

## Christianity: Background, Basic Beliefs, and Sacred Texts

### How did Christianity begin?

Christianity traces its beginning to the miraculous birth, adult ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, known as Jesus Christ. Over 2000 years ago in Palestine (today's Israel), Jesus was born into a humble Jewish family. His mother was a young peasant woman named Mary. Christians believe that his father was the Holy Spirit of God, making Jesus both fully human and fully divine. His earliest followers came to believe that he was the Messiah, or messenger, sent by God to free God's people from slavery, sin, and death. Christians believe God sent his son Jesus in human form so that people would better understand God as a caring and loving parent. Jesus lived and experienced the suffering of humans. Jesus healed the sick and told stories, or parables, and preached sermons that taught what God wanted people to do – to love God with all their hearts and love their neighbors as themselves. Jesus taught by example. Christianity teaches followers that, by being loving and forgiving himself, Jesus taught others to be loving and forgiving - especially toward those who were considered outcasts in society. This is the central message and style of Jesus' teaching.

Q: What is the main, or central, message of Jesus to his followers? \_\_\_\_\_

During his adult ministry, Jesus built up a loyal following, led by his twelve **disciples**, or students; However, Jesus also made enemies among the religious and political leaders of his time. In the end, these powerful leaders were so threatened by Jesus' growing following that the Roman governor sentenced Jesus to death and had him crucified. Christians believe that, the third day after Jesus' death, he was raised from the dead. They believe that the painful sacrifice of Jesus' life on the cross shows how much God loves God's people. Jesus paid with his life on Earth for the sins of the world. Christians believe that, in raising Jesus' from the dead, God showed that Jesus' message of love and forgiveness was more powerful than death, and that believing in Jesus and following the example of his life and his teaching would lead to eternal life after death. The resurrection (rising from the dead) is the sign of God's salvation offered to all people.

Q: What do Christians believe Jesus does by dying on the cross (being crucified)? \_\_\_\_\_

Q: According to Christians, what does following Jesus' message lead to? \_\_\_\_\_

### What do Christians believe?

Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God – fully human and fully divine – and that through believing in him and following his teachings they can inherit eternal life. Christians believe that Jesus died for humanity, that God raised him from the dead, and that Jesus will come again at the end of time. In addition, Christians believe in the Trinity, or the three parts of God: God the Father or Creator, God the Son (Jesus) or Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit or Sanctifier. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in the world.

The essence of Jesus' teaching comes from the Jewish law he grew up with in the 10 Commandments with and these additional beliefs:

\*Love God with all your heart, soul and mind

\*Love and tolerance of all people

\*Life after death was better than that on earth.

\* You do not have to be rich to be Christian

\*Help the poor and sick

\*God is more powerful than leaders

Q: Which of the beliefs would cause Christianity to grow, especially among poor peasants? \_\_\_\_\_

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Q: Which of these beliefs could threaten rulers like Roman Emperors? \_\_\_\_\_

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**What are the sacred texts of Christianity?**

The sacred text of Christianity is the Holy Bible. The Christian Bible has two parts: the Old Testament which is essentially the Hebrew scripture, or the Torah, of Jesus' time; and the New Testament which contains writings about Jesus Christ and about the early church. The four gospels (a word meaning 'good news') of the New Testament are accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, of his death and resurrection. The New Testament also contains the Acts of the Apostles, which describes the early growth of the Christian church; the letters of Paul and other important leaders in the early church; the Letter to the Hebrews; and the Book of Revelation. The New Testament teaches that salvation comes through believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in following his teachings. It teaches that salvation is a gift God extends freely through Jesus Christ to all people.

Q: What is the sacred text of Christians? \_\_\_\_\_

Q: The Old Testament of the Bible is the same as the \_\_\_\_\_ of Judaism.

**Why are there so many different kinds of Christians?**

From its beginning with a tiny group of Jesus' followers, Christianity has spread all over the world. Today, it is practiced by two billion people. As with any large group, Christianity has experienced many different interpretations, disagreements and struggles for power over the centuries. These have led to the growth of many different branches of Christianity interpreting the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in different ways. There are three basic streams of Christianity: Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic.

Q: In what ways do different groups of Christians disagree within Christianity? \_\_\_\_\_

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Q: What are the three basic "streams" of Christianity? \_\_\_\_\_

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