



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for Heaven and Hell

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us treat the transcendent realities of heaven and hell carefully and seriously. The guides can be used in a series or individually. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- Living Under Vacant Skies** 2
- As our culture loses the thought of heaven “over us,” how does that shape the way we live? A world left without a vision of the transcendent is a world of struggles without victory and of sacrifice without purpose. To understand this is also to understand in a new way the task of the church.
- The Virtue of Hope** 4
- If we are to pursue our moral life seriously, we need a *transcendent* hope that is *not* based on human capacity for self-improvement. We have grounds in our faith for such a hope, both at the individual level and at the level of society.
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Focus Article:

📖 Living Under Vacant Skies
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 9-17)

Suggested Article:

📖 Nothing But the Truth
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 79-83)

What do you think?

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Living Under Vacant Skies

When, in the biblical cosmology, God creates heaven and earth, “heaven” names that part of creation in which God alone exercises dominion, and which we do not know intimately until we are at last fully reconciled to God. As our culture loses this sense of heaven “over us,” it will be more than a change in how we picture the world in our minds. It will reshape the way we live.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 17:16-34

Responsive Reading†

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Why should the nations say, “Where is our God?” Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases.

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats.

Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.

We, who fear the LORD, will trust in the LORD! He is our help and shield.

May you be blessed by the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings.

We will bless the LORD from this time on and forevermore.

Praise the LORD!

Reflection

Language is funny, isn’t it? A physicist says, “Quarks, the imperceptible fundamental particles of matter, exist in six ‘flavors’: up, down, strange, charm, bottom, and top,” and this makes perfect sense to a person trained in quantum physics. But to other people it sure sounds like gobbledygook!

The biblical language about heaven can sound strange to us today. The prophet John sees “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (Revelation 21:10, cf. 3:12). Peter reports seeing “something like a large sheet coming down from heaven,” filled with all sorts of animals (Acts 11:5-10). “I am the bread that came down from heaven,” Jesus says, referring to himself as the embodiment of God’s life-giving, heavenly manna (John 6:32-51). Doesn’t this sound like gobbledygook to many folks today? Yet, as Christians, we need such language, just as quantum physicists require quark-flavor talk, to think clearly.

What does it mean to say that heaven is “over us”? Heaven is not over us in any astrophysical sense. We could just as well say heaven is “inside,” or “outside,” if spatial relations were the only important point to convey. Yet we want to say that heaven is



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something different from the world (else, “inside” would be preferable). And heaven is more than a temporal continuation of this life, for heaven supersedes and is exalted above every temporal thing; indeed it creates a hierarchy of value in the world (otherwise “outside” would do as well). Heaven is a reality “over us” because it is the greater reality, the ultimate value, the final purpose, and the consummation of all things.

In the Christian teachings on creation and reconciliation, we can see why this type of transcendent vision, a certain longing for heaven, is essential to the life of the church:

- ▶ *Creation is a good gift.* “Heaven is the part of creation that we can only receive, as opposed to that which we partially control, employ, and manipulate,” writes A. J. Conyers. “It is the realm of grace, for it comes entirely as God’s gift and represents the fullness of all gifts.” Human action is always a response to creation and does not constitute reality. Thus, even as we affect a small part of the earth, “our actions are fraught with all kinds of ambiguity. Our intentional efforts to do a good thing, for instance, always invite the possibility of unintended evil.” Furthermore, the world does not find its purpose in itself. As Paul reminds the Athenians, all things find their purpose in relationship with God (Acts 17:28).
- ▶ *Salvation comes by grace.* When we are open to the mystery of heaven, we are predisposed to expect help. Our ethical struggles are taken up in benevolent grace, so we can tackle large, systemic problems with confidence. Our work in the world can be about more than “making a living,” as we remember that “the object of making a living is life and that life is never earned; it is only given.”

Study Questions

1. How would you explain the biblical language about “coming down from heaven”? If people need a translation of what we mean by heaven being “over us,” we need to supply not only more words, but actions that reveal what we believe. How could our lives reflect our deep belief in heaven “over us”?
2. In addition to the “over us” language, what ways of speaking about heaven are difficult for people to comprehend?
3. Conyers suggests that though children experience the world as a gift, adults tend to lose sight of this truth (*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 15-16)? Do you agree? How can your congregation’s worship remind people that they live “under heaven”?
4. How do you respond to Matthew Arnold’s description, in the poem *Dover Beach*, of a world without a transcendent heaven (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 16)?
5. Living as though the world is dependent upon nothing outside itself is called “idolatry” in the Bible, because we will wrongly place ultimate value on some mere part of the world. What idols do people worship in our culture?

Departing Hymn: “My Life Flows On In Endless Song”



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Focus Article:

📖 **The Virtue of Hope**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 18-23)

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The Virtue of Hope

If we are to pursue our moral life seriously, then we need a *transcendent* hope that is *not* based on human capacity for self-improvement. We have grounds in our faith for such a hope, both at the individual level and at the level of society.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Romans 8:18-30; Revelation 2:17

Reflection

Everyone, it seems, struggles to do the right thing. Moral scandals of political, business, and religious leaders, not to mention entertainers and sports figures, are constantly in the news. Is it even possible to be morally good in our society?

A “moral gap” certainly yawns between what we morally should do and become, and our meager human capacities. All of us “fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Sometimes we know what we ought to do, but fail to do it; and at other times we don’t even know what we should do. We cannot bridge this moral gap on our own. The Christian virtue of hope is a deep confidence that God provides encouragement, guidance, and assistance in becoming the people God calls us to be.

Pergamum, a city notorious for its idolatry (“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is.... where Satan lives”), must have been a terribly difficult setting in which to be morally good. To the beleaguered Christian church in Pergamum, the prophet John offers this strange vision of hope: God has a name for each one of us that marks what we truly are, and it will be given to us on a white stone when we enter the next life (Revelation 2:17). What is the meaning of this good news?

▶ *Hope, at the individual level, to become what God has called us to be.* Our hope is grounded in how God sees us, not in what we accomplish. This is the meaning of the white stone, on which our true name is written. “God knows us already as we are in Christ and gives us faith as an earnest of our inheritance,” writes John Hare. That faith is “the title deed to what we hope for (‘the substance’ in Hebrews 11:1).”

Does God’s knowing us by this name make us proud or humble? We can be proud (though it is not our own production) because our identity in Christ is already real by God’s declaration. This is the doctrine of justification. We are humble because our new identity is not yet completely real in our experience; we grow into our name and get glimpses of it as we proceed. This is the doctrine of sanctification. “God holds together all the fragments of what we are called to aim at, so that they become a coherent magnetic force, pulling us towards the magnetic center, which is God.”

▶ *Hope to be the body of Christ.* Sometimes we get glimpses of the economy of God’s kingdom, in which we do not compete for wealth, prestige, or power, but each of us contributes to the flourishing of one another. “We hear about fire fighters climbing into a burning skyscraper, or couples who receive



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into their homes and families Somali teenagers from refugee camps,” Hare says. “These are glimpses of a world in which justice and peace, or *shalom*, embrace. It is not merely that in such a world people get what they want, but what they want is good for them and for everyone else.” These glimpses of the kingdom enable us to aim our lives coherently, knowing that the good of the whole will in the end prevail over whatever is set against it. Jesus’ resurrection, which we believe by faith, gives us hope that his life truly reveals how life in the kingdom of heaven is supposed to go.

Study Questions:

1. What recent events, either in our culture or in your personal experience, might lead you to despair that you, or those whom you love, will not be able to live morally?
2. In what sense might a person become “too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good”?
3. What sort of “heavenly-mindedness” does John Hare commend?
4. How do you respond to John Hare’s view that “much of the misery of the twentieth century was caused by people who were optimistic that they could marshal techniques to produce [a] better world” (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 19)?
5. According to the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:18-30, how is the presence of God’s Spirit a ground of hope, both in our individual lives and in the world as a whole?

Departing Hymn: “My Life Flows On In Endless Song”



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Focus Article:

📖 **Heaven is My Home**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 53-59)

Suggested Article:

📖 **Why Stand Gazing?**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 39-42)

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Heaven is Our Home

Is our true home in heaven, and we are merely sojourners on earth? Or are we genuinely citizens of the earth? Where is our true home? Heaven is our true home, but heaven begins here on earth as the Holy Spirit transforms us into a community that manifests love.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:1-5,22-27

Responsive Reading†

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus,
sing his mercy and his grace:
In the mansions bright and blessed,
he'll prepare for us a place.

**When we all get to heaven,
what a day of rejoicing that will be!**

While we walk the pilgrim pathway,
clouds will overspread the sky;
But when traveling days are over,
not a shadow, not a sigh.

**When we all get to heaven,
what a day of rejoicing that will be!**

Let us then be true and faithful,
trusting, serving every day,
Just one glimpse of God's great glory
will the toils of life repay.

**When we all get to heaven,
what a day of rejoicing that will be!**

Reflection

Do we hunger for heaven? The evidence is apparently conflicting. The joyful heart-hunger for heaven expressed in Eliza Hewitt's gospel hymn, *Sing the Wondrous Love of Jesus*, with its image of this life as mere "traveling days" on a "pilgrim pathway," will seem forced to many of us, because we are much more "at home" in this world than these phrases suggest.

On the other hand, a hunger for God's presence in our lives causes many of us "to embark on spiritual quests, to join new religious movements, to call up the Psychic Friends Network, or to buy the books of the latest spirituality-expert featured as a guest on *Oprah*," Susan Garrett observes. It "fuels the remarkable sales of books about angels and causes many millions of persons to tune in each week to the television show *Touched By An Angel*, which regularly assures us of God's love for us."

The New Testament helps us to make sense of our hunger. In the climactic vision of Revelation, John sees the heavenly city coming down to a new earth. The biblical heaven "is the invasion of the city by the City," notes Eugene Peterson. "We enter heaven not by escaping what we don't like, but by the sanctification of the place in which God has placed us." Heaven is our home, it seems, but heaven begins here on earth. We begin to 'get to' heaven when this world where we live and this church



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where we come together to worship, are in the presence of God.

The glory of God illuminates the heavenly city. In similar fashion, the Spirit of the Lord is a transforming presence in our lives, changing us “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Recall that when Moses had been speaking with God, Moses’ face glowed; it was as if the fullness of God’s glory spilled onto him (Exodus 34:29-35). At the Transfiguration of Jesus, when he appeared with Moses and Elijah, Jesus’ face “shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matthew 17:2). Jesus, even more than Moses, reflected the brightness of God’s presence and glory. Now through Jesus, Paul says, God is shining also in *our* hearts, to give us “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Our beholding of that light transforms us.

Both our hunger for God’s presence and our hunger for the transformation of this world finally are gathered up and united within God’s plan for our lives. We really hunger for the glory of God to be shining in our lives, relationships, and world. The Good News is that God shines in our hearts through Christ, and thus it begins that “the home of God is among mortals” (Revelation 21:3).

Study Questions

1. In what ways do people express their hunger for God’s presence in their lives today? How is your church helping them to satisfy this hunger by clearly presenting the biblical understanding of this longing?
2. How do you respond to Susan Garrett’s suggestion that “many popular spiritual teachers today focus only on the individual, posing the questions: ‘How can *I* be healed?’ ‘How can *I* achieve peace?’ and ‘How can *my* life be better?’ But the greatest mark of the Spirit’s transforming presence, Paul teaches, is not *my* communion with the divine, as important as that may be. Rather, the greatest mark of the Spirit’s presence is *love manifested in community*.” (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 59)
3. We all suffer from “spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder,” observes Julie Pennington-Russell. “Left on our own, we find all kinds of secondary issues to wrap ourselves around,” including even a distracting fascination with eternity (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 41). What should we focus upon instead of “our brownstone in heaven or the brimstone of hell”? How might we stir up our hunger for heaven and for God’s presence, without living in a way that denies the goodness of this life?
4. We are being “changed from one degree of glory into another,” Paul assures us, but through what behaviors or attitudes should this change appear in our lives? Susan Garrett recommends some confirmation that we might seek (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 58).

Departing Hymn: “Heaven Shall Not Wait”

† Adapted from “When We All Get to Heaven” by Eliza E. Hewitt, 1898.



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Focus Article:

📖 Unquenchable Fire
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 24-30)

Suggested Article:

📖 Hell is a Bar in Adams-Morgan
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 75-81)

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Unquenchable Fire

We have many questions about hell: Why does it exist? Who are the 'wicked' that go there? Is hell itself eternal? Is it a place of everlasting or temporary suffering? To what can we compare hell's torment? We can begin to answer these questions by studying the biblical passages about Sheol, Gehenna, and Hades.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 9:42-48

Responsive Reading†

Brethren, we have met to worship, and adore the Lord our God. Will you pray with all your power, while we try to preach the word?

All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down. Brethren, pray and holy manna will be showered all around.

Sisters, will you join and help us? Moses' sister aided him. Will you help the trembling mourners who are struggling hard with sin?

Tell them all about the Savior, tell them that he will be found. Sisters pray and holy manna will be showered all around.

See poor sinners all around you slumbering on the brink of woe: Death is coming, hell is moving, can you bear to let them go?

See our fathers and our mothers, and our children sinking down. We will pray and holy manna will be showered all around.

Reflection

As we frame a scriptural view of hell, the passages about Sheol, Gehenna, and Hades must be read carefully, of course, but not literally. "All language about hell, heaven, and God are to be taken non-literally," Peter Kreeft points out. "Our language taken from the realm of visible things (for example, fire, light, or fatherhood) is analogical. Of course it is true, authoritative, infallible, terribly important, and revealing. But it is not literal" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 81).

▶ *Sheol*: In earlier Old Testament writings, all the dead descend to Sheol (Job 7:9-10), a region in the depths of the earth (Psalm 86:13; cf. Psalm 88:6) with gates preventing its prisoners from escaping (Isaiah 38:10; Job 17:16). Its inhabitants are mere 'shades' who fade away into nonexistence (Proverbs 9:18). In later times as belief in resurrection and eternal life grew, Sheol became only a temporary abode for all souls after death and before the resurrection (Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2). In Jewish writings from the first century A.D., Sheol is reserved for the wicked after death and Paradise is the abode of the blessed. So, originally Sheol was a place for all the dead, but it came to be understood as a place for the unrighteous dead.

▶ *Gehenna*: Literally, "the valley of Hinnom," just south of



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Jerusalem, it was infamous for Baal worship (Jeremiah 32:35) and child sacrifice to the god Molech. Gehenna became a continually burning garbage dump for the city of Jerusalem after King Josiah destroyed its Molech altar. Jeremiah proclaimed that the valley would become, in the time of God's judgment, the valley of Slaughter because of all the people who would be killed and cast into its fires (Jeremiah 7:30-34). "Gehenna" comes to be used as a metaphor for fiery judgment for the unrighteous, as in Mark 9:42-48 and Matthew 10:28.

- ▶ *Hades*: Peter declares that Jesus was not abandoned to Hades to "experience corruption," or fade from existence (Acts 2:27,31). Death and Hades are personified in the book of Revelation: they ride on a pale green horse and are given authority to kill one-fourth of the earth's population (6:8); they give up the dead that are in them, though there is no mention of whether these dead people are righteous or wicked (20:13); and they themselves are thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death (20:14). The gates of Hades (or death) do not have power over the gathered community of Jesus' disciples (Matthew 18:18); he holds the keys (Revelation 1:18) and determines which dead are captured by Hades. All of these references seem to follow the earlier concept of Hades (Sheol), as the place where all individuals go after death. Elsewhere, however, Hades is a prison for the wicked. In Jesus' parable, the rich man is tormented in Hades (Luke 16:19-31). Likewise in his warnings to the unrepentant cities, Hades is not a place for all of the dead, but only for those who do evil (Luke 10:13-15; Matthew 11:20-24).

Study Questions

1. How is the history and use of "Gehenna" different from the concept of "Hades"?
2. These biblical passages about Sheol, Gehenna, and Hades shape our answers to our most insistent question: "What happens to the unrighteous after they die?" What are the most common Christian views, called "traditionalism" and "conditionalism" by Anni Judkins (*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 28-29)? How do traditionalists and conditionalists differ in their understanding of Revelation 20:13-14?
3. What are your questions about hell that were not addressed in the passages that we studied in this lesson?
4. "We must accept that Scripture generally does not speculate about the nature of hell," Anni Judkins says, "but rather emphasizes the certainty of God's judgment of wickedness and rebellion" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 30). What limits should this put on our own speculation? Do Christians need a well-developed teaching concerning hell?

Departing Hymn: "Forever Where Our Hope Is Born"

† Adapted from "Brethren, We Have Met to Worship" by George Atkins, 1819.



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Focus Article:

📖 **The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 31-34)

Suggested Article:

📖 **My Maker Was the Primal Love**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 35-38)

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The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail

The universe and our lives ultimately are bounded by God's unfathomable love and righteousness. How can we unravel the apparent incongruity between God's loving character and the existence of hell?

Prayer†

For neither death nor life, nor angels, nor princes, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 3:13–4:6

Reflection

One of the church's most ancient claims is that God's love, expressed in the death of Jesus Christ, conquers hell itself. The Apostles' Creed proclaims that Christ was not only "crucified, dead, and buried," but also that he "descended into hell." This means, says Rufinus (ca. 400 A.D.), that Christ brought "three kingdoms at once into subjection under his sway." All creatures "in heaven and on earth and under the earth" bend the knee to Jesus, as Paul teaches in Philippians 2:10.

Related to this is the Harrowing of Hell, the teaching that Christ drew out of hell the Old Testament saints who lived by faith in anticipation of the coming of Christ. In this way the church explained how God's love extends "to all those who would seem to be damned by no other fault than having been born before Christ," Ralph Wood observes.

Theologians find two other insights here:

- ▶ "The doctrine of Christ's descent into hell also opens up the possibility of saving faith being given to the unnumbered dead who, even during the Christian era, have never heard the Gospel," writes Wood. "Thus [we] affirm, with Paul in Romans 8:38-39, that absolutely *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus—neither death nor demonic powers nor even the abyss of hell" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 32).
- ▶ Christ's descent into death and hell was initially "a dread defeat," a moment when demonic forces triumphed. Here we see what hell really is, says Wood, "not chiefly our own much-deserved punishment, but rather Christ's utterly undeserved defeat." Yet the Father did not abandon his crucified Son to Hades (Acts 2:31), but raised him. Easter vindicates both Jesus as the second person of the Trinity and also the faith for which he died. Alan E. Lewis describes our Easter freedom as the faith "that the self-promoters who destroy others cannot prove victorious in the end; for the way of life leads only down the path of risky, loving self-expenditure and humble servitude."

Even if God's saving love in some way reaches into hell, we still are left to wonder how God could *create* an apparent monstrosity like hell. The poet Dante's inscription over the Gates of Hell, "my maker ... was the primal love," shocks us.



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Two thoughts may be helpful. First, all of God's actions are both loving and righteous, or just. For instance, divine punishment in this life, Proverbs 3:12 says, does not preclude love. "Though punishment and love are often pulled asunder in human relationships," Doug Henry notes, "never is God's punishment vindictive. And if love prompts God's punishment of humans in general, love also prompts the punishment of humans in hell" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 36).

The second thought clarifies how God's love extends even to those consigned to hell. God always invites our free and reciprocal (even if unequal) love in response. God does not override our free response, even though this opens the possibility that we will freely reject God's love—for days, decades, or eternity. "So, even if hell offers no hope of correction, nonetheless it is love that makes hell possible," writes Henry. "If we finally and everlastingly refuse God, he finally and everlastingly recognizes that refusal, and thereby justly condemns" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 37).

Study Questions

1. "The doctrine of Christ's descent into hell is a careful theological extrapolation from the biblical narratives," says Ralph Wood (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 31). What biblical passages did the earliest Christians link with this doctrine?
2. How do you respond to Hans Urs von Balthasar's view that exactly in his descent into hell, Christ "disturbs the absolute loneliness striven for by the sinner: the sinner, who wants to be 'damned' apart from God, finds God again in his loneliness, but God in the absolute weakness of love ... enters into solidarity with those damning themselves."
3. Discuss the following passage from C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. "Merely to override a human will . . . would be for [God] useless," mocks Screwtape, a senior devil. "He cannot ravish. He can only woo. For His ignoble idea is to eat the cake and have it; the creatures are to be one with Him, but yet themselves; merely to cancel them, or assimilate them, will not serve." Does this illuminate the relation between human freedom and divine love?
4. What are your questions concerning hell and God's love that were not addressed in the teachings that we studied in this lesson?

Departing Hymn: "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy"




† Adapted from Romans 8:38-39.



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Focus Articles:

-  **Left Behind and Getting Ahead**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 70-78)
-  **Confronted**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 46-49)
-  **Falling**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 50-52)

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The Art of the Final Judgment

Artists have struggled to portray the Final Judgment in a spiritually discerning manner. How can their work avoid sinking into a kind of morbid voyeurism and superficial speculation about future calamities?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57; Matthew 24:29-31; Revelation 1:4-8

Responsive Reading[†]

Come, you sinners poor and needy,
weak and wounded, sick and sore:

**Jesus ready stands to save us,
full of pity, love and power.**

Come, you thirsty, come and welcome,
God's free bounty glorify;

**True belief and true repentance,
every grace that brings us nigh.**

Come you weary, heavy-laden,
lost and ruined by the fall;

**If we tarry, 'til we better,
we will never come at all.**

Let not conscience make you linger,
nor of fitness fondly dream;

**All the fitness God requires
is to feel our own great need.**

Reflection

Vivid scriptural images have inspired “high,” “folk,” and popular artists to represent God’s final judgment—not merely to illustrate the biblical words, but through their artwork to teach, preach, and prophetically lead the church. As Christians we are to “discern the spirits,” or to weigh their work for the body of Christ, as Paul teaches (1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:29). We might ask: Does the art express biblical ideas in a faithful and theologically sensitive way? How does it integrate non-biblical materials? What message does the art convey in the contexts in which it typically is used?

In Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, the action flows in an arching movement: dead persons are led from their graves, taken upwards to Christ’s judgment, and (when judged unrighteous) sent down to hell. Christ is the pinnacle figure who controls the event: with one arm he draws up the dead and with the other he casts down the unrighteous. Angels below announce his judgment with trumpets.

Michelangelo elaborates on his biblical sources, placing Mary next to Christ (which identifies him as the risen son of Mary) and including martyred saints, who look toward their Savior, on surrounding clouds. A serpent, binding a figure in hell, reminds us of the tempter in Eden. Charon, a non-biblical figure from Greek stories, shoves the unrighteous from his boat.

Covering the wall above the altar in the Pope’s chapel, *Last*



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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Judgment is a forceful warning to the leaders of church and society that they are not the ultimate judges; Christ is.

Rodin's imagination is more playful in *Gates of Hell*, perhaps because there is no biblical description of hell's portal. Mythological figures (centaurs, fauns), biblical personages (John the Baptist, a martyr), everyday characters (*The Helmet-maker's Wife*, a crouching woman, a crying girl, a young mother), roil among literary figures from Greek stories (*The Three Shades*) and Dante's epic *Divine Comedy* (*Ugolino and his Sons* and *Paolo and Francesca*). Figures fall and disintegrate before our eyes. The arching movement of Michelangelo's piece may be present, however the pinnacle figure is not the Christ (this is hell's gate, after all), but the brooding character of Dante (*The Thinker*) who reflects upon his own soul and the meaning of ultimate judgment that swirls around him.

Gates of Hell was to be the entrance to the Decorative Arts Museum for the Paris World's Fair in 1889, but the museum was canceled. What meaning would it have borne in that context?

LaHaye and Jenkins' *Left Behind* novels and related products reach a wide audience today with a version of dispensationalism, which is a very uncommon view of judgment in Christian history. The warning of God's judgment is well intentioned, but the heavy emphasis on questionable events (the Rapture, a remnant from the Gentiles) and minor figures (the "antichrist(s)" in 1 and 2 John) may overshadow the central action of Christ. The non-biblical themes of political opposition to the United Nations, reliance upon the latest technology, and fascination with the surface of fighting and adventure, do not comport well with an underlying biblical message of contrition and repentance.

If we entertain ourselves with vicarious violence, we dull our response to the truly serious nature of violence. Turning "biblical revelation into harum-scarum entertainment" likewise may reduce our response to biblical truth, warns David Jeffrey. "The appetites of the church," he fears, become "too much like the appetites of the world" for watching gleefully as enemies suffer.

Study Questions

1. What images and ideas from the scripture passages in this lesson are reflected in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*?
2. "Scripture generally does not speculate about the nature of hell," Anni Judkins says, "but rather emphasizes the certainty of God's judgment of wickedness and rebellion" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 30). Does the artwork discussed in this lesson convey this truth?
3. Do you agree that artists through their work can teach, preach, and prophetically challenge the church? Do you agree with the suggested questions that we should ask concerning artwork in order to weigh its contribution to the ministry and worship of the church? Are there other questions we should be asking?

Departing Hymn: "Forever Where Our Hope Is Born"

† Adapted from "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy" by Joseph Hart, 1759.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Living Under Vacant Skies

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To appreciate the importance of the transcendent nature of heaven.
2. To reflect on the meaning of biblical language about heaven “over us.”
3. To reflect on how the transcendence of heaven relates to the doctrines of creation and reconciliation.
4. To begin to recognize how a belief in heaven “over us” shapes our character and actions.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Heaven and Hell (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting. The hymn text “My Life Flows On In Endless Song” is reprinted in *Heaven and Hell*, pp. 68-69. Locate the tune for “My Life Flows On In Endless Song” in your hymnbook, or print copies of this public domain tune from the Web site www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Share the story that A. J. Conyers tells of preparing the wedding ceremony for Ben and Cheryl (on p. 11 of *Heaven and Hell*). The story highlights one way in which we live “under vacant skies” and the pressure that this puts on us to find ultimate happiness through our own actions.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members in the following week will face temptations, endure struggles, and evaluate opportunities in a manner that shows awareness of heaven “over” them.

Scripture Reading

Arrange for a group member to read aloud Acts 17:16-34 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Members may be familiar with this story of Paul’s visit to Athens. What features of the story did they only just notice when they heard it read again? Perhaps they will mention that it begins with Paul’s distress that “the city was full of idols,” that his preaching at first sounds like gobbledygook to the Athenians (and some of them mistake “Jesus and the resurrection” for the names of two new gods), that Paul’s response to idolatry is to emphasize the transcendence of God (as the creator and Lord of heaven and earth, the one who appointed the times and places of flourishing for all nations, and the final judge

of creation), and that Paul explains God's transcendence (in verse 28) by quoting twice from their poets and philosophers.

Explain that Psalm 115 (quoted in the responsive reading) guides Paul's reaction to the Athenians' idolatry: they are living as though the world is dependent upon nothing outside itself and have wrongly placed ultimate value on some mere part of the world. Even the Athenians' many 'gods' are, in Paul's view, mere personifications of some values or natural forces within the world. They represent a blind "groping" after the true God.

The reflection focuses on what the Bible means when it says heaven is "over us," that the New Jerusalem comes "down" from heaven, and so on. This is not spatial or astrophysical language. Rather it conveys the difference and greater reality of heaven in relation to earth, and that heaven, as the portion of creation in which God's will is fully done, is a source of grace that provides the final purpose and consummation of all things. Recall Jesus' model prayer to God: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

- ▶ *Creation is a good gift.* Discuss the key differences between Greek stories of creation and the Biblical story reviewed by Conyers on pp. 13-14 of *Heaven and Hell*.
- ▶ *Salvation comes by grace.* Discuss Conyers' suggestion about how children and adults differ in their stance toward reality (*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 15-16).

Study Questions

1. Members might focus on Revelation 21:10, Acts 11:5-10, or John 6:32-51. They might mention that Revelation 21:10 suggests that our happiness is not a product of our own efforts, but will be a gift prepared by God. Interestingly, heaven is not described as a place we go when we die, but the source from whence our happy life with God comes. In Acts 11 the message comes to Peter from God. Likewise, in John's gospel, Jesus comes to dwell with us from the Father "in heaven," which is to say, from the Creator God.
2. Members might mention the language of "going to (or coming from) heaven," of "heavenly beings," and of heaven being like a "city" or like a "garden (Paradise)."
3. While we can think of exceptions to the rule, Conyers' observation seems to be true in many people's lives. Members might mention worship activities such as prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of confession, singing hymns about heaven or judgment, bodily motions such as bowing in prayer or lifting hands in praise, or specific sermons. Conyers describes the special language invoked in services of burial and marriage.
4. Arnold describes an army that does not know when to fight and when to retreat, perhaps because it hears conflicting signals to do both coming from different leaders. In this setting, the struggle loses its meaning as well as its direction. Do we sometimes feel morally enraged, but unsure about what should be the object of our struggle? Are we easily misled into being morally "against" the wrong things? Are we tempted to "give up" because we see little progress being accomplished?
5. Review the responsive reading adapted from Psalm 115. Members might suggest idols such as honor and prestige, wealth, mere power over other people, caring for one's family to the neglect of the legitimate needs of other people, advancing a particular political agenda, 'worshiping' nature, and so on. Idols are rarely bad things; rather they are values that we wrongly place ahead of our response to God's call.

Departing Hymn

Distribute copies of the tune "My Life Flows On In Endless Song." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

The Virtue of Hope

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Discuss Rom. 8:18-30	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To identify those things in our culture or personal lives that can lead us to despair of living morally.
2. To distinguish between (a) optimism concerning human capacities and accomplishments, and (b) the grounds on which the Christian virtue of hope is based
3. To define a proper sense of “heavenly-mindedness” that enables us to pursue our moral life seriously.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Heaven and Hell (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. The hymn text “My Life Flows On In Endless Song” is reprinted in *Heaven and Hell*, pp. 68-69. Locate the tune for “My Life Flows On In Endless Song” in your hymnbook, or print copies of this public domain tune from the Web site www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Share the story that John Hare tells about Eva, a survivor of the concentration camps of World War II (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 22). This story is about a desperate situation that could make people lose all hope in moral goodness, either in their own lives or in the world. Yet even in the concentration camps, Eva recalls, many people found that their faith in God sustained their hope.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Ask members to confess to God those desires and actions that can lead them to despair of living morally. Voice a prayer of thanksgiving that God’s Spirit intercedes for us with “sighs too deep for words” when we do not know how to pray.

Scripture Reading

Arrange for group members to read aloud Romans 8:18-30 and Revelation 2:17 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Begin by mentioning situations in our society or personal lives that lead us to despair that we cannot be morally good. Major scandals at Enron or in the White House are demoralizing, but closer to home we worry about pressures we face at work, situations our children endure at school, or distorting images of a good life which are advanced in the popular media. Sometimes our cultural setting can seem, like Pergamum, to be a place “where Satan lives.”

“Justification” and “sanctification” might seem to members to be large theological words with little relevance to their lives. Help them to understand how these two doctrines offer hope to us that, because

of God's work in our lives, we can grow into people who know and desire moral goodness.

How can we keep struggling to do what we believe is morally good? We need a sure faith that what we are doing makes sense for the good of the whole in the long run, even if we do not yet see how it is all going to work. We need confidence that we live in a world in which we need not compete for scarce goods, but each of us can contribute to the flourishing of one another. As Christians, we can believe firmly that, despite contrary appearances, the kingdom of heaven is the ultimate reality. Discuss how your church community can offer glimpses of this reality.

Study Questions

1. Members may mention national or local scandals, or events of human evil in the news. They might mention things in our culture that are sources of temptation for them, members of their families, or other people.
2. Persons might be "heavenly-minded" in the sense of being unaware of the serious suffering and evil around them, or unconcerned and unprepared to respond to it because they misunderstand the thought that "God will take care of everything."
3. John Hare describes the Christian virtue of hope, a deep confidence that we can and should continue our struggle toward moral goodness. This hope is grounded not in our own capacities or accomplishments, but in the fact that God already sees the persons that we are in Christ and draws us toward being these persons. If we are aware in this way of our inability to be morally good on our own capacities, will we be more sensitive to the suffering and evil around us?
4. Members may mention the great social projects of the political right (Nazism, fascism) and left (Marxism, communism). Closer to home they may identify attempts to create a "melting pot" by forcefully denying traditional cultures (Cajun, Native American, Irish, central European, Hispanic, Asian) in various parts of the United States. They may think of laws passed to enforce moral standards in Hollywood, or to enforce abstinence from alcohol, for instance. Do members think that these movements produced morally better people?
5. Discuss the promise in verses 26-27 for our individual lives: the Spirit helps us to know our weakness, and the Spirit expresses before God all that we know and more. Discuss how verse 28 applies to the church (the "large family" in verse 29) and the entire creation: as God transforms us to be like Jesus, the church and all creation begin to embody God's purposes and enjoy God's goodness.

Departing Hymn

Distribute copies of the tune "My Life Flows On In Endless Song." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

Heaven is Our Home

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the biblical teaching that heaven is our true home, yet we properly hunger to enjoy God-transformed lives and relationships in this world.
2. To reflect on the moral changes that should occur in us as we are being transformed by the glory of God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Heaven and Hell (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a story

Share the story that Susan Garrett tells of her grandma, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease and, though living in her own home, would sometimes grow restless to "go home now" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 53). This story reminds us that often some homesickness surfaces in our lives, which can be (at least) analogous to, if not expressive of a longing for heaven.

Or, remind members of the story of Marshall Applewhite and the "Heaven's Gate" community (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 55). Their lives were tragically wasted because they accepted a distorting vision of heaven and its relation to this world.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will be aware of how God, through Jesus, is a transforming presence in their lives.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read Revelation 21:1-5,22-27 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The reflection begins by exploring the following paradox: many people today express a hunger for spiritual experience (which Christians will understand as a deep longing for God's presence in our lives), yet they are put off by a theology of "getting to heaven." Susan Garrett observes that, "against the backdrop of everyday conversation, such talk seems old-fashioned. Most of us just do not talk about heaven that way anymore. Heaven has lost its hold on our imagination." Why this paradox? "We are convinced that life on this earth, in these bodies, ought to mean something; we are not ready to write off

our lives in this world as if they were worthless. We don't want 'pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by;' we want happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction here and now."

The biblical view of heaven does not force us to separate these longings, for God's presence with us and for heaven, but sees them as continuous with one another. This means that talk about "getting to heaven" is not just about eternity after we die, but also about a quality of our life in God that begins now.

Ask three members to read aloud Exodus 34:29-35, Matthew 17:1-8, and 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, and 4:6. The passages from Matthew and 2 Corinthians clearly build upon the story in Exodus, and the vision in Revelation 21 must be understood in light of all of these passages. Pull together these passages about God's glory to think about how heaven is our home, but heaven begins now.

Study Questions

1. Members may mention elements of popular culture (books, movies, or television programs) that are expressions of this longing. Christians will interpret the New Age spirituality as a distorted reflection of it. Your church may have discipleship groups in which members discern together the spiritual themes in popular books or movies, and it may reach out to people outside the church through these study groups. Not only the sermons and teachings, but also the church's music and art can express and shape our longings for heaven.
2. In addition to some New Age eclectic spirituality (drawing from many different religions, as the individual desires), members might mention the television-only Christianity that makes no demands upon its 'congregants.' Closer to home is our tendency to distort the Church into being a therapeutic center, 'on call' to satisfy member's desires and spiritual needs.
3. Julie Pennington-Russell warns, "Perhaps that is why Jesus was always giving us such straightforward instructions: *Follow me. Don't be anxious. Love God. Love each other.* Christ apparently did not think it important to fill in all of the missing pieces about life after death. What he gave us was a calling so high and a love so expansive that everything else seems puny by comparison" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 41). You could approach this question by summarizing how the disciples responded to the messenger's rhetorical question: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" They organized to pray, witness, and continue Christ's ministry (Acts 1:12-26).
4. Susan Garrett writes, "As a Christian community, as a church, we are called by Christ to pour out his love by honoring and serving the weak, rather than holding onto any privileges or prestige that set us apart. How are we and the other members of the church honoring and serving the weak, both those within the Christian body, and those outside of it?" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 58) Use this discussion to lead members toward singing or praying the closing hymn, "Heaven Shall Not Wait."

Departing Hymn

"Heaven Shall Not Wait" is on pp. 62-63 of *Heaven and Hell*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Unquenchable Fire

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Matthew 25:31-46
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (review all)
Question 3 or 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 3	Questions 2 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To outline the development of the biblical concepts of Sheol, Gehenna, and Hades.
2. To understand how limited and varied are the details concerning hell in the Bible.
3. To see how the New Testament passages are understood in two theologies of hell, the “traditionalist” and “conditionalist” views.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Heaven and Hell (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a story

Share the story that Jim Somerville tells of the outlandish bar called “Hell” in Adams-Morgan, a Washington, D.C. district (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 43). Somerville notes that the bar owner derived his ideas about hell from many sources, and wonders about what guides our ideas about hell.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request for wisdom in understanding these difficult passages, and a willingness to live with unanswered questions.

Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Matthew 3:1-12 and Mark 9:42-48 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The two readers have introduced the difficult phrase, “unquenchable fire,” in John the Baptist and Jesus’ teachings. It is a startling image of the certainty of God’s judgment of wickedness and rebellion. How should we understand such language? Peter Kreeft’s reminder that this is analogical language (which describes, as best we can, in language drawn from the realm of visible things, this reality that is beyond all of our experience) does not mean that we should not take it seriously. But his reminder suggests that we must proceed thoughtfully and with prayer as we allow it to shape our ideas about hell.

This lesson covers two major themes: (1) the key biblical terminology regarding the afterlife for the wicked, and (2) the theological understanding of these biblical passages in “traditionalism” and “conditionalism.” If you plan to use this study guide for two sessions, you might treat these themes separately and in this order.

If members are not familiar with the different concepts of Sheol, Gehenna, and Hades, then the group will want to read many or all of the scripture references. A good study Bible with footnotes is very helpful in understanding these passages, because some English versions of the Bible do not distinguish

these words in translation. To simplify the development of the biblical concepts, draw the following diagram and lead members to discover the defining traits (which are shown in italic type):

	<u>Sheol</u>	<u>Gehenna</u>	<u>Hades</u>
Old Testament period			
(1) (early)	<i>all the dead; permanent; “shades”</i>	<i>a literal valley; place of idolatry and child sacrifice</i>	
(2) (later)	<i>everyone; temporary (before resurrection)</i>	<i>idols destroyed; city trash heap; metaphor for fiery judgment</i>	
New Testament period			
(3) (extra-biblical writings)	<i>the wicked only (righteous go to Paradise)</i>		
(4) (biblical writings)			<i>metaphor for fiery judgment; all the dead (or, the wicked only); Hades is not a fiery place itself, but is thrown into a lake of fire</i>

Study Questions

1. “Gehenna” was the name of a literal valley, which, because of its sordid history, became a metaphor for fiery judgment. “Unquenchable fire” refers to its unending smoldering trash, or the inescapable nature of God’s judgment of evil. “Sheol” (in Hebrew) and “Hades” (in Greek) refer to a place where all dead persons reside. Gradually each concept becomes connected to judgment, though neither is a fiery place.
2. Traditionalists hold that the unrighteous are destined to eternal physical and spiritual torment, while conditionalists say that the unrighteous will cease to exist (after God’s judgment, or after some period of torment). Judkins discusses passages used to support each view. Traditionalists understand Revelation 20:13-14 to mean that the torment in the lake of fire will be continual and is the fate of all the unrighteous. Conditionalists understand these verses to claim that death and hell themselves will be cast into the lake of fire and, therefore, cease. Other theologies of hell have been proposed, but the traditionalist and conditionalist views are the most widely accepted among Christians. Perhaps this is because each of them so strongly encourages the evangelical impetus of our faith.
3. Members might mention: Why does hell exist? Who are the ‘wicked’ that go there? To what can we compare hell’s torment? Can hell be the creation of a loving God? Is Satan in hell? Is hell itself merely a metaphor?
4. Scripture does not address many of our questions, and our views are often shaped by extra-biblical speculation. The focus of scripture should be our focus: God’s judgment of wickedness and rebellion is certain. When we develop more teachings concerning hell, we must ask ourselves, “Are they necessary for understanding and explaining the gospel, or are we merely satisfying our curiosity?”

Departing Hymn

“Forever Where Our Hope is Born” is on pp. 60-61 of *Heaven and Hell*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (Harrowing of Hell)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how the church has addressed the relation of hell to God's love.
2. To discuss the doctrine that "Jesus descended into hell."
3. To discern whether a teaching on hell is developed to help explain the gospel, or merely to satisfy our curiosity.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Heaven and Hell (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the two focus articles before the group meeting. You may make copies of the Apostles' Creed from the Web site: www.ccel.org/creeds/apostles.creed.html. Locate the hymn "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy" in your hymnbook, or print copies of this public domain hymn from the Web site www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a poem

Share the full inscription above the Gates of Hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (reprinted in *Heaven and Hell*, pp. 35-36). Highlight the amazing theme that hell is an expression of God's justice, wisdom, and the primal love.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read 1 Peter 3:13-4:6 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The Apostles' Creed derives from the church's earliest statements of belief. Rufinus, in *The Exposition of the Creed* (ca. 400 A.D.), comments upon the phrase "descended into hell," but he mentions that earlier versions of the Creed do not include this phrase. So, this phrase must have been added to the Apostle's Creed in the fourth century.

The primary meaning of the teaching that Christ descended into hell is that Christ is Lord over all creation. Since, in the New Testament, hell (Hades) is frequently the place of all dead persons, the Creed may mean that Christ fully entered death. Yet, hell (Hades) can also be the place of the wicked, so several Christian doctrines have developed using this interpretation of hell in this statement in the Apostles' Creed.

The Harrowing of Hell has some scriptural warrant, but it is largely a theological construction. Members may discuss whether it is a teaching required to help explain the gospel, or exists to satisfy our curiosity.

Two other theological constructions based upon Christ's descent into hell are briefly discussed: Ralph Wood's view that it "opens up the possibility of saving faith being given to the unnumbered dead, who,

even during the Christian era, have never heard the Gospel,” and Alan Lewis’ view that it shows the Father rescuing his Son from utter defeat and vindicating Jesus’ life and ministry. These are thoughtful views that explore the meaning of Christ’s lordship over all creation, but they are not biblical or ancient doctrines. Again, encourage members to discuss their merits in communicating, and not distorting, the gospel today.

Finally, Doug Henry reflects on Dante’s statement that hell is constructed by “the primal love,” a reference to the Holy Spirit. Henry suggests that God refuses to override creaturely freedom, and allows humans ultimately to refuse a loving relationship with God.

Members who want to explore these and other doctrines related to hell will find resources in Rikk Watts, “The History of Heaven and Hell” (*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 84-89).

Study Questions

1. If time permits, members may want to read in context these verses mentioned by Ralph Wood: Psalm 139:8; Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 15:26; and Colossians 2:15. Wood describes how early Christian writers connected the themes in these passages.
2. Von Balthasar says that God is reluctant to take “No” for the final answer from a rebellious person. Members might reflect on the implications for loved ones who have misunderstood or rejected God. Another important issue here involves our desires that the unrighteous suffer for their rebellion and wickedness. God will pursue heinous criminals into their self-imposed loneliness, too, and address them with the “absolute weakness of love.”
3. Screwtape’s mocking tone comes out in this passage; he thinks it a limitation that God “cannot ravish. He can only woo.” That is, God does not overpower us. But this is the ‘devil’ speaking, and C. S. Lewis rather is commending this loving nature of God. “Wooing” or “courting” honors our freedom, yet reaches out for our heartfelt response.
4. Members might mention: How does God deal with those who have never heard the Gospel, or have heard only a distorted version? How does God woo human beings with diminished mental or emotional capacities? How does God nurture our creaturely freedom to respond to him, and then amply protect it from the distortions of culture and the devices of our own hearts? Doug Henry’s comment that “Much mystery remains” (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 37), and properly so, is a good note on which to conclude the group’s discussion.

Departing Hymn

Distribute copies of “Come Ye Sinner, Poor and Needy.” If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

The Art of the Final Judgment

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Study selected art	Reflection (all sections)
Question (on selected art)	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate the gifts of Christian artists who serve as teachers and prophets to the church through their art.
2. To practice “discernment of spirits” in regard to Christian art, by evaluating its contribution to the building up of the church, the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:10).

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Heaven and Hell (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles on the art that the group will discuss.

Begin with a story

Auguste Rodin accepted his first major commission, *The Gates of Hell*, when he was forty years old. This sculpture was to be the doorway for the École des Arts Décoratifs (Museum of Decorative Arts) in the Paris World’s Fair in 1889. The museum project was cancelled, but Rodin continued to struggle over the next twenty years to depict the damned as they approach the entrance into hell. He never finished. The sculpture was cast in bronze after the artist’s death, using plaster casts taken from his clay models. Why would an artist pursue such a project?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then voice common concerns of the group. Close by thanking God for Christian artists who inspire and teach us.

Scripture Reading

Ask four members to read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57; Matthew 24:29-31; and Revelation 1:4-8 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this lesson we evaluate Christian art in terms of how well it serves the body of Christ. Rather than evaluating it as “art for art’s sake,” we respond to it as art for teaching Christian truth, proclaiming the gospel, or prophetically directing the church to discover the will of God. This means that we should respond to Christian art—as we should to other teaching, preaching, and prophesying—by weighing its work in building up the church. “Discerning the spirits” is the Apostle Paul’s term for this sort of evaluation. Read 1 Corinthians 12:10 and 14:29 together and discuss how this practice can apply to art. This practice of discernment requires, at least, that we ask questions such as: “Does the art express biblical ideas in a faithful and theologically sensitive way?” “How does it integrate non-biblical materials?” and “What message does the art convey in the contexts in which it typically is used?” Members may suggest other questions that Christians should ask.

The lesson then illustrates this practice of discernment in relation to three works of art: Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, Rodin's *The Gates of Hell*, and LaHaye and Jenkins' *Left Behind* series.

Study Questions

1. Members might mention: Jesus descends from heaven (the sky); the dead are brought from their graves, and they ascend to meet Jesus in the clouds; trumpets are sounded; bodies are changed (in the fresco, the martyred disciples who look to Jesus are clothed in new, undamaged bodies); angels gather the elect; and the unrighteous turn away from Jesus and wail. Members might mention that Michelangelo incorporates images from other biblical stories: for example, the serpent entwined around a person in hell reminds us that the final judgment was prefigured in the Fall in the Garden of Eden.
2. Members might make the following comments regarding the *speculation* of these artists:
 - ✓ Michelangelo and Rodin are restrained in their depictions of the entrance to hell. Michelangelo includes the Greek figure, Charon, but he plays a very minor role in driving people into Hades (a reminder that the Christian idea of hell derives, in part, from the New Testament's appropriation of the concept of Hades). Charon plays no role in God's judgment itself. The entrance to hell is simply a dark, painful region in Michelangelo's fresco.
 - ✓ While Rodin include many non-biblical figures, he uses these to emphasize the chaos and fragmentation of hell.
 - ✓ LaHaye and Jenkins deal with earlier stages in the dispensationalist's apocalyptic timetable. That dispensationalist timetable is speculative.

A danger that these artists face is that they might entice us to become voyeurs of the suffering of the unrighteous. How do they deal with this danger?

 - ✓ Michelangelo moves much of the suffering 'off scene' and makes the judgment of Christ the focal point of his composition. He invites us to think about the judgment, rather than the unrighteous persons' suffering.
 - ✓ Rodin, depicting hell itself, shows more suffering and anguish than did Michelangelo, but Rodin's focal point is the character of Dante (*The Thinker*), who is reflecting upon his own sins and his relation to the suffering around him.
 - ✓ The focus in *Left Behind* novels, too often, is the adventure of the struggle against the forces of evil, Jeffrey suggests. Members may disagree, but Jeffrey fears that this removes the focus from God's judgment and the reader's attendant self-reflection and contrition.
3. Members may suggest more specific forms of the three questions, or related questions, such as: "Does the art make interesting theological suggestions which are consistent with Scripture?" "Does it use violence or sexual activity in a voyeuristic manner?" "Does it minimize the impact of the biblical witness by making it relatively equal to competing views?" "Does it fail to challenge Christian views which have been deformed by our culture?" and "Does it exhibit self-righteousness, for instance by belittling competing interpretations of scripture?"

Departing Hymn

"Forever Where Our Hope is Born" is on pp. 60-61 of *Heaven and Hell*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.