

In the New Testament, Hell is sometimes called Gehenna. This was a reference to the Valley of Hinnom, a rubbish dump outside Jerusalem where the rubbish was burnt. The fires never went out and it made a vivid metaphor for a place of eternal punishment.

To Christians, one thing is certain about the afterlife; it lasts forever. It is not surprising therefore that belief in an afterlife can influence the behaviour of believers in their present life.

### FOR DISCUSSION

How might belief in a Day of Judgement and life after death affect the attitudes and behaviour of believers? Try to think of both positive and negative effects.

The fact that every individual is responsible for his or her actions implies another important belief: that humans have been created with free will. Christians believe that people are free to choose to follow the teachings of Christianity or to reject them but they must face the consequences of their decision at the Last Judgement. At first it seems difficult to reconcile the idea of free will with the complete control that God has over everything. Christians have different beliefs about predestination and free will and the balance between the two. Sometimes the idea of predestination is described as being like a game of chess. The players can see the moves as the game progresses and they can think ahead to some of the strategies to deal with the possibilities. A chess master can see further ahead than most people and predict the outcome of the game. God is omniscient, he knows everything. God has no restrictions and can see both past and future. The players have their freedom to make their moves in the game of life but the plans of God anticipate and incorporate what he knows is going to happen. This is Predestination by Foreknowledge. God is also more caring than we can imagine. Christians trust God to know best and to do what is best for them.

Christians believe that God is omnipotent; that means God has the power to do anything. Nothing is

impossible with God. Obviously this raises some other important religious questions. If God is so powerful and cares so much then how does Christianity explain the existence of evil and suffering?

Christians believe that God's creation was perfect. This creation included other unseen worlds besides the physical natural universe and other beings besides humans and animals. Among these beings are angels, messengers of God, who have no free will and no physical bodies, though they can take on human shape.

Many Christians believe that a fallen angel, 'Lucifer, Son of the Morning', was cast out of heaven but is allowed to tempt humans till the Day of Judgement. This tempter is known as Satan or the Devil. The gospels tell of Jesus being tempted by the Devil in the wilderness.

The Biblical explanation of evil points to a very important conviction: that, however bad things may seem in the world, good is more powerful than evil. It is not a battle between two equal forces or two gods. There is only One God. In the end, good is certain to win. In fact, according to Christians the main victory has been won already, when Jesus was crucified and rose again.

### FORGIVENESS

Jesus taught his followers to pray to God for forgiveness for their sins. The first step towards forgiveness is repentance. This means being truly sorry for the things you have done which are wrong. It also means trying to make amends for the wrongdoing.

The need for repentance and confession is mentioned often in the Jewish Scriptures, especially by the prophets.

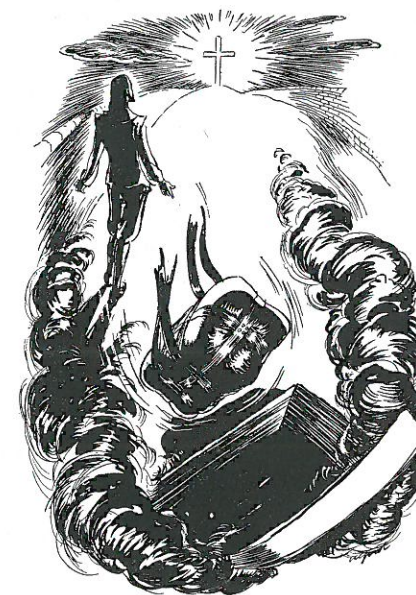
Jesus himself used to forgive sins. On the cross he even forgave his enemies.

*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*

(Luke 23:34)

Jesus taught his followers that if they were truly repentant then God would forgive them, no matter what dreadful things they had done. They could stop feeling guilty and get on with living a new life.

For some Christians the experience of knowing that they are forgiven is so emotional and overpowering that they describe it as feeling like the burden of sin has fallen from their back.



*Christian losing his burden at the cross, from John Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress'.*

Though Christians can confess their sins and pray to God at home, some prefer to confess their sins to a priest in confidence. The power 'to loose and bind' (to forgive sins) was given to the apostles (according to Matthew 16:19 and 18:18) and in some churches priests have the authority to give absolution, to say that the sins are forgiven.

Many Christian churches organise their services to include a general confession spoken by the whole congregation followed by absolution in the communion service.

Christians believe that they cannot buy forgiveness and they cannot earn forgiveness by doing good deeds. They believe that if they have faith that Jesus died for their sins they will be forgiven by the free grace of God.

At the Last Supper when Jesus offered the cup of wine to his disciples, he said, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.' Christians remember these words when they celebrate the Eucharist (see page 97).

If Christians appreciate the fact that their sins are forgiven then they will show their gratitude and be generous in forgiving other people.

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

(Ephesians 4:32)