

# Faith

## CONFIRMED

Preparing for  
confirmation

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# About this book

In the introduction to this book, we compare confirming our faith in Jesus to deciding to travel through life with a really accurate map. Each chapter of the book forms part of the map. When you look at a map, you have to find your bearings; similarly, it's best to glance through the layout of each chapter before you read it properly.

Each chapter begins with a story or stories and pictures that are designed to provide a bridge between ideas and experiences already familiar to you and the Christian beliefs you will need to find out about. Further factual information is provided in boxes headed "Christian beliefs." You can use these for reference or to explore the ideas in greater detail. There are more stories and explanations later in the chapter to deepen your understanding.

Each chapter (except Chapter 11) concludes with three standard sections:

*Thinking it through* provides you with some questions to ask yourself. They can also be used to open up group discussion. To answer them, you can turn back and look through the chapter but you can also draw on your own experience.

*Bible study* can be used on your own or in a group. It should help you to understand how Christian beliefs are rooted in the Bible.

*For prayer and reflection* provides you with a prayer that you may use privately or say together in a group. You may also like to make up your own prayers reflecting what you have learned from the chapter, and you will find some suggestions for prayer topics at the end of each chapter.

## To those leading groups preparing for confirmation

We have aimed in writing this book to make a simple, accessible, and attractive presentation of what Episcopalians believe. Inevitably, individuals may quibble over details and points of emphasis but we believe that a coherent exposition of Episcopal belief is possible and desirable if we are effectively to draw people into active, thoughtful, and committed membership of the Church.

The main practical principle behind the writing of this book is that people need bridges between their own experience and Christian concepts. These are best provided by pictures and stories. Once contact has been made between the reader and the main Christian concept, the group leader can then choose from a wide variety of material.



Preparation for confirmation introduces us to the Christian “map” for our journey through life.

Each chapter is laid out in much the same way, in sections, as described above. The time available and the age and ability of your group will affect how much coverage you can allocate to each section.

The book has been designed very much to be the personal possession of each reader. It will be used particularly by those preparing for confirmation, but it will also be valuable to those who have

already gone some way on their personal Christian journey and wish simply to know more about the Christian faith. Experience has shown that it is useful to readers of all ages. We hope that readers will read some or all of the book on their own.

Finally, our own experience has led us to believe that the “For prayer and reflection” sections can be particularly rewarding. Often, when a group or individuals compose their own prayers, they give personal expression to the Christian beliefs they have studied. This process is another way to engage the hearts and the minds.

## A note on this edition

Originally published in England, this book has been updated for the Episcopal Church. While some small differences exist between the Church of England and the Episcopal Church, the fundamental principles of confirmation and committing one’s life to Christ are, thankfully, the same.

# Introduction



When we confirm something, we say yes. At confirmation we say yes to Jesus' call to follow him on our journey through life. We confirm our faith in him. Parents and godparents will usually have said yes for us when we were babies and unable to speak for ourselves at baptism, but confirmation gives *us* the chance to say yes.

We have all had the experience of getting lost. This can happen because we have no map or an inadequate one, or because our smartphone or other mapping service isn't working properly. Confirming our faith in Jesus is like deciding to travel through life with a really accurate map. This book aims to help you become familiar with the main features of the "Christian map."

On the contents page, you will find its landmarks. Some of these will be familiar to you and others new. Although it will make sense if you read the book on your own, we hope you will share it with others. Just as planning a journey is more fun when you discuss it with others, so Christianity makes more sense when it's experienced and lived with other people. We hope also that you will refer back to this guide after your confirmation. On long journeys, we have to keep on checking our directions. To carry the "journey" picture a bit further: why not see confirmation as a time to take stock of where you have come from and seek God's help in preparing for what lies ahead?



## Chapter 1

# GOD

*Do you believe in God the Father?*

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.*

*—The Book of Common Prayer, p. 304*

If you are reading this book, you may already believe in God, or you may be unsure about believing but curious about exploring belief. But where did this belief or curiosity about belief come from?

Maybe you were brought up to believe in God by your parents, or you have seen God at work in people you respect and look up to. Maybe you or someone close to you has been very ill or has died and this has made you wonder about what life means and whether God plays a part in your life. Maybe you started to believe in or wondered about God as the creator of the world as you looked around at the order and beauty of the natural world. Maybe you began to believe in God or to be curious about God from reading the

Bible. Or maybe you started to feel that there was an unseen hand guiding your life, that coincidences were signs of God, present through the circumstances and the people you met.

Some people, like David's parents, started to believe in God as a result of a crisis. When their son died, his family was devastated. They felt their world had come to an end. All their hopes had been destroyed. Their life became one long nightmare. However, in their despair, their son's death became a religious experience for the family—they woke up to what was important in life, turned to God, began reading the Bible and going to church, and within a year were confirmed in the church.

# How do we know God?

God is waiting to enter into a loving relationship with each of us. God reveals this in a number of ways.

## Through the Bible and the Church

The Bible is our main source for understanding how God has acted and how Jesus came into the world to save us.

As we will see in Chapter 8, the Bible was produced over a very long period. Therefore, it provides us with a unique record of how countless generations experienced God's presence and actions and bore witness to them.

Christians believe that God inspired the different authors of the books of the Bible to write them so that the revelation of Godself should be kept alive for later generations.

The Church has done this by translating and copying the Bible but also by teaching about the Bible and applying it afresh to new circumstances. It is a living book kept alive by the living community of the Church.

That is one of the reasons why we have provided suggestions for Bible study in this book. We cannot hear the Bible as the living Word of God unless we study it and give it time to speak to us.

## Through God's creation

Have you ever felt a sense of awe and wonder at nature—maybe standing under a waterfall or on top of a mountain or being caught in a thunderstorm? Many people have felt God's powerful presence in the world God created. Its beauty and

majesty have revealed God's beauty and majesty to them.

## Through experiences in life

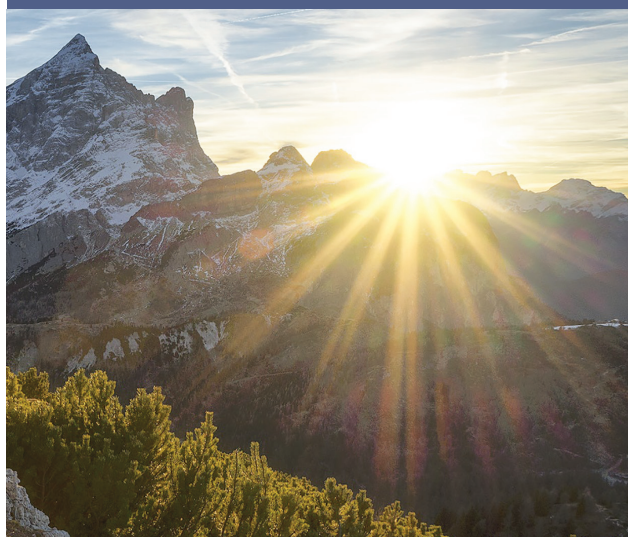
What does it mean to say a person has a conscience? Have you ever felt your conscience telling you to do something or to stop doing something? Where does your sense of right and wrong come from?

Christians believe that God speaks to people through their conscience. They can develop their conscience by learning about what the Bible and the Church's tradition teach.

Sometimes we have experiences which make us stand back and ask, "Where did that come from?"

God speaks to us through our everyday life—through the people we meet and the things that happen. Sometimes people dismiss these experiences as coincidences and ignore the fact that God may be speaking to us through them. To respond

Many people say they find God in nature. Does this picture make you think of God? What images in your life remind you of God?





well to these experiences, we need to give ourselves time to reflect on their meaning—we need time to discern.

Sometimes God speaks to people in an unmistakable way. Such people say that they have experienced a conversion in which their lives have been shaken up and turned around. However, for other people, their conversion is very gradual and may take many years—it is a slow realization that their values and attitudes are changing and being brought more in line with God’s wishes for them.

### Through prayer

God is a personal God. We believe that God speaks to us through prayer. As with any relationship we need to spend time together—to talk and listen to each other. This is what prayer is—a time of talking and listening to God. Without prayer the relationship would become dry. Prayer is the way we communicate with God.



What is going on in this photograph? How can you tell? If you were able to hear this person speak, you would hear only one side of the conversation. In what sense does the person hear the other side of the conversation?

## Christian beliefs about God

- **God created the universe.** God is involved with the world and is in constant interaction with it. The story of the Bible is the story of salvation history, of how God interacts with history to save his people.
- **God is unique.**
  - **God is everywhere** (omnipresent). The Bible teaches that there is nowhere outside his presence: “Where can I go then from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalm 139:6).
  - **God is all-powerful** (omnipotent). God will judge all people and will overcome all forces of darkness in the world: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2).
  - **God knows everything** (omniscient). God can see the past, present and future. God fully understands people’s needs and secret thoughts: “O LORD, you have searched me out and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar. Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, but you O LORD, know it altogether” (Psalm 139:1-3).
  - **God is above space and time** (eternal, unchanging). God has always existed and owes his existence to no one: “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god” (Isaiah 44:6).
- **God is holy and wants people to be holy.** The word “holy” describes God’s perfect nature. God sets holy standards for people to live up to—like the Ten Commandments.
- **God has different attributes.** The Bible uses a number of word pictures to describe different attributes of God. God is likened

to a shepherd: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want” (Psalm 23:1); a rock, shield, and fortress: “O LORD my stronghold, my crag, and my haven. My God, my rock in whom I put my trust, my shield, the horn of my salvation, and my praise” (Psalm 18:1-2); a judge: “for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed” (1 Samuel 2:3); a king: “Who would not fear you, O King of the nations?...In all their kingdoms there is no one like you” (Jeremiah 10:7).

- **God reveals Godself in a number of ways.** This includes through God’s actions in history: “Listen to me in silence...Who has roused a victor from the east, summoned him to his service? He delivers up nations to him, and tramples kings under foot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow...Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, am first, and will be with the last” (Isaiah 41:1-4).

- **God reveals Godself in the Bible:** “You must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:20-21).

- **God reveals Godself through creation:** “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1); “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Romans 1:20).

- **God revealed Godself fully in Jesus.** Jesus’ life and teaching showed people what God was truly like. Jesus is sometimes described

as the human window into God. Jesus said: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

- **God makes covenants (agreements) with people.** God makes promises to humanity, and although people break their promises, God is faithful in keeping God’s promises. God is like the loving and forgiving father in the parable of the Prodigal Son: “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). God is pictured in Hosea as a generous lover: in spite of people disobeying God and the laws, God still loves them.

- **God is not just male.** Although God is often referred to in the masculine, many Christians do not believe in a male concept of God. In the Bible God is likened both to a father: “The LORD your God...will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, and in the wilderness, where you saw how the LORD your God carried you, just as one carries a child” (Deuteronomy 1:30-31); and a mother: “Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Isaiah 49:15).

- **God is one being but is also three persons:** Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are all equally God. This three-in-one God is known as the Trinity.

- **We can know God through faith,** by putting our trust in God, even though God is greater than words can describe or than we can imagine.

# What kind of God do we believe in?

## God is holy

Light is a symbol often used to describe God. It points to God's glory or holiness. The word "holy" describes God's perfect nature. Christians believe that God made people and God wants them to be holy too. This is why God has said that there is a right way to live. God has set holy standards, not to make life miserable and hard but to allow love and happiness to grow. The Christian way of life is called holiness. A Christian is made whole by knowing God.

## God is Trinity

We believe in one God revealed in three distinct persons: as the Father who created the world, as the Son who came to bring forgiveness and rescue humanity, and as the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of God filling people with love, joy, and peace and making them more like Christ. Christians refer to the three-in-one nature of God as the Trinity.

We find a very early reference to the three-in-one nature of God in the last words of Paul's second letter to the Corinthian Church: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Corinthians 13:13).

In our everyday experience we know of different things that at the same time can be one. For example, water, ice, and steam are different states of the chemical H<sub>2</sub>O. The same person can be a mother, a cousin, and a sister all at the same time.

But what do we mean when we say that God is One in three persons? The Latin word *persona* (way of being) referred to a Roman actor's mask, which changed with each different role. The belief in God as Trinity is saying "we believe in one God who exists and works in three ways." Christians experience God in three distinct personal ways.

The doctrine of the Trinity means that God can be likened to a communion of persons, eternally linked by love. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are eternally united by love, and Scripture says that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). That is why when we truly love others, then we are most like God.

## A creator God

James Weldon Johnson, an American author and early civil rights activist, describes the creation of the world in a poem:

*And God stepped out on space,  
And he looked around and said:  
I'm lonely –  
I'll make me a world . . .*

From "The Creation"<sup>1</sup>

We believe that God created the world out of love and that evidence of this creating can be found in the beauty and detail of nature.

## But what about suffering?

The existence of suffering in the world is the greatest obstacle preventing people from believing in a loving God. How do you explain belief in God in the face of so much suffering?

Christians have debated this question down the centuries. In a sense, suffering is a mystery. When Job questioned God about the existence of suffering, God asked him: “Why do you talk without knowing what you are talking about?” (Job 38:2, *The Message*).

One partial way to understand the problem of suffering is to recognize that a lot of it can be traced to the fact that people have rebelled against God’s wishes for them. Suffering is the result of their sin—their hatred of one another, their thoughtlessness toward the environment and the animal world. Not all suffering, however, is due to human sin.

Another way is to explore the nature of God, to ask: “Would it help if God intervened every time someone was suffering?” In his book *Why Do People Suffer?* James Jones, a Church of England bishop, recalls an incident from his own life. As you read it, imagine that the father is God and the child is each of us in our suffering.

*I remember once walking past the school at the end of our road. On the other side of the six-foot wall I could hear a small*



How are the three persons of the Trinity represented here? What message do you think the painter El Greco is trying to give?

*God is the sea in which I swim, the atmosphere in which I breathe, the reality in which I move. I cannot find the tiniest thing which does not speak to me of Him, which is not somehow His image, His message, His call, His smile.*

Carlo Carretto, *Love is for Living*<sup>2</sup>

*child crying inconsolably. A teacher was trying to comfort her but with little immediate success. Like any parent, the sound of a child sobbing stirred my heart.*

*As I walked on down the road, the child's crying ringing in my ears, I stopped dead in my tracks as I realized that the child who was in tears was my own daughter. Part of me wanted to vault over the wall and rescue her—to tell her that it was all right, that Daddy was here and she'd be okay now. But another part of me knew that I should do nothing of the*

*kind—that I had to leave her so that others could come near to her and help her.<sup>3</sup>*

In the end, there is no answer to the problem of suffering that will fully satisfy our reason. Perhaps the most important thing to say is that as Christians, we do not believe that God wills our suffering. He does not sit on a throne far away, deciding which of us will suffer today. On the contrary, the cross of Jesus means that God shares our suffering. God suffers alongside us. (See Chapter 4, “Jesus: death and resurrection.”)



The cross, flowers, and stained glass are common symbols found in churches. How does each one speak to you about the nature of God? What other symbols of God are important to you?



## Thinking it through

- Think about how you came to believe in God. What evidence is there of God's presence in the world?
- What do you understand prayer to be? Do you think that God answers prayers?
- How might James Jones's account of the father and his child help you to believe in a loving God in the face of suffering?



## Bible Study

Read the following descriptions of God in the Bible:

Deuteronomy 32:6, 10

Isaiah 49:14-15

Psalm 18:2

I Timothy 6:15

I Corinthians 4:5

- Is God described in terms of gender (i.e. male or female)? What does this say about God?
- What do these descriptions say about God's relationship to people?

## FOR PRAYER & REFLECTION

*God be in my head  
and in my understanding.*

*God be in my eyes  
and in my looking.*

*God be in my mouth  
and in my speaking.*

*God be in my heart  
and in my thinking.*

*God be at mine end  
and at my departing.*

## Some prayer topics

A prayer of thanks for all the good things God has created.

To say sorry for all the times when you have turned away from God and God's will for your life.

To ask God to come into the situation you find yourself in at the moment—to ask for God's help, protection and guidance.