

Is Christianity just a psychological crutch?

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[0 : 00] Well, today's reading is Mark chapter 8, verses 27 to 38, and it can be found on page 1017 of the Church Bibles.

That's Mark chapter 8, verses 27 to 38. And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi.

And on the way he asked his disciples, Who do people say that I am? And they told him, John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others one of the prophets.

And he asked them, But who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, You are the Christ. And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, and the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

[1 : 09] And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, Get behind me, Satan, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

And he called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life?

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Let me add my welcome to Bruce's. My name is Simon Dowdy, and I'm the minister here at Grace Church. And it's great to have you with us this morning as we consider this important question, Is Christianity just a psychological crutch?

[2 : 24] And I'd be grateful, please, if we could turn back to that reading which we had in Mark's Gospel. You'll find it on page 1017, which we'll come to in a moment.

Page 1017, Mark chapter 8. Now you'll know the comedian Victoria Wood died a couple of weeks ago, and as part of her, one of the obituaries I read, she said, Life's not fair, is it?

Some of us drink champagne in the fast lane. Some of us eat our sandwiches by the loose chippings on the A597. And I guess our title this morning, Is Christianity Just a Psychological Crutch?

Very much assumes that Christianity is for the sandwich eaters on the A597 rather than for the champagne drinkers. That's the assumption, I think.

In other words, Christianity is a crutch for weak people, for needy people, who don't have the strength to take responsibility for their own lives.

[3 : 29] So what we're going to do over the next few minutes is to look at that reading from Mark chapter 8. We're going to do that because the Bible is the source document, if you like, for the Christian faith.

And the person of Jesus Christ is at the very heart of the Bible, and that, of course, is why we are looking at one of the Gospels. So we're right up close, if you like, to the person of Jesus Christ and the teaching of Jesus Christ.

I want us to look this morning at that reading we had from Mark chapter 8, verse 27 to the end of the chapter. And you'll see, for those who'd like to know where we're going, my three headings for my talk are there on the outline as well.

So first of all, is Christianity a crutch for the fearful who can't cope with death? Is Christianity just a crutch for the fearful who can't cope with death?

It was the Austrian psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud, who was one of the most popular proponents of the idea that Christianity is a psychological crutch. And he believed that Christianity was the result of a deep-seated desire for the loving protection of their sort of heavenly father figure.

[4 : 42] He argued that as people grew up and found themselves thrust out into the cruel, cold world, they needed to look to someone or something for security and protection.

Too old to kind of look back to their parents, and so they look to a god instead, and especially for protection from the fear of death.

In other words, for Freud, God was simply a creation of the human mind rather than reality, the ultimate, if you like, in wish fulfillment, a mere psychological projection for those who fear death, for those who want to believe there is a god.

Now, the argument cuts both ways, of course. You could equally argue, I think, that atheists believe that no god exists for the very reason that they don't want there to be a god.

They don't want to be accountable for the way in which they live their lives. They want to be free, to live exactly as they want to be free. Indeed, Aldous Huxley, one of the great atheists of the 20th century, and many others, made exactly that point.

[5 : 54] But the harsh matter, I think, is this. Is God make-believe, or is he really there? That is the issue. Which brings us to our Bible reading.

Have a look at Mark chapter 8, verses 27 to 30, under the heading, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ. Let me read it.

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way, he asked his disciples, who do people say that I am? And they told him, John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others one of the prophets.

And he asked them, but who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, you are the Christ. And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

Now, this is the halfway point, if you like, of Mark's Gospel. The whole of the first half of Mark's Gospel addresses the question, who Jesus is.

[6 : 58] It's why Jesus then asks his disciples, who do people say he is? And the answer, verse 28, is, I guess, not dissimilar, is it, to the kinds of things we might hear people say today.

You know, a great prophet, a great teacher, a religious leader, that kind of thing. But then, verse 29, he asks Peter, who do you say I am?

And Peter answers, you are the Christ. The word Christ simply means God's appointed king. The New Testament was written in Greek, so it's a Greek word.

The Old Testament in Hebrew, where the same word is Messiah. So, Christ and Messiah means exactly the same thing, that Jesus Christ is God's appointed king.

He is God himself, come down to earth, fully man, fully God, the one person in history who perfectly and completely reveals God and shows us what God is like.

[8 : 04] In other words, if you'd lived 2,000 years ago in what is present-day Israel, and if someone had said to you, please would you show me what God is like, you could have pointed to Jesus and said, he is what God is like, because he is God, God in the flesh, fully God, fully man.

And that is precisely what we see happening in the first half of Mark's Gospel. You might like to read through chapters 1 to 8 later on today, where we see Jesus demonstrating he is God on earth. So he drives out evil spirits to demonstrate that he is Lord over evil and Satan.

He healed the sick to demonstrate that he is Lord over sickness and disease. He claimed to have the right to interpret the Old Testament scriptures, because he is the God who wrote them.

He calmed a fierce storm, which was terrifying, even the most hardened fishermen, because he is the creator come to earth. He raised a little girl who had died, the weeping and wailing had begun.

Everyone knew a dead body when they saw one, demonstrating that he is the life giver, the Lord of life. He fed 5,000 people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish.

[9 : 20] Again, the power of the creator, who is able to create matter, can create stuff out of nothing. Christianity, you see, stands or falls on the person of Jesus Christ.

Christ. If he is God come to earth, then far from Christianity being simply the invention of the human mind, well, he is a person of history who needs to be taken seriously.

Besides, I suspect we are more afraid of death than we let on. Death unsettles us, doesn't it? Even when it's people we don't really know.

Hence the outcry on social media over the last few weeks with the death of so many celebrities. David Bowie, Alan Rickman, Ronnie Corbett, Victoria Wood, Prince.

The comedian Paul Daniels, when it became apparent that he was ill, and when he was aware of the fact that he was ill, he told his wife he didn't want to know what was wrong with him.

[10:27] He spent his last days watching telly eating ice cream, unable to face the facts. But wonderfully, you see, we don't need to play let's pretend like that in the face of death.

Supremely, because Jesus himself died, but then three days later he rose from the dead, never to die again. Which brings us on to our next point.

is Christianity a crutch for the needy who can't cope with life? So, back to our question, is Christianity a psychological crutch?

I guess another assumption is that Christianity is simply for needy people, a good thing for weak people, lonely people, for those who can't cope with life. But for those who can cope with life, then actually they have no need for Christianity at all.

I think that's a pretty big assumption, isn't it, in our society. That's what people tend to assume. In other words, the assumption is basically that there are two sorts of people in our world.

[11:37] There are the strong who can cope with life, and there are the weak who can't cope with life. And so, in a room like this, I guess we would draw the line, wouldn't we, straight down the middle of the room, and we'd say, well, on one side there are those who can cope with life, and on the other side there are those who can't cope with life.

Well, that's very different from the way Jesus sees people. Instead, Jesus divides people very differently. He divides people, and we're going to see this in just a moment, between those who recognize their need and those who don't recognize their need.

Now, in order to understand that, we need to grasp, I think, the shock of verses 31 to 33. Let me read them again for us. And Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, get behind me, Satan, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

Now, the shock is the word must in verse 31. Jesus must suffer, be rejected, killed, and rise again. Why must?

[13:07] Well, certainly it goes, doesn't it, against the popular myth that Jesus' death was simply a tragic accident. Several years ago, when I was living in Wimbledon, I spent a Saturday morning interviewing people on Wimbledon Common, asking them why they thought Jesus died.

and the overwhelming majority simply said something like this, well, you know, it's just a tragic accident. Jesus got on the wrong side of the law, people didn't like his message, he crossed the Romans once too often, and so he was killed, a life tragically put to an end so young.

But Jesus says, verse 1, he must die. Indeed, if the first half of Mark's gospel is all about who Jesus is, the second half of Mark's gospel is all about why he came.

Three times Jesus says he will die. You can see it again, just on a little bit in chapter 9, verse 31, over the page, where Jesus says the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him.

And when he is killed, after three days, he will rise. And then over the page, in chapter 10, verse 33, exactly the same thing, as Jesus says, chapter 10, verse 33, see, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him over to the Gentiles, and they will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him, and after three days, he will rise.

[14:45] Isn't that very striking? Three times Jesus says he's going to die because he must die. And also to understand this, we just need to turn back, if you will, to page 1010, to one of Jesus' mission statements, if you like.

So please turn back to Mark chapter 2. It's our last bit of page turning. Mark chapter 2, page 1010. I want to read out verse 17, Mark chapter 2, verse 17.

When Jesus heard it, he said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

This is Jesus' mission statement. What do you say? That just confirms what I thought, that Jesus came simply for weak and needy people. Perhaps some of us look at that verse, we think to ourselves, well, I'm not a kind of sad person who can't cope with life, and I'm not a bad person either.

I don't think of myself as being a sinner. But think again, because actually a sinner describes all of us. It takes us to the very heart of what it means to be human, to our human identity, as Nick was saying earlier in the interview, to understand what's wrong with our world.

[16:08] And that is, you see, wonderfully made. We are wonderfully made in the image of God, yet all of us naturally reject God and turn our backs on God. We may still acknowledge him in some way, we may attend church occasionally, but actually in terms of day-to-day life and the decisions that really matter, then God is an irrelevance to us.

We live as if he's not there. Now, does that not describe what you are naturally like? It certainly describes what I am naturally like.

Mark 2, verse 17, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Imagine you go and see your GP tomorrow morning. Doctor, you say, I just thought I'd pop in and tell you how wonderfully fit and well I am. It's slightly odd, isn't it?

I guess at the very worst you might be accused of wasting, at the very best rather, you might be accused of wasting NHS time. I guess at the worst you might be sent off to see Nick for a psychological assessment. you see, when Jesus looks at the world, he doesn't see those who are needy on one side and those who are not needy on the other side.

[17:33] No, he sees those on the one side who recognize their needs and on the other side those who don't. All are needy because all are sinners, to use Bible language.

None of us can be good enough for God, which means all of us need forgiveness. Whatever needs you feel you have this morning, I guess inevitably in a crowd this size, there are going to be some that actually we don't feel we have that much in the way of need, so to speak, and there may well be others that actually we feel we are very needy indeed.

But actually whatever other needs we have, this is our very greatest need. the need of forgiveness, and to be able to stand before God, forgiven.

Let me put it to you that if you wanted to make up a religion which was simply a psychological crutch, you would never invent Christianity. You'd never come up with a God who says there will be a day of judgment, a day of final accountability.

You'd never come up with a God who is too holy and too pure to be able to please by our own efforts and good works. You'd come up with a God, wouldn't you, who simply lets you live how you want to live.

[18:59] Of course, that is the God which most people in this country believe in, but it's not Christianity. is he? It's why back in March 8, verses 31 to 33, do turn back to it, Jesus says he must die to take the punishment that we deserve for our sins, to bear in his own body the just penalty of God that is rightly ours.

He died in our place as a substitute. I wonder if you remember reading the story of Elsa Del Plas last year.

On November the 13th, she and her five-year-old son Louis went to the Bataclan Theatre in Paris to attend a rock concert. As gunmen opened fire, she threw herself on top of her son, acting as a human shield.

Hours later, Louis was discovered alive under his mother's lifeless body. The headlines the next day described her as a heroine giving her life for the life of her son.

In a far greater way, you see, Jesus Christ gave his life, bearing in himself the judgment of God that is rightly ours, so that we might receive full forgiveness from God and stand before God, thus dealing with our greatest need, and to enjoy life with God, life with God now in this world, and also life with God in the next as well.

[20:43] A crutch for the fearful who can't cope with death, a crutch for the needy who can't cope with life. Well, thirdly, following Jesus, a cross, not a crutch.

Have a look at Mark 8, verse 34. And Jesus called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Because the truth is that Jesus never offered a crutch. He only offered a cross. It was good, wasn't it, to hear Claudia speaking of one or two of the ways in which actually being a Christian makes life harder, not easier, just as it has done for countless others through history.

Many of Jesus' disciples, the early followers, were killed. even today, millions of people around the world continue to suffer simply because they believe in Jesus Christ and follow Jesus Christ. A recent article in the Guardian ran the headline, Dying for Christianity, Millions at Risk Amid Rise in Persecution Across the Globe. It reported how Christians are facing growing persecution. [22 : 07] The Prince of Wales has described threats to Christians in the Middle East as an indescribable tragedy. Last Easter, the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke of today's Christian martyrs.

He said Christians are living under persecution in almost half of the 38 provinces of the Anglican Church, living in fear every day of their lives.

According to Lord Alton, who campaigns on religious freedom, as many as 200 million Christians in 60 countries across the world face some degree of restriction, discrimination, or outright persecution.

That is about one in ten Christians in the world. In total, Christians face harassment in 102 countries, more than any other religion.

Again, if you wanted to make up a religion which is simply a psychological crutch, you'd never invent Christianity. The assumption that Christianity is a psychological crutch, I think represents a very Western, rich world view.

[23 : 20] It simply cannot explain why so many people throughout the world follow Jesus Christ, when actually it makes life far harder for them, rather than being easier.

Just last week, I read of a church leader in Mosul, in Iraq, rejoicing that Iraqi Christians haven't converted to Islam, even when forced to flee their homes by the brutality of Islamic State.

Willing to give up all they own, their lives if necessary, rather than deny their Lord and Saviour. And when we ask why, well, it is simply because it is the truth.

They know the truth, they've experienced the truth, they know Jesus Christ, they are followers of Jesus Christ. And so you see, Jesus presents us in verse 35 with a choice.

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospels will save it. You can save your life in this world, but lose it for eternity, or you can follow Jesus, losing the life of living for yourself in this world, but gaining eternity.

[24 : 40] A tough decision. Well, says Jesus, verse 36, do the maths. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

It's a penetrating question, isn't it? Even if you gained everything the world has to offer, but actually lost your soul in eternity, you would lose.

After all, verse 37, what can a man give in return for his life? Nothing. And why is this all the case?

Because, verse 38, for whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation of him will the son of man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his father with the holy angels.

Jesus, because you see, the Jesus who died, who rose three days later, is going to return at the end of history. Which makes the question, doesn't it, of verse 34, will we follow?

[25 : 44] If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me, says Jesus. Will he do that? Not giving up sort of things for Lent, like chocolate or trivia like that.

Not denying yourself in that sense, but denying yourself. There is a cost of following Jesus Christ. Sin naturally lives for self.

We naturally live the way we want to live, living how we want to live, pleasing ourselves. As part of following Jesus, well, we follow him as number one, and not ourselves as number one.

There's a cost of following Jesus. But as Jesus makes plain in verses 35 to 38, there is also a cost in not following him as well. himself.

There's a cost in himself as the house of Richards, there is a cost in all love in money, and he can't Allah no door to nothing but the someone teaches