



CHRISTIANITY|**EXPLORED**

WHAT'S THE BEST NEWS
YOU'VE EVER HEARD?

LEADER'S HANDBOOK



Episode 1: Good News

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

For me it was probably Table Mountain in South Africa. I was visiting my twin sis-ter, and some friends and I took a cable car to the top. I remember watching the sun break through the clouds and light up Cape Town 3000 feet below. It was so stunning we lost all track of our conversa-tion and just stood there in silence.

What would it be for you?

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

Did all this beauty really just happen by chance?

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

And even if I do decide it all happened completely by chance, why is there anything here at all?

Why is there something... and not nothing?

Then there are the stars... millions of millions of miles above us... Apparently, there are at least 100 billion stars in our galaxy alone, and scientists estimate there are at least 100 billion galaxies in the universe.

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

There are 75000 miles of blood vessels crammed inside us and at least 50 trillion cells. If the DNA from a single human cell were stretched out, it would measure about six feet in length.

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

You're amazing, and if you saw something that stunning in a gallery, or heard something that beautiful on the radio, you'd instinctively ask, "Who created it?"

And if someone were to tell you that this incredible piece of art or music just came together by itself, without any author to create it, would you believe them?

The Bible quite unashamedly says that all this natural beauty is meant to point us towards God, the one who created the ex-

traordinary scale and complexity of the universe we live in, and the bodies we inhabit.

But as a younger man I had a real problem with all that. Although my experience of the universe was that it really was extraordinary, Christianity definitely was not.

First of all, it was incredibly dull. I used to go to church about once a month, and when I did, I just sat there counting the number of bricks up the wall.

Secondly, I couldn't see what it had to do with me. I couldn't relate to the religious people I met, and I couldn't see the point of reading a book written 2000 years ago and 2000 miles away. I thought it was a bunch of rules telling me how to live my life, and actually, my life was pretty good so I didn't need any of them.

Then thirdly, and most importantly, I just thought it wasn't true. I didn't have a problem with Christmas, and as you can probably guess I had no problem with Christmas stuffing, but Christianity itself was make-believe. I never mistook it for the real world.

But then my brother did something that started to change the way I thought about Christianity. He opened a Bible and showed me the very first sentence of a book called Mark. It says this:

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

He said to me, "Rico, you just don't understand what Christianity's about. You think it's all about... churches... and rules... and leaving your brain at the door... and having all your fun spoiled.

"But," he said to me, "That's not what it's about. The first sentence of Mark says that Christianity is about Christ."

He explained that the word "Christ" isn't Jesus' second name. It's a title, like President or Prime Minister. And it means "God's only chosen King".

And "Christ" was an extremely dangerous word for Mark to use here, because at the time he was writing, Roman Emperors were said to have divine authority.

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

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

Then my brother pointed me back to the first sentence in Mark...

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

He said, "Rico, not only is Christianity about Jesus Christ... it's the 'gospel' about Jesus Christ."

The word "gospel" literally means "good news", but that doesn't really do it justice. It's more like the announcement that war is finally over.

It's the kind of news that makes people dance in the streets and hug complete strangers, it's that good.

So one thing I'd like to say as we start to explore Mark together is this. When you hear what you're about to hear, if you don't think it's the best news you've ever heard, you can be absolutely certain you've not understood it.

And it would be so easy to miss. Have you ever had the experience of walking down

the main street of a city, and being offered a leaflet? You ignore it, or take it and then ignore it, because you don't think it will do you any good.

Well, there was an experiment conducted by a London newspaper. They got a man to stand just here, outside Oxford Circus tube station, offering people a leaflet. On the leaflet was the free offer of five pounds. All you had to do was bring the leaflet back to the man and he would hand you the cash right there on the spot.

Hordes of people passed him. And in three hours only eleven people came back for the money. They thought they already knew what he was handing out; that it wouldn't do them any good. So they either didn't bother to take it, they didn't bother to read it, or if they did read it, they simply refused to believe it.

Please don't make the same mistake with Mark's Gospel. Make time to pick it up and read it. Take a look at what Mark has to say about Jesus, and as you do that I hope you'll begin to see why Mark describes Jesus as "good news".

No one knows exactly when Mark wrote his Gospel, but it was most likely between 45 and 60 AD, within about 20 years of Jesus' death. Mark was being guided by one of Jesus' closest followers, Peter – a man who was an actual eyewitness of the remarkable events that occurred.

And they were remarkable events. Right from the beginning of Mark's Gospel, strange things start to happen. Supernatural things.

"At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan.

"As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven:

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9-11)

Heaven gets torn open, the Holy Spirit comes down on Jesus, and God the Father announces, "You are my Son".

And if you're thinking to yourself, well this is just flat-out weird, you're not the only one. Mark tells us that people thought exactly the same thing 2000 years ago, including Jesus' closest followers.

But maybe they should have expected it. Early in Mark's Gospel we read a 700-year-old prediction that someone called "the Lord" was on his way.

In other words, get ready. God is coming to meet you.

The prediction also says that a messenger in the desert will tell people that the Lord is coming. That messenger, according to Mark chapter 1, was a man called John the Baptist.

Mark tells us that...

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

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

So John offers them baptism with water, as a sign of being washed clean, of being for-

given. When the person was lowered into the water, it was a symbol of dying to the old self; and when they were lifted out of the water, it was a symbol of being raised to new life.

But John knows that when the Lord himself comes, he will offer them – and us – so much more.

“After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:7-8)

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

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

But is it true?

It’s certainly true that what Mark reports isn’t the kind of thing people normally experience. And if Jesus is just an ordinary man, then what we read here is simply not believable.

But if, as Mark claims, Jesus is much more than that, then it shouldn’t surprise us that extraordinary things are starting to happen.

And that is the beginning of the good news that Mark has for us: God has actually revealed himself to us in human history through Jesus Christ. When we look at Jesus, all the guessing games about God stop.

The good news, according to Mark, is that Jesus really is the Christ, God’s only chosen King.

But Mark is just getting started...

