

CONTENTS

PREFACE	Before We Begin p 2
WEEK 1	Introduction p 7
WEEK 2	Jesus - Who Was He? p 11
WEEK 3	Jesus - Why Did He Come? p 17
WEEK 4	Jesus - His Death p 23
WEEK 5	What is Grace? p 29
WEEK 6	Jesus - His Resurrection p 35
EXPLORING CHRISTIAN LIFE	
	The Church p 42
	The Holy Spirit p 43
	Prayer p 45
	The Bible p 46
WEEK 7	What is a Christian? p 47
WEEK 8	Continuing as a Christian p 51
WEEK 9	Choices - King Herod p 55
WEEK 10	Choices - James, John & Bartimaeus .. p 59

PREFACE

BEFORE WE BEGIN

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

Welcome to *Christianity Explored*.

Over the next ten weeks, we will explore three questions that cut right to the heart of Christianity: Who was Jesus? Why did he come? What is involved in following him?

Don't be afraid to ask questions, no matter how simple or difficult you think they are. And if you have to miss a week, don't worry. You can always ask someone in your group for a quick summary of what you've missed.

So who was Jesus? Why did he come? And what does it mean to follow him?

OUR GUIDE, MARK

To help us answer those questions, we're going to use one of the books of the Bible. It's a book named after its author, Mark.

But before we start looking at the Bible, here are some tips on finding your way around it:

- The Bible is divided into two main sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was written before Jesus was born and the New Testament was written after Jesus was born.
- There are 66 books in the Bible: 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament.
- Every Bible has a contents page at the front that will help you find the books referred to in this *Study Guide*.
- Each book of the Bible is divided up into chapters and each chapter is further divided into individual verses, all of which are numbered.

So “Mark 1:1 – 3:6” refers to the book of Mark, chapter 1, verse 1, through to chapter 3, verse 6. All the Bible references in this *Study Guide* are written in this way.

- There are four accounts of Jesus’ life in the Bible, all named after their authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They’re known as “Gospels” (the word “gospel” literally means “good news”).
- You can find the book of Mark (also known as Mark’s Gospel) about three-quarters of the way through your Bible, between the books of Matthew and Luke.

WHY SHOULD WE READ MARK’S GOSPEL?

One reason to read Mark is that his book is the shortest of the four Gospels!

Another reason is that Mark opens his book with a staggering claim. In his first sentence, Mark claims that Jesus Christ is “the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). In other words, Mark tells us that Jesus is God in human form.

By reading Mark, you have the opportunity to prove – or disprove – the writer’s claim.

CAN WE RELY ON MARK’S GOSPEL?

You may be wondering whether Mark is a reliable place to find out about Jesus. So it’s important to ask the same questions we should ask of any document that claims to record history:

What do we know about the author?

Mark was a close associate of Peter, who was one of Jesus’ “apostles” (those who Jesus specifically called to be witnesses of his life; see Mark 3:14). Papias, writing in about AD 130, recorded the connection between Mark and Peter: “Mark being the interpreter of Peter, whatsoever he recorded he wrote with great accuracy.”

When was the document written?

Peter clearly knew he would soon be killed for his belief in Jesus and wrote: “I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be

able to remember these things” (2 Peter 1:15). Peter died in the mid-sixties AD, so the evidence suggests that Mark wrote his Gospel either just before or just after Peter’s death, in order to accurately preserve Peter’s eyewitness testimony.

Was it written a long time after the events it records?

Jesus died in about AD 30. That means there was a gap of around thirty years between the events Mark records and the date he wrote about them. This is well within the lifetime of those who lived through the events he describes, so many of Mark’s readers would have been able to spot any fabrications or inconsistencies. There were also many hostile eyewitnesses who were anxious to discredit him. Mark had to make sure that his account was trustworthy.

Have the original documents been accurately passed down to us?

If the originals of the Bible or any other ancient document do not exist, then the following questions need to be asked to assess the reliability of the copies:

- how old are the copies?
- how much time has elapsed between the composition of the original document and the copies that now exist?
- how many copies have been found?

▶ *The table below answers these questions for three widely trusted historical works and compares them with the New Testament. Fill in the blank space, and compare your guess with the answer at the bottom of the page.*

	Date of original document	Date of oldest surviving copy	Approximate time between original and oldest surviving copy	Number of ancient copies in existence today
THUCYDIDES' HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR	c. 431–400 BC	AD 900 plus a few late 1st century fragments	1,300 years	73
CAESAR'S GALLIC WAR	c. 58–50 BC	AD 825	875 years	10
TACITUS' HISTORIES AND ANNALS	c. AD 98–108	c. AD 850	750 years	2
THE NEW TESTAMENT	AD 40–100 (Mark AD 60–65)	AD 350 (Mark 3rd century)	310 years	*

As the table shows, the interval between the original composition date of the New Testament and the date of the oldest surviving copy is comparatively small. Moreover, in contrast to the other works, there are an enormous number of early manuscript copies or portions of the New Testament.

Do other historical documents support Mark's account of Jesus?

Even without the New Testament accounts of Jesus or other Christian writings we still have plenty of evidence concerning the life and claims of Jesus. For example, the Samaritan historian Thallus (AD 52) discusses the darkness that fell during the crucifixion (recorded in Mark 15:33). And Josephus, a Jewish historian writing in the first century AD, has the following to say: "Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of the Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day."

EXPLORING MARK'S GOSPEL

Each week, you'll have the opportunity to explore a few chapters of Mark.

The HOME STUDY sections provide questions to help you do this. By the end of Week 6, you'll have read through the whole of Mark's Gospel.

As a group you'll also look in detail at passages of particular interest.

Here are some tips to help you get the most out of Mark's Gospel:

- Remember that Mark is writing with a clear purpose: to tell people the good news about Jesus (Mark 1:1). Mark's Gospel is not just a random collection of incidents from Jesus' life and extracts from his teaching. Instead, he carefully selects events from the life of Jesus, and deliberately

places them in a certain order. He does this because he wants his readers to understand exactly who Jesus was.

A good example of this occurs in Mark 15:33–39. Why does Mark take us from events at the cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem (verses 33–37), to the temple in the heart of the city (verse 38), and then back to the cross (verse 39)? It's because he wants us to understand that these events are connected in some way and tell us something about Jesus.

- As with any book, context is very important. If you come across something you don't understand, ask yourself what has happened immediately before, and take into account what happens immediately afterwards.
- It's also important to set Mark in the context of the Bible as a whole. Just as it would make no sense to start reading Mark's Gospel at chapter 10 without thinking about what he has written in the first nine chapters, it's also vital to see how Mark fits in to the overall narrative of the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament, we read of God's gradually unfolding plan to draw people into a relationship with him. In Mark's Gospel, we see that plan reaching its conclusion. The Old Testament quotations in Mark help us to understand this.

For example, in Mark 1:2–3, Mark quotes from the Old Testament. Why does he do that? And why does he do it at this point? It's because he wants us to understand that the events he describes are part of a bigger picture.

As you explore Mark's Gospel, you will be able to discover for yourself who Jesus was, why he came, and what it would mean to follow him.