

# just who is God?

## Wonder what we conjure up in our minds when we think about God? How do we imagine him?

Perhaps he's some vague, undefined Force? Or he might be some kind of super-policeman always checking up on us? He may even be like a sci-fi character from outer space to us? Or he could be the very power of nature?

Or do we simply imagine him as an old character with a very long, white beard who sits contemplating a wayward world from somewhere out there in space?

Well, thankfully we're not left to make up our own minds, because God has gone out of his way to show us what he's like. For many years – in a variety of ways he made himself known to mankind. We can know what kind of God he is.

## Holy One

We know that God is far above and beyond our human weakness. This is something of what the Bible authors meant when they said that God was 'holy' – utterly separate, wholly other. He was surrounded by breathtaking mystery; their God who wanted to have dealings with them, and yet they knew that when they came into touch with him, they were right out of their depth. They couldn't be flippant about him or take his name lightly. Instead, they took great care in drawing close to him, and avoided all casualness when they worshipped him.

This was something they learnt. God gave them a highly elaborate ritual for their worship, without which they daren't come too close. It was like handling high voltage electricity.

*After all, you can't play around with the vast energy that brought the universe into being and which keeps it going - and get away with it.*

But there was another meaning to this word 'holy'. God showed his people that he had fixed standards for their daily way of life – which they always failed to live up to. He called them to live holy lives - that is, lives which pleased him (free from evil). **He wanted them to be holy like himself.**

That's what the word, 'righteous' means in the Bible. Just as there are agreed standards for building safe houses, so too God sets high standards for us which are right and true.

You know where you are with God! He doesn't ask for one thing one day and another the next. This is why God gave us laws. They are clear instructions for daily living. They tell us what's right and what isn't. They show us how different from God we are.

## just judge

Because of who he is – our Creator – God alone is able to judge us.

The Bible tells us that one day he will.

If we break one of the natural laws built into the fabric of the universe, we suffer for it. If we defy the law of gravity, we get what we deserve when we stop falling! Similarly, we can't play around with his moral laws. If we don't reap the results in this life, the Bible tells there will be a final judgement.

Of course, none of us likes this idea – we'd prefer God to close his eyes to the things we do wrong.

**But Christians believe God is a good, kind, loving and just God.** So we prepare ourselves to face his justice. Sins and wickedness will be rewarded. Suffering and injustice will be redressed – because God is just.

Rebellion grieves God.

# Right and wrong

*Something for you to do at home.*

Find the **Ten Commandments** of God in the Bible, and write them in the spaces below.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

Jesus was once asked what he thought God's greatest commandment was.

**What did he say?**

Write his answer in the box below.

*Matthew 22:34*

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## love

The word love today is a rather 'elastic' word – stretched all over the place.

Love happens on the cinema screen when a couple kiss; or is that 'thing' we fall in and out of – we even 'make' love nowadays. Its so often a very misused word.

So what does it mean to say that God loves us and that we can love him?

The New Testament writers had the same problem when they came to use the word love. There were several words in Greek for them to use – most of which had been spoiled by misuse. One word, eros, had been so widely used for sexual love that it had come simply to mean 'lust'.

The word which had the least bad overtones was AGAPE (pronounced **agapay**). It came into its own in the New Testament as the favourite word for speaking about God's love for the world, our love for God, or even our love for one another.

God loved us so much, that he sent Jesus to die for us on the cross. This gave the word agape even greater meaning – i.e. loving the unattractive and undeserving; reconciliation with old enemies, welcoming them open-heartedly.

Agape means more than just the nice feeling that modern love often is. It means to be committed to loving and caring for another person, whatever.

Because of the depth of meaning in agape, its the ideal word for Christians to use, especially in showing how God's love surpasses all racial, sexual or social barriers.

Why do Christians love like this? Because this is the way God loves us.

What must it be like living - as many have to - in a society where there's no hope of getting justice? Where, in spite of your innocence, your rights are taken away, you are injured and hurt, and no one cares? Where the judge is not an upright person and the lawyers are bribed – the jury threatened? There isn't hope in a system like that!

That's why over the years the oppressed, falsely accused, enslaved and dispossessed of the world have turned to the **Just God** for their rights and for their vindication. That's why Christians are often in the forefront of legal reform, standing up for what is right and just.

## genuine

The Bible writers often talked about their God as the true God, quite unlike the false gods of the surrounding nations. He was the only real God, who could actually do things for his people. They also meant that he is constant and reliable, and that you can trust him to fulfill his promises. For God never contradicts himself or goes back on his word. That is one of the reasons why we can take what the Bible says as being true.

In the Old Testament, God's people demonstrated this all through their history. He had made a special agreement (or 'covenant') with them, an agreement which they repeatedly broke. God often allowed them to suffer for their wrongdoing, but he did not forget that he had promised to be their God. Again and again he stepped into their tangled affairs to rescue them, and to bring them back into line.

Something which runs right through the Christian message is that God is good to us in spite of ourselves - because he is true to himself.

## God = LOVE

One of the greatest truths of the Bible, (the heart of what Christians believe), is that this great and holy God loves us his creation. If we didn't know this truth, there's a lot about him we'd fear and dread - his majesty, purity, power and justice. But the Bible uses many warm, familiar words which tell us that God is a loving heart.

**He loves us just like a parent loves their child – or a husband loves his wife. He sympathizes with our weakness; he has compassion on us because we are lost. His heart is broken over those whose lives are messed up, and he goes out of his way to meet the needs of the poor, troubled, sad and lonely people of the world.**

We see this in the way that he looked after his holy people – even though they rebelled against him. We see it in the promises he's made to be close to us in our difficulties, guiding the direction of our lives. We see it most of all in the fact that he sent Jesus, his Son, to die for us.

*This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven. John*

### **all we need is love . . .**

Actually not quite all, but we'd have a pretty bad time without it. We know that if a child is to develop normally, it will need a secure, loving home. Teenagers long for love as their emotions tell them that life was made to be shared. Married couples experience the deep fulfilment which comes from loving and being loved, and families thrive on it. Good communities offer a warm sense of belonging which is love. There's no doubt about it – we all need love and loving!

That's why it's such a tragedy that we live in such a love-starved world. Unwanted and neglected children have become a fact of life, and the emotions of the young are exploited. Husbands and wives are often at each other's necks, and neighbours often live in hate. Racial and sectarian violence blast community life too often, and the poor, sick, elderly and feeble are easily tossed aside or forgotten.

Thank God that he not only has enough love to fill the empty places in our hearts and lives, but that he also teaches us to love people we wouldn't normally bother with.

### **the shepherd**

David was as a shepherd boy caring for his sheep on the hills around Bethlehem. He drew on this experience when he described the way God had dealt with him. He struck the balance beautifully between God's care and God's discipline:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. He lets me rest in fields of green grass and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water. He gives me new strength. He guides me in the right paths, as he has promised. Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me. Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me. You prepare a banquet for me, where all my enemies can see me; you welcome me as an honoured guest and fill my cup to the brim. I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life; and your house will be my home as long as I live. Psalm 23*

### **don't!**

*There seem to be plenty of things the Bible tells us we mustn't do. To some, God's law can seem just a bit too restrictive and kill-joy?*

*Well of course it's true to say that the Bible does contain laws, some of which warn us against certain things. But it's easy to see that they were given for our own good. They tell us not to lie to, or deceive, others. They forbid discriminating against people of different races. God gives us rules to stop us hurting ourselves – and to protect the community.*

*But the Bible isn't simply a collection of 'don'ts'. One of its great themes is that by knowing God we can be set free from wrong behaviour to do what is right. Some rules are important for our freedom. Think about learning to play the football. It's only when we learn and follow the 'rules' of football that we're set free to enjoy playing it. God's laws work in the much the same way.*

### **a kind grandfather?**

Love is such an elastic word that it can mean many different things. Some people think of God's love in a soft, indulgent way. They see him as a rather senile old man, ladling out favours indiscriminately to one and all. They assume that it doesn't really matter what you believe or how you live, because God's love can cope with all that, and bring everyone safely home at last.

But real love isn't like that, especially when it's the love of a holy God. Love wants the very best for the person loved. Loving parents do not give their children everything they ask for. Because they want the best for them they will withhold some things, and sometimes positively discipline their children. Good parents teach their children the difference between right and wrong, and keep them to it when they step out of line.

It is because God is holy as well as loving that he goes about establishing right where there is wrong and justice where there is wickedness. He works to reverse the trend of evil in human lives.

That is why the Bible's picture of God is that of a wise, kind Father, who has high ambitions for us if we are his children - not a weak, indulgent parent who couldn't care less. He wants the best and the highest for us. He wants us to share something of his family likeness.

In order to do that, he had to devise a way to help us which, at one and the same time, showed just how serious our wrongdoing was, and just how great his love for us was. That is what the cross, the central symbol of the Christian faith, is all about.

### **God looks!**

One of the things Jesus taught about God was that he didn't wait for us to come to him. He comes to us where we are. He's like a shepherd who's lost a sheep - and who goes out looking for it.

God loves us so much that he makes the first move – as opposed to our way of helping people when we think they deserve it. The Bible tells us that God came to our rescue when we had purposely turned our backs on him. If we come to know God, we soon realise that long before we began to think about him, he came after us, leading us back.

That's the kind of God we've got: a God who wants us to be right with him, and to experience for ourselves everything he can do for us.

### **ABBA - FATHER**

When Jesus prayed, he used a word his fellow-Jews would never have dared to utter with regard to God. He called him 'Abba' which, in Jesus' language, Aramaic, was dad or daddy. It's what Jewish boys and girls called their dads then, and for him to call God that was daring, even shocking – but it summed up the tremendously close relationship he had with God.

Then he turned to his disciples and taught them to say it and use it too!

Not everyone can speak of God in this way. Only in the very broadest sense of being God's creatures are we all God's children. But those people whose lives are committed to Jesus can know the same sort of close, deep bond with the God who cares for us in the same way that we care for our youngsters.

**Something for you to do at home.**

Find the **Lord's Prayer** in the Bible, and write the exact words Jesus used in the space below.

