

**BASICS**  
OF THE  
**CHRISTIAN FAITH**

**MADE EASY**



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# INTRODUCTION

**T**HE world today holds an array of faith traditions, each presenting their own version of our relationship to God, what happens after death, and God's ultimate plans for the world. Perhaps you've been exploring the menu, familiarizing yourself with the tenets of different religions.

When it comes to the Christian faith, you may have found yourself asking questions like *What makes someone a Christian? What are their core beliefs? How do they believe an ancient book like the Bible can guide their faith and practices?* Or maybe you've wondered, *What are Christians really doing when they pray? Why pray to someone you can't see? What's the point behind customs like baptism and communion?*

It can be overwhelming trying to sort through the vast amount of information on these subjects. Whether you're on a personal quest to find God, someone who's simply interested in learning more about what Christians believe, or a seasoned Christian who needs help explaining your faith to a friend, *Basics of the Christian Faith Made Easy* aims to provide concise answers to these questions and more.

First, we'll take a look at the basis of Christian faith and how it's revealed in their collection of Scriptures, called *the Bible*, and from there we'll explore the Christian concept of God's character. Next, we'll zero in on the central historical

figure of Christianity—Jesus Christ—and examine how Christians view his claims.

Once a person has placed their faith in Jesus Christ, or become a “believer,” as Christians are sometimes called by their own, they seek to follow his teachings and emulate his character—a process called discipleship. We’ll touch on what’s involved and the practices and disciplines of discipleship, as well as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which have been part of the Christian church for centuries. Finally, we’ll wrap up with what Christians believe about death, the afterlife, and God’s ultimate plans for the earth and humanity.

If you would like to jump to a quick reference that summarizes key Christian beliefs, feel free to take a peek at the chapters at the back of this book—“Quick Reference: 14 Key Christian Beliefs” and “The Apostles’ Creed.” A short list of resources for further reading and study is also included at the very end.

If you want to dive in at the beginning, you’ll learn some basics about the Bible—what it is and how Christians look to it as the authoritative source that describes who God is and how he relates to people. Are you ready to go? Let’s get started!



# HOW DO CHRISTIANS KNOW ABOUT GOD?

**G**OD: It's a word that's thrown around a lot, but have you ever wondered who God is or whether God even exists? The Christian faith is one that holds a strong belief in a supreme being who is closely involved with the world he created. But what makes Christians so sure that there is a God, and from where do they draw their concept of who he is and what he is like?

In a nutshell, Christians point to (1) **the beauty and complexity of the world around us**, and (2) their collection of Scriptures, called **the Bible**.

## Creation

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Christians believe that the wonders of the world we see—and even the intricacies of the world we can't see—point to a supreme Creator. The universe with its myriad stars and galaxies ... the fact the earth is the perfect distance from the sun, making life sustainable ... the vibrant colors of a rainbow or a sunset ... our planet's thousands of unique (and often curious) plant and animal species ... the amazing craftsmanship of the human body ... Christ's followers claim that such beauty and majesty could only originate from



a divine being. The following passages from the Bible illustrate this concept:

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.*

PSALM 19:1–2

*Ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature.*

ROMANS 1:20 NLT

## The Bible



In addition to creation, Christians point to the Bible—a collection of ancient writings and letters—as the source that reveals God’s identity, works, and character, as well as his plan for mankind. The Bible, Christians say, clearly shows that despite humanity’s many failures, God still cares deeply for the people he created and is actively involved in their lives. But what exactly is the Bible, and what does it say? Let’s take a closer look.

### **What Is the Bible?**

Many think the Bible is a thousand-plus pages of religious restrictions and requirements, but Christians

see this as a misconception. To understand their point of view, try looking at it like this: Imagine rooting around in your great-grandfather's basement. Buried in the corner next to an old phonograph is a big, overstuffed briefcase. Your heart races—maybe it's full of gold, jewels, or money!

Actually, it's even better than that. Within that leather portfolio you discover a treasure trove of old family documents: love letters and postcards, news clippings of major events, and tattered snapshots of relatives you didn't even know you had! You find birth and baptismal records, property deeds, marriage licenses, death certificates, and family genealogies. From that dusty satchel, you retrieve poems from someone's old journal, three or four outdated maps, plus a few vacation souvenirs. At the bottom of the briefcase, you even come across some old sheet music, a few "secret" family recipes, and folded-up building plans for your granddad's place, the old family homestead.

The Bible is a written history of the people of God—an assortment of ancient texts by dozens of authors—kings, prophets, scribes, followers of Jesus, and others.

What you have stumbled upon, of course, is a family history. All those individual documents and artifacts combine to tell the unique story of a specific family—yours. In a real sense, this is what the Bible is. It's a written history of the people of God—an assortment of ancient texts by dozens of authors—kings, prophets, scribes, followers

of Jesus, and others. These writings were composed over a period of some twelve to sixteen centuries! (For comparison's sake, Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in only six weeks.) After these biblical documents were written, they were copied, circulated, gathered together, guarded, recopied, and passed down through the generations.

Even though it's technically an anthology of sixty-six smaller books, the Bible tells one epic story. Like our “briefcase in the basement” example, the assorted books within the Bible include a variety of material. Among the first thirty-nine books of the Bible—what Christians call the Old Testament—are lengthy narratives of Israel's distant history and detailed records of moral and ceremonial law. Other Old Testament books consist of poetic or wisdom literature, and others are prophetic in nature.

The final twenty-seven books of the Bible—called the New Testament—include narratives of the life of Jesus and a history of the first three or more decades of the Christian movement.



These historical records are followed by a number of letters (some not much longer than a postcard) written to specific churches and individuals. The New Testament ends with the famous book of Revelation, an eye-popping book of wild imagery and heavenly visions of what is and what's to come.

## **Two Testaments, One Story**

The word *testament* means “agreement” or “covenant.” The Old Testament describes how the world began and the unfolding of good and evil. It testifies of God’s sadness over humanity’s sin and his promise to restore their relationship with him. This promise started to gain steam when God told an old man named Abraham that he would become a blessing to all nations and have a myriad of descendants and land that belonged to them. The books of the Old Testament

## **How Did We Get the Word *Bible*?**

Our English word *Bible* comes from the Greek word *biblion*, which means “scroll” or “book.” A similar term, *biblos*, was used to refer to the papyrus material shipped from the ancient port city of Byblos. Many biblical manuscripts were written on papyrus. The plural of *biblion* is *biblia*, and the term came to refer to a collection of holy writings or sacred scriptures. Jerome, a scholar in the fourth century who translated the Bible into Latin, called the books of the Bible “the Divine Library.”



chronicle the ups and downs of Abraham’s descendants, the Israelites, and God’s faithfulness to his promises despite the unfaithfulness of his people.

The emphasis is on a deliverer—a Messiah, meaning “anointed person”—whom God will raise up to save his wayward people and all of humanity from the curse of sin and death. When the last book of the Old Testament was written, about four centuries before the time of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, God’s people—the Jewish nation—and the rest of the human race were still groaning under the weight of sin.

The Bible is a single story—the written record of God’s efforts to seek and save humanity from the effects of a world broken by sin.

Christians see the New Testament as a record of how Jesus Christ of Nazareth revealed himself to be the Messiah—the great king and deliverer foretold by the prophets in the Old Testament—the fully human and fully divine Son of God. *Jesus* derives from his Hebrew name, Yeshua, and *Christ* derives from the Greek term *christos*, which means “anointed one.” Christians see his life, death, and resurrection as God’s way of inaugurating a new covenant between God and all humanity (both Jews and non-Jews). The New Testament also records the historical beginnings of this new covenant and the followers of Jesus, who came to be called Christians, as well as several letters and writings by leaders whom Jesus had appointed. As a whole, the writings of the New Testament help to establish and reinforce the basic beliefs and practices of the Christian faith.

The Bible, then, is a single story—the written record of God’s efforts to seek and save humanity from the effects of a world broken by sin. It has one consistent, overriding message: We humans will remain restless until we stop running from God, turn to him in faith, and find rest in the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Observant readers marvel at the many ways the Old Testament foreshadows the events of the New Testament, at how it ingeniously points to the coming of Jesus and completes the story of the Old Testament.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT

To see how the text of the Bible came to be, we have to go back around 3,400 years. Here’s the story in brief:

The Israelites, recently freed from Egyptian slavery, gathered at the base of Mount Sinai while Moses, their leader,

went to the summit to meet with God. It was there that the Israelites entered into a covenant with God, and it was then that God revealed his will—his plans and promises for his people.

The second book of the Bible, Exodus, describes the scene. It says that Moses “wrote down everything that the LORD had said” (Ex. 24:4).



A short time later, God gave Moses two tablets of stone said to be “inscribed by the finger of God” (Ex. 31:18). For Christians and Jews, this encounter is viewed as the beginning of the composition of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible—also known as the Pentateuch, the Law, or the five books of Moses.

For the next eight or so centuries, Israel wandered in the desert south of Canaan; settled in the promised land; lived under a series of judges and kings; constantly battled their enemies; gradually turned away from God; watched their nation disintegrate; went into exile; and then returned from captivity to rebuild their land.

During this long period, God inspired prophets, kings, scribes, and unknown individuals to write down stories, lessons, and principles that he wanted preserved for posterity. He had these writers chronicle historical events; compose poems, songs, and wise sayings; and also record chilling and thrilling prophecies. In time, all these writings became what Christians know as the Old Testament.

There are many details we don't know about the actual “creation” of the Old Testament: how in each instance this mysterious divine and human collaborative process worked; who specifically wrote each and every book; and when precisely each of these writings first appeared as ink on parchment.

But there is much we do know. We know that ancient Israelite culture was an oral culture. They carefully

memorized, constantly repeated, and faithfully handed down the stories of God's marvelous acts in history. We know, too, that the ancient Israelites were literate; they could read and write. We know they kept written records. Given all these oral traditions and careful records, at any point, a person guided by the Spirit could have sat down and faithfully recorded whatever God wanted revealed. We also know that occasionally the prophets were explicitly commanded by God to put his messages in writing.

The writings of the Old Testament were copied and recopied many times over the centuries. Roughly from 500 BC to the time of Jesus in the first century AD was

## **How Did We Get the Word *Christian*?**

The book of Acts in the New Testament says that believers in Jesus were first called "Christians" at a place called Antioch, located in modern-day Turkey. The name obviously stuck, but what does it mean? *Christ* comes from the Greek term for the Hebrew Messiah, *christos*, which means "anointed one." To be anointed in the Hebrew culture was to be set apart for some special service. It came to be associated in the Prophetic writings of the Old Testament with God's promised Savior from the line of King David—Jesus. The "-ian" ending indicates belonging or membership. Christian means "one who belongs to Christ," or "one who is a part of Christ."

an era when many scholars think the books of the Hebrew Bible were gathered and arranged into a widely accepted canon of Scripture. By the time of Jesus, the Hebrew Bible was frequently called “the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings,” “the Law, the Prophets, and Psalms,” or simply “the Law and the Prophets.” The apostle Paul referred to the Hebrew Scriptures as “the old covenant.”



## THE NEW TESTAMENT

Christians view the New Testament as a continuation and fulfillment of the teachings and prophecies established in the Old Testament. Here is a peek at what’s in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament:

### ◆ **Four Gospels**

The New Testament begins with four accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. (The word *gospel* means “good news.”) The writers were Matthew and John (apostles of Jesus) and Mark and Luke (close associates of the apostles).

### ◆ **The Book of Acts**

Also called “Acts of the Apostles,” this book is Luke’s “sequel” to his gospel. In it, he chronicles the beginning and expansion of the early church in the first thirty or so years after Jesus. *Apostle* is a term

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that comes from the New Testament Greek word *apostolos*, which means “one sent on a mission.”

◆ **Twenty-One Epistles**

These letters were written to various churches and individual Christians.

◆ **The Book of Revelation**

This last book of the New Testament (and the Bible) is apocalyptic in nature, meaning that it envisions a great change in the world as God’s kingdom is fully established on the earth.