

Christianity

The Message of Jesus

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Contents

JESUS.....	1
MESSAGE OF JESUS	1
LIFE OF JESUS	4
CHRISTIAN BELIEFS	9
EXISTENCE OF GOD	9
TRINITY	11
SIN.....	14
JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH	16
PRAYER	18
CHURCH	21
CHALLENGING ISSUES	22
BEAUTY OF RELIGION	22
EXISTENCE OF SUFFERING.....	25
EXISTENCE OF EVIL.....	28
WHY CHRISTIANITY?	30
BECOMING A CHRISTIAN	33

Jesus

Jesus has been given the title of The Great Teacher by many people who have studied and applied his teachings throughout history. The surprising thing is that Jesus was not the typical philosopher or preacher that people were used to. Unlike some other people Jesus tried to make his advice understandable to the common man, sometimes using stories or symbols, but always keeping his message simple, straightforward and practical.

Message of Jesus

Jesus dealt with many aspects of human life but the one that he spent longest on was the need for love. His focus was not just on the love for our friends and family, but something much more challenging, a love that tests every nerve and sinew.

“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44)

He spoke of a love for those who we want to hate, a love for those who already hate us. This love requires effort, and strain, and every ounce of self-command that man can summon up.

It is the easiest thing in the world to hate, to let the desire for revenge grow in our hearts. Indeed vengeance may even have the shadow of justice attached to it, but in reality it leads to dark, unadulterated hate and a spiral of destruction.

To be truly happy we must rise above the bigotry and jealousy of others. We must love even if we are hated for it. Love and do not hate, for surely love is the only path to peace, freedom and happiness.

There were many people Jesus met who seemed holy in front of others but who acted very differently when there was no-one watching. For Jesus it was no good just pretending to love others, or pretending to control our selfish instincts, we had to truly feel it in our hearts.

“You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28)

What we think in our hearts makes us just as guilty as those who commit their sins in daylight. Each of us are careful to appear respectable in front of others, but how many of us would dare to say that our hearts are pure?

If only the world could rid itself of its hypocrisy then people may truly become good rather than just trying to appear so. It is a challenge which each of us must face every hour of every day for the temptation to be otherwise is overwhelming.

Without this sincerity, without this trust, no man can achieve anything worthy of note. It is only sincerity that can inspire men to greatness, that can make heroes who stand up for truth, liberty and justice.

For Jesus it was important not only that we try to reach these standards of love and sincerity but also that we realise the occasions when we do not. Once we have understood what we have done wrong we can ask for forgiveness, and then make a serious effort to correct our mistakes. It is only when we do this that we can truly be a follower of God.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts

himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

The forgiveness of our sins is not without a cost because when we break laws, whether they be civil or divine, we should expect to face some consequences. However the price of our forgiveness was paid in a remarkable, symbolic way when Jesus suffered and died in our place. He explained this sacrifice by using bread and wine as symbols of his body and blood.

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” (Matthew 26:26-28)

All of the followers of Jesus are joined together in a mystical union to make up one body, of which Christ is the head. When Jesus died it was like this whole body of believers died in him, and so his death becomes a meaningful sacrifice for the wrong doing of all believers.

We must humble ourselves in a way that allows us to truly understand what we have done, what we deserve, and what Jesus gave up so that we could be free. When we do this we will finally realise how much God has done for us.

Having shown men how they should live loving, sincere, humble lives, Jesus also began telling them about how they should think of God. Within each of us there is something that tells us there is a God, some kind of higher power, some force governing the world, yet it is beyond our understanding as to what exactly this Being is.

Jesus tried to reveal this higher power to us in a very simple, yet a truly radical way. Jesus told us to think of God as our Father, as a loving, kind, generous parent who has given us life and will provide for us in the times ahead.

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For

everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”
(Matthew 7:7-11)

Jesus' relationship with the Father was unique as his Spirit was divine, but we too can be children of God. This way of thinking about God changes our whole conception of life. It give us confidence and strength during even the toughest times, and comforts us in the moments of despair.

Jesus' teaching on the Heavenly Father was a truly revolutionary step forward in philosophy and religion. By thinking of God as our Father we can face the world with confidence knowing that he will work everything out for the best. However it also places on us the responsibility of living as the children of God, a truly great family that we must never bring shame upon.

Jesus was more than just a teacher, he was also unique in his nature. He united the essence of God and man within himself, being both divine and human. This meant he could be a unique mediator between the Father and mankind, with his death allowing us to be reconciled with God.

Life of Jesus

It may be expected that someone of such importance had an expensive education with a privileged childhood. Yet Jesus was raised as the son of a humble carpenter and he spent his childhood in obscurity working in a small town in the north of Israel.

Although he was brought up in this way he was not born as the natural result of a man and a woman. He was conceived uniquely, being the true child of God. He united the natures of both God and man, being the mediator between us and the Father.

Never did he show any desire for power or wealth but focussed instead on what he knew to be wise - to follow a life of love, sincerity and commitment to our heavenly Father. Throughout his time on Earth Jesus passed on this wisdom to others, encouraging them to give up the pointless pursuit of treasures on earth. He taught that a loving, healthy relationship with God and with our fellow human beings would produce a much more fruitful and useful life.

His compassion for others has been unrivalled by anyone who has ever lived before or since. His life is a testimony to the sincere love that he had for those around him. Time after time we are told of how Jesus helped those who could not help themselves.

“Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them.” (Matthew 15:30)

In our modern world we are sceptical of miracles yet even today we see what can happen when people believe strongly in something. Jesus showed us what belief can accomplish when he gave sight to the blind, speech to the dumb and the power to walk to those who were lame.

His motive for using this healing power was not to make a display before others but a simple, deep care for the needs of the weak and ill.

Yet not everyone who came into contact with Jesus appreciated his teachings or his healing powers. A group of people, called Pharisees, became particularly upset with him. These Pharisees claimed to be religious and holy yet Jesus knew that in their heart they were as guilty as anyone else, and Jesus condemned them for it.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” (Matthew 23:28)

Jesus told them that God did not care about vain rituals and sacrifice, all that mattered was a sincere love for God and for man. If only they

paid more attention to helping others and less attention to rules and regulations, they would be much better off.

Rather than changing their ways they decided that they had to get rid of Jesus. As a result Jesus was always on the move, having nowhere to call his home. Within only a few years of starting his ministry, when he was just thirty-three years old, Jesus was arrested and handed over to the Romans who were ruling Israel at that time.

After an unfair trial Jesus was condemned to death by crucifixion. This method of killing prisoners was a horrendous, slow death where the body was nailed to a wooden cross and put on display in front of the crowds. We are given the following account of Jesus' death:

“Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. “Hail, king of the Jews!” they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.

When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.” (Matthew 27:22-38)

Jesus' death was a tragedy - an innocent man tortured and killed because of the hatred of a few fanatics. Yet Jesus still loved those who murdered him. While he was dying, in the midst of unbearable pain,

Jesus asked God that these men would be forgiven. A truly generous thought from the heart of a great and noble soul.

However this tragic death is not the end of Jesus' life. Although he was buried in a tomb guarded by Roman soldiers, his body disappeared. The reason for this disappearance is that Jesus was raised to life again. In the following days he appeared repeatedly, providing over five hundred eye-witnesses to prove his existence, before ascending into Heaven where he is still watching over us.

“After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you.” So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

“While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, “You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So the soldiers took the money and did

as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:1-20)

Jesus was wise and honourable, being persecuted only because some people disagreed with his views. His life is a testimony to the spirit of God with which he was of the one essence. It gave him the power, and the love, to achieve things which no man has accomplished before or since.

Yet Jesus told us that we too can be filled with the spirit of God. If we turn to God and give up our insincere, vain pursuit of earthly treasures, we can call God our Father.

The question is how can we who are by nature selfish and insincere be treated as children by a holy, pure God? The answer is that Jesus' death acts like a sacrifice for us. Instead of each of us being punished for all that we have done, Jesus symbolically died in our place.

The life of Jesus is truly extraordinary and his short time here on Earth has impacted more people than anyone else in history. Jesus taught us to love, and he loved. He taught us to be sincere, and he was sincere. He taught us that God was our Father, and he truly was the child of God.

Christian beliefs

The sacred book of Christianity, the Bible, should actually be thought of as a collection of small books. It includes the original writings of many different authors including both Hebrew Prophets and followers of Jesus.

All of these men shared a common faith in God and were inspired to write what we now call the Holy Scriptures. A short summary of what is found in these Scriptures is presented below in a way which is hopefully both comprehensive and understandable.

Existence of God

God is a spirit which cannot be seen, a being which cannot be touched. Yet despite not seeing him, the evidence of his work is all around us in magnificent splendour.

“This green flowery rock-built earth, the trees, the mountains, rivers, many-sounding seas;--that great deep sea of azure that swims overhead; the winds sweeping through it; the black cloud fashioning itself together, now pouring out fire, now hail and rain; what “is” it? This world, after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle; wonderful, inscrutable, “magical” and more, to whosoever will “think” of it.

“This Universe, ah me--what could the wild man know of it; what can we yet know? What is it? God's Creation, the religious people answer; it is the Almighty God's!

“Atheistic science babbles poorly of it, with scientific nomenclatures, experiments and what not, as if it were a poor dead thing, to be bottled up in Leyden jars and sold over counters: but the natural sense of man, in all times, if he will honestly apply his sense, proclaims it to be a living thing,--ah, an unspeakable, godlike thing; towards which the best attitude for us, after never so much science, is awe, devout prostration and humility

of soul; worship if not in words, then in silence.”
(Thomas Carlyle)

All around us is the handwriting of a Divine Author whose brilliance shines forth on each new day. Yet we do not even have to look outside ourselves to find examples of his handiwork. Let us look at ourselves, at man, who was created in the image of God.

“But now if all things whatsoever that we look upon are emblems to us of the Highest God, I add that more so than any of them is man such an emblem. The essence of our being, the mystery in us that calls itself “I,”--ah, what words have we for such things?--is a breath of Heaven; the Highest Being reveals himself in man. This body, these faculties, this life of ours, is it not all as a vesture for that Unnamed? “There is but one Temple in the Universe,” says the devout Novalis, “and that is the Body of Man.”

“We are the miracle of miracles,--the great inscrutable mystery of God. We cannot understand it, we know not how to speak of it; but we may feel and know, if we like, that it is verily so.” (Thomas Carlyle)

Not only is the evidence of God's guiding hand demonstrated clearly to our senses, there is also something within each of us that tells us about the existence of this higher being. It is to this thought that men turn in times of sickness and death because it is the natural comfort which all men are inclined to follow.

“That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.

“Since, then, there never has been, from the very first, any quarter of the globe, any city, any household even, without religion, this amounts to a tacit confession, that a sense of Deity is inscribed on every heart.

“Nay, even idolatry is ample evidence of this fact. For we know how reluctant man is to lower himself, in order to set other creatures above him. Therefore, when he chooses to worship wood and stone rather than be thought to have no God, it is evident how very strong this impression of a Deity must be; since it is more difficult to obliterate it from the mind of man, than to break down the feelings of his nature, - these certainly being broken down, when, in opposition to his natural haughtiness, he spontaneously humbles himself before the meanest object as an act of reverence to God.” (John Calvin)

To believe in God is both rational and natural because it is based on the evidence of the world around us and the soul within us.

Trinity

Christians believe that there is only one God, and that he is the Author and Director of the Universe. He is awesome, magnificent and beyond comprehension.

“His wisdom is profound, his power is vast.
Who has resisted him and come out unscathed?
He moves mountains without their knowing it
and overturns them in his anger.
He shakes the earth from its place
and makes its pillars tremble.
He speaks to the sun and it does not shine;
he seals off the light of the stars.
He alone stretches out the heavens
and treads on the waves of the sea.
He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the constellations of the south.
He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed,
miracles that cannot be counted.” (Job 9:4-9)

Yet this one God should actually be thought of as having three “persons” within the God-head.

“When we profess to believe in one God, by the name God is understood the one simple essence, comprehending three persons or hypostases.” (John Calvin)

Someone tried to explain this by using a plant called a shamrock which has three leaves. There is only one shamrock but there are three distinct parts to it. The same can be said of God; there is one God but three distinct “persons.”

The three “persons” are called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

“To the Father is attributed the beginning of action, the fountain and source of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and arrangement in action, while the energy and efficacy of action is assigned to the Spirit.” (John Calvin)

About 2000 years ago the Son took on human nature and became known to the world as Jesus Christ.

“The Lord of the universe took the form of a servant; the impassible God became a suffering man; the Immortal One submitted himself to the dominion of death; Majesty assumed into itself lowliness; Strength, weakness; Eternity, mortality.” (Leo I)

“The result of the incarnation, that infinite act of divine love, is the God-Man. Not a double being, with two persons; nor a compound middle being; but one person, who is both divine and human. Christ has a rational human soul, and a human will, and is therefore in the full sense of the word the Son of man; while yet at the same time he is the eternal Son of God in one person, with one undivided self-consciousness.” (Philip Schaff)

The third person of the Trinity is known as the Holy Spirit.

“The Holy Ghost is nowhere in Scripture reckoned among creatures or angels, but is placed in God himself, co-eternal with God, as that which searches the depths of Godhead (1 Cor. ii. 11, 12). He is the source of all gifts in the church (1 Cor. xii). He dwells in believers, like the Father and the Son, and makes them partakers of the divine life. The Holy Ghost is the source of sanctification, and unites us with the divine life, and thus must himself be divine.” (Philip Schaff)

The doctrine of the Trinity is one which no man will ever understand in its entirety.

“The Church fathers did not pretend to have exhausted the mystery of the Trinity, and very well understood that all human knowledge, especially in this deepest, central dogma, proves itself but fragmentary. All speculation on divine things ends in a mystery, and reaches an inexplicable residue, before which the thinking mind must bow in humble devotion.” (Philip Schaff)

However there are some general points which we should remember

“There is only one divine essence or substance. Father, Son, and Spirit are one in essence, or consubstantial. They are in one another, inseparable, and cannot be conceived without each other. In this point the Nicene doctrine is thoroughly monotheistic or monarchian, in distinction from tritheism, which is but a new form of the polytheism of the pagans.

In this one divine essence there are three persons or, to use a better term, hypostases, that is, three different modes of subsistence of the one same undivided and indivisible whole, which in the Scriptures are called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

These distinctions are not merely different attributes, powers, or activities of the Godhead, still less merely subjective aspects under which it presents itself to the human mind; but each person expresses the whole

fulness of the divine being with all its attributes, and the three persons stand in a relation of mutual knowledge and love.

The Father communicates his very life to the Son, and the Spirit is the bond of union and communion between the two. The Son speaks, and as the God-Man, even prays, to the Father, thus standing over against him as a first person towards a second; and calls the Holy Ghost “another Comforter” whom he will send from the Father, thus speaking of him as of a third person.

In each person there is the same inseparable divine substance, united with the individual property and relation which distinguishes that person from the others. The word person is in reality only a make-shift, in the absence of a more adequate term. Our idea of God is more true and deep than our terminology, and the essence and character of God far transcends our highest ideas.” (Philip Schaff)

Sin

Sin is simply any thought or action which breaks the law of God. For many people it is common to associate sin with extremes of evilness, however it should actually be thought of as anything we do which falls short of perfection. Sin is not just about doing something which is hurtful or depraved, it is also about not doing something which is good and holy.

In many situations we try to excuse our behaviour, often convincing ourselves that what we have done is not actually sinful. However there is a simple test which we can apply to any circumstance to help us choose the right thing to do.

We should always imagine ourselves standing before God, being asked to explain our behaviour to him.

“How shall we answer the heavenly Judge when he calls us to account? Let us contemplate that Judge, not as

our own unaided intellect conceives of him, but as he is portrayed to us in the Bible, with a brightness which obscures the stars, a strength which melts the mountains, an anger which shakes the earth, a wisdom which takes the wise in their own craftiness, a purity before which all things become impure, a righteousness to which not even angels are equal. Let Him, I say, sit in judgment on the actions of men, and who will feel secure in standing before His throne?

“Thus then must we raise our eyes that we may learn to tremble instead of vainly exulting. It is easy, indeed, when the comparison is made among men, for every one to plume himself on some quality which others ought not to despise; but when we rise to God, that confidence instantly falls and dies away.

“Therefore, lest we deceive ourselves by vain confidence, let us recollect that even though we deem ourselves equal or superior to other men, this is nothing to God, by whose judgment the decision must be given.

“Those who do not turn their thoughts to this scene may be able for the moment calmly and complacently to rear up a righteousness for themselves; but this the judgment of God will immediately overthrow, just as great wealth amassed in a dream vanishes the moment we awake.

“Those who, as in the presence of God, inquire seriously into the true standard of righteousness, will certainly find that all the works of men, if estimated by their own worth, are nothing but vileness and pollution, that what is commonly deemed justice is with God mere iniquity; what is deemed integrity is pollution; what deemed glory is ignominy.” (John Calvin)

We are not perfect, and we are not capable of pleasing God through our own works; but God still loves us and will forgive us if we ask him to. The reason that Christians try to tell people of their sin is not to

make them fear, it is to show them that they need the mercy which God so freely offers.

“We are commanded to beseech and entreat you to accept the offer and turn; to tell you what preparation is made by Christ; what mercy stays for you; what patience waits on you, how certainly and unspeakable happy you may be if you will.

“We have indeed a message of wrath and death; yea, of a twofold wrath and death; but neither of them is our principal message. We must tell you of the wrath that is on you already, and the death that you are born under for the breach of the law of works. But this is only to show you the need of mercy, and to provoke you to esteem the grace of the Redeemer.

“Our telling you of your misery is not to make you miserable, but to drive you out to seek for mercy. It is you who have brought this death on yourselves. We tell you also of another death, one even remediless, and much greater torment that will fall on those who will not be converted. This is the last and saddest part of our message. We are first to offer you mercy, if you will turn.” (Richard Baxter)

The great beauty of Christianity is that God tells us that he does not want payment for our sins, he offers free forgiveness; all that we must do is accept.

Justification by Faith

Justification is a term which is used in the Bible, especially by Paul, to tell us about how God accepts us despite our sinful nature. It is a legal term which means that the Heavenly Judge has pardoned our sins.

Evangelical Christians believe that God forgives us (justifies us), not because of any good thing that we do, but simply because we trust in him. We believe this because we realise that even our best works are not perfect. They do not reach the standard of Divine purity which is necessary to please a holy God.

As our works are so below the standard which God desires, he has provided a way to Heaven which does not depend on our merits. When Jesus died he represented all of his followers in that death. Instead of each of us being punished for our sins the death of Jesus acts as a wonderful substitute so that we can be set free.

To take part in this great act of forgiveness all that we must do is to turn our hearts to God with a sincere and honest faith. We have been promised that any who come unto him, he will in no wise cast out.

This faith is not the bare and dead agreement to certain doctrines which some men make it to be. Rather, faith is a vibrant belief which turns our whole hearts to seeking after God, and resting on his mercy for our salvation.

“Faith is a work of God in us, which changes us and brings us to birth anew from God. It kills the old Adam, makes us completely different people in heart, mind, senses, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. What a living, creative, active powerful thing is faith!

“Faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace; it is so certain, that someone would die a thousand times for it. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith.

“It is impossible that faith ever stop doing good. Faith doesn't ask whether good works are to be done, but, before it is asked, it has done them. It is always active. Whoever doesn't do such works is without faith; he gropes and searches about him for faith and good works but doesn't know what faith or good works are. Even so, he chatters on with a great many words about faith and good works.” (Martin Luther)

The teaching of Christianity is simple:

“We ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.

“But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour;

“That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men.” (Titus 3:3-7)

We are forgiven by God, through grace alone and through faith alone. By grace alone, means that all of our salvation, from beginning to end rests on the mercy of a loving Father. By faith alone means that we are forgiven, not because of our own righteousness, but because we trust that the Father who loved us so much that he sent his own Son, will forgive us for our sins.

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:” (Ephesians 2:8)

Prayer

We live in an uncertain world where there is much to fear about the future. However as followers of God we can face this unpredictability with a strength and confidence unknown by others.

We can do this because we have in Heaven a Father who has not only the power, but also the will to help us. He has promised to work all things together for the good of those who love him, so if we truly rest on his promise we can face our destiny with boldness and resolve.

Our Heavenly Father wants us to bring our worries and fears to him in prayer. He tells us to come just as we are, asking him to help us in our time of need. We can talk to him anywhere, at any time, with the certainty that the all knowing God will hear the thoughts of our heart.

All that God asks of us is that we trust him. If we pray but do not believe then there was no point in praying at all. However, those who rely on God for all their strength will be delivered in ways we could never imagine.

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”
(Matthew 7:7-11)

When we pray we should ask God with a heart which knows that the Creator and Ruler of all things can and will help those who love him and ask for his help.

When God answers our prayers let us not forget that it was his power which delivered us, and not our own. Too often, in times of trouble we call to God and then when we regain our strength and health we forget we ever did so. If we pray we must give to God the glory for any answers which he may have for us.

Prayer is for the most part a very personal thing between you and God. However it is also good to pray with and for others. Jesus has promised that he will be there whenever a few people are gathered together.

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:19-20)

If you would like to do this the best way is to go to church where there will be prayer during the meeting, and there will also probably be a special meeting just dedicated to praying.

To end any look at prayer it is always essential to look at how Jesus taught us to pray. His advice is simple and straightforward, but as always it is filled with truth and power.

“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“This, then, is how you should pray:

'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one. '

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:5-15)

Church

The power of the Christian message comes not from ritual or ceremony, but from the life changing faith which it instils in the hearts of men. It is this faith, and not any church or sacrifice, that frees man from his old way of life. However, even though the church will never save a man, it can play an important role in his growth and development.

In our modern world we tend to forget what really matters. We lose sight of the goodness of God and become wrapped up with our own little problems. By attending church regularly we can make sure that we are continually reminded of the most important things in life, allowing us to focus on God and all that he has done for us.

Attending church not only allows us to hear the good news of Christianity, it also allows us to spend time with people who share our faith. The church is an excellent way to get to know people who are our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Being in the company of these men and women allows us to be strengthened by their prayers, comforted by their sympathy and encouraged by their love.

A final area of Christian life that the church plays an essential part in is that of the sacraments. These are physical ceremonies which have a particular spiritual significance. The two Christian sacraments are baptism, when new Christians show that they have turned to God by being immersed in water, and the Lord's Supper, when Christians remember Jesus' death and resurrection by breaking bread.

For all these reasons and many more it is important that we should become part of our local church. Most church services will follow a fairly standard format: it will generally begin with singing and prayer led by the minister, which will then be followed by a talk about some aspect of Christian life. At the end you can spend some time talking to other people who attend the church and also find out more about what other things the church organizes.

If you do not know anyone else who goes to a particular church you could just go along and meet people who are there, or you could ask someone to go with you. Always remember that you will be made to feel very welcome wherever you attend, so please just go along some week.

Challenging issues

Some people have questioned the truth and usefulness of religion because they see it as inhibiting, or do not think that it can be consistent with the existence of suffering and evil. These issues may be challenging but they do not undermine the basis of faith.

Beauty of Religion

While religion may, at first glance, seem restrictive it is important to realise that there is a natural beauty in doing what is right. Restraining ourselves against certain temptations is the only way that we can lead a peaceful and pleasant existence.

The contentment of a clear conscience is one of the purest forms of happiness known to man. When we do what is wrong, our conscience confronts us and makes us feel a horrifying sense of shame and guilt.

“If in the course of the day we have swerved in any respect from the rules which our Conscience prescribes to us; if we have either exceeded or relaxed in our frugality; if we have either exceeded or relaxed in our industry; if, through passion or inadvertency, we have hurt in any respect the interest or happiness of our neighbour; if we have neglected a plain and proper opportunity of promoting that interest and happiness; it is this Conscience who, in the evening, calls us to an account for all those omissions and violations, and his reproaches often make us blush inwardly both for our folly and inattention to our own happiness, and for our still greater indifference and inattention, perhaps, to that of other people.” (Adam Smith)

It is only when we turn away from our life of sin that we can enjoy the comforts of a quiet conscience.

Virtue not only keeps our own conscience clear, it also benefits our friends, family and neighbours, who will repay us for our kindness and hospitality.

“No benevolent man ever lost altogether the fruits of his benevolence. If he does not always gather them from the persons from whom he ought to have gathered them, he seldom fails to gather them, and with a tenfold increase, from other people. Kindness is the parent of kindness; and if to be beloved by our brethren be the great object of our ambition, the surest way of obtaining it is, by our conduct to show that we really love them.” (Adam Smith)

By living a life of service rather than greed we can embrace the greatest joy of human life, love. It is only by putting others first that we can really enjoy time spent in the company of our companions.

When a whole country experiences a revival of religion there is a great improvement in the society of that land. The virtues encouraged by religion are of great benefit to the whole of civilisation.

“That the tendency of virtue to promote the order of society, when we consider it coolly and philosophically, reflects a very great beauty upon it, cannot be called into question. Human society, when we contemplate it in a certain abstract and philosophical light, appears like a great, an immense machine, whose regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand agreeable effects. As in any other beautiful and noble machine that was the production of human art, whatever tended to render its movements more smooth and easy, would derive a beauty from this effect, and, on the contrary, whatever tended to obstruct them would displease upon that account: so virtue, which is, as it were, the fine polish to the wheels of society, necessarily pleases; while vice, like the vile rust, which makes them jar and grate upon one another, is as necessarily offensive.” (Adam Smith)

A life of religious virtue is not a wretched existence of unhappiness, rather it is the means by which we, and all of those around us, may grow and prosper in love and peace.

Besides the benefits which we derive from the practise of virtue, there are great comforts from believing in an Almighty God, who watches over us as a Father cares for his son.

When we trust on the All-powerful Author and Judge of the Universe, we can rest on a sure foundation. We know that even if evil triumphs for a moment, it will not prosper for long. If we trust and obey then we know that while our friends may let us down, God will never leave us nor forsake us.

“He by whom God is thus known perceiving how He governs all things, confides in Him as his guardian and protector, and casts himself entirely upon His faithfulness, - perceiving Him to be the source of every blessing, if he is in any strait or feels any want, he instantly recurs to His protection and trusts to His aid, - persuaded that He is good and merciful, he reclines upon him with sure confidence, and doubts not that, in the divine clemency, a remedy will be provided for his every time of need.” (John Calvin)

When we trust in God we can look to the future and have a sure confidence that everything will work out. We will call to mind that great promise which says that all things will work together for the good of those who love God.

With confidence we can look to tomorrow, not knowing what will happen, but knowing that it is all for the best that it should happen.

“The idea of that divine Being, whose benevolence and wisdom have, from all eternity, contrived and conducted the immense machine of the universe, so as at all times to produce the greatest possible quantity of happiness, is certainly of all the objects of human contemplation by far the most sublime. Every other thought necessarily appears mean in the comparison.”
(Adam Smith)

Not only can we trust in God to help us tomorrow, and for years to come, we also know that when our time on this Earth is at an end he will bring us to him, to be with him for all eternity.

A sure and firm faith in God is not only natural, but it brings contentment, comfort and confidence to anyone who holds it.

Existence of Suffering

Suffering is a powerful and emotive issue which affects each and every one of us. While some imagine that if God truly existed he would prevent all suffering, it is necessary to examine if this is really true.

Although we may never fully appreciate the reason that God works as he does, we must always trust that he has never, and will never, allow anything to happen which was not absolutely essential for the good of ourselves, our companions and for society as a whole. Only when we rest on the goodness and wisdom of the Almighty God can we take comfort in the midst of our trials and sufferings.

“Consolation may be drawn from a reverential submission to that benevolent wisdom which directs all the events of human life, and which, we may be assured, would never have suffered those misfortunes to happen, had they not been indispensably necessary for the good of the whole. Nature has not prescribed to us this sublime contemplation as the great business and occupation of our lives. She only points it out to us as the consolation of our misfortunes.” (Adam Smith)

When we face times of trouble we must always return to the words of God, which remind us that God loves us as a Father, and that he will never allow us to suffer for a second longer than is unavoidably necessary.

“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

“He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.” (Psalms 91:4)

When we face difficulties we must submit ourselves to the wisdom of God and thank him that he has chosen to deal with us in the way that he has.

“Among those primary objects which nature had recommended to us as eligible, was the prosperity of our family, of our relations, of our friends, of our country, of mankind, and of the universe in general. Nature, too, had taught us, that as the prosperity of two was preferable to that of one, that of many, or of all, must be infinitely more so. That we ourselves were but one, and that consequently wherever our prosperity was inconsistent with that, either of the whole, or of any considerable part of the whole, it ought, even in our own choice, to yield to what was so vastly preferable.

“As all the events in this world were conducted by the providence of a wise, powerful, and good God, we might be assured that whatever happened tended to the prosperity and perfection of the whole. If we ourselves, therefore, were in poverty, in sickness, or in any other calamity, we ought, first of all, to use our utmost endeavours, so far as justice and our duty to others would allow, to rescue ourselves from this disagreeable circumstance.

“But if, after all we could do, we found this impossible, we ought to rest satisfied that the order and perfection of the universe required that we should in the mean time continue in this situation. And as the prosperity of the whole should, even to us, appear preferable to so insignificant a part as ourselves, our situation, whatever it was, ought from that moment to become the object of our liking, if we would maintain that complete propriety and rectitude of sentiment and conduct in which consisted the perfection of our nature.

“If, indeed, any opportunity of extricating ourselves should offer, it became our duty to embrace it. The order of the universe, it was evident, no longer required our continuance in this situation, and the great Director of the world plainly called upon us to leave it, by so clearly pointing out the road which we were to follow. It was the same case with the adversity of our relations, our friends, our country. If, without violating any more sacred obligation, it was in our power to prevent or put an end to their calamity, it undoubtedly was our duty to do so.

“But if it was altogether out of our power to do either, we ought then to consider this event as the most fortunate which could possibly have happened; because we might be assured that it tended most to the prosperity and order of the whole, which was what we ourselves, if we were wise and equitable, ought most of all to desire. It was our own final interest considered as a part of that whole, of which the prosperity ought to be, not only the principal, but the sole object of our desire.” (Adam Smith)

God has provided a place without suffering, where the injury and pain of this world are left far behind. The bliss of this paradise is beyond our comprehension and is more than worth the troubles of the present era.

“That there is a world to come, where exact justice will be done to every man, where every man will be ranked with those who, in the moral and intellectual qualities, are really his equals; where the owner of those humble talents and virtues which, from being depressed by fortune, had, in this life, no opportunity of displaying themselves; which were unknown, not only to the public, but which he himself could scarce be sure that he possessed; where that modest, silent, and unknown merit, will be placed upon a level, and sometimes above those who, in this world, had enjoyed the highest reputation, and who, from the advantage of their situation, had been enabled to perform the most splendid and dazzling actions; is a doctrine, in every respect so venerable, so comfortable to the weakness,

so flattering to the grandeur of human nature, that the virtuous man who has the misfortune to doubt of it, cannot possibly avoid wishing most earnestly and anxiously to believe it.” (Adam Smith)

We should always remember that all of our present troubles will eventually come to an end and that a better place awaits those who trust in our Heavenly Father.

Existence of Evil

Of all the suffering in this world, a great quantity of it can be attributed to the evilness and depravity of mankind. One man's anger may maim or kill hundreds of innocent people. The depravity of another may wreck the life of pure and innocent young children. There is hardly an act of evilness which has not resulted in the hurt or injury of many blameless bystanders.

Some people imagine that God is responsible for the evilness in this world, that he is its cause and source. But God is loving, merciful and fair and he created man in the same way. However man has turned against God. Humans have rebelled against God's laws and have not been thankful for his kindness. It is not God that is responsible for evilness, it is due to the sinfulness of man.

Although God is not the Author of evil, surely he could still prevent it? If God is All-powerful why does he not stop evilness from triumphing? These are very good questions that need to be carefully looked at. I will try to explain why I think God permits some evilness to succeed, even if it is only for a short time.

Firstly God loves and cares for us. He does not want to punish us unless he has to. He perseveres with even the most evil men, giving them the opportunities to ask for forgiveness and to follow his laws.

“How richly does he supply us with the means of contemplating his mercy when, as frequently happens, he continues to visit miserable sinners with unwearied kindness, until he subdues their depravity, and woos them back with more than a parent's fondness?” (John Calvin)

God tries to bring us to him by showing us his mercy rather than his anger. Were God to punish all of mankind as is deserved not one of us would survive as we have all sinned and come short of his glory. We each deserve his wrath and condemnation, yet he perseveres with each of us trying to draw us to him with his love instead of his judgement.

Another reason for God permitting evil is that it makes us look forward to the Final Judgement when God will take account of everything that has been done.

“Were all sin now visited with open punishment, it might be thought that nothing was reserved for the final judgement; and, on the other hand, were no sin now openly punished, it might be supposed there was no divine providence.” (Augustine)

“And though God often permits the guilty to exult for a time with impunity, and the innocent to be driven to and fro in adversity, nay, even to be wickedly and iniquitously oppressed, this ought not to produce any uncertainty as to the uniform justice of all his procedure. Nay, an opposite inference should be drawn. When any one crime calls forth visible manifestations of his anger, it must be because he hates all crimes; and, on the other hand, his leaving many crimes unpunished, only proves that there is a judgement in reserve, when the punishment now delayed shall be inflicted.” (John Calvin)

A final reason for God allowing evil to continue in this world is so that we can really appreciate Heaven. If this world were sinless then Heaven would be unnecessary because we would already be there. Only by experiencing the depravity of evil, can we fully appreciate the goodness of God. God will not allow evil to continue. He will punish, not only the Hitlers and Osama Bin Ladens of this world, but everybody who hurts others, everybody who breaks the laws he has set for our own good. We all must turn to God for forgiveness.

Why Christianity?

The key to the Christian faith is the teachings of Jesus Christ. Throughout his ministry Jesus displayed a practical wisdom which has left a mark for thousands of years.

The cornerstone of Jesus' life is love, not just for those who we are close to, but for those who hate and hurt us. This love is not easy, no-one ever claimed it was, but this love is what the world needs. If only we stopped hating those who hate us, or even just stopped ignoring those who are rejected by society, the world, our neighbours, and thus ourselves would be happier and more peaceful.

The other rock on which Jesus built his life was on that of sincerity. Jesus wanted us to truly be the men who we claimed to be. We should not give the impression of love and then hate. We should not give the appearance of purity and then defile ourselves. Such restraint, such self-command is difficult, nearly impossible, but when we try to be truly good men then we can accomplish great things.

To follow Christ is to live a life in line with the natural law which is imprinted on our hearts but which we ignore so often and so subtly that we forget it exists at all.

Alongside the natural law of our hearts there sits a natural belief, a realisation that there is something out there greater than ourselves which we can neither see nor touch.

We can go through life quietly shutting it out for long periods at a time, but in our moments of basic instinct when faced with death or sickness, we naturally and almost without exception turn to this Being for help.

Not only did Jesus affirm that this Being exists, he also gave us the vision to see him more clearly. Jesus taught us to think of God as our Father, as a loving fair parent who watches over his dearly beloved children.

This explanation of God confirms so much of what we see around us, whether it be in the beauty of nature or in the great dramas of our own lives. When we really look at all that is good about this world we must feel that there is some caring Being watching over it, despite the best efforts of man to destroy it.

To follow Jesus is to become a child of God, not of natural descent, but as adopted sons. It confirms the natural inclination of our hearts which senses a powerful guiding hand which helps and strengthens those in need.

The teachings of Jesus have a depth and natural truth about them which men should ponder in their hearts. Yet there is even more to Jesus than these principles of philosophy. This is because Jesus was not just a teacher, he was and still is a mediator between man and God, because although his body was human, his spirit was divine.

When we believe and trust in his way we become part of the mystical body of Christ, all believers united, working together in a divine and incomprehensible way. This means that when Jesus' body was crucified it had a significance for all of those who follow him.

God is a loving, kind, generous Father who calls us back to him, but it is also the role of every good Father to chastise his children. Each of us in some way deserve this discipline, in fact the punishment which we rightly deserve is more than we could bear.

Yet instead of allowing each of us to be punished for our wrongdoing, Jesus was given as a sacrifice representative of all believers. By the mystical union which all followers have in the body of Christ, Jesus' death is like a payment for the guilt of the whole body of believers.

By following Jesus we become part of this mystical body, and so all of the punishment which we should endure for our wrongdoing has already been experienced by Jesus. Without this sacrifice there is no way that we can avoid the punishment which we are worthy of.

While looking at the importance of his death, we should never forget that the most astounding event involving Jesus came three days after he had been killed. Throughout his life Jesus had shown a special power by which he could help and heal others but undoubtedly the greatest miracle of all was his resurrection. By rising from the dead Jesus showed that he really was the chosen one of God, the Christ.

After three days Jesus' body which had hung for hours on a wooden cross was raised to life again. His tomb was empty, and in his place an angel stood telling his followers "He has risen." Powerful Roman

guards who had been told to watch his tomb were so afraid that they shook and became like dead men.

Over the next month Jesus appeared to many people. Paul, a follower of Jesus, says that up to five hundred men seen him after he was raised back to life. These men, many of whom died for their beliefs, whose entire ethos was honesty and sincerity are accurate witnesses of a truly divine event.

The resurrection is the greatest in a long line of miracles, and surely he who admits it cannot possibly deny that Jesus is the chosen one of God.

Why Christianity? The answer to this question lies in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By following his teachings we can live the lives which God meant for us, by accepting his death in our place we cancel the debts of our sins, and by trusting in the resurrection we can stand confidently knowing that the evidence of divine power supports us.

Becoming a Christian

To become a Christian it is important not only to understand and agree with Christian beliefs, but also to rely on these things for your life and salvation. We must put into practice what we believe by forgiving others and by living a life free from corruption.

An important step in becoming a Christian is to realise that no man is perfect. Although compared to others we may be above the average, who amongst us could say that they live a life without any hint of self-interest or desire.

“How shall we answer the heavenly Judge when he calls us to account? Let us contemplate that Judge, not as our own unaided intellect conceives of him, but as he is portrayed to us in the Bible, with a brightness which obscures the stars, a strength which melts the mountains, an anger which shakes the earth, a wisdom which takes the wise in their own craftiness, a purity before which all things become impure, a righteousness to which not even angels are equal. Let Him, I say, sit in judgment on the actions of men, and who will feel secure in standing before His throne?” (John Calvin)

Rather than despairing over our own nature we should turn to God, knowing that he offers us forgiveness for all that we have done wrong. Instead of God demanding punishment for our sin he has given us a way out, a lifeboat which can save us from the sinking ship.

His chosen one, Jesus Christ, the true child of God, who he loved and committed all things to, was given up as a sacrifice in our place. Being both divine and human, it meant that he could be a unique mediator between man and God. His death was an offering by all believers to say sorry for their sins and to beg forgiveness from a holy God. When we follow Jesus we are partakers of this sacrifice, and so the things which we have done in the past will not be used against us.

When we commit ourselves to becoming Christians we are adopted into the family of God, to become sons and heirs. God, who has done so much for us in the past, will continue to help us in the future. His tender care and awesome wisdom will never fail us. We can rest on him

as a loving Father who will love us, protect us and guide us in all the tough times which lie ahead.

To follow Jesus means that we have a faith which trusts in God and loves the pure things of life.

“It is impossible that faith ever stop doing good. Faith doesn't ask whether good works are to be done, but, before it is asked, it has done them. It is always active. Whoever doesn't do such works is without faith; he gropes and searches about him for faith and good works but doesn't know what faith or good works are.”
(Martin Luther)

We must love others even when they do not love us. We must help and care for those who have wronged us and caused us trouble. There can be no excuses - we must love and forgive, just as our Heavenly Father has forgiven us. We must let no good deed go undone, nor any chance of helping others be missed. We must live as Jesus lived and use his life and his teachings as the model for our own lives.

The road ahead may be difficult, but we can choose no other way. When trouble comes we know that we can trust in God who has promised that he will never allow us to go through more than we can bear. We will also have the spirit of God dwelling within us, helping us, strengthening us and leading us in the right path, producing the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control.

If you want to turn to God there is no need for delay. He is ready and willing to adopt you as his own child, all that you have to do is ask. Whoever comes to him will never be turned away, so just ask him to forgive you and plead for help on the journey ahead.

The Christian life is not easy if it is attempted in isolation. You should try to find a church close to your home where you can hear more about God and meet others who share your faith.

May God help you and strengthen you on the way ahead.

