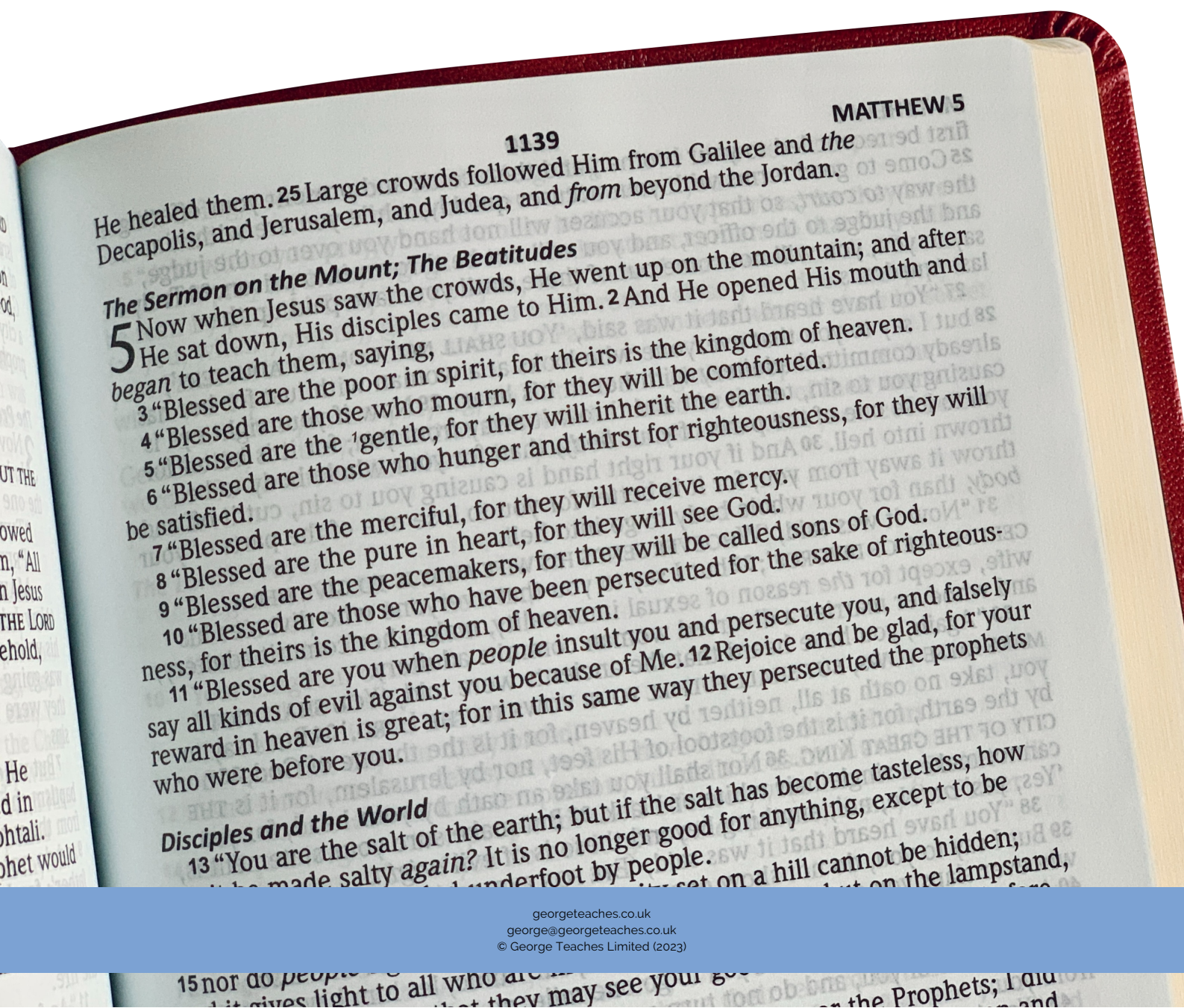


Religious Studies

Beliefs and Teachings

Christianity

Information Booklet



MATTHEW 5

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He healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

The Sermon on the Mount; The Beatitudes

5 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² And He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

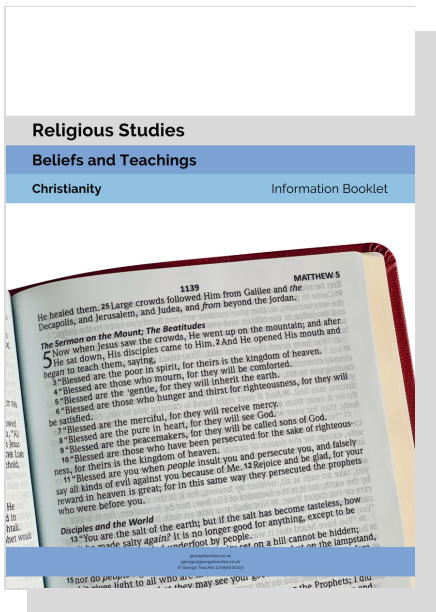
Disciples and the World

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by people.

Preface

This information booklet is all about Christianity. It surveys the important elements of the religion's beliefs and teachings, including those about the nature of God and the Trinity, the problem of evil, creation, sin and salvation, and the afterlife. Additionally, it covers the evaluation of beliefs and teachings about the person of Jesus, including his life, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, and his role in the process of salvation according to Christians. It is an introductory text, but it provides useful pointers throughout for those interested in further independent study.

This information booklet follows the video lessons available at George Teaches and is designed for use in conjunction with them. It is accompanied by worksheets that can be completed online or by hand, which are also available in a single work booklet. Additional assessment resources are available online that facilitate knowledge testing with multiple-choice questions. Throughout this information booklet, key questions are used as subtitles, key terms are highlighted in separate boxes, and brief reflections are offered under the heading, "George Thinks".



As always, I am deeply indebted to my colleagues and students for the production of this publication, which has been inspired by their desire for more extensive and holistic resources for teaching and learning about religious studies. At all times, I have attempted to produce material that covers popular and important content but is not confined by the straitjacket of any particular curriculum or specification. Consequently, whilst this covers all relevant content for Christianity at GCSE, it goes far beyond. My earnest hope is that it proves capable of both supporting students of all abilities and challenging the ablest to embark upon their own self-directed inquiries. Above all, my sincerest wish is that it proves beneficial to both your teaching and your learning of Christianity, be you teacher or student (or, as I am, be you both).



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London, UK
26 August 2023



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Nature of God

1. **What** is the nature of God?

When Christians talk about the nature of God, what do they mean? What is God like? What qualities does God have and how do Christians describe him? All these questions are about the nature of God; however, they are tricky for Christians to answer because most believe it is impossible to encounter God under normal circumstances. Consequently, all Christians search the Bible for clues to what God is like and although some argue that it is possible to work out things about God's nature in other ways, reading scripture is the primary source of information for most.

Omniscient

All-knowing; characterised by limitless knowledge, understanding and wisdom.

Personal

Being a person or individual with whom others are able to have a relationship.

Eternal

Everlasting; forever existing, indestructible and without beginning or ending.

Monotheistic

Believing in the existence of a single God and rejecting belief in other gods or demigods.

The short answer to questions about what God is like is that he is complicated, or, to put it another way, that he is difficult for people to wrap their heads around. However, this does not stop most Christians from making various claims about what God is like. For example, God is eternal (i.e. he has no beginning or end and is indestructible), omniscient (i.e. he knows everything), and personal (i.e. he forms relationships with human beings). However, this list is far from exhaustive and there are several other things that Christians believe about God's nature. Additionally and perhaps most importantly, Christianity is monotheistic, which means that all Christians claim that God is singular: there is only one God.

2. **How** does the nature of God work?

Generally, Christians believe what they do about what God is like because of the Bible, which describes God's nature in great detail. For example, God's benevolent character is presented through the life and death of Jesus (i.e. God the Son) and some Old Testament passages like Psalm 86:15, which describes God as merciful, gracious and abounding in steadfast love. Similarly, John 3:16 states, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that [we]... may have eternal life." Elsewhere in the New Testament, God's forgiving nature is presented through passages like the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Lord's Prayer. In the former passage, a father forgives his son even though he leaves home to squander his inheritance. When the son returns in disgrace and confesses his sins, his father forgives him and even kills the fatted calf (biblical slang for throwing a wild and raucous party). In the latter passage, the Lord's Prayer, Christians ask God to forgive their sins, revealing a deep conviction in God's forgiving nature.

Judge

One who decides whether another's actions are good or evil and how to respond to them.

Omnipotent

All-powerful; characterised by limitless ability, influence and strength.

Benevolent

All-loving; characterised by limitless compassion, kindness and supportiveness.

Forgiving

Accepting of wrong actions and thoughts; able to show mercy and pardon wrongdoers.

Notwithstanding this, Christians also believe that God acts as the perfectly just judge. In the New Testament's Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats; here, readers learn that wrongdoers will "go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life", which is evidence of God's role at the Last Judgement. Additionally, God is widely presented as omnipotent. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, God performs several miracles through Moses, like turning the water of the Nile to blood and parting the Red Sea. Both these acts are demonstrations of extraordinary power, but omnipotence can be found all over the place, like in the creation of Earth and the miracles of Jesus.

3. **Why** is the nature of God important?

Christian beliefs about the nature of God are important because they have a huge influence on how Christians behave. For some Christians, God's benevolent, immanent and personal nature is emphasised in Jesus, God the Son. For these Christians, the humanity of Jesus is essential, which is well-captured at his baptism and during the week culminating in his crucifixion. With these aspects of God's nature emphasised, he becomes a role model that Christians can attempt to emulate (even if they will never ultimately be successful). For other Christians, it is God the Father, the omnipotent, omniscient and transcendent judge whom they imagine in their mind's eye. Such Christians may be especially God-fearing and concerned with the impending Last Judgement. What Christians think God is like affects how they behave and worship, and the fact that different Christians emphasise different aspects of God's nature is one of the reasons why different denominations have different beliefs, teachings and practices.

Immanent

Being an intrinsic and permanent part of something (e.g. the universe).

Transcendent

Being beyond the possibility of experience or outside of something (e.g. the universe).

George Thinks

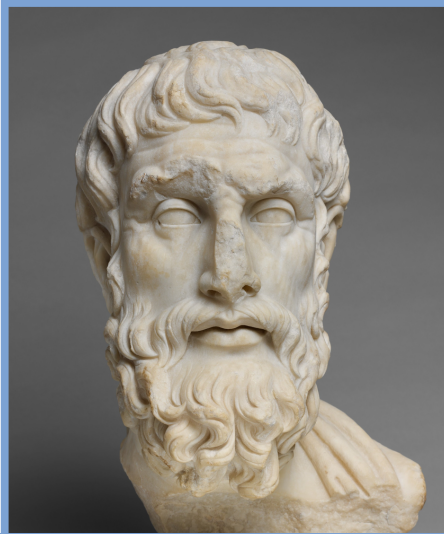
So, what must we remember about what Christians think God's like? Well, he has various characteristics or qualities, and some appear to be mutually exclusive (like immanence, which involves being part of the universe, and transcendence, which involves being beyond it). For Christians, God is impossible to comprehend fully. What's more, all these characteristics or qualities are grounded in the Bible; scripture is the basis for almost everything Christians believe about God, even if it's sometimes supported by the work of philosophers and theologians using non-textual evidence. And finally, God's multifaceted nature means that different Christians inevitably emphasise various aspects of God's nature at the expense of others; this, in turn, gives rise to some major inter-denominational differences: some Christians think and do one thing, whilst others think and do another. If you understand this final point, you'll be able to avoid asking a lot of repetitive questions of your teacher. The Bible is more like a miniature library than a single book: it contains two collections of multiple books by different authors (and some books were even written by more than one person). Consequently, a vast array of views about what God's like are presented. It's impossible to reconcile all of them perfectly, and, because of this, some Christians do this and other Christians do that. Christianity is a broad church, so to speak!



Problem of Evil

1. What is the problem of evil?

The problem of evil is the stumbling block to Christian faith created by the existence of a force that's opposed to good alongside God. The presence of an immoral power in the universe that causes pain and suffering undermines belief in the existence of a deity that is both benevolent (i.e. all-loving) and omnipotent (i.e. all-powerful) because it is not immediately apparent to many people that belief in such a deity is possible in the face of evil. Indeed, if God is benevolent and omnipotent, surely he would remove evil, pain and suffering from the world. Every time human beings confront evil, they are challenged with the seemingly insuperable question: why would God allow this?



Epicurus

Natural evil and moral evil: instances of evil are typically assigned to one of two categories: natural evil, which is the kind of pain and suffering that human beings can do little about because it is caused by the natural world (e.g. by earthquakes). And moral evil, which is under human control because it is a product of bad behaviour (crimes like murder and theft fall into this category). This distinction is essential because even if the existence of moral evil can be blamed on people's lousy decision-making, it is hard to convincingly argue that human beings are in any way responsible for natural evil.

Inconsistent triad: regardless of type, the problem of evil is best expressed by the inconsistent triad, which consists of the three following claims: (1) evil exists, (2) God is benevolent, and (3) God is omnipotent. The triad is inconsistent because at least one of the claims must be false. As Epicurus (341-270 BCE) put it, "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able but not willing? Then his is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?" In short, if God is able and willing to stop evil, why does it exist?

2. How does the problem of evil work?

Soul-deciding defence: Christians respond to the problem of evil in different ways. One of the most famous is using the soul-deciding defence. This defence maintains that people are individually responsible for deciding what happens to their souls. Human beings have free will and can use it to make right decisions and do good or make wrong decisions and do evil. Whilst free will provides people with the ability to think for themselves and act independently, actions have consequences: human souls either ascend to heaven or descend to hell. Although this defence is very popular, especially among Catholic Christians, it has one major problem: it only really accounts for the existence of moral evil.

Soul-making defence: other Christians claim that an all-loving and all-powerful deity allows evil because it is only through pain and suffering that human souls can be developed and perfected. The poster boy for this defence is a biblical figure named Job, who suffered a series of extreme misfortunes inflicted by Satan, who bet God that Job's sufferings would inspire him to abandon his faith. Despite the fact that Job suffered horrendous mental and physical pain as a result of this wager, according to the Bible, he emerged from the ordeal better than before. Similarly, Psalm 119 extols the virtues of being humbled by God for its beneficial consequence: becoming a better person. The principal problem with this defence is that not everyone is as resilient as Job. Some people are broken by the pain and suffering they endure, and others die as a consequence of evil; it is difficult to see how the souls of these individuals grow and develop thanks to the misfortunes they are subjected to.

Evil

The opposite of good; a force or power that is immoral or otherwise causes pain and suffering.

Free Will

The ability to make decisions for oneself and act upon them without constraint or obstruction.

Original Sin

The Christian doctrine that all human beings are inherently sinful because of Adam and Eve's first sin.

3. **Why** is the problem of evil important?

How people respond to the problem of evil has a significant effect on whether they subscribe to atheism, agnosticism or theism. Christians who accept the soul-deciding defence maintain their faith by insisting that the God-given gift of free will gives rise to evil as an unavoidable byproduct. Christians who accept the soul-making defence, like Billy Graham (1918-2018), maintain their faith by insisting that good can come from pain and suffering, so "even if we may not always understand why God allows certain things to happen to us," God is capable of bringing good out of it and "triumph out of suffering". However, for some people, the problem presented by the existence of evil is just too much. So atheists like Stephen Fry (b. 1957) can ask why we should "respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who create[d] a world... so full of injustice and pain". More than any other evidence available to refute the existence of God, the existence of evil and the experience of pain and suffering in this world appears most at odds with the claim that an all-loving and all-powerful deity is running the show.



Stephen Fry

George Thinks

The key thing to remember about the problem of evil is that it's more of a problem for Christians than it is for atheists or agnostics because it casts doubt over the existence of God, and it casts doubt over the existence of God because he's supposed to be both all-loving and all-powerful. There are, of course, some defences against this doubt. The two most famous are the soul-deciding and soul-making defences, both of which rely on us conceding that there are some circumstances in which an all-loving and all-powerful God might accept the existence of evil; in other words, there might be some situations in which pain and suffering are necessary despite God's benevolent and omnipotent nature. As it happens, whilst I'm not an atheist, I don't accept these defences because an all-powerful God should be able to create a universe in which free will or the development of our souls is possible without the existence of evil. This said, of the two most famous defences to the problem of evil, I find the second one (i.e. the soul-making defence) more persuasive. Sure, I don't enjoy the experience of pain and suffering; however, I think that some of the sufferings I have experienced have made me more compassionate and forgiving. But the unavoidable problem is that I know that some people's sufferings are unbearable, and if I were to experience them, I'm not sure I'd necessarily be developed by them.



Trinity

1. **What** is the Trinity?

The doctrine of the Trinity is a central Christian teaching about the nature of God that states he is like a shamrock (i.e. a species of clover used as a national symbol of Ireland). A shamrock is a single plant almost entirely comprised of three distinct leaves. For Christians like Saint Patrick (who, according to legend, popularised the use of the shamrock as a symbol for the Trinity), this is just like God: one leaf symbolises God the Father, the first person of the Trinity, who is responsible for the creation and sustenance of the universe. Another leaf symbolises God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, who is responsible for saving humanity from the consequences of sin. The last leaf represents God the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, who is responsible for sustaining Christians and the Church. All persons of the Trinity are coequal (i.e. of equal importance and status), coeternal (i.e. of equal, never-ending age) and consubstantial (i.e. made up of the same divine substance). However, despite their coequality, coeternity and consubstantiality, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are distinct entities.

Trinity

The three persons who form the one God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

2. **How** does the Trinity work?



A shamrock: an analogy for the Trinity and a national symbol of Ireland.

The doctrine of the Trinity is never explicitly articulated in the New Testament; however, between 100-400, it became a central teaching that almost all Christians accept today. (It is interesting to note that a small number of churches reject the doctrine of the Trinity; their members are known as nontrinitarian Christians and are sometimes labelled as heretics by mainstream, trinitarian Christians.) Notwithstanding the lack of explicit references to the Trinity in the Bible, several passages appear to imply its existence. Some of the most famous verses that trinitarian Christians use to support their doctrine are found in the letters of Paul the Apostle, and the gospels of both Matthew the Apostle and John the Evangelist (i.e. the early Christians to whom two of the gospels are traditionally attributed).

The Pauline epistles: in Philippians 2, Paul the Apostle writes that "Christ Jesus... though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness." This passage appears to reveal that Paul the Apostle thought Jesus was God the Son: he boldly asserted the belief that Jesus existed in the form of God and later suggested "being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death". The person to whom Jesus was obedient is not stated at this point; however, given the context, trinitarian Christians think it is reasonable to assume that Paul the Apostle had the person of God the Father in mind.

The Gospel of Matthew: Matthew the Apostle wrote that "when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."" This scene from Matthew 3 may be the first reported sighting of the Trinity in the New Testament. The person of God the Holy Spirit is clearly identifiable descending like a dove; the person of God the Father appears to be heard in the voice from heaven; and, similarly, the person of God the Son appears to be identified as Jesus with the famous words, "This is my Son, the Beloved."

The Gospel of John: John the Evangelist used trinitarian statements in John 10, where he recorded Jesus saying "the Father and I are one", and John 14, where he wrote, "No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." In both these passages, Jesus explicitly claims to be connected with God the Father. Similarly, in John 14, the Holy Spirit is referenced with Jesus's words, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

3. Why is the Trinity important?

In order to be a Catholic or an Orthodox Christian, accepting the doctrine of the Trinity is required. Likewise, the vast majority of Protestant Christians profess that God is one in three persons as well. Although it is possible to be a nontrinitarian or antitrinitarian Christian, as far as the rest of the religion is concerned, rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity is a heresy. Beyond this, the Trinity is important because it allows Christians to make sense of the sometimes contradictory nature of God. The conceptual framework of trinitarianism helps Christians visualise God's omnipotence and omniscience in the person of God the Father, who is often represented as a wise and bearded ruler. Likewise, Christians picture God's benevolent and personal nature in the person of God the Son, who is movingly represented with the wounds he suffered during his self-sacrifice on the cross and in clearly human, personal form. Finally, Christians imagine God's immanence in the person of God the Holy Spirit, who is frequently depicted in Christian art as a dove that radiates light throughout the universe.



The Shield of the Trinity: a diagram that explains the Trinity.

George Thinks

So, after all that, what's the doctrine of the Trinity really about? It's perfectly possible that you're none the wiser; it is, after all, a pretty tricky concept for anyone to wrap their heads around (including the minority of nontrinitarian Christians who reject it). The important thing to remember is this: the doctrine of the Trinity is the teaching that even though God's one and Christianity is monotheistic, the one God exists in three distinct persons; just think about the shamrock. Beyond this, knowing that the Trinity is never explicitly written about in the New Testament is helpful. Still, there are enough references for most Christians to think it accurately describes the nature of God, and one of the reasons for this is that the doctrine of the Trinity helps to make sense of some of God's apparently contradictory features. For Christians, he is both benevolent and the judge, immanent and transcendent, and omniscient but also the giver of free will. For pretty obvious reasons, the belief that God's all-loving is difficult to square with the idea that he's responsible for judging people when they die and sending them to an eternity in either heaven or hell. Likewise, how can God be beyond the universe and, therefore, responsible for its creation whilst, at the same time, somehow be a part of it? It's issues like these that the Trinity helps to resolve. And yet, for non-Christians, this doctrine often gives rise to more questions than it answers.



Creation

1. **What** is the story of creation?

The story of creation is all about the origins of the universe and life on Earth. Christians believe that important details about creation are revealed in the New Testament, in the Gospel of John, which go beyond the information provided at the start of the Old Testament, in the Genesis account that they share with Jews. Additionally, some Christians believe that what happened immediately after creation, in Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, helps explain the existence of evil, pain and suffering in the world. This makes the story of creation a really important Christian narrative that helps explain how the universe was created and why it is the way it is today.



The Garden of Eden

Creation

The process through which God brought the universe and living things within it into existence.

Genesis: the first chapter of Genesis contains the most famous account of creation, which informs readers that God the Father and God the Holy Spirit brought the universe and living things into existence over six days and that God the Father rested on the seventh. On the first day, God created light and distinguished day from night. On the second day, God created the sky; then, on the third day, he made the sea, the land, and plant life. On the fourth day, God created the Sun, Moon, and stars. On the fifth day, he made birds and fish; then, on the sixth day, he created land animals and human beings.

John: the Gospel of John does not revisit the details of the Genesis account, but it does inform readers that God the Son was present at creation in addition to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. According to John, God the Father and God the Son brought the universe and living things within it into existence by God the Son acting as the creative agent of God the Father. In summary, this means that the Gospel of John claims God the Son somehow created on behalf of God the Father, an idea not expressed in the Old Testament but revealed to Christians later.

2. **How** does the story of creation work?

For Christians, the story of creation works by demonstrating that all three persons of God were present and active in the process of bringing the universe into being; God the Father and God the Holy Spirit in Genesis, and God the Son in John.

Word of God

The manifestation of the mind and will of God; a synonym for God the Son used in the Gospel of John.

God the Father: Genesis 1:1 reveals God the Father at work during creation with the words, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth..." Likewise, Romans 1:20 contains Paul the Apostle's claim that, "Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature... have been seen and understood through the things God has made." Finally, the Apostles' Creed confirms the role that God the Father had in bringing about the universe in its opening lines, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth."

God the Son: John 1:1-3 introduces the role of God the Son in creation with the words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." The author of John used the word "Word" to describe the manifestation of the mind and will of God, and as a synonym for God the Son (the author of John clarified this a few verses later when he wrote that the Word became flesh, or was incarnated, as Jesus).

God the Holy Spirit: Genesis 1:2 follows on from verse one with the words, "The earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." The phrase, "wind from God", is important because some translations use the term "spirit of God", which sounds like "God the Holy Spirit". Although Jews also read Genesis they don't recognise this translation. For them, the "wind from God" is just a wind; but for Christians, it points towards the role of God the Holy Spirit in creation.

3. **Why** is the creation story important?

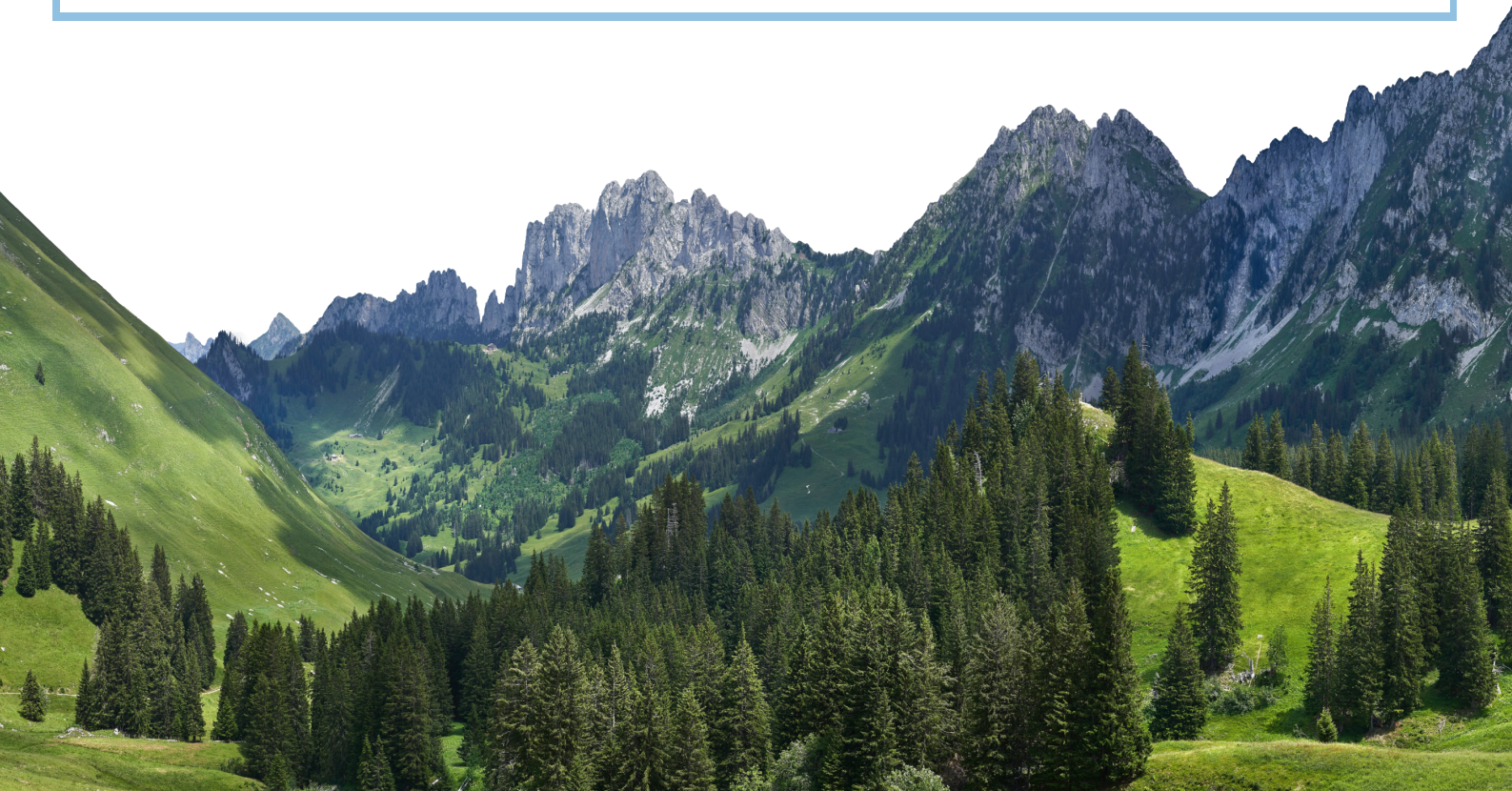
The story of creation is important for three principal reasons. First, Christians use it to support the belief in and worship of the Trinity because the three persons of the Trinity all appear to feature in the story. Second, the story of creation forms a major faultline in Christianity: did God bring the universe into being precisely as described in Genesis 1, or is this passage merely a metaphor for a process that looked radically different (maybe even like the Big Bang, or evolution by natural selection)? For liberal Christians, the story of creation didn't take place over six days, but for fundamentalist Christians, it did; the Bible tells it exactly as it happened. The story of creation is important in this regard because whether Christians read it literally or metaphorically can be used as a litmus test to work out whether they are on the liberal or the fundamentalist wing of the religion. Finally, the creation story is not just about the origins of the universe, living things and human beings in particular; it is also about the immediate aftermath of this process, in which Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden for disobeying God.



The Big Bang

George Thinks

Christians have a whole host of beliefs surrounding the creation story, but the most important thing to take away from it is that God, and God alone, is responsible for the creation of the universe and everything in it. If you look closely, it's possible to find God at work in all three persons of the Trinity; however, speaking personally, I think this stretches the text a little. After all, in Genesis, whether the word "wind" should be read as "spirit" remains highly contentious, and God the Son isn't mentioned at all (you've got to wait until the Gospel of John for that). But whatever you think, Christians are unanimous in affirming that God created the universe from nothing (perhaps as stated in the Bible if you're a fundamentalist Christian; perhaps via the Big Bang if you're a liberal one). Creation is the start of it all, and it should be no surprise that thinkers repeatedly return to it to help explain why the world is the way it is. Not least because it's where the seeds of the problem of evil are sown, which is another reason why it's so interesting. According to Genesis 3, by disobeying God and eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve come to know evil and have sufferings inflicted on them. This is why Augustine of Hippo proposes his soul-deciding defence: Adam and Eve have free will, exercising it in disobedience of God has consequences, but apparently this doesn't undermine God's benevolence because we are responsible!



Sin and Salvation

1. **What** are sin and salvation?

Sin is behaviour that separates human beings from God by breaking biblical laws. The first sin was committed in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (something God had explicitly forbidden), but some of the most famous examples can be found in the Ten Commandments. For instance, "you shall have no other Gods before me" and "you shall not murder" make clear that worshipping other gods and murdering people drives a wedge between God and human beings; they are sins.

Grace

God's freely-given and undeserved gift of love and support for human beings.

Law

Biblical commandments that define sin and explain how Christians should behave.

Sin

Behaviour that separates human beings from God by breaking biblical laws.

Salvation

The process by which God saves human beings from the consequences of sin.

Salvation is the process by which God saves human beings from the consequences of sin (i.e. death). Christians believe that Jesus saved humanity through his sacrifice on the cross, which they commemorate at Holy Communion by eating bread and drinking wine. Different Christians think salvation works in different ways. For some, Christians are saved by God's grace: the freely-given and undeserved gift of love and support for human beings that, in this instance, saves people from the consequences of their sins. For others, Christians are saved by accepting this gift and following the law, which is comprised of biblical commandments that define sin and explain how people should behave.

2. **How** do sin and salvation work?

In Genesis 3:1-7, Christians learn that eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a sin because God had forbidden it and that the consequence of sin is death (God tells Adam and Eve, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die"). Finally, the experience of Adam and Eve teaches Christians that sin separates God from human beings because when God discovered their disobedience, he banished them from the Garden of Eden, never to return. In the New Testament, Paul the Apostle provided further information about the nature of sin. In a passage that has been used to support the doctrine of original sin, he asserted that people cannot avoid sinful behaviour. "All have sinned," he wrote in Romans 3:23, "and fall short of the glory of God." Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, he confirmed that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God.

On the subject of salvation, Paul the Apostle claimed that being saved from the consequence of sin (or death) is the free gift of God. Perhaps most emphatically, he wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Here, the idea that Christians are saved by grace alone is most clearly articulated; the words are unequivocal: salvation is a gift, not something that can be earned. However, whilst this idea is repeated throughout the letters of Paul the Apostle, it appears at odds with some of the things that Jesus said according to the authors of the gospels. For example, in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus implied that God would condemn those who failed to observe his commandments with the words, "Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'" So, the debate about how Christians receive or achieve salvation is impossible to settle; it is clearly a gift, but it may also require good deeds or right action.



The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: bad news for humanity.

3. **Why** are sin and salvation important?

There is one principal reason why sin and salvation are important: the way Christians make sense of these ideas influences what they believe will happen to them in the afterlife. Take the Last Judgement, for instance: who will get into heaven and who will end up in hell? Some Christians believe everyone who accepts God's grace will ascend to paradise. Some argue that people must be good to receive this gift, but others (i.e. universalists) think it is available to anyone regardless of their behaviour. For them, everyone is getting into heaven. On the other hand, Christians like those in the Catholic tradition cannot escape the importance of good works. Biblical commandments define sin and explain how Christians should behave. The law is not superfluous window-dressing; it really matters. For Catholics, people who do not take seriously their responsibility to behave according to God's laws risk being condemned to hell. For Christians of this persuasion, the possibility of salvation and the promise of condemnation for sinners has a significant influence on how they live their lives and what they teach their children.



The Last Judgement

George Thinks

As we can see, sin and salvation are vital concepts within Christianity, and, even though there's a broad degree of agreement about what they mean, there remain some crucial differences. The most significant of these concerns Christian beliefs and teachings about salvation. Some Christians believe that heaven is open to everyone or, at least, everyone who accepts the freely-given and undeserved gift of God's grace, in this instance expressed as salvation from eternal death. Other Christians argue that this isn't enough, that people must follow God's laws and behave themselves if they want to end up in heaven. Despite the appeal of universalism, the idea that everyone will end up in heaven (or almost everyone, depending on your particular variety), the prospect of potential condemnation remains a powerful belief throughout much of the Christian world. The fear of future judgement at the hands of Jesus in the life hereafter has a significant impact on the behaviour of devout Christians: some separate from their spouses instead of divorcing; others live lives of sexual abstinence instead of engaging in the loving and intimate homosexual relationships they desire; at their most extreme, some decline life-saving medical treatment for fear of sinning. In short, these concepts give rise to life-changing behaviours for millions of people, which is why they're so important.



Afterlife

1. **What** is the afterlife?

The afterlife can be defined as a state that exists after death and that human beings experience when they die (if they can experience anything at all). For Christians, there are three principal destinations for people at the end of their lives. All Christians agree on the existence of heaven, which they conceive of as a place of eternal happiness and peace for those who receive salvation that God rules over. Some Christians consider paradise a physical place, while others imagine it as a spiritual realm. However, all agree that something heaven-like is out there somewhere.

Purgatory

A place of cleansing for sinners before their souls are allowed to enter heaven.

Hell

A place of eternal pain and suffering for the condemned from which God is absent.

Afterlife

A state that exists after death and that human beings experience after they die.

Heaven

A place of eternal happiness and peace for the saved that is ruled over by God.

Other Christians, most famously Catholics, believe in the existence of purgatory, which is a place for the cleansing of sinners before their souls are allowed into paradise. Whilst purgatory might not be as pleasant as heaven, it is certainly not as nasty as the third and final potential destination. This is hell, characterised by eternal pain and suffering for the condemned, from which God is entirely absent. It is repeatedly referenced in the New Testament, but some Christians argue that these passages should be read metaphorically instead of literally: hell is not a place of actual torture, they claim; this imagery is simply used to convey the pain and suffering of being separated from God.

2. **How** does the afterlife work?

What are the rules of the afterlife for Christians, and what can they expect if their beliefs are correct? First, many believe the afterlife will come shortly after Jesus's return and the Last Judgement. It is after this event that the saved are going to ascend to heaven, and the condemned are going to descend to hell. According to the gospels, these places are very real. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." The reader also gets a glimpse of this place in Luke 16:19-23 when, after death, the rich man is condemned to "Hades, where he was being tormented" on account of his inadequate behaviour in life. For centuries, Christians literally believed that people who had been condemned, just like the rich man, would be dragged down to hell by Satan's demons.

Judgement

The process by which God decides where human beings will spend the afterlife.

separates the sheep from the goats." According to Paul the Apostle, it is at this point that those who have died before judgement will be resurrected and sent either to heaven or hell ("For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable"). These beliefs about what Christians can expect in the afterlife find very early declaration in both the Nicene Creed, which affirms belief in heaven, the resurrection of the dead, and judgement when Jesus returns, and the Apostles' Creed, which affirms belief in both heaven and hell, the resurrection of everyone who has ever died, and judgement upon Jesus's return to Earth.



Heaven: a place of eternal happiness and peace for the saved.

3. **Why** is the afterlife important?

One primary reason the afterlife is so important is that Christian beliefs regarding it are bound up with teachings about the Last Judgement, which is only sometimes evident in presentations about the central beliefs and teachings of Christianity. Officially, all Christians believe that the dead will rise from their graves or tombs at some point in the future, as has been depicted in Christian art for centuries. At that time, both the living and the resurrected will have their bodies transformed, and then all will be judged by Jesus upon his return to Earth. At this point, most Christians (with the notable exception of universalists) think that the stakes will be incredibly high. Some people will end up in heaven, that place of eternal happiness and peace ruled over by God; others will end up in hell, that place of eternal pain and suffering. Some Christians shy away from their harder-edged beliefs and teachings about eternal rewards and punishments. Still, beliefs and teachings about the afterlife are essential because they reveal what Christians think will happen after death. They act as a powerful sanction, encouraging people to become Christians and behave well.



General resurrection: Christians believe the dead will be raised for the Last Judgement.

George Thinks

A lot is going on here, but there are, in my opinion, two big and important things. First, Christians all believe in the Last Judgement. Even though some Christian groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons reject belief in the Trinity, none reject belief in the second coming of Jesus, general resurrection and Last Judgement. In short, this is a central Christian belief because it's so widely and repeatedly attested in the New Testament (even more, for instance, than Jesus's divinity). Second, Christians don't just believe in the existence of heaven. Yes, universalists think that everyone's going there, and even those who believe in hell are often quicker to confirm the presence of heaven. However, hell's still a possibility in most Christian thinking. In other words, for almost all Christians, what we do in this world matters: accept God's gift of salvation and behave well, and you can enjoy an afterlife of eternal bliss in heaven; don't, and prepare to burn in hellfire forever (metaphorically, at the very least). It's this tremendous possible cost that underpins Blaise Pascal's famous argument: even though the existence of God can't be proved, believing in him is a good idea because the potential consequences of rejecting Christianity are so horrific. However, be that as it may, when confronted with whether or not to believe in the existence of heaven, hell and purgatory, Christianity doesn't provide an entirely coherent picture.



Life of Jesus

1. **Who** was Jesus, and what are the critical moments of his life?

Everyone agrees that Jesus (c. 4 BCE - c. 30 CE) was a man who lived in the first century, and the consensus is that he was born around 4 BCE. The reason scholars believe Jesus was born before 0 is complicated; suffice it to say that when the calendar was changed to place Jesus in the centre of history, the people who did it got their dates wrong. Little is known definitively about Jesus's early life; however, he was almost certainly baptised in the River Jordan by John the Baptist around 29 CE. This event launched a period of travelling and teaching that lasted between one and three years that Christians claim also involved Jesus performing miracles, like healing the sick and exorcising demons.

Saviour

A title of Jesus that describes his role in saving humanity from the consequence of sin (i.e. eternal death).

Messiah

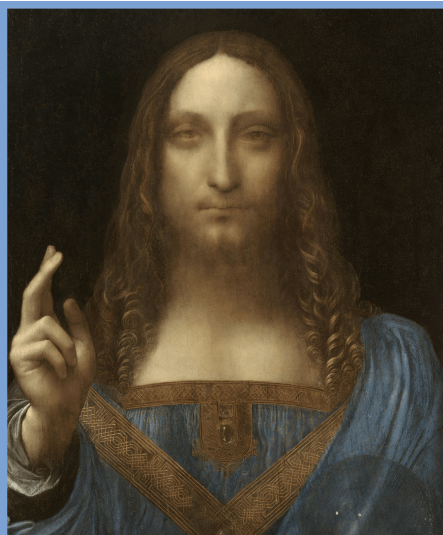
A title of Jesus that describes his role as the saviour of humanity prophesied in the Old Testament.

Lord

A title of Jesus that describes his role as a master over others and may imply that he is God.

Finally, scholars agree that the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, ordered Jesus's execution by crucifixion sometime around 30 CE, when Jesus was approximately 33 years old. Even though Christians and non-Christians agree that Jesus's ministry was a crucial moment in his life and one that led to his death, Christians claim that it is possible to know a lot more about the specifics of his miracle-working and teaching and that they are particularly significant. For Christians, what makes the specifics important is that they point towards Jesus's identity as messiah (a title that describes Jesus's role as the saviour of humanity prophesied in the Old Testament), as lord (a title that describes Jesus's role as a master over others and may imply his divinity), and as saviour (a title that describes Jesus's role in saving humanity from the consequence of sin (i.e. eternal death)).

2. **How** do the key moments of Jesus's life work?



Jesus

What does the ministry of Jesus reveal for Christians, especially if the gospel narratives are taken at face value? To answer this question, it is best to divide the events of Jesus's ministry into two significant and essential categories: Jesus's miracles and Jesus's teachings.

Miracles: these work by demonstrating that Jesus is both messianic and divine, so they support his claim to titles like messiah, lord and saviour. For example, Jesus's healing of the man born blind fulfilled messianic expectations found in Isaiah. For Christians, Isaiah 35 explains what people can expect when the messiah arrives, and here believers read that the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be unstopped, and the lame will leap like deer. According to the gospels, when Jesus restored the sight of the man born blind, he proved himself to be the messiah anticipated by Isaiah. Accounts of miracles like that of a girl restored to life are even more astonishing because they might point towards Jesus's divinity. Jews believed that only God had the power to give life, so the miracles are essential to claims in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed that Jesus is God the Son.

Teachings: stories about Jesus's teachings work similarly by showing that he can interpret God's commandments. For example, when he told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he reinterpreted what it means to be a neighbour, declaring that people should be neighbours to everyone they meet, not merely those of the same religion. According to the gospels, Jesus acted similarly when he preached the Sermon on the Mount and delivered the Greatest Commandment. Above all, Jesus claimed that agape was at the heart of God's laws and Jewish teachings, which is a form of selfless, unconditional love that extends to all human beings and is modelled on Jesus's concern

for others. Just as God gave Moses the commandments and Moses delivered them to the people, Jesus is presented taking them, reinterpreting them, and redelivering them. This may show Jesus as divine, for who has the authority to reinterpret the commandments except God himself? For Christians, these teachings all support claims about Jesus's identity.

Agape

A form of selfless, unconditional love that extends to all human beings and is modelled on the love of Jesus.

3. **Why** are the key moments of Jesus's life important?

First, the miracles of Jesus have immense theological significance (i.e. they are essential for understanding the nature of God the Son). Even though historians and scientists do not consider biblical stories to be strong enough evidence to support Christian claims about Jesus, they provided the types of evidence that passed for proof in some first and second-century settings. Jesus heals the blind, the deaf, the lame and the mute; he casts out demons and brings the Kingdom of God behind him; he turns water into a superabundance of wine. Healings, Satan's retreat, and lashings of wine were things that Jews believed the messiah was going to bring with him. More controversially, miracles demonstrating divine powers over life and death and manipulating nature (e.g. restoring Jairus's daughter to life, raising Lazarus from the dead, and walking on water) may reveal that Jesus is God. Second, the teachings of Jesus have tremendous ethical significance. Regardless of whether Christians always act according to them, they play a central role in Christianity and find their expression in critical moments from Jesus's ministry.

George Thinks

From my point of view, it's important to remember that, whilst we can't be sure whether or not Jesus performed any of the miracles or delivered any of the teachings recorded in the gospels (at least from a historical perspective), this doesn't matter. What matters is that these are the stories that early followers of Jesus told about their religious leader and that their listeners passed on to others. Regardless of whether or not the rumours are true, they tell us a considerable amount about what the earliest followers of Jesus thought about him. In short, the miracles and teachings of Jesus show that they thought he was the messiah, they may have thought he was divine, and they certainly believed he had the authority to reinterpret God's commandments. To what end? Well, it appears to be the creation of a more loving, compassionate, and peaceful community ahead of the arrival of the Kingdom of God. Without a doubt, what we know of Jesus's life apart from his death and resurrection is crucial to understanding Christian beliefs today.



Incarnation of Jesus

1. **What** is the incarnation of Jesus?

The incarnation is the event at which God became flesh and took human form in the person of Jesus. It comes from a Latin word that means to become flesh or be in-fleshed: the famous Christmas carol, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, refers to the incarnation involving God being "veiled in the flesh". The biblical passages in which the incarnation is described include the nativity of Jesus, as recounted in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and the opening verses of the Gospel of John, which is known as the prologue.

Incarnation

The event at which God became flesh and took human form in the person of Jesus.



The Annunciation: the angel Gabriel foretells Jesus's conception via the Holy Spirit.

Luke: according to this account, the angel Gabriel visited Mary, mother of Jesus, and explained, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." This account is similar to the one reported in the Gospel of Matthew, which also describes Jesus's miraculous conception through the Holy Spirit.

John: the prologue in the Gospel of John is different. The text explicitly describes the divinity of the Word of God in John 1:1 and then, in John 1:14, exclaims "the Word became flesh and lived among us." This provides further details about the incarnation, stating that the conception of Jesus involved a process through which the Word of God (i.e. God the Son) became human.

2. **How** does the incarnation of Jesus work?

What is the incarnation about, and how do Christians understand it? Although many things go on across the accounts of the incarnation, their primary function is to demonstrate Jesus's identity. The incarnation stories found in the nativity accounts from Matthew and Luke's gospels and the prologue to the Gospel of John tell Christians essential things about Jesus's nature. Principally, the nativity stories emphasise Jesus's messiahship whilst, in the prologue, the stress is on Jesus's divinity.

Luke: the Gospel of Luke implies Jesus's messiahship because it shows that Jesus fulfils expectations. For example, Luke 1:32 reads, "The Lord God will give to [Jesus] the throne of his ancestor David." This verse confirms that Jesus will sit on David's throne as his descendant, fulfilling the expectation that the messiah will be a king related to David. Furthermore, in Luke 2:10-11 the shepherds who eventually visit Jesus are told, "I am bringing you good news of great joy... to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord." So Jesus is a member of the house of David, who will be given the throne of David, and is born in the city of David (i.e. Bethlehem).

John: whilst the nativity stories show how Jesus ticks several items off the messianic expectations checklist, they do not claim that Jesus is divine or God the Son. For this, the incarnation account in the Gospel of John is required, which states, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." This passage states that the Word of God is God and became a human being who lived on Earth. This is confirmed in the letter of 1 Timothy with the words, "Without any doubt, the mystery of godliness is great: He was revealed in flesh,... proclaimed among gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory." Passages like these support the claim that Jesus is God the Son (i.e. divine or godly) and the messiah (i.e. the special human being chosen by God to save everyone on Earth).



Jesus's incarnation

3. **Why** is the incarnation of Jesus important?

First, the nativity stories in the gospels of Matthew and Luke show that Jesus fulfils expectations about the messiah. According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is king-like: "The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." Check, because many Jews were expecting a kingly messiah reminiscent of the famous warrior-king David. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is prophet-like: immediately after his birth, he was hidden from Herod the Great in Egypt and called out of it. Check, because some Jews were expecting a prophetic messiah reminiscent of the most important prophet in Judaism, Moses (and he was hidden from Pharaoh and then called out of Egypt). What matters about these passages is that their authors believed them and they reveal a birth that satisfies messianic expectations. Second, the prologue in the Gospel of John confirms Jesus's divinity; the Word of God was God and became human at the incarnation, a claim that supports the Christian belief that Jesus was not merely the messiah, but God the Son as well (and may have been behind the charges of blasphemy that Jesus faced). Finally, this central belief gives rise to the festival of Christmas when Christians celebrate the moment that both the messiah arrived and God became man.

Blasphemy

A sin that involves claiming to be divine or otherwise comparing oneself to God.

George Thinks

So, there's a lot more to the incarnation than meets the eye. The biblical texts that record it are essential for Christians because they establish both Jesus's messiahship and his divinity. Again, the accuracy of the texts isn't particularly important at one level; what's important is that (regardless of their accuracy) they reveal that the earliest followers of Jesus believed he was the messiah, and some were unequivocally certain he was God the Son, too (as demonstrated by the prologue of the Gospel of John). Taken together with the accounts of Jesus's miracles and resurrection, the accounts of the incarnation are integral to Christian beliefs and teachings about Jesus's identity. Using these passages, Christians justify their claims that Jesus is God, with all their impact on practices from daily prayer to festivals like Christmas. Regardless of whether or not you're a Christian, what I hope you'll bear in mind is that the incarnation isn't really about all the famous details that we know so well from the nativity stories (e.g. Jesus's birth in Bethlehem, the arrival of the kings, and his flight from Herod the Great into hiding in Egypt), it's about what these details are trying to imply. All of them are hinting at what Jesus is: the messiah. If you can interpret the hidden meanings in these stories, you'll understand why they're so central to Christianity.



Crucifixion of Jesus

1. **What** is the crucifixion of Jesus?

The crucifixion is the event at which Jesus was executed. Needless to say, this was more than a method of execution, it was an appalling form of punishment designed to torture the victim, publicly humiliate them and subsequently deter others from committing similar crimes. Typically, with the notable exception of slaves, crucifixion was reserved for pirates and people who had committed crimes against the Roman Empire (like rebels and attempted revolutionaries).

Crucifixion

The event at which Jesus was executed by the Roman method of being fixed to a cross and left to die.



The Last Supper: Jesus's final meal with his disciples before the crucifixion.

Thursday: according to the first three gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke), Jews were preparing for the Passover on Thursday (because it celebrates Jewish liberation from Egypt, the Romans may have been sensitive to any potentially rebellious disturbances). Jesus had his last meal with the disciples after sunset on Thursday and was betrayed by Judas before being arrested shortly after that.

Friday: Jesus was interrogated at night by the Jewish authorities. Then, after sunrise, Jesus was tried by the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, sentenced to death and crucified. There may be a political reason for Jesus's death related to the disturbance he caused in the Temple, but this is not provided by the gospels, which suggest that Pontius Pilate did not recognise Jesus as a threat.

2. **How** does the crucifixion of Jesus work?

What do Christians believe happened at the crucifixion of Jesus beyond his physical death, and what purpose did his execution serve? In other words, what was accomplished by Jesus's death? To answer these questions, it is essential to consider the events immediately before the crucifixion as well as the crucifixion itself. Chief among these is the Last Supper, Jesus's final meal with his disciples before his arrest, trial and execution, and the event at which he instituted the first Holy Communion, according to most gospels.

Last Supper: according to the Gospel of Matthew, it is at this event that "Jesus... took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Here, readers learn that Jesus's death will lead to the forgiveness of sins. The thinking of early Christians may be linked to the Day of Atonement when the High Priest symbolically transferred the sins of Jews onto a scapegoat before having it driven into the wilderness to restore their relationship with God (as commanded in Leviticus). The death of Jesus, then, may be required to restore the relationship between God and humanity.



Jesus's crucifixion

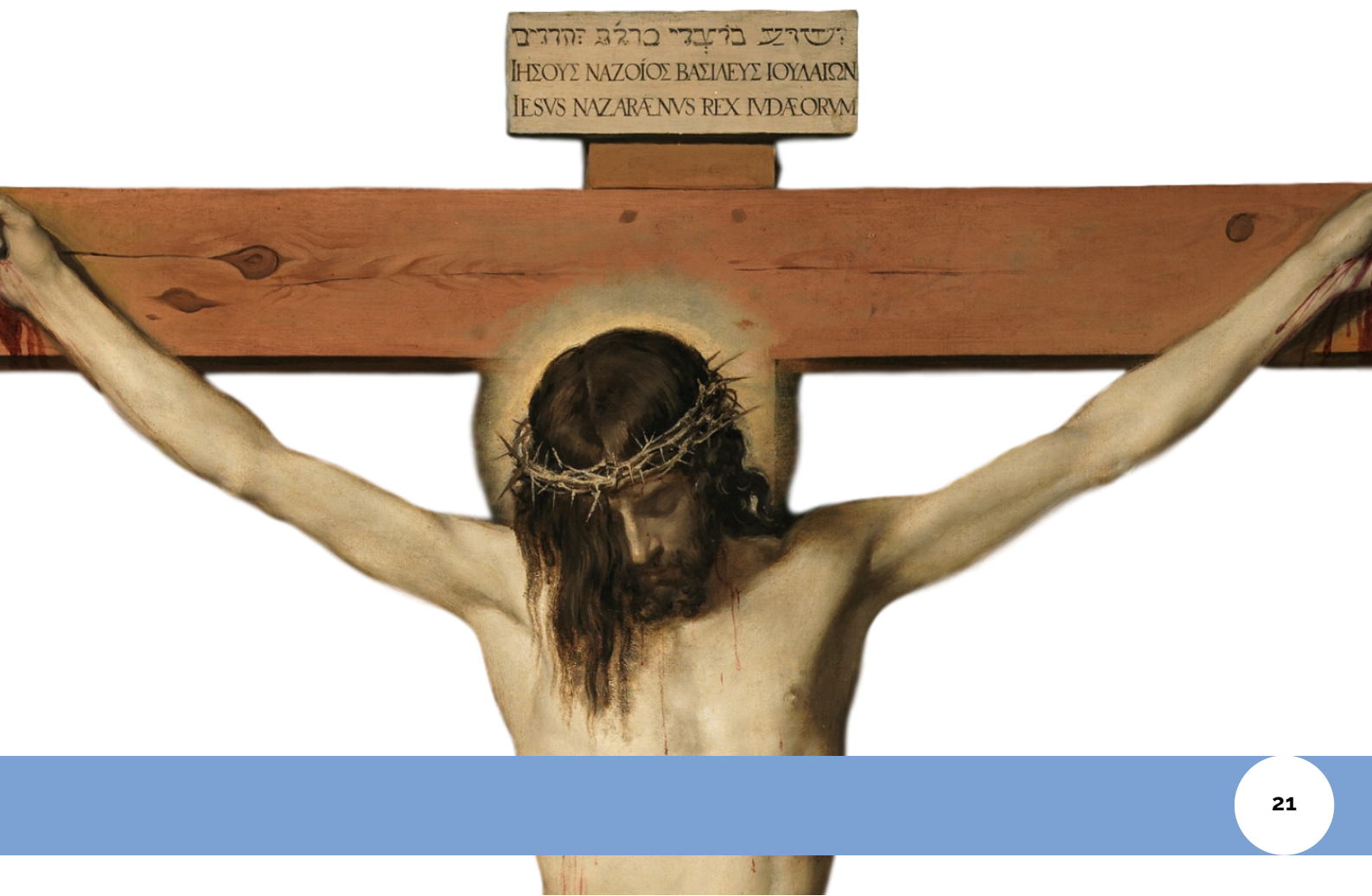
Crucifixion: Matthew 27 states, "When they had crucified [Jesus], they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots... And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice... When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink." Details from this passage (e.g. the casting of lots for Jesus's clothing, the mocking bystanders, and the vinegar on a stick) recall an Old Testament figure called the Suffering Servant. This figure is chosen by God, endures tremendous suffering, but ultimately triumphs over his hardships. Christians believe that the Old Testament passages that refer to the Suffering Servant are actually prophesying the arrival of a suffering messiah; in other words, a messiah who will suffer and die but eventually triumph, just like Jesus. So, despite the crucifixion involving Jesus's suffering and death, it simultaneously presents him as the messiah.

3. **Why** is the crucifixion of Jesus important?

Why is Jesus's death so significant to Christians? First, it is the moment Christians believe Jesus sacrificed himself so that God's relationship with humanity could be restored. As such, it is the focus of Christian worship at Easter and Holy Communion. Christians believe that Jesus gave his body and blood so they would not have to pay the price of eternal death for their sins; instead, thanks to Jesus's sacrifice, they will be resurrected at the Last Judgement and ascend into heaven. The crucifixion is vitally important to Christians because it is the mechanism by which the punishment they believe they should rightly suffer for their sins was removed. Second, the crucifixion accounts in the gospels confirm Jesus's messiahship. Passages like Isaiah 53 present the figure of the Suffering Servant, a messianic figure who endures tremendous hardships before eventually triumphing over his oppressors. According to Matthew 27:28-29, and 31, the Romans "stripped Jesus and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown they put it on his head... After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe... Then they led him away to crucify him." For Christians, details like this confirm that Jesus is the messiah, the Suffering Servant anticipated in the Old Testament; he is still God's chosen one despite his crucifixion. The very circumstances that might suggest to others that Jesus wasn't beloved by God act as confirmation of Jesus's messiahship.

George Thinks

What are the most important things for us to understand and take away from the gospel accounts of the crucifixion and the events immediately preceding it (most significantly, the Last Supper)? Well, the big one is that Christians believe the crucifixion is the process by which humanity is saved from the consequences of sin (by which they mean eternal death). Yes, the resurrection may be the more memorable, miraculous and triumphant note, but the crucifixion is more important: it's the crucifixion that is the sacrifice that saves humanity. Christians believe it's required for their salvation despite considerable debate about how this is accomplished. Regardless of this debate, though, without the crucifixion, heaven's impossible. Less critical but still vital is that the crucifixion actually confirms Jesus is the messiah. As you've read, this one's a little tricky, but Christians think Old Testament texts like Isaiah prophesy the coming of a suffering messiah. The incarnation and the ministry show that Jesus is a powerful miracle-worker and heir to King David, which is what most Jews were expecting of the messiah. The crucifixion isn't something that first-century Jews were anticipating their messiah would have to endure, but this doesn't prove that Jesus wasn't the messiah. Instead, Christians believe it casts him in the mould of a second messianic figure: the Suffering Servant.



Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus

1. **What** are the resurrection and ascension of Jesus?

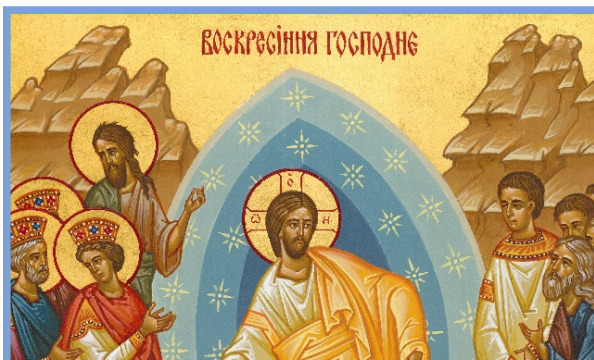
Although there is widespread agreement among Christians and non-Christians that Jesus died by crucifixion, atheists and followers of other religions reject the belief that he was raised from the dead and, after that, ascended into heaven. Notwithstanding this, historians concede that something happened after Jesus's death: some of his followers had experiences that convinced them of the resurrection. Although it is impossible to ascertain their nature, perhaps some disciples suffered hallucinations or visions triggered by profound grief. These are the types of explanations offered by non-Christians. However, for Christians, the resurrection and ascension are historical facts: they really happened.

Resurrection

The event at which Jesus rose from the dead and left his tomb empty shortly after his death and burial.

Ascension

The event at which the disciples witnessed Jesus raised up into heaven shortly after his resurrection.



The resurrection: the moment at which Christians believe Jesus conquered death.

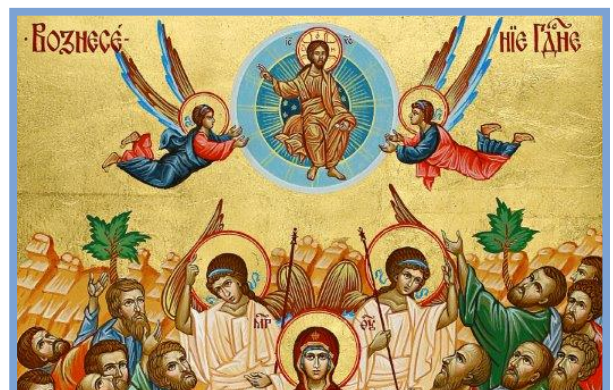
Resurrection: the gospels do not provide accounts of the moment of Jesus's resurrection. Instead, according to Luke 24:1-3, readers learn that those who discovered the empty tomb "found the stone rolled away... but when they went in, they did not find the body." So, after the burial of Jesus, the next widely attested story assumes the resurrection with the discovery of his empty tomb.

Ascension: Luke 24:51-53 reports the ascension with the words, "While [Jesus] was blessing [the disciples], he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven." Christians claim that all the gospels assume the ascension, although only Luke's records it. These verses are significant to claims that Jesus was bodily resurrected rather than seen during a visionary experience.

2. **How** do the resurrection and ascension of Jesus work?

Resurrection: the first thing to note is that Christians believe that Jesus genuinely returned from the grave. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, Paul the Apostle writes, "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and... he was buried and... he was raised on the third day". He knew this was an extraordinary claim, but Jesus's followers had seen him: "he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time." There is no doubt from the writings of Paul the Apostle that people believed Jesus was actually, physically raised from the dead; it is what was anticipated in the Old Testament, and eyewitness accounts of the risen Jesus confirmed it. The gospels of Matthew, Luke and John even record some of these appearances, including physical encounters with the disciples and influential female followers of Jesus.

Ascension: Acts of the Apostles, which is traditionally attributed to the author of Luke's Gospel and can loosely be described as a gospel of the disciples, tells readers that Jesus ascended physically into heaven. In Acts 1:9-11 readers learn that "When [Jesus] had said this, as [the disciples] were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee... This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." This account simultaneously reinforces the belief that Jesus will return in the future for the Last Judgement; he was taken up into heaven on a cloud, and he will return on a cloud to judge the living and the dead.



The ascension

3. **Why** are the resurrection and ascension of Jesus important?

The resurrection and ascension are both of tremendous theological significance. In other words, they inform the Christian view about what God is like. First, for Christians, the resurrection confirms that Jesus is God the Son: he is the second person of the Trinity, responsible for saving humanity from the consequences of sin. Second, it is proof that Jesus's death on the cross restored the relationship between God and humanity. It demonstrates that Jesus's death had the saving power Christians claim. Third, it tells Christians what to expect at the general resurrection before the Last Judgement: there will be an actual, bodily resurrection just like the one experienced by Jesus. This is something underscored by the account of the ascension in Acts of the Apostles: Jesus ascends into heaven, and readers learn that, in just the same way, he will eventually descend at his second coming (i.e. the Last Judgement). Finally, the resurrection and ascension end the narrative of Holy Week, the week immediately before Easter, and Jesus's life more generally. For Christians, the events of this week give the broader gospel story its authority and force. These events demonstrate Jesus's divinity, which means, working backwards to the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Holy Week or still further to Jesus's teachings from the start and middle of his ministry, we should follow his commandments: they are the words of God.

George Thinks

What are the most important things for us to remember about the resurrection and ascension of Jesus? Well, first and foremost, they're the other half of the crucifixion: the proof, as far as Christians are concerned, that what they claim the death of Jesus accomplished was, indeed, achieved. Because the crucifixion is the sacrifice required to save humanity from the consequence of sin and restore the relationship with God. For Christians, the resurrection proves this happened. Beyond that, it's a model for what Christians can expect at the general resurrection when the Last Judgement happens. It gives Christians hope that they will be resurrected and transformed by God and that they'll enjoy eternity with him in heaven, just like Jesus did after his own resurrection and ascension. However, the resurrection and ascension are also two of the miracles that atheists and non-Christians are most sceptical about. They wonder whether they are merely tall stories embellished from hallucinations or visions that the disciples suffered in their grief-stricken state. What's more likely, they would argue, that the laws of nature were violated and death defeated, or that some disciples mistook visionary experiences for real encounters with a physically resurrected Jesus? Wherever the truth lies, undoubtedly, it is belief in this pair of events that moved the earliest Christians to confirm their faith in Jesus.



Jesus and Salvation

1. **What** is the role of Jesus in salvation?

Jesus's role in salvation is to facilitate atonement, which is the process by which the relationship between God and human beings is restored. For Christians, Jesus's sacrifice on the cross makes forgiveness possible, which, in this case, refers to being pardoned by God for sinful behaviour. Whilst all Christians agree on these broad brushstrokes, debate rages about precisely how atonement happens; in other words, there is much disagreement over the mechanics. Crudely put, Christians agree that the crucifixion is something that produces human salvation but disagree about how exactly it works, leading to various hypothetical suggestions.

Ransom theory: many early Christians subscribed to ransom theory. They believed that Jesus's death was a ransom payment to God or Satan (depending on the particular variety) to free people from death. For various reasons, this theory has not aged particularly well, and now virtually no Christians explain salvation by referencing it.

Satisfaction theory: a more enduring hypothesis is satisfaction theory, the idea that Jesus's death was a sacrifice that provided God with just compensation for human sin (i.e. Jesus's sinless death satisfied God's need for justice). Both ransom and satisfaction theory trace their origins to the twelfth century and beyond; however, not all of them are this old.

Scapegoat theory: this relatively recent development is the hypothesis that Jesus's death involved him absorbing all human sins (just as the scapegoat did in Judaism on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur). Some Christians believe that Jesus released them from their sins through this process, just as Jews thought the scapegoat did for them.

Atonement

The process by which the relationship between God and human beings is restored by Jesus.

Forgiveness

The process by which someone is pardoned for something they have done wrong.

2. **How** does the role of Jesus in salvation work?



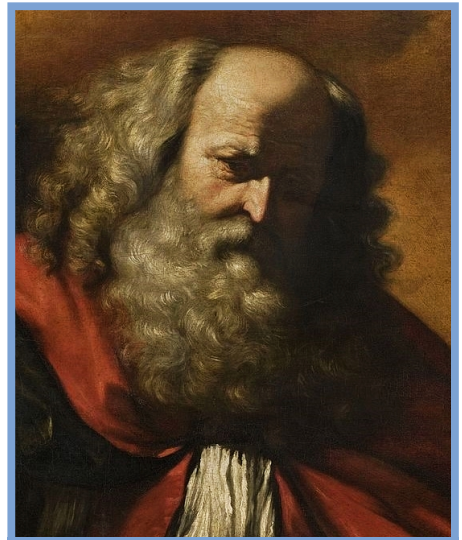
Satan: according to ransom theory, tricked into releasing humanity from death.

Ransom theory: in the most famous formulation of ransom theory, proponents argue that Adam and Eve sold humanity into bondage to Satan and eternal death by sinning in the Garden of Eden. In order to save humanity from Satan, God the Father gave his son, Jesus, as a ransom payment. And in a final twist, Satan was actually tricked because the bonds of death were too weak to keep God the Son in bondage. This theory has not aged particularly well despite considerable early popularity. First, there is the issue of God the Father needing to pay a ransom to Satan for humanity. He is omnipotent, more powerful than Satan, so why is this necessary? Second, God the Father knew that Jesus would break the bonds of death, so this theory presents him as a dishonest dealer, which all Christians now argue is incompatible with his nature.

Satisfaction theory: a more popular hypothesis since the first half of the second millennium is satisfaction theory. According to its proponents, God requires satisfaction for human disobedience (which Christians commonly call sin), which is why the just punishment he metes out for it is death. However, Jesus's sinless death satisfied God's need for justice and released humanity from the need to suffer sin's consequences. Evidence for this way of thinking about salvation can be found in a passage about the Suffering Servant from Isaiah (a figure many Christians believe prophesied Jesus). Here, readers find the words, "Out of his anguish he shall see; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." According to Christians, this verse presents the idea that Jesus will make humanity righteous by suffering for their iniquities (i.e. sins) spelt out in scripture. Likewise, in Hebrews, Paul the Apostle wrote that "Christ has offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins." This passage compares Jewish sacrifices at the Temple with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Paul the Apostle argued that Jewish sacrifices could not take away sin (or its major consequence, death); however, Jesus's sacrifice does, once and for all time.

3. **Why** is the role of Jesus in salvation important?

How Christians conceive of Jesus's role in salvation reveals a lot about the nature of God the Father. They learn from his apparent desire to absolve humanity from the consequences of sin by sacrificing his only son that he is both benevolent and forgiving. Likewise, Christians infer that God the Father wants a personal relationship with them. In Genesis, the story of original sin presents God's personal relationship with Adam and Eve, which was ruined by the first sin (the act of disobedience in which they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and were expelled from the Garden of Eden as a result). Christians claim that God wants to restore this relationship and that his sacrifice of Jesus demonstrates how important a personal relationship is. However, in satisfaction theory, God's role as a just judge is emphatically underlined. Humanity's sins require proper punishment, and to relent on this point would be to stop being a just judge. Conversely, ransom theory implies that God is weak and dishonest, which are not qualities Christians think he embodies, so this theory has fallen out of fashion.



God the Father

George Thinks

We know a lot about salvation and why it's important already, and we know a lot about Jesus, so why are we revisiting the overlap? In essence, because this is at the heart of most Christian claims and some of the oldest arguments in Christianity. Christians confidently assert that we're saved, but not accidentally or just because God loves us; sophisticated hypotheses like satisfaction theory remind us that God is a perfectly just judge, so he can't simply let us off the hook. He has to satisfy his need for sin to be punished, and Jesus is the only person who can step in to suffer it sinlessly on our behalf. And so it's also at the heart of arguments about who Jesus was as well. Some early Christians thought Jesus was born a man, not God the Son, and only elevated to divine status later. But if this were the case, Jesus wouldn't be a sinless sacrifice: he would be tainted by original sin (which many Christians believe we're all born with), and, as a human being, he would have been unable to live an entirely sinless life before he was elevated to divinity, or so the argument goes. I don't want to get bogged down in too much detail here because it goes way beyond an introductory course. What I want us to reflect upon is the fact that these claims, and they're not all the same, have significant consequences for what Christians think God is like, which goes right to the heart of the Christian faith.



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MATTHEW 5

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He healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

The Sermon on the Mount; The Beatitudes

5 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² And He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
⁵ "Blessed are the 'gentle, for they will inherit the earth.
⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
¹⁰ "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Disciples and the World

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out on a hill cannot be hidden;