

# Religion // Cruciformity

There is no standard scholarly agreement on what exactly is meant by the word *religion*, so defining *religion* (from the Latin *religiō*) can be a bit tricky. In fact, prior to the 16th and 17th centuries, the concept of religion, as a *distinct set of beliefs or doctrines*, didn't really exist.

Today, we would probably summarise religion as a *unifying social-cultural system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred, supernatural, or spiritual elements*. We may tend to also think of religion, particularly in a Christian context, as somewhat *creedal*, that is, as a set of ideas, formulas, regulations, or practices that are defined in some formal way, such as through statements, creeds, confessions, and denominational distinctives.

The word religion, from the Latin *religiō*, meaning 'to bind', is a word which in the ancient and medieval world was used to refer to *individual virtue of worship; respect for what was sacred, and a reverence for the divine*. It described an attitude of *being* rather than a *creedal position* and it related to the *individual* rather than the *collective*.

The act of *binding to* – of *religio* – is an act of faithfulness to something or someone, to which one is bound as if by a pledge or duty. It's similar to when someone makes an *oath of allegiance* to their country, effectively *binding themselves* to that country and pledging to respect, uphold and obey its laws.

In fact, companions to the word *religio* would be words like *duty, fealty, allegiance, or obedience*. Used with its original meaning in mind, it's a worthy addition to a list of descriptors we might use for the relationship that is formed when someone surrenders authority over their life to Jesus.

*Religion* is actually a necessary undertaking of every

Christian who wishes to give their life and allegiance to Jesus as king and who chooses to surrender to his guidance and leadership in their life. This *binding to Jesus – religio* – and the reality that he becomes everything in a person's life – is what it means to become a child of God, joined to the mission of God to the world and submitting to His will, in Christ, for our lives. It is an act of individual virtue of worship, not simply an acceptance of a creedal statement or list of practices.

*“So, then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” | Ephesians 2:19-20 CSB*

For many of us, however, this isn't our experience of religion.

What we may have experienced or grown up with and what we would describe as *religion* is probably; adherence to a distinct set of beliefs, doctrines, or practices (some of which find their roots in scripture, some which don't).

Perhaps our family's beliefs eventually became our own; their set of doctrines were absorbed as ours, and we found ourselves one day 'a Christian, attending church', without giving too much thought to the process by which we got there. We accepted, without question, someone else's *religion*, as we might accept an old, hand-me-down sweater, thinking to make it our own.

*Religious* is perhaps what many of us became; that is, we converted to Christianity by adopting a set of beliefs and practices related to the historical figure of Jesus. Our *religiosity* as Christians might have been further defined by our identification with one particular denomination's creeds and practices over another.

Yet both these actions are not describing the true nature of *religion*. The differences may be subtle, almost indistinguishable from one another; however the reality is that what we may have ended up giving our allegiance to was a *system*, rather than to *Jesus*.

While being a Christian is certainly communal, and while Christians tend to believe mostly all the same fundamental creeds, and while the creeds and practices of Christianity can be taught and preached and are, in many ways, intrinsically invaluable to religion, *true religion* is the *individual and deeply personal matter of an individual's binding to the person of Christ*.

*Religion*, in the true sense of the word, cannot be passed down.

*'Part of the genius of genuine Christianity is that each generation has to think it through afresh. Precisely because God wants every single Christian to grow up in understanding as well as trust, the Christian faith has never been something that one generation can sort out in such a way as to leave their successors with no work to do.'* (N T Wright)

*"Don't think of worship in terms of attending a church service, singing praise and worship songs or honouring the name of Jesus. The meaning of worship touches much larger questions. Namely, worship is all about who has the authority over our lives. Who will have our submission? Who will be given first place? Who will win our love, allegiance and devotion? True worship is absolute committal, surrender and submission to God." | Frank Viola, Insurgence*

## **Counterfeit Religion**

Paul the Apostle wrote his letter to the Galatians addressing an idea that had taken root at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did plus additional 'spiritual

acts' that are undertaken, that we are made "*right with God by what we do*".

However, this is performance-based Christianity – in fact, probably a rather apt description of our modern understanding of *religion*. Paul reiterates to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

*"Foolish Galatians, who has cunningly deceived you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly set forth as crucified? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now completed in the flesh? He therefore who supplies the Spirit to you, and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by hearing of faith?" | Galatians 3:1-5, New Heart English Bible*

Patterns of thought, actions, or behaviours, which are deemed 'godly' 'spiritual' or 'biblical' can often become the outward markers of people who are perceived to be *religious* but may, in reality, mask a heart far from allegiance to Christ.

Anything apart from 'binding to the cross of Jesus' results in toxic faith – *religion* that has gone wrong, leading to dependence on others' approval and not God's. Anything that adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and binds us to human systems of belief or worship, and not to God.

Yielding our allegiance to a set of beliefs, as *the primary driving force*, will result in Christians who may have a form of godliness but who deny the miraculous power of transformation implicit in such a life; a Christian life marked by the cruciform love of Jesus (John 13:5).

It is, quite simply, putting the cart before the horse.

As Christian Evangelist Gordon Fee comments, *“If you had asked Paul to define what a Christian is, he would not have said, ‘A Christian is a person who believes X and Y doctrines about Christ,’ but ‘A Christian is a person who walks in the Spirit, who **knows** Christ.’”* (Gordon Fee, 1934-2022)

There is a subtle yet crucial difference and the long-term effects of mistaking one for the other can be disastrous.

Christian life will become joyless, suffocating, without meaning, and without power. This kind of Christian morphs into ‘clouds without water, carried along by the wind, inflated but empty; fruitless trees in autumn, whose branches are disappointingly empty at harvest time.’ They become rooted in performance, rules, patterns of behaviour, and intractable systems of belief that leave very little room for any theological growth or deeper understanding. The lifeblood of faith – the crucified and resurrected Christ – seems almost an afterthought when laid alongside the many parameters they will use to define their *religion*.

Critically, a true and meaningful relationship with God will never be sustained on this basis.

*“When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.” – Abraham Heschel*

This is why Paul makes what initially seems to be a brief and insignificant statement regarding the gospel (but is, in actual fact, one of the most powerful statements he makes), *“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David; such is my gospel.”* (2 Timothy 2:8, ISV).

The starting point – the impetus behind the act of binding to (*religio*) for the Christian life is *faith by grace alone in the crucified Christ*. The animating and life-transforming force in a Christian's [walk with God](#) is the [resurrection life](#) of the living Christ; a cruciform life.

This, and this alone, is what any Christian must first and foremost be bound to.

*“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” | 1 Corinthians 2:1-3, CSB*

## **Journey To Cruciformity**

Choosing Jesus, truly choosing him above all else, means rethinking everything you thought you knew about your faith and what – or who – your life is bound to. It means learning that your identity must rest on the rock of Christ, not in others' opinions of you or in the set of beliefs to which they subscribe, even if those beliefs are ones which you would agree with. It means making decisions others can and will criticise and judge you for. It means being much less certain in your own abilities and more certain in the reality of God's grace in your life.

It means wrestling and arguing with God, with fervent prayer and pleading, to finally arriving at the understanding that God will provide everything that you need. It means, perhaps, starting again at the place where Jesus needs to truly become the Lord of your life; that he has your complete allegiance and your life is bound to his.

You may discover that what you have been searching for, all this time, to feel whole and secure, will only be found in the one who loved like no other, laying down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

*“To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus, for my life is wholly bound (religio) to his. Oh, how strange and divine, I can sing: all is mine. Yet not I, but through Christ in me.” | City Alight*

Jesus taught his disciples that following him meant that one had to be willing to *“pick up their cross daily”* (Luke 9:23; 14:27). Cruciformity is, in essence, *conformity to the cross*; a life that is shaped by the narrative of the cross.

Cruciformity was the beating heart of God’s mission to the world demonstrated in full measure by the ministry of Jesus, who came *“not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:1-17). The cruciform life, therefore, is one that is a living exegesis of the story of Jesus, beginning firstly in identification with his death and then flowing outwards in a living embodiment of his resurrection.

Cruciformity does not mean *‘being spiritual’* or *‘belonging to a faith community’* or *‘seeking spiritual direction’*. Of course, it may involve those things but the cruciform life is grounded in the wholehearted trust that God will keep His promises, demonstrated in the crucified Jesus, and this trust is constantly affirmed and expressed by a transformed life.

A truly cruciform, gospel-shaped life starts with the activity of God. It is God who is saving us and it is God who is renewing us. It is God who accepts our belief in the sacrifice of Jesus and sends [His Spirit](#) into our lives to regenerate us as new creatures in His Son.

**A cruciform life is one that is pointed in pursuit of Jesus and utterly and completely *bound to him*.**

*“A person who lives by the indwelling life of Christ through the Holy Spirit is a person who is under Law. But it is not the Law of Moses. Nor is it a Law that some preacher created*

*from his own personal standards. No, the Law I'm referring to is 'the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:3). This Law is like the law of gravity; it's a constant force or power. You and I have an indwelling Lord. The Law of God has been written on our hearts because Jesus Christ lives within us by his Spirit. This is the promise of the new covenant. Spiritual people (religious people)(italics, ours) are those who live by the Lord's life that indwells them. They know by instinct what the will of God is (1 John 2:27). Where the Spirit leads them, they yield to it (for the most part) – no matter what the cost. And life and peace are the results (Romans 8:6). The external Law, then, is no longer an outward thing full of dead letters and cold commands. It has been transferred into the indwelling life of Christ. To live by Christ is our highest calling as people of the insurgence." | Frank Viola, Insurgence*

*"Christ carried the burden of our sins. He was nailed to the cross, so we would stop sinning and start living right. By his cuts and bruises, you are healed. You had wandered away like sheep. Now you have returned to the one who is your shepherd and protector." | 1 Peter 2:24-25, CSB*

---

**\*"The word 'theology' literally means '*thinking about God*'. One classic definition of theology was given by St Anselm. He called it '*faith seeking understanding*' and for many this is the true function of Christian theology." | Paul Badham**

**Our theology – what we think about God – is therefore important. How can we begin to know and understand ourselves and our place in this expansive creation if we have no sense of the One who made us and the purpose for which we've been made?**

**However, a robust and living theology will spring from knowing**



and experiencing *who God is* and what *He has done for us*, in Jesus, and is not simply giving agreement to a statement or creed of 'theological beliefs'.

By affirming the biblical narrative, that we are saved by grace through faith alone, we begin a journey towards a deeper understanding of *who God is*, which only grows as our Christian life progresses. Our theology is, perhaps then, best described as an expedition of discovery, rather than a destination at which we arrive. We discern more and more about the heart and mind of the Creator as our life progresses. This knowing and experiencing – this [walking with God](#) – renews us day by day to become more like the crucified Lord we follow.

Jesus was the exact representation of God and the very imprint of His nature ([Hebrews 1:3](#), [John 14:10-11](#)), the Word-made-flesh who took up residence amongst us ([John 1:1-14](#)). By knowing him, we can know God (Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3, 2 Peter 1:3).

To know God is to know Jesus, whom He sent (John 17:3) and, therefore, the true starting point of our *theology* as Christians is looking to Jesus and, fundamentally, to Jesus crucified. Our *theology* begins with *cruciformity*; a life first and foremost surrendered to the crucified Christ in faith.

Theology, *true theology* – thinking about God – will be seen and witnessed in *cruciformity* (Galatians 5:22-23); a life pointed in pursuit of Jesus and utterly and completely *bound to him*.

This article was first published 10 February 2021

---

## Jesus, The Hope Of The World

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

*“Behold, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Emmanuel” (which means, “God with us”)* | Matthew 1:23, BRB

Scripture tells of a crowded family home in a bustling ancestral town, set at the southern end of the Judean hills. Filled to the brim already, perhaps with relatives from both near and far, there was [no room in the guest quarters](#) for the additional arrival of a heavily pregnant Mary, accompanied by her fiancée Joseph.

Exhausted from the arduous travel to Bethlehem, necessitated by the tax decree from Cæsar Augustus (Luke 2:1), Mary and Joseph found space in the ground floor family room with Joseph’s extended family; a comfortable, homely room filled with hollows of straw, and where the animals also slept and fed.

Surrounded by family, and labouring in a crowded, warm, Israeli home like many other women before her, Mary gave birth to her first child, a son. His name was to be ‘Jesus’ (meaning ‘Yahweh will save’) and he was born to ‘save his people from their sins’ (Matthew 1:21).

*“A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn...”* | O Holy Night

## **The Necessity Of Jesus’ Humanity**

It was an important and necessary reality that Jesus [shared in our humanity](#); a connection which he derived from his mother, Mary.

Jesus’ redemptive work on behalf of humanity was deeply connected to his own humanity. His ability to sympathise with us and to reconcile on our behalf springs from a complete understanding of what it is like to be human; with all our

doubts, fears, temptations, and failures. He understood humans *because he was human.*

The story of his birth impresses upon us just how similar he was to us in every way, even to the unremarkable ordinariness of his birth.

Like countless babies before him, he was born surrounded by noise and bustle, sweat, blood, and tears. Relatives would have crowded around to proudly admire (what was assumed to be) Joseph's firstborn son. Mary would have comforted the newborn's hungry cries by pressing him closely to her breast. His arrival was, on one hand, a thoroughly human affair, recognisable the world over.

*"There are three creation stories of the creation of humanity in the Bible. The first is that humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. The second is that a human is formed from the dust of the earth and the woman is taken from man: she is flesh of his flesh. The third is that humanity is reborn through a saviour; who is born of a woman, and he is flesh of her flesh...Jesus is made of her, not just in her. He is made from her and not just through her. How else could Jesus be connected to the line of David [King of Israel] through Mary unless the baby was truly hers, albeit born of the Spirit. This physical connection to Mary is the basis of the story of salvation, the proof that our own flesh, our souls and bodies, can be redeemed and cleansed and resurrected." | Lucy Peppiatt*

Yet, despite the seemingly unremarkable circumstances of his birth, God was, in fact, doing something completely remarkable and unique in and through this child. This newborn babe was the Word-Made-Flesh, God-With-Us, and his birth was an event that would change the course of human history forever.

# The Darkness Of The Human Heart

When God originally created this world and the humans that inhabit it, He did so with purpose and intentionality. He wanted humanity to choose to '[walk with Him](#)', to want to be like Him, and to partner with Him in His glorious mission to fill the earth with His glory.

Yet much of the Bible is a repetitive narrative of human failure, telling over and over again of the inability of humans to live as the perfect image-bearers that God had intended.

Disobedience of God's directive in the very beginning and the first act of sin in the world brought about its awful consequence for humanity; a sentence of death, and being sent from God's presence in shame and disappointment. Instead of beauty, the first humans received a crown of ashes and instead of joy, they experienced loss and mourning.

Not only this, the spiritual heart of humanity became darkened and sick, in desperate need of healing and regeneration. Humanity died that day – not physically or immediately, but spiritually. Our union with God was severed and we became separated from God's presence. Seeking our own will at the expense of God's glory, we were incapable of living the glorious life He had intended for us. And, just as we have inherited physical life from our parents, so too we have inherited spiritual death.

*“Made for spirituality, we wallow in introspection. Made for joy, we settle for pleasure. Made for justice, we clamour for vengeance. Made for relationship, we insist on our own way. Made for beauty, we are satisfied with sentiment.” | N T Wright*

Every human who is born comes into the world physically alive but spiritually dead. Without our spiritual connection with

God, we are nothing more than 'dead men walking', living in darkness and far from the eternal life God intended for us.

*"And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't."  
Romans 7:18, NLT*

*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? Jeremiah 17:9, ESV*

*"This is an evil in everything that is done under the sun: There is one fate for everyone. Furthermore, the hearts of men are full of evil and madness while they are alive, and afterward they join the dead." Ecclesiastes 9:3, BSB*

*"For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." Galatian 5:17, ESV*

## **The Necessity Of Jesus' Divinity**

But God, in His infinite love, did not leave anything to chance in His plan of saving and redeeming humanity.

Despite human failure and many, many detours [in this story](#), God has declared that His purpose will not be thwarted. He will accomplish what He intended for His creation, even to His own personal cost, as it turns out.

*"I declare the end from the beginning and ancient times from what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and all My good pleasure I will accomplish.'" | Isaiah 46:10, ESV*

Jesus was born to 'save his people from their sins'; to break the power of death and to reconcile all of humanity back to

God. Yet no 'ordinary human' could possibly have achieved this remarkable feat.

The child of both a human father and a human mother would have resulted in the kind of human we see around us every day and indeed within our own selves – a person who is subject to the ravaging effects of sin and governed by a heart that is, in its deepest recesses, at enmity with God. This kind of human couldn't possibly have overcome sin or lived, without fault, as God's perfect image-bearer. Nor could this kind of human have defeated the power of death by virtue of living a sinless life, perfectly obeying God's moral law.

Jesus was human, born of a human mother. However, prophecies that spoke of the coming saviour made it clear that he was to be born of a virgin, with no human father involved in his conception (Isaiah 7:14). Instead, the Holy Spirit moved and, in the same way that creation sprang into being at God's command (Genesis 1), so too it was the animating force for the conception of God's Son. "God said" and it was so!

*"The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent His own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body, God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving His Son as a sacrifice for our sins." | Romans 8:3, NLT*

*"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil." | Hebrews 2:14, NIV*

*"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" | John 1:14 NIV*

John, the author of the fourth gospel account in the New Testament, deliberately parallels the Genesis account when beginning his record of this pivotal and distinctly unique moment in human history; the arrival of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

He tells us that 'in the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). The use of the Greek word *logos* here is frustratingly difficult to adequately convey in English by a single word. Literally meaning "I say", it's not used for 'a word' in the grammatical sense; the term *lexis* (λέξις, *léxis*) would have been used in that instance. However, both *logos* and *lexis* derive from the same verb *légō* (λέγω), meaning "(I) count, tell, say, speak".

That 'Word', and all that is contained by the expression, became flesh and 'dwelt among us'. He was 'God-With-Us'; anyone who saw him saw all the radiance of God's glory; the exact representation of His being and the imprint of His nature (Hebrews 1:3, John 14:10-11).

Paul the Apostle tells us that Jesus, who was in the very nature of God, emptied himself and took the form of a servant, made in the likeness of humans that sin (Philippians 2:6-7). He became the representative of us all and in his human body, the war against sin and death would be waged and won.

## **A New Creation In Jesus**

All of human history had been leading up to this moment, when creation would be reconciled and redeemed back to God and to the purpose for which it had been created. Through his human descent, Jesus was connected to us all, right back to the garden of Eden; and what was done by one man (Adam) to the detriment of us all, would be reversed in another, 'the second Adam', who was to be a life-giving Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45).

Other places in scripture, particularly the writings of Paul the Apostle, affirm that the revelation of God's original plan of creation, the redeeming, recreating, and re-ordering of all things, together with the reconciliation of creation to its Creator, all find their true and most meaningful significance in Jesus Christ, the Word-Made-Flesh (Ephesians 1:3-10; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-3; Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 8:6). The invisible God was now revealing Himself visibly through His Word-Made-Flesh, in whose hands the world and all that is therein, has been placed. (John 3:35; Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20).

In Jesus Christ, we find the reasons for truth and life. In him, we find the source of life and the light of humanity, the light that shines in the darkest places of the human heart, bringing peace to the chaos and creating order and beauty again (John 1:4, 2 Corinthians 4:6).

In the unique person of Jesus, God was doing a completely new thing; bringing about a new creation and restoring again the hearts of humanity to a whole relationship with Him (Isaiah 43:19, 2 Corinthians 5:17).

*“For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” | 2 Corinthians 4:6, NKJV*

## **Focusing On The Miracle**

Jesus was both the son of a human mother and the son of a divine Father; the human and the divine embodied within the one individual. He was born specifically and uniquely, after centuries of human failure, that, in him, the Creator might redeem His creation. He was the “Word-Made-Flesh” – the ‘one and only of his kind’, a man, *but not merely a man* and in him, ‘the entire fullness (completeness) of God’s nature dwells



bodily' (Colossians 2:9).

Theologians have deliberated about this seemingly impossible reality for centuries. As early as 300 hundred years after Jesus' birth, a council of Christian bishops convened in the city of Nicaea (now known as the town of İznik, in modern-day Turkey) to decide on the longstanding theological debate regarding the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God.

Settlement of the debate was affected by the creation of the Nicene Creed, a statement of beliefs now widely used in Christian liturgy. With the creation of the creed, a precedent was established for subsequent local and regional councils of Bishops to create statements of belief and canons of doctrinal orthodoxy. The intention was to define unity of beliefs for the whole of Christendom.

And yet, the arguments still rage today. Dialogue tends to grapple with the *how* (and the answer to this is perhaps well outside our paygrade), focusing on the need to fully explain and document *in what way* the person of Jesus was the Word-Made-Flesh. Quite often, the miraculous reality is lost in the foray of dogmatic contention.

What is often also lost is an acknowledgment and rejoicing in the *why* – that only the Word-Made-Flesh could truly and completely redeem humanity. Only God stepping personally into the drama and chaos of humanity through the sending of His Son could solve the dilemma of sin and death that we all share in. And this miracle of redemption and rescue was achieved through God's only Son, both human and divine.

*“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. (1 John 1:1–2) and*

*God was manifest (appeared) in the flesh.” (1 Timothy 3:16)*

*“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and His arm rules for Him;” | Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-10, ESV*

## **Nature + Nurture**

Who we are as individuals is derived from both genetic predisposition (‘nature’) and environmental factors (‘nurture’)

The reference to ‘nature’ is the idea that human behaviour can be considered to be the result of ‘pre-wiring’; information or characteristics that are determined by our genes. These biological factors influence our predisposition to certain traits and behaviours and are determined at a gene level, over which we have no personal ability to control.

The reference to ‘nurture’ relates to the idea that the environment a person is exposed to, either prenatally or during a person’s life, will influence and affect the development and psychology of an individual, and therefore their resulting behaviours and traits.

Studies conducted in the twentieth century on twins who had been separated at birth concluded that human behavioural development is affected by both nature and nurture – both an individual's natural disposition and the environment in which they are raised.

When we consider the impact of this in relation to Jesus, both son of man and son of God, at once human and divine, we understand certain passages of scripture in a new light and are amazed at the mastery of God in relation to the remarkable reality of His son.

Firstly, the genealogy of Jesus is important. It's one of the first things that the gospel of Luke makes known – that is, the genetic origins of the one who is to be called the Christ.

He is born to a young woman descended from the family of the great King David, a woman favoured of the Lord and deeply devout and spiritual in her faith (Luke 1:28, 47-55). Joseph, the man who would become his earthly adoptive father, was also 'a good man', honourable, faithful, and generous-hearted (Matthew 1:18-19). Joseph was not willing to put Mary through public disgrace, despite the initial assumption of scandal that surrounded her pregnancy.

Yet Jesus is also born in Bethlehem, an [insignificant village in Judah](#) (Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:6) to a poor family who could only offer the most inexpensive of offerings at his birth (Luke 2:24, Leviticus 12:8)

There was nothing in his circumstances that any human could boast in and he certainly wasn't born into the privilege, wealth, or status that we might normally associate with royalty.

Everything about his arrival was so counter-cultural to expectation that it's no wonder he was overlooked and discounted by even his own peers and fellow countrymen. By all accounts, he was nothing special – the son of a country

carpenter – if even his actual son, as the whispers rumoured a different story – and, in this way, he represents every single one of us.

In his humanity, he felt everything that we feel, our stresses, fears, struggles, heartbreaks. He understood what it was like to be poor, rejected, and marginalised. He understood oppression and abuse of power. Yet he also understood the joy of our humanity; love, family, celebration, hope. He appeared to be completely ordinary and in his complete human ordinariness, he could not have represented us better (Isaiah 53:2).

Yet despite outward appearances, he was anything but ordinary. In nature, his heart belonged to His Father (John 6:38, John 4:34) and his mission was to do his Father's will, accomplishing the work that He had given him to do (John 6:38). In him, God was glorified and in him *'mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other'* (Psalm 85:10-11).

*"This Good News is about His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In his human nature, he was a descendant of David. In his spiritual holy nature, he was declared the Son of God. This was shown in a powerful way when he came back to life." | Romans 1:3-5 (GW)*

In Jesus, we see everything that God is.

Scripture could not be any clearer that the victory over sin and death was going to be God's, accomplished through the sending of His Son. Sent in the likeness of all of humanity, but in whom dwelt all the fullness of God, only the uniquely special Son of God would be able to overcome and defeat our greatest enemy.

There is a world of meaning in what it was to be "the Son of God", 'begotten not created', 'spiritual, not earthly'. Jesus

was enough like us in the ways that mattered to defeat sin and overcome death on our behalf but also enough **not** like us that a victory could and would be won, and that this victory would be God's, not ours.

With the arrival of Jesus, the Word-Made-Flesh, God-With-Us, we are being invited to think about all that 'God' is in new and breathtaking ways. We are challenged to comprehend the reality that all the goodness and love and compassion and righteousness and truth and mercy that God is took up residence amongst us. Jesus confirmed that those who had 'seen him, had seen the Father' and that 'I and my Father are one'. He was everything that is God, expressed in human form. God had arrived, in the person of His Son (Isaiah 40:4, Mark 1:3).

## **Theology | Faith Seeking Understanding**

This article is obviously referencing core biblical theology in relation to salvation, redemption, the nature of Jesus, and the truth of God and who He is. However, we should avoid the temptation to merely get 'stuck' in a particular doctrinal position or viewpoint on the subject. To do so is to ignore the reality that not everything that is true can be fully explained, and that the goal of theology is not to *acquire knowledge*, for its own sake, but to *gain understanding* that not only informs but transforms our faith.

*The word 'theology' literally means 'thinking about God'. One classic definition of theology was given by St Anselm. He called it 'faith seeking understanding' and for many this is the true function of Christian theology." | Paul Badham*

Our theology – what we think about God – is important. How can we begin to know and understand ourselves and our place in this expansive creation if we have no sense of the One who made us and the purpose for which we've been made?

However, a robust and living theology will spring from

understanding and experiencing who God is and what He has done for us, in Jesus, not simply by giving agreement to a statement or creed of 'theological beliefs'.

By affirming the biblical narrative, that we are saved by [grace](#) through faith alone, we begin a journey towards a deeper understanding of who God is, which only grows as our Christian life progresses. Our theology is, perhaps then, best described as an expedition of discovery, rather than a destination at which we arrive. We discern more and more about the heart and mind of the Creator as our life progresses. This *knowing and experiencing* – this walking with God – renews us day by day to become more like the crucified Lord we follow.

Jesus was the exact representation of God and the very imprint of His nature (Hebrews 1:3, John 14:10-11), the Word-Made-Flesh who took up residence amongst us (John 1:1-14).

To know God is to know Jesus, whom He sent (John 17:3), and, therefore, the true starting point of our theology as Christians is looking to Jesus and, fundamentally, to God, in Jesus, crucified. It is in this that we see the extent to which God was prepared to go in order to rescue and redeem us and why Jesus, and Jesus alone, truly human and truly divine, was the hope of the world.

In your pursuit of knowledge, don't lose sight of this miracle.

*"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." | Colossians 1: 15, ESV*

*"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature, upholding all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." | Hebrews 1:3, ESV*

*“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness.” | 2 Peter 1:3, NIV*

---

**This article was first published 26 July 2021**

---

# Only A Suitable Redeemer Will Do

One of the most startling pieces of information that we are given in relation to Jesus is the fact that he was **made like us**. Jesus' redemptive work *on behalf of humanity* was deeply connected to *his own humanity*. Although he was born “[the Son of God](#)”, and radiant with His Father's glory, he participated in every way in all the experiences of what it means to be human. His ability to sympathise with us and to reconcile on our behalf springs from a complete understanding of what it is like to be human; with all our doubts, fears, temptations and failures. He understood humans because **he was human**.

*“For this reason he (Jesus) had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.” – Hebrews 2:17, NIV*

*“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.” – Hebrews 4:15, NIV*

These remarkable concepts of atonement, redeeming and redemption were subtly foreshadowed many times throughout Old Testament stories; one such example is the well known tale of Joseph of the multi-coloured coat and his descent into slavery at the hands of his brothers.

However, the law of *the kinsman* or *the kinsmen redeemer* had been written into the weave of Israeli life from very early times, clearly foretelling what Jesus' work was to be and how it was to be accomplished. We find the narrative of **the redeemer and the redeemed** poignantly depicted in the [story of Ruth](#)

## A Story Of Redemptive Love

The [story of Ruth](#), the inconsequential outsider, is one of joy and heartbreak, desolation and hope. Ruth, of all people, was an unlikely heroine. Not only was she a woman, in a time when women were of minor importance, she was also a widow, poor and foreign and would have been considered an outsider to any true-born Israelite. Yet the conclusion of this seemingly insignificant tale brings us to the interesting discovery that Ruth eventually became an incredibly significant and vital part of [God's plan of salvation](#) for the world – she was an ancestor of [Jesus Christ](#).

Ruth's story powerfully underscores the importance of love's redeeming power to transform lives. (You can read more about it [here](#).)

Yet hidden within the narrative lies a deeper significance; a story within a story, that has remarkable bearing on the work and purpose of Jesus himself. Hidden, in plain sight, is the way in which God intended to save the world, through His Son.

### 'The Nearest Kinsman Redeemer'

The book of Ruth is set during the time of Israel's history



known as 'the Judges' (circa 1220 – 1050 B.C.). It was a period of religious and moral decline, frequent foreign oppression and national disunity. The people of Israel were often at the mercy of enemies from without and discord from within. Yet although it was a time of great instability, certain laws and customs helped to form an integral part of Israelite society. Many of these laws can still be found throughout the Old Testament, in the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

One law, in particular, was known as the law of the *nearest kinsman* or the *kinsmen redeemer*. The kinsman-redeemer was a **male relative** who, according to various laws of the [Pentateuch](#), was responsible to act on behalf of a relative who was in trouble, danger, or need. The Hebrew term for kinsman-redeemer (*go el*) designates *one who delivers or rescues*, either property or person. **The redeemer had to be related to the person being redeemed and could not be a stranger.**

The *kinsman-redeemer* or *guardian-redeemer* was the proper legal term for the nearest male kinsman who was able to redeem or vindicate a relative (Leviticus 25:25-55).

*“If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his **nearest redeemer** shall come and **redeem** what his brother has sold.” – Leviticus 25:25, ESV*

*“If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and **perform the duty of a husband’s brother** to her. – Deuteronomy 25:5, ESV*

*“If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you or to a member of the*

*stranger's clan, then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him.” – Leviticus 25:47-49, ESV*

While these laws may seem strange and somewhat archaic to us in the 21st century, they were instituted to protect the impoverished or marginalised members of society who might otherwise suffer permanent loss of life, freedom or property.

## **The Law Cannot Redeem**

Ruth appealed to a wealthy landowner and relative of her mother-in-law, named Boaz, who was eligible to undertake the rights and responsibilities of the *nearest kinsman*. Boaz immediately tells Ruth he is willing to redeem her, however there was a kinsman nearer than himself. If this kinsman could not, or would not, then Boaz promises Ruth he will certainly redeem her.

*“And now do not be afraid, my daughter. I will do for you whatever you request, since all my fellow townspeople know that you are a woman of noble character. Yes, it is true that I am a kinsman-redeemer, but there is a redeemer nearer than I. Stay here tonight, and in the morning, if he wants to redeem you, good. Let him redeem you. But if he does not want to redeem you, as surely as the LORD lives, I will. Now lie here until morning.” – Ruth 3:11-13, BSB*

Boaz's conversation with the nearer kinsman soon makes it clear that this kinsman cannot redeem Ruth. He offers Boaz this right of redemption, which Boaz accepts.

*“Take my right of redemption, because I cannot redeem it...At this, Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses today that I am buying from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech, Chilion, and Mahlon. Moreover, I have acquired*

*Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, to raise up the name of the deceased through his inheritance, so that his name will not disappear from among his brothers or from the gate of his home. You are witnesses today..” – Ruth 4:6, 9, BSB*

The nearer kinsman in this narrative represents the Law of Moses, under which Israel was governed. Instituted soon after the Israelites had migrated from Egypt, an event also known as ‘The Exodus’, this law remained in place until Jesus’ time and still forms a central part of [Judaism](#) today. Yet, while the Law came first, prior to Jesus, and imposed many values of morality and justice, ultimately it could never put a man or a woman right with God. ***It was unable to redeem.***

*“The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent His own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin’s control over us by giving His Son as a sacrifice for our sins.” – Romans 8:3, NLT*

No amount of doing good or attempts at obedience can remove the stain of sin from a person’s life. All believers must come to understand that obeying God’s laws cannot produce the righteousness needed for salvation. It is only [dependence on God](#), in faith, to put things right, that makes it possible to be ‘[right with God](#)’.

The law was only a shadow of better things to come; acting as a guardian until all humanity could come to understand their need of a Saviour.

## **Jesus’ Humanity Was Crucial To Redemption**

*“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power*

*of him who holds the power of death—that is, [the devil](#).” –  
Hebrews 2:14, NIV*

Only a human could break the power of sin and death which had gripped humanity in a stranglehold for over 4000 years. Only the **kinsman-redeemer** could redeem.

Yet no ordinary human could possibly have achieved this remarkable feat. God, in His infinite love, did not leave anything to chance, causing His Son to be born, with the mind and character of Himself, the exact representation of His being and radiant with His glory (Hebrew 1:3), yet flesh and blood like us. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Jesus became *Emmanuel*, “*God-With-Us*”, strengthened in will and purpose and redeemer of the world.

## **Only A Suitable Redeemer Will Do**

Jesus was human and ‘our brother’ in every way, made like this so He could be a suitable redeemer.

He fulfilled the essential requirements of being made ‘like his brethren’, human in every respect necessary, so that he could conquer sin and death for all those who shared in his same humanity.

Only in this way, being completely mortal and subject to pain and death, could it be said of Jesus that “*he must suffer and that, by being the **first to rise from the dead**, he would proclaim light both to [the Jews] and to the Gentiles*”, thereby giving the rest of humanity hope of also escaping the finality of mortality and death.