



The Life Course

Table Leaders Handbook

(Version 3- May 2023)

Have you considered the meaning of life and explored the claims made by Jesus in the Bible?

The Life Course is here to provide those who attend with the opportunity to find out about Jesus and consider the big questions in life.

This booklet provides you, as a Table Leader, with key information about the course.

The course runs for five weeks and is designed to lead straight in to the follow up course: Christianity Explored.

How the evening runs

Each week will follow this basic pattern:

- Welcome/chat in groups/icebreaker questions (10 mins)
- Talk (20/25 mins)
- Time to chat in groups (20 mins)
- Testimony/Q&A (10/15 mins)

The team roles

The 'welcomer' is the first point of contact each night for those attending Life and will provide name tags if relevant and a warm greeting. People are often wary and nervous about coming to Life and it is important that they are greeted and made to feel relaxed as soon as they arrive. Perhaps have a few icebreaker questions ready to use: name your top three chocolate bars, best holiday memory, your five minutes of fame etc

The 'host' sets the tone for the evening by welcoming everyone to Life and introducing each topic. Their role is to promote enthusiasm and coordinate the proceedings as well as assisting the speaker with any props and demonstrations required. At the end of each night they will close proceedings with a summary and a preview of the next topic

The 'table leader' is the link between the speaker, the message and those attending Life. It is very important that people feel comfortable enough to express their views, ask questions and wrestle with the issues. Your response to their questions and statements (even when they are incorrect) will greatly assist them to seek to find the truth. People can be nervous and unsure and it is important that they feel relaxed and unthreatened.

The aim of the course

Life is a five week course, the **main goal** of which (in conjunction with the follow up of Christianity Explored and Discipleship Explored) is to present the gospel in the expectation that this message is the instrument through which the Holy Spirit will bring to conversion those who do not know him while strengthening those who do.

There is a **secondary benefit** to the course. Our desire is to build a church, passionate about the gospel and lovingly skilful in their communication of it. Life presents a context in which we can interact with many genuine enquirers over a period of some weeks. This enables us to hear the objections, stumbling blocks and questions which enquirers voice, while learning and practicing strategies for how to help them through these.

To that end, consider the following.

“Evangelism is a process.” It has been said that nowadays most people need to hear the gospel many times before they grasp it and, by the power of the Holy Spirit are ready and able to respond to it.

This means:

- Our goal is to win people to a considered investigation of the gospel over a period of weeks or even months.
- Each night presents one small step in developing a person’s grasp of the gospel message.
- Many who think they have become Christians at the end of the course have not. Often they have become warmly disposed to the gospel and become Christians during the 7 week follow-up course.
- We must avoid impatience with unbelieving friends.
- People will often come thinking they are converted but are not. This is very common.

These considerations have profound implications for the way Christians should spend their time around unbelieving friends. Consider how the outsider feels when they come to Life. At first it will be very threatening for them. They will be wondering: “What have I let myself in for? Is it a cult? Will it be embarrassing? Will the people there be weirdos? Will I enjoy it? Perhaps my friend will be happy if I just come once!” Knowing all this we need to take great care. Here are some important suggestions...

DON'T

...talk about "insider topics" that make the enquirer feel that they have come to a club of which they are not a part.

...assume that those at your table are all Christians simply because they speak as if they are.

...think that this is the opportunity to ask all the hard questions you've had about Christian life which non-Christians have never even considered.

...consider that your role is to win them over by your apologetic arguments; not every question needs an answer.

...be dominating, bored, dismissive or intrusive.

DO

...be positive, warm and welcoming

...seek to foster relationships at your table

...be patient and affirming of their questions encouraging them to ask them

...seek to gently direct the conversation at the table

...seek to teach other church members who are in your group what you can about evangelism. This may be a matter of them learning from our example or from our mistakes!

Week 1: What is a Christian?

The aim of the evening:

To help put guests understand that in order to know what a Christian is we need to know who Jesus is and we can find that out from the Bible, which is a trustworthy source.

The script:

Settle in (10 mins)

Let people get refreshments and get seated

Welcome (2 mins)

(Introduce yourself) It's great to have you all here, so good to be here in person.

Some of you will be here because a friend invited you, some will have seen this online somewhere, however you found out, you're really welcome.

The Life Course is all about exploring the big questions in life, and over the next 5 weeks we'll be looking at what Christianity is and what answers it gives to the biggest question we face in life.

Some of you will have heard some of these ideas before, for some us though, this will be totally new. Either way, we're excited you're here and please feel comfortable to ask any questions during our time together. You won't be asked to do anything embarrassing, and you don't even have to speak if that's uncomfortable. But hopefully you'll feel like this is a place where you can ask what's on your mind.

And tonight, we're starting with a straightforward question: what is a Christian?

We're going to spend a few minutes discussing that question and getting to know each other a bit just on our tables. Before we do that I want to briefly introduce our speaker for tonight (invite up speaker and ask a few light-hearted questions to break the ice and help folk get to know the speaker).

Pre-talk questions (10 mins)

What is your understanding of what a Christian is?

How would you finish the statement: a Christian is...?

What is our answer based upon?

What ideas do people in our society have about Jesus?

What is your idea of the good life, and who do you think has it?

Talk introduction

Sorry to interrupt there, I'm sure there were loads of ideas bouncing around which is great. But we're going to tune in to this evenings talk. Feel free to jot down some notes or any questions that may pop into your mind as you listen.

Talk (25 mins)

Something of my story. Started following Jesus aged 19 just before heading to uni.

Raised in a Christian home, but as I hit mid teens, became less and less interested in church and the Bible.

I threw myself in to teenage culture and the football team- all that. But didn't deliver happiness. I knew, as I lay in my bed at night that this wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

And so, I decided to look afresh at the Bible and the claims of Jesus for the first time as an adult. And over about 19 months I became convinced that it was true and that I knew I had to follow Jesus. And we'd love for you to consider, perhaps for the first time, the claims of the Bible. Look at the evidence for yourself. We hope that you'll find life, in all its fullness.

We call this course 'life' because life, a good life, is what we're striving after isn't it!

What is life really all about? What answer does Christianity give?

I want to begin by picking up the question you were discussing around your tables: **what is a Christian?**

It sounds like a question that should be straightforward to answer, right?

After all, Christianity is the worlds biggest religion. Over 2 billion people globally identify themselves as Christians. It's been around more than five minutes! In fact the term 'Christian' has been in use for about 2000 years and the foundations of the faith stretch back much much further. Surely we should be able to answer the question about what a Christian is with relative ease?

But, in my experience at least, all sorts of responses come up!

People will say something like: a Christian is someone who...

Goes to church

Believes in God
Tries to be a good person
Has faith
Reads the Bible.

Why such a variety of answers?

Well, we all bring plenty of baggage with us as we respond to this simple question. Perhaps we've had our own experiences of the Christian faith: positive and negative. There is what we pick up from family and friends, it's what we see in the media, in films, on TV.

We form an opinion, we think we know what it's all about, when actually what we know about the Christian faith is simply the product of all the influences we've been subject to. Some of which we're conscious of, some not. Our perspective colours our response to the question: what is a Christian?

So how then do we form a right understanding of what Christianity is all about?

Well, we need to go to the root. The foundation . The source.

There is a perspective available which we can trust to be telling the truth. You see, Christianity is all about Jesus Christ.

Jesus was a real person, who really lived, 2000 years ago.

Who is Jesus?

At a very basic level he was Jew, born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, a carpenter, a religious teacher and the victim of a unjust execution.

Those statements are all true, but they are insufficient.

What did Jesus say about himself? Well, he made some pretty extraordinary claims!

He said: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:10)

"I am the Alpha and Omega...who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev 1:8)

Jesus' claims about himself are not that he's some religious teacher or life coach. His claims are much bigger!

He says that he is God. God's eternal son.

It is what Jesus says and does that forms the very core of the Christian faith.

And that means:

We don't determine what a Christian is: Jesus does.

His perspective is not just another possible perspective, but it is THE perspective. This is the word of God himself.

And so, to find the truth, to understand what life is really all about, to know what a Christian is, then we need to listen to Jesus. What does he say?

Well we can read about him in the Bible. We find what he says in the Bible. And a Christian, according to Jesus, according to the Bible someone who has been saved by Jesus and who now follows him as their king. Now there is a lot to unpack in that statement and we're going to take the next four weeks to do so. But that is the essence.

A Christian is someone who has been saved by Jesus and who now follows him as their king.

Jesus is the key to life. Life in all its fullness. These are big claims. Too big to ignore. Too significant to dismiss.

You've got to do something with Jesus. If it's true then it changes everything!

And so, the key place we must go to, if we're to get a fair understanding of the Christian faith, to consider it on its own terms, is to go to the original sources themselves. To the Bible.

Can we, can you, trust the Bible?

As we will see, there is overwhelming evidence, in the gospels, of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Big claims.

We need to have confidence in the Bible don't we. If this is all true then the implications are of immense proportions!

He is the one at the centre of the Christian faith. He is the one who can give us life.

And so, the answer to that questions that gnaws away in our hearts and minds, what am I here for, what is life really all about, the answer, according to Christianity and the Bible, is a person, it's the one who made you, Jesus Christ.

It is the key question isn't it. Because you and I weren't around to see the events the Bible talks about. We weren't there. No one who is alive today was there. So we are totally dependent on what the Bible says. So how do we know it's reliable and unchanged? How do we know it's true?

That is a fundamental question, a fundamental reality about the Christian faith, because it is a faith based on evidence and actual events in human history. It is absolutely not a case of leaving your brain at the door.

Listen to this brief interview with the Director of the Human Genome Project, Francis Collins.

Watch video

The man Jesus Christ is a person for whom we have a great deal of evidence. We cannot dismiss him a myth, that is to ignore the history, that is to ignore the evidence. So let's consider the evidence.

1) Taking the Bible on it's own terms

What does the Bible say about itself? Let's listen to the introduction to one of the gospels- one of the first four books of the New Testament- one of the biographies of the Bible.

We're going to hear the start of Luke's gospel. He is what Luke, a physician, the author, says about why he writes:

'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.' (Luke 1:1-4)

If we take the author of this gospel seriously, then we can't possibly dismiss his account as fiction can we? That is one possible option of course: the author could be deliberately communicating misleading information.

Or he could be mistaken.

Or he could be doing the work of a genuine historian. Carefully putting together the accounts he has heard from eyewitnesses into an orderly account.

That is certainly how Luke intends his gospel to be read. That is his purpose. He is writing history. In particular he is writing for a chap called Theophilus so that he could be certain about the things he's been taught.

And to do that, Doctor Luke does his work. He looks into what people said about Jesus. And so his account asks to be read carefully. And I would invite you to do that. If you've not before taken the opportunity, as an adult, to read, for yourself the accounts of the life of Jesus, then do so.

Read it the way it's intended to be read. We need to read it as history and assess it as history. See if it holds up to scrutiny.

The gospels claim to be history. But are they good history or bad history?

Let's think about how the Bible documents compare with other sources.

2) The Bible checks out with other sources

Let's see what other people were saying about Jesus at the time. Is there evidence outside of the Bible which confirms what the Bible says?

That's a natural instinct isn't it. When we hear a bit of big news we want to check it out for ourselves. When the COVID lockdown was announced, the first thing I did was grab my phone and listen to the Prime Minister's announcement myself. We want confirmation don't we! We want to know it's actually true.

And the Bible checks out.

Greco-Roman sources:

Tacitus (AD 112)

Christus, from whom the name Christians had its origin suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but also in the city of Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular.

Jewish historians:

Josephus (AD70-80)

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deed, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was perhaps the Messiah-Christ. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously, did not cease to do so. For they reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. And up till this very day the tribe of Christians named after him, has not died out.

There are many other sources, like these, we could quote. But these sources outside the Bible tell us quite a lot about Jesus:

- When he lived
- Where he lived
- That he was an influential teacher
- That he engaged with activities thought to be supernatural
- That he was executed, when and by whom
- That he had a brother called James
- People claimed to have seen him raised from the dead
- That he was widely known by the title Christ/Messiah
- Christians worshipped him as God
- The flourishing movement that came after him

These basic facts about the life and death of Jesus match up with the Bible's account. They agree with and give further credibility to the Bible's account of Jesus Christ.

In fact we have far more manuscript evidence for the life of Jesus than we do for the lives of some other important historical figures of the time, including Tiberius, the Roman emperor who ruled during Jesus' public ministry.

3) The Bible has historical integrity

Is the Bible we hold in our hands and can buy in the shops- is it the same Bible that was penned all those hundred of years ago?

There are more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. In addition to that there are 10,000 Latin manuscripts. As one scholar FF Bruce writes: 'there is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.'

There are in fact over 24,000 extant manuscript copies of part of the New Testament. No other document from antiquity even comes close to this. The closest is Homer's Iliad with 634 manuscripts. I

n addition to that there are the writings of the early church leaders which contain with them 86,000 quotes from the New Testament- so many that if somehow all the ancient NT manuscripts were to disappear overnight , it would still be possible to construct the whole NT from the writing of the early church leaders, apart from about 20 verses.

As Bart Ehrman acknowledges, 'the NT gospels are the oldest and best sources we have for knowing about the life of Jesus... this (he says) is the view of all serious historians of antiquity of every kind, from committed Christians to hardcore atheists.'

Just consider other key figures from history who we take for granted existed:

	Written	Earliest Fragment	Time span	Number of manuscripts
Caesar	100-44 BC	AD900	1000 years	10
Plato	427-347 BC	AD900	1200 years	7
Homer	900 BC	400 BC	500 years	634
New Testament	AD 40-100	AD 125	25-50 years	24,000

I think it is possible to conclude that the Bible has real integrity, at least when compared to other ancient documents and historical figures that we take as a given.

There is, I hope you are persuaded, reason to at least consider, seriously, the Bible and what it says. At it's core the Bible claims to be the revelation of a personal God who can be known and related to.

But can I encourage you to check out the evidence for yourself. If you've not read the Bible for your self, as an adult, then do so. Check it out. Don't take my word for it. Read it and discover for yourself, life in all its fullness, life with Jesus.

But for now, we'll spend a little time discussing what we've heard. A chance to pose a few questions.

Post talk discussion

What stood out to you from the talk tonight?

Francis Collins (Director of the Human Genome Project) said "I realised that I had arrived at an answer to the most important issue that we humans face- is there a God- and I had arrived there without ever really looking at the evidence... and I'm supposed to be a scientist." What did you think about his honest admission?

In the talk Paul said that 'we have far more manuscript evidence for the life of Jesus than we do for the lives of some other important historical figures of the time, including Tiberius, the Roman emperor who ruled during Jesus' public ministry.' Did that fact change how you think about the Bible and the record of Jesus life?

If you had questions about the reliability of the Bible were they answered by the talk? If not, what questions would you like some answers for?

Testimony (5min)

It's great to see all the chat going on, I'm sure we've just scratched the surface on a few things. But now we're going to watch a short video of Alec, he's a Christian; and he's just going to explain a bit about how a lot of what we've been talking about actually plays out in real life. Let's watch together.

Wrap up

Week 2: God made it

The aim of the evening:

To understand that God made everything and he made it with a purpose. We have been created for relationship with Jesus.

Pre-talk questions

How would you account for our existence? Where did we come from?

What is our purpose in life?

Talk

What is life for? What am I here for, what are you here for? What is my purpose in life?!

These are questions that we all ponder from time to time. And the world throws many answers at us!

The Bible has an answer and, I would argue, THE answer. Jesus gives us THE answer because of who he is.

Who you are gives you credibility on any given topic, or credibility can drain away given who you are!

If I wanted to speak to an expert on football, I would want to talk to Sir Alex Ferguson, because of who he is and what he's done in the game. I wouldn't go to my mate I play five a side with on a Monday night!

If I wanted to get an expert opinion on a health matter then I would go to a consultant who specialise in that area of medicine. I wouldn't ask the barista at my local cafe!

So why is Jesus the one to turn to for the answers to the big questions in life? Well, it is because of who he is.

The foundational reality that the Bible establishes is that God made everything.

And given that he made everything, he is the one we should listen to if we want to understand the world and our lives.

The Bible opens with these words:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1).

God created everything. Genesis, the first book in the Bible, is first of all polemic, a frontal assault on every other view of the world.

Every creation myth and story of the ancient (and modern) world is swept away and this truth is proclaimed to be the truth. The universe is not governed by chance! The world was created by the Sovereign God of majestic power, who is the Covenant God of masterful purpose; his creation has meaning.

The New Testament adds to this:

“He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” (Col 1:15-16).

It is in, through and for Jesus that everything in this universe has been created.

That is pretty staggering when we ponder the sheer scale of the universe! An estimated 100 billion galaxies, each with billions of stars. The trillion individual life forms alive on earth at this moment, comprised of 9 million species. The 8 billion people alive right now and the countless millions that have lived before us and who will come after us across 24,000 people groups and 195 countries.

Despite the scale, Jesus made it all and, staggeringly, he knows each of us by name. The Bible tells us that he made us and he knows each and every one of the hairs on our heads.

Two key implications:

One: the world, everyone and everything in it, belongs to God. This is his world, not ours. What each of us do in God’s world matters to him.

Two: God didn’t only create us, he also created the purpose of our lives. We were made for a purpose. He knows what we’re here for. The clear message is that God has ordered creation for mankind, in order that people shall seek him, know him, and rejoice in relationship with God.

So: what does Jesus say about the purpose of life?! What are we here for?

Well, let’s look at what Jesus said in an interaction he had with some of the religious leaders at the time about this very topic. The religious teacher asks Jesus about what matters most in life. What is it that God asks us to prioritise in life?

Here is what Jesus said in response:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matt 22:37-39)

So what matters most in life, according to Jesus?

Not the usual suspects. Not money, property, reputation or success.

What matters most is love.

That is the core. That is the meaning and purpose of our lives. We were created to love. To know and be known. To love and be loved.

The best of the worlds research actually backs that up.

One of the most viewed [TED talks](#) of all time (watched almost 40 million times) has the title: "[What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness](#)".

The man giving the talk is the Director of a 70 year long Harvard Study of Adult Development into what contributes to general wellbeing and happiness. It's an impressive piece of work.

They began follow 724 people from a range of backgrounds with the aim of discovering what makes for a good life. Over the decades they survey the same people asking thousands of questions and taking loads of measurements including brain scans and blood work.

They have discovered lots of very interesting things but they found that one thing had more effect on physical and mental health and longevity than anything else.

The thing that keeps us health and happy boils down to this: the answer is **not** money, **or** fame, **but** [good relationships](#).

And that is absolutely right; the key is relationships. It's love.

Freddie Mercury in spite of the fact that he had amassed a *huge fortune* and had attracted *thousands of fans*, admitted in an interview shortly before his death in 1991 that he was *desperately lonely*.

He said, 'You can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man, and that is the most bitter type of loneliness. Success has brought me *world idolisation* and *millions of pounds*, but it's prevented me from having the one thing we all need - *a loving, ongoing relationship*.'

I think we all know that. We don't need Freddie Mercury or a Harvard Study to tell us this.

In fact Jesus said exactly this 2000 years ago.

HOWEVER... there is one major difference. Yes, he agrees that loving one another is really important. But it is not the most important thing.

Listen again to Jesus words:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matt 22:37-39).

According to Jesus, the very centre of our existence, at the heart of our purpose for living is a loving relationship with the God created us, who created everything. That is what we were made for.

That is why nothing else on this planet will give us what we are looking for.

Jim Carey once said: "I wish that everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so that they can see it's not the answer."

We can have all the money and possessions and holidays we like, but they'll never satisfy. They will never satisfy because we were never created to be satisfied by those things- we were created for something more.

The author of the Chronicles of Narnia, CS Lewis put it this way:

"If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

Beyond the need for relationships with others Christianity points us toward another relationship: we're designed for something greater- for a relationship with the God who made us. That is the answer the Bible gives.

Our true purpose is found in know, relating to, God.

So that leaves us, leaves you, with a big question!

Is it possible to find happiness if you leave God out of the picture?

2000 years ago Jesus Christ came and answered that question for us.

He said that trying to live life to the full, to find true happiness, without God is an exercise in futility.

Just imagine with me: imagine that there is a creator. Imagine that he's good and kind, he intends life to the full for you, he offers you the key to that good life.

But you try and seek that life with no reference to him at all, you cut him out of the picture. It's never going to work. Nothing can fill that gap.

You can't get life in all it's glorious technicolour fulness if you cut the very source of life out of the picture.

Jesus claims that life, in all its fulness is found in him alone.

Jesus claims that if you are cut off from the life giving God then it really doesn't matter what you try to fill the gap with, it will never work because something irreplaceable is missing.

It's like you're a flower in a vase that's disconnected from its life source.

It may look good, beautiful even, for a while. But it's not going to thrive- the water will dry up. In fact it will soon die.

And for us to truly thrive, for all eternity, we need to be connected to the source of true life.

So, how do we do that? What does it look like to relate to the God who made everything and who made us? What does it mean to be a Christian?

Well, that is what we're going to think about over the coming weeks.

But it boils down to this:

God is the creator. We were made to live in relationship with him. But there is a significant problem. All is not well with the world. All is not well with us, because we, by nature, are sinners. We reject God and are therefore separated from him.

We are cut off from the source of life and goodness.

We are, the Bible tells us, deserving of judgment.

The only way back is through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He died on the cross and rose from the dead to take the punishment for our sins and to conquer death. A Christian is someone who therefore repents of their sin, is saved by Jesus and who follows him.

That is an outline of where we're going over the coming weeks.

But the key thing tonight is to understand that God made everything, he made you and me. He made us for a purpose and that purpose is to know him- to relate to him. It is only in Him that we find our meaning in life. To go chasing after meaning in other things will never satisfy.

Post-talk questions

In the talk Paul quoted Jim Carey who said: "I wish that everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so that they can see it's not the answer." We might agree with the sentiment, but do we live as if we do?

Week 3: We broke it

The aim of the evening:

To understand that we are sinners deserving of judgment and in need of a Saviour.

Pre-talk questions

What do you think is wrong with the world? How do you account for the hurt and sorrow we see all around us?

How would you define the word 'sin'?

Talk

To give you something of a heads up- this will be quite a sobering talk. But it is necessary. This talk will confront us with the reality of the human condition. We must deal with the problem before we get to the solution next week. So buckle up!

To say that all is not well with the world is something of an understatement. It hardly needs said and I doubt you need persuaded of the fact! We just need to look around us to see sadness and suffering and brokenness.

Yes, as we saw last week, God made everything. And he made everything with a purpose and our ultimate purpose is to know God, to relate to him. But that is not what we observe is it?

The world is broken. And much as we'd like to point the finger, we, that is humanity, must be prepared to take most of the blame. Most of the suffering we witness in the world is self inflicted. Just consider this horrifying statistics.

In the past 100 years, since the outbreak of World War I, 108 million lives have been lost through wars. It is estimated that 400,000 people are murdered every year and the majority of these were murdered by people known to them.

How do we account for that?

We look around for someone to blame. Government, or capitalism or land ownership. And there is undoubtedly elements of truth in those areas being responsible, but those things don't fully account for the state of the world.

Jesus gives us a far more penetrating and sobering assessment of what is wrong with the world. Listen to these words.

'And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness,

deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." (Mark 7:20-23)

So what does Jesus say is wrong with the world? Not violence or hatred or murder. Those are symptoms of the problem, not the source. The main issue is me and you. All of us. It's our hearts. The heart of the human problem, is the human heart.

Ok, we might say. That seems like a good analysis. I can see how that operates for the really bad people in the world: the murderers and rapists, the Hitler's and Stalin's of this world. But I don't really see myself in that category. I'm one of the good guys!

So, how do you see yourself?

Let's imagine that there is 100 story skyscraper. The top floors represent absolute goodness- human perfection is right at the top. Perfect people, good people, get to live there!

At the bottom is absolute evil. Hitler, for sure, lives on the bottom floor.

Where would you put Mother Theresa? The late Queen?

Where would you put yourself? Pick a floor....

But the question is, not where would I put myself, but where would Jesus put me?

Actually, he would put us all at the bottom!

We naturally bristle against that don't we!! But the thing is, we've misunderstood what goodness is.

What makes someone good?

Jesus was once asked that question and his answer is one that we've seen before at The Life Course. Here is what Jesus says:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matt 22:37-39)

There are two parts to Jesus' answer:

One- love the Lord your God with all your heart.

Two- love your neighbour as yourself.

When we think about what makes a good person we almost always think of the second part- the loving your neighbour part. We don't tend to think about the first part, the God part. But Jesus says that is central to the 'goodness issue'.

You see, something is good when it works the way in which it is meant to, the way in which it is designed to.

You and I are built to relate. Yes, to one another. But, most importantly, to God. We are designed to relate properly to God. We were made to have him at the very centre of our lives. But the Bible tells us, that we've not lived like that. We have not loved God with all of our hearts. In fact the Bible tells us that we're far from good!

Because even though God created you to love Him, that is not how you've lived. But it's not only you, it's all of us. We've all said "no" to loving God the way we should. We don't put him first in our lives. We don't listen to how he says to live.

The word the Bible uses to describe this is sin. Sin is a word, like the word 'Christian', that many of us find difficult to define properly. Many people associate the word sin with doing 'bad' things, or 'breaking God's rules'.

But whilst bad things and disobedience of how God tells us to live are examples of sin, it's not the definition of sin. Those are symptoms, rather than the source.

Sin is not about breaking rules. It's about breaking a relationship.

Even though Jesus makes it clear that God made us to be people who love him with all of our heart, soul and mind, the truth is that we haven't done it.

To love God means not only to know he's real, but to actively listen and do what he says. But none of us want to do this. We want to be independent and run our lives our own way.

We might say that God is in charge of our lives with our words, but our actions prove otherwise. All of us have actively rebelled against him.

So you see, sin is profoundly relational.

Let me give you a rather stark example of what I mean:

Imagine that you have a child. A very special kind of child.

At school - top of every class. Best at languages, science, maths. Best athlete. The lead in school play.

As a parent, is this a good child? Of course. This is the kind of kid that makes you look good!

After school finishes for the day, it gets even better.

They don't drop their bag, they hang it up. They prepare dinner for the family, do their homework, help their siblings, serve dinner, do the washing up and then tutor some underprivileged kids.

They go to bed without complaint and have the lights off by 9pm sharp every night.

Is this a good child? Yes! Amazingly good.

But there is one part of their behaviour I haven't mentioned.

In all their life - through everything they've done they've never once spoken to you or acknowledged your existence.

You congratulate them on school performance. They are silent.

You thank them for cooking dinner: they walk straight past you.

You go to give them a kiss good night, and whisper 'I love you'. In response, they roll over and ignore you. As a parent, is this still a good child?

No. Why not?

Because as a parent what you want more than anything else is a loving relationship between you and your child. You'd sacrifice everything else to have it.

And that is a small picture of how we've treated God.

God created us and calls us to love him, but we don't. Instead, we rebel against him. Which means that no matter how well we behave or act; it doesn't undo the fact that our biggest problem is the rejection of God. The Bible is unapologetically clear that we all sin.

It's not an insult that religious people use against non-religious people, or that "good" people make against "bad" people. The best person you've ever met is a sinner. So are you. So am I.

No matter how much we would like to ignore it and pretend it's not real, we can't, because it is and it destroys everything it touches. We see it everywhere around us. God tells us to love one another, but in our thoughts and actions we say 'no'. God tells us to forgive when people wrong us, but in our thoughts and actions we say 'no'. As a result our lives contain near constant conflict as we hurt one another again and again.

You see, we are the problem. You and me and every person. The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. That is the reality that explains the world. That is the reality of our deepest problem. We don't just sin against one another, but we've sinned against God. And there are consequences to that.

God made us. He made us for relationship with him.

But, as we've seen, we've rejected God. We've not loved him as we ought. Our sin separates us from God.

And the thing is, God hates sin. Sin is the source of all that is wrong in our world. Sin destroys. It has destroyed the life of every person who has ever walked this earth. None of us could point

to anyone whose life has not be radically impacted by sin! Sin brought death into the world- our greatest enemy and one we cannot avoid.

God cannot just ignore sin can he. Sin must be met with justice. Sin must be punished.

And Jesus promises that there is a day coming when justice will be done.

And deep down we do want justice. We know justice is right.

Imagine a man guilty of murdering a loved one of yours is brought into the court with clear evidence presented which shows his guilt. But imagine if the judge were to say: "you know what. I'm a loving and compassionate judge. I'm going to let you go free..."

Cue outrage! On what grounds could the judge let a guilty murderer go free?!

We want justice, don't we?!

But do we want justice from God? Because the Bible tells us we're all guilty of sin. Do we really want justice for how we've treated God? One day we will die and face Jesus in judgment for the life that we have lived. God is perfectly just and he cannot overlook sin or pretend it never happened.

That is the sober reality we must come to terms with.

But as well as being just, God is merciful. His desire is not that we should be punished but rather that we would be saved! He desires to forgive but needs to do justice.

But how is that possible. How can God's extend mercy to us, whilst at the same time maintaining justice.

The answer, is a person. The answer is Jesus. We'll think about how, next time.

But here is the key point from this evening and it's a sober one. We must face reality: the world is broken. It is a mess. But, the problem is not out there somewhere. It's in here. In each one of us. The Bible teaches that we are all sinners. Every one of us has rejected God and done life on our own terms. That is our biggest problem. We need a solution for our sin.

Post-talk questions

What do you think about Christianity's account of what is wrong with the world?

Wrap up

Week 4: Jesus fixed it

The aim of the evening:

To understand that Jesus came to bring salvation and everlasting life. He did this through his death and resurrection.

Pre-talk questions

Why do you think Jesus came to do?

Why do you think that a cruel method of execution (crucifixion on a cross) is the symbol of Christianity?

Talk

The problem, as we saw last week, is the problem of our sin. The heart of the human problem, is the human heart.

But what is the solution? What will God do about our rebellion?

He could show us unjustified mercy and just let us all off! Or he could show us unmerciful justice and give us all exactly what we deserve!

I know which one we'd prefer, certainly when it comes to ourselves. We want mercy!

But roll out the principle of unjustified mercy and pretty quickly you'll be wanting to insist that 'so and so' doesn't get mercy because they've done something really bad.

But the Bible teaches us that God shows both mercy and justice.

God is merciful and will forgive sin. God is just and must punish sin.

But how?! How can God be both merciful and just at the same time?

How can God forgive those who are guilty without denying justice?

How can God punish us justly and yet be merciful to us?

Seems like an impossible scenario- doesn't it!

But God has made a way to be both just and merciful. His way is a person. His way is Jesus.

Despite rejection and rebellion, and a hatred of sin and all its consequences, God loves us. His desire is that all might be saved. God loves you. He loves you more than you've ever loved anyone or anything. And he loves us not because we're especially lovely, or because we're good, or deserving. He loves us even though we're none of those things.

God loves you enough to deal with your sin. He sent his son, Jesus Christ.

We remember the birth of Jesus every year, across the world, at Christmas. But that was not the start of his life.

"He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him." (Col 1:15-16).

Jesus was there before the beginning. It was in him and through him and for him that everything was created. When he was born as a human child it was with a clear purpose. It wasn't the start of his life, but rather it was the start of his mission on earth.

So, why was Jesus born? Why did he come?

The good news is that this isn't a mystery for you to work out. Jesus tells you the answer very clearly. All through his life, Jesus made it clear that he was on earth in order to achieve two objectives above all others.

The first one is declared at the very start of his life. An angel appears not long after his birth and declares:

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11)

Jesus is a saviour

Jesus is a saviour, which is a word that means rescuer. He later says the same thing about himself. "For the son of Man came to seek and to save the lost..." Luke 19:10

Jesus is a saviour, who has come to save those who are spiritually lost. People who hear that like the sound of it. It's an admirable aim in life, to be a saviour. However his other objective shocked those who heard it.

Jesus came to die

Listen to what he told his disciples: And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." (Luke 9:22) Jesus says he has come to suffer, be rejected, and be killed.

But take note - it's not a prediction. It's not 'I will die'? It's a promise - I must die.

For around three years Jesus taught and performed miracles. He both attracted and offended large groups of people. His life and teaching was utterly unique and life transforming.

But then it ended. He was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death.

He was tortured, mocked, and then he was killed by crucifixion. From a distance the death of Jesus looks like a tragic failure. The man who said he had come to save people - unable to even save himself.

But it wasn't a failure or a tragedy. It had to happen this way because it was his mission. Yes, Jesus is the saviour who came to suffer. It was his very purpose to come and to suffer and to die.

But why?

Why did he need to suffer?

Jesus suffers, he is forsaken, so that we would be forgiven.

That is the significance of the two signs we get in Mark's account of the death of Jesus.

The first sign was the darkness that consumed the whole land for three hours. The second sign was the curtain of the temple being torn in two.

The darkness is significant because it is indicative of the darkening of the sun on judgment day. A darkening that Jesus speak of in Mark Ch 13:

'But in those days after that tribulation the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light...'

Jesus is talking about the day of judgement when all will stand before the creator of heaven and earth and all will face the final judgment. And God will judge sin.

At this moment, as Jesus was on the cross, God was pouring out his wrath against sin on his own son.

That is the significance of the darkness.

Jesus drinks from the cup of wrath he feared so that we wouldn't have to. His death atones for, pays for, the price for sin.

Our sin is more serious than we dare to think- it is a full on assault against our king and creator.

It deserves punishment- we deserve punishment and we deserve death, according to the Bible. And yet, Jesus' death pays the price for sin. This is what Jesus came to do, that we might be saved.

The death that He tasted was death in all its horror as the wages of sin.

You see, sin separates - that is the teaching of the Scripture, and when the Son of God was made sin for us, He bore the consequences of sin too and endured the separation from God that it entailed.

The darkness itself was symbolic of the blackness of darkness that is separation from God, and the crushing weight of eternal loss and separation from God which our sins deserve were all crowded into these hours on the Cross.

That the first sign. Darkness.

The **second** sign was the torn curtain.

The tearing of the curtain is significant because that curtain symbolised the separation between God and humanity.

This curtain hung at the entrance to the holy of holies in the temple.

This was a small sacred space which symbolised God's presence. This was his footstool on earth. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter and even he was only allowed to enter once a year.

The significance of Jesus' death as the once and for all atoning sacrifice for sin means that access into the presence of God is no longer restricted to the High Priest once a year, but is now unrestricted and available to all who trust in Jesus.

His death absorbed God's wrath and opened up the way to the holy place so that we might be saved. He died the death we deserved to die, so that we might live. Jesus stands in our place. He is our substitute.

And that is the vivid illustration that we have in the prisoner exchange before the crucifixion.

Barrabbus is a very real illustration of Christ's work for us. Barrabbus was a rough character. A murderer, an insurrectionist. He was destined for crucifixion.

He knew that he deserved to die, but when Pilate's offer of clemency was made and the crowd indicated their choice of Barabbas, then in a very literal sense Jesus took Barabbas' place and went to the cross to pay the penalty of Barabbas' sins.

The price of Barabbas' freedom is the death of Jesus. It cost Barabbas nothing, but Jesus- well it cost him everything. The innocent is punished and the guilty set free.

That is at the very heart of the gospel and that is the very source of my hope and yours.

We are all in our natural state, guilty and deserving of punishment. We, all of us, stand guilty like Barabbas. But like Barabbas, we can, through no merit of our own, go free. Like Barabbas, Jesus can stand in our place.

Jesus suffered that we might be saved. And so the question must be asked:

Will you come to him and admit your own failure and sin and rejection of him?

Will you accept the sacrifice that Jesus has made on your behalf?

But the cross of Christ was not the end of the story!

Jesus died, yes, but he rose from the dead. Jesus resurrection demonstrates that his death was effective and effective in two particular ways:

Sin has really been paid for. Sin really has been dealt with. The apostle Paul writing some years after the resurrection of Jesus wrote: 'if Christ had not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins'. If Jesus is still dead then it would mean that God's wrath was not yet satisfied. His resurrection shows that sin really has been dealt with. God's wrath really has been absorbed by Christ's sacrifices.

Death really has been defeated. The tomb is empty and death, our great and final enemy, was overcome.

CS Lewis: Jesus has forced opened a door that had been locked since the death of the first man: he has met, fought and beaten the king of death.

But Jesus resurrection also means that he then ascended to heaven where he now sits enthroned as king of the whole world. He rules and reigns over all things. He is alive today and in control. There is also a time when he will return as judge over all.

So Christ's resurrection means that for all who will put their trust in him can have certainty of forgiveness of sin and everlasting life. It is only in Him that we have this. But we do have to turn to him in repentance and faith, because there is a judgment coming.

To admit our sin, to confess it, is so hard for us, is it not. We are so often proud- so entrenched in our sin- we can't bring ourselves to bow to knee before him. But we must. He commands us to. But it is a loving command.

He loves each and every person on this planet and his great desire is that all would hear his command to repent and follow him.

And for all who do that, for all who come, he will gladly receive you and welcome you in to his eternal family.

And, let me tell you, there is no greater joy to be had this world, than to humble ourselves before our Jesus and follow him. We will think more about our response next week. We will be asking the question: how do you become a Christian?

Post-talk questions

Wrap up

Week 5: How to become a Christian

The aim of the evening:

To understand that to become a Christian we must repent and believe the good news about Jesus death and resurrection.

Pre-talk questions

What do you think a Christian is? How do you become a Christian?

Talk

What does it mean to follow Jesus?

How do you even do that? What is a Christian and how do I become a Christian?

At the very start of the Life Course we posed this same question: what is a Christian?

People will say something like: a Christian is someone who...

Goes to church

Believes in God

Tries to be a good person

Has faith

Reads the Bible.

And those are all aspects of what it is to be a Christian, but none of them really account for the heart of the matter. You could do all those things and yet not be a Christian!

You see, being a Christian is not so much about what I do, but rather it's about what Jesus has done for me. He died on a cross and rose from the dead and in doing so he takes the punishment for our sins and conquered death.

A Christian is someone who has been saved by Jesus and who now follows him as their king.

It is primarily about what Jesus has done for us. But there is still the question: how do I become a Christian?

Listen to these words from start of Mark's gospel: "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe in the gospel (good news)."

We've heard over these past few weeks what that good news is. Yes we have a problem (our sin) but Jesus, our creator and king, came into our world in order to save us. He lived a perfect life and died a death under God's judgment that we should all have to face ourselves and then he rose again. In so doing he provides a way for our sin to be forgiven and offers us eternal life.

That is wonderful, wonderful news.

But how do we attain this forgiveness and life? What must we do to receive these amazing gifts?

Well, the answer is nothing. We give nothing, we contribute nothing, but we must be willing to receive it.

Those verses I read from Mark tell us what we need to do. We need to receive these gifts and we do so by repenting and faith.

We'll think about those two things in turn:

Faith

We do need to be clear about what faith is and what it is not.

This is where it is helpful to have some 'necessary negatives'! Faith is not this, but rather it is this...

Many people will speak about having lots of faith, or not having much. Or they talk about wishing they could have some faith.

Speaking in that sort of way makes it sound like faith is some sort of substance you are born with. An athlete (this is a personal illustration, obviously) is born with speed, an artist is born with creativity and religious people are born with faith.

Faith can also be thought of as being in a distinct category from rational, logical, evidence based belief. You might describe it as blind faith.

But none of those come close to what the Bible means by faith!

Some necessary negatives. Here is what faith is not!

It is **not** "positive thinking"

You might hear an athlete speak about "keeping the faith". What they mean is think positive. Have faith. But that is not what the Bible means by faith.

It is **not** knowing certain facts

Lots of people know facts about Jesus, but they're not Christians. They're not forgiven.

It is **not** some ethereal/mystical feeling or experience.

Faith is trust in action. It is trust in a person: Jesus. It is the object of our faith that is the important thing! It is the object of our trust that really matters.

It not about us. It is not about us conjuring up enough faith to qualify! It is not about us somehow having enough faith.

Let me illustrate.

Imagine two people at the airport waiting to board the plane. Let's enjoy the illustration and imagine that they are on the way to south of Portugal to spend two weeks in a villa with it's own pool and a five minute walk to the beach.

Anyway. One of these people is super excited. They love the whole experience- they sit at the window seat. It's great.

The other person is a quivering wreck. They feel sick at the thought of getting on that flight. They are the last on (stretchered on by the flight attendants) and sit as far away as they can from any window. They close their eyes and almost pass out every time there is the slightest bit of turbulence.

Now which of these two successfully makes it to the beach in Portugal? Who gets there safely? The bold or timid person?

They both get there don't they! The fact that one was a confident flyer and the other not, made no difference to reaching the destination. What mattered was not them and the level of their faith, but rather the object of their faith; namely, the plane. The plane was the crucial thing.

So it is when it comes to faith in Jesus. What matters is not the strength of my feeling, or the confidence with which I trust. Rather, what matters is the person in who we trust. It is not about the quantity of our faith, but the quality of the object your faith is in.

You could have a very very confident flyer. But a plane that is falling apart and has an engine about to blow up, is not a plane you want to get on. What matters there is the quality of the plane, not the degree of confidence I have in it!

So when it comes to Christianity and God and salvation. What matters is that we have trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. Because he and he alone has dealt with our sin. He and he alone has died and absorbed the wrath of God. He and he alone has risen from the dead. He and he alone is the one who can save us.

We can't pay the price ourselves and live. The Christian life is therefore not about trusting in ourselves: our own abilities, mortality, cleverness, determination. The Christian life is about looking away from ourselves, realising that we need Jesus, it's about trusting what he has done for us.

And the thing that reveals we've understood the nature of faith is the fact that we repent.

If you really trust Jesus as king, then you will repent.

Repentance

What is repentance?

To repent means to do a total turn around in our lives. It's a complete u-turn. We stop living for self and start living for God.

It's like we're walking away from God, ignoring him totally. It's as if he's not there. But to repent means to acknowledge that he is there; it is to acknowledge that we have lived in rebellion against him, we have sinned and that we need to turn around and confess that he is God and that we've been in the wrong.

To repent means to turn from being someone who ignores God, to being someone who recognises his right rule over our lives. It is, fundamentally, a change in allegiance.

Let me share with you my own story...

I knew about Jesus, from my earliest days. But it made no actual impact on my life. I was refusing to have him as Lord of my life. But I could not escape the facts of the gospel. All that we've looked at over these past few weeks. I could not continue to live as if these things were not true. I was increasingly unhappy and dis-content. I knew I had to repent. And I did. Best thing I've ever done! Instead of doing things my way and living for myself, instead I sought to live for him because he is the king.

If we repent, then we are forgiven. We are welcomed into God's family, forever.

Repentance is not... Just knowing all the facts but not taking any action

Repentance is not... Denying or diminishing your sin before God (I was dealt a tough hand... Mitigating circumstances...)

Repentance is not... Managing your sin (it is not toning down our sin to an acceptable level)

Repentance is not... Remorse (Feeling bad but not changing)

Repentance is not... Merely confessing sin. It is turning away from it

Repentance is not... Cleaning ourselves up so that God will accept us. Rather we come to him as a mess and he cleans us up.

You become a Christian by turning to Jesus and trusting in him. It is repentance and faith.

To become a Christian is to stop travelling down the road with our backs to God- the destination is an eternity separated from him. It's to stop that and turn around and walk towards him, following him- the destination is an eternity with him.

As we turn to him, Jesus promises that God has forgiven your sins and granted you eternal life. He enters into a relationship with you. He gives you the gift of his Holy Spirit to live within us and

help us continue to follow him. He speaks to us through his word, the bible. We can speak to him in prayer. We get to gather with other believers in the church.

A Christian is someone who has been saved by Jesus to follow him as king.

And so we face a choice. There are two possibilities to everything we've heard. One is to repent and believe. The other is to carry on walking down our road with our backs to God.

Perhaps you are ready to make that choice tonight? If so I am going to pray a prayer which you can echo in your own heart. I am, very simply, going to say sorry, thank you, please.

Let me pray.

Lord God, I have not given you the place in my life that you deserve. I am sorry that I have done that- please forgive me. I know that Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment I deserve. I know that if I trust in him you have forgiven me. Thank you that he rose from the dead to give me new life. From today I want to live with you as my king to the best of my ability. Please help me to do that. Please come into my life and take complete control of it.

Amen

Post-talk questions

Has this talk changed your understanding of what a Christian is?

How would you define faith?

Why do you think repentance is something we find hard to do?

Wrap up

Thank you so much for coming to the Life Course. We have loved having you along, but this is not the end! We would love to invite you along to church on Sunday, first and foremost. But we would also like to invite you to keep coming along here. We meet at the same time next week and we continue to explore the Christian faith by taking a close look at one of the accounts of the life of Jesus, Mark's Gospel. It's called Christianity Explored and over a 7 sessions we'll work through Mark's Gospel together. It's the same format as the Life Course. Same table leaders and we'd love you to come.