



CHRISTIANITY|EXPLORED

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

Episode 7: Come and Die

Your eyes sometimes have a funny way of playing tricks on you. For example, what do you see when you look at this picture? There are actually two women here: an old woman and a young woman. Not everyone can see both. If you can't see them, try looking at the old woman's chin here... or the young woman's chin here. If you still can't see them, they are there. Trust me, I'm a Christian.



But I wonder what you've seen as you've looked at the picture of Jesus in Mark's Gospel? Because in a similar way, as we look at Jesus, there are two aspects to his identity, two faces to be seen at the same time. There's the human face of Jesus, but there's also the divine face of Christ. And not everyone can see both.

Some of us, just like the disciples, can stare at the face of Jesus for years – and all we can see is the man. Like the disciples in Mark's Gospel, it's possible to spend lots of time in Jesus' company, and yet be to-tally blind to the divine face of Christ.

Well, what did the disciples see when they looked at him?

They saw an apparently uneducated man who taught as no one had ever taught. They saw a man who cured incurable dis-eases. A man who could control nature with a word. A man who took the hand of a corpse and raised it to life. A man who demonstrated authority to forgive sin.

They saw him do all these things. They ask themselves in Mark chapter 4, "Who

is this?". And yet incredibly, they are still blind to the answer Jesus has been giving them all along. By the time we get to Mark chapter 8, Jesus is exasperated with them. He says:

"Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?" (Mark 8:17-18)

If being a first-hand witness of all these staggering events is not enough to make them see who Jesus is, then what hope is there? Who can possibly cure that kind of blindness?

And then, as if to answer that question, Jesus gives a blind man his sight. But this healing is unique. It's the only one that happens gradually.

"They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, 'Do you see anything?'"

"He looked up and said, 'I see people; they look like trees walking around.'"

"Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly." (Mark 8:22-25)

First, Jesus touches the blind man, and he begins to see, but only partially. Then, Jesus touches him again, and this time the man sees everything clearly.

Just like the optical illusion. It's a reminder that sometimes, even when we think we can see, actually we can only see part of the picture.

And now we reach a turning point in Mark's Gospel. Will the disciples finally be able to see who Jesus is?

"Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?'"

"They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'"

"'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'" (Mark 8:27-29)

Jesus suddenly asks them a very personal question here, and this is where it gets very personal for us, too. Can we only see the human face of Jesus, or can we also see the divine face of Christ? Who do we say Jesus is? Teacher? Healer? Miracle Worker?

"Peter answered, 'You are the Christ.'" (Mark 8:29)

Finally, Peter sees it. Or does he?

"Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him." (Mark 8:30)

You see, Jesus knows the disciples' blindness is only partly cured. Although they can see who he is, they don't yet see why he's come – or what it means to follow him.

That's why Jesus immediately begins to teach them more about himself. It's as if he's starting to correct their partial vision.

"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31)

That's why Jesus came. He came to die and rise again. In fact, Jesus himself says he "must" die. He knows it's the only way sinful people like you and me can be brought back into a relationship with our loving Creator.

And now we reach the next turning point in Mark's Gospel. Peter has understood who Jesus is, but will he understand why Jesus came?

"Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him." (Mark 8:32)

Again, it gets very personal for us. Can we see not only who Jesus is, but why Jesus came? Do we understand how serious our sin is, and how badly we need rescue? Or, like Peter, does the idea of Jesus' death fill us only with horror and disgust?

If we're like Peter, Jesus has some very strong words for us at this point.

"When Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'" (Mark 8:33)

If we have in mind the things of men, then Jesus' death on the cross seems pointless, tragic and weak. But seen in a different way, having in mind the things of God, there has never been a more powerful moment in all of human history.

Although we don't deserve anything apart from his condemnation, and although he did not need to rescue any of us, yet in his amazing love, Jesus humbled himself by coming to earth, becoming a man, and suffering and dying for the very people who had been rebelling against him all their lives. He died for sinners, taking the punishment we deserve, so that we could

enjoy the relationship with God that we were created to enjoy. Forever.

But there is one more thing the disciples need to understand before they see can see everything clearly. Because it's not enough to see who Jesus is. It's not even enough to see why he came. Just like the disciples, we also need to see what it means to follow him.

Jesus says that if we are his followers, we'll do two things. We'll deny ourselves, and take up our cross.

"Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" (Mark 8:34)

The explorer Ernest Shackleton, when he was looking for people to go with him on his exploration of the Antarctic, reportedly placed an ad in a newspaper. It said simply:

"Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success."

There is something of that in Jesus' call to each one of us. The message is: "Come and die." Following him will cost us a great deal: it may cost us in terms of relationships, careers, comfort, it may even – in some places – cost us our lives.

But there's a crucial difference between Shackleton's call, and Jesus' call. The difference is that if we respond to Jesus' call, there is no doubt about the final outcome.

All the way through Mark's Gospel, Jesus has demonstrated ultimate power and authority over everything – sin, sickness, nature, even death itself. He has shown time

and again his love, his mercy, his grace – even to the most broken, rejected people.

If we give our lives to him, it's not a suicidal gesture. In fact, it's the complete opposite. Listen to what Jesus says next:

"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." (Mark 8:35-38)

You see, not only does Jesus have ultimate authority over sin, sickness, nature and death, he also has ultimate authority over us. If we try to save ourselves by rejecting Jesus, we will end up losing the very thing we're so desperate to hang on to.

If we really want to save our lives, we must entrust them to Jesus. And, having explored Mark's Gospel for ourselves, we can do that knowing we can trust him.

A true follower of Christ is someone who clearly sees what it will cost to follow him, but does it joyfully anyway, knowing that Jesus is worth infinitely more. Even more than friendship, or family, or career, even more than life itself.

What is given up is nothing compared to what is gained.

Immediately after this, in Mark chapter 9, some of the disciples witness something that once again demonstrates powerfully that Jesus can be trusted, that he is exactly who he says he is.

"After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus." (Mark 9:2-4)

"Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!'" (Mark 9:7)

Just as we saw in the very first chapter of Mark, God the Father tells us exactly who Jesus is: "This is my Son, whom I love."

But he also tells us how we should respond: "Listen to him!"

So as our journey through Mark's Gospel comes to an end, we're left with three questions:

What do you see when you look at Jesus? Is he just a good man, or is he the Christ, the Son of God?

What do you see when you look at his death? Was it just a tragic waste of a young life, or is it a rescue, a "ransom for many"?

And finally, what do you see as you consider Jesus' call? Is it a call to come and die?

Or can you see that because of his death and resurrection, he is calling you to come and die...

...and live.