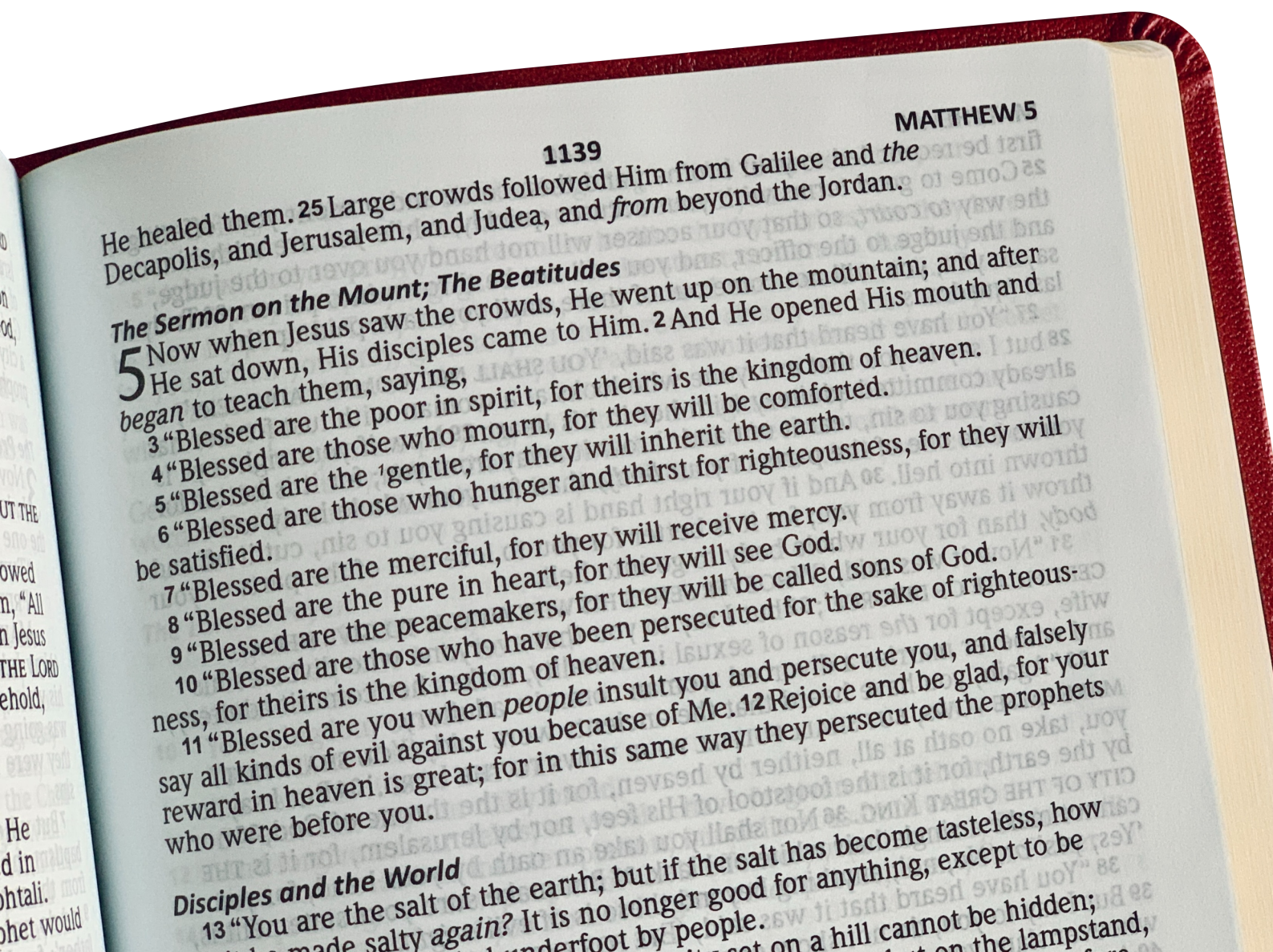


Religious Studies

Beliefs and Teachings

Christianity

Script Booklet

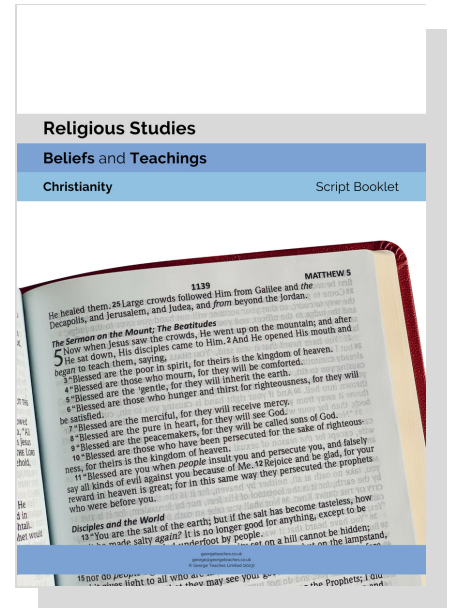


Preface

This script booklet is all about Christianity. It is a series of presentation scripts that survey 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 designed to interest, inform, and inspire further independent enquiry among students.

This script booklet follows the presentation available at George Teaches and is designed for use in conjunction with it. It is accompanied by an information booklet and work booklet, which can be used to support teaching and learning. Additional assessment resources are available online that facilitate knowledge testing with automatically marked multiple-choice questions for students. Throughout this work booklet, key questions are used as subtitles, key terms and key thinkers are highlighted in separate boxes, and areas for the consolidation of notes are provided (most notably at the beginning).

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 situation ethics, be you teacher or student (or, as I am, be you both).



A large, handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'G.T.'.

London, UK
26 August 2023

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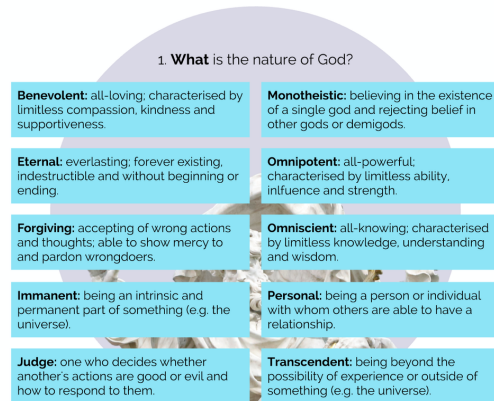
Nature of God

Hi! What's God like? When we talk about the so-called "nature" of God, that's what we mean. In other words, what qualities does he have, and how can we describe him? Needless to say, the task is a little tricky because we can't see God, so working out what he's like depends a great deal on how he's described in the Bible. This isn't the only source of information; philosophers of religion sometimes look for clues about what God's like from the way the world works (because, as a creation (according to Christian belief), it should be capable of revealing something about its creator). But, notwithstanding this, it's scripture, the Bible, that remains the primary source of information. All of which brings me to what we'll be covering in this lesson, namely: what Christians believe about what God's like, how Christians believe the nature of God "works", which is to say, where they get their ideas about his most important qualities from, and why having a developed idea about what God's like is so important.

•• So, without further ado, what is the nature of God? What's he like, as far as Christians are concerned? The short answer is that he's complicated, or, to put it another way, that he's difficult for us to wrap our heads around. What we're going to look at now are ten of the qualities that Christians claim God has, all of which are key terms, and for ease of reference, we're going to take them in alphabetical order. So, first up, • he's benevolent, which comes from the Latin for good-willing. He wants good things to happen, or, as Christians more commonly describe it, he's all-

loving. Next up, • God's eternal; he has no beginning or end; he's everlasting and indestructible; he exists, always has done, and always will do. Third, • he's forgiving, which dovetails neatly with the idea that he's benevolent. God knows that people are sometimes bad (indeed, that they're sometimes downright evil); however, because he's kind, compassionate and supportive of his creations, he shows mercy to people and pardons them of wrongdoing (although usually only if they ask). So far, so good, but now for something a little more complicated. • Christians claim that God is immanent, by which they mean he's inside the universe and an omnipresent part of it (in other words, that he's everywhere, thanks to God the Holy Spirit). And even though he's forgiving, • he's a judge: he decides whether the way people behave is good or evil and responds appropriately (especially if people don't ask for forgiveness for wrongdoing). Sixth, he's all alone; there's only one God; • although we express this by saying that Christianity, as a religion, is monotheistic. • He's also omnipotent, which comes from the Latin for "all-powerful" and • omniscient, which comes from the Latin for "all-knowing" (in fact, if you'll allow me a brief digression, the Latin word for "knowledge", "scientia", also provides the root for the English word "science", which is all about knowledge of our universe and may be a helpful way of remembering the meaning of "omniscient"). • God's also personal, by which Christians mean it's possible to have a relationship with him. And finally, • he's transcendent, or beyond the possibility of experience, because he's outside the universe. Of course, this seems to be obviously at odds with the belief that God is immanent and personal; however, most Christians square this circle with reference to the Trinity. So, there we go; these are the ten qualities that almost all Christians attribute to God to some degree or another. Some Christians argue that certain qualities are more important than others, which we'll revisit a little later on, but they all describe something of God's nature. If there are any you're unsure about, cram them into your head now!

•• Next, we're concerned with how the nature of God works: where is it that Christians get their ideas about what God's like? Well, as we discussed earlier, the Bible is a major source of the material; we're going to take just four of the characteristics that Christians attribute to God and ask how the Bible supports them. • First, benevolence. In the Bible, God's benevolent nature is predominantly presented through the life and death of Jesus, whom Christians refer to as "God the Son". However, there are references to God's benevolence in books written before Jesus's birth. • Psalm 86:15 from the Old Testament describes God as merciful, gracious and abounding in steadfast love (pretty benevolent if you ask me). But it's in the gospels and letters of the New Testament that this quality is most obviously displayed. • In John 3:16, we read that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that [we]... may have eternal life." • Similarly, Paul the Apostle wrote in Romans 8 that we are victorious because of God's love, and that nothing can come between it and us. •• The belief that God's forgiving is also something we can read about



repeatedly, especially in New Testament passages like the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Lord's Prayer. • In the former passage from Luke, a father forgives his son even though he's squandered his inheritance. When the son returns home 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. • However, despite the fact that God's forgiving, • he's also the judge, a role many Christians believe he'll play most prominently at the Last Judgement. In the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, • God's role as judge is repeatedly reinforced: he tells Jews that he'll punish children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generation, and we read that he "will not acquit anyone who misuses his name". Likewise, • 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". So, whilst God is forgiving, those who don't repent for their sins can expect to be judged for them, and, in some cases, it'll be pretty harsh (read, "eternal")! • Finally, • evidence of God's omnipotence can be found throughout the Bible. 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 elsewhere, like in the creation of Earth and the miracles of Jesus. The key thing to remember here is that Christians don't believe what they do about God for no reason; throughout the Bible, they're told what God's like, and these passages from their holy scriptures inform their ideas about his nature even though they've never laid eyes on him.

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

Benevolent
According to the Bible, God is all-loving, always acting with compassion, kindness and supportiveness. This aspect of God's nature is presented prominently through the life and death of Jesus.

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. **Psalm 86:15**

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. **John 3:16-18**

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ, Jesus our Lord. **Romans 8:37-39**

•• All of this brings us to the question of why the nature of God is important, and the answer's pretty straightforward: it drives a huge amount of Christian behaviour (and, indeed, a huge amount of behaviour among non-Christians, too). • 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, in many ways, a role model that Christians can attempt to emulate (even if they'll never ultimately be successful). • For other Christians, Jesus's omnipotence is more important, as displayed by his transfiguration, the miracles, and his resurrection and ascension; for these Christians, Jesus isn't so much a role model but a source of divine authority whose commandments and teachings are to be strictly followed. • For still others, it's God the Father, the omnipotent and omniscient judge whom they imagine in their mind's eye. Such Christians may be especially God-fearing and concerned with the impending Last Judgement. Anyway, the point is this: what Christians think God's 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.

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

•• That brings us to the end of our discussion of the nature of God. What do we have to 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 different 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. And on that diverse note, goodbye!

Problem of Evil

Hi! What's the problem of evil? Well, of course, evil is a problem: the world would be a much better place if it didn't exist (and whilst some people say evil isn't a real thing, the consensus is that it is, and, at the very least, it's difficult to deny the existence of pain and suffering even if you do reject the existence of evil itself). But, when we talk about the problem of evil, we don't mean it in this sense because, as it happens, it's more of a problem for some people than it is for others, and the people who are especially irked by it are Christians. Why? Because it's not immediately apparent to most rational people that belief in a benevolent and omnipotent God is possible in the face of evil. Indeed, if God is all-loving and all-powerful, surely he'd remove evil, pain and suffering from our universe. Every time we confront evil, we're challenged with the seemingly insuperable question: why would God allow this? And although Christians provide some answers to this question, the fact that many people find them unconvincing constitutes the problem of evil. All of which brings me to what we'll be covering in this lesson: what the problem of evil is, how it works, and why it's so important.

• So, without further ado, what's the problem of evil? • Well, it's the problem caused for Christians by the existence of a force that's opposed to good alongside the existence of God; the presence of an immoral power in our universe that causes pain and suffering. (This is a perfect definition of evil, if I do say so myself, so you should probably jot it down or, at the very least, commit it to memory.)

Anyway, instances of evil are typically assigned to one of two pretty famous categories: • natural evil, which is the kind of pain and suffering that we can't do anything about because it's caused by the natural world. • And moral evil, which is completely under our control because it's a product of bad behaviour.

Crimes like murder and theft fall pretty unambiguously into this category. However, there are several non-crimes that most Christians would still describe as evil, like adultery, because, whilst legal, they're considered sinful (or against God's will). Before we go any further, this distinction's essential because even if you can blame the existence of moral evil on us and our lousy decision-making, there's at least some evil (specifically natural evil) that it's hard to convincingly argue that we're responsible for (not that this has stopped some Christian thinkers from trying; I'm looking at you, Augustine of Hippo). • However, regardless of type, the problem of evil is probably best expressed by the so-called "inconsistent triad". • At the first corner of the triad, we've got evil (just as we have here); at the second corner, we have God's benevolence (• which is supported by biblical passages like this one from Psalm 103, in which we read that God is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, [and] abounding in love"). • And at the third corner, we've got God's omnipotence. The triad's inconsistent because we can't have all three of these things simultaneously. • As Epicurus so eloquently put it, "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent [in other words, "not benevolent"]. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?" I suppose that pretty much covers it: if God is both able to stop evil, pain and suffering and all-loving, why doesn't he put an end to all the awful things that happen to people around the world daily? Over the centuries, Christians have come up with different answers; hopefully, we can now all agree that something pretty convincing is required!

• Next, we're concerned with how the problem of evil works or how Christians try to explain the existence of both a benevolent and omnipotent God and evil. • The first explanation we'll look at is the soul-deciding defence to the problem of evil. Augustine of Hippo came up with one of the most famous versions of this defence at the turn of the fifth century (that's about 1,500 years ago to you and me), but we're not going to worry too much about the specific details of his argument. The critical thing about soul-deciding defences is that we're responsible for deciding what happens to our souls. We've got free will, and we can use it as we wish: to do good or to do evil. Loosely, • free will is the ability to make decisions for ourselves and act upon them without obstruction, but we have to live with the consequences (either our souls go to heaven, or they go to hell). Take the unfortunates in this image, better known as Adam and Eve. You probably haven't seen them depicted like this before, but they're looking so miserable because they're being marched out of the Garden of Eden at swordpoint (which Adam has stuck in the back of his



Neck). You see, • the support for this defence is found in Genesis 3 when the snake successfully tempts Adam and Eve into eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil even though God has forbidden it. Because Adam and Eve have free will, they're able to do this sinful, evil thing, • but then they have to live with the painful consequences: the agony of childbirth, the drudgery of neverending labour, old age and death. • And, according to Christians, Adam and Eve's first sin gives us all original sin or an inherently sinful nature. We can't help but sin

and, therefore, there'll always be evil in our world. Free will plus our inability to resist temptation equals evil. • The problem is that it only really accounts for moral evil. • And so comes the soul-making defence, most famously proposed by a second-century Christian named Irenaeus. He argued that an all-loving and all-powerful God allows evil because it's only through pain and suffering that our souls are developed and perfected. The poster boy for this defence is a biblical figure named Job, the miserable-looking chap depicted here. • According to the Bible, Job suffers a series of extreme misfortunes inflicted by Satan, who bets God that Job's sufferings will inspire him to abandon his faith. Whilst a lot is going on in this book, the headline for our purposes is that Job suffers horrendous mental and physical pain but emerges from the ordeal better than before. Likewise, • Psalm 119 extols the virtues of being humbled by God for its beneficial consequence: becoming a better person. Of course, this defence isn't without its problems either: 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's difficult to see how the souls of these individuals grow and develop thanks to the misfortunes they're subjected to, and whilst many Christians see ways around this issue, it's generally considered insurmountable by most atheists.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why the problem of evil is so important for us to understand. The answer? Quite simply, • because our response to it usually dictates whether or not we can believe in the God of classical theism or are forced to subscribe to either agnosticism or atheism. • Christians who accept the soul-deciding defence, • like C. S. Lewis, maintain their faith by insisting that the God-given gift of free will gives rise to evil as a byproduct: we are allowed to "choose the right side", as he puts it, but plenty choose the wrong one, causing pain and suffering as a consequence. • Christians who accept the soul-making defence, • like Billy Graham, 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," we can accept the existence of evil because 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 can ask why we should "respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who created 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.

•• That brings us to the end of our discussion on the problem of evil. The key thing to remember is this: the problem of evil is a problem 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, but that's an argument for another time. And on that combative note, goodbye!

2. How does the problem of evil work?

Free will: the ability to make decisions for oneself and act upon them without constraint or obstruction.

Soul-Deciding Defence
Also known as the "free will defence", the soul-deciding defence claims that human beings are responsible for evil and its consequences, via original sin, and that they are a byproduct of free will.


Genesis 3:1-7

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, '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.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

Genesis 3:16-18

To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbirth exceedingly great; yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field."

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?

Soul-Deciding Defence

Soul-Making Defence

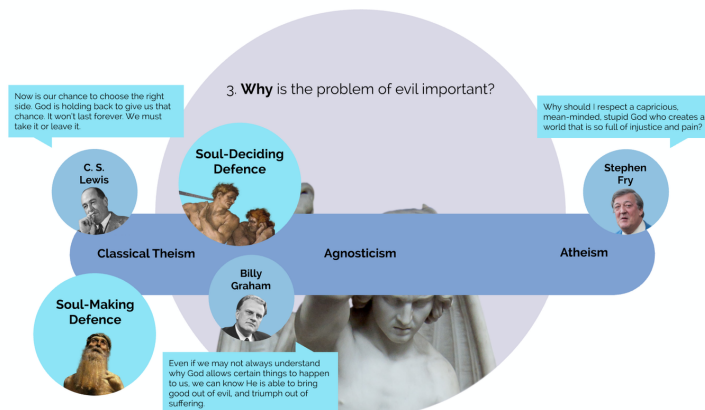
Classical Theism **Agnosticism** **Atheism**

C. S. Lewis **Billy Graham** **Stephen Fry**

Now is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It won't last forever. We must take it or leave it.

Even if we may not always understand why God allows certain things to happen to us, we can know He is able to bring good out of evil, and triumph out of suffering.

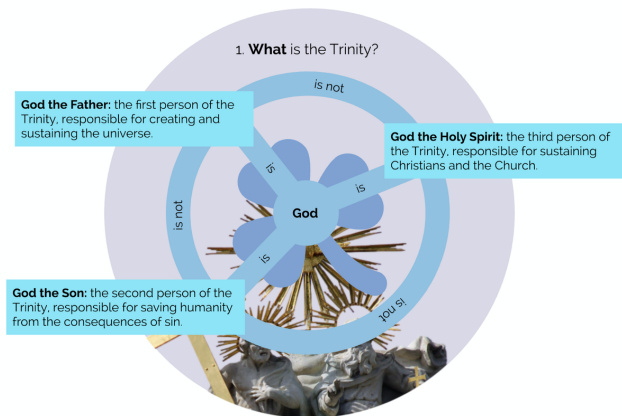
Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain?



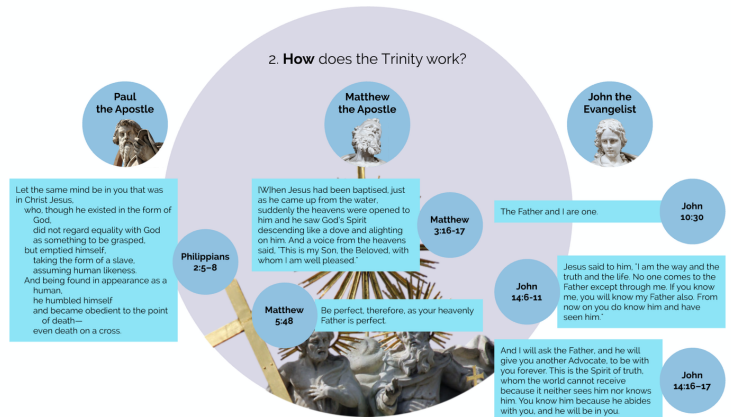
Hi! And welcome to one of the most famous and fiendishly challenging Christian teachings: the doctrine of the Trinity. You'll remember that Christianity is monotheistic, which means that Christians believe in the existence of only one God; however, unlike Jews and Muslims, Christians claim that this one God exists in three coequal, coeternal and consubstantial persons, referred to as "God the Father", "God the Son" and "God the Holy Spirit". The ideas of coequality, coeternity and consubstantiality are pretty complicated. We'll dig into them a little further over the course of this lesson, but they loosely mean that God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are each equally important, equally old (read "eternal") and made up of the same divine stuff, albeit in distinct persons. Jews and Muslims often argue that the doctrine of the Trinity means Christianity isn't really monotheistic; how can one God take three different forms, after all? Still, Christians reject this accusation, maintaining that monotheism is compatible with their doctrine. Over the course of our lesson, we'll look at this issue along with several others, including what the Trinity is, how Christians believe it works, and why it's so important.

•• So, without further ado, what is the Trinity?

Strictly speaking, it's the name given to a central Christian teaching about what God's like, which loosely states that he is like a shamrock (which you might have heard of because it's a national symbol of Ireland). Christians claim that God is like a shamrock because it's 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), 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, responsible for saving humanity from the consequences of their sin. And the last leaf symbolises God the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity responsible for sustaining Christians and the Church. As you can see from this diagram, known as the "Shield of the Trinity", God the Father is God, as is both God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. They are all coequal, or of equal importance and status, coeternal, or of equal age (which for Christians is eternity), and consubstantial, made up of the same divine stuff. However, God the Father is neither God the Son nor God the Holy Spirit; likewise, God the Son is neither God the Father nor God the Holy Spirit, and God the Holy Spirit is neither God the Father nor God the Son. The Shield of the Trinity was widely used in medieval Europe to efficiently and effectively represent the doctrine of the Trinity. And although it doesn't conclusively answer some challenging questions, like how three persons can still be one God, it does manage to communicate the essentials of this central teaching: God is one in three.



•• Our next question is how the Trinity actually works. To answer this we're going to consider where the doctrine comes from, because it's never explicitly articulated in the New Testament, and then ask how it became the massively important Christian teaching that it is today. Now, whilst the Trinity isn't clearly articulated in the Bible in the way that it is on the medieval shield that bears its name, it's possible to argue that it's implicitly assumed from very early on. For example, Paul the Apostle writes in Philippians 2 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." Here, it's difficult to argue that Paul the Apostle didn't think Jesus was divine because he so boldly asserts his belief that Jesus existed in the form of God. Elsewhere, Matthew the Apostle writes in his gospel 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." Is this scene from Matthew 3 the first reported sighting of the Trinity within the New Testament? Possibly, we have God the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, a voice from heaven that we might reasonably assume belongs to God the Father, and Jesus identified as his son. There are some problems because Jesus's identification as God's son might refer to his anointing as the messiah, who was sometimes labelled this way, instead of confirming his divinity, but there's certainly room for debate. • And later in his gospel, Matthew clearly refers to God the Father as a perfect, heavenly being, separate from any other divine persons. • Finally, John the Evangelist contains similar trinitarian statements • when he records Jesus saying, "the Father and I are one" in chapter 10, and, • four chapters later, "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 that he's inextricably bound up with God the Father, and there's a genuine sense of the consubstantiality of their two persons. • And John the Evangelist knows God the Spirit too because, in chapter 14, he reports Jesus telling his disciples, "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." So, as we can see, although the New Testament isn't absolutely clear in its presentation of the Trinity, there's the obvious basis for an argument: God the Father is constantly referenced, as is God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit appears at different points independently of these two persons. • So, how did we get from there to here? • Well, thanks to the First Council of Nicaea, belief in one God (the Father), one Lord (the Son) and the Holy Spirit was officially affirmed in 325 CE by a group of Christianity's most influential bishops, which paved the way for the much clearer and considerably more systematic doctrine of the Trinity. • By the fifth century, this understanding of what God's like was baked into the Apostles' Creed, which remains one of Christianity's most important declarations of faith. This affirms belief in the existence of God the Father, the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit, which appears to have crystallised in a close-to-current form about 50 years after the Council of Nicaea, sometime just before 400 CE.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why the Trinity is important, and the answer's pretty straightforward at one level: it dictates whether or not you're a Christian. Of course, some Christians reject the existence of the Trinity, partly because they don't find it explicitly described in the New Testament despite the various implicit references, but they're well outside the mainstream. If you want to be a Catholic or an Orthodox Christian, you have to subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity, which the vast majority of Protestant Christians accept by affirming that God is one in three

persons as well. If you're a nontrinitarian or antitrinitarian Christian, you are, as far as the rest of the religion's concerned, something of a heretic. • But, 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, represented here as a wise, bearded ruler (with a sceptre in his right hand symbolising his power). Meanwhile, God's • benevolent and • personal nature can be visualised in the person of God the Son, represented here with the wounds he suffered during his self-sacrifice on the cross and, with his bare torso, in clearly human, personal form. Finally, God's • immanence may be portrayed here in the person of God the Holy Spirit, who hovers above the entire scene, radiating light throughout the heavens and down onto Earth.

•• That brings us to the end of our discussion about the Trinity. 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 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 because 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. And on that conciliatory note, goodbye!



Creation

Hi! This lesson's all about creation, by which we mean the origins of the universe and life on Earth. You may think you already know about creation, the six or seven-day period (depending on whether or not you count God's day of rest) during which light, sky, land, sea and plants, Sun, Moon and stars, animals of the air and sea, then land animals and human beings were brought into being according to the Bible. Still, there's more to this process than meets the eye. For starters, 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. What's more, 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. In fact, Augustine of Hippo's theory about how God is all-loving and all-powerful even though evil exists relies entirely on the first few chapters of Genesis. Anyway, throughout this lesson, we'll look at these surprising beliefs about creation along with several others, including how Christians think it works and why it's so important.

•• So, without further ado, what's the story of creation? As we've already discussed, • you may know it as the process through which Christians believe God brought the universe and living things within it into existence. Most people think the story's told in the opening pages of the Bible, in Genesis 1, but Christians also think that the Gospel of John contains some additional information about God the Son's role in the whole process.


• Genesis contains the most famous account, which informs us that God the Father and God the Holy Spirit (although Jews would quibble with this translation) brought the universe and living things within it into existence over six days, and that God the Father rested on the seventh. On the first day, God created light, separated it from darkness and thereby distinguished day from night. On the second day, God created the sky; then, on the third day, he made the sea and the land and filled the land with plant life. On the fourth day, God created the Sun, Moon and stars. On the fifth day, he made birds and fish (or the animals of the air and sea); then, on the sixth day, he created land animals and human beings. • The Gospel of John doesn't really embellish this pretty detailed account, but it does inform us that God the Son was present at creation, not just God the Father and God the Holy Spirit (as Christians understand from their reading of Genesis). 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. More on this in a moment, but, for now, what this means is 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.

•• Our next question is how the story of creation actually works. • To answer this, we're going to revisit the Trinity and think about how Genesis and John prop up this essential Christian belief by revealing all three persons of God bringing the universe and life within it into being. • Pretty obviously (and uncontroversially) Genesis 1:1 reveals God the Father at work with the words, "When God began to create the heavens and the earth..."; • however, verse two goes on to read, "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." Now this phrase, "wind from God", is important because some translations use the term "spirit of God", which sounds awfully like "God the Holy Spirit". As we know, Jews also read Genesis (in fact, it's the first book of their holy scriptures as well), but they don't recognise this translation. For them, this wind is just that: a wind; but for Christians, it points towards the role of God the Holy Spirit in creation because the

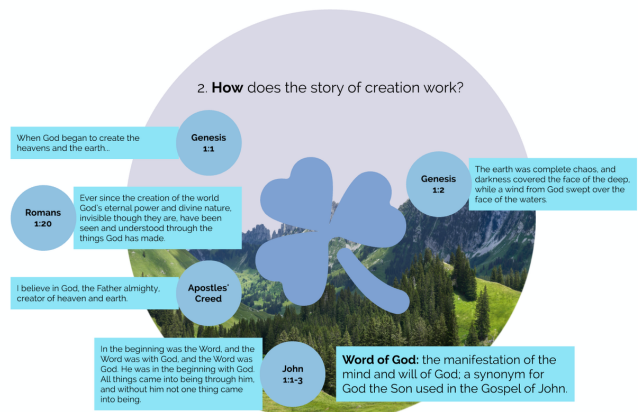
1. What is the story of creation?

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

Genesis	John
According to Genesis, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit brought the universe and living things within it into existence over a six-day period, and God the Father rested on the seventh day.	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.
Day 1: light	
Day 2: sky	
Day 3: land, sea, and plants	
Day 4: Sun, Moon, and stars	
Day 5: animals of the air and sea	
Day 6: land animals and human beings	



2. How does the story of creation work?



Genesis 1:1 When God began to create the heavens and the earth.

Romans 1:20 Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made.

Apostles' Creed I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

John 1:1-3 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.

Genesis 1:2 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.

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

underlying Hebrew can be translated as "spirit" despite its more straightforward, commonplace meaning. Returning to the role of God the Father, • this is reiterated by Paul the Apostle with the words, "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." (That's Romans 1:20.) • Likewise, the Apostles' Creed confirms the essential 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." This role as creator is absolutely essential to the nature of the first person of the Trinity, God the Father. • But John 1:1-3 introduces the role of God the Son in this process as well 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." Confusingly, the words "God the Son" or even "Jesus" aren't used by the author of John; instead, we read the word "Word" (or "logos", which refers to the underlying Greek in which the New Testament was originally written). • In this context, "Word" means the Word of God, which is the manifestation of the mind and will of God and is used as a synonym for God the Son in the Gospel of John (in fact, the author of John spells this out for us a few verses later when he writes that the Word became flesh, or was incarnated, as Jesus). For Christians, we can now see that the creation story works by informing us that all three persons of the Trinity were present and involved in the process. This isn't something that all readers of Genesis can accept, like Jews, but it is an essential, text-based argument for worshipping God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit: they are all, together, responsible for our existence.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why the story of creation is important, and there are three major reasons. • First, as we've already discussed, Christians use it to support the belief in and worship of the Trinity. As we've picked over in close detail, between Genesis and the Gospel of John, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are described creating the universe and everything in it. The three persons of the Trinity are all very much responsible for creation.

• Second, and, perhaps, more interestingly from a non-religious perspective, the story of creation forms a major faultline in Christianity. Take this abstract and highly interpretive depiction of God creating the universe by James Tissot: 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 kind of litmus test to work out whether they're on the liberal or the fundamentalist wing of the religion. Finally, the creation story isn't just about the origins of the universe, living things and human beings in particular; • it's also about the immediate aftermath of this process, in which Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden for disobeying God. (Something that comes with a lot of consequences beyond being kicked out of the house.) • 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 as a result: "The Lord God sent them forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which they were taken." In other words, it's shortly after creation that evil enters the world, and the seeds of Augustine of Hippo's soul-deciding defence are sown: Adam and Eve have free will, exercising it in disobedience of God has consequences, but this doesn't undermine God's benevolence; we are responsible.

•• That brings us to the end of our discussion about creation. Christians have a whole host of beliefs surrounding it, and we've surveyed the most important of them here. The most important thing to take away from the story 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 here at all (you've got to wait until the Gospel of John for that). Whatever you think, though, 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 to us that thinkers throughout the ages have returned to it to help explain why the world is the way it is. And on that retrospective note, goodbye!



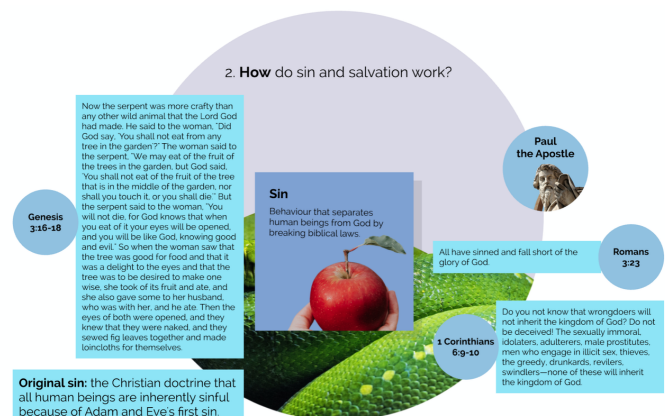
Sin and Salvation

Hi! This lesson's all about sin and salvation, two Christian concepts that go together like bubble and squeak, Batman and Robin, or, perhaps, Adam and Eve. We already know a bit about sin because of its intimate relationship with the problem of evil, but the concept of salvation is new. In a nutshell, sin is something that separates us from God. According to Christians, this separation has consequences (most famously, death) and salvation is the only way they can be avoided. However, whilst there's a reasonable amount of agreement about how sin works, there's considerable debate about the mechanics of salvation. In other words, Christians broadly agree on how sin separates them from God (and, even though there's some disagreement about exactly what constitutes sinful behaviour, there's a relatively large degree of agreement here as well). However, this isn't the case for salvation, and different types of Christians have different ideas about how it works, or how they can expect to be saved. Anyway, throughout this lesson, we'll look at sin and salvation in much greater detail, explain how they both work and consider why they're such important Christian concepts.

• So, without further ado, what are sin and salvation? As we've already discussed, • 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, like • "you shall have no other Gods before me" and • "you shall not murder".

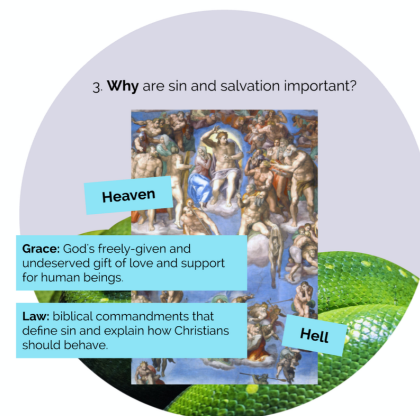
These commandments make clear that worshipping other gods and murdering people drives a wedge between God and human beings; they're sins. • Salvation, on the other hand, is altogether different; it's the process by which God saves human beings from the consequences of sin (the most famous being death). Christians believe that Jesus saved us through his sacrifice on the cross, something that they commemorate at Holy Communion by eating bread and drinking wine. Exactly how this sacrifice saves Christians is one for another time; for now, it's simply important to consider the different ways that different Christians think salvation works. • 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 us from the consequences of our 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. Christians believe that God the Holy Spirit is involved in helping us to accept God's grace. For some, this is all we need, but for others, good works are necessary too. In other words, in order to be saved you've got to be a good person as well, you can't just call yourself a Christian and accept the gift.

• Our next question is how sin and salvation work. To answer this, we're going to consider some things the Bible tells us and what Christians understand by them. • First, on sin, we read that it's first and foremost disobedience to God's will. • So, in Genesis 3:1-7, we learn that eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a sin because God had forbidden it. And it's here, very early on, that Christians discover two other essential things. First, 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." Second, sin separates God from human beings; when God discovers that Adam and Eve have disobeyed him, he banishes them from the Garden of Eden never to return. • So in this first sin, which supports the doctrine of original sin, Christians have both a clear definition of sin and a comprehensive



understanding of its consequences. In the New Testament, • Paul the Apostle provided further information about the nature of sin. In another passage that has been used to support the doctrine of original sin, he asserted that it's impossible for people to 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; in other words, those who sin will die (unless, that is, they accept what Jesus has to offer). •• This, of course, is the good news of salvation. •• And, on this subject, Paul the Apostle claimed that being saved from the consequence of sin (or death) is the free gift of God. • Elsewhere in Romans this message is repeated, with Paul's claim that Christians are saved by the gift of God's grace. • And, perhaps most emphatically, in Ephesians 2:8-9 Paul the Apostle wrote, "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, it isn't something we can earn. 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, • as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, • Jesus implies that God will condemn those who fail 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's clear that it is a gift, but it may also require good deeds or right action.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why sin and salvation are so important, and there's one principal reason: 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 that everyone who accepts God's grace, • that freely-given and undeserved gift of love and support for human beings, will end up ascending into heaven. Some argue that you have to be a Christian to receive this gift, but



others (a group loosely labelled "universalists") think that it's available to anyone of any religion regardless of their behaviour. For them, if there even is a Last Judgement, everyone's getting into heaven. On the other hand, Christians like those in the Catholic tradition can't escape the importance of good works. • Biblical commandments define sin and explain how Christians should behave. In other words, the law isn't superfluous window-dressing; it really matters. Sin isn't a good thing, it separates us from God and hurts other people, so we all have a responsibility to avoid sinful behaviour. For Catholics, those who don't take seriously their responsibility to behave according to God's laws risk being condemned to hell, especially if they don't accept the freely-given and undeserved gift of salvation. For Christians of this persuasion, the possibility of salvation and the promise of condemnation for sinners has a major influence on how they live their lives: they attempt to do good and avoid evil lest they end up being condemned to an afterlife of eternal suffering with Satan.

•• That brings us to the end of our discussion about sin and salvation. As we can see, they're vital concepts within Christianity and, even though there's a broad degree of agreement about what they mean, there remain some important 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 have to follow God's laws and behave themselves if they want to end up in heaven. Despite the appeal of universalism, the idea that everyone is going to 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 committing sin. In short, for millions of people, these concepts give rise to life-changing behaviours. And on that sobering note, goodbye!

Afterlife

Hi! This lesson's all about the afterlife, a topic that almost everyone finds fascinating. Even if you, your family and your friends aren't religious, it's the kind of thing that gets discussed around the dining room table, and often sees the presentation of some wildly different perspectives (and weird and wacky ones too). So, even if you're not a Christian, the question of whether or not there's an afterlife is relevant to everyone, and it's one you've probably thought a little bit about already. Why? Well, uniquely we think, human beings are aware of their mortality, which means that we can't help but think about what happens to us after we die, if anything. And over the last couple of millennia, Christians have dedicated a considerable amount of time to contemplating this question and they've come up with a variety of answers. And interestingly, different ideas have come and gone over the centuries, which may be because there's not a huge amount of clarity in the Bible. Anyway, throughout this lesson, we'll look at exactly what Christians think about the afterlife, explain how most of them think that it works and consider why the existence of life after death is so central to Christian beliefs and teachings.

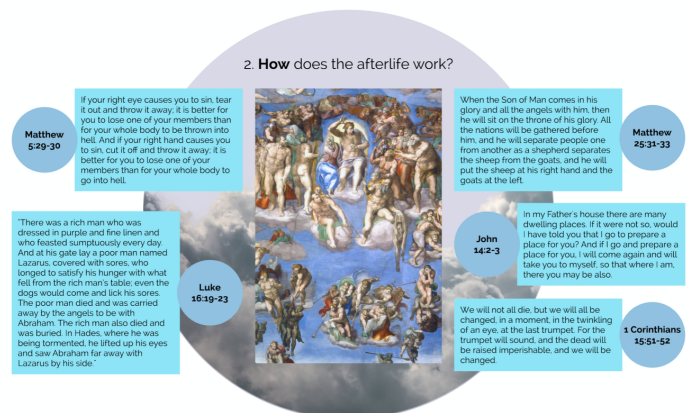
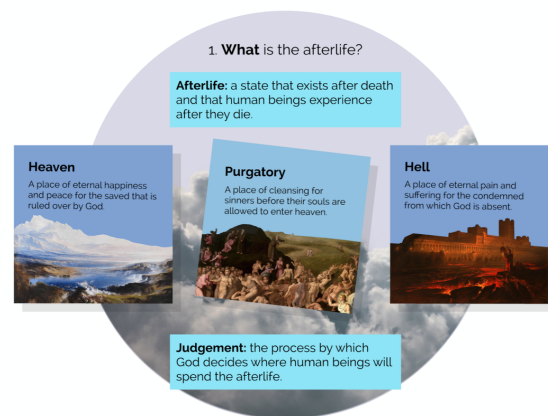
• So, without further ado, what's the afterlife? As we've already discussed in passing, • it can be defined as a state that exists after death and that human beings experience when they die (if they can experience anything at all). For Christians, there are three principal destinations for people at 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's ruled over by God. Some Christians like to think of it as a physical place, while others imagine it as a spiritual realm.

But all agree that something you'd recognise as heaven is out there somewhere. In fact, for some Christians who are loosely labelled universalists, heaven's the only place in which you'll find yourself in the afterlife: in other words, everyone's destined for salvation. • Other Christians, most famously Catholics, believe purgatory is a different place in which you might end up; it's for the cleansing of sinners before their souls are allowed into paradise and whilst it might not be as nice as heaven, it's certainly not as nasty as hell, which is the third and final place on our list. • This is somewhere (again, not necessarily physical) that's characterised by eternal pain and suffering for the condemned from which God is entirely absent. It's repeatedly referenced in the New Testament but some Christians argue that these passages should be read metaphorically instead of literally: hell isn't a place of actual torture they argue, this imagery is simply used to convey the pain and suffering of being separated from God. Finally, • Christians agree that God dictates where you end up spending your afterlife via a process known as judgement, which might happen immediately after your death in an intermediate fashion but will ultimately happen when Jesus returns to Earth.

• Our next question is about how the afterlife works. In other words, what are the rules, and what can Christians expect if their beliefs are correct?

• Well, many believe that the afterlife is going to come hot on the heels of Jesus's return and the Last Judgement. It's after this event that the saved are going to ascend to heaven and the condemned are going to descend to hell. And according to the gospels, these places are very real. • In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us, "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."

• And we get 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. • So we see Jesus here at the Last Judgement, accepting those who have been saved into heaven, • whilst those who have been condemned are dragged down to hell by Satan's demons. • Which brings



us to the belief that Jesus will be involved in the Last Judgement when he returns at some point in the future.

- According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." (An obvious reference to the division between those destined for heaven and those destined for hell anticipated at the Last Judgement.)
- Likewise, according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." The gospels, therefore, contain the transparent claim that Jesus will return to Earth to send those who have received salvation to heaven, • which is reinforced by Paul the Apostle with the words, "We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." This is a reference to the belief that anyone who dies before the Last Judgement will be resurrected (whilst the bodies of those still alive will be transformed). Then, all will be judged and either gathered into heaven or dispatched to hell.
- 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 our bodies, and judgement upon Jesus's return to Earth. Today, Christian belief in the Last Judgement is not as fixed as it was when these creeds were written; instead, some Christians believe in a form of personal or particular judgement immediately after death in advance of Jesus's second coming. This precipitates a process in which people's souls wait in some sort of conscious afterlife until the end of the world, instead of some sort of unconscious sleep-state. Nevertheless, general resurrection at the Last Judgement remains the mechanism by which all Christians believe the afterlife will ultimately be accessed.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why the afterlife and beliefs about it are so important. One major reason is that Christian beliefs regarding it are bound up with teachings about the Last Judgement, which isn't always front and centre in presentations about the central beliefs and teachings of Christianity.

- Officially, all Christians believe that at some point in the future the dead will rise from their graves or tombs • as has been depicted in Christian art for centuries. At that time, both the living and the resurrected will have their bodies somehow 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 for the condemned from which God is absent. And after judgement, that will be that: the saved will experience eternal bliss; the damned will endure neverending torment. Understandably, Christians shy away from some of their harder-edged beliefs and teachings about eternal rewards and punishments, but beliefs and teachings about the afterlife are important because they reveal what Christians think is going to happen after we die, and they act as a powerful sanction, encouraging people to become Christians and behave well. As Blaise Pascal famously argued, 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.



•• That brings us to the end of our discussion about the afterlife. There's a lot going on here but there are, in my opinion, two big and important things. First, Christians all believe in the Last Judgement. In fact, 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 existence of heaven, but hell's still a possibility in most Christian thinking. In other words, for almost all Christians, what we do in this world really 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 least). And on that pyromaniacal note, goodbye!

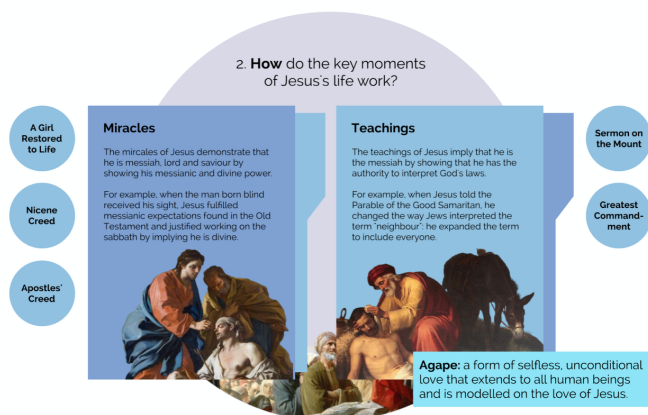
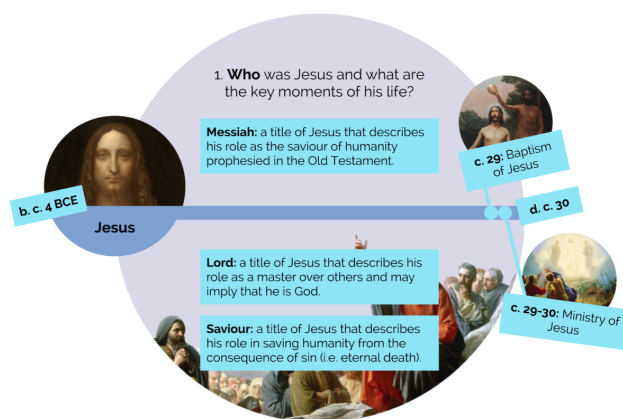
Life of Jesus

Hi! This lesson's all about Jesus. Arguably, the most famous man who's ever lived (and, for Christians, both the messiah and divine son of God). But before we go any further, I'm going to share with you one of my biggest bugbears: the claim that Jesus never existed; that he's a fictional character invented by the authors of the Bible. Every year, some precocious student tells me that Jesus is fake news; and, whilst I understand how people come to this conclusion, it's not a very strong one. The fact of the matter is that there's good historical evidence for the belief that Jesus existed; in fact, there's more contemporary documentary evidence for the existence of Jesus than there is for the existence of Alexander the Great. In other words, we have more documents written about Jesus from the time of his life and death than we have written about Alexander the Great (in fact, in his case, we don't have any at all). All this means that we're pretty certain Jesus existed, although this doesn't mean that what Christians say about him is all true. Anyway, throughout this lesson, we'll look at what we do know about the life of Jesus, explain how Christians interpret some of its key moments, and consider why it continues to be so important.

•• So, without further ado, who was Jesus and what are the key moments of his life. • Well, everyone's agreed that he was a man who lived in the first century, • and the general consensus is that he was born around 4 BCE. We won't get too deep into the weeds regarding why Jesus was born before 0 instead of at 0; suffice it to say, when our calendar was changed to place Jesus in the centre of history, the people who did it got their dates wrong and we've been living with their mistake ever since. Anyway, we don't know anything definitive about Jesus's early life, • but

we do know that he was almost certainly baptised in the River Jordan by John the Baptist around 29 CE • and that this began his ministry. Jesus's ministry was a period of travelling and teaching that lasted anywhere between one and three years (although the earliest gospels claim it only lasted one). And Christians claim it also involved Jesus performing miracles, like healing the sick and exorcising demons, although non-Christians dispute this. • Finally, we know that the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, ordered Jesus's execution by crucifixion sometime around 30 CE, when Jesus was about 33 years old. Now, even though Christians and non-Christians agree that Jesus's ministry was a key moment in his life and one that led to his death, Christians claim that we can know a lot more about the specifics and that they're particularly significant. And what makes the specifics important is that they point towards Jesus's identity as • messiah (which describes Jesus's role as the saviour of humanity prophesied in the Old Testament), • as lord (which describes Jesus's role as a master over others and may imply his divinity), • and as saviour (which describes Jesus's role in saving humanity from the consequence of sin (namely, eternal death)).

•• Our next question revolves around the issue of how the key moments of Jesus's life work. In other words, what do they do for Christians, especially if they're taken at face value as recorded in the gospels? As discussed, we're going to consider Jesus's ministry here, not least because we'll investigate his birth and death elsewhere. Now a lot is recorded about Jesus's ministry (and different gospels contain different material) but, broadly speaking, the accounts can be divided into two categories. • First, stories about Jesus's miracles. These are important because they demonstrate that Jesus is both messianic and divine, so support his claim to titles like messiah, lord and saviour. To take just one 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 we can 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. So, according

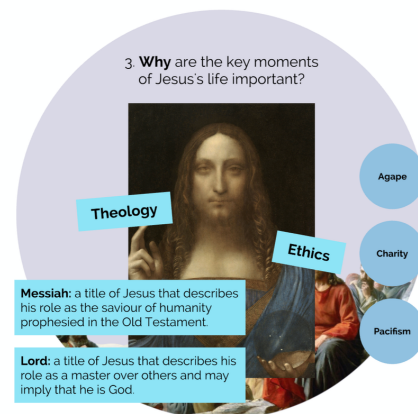


to the gospels, when Jesus restored the sight of the man born blind, he proved himself to be the messiah anticipated by Isaiah. Likewise, when he healed people who were deaf or paralysed he was simultaneously demonstrating his messiahship. • Accounts of miracles like that of a girl restored to life are even more astonishing because they might point towards Jesus's divinity. Why? Well, because most first-century Jews believed that only God had the power to give life. So, we can see that the miracles are an essential support to claims in the • Nicene Creed and the • Apostles' Creed that Jesus is both God the Son and the messiah. • Second, stories about Jesus's teachings are similarly important because they show that he has the authority to 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 we should be neighbours to everyone we meet not merely those of the same religion. And, 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 the commandments, reinterpreting them, and redelivering them. At the very least, the gospels portray Jesus as a new Moses (in other words, a messianic figure); at the very most, they may even portray him as divine, for who has the authority to reinterpret the commandments except God himself? Of course, non-Christians doubt accounts of Jesus's miracles and don't trust many of the sayings that the gospels attribute to him; but whether or not Jesus performed his miracles or taught his teachings isn't really relevant. What's important is that these key moments in Jesus's life, at least as they're retold in the gospels, aren't just nice stories, they're pieces of evidence used to support Christian claims about Jesus's identity as God the Son and messiah.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why the key moments in Jesus's life are so important to Christians. • And there are two big reasons. • First, the miracles of Jesus have huge theological significance. In other words, they're really important for understanding the nature of God (and, in this case, we mean God the Son). Even though historians and scientists don't 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.

• For example, many of Jesus's miracles, conforming as they do to Old Testament prophecies about how the messiah would behave, confirm Jesus's messianic identity. He 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 that demonstrate both Jesus's power over life and death and his ability to manipulate nature (like restoring Jairus's daughter to life, raising Lazarus from the dead, and walking on water) show Jesus wielding divine powers and may reveal that he's God. • Second, the teachings of Jesus have tremendous ethical significance. It's the things which Jesus said that form the bedrock of Christian ethics today: • the central place of agape, that form of selfless, unconditional love that extends to all human beings, coupled with practices like • charity and • pacifism. Regardless of whether or not Christians always act in accordance with Jesus's teachings, they play a central role in Christianity and find their expression in key moments from Jesus's ministry. Without a doubt, what we know of Jesus's life apart from his death and resurrection is of huge importance today.

•• That brings us to the end of our discussion about the life of Jesus. 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 really 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 stories are true, they tell us a huge amount about what the earliest followers of Jesus thought about him. In short, the miracles and teachings of Jesus show that they definitely 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 the creation of a more loving, more compassionate, and more peaceful community ahead of the arrival of the Kingdom of God. And on that apocalyptic note, goodbye!



Incarnation of Jesus

Hi! This lesson's all about the incarnation of Jesus, which is marked by one of the most celebrated events in our calendar, even if you're not a Christian. We're talking, of course, about Christmas, which is when Christians remember the incarnation and birth of Jesus and everyone else enjoys a holiday, spends time with family (and tries not to fall out with them), and usually eats far too much (especially chocolate). Unlike the date of Jesus's crucifixion, which we think we can know with a reasonable degree of certainty, the date of Jesus's birthday is largely speculative. For Christians, it's shrouded in another mystery: how God became a human being. Because it's at this moment that Christians believe the Word of God (which you may remember from the account of creation recollecting at the beginning of the Gospel of John) became Jesus. Exactly what happened and how it worked was the subject of lively debate for several centuries after Jesus's death, but now all Christians are settled on the fact that it did occur: God became human. Anyway, throughout this lesson, we'll look at exactly what the incarnation is, explain how Christians believe it works and consider why it's such an important event.

•• So, without further ado, what's the incarnation of Jesus? • Well, as we've loosely discussed, it's the event at which God became flesh and took human form in the person of Jesus. It comes from a Latin word that literally means to become flesh or be infleshed; in fact, the famous Christmas carol, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, refers to the incarnation involving God being "veiled in flesh". Now, 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.

• According to Luke 1:28-33, the angel Gabriel visited Mary, mother of Jesus, and told her that God was with her. This greeting confused Mary, so Gabriel said, "Do not be afraid... for you have found favour with God. And now, 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, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." This account is very similar to the one reported in the Gospel of Matthew, which also describes Jesus's miraculous conception through the intervention of the Holy Spirit. • The prologue in the Gospel of John is different. Although the nativity of Jesus isn't recorded here, 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, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." And so the Gospel of John appears to provide further details about the incarnation, stating that the conception of Jesus involved a process through which the Word of God, or God the Son, became human.

•• Our next question is about how the incarnation of Jesus works. In other words, what's it all about and how do Christians understand it? Well, first and foremost it's about demonstrating Jesus's messiahship. • The term "messiah" is one that we've already encountered; it's a title for Jesus that describes his role as the saviour of humanity prophesied in the Old Testament. Importantly, it's a term that refers to a human being; it doesn't in and of itself mean that Jesus is divine (there are other titles and passages in the gospels that do that, and we'll get to them in a moment).

Ultimately, it's a title used to describe someone appointed by God with one mission: to save the world. Anyway, the nativity stories in the gospels of Matthew and Luke help to support this claim because they tell us that Jesus fulfils expectations about what the messiah is going to be like. For example, • in Luke 1:26-27 we read that Jesus's legal father, Saint Joseph, belonged to the house of David, which is an important piece of information because Jews

1. What is the incarnation of Jesus?

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

Luke 1:28-33

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, 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, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."



John 1:14

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.



2. How does the incarnation of Jesus work?

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

God the Son: the second person of the Trinity, responsible for saving humanity from the consequences of sin.

Luke 1:26-27

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

John 1:1, 14

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.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

Luke 1:32

Without any doubt, the mystery of godliness is great:

He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.

1 Timothy 3:16

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, 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."

Luke 2:10-11

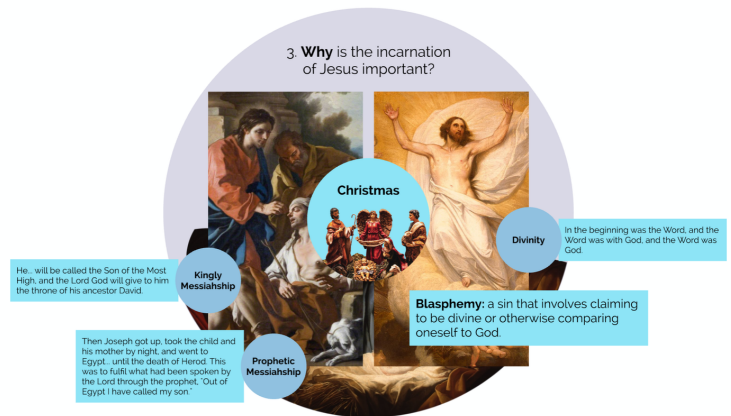
expected the messiah to be a descendant of David. Even though this passage anticipates that Saint Joseph will not be the biological father of Jesus, the blood relationship isn't necessarily relevant: what matters is Jesus's link to David. • This is emphatically underlined in Luke 1:32, where we read, "Jesus will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." This verse confirms that Jesus will sit on David's throne as a king, fulfilling another messianic expectation: that the messiah will be a king. • And, in case there's any doubt about the connection, in Luke 2:10-11 the shepherds who eventually visit Jesus are told, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 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 (that's Bethlehem to you and me). Coincidence? I think not!

Nevertheless, whilst the nativity stories show how Jesus ticks several items off the messianic expectations checklist, they don't really claim that Jesus is divine, • or God the Son. For this, we have to read the account of the incarnation in the Gospel of John, • 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 clearly states that the Word of God is God, and that the Word of God became a human being, Jesus, and lived on Earth. • This idea is explicitly 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." As we can see, then, passages about the incarnation work by supporting the claim that Jesus is both God the Son (that is, divine or godly) and messiah (in other words, the special human being chosen by God to save everyone on Earth). Of course, if you're not a Christian, you're unlikely to believe any of these claims; but that's beside the point. For Christians, this is how these passages are understood; they provide evidence for their beliefs and teachings about Jesus.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why the incarnation is so important, and there are a few things worth drawing attention to. • 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 who would remind them 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 then called out of it. Check, because some Jews were expecting a prophetic messiah who would remind them of the most important prophet in Judaism, Moses (and he was hidden from Pharaoh and then called out of Egypt). And don't forget, the historical accuracy of the nativity stories doesn't matter; what matters is that their authors believed them, and what they reveal is a birth that satisfies messianic expectations. • Second, the prologue in the Gospel of John confirms Jesus's divinity; • we read that the Word of God was God, and that he 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 apparently faced). • Finally, it's worth noting that this central belief gives rise to the festival of Christmas when Christians celebrate the moment that both the messiah arrived and God became man.

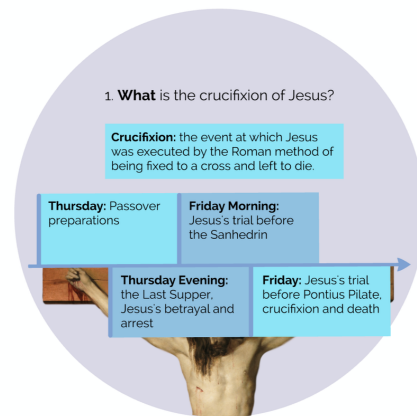
•• That brings us to the end of our discussion about the incarnation. For Christians, the biblical texts that record it are essential because they establish both Jesus's messiahship and his divinity. Again, the accuracy of the texts isn't important; what they reveal is that the earliest followers of 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. It's using these passages that Christians base their belief that Jesus was God, with all the impact that has 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 the details that we know so well from the nativity stories, Jesus's birth in Bethlehem, the arrival of the kings, his flight from Herod the Great into hiding in Egypt, it's about what all these details are trying to imply. All of them are hinting at what Jesus is: the messiah. If you're able to interpret the hidden meanings in these stories then you'll understand why they're so central to Christianity. And on that Da Vinci Code-esque note, goodbye!



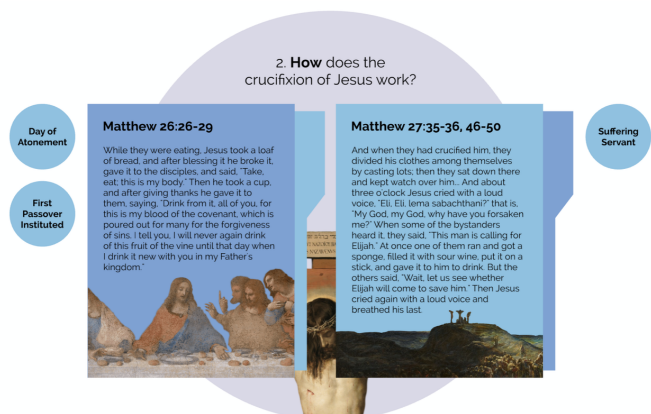
Crucifixion of Jesus

Hi! This lesson's all about the crucifixion of Jesus. Unlike some of the other events recorded in the gospels, like most of Jesus's miracles and many of his teachings, historians are widely agreed that this one definitely happened. Furthermore, there's a general consensus among both Christian and non-Christian scholars that the last week of Jesus's life unfolded largely as described: he went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, caused a disturbance in the Temple, ate a final meal with his disciples, was arrested by the Jewish authorities and then handed over to the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, who sentenced him to death by crucifixion. Notwithstanding widespread agreement on the big picture, the historical accuracy of smaller details are more difficult to agree upon, and many of these are important because they support the Christian claim that, despite his crucifixion, Jesus was both God the Son and the messiah. Anyway, throughout this lesson, we'll look at what we know about the crucifixion of Jesus and the circumstances surrounding it, explain how Christians interpret an event as shocking as the death of their divine messiah, and consider why it is of central importance to Christianity.

•• So, without further ado, what is the crucifixion of Jesus? • Well, plainly, it's the event at which Jesus was executed by the Roman method of being fixed to a cross and left to die. 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 (because removal of the corpse wasn't commonplace). 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). The disturbance Jesus caused in the Temple may have led Pontius Pilate to consider Jesus a threat. • According to the first three gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke), Jews were preparing for the Passover on Thursday (and given the fact that Passover celebrates Jewish liberation from Egyptian oppression, the Romans may have been especially sensitive to any potentially rebellious disturbances). • Regardless, according to the gospels, Jesus had his last meal with the disciples after sunset on Thursday, and was betrayed by Judas before being arrested shortly thereafter. • Under cover of darkness in the early hours of Friday morning, he was interrogated by the Jewish authorities. • Then, when the new day dawned, Jesus was tried by the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, sentenced to death and then summarily executed by crucifixion. Now, as we've discussed, there may be a political reason for Jesus's death related to his behaviour in the Temple but this is not one provided by the gospels, which suggest that Pontius Pilate didn't recognise Jesus as a threat. Instead, smaller details from the accounts of the crucifixion suggest to Christians that Jesus's death was part of God's plan; and, despite the shocking nature of Jesus's execution, that it even supports the claim he was messiah.

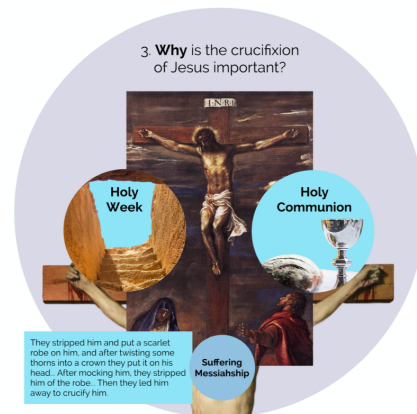


•• Our next question revolves around the issue of how the crucifixion works? In other words, beyond Jesus's death, what do Christians believe is actually happening at his execution? Why do Christians believe that their incarnate God had to die at the hands of the Romans? What was accomplished by this? To answer these questions, • we first need to look at the Last Supper. According to the Gospel of Matthew, it's at this event that "Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he 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." At this point, one early Christian understanding of Jesus's death is explicitly stated. We aren't told how, but we are told clearly: somehow Jesus's death, the pouring



out of his blood for many, will lead to the forgiveness of sins. • The thinking of early Christians may be linked to the Day of Atonement, during which the High Priest was tasked with symbolically transferring the sins of Jews onto a scapegoat before having it driven out into the wilderness in order to restore their relationship with God (as commanded in Leviticus 16:20-22). The death of Jesus, then, may be required to restore the relationship between God and humanity. • Or, is Jesus's blood capable of saving people from death like the blood of the first Passover lambs saved Jews from the Angel of Death that God sent against Egypt; this is certainly how the Gospel of John presents Jesus's death, which we are told happened at exactly the same time as the slaughter of the Passover lambs on the Passover festival when Jesus was crucified? Whatever the answer, the Last Supper makes clear that Jesus's death somehow saves us. But it does more. • In Matthew 27 we read that "when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 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, like the casting of lots for Jesus's clothing, the mocking of the bystanders, and the provision of vinegar on a stick recall an Old Testament figure known as the • Suffering Servant. This figure is important because he appears to be someone chosen by God who endures tremendous suffering but ultimately triumphs over his hardships. And Christians believe that the Old Testament passages that refer to the Suffering Servant are actually prophesying the eventual arrival of a suffering messiah; in other words, a messiah who will suffer and die but eventually triumph; a messiah like Jesus. So, we can see that the crucifixion, despite the fact it involves Jesus's suffering and death, simultaneously presents him as the messiah.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why the crucifixion is of such tremendous importance.
 • Why is Jesus's death so significant to Christians? Well, as we've already discovered, it's the moment at which Christians believe Jesus sacrificed himself so that our relationship with God could be restored. As such, • it is the focus of Christian worship at Easter, but its remembrance doesn't stop there. • In some traditions it is symbolically recalled every day through services of Holy Communion. Christians believe that Jesus gave his body and his blood so that they wouldn't 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. • Additionally, the accounts of the crucifixion in the gospels appear to confirm Jesus's messiahship. This is an odd one because Jews were generally expecting a kingly warrior messiah, not one who would suffer and die at the hands of the Romans. However, passages like Isaiah 53 present the figure of the Suffering Servant, a messianic figure who endures tremendous hardships before eventually triumphing over his oppressors. In the Gospel of Matthew we read that 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 even though he is sentenced to death and executed by crucifixion. In fact, the very set of circumstances that might suggest to others that Jesus wasn't beloved by God acts as confirmation of Jesus messiahship for Christians.

•• That brings us to the end of our discussion about the crucifixion of Jesus. So, what should we take away? Well, the big one's that Christians believe it's 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. In short, without it, there's no possibility of heaven. Less important but still vital is that the crucifixion actually confirms Jesus is the messiah. As we've discussed, this one's a little tricky, but Christians think that Old Testament texts like Isaiah prophesy the coming of a suffering messiah. The incarnation and the miracles show that Jesus is a powerful messiah and heir to King David, and the crucifixion casts him in the mould of another messianic figure: the Suffering Servant. And on that prophetic note, goodbye!

Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus

Hi! This lesson's all about the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Although there's widespread agreement among both Christians and non-Christians that Jesus died by crucifixion, the belief that he was raised from the dead and thereafter ascended into heaven is rejected by atheists and followers of other religions. Notwithstanding this, historians do concede that something did happen after Jesus's death: at least some of his followers had experiences that convinced them of the resurrection, although we'll never be sure of their nature. Perhaps some disciples suffered hallucinations or visions triggered by profound grief. These are the types of explanations offered by non-Christians looking for answers that don't have supernatural components. But for Christians, the resurrection is a historical fact; it really happened. Regardless, what's important is what early followers believed the resurrection and ascension revealed about Jesus, because it's this that lies at the heart of Christian beliefs and teachings. Anyway, throughout this lesson, we'll look at what we do know about the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, explain how Christians interpret these key moments, and consider why they're both so important.

• So, without further ado, what are the resurrection and ascension of Jesus? Well, they're two separate but closely related events. The first, the resurrection, is the event at which Jesus rose from the dead and left his tomb empty shortly after his death and burial. As you can see from Luke 24:1-3, we don't actually have an account of the moment; instead, we read that those who discovered the tomb (and they differ by gospel), "found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body." So, after the burial of Jesus, the next widely attested story records the discovery of his empty tomb, which is a detail that atheists and non-Christians sometimes seize upon to refute belief in the resurrection. The ascension, on the other hand, is the event at which the disciples witnessed Jesus being raised up into heaven shortly after his resurrection. The Gospel of Luke reports this with the words, "While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." Christians claim that all the gospels assume the ascension although only the Gospel of Luke records it (in other words, the gospels of Mark, Matthew and John don't explain how Jesus leaves Earth after his resurrection). This makes Luke 24:51-53 incredibly important: without it, claiming that the resurrection appearances were hallucinations or visions becomes easier; with it, claiming that the resurrection actually occurred in a way that then required Jesus to bodily ascend into heaven may become more reasonable. In any event, Christians believe that it happened sometime relatively shortly after Jesus's resurrection.

• Our next question revolves around the issue of how the resurrection and the ascension work. What exactly do Christians believe happened after Jesus's death, and what do they think it means? Well, the first thing to note is that Christians believe that Jesus genuinely returned from the grave. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, Paul the Apostle writes, "I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." There's no doubt from the writings of Paul the Apostle that people believed Jesus was

1. What are the resurrection and ascension of Jesus?

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.

Luke 24:1-3
But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.

Luke 24:51-53
While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

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

Paul the Apostle
1 Corinthians 15:3-8
For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

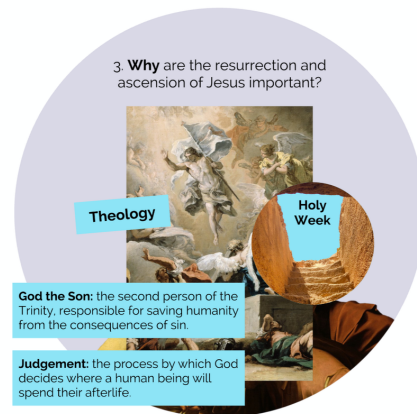
Matthew the Apostle
Matthew 28:1-7, 7-10
After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. The angel said to the women, "Gloria quickly and tell his disciples. He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him. This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Luke the Evangelist
Luke 24:50-53
Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Acts
Acts 1:9-11
When he had said this, as they 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."

actually, physically raised from the dead; it's what was anticipated in the Old Testament, and it was confirmed by eyewitness accounts of the risen Jesus. • The Gospel of Matthew records some of these resurrection appearances as well, like the gospels of Luke and John (although, notably, unlike the Gospel of Mark, which ends in its original form with the discovery of the empty tomb). • When the women go to the tomb on Easter we're told that, following an encounter with an angel, "they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Accounts like this confirm that Jesus's resurrection was physical: the corpse is missing and the women actually touch Jesus: they take hold of his feet and worship him. For Christians, details like this dispel the notion that Jesus's followers saw some sort of ghost or spirit; the resurrection was a bodily experience, and they believe that it's one that they can look forward to as well, at the Last Judgement. • Finally, Luke the Evangelist, who is traditionally identified as the author of both the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles (something loosely resembling a gospel about Jesus's disciples), tells us that Jesus ascended physically into heaven. • We've already read the account from Luke 24 (the only record of the ascension to be found in the gospels), • and Acts 1:9-11 contains a similar narrative. We read, "When he had said this, as they 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." So here we have the account of the ascension simultaneously reinforcing 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.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why the resurrection and ascension are so important?
 • Why is it that, along with the crucifixion, they're placed at the heart of the Christian religion? • Well, in brief, they are both of tremendous theological significance. In other words, they inform the Christian view about what God is or what God's like. • Significantly, for Christians, the resurrection confirms that Jesus is God the Son: he's the second person of the Trinity, responsible for saving humanity from the consequences of sin. It's the resurrection that's the proof that Jesus's death



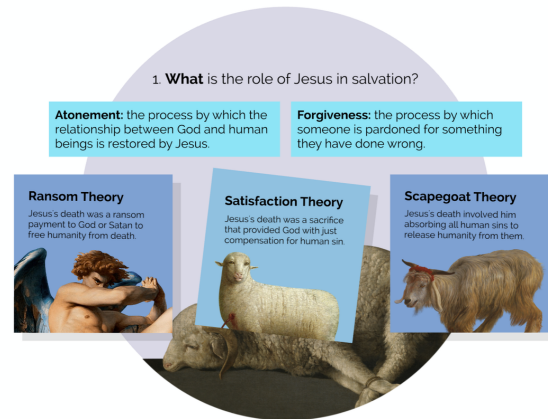
on the cross succeeded in restoring the relationship between God and humanity. It's the demonstration that Jesus's death had the saving power Christians claim. • Additionally, it tells Christians what to expect at the general resurrection at the Last Judgement: there will be an actual, bodily resurrection just like the one experienced by Jesus. And this is something underscored by the account of the ascension in Acts of the Apostles: Jesus ascends into heaven and we read that, in just the same way, he will eventually descend at his second coming (or, in other words, the Last Judgement). • Finally, the resurrection and ascension provide the end to the narrative of Holy Week, that is the week immediately before Easter, and Jesus's life more generally. For Christians, it's the events of this week that give the broader gospel story its authority and force. For Christians, 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 beginning and middle of his ministry, we should follow his commandments: they are the words of God.

•• That brings us to the end of our discussion about the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. What's the most important thing to remember? Well, it's that 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 that was 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 serves as a model for what Christians can expect at the general resurrection when the Last Judgement happens. It gives Christians hope that they, too, will be resurrected and transformed by God, and that they'll enjoy eternity with him in heaven. 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 on the back of hallucinations or visions that the disciples suffered in their grief-stricken state. Nevertheless, wherever the truth lies, undoubtedly it's the belief in this pair of events that moved the earliest Christians to confirm their faith in Jesus. And on that contentious note, goodbye!

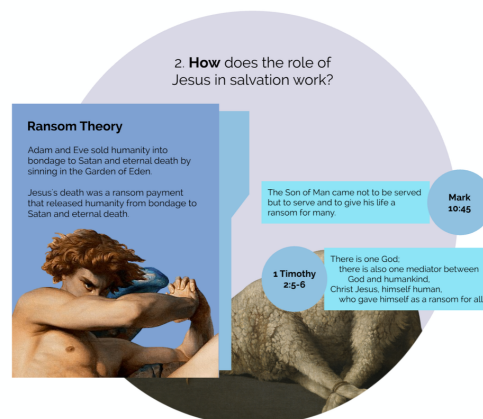
Jesus and Salvation

Hi! This lesson is all about Jesus and salvation. In a Christian context, we know that salvation is the process by which God saves human beings from the consequences of sin; what we're looking at here is how Christians believe he does this. We can't observe the process of salvation (if it even occurs), which means Christians offer up various hypotheses. Different Christians have competing ideas about how Jesus is involved and how the whole thing works more generally. According to all Christians, Jesus's death by crucifixion is essential to salvation; however, because of some relatively small differences between accounts of the crucifixion across the gospels, there's considerable debate about exactly how Jesus's death actually saves us. Christians believe that the most significant consequence of sinful behaviour, of which we're all guilty, is death. Somehow, Jesus's death provides us with the possibility of an eternal afterlife in heaven instead. Throughout this lesson, we'll look at what Christians believe about Jesus's role in salvation, how different Christians believe this role works, and consider why Jesus's role in salvation is so important.

•• So, without further ado, what's the role of Jesus in salvation? • Well, in short, he facilitates 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 is the process by which we're pardoned for something we've done wrong (in this case, pardoned by God for our sinful behaviour). Whilst all Christians agree on these broad brushstrokes, debate rages about precisely how this happens; in other words, there's much disagreement over the mechanics. Crudely put, Christians agree that the crucifixion is a machine that produces human salvation; however, they disagree on how this machine works. For example, • 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 us from death. For various reasons, this theory hasn't aged particularly well, and now virtually no Christians explain salvation by referencing it. • 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. (In other words, Jesus's sinless death satisfied God's need for justice.) Both these theories trace their origins to the twelfth century and beyond; however, not all of them are this old. • A relatively recent development is scapegoat theory, which 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. These are three famous theories, but there are plenty of others. The important thing to note at this point is that there's quite a bit of difference: in ransom theory, Jesus is a ransom payment; in satisfaction theory, he's a compensation payment; in scapegoat theory, he's an innocent scapegoat who absorbs our sins.



•• Our next question is concerned with how Jesus's role in salvation works, and to explore this we're going to discuss a couple of hypotheses in greater detail: ransom theory and satisfaction 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 Satan 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. Now, as we discussed earlier, this theory hasn't aged particularly well despite considerable popularity between the fourth and eleventh centuries. First, there's the issue of God the Father needing to pay a ransom to Satan for humanity. He's omnipotent, more powerful than Satan, so why on Earth wouldn't he just

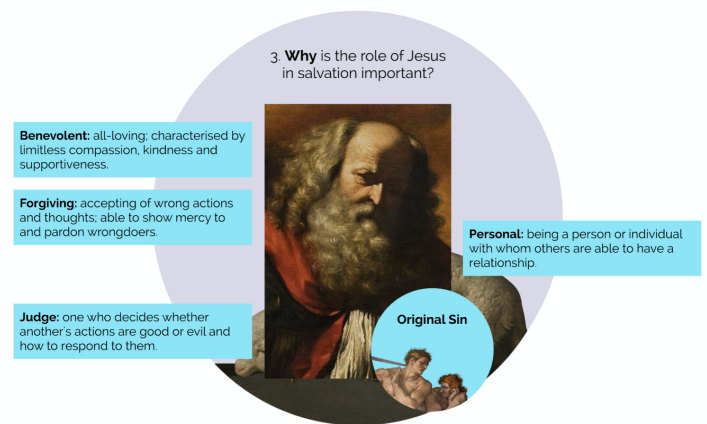


overpower him to secure our release? Second, Jesus isn't a very good ransom payment (at least from Satan's perspective) because he's strong enough to escape the bonds of death. God the Father knew this, so this theory presents him as a dishonest dealer, which all Christians argue is incompatible with his nature. Notwithstanding this, there's evidence that some early Christians believed this was how Jesus's death secured their salvation. • Mark 10:45 reads, "The Son of Man," that's Jesus, "came not to serve but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." • Likewise, 1 Timothy tells us, "here is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all." • Conversely, a more popular hypothesis since the first half of the second millennium is satisfaction theory. According to its proponents, God requires satisfaction for our 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 we read: "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, here we have the idea that Jesus will make us righteous by suffering for our iniquities (or 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 couldn't take away sin (or its major consequence, death); however, Jesus's sacrifice does, once and for all time.

•• All of this brings us to the question of why Jesus's role in salvation is so important. • And, in my opinion, it's principally because how we conceive of Jesus's role reveals a lot about the nature of God the Father. So, we learn from God the Father's apparent desire to absolve us from the consequences of sin by sacrificing his only son that he is both • benevolent and • forgiving. Regardless of whether one subscribes to ransom theory, satisfaction theory, or scapegoat theory, Jesus is sacrificed for the benefit of humanity, which tells us that God the Father has compassion

and kindness for us, at least as far as Christians are concerned. • Likewise, we can infer that God wants a personal relationship with us. • In Genesis, the story of original sin reminds us that God has a 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 just how important a personal relationship with his creation is to our creator. • However, in satisfaction theory, in particular, 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. The fact that this theory requires Jesus's death to satisfy God's need for justice is important: it tells us what he's like. Conversely, that now-repudiated theory that Jesus was a ransom payment implies that God isn't strong enough to overpower Satan and that he's a dishonest dealer, a trickster; these aren't qualities that Christians think God embodies, and so this theory has fallen out of fashion over the last millennium.

•• That brings us to the end of our discussion about Jesus and salvation. 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. And on that theological note, goodbye!



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.