



## FACILITATOR'S NOTES AND SCRIPT

### AIM for this session

- \* To introduce attendees to the style and ethos of the course and help them see value in attending all of the course's sessions.
- \* To start looking at the evidence for Christianity's claims as found in the beginning of Mark's Gospel (particularly introducing the attendees to the concept of biblical prophecy)

### OVERVIEW of this session (70-90 minutes)

1. INTRODUCTION (10-15 minutes)
2. OPENING CONVERSATION (10-15 minutes)
3. MAIN PRESENTATION (25-30 minutes)
4. PERSONAL REFLECTION (20-25 minutes)
5. CONCLUSION (5 minutes)
6. 'MINGLING' (You may wish to allow some time at the end for people to just chat)

### INTRODUCTION (10-15 minutes)

Good evening<sup>1</sup> and welcome to the opening session of *Discovering Christianity*. As you may already know my name is [YOUR NAME] and I'll be facilitating tonight's discussion. The format for tonight and the other six sessions in the course is quite informal with time for getting to know each other a bit better, as well as a main presentation on an aspect of Christianity. There's also plenty of time for discussion and being able to apply any lessons into our own lives today.

#### THE COURSE

The *Discovering Christianity* course is a series of presentations and discussions on the subject of the Christian faith and the man we know as Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus Christ. The course uses one of the four "Gospels"<sup>2</sup> (or biographies) of Jesus' life known as the Gospel of Mark.

Who was "Mark"? Mark is mentioned a few times in the Bible by other writers and is believed to have worked with the Apostle Peter during the first few decades after the death of Jesus. The exact date of when Mark wrote his "Gospel" is unknown but it is probably sometime between 65-70AD (30-40 years after the death of Jesus).

<sup>1</sup> Or other appropriate greeting depending on the time of day

<sup>2</sup> "Gospel" is an Old English word meaning "good news" and the word today is often used to describe the four biographies of Jesus' life found at the beginning of the New Testament.

We're using the *Gospel of Mark* for this series for a few reasons. First of all, it's the shortest of the four Gospels we have, so that's not a bad reason to use it! 😊 Another reason is that it quickly links a series of action scenes together without editorializing too much.

The Bible as a whole is not so much a book, but a collection of 66 books and writings written over a 1,500 year period (approximately). There are 39 "books" in what we refer to as the *Old Testament*<sup>3</sup> and 27 "books" in the *New Testament*<sup>4</sup> (Facilitator: It might help to physically show them in your Bible these two sections. Remember, some people may have never read a Bible before.)

#### EVIDENCE FOR JESUS OUTSIDE OF THE BIBLE

As I mentioned, during the seven sessions of this course we'll be focusing primarily on the person of Jesus. We'll look at questions like: Who was he? What did he do and say? What significance did his life and death have? What promises did he make? What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus?

It might be useful to point out at this stage that there is significant evidence outside of the Bible to show that Jesus was a real person of history.

For example, Jesus is mentioned by Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus who the Encyclopedia Britannica calls "probably the greatest historian (that) wrote in the Latin language".<sup>5</sup> He wrote during the century that Jesus lived and when writing about the "Great Fire of Rome" in 64AD reportedly started by Emperor Nero, Tacitus says:

*"To suppress the rumour, [Emperor Nero] falsely charged the guild, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius."*<sup>6</sup>

Tacitus' colleague, Pliny "The Younger" observed during his role as a Roman Governor: *"that (Christians) were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang...a hymn to Christ as to a God..."*<sup>7</sup>

Another historian who wrote during the same century as the life of Jesus and mentions him was Flavius Josephus.<sup>8</sup> Josephus states:

*"At this time there was a wise man called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and other nations became his disciples."*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Some people prefer to refer to it as the *Hebrew Bible*

<sup>4</sup> Some people prefer to refer to it as the *Christian Bible*

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9070868/Tacitus>

<sup>6</sup> Annals, Book 15, Section 44

<sup>7</sup> Epistles, Book 10, Section 96

<sup>8</sup> Josephus was a Jewish historian who was in the employment of the Roman authorities

<sup>9</sup> Antiquities, Book 18, Section 33

So, you can see that we can't put Jesus in the same category as King Arthur or the Easter Bunny. Jesus is not a myth or made-up-story, he is a real person of history.

**OPENING  
CONVERSATION  
(10-15minutes)**

Before we have a look at the opening of the Gospel of Mark, it might be useful to go around the group and introduce ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

On your handouts for this session you will see there are a couple of questions in the **OPENING CONVERSATION** section. Let's have a look at them for a few moments.

1. Why did you choose to attend this session of *Discovering Christianity*?
2. What has been your past experience with Christianity?

**MAIN  
PRESENTATION  
(25-30minutes)**

**OPENING**

O.K., let's move on to the **MAIN PRESENTATION** and read together the opening sentence of Mark's Gospel.<sup>11</sup>

*"This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God"*<sup>12</sup>

Mark's biography of Jesus is different from many biographies of other people's lives in that Mark tells us his conclusion in the opening sentence. Mark believes Jesus to be the Messiah, a Jewish word meaning "God's special one". The Greek word for this Jewish word is "Christ". So, when we're talking about Jesus Christ, "Christ" is a title and not his last name as if you could find him under "C" in the Jerusalem phone book. 😊

It's interesting that Mark believed that there was something about Jesus that brought "Good News".<sup>13</sup> When we read newspapers and watch news reports on T.V. there are very few things you could describe as "Good News". The message of Christianity is that there is something to be very excited about and it's this subject that this course will look at over the seven sessions.

It's also interesting to note the second title Mark gives to Jesus: "the Son of God". At the time Mark was writing the Roman Emperors would give themselves the title "son of god" meaning that they were more than human and deserved to be worshipped. To refer to anybody else other than the Emperor in that way was against Roman

<sup>10</sup> Facilitator: Take a few minutes for each person at the table to introduce themselves. Sometimes it's useful to also share professions. If the group already knows each other then move on to the two questions at the top of the handout.

<sup>11</sup> Facilitator: If some of the people in the group are new to the Bible you may wish to explain the "Chapter and Verse" system for finding references. I have found it very useful to use the same edition of the Bible with all the attendees during the discussions, as it helps to refer to the page numbers as well as 'chapter and verse'.

<sup>12</sup> Facilitator: Use the Bible translation that you're most comfortable with for this course. I'm using the *New Living Translation* in this script as I've found it to have a good balance of scholarly approach and also modern-day language which is useful for people you have limited exposure to the Bible.

<sup>13</sup> Gospel is Old English for "good news" (From the combination of "god" = good + "spel" = news/story)

law and punishable by death. Mark wanted to make it very clear he thought Jesus was divine so he used two “titles”

1. Christ/Messiah, 2. “the Son of God”.<sup>14</sup>

### THREE CATEGORIES OF EVIDENCE

So, what does Mark use as evidence to back up his claim that Jesus is the God in human flesh? In the opening eleven verses we see three categories of evidence for Jesus being the “special one”. These three categories will come up through Mark’s book so it’s important to take note of them now.

### CATEGORY 1

THE BIBLE’S \_\_\_\_\_

The first category can be seen in verses 2 & 3 (read these verses).

*2 just as the prophet Isaiah had written: “Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, and he will prepare your way. 3 He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming! Clear the road for him!”*

It’s interesting that Mark ties in his claim about Jesus with a prediction made about 700 years earlier by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Isaiah’s writings were full of predictions regarding the coming of the Messiah and Mark is saying that these events are a fulfillment of these predictions.

And that’s the first of three categories of evidence that Mark is going to use to back up his claim that Jesus is the Messiah (*Complete the point in the handout:*

**THE BIBLE’S FULFILLED PREDICTIONS**).

Many people aren’t aware that a lot of the *Old Testament* writings have specific predictions about the Messiah. There are prophecies not only in Isaiah but also in such books as Psalms, Daniel, Malachi, Zechariah, and others regarding where the Messiah would be born<sup>15</sup>, some of the circumstances of his life<sup>16</sup> and death<sup>17</sup>, even the date of the Messiah’s death<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Facilitator: You may like to make reference to the following:

“By the way, most Bibles will point out in the footnotes that the earliest manuscripts do not include “the Son of God” as part of Mark’s Gospel. This doesn’t necessarily mean that Mark didn’t write “the Son of God” in his original document as it could have been “dropped” from subsequent copies because it was against Roman law to say something like this. On the other hand, if it is a later addition by another writer other than Mark it doesn’t really matter as the terms “Christ/Messiah” and “the Son of God” mean the same thing, that is: *God in human form.*”

Facilitator: The occasional ‘textual discrepancies’ like this one are pointed out in the footnotes of most Bible translations. I’ve found that it sometimes helps to point out these Bible footnotes to the group and explain them if necessary. It shows that you are being open, as well as helping them develop a habit of referring to footnotes as they read through the Gospel of Mark and the rest of the Bible.

<sup>15</sup> Micah 5:2

<sup>16</sup> Malachi 3:1, Zech 9:9,

<sup>17</sup> Zech 11:12, Zech, 13:6, Isiah 53:7

<sup>18</sup> See the prophecy of Daniel 9:20-27. This should be examined more fully in a later session.

Interestingly, as Mark wants to point out, these predictions have been fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus. This can mean a couple of things. Either:

1. Jesus knew about these predictions and orchestrated his life in such a way as to convince people that he was the Messiah<sup>19</sup>, or
2. It was all purely a coincidence, or
3. Jesus is the Messiah.

It's been estimated that the probability of one man fulfilling 8 of these *Old Testament* prophecies<sup>20</sup> is 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000 (i.e., 1 in 10 to the power of 17, or 1:10<sup>17</sup>). That's the same as someone being able to correctly predict the toss of a coin 56 times.

Let's take 48 *Old Testament* prophecies that Jesus fulfilled in his life and using the same mathematics we can determine that the probability of one person fulfilling them during his lifetime is 1 in 10 to the power of 157 (i.e. 1:10<sup>157</sup>). That's the same as someone being able to guess correctly the toss of a coin 521 times in a row.

If you had the ability to correctly call these types of probabilities, I'd like you to join me at the nearest casino! Together, we'd be very rich. 😊

Whether or not you agree with the math the point is the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy is a major factor for many people recognising Jesus as the Messiah and it is the first "category" of evidence that Mark uses.

## CATEGORY 2

### AN INDIVIDUAL'S \_\_\_\_\_

That leads us onto the second category of evidence in your handout for Jesus' Messiahship. As we read verses 4 to 8 we see Mark talk about John the Baptist.

*4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

<sup>19</sup> Many of the prophecies would be impossible to intentionally fulfill. For example:

1. Orchestrating the Roman justice system in order to die at a specific time by execution on a cross.
2. The 30 pieces of silver Judas was paid by the Jewish authorities for his betrayal of Jesus couldn't have been determined by Jesus himself (see Zechariah 11:12-13 and Matthew 26:14-15)

<sup>20</sup> These specific 8 prophecies and the mathematics behind it can be seen in the book "Science Speaks" written by Peter Stoner. See online reference at [http://www.geocities.com/stonerdon/science\\_speaks.html](http://www.geocities.com/stonerdon/science_speaks.html)

John was a very popular religious figure during the time who some people thought might be the Messiah, but John tells them he's not. John says that the Messiah is someone that people would personally meet sometime soon.

As we read further into Mark we see that it's the personal experience, that John the Baptist and others have with Jesus that leads them to the conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah. And that's the second point of tonight's main presentation, that the second category of evidence for Jesus being the Messiah is **AN INDIVIDUAL'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**. (Complete the point in the handout: **AN INDIVIDUAL'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**).

This category of evidence is more subjective than the first category, but I'd like to suggest that it has a valid place.

*(You may wish to include your own brief testimony here of why you're a Christian. My brief testimony is something like this: "When I first became a believer in Jesus I had a friend who challenged me to prove that there was a God but not to use the Bible. The first thing that came into my mind to use for evidence for my friend was the positive changes in my own life that were occurring. My own personal experience with the life and teachings of Jesus is a powerful indicator to me that Jesus was who Christianity says He is.")*

### CATEGORY 3

LIFE'S \_\_\_\_\_

The third and final category that Mark offers as evidence for Jesus' divinity can be found in verses 9-11.

*9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

I think that's Mark's third category of evidence: That is, **LIFE'S UNEXPLAINABLE EVENTS** (Complete the point in the handout: **LIFE'S UNEXPLAINABLE EVENTS**)

There are some things that happen in life that seem to defy known laws of science and nature. They seem to be supernatural. That is, above nature. Some people are quite comfortable with some of life's events being unexplainable and supernatural, others need to search for rational laws to explain everything. As we'll read over the next few weeks, Mark is going to describe some incredible events: Some people miraculously healed from illness. Others will be raised from the dead. Storm's will be calmed. Water will be walked on. Thousands of people will be fed with only a few fish and loaves of bread.

To Mark, these events in front of many eyewitnesses is a category of evidence to back up his claim that Jesus is God in human flesh.

## SUMMARY

So, Mark opens up his book with a claim, and then he offers up three categories of evidence. One of them objective, the second subjective, and the third supernatural.

Interestingly, these three categories are going to come up through the entire 16 chapters of the Gospel of Mark:

1. There are going to be some predictions made by Jesus that will come true.
2. People will have personal encounters with Jesus and their lives will be changed
3. And there will some incidents described that seemed to defy our understanding of nature.

That's the **MAIN PRESENTATION** for the evening, let's spend our remaining time together looking at the questions in the **PERSONAL REFLECTION** section of your handout.<sup>21</sup>

PERSONAL  
REFLECTION  
(20-25 minutes)

1. What are your thoughts on the three "categories of evidence" that Mark offers as initial proof that Jesus is the "Son of God"? Which one appeals to you the most and why
2. Do you think there are any other forms of "evidence" for the existence of God not mentioned in Mark's opening?
3. How do you feel about reading through segments of Mark's "Gospel" during the next six sessions ?
4. Is there a question that you have always wanted to ask God?<sup>22</sup>

CONCLUSION  
(5 minutes)

I hope you've found tonight's discussion valuable. We've looked at the belief of Mark (and that of Christianity) that Jesus was more than human and also some of the evidence to support that belief.

Next session we'll look at who Jesus himself claimed to be and what conclusions we can draw from his claims.

There is a short section of Mark that I'll ask you to read in preparation for next session. One of the aims of the course is that, over the next 6 weeks, we'll read through the entire 16 chapters of Mark to get a good overview of the work and teachings of Jesus. So the *Home Reading* for this week is from where we finished today (verse 11) up to Chapter 3 and verse 12.

There are also a couple of questions that might help focus your reading and you can find those on your handout.<sup>23</sup>

Thank you for coming and I hope to see you next session (*confirm the date/time*).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Facilitator: don't restrict yourself to these questions in the **PERSONAL REFLECTION** section. Allow the discussion to be directed by the issues and concerns of the participants. Just keep an eye on the time

<sup>22</sup> Facilitator: I've found that by writing these questions down (and even who asked them) is a useful reference in knowing how to orient subsequent sessions. I try to respond to most of the questions either during the presentations or in private with the person who asked.

<sup>23</sup> Facilitator: Show them where on the handout the *Home Reading* section is.

<sup>24</sup> Facilitator: It's important to end at the stated time as a sign of respect and to allow those who have other appointments. You will find that people will be encouraged to come back (and even invite a friend) if they have confidence that it will start and end at the stated time. If you are facilitating a group of people you might like to say "Please feel free to stay behind if you have other opinions you would like to discuss, or even just to chat". Maybe have some light refreshments to aid any additional conversation.