

Foundations of the Christian Faith Part 1



LATE
CHURCH




Foundations - *Introduction*

There is so much confusion about what it means to be a Christian these days. Is it a box you tick on the census form? Is it heritage? Is it about what you do or what you don't do? Is it just for the Western world?

So if we were to boil it down to its bare essentials, what would Christianity look like?

That's what this two part series is about. The **first** part will look at four essential areas of the Christian faith - why they're important and how they differ from other worldviews. The **second** part will look at four areas of the Christian life - what they look like and why the Bible sees them as so important.

It's impossible to cover everything the Bible talks about and look at it in extensive detail in eight weeks - but that's the point. We want to emphasise what the Bible emphasises, be firm where the Bible is firm. And where the Bible is not clear, or where the Bible has little to say - we will be very cautious about jumping to conclusions that it doesn't.

As you work through this series, I hope you find the answer and promise God has given to the world:

"For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God." - 2 Corinthians 1:20

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Study 1 - Sin

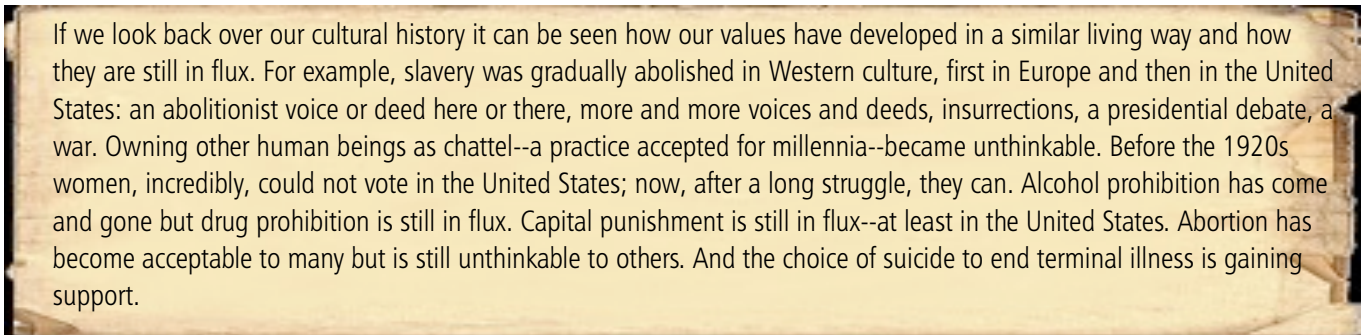
One of the most misunderstood and watered down words in Christianity is **sin**. Is sin really as serious as the church and Christians have made it out to be? Why is God so concerned about things that we do to each other?

Before we get started, spend a minute thinking about how you would define sin. Write your thoughts below.

Understanding the Problem

There aren't many who would suggest that people are perfect. You just need to turn on the news at night, look at our over-crowded prisons, and (if we're going to be honest) look at our own track record. But everyone seems to have an explanation for why we aren't perfect.

As a group, have a read of the article below and describe how it views 'sin'.¹



In what other ways do people explain (or excuse) wrong-doing in themselves or in society? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these explanations?

What the Bible says

The Bible has a very clear and comprehensive answer to the question of wrong-doing - or 'sin' as it's generally referred to. Let's have a look at two passages that help us build a picture of what God says.

Read Genesis 3:1-24.

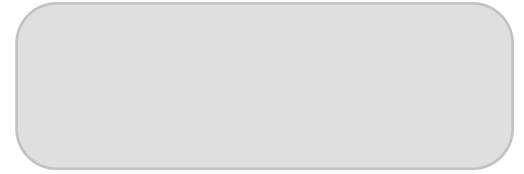
This part of the bible is often called the "Fall". Really, it's the breaking of a relationship between God and his creation that, up until this point, had been perfect. So let's look at what caused this falling out.

¹ The first excerpt is from an article by John M. Chrisman who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy. The entire article can be found at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_4_60/ai_63257724?tag=content;col1

The heart of sin...

In the serpent, we see what sin actually is.

What does he do to draw Eve into temptation? (v.1 & 4-5)

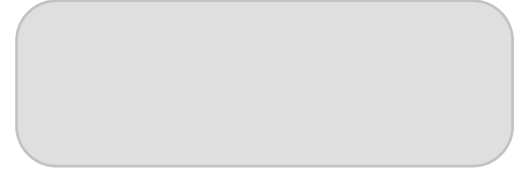


The description of sin...

In Eve we see sin as it unfolds for the first time.

What are Eve's responses to the serpent? (vv.2-3 & 6)

Compare her response to what God actually said. (2:16-17)

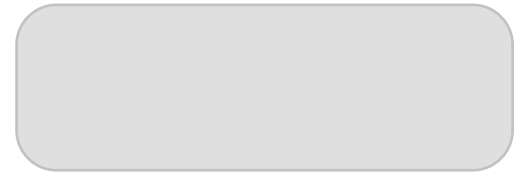


The effects of sin...

The effects of what Adam & Eve do are felt immediately.

Describe the events that unfold immediately following. (vv. 7-14)

How are people relating to each other and God?



What we learn about sin here is that it's something deeper than just the action - Eve just ate some fruit! It's what the action represents. A willingness to set aside what God says for what we think.

According to this definition, can you tell if something is sinful just by observing it?

At the end of the Genesis story, we see the end of what was, in God's words, "very good". And God, true to His word, casts them out of the Garden...but more significantly, out of His presence. People no longer have access to God. And because of the way mankind is wired, this is the equivalent of being "dead" (See 2:17).²

Now read Ephesians 2:1-3 to see the New Testament description of sin, and being "dead" in God's eyes.

In what way is mankind "dead" according to this passage?

What are the results of sin?

Discuss the similarities between the description of sin here, and what we've just seen in Genesis.

² Just as an aside, even in the midst of some pretty bad news in Genesis 3, we see the first glimmer of hope from God in 3:15. Somehow, somehow, God is going to crush sin. The rest of the Bible is really building up to, and then explaining, how God did this.

Where do we go from here?

So now that we've seen what the Bible has to say about sin, let's try and summarise. Write down a one sentence description on how the Bible defines sin.

Now compare this description to the description you wrote down at the start. Do the two agree? (Discuss)

How you understand sin is going to shape how you see yourself before God. And that in turn is going to shape what you think Jesus did and whether you need Him. But that's for the next study.

Before we go there, discuss the following:

Do you think the Bible's description of sin fits with your experience of the world and yourself?

Is the Bible's description of sin offensive? (i.e. Do you like being called spiritually dead?)

Do you think God has a right to be angry at mankind? (i.e. Why should He be angry for what I do in my personal life?)

Study 2 - Salvation

It seems nearly every religion, cult or ideology has some sort of "salvation" aspect to it. And as we mentioned in the last study, how you view sin and the situation of mankind will have a huge impact on how you approach the idea of salvation.

Understanding the Problem

Have a look at the following ideas of salvation and discuss how they view mankind and where God (or Jesus) fits into the picture. What does salvation look like with these world views?³

Example 1

Salvation lies in the realization of oneness with the impersonal life force. Awareness can be heightened through methods that induce altered states of consciousness, e.g., hypnosis, meditation, music, drugs. Spiritual "tools" include crystals, tarot cards, amulets, channeling, fortunetellers and psychics. Some believe the salvation of humanity will occur when a critical mass is reached, when people converge in experiencing their oneness with God and with each other. This will bring a New World Order or new Planetary Order, resulting in oneness of civilization and one-world government, peace, and harmony.

Example 2

Through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, you can become clean from sin and enjoy peace of conscience.

To become worthy to live in Heavenly Father's presence after this life and to receive this peace and strength, you must learn and follow the principles and ordinances' of the gospel.

Example 3

Christians also celebrate "new life" at Easter, but in a religious sense. The focus of their festival is the belief that tragedy and grief - symbolised by the crucifixion - can give way to new life - symbolised by the resurrection - and that pain and loss are essential steps on the journey towards enlightenment.

If there's no problem, then no solution is needed. Or if the problem's not as bad as described, then the solution may not be that dramatic. And so our view of sin directly affects our view of salvation.

What the Bible says

But what is there to do when the Bible describes people as "dead" in their sin? It's going to take a fair bit of effort to raise a dead person. Let's see what the Bible says.

Read John 3:1-21

In this passage, Jesus is talking to a religious leader named Nicodemus. Of all people, a Jewish religious leader would have been confident in his standing before God. But Jesus has some bad news for him.

³ Example 1 from <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2001/06/What-New-Agers-Believe.aspx>

Example 2 from <http://www.mormon.org/mormonorg/eng/basic-beliefs/jesus-christ-our-savior/the-gospel-of-jesus-christ>

Example 3 is an excerpt from an article by Hugh McKay in the Sydney Morning Herald, March 25 2005.

What is Jesus' pre-requisite for seeing the Kingdom of God⁴ from verses 1-8?

From this passage, who brings salvation about and how?

And from verses 14-21, what do people contribute to their salvation?

How does this all fit with the Bible's description of people as being "dead" in their sin?

Summarise what the Bible says is the only way for mankind to be saved:

The Bible has a pretty pessimistic view of the situation of mankind. But it's not fatalistic. And that's not because people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but because God has taken the initiative and done what they couldn't.

Where do we go from here?

Jesus death is crucial to the storyline of the Bible. And not only THAT he died, but WHY he died.

From what you've just seen in the Bible, how does the Bible's view of salvation differ from the three examples we saw at the start?

Why might the Bible's view be offensive or confronting?

What difference does our understanding of Jesus (and his death) make to our view of sin and salvation?

What difference does our understanding of Jesus make to the way we view our life and our world?

While a clear understanding of sin helps us understand our need for salvation, understanding how we're saved forms the basis for what the Christian life looks like. If we think we save ourselves, there's not really that much to be thankful to God about. If we think we meet God half-way, we can take pride in how much better we are than others who aren't meeting God half-way.

But if we understand that we were dead in sin, but have been born again (made alive) because of what Jesus has done on the cross, then life begins to take on a whole new perspective. Thankfulness that God would save us. Humility because we know we couldn't do it ourselves. And a desire to live this new life as people who have been born into God's family. And that's what we're going to look at in our next study.

⁴ This is John's way of talking about having eternal life, or salvation.

Study 3 - The Christian Life

In the last study we saw that because we are spiritually dead, a relationship with God is only possible by being born again. And we saw that God had done this through the death and resurrection of Jesus on our behalf.

But once you've done that...what then? Are we always assured of a relationship with God? What does the normal Christian life look like?

The Traps and Pitfalls

Let's have a look at three views of how people picture the Christian life.

Discuss what's attractive about the below views, and what's not.



It's ironic that people can feel great freedom at being saved by Jesus, but then feel trapped and burdened at what that salvation looks like. And it arises because people have misunderstood what the Bible says the normal Christian life is like. Let's have a look.

What the Bible says

In short, the Christian life is characterised by being like God, that is, being holy. So as we look at this topic, you'll see that word popping up a bit. But let's boil the Bible's view of the Christian life down to three things.

1 - How God (always) sees His people.

The letter of 1 Corinthians was written to a church that we would have seen on A Current Affair if it existed now.

Open up Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and flick through the letter looking at the headings above the paragraphs.⁵ Where relevant, note down some of the problems you can see in the Corinthian church.

Now knowing what this church is like,⁶ look at what Paul says about them in 1 Corinthians 1:2. (It might help to substitute the word 'sanctified' for its literal meaning, 'made holy'.)

Summarise how God sees His people:

⁵ These aren't in the original letters, but they're generally helpful for getting an overview.

⁶ Divisive (3), incestuous (5), litigious (6) and sexually immoral (6) to name a few!

2 - What God is doing with His people

Have a look at the following three sections of the New Testament, and write down what God is doing in Christians.

2 Corinthians 3:18

Colossians 3:9-10

1 Thessalonians 4:3-5

God has a clear aim for people He saves through Jesus Christ. Summarise what that aim is:

3 - How God is doing it

Look at the following two passages (from the same book), and try to identify where the responsibility lies.

2 Corinthians 4:16

2 Corinthians 7:1

Summarise these two ideas:

Where do we go from here?

So what we've seen is that God views His people as holy because of Jesus Christ, but he knows they have a long way to go until they're perfect like Jesus. So he gives them His Holy Spirit to work with them in their day-to-day struggle with sin, as they seek to become like Jesus.

We could summarise this as:

The Christian life is a gradual process of living more and more appropriately to how God has already made and sees us in Jesus Christ. Holy.

Compare this summary, and what we've seen in the Bible, to how you have previously viewed the Christian life.

What is the place of guilt in the Christian life?

How do we measure our relationship with God in the Christian life?

How do we know what we should and shouldn't do? (i.e. is it okay to drink alcohol?)

What should we expect the normal Christian life to look like?

Study 4 - The End and the Beginning

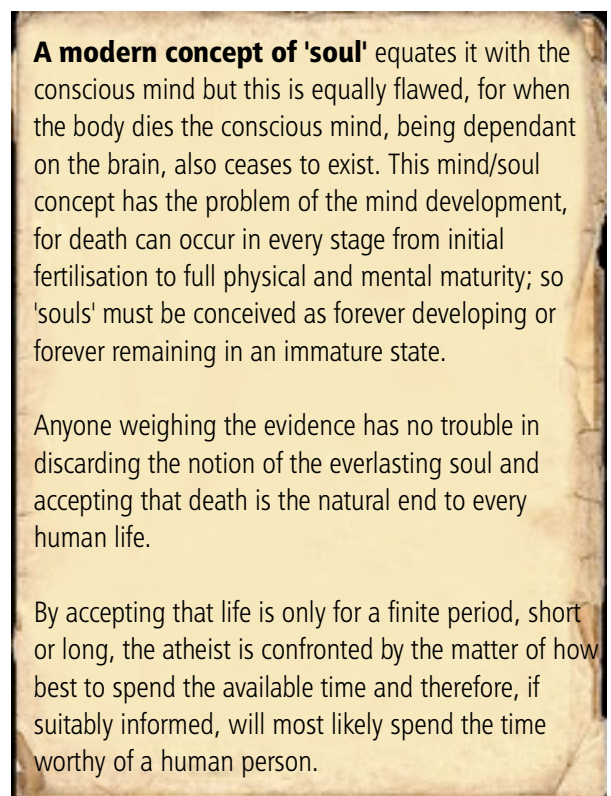
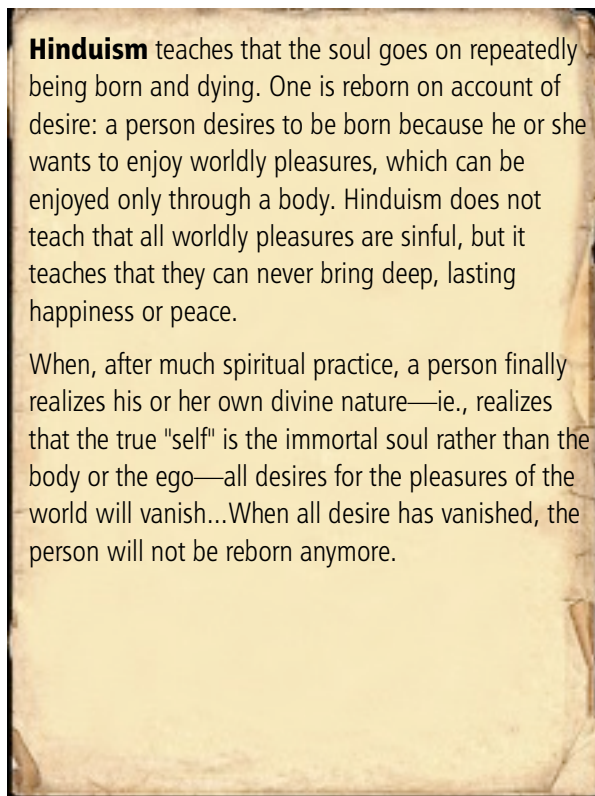
We've looked at the beginning of the problem (sin), God's solution to the problem (Jesus), and what it looks like when we've taken up God's solution - but where's it all heading? What can we expect for this world in the long run? What can we expect when we die?

Discuss what and where **you** think the world is heading, and what **you** think happens after we die.

Different views of life, death & eternity

Every worldview (i.e. explanation for life) - no matter whether it involves God or not - attempts to explain what happens when we die. Because what happens when we die gives such meaning to what we do in life.

Below are two views of how the world will unfold, or what happens to people when they die. What does each suggest about what happens when we die? What can you see as their strengths and its weaknesses?⁷



Now let's have a look at what the Bible says about death and the afterlife.

What the Bible says

The Christian view of what happens after we die has been distorted over the years to the point where it is hardly recognisable from what the Bible says. We're going to try and build a picture of what the Bible actually says.

⁷ Example 1 - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reincarnation_and_Hinduism

Example 2 - <http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au/death.htm>

When eternity is decided...

The picture is often that we will rock up at the pearly gates, and someone (perhaps Saint Peter) will look at our life and tell us whether we get to enter or not. But that's simply not what the Bible says. Have a look at these passages, and build a picture of when our eternity is decided and how.

John 3:36

John 5:24

So while the Bible speaks of judgement, where we're going to spend eternity is actually decided in life. And it's decided by how we respond to Jesus. Once you die, you don't change camps. If you're with Jesus in life, you're with him in death. If you're not with him in life, you're not with him in death.

What happens at judgement

So if the Bible speaks about a judgement, and it doesn't have to do with our eternal destiny, what will this judgement look like and involve? Let's have a look at a few passages and build a picture of what judgement will look like.

John 5:24-30⁸

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 (esp. v.10)

1 Timothy 5:24-25

To have all your deeds laid out before God is a scary prospect, especially when the pass mark is perfection.

For those who don't have Jesus mediating for them on that day, it'll be terrifying in the extreme. To face the living God, with no mediator, and with only one assured outcome - banishment from his presence - is not a prospect anyone should want to face.

But for those who know Jesus, those areas of sin and failure will be revealed as sins and failures forgiven through him. So those who know Jesus have nothing to fear in judgement (see Romans 8:1). Instead, judgement day should be a motivation for them to overcome sin in order to reach their goal and attain their reward.

Eternity

What do the following passages say about the nature of eternal punishment and reward:

Matthew 25:31-46 (esp. v.34, 41, 46)

1 Corinthians 15:42-49

⁸ As opposed to the airy-fairy view of the afterlife that we often get presented, the Bible's view is quite different. Mankind was created with both body **and** spirit - and the two were never meant to be separated, either through spiritual death (i.e. being out of relationship with God) or physical death. So the Bible's view is that just as Jesus physically rose, he was the template of what was to come for all. But that doesn't mean all will rise to life.

Revelation 21:1-4

Where do we go from here?

What we've seen is both confronting and comforting - and very little like what most people think of as life after death.

Based on how we respond to Jesus in this life, we are going to be raised in the body to spend eternity with God in a New Creation, or eternity without Him.

From what you've talked about and seen in the Bible:

What differences are there in what the Bible says about life after death compared with what you previously thought, or what society normally says?

How do you feel about what you've read? (i.e. nervous, sceptical, excited...)

What difference does the Bible's view of what happens after death make to life now?