

## What Is Christianity All About?

Most people in the United States have some familiarity with Christianity. By that, I mean most people personally know someone who claims to be a Christian, have been inside of a Christian church, and probably even know Jesus has something to do with the cross hanging around so many necks. But despite this familiarity, many don't know what Christianity is all about. Sometimes in conversations I ask, "If you were to describe to someone what Christianity is all about, what would you say?" The responses I receive not only vary substantially, but are often associated with a lot of hesitation and stammering. That said, if you're not sure what Christianity is all about, you are in good company.

Some, I'm sure, would take issue with me even trying to answer this question. They, and perhaps you, might ask, "Who are you to say what Christianity is all about?" I understand there are all kinds of interpretations, so my aim will not be to give you my take on this question, but to give you the long, standing historical view of Christianity. It's the view that's held most often, not by people who happen into church a couple times per year, but by those whose identity is very much wrapped up in being a Christian and who are most familiar with the biblical story on which Christianity stands.

I suppose the best place to build an understanding of what Christianity is all about is by starting at the beginning. That's what the Bible does. It starts with Genesis and the creation of the universe, including the creation of humankind. What it says is telling. It says God made people very good. That is, God stood back after He made men and women and gave Himself an A+. So it's no surprise that He had grand designs for them. He wanted men and women to live in harmony with one another, with creation, and most importantly with God Himself. This could not be accomplished in any manner; it could only be done if people were willing to play by God's rules. The rules weren't very extensive. They could be boiled down to this: trust in God enough to go His way instead of your own.

Now, as you might guess, humankind wasn't very good at playing by God's rules. God didn't tell the first man and woman much to do. One simple request, don't eat of one tree in a big garden. "Trust me in that," he said. But they didn't do it. And so has been the history of humankind. God asks this or that of us—like be kind to one another or keep your hands off another man's wife—and we disregard what He says and go another way. Don't miss what is said here. Christianity says God made everybody for relationship with Him, but humankind pushed aside that relationship for everything from fame to fortune and Pokémon to pole dancing. Or in succinct biblical terms, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

I am not sure what your view of God is. But for many today, God is a bit like parents at Christmas. They might sing a song about Santa checking his list for who has been naughty or nice, but in the end every kid gets a toy regardless. But that is not the God of Christianity. When we go our way instead of His, He doesn't wink and act like He doesn't see anything. Rather, He is like an umpire; He calls them like He sees them and has no problem calling a batter out. In fact, Jesus said something rather startling in this regard. He said that because of our less than perfect record of following God's ways, we all stand condemned before Him—a condemnation that leads to eternal separation from God.

Now, what we've got so far is the front half of the Christian story. God makes humanity. Humanity chooses to chart its own course with minimal regard for God. And God condemns humanity for it. So condemned are we that God sentences us to an eternity apart from Him. I know, I know, that seems harsh. Maybe even unfair. But this is what Christianity says. It says that as things currently stand we all

start out on the outside looking in. But as I said this is just the first half of what Christianity is all about. In fact, it is just the backdrop. The better part, or the good news, of the story is still to come.

I am fascinated with one particular human intuition. It's the intuition that heroes of the imperiled are to be cheered. Think about some of the movies you have gone to see. A character has found herself in a mess. Perhaps it is of her own making. Perhaps it is because of bad fortune. Perhaps it is because a "bad guy" has penned her against the wall. And then just when everything seems lost, a hero (perhaps even an unlikely one) shows up on the scene at just the right time and in just the right way to save the one who seems set to be crushed. Now, think of what happens in a theater when this happens. People cheer, don't they? The film the audience is watching might be fictional, but when a character swoops in and saves the imperiled, crowd after crowd cannot help but let out a triumphant cry.

I think I am fascinated with the human intuition to cheer the savior of the imperiled, because it mirrors the crux of Christianity. Yes, Christianity says God made us for relationship with him. Yes, Christianity says we broke that relationship through our own waywardness. And yes, Christianity says God has landed His gavel in judgment of our ways. But it says something else as well. It says God does not want to leave us there. It says as wayward as we might be, the last thing He wants to do is condemn us. As righteous judge, He must condemn us, but as loving Father, He wants to jump into the mess and save us. And so that's just what He did.

Most people have heard of Jesus. But people don't necessarily know Jesus was God's way of jumping into the mess and saving us. Sure, Jesus said some things about the way we ought to live, but he was much more than a moral teacher. He was sent to earth for one particular purpose: to save us from ourselves. Years ago during the Great Depression, it is said that an old man stood before the magistrate of a New York court. He was charged with stealing a loaf of bread. By coincidence, the mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, was the judge that day. Upon hearing the case, LaGuardia fined the old man \$10. "The law is the law, and cannot be broken," the mayor declared. But LaGuardia was not hard of heart and could see the plight of the man. How do you fine a man \$10 for stealing bread who has no money to buy bread in the first place? And so shortly after declaring the sentence, LaGuardia took a \$10 bill out of his own wallet and paid the fine for the man. The defendant, of course, stood amazed. Here was the mayor acting as both a judge who upholds the standard of justice and a compassionate forgiver of debt.

I share this story because it is right in step with what Christianity is all about. God, as the upholder of justice, has sentenced us to eternal separation from him. Why? Because "the law is the law, and cannot be broken." But in compassion, he has offered a way forward. He sent Christ to take the penalty of our sins onto himself and essentially pay the fine for our own short-comings by having one who didn't deserve to die for his sins, die in our place. One verse in the Bible sums it up well. It reads: "But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). What is most stunning about this verse is that it does not say that once we clean up our act, God demonstrates His love for us. If that were the case, we'd all be in trouble. Rather, it claims that *while we were yet sinners* Christ died for us.

The question asked here is: what is Christianity all about? The best way I know to answer the question is to say it's about the hero who has saved the imperiled. It is about Christ having come to offer a payment for our sins. All humanity sits condemned, but all humanity is offered forgiveness. All humanity is sentenced to separation from God, but all humanity has been granted a pardon.

Now, there is one more element of Christianity that is very important to understand. Frankly, you can't get a handle on Christianity without it. Christianity says Christ died so we could be put in good standing with God again, a standing that endures after we die. But Christianity also says the offer of forgiveness and pardon is just that an offer. It is not something God forces upon us. Think back to the LaGuardia story. Suppose the man was offered \$10 to pay the fine but refused to take it. In that case, he would have still been on the hook. The same is true for humanity. The offer has been made to forgive the sentence of separation from God, but the offer must be accepted. It doesn't cost anything other than admitting your need for it and recognizing that there are no other working offers on the table. Jesus summed this all up rather succinctly when he said, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:17-18).

So Christianity says God made us for relationship with him. It says we broke that relationship by charting our own path instead of going God's way. It says we are condemned for our waywardness. But it also says there is a way back to God, and it comes through accepting the offer given by Christ to trust in him as the only way God's judgment can be absolved. This is what Christianity is all about. Are there more pieces of the story that give it even more color and depth? Undoubtedly, and elsewhere I am sure to comment on some of it, but if you don't grasp what is written here, you are almost certainly sure to have missed out on what Christianity is all about.

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