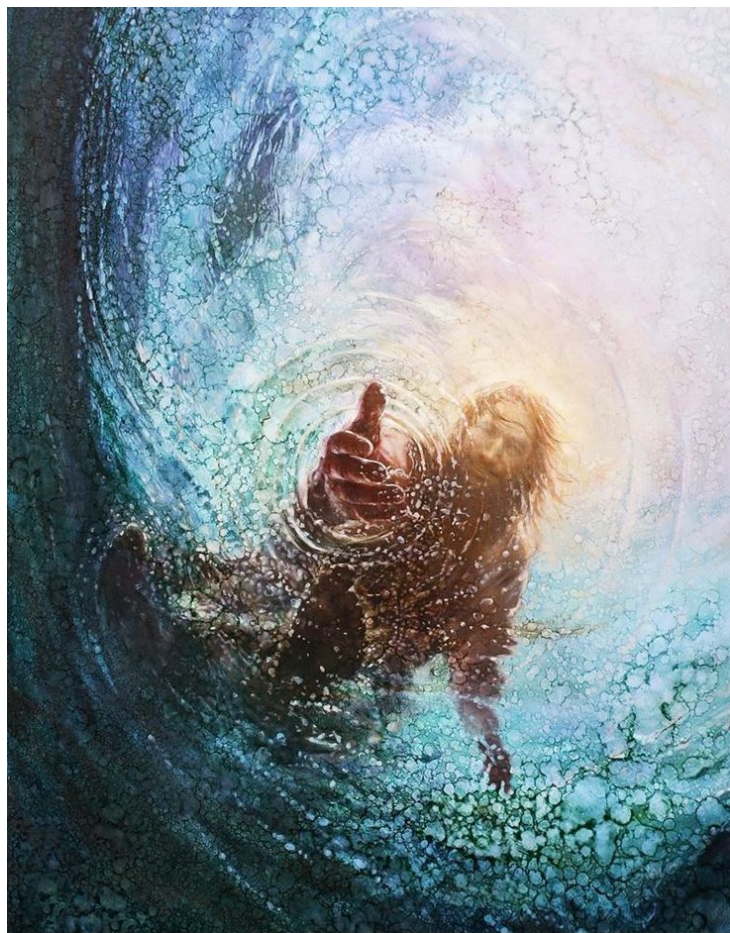


# GCSE Religious Studies

## Christianity

### Beliefs & Teachings Task Book



Name:

# The Nature of God

Christians believe that God is totally different from anything in the universe and is ultimately beyond human understanding. However, they believe that He has revealed something of Himself through nature, the insights of the Bible and personal experience. From this, Christians believe that God has many attributes (qualities) and can describe these.

## God as Omnipotent

'Omnipotence' means 'all-powerful'. This is sometimes misunderstood as meaning that God can do absolutely anything, such as making a square circle or doing something that is morally wrong. However, by omnipotence, most Christians mean that God can do anything that makes sense for God to do. The idea of a square circle is just nonsense and doing something morally wrong could be contradictory for a God who is all good. Christians do mean that God's power is immense – immeasurable even.

For Christians, God's omnipotence can be seen in many ways, for example:

- The creation of the universe itself
- The wonders of the universe, which owes its existence to His creative and sustaining power
- The miracles performed by Jesus and the miracles which are claimed to sometimes occur in the modern world

Above all, Christians believe that however bad things may seem in the world, nothing can ultimately defeat God's power.

## What the Bible says about God's omnipotence

There are many stories about God's omnipotence. The Creation, the Flood and Ten Plagues are just three of them.

In St Mark's Gospel, there is the story of Jesus and his disciples out on Lake Galilee in a boat. Sudden storms are common on this lake and can be very dangerous, though they end as suddenly as they begin. On this occasion, while Jesus was sleeping, a violent storm blew up and the disciples feared the boat would sink. They woke Jesus, saying, "Teacher, do you not care if we drown?" Jesus got up and spoke to the wind and waves. "Quiet! Be still!" Immediately the storm ended and the disciples were amazed at his power.

## Some Christians think that:

- This story happened exactly as Mark told it, or
- The story can be explained as coincidence, or
- Jesus was speaking to the disciples and it was their panic, not the storm which was causing the problem, or
- It was a story created by the Church to show Jesus' divine power

Many Christians claim this story illustrates God's power at work, as they believe that Jesus is the son of God.



**TASK 1:** Complete the revision page using the information on the nature of God.

Omnipotence

How can God's omnipotence be seen?

What does the Bible say about God's omnipotence?

Different Christian beliefs

Different Christian beliefs

Your opinion

## God as Loving

Christians believe that God is all-loving. When referring to God's love, the New Testament writers used the word 'agape', which refers to a self-giving, self-sacrificial love. Christians see Jesus' death on the cross as the supreme example of that love: "for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." (John 3:16) They believe this showed love because the sacrifice of Jesus then allowed human beings the chance to enter heaven in the afterlife. Many people find it hard to believe that there is an all-loving God when they see so much suffering in the world. When they experience it themselves, some lose any belief that they had in God, as the God they believed in would have helped them. Suffering actually leads some Christians to feel closer to God; they feel that God is sharing their pain and giving them strength to cope.



## How God's all-loving nature is shown in the Bible

Much of Jesus' teaching is about the love of God, which is universal and unconditional. Universal means for everyone everywhere; unconditional means without conditions (regardless of what they have done). This is why Christians believe that even those who do the most evil things are still loved by God and can still come back to God and be forgiven.

Jesus told the Parable of the Prodigal Son, illustrating this love (Luke 15:11-32). A man has two sons, one claims his inheritance and leaves to waste it all. He returns to ask for a job on his father's farm, and is welcomed home. His father has forgiven him. This does not mean he gets another inheritance – everything now belongs to the elder son – but he does get a fresh start because of his father's love.

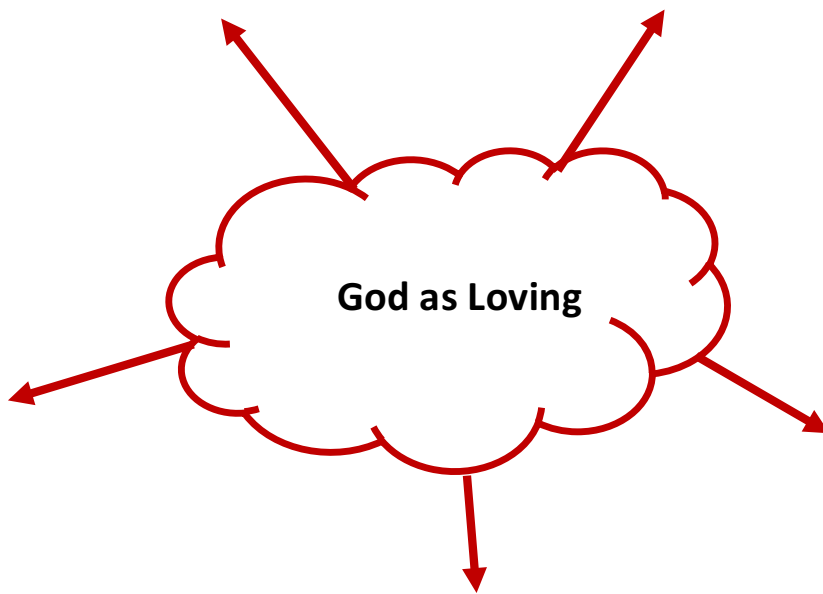
In the teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be the sons



of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous...Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:43-48)

**TASK 2:** Create a mind map about God's omnibenevolence.



## God as Just

To be 'just' means to be fair, to operate in a way which gives everyone equal value and equal rights, rather than being discriminatory. Christians believe that God is just.



However, it does not always seem that God is just. Many Christians think that the idea of suffering as a test of faith does not fit with believing in a loving and just God. The fact that



terrible things happen in the world where there is supposed to be an all-loving God is called the 'problem of evil'. It is made worse by the fact that suffering often seems excessive and pointless. Some people argue that God is not fair or just since He allows it. (He is omnipotent, remember). The only answer to the problem of suffering in the view of Christian philosophers like John Hick, is that ultimately, it cannot be explained. Those who experience the love of God in other ways simple have to be prepared to accept what they cannot understand and to believe that God is indeed a God of justice.

## Why is it important for Christians to believe God is just?

The news often makes us think that there is no justice, only terrible situations in which people suffer, and wicked people get away with their behaviour. Believing in Judgement Day or the afterlife and that God is just, means that you believe these things will be addressed and made fair.

The Bible portrays God as just and says that He expects believers to behave justly. This means not only treating their fellow-human beings fairly, but also doing what it takes to relieve suffering and injustice. Many Christians work for justice in society because of this. The Bible contains rules for life, such as the Ten Commandments, which believers are expected to obey. The prophet Amos told his audience to 'let justice roll on like a river.' Jesus taught that God would judge all the people according to how they had cared, or not cared, for those in need and that whatever they did for others, they did for him. He said, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12)









# The Problem of Evil and Suffering

God is:

- All-loving: God loves each and every person as a unique individual
- All-knowing: God knows everything it is possible to know – much more than human beings can know. This is omniscience.
- All-powerful: God has unimaginable power. Nothing is beyond God.
- Just: God is completely fair and just, so that all will be judged fairly without discrimination

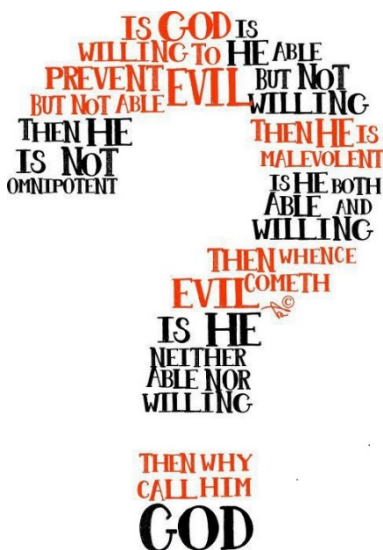


Christians are also very aware of the evil and suffering going on in the world.

Moral evil is a term given to suffering inflicted by people on each other, for example, murder. Suffering is the pain (physical or emotional) which a person goes through for any reason. Nature is responsible for a lot of the suffering in the world, for example, through natural disasters like a tsunami.

The problem a Christian has is how to reconcile their idea of God with the reality of suffering and evil. They have to be able to make sense of God allowing this evil and suffering to continue to happen.

## How do Christians try to solve the problem of evil and suffering?



The problem of evil and suffering is why God (who is all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful and just) allows evil and suffering.

Evil is easier to explain than the suffering caused by nature. Many Christians believe in the existence of an evil force, which they call the Devil or Satan. This being tries to tempt human beings into behaving badly and disobeying God. So, evil perpetrated by them is a result of the Devil's work.

Not all Christians believe in the Devil. Many believe that as human beings have free will, they have the ability to choose their actions. This free will was given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and they abused it by disobeying God (they ate fruit from the tree of knowledge). So, for many Christians,

freedom of choice when mixed with greed, selfishness or hatred lead to evil doings. Humans, not God, are responsible for this kind of evil.

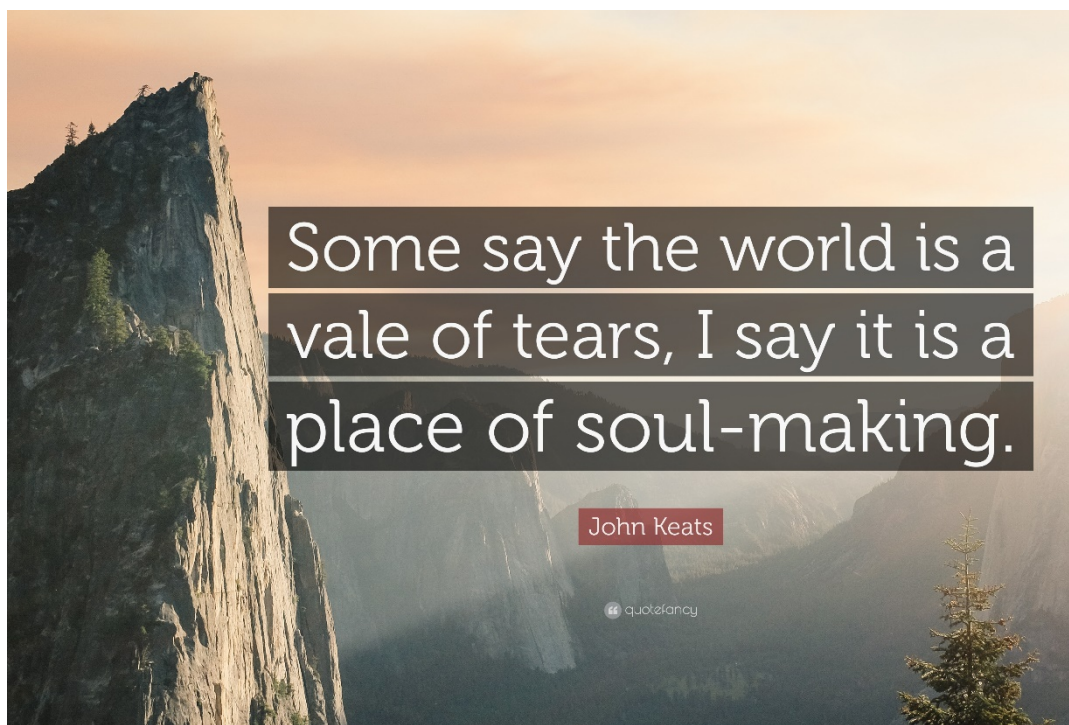
Suffering caused by nature is more difficult. After all, God created the world, so why does it seem so flawed in its design? God must be allowing the suffering to continue as God is all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing. In other words, God knows about the evil and suffering, loves us enough to want us not to suffer and has the power to deal with anything. So why is there still suffering?

The solution to this dilemma has been sought for many centuries by Christians, and it is not resolved. Here are some suggested explanations as to why God allows suffering:

- Suffering is a punishment for wrong doing.
- Suffering is a test of faith in God. If they pass the test, the reward will be great.
- Suffering is a form of education for our souls. By suffering, we grow spiritually and learn to take responsibility and help others
- Suffering is needed as a balance – to appreciate good, we have to be able to recognise evil or bad. It is impossible to have one without the other.

These solutions can become problematic when examined. There will always be an example of a suffering which simply cannot be explained satisfactorily. For example, how can we be satisfied with the suffering of a baby who was born in pain and severely disabled? Or a person who has always followed God's rules, worshipped him and was genuinely good. Would any of these solutions explain their suffering a terrible and painful death?

The final attempt to explain why God allows suffering is to say that humans simply must accept it. John Hick and many other Christians would claim that they experience God's love in other areas of their lives. So when they experience suffering that seems excessive or pointless, they are prepared to accept what they cannot understand. They are prepared to trust in God's goodness and his purposes, and so, suffering must be accepted.



For Christians, the point is not to question why God allows suffering, but rather to look at how they can respond positively to suffering, whether it be their own or that of others. Suffering becomes a trigger for actions, for showing the love of Jesus to their fellow humans.

**TASK 4:** Create a Newspaper article for 'Our Purpose' magazine, reporting the problem of evil and suffering, including some Christian responses.

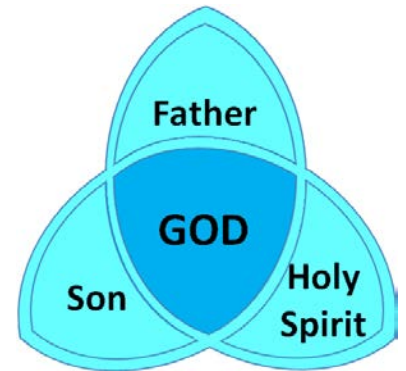
# Our Purpose

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# The Oneness of God and the Trinity

Christianity is a monotheistic faith – they believe in one God. Most Christians believe that God's nature has been revealed to the world in distinct ways:

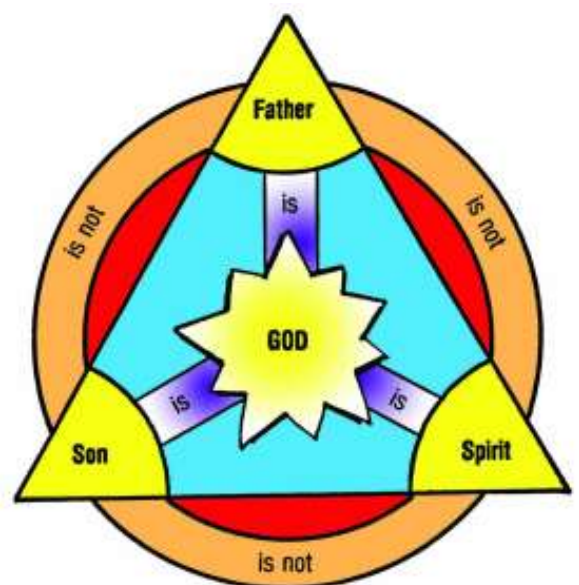
- As the loving creator and sustainer of the universe (God the Father)
- As the saviour who became incarnate (born in human flesh) and lived, died and rose against (God the Son)
- As the source of strength which Christians find at work in their hearts (God the Holy Spirit)



The Trinity concept is an attempt to explain what the Bible says about the nature of the relationships between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Christians believe that the One God is a Trinity of these Three Persons. The word 'Person' in relation to the Trinity is used in a very different way from its meaning in modern everyday life. It does not mean that God consists of three individuals or that God has three properties. God can be known in three ways and each way has its own characteristics, but they are three forms of the same single entity. The Trinity is also often called the Godhead.

However, believing something to be both three and one at the same time can be a confusing idea. Christians accept this to be the case but say that:

- God cannot be known. The nature of God is totally beyond human understanding. So it should not be possible to make full sense of it



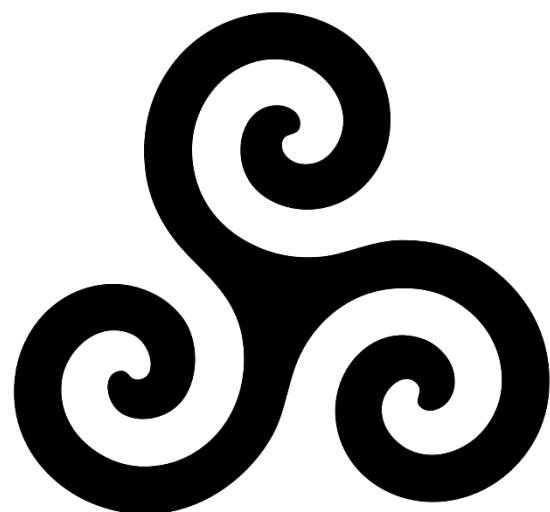
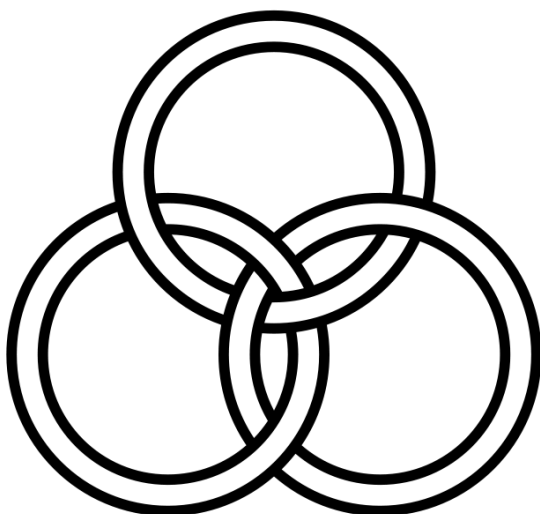
- Belief in God as Trinity makes the best sense of what they read in the Bible and experience in their lives. In the Bible it says that when Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and a voice said, “You are my Son...” At his final meeting on Earth with his disciples, Jesus told them to, “Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19)

### **Symbols of the Trinity**

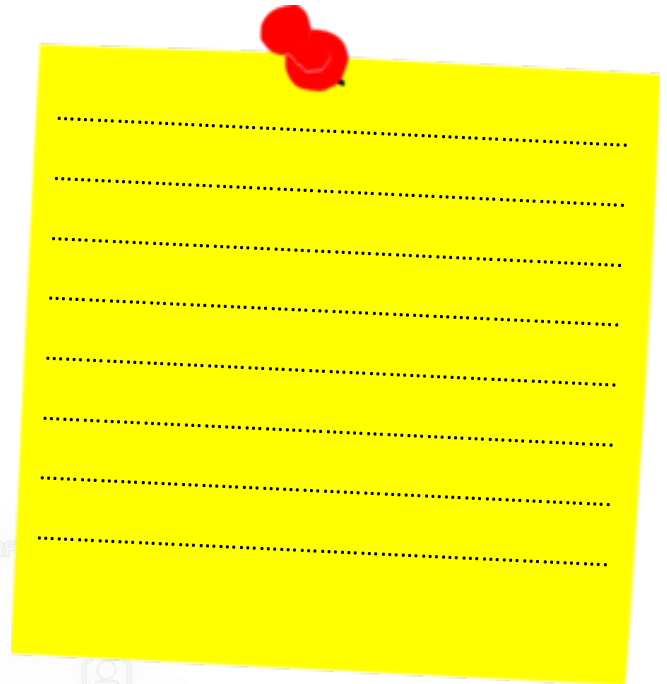
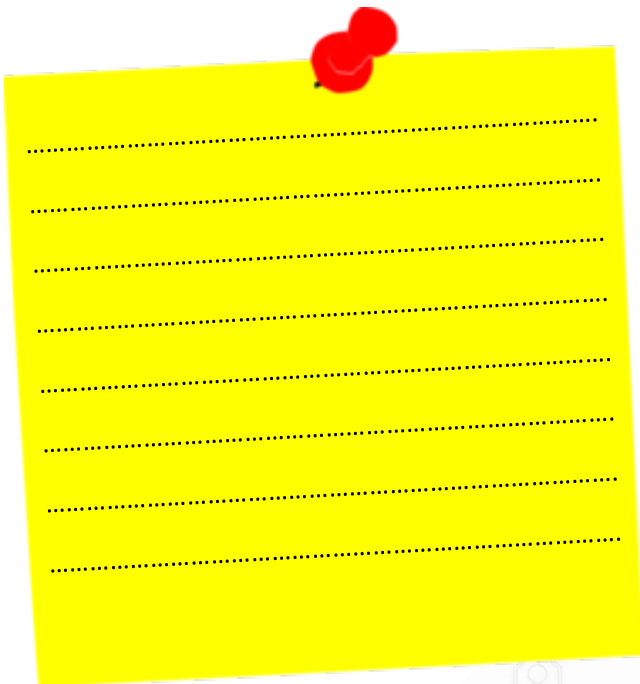
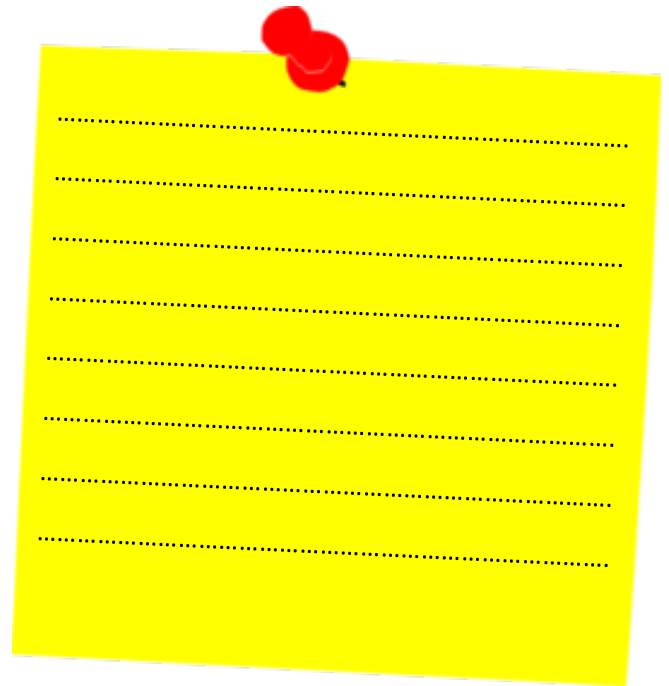
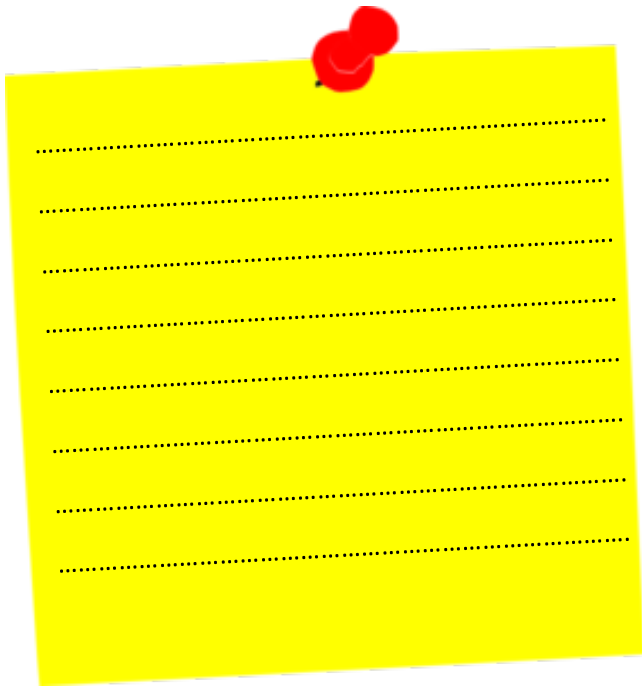
Christians often use symbols to show the concept of the Trinity, showing the idea of ‘three in one’. Perhaps the earliest and simplest symbol is an equilateral triangle, with each of its sides representing one of the Persons of the Trinity.

#### **Other symbols include:**

- The Shamrock, which St Patrick used when teaching the Christian faith in Ireland
- The Borromean rings, which together are inseparable, but if one is removed then the other two fall apart. They are seen as a symbol of strength in unity.  
The circle is a symbol of the unending and eternal nature of God
- The ancient Celtic spiral triskelion shape is also used by Christians.



**TASK 5:** Complete the post-its using the information about the oneness and Trinity of God.



# How belief in the Trinity influences Christians

In baptism, (a symbol of welcome into the Christian Church) the Trinity is mentioned throughout the ceremony. In the Church of England, for instance, the priest will say, "(Name), I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Before the baptism can take place, the person being baptised (if old enough) or the parents and godparents declare their faith in God as Three-in-One. The priest asks if they believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit and finally everyone present says, "This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit."



The idea of the Trinity is also used in prayers. For example, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us evermore. Amen." This is said at the end of most services. Many hymns mention the Trinity, and at the end of saying or singing a psalm, there are the words, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit."

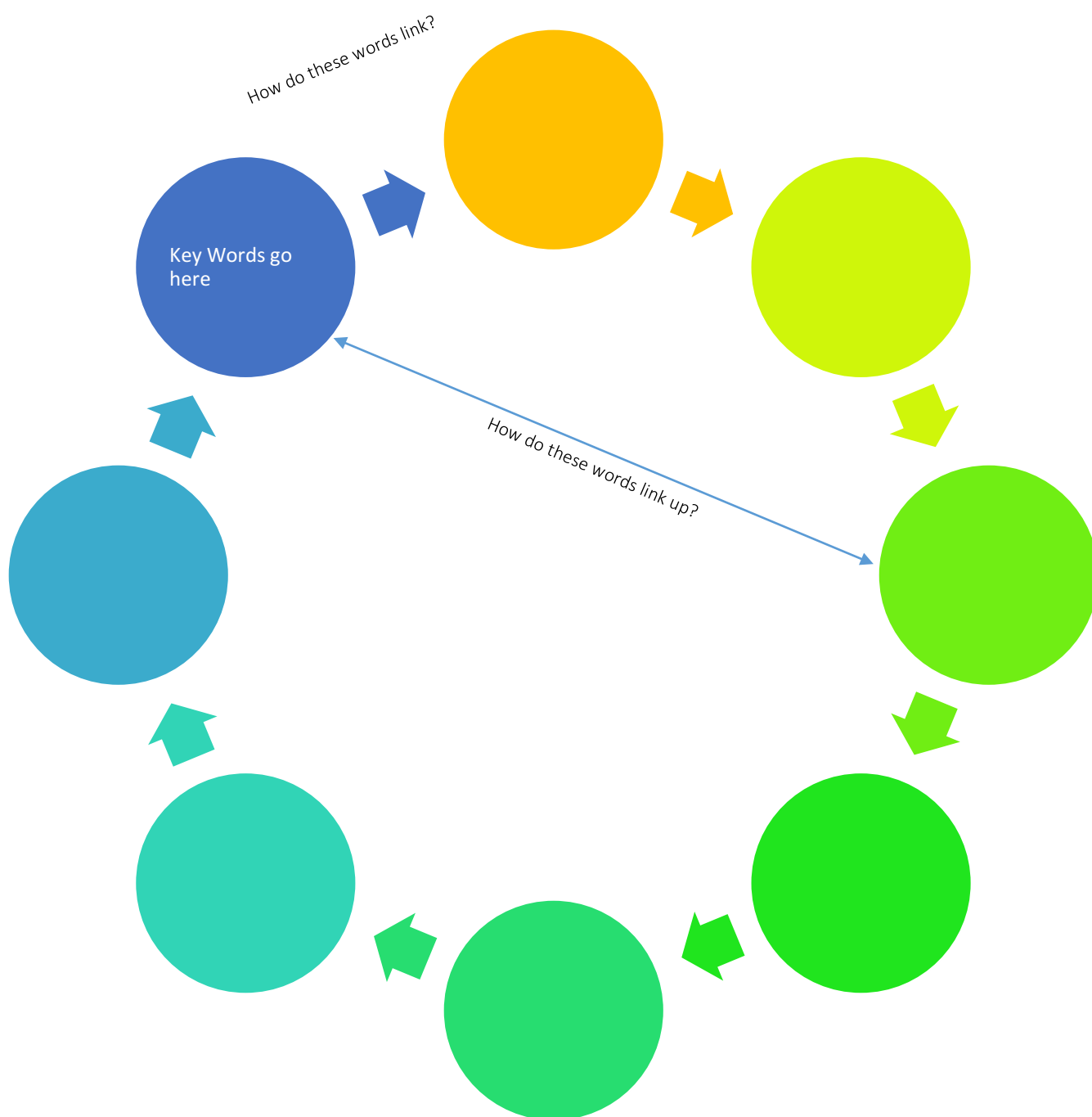
The Trinity has been explained as being like a relationship based on love and equality... hence the equilateral triangle. Human beings are said to be created in the image of God, so they should show that same unity of love and equality in their relationships with others. This should make a big difference to a Christian lifestyle – Christians must try to show their fellow human beings the same love and respect that flows between the three Persons of the Trinity.

## **Challenging the Idea of the Trinity**

Some Jews, Muslims and others suggest Christianity believes in tritheism. This means belief in three separate gods who are linked in some way. In other words, they claim that Christians believe in three separate gods.

Secular critics, such as Richard Dawkins, state that belief in the Trinity makes no logical sense whatsoever. They say it confirms their view that religion is just superstitious nonsense based on old-fashioned and out-dated thinking.

**TASK 6:** Choose 8 key words from our course so far and write them into the circles. Then, draw lines from each word to a different word, writing a sentence that joins them. Complete the rest of your 'Concept Map'. Try to be as creative as possible, matching up each key concept word with its neighbours and with concepts from the other side of the circle!





# Christian beliefs about Creation

God is transcendent (beyond space and time, controlled by neither). Christians believe God created the world, as both Christians and Jews have the same teaching.

One of the most fundamental beliefs of Christianity which separates it from other religions, is that of the Trinity. If God is the Trinity, then the Trinity must have existed before the creation – because God did. So for Christians, the Trinity is the way in which the world was created.

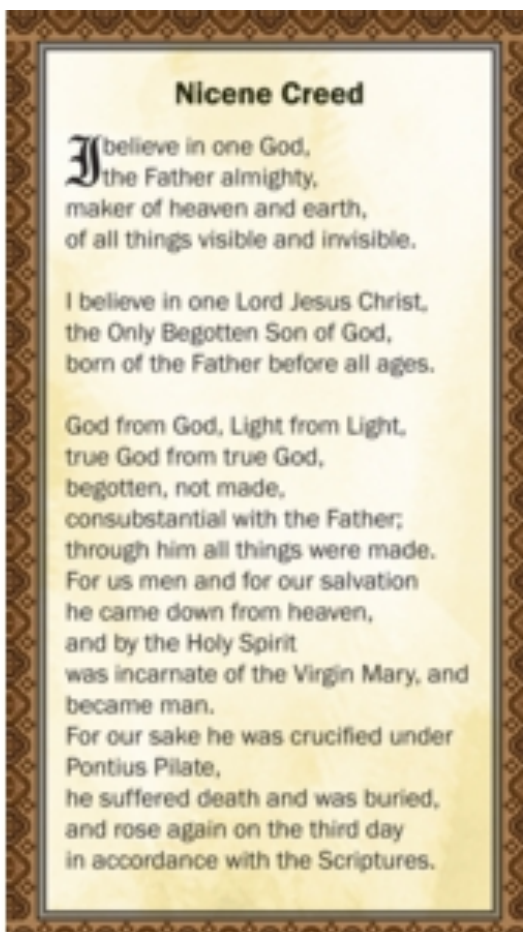
Creeds are statements of belief. The Nicene Creed begins with: “We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” Here, ‘Father’ is a metaphor that expresses the life-giving, creative nature of God. This statement reflects the opening verse in the Old Testament: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1.1)

St John’s Gospel also opens with the phrase ‘in the beginning’. It says, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has

been made.” This picks up the idea of God creating through His Word, for example, ‘And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.’

However, there is more to the term ‘Word’ than this. The author of St John’s Gospel linked the Word with Jesus (the Son) in the statement: “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son...” (John 1:14) Christians understand this as referring to the Second Person of the Trinity, who might be referred to both as the Word and the Son of God. So God and Jesus are ‘one’.

The Genesis account of creation also states: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:2) Christians see this as a reference to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit shows God in action, transforming chaos into order, as seen in the rest of Genesis 1.



**TASK 7:** Complete notes page about what Christians believe about creation.

# CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT CREATION



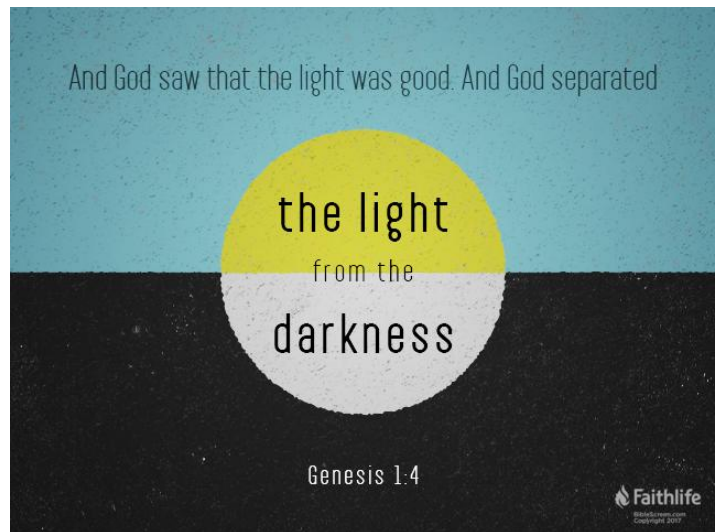
# Genesis 1: 1-31

This describes God's creation of the universe over a period of six days, starting with day and night and ending with the creation of human beings, with a seventh day of rest. Some Christians believe the story literally: that is, that it tells us exactly how creation happened. They believe that the authors of the writings in the Bible were directly inspired by God, so that what they wrote contains no mistakes.

However, many Christians think that the story is a myth: that is, a fictional story with a profound message, delivered through symbolism. It is the message or symbolism that is important rather than the what and when it all happened. In this case, it is trying to teach religious truths about the nature of God and his relationship with his creation.

The message is:

- God is the sole and omnipotent creator
- God is the source of everything in the universe and sustains it
- God created a universe that was ordered, not chaotic
- Every aspect of God's creation was good: that is, it fulfilled his purposes for it
- Human beings are created in God's image, so they reflect God's capacity for creativity and relationship
- Human beings are given authority over the rest of the created world



## The importance of beliefs about Genesis 1 for Christians

Christians believe that the message within Genesis 1 is true and that they live in an ordered world, created and sustained by God. The universe does not exist by chance and human lives have meaning and purpose. This belief encourages Christians to adopt a positive approach to life. Even when things go wrong, they retain this positivity, and they do not ignore issues but rather they think things through and then act on their beliefs.

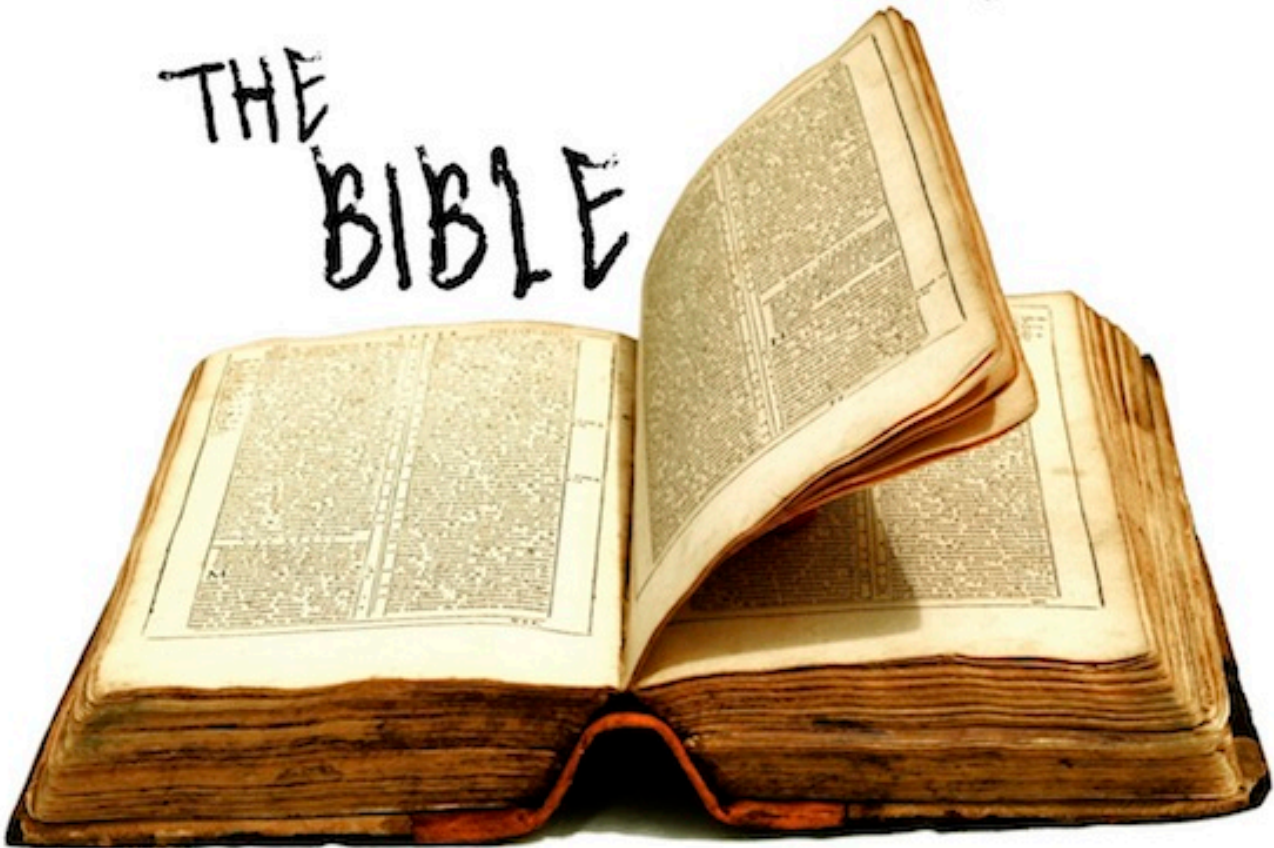
The statement that human beings are made in the image of God is highly significant for Christians. To be human is to have potential and this can be seen in the tremendous achievements made in the arts,

science, medicine, sport and so on. Being in the image of God applies to all human beings, which means that all human lives are of value, regardless of their physical, mental or intellectual capacity.

Christians therefore believe that they have a responsibility to treat everyone equally and to show love and respect to all created beings – human and non-human. The power that humans have been given over the rest of creation entails responsibility, not privilege, and most Christians interpret it in terms of stewardship, not domination leading to exploitation.

# How to interpret

## THE BIBLE



### Interpretations of the Genesis 1 creation story

- **Fundamentalism:** The story is literally true. Every word in it is the word of God, which is always correct. Where questions are raised by fossil evidence or science – science is wrong and faith is a test from God.
- **Conservatism:** The Bible account of Genesis 1 is true however it was not dictated by God, but inspired by God. Therefore there is room for error in the way it is told. For example, a 'day' could mean a 'period of time', showing how God raised the development of the world at regular intervals over a long period of time.
- **Liberalism:** The Bible is inspired by God and tries to answer questions like, 'Why did the world come to be?' and 'Have I got a purpose on earth?' In Genesis, the writer is trying to show our purpose and that the world is a good place. The story isn't trying to state facts, what is important is the message of the story – that there is a loving God, who created each of us as special beings, and have us a world to look after and live in.

**TASK 8:** Draw and annotate/label the storyboards. The first one should be the literal interpretation of the Christian creation story. The second story board should be the non-literal (liberal) interpretation of the Christian creation story.

➤ **Biblical Creation Story**

|  |  |  |  |                   |
|--|--|--|--|-------------------|
|  |  |  |  | Images / Pictures |
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➤ **Literal Interpretation of Creation**

|  |  |  |  |                   |
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|  |  |  |  | Images / Pictures |
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**Liberal (non-literal) Interpretation of Creation**

|  |  |  |  |                   |
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|  |  |  |  | Description       |

# Beliefs About the Afterlife



Simply, Christians believe that after you die, your soul leaves your body, goes to be judged and then goes to heaven or hell, depending on whether you have been good or bad. However, it can be much more complex than this.

Christianity teaches that death is not the end. It separates life on earth (temporary and subject to the limitations of time and space) from life with God (eternal and beyond time and space). Death is not something to be feared. Many believe that they will

be reunited with loved ones who have already died, which helps them with the awful pain of bereavement.

The Christian hope about the afterlife is expressed as follows in Revelation:

“God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

## **The importance of believe in the resurrection for Christians**

Most Christians believe in resurrection – that the dead will be restored to life. This belief is based on the teaching of Jesus and that he overcame death through resurrection. St Paul said that belief in Jesus' resurrection was central to the Christian faith. If death was really the end for Jesus, then Christianity is in effect nothing more than the worship of a martyr whose life ended in failure with a shameful death. Christians believe that Jesus lives and, after death, so will they in a state of unimaginable joy.

Belief in resurrection treats the physical body as an integral and valuable part of what it means to be human. The body is a 'temple of the Holy Spirit' and should be treated with respect. Some believe it will be restored to life; for them the concept of resurrection is of a physical resurrection. Others believe that the resurrection body will be spiritual, not physical.





# Resurrection

*"I believe in...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen"*  
(Apostles' Creed)

A creed is a statement of belief but Christians know that after death the physical body decomposes. So what do Christians mean by resurrection of the body? Some Christians reject the idea of cremation because of their belief in that physical resurrection – they believe that God will raise them back to life before Judgement Day.

When Jesus was questioned about the ideas of resurrection, he said, "When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage." (Mark 12:25)

The new mode of existence would be different from the earthly one. St Paul tried to explain this – 'The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable...it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.' (1 Corinthians 15:42, 44) sometimes the lifecycle of the butterfly is used to illustrate Christianity's teaching that there is a continuity of identity between the person's earthly life and the resurrection life. The caterpillar and butterfly have totally different appearances, however there is a continuity of identity throughout.

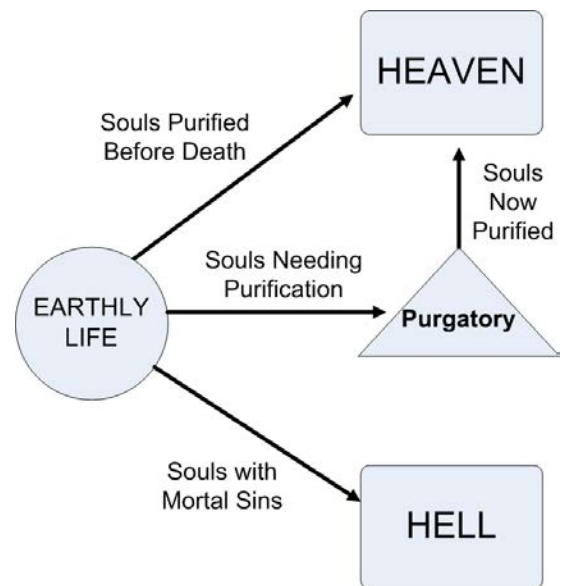
Roman Catholics believe in purgatory. This is believed to be an intermediate state of existence between death and the afterlife. After the death of the body, the soul goes to purgatory if it is destined for heaven. Purgatory is a place of purification for the soul, so that it can become pure and holy enough to enter heaven. It is not a physical place.

## Different views about the afterlife

There has always been debate about what resurrection really means. If we are all physically resurrected, where is the place we will go to? How will we all recognise each other? Will we be resurrected in the body which died, which may be very damaged? These are some of the problems raised. Many Christians say that God has the answers, and human beings must trust in that as we cannot understand.

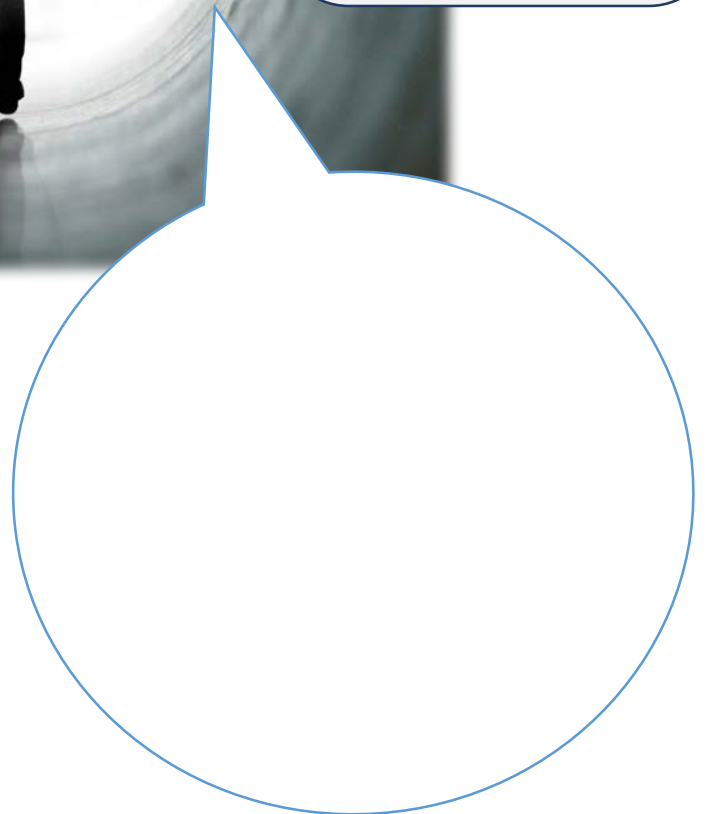
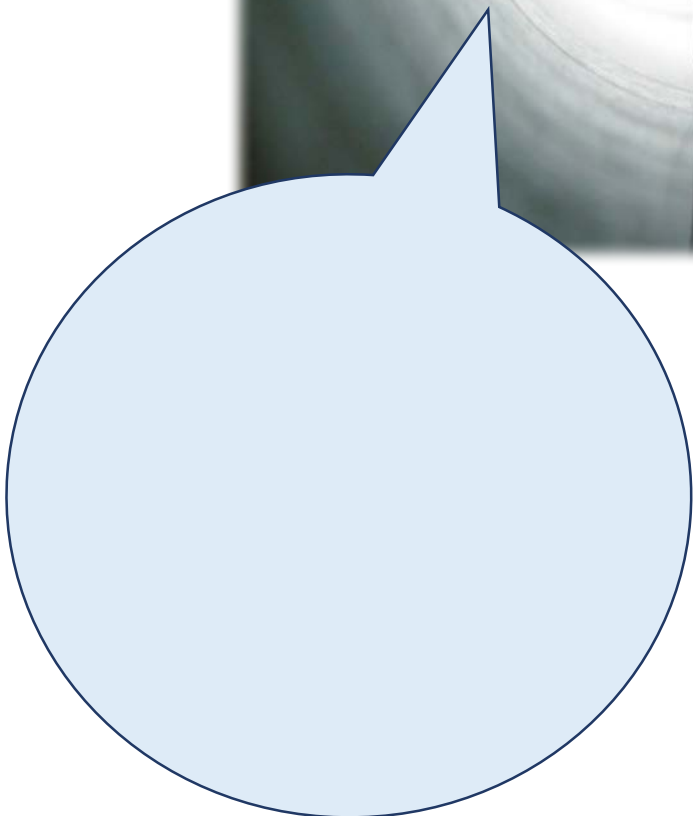
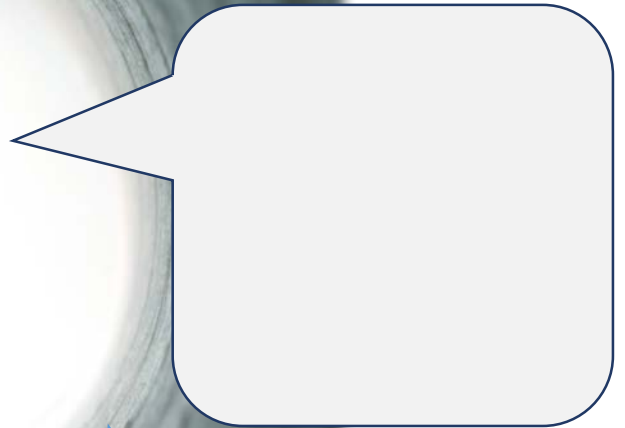
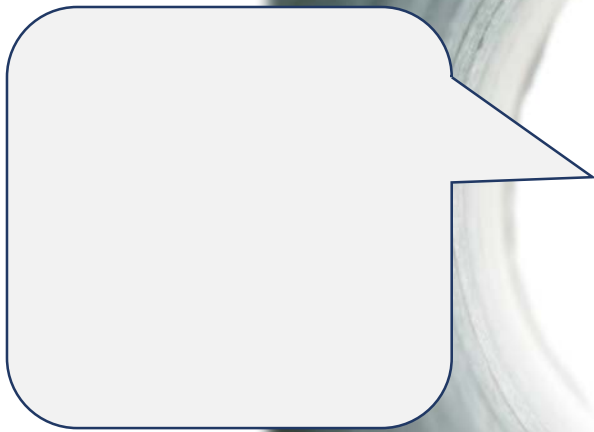
There is no scientific proof of resurrection, nor evidence beyond the Biblical stories of, and earthly historical writings about Jesus. Many believe our souls are what live, not the physical body; the soul is eternal and it will be in heaven after the Judgement. This fits with what Jesus and St Paul said, whilst a physical resurrection does not.

Increasing numbers of people ask to have humanist funerals when they die. Usually taking place at the cemetery or crematorium where the actual disposal of the body will take place, they focus on the dead person's achievements in life. They think there is no afterlife, whereas a Christian funeral has references to the afterlife and resurrection.





**TASK 10:** Explain the resurrection and the afterlife in the bubbles below!



# Judgement

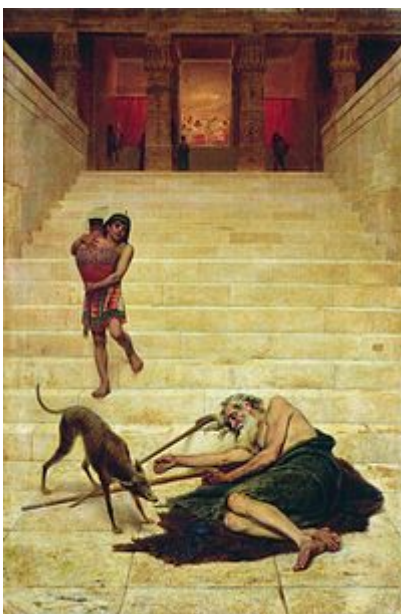
Aside from whether a person is Christian or not, Christian beliefs about an afterlife and Judgement Day have a very big impact on our culture.

Jesus taught that God's love and mercy are unconditional, though many of his parables speak about God's judgement after death. Christianity teaches that there will be a Judgement Day at the end of time and all will be judged by Jesus according to how they have behaved.

The Nicene Creed stated that Jesus 'will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.' This is showing Jesus will make and deliver the judgement.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that there are two judgements, the particular and the general judgements. The particular judgement occurs immediately after each individual's death. The general/final judgement takes place at the Second Coming, which is when many Christians believe that Jesus will return in glory to Earth, bringing the age of time and space to an end. He will judge those still alive and those who are dead, as a result of which they will be assigned to either heaven or hell.

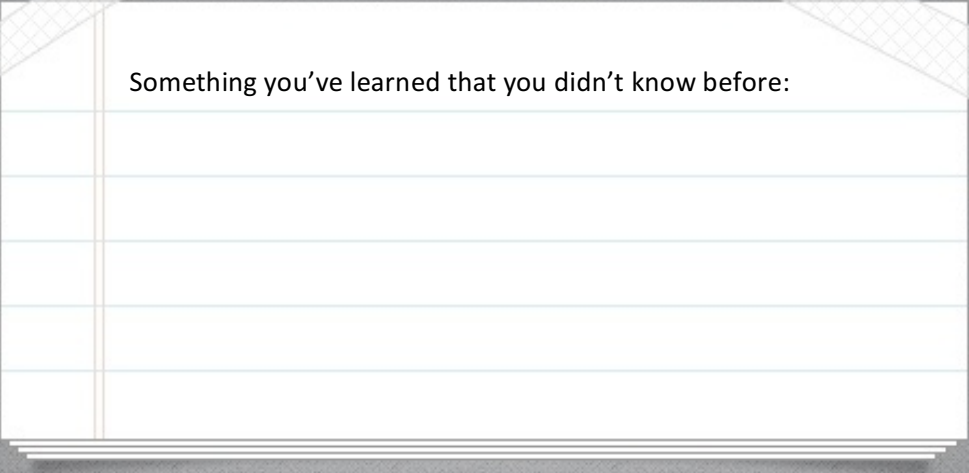
Many Christians believe that after they die, their souls will wait for Judgement Day. From there, they will be rewarded with heaven or punished with hell. The problem is that words cannot describe the afterlife adequately, not least because no one has the experience to speak from. Some Christians reject the idea of the Second Coming and final judgement. They think Jesus was trying to express something human beings cannot fully understand, but in a way that they could make some sense of. They also believe the creeds should be understood in the same way. They do not deny that humans will be called to account for their lives, but they disagree about the context and the way in which it is to be interpreted.



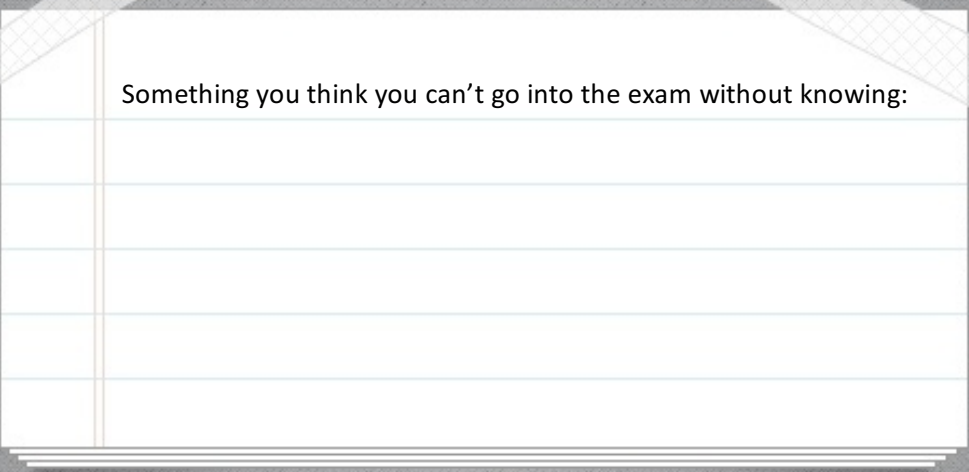
## Judgement in Jesus' teaching

A number of Jesus' parables relate to judgement. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus warns that ignoring the needs of others may have eternal consequences. Another parable is that of the sheep and the goats. The message is that on Judgement Day, some will be rewarded with heaven for helping others, whilst others are sent to hell because they did not.

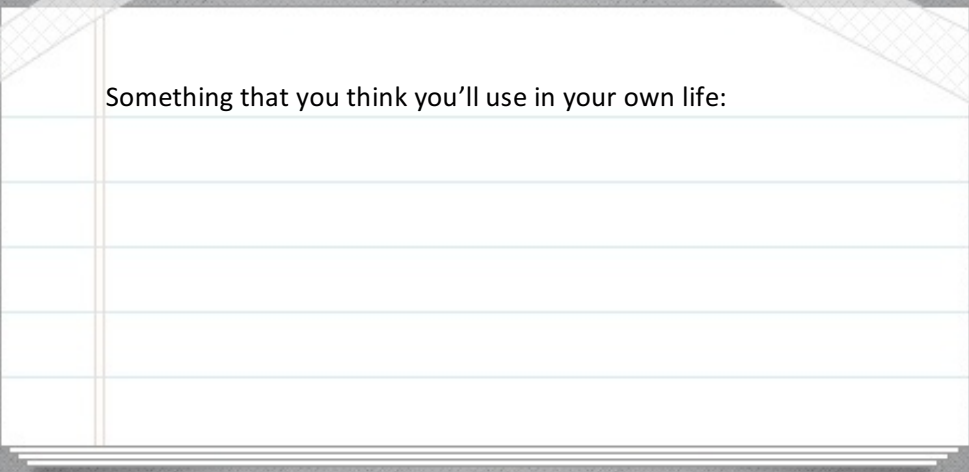
**TASK 11:** Complete the summaries below! Use the information from the page on 'Judgement' to help you.



Something you've learned that you didn't know before:



Something you think you can't go into the exam without knowing:



Something that you think you'll use in your own life:

# Heaven and Hell

## Heaven

If people are asked to describe what they think heaven will be like, their answers might well relate to what they see as most desirable in their present lives. So for those living in a land frequently suffering from drought, heaven might be a well-watered garden with an abundance of trees and flowers. Those who have to face extreme heat might think of somewhere with cooling breezes. Children might imagine heaven as a party with lots of ice cream and chocolate. Christians themselves use earthly images to explain their understanding of heaven, but Christianity teaches that heaven is a state of being, not a physical place. It is being with God outside time and space. In a newspaper interview, Desmond Tutu said of heaven: "It is difficult for us to conceive of an existence that is timeless, where you look at absolute beauty and goodness and you have no words. It is enough just to be there. You know how it is when you are sitting with someone you love and hours can go by in what seems like moments? Well, in heaven, eternity itself will pass in a flash...heaven is a community."



## Hell

The bible depicts hell as a place of unquenchable fire. Again, this is a metaphor but it led to the most horrific paintings in the Middle Ages. As a way of frightening people into obeying the rules of the Church, some artists painted nightmarish scenes of devils tearing people apart and eating them. Many Christians have rejected those literal views of hell. They teach that hell is eternal separation from God. This separation results from the deliberate rejection of any relationship with him. So hell is not what God decides for people. It is not what God wants. It is down to human free

choice. Many Christians who believe in hell would agree with this statement: "God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a wilful turning away from God...is necessary and persistence in it until the end." (Catechism of the Catholic Church)



### **Different beliefs about heaven and hell**

Some Christian reject any idea of hell because they think its existence would mean that God's love would not triumph over evil. They think that ultimately everyone will respond to God's love and that whatever evil things people may have done, they will repent and be forgiven. This belief is called universalism.





# The Incarnation

Belief in the incarnation is a central Christian belief. The word literally means 'embodiment', and the term refers to the belief that God took on human form as Jesus. This belief is stated in John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen His glory of the one and only [Son], who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Christians believe that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human (conceived of and born of Mary). As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, '...Jesus is inseparably true God and true man. He is truly the Son of God who, without ceasing to be God and Lord, became a man and our brother.'

As with the idea of the Trinity, this teaching about the incarnation is impossible to fully understand, but it refers to how his disciples and the early Christians experienced Jesus. Those who wrote the books in the New Testament struggled to express their belief that Jesus was both divine and human, but were convinced that this was the case and that it was essential to the Christian faith: "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us." (1 John 4:14-16)



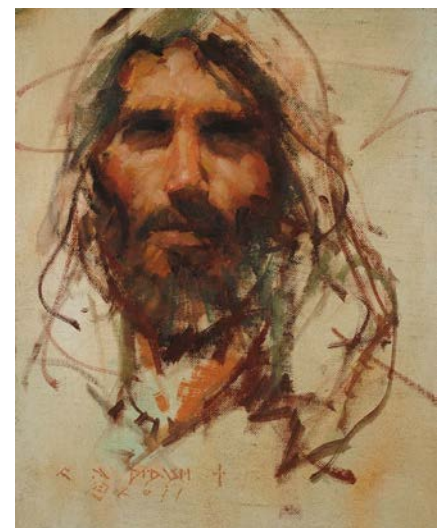
## The New Testament: Jesus as the Son of God



Throughout the New Testament it states that Jesus is the Son of God. Stories relating to Jesus' birth are found in St. Matthew's and St. Luke's Gospels and the title 'Son of God' is used about Jesus again and again. Both Gospels state that Mary was a virgin. According to Luke, Mary was told that she would conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is taken up in the Nicene Creed's statement that Jesus was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.' Christians hold different views on the idea of the virgin birth. Some accept it as what actually happened and that this was the most appropriate way in which Jesus could be conceived. However some Christians think that it is a myth, believing that a metaphor was being used to show that Jesus was not simply a human being but was in a unique sense the Son of God – he was fully divine and fully human. At Christmas, carols are sung telling the story of the birth of Jesus from the Gospels and often including beliefs about the person of Jesus.

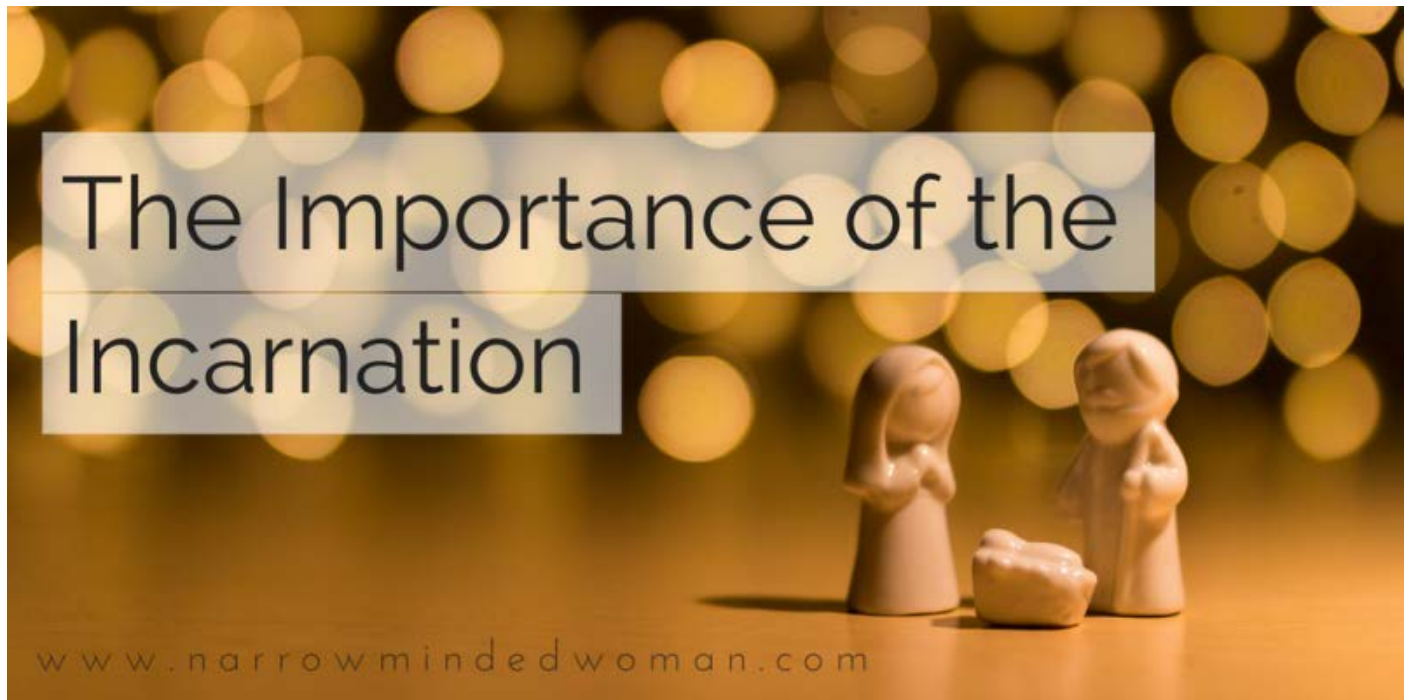
### **What about Jesus' knowledge?**

One problem that Christians have with believing in Jesus as both fully God and fully human is how to understand the knowledge of Jesus. There are many occasions recorded in the Gospels when it appears that Jesus' knowledge was limited. For instance, Mark writes about a time when the people of Jesus' home town rejected him, which meant he was unable to perform any miracles there. When speaking about the end of the world, he said to his disciples that no one, not even he, knew when this would happen. If Jesus was really divine, how could he not do or know those things?





One possible answer to this can be found in Paul's letter to the Christians at Philippi, a Christian community in Macedonia. There he quotes from what many Christians think was a very early Christian hymn. It says that at the incarnation, Jesus willingly became fully human. Paul described Jesus as coming in 'the nature of a servant', which might be a pointer to the fact that Jesus was born into a poor family, shown because they could give only the 'poor man's offering' when they went to the Temple after Jesus' birth. Christian writers say that God could only be properly human by giving up most of his divine knowledge. Jesus was still fully God in his relationship with and understanding of God, but he made this act of supreme self-giving.



### **The importance of belief in the incarnation for Christian lifestyle**

Belief in the incarnation is central to how Christianity understands the extent of God's love for humanity, but it also has great importance for how Christians believe they should live. The author of 1 John wrote: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:10-11).

The humility and selfless love for others can be seen in the lives of some Christians. For example, Mother Teresa left the relative comfort of her convent to live among the poorest people in India as one of them, and Father Kolbe offered his own life in order to save another's in Auschwitz.



# The Crucifixion

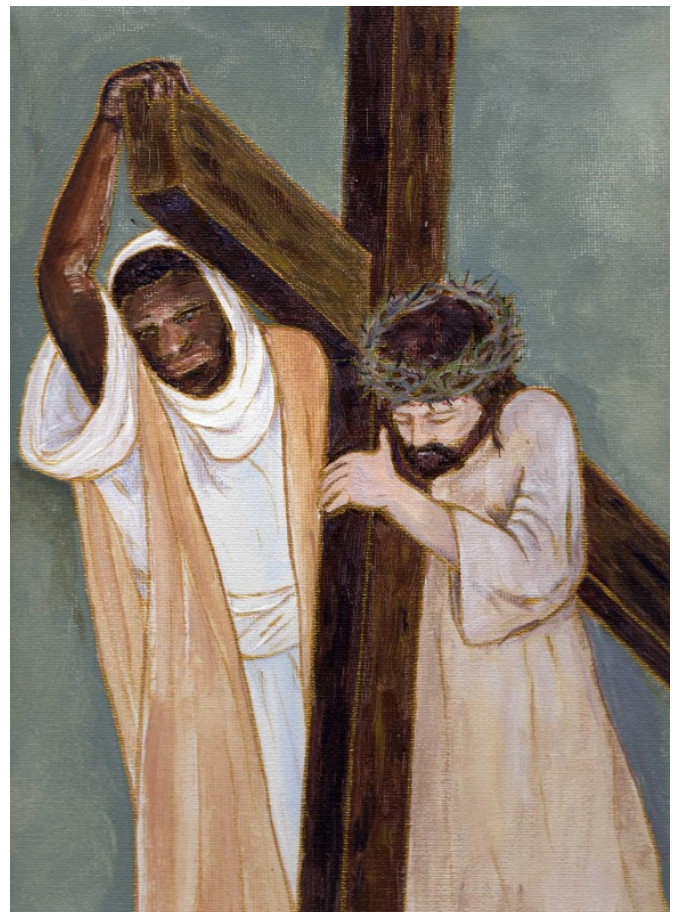
Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing lasted for about three years and ended with his death by crucifixion. He was arrested, tried and convicted of blasphemy by the Jewish religious authorities – a crime which was punishable by death in the Jewish law. However, they were not allowed to carry out the death sentence under Roman rule, so they handed him over to the Roman governor, Pilate, on a charge of treason. He was found



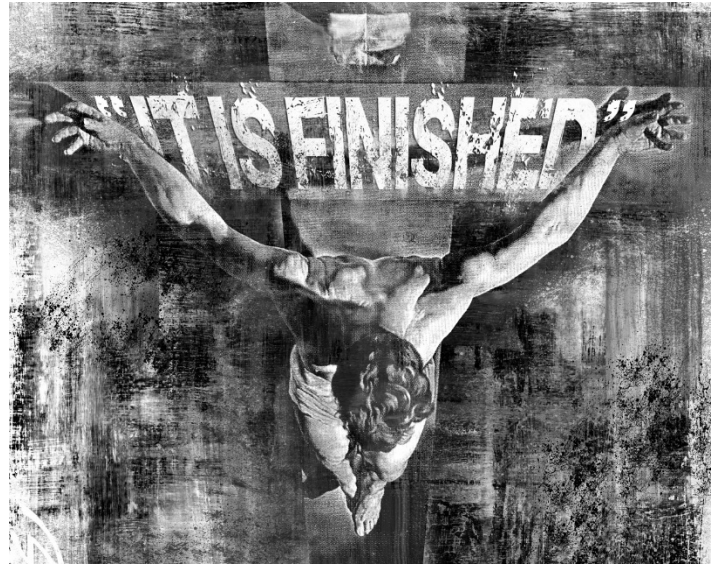
## Mark 15:21-39

According to Mark, a man names Simon was made to carry the crossbeam to the place of execution, perhaps because the whipping prior to the crucifixion meant that Jesus was unable to carry it himself. The crucifixion took place at Golgotha. Jesus was stripped of his clothes, nailed through the wrists to the beam, hoisted up and nailed through the ankle and heel to the vertical post. He was offered wine mixed with myrrh but refused it. A sign stating his crime (claiming to be king of the Jews) was attached to the cross. Two other criminals were crucified on either side of him. As he hung there, those who had come to watch or who were passing by shouted insults. It took six hours for Jesus to die, and Mark recorded that

guilty and sentenced to death. Crucifixion was the method of execution for those who were not Roman citizens. It was a humiliating and inhumane method that led to a slow and agonising death. All four Gospels contain accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and it was referred to by Tacitus, a first-century Roman historian.



for the final three hours, the whole land was dark. Some Christians think that Mark invented this as a symbol of the judgement falling on Israel for its rejection of the Messiah. Shortly before his death, Jesus shouted, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The crowd misunderstood, thinking he was calling to the prophet Elijah to come to his aid and they tried to prolong his life by offering him some wine. Jesus,



however gave a loud cry and died. According to Mark, the Temple curtain that separated the most sacred part of the building from the rest was torn in two. Again, many Christians think that this was intended to symbolise that Jesus' death destroyed the barrier of sin that had separated humanity from God, making it possible for everyone, Jew and non-Jew, to have access to God. This may explain the last point in the Biblical story, when the Roman officer on duty, hearing Jesus' cry and seeing how he died, commented, 'Surely this man was the Son of God.'

### **Why did the Son of God have to die?**

There are three key reasons why Jesus had to die. Two of them are about the time he lived in.

Jesus was born in Palestine at the time when the Romans controlled the country as part of their Empire. The Romans allowed the Jewish religious leaders to have a level of control, stopping short of the ability to sentence people to death. Practice of the religion was allowed to continue. The religious leaders made up the Sanhedrin – the ruling council – who had a lot of power. Jesus, with his new interpretation of the religious law of the Torah, came into conflict with them. For example, he helped people on the Sabbath which was a breach of laws forbidding work on the Sabbath. Some of the things he said and did,



they considered blasphemy. The reception people gave him was a threat to their own authority.

At the time of Jesus, various groups, for example, the Zealots, were agitating against the Roman occupation of their country. They caused lots of problems for the Romans and were a problem which Pilate, the Roman Governor, needed to solve. He put down rebellions with brutality, always making it more likely that they would recur rather than be solved. His superiors in Rome, from which the Empire was controlled, were not impressed with his actions in Palestine and ended his tenure soon after Jesus' death. According to St. John's Gospel, Pilate said he intended to release Jesus, but the crowd warned him that if he did do, he was no friend of Caesar (the ruler of the Roman Empire). It was therefore probably the fear of a report going to Rome that he had set free a Jewish rebel which made him sentence Jesus to death.

Finally, there is the theology that actually Jesus had to die to fulfil God's commands for him. Without Jesus' death, human beings could not be reunited with God and could not enter heaven. Human beings strayed from God's ways, separating themselves from him; Jesus' sacrificial death would atone (make up for) that separation.



**TASK 13:** Create a storyboard for the crucifixion of Jesus, starting with his arrest and ending with his death on the cross.

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# The Role of Christ in Salvation

John 3:16 sums up what Christians believe: "For God so loved the world that he have his one and only Son, that whoever believed in him shall not perish but have eternal life." They believe that the death of Jesus was central to God's plan of salvation.

For Christians, the crucifixion was no unfortunate accident. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus pleaded with God as he did not want to die, yet at the same time he said, 'Your will, not mine, be done.' The belief that he was carrying out God's will was what enabled him to get through the arrest, the trials, the flogging and the crucifixion.

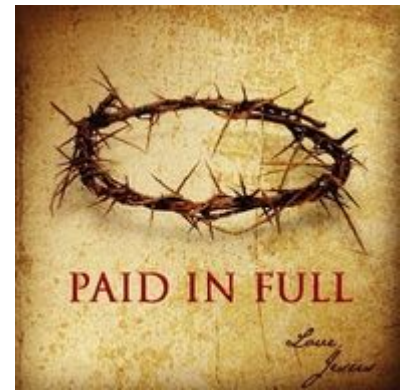


Christians often see Jesus' death as an atonement. The New Testament authors express the idea in various ways, the main approaches which link to each other, being:

- On the cross Jesus bore the consequences and penalty of human sin
- This was God taking the initiative in reconciling humanity to God
- It inspires human beings to take the moral lead in reconciliation in the world today
- The cross is an example of inspiration.

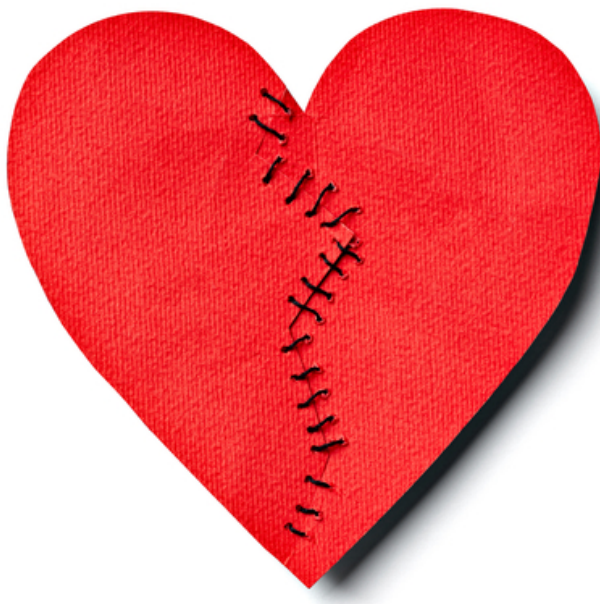
## Jesus' death – paying the debt caused by human sin

The view starts from the point that human nature is sinful. Human beings have deliberately turned away from God, refusing to obey His will. Being just, God must judge and punish human beings for this wilful disobedience. However, God is also loving and merciful, so he made it possible to be forgiven through the incarnation and Jesus taking on himself the punishment for sin. Christians adopting this approach speak of Jesus' death as a ransom for human sin.



Many Christians struggle with this understanding of Jesus' death, where God is a judge whose justice needs to be satisfied through retribution, and where Jesus bears a penalty which is not his own.

## How Jesus' death was an act of atonement and reconciliation



Atonement means making up for, making amends. Literally it can be seen as 'at one ment'; the idea that two people who were estranged are now at one with each other, differences put aside. The traditional and still common view of atonement is that because human beings often create a barrier between themselves and God but thinking only of themselves, Jesus' death was a necessary atonement, because humans could not deal with this problem of selfishness themselves.

Reconciliation is the restoration of friendship or relationships. Christians believe that the relationship between God and humans was so damaged that drastic action was needed.

Christians believe that human beings needed to be reconciled with God so that they could be reunited with him in heaven. Humans could not make that happen, it was up to God through a drastic event; this was God's self-sacrifice in the form of Jesus. They





**TASK 14:** Create a leaflet/flyer to educate people about how and why Christians believe they have been 'saved'!

# Saved!

# The Resurrection



According to the New Testament, a man names Joseph was given permission by Pilate to have Jesus' body taken down from the cross and handed over to him for burial. Jesus was buried in a rock tomb, but the women who accompanied Joseph could not take care of the body because the Sabbath was about to start, meaning no work could be done. A huge boulder was rolled across

the entrance to stop animals from getting in. the women returned as soon as it was light on the Sunday to do this work, only to discover that the stone was rolled to one side. The Gospel accounts vary slightly in what followed, but all agree that the body was no longer there and the women were told that Jesus had risen. According to Mark, a young man in white told them this and said that they were to return to Galilee, where they would meet the risen Jesus. The women were terrified and fled, telling no one at first about what they had experienced. According to John, this person revealed himself to Mary Magdalene as Jesus was not immediately recognised, either there was something different in his appearance, or nobody expected to see him. The stories all stress the physical nature of Jesus' appearance, as if to show it was not a ghost.

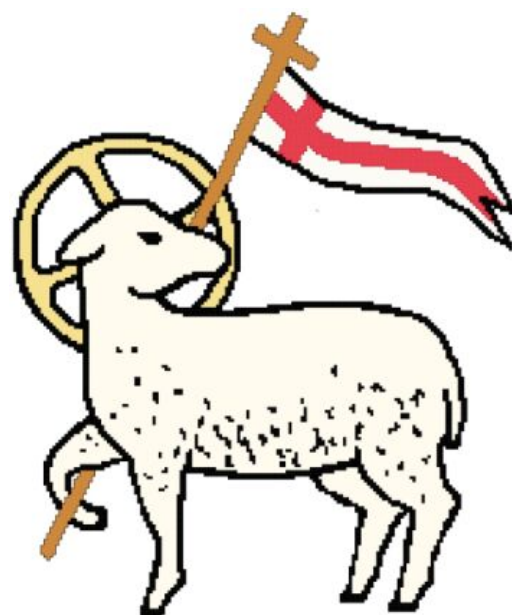


## The ascension – the fortieth day after the resurrection

St. Luke's Gospel ends with what Christians call the ascension of Jesus. Another, longer account of the ascension, in Acts 1:3-11, described Jesus taking his disciples to a place called Bethany and blessing them. Then, he is 'taken up to heaven', which in pictures is usually shown to be him rising up into the sky. In Acts, it says a cloud 'received him out of their sight'. Most Christians think this story was not intended to be taken literally as if Jesus was taken up and taken to heaven by God's power. Rather, the writer uses imagery to stress the finality of this appearance, the successful completion of his work on earth and also Jesus' divine kingship. Some fundamentalist Christians so take the event literally in terms of Jesus being hidden by a cloud and disappearing into another dimension.

### Why Jesus' resurrection is important to Christians

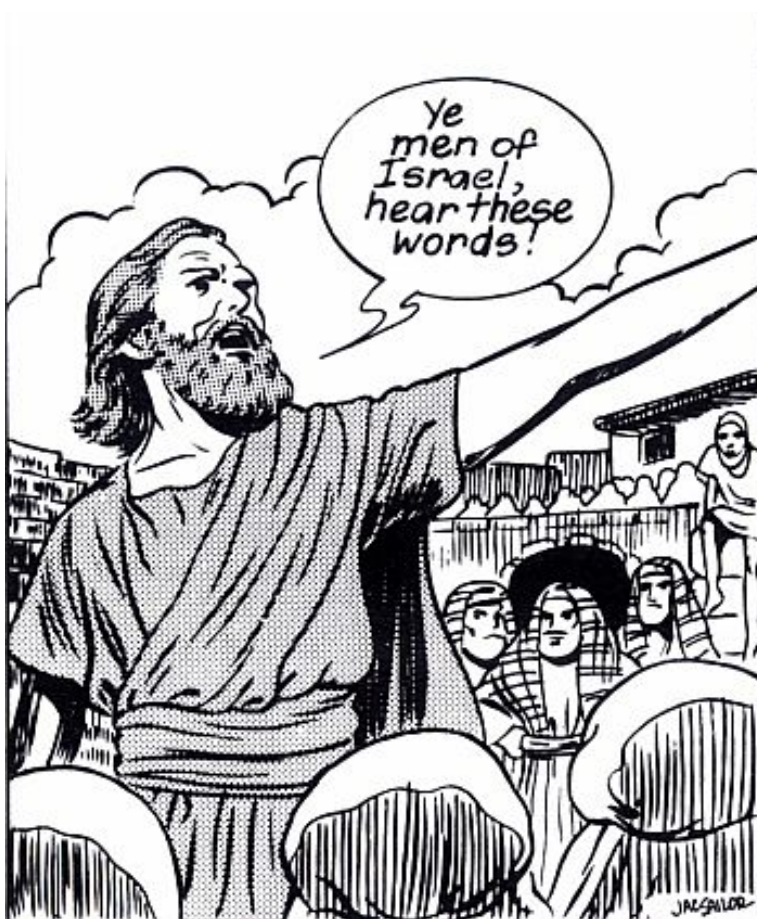
For most Christians, belief in Jesus' resurrection is a central element to their faith. If death was the end for him, then Jesus' life ended in failure. At best, he was a martyr, dying for his beliefs. At worst, he was just someone whose delusions got him into trouble with the authorities. Christians interpret his resurrection from the dead as the ultimate proof that he is the Son of God, showing God's triumph over evil and death. A Christian symbol of the resurrection shows a Passover Lamb (representing Jesus' sacrificial death) carrying a banner of victory (over death).



### Did Jesus rise from the dead?

| No, he did not                                                                                                                              | Replies to the points                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The women went to the wrong tomb and when the young man said, 'He is not here. See the place where they laid him,' he was redirecting them. | The women know where he was buried as they had accompanied Joseph when taking the body to the tomb.               |
| Jesus was not actually dead when taken off the cross. He came round in the tomb                                                             | He would not have been capable of getting himself out. If someone had got him out, surely someone would have seen |

|                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| and either got out himself or someone came and got him out.                    | him. He could not have been hidden forever.                                                                                                                                      |
| The disciples were deluded; the appearance of Jesus was just wishful thinking. | Jesus' resurrection was the last thing that the disciples expected. They were in hiding for fear of being arrested themselves.                                                   |
| The story was made up by the disciples to gain prestige.                       | The disciples gained anything but prestige. They were persecuted from the start when they began to talk about Jesus and most became martyrs; they were killed for their beliefs. |

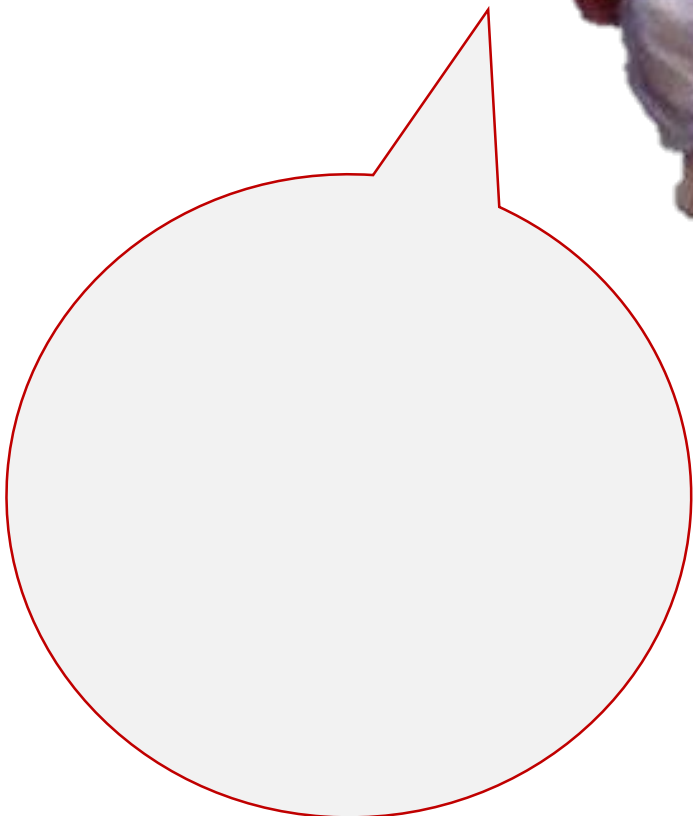
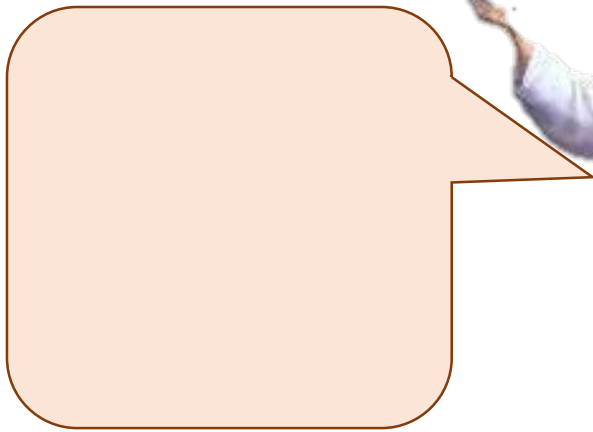
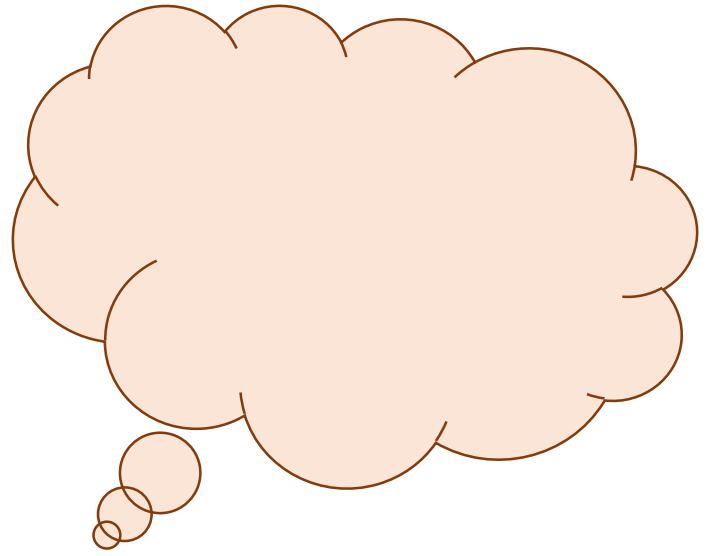
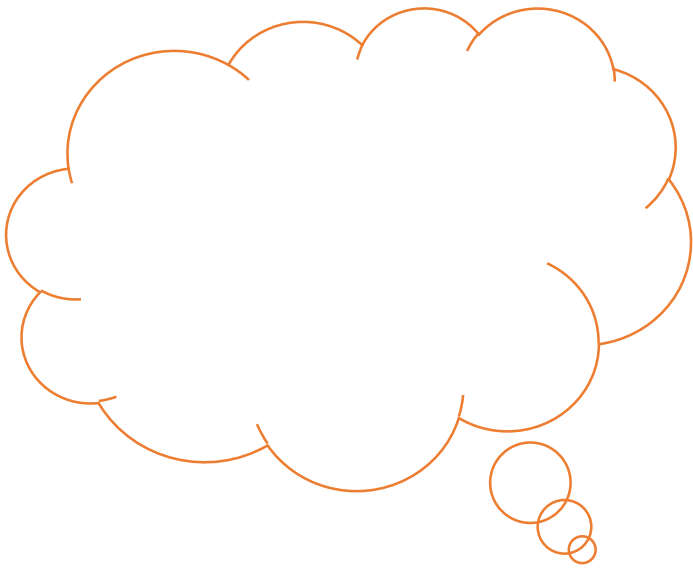


What decides the debate for many Christians in the transformation of the disciples, especially Peter. When Jesus was arrested, Peter ran away in terror. He did go to the High Priest's palace to find out what was happening to Jesus, but was recognised and challenged. Three times he denied all knowledge of Jesus. From then on he was in hiding.

Yet, just a few weeks later, he was proclaiming to anyone who would listen that Jesus was sent by God and was risen from the dead. Even when threatened by the high priest, he

refused to stop, saying 'Do we obey you or God?' He was eventually martyred in Rome. Christians think that Peter would not have done this for something he knew to be a lie or as a result of a delusion. Only something that actually happened could explain the transformation.

**TASK 15:** Explain the resurrection of Jesus in the bubbles below.



**TASK 16:** Write a script for a TV interview with the disciples on the day of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Ensure you talk about the meaning and importance of the ascension to Christians today.

INTERVIEWER: Good evening! We are here with .....

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And today we are talking about .....

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# Sin

The story of original sin (the Fall) is found in Genesis 3. In the story Adam and Eve disobey God's command not to eat fruit from the tree of good and evil. The serpent tempted them to think that God's command arose out of his concern for himself and not from what was best for them. He said they would become like God himself, and that have in and ate the fruit. This was the first (original) sin. As a result, god gave certain punishments and Adam and Eve were thrown out of Eden.

For many centuries, most Christians took the story literally. They thought that humans were all descended from Adam and Eve and that their act of disobedience led to all their descendants being tainted with what they called original sin; an inbuilt tendency to disobey God. This meant they were separated from God and in danger of receiving eternal punishment. It also meant they would continue to sin and do wrong, hurting others. Their sinfulness meant that they could not themselves put this right; only God was able to deal with the barrier caused by sin. God did this through the incarnation and then the sacrificial death of Jesus. God in Christ offered salvation: that is, the cancelling out of original sin and the promise of eternal life. Most Christians today do not take Genesis 3 literally, but many think that it conveys a truth, that humans seem to have a natural inclination to do what they are told not to. This extends to disobeying God, which damages their relationship with God.



## Salvation through law



Salvation means being accepted by God and so being assured of eternal life. In Jesus' time, his fellow Jews thought that in order to be accepted by God they had to obey the law. This meant following all the commandments as laid down in the scriptures and as interpreted

by their religious leaders. Before becoming a Christians, St. Paul agreed with them.

Some Christians have adopted a similar approach. It is known as 'salvation through works'. In other words, a right relationship with God has to be earned. Throughout the centuries there have been Christian groups that claimed salvation depended on keeping to all the rules that they put in place. However, most Christians reject the idea that salvation can be earned through obedience to the law. Jesus, in his teachings, taught about what pleases his Father, saying that the thoughts in our minds and the love in our hearts for God and for others is far more important. Putting those thoughts into Christian actions towards and for one another is of primary importance for most Christians today.

**TASK 17:** Explain the idea of 'sin' in Christianity. How is it linked to salvation?

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# Salvation, Grace and the Spirit

The word 'grace' appears many times in the New Testament. It refers to the unconditional love that God shows to everyone, even when it seems underserved. In other words, God loves humans despite what we do or do not do. In Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, the son certainly did not deserve the 'welcome with open arms' that he received, but that is how, according to Jesus, God treats humanity. Paul experienced this when he became a Christian: 'For I so not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am...' (1 Corinthians 15:9-10)

Christians believe that this love of God was shown in his offer of salvation as a free gift to all who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. They refer to this as 'salvation through grace and Spirit' and claim that this was made possible through the atoning death of Jesus. Jesus' actions made forgiveness for the sins of the world and reconciliation possible.

Christians believe that they continue to receive God's grace through the presence in their hearts of the Holy Spirit which enabled them to try and show love as Jesus did.

