

# Bitesize: Mark's Gospel Edition

The University of Central Lancashire CU

## Leaders' Notes

The philosophy behind **Bitesize** is to make it as easy as possible for students to come to a course to investigate Jesus' life and claims. The course assumes that people are starting a long way back. More and more people now have next to no exposure to the Christian faith. That means we must go back to basics, making no assumptions about what people know. In the past, people were often familiar with the basic doctrines of who God was and may have responded to a gospel invitation because it was the final piece in the jigsaw. But that is no longer the case. They don't need the final piece - they need all the pieces. That means filling in much more background than was previously necessary.

### The Format of the Evening

We begin with a leaders' meeting at [time] in [venue]. Most of this time will be spent praying. The rest is for feedback and discussion. This should finish by [time] so that we can get to [venue] to welcome those arriving early.

The main meeting runs from [time] [at the latest] at [venue]. As everyone arrives they welcomed and directed to a group. Each group will include two leaders who must be there first. These groups will remain the same throughout the course. Soon after people arrive, they will be offered tea, coffee and cakes.

The formal part of each evening will kick off with a talk [which will last between 10 and 15 minutes]. Copies of Mark's Gospel will be handed around just before the talk. The course has been written based on the NIV translation of the gospel. After this, a short announcement will be made, and then groups will look together at a section of Mark's gospel for about 45 minutes. The evening will then finish with an opportunity for group members to ask questions, followed by any notices that need to be given.

### Summary

[time]	Leaders' Meeting at [venue]
[time]	Arrive at [venue] to start welcoming group members
[time]	Introduction and talk
[time]	Small group Bible discussions
[time]	Questions and close [host]
[time]	Close – informal conversations may be continued at a pub.

### The Programme

The course runs for five weeks. Each week considers a different subject, and each talk will introduce the topic by referring to a passage or passages in Mark's Gospel. The small groups then look at one passage from Mark on the same theme [this may well have been a passage referred to in the talk], then using it as the starting point for a discussion. The topics are as follows:

Week 1	Who is Jesus?	Talk: Mark 8:27-30
Week 2	What's gone wrong with the world?	Talk: Mark 7:14-23
Week 3	Why did Jesus have to die?	Talk: Mark 10:45
Week 4	Did Jesus really come back to life?	Talk: Mark 15:42-16:8
Week 5	What difference does Jesus make?	Talk: Mark 8:31-38

## The Role of the Leader

As a group leader, please commit yourself to doing the following things:

**Attending all the meetings.** It is vital that you come to each of the **Bitesize** meetings. Five weeks is a very short time and we need to make the most of every opportunity to get to know those who come. It is also important that we all meet to plan and pray at [time] each week.

**Welcoming.** Some of those who come will arrive on their own and will not know anyone. Others will only know one or two. Many will be a little nervous at first. It is the task of all of us to give everyone a warm welcome as they arrive. In particular, look out for those not talking to anyone.

**Praying.** We are totally dependent on God and therefore any ministry we engage in must have prayer at the centre. Agreeing to take on the role of being a leader at **Bitesize** will involve a commitment to pray regularly for the members of your group and to attend the leaders' prayer meeting [every week at [time]]. Try to meet up with your co-leader to pray as well.

**Personal Work.** Try to get alongside group members individually outside the group. Look for opportunities to meet up for coffee etc. without being too pushy. This will become easier as the weeks go by and friendships develop. If someone can't turn up one week, suggest that you get together to go through the material. When you meet, the normal tips for personal work apply. Try to find out where the individual is at without being too aggressive. Good questions might include: "How are you finding the meetings?"; "Is there anything you are finding hard to understand?"; "Where would you say you stand on all this?" etc. Hopefully good conversation should flow. If you sense that the other person is feeling uncomfortable, back off and change the conversation.

**Leading a small group.** The small groups are at the most important part of **Bitesize**. It is here that issues will be grappled with and relationships will be built. The hope is that the same members will go to the same groups each week. This will help people feel at home and also make personal work easier. There are bound to be a certain amount of comings and goings. Ideally there will be more non-Christians in each group than Christians, although this depends on how many Christians come with their friends.

## The Aim of Small Groups

Our aim in setting up the small groups at **Bitesize** is as follows: "to present the gospel clearly in a relaxed atmosphere which facilitates questions and discussion".

### "To present the gospel clearly"

There is always a danger in discussion groups that the agenda is completely set by the non-Christians who attend. The result can be that the time is taken up with vague discussions about "the meaning of life" or particular questions which are of interest only to one person. The focus needs to be kept on the basics of Christian doctrine [i.e. the gospel] and, more specifically, on Jesus. The following points are important in helping to achieve that:

- We must make it clear when we invite people to **Bitesize** what it is they are coming to: "We will be discussing the basic claims of Christianity in the Bible". The same point needs to be made again at the first meeting. The format should be explained clearly: a short reading from Mark's gospel and then a discussion of what it means, leading on to a wider discussion of the topic raised by the talk. We will train the CU in inviting folks to **Bitesize** too.
- Handling questions takes some skill. Some questions directly concern the main topic for discussion and should be given time. Others threaten to take the whole session off course. Unless the issue is an important one for a significant number in the group it should be deflected. It might be possible to give a very quick answer and then suggest that you pursue it at the end of the meeting or at another time. This could provide a good opportunity for personal work. There will also be pieces of A4 paper available to each small group – suggest that questions are written down here and then posed to the speaker at the question time at the end of the evening.
- Apologetics. **Bitesize** contains little apologetic content compared to some courses. This is deliberate. There is always a danger that apologetic questions can dominate the discussion to the extent that there is little to time left to consider the Bible's teaching. However, when relevant apologetic issues are raised or would be useful to cover then don't be afraid to tackle them in the group.

## **“Relaxed atmosphere”**

Work hard at hosting the sessions. Most non-Christians will be fairly wary and nervous on their first couple of visits. Put them at their ease and convince them that we are [fairly!] normal. The first few minutes are important. Make sure that everyone begins to get to know one another. In between the meetings, pray that the group would get on with each other - it is a great help if they actually enjoy being together. The more relaxed the members are the more they are likely to open up and ask the questions that are on their minds and more likely it is that they will want to keep returning.

## **“Facilitates questions and discussion”**

This is the advantage of a small group over a formal talk. Meeting in an informal and relaxed setting gives people a chance to respond straight away to what they hear. Leaders can focus the discussion on the particular areas of the Christian message which the individuals find hardest to understand or accept. Small groups can also be pitched appropriately. Some in the group will be very close to conversion, others will not. It is the job of the leader to be flexible depending on who is in the group.

Don't worry if it takes time for discussion to get going. Most groups start off fairly quiet - it can take two or three sessions before many of the members open up. Remember too that a **Bitesize** group is not the same as a Bible Study group - the aim is not necessarily to get everyone talking. Some people will simply prefer to listen. The first couple of meetings may well be dominated by the leader's voice. That does not matter as long as there is plenty of opportunity for others to contribute [e.g. by inviting questions and comments]. The leader's style sets the whole atmosphere and determines whether members feel able to contribute or not.

Avoid the temptation to preach. Don't use language that tells people what to believe. For instance, say "the Christian claim is that three days later Jesus rose from the dead", rather than "Jesus rose from the dead". We need to make it clear that we are not simply saying "this is the truth and you can like it or lump it". The way we present the gospel should invite questions and comments. Our language should give permission for people to raise them. Be unshockable. If you look hurt every time someone disagrees with the Bible the members will soon get the message that such views are not welcome and should not be raised.

## **The Limitations**

We should not have too high expectations of a course that only lasts for a couple of hours over five sessions. Most of the really important work goes on outside the formal meetings. The keys to an effective **Bitesize** are "the 3 Ps":

- **Prayer.** Aim to pray for each member of the group regularly during the course [daily is the ideal].
- **Personal work.** Look for every opportunity to chat things through with individuals personally.
- **Preaching.** Encourage members to come to a meeting where they will hear a longer talk [e.g. church on Sunday, to a CU meeting on Wednesday or another evangelistic event]. God speaks through His Word so the more exposure to good Bible teaching the better.

## **The Next Step**

We must be aware that much work will still need to be done once **Bitesize** has finished. Some, we hope, will have begun to follow Christ by then, but they will still need much help in the early days of their Christian life. Others will still be full of questions and holding back from making a start as a Christian. The best follow-up is done individually. It may be appropriate to meet up one to one to study the Bible or to arrange to go to church together. If the group has gelled together well you might be able to continue something together either regularly or as a one-off get-together.

## General Tips

**Keep to time.** Always end promptly even if the discussion is going really well. It helps people to know exactly when they will be able to get away. They can always stay on at the end if they want to after you have given the others an opportunity to escape. We want to finish at [time]. Informal discussions can carry on at a pub or coffee shop if appropriate.

**Prepare well.** Think: What are the questions that might arise? What misunderstandings might there be? But be prepared for the unexpected. i.e. Don't have a fixed line of inflexible questions and answers that you are determined to stick to, whatever happens.

**Listen to what group members are saying.** Is there a question behind the question? e.g. Is the question about suffering purely intellectual or is there some personal experience behind it? That should influence how you answer.

**Develop friendships.** The most useful conversations often take place outside the group as an individual opens up to a leader who has won his trust. Pray for such friendships and try, as much as time allows, to provide opportunities for them to be established.

**Recommend a good evangelistic book and a gospel to read.** You could offer a free gospel and the loan of a book to anyone who wants to do some additional reading. Good books are: John Chapman – "A Fresh Start"; Vaughan Roberts – "Turning Points"; Lee Strobel – "The Case for Christ"; Rico Tice – "Christianity Explored". In some ways, it's better to lend a book rather give it away - that way there should be an opening for a conversation when it is returned.

**Don't let one aggressive or extrovert member dominate.** People like that tend to be fairly thick skinned so be prepared to interrupt them and give others a chance to contribute - "What does anyone else think?". Ask for advice if there are any difficulties.

## How to use the material

The material for each session is set out in the same order:

- 1. Leaders' preparation** – what you need to do before each session
- 2. Talk outline** – a full outline to enable you to pray and prepare more intelligently
- 3. Group discussion:**
  - a. Explanation of the passage** – to help **you** to get into the passage and see how it fits into John. It is not exhaustive though! Please make sure you do your own preparation. There is no point in regurgitating questions if you don't see how the passage fits together. Pray that God will speak to you as you grapple with the text and that you will be changed as a result.
  - b. Suggested questions** – you can add to these, they are written as a springboard for discussion. The progression of the questions has been carefully thought through though, so don't completely rearrange them!
- 4. Round-up** – this is included, so you know how each session will be finished [after the question and answer session, where any tricky situations that came up in the group time can be dealt with]. As it is more difficult to issue challenges in a group situation, the speaker will give all attendees a question to take away at the end.
- 5. Helpful hints and possible questions** – in each session, there may be questions asked, relating to the material that you will need to answer. Also, there may be questions not asked by your group, but you might feel it would be helpful if you dropped them in. The material in this section is to help you to prepare for such events. Work through these questions and try to anticipate answers. Again, this is not an exhaustive list, so please think through each session carefully and develop the skill of 'second guessing' with your group.

## THANKYOU!

Many thanks for being willing to help with **Bitesize**. It will be hard work and much of what you do will be behind the scenes, but it is appreciated greatly – and we pray that, by grace, we will see some saved through our efforts.

# SESSION 1: Who is Jesus?

<b>Aim:</b> to point to Jesus as God, confirmed by his words and deeds.
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## Leaders' preparation

- Read Mark chapter 1 and 8:27-30, and prepare the study.
- Question to consider: how does Mark try to convince us of Jesus' identity?
- Get to grips with the 'Mad, Bad, God' and 'Reliability of the gospels' handouts.

The first meeting is crucial in setting the atmosphere and tone for the meetings and, hopefully, in calming members fears and convincing them that they want to keep coming. Pray hard beforehand for a relaxed and profitable time. Chat generally over drinks and welcome whoever is near you. When you split into groups, welcome your group members.

When people have arrived and are settled, the host will then centrally say something about the aim of **Bitesize** e.g.

"Bitesize is designed for those who are Christians or not quite sure where they stand but who want to investigate the claims of Christianity for themselves. We'll meet over the next five weeks to consider the basics of the Christian faith. The idea is that, as we go on, you raise the issue and questions that you find hard or difficult to understand. I hope that this is roughly what you expected – and we hope you'll keep coming back over the weeks. If you can come each week, please do, as the sessions will follow on from each other."

After this, and before the talk, there will be an opportunity for introductions within the group. Give everyone a chance to introduce themselves, but beware of cheesiness! You may find it best to ask them to say who they are and how they came to be here, making it clear that they can say as much or as little as they like. This may reveal a fair bit about where they are at spiritually and give some indication as to the level at which the discussion should be pitched. But don't let all these introductions drag on too long - there is a lot to get through.

Then work on an introductory question: *If God were here tonight and you could ask him any question and know that he would answer it, what would it be?* Gather the questions, but don't try and answer them!

After a short while, the groups will then be brought together, the speaker introduced, gospels handed out and the talk given.

## Talk outline

The speaker will get the group members to flick through their gospels during a whistle-stop tour, making them familiar with the gospel:

- **The big questions:**

- Many of us find ourselves asking the same big questions: Is God there? If he is, what is he like? Is there more to life than we can see? How do we find fulfilment?
- All of these questions are linked – Mark was convinced that they found answers in the person of Jesus Christ.

- **Introducing Mark:**

- A few comments about the reliability of Mark's gospel.
- Papias wrote in 130AD: 'Mark became Peter's [one of the twelve apostles] interpreter and wrote accurately all that he had remembered, not indeed in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For Mark had not heard the Lord, nor had followed him, but later on, he followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded...'.  
• The NT book 'Acts' mentions Mark several times [see 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:39]. One of the two letters written by Peter has a 'PS' from Mark, who was with him [see 1 Peter 5:13]. When writing his second letter, Peter clearly knew that he was soon to be killed for his faith, and wrote, 'And I will make every effort to see that after my departure [i.e. his death], you will be able to remember these things' [2 Peter 1:15]. Peter died in the mid-60s AD. The evidence points to the conclusion that Mark wrote his gospel either before or just after Peter's death so that Peter's eye-witness testimony was preserved.
- Point folks to 'The Reliability of the Gospels' handout.

- **Introducing Jesus:**

- People have different ideas about Jesus today: he's objectively the most influential figure in history.
- Mark believed that Jesus was the Son of God [an even more massive claim to make in Jewish monotheistic society than today!].
- Mark's gospel focuses on the question Jesus asked his disciples in 8:29: "Who do you say that I am?"

- **The evidence** of the early chapters of the gospel points to the fact that he is who Mark says he is in his very first verse: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" [1:1 – please give the page number each time]:

- He taught with authority [1:21-22];
- He showed authority over sickness [1:29-31 cf. 12:2] – there are 30 healings in Mark;
- He has power and authority over nature [4:37-41];
- He has absolute power and authority over death [5:35-43]
- etc.
- The evidence of Jesus' life, teaching and miracles all suggest that he was not a liar or a lunatic but was and is the Lord of the universe.

- **Final challenge:** Christianity is focused on the person of Jesus: "If we are to decide where we stand on Christianity we must focus on Jesus. Christianity is not about rules or rituals but about a relationship with a person. Here is a man who has had a greater impact on the history of the world than anyone else - at the very least we have to accept that he was a remarkable man. Who do you say he is?"

## Group discussion: Mark 8:27-30

Firstly, **have a time for feedback and questions about the talk**. If a question comes up here that you will cover later, don't tackle it at this stage: make it clear, it will come up again.

The key thing for this study is to get the members in the group to think about **who Jesus is**. By the things that Mark has recorded Jesus as saying and doing, he clearly believes that Jesus' claims are true.

### Mark 8:27-30: Explanation of the passage for leaders

In the context of Mark's gospel: these verses close the first section of Mark's gospel, which have been preoccupied with the question of Jesus' identity. He has given the people [and readers like us] many clues already with the signs and miracles that he has performed. He has also claimed to come to rescue God's people in a kind of 'second exodus' [see 6:32-44] – Jesus alludes to this through feeding the crowds in a way reminiscent to how God fed Israel in the desert, and will be God's good shepherd [see 6:34] who will gather up God's people [see Ezekiel 34].

At last Peter understands who Jesus is in 8:29: the Christ, God's promised rescuer-king. At the time of Jesus there was an expectation that God would send this ultimate Messiah to his people. The Jews were expecting God to send a military liberator who would lead the people in victory against the Roman army. By recognising Jesus to be the Christ, Peter recognises Jesus to be God's King in God's world.

Jesus wants his identity to be a secret at this point, because the expectations of the average person of the Messiah were far removed from Jesus' own understandings [see 8:31-32 etc.]. Jesus could never have spoken openly about his identity – the people would have been blinded by preconceptions and would not have listened to him.

Terms to explain to your group:

- **John the Baptist** and **Elijah** – two of the best known Jewish prophets. Legend held that Elijah would return before the Messiah. Peter therefore says that the people generally consider Jesus to be a prophet;
- **Christ** – the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word 'Messiah', literally meaning 'anointed by God', used to apply to kings that had been appointed by God. At the time of Jesus, there was the expectation that God would send the ultimate Christ (*the Christ*) to his people, who would put everything right for God's people.

### Mark 8:27-30: Possible questions – 15 minutes

**Re-read Mark 8:27-30** – give the page number

- The disciples have been with Jesus for quite a while at this stage. He turns to them and asks them "Who do you think I am?" What different opinions do people have of him today? If you were to ask your friends and neighbours what they make of Jesus, what different answers might they give?

[NB. We've deliberately avoided "what do **you** make of Jesus?", which could make people feel awkward].

- Who did the people say that Jesus was?
- Who did Jesus say that Peter was? What evidence do you think might have led Peter to that conclusion?

[Passages that show the kind of things that Jesus said and did include 1:29-34; 4:35-41 [miracles] and 2:5-7; 14:61-62 [divine claims]. Some of these may have been mentioned already in the talk.]

- Turn to 2:1-7. Who did Jesus think he was?

[We will be looking at this passage in greater detail next week – so don't jump the gun too much here – merely point to the fact that Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins: a massive claim!]

- Why do you think reaction to Jesus in society is often so apathetic?
- After the reading the account here, and the claims that Jesus makes, do you think it is reasonable to think of Jesus as simply a good man or a prophet?

## **'Mad, Bad, God': Explanation for leaders**

Give a handout to each person in your group; then either read it out or let the group read it through.

### **Is this a sensible way to approach the question?**

It may be that some people find the idea of a reliable witness to Jesus' claims difficult. Do not bring this up if it is not a problem, but if people ask about the reliability of Mark's gospel, then let them have a copy of 'The reliability of the gospels' handout. If this issue does not come up, then give each person a copy of the handout anyway.

### **What does such a claim mean about someone? And how should we assess these claims?**

Often we can tell if people's claims about themselves hold water when we see if their lives match up to their claims....

### **Did Jesus' lifestyle and teaching match up to his claims?**

Jesus lived a life of love that amazed the people around him: he had time for people that others considered on the fringe of society [see Mark 5:1-20, 10:13-16 etc] and those who had need [6:34].

- Is this a man who is deviously plotting to **deceive** those he invests so much time in?
- Jesus humbly **serves** those who follow him, seeing even his death as a mission to serve [10:45].
- Is this a man who has **delusions of grandeur**?
- **Truth** is at the very centre of Jesus' teaching, so much so that he says, 'I am the truth'. If Jesus' claims are false, he is a major hypocrite. Not only is he a liar, but he is a liar who says, 'I am the truth'.

### **'Mad, Bad, God': possible questions – 15 minutes**

- Do you think it is fair to say that these are the only options? Can you think of any others?
- Which of these options do most people in Preston think is the most likely when they consider the question of Jesus' identity?
- Is CS Lewis right in claiming that there is no chance of Jesus being just a 'good man'?
- How do you think we should respond to Jesus?
- The question we are still left with: was Jesus mad, bad or God? What is your hunch at the moment?

## **Closing the meeting**

There will be a few minutes for group members to ask the speaker any questions that have arisen from the talk or study. If a group member has asked a question, but seems uncomfortable to ask it, then ask on their behalf.

The host will then encourage group members to take a copy of Mark's Gospel. There are sixteen chapters – group members will be encouraged to read four chapters a week, so that they have read the whole by the end of the course. Each week, there will be an opportunity in the groups to discuss any questions that have arisen from reading it.

[If you have not finished your discussions by the time the round-up starts, feel free to continue afterwards but make it easy for anyone who wants to go to do so. Outline the next couple of meetings: next week we will be thinking about 'what's wrong with the world?'. End the meeting promptly with an encouragement for members to return: "We will meet again the same time next week. Do come if you possibly can". Challenge group members to not stop looking until they have a satisfactory answer to the question of Jesus' identity. Mention that you are available if anyone wants to ask any questions. Encourage everyone to read Mark 1-4 and bring any questions with them next week.]



## Session 1: helpful hints and possible questions

The following paragraphs are for your background knowledge. It may be appropriate to drop some of the information into the discussion.

### **What about miracles?**

Miracles are not the kinds of things we expect to happen – otherwise, they would not be miracles at all. But, if Jesus really was God, the Creator of the world, we would expect him to be able to perform miracles. Mark does indeed cite many miracles. We are likely to be sceptical about miracles, and rightly so. But if they did not happen, we would have expected the early opponents of Christianity to say that the miracle stories were invented.

### **Did the people at the time deny that the miracles had happened?**

The amazing thing is that, in all the early writings against Christianity, that the miracles were never denied; they were just attributed to the devil rather than to God [see also 3:22, 3:30]. If necessary, look at the early Jewish sources below.

### **Weren't people just a lot more gullible in those days about the 'miraculous'?**

No! They were actually more down to earth and less gullible! We are more used to seeing amazing things happen with the development of technology and science. If you told a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jew that one day man would walk on the moon, they would probably never believe you! Another gospel writer, John, cites that Thomas, even when he had been with Jesus for three years, did not believe Jesus had been resurrected until he'd seen Jesus alive for himself. The disciples were sceptical themselves, yet now they believed – they had become convinced.

### **Isn't the belief in miracles unscientific?**

It is unscientific to say that miracles cannot happen – the role of science is to look at what happens and to see if we can find a model that explains what is going on. To say that miracles do not fit a model and, therefore, that they cannot happen, is unscientific. Imagine scientists found something that moves faster than light. We can't they say that it can't because of Einstein's theories. We would reassess Einstein rather than ignore the scientists' evidence. In the same way, if we have an overwhelming number of witnesses telling us that something happened, we must question the theory that miracles can't happen, as well as being sceptical of the report of miracles.

### **Were there any early Jewish sources speaking of Jesus' miracles?**

- AD 95: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus speaks of Jesus' magic art [Sabbath 104b, Tos. Sabbath 1:15].
- AD 95-110: 'Jesus practised magic art and misled and seduced Israel [Sanh. 43a, 107b].

The polemics of the rabbis completely assume the brute fact that Jesus worked miracles. Nowhere in ancient sources is a claim found that the miracles never happened. Why would they admit to the miracles if it were not the fact that miracles were so widely beheld, as to be undeniable? The fact is that at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century:

- There were still a few eye-witnesses still alive.
- Those that denied Jesus' claims never attempted to deny the miracles. All along they had accepted that they had happened – but they attributed them to magic rather than to God's work.

### **How can Jesus claim that the Old Testament witnesses to him?**

If God were to come to earth in an amazing way as a one-off, we would expect him to make sure that we didn't miss him! We might expect him to prepare a particular group of people to be especially ready, so that they would recognise him and be able to tell others [this was the role of the Jews]. We would expect that God would have given hundreds of points for hundreds of years as to where and when he would come.

## SESSION 2: What's wrong with the world?

**Aim:** to establish what the Bible teaches about our problem [sin] and our need to be saved.

### Leaders' preparation

- Read Mark 2:1-12 and 7:14-23, and prepare the study.
- Questions to consider: How does Mark demonstrate that all of us are sinful?
- Read the 'Fire Starter' sheet on sin.

### Talk outline

- Recap last week: groups considered the question of Jesus' identity, and closed with the challenge not to stop looking until they have come to a satisfactory explanation.
- **Today's big question:** what does Jesus make of the world?
- Our view of the world we live in and how we think of ourselves: it is a world of much beauty and good, yet it is dominated by bad things. We know that something is wrong with the world.
- What does Jesus say is the biggest problem? Mark 7:20-23 [refer to page number]: it's us! We can't live up to the standards we demand of other people – and we can't live up to the standards we have set ourselves. Even when we do good, our motives are mixed. We are not the people we should be.
- In comparison to Jesus Christ, none of us can think of ourselves as good. Mark 12:29-31 shows how God wants us to live. God demands perfect love for him and perfect love for each other – deep down, that's how we know we should live, but none of us do. We are all rebels against God by nature and as such are unclean in His sight and not fit for His presence.
- Jesus says what's wrong with the world: each of us has an attitude problem with God. We're designed for a relationship with God, but each of us has turned our back on him – it's what the Bible calls sin. "The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart."
- We all have an innate sense of justice and fairness – children say "that's not fair!" We want God to be just against those we consider to be bad people – the problem is he will judge those he considers to be bad, including us all.
- Given the bleak state of the world under Jesus' verdict, helpless and hopeless, we should be willing to accept a solution if one is on offer. **Where do you stand?**

### Group discussion: Mark 2:1-12

#### Explanation of the passages for leaders

In the context of the book: This episode follows chapter 1, where Mark has ordered a number of short snippets to raise questions about Jesus' identity, including ordering an evil spirit to leave a man [1:21-28], healing many people [1:32-34] and touching a man with leprosy [1:40-45]. These verses are the climax of the opening section, where Jesus claims to be able to forgive sin. No wonder people are amazed at the end of it, and do not quite know what to make of Jesus [2:12].

Don't under-estimate Jesus' claim to be able to forgive sin. In the Old Testament, God instituted the sacrificial system, the Day of Atonement – 'atonement' means 'to make one' or 'to reconcile' [see Leviticus 16]. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would offer sacrifices and then he would present a goat as an offering to God for the sins of the people by killing it and presenting its blood in the Most Holy Place in the temple. Another goat was taken and the priest would lay his hands on his head and confess the sins of the people. Then the goat was sent into the desert as a scapegoat, to symbolise the sins of the people being carried away from them. Through these sacrifices, the idea of substitution was in the minds of the Jews. But by in claiming to offer forgiveness of sin without animal sacrifice, Jesus is claiming that a whole new way of being forgiven is available.

Jesus is accused of blasphemy, a theme that re-emerges in Mark's gospel, and which soon sees the plot emerge to kill Jesus [3:6]. In response, Jesus poses the question of verse 9. It is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven" – this is an invisible thing that cannot be tested, whereas to heal someone is a physical and testable thing. You would look foolish to proclaim someone healed and they did not get up. Jesus' healing demonstrates that he has the power and authority to forgive sin, and reinforces the truthfulness of his claim to be able to forgive sin, and therefore to be God in human form.

Read the 'Firestarter' handout on sin [this isn't itself going to be given out to group members, but is helpful in defining concepts that you might want to drop into group discussion].

Terms to explain from the passage:

- **Capernaum** – a town in Galilee;
- **Blasphemy** – a illegal claim to be God, or to possess his authority;
- **Teachers of the law** – the ruling Jewish authorities.

#### **Introductory questions** – 10 minutes

- Get feedback from the talk; deal with any immediate questions.
- Are there any questions from anything that anyone has read from Mark chapters 1-4?
- If you asked students on campus what they think the biggest problem in the world is, what do you think they would say?

#### **Mark 2:1-12: possible questions** – 30 minutes

- What is Jesus doing at the beginning of the scene? How do you think Jesus might have reacted when he saw the paralysed man being lowered through the roof?
- Were Jesus' words what the paralysed man would have expected?
- What kind of priorities does Jesus show by telling the man his sins were forgiven?

[Ensure that folks understand this important point: Jesus considered the man's sin as a worse problem even than his paralysis].

- Why does Jesus consider the man's sin his biggest problem? Do you think that most people in Preston view their unforgiven sin as being their biggest problem? Why or why not?
- Re-read **Mark 12:28-33**. One way of defining sin is failure to obey God's commands. How does this passage help us to define sin?
- Who, then, is sinful?
- Why can't God just 'sweep sin under the carpet' and forgive everyone?
- Back in Mark 2, what claim is Jesus making when he claims to forgive the man his sin?
- Why, then, do you think that the teachers of the law were so offended when Jesus claimed to forgive the man's sins?
- How does Jesus respond to the claim of blasphemy?
- What is the answer to Jesus' question in verse 9? What, then, does Jesus demonstrate through healing the man?
- What is the reaction of the people that were there? What do you think that your reaction to Jesus' claims would have been had you been there?
- What would it mean to you to hear that your sin had been forgiven by God?

#### **Closing the meeting**

Once again, following questions, the host will encourage attendees to read Mark chapters 5-8 – and will be encouraged to bring questions with them next week. Group members will be encouraged to come back next week when we will be considering the Bible's claim that Jesus dealt with the big problem that spoils the world through dying on the cross.

## Session 2: helpful hints and possible questions

When people think about the question that we started with – ‘What’s wrong with the world?’ – one of the questions that’s often asked about God is, ‘Why does he allow all of the evil to go on in the world? Why doesn’t God just get rid of the Hitlers and Stalins?’ But the study attempts to show that, if God did that, we would also be in the same boat – we are all on the same side. We must all be treated in the same way.

If things get tough, gently point out that we established Jesus’ authority last week. The question is, are we prepared to reject his verdict just because it offends our sensibilities? So do stress that we speak on the authority of Jesus himself and the Bible, and not our own.

### **Was the paralysed man ill because of his own personal sin?**

Jesus specifically rejected the idea that sickness is a result of personal sin when asked by his disciples whether a man’s blindness was a result of his own or his parents’ sin [John 9:3]. It is true that the Bible claims that all sickness is indirectly caused by the fact that humans in general have disobeyed God. However, this is not particularised. We may not say that those who suffer more are being punished for being worse people [see also Luke 13:1-3].

### **Why can’t God just forgive everyone?**

If God were to forgive everyone, then he would be saying that evil doesn’t matter. He would have to say to Hitler, ‘Don’t worry about the Holocaust – I’ll just pretend it didn’t happen.’ The fact that God is going to judge the world shows that he cares a great deal. It would be a God who did not care that would not judge.

### **What right does God have to judge us?**

He made us. He gave us life in the first place. We have all decided to put ourselves before him, and therefore we deserve to be treated as rebels. God is the Creator and the King of the universe, but we have acted as if we are rulers.

### **Surely if I try my best, that’s good enough?**

No it isn’t. God’s standards are perfect. He cannot pretend that your rejection of him does not matter. He cannot pretend that the times you’ve hurt others don’t matter. He cannot pretend that the times you’ve abused the world don’t matter. Anyway, nobody tries their hardest all the time. Often we deliberately do things to spite others, and deliberately do not do the things we should.

### **What’s the rush in thinking about things now?**

The Bible never promises us a tomorrow to think about things. If the new life Jesus offers is so good, it is foolish to wait. Practically speaking, while you are a student is the time when you are most likely to have the time and opportunities to think through these things. It is likely that when you leave, you may never get round to thinking through these issues again.

## SESSION 3: Why did Jesus die?

**Aim:** to explain that Jesus died in the place of others as their substitute and to show how this is our only hope of being acceptable to God.

### Leaders' preparation

- Read Mark 10:32-45 and 15:16-39, and prepare the study.
- Questions to consider: How does Mark emphasise what Jesus' death achieved through his account of the crucifixion?

### Talk outline

- Read **Mark 8:31** [give the page number each time]: explain that 'must' here means 'necessary for certain great ends'. Jesus explains that it is necessary for him to die. It was needed.
- Now read **Mark 10:45**: Jesus' death is explained: he came to give his life as a ransom for many; he died to rescue rebels by paying the price to free them. In his love, God longs to forgive but, in his justice and holiness, he must punish. Christians believe that it was only through the cross – the willing death of God in human form – that the demands of both God's justice and his mercy can be met.
- Jesus is presented to die for us all. The Son of God, the only perfect man who didn't deserve to die, came into the world to intervene on God's behalf to act as humanity's representative and substitute.
- The cross was physically horrendous [Cicero: "It is the most cruel and shameful of all punishments. Let it never come near the body of a Roman citizen. Indeed, let it never come near his thoughts, or eyes, or ears or let the word pass from his lips"] and emotionally tormenting, but above all spiritually agonising.
- On the cross, Jesus took the spiritual punishment for sinners. Read and explain 2 Corinthians 5:21.
- An exchange occurred. Jesus takes on my sin, and I am offered his moral perfection. He took the punishment that I deserved: 'penal substitution' – a punishment-related and legally satisfying substitution. The guilty go free, the innocent is willingly punished [perhaps use the metaphor involving Barabbas in **Mark 15:1-15**].
- God's amazing love means that he would rather take the punishment of death himself than let people be punished for sin. Jesus' death on the cross is God's initiative and gift to humanity. And he did it because he loves us. When we see how big a problem sin is for God, that we realise just how much God loves us. This is what the Bible calls 'grace'.
- Jesus absorbed God's anger on the cross. This means that we can go free. But it's not automatic, we must turn to him. Thanks to Jesus, the way to God is open: but every other way [good works, religion, anything else] is a dead end. Today's study will be looking more closely at the crucifixion passage as recorded in Mark's gospel.

### Group discussion: Mark 15:16-39

#### Explanation of the passage for leaders

In the context of the book: XXX

We read in verse 33 that there was darkness during the daytime as Jesus died. Some have suggested that this was caused by a daytime eclipse – but this is not possible in astronomic terms. Jesus was crucified at the time of Passover, always at full moon. At full moon, the bodies are always ordered sun-earth-moon. For an eclipse, the order would have to be sun-moon-earth. Rather, this darkness and accompanying earthquake [see Matthew 27:51] were supernatural symbol of God's anger [see also Exodus 10:21-29 and Amos 8:9-10].

Jesus was under the judgement of God. He really was God-forsaken, as his quote from Psalm 22 indicates. The cry is not

He really was God-forsaken, as the quotation from Psalm 22 indicates. That quotation does not indicate that Jesus lost His faith at the crucial moment. He quoted it for the same reason that He almost always quoted the O.T. – to show how He fulfilled it. The result of the fact that He faced the judgement of God in our place is shown by the great visual aid that God used. The curtain of the temple [verse 38] separated the people from the "Holy of Holies" – which was the focus of God's presence in the temple. Only one man [the High Priest] was allowed to go into it and then only once a year. But the cross changed all that. It opened up the way to the presence of God. The fact that the curtain was torn from top to bottom showed that it was God's doing – and not our own – that makes reconciliation to him possible.

A key point to stress is that the biggest obstacle to us being acceptable to God is not so much our sin as God's reaction to it: he is righteously angry at sin. He can't just stop being angry and pretend that our wrongdoing doesn't matter because it does. If God was to stop being angry at human sin, he would cease to be just. Justice demands that wrongdoing is punished. If God is to be able to forgive us, he must do so in such a way that His justice is not compromised; he must do so while showing that he has not gone soft on sin. The Christian claim is that the only way he could do that was through Jesus' death on the cross. On the cross Jesus stood in for others - and God directed the anger that should have been faced by those who deserved it against his Son who did not. It might help to speak about the background of sacrifices in the Old Testament and then show how Jesus fulfils them [see Session 2].

Terms to explain from the passage:

- **Purple robe** – this would have been worn by monarchs at the time. The soldiers ridiculed Jesus for having claimed to be 'the King of the Jews';
- **Golgotha** – a place just outside of Jerusalem;
- **Myrrh** – a form of natural anaesthetic.

### Introductory questions

- Get feedback from the talk; deal with any immediate questions. Check that your group understands what is going on with substitution.
- Ask the group to recap last week – this will help them to see how this week follows on, and will help you to gauge their understanding. Stress the problem: we have all fallen short of God's standards, having rebelled against him, and deserve only punishment and death. In particular ensure that all of the group realise that they cannot deal with their sin themselves.

### Mark 15:16-39: possible questions

- Why do you think the soldiers mocked and abused Jesus?
- Can you describe what happens next, putting verses 21-24 in your own words?
- How do those watching add to the suffering of Jesus on the cross?
- Why does Jesus get the kind of abuse normally reserved for a rapist or murderer from [a] the religious authorities and [b] the passers by?
- Read **Mark 10:45**. We saw last week that Jesus was immensely powerful and could have beaten his enemies with a word. How does this verse explain why Jesus allowed them to beat and ridicule him?
- What did Jesus cry from the cross? How do you understand what he is saying?
- Why did Jesus feel abandoned by God? How does this make you feel?
- What two events followed Jesus' last breath [verses 38-39]?

**EXPLAIN:** *The temple.* For the Jews, the temple was the most important building, the focal point of every aspect of Jewish life. It was the equivalent of Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament all rolled into one. The curtain separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the temple. The only person ever allowed in the Most Holy Place was the chief priest who was allowed in only once a year after many sacrifices had been made.

- Imagine yourself to be a Jew hearing about the Temple curtain being torn in two at the moment of Jesus' death. What significance would this have had for you?
- Why is it particularly amazing that a Roman executioner recognised Jesus to be the Son of God as he died?
- What does the way that Jesus died show you about his character? How do his actions make you feel?
- "Jesus' death on the cross shows us that we are more wicked than we know but more loved than we'd ever imagined." How do you respond to this statement?

*[The cross looks like a failure – but the Bible's claim is that in fact this is what Jesus came to do: and following his death the temple curtain is torn: reconciliation to God is made possible.]*

### Closing the meeting

Once again, following questions, the host will encourage attendees to read Mark chapters 9-12 – and will be encouraged to bring questions with them next week. Encourage group members to come back next week as we will be considering the Bible's claims about Jesus' resurrection.

### Session 3: Helpful hints and possible questions

**What can we do to get rid of our sin?**

Try harder? Do good things? No – we cannot do it. XXX. Only Jesus is able to deal with our sin.

**How can God's justice and our sin be resolved?**

Either in hell – there they will meet if we insist. Or, because of God's love, they can meet at the cross, if we receive the forgiveness God offers in Jesus. Either we receive the just punishment of God, or Jesus takes it for us. There is no other option. Jesus is the only way [XXX].

**How can Jesus' death [the death of one man] be enough to atone for the sins of everyone who turns to Jesus?**

Jesus is no ordinary person. There is nobody else could do this. Additionally, the question is not so much about amount or duration of punishment, but about whether or not his death is effective in absorbing God's anger. In his death, Jesus absorbs all God's anger – and so, if we accept Jesus, we no longer face God's anger.

**How can Christians say that Jesus is the only way to deal with sin?**

Christianity does not say that other religions get everything **totally** wrong. They may have some truth – for instance, we can agree with Islam that there is only one God. But world religions disagree about fundamental issues, like who is Jesus? Why did he die? and What is God like? Christianity sees that what we need is forgiveness for sin, otherwise we face God's righteous anger. No other religion deals with sin once for all. There is nowhere else that God's love and justice is completely satisfied except the cross.

**How can it be just for God to punish an innocent third party for our sin?**

The amazing thing is that Jesus was no innocent third party, but is himself also the judge [XXX]. So the crucifixion is not the judge punishing the wrong person, but the innocent judge taking the punishment himself, so that the guilty [us] may go free.

## SESSION 4: Did Jesus rise from the dead?

**Aim:** To show that belief in the resurrection is rational – and to teach some of its implications.

### Leaders' preparation

- Read Mark 15:42-16:8 and 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, and prepare the study.
- Question to consider: XXX?
- Read 'Me, A Christian?' and the 'Evidence for the Resurrection' material.

### Talk outline

- Start with a brief recap with what was covered on the cross from the previous week: God's justice means that we face death as sinful people. God's love means that, in Jesus' death, he has provided a way for his justice to be satisfied, offering us reconciliation with God. No other way is open.
- Jesus frequently spoke of his own resurrection [see Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:34]. How will we respond to Jesus' astonishing claims? Look at Mark 14:61-65: another occasion where Jesus speaks of his impending resurrection. Like the high priest, we are left with two possible responses:
  - Either we can agree with the high priest, and dismiss Jesus as a blasphemer [making him either mad or bad – see verses 63-64];
  - Or we can accept him to be God's true great King.
- Why does the resurrection matter?
  - In death, Jesus paid the ultimate penalty for sin. If he had not risen from the dead, there would be no good news. It would have either shown that Jesus himself was sin [and therefore his claims deluded or evil], or that his death could not rightfully pay the price of sin. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christians are sad and deluded people who are living a lie.
  - The fact that Jesus rose – that Jesus, who took the curse of death, was resurrected – shows that the curse is over. The resurrection of Jesus is the promise that death is defeated. If Jesus did rise from the dead, it means Jesus' claims are true. It means we cannot ignore Jesus. He really is the Lord of the Universe.
- The Bible writers claim that Jesus' resurrection proclaims God's verdict on Jesus: he really is who he claimed to be. We should, therefore, trust in him and submit to him. See Acts 17:31.
- If the resurrection is true, then it proves conclusively that Jesus was indeed Son of God and Lord of the Universe. All that he claimed would be proven true, and we should willingly trust in him and submit to him.
- Today's small groups will consider the evidence for the resurrection, and also start to consider its implications.

### Group discussion: Mark 15:42-16:8 & 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

#### Explanation of the passage for leaders

XXX.

#### Suggested questions

##### Introductory comments – 10 minutes

- Take feedback from the talk, and ask if anyone has any questions from what they have read themselves from Mark's gospel this week.

##### Mark 15:42-16:8: possible questions – 15 minutes

- The whole account: clearly the women claimed to have seen Jesus alive again. They were either right or wrong. Read 16:2-8 through slowly. What are different shocks that the women would have felt as they discovered the empty tomb?
- What possible explanations are there for the empty tomb and the missing body?
- How convincing do you find the evidence for Jesus' resurrection? [If the answer is 'not very', don't go over it again, but ask 'where do you think the flaws in the evidence are?' and 'what would you see as a better way of explaining the evidence?']
- Read through the handout on the resurrection, dwelling on bits that answer your group's particular questions.



### **1 Corinthians 15:12-19 – 15 minutes**

Hand around the copies of the section from 1 Corinthians. Explain that this is a part of the Bible that was written to a church in Corinth explaining the full significance of Jesus' resurrection.

- How many different reasons for whether Jesus' resurrection matters does Paul speak about in this short section? Can you put these in your own words?
- How does Paul say that our future resurrections are linked to Jesus' resurrection?
- If you were convinced beyond any reasonable doubt that Jesus had risen from the dead, would you acknowledge him as your Lord and God? Why do you think it is such a hard thing to do?

### **Round-up**

- Belief is not a leap in the dark.
- Jesus' resurrection proves that he can give eternal life and proves he is Lord of the universe.
- It is stupid to deny the Lord of life control of your own life.
- This is a lot to take in – think about what it would mean in practical terms to have Jesus as the Lord of your life. Weigh up these claims over the following week.
- Accepting or rejecting Jesus is not an intellectual decision, but a moral one. If you want more evidence, we can provide you with more material. Come and ask.
- What would turning to Jesus involve?

## Session 4: Helpful hints and possible questions

### **Why aren't we reading verses 9-20?**

This is the so-called 'longer ending' of Mark's Gospel. It doesn't appear in the very earliest transcripts of Mark. The section is therefore reasonably assumed to be a later ending [known at least by the time of St Irenaeus, who quoted the section in 170 AD]. The section was probably rounded off by someone other than Mark [it uses different style and vocabulary]. It was probably added because initially the gospel account would have been recounted by word of mouth. The original ending otherwise does finish abruptly – probably deliberately, forcing the question: have you yet seen Jesus, why he came and what it meant to follow him?

### **Was the tomb really empty?**

Nobody – not even Christianity's opponents – denied the empty tomb.

### **How did the Jewish authorities explain the empty tomb?**

Matthew 28:15 and John 20:15 combat the common argument used by the Jews, who did not deny the empty tomb, but claimed that the body had been stolen by someone. Matthew's account says that this Jewish argument is still in circulation at the time of the authorship of his gospel. The same argument dragged on into the middle of the second Century, when Justin Martyr wrote in about 150 AD. He quotes an official circulation of the Sanhedrin [Dial 108], which says, "One Jesus of Galilee, a deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he had been laid after being un-nailed from the cross, and they deceive men by saying he is risen from the dead and has ascended into heaven." This remained the anti-Christian argument until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Is there any other evidence to the truth of the disciples' account?**

Early church records suggest that eleven of the twelve apostles were executed for their faith. If they admitted that the resurrection was fabricated and had renounced their faith, they would have lived. Why would they want to make it up, when the hope that Christianity brings relies entirely on the fact that Jesus beat death and was raised again?

## SESSION 5: What difference does Jesus make?

**Aim:** To explain what it means to live a Christian life. The session will include teaching on the cost both of following Jesus and of rejecting Him and will encourage people to choose the former.

### Leaders' preparation

- Read Mark 8:27-38 and 10:17-31, and prepare the study.
- Questions to consider: XXX?
- Read 'Me, A Christian?' and familiarise yourself with the steps to lead someone to Christ.

### Talk outline

- Read Mark 8:27-38 – remember to give the page number. The groups should already be familiar with 8:37-30, which they looked at in the first study.
- In verse 34, Jesus calls his hearers to be willing to die for him: the only people carrying crosses in Palestine in those days would have been those who were on their way to their execution. If we want to be his disciples we must be willing to go the way he travelled: the way of self-sacrifice which took Him to the cross.
- In practice this 'dying' means putting a desire to please him above a desire to please ourselves, living out the spiritual reality that he is at the centre of the universe. In what areas may there be a clash between our will and Christ's will? Sex, drink and drugs? Pride, arrogance, selfishness, lust and greed? Gossip and backstabbing?
- It is hard to do what Christ calls on us to do in this passage: we will not simply have to contend with our own natural reluctance to hand over the running of our lives to Christ. We will also have to face the reaction of others. It is not easy living for Christ in a world that has rejected Him.
- Is it really all worth the effort? What is the 'life' that we 'save' [verse 35] if we go Christ's way? What does he offer to those who trust in Him? Above all he offers forgiveness, friendship with the God who made us and a certain hope for the future of a place in heaven. It's what Jesus called 'life to the full' [John 10:10] in this world and the next. Its life as God designed it to be.
- Perhaps include a word of personal testimony: have you gained more than you gave up?
- The decision whether to follow Christ or not is a matter of life and death. We must be willing to die to ourselves, putting Christ first. Only then will we enjoy the life that he offers.
- Today's group discussions will also be looking at the theme of what it means to follow Jesus. Set the context for 10:17-31.

### Group discussion: Mark 10:17-31

#### Explanation of the passage for leaders

XXX

XXX.

#### Passage Outline

XXX.

#### Suggested questions

A prayer for forgiveness will be offered, based on Mark 1:15: 'repent and believe':

- Repent – turn to God and accept his gift of forgiveness and a restored relationship with him – NOT just 'turning over a new leaf', but turning back from our way to God's way.
- Believe – to trust that Jesus' death is sufficient to cover sin and receiving a new and satisfying life from him, with comfort and power through the Holy Spirit.

[At the end of this, all group members will be asked to fill out a form, where they will be able to say if they prayed the prayer, and what sort of follow-up they wish to have. Look for an opportunity to chat with your group members, either then or at another time. If someone tells you that they prayed the prayer, arrange to meet them to talk further.]

#### Helpful hints and possible questions

**I could never keep up the Christian life....**

True – you can't on your own. But Jesus promises that if you follow him, he'll never let you go [10:26-28]. You do not need to rely on your own strength, because God promises the Holy Spirit to all who follow him. He will give you strength and power to live for him.

**What does it cost to become a Christian?**

In some ways, nothing – it's a free gift for all who come to Jesus [XX]; in other ways, everything – there is a great cost in following Jesus first [8:35-38].

**The Christian life sounds too boring...**

The Christian life is hard, but certainly not boring! It is real life, life as it was supposed to be. Life to the full, the best life, that lasts forever! XXX

# Mad, Bad or God?

**Jesus of Nazareth never wrote a book, yet more has been written about him than anyone else in world history. Jesus never travelled, yet he has more followers worldwide than any other person, living or dead. His birth split time [BC/AD]. His influence on the ancient and modern world is incredible, but who is he?**

For many people, Jesus is a trigger than switches on misconceptions and distortions: he has become a victim of people's desires to tame him. Few people seem to want to expose the true man, for fear that he might not be as inoffensive as we pretend. We can come to significant conclusions about Jesus when we discover the available evidence.

1. **He existed** – this is not at issue amongst historians.
2. **He claimed to be God** – see, for example, **Mark 14:61-64, John 8:57-59, John 10:30-33** and **Luke 21:27** for direct claims and notice his indirect claims in **Matthew 14:33, John 20:27-29** and **Luke 5:20-24**.
3. **He died for that claim** – Jesus died claiming to be God [see **Matthew 26:64**]. Also see other non-Christian documents, such as the Babylonian Sanhedrin 43a and Josephus' *'Antiquities'*.
4. **The Church was founded on Jesus as God** – Lucian writes in *'The Passing of Peregrinus'* that 'the disciples have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and worshipping that crucified sophist'. The Christian claim is that God was revealing himself to the world supremely in Jesus of Nazareth.

Logically, this leaves only three possibilities...

## MAD?

To believe you are God in a first century Jewish culture would mean that you were totally detached from reality. This is no mere flight of fantasy. Historian Philip Schaff wrote this:

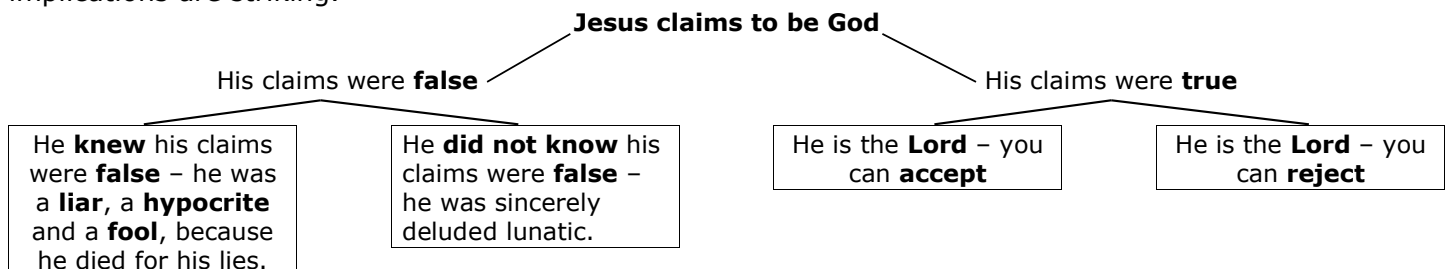
*'Is such an intellect - clear as the sky, bracing as the mountain air, sharp and penetrating as a sword, thoroughly healthy and vigorous, always ready and always self-possessed - liable to a radical and most serious delusion concerning his own character and mission? Preposterous imagination!'*

## BAD?

The evidence of Jesus' life and teaching, which exemplify integrity and compassion, do not allow us to entertain this possibility. That Jesus manipulated his followers into leaving Judaism, being rejected by their own families and by society, and dying horribly for what was nothing more than a fraud is as ridiculous as it is repulsive.

## GOD?

The quality of Jesus' life, teaching and miracles is evidence that he was not a fraud or a fanatic, but rather who he claimed to be. If we can't accept that, it's probably an anti-supernatural knee-jerk reaction which is responsible, and not a considered response to the available evidence. If Jesus' claims are true, then the implications are striking.



*'I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'* – **Professor CS Lewis**

# Firestarter on ... Sin

## 1. The Importance

- Unbelievers don't understand this concept – but its easy to demonstrate.
- Sin is a unique teaching only taught fully in Judaism and Christianity.
- It can only be understood with a reference to God – that he makes us for his purposes and we rebel against our Maker.

## 2. Key Biblical References

- **Old Testament:** Genesis 3; Romans 3:9-18 refers to Psalms 5:9; 10:7; 14:1-3; 36:1; 53:1-3; 140:3; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Isaiah 59:7-8.
- **New Testament:** Matthew 7:11; Mark 7:20-23; John 6:44; John 8:34; Ephesians 2:1-3; 1 John 1:8-10.

'There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God. All have turned away.' – **Romans 3:10-12**

This verse shows how sin is relational, falling short of God's standards and rejecting him.

## 3. The Concepts

- The **universality** of sin: we all reject God:
  - No-one seeks God – he has to come and get us – Romans 1:18-20, 3:9-18, 5:12-19, 1 John 8:1-10;
  - Jesus was the only exception – see 1 Peter 2:22, John 8:46, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15, 9:14.
  - NOTE: Mary was NOT an exception – see Luke 11:27-28, Mark 3:33-35.
- The **nature** of sin: we try to run our life without God:
  - The Bible focuses on 'sin' and not 'sins' [where sins are understood to be the expressions and symptoms of sin]. Sin is setting ourselves above God's law, rejecting that God has the right to regulate us. See 1 John 3:4. Motives shape the quality of the action – we can still seem to be good, even if we are rejecting God. Sin is the attitude that describes why we're doing it, not what we're doing.
  - Genesis 3: shows the problem: Adam wanted to be the same as God. Now humans are makers of their own law – see Genesis 11; Romans 1:18-32 etc.
- The **consequences** of sin: we fail to rule ourselves or society or the world:
  - God's response is one of holy wrath: Genesis 3; Romans 1:18-32, 6:23; Mark 9:42-50.
  - Our nature has changed. We are now under the control of the devil and are committed to lies, especially to the one that says we are the determiners of good and evil. We will always be wrong. See Ephesians 2:1-3, John 8:34.
  - **We fail to rule ourselves** – we can't even get up when our alarm goes off!
  - **We fail to rule society** – James 4, Romans 7, Galatians 5.
  - **We fail to rule the world** – we are alienated from it – Romans 8:18-39, Revelation 21.
  - Death enters the world – we are children of Adam – see 1 Corinthians 15:22, Romans 5:12-21. We are condemned to death as a corporate part of humanity.
  - We are caught up in a cosmic battle and have replaced God with the devil.
  - Religion is a human construct, and constitutes us running away from God, not to him. We worship our own things that we cannot control.
  - We are depraved, unable to do good – Romans 8:5-9. We cannot please God: Jeremiah 17:9, Isaiah 64:4-6, Ephesians 2:1-12, Luke 17:10.

# Resurrection?

**Anyone seriously investigating Christianity must at some stage turn their mind to the different explanations for Jesus' resurrection. And the truth is that everybody puts their trust in one explanation or another. Whether we believe the Christian contention or not, we base our lives, consciously or not, on a belief about whether Jesus rose from the dead.**

The stakes are high: if Jesus rose from the dead, the implications for our lives are vast. If he did not, according to one Bible writer, the whole of Christianity is futile. When we get down to it, there are certain things we know for sure. The disciples certainly claimed that Jesus rose. And Jesus either did or did not rise. This leaves only three options:

1. Jesus did not rise – and the disciples knew this – **the disciples were deceitful.**
2. Jesus did not rise – and the disciples did not know this – **the disciples were deluded.**
3. Jesus did indeed rise from the dead.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate each of these options in turn. Obviously an article of this length cannot be exhaustive and, to some degree, it is bound to simplify the evidence. But it is still of some use for those investigating Christianity's greatest claim. As we evaluate the different options, we need to realise three preliminary things:

**1.** This article is not trying to 'prove' the resurrection. Such an effort is doomed to failure. In the final analysis, 'proof' of anything, even of historical events, is impossible. When looking into historical claims that it is always possible to ask for more evidence. For example, I may want more evidence before I believe that the Battle of Hastings happened in 1066, but the real question is "Do I have all the evidence we need?" It is the same with the resurrection. The question is not, "Do I want more evidence?" but "Do I have all the evidence I need?"

**2.** We must treat all the options evenly. It may be tempting to put one theory [normally someone else's!] under much closer scrutiny than any other. If we are to have integrity, we must all [Christians included] put every option through the same mill. Whatever our conclusion, we must not believe it blindly: the question is too significant to be satisfied with half-answers. It is as foolish to reject the claims of the resurrection because people we know have rejected them as it is to believe them because we were told to at school. On a matter of such importance, second-hand faith and second-hand doubt are both great evils. We need great integrity.

**3.** The question of Jesus' resurrection [or not] is not purely intellectual. It is also moral. Some people reject the claims of the resurrection of Jesus simply because they do not want to submit their lives to his moral authority. Other people believe just because they find the 'faith' of some Christians appealing. We must be aware that our moral choices can blind us, and consider the evidence with an open mind.

## **Possibility 1: The disciples were deceitful – they knew that Jesus had not risen**

This requires that the accounts of the first Easter and of the succeeding forty days were mere lies or fabrications. If so, they must be decisively dismissed.

The Bible writer Paul records of how Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at the same time – and tells his readers that many of these people were still alive, should they wish to verify his account. But this was only one of many 'resurrection' appearances. Think of the number of witnesses; of the quality of the ethical teaching which they gave to the world, and which, even on the testimony of their enemies, they lived out in their lives. To say that the disciples were deceitful requires an explanation of the historical fact that not one of them, even under the pressure of persecution, rejection and tortuous death ever went back on their testimony to have seen Jesus alive. Consider too that a band of men were transformed almost overnight from craven cowards, huddling and hiding in a back room, into a company of fearless witnesses that no-one could silence – testifying boldly that they had seen Jesus alive. It is a psychological absurdity to suggest that such a transformation was the result of nothing more than a conspiracy to foist a miserable deception on the world.

Many who think that the disciples were deliberately deceiving people about the 'resurrection' suggest that the disciples stole the body of Jesus from the tomb to authenticate their claim. But apart from the problems of getting through a well-trained Roman guard, whose lives would have been at stake, and moving the stone, it is difficult to imagine that this pathetic group of disciples would have performed a night-time raid on the tomb. All their hopes and expectations had been dashed by Jesus' death just days earlier. But if they did raid the tomb, to say that they stole the body, and buried it furtively somewhere else [why?] and then proceeded to foist this miserable fraud on the world is hard to swallow. The whole thing flies in the face of the things we know for sure about the disciples: their ethical teaching, their quality of life, their steadfastness in suffering and persecution. Nor does this explanation even begin to account for their dramatic transformation from dejected cowards into evangelists no-one could muzzle.

## **Possibility 2: The disciples were deluded – they thought Jesus had risen, but he hadn't**

Over the years a series of scholars have made repeated attempts to explain away the stories of the resurrection as mere legends. But they have failed: there is no reasonable doubt that the testimony to the resurrection can be traced back to the first decade after the event, not nearly enough time for legend to have developed. Neither are we talking about stories handed down through the generations, subject to Chinese Whispers, but accounts written while eyewitnesses were alive to verify or dismiss them.

The accounts of the resurrection don't smack of legend. Which legend-monger would have Jesus appearing first to Mary, a reformed prostitute [whose testimony would be rejected out of hand] and say that she mistook him for a gardener? Surely the legend-monger would have described the beautiful scene of Jesus appearing to his heart-broken mother or to the downcast apostles? When we compare the New Testament accounts with those recorded in the apocryphal gospels written a century or two later, we realise that they are too restrained, dignified and true to life to be legends.

That is why no scholarly critic today appears to be suggesting that these stories are either lies or mere legends. On the contrary, all admit, as they must, that the apostles firmly believed their master had risen from the dead. Instead, then, the critics' attempts to explain away the story of Easter comes through putting a wedge between the historical records of the empty tomb on the one hand and the resurrection appearances on the other. To do this, they have come up with a number of ingenious explanations for why the tomb was empty, and where the body had gone. The resurrection appearances are then dismissed as some form of hallucination or psychological experience which convinced the apostles, but not grounded in historical fact. We'll consider two of the most common 'rationalisations':

**The disciples came to the wrong grave.** This appears a more reasonable suggestion: that the body of Christ was moved to another grave for some other reason or another, on the orders of the Chief Priests or Joseph of Arimathea [who owned the tomb]. The disciples came to the wrong tomb, and concluded Jesus had risen.

But remember that none of the disciples were expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. 'Jesus is alive' would hardly be the first thought to leap into their minds on finding the tomb empty. And within seven weeks, Jerusalem was buzzing with the apostles' teaching about the resurrection. It caused a major stir in the city, causing embarrassment and heart-ache for the city's authorities. Why then did they not issue an official denial of the resurrection, and say that the body had been moved on their orders? If this didn't work, why did they not produce as witnesses the soldiers who were supposed to have carried the body away? Or why did they not produce the body to silence the disciples once and for all?

**Jesus never really died.** This theory says that Jesus never actually died on the cross, but only fainted. When he was placed in the tomb, he was still alive. After several hours he was revived, got up and left. But the problems with this theory are insurmountable.

Consider Jesus' suffering before and during the crucifixion: the beating, the thorns, carrying the cross, being nailed hands and feet, hanging there for hours in constant danger of suffocation, the agony of lifting himself up to avoid it, the spear through his side. Consider the skill of the Roman soldiers at crucifying people in this way. They were in good practice and were under threat of death for neglecting their duties. Both the centurion and soldiers confirmed Jesus' death by thrusting a spear into his side. And they were so sure of his death that they broke with tradition and did not break his legs, to quicken the process of execution. And consider the obstacles of the tightly-bound grave clothes, the heavy stone and the Roman guard. Is it really possible that Jesus could have been alive at all, let alone alive enough to unwrap himself [meticulously putting the grave clothes back in one piece!], remove the stone, slip past the guard, and prevent himself to his disciples in such great splendour and physical condition that they mistook his resuscitation for a resurrection? And why did no-one at the time consider the possibility that Jesus was only resuscitated? Resurrections were no more common then than today.

The facts make it difficult to believe these alternative explanations. Let's consider them once again: Jesus was dead. Jesus was buried. Jesus was missing. Jesus was seen. Jesus' resurrection was preached. It is more logical to believe that Jesus rose from the dead than it is to believe any alternative explanation.

## **Possibility 3: Jesus rose from the dead**

The proclamation of the resurrection lay at the heart of Christian teaching right from the start. All the New Testament documents and all pagan and Jewish documents testify to the triumphant faith and witness of the first generation of Christians. Such evidence, to say nothing of the overwhelming circumstantial evidence provided by the growth of the church, shows that the disciples were convinced that Jesus rose from the dead. But more than that, we too can be sure that Jesus rose from the dead. He claims that in the testimony of the apostles we have all the evidence we need to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. In fact, Jesus rebuked Thomas, one of his disciples, for not believing when the others told him they had seen Jesus alive. Through the account of Thomas, Jesus speaks the same message today: "Stop doubting and believe."