

Roman Catholics distinguish between mortal sins which are serious matters (e.g. murder) and venial sins which are the failings of everyday life. Mortal sins need to be confessed to a priest.

From very early times, priests were meant to keep secret what they were told in the confessional and it has been a church law ever since 1215.

SALVATION

Jesus Christ ... who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. (Nicene Creed)

Salvation is the healing of a broken relationship between people and God, which brings new life and peace.

When they experience forgiveness of sin and commit themselves to following Jesus, some Christians say that they have been saved. They are using the language of the New Testament.

In the New Testament, Jesus is described as 'the Saviour of the world' (1 John 4:14). Christians believe that Jesus saves people from their sins. In John's gospel Jesus is called 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29).



In Mark 10:45 Jesus says, 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Salvation is also called redemption and another Christian title for Jesus Christ is the Redeemer. This idea comes from the practice of buying back, redeeming or paying the price for a slave's freedom.

Many of the metaphors to explain how Jesus paid for human sin continue to be used by Christians today. The situation is sometimes likened to a court room in which justice had to be done. Jesus accepted the penalty which was due as the punishment for sin even though he had done no wrong. He died in the place of sinners. He atoned for what they had done wrong.

Sometimes Christians talk about the blood of Jesus washing away sin. They are describing the crucifixion as a sacrifice of the life-blood, a pure offering which had to be made to appease a just God for the sins of the world.

This makes God seem harsh but Christians say God was providing a solution to the problem of sin because of his love for humankind.

Christians had a rich heritage of Jewish ideas to draw from. Jesus and his followers were always quoting the Jewish Scriptures. Atonement was a familiar idea to them because of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which is a fasting day on the tenth day after Rosh Hashanah, the New Year.

A goat, a scapegoat, used to be driven into the wilderness symbolically carrying away the sins of the people.

Jewish rituals at this time involve confessing sins and making a new start. To atone means to make up for something which was wrong. On the Day of Atonement, sins are atoned for and God and the people are reconciled, they are made as one.

Christians borrowed this idea to express their belief that the death of Jesus was for all time the atonement for the sin of the world.

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

(1 John 2:2)

ETERNAL LIFE

When people die who believe in God they are said to be in a state of grace and Christians believe their souls will go to heaven and have eternal life. God is eternal so friendship with God is eternal.

Life after death is sometimes called everlasting life. This is because it goes on for ever. Unbelievers are said to spend forever in hell. Christians have different ideas about hell. The New Testament pictures it as flames but also as weeping and gnashing of teeth in outer darkness, which is a way of describing unhappiness at being separated from God.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

(John 3:16)

In New Testament teaching, especially in the Gospel of John, the eternal life which is promised to believers is not simply everlasting life, something that goes on for ever. Eternal life with God refers not only to quantity, or length of time, but also to quality of life. Christians believe that eternal life with God is something so good and so beautiful that it is beyond human imagination but they can have a glimpse of it because in some ways eternal life, heaven and hell begin here on earth.

John's gospel says the moment of accepting the Christian faith is a new start, so it is like being born all over again. Eternal life for the believer has started at that moment.



THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Then God spoke all these words. He said:

I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you lived as slaves. 'You shall have no other gods to rival me. You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God and I punish a parent's fault in the children, the grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren among those who hate me; but I act with faithful love towards thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not leave unpunished anyone who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath for Yahweh your God. You shall do no work that day, neither you nor your son nor your daughter nor your servants, men or women, nor your animals nor the alien living with you. For in six days Yahweh made the heavens, earth and sea and all that these contain, but on the seventh day he rested; that is why Yahweh has blessed the Sabbath day and made it sacred. Honour your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false evidence against your neighbour. You shall not set your heart on your neighbour's house. You shall not set your heart on your neighbour's spouse, or servant, man or woman, or ox, or donkey, or any of your neighbour's possessions.

(Exodus 20:1-17 The New Jerusalem Bible)