

**Trick or Treat?**  
**A Side by Side with God in Everyday Life Halloween special**  
**By Yvonne Morris**

**A note for grown-ups**

Halloween seems to cause a division in Christians into the 'should not's' and the 'it's ok really' camps. There are good reasons not to 'celebrate' spiritual darkness, but there are good reasons to engage in cultural mission, and there are many viewpoints in between for Christians to reside. Nevertheless, Halloween can be a difficult time for Christian parents to talk with their children about why they do or don't want them to go 'trick or treating'.

I wonder if we choose not to 'go there' with these discussions because we're not quite sure what to say about it, what we even think or believe, and our own fears and anxieties cause us to go for avoidance or a dogmatic 'no'. Living with the questions, admitting you're not sure and 'that's a good question' are all better than sweeping the issue under the carpet.

This 'side by side with God' Halloween special uses the format and ethos of *Side by Side with God in Everyday Life* to offer Christian parents and children's leaders a way into discussion and exploration which seeks spiritually to nurture children and young teens (as well as adults!), equipping them for a lifelong journey of exploration as a disciple of Christ. It is suggested that you explore the sections most relevant to your children and situation rather than going through the whole lot in one go.

**Introduction**

Halloween is a time when adults and children are often encouraged to dress up as witches, monsters and ghosts, and go to parties or out 'trick or treating', if they are allowed. However, many children get frightened by the images and products they see, as do many adults. So, what do we think God says about the whole 'Halloween thing'?



In October 2011, CBBC ran a poll on their website for children to respond to the question: Spooky stuff - ban it/don't ban it?

Of the children who thought it shouldn't be banned, here are some of their reasons:

- You get to dress up.
- You get sweets and money from trick or treating.
- Banning 'spooky stuff' would mean no Scooby Doo, Sarah Jane Adventures or Young Dracula.
- You couldn't tell scary stories at sleepovers.
- It's cool and life would be boring without it.

Others thought it should be banned - here are some of their reasons:

- Strangers come to your door.
- It's frightening/It freaks me out.
- I hate spiders.
- If you ban it people won't believe in devils.
- I want to walk out of my house and not be frightened.
- You should ban spookiness so ghosts can't get into your dreams.

Talk together about your responses to these reasons and whether you think Halloween should be 'banned' or 'not banned' asking yourselves 'why'. (The thread on the conversation is closed but you can still view it at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/mbcbbc/NF11365188?thread=8290029>).

Did you know that there is a story about witches and ghosts in the Bible?

## Opening the Bible

The prophet Samuel was dead. All Israel had mourned for him and buried him in his own town of Ramah. Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritists (those who claim to communicate with the dead) from the kingdom.

At that time, Saul and David were enemies. Saul was hunting David but he and his men escaped to the land of the Philistines, where the Philistine King Achish allowed David to camp in safety. Achish knew it was better to have David as a friend.

Meanwhile, Saul gathered the Israelite troops at Gilboa where they could see the Philistines setting up camp at Shunem. Saul was terrified! Filled with fear, he prayed to God, asking him what would happen and for help, but God did not answer him.

In his fear and the silence, Saul became desperate. What should he do? He had to know what would happen. If God wasn't answering him, who else could help?

Then an idea came to him: Samuel could help him - but Samuel was dead. Saul dressed up in disguise and found a woman who claimed to communicate with the dead.

'I want to talk with Samuel' Saul said.

But the woman was cautious: 'Surely you know what Saul has done. He has sent out mediums and spiritists from the land because talking to the dead is against God's law. Why have you set a trap to bring me danger?'

Saul made a solemn promise to her by the Lord: 'As surely as the Lord lives, you will not be punished for this.'

So the woman spoke and the spirit of Samuel came. But Samuel brought no comfort to Saul. 'You have disobeyed God. He will not help you tomorrow, your army will lose and you will die.'

Back at the Philistine camp, they too were unsettled. They didn't want David fighting on their side. So it happened that the Philistines beat Saul's army but David wasn't there to see his best friend die in the battle nor King Saul fall on his own sword rather than have his enemy kill him.

RETOLD FROM 1 SAMUEL 28

## Wondering questions

- Wonder which part of the story you found interesting or liked the best.
- Wonder which part of the story you found difficult or unsettling.
- Where do you see God in this story?

## Chatting together

### *Where did Halloween come from?*

How Halloween came to be an 'event' in our culture is the cause of much debate among those who study history, culture, religion and people. There are all sorts of theories about how it came about, what it was for originally, who 'celebrated' it and how, and with all the stories that have been added over the years, it's hard to pin down an accurate truth.

One thing that is widely accepted is that the name 'Halloween' is itself a clue, linking it with religion at some point in history. At this time of year, the church calendar has special holy days to do with the dead. There is All Saints Day on 1st November, All Soul's Day on 2nd November and Remembrance Day just over a week later. It seems to be a season to think about, remember and pray for those who've died for their faith (All Saints), the faithful believers who've died (All Souls) and those who've died in wars and conflicts for our country (Remembrance). It is therefore understandable that some customs developed for the evening before All Hallows when people were beginning to think about the dead and the possibility that

some spirits weren't resting peacefully. Did the story from the Bible help you think about spirits resting? (You can find more ways to talk about 'a time for death' in *Side by Side with God in Everyday Life*.)

### *Trick or treat*

I wonder what you think of when you hear the phrase 'trick or treat'. Do you think about dressing up, having fun and going out to see how many 'treats' you can collect? Or, if you are not allowed to, how do you feel about that?

The 'treat' side is very easy to think about - it's nice to get sweets and chocolate treats. But what about the 'trick' part? Would you play a trick on someone who didn't give you a treat? If you look up 'trick' in a dictionary, you will discover that it's about 'concealing the truth', like dressing up or hiding. Some other words a thesaurus offers for trick are: ambush, cheat, con, conceal, cover, deceive, dodge, fake, fraud, hoax, illusion, pretend, swindle, trap. Does this affect your view of 'trick or treat'?

Two things that set God's ways apart are that, time and again, his people are encouraged and instructed to be truthful and honest.

### *Scared of the dark*

One of the things that makes Halloween scarier for some people is that it occurs in the season of autumn when the winter is coming and it is cold and dark - many people find the dark scary, and not just at Halloween. There is a story in the Old Testament in which Moses experiences God in darkness: *The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was* (Exodus 20:21, NIV). That story goes on to say that Moses spent a long time in God's presence, and God talked with him and instructed him on how to lead the people. God also promised to prepare the way for the Israelites to travel, and to protect them.

I wonder if the darkness is a place where you can find and enter God's presence.

### *Ghosts*

The concept of ghosts can be very frightening for children (and adults!). The idea that an unknown, invisible, not dead but not alive 'spirit' could make itself known in the 'real' world causes much discomfort and raises many questions about life and death. Throughout the centuries, ghost stories have abounded in order to frighten or unsettle, but the question as to whether they are real or not has never, for some, been satisfactorily answered.

There are many things in life that cannot be explained, proven or even disproved logically or by science, yet the Bible talks a lot about angels and spirits, so we can suppose that God wants us in some way to pay attention to these questions.

So, what does that mean for us in relation to the issue of 'ghosts'?

Did you know that Jesus was mistaken for a ghost? Here is the story from the Bible.

*Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.*

*During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. 'It's a ghost,' they said, and cried out in fear.*

*But Jesus immediately said to them: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.'*

*'Lord, if it's you,' Peter replied, 'tell me to come to you on the water.'*

*'Come,' he said.*

*Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!'*

*Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?'*

*And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'*

FROM MATTHEW 14:22-33 (NIV)

How does this story help you in your wonderings about ghosts? How does this story help you in your wonderings about who Jesus is?

**Note for adults:** Sometimes children talk about their experiences with boys, girls or adults that can't be seen by others. This can be unsettling for parents and carers - is it an imaginary friend or a 'ghost' or spirit? Knowing the truth can be hard but if your child talks in this way, receive what they say calmly and without judgement. If your child seems unduly frightened by an experience, you can pray for God's peace and protection and seek further advice from your local priest.

### **Bible links**

How do the following Bible verses help or hinder you in your thinking and wondering about Halloween and trick or treat?

*Don't sacrifice your son or daughter. And don't try to use any kind of magic or witchcraft to tell fortunes or to cast spells or to talk with spirits of the dead. The Lord is disgusted with anyone who does these things, and that's why he will help you destroy the nations that are in the land. Deuteronomy 18:10-12 (CEV)*

*I will stop you from telling fortunes and practicing witchcraft. Micah 5:12 (CEV)*

*An honest person tells the truth in court, but a dishonest person tells nothing but lies. Proverbs 12:17 (CEV)*

*Once again Jesus spoke to the people. This time he said, 'I am the light for the world! Follow me, and you won't be walking in the dark. You will have the light that gives life.' John 8:12 (CEV)*

### **Capturing the question**

What would you most like to ask God about this whole issue?

### **Chatting with God**

Chat with God about your questions, fears and thoughts about Halloween, then spend some time in quiet so God can talk with you too. The words of the blessing in the Baptism service may be a starting place for your prayers:

*May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness, restore in you the image of his glory, and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ. Amen.*

The Baptism Service Liturgy *Common Worship* © The Archbishops' Council of the Church of England downloaded from <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1190836/holy%20baptism.pdf>

Further resources for alternatives to Halloween can be found at <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/children/childrens-work-resources/alternatives-to-halloween.html>

You could also use Veggie Tales 'Where's God when I'm scared' or 'The owl who was afraid of the dark' by Jill Tomlinson and Paul Howard, to open up conversation with younger children.