression.

Now, the people of the time were obviously convinced that Jesus had extraordinary ability to heal. In Mark 1:45 we read that they "came to him from everywhere".

No one, not even Jesus' enemies, doubted his power. His enemies wanted to discredit him, but couldn't deny the power he had. The evidence points to genuine, God-like healing ability.

These are astonishing miracles. But if Jesus Christ truly is the Son of God breaking into history, isn't this what you'd expect to see?

But Jesus wasn't just a teacher and healer...

3. Jesus had power and authority over nature

Let's think back to the story we talked about together – the story of Jesus calming the storm.

Isn't it amazing in this story to see the genuine humanity of Jesus? He is a real flesh-and-blood man. And here we see him in the stern of the boat, sleeping on a cushion. He is exhausted. But is he *just* a man?

The word translated "furious squall" can literally mean a whirlwind. The boat was nearly swamped. So the disciples woke Jesus and complained: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" (v 38).

Now several of the disciples were hardened fishermen. They'd sailed on Lake Galilee hundreds of times. If they think they're going to die, it must be serious.

Notice that they call him "teacher". They know that Jesus speaks with authority. And they know he can heal the sick. So he has power... but does he care? That was their question: "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

What happens next is amazing:

"He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm" (Mark 4:39).

Do you see what we're being presented with here? Jesus not only has authority with people and over illness. In this instance, he speaks and the forces of nature – which have no ears to listen, and no brain to understand His command – respond instantly.

Jesus actually does two things here:

- He stops the wind, which is the *cause* of the storm.
- He calms the waves, which are the *result* of the storm.
- You could include a practical illustration here. For example, suggest this to the group:

Next time you fill a bowl of water to wash some dishes, try rocking the bowl to make some waves. Then stop the rocking and watch what happens. Even though the bowl has stopped, the water doesn't. It continues to move from side to side for a long time. The same is true for waves on the sea.

Now normally it takes hours for the surface of the water to calm after a severe storm – because the swell has built up. But Jesus calms these waves instantly.

And after he flattened the sea, he said to his disciples: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

What are they afraid of now? Are they afraid of the storm? It's calm.

"They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" (Mark 4:41)

The disciples knew from their Old Testament that only Almighty God has the power to control the astonishing forces of nature. They would have sung psalms about this. But it's one thing to grow up singing about a God who can calm the wind and waves. It's quite another to find yourself sitting in a boat with him – having rudely wakened him to ask him if he cares!

As they sit in the boat on the calmed sea, they begin to see what this miracle means. He gets tired like us and falls fast asleep. But unlike us, he has a word with the wind and waves, and they do as they are told. So the disciples ask: "Who is this?" The answer is obvious: who else can Jesus be but God in human flesh?

But, remarkable as that is, in the next chapter the disciples witness something even more astonishing...

4. Jesus had power and authority over death

™ Read Mark 5:21-22

Jairus is a key man in the community, a figure of honour and respect. Yet he is flat on his face before Jesus.

We see why in verse 23:

"[Jairus] pleaded earnestly with him, 'My little daughter is dying.

Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.'"

Here is a dad who has always provided for his little girl. He has always protected her and done all he can for her, but now he's desperate. Imagine the desperation and powerlessness you would feel if your own child was dying. That's the emotional intensity here.

Perhaps include a personal illustration here of your own experience of death and how it severs relationships with people we dearly love.

So imagine Jairus' relief when Jesus agrees to go with him. He knows that Jesus has never failed to heal any illness.

But as they move off together, a lady comes to Jesus for help, and he stops to talk to her. This lady had been ill for as long as Jairus' daughter had been alive. But Jairus must have been beside himself with anxiety because of this delay.

Now pick up the story at verse 35:

Read Mark 5:35

These men still call Jesus "teacher". They all know about his amazing teaching. Also that he could heal sickness and control the forces of nature. But they think there is a limit to the authority of Jesus. They think that limit has now been reached.

The men who bring the terrible news have seen the dead girl. So their view is: "Jesus may be a remarkable teacher. He may be able to make sick people well, which was what we hoped he would do for us. But she's no longer sick, she's dead. We don't need Jesus any more."

But listen to Jesus' extraordinary words in verse 36:

Read Mark 5:36

Jesus ignores what they say! As Jesus hears that this girl has died, it apparently makes no difference to his plans. He ignores the "detail" of her death!

Let's have a look and see what happened next:

™ Read Mark 5:37-40a

This is the laughter of scorn. Maybe, inwardly, you are laughing scornfully as well at the thought of Jesus being able to do these things. But if this is true, the implications are huge.

Jesus doesn't mean that the girl wasn't dead – she was. But he knew that it would be easier for him to bring her back to life than it is for you to wake a sleeping teenager.

Why? Because he is the Son of God, and has power and authority over death.

Read Mark 5:40b-42

Isn't this a lovely intimate scene? Jesus has put the mockers outside. And Mum and Dad watch as he takes their daughter's hand. "Talitha koum!" – which means: "Little girl, I say to you, get up!". These were the words her father would have used every morning to wake her up.

And her eyes open. She gets up! And Jesus says: "Get her something to eat". No wonder they were "completely astonished". Wouldn't you be?

Now, if this is a man who has power over death, surely it would be madness to ignore him – to say: "I'm just not interested in this" or "This is boring" or "Well that's fine for you to believe".

One day you and I are going to die. After the evidence we've just seen, the question we must ask ourselves is this: Can I trust Jesus with my own death?

But I have to say that "Quiet! Be still!" and "Little girl ... get up" are not the most outrageous things Jesus says in Mark. For that we have to go back to chapter 2.

5. Jesus had power and authority to forgive sin

Read Mark 2:1-12

I've had (or seen) some amazing interruptions when I have (or someone has) been speaking to groups.

Give an illustration of an interruption you've had while speaking to a group, or have seen happen to another speaker.

But this interruption just beats everything. The roof gets ripped up. Pieces fall onto the crowd below. Then a shaft of daylight. Then it goes dark again as the stretcher is lowered and this poor man comes down with it.

And then we have the first words Jesus says to the man: "Son, your sins are forgiven".

Why would Jesus say this? The obvious issue for this man is his paralysis. You can imagine him saying: "I'm sorry Jesus, it's not my sins I'm worried about, it's my pins. It's my legs. I can't walk!" (Note: This is an opportunity to bring in a bit of humour. But if using "pins" for "legs" doesn't work in your situation, leave it out.)

But Jesus knows that the man's sin is a far more pressing problem than his paralysis. To see why, we have to understand what the Bible means by "sin".

Sin isn't just doing wrong things; it's not just lust or laziness or whatever. No, the Bible says that sin is ignoring our Creator in the world he has made. It's living the way we want, instead of the way he wants. And sin matters because it gets in the way between us and God.

Jesus knows that our relationship with God is more important than anything else. That's why his focus is on the man's sin, rather than his legs.

But as we saw earlier, the religious leaders are furious. They know that only God has the power and authority to forgive sin. If sin is ignoring God in the world he has made, then only God has the right to forgive it. So they take it for granted that Jesus must be lying.

But Jesus knows what they are thinking. So he says to them:

™ Read Mark 2:10-12

The whole point of Jesus healing the man – of doing that amazing creative miracle – is to reveal his true *identity*. To show that he **is** God and that he does have authority on earth to forgive sin.

Next time we will see that Jesus himself said that this is why he came. His mission is to save sinners.

Conclusion

We heard earlier what happens when you get someone's identity wrong.

Briefly (in one sentence) recap the illustration you used at the beginning of the talk.

Mark has given us five examples of evidence that point to the real identity of Jesus. We've seen his power and authority to teach; to heal the sick; to control nature; to raise the dead; and to forgive sin. We've seen that Jesus acts in God's world, with God's authority.

So who is Jesus? Mark is showing us that Jesus is God's Son, with the same power and authority as God. And that he is God's only chosen King. And if this is who he is – the question for us is: "How have we been relating to him?"

3: SIN

Why did Jesus come?



- Deliver Talk 3 using the notes below. These notes can also be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 19 of the participants'
 Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as
 they listen to the talk.

Aim

- To show that Jesus came to cure our heart problem our sin and to rescue us from judgment and hell.
- To challenge group members to consider the implications of this for their own lives

Introduction

Start with an illustration about finding out the truth about ourselves while there's still time to do something about it. If you don't have a personal illustration about this, use the following:

I don't know how you feel about dentists. I suspect that very few of us get up in the morning thinking: "At last, the day I've been looking forward to. I'm off to see the dentist for my six-month check-up!"

You know the dentist's sharp little pick is going to sink in every now and again. And when it does, you feel the pain and you know you're in trouble.

But it's better to know about something rotten now than when it's too late to do anything about it.

Adapt the following paragraph to fit the illustration you have used.

This session of *Christianity Explored* is going to be a little bit like going to the dentist. Listening to what Jesus has to say about us can be extremely uncomfortable, because, like the dentist's pick, it exposes what we're really like. But it's better to find out the truth about ourselves while we still have time to do something about it.

There are aspects of Jesus' teaching that are difficult for all of us to hear. But these are things we need to know, and Jesus wants us to know about them, because he can deal with them.

We've already explored *who Jesus is.* In this session we focus on another vital question: *Why did Jesus come?*

How would you answer that one? Did he want to bring peace on earth? Was it to heal disease, and end the sufferings of the world? Did he want to transform society, and give us an example of how we ought to live?

There's an element of truth in every one of those options. But Mark says they're not the main reason Jesus came. Jesus came to cure a problem we all have

1. We all have a heart problem

Start with one or two examples of natural beauty in your location or country, eg: a well-known beauty spot, a rugged mountain range, a waterfall. a beach...

When we look at the world, there's so much to marvel at. But who can honestly say the world is all good?

Estimates vary, but histories of the twentieth century suggest that at least one hundred million people died violently in those hundred years. That's two thousand four hundred violent deaths every day. The question is: Why is the world like this?

Jesus tells us the uncomfortable truth in Mark's Gospel. He says the reason the *world* is not the way it's supposed to be is because *we* are not the way we're supposed to be.

■ Imagine for a moment a huge public gallery. (Give an example of a gallery or public building nearby.) On the walls is a display about you. It shows everything you've ever done – and also every word you've said, and every thought you've had. Nothing is left out – it's all there, for everyone to see.

Now I'm sure there will be parts you're proud of: special achievements; success at work or sport or music; times when you've helped others, or been generous with your money.

But there will also be thousands of things that you don't want anyone to see. Things you've done, or said, or thought that you wouldn't want anyone to know about, not even your closest friend.

And it's not only the things we've said, done and thought that are a problem. There are also the things we should have done, and the words we should have said

I wonder how you would feel, knowing that all of that was exposed for everyone to see. For myself, if my life were on the walls for everyone to see, I'd be so ashamed. I wouldn't be able to look people in the eye. Could you, if you're being honest?

So why are we like this? Why is there so much to be ashamed of? Jesus gives us the answer in Mark chapter 7.

Read Mark 7:20-23

What Jesus said is startling. It's like being shown an X-ray of our hearts. Not an X-ray that shows bones, but one that shows who we are and what we are really like inside.

You may feel indignant about the things Jesus says here. It's not how people usually talk about wrongdoing. We are used to hearing people in public life calling the wrong things they have done a "mistake". It gives the impression that their adultery or stealing or lying or whatever wasn't intentional, it was just something that came upon them.

But Jesus says that is nonsense. Sin is not something that I come across "out there" and unintentionally get caught up in. It is something I discover in here (*point to your heart*). I can see it on the X-ray – can you?

We have to look within and take responsibility for what we see. Jesus tells us that sin – rebelling against God and choosing to go our own

way rather than his way – comes "from within", from our "hearts".

And see how Jesus includes all of us. He doesn't just mention immorality, theft, murder and adultery – but also greed, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

Some sins make front-page headlines in this world. Some don't. But they are all evil in God's reckoning, and they all come from inside you and me! If we could see the gallery of our lives on the walls, we'd see that we all have a heart problem.

Each of us has a heart problem. We often treat each other and our world in a shameful way. But our problems don't end there, because we treat God in that way too.

In Mark chapter 12, Jesus tells us how we *should* relate to God:

Read Mark 12:30

If you don't have a heart problem – if you're not a sinner – then you will look back on your life and see that you have loved God with **all** your heart, **all** your soul, **all** your mind, and **all** your strength.

If you're not a sinful person, then there won't have been a single moment when your life didn't joyfully centre on God and his glory.

But I see the gallery of my life, and I can't even find ten consecutive minutes where I have treated God with the love and honour that is rightfully his.

We all have the same heart problem. We should love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength - because he is our loving Creator. But we never manage to do this.

Instead we've all rebelled against God. He is our loving Creator, but we choose to live our lives our own way rather than his way. We give our hearts to lots of things, but not to our Creator. The Bible calls this "sin".

2. Jesus came to cure our heart problem

So why did Jesus come? Mark's Gospel tells us that Jesus came to cure our heart problem: the problem of our sin.

In chapter 2, Mark tells us what happened when Jesus had dinner at Levi's house. Levi was a tax collector who worked for the Romans. He would have been seen as a traitor by Jewish people, and as a "sinner" by the religious leaders. So why is Jesus having a meal with him?

■ Read Mark 2:15-17

There are two groups of people here in this passage – the "good guys" and the "bad guys".

The "good guys" are the senior religious figures of the day – the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. They looked faultless in religious terms. The "bad guys" are made up of people like Levi, the tax collector, and his friends.

The question is: Who would you expect Jesus to want to spend time with?

The religious types can't believe that Jesus has chosen to have a meal with tax collectors and their friends. Surely he should be with the religious, not the rebels.

But listen again to what Jesus says in verse 17. This is not a coincidence or a mistake. This is intentional. He says:

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17).

Jesus is at Levi's house on business. And his business is to be the doctor for the spiritually sick. He hasn't come for those who think they are spiritually fit, but for those who know that they are spiritual wrecks.

He says, if you think you're good, if you think you're spiritually healthy, then you won't think you need him. Just as healthy people don't need doctors, so people who think they're good don't need Jesus. The qualification for coming to Jesus is not being good enough but realizing that you're bad enough?

Jesus came for people who know they have a heart problem, and know they need him to cure it.

3. Why does our heart problem matter so much?

Return to the illustration that you used at the start of the talk, and explain what would happen if you didn't take the warning seriously. For example:

If the dentist diagnoses my problem, and explains in lurid detail the treatment for it, I might thank him politely and make a run for it. I might choose to ignore the problem, unless I understand the consequences. So it's important that I understand what will happen if I don't take his warning seriously.

The same is true for us now. We need to understand why our heart problem matters so much, and what the consequences are if we don't do anything about it. And that brings us to one of the most disturbing passages in Mark's Gospel, where we discover what Jesus said about the seriousness of sin.

№ Read Mark 9:43-47

Can you imagine a situation where it would be better to lose a hand than to keep it? Better to lose one eye than to have two? We've probably all seen pictures of people who've lost arms or legs in accidents or wars. These are shocking images.

So why is Jesus using such extreme language here? Why is he being so shocking? Because he knows that if we reject God throughout our lives, then ultimately God will be right to reject us. If our sin isn't dealt with, it will take us to hell. Jesus lovingly warns us about hell because he does not want us to go there.

In the 21st century many people either dismiss hell as a myth, or treat it as a joke. They joke that they'd much rather be in hell than heaven, because all their friends will be in hell too, and it will be much more fun.

But there's no fun in hell. No friendship either. Hell means being totally separated from God's mercy and blessing. And completely cut off from all the goodness God brings. God is the source of love, joy, friendship, kindness. So in hell there's none of these things. Nothing good is there.

Hell is the place where we face God's judgment for our rebellion against him. You can see why Jesus warns us about hell, and uses such strong language to do so. He knows what hell is really like, and he doesn't want us to go there.

Anyone who conducts funerals knows that people want to hear lots about heaven, but we have no integrity unless we also talk about hell. Hell is the consequence of sin. We've already seen that we all have a heart problem. We all sin. And that means we're all in danger, whether we realize it or not. And that's why Jesus came: to cure our heart problem and rescue us from the consequences of our sin.

Return again to the illustration you used at the beginning. Eg:

I might like my dentist if he tells me my teeth are fine, and I can go on eating lots of chocolate. But if he knows that is not the truth, he is not being friendly. My dentist isn't being cruel when he tells me I have a rotten cavity, and that it needs to be fixed. He doesn't say it to ruin my day, or because he enjoys inflicting pain. He's actually being kind. He's warning me about a problem while there's still time to do something about it. I can choose to listen to him, or take no notice. But if I do ignore him, I know that there will be consequences.

Jesus doesn't warn us about hell because he's being cruel. He doesn't say it to ruin our day. He lovingly warns us about hell because he does not want us to go there. He knows the consequences of our heart problem. And he loves us so much that he came to save us from those consequences – to rescue us from our sin.

If you understand this, then you're beginning to see why Mark says that Jesus is such good news! He didn't come "to call the righteous, but sinners"

The question is: Are we going to listen to Jesus while there's still time to do something about the problem?

4: THE CROSS

Why did Jesus die?



- Deliver Talk 4 using the notes below. These notes can also be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 28 of the participants'
 Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as
 they listen to the talk.

Aim

- To explain the significance of the cross.
- To explore the different reactions to Jesus' death as recorded in Mark's Gospel.
- To challenge group members to consider the implications of this for their own lives.

Introduction

Let me begin with a question:

If you think for a moment of all the faiths and philosophies in the world, how many of them celebrate the death of their founder? And how many of them see the death of their founder as the most significant moment in history?

I'm sure you know that I'm talking about the Christian faith – but I wanted to ask the question to show how striking this is. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is at the very centre of Christianity. But think how strange that is.

■ Hold up a recent biography of someone famous who is no longer alive. (Libraries are a good source if you don't have anything suitable.) Give one or two brief examples of things the biography tells us about that person's life.

If you look at most biographies, the writers want to talk about their subject's life. Their death is often an inevitable footnote.

Show how much of your sample biography is about the person's life, and how much (maybe just a couple of pages, or a paragraph) is about their death.

And yet, in the four biographies of Jesus' life – the Gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – one third of each book is about Jesus' death.

Not only that, but Christians never stop talking about the cross. This seems particularly strange because crucifixion, the manner in which Jesus died, was considered terribly shameful.

When someone was crucified, they were severely whipped, nailed to a wooden cross, which was then hoisted into place with the victim attached, and left to die. Crucifixion was deliberately made cruel and gruesome so that any slave who was thinking about rebellion would see the crucified victim and conclude that it could never be worth the risk. It was the ultimate deterrent.

So why is the cross the universally-recognized symbol of Christianity? Christians could have chosen a manger to remind them of Jesus' birth, or perhaps a scroll to remind them of his amazing teaching. But no, it's a cross – a reminder of his death. Why is this? The answer is simple. The cross is how Jesus rescues people.

So today we're going to look at:

- what actually happened when Jesus died on the cross
- what that means
- and how people reacted to it.

But first we'll remind ourselves of why people need to be rescued.

Why do we need to be rescued?

In our last session we saw that each of us has a serious "heart problem". We looked at Mark chapter 7 where Jesus says this:

"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean' [by "unclean" Jesus means "sinful"]. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery..."

and so the list goes on (Mark 7:20-21).

This means that we're all in danger, whether we realize it or not, because ultimately our sin will lead us to hell.

We also saw the wonderful news that Jesus had said earlier:

"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17).

Remember the qualification for coming to Jesus isn't being good enough but realizing we're bad enough. Jesus wants to rescue sinful people like you and me. Today we'll see that he does that by what he achieved for us when he died on the cross.

Read Mark 8:31

So Jesus taught his followers that he must suffer and be rejected. That he must be killed. It was something he had to do. But why? We get the answer in Mark chapter 10 verse 45, where Jesus tells us this:

Read Mark 10:45

So that's what Jesus says he came to do: "to give his life as a ransom for many". Jesus went to his death willingly and deliberately. He knew it was necessary.

To understand exactly what happened – and how Jesus died to ransom, or free, others – we need to read Mark's account of Jesus' death.

™ Read Mark 15:22–39

We learn three striking things from that passage:

- 1. God was angry
- 2. Jesus was abandoned
- 3. We can be accepted

1. God was angry

Verse 33 says:

"At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour" (Mark 15:33).

Mark is counting hours according to the ancient Jewish system, so the sixth hour would have been noon, the middle of the day. At the moment when the midday sun should have been at its brightest in the sky, darkness fell over the whole land, and remained until three o'clock in the afternoon.

It could not have been an eclipse, because this happened at the Jewish Passover feast – and Passover always fell on a full moon. A solar eclipse can't happen at the same time as a full moon. Also, solar eclipses never last more than about six minutes. This darkness lasted three hours. So, something supernatural was going on.

Time and again in the Bible, light symbolizes God's presence and blessing – while darkness is a sign of God's anger and judgment. So when darkness comes over the land while Jesus is dying, it is a sign that God is angry.

Now, we won't understand this if we see anger as something that is unpredictable and wild – the result of a quick temper. God's anger is not like that. God's anger is his settled, controlled, personal hostility to all that is wrong.

God is a God of holiness, of blazing purity – and he hates what is evil. When it comes to evil, he doesn't lean back in a rocking chair, and pretend nothing has happened. No, wrongdoing matters to God.

How I treat you matters to God. How you treat me matters to God. And how we treat the world matters to God. And for some of you who've been badly treated by other people, I want you to know that it matters to God.

Surely if we care about the injustices we see in the world, we can't expect our loving Creator to care less than we do. And a God who cares about injustice is right to be angry about sin, and right to punish it.

So, as Jesus was dying on the cross, darkness came over the whole land. It was a supernatural sign of God's anger. But that leaves us with a question: What does this have to do with Jesus?

2. Jesus was abandoned

In verse 34, Mark tells us something that Jesus said shortly before he died:

"And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' – which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:34)

Now there is no doubt that Jesus suffered physical agony on the cross. But what is being spoken about here is spiritual agony – being forsaken or abandoned by God.

As we read Mark's account of the crucifixion and hear this cry from Jesus, we begin to see that on the cross Jesus was in some way "forsaken" or abandoned by God, as God punished sin. God was focusing his anger over our sin on Jesus. Jesus was taking the punishment we deserve.

But Jesus had led a sinless life. In our very first session we read about John the Baptist baptizing Jesus. Mark tells us that God the Father's voice was heard at that time saying:

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."
(Mark 1:11)

And in a later part of Mark's Gospel, God's voice is again heard. This time God says:

"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7)

Jesus never sinned – he always perfectly obeyed the will of God. The significance of that is enormous as we think about his death on the cross. We have seen that God is angry at our sin. We've now seen that God is punishing Jesus. But clearly Jesus was not being punished for his own sin.

So why was God punishing him? And why did Jesus allow himself to be subjected to this? The answer is that Jesus went through all of this on our behalf, so that we can be rescued. He came to give his life as a ransom for many.

Use the following illustration to explain what happened as Jesus died on the cross.

What to do

Hold up a blank DVD case in your right hand.



What to say

Think back to the public gallery where your whole life is displayed on the walls. They show everything you have ever done, said and thought. Now imagine that everything from that display has been recorded onto this DVD.

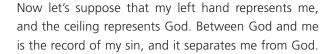
There's lots of stuff on here that looks great to us. Perhaps there's a loving home, selfless acts, achievements and success. But there is also a lot on this DVD that you're ashamed of. Things you'd rather people didn't see. We all have secrets that we would hate to have exposed.

The Bible says:

"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13).

And it's not just the way we've treated others, but also the way we've treated God that is recorded.

Hold your left hand out, with your palm facing the ceiling.





Take the DVD and put it flat on your hand.

My sin cuts me off from God. But let me illustrate what happened at the cross.



What to do

Hold out your right hand, facing up. Your left hand should still have the DVD.



Suppose that my right hand represents Jesus – and remember that the ceiling represents God. Jesus lived a sinless life. He always perfectly obeyed the will of God – so there was no barrier between him and God.



But Jesus said that he came to "give his life as a ransom for many". So when he was on the cross, he took my sin.

Now transfer the DVD from the left hand to the right hand.

That's why Jesus cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" as he hung on the cross. It wasn't his sin that had separated him from God, because Jesus had never sinned. No, it was our sin that made him feel forsaken by God.



In those agonizing moments, Jesus was taking upon himself all the punishment that our sin, everything on this DVD, deserves. He gave himself up as a substitute, to be punished on our behalf.

The Bible says:

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

Jesus died as my substitute, in my place, taking the punishment I deserve.

Refer to your left hand, now empty, still facing upwards.



How much sin is left? (Wait for an answer – don't worry if it's a long pause. That will make the point even more clearly.) Yes that's right, zero. In fact, this is shocking; I can be as sinless in God's sight as Jesus himself!

3. We can be accepted

Let's look again at verses 37 and 38.

™ Read Mark 15:37–38

Mark records the exact moment of Jesus' death – but then he turns our attention to something that happens simultaneously at the temple, which is on the other side of the city. He wants us to understand that the two events are connected in some way.

There was a thirty-foot high curtain in the temple, which was as thick as the span of a man's hand. (Hold up your hand to show how thick the curtain was.) When Jesus died, this curtain was torn from top to bottom. Why is that significant?

Well, this thick curtain used to hang in the temple, dividing the people from the place where God was said to live. The curtain was like a big "Do not enter" sign. It said loudly and clearly that it is impossible for sinful people like you and me to walk into God's presence.

Then, suddenly, as Jesus died on the cross, God ripped this curtain in two, from top to bottom. It's as if God is saying: "The way is now open for people to approach me." And that's only possible because Jesus had just paid the price for our sin. Jesus had died as the "ransom for many".

That's what was happening on the cross. Jesus was dying as our substitute, being punished for our sin, so that we can be rescued. Because of the cross, the way is now open for people to approach God. You can see why the cross, the reminder of Jesus' death, is the symbol of Christianity.

But what about the people who were there when Jesus died? How did they respond to Jesus' death on the cross?

Four reactions to Jesus' death

Mark brings our attention to the way various people react to the death of Jesus. As we look at these reactions, ask yourself what you see when you look at Jesus' death and how you respond.

1. The soldiers

Verse 24 tells us about the soldiers who had nailed Jesus to the cross.

Read Mark 15:24

The soldiers weren't interested in what was happening on the cross – they had seen it all before. The only thing they were interested in was gambling for Jesus' clothes. They completely missed what was happening right in front of their eyes. For them the main legacy of the cross was Jesus' clothing.

2. The religious leaders

The religious leaders had wanted for a long time to have Jesus killed. They watched him die, laughing about it among themselves.

™ Read Mark 15:31-32

The religious leaders were convinced that they knew the way to God, so they didn't need Jesus. They knew that some people thought that Jesus was the Christ, God's only chosen King – but the chief priests and teachers of the law refused to believe that.

Ironically they mocked Jesus, claiming that he couldn't save himself – and completely missing the point that he was actually dying to save others, just as he had said he would.

3. Pontius Pilate

So the religious leaders rejected Jesus – but what about the political leader? What about the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate? He had questioned Jesus himself, and knew that Jesus was an innocent man. But Pilate was swayed by the crowds.

Read Mark 15:12-15

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent. But when the pressure was on, he gave in. Instead of releasing Jesus, as he knew was right, he gave in to the crowds and had Jesus crucified.

By showing us these different reactions it's as if Mark is saying: "OK, this is how others reacted to Jesus' death on the cross. But what about you? What do you see when you look at the cross?"

- Are we too busy like the soldiers?
- Too self-righteous like the religious leaders?
- Too cowardly like Pilate?

But there's one more response to look at...

4. The Roman centurion

Mark records the reaction of a Roman centurion – a hard-bitten soldier who was a high-ranking military officer. He would have seen many men die – but he had never seen a man die like this. This is how Mark describes it:

Read Mark 15:39

And that is what we are meant to see as we look at what happened at the cross. We can recognize that Jesus is telling the truth: that he is indeed the Son of God. And that his death is God's amazing plan to rescue us from our sin.

There has never been better news than this. The gospel message tells me the terrible truth about myself – about my heart problem that I cannot cure. But then it tells me the wonderful news about Jesus dying for sinners, to give his life as a ransom for many.

So the question is: What do you make of all this? And what will you do with your sin?

Will you take it with you to the grave, and insist that you pay for it yourself?

Or will you take it to the cross to be forgiven?

5: RESURRECTION

Why did Jesus rise?



- Deliver Talk 5 using the notes below. These notes can also be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 36 of the participants'
 Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as
 they listen to the talk.

Aim

- To present the facts about the resurrection of Jesus.
- To show how the resurrection brings both hope and a warning.
- To challenge group members to consider the implications of this for their own lives.

Introduction

Opening illustration. Give a personal example of lining up in a queue, preferably for something you're not looking forward to but will definitely happen. For example:

I remember very vividly when the school doctor came to give us our BCG injections against tuberculosis. Having to stand there, waiting to be injected, wasn't a great feeling. I remember looking at the guys ahead of me in the queue, lined up in alphabetical order. I thought: "If they get in and out alright, then I'll be fine".

The first boy went in, and to my amazement there were no screams from the medical room – and no blood seeping under the door. He came out calmly doing up his shirt cuff, and I thought: "I'm fine. If he can get through it, I can too." We're running *Christianity Explored* because we're all in a queue. We are mortal and we will all die – but not necessarily in alphabetical order! We all know this. We can't ignore it, or pretend it's not true, though many try to do so. The fact of death applies to us all – one day our lives will be over.

Last time we saw that Jesus died on a cross to cure our heart problem, the problem of our sin. But Mark tells us that Jesus not only died for sinners, but rose again from death. And because of that, the ultimate terror of death is removed. Because Jesus got through death, and triumphed over it, he can get us through it too.

We're going to trace the events of the resurrection morning from Mark's brief record of it in chapter 16. But first, we'll see what Jesus said about his resurrection **before** it happened.

Jesus knew he would rise again

In these predictions Jesus is again using the phrase "the Son of Man" to talk about himself

Read Mark 8:31

Jesus said the same thing on two other occasions:

He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and **after three days he will rise**" (Mark 9:31).

"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. **Three days later** he will rise" (Mark 10:33-34).

Jesus repeatedly claimed that he would be raised to life on the third day after his death. The resurrection wasn't a surprise to him – he knew his death wouldn't be the end.

So let's see what Mark tells us about the resurrection of Jesus, starting with some women who had watched him die.

Read Mark 15:40 – 16:3

- If possible, show the following four headings as a visual aid as you give the talk, revealing each heading as you reach it:
 - 1. Dead and buried
 - 2. Alive and well
 - 3. Ruling as King
 - 4. Go and tell

1. Dead and buried

These women knew Jesus well. We learn in verse 41 that they had cared for Jesus and looked after his needs. And now they watched his gruesome death, and saw where his body was buried.

Jesus was buried by a man called Joseph of Arimathea. He went to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and rather bravely asked permission to bury the body.

Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus had died already. So he checked the facts. He asked the Roman centurion if Jesus was in fact dead – and the centurion confirmed that it was true. So Pilate agreed that Joseph could take the body.

Joseph took the lifeless, bloodied body down from the cross, wrapped it in linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Jesus Christ was dead and buried.

But now it was 36 hours later on the Sunday morning, and these three grieving women came to do what they imagined was the last loving thing they could do for him. They came to embalm his corpse.

Some time after dark the previous evening, when the Jewish Sabbath was over and the shops were opening again, they had gone and bought some spices. Their idea was to put them on the linen that the body was wrapped in, as a last loving act, to mask the smell of decay.

So they got up first thing the next morning, and set off to the tomb. They already knew where to go because they had seen the burial of Jesus.

As they made their way to the grave, they discussed the barrier they were going to face that morning. They had seen Joseph roll the very large stone across the entrance to the tomb, and wondered who might roll the stone away again so that they could put their spices on the body. It would have been too heavy for them to move themselves – even harder than one of us trying to lift a piano on our own.

You might include a personal illustration here of visiting a grave of someone you knew and loved. You know you won't see that person there; you know that they are dead; but you go to remember them, and maybe put some flowers on the grave.

That's how it was for the women that morning, because they knew – just like the Roman centurion – that Jesus was dead and buried.

2. Alive and well

Let's have a look at the next part of chapter 16 to see what happened when the women reached the tomb.

■ Read Mark 16:4-8

The women were given two staggering shocks which left them "trembling and bewildered" (v 8), and they "fled from the tomb". The Greek word translated as "fled" is the word used for escaping from a wild animal. If you can imagine how you'd feel being chased by a bull or a pack of wolves, then you know how these women felt!

If you have a personal illustration of being chased by an animal, use it briefly here. eg: "I was chased by an angry dog once, and was terrified. That's how these women felt."

The first shock comes in verse 4 when the women arrive and find that the stone in front of the tomb has been dealt with. The huge heavy stone has been flung away from the entrance.

The second shock is that there's no need for the spices they've spent so much money on. The barrier has been removed – and the body isn't there.

Then the "young man dressed in a white robe" – who is clearly a messenger from God – says this:

"Don't be alarmed ... You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified" (Mark 16:6).

So he confirmed that a man from Nazareth, called Jesus, whose death the women had seen, had been crucified and was buried there. He says:

"See the place where they laid him."

They were not imagining this, they were not in the wrong place – that's the place where Jesus was laid. They were not dreaming – it really happened. But it's not the end of the story.

The messenger says: "You can see the place, you can see the discarded grave clothes, but you won't see him. He's not here. He is risen!"

But that's not the end of the young man's news. He has a message for the disciples – one that can only be true if Jesus really has risen from the dead

"But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (Mark 16:7).

One of the predictions we looked at in our "Explore" study earlier was Jesus telling his disciples that he would rise to life, and then go to Galilee, where they would join him. Now the young man in white is telling the women the same thing. The risen Jesus would meet the disciples, including Peter, in Galilee.

Mark ends his book with the reaction of the women. But the other three Gospels, and the book of Acts, fill in some of the things that happened after the resurrection. They tell us that Jesus appeared to his disciples on at least ten separate occasions after his death. He also appeared to more than 500 people at the same time.

Now, at this point you may find it hard to believe what Mark tells us about the resurrection. Or perhaps you dismiss everything the Bible says about the amazing things Jesus said and did. We all know that bringing life to a corpse is something that human science and power can't do. But we should not reject the resurrection of the dead on the grounds that we can't do it.

Please don't discard the plain teaching of the Bible about Jesus dying and rising on the basis that if we can't do it, it can't be done. As we meet Jesus in Mark's Gospel we hear and see things that are well beyond our comprehension and ability. **But that's what you would expect when God the Son comes into the world he has created.**

But if you haven't seen who Jesus is as he teaches and calls and heals and controls and raises from death and forgives sins – then of course you will not believe he can be raised from death.

Mark doesn't "rose-tint" the reactions of the original hearers of the news that Jesus had risen. The women had seen Jesus brutally executed 36 hours earlier. They react to the news that he is alive again with bewilderment and fear. Mark doesn't downplay their struggle to comprehend what they are being told about Jesus. Because this is history – this happened!

3. Ruling as King

Think about all of the things that were done to Jesus before and as he died. People betrayed him, rejected him, mocked him, spat on him, flogged him, and killed him. These things show what those people thought of Jesus. He was worthless to them. They attached no value to his life.

But the resurrection shows that God has reversed that verdict. He places ultimate worth on his Son. God did not leave Jesus where men had laid him. No, the startling news came: "He is risen!" God thinks differently about his Son. People rejected him – God has lifted him up. This was always the plan.

It was because of this that the man from heaven said in verse 7:

"But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Jesus always spoke about the certainty of his resurrection when he spoke about his death. What a picture this is of the sovereign power of Jesus the King. Who else could be in such control of every aspect of his death and resurrection?

It's almost as though Jesus had been saying to his followers: "We're going to have a really tough time, and you will see me die – but I am rising on Sunday, and we will all meet up in Galilee on Monday as planned."

Anyone could say these words, but only a King of staggering power could make them happen!

So the resurrection of Jesus reverses the world's verdict on Jesus. It shows that he is God's exalted Son and King – who was always in sovereign control, even as he was being rejected by the Jews, abandoned by the disciples, brutalised by the Romans, and forsaken by God on the cross as He paid for my sin.

The women had come to pay their last loving tribute to a dead body; to anoint a corpse. They thought that everything had finished in this tragedy as Christ was murdered and their hopes were shattered.

But now those three words "He has risen" change everything.

4. Go and tell

We have seen how uncompromisingly honest Mark is in his record of what happened that day. Mark 16:8 tells us that, at least initially, the women were so completely overwhelmed that they ran for their lives and said nothing.

Nevertheless, you can see that this news of the resurrection needs to be told. God's messenger had said:

"But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" (Mark 16:7)

In other words, the news is: Jesus is alive, and you are going to meet him, just as he said.

If possible, show this statement as a visual aid:

The news is: Jesus is alive, and you are going to meet him, just as he said.

How could anyone say that the Christian message is irrelevant to them? We are all in that queue – we will all have to face death. Yet here is Jesus – who walked out of the grave to lead those who trust him out of the grave too.

The news of the resurrection is utterly wonderful. It means death didn't destroy Jesus; he suffered it, and then destroyed it by rising. This news is amazing and wonderful.

But this is the point where it gets uncomfortable for all of us. I am uncomfortable, because I have to tell you something, and I am concerned that you do not mishear me. And you will be uncomfortable as you listen, because the resurrection of Jesus has another implication.

So let me say it again, and then explain it. This news of the resurrection must be told. The news is: Jesus is alive, and **you are** going to meet Him, just as He said.

Do you see the inescapable implication of the resurrection for everyone? It is not just the disciples who will see Jesus again – we all will.

In Acts 17, when the apostle Paul was speaking in Athens, he said that God "has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

The resurrection of Jesus brings hope in the face of death. But it also promises that Jesus Christ has the power and the right to raise us and judge us. There will be an end point in history, where Jesus returns to this world – which is still in rebellion against him – and ends that rebellion. There must come a day when God shows that the despised Jesus is his beloved, exalted Son, King and Judge.

Now that is a terrifying prospect if you, like me, know how badly you have treated the Lord Jesus.

■ Hold up the DVD from last week's illustration, and remind the group that this holds a record of everything we have done, said and thought.

But let me close by showing you from Mark 16 how you can be ready and unashamed to meet Jesus when he returns.

Mark 16:7 says: "But go, tell his disciples **and Peter**, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

■ Hold up the DVD again.

What was on Peter's DVD? The disciples had all fled from Jesus at the critical time. But Peter had denied even knowing him. This is the man who argued in Mark 8 that Jesus should not go to the cross. But notice how, after Peter's failure, the risen Jesus sends a particular message to Peter.

Peter would have thought his failure was final. But the risen Lord Jesus has died for sins, and says that Peter is welcome.

Even though, like Peter, we have denied God and made a mess of our relationship with him, Jesus paid for that sin on the cross. And now he lives – as the resurrection proves – to forgive all those who will trust him.

The resurrection proves that God has accepted the death of Jesus in my place, in full and final payment for my personal rebellion against him. Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many, just as he said he would. He died to pay for our sin, and rose again to prove that sin was truly paid for. The ransom price has been paid.

So this is the message that everyone needs to hear: Jesus is alive, and you are going to meet him, just as he said.

But you can meet him before then, by faith. And as you thank him for dying for you, ask his forgiveness for your sin, and put your life in his hands, you can go through life with no fear of death or judgment because Jesus faced it for you.

Because of the resurrection, we can trust Jesus with our own death. And because he is alive, you can speak to him yourself right now.

- Either give a quick personal testimony about "meeting Jesus by faith" and "speaking to him yourself" and how real and transforming that is.
 - Or suggest that people can ask you or one of the other leaders about this at the end of the session if they want to find out more.

Let me end by saying again that this is the message that everyone needs to hear: Jesus is alive, and **you are** going to meet him, just as he said.

6: GRACE

How can God accept us?



- Deliver Talk 6 using the notes below. These notes can also be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 43 of the participants' Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as they listen to the talk.
- This talk uses 14 large cards (or sheets of paper) as visual aids. Leave one card blank. Write the following on the remaining cards (or download a set from www.ceministries.org):

Set A:	Set B:
I'm a good person	I'm a spiritual person
I don't steal	I try to treat others as I like to be treated myself
I don't lie	I've been baptised
I give to charity	I go to church
I give blood	I go to communion
I'm not a murderer	I read the Bible
I'm not a rapist	

Aim

- To show that we can never do enough to inherit eternal life
- To explain God grace his undeserved gift to us
- To look at the implications of this for how group members respond to God

Introduction

At the beginning of *Christianity Explored* we asked you this:

"If you could ask God one question, and you knew it would be answered, what would it be?"

Now I'd like you to think about another question. This time it's something that God might ask you:

"If God were to say to you: 'Why should I give you eternal life?', what would you say?"

Take a few moments to think quietly about your answer.

(Optional) You might like to ask group members to write their answers down, assuring them that they won't be asked to read them out. If you do this, give the group an opportunity to think about the question again at the beginning of the "Discuss" section after this talk, since they may want to change their answers.

I wonder what your answer was. Some answers people may give are as follows:

■ Hold up the cards from Set A one at a time. This works well if you hold up the whole set, and then move each card in turn from the front to the back.

Or maybe yours is a more religious answer:

Hold up the cards from Set B one at a time. Then put the cards down in a pile to use again later.

The question of eternal life is one that many people think about at some point in their lives. I'd guess that you probably wouldn't still be doing this course if you weren't interested in knowing the answer.

In Mark 10 we discover some crucial things about eternal life. And we also find it described in a number of different ways: "having treasure in heaven", "entering the kingdom of God", "being saved". All of these mean being accepted by God as a member of his kingdom now, and looking forward to enjoying a relationship with him for ever.

In Mark 10 we meet a man who really wanted to know how to have eternal life. Mark tells us that this man had "great wealth". Two other Bible writers help us to build a picture of him: Matthew tells us that he is young, and Luke adds the detail that he is a "ruler" of some kind.

So this man seems to have everything going for him. He's young; despite his youth he's already an important man; and he's very wealthy. But he has a crucial question to ask Jesus – about something he knows he doesn't have – eternal life.

Read Mark 10:17

Notice two things this young man says to Jesus: he calls Jesus "Good teacher" and he asks what he has to "do" to inherit eternal life. Jesus picks up on both of these as he helps this man to understand some very important things.

The problem with "being good"

Firstly, Jesus focuses on the title "Good teacher".

Read Mark 10:18

Maybe the man was just being polite. He knew Jesus had built a reputation as someone who taught with authority, and whose teaching was completely different from that of the religious leaders. And he clearly respected Jesus as a man of God – so much so that he fell on his knees before Jesus. So maybe "Good teacher" was his way of showing respect for Jesus.

But Jesus chose to use the title to teach this man – and also the disciples, who were listening in. "No-one is good – except God alone," he said. Notice what Jesus is **not** saying. He's not denying his deity – he's not saying that he isn't God's Son. Jesus is indeed **good**. But he is also using this title to challenge how most people see themselves.

It's easy to compare ourselves to someone who is dishonest, or violent, or a sex offender, and to decide that compared to them we're basically good. We use the word "good" when we mean "not as bad as".

■ Give an illustration of someone currently in the news for fraud, sex offences, murder etc. Explain that one reason the media have focused so strongly on this person is because we're shocked at their level of wrongdoing. Compared to them, most of us would say that we live good lives.

But Jesus shows that we're comparing ourselves to the wrong person. The question isn't whether we're better than _____ (the person you've just spoken about). The issue is how we match up to God himself. He is genuinely and completely good. He is perfectly just, perfectly wise, perfectly pure and perfectly loving. As Jesus puts it: "No-one is good – except God alone."

Now it seems likely that this man did consider himself to be good. Let's see how Jesus draws that out of him.

■ Read Mark 10:19-20

The laws Jesus gives here come from the ten commandments. These were ten laws that God gave to Moses to show the Israelites how to live as God's people. The commands Jesus quotes are all about how we relate to those around us. There were also commands about how to relate to God, which Jesus will come to later.

The rich young man was very confident about his ability to keep God's commands. He declared: "All these I have kept since I was a boy".

■ Hold up the full set of cards (Sets A and B together) again.

His answer would have been some of the things we've seen on these cards. In other words, he'd treated people well. He had never murdered anyone, or committed adultery. He wasn't a thief, a cheat or a liar. He was a good son to his mum and dad. He was supremely confident that he'd lived a good life, keeping God's laws.

If God were to say to this man: "Why should I give you eternal life?", that's the answer the man would give.

Why good is never enough

The young man's law-keeping gives us a clue to the second thing he asked Jesus:

"Good teacher ... what must I **do** to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17)

He already kept the laws Jesus had listed – or believed that he did. But surely there was something else he could do to inherit eternal life. In other words, he wanted to know how he could *earn* a place in God's kingdom, how he could be good enough for God to accept him. He wanted to be able to work for it, and to receive it as a well-deserved reward.

■ Give an example of something you have worked for and achieved: eg: passing a teaching certificate to work in schools; taking a computer qualification to earn a promotion; passing your driving test, or learning guitar to play in a band. We're used to earning our success – and it seems that this young man wanted to do the same thing.

This rich young man seemed to genuinely believe that he was fully keeping all of God's laws. And that maybe there was something else he could do to earn eternal life. He wanted to be told what to do – so Jesus answered him.

™ Read Mark 10:21-22

This man has asked Jesus what to do. But when Jesus tells him, he doesn't respond with joy or a desire to do it as quickly as possible. Instead, his face falls, he turns away, and goes home sad. Why? Because "he had great wealth".

He was rich, and being asked to give away all his money was too much for him. What this actually shows is that he isn't keeping all of God's laws at all. The first commandments are about how we relate to God. They include this:

"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20:3-5).

In other words, no one is greater than God. And you mustn't treat anyone or anything as more important than him. If this rich young ruler really thought that loving and serving God, and enjoying eternal life, was more important than the things he had on earth, he would have gladly given away his money, and given up his importance, to follow Jesus. The point is that if anyone is going to earn eternal life, they would have to live perfectly, in relation to others, and in relation to God.

The man's reaction shows that he isn't keeping all of God's laws at all – he is treating his money as an idol, as more important than the God who made him. There is a greater treasure he'd rather have than being with Jesus and having treasure in heaven. His money is more important to him than God.

So we see that this man was wrong in believing that he was fully keeping God's laws. But he was also wrong in thinking that he could do something to earn eternal life. We can never do enough to inherit eternal life. Look at what Jesus says next:

■ Read Mark 10:23-27

At this time people believed that wealth and success were proof that God was pleased with you. So the disciples were stunned by what Jesus said. If even rich men found it hard to enter the kingdom of God, how could anyone else possibly do it?

So they ask their own question. And it's the right question to ask. Not "what can I do to be saved" but "who then can be saved?". And Jesus replies: "With man this is impossible".

The problem with our hearts

Do you remember in session 3 that we learned that we all have a heart problem.

"For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mark 7:21-23).

Sin comes from within, from our hearts – and we all sin. We don't love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We have a heart problem, and nothing we do can cure it. This is why Jesus came. He came "to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Jesus came to rescue us from our sin, by taking the punishment we deserve.

And we know that the ransom price was paid and accepted because of the resurrection. Jesus died to pay for sin, and rose from death to prove that sin was truly paid for.

This is why Jesus says: "With man this is impossible". Nothing we do can cure our heart problem – only Jesus can.

Hold up the full set of cards again. Either rip them in half or throw them onto the ground one at a time to show that they are useless.

But what then is the answer to the disciples' question? "Who then can be saved?"

God's amazing gift

The answer to that question comes from another meeting with Jesus. Just before the rich young ruler came to Jesus, some other people were brought to him. They weren't rich, important or even adults: they were little children.

Give an illustration of how young children are seen in your country and culture. For example, in the UK there are more and more television adverts aimed at children and young teenagers. Children have more money of their own to spend, and advertisers are also

aware of their "pester power" to persuade their parents to buy them the latest gadgets, fashions, games etc. You could quote or show a recent advert of this kind.

In first-century Israel children were seen very differently. They were greatly loved by their parents, but also seen as a burden on the family resources until they were old enough to work. Children had little or no status. Keep that in mind as we read again the passage we looked at earlier in our group.

™ Read Mark 10:13-16

These children had nothing to offer Jesus. They hadn't done anything to deserve his love and acceptance. Perhaps that's why the disciples didn't want Jesus to be bothered by them. But listen to what Jesus says:

"...the kingdom of God belongs to such as these ... anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it"

(Mark 10:14-15).

These children did nothing to earn acceptance by Jesus.

Hold up a blank card.

All they did was come to him. And Jesus took them in his arms. He put his hands on them, and he blessed them.

How to receive God's gift

Here is the answer to the rich man's question about inheriting eternal life. And to the disciples' question about being saved. The answer is that only those who receive the kingdom of God *like a child* will enter it.

■ Give a personal illustration of giving someone a gift, a child if possible. Include how they responded. For example, giving a present to your own child, or god-child, or a niece or nephew, and describing their excitement when opening it. Explain how shocked you would have been if the child had asked how much they had to pay for the present. They didn't need to pay anything – it was a gift.

We can't do anything to earn eternal life. We can't work our way into the kingdom of God. Nothing we do can cure our heart problem. We can't do anything ourselves in order to be saved. But we can receive it as a free gift – paid for by the death of Jesus.

Our entry point to God's kingdom is not the good things we've done for God. Rather, it's the amazing thing Christ has done for us. It's not about getting what we think we have earned, but rather it is about us receiving from God the opposite of what we deserve. The Bible calls this "grace" – God's undeserved gift to us. And like a child, all we can do is receive it.

Conclusion

This is the good news that Mark wrote about at the very beginning of his book: the good news about Jesus Christ.

Jesus shows us that we are all sinful. We all have a heart problem that we can't cure. He tells us that there is nothing we can do to be saved. But he also showed how much he loves us by willingly dying to take the punishment we deserve, to give his life as a ransom for many. And as a result, when we trust in what Jesus has done, we can be accepted by God and be given eternal life – if we will just receive it as a free, undeserved gift.

That's grace – that we are more sinful than we ever imagined, but more loved than we ever dreamed.

And the impact of grace on our lives *now* is enormous. Living by grace means I don't need to go through life pretending to be what I'm not or wearing masks to disguise who I am. When I understand God's grace, I have nothing to prove and no masks to wear any more. God knows exactly what I'm like. I can't hide it from him. And yet, amazingly, in Christ he accepts and loves me. That is so liberating. It is such good news!

That's grace.

DAY AWAY 1: THE SOWER Christianity Listen carefully E-PLORED

Listen carefully



- Deliver Day Away Talk 1 using the notes below. These notes can be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 50 of the participants' Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as they listen to the talk.

Aim

- To show that the good news of Jesus will only change your life if you hear it properly.
- To challenge group members to consider what kind of soil they are.

Introduction

The whole Christianity Explored course is built around the three big guestions Mark is fascinated by: Who is Jesus? Why did he come? What is involved in following him?. In the first two sessions we explored **who Jesus** is. Then in Sessions 3-5 we saw why Jesus came. The guestion from Session 6 on is: How should we respond? What does Jesus ask of us?

In order to answer that question we need to get something very basic in place:

Have we heard what Jesus says? Has his word taken root in our lives?

That is the issue in Mark chapter 4. Jesus tells a story that pictures his extraordinary, life-changing words as tiny, vulnerable seeds. What Jesus is saying is clear. Just as seeds will only grow if you plant them properly, so the good news about him will only change your life... if you hear it properly.

Read Mark 4:3-9

I don't know if you realized it, but you had a walk-on part in that story. Everyone who has ever heard the good news – the gospel message about Jesus – appears in it. It's as if Jesus is holding up a mirror so that we can see ourselves reflected back.

The main focus of the parable is not on the sower, or the seed. Jesus focuses on the soil. It is all about where the seed lands – the way that people respond to hearing the gospel message, and how Satan interferes with God's word to prevent it from making its impact.

Jesus likens us to four different types of soil the seed falls on – the hard soil on the path, the shallow soil on the rock, the soil in which thorns grow, and lastly good soil. Each of us receives the good news in a different way. And Jesus wants us to ask ourselves the question: How am I responding to the gospel? What kind of soil am I?

Hard ground

The first type of soil is in verse 4: the path, where the soil is hard. The fields in ancient Israel were long, narrow strips divided by little paths. Over the years, the constant traffic of footsteps, hooves and wheels turned these paths as hard as concrete. So if seeds fell here, they'd never go deep into the soil – they'd just bounce off and remain on the surface.

When the seed falls on this hard ground, the birds immediately come and eat it up.

Jesus explains in verse 15 that some people, as they hear the good news about Jesus, are just like that hardened path:

"As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them" (Mark 4:15).

You may never have taken the person of Satan, the devil, seriously before. You may have thought he was a mythical figure from fairy tales. But the Bible says he is utterly real. All the way through Mark's Gospel we see Jesus encountering him and defeating his power. And here Jesus warns us to take Satan seriously, and to be aware of the subtlety of his work. Satan's aim is always to stop the gospel message from being properly heard, and to take it from us – immediately if possible.

The person who is like this first type of soil, the path, may be a hardened sceptic who immediately rejects anything that challenges their own ideas.

Or it may simply be someone who is easily distracted. Satan loves to distract us with thoughts about work, family, finance or hobbies. If he can only distract you so that the word of God goes in one ear and out the other, he will have successfully taken away God's message and blocked its impact on you.

Add a personal illustration about someone rejecting or being distracted from the gospel message. For example:

I took a friend along to a meeting to hear a well-known speaker explain the gospel. At the end of the evening when I asked him for his thoughts on what was said, he explained that he couldn't take anyone seriously who had an accent like that speaker! He had switched off immediately.

There is a large, yellow sign chained to a lamppost just off Oxford Circus in central London. In black writing it bears this message...

"Thieves operate in this area. You are not obliged to be their victim. Guard your valuables!"

As we begin our day together, I want to issue the same warning. There is a thief among us who wants to take from you – not your wallet, purse or car keys – but the word of God. There is a risk of us going home at the end of the day with an empty head and heart, because everything of lasting significance has been stolen from us. Satan is like a thief who wants to take the gospel message from you.

Do you recognize the possibility that so far the truth of the gospel message, the power of God's word, has fallen on hard ground in your life? If you can't really remember much from the course, and if little of what we have seen about Jesus has made an impact on you, then you have been robbed of the truth. Please talk to me, or your group leader, if you are concerned about this.

But the thief is not limited to an immediate snatch. Sometimes he works more gradually – slowly, secretly, taking the seed of God's word from our lives.

Shallow ground

In Israel, some of the land has a thin layer of soil lying on the top of limestone bedrock. If seed falls there, the sun heats the soil quickly because it's so shallow, and the seed responds at once. The immediate growth is spectacular.

But the bedrock only a few inches below means there's nothing for the roots to go down into, and no way for the plant to get moisture. So it quickly dies.

That is what Jesus had in mind in verse 5. And he explains it in verses 16-17:

™ Read Mark 4:16-17

This person responds quickly and joyfully to the gospel message. But then trouble or persecution come as a result – at which point they fall away, they give up on following Jesus.

It is amazing to see how candid Jesus is. He fully expects and warns us that trouble and persecution will come. Jesus himself was rejected, and his followers will be too. That can be very painful.

This trouble is a bit like the side-effects you get with some medications. Many life-saving treatments bring with them some pretty awful side-effects.

Give a personal illustration of someone (yourself?) experiencing distressing side-effects from life-saving treatment such as chemotherapy.

There are times when the patient undergoing treatment may wonder if the cure is worse than the condition. But to give up on the life-saving treatment because of the temporary side-effects would be to give up on life.

Like a doctor, Jesus explains the unpleasant temporary side-effects of following him. He warns us that if we have not understood and expected this hostile reaction from people, we may decide that the trouble attracted by the Christian life is not worth it. We may give up on Jesus rather than put up with the cost of following him.

That is why we are careful during *Christianity Explored* to explain what it means to follow Jesus; that there will be tough times for us. The Christian life is like climbing up the down escalator. We have to go against the flow. There will be many obstacles and much opposition.

Ask a leader to give a three-minute testimony at this point about the tough time they faced after becoming a Christian.

But we won't be left to cope with this on our own. Back in Mark chapter 1 we read that Jesus "will baptise you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). The Holy Spirit isn't a force, like electricity. He is a person. He is God's Spirit, who comes to live in everyone who follows Jesus. He gives those who trust in Jesus the power to get through the tough times and the roots to stabilize us

Thorny ground

I have never known a gardener choose to grow thorns and weeds. But according to Jesus that's what people in this third category effectively do in their lives

■ Read Mark 4:18-19

"The worries of this life" are not so much negative things we are worried about, but the things which distract and preoccupy us so much that they grow to define us.

Desire for security, comfort, approval or power, maybe money, maybe the desire for a potential spouse who doesn't share their view of Jesus – these desires, and the worries that come with them, become stronger than the desire for Jesus

Jesus also mentions the "deceitfulness of wealth". Wealth is deceitful when it promises complete happiness and guarantees a meaningful life. We become deceived when we make becoming wealthy – or at least wealthier than we are at the moment – the priority of our lives.

We may get that niggling feeling that if we stick with the gospel, and build our lives on it, we will have to give up something much better.

It's like the story of the young man who said: "Darling, I want you to know that I love you more than anything else in the world. Will you marry me? I know I'm not rich like John Brown, I don't have a big house or a beautiful car, but I do love you with all my heart."

And the young woman replies: "I love you with all my heart too – but tell me more about John Brown."

The "desire for other things" may cause us to believe that we would be much happier if we don't get too serious about Jesus.

The desire for other things competes with our involvement with Jesus. When we are like thorny ground, we don't see that the security, comfort, approval and power that come from knowing Christ infinitely outweigh any treasure the world has to offer.

Good ground

The seed of God's word must be great and powerful if Satan has set up all these strategies against it. In the final verse of the parable Jesus shows us the astonishing effectiveness and power of the gospel message to radically change lives. In verse 20 Jesus says:

"Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown" (Mark 4:20).

When Jesus talks about the fourth kind of soil in this parable, he's talking about someone who not only hears the good news about Jesus Christ, but sees it for what it is and makes it their treasure. When Jesus himself becomes more valuable to you than anything else in the world, that's when you know you've really heard him.

And from tiny beginnings, as the seed of God's word begins to grow in our lives, changes are made that last for eternity.

In a cemetery in Italy there is a thick marble slab over the top of one of the graves. But, somehow, years earlier, an acorn had fallen through a small crack into the grave. And over the years the acorn had grown until eventually it had smashed through the surface of the hard marble and cracked the enormous slab into two pieces. As the tree grew up, it just pushed the marble aside as if it wasn't there.

There's a lot of power packed into that seed. All it needed was the right kind of soil. The gospel message, though it may seem small and weak, has the power to break through any human heart – if only we will listen and act on what we hear.

There may be areas of your heart you think are impenetrable, unreachable and unchangeable. There may be self-image problems, battles with addiction or alienation or abuse. You may feel trapped by all kinds of darkness inside you, things you feel you can't even admit. Let this parable give you hope. As you can see, there's a lot of power packed into that seed.

Ask a leader (maybe the same one) to give a three-minute testimony at this point about the power and impact of God's word in their lives.

And let this parable make you treasure the word of God, the seed that is sown. The gospel message tells us that Jesus Christ has fully paid the price for sin on the cross, so the way is now open for us to know God and enjoy him forever, if only we will hear, accept and trust him.

But that is not a passive thing. It's not something that will just happen regardless of whether or not we choose to act on what we hear. The thief wants the seed of God's word to come to nothing in your life. Beware of the thief. Know his tactics. Recognize his activity. "Thieves operate in this area. You are not obliged to be their victim. Guard your valuables!"

And as you hear God's word today, will you accept it, welcome it, treasure it?

DAY AWAY 2: JAMES & JOHN Christianity Ach humbly EXPLORED Ask humbly



- Deliver Day Away Talk 2 using the notes below. These notes can be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 52 of the participants' Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as they listen to the talk.

Aim

- To show the contrast between what James and John asked Jesus to do for them, and what Bartimaeus asked for.
- To show that following Jesus is about service, not status and that we need to ask Jesus for mercy, not a reward.
- To challenge group members to consider what they want Jesus to do for them.

Introduction

In day-to-day life there are many situations where people ask us what we want them to do for us. In a shop we get asked: "Can I help you?" A care assistant visiting someone at home may ask: "What do you want me to do today?" If we visit the doctor, he or she may say: "What can I help you with?" At a burger bar it might just be: "Whaddya want?"

Change the above examples as needed to suit your own situation.

These people are all asking the same question: "What do you want me to do for you?"

But what if God asked you that question? If God said: "What do you want me to do for you?", what would you ask for? What would be your priority? The thing you most wanted?

In Mark chapter 10 Jesus asks that question twice: "What do you want me to do for you?" The answers he receives will help us to think about our own reply.

The brothers...

James and John were brothers who were two of Jesus' closest disciples. They had spent three years with Jesus and knew him well. They had heard his amazing teaching; seen his power and authority over sickness, nature and even death; and watched him drive out evil spirits.

And they were there when Peter finally saw that Jesus was the Christ, God's only chosen King. They'd been given a unique opportunity to recognize Jesus' identity and understand his mission.

James and John had already heard Jesus say that he was going to suffer and die. In Mark 10 he explains that to them again.

■ Read Mark 10:33-34

This is the third time that Jesus told his disciples what was going to happen. He knew that he was going to be betrayed, that he would suffer and die, and then rise again. He was on his way to Jerusalem, where the religious leaders and the Gentile Roman authorities would work together to have him killed.

This was why Jesus had come: "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). He is telling his disciples what he is going to do for them, and what it will cost him – he will be mocked, spat upon, flogged and killed.

So how do James and John respond to this news? The next verse tells us.

Read Mark 10:35

Jesus has just told James and John what he is going to do for them – and their response is to think about themselves. They want Jesus to do something just for them. And they even want him to agree before he knows what it is - "we want you to do for us whatever we ask," they say.

...who asked for the wrong thing

So what did they want Jesus to do?

Read Mark 10:36-37

James and John weren't asking for a small favour. They had grasped that Jesus was going to be exalted in some way, so they wanted the two most important positions in his kingdom – to sit on his right and left in places of power and prestige.

This was shockingly inappropriate. Their request is like being at a wedding and asking to be in all the photos, standing between the bride and groom!

Even though Jesus had explained his mission to them – that he was going to suffer and die – they are seeing his kingship in terms of power. And they want a share of it for themselves. A few days earlier the disciples had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. If James and John were given the two most important positions beside Jesus, it would settle that dispute once and for all.

They knew Jesus well – they knew what he said he had come to do – but they asked for the wrong thing.

As he had done so often before, Jesus used their question as an opportunity to teach them – about themselves, and also about himself and his mission. He started with a question of his own:

Read Mark 10:38-39a

What does Jesus mean by "drink the cup I drink"? He means suffering God's anger for our sin as he dies as a ransom for many. Can James and John do what Jesus is about to do? Can they die to save sinners? Can they bring down the barrier separating sinful human beings from their Creator? Can they be raised to life again to prove that death and sin have been conquered?

"We can", they say. But clearly they cannot. They can't save others – they need to be saved from their own sinful rebellion against God. As Jesus said, they don't know what they're asking.

James and John want glory, but have no clue about the path of suffering that will lead Jesus to glory. It is a path that he is clearly willing to take. He knows it is only through his death and resurrection that they can be rescued from the results of their own sin, and enjoy a right relationship with Jesus for ever.

James and John want power and prestige, but Jesus offers something far more valuable – himself. As the brothers think about what they can gain for themselves, Jesus is thinking of what it will cost him as he serves and gives his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus then went on to show all the disciples that following him is about service, not status.

™ Read Mark 10:41-44

It's not surprising that the other ten disciples were "indignant" with James and John. But their reaction shows that they, too, were concerned about status. They clearly didn't want James and John to be more important than the rest of them. But this isn't how Jesus wants them to think. He wants them to focus on what they can give, not what they can get.

Jesus reminds them of how most people operate:

"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them"

(Mark 10:41).

That sounds familiar, doesn't it? We've probably all experienced people in authority who use it as an opportunity to lord it over other people.

Give a personal illustration here, maybe from a local situation or recent news item, of someone using their position of authority for personal gain or prestige.

We're very used to people wanting to be seen as the greatest or pushing to get what they want, using other people as rungs on the ladder to be climbed on, or even just jumping to the front of a queue. It is easy to be impressed by that kind of eagerness to get ahead.

But Jesus uses this as a contrast to how his followers should be. Their focus shouldn't be status, but service.

In other words, they shouldn't model themselves on what the rest of the world does. Their model is Jesus himself.

Read Mark 10:45

Jesus is the supreme example of what he is calling his disciples to do. Jesus does have power and authority. He is the Son of God. But he hasn't come to be served, although that would be his right. Instead, he has come to be a servant – to serve others by dying for them, giving his life "as a ransom for many". This is why you will sometimes hear Christians call Jesus the "servant King".

Actually that hunger for personal greatness and glory that sets us above our peers can never be satisfied. A glance at the lives of those who have pursued it shows that it is an impossible dream. They are never secure, and continue wanting more power, more prestige, more status. That's the way of the world – no matter how much we get we're never satisfied. We just want more.

Include an example here of a celebrity who has achieved success, fame and money – but found that it doesn't satisfy.

And there's a reason for that. We can only be fully satisfied by loving and serving the one who made us. It's the way he made us to be. We look for contentment, satisfaction and fulfilment in the wrong places. We look to wealth, or success, or family, or security, or sex, or power to fulfil our lives.

We make these things more important than God. The Bible calls this idolatry: turning something God has created into a substitute for God.

So we've seen what happened when Jesus asked James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" They knew him well – but asked for the wrong thing. And Jesus then used this as an opportunity to teach them what it really means to follow him: that he came to serve, and that true greatness is not found in status but in service.

Later on, Jesus asks someone else the same question: "What do you want me to do for you?" But this man was very different from James and John.

The blind man...

Jesus and his disciples are still on their way to Jerusalem. When they reach Jericho, a large crowd joins them. And as they leave the city, they walk past a blind man who is sitting by the side of the road, begging. We don't know if this man had met Jesus before – probably not – but he knew who Jesus was.

™ Read Mark 10:46-47

Bartimaeus couldn't see – and yet he was seeing clearly. He could see who Jesus was. This is the only time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus is called "Son of David". Bartimaeus was right that Jesus belonged to the family line of King David, the greatest king the Israelites ever had. But "Son of David" means more than that.

God had made a promise to David that someone from his family would be king for ever. This would be God's only chosen King, the Christ or Messiah. When this blind man calls Jesus "Son of David", he is seeing that Jesus is God's promised King.

Jesus called Bartimaeus to him, and asked him the same question he had asked James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" This time the answer was very different.

...who asked for the right thing

Read Mark 10:48-51

Bartimaeus was a beggar. The only thing of value he had was his cloak. But when Jesus called him, he threw his cloak aside and rushed to Jesus. He had already asked Jesus for mercy. Now he very simply asks for what he needs – he wants to see.

This man knew that he had nothing to offer Jesus. He knew that he was helpless and hopeless. All he could do was come to God's King and beg for mercy. That means he knew he had no claim to it – it was undeserved and unmerited. How unlike James and John he was.

James and John had looked for glory. But Bartimaeus asked for mercy – and he received it.

Read Mark 10:52

Jesus gave Bartimaeus what he asked for. He could already see who Jesus was. Now he could see Jesus with his own eyes. He had received the mercy he asked for – and his response was to follow Jesus.

Think of all the things that Bartimaeus could have done for the first time in his life, now that he had his sight. But of all the people he could now see, and all the possibilities life now held for him, he chooses to follow Jesus along the road. It's clear that for Bartimaeus Jesus was the ultimate treasure.

If you see who Jesus is, and experience his grace and mercy, following him will not be a boring, self-sacrificial chore. It will be the source of your greatest and lasting joy.

We're not told how the disciples reacted to this miracle. But James and John must have recognized the question Jesus asked Bartimaeus, the very same one he had asked them: "What do you want me to do for you?" And they would have seen the very different result.

They had come looking for status – and instead were shown the need to be servants. Bartimaeus came asking only for mercy – and received it.

It's a question for us to think about too. If Jesus asked you, "What do you want me to do for you?", what would you ask for?

DAY AWAY 3: HEROD

Choose wisely



- Deliver Day Away Talk 3 using the notes below. These notes can be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 54 of the participants'
 Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as
 they listen to the talk.

Aim

- To explain that ignoring Jesus' call to repent and believe will eventually earn us the rejection of Jesus.
- To show from Herod's example that "we are the choices we have made".
- To challenge group members not to put off the choice to follow Jesus.

Introduction

Have you ever looked back on one of those "fork in the road" moments in life, and wished you had taken the other path, the alternative course of action? It may have been something small, like buying a used car that broke down all the time – or a much larger decision, such as moving to another country for a job, then losing your job a month later.

If possible, include a personal example here of a choice you, or someone you know, made and then regretted.

As the old saying goes: "We are the choices we have made." In Mark chapter 6 we are told the harrowing story of a man who, it seems, would have given almost anything to undo the terrible situation his choices had got him into. He was a king – but he was played like a pawn.

№ Read Mark 6:17-29

1. Herod's happiness

If we had lived in first-century Israel, at the same time as Herod, we would have said that Herod had it made. He was the king. He lived in a palace. And his birthday guest list read like a "who's who" of the great and the powerful (verse 21b).

Everything that could have brought him happiness was at his disposal, and what was not his he took – even his brother's wife, Herodias. Herod denied himself nothing in pursuit of his happiness. If he wanted Herodias, he got her

So there he was – guest of honour at his own birthday, with a dancing girl, the daughter of Herodias, to entertain him.

Read Mark 6:22a

It wasn't her skill as a ballerina that pleased the men. No, this was a seductive dance, and as Herod and his guests leered over the girl, he mixed his pleasure with a display of power.

Read Mark 6:22b-23

Herod is making it clear that he has the power to give the girl anything she wants. The emphasis is on the "ask me". He is showing his guests how red-blooded he is; how much he appreciates this entertainment, and how much he can afford to give away in his pursuit of happiness.

But this isn't just any dancer – she is the daughter of Herodias. And when the girl asks her mum what she should request from Herod, Herodias doesn't need to think twice. She is ready with her answer.

Read Mark 6:24

Meanwhile, back in the banqueting room, and before the girl returns with her grisly request, King Herod is enjoying the revelry, and has forgotten about the trouble he is having...

2. Herod's problems

Happiness came at a price for Herod. Presumably he and his brother Philip weren't that close these days. And even the prized Herodias was causing Herod trouble.

■ Read Mark 6:17-20a

This is the same John we read about in Mark chapter 1, who was telling people they needed to repent, and preparing them for the coming of Jesus. There was no one to whom John would not speak - even an adulterous king.

Herodias did not like the influence that John was having on Herod. She thought John was so inflexible in his views, so intolerant, so judgemental that she wanted him dead. And she made no secret of her willingness to assist in that process.

The nightmare for Herod was that she might succeed. That is why he kept them as far apart as possible. Herod was king – but actually in this central area of his life he was out of control.

He couldn't control himself, and he couldn't control his wife. All he could do was keep John out of her way, in prison. He didn't want to tell John to get out of town completely because he enjoyed listening to him.

So there was Herod being pulled apart by these two competing influences in his life. They couldn't happily exist together. Herodias and John knew that. But Herod desperately tried to find a way to have both.

He wanted to hear the word of God from John, but he also wanted to disobey the word of God with Herodias. He was being pulled apart by this conflict.

3. Herod liked to listen

In one sense Herod didn't like what John had to say any more than Herodias did. But while everyone else would say anything to ingratiate themselves with Herod, John told him the absolute truth.

Read Mark 6:18

During *Christianity Explored*, you will have heard some things that are hard to take – about your sin, and God's anger, and the need to repent and believe. There are aspects of the gospel message that are hard to tell people. But we hope you can see that we care enough to tell you the truth. We want to be for you what John was to Herod.

Herod respected John for that, and he knew John was the real thing. This was the fork in the road for Herod. This was the moment he would look back on and perhaps long to return to.

Herod knew that John was a "righteous and holy man" (verse 20). He liked to listen to John. He was quite willing to hear him. But if he knew John was God's man, and that what he was saying was true – why didn't he act on it? Why wouldn't he repent?

4. Herod chose not to act

Why didn't Herod act decisively? What was stopping him? The answer is in the parable of the soils.

■ Read Mark 4:18-19

That explains Herod. He heard God's word from John, but that word was being choked because Herod was worried about all the "good things" he was going to have to give up!

This is exactly the point you may be at in exploring the Christian faith. You may have reached that fork in the road. You may have seen the reality of your sin and where it will take you. You may have been thrilled to hear of the death of Jesus on the cross for sinners, and heard his call to follow him.

And you know you need to act on this – but the life-giving, life-changing seed of God's word is in danger of being stolen right now because you are thinking about what you would need to give up. You know that living with Jesus as Lord will mean changing or giving up parts of your life that you treasure.

In reality no one gives up anything good to follow Jesus. Those who trust him discover that knowing him is more valuable and satisfying than anything else.

But right now you may be admiring your beautiful thorns. If so, let Herod's experience inform yours...

5. Herod's distress

Back in the banqueting hall, Herod was making merry and probably forgot the battle that was raging within him.

His guests must have been longing to hear what the dancer was going to ask the king for – and perhaps they were calculating the loss to Herod's personal fortune if she did ask for half his kingdom.

They didn't have long to wait.

Read Mark 6:25

Let's press the pause button there before this sinks in with Herod, and we'll give Herodias her moment.

There are people in the world who realise how powerful God's word is, and hate it so much that they will give anything to stop it having its impact on others. Herodias was like that.

This was a golden opportunity for Herodias and her daughter to have some financial independence. She could have become a very wealthy woman in seconds. But instead she trades half the kingdom for the perverse joy of silencing God's word in her husband's life.

We must see again the trouble Satan will go to in order to steal God's word. That should make you want to guard it and treasure it and accept it.

Herodias' daughter delivered her lines and revealed her request. It must have been a horrific moment for Herod as he instantly sobered up. He is the most powerful man in the room and in the kingdom. But as everyone laughed and cheered at the girl's obscene request, the king knew deep down he was a pawn.

You have probably heard of people talking about a life-changing moment when their whole life passed before their eyes. Surely this was one such moment for Herod. What a fool he had been. He had fallen into a trap of his own making. He had hesitated and dithered. He had listened to John repeatedly and knew what he said was right. Opportunity had knocked on Herod's door again and again, but he hadn't taken it.

But in the time it had taken the servants to refill his glass, his wife had seized her opportunity when it came.

I wonder if Herod's guests thought their host had got off lightly. He could have lost a fortune – instead John the preacher was going to lose his head. Maybe it was no big deal to them. But Mark tells us that Herod was *greatly distressed*

™ Read Mark 6:26-28

The pressure to keep his foolish oath to friends, family and work colleagues meant that Herod caved in. He hadn't acted on what John said about Herodias. So in the end he felt forced to do something he didn't want to do – and had John killed. He allowed the head that warned him, the tongue that told him to repent and be rescued, to be literally cut off.

Much as he feared John, Herod feared his peers more. We may feel that we are very different from Herod, but this is a pressure we all face as we respond to the gospel message. We can just imagine what friends and colleagues, even family members, will say if they hear we are followers of Christ. Will we deny what we know is right because of what family will think, what business colleagues may do, or what friends will say? Or because we know it will mean changing much-loved habits?

Followers of Jesus will be misunderstood

Amazingly, Jesus himself knew first-hand what it felt like to be misunderstood and ridiculed – even by his own family. We'll leave Herod for a moment to go back to Mark chapter 3, where we read that Jesus' family...

"...went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind'"

(Mark 3:21).

But when his family arrive at the house where he is teaching, Jesus says something remarkable.

■ Read Mark 3:32-35

It may be that you feel afraid of what it will cost you to follow Jesus. I hope Jesus' words here are a great comfort. He reminds us that if you take his words seriously, even if the people closest to you think you're out of your mind, there is a loving family of fellow believers who are there to support and encourage us. Whoever does God's will, whoever follows Jesus, is your brother and sister and mother.

But it goes even further than that. In Mark chapter 10, Jesus makes this amazing promise to all those who put their trust in him:

Read Mark 10:29-30

Followers of Jesus will be blessed

Yes, there will be persecutions of one kind or another. But with them, Jesus promises extraordinary blessings, and extraordinary joy that will far outweigh any suffering we might face. We may feel that we are like Herod in fearing what others will think of us – and Jesus doesn't hide the fact that there will be a cost to following him. But he also promises a family of fellow believers to help and encourage us – and exceptional blessings and joy.

Ask a leader to give a brief testimony about some of the blessings and joy they have experienced as a follower of Jesus.

Herod is mentioned a final time in the Gospels. The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, sends Jesus to meet Herod, and in Luke chapter 23, Luke records what happened. The meeting between Herod and Jesus is ominous, not because of what *is* said, but because of what is *not* said.

™ Read Luke 23:8-9

Herod had thought he could listen to Jesus like he had listened to John, but it was too late.

You see, there does come a time, after repeatedly refusing to repent, when sadly there is no longer an opportunity to do so. It's easy to put it off, to say that we don't have the time, to think that we have too much to lose, or that there'll be a more convenient time in the future.

Of course, it's never easy to repent. But Herod's story reminds us that there is a cost when we refuse to listen to God's word. It also warns us that we may not get an opportunity later. Herod threw many questions at Jesus – but received no answer.

It is a tragedy that John the Baptist lost his life. And yet the tragedy of Herod himself is even greater. We are the choices we have made. When Herod failed to choose wisely, he lost something that was more precious even than life itself: the opportunity to repent.

Ignoring Jesus' call to repent and believe may earn us the approval of other people. But it will eventually earn us... the rejection of Jesus.

Maybe you want more time to think about Jesus and the gospel message. There is a lot to think through. But don't be like Herod. His story warns us of the danger of putting off until later what should be done now.

How Herod must have longed to go back to that fork in the road of his life. Perhaps that's the fork at which you stand today.

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7: COME AND DIE



What does it mean to follow Jesus?

- Deliver Talk 7 using the notes below. These notes can also be downloaded in Word format from **www.ceministries.org** to enable you to adapt them for your group and add your own illustrations.
- There is a bulleted talk outline on page 60 of the participants'
 Handbook. Encourage people to write notes next to this outline as
 they listen to the talk.

Aim

- To recap Mark's teaching about the *identity*, *mission* and *call* of Jesus.
- To show that following Jesus means denying self, and taking up our cross.
- To give group members an opportunity to respond personally to the call of Jesus.

Introduction

Tonight brings us to the end of our short journey through *Christianity Explored*. Thank you for exploring Mark's Gospel with us.

It may be the end of the course, but I hope you will find that it's just the beginning of a life with Jesus. That will depend on how you respond to him.

During the course we've seen what Mark says about Jesus: his *identity* (who he is), his *mission* (why he came) and his *call* (what it means to follow him). The verses we'll look at now will remind us of these three things, and also challenge us to think about where we stand with Jesus personally.

- You may want to use a simple visual aid to help your group follow the talk:
 - Identity: who Jesus is
 - Mission: why Jesus came
 - Call: what it means to follow Jesus
 - So what now?

Identity: who Jesus is

Sometimes we think we can see something clearly, when actually we're only seeing part of the picture.

■ Illustration: Show the picture of the young/old woman (available as a free download from www.ceministries. org/downloads). Ask your group what they can see. Some may only see the young woman, or the old woman. Help them to see both, but don't spend too long on this. It's fine if one or more of the group still can't see both women in the picture.



The disciples had spent three years with Jesus. They had seen his amazing power and authority – as a teacher; over nature, evil spirits and sickness; and over death itself. But even so, they were still asking themselves: "Who is this?" They were eyewitnesses of everything Jesus had said and done – but still blind to his *identity*. They were only seeing part of the picture.

If being with Jesus in person hadn't cured their blindness, what could? To help answer that question, Jesus healed a blind man – but it was a very unusual healing. This was the only time when Jesus didn't cure someone immediately.

This man was healed in stages. He started totally blind; then was able to see a little, but not clearly; then finally his sight was completely restored. This gradual healing reflects the gradual growth of the disciples' understanding. To start with they couldn't see who Jesus was. They didn't know his *identity*. But in chapter 8 they began to see the truth – but not clearly.

Mark 8:27-29 focuses on the *identity* of Jesus. He asks his disciples firstly who people say he is – and then he asks them who *they* think he is:

■ Read Mark 8:27-29

Who does the evidence say about who Jesus is? Who do you think Jesus is? You need to settle this issue for yourself because it could be a matter of life and death for you.

Peter gives an amazing answer. He has come to see that Jesus is not another prophet, or a great teacher or healer, but the Christ, the Messiah – the King God had promised to send, who has now come into the world.

So like the blind man, the disciples can now see who Jesus is. Or can they? They see his *identity* – that Jesus is the Christ, God's only chosen King. But their "sight" is not fully healed. Although they see who Jesus is, they don't yet see why he has come or what it means to follow him. They are only seeing part of the picture.

Mission: why Jesus came

As soon as the *identity* of Jesus is established, look what happens next. The focus turns to the *mission* of Jesus.

▼ Read Mark 8:30-32a

This is why Jesus has come – to suffer, be rejected, die and rise again – to "give his life as a ransom for many". And Jesus confirms this mission repeatedly, as we've seen in previous sessions.

But now we'll read the whole of verse 32:

Read Mark 8:32

Peter takes a lot on himself here as he rebukes the one he has just identified as God's promised King. But he doesn't get far. See verse 33:

Read Mark 8:33

"Having in mind the things of men" may have meant Peter had great hopes that his own importance would grow as a close ally of the King. Or he may have wanted King Jesus to free the Jewish people from the hated Romans who had occupied their country. But neither of these things could happen if Jesus was killed as he predicted.

Peter doesn't want Jesus to suffer and die because that wouldn't serve "the things of men". But Peter isn't the only one who doesn't want Jesus to die in this way. Jesus understands that *Satan* doesn't want him to fulfil "the things of God" either.

In trying to prevent Jesus from going through suffering, rejection and death, Peter was siding with Satan, not with God.

Our temptation will be much the same as Peter's at this point: to think of Jesus' death as something unpleasant, unnecessary – an embarrassment. But are we, like Peter, only seeing part of the picture?

Peter was blind to what the cross was about. Are we blind? Do we see it as a waste or a rescue?

As you think about the cross, are you thankful to Jesus for dying to pay for your sin so that you don't have to pay for it yourself?

Sadly, many people are impressed by Jesus, but the influence of Satan makes them fear the rejection they may suffer through being his follower, and so they walk away.

The influence of Satan is as strong as it is subtle. It results in a world where people will tolerate, endorse and even embrace almost every way of thinking and behaving. But to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, who served me by giving his life on the cross to pay for my sin, so that I can be forgiven of my sin and put right with God for ever – that is perceived in every culture to be the most embarrassing belief there is!

It is amazing that it should be like this. Our Creator gave his life to rescue us from the terrible consequences of our rebellion against him. How could we be ashamed by that?

Yet for many, as for Peter, the *mission* of Jesus is too shameful to be associated with. The fear of friends and family, neighbours and colleagues laughing at our love and gratitude to Jesus has caused many to walk away from him, even though they are personally convinced that he is the real thing.

Satan failed to stop Jesus going to the cross. But he will still try to stop you from following the Christ of the cross. That is why Jesus makes it crystal clear both what it will mean to be his follower, and why we should *want* to be his followers...

Call: what it means to follow Jesus

We pick up where we left off and turn now to the *call* of Jesus in Mark 8:34-38.

■ Read Mark 8:34-38

In verse 38 Jesus warns us what will happen if we are ashamed of him and his words. He explains that human thinking is instinctively unfaithful to God and rebellious against him. That means it's a very tough environment for those who choose to follow Jesus.

Listen again to what he says in verse 34:

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

That is exactly what Peter was struggling with. He had in mind the things of men – following a popular, powerful leader, being one of his top men, seeing him defeat their Roman enemies – that was what Peter wanted.

But Jesus says: "No! I have come to suffer, be rejected and die, and I will rise again so that I can rescue you. And if you are going to follow me, you must deny your right to run your own life – and just as this world rejects me, so it will reject you because you follow me."

It is as though Jesus says to Peter: "Not only is there no escape from the shame of the cross for me, Peter; there is no escape from the shame of the cross for you if you will be my disciple."

Just as the cross meant rejection, humiliation and suffering for Jesus, so it may mean the same for us as his followers.

Denying yourself means putting your desire for comfort and acceptance in this world to one side, so that it doesn't stop you from following Jesus and being saved. We all crave comfort and acceptance, and that's why Jesus says in verse 35:

"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35).

If you want the approval of this world and can't bear to think of being rejected by it, then you will save your life now, but lose it eternally.

But if you see the treasure that is in Jesus and choose to follow him, then even though the world may mock you and reject you now, your life will be saved, eternally. Jesus is the only one who has ever died and then risen to live for ever – so he is the only one who can make that a reality for us. If we want to save our lives, we must entrust them to Jesus.

Jesus emphasizes this point in the next verses:

"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36-37)

The point is that we are not just flesh and blood. Your soul is the essential you – the part that can't be X-rayed or touched – the part of you that lasts eternally, either enjoying God for ever, or separated from his blessing for ever, in hell. Can you see how incomparably precious your soul is?

Your soul will last for ever, but Satan blinds us to the *eternal* realities. Instead, he gets us to think only about the temporary trinkets of this life.

Satan does something like this, but far worse. He's not worried about cream cakes or large stomachs! He wants us to forget about the future – and about our eternal soul – and to focus instead on the here and now.

But as Jesus said:

"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36)

■ In 1000 AD, 186 years after the death of Emperor Charlemagne, officials of the Emperor Otto re-opened Charlemagne's tomb.¹
Before them was an extraordinary sight. In the midst of all the finery buried with him – the gold, the jewels, the priceless treasure – there was the skeleton of Charlemagne himself, still seated on his throne, still wearing his crown.

In his lap, there lay a Bible, and a bony finger rested on Mark chapter 8 verse 36: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"

Jesus has been very clear about the cost of following him. His disciples needed to know what it would mean – and so do we. But we also need to be clear about what Jesus is **not** saying.

Firstly, please don't think that the toughness of being a Christian *earns* us our salvation. That is the opposite of the gospel message. We have seen during the course that Jesus "did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). It is Jesus who earns our salvation, not us.

And secondly, don't think that being a Christian is all about pain with nothing to gain. Jesus is very clear about the cost, but he also tells us that what is given up is nothing compared to what is gained. We read during our day away about the promises Jesus made to his followers:

™ Read Mark 10:29-30

Do you see what Jesus says? Even those who leave the comforts of home, the support of family, the wealth of property and their normal means of support because of Jesus will not go without.

Jesus will see to it that they are comforted, supported and provided for. They will face persecution for standing up for Jesus and the gospel, but they will not be neglected by him. They will enjoy an unimaginable, unfading and unending quality of life, enjoying God for ever.

A true follower of Jesus is someone who clearly sees what it will cost to follow him – but does it joyfully anyway, knowing that Jesus is worth infinitely more.

Show the old/young woman picture again.

For many people, when they look at this picture they only see one woman. They think they are seeing clearly, but in fact they're not seeing the whole picture. The same was true for the blind man. At first he couldn't see at all; then he could see something, but not clearly; and finally his blindness was cured and he could see clearly.

The gradual healing of the blind man reflects the gradual growth of the disciples' understanding. In Mark 8 they saw at last the *identity* of Jesus – that he is the Christ, God's only chosen King. But they didn't yet see the whole picture. So Jesus patiently explained his *mission* to them – that he must suffer, be rejected, die and rise again. And then he *called* them to follow him – by denying themselves and taking up their cross.

So what now?

I wonder whether you are like the disciples. Can you see the *identity* of Jesus? Can you see the necessity of his *mission*? Are you ready to respond to his *call*?

Or are you struggling with "The Week 7 Dilemma"?

■ Note: If you are not using Christianity Explored weekly, use another name such as "The Last Session Dilemma" or "The Mark 8 Dilemma".

"The Week 7 dilemma" is a dilemma that you are likely to find yourself in having met Jesus in Mark. It is this:

¹ Charlemagne – King of the Franks (768–814), King of the Lombards (774–814) and Emperor (800–814); b. 2 April c. 742, d. 28 January 814. His tomb in Aix au Chapelle was opened by Otto III (b. July 980, d. 23 January 1002) in AD 1000.

On the one hand you may find that you are *intrigued or personally impressed* by Jesus, but on the other you worry that you will be *publicly embarrassed* by him.

You may have begun to feel this tension: you are intrigued or impressed by all that you have seen of Jesus – maybe his stature has grown in your eyes and you are amazed to see that he is the opposite to what you always thought.

But as you work out how you are going to respond to him, and if you will become his follower, there is that nagging question of how family, friends and colleagues will react to you trusting in Christ.

That's "The Week 7 Dilemma". If it's a dilemma you're struggling with, I'd love to help you think it through. I'm happy to talk with you after the session, or arrange another time when we could meet. Or you may find it helpful to keep exploring Christianity by coming to one of our regular small groups.

Note: Please adapt the suggestions above to fit your own situation. You may have a follow-on course that would be suitable, or a sermon series to recommend. Any one-to-one meetings with group members are best done by a leader of the same sex as the participant.

As you work out how you will respond to Jesus, let me leave you with a greater question: how will he respond to you?

Read Mark 8:38

On that day, when we see Jesus in unparalleled majesty, it will be unimaginable that any of us could ever have been ashamed of him.

But the greater wonder of that day will be this:

Those who have answered his call and followed Jesus will discover that, in spite of all the sin and rebellion of our lives, *he* will not be ashamed of us.

Conclusion

So - what do you see when you look at Jesus?

- What do you see when you look at Jesus' *identity*? Is he just a good man, or is he the Christ, the Son of God?
- What do you see when you look at Jesus' *mission*? Is his death a tragic waste, or is it a rescue a "ransom for many"?
- And what do you see when you look at Jesus' call? Is it a way of losing your life, or a way of gaining it?

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