What the Bible Really Says About Hell

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Introduction

Jesus talked a lot about hell, always as a warning. But modern Christians are often reluctant to give such a negative message. So what exactly does the Bible say about hell? And how should we believe and teach on this subject?

We’ve assembled the teaching of three respected teachers to give us their wisdom and perspective on the weighty topic of hell:

- **Timothy Keller** is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Reason for God*, *The Prodigal God*, and *Counterfeit Gods*. Use this study to get a handle on basic, everyday theology that affects how we live.

- **Bill Hybels** is the founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church. He is well known for his relevant and insightful Bible-based teaching. He is the author of many books, including *Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith*, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (with Mark Mittelberg), and *The God You’re Looking For*.

- **Timothy Peck** is a teaching pastor at Life Bible Fellowship Church in Upland, California, and adjunct instructor at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, in La Mirada, California.
How to use this resource for a group study

This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.

1. Make enough copies of the Participant’s Guide for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader’s guide for them instead.

2. Don’t feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.

3. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.

4. When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.

5. Begin and end the session in prayer.
Is the God of Christianity an Angry Judge?

An understanding of the doctrine of hell is crucial to knowing God.

One of the things that troubles people most about Christianity is the teaching that God is a judge who consigns people to hell. How can we possibly reconcile the concept of judgment and hell with the idea of a loving God? They just don’t seem to go together. What do we say to their concern?

The Christian understanding of hell is crucial for understanding our own hearts, for living at peace in the world, and for knowing the love of God. This study will discuss these seemingly counterintuitive ideas.


Based On: The sermon “Hell: Isn’t the God of Christianity an Angry Judge?,” by Timothy Keller, PreachingToday.com
Part 1 Identify the Issue

**Note to Leader:** Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

C. S. Lewis wrote that Christianity’s assertion that we are going to live forever is either true or false. If I am only going to live 80 years or so, there are a good many things not worth bothering about. But that changes if I’m going to go on living forever. Perhaps my bad temper or my jealousy is gradually getting worse—so gradually that the increase in my lifetime may not be noticeable. But it might be absolute hell in a million years. In fact, if Christianity is true, hell is precisely the correct term for it. Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others, but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer do so. Then there will be no “you” left to criticize or even to enjoy the mood. It will just be the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. You see, it’s not a question of whether God sends us “to hell.” In every one of us, there is something growing which will be hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

**Discussion Questions:**

[Q] What do you say when people ask, “How can God be loving if he sends people to hell?”

[Q] What struggles do you have with the doctrine of hell?

[Q] How does the doctrine of hell affect your day-to-day life and faith?

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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

**Teaching Point One:** Hell is crucial for understanding your own heart.


In verse 25, Abraham basically says to the rich man, *The good things you built your life on were the basis for your identity, and now that you’re dead, they no longer exist—there is no “you” left.***

If you take a good thing and make it an ultimate thing, you are placing your hope in something other than God. This misplaced focus is what starts a spiritual fire in your heart. The act of turning good things into ultimate things is like an addiction—and all addictions lead to internal and external devastation, isolation, and denial. This is the hell fire of which the Bible speaks.
What the Bible Really Says About Hell

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Leaders Guide

Every single person, religious or irreligious, moral or immoral, is addicted to grounding his or her identity in something other than God, and the human soul goes on forever. What does this mean for us in life and death? It’s not a question of whether God sends us “to hell.” In every one of us, there is something growing which will be hell unless it is nipped in the bud. Commentators have long noted that the rich man in the parable is astonishingly blind. He is in denial, filled with blame-shifting. Hell is a freely-chosen identity, based on something other than God, that goes on forever. But even while you disintegrate, you refuse to admit what hell is. There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says in the end, “Thy will be done.”

[Q] Why was the rich man in hell? What might have been his identity in life?

[Q] Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish philosopher, wrote a book called Sickness Unto Death. In it he wrestles with the definition of sin, which he defines as building your identity on anything but God. Is this a good definition of sin? Why or why not?

[Q] The act of turning good things into ultimate things is like an addiction—and all addictions lead to internal and external devastation, isolation, and denial. This is the fire of which the Bible speaks. What are the fires of hell according to this passage and others you’ve read in Scripture?

[Q] We think that it is God who casts a person into hell, but it is a self-chosen identity. What does this mean? Is it true?

[Q] What is it that gives meaning to your life—your highest good? Do you have a misplaced focus?

Teaching Point Two: Hell is crucial for living at peace in the world.

Verse 25 is intriguing: When Abraham looks down from heaven into hell and speaks to the rich man, he calls him “son.” There is a real sadness, a sense of tragedy, in his words. Anyone who believes the Bible looks with great sadness at people who are on their way to hell. There is no sense in which we would disdain those who are going—not if we understand what hell is like. Consider what Miroslav Volf shares in his book. As a Croatian, Volf had first-hand experience with the terrible violence in the Balkans.

He saw people locked in a cycle of vengeance and retaliation for years and years. But in his book he says that the cycle of retaliation was not fueled by a belief in a God of judgment. It was fueled by a lack of belief in a God of judgment. He writes: “If God were not angry at injustice, that God would not be worthy of worship. The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that judgment is legitimate only when it comes from God. My thesis, that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance,
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will be unpopular with many, but it takes the quiet of a suburban home to believe that human nonviolence results from a belief in God’s refusal to judge. In a land soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die with other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.”

[Q] Give an example of a great injustice that you wished would be judged.

[Q] There are many people who are afraid that if you believe in a God of judgment and the doctrine of hell, you will have disdain for certain classes of people—that you will be oppressive. What would you say to this?

[Q] How does verse 25 inform our interactions with the “lost”?

[Q] What is your disposition toward unbelievers around you?

[Q] How does your faith in a God of ultimate judgment affect your words and actions? Are you a peacemaker or a retaliator?

Teaching Point Three: Hell is crucial for knowing the love of God.

Fear of hell and damnation will never change the fundamental structures of a human heart. When you scare people with thoughts of hell, they won’t end up being good for goodness’ sake or for God’s sake, for his pleasure. They’re just going to be good for their own sake. It’s just more selfishness! So what will change the fundamental structures of the heart? Love. Radical, unconditional love is the only thing that will take our mistrustful, in-denial, conniving little hearts and shock them into a whole new way of living and being.

But where are we going to get the kind of love that changes our heart? Jesus points out that the key is knowing why he died—which is shown in the writings of Moses and the Prophets. The Lord made him a guilt offering, and by the results of his suffering, God is satisfied. You do not know how much Jesus loves you unless you know how much he suffered.

[Q] How can we say that God is loving if hell exists?

[Q] Why, in verses 27–31, does Father Abraham say that a risen dead man would not be enough to motivate the rich man’s family toward saving faith? What do they need?

[Q] Isn’t hell just God’s means to “scare us straight”? Explain.

[Q] What do Moses and the Prophets tell us about God’s plan of salvation?

[Q] How does hell help you appreciate God’s love for you in Christ?
Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** To consider how the doctrine of hell affects our discipleship.

**Activity:** The doctrine of hell should lead us to worship, to peacemaking, and to compassionate evangelism. Take an extended time as a group to pray for friends and family who need to hear of Christ’s radical, unconditional love. Discuss together what might be the next step for each person to share their faith. Maybe it’s a cup of coffee with a co-worker, or reading one of the Gospels with a neighbor. Encourage each other to take the step by continuing to follow up with one another in upcoming meetings.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Spend an extended time of prayer thanking God for your identity in him and for his love for you in Christ. Then, pray for those around you whose identity is not focused on Christ and who may be in danger of hell.

**Action Point:** Who are you really? Is your core identity based on what God has done for you in Jesus? Is it based on being a child of the King, in the mission of getting to the new heavens and new earth? Or are you just a businessman or businesswoman? Are you just an artist, a mother, a father? Take time to think about your identity this week.

—Study by Timothy Keller with Kyle L. White
An understanding of the doctrine of hell is crucial to knowing God.

One of the things that troubles people most about Christianity is the teaching that God is a judge who consigns people to hell. How can we possibly reconcile the concept of judgment and hell with the idea of a loving God? They just don’t seem to go together. What do we say to their concern?

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What the Bible Really Says About Hell

Is the God of Christianity an Angry Judge?

Participant’s Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

C. S. Lewis wrote that Christianity’s assertion that we are going to live forever is either true or false. If I am only going to live 80 years or so, there are a good many things not worth bothering about. But that changes if I’m going to go on living forever. Perhaps my bad temper or my jealousy is gradually getting worse—so gradually that the increase in my lifetime may not be noticeable. But it might be absolute hell in a million years. In fact, if Christianity is true, hell is precisely the correct term for it. Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others, but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer do so. Then there will be no “you” left to criticize or even to enjoy the mood. It will just be the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. You see, it’s not a question of whether God sends us “to hell.” In every one of us, there is something growing which will be hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Hell is crucial for understanding your own heart.

Teaching Point Two: Hell is crucial for living at peace in the world.

Teaching Point Three: Hell is crucial for knowing the love of God.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

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—Study by Timothy Keller with Kyle L. White
What Does the Bible Say About Hell?

Hell is a spiritual reality that can be countered only by the Cross of Christ.

Do you really believe in a hell as well as a heaven? Or have you done your best not to think about it much? Most of us don’t like thinking about hell; we don’t like the fact that some of our loved ones are headed that way based on the decisions they’re making every day. But you cannot read your Bible without being confronted by the fact that Jesus believed in a hell and warned us about it, because he knew most people would try desperately to block the reality of hell from their thoughts.

Scripture: Matthew 13:47–51

Based On: The sermon “A Look at Hell,” by Bill Hybels, PreachingToday.com
What Does the Bible Say About Hell?

Leader’s Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] Are you convinced there is a hell? Why or why not?

[Q] What do you know about hell? How do you picture it?

[Q] Who do you think goes to hell?

Several of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen. And no doubt that is why, while Jesus was teaching about the afterlife, he used a commercial fishing illustration to make an abstract truth come to life. Read Matthew 13:47–51.

Jesus was saying that you can learn some truths about the afterlife through a simple illustration about a dragnet, a lake, and some fish.

First, all people will be brought to judgment some day. Every fish in the lake will be gathered up. It’s a dragnet; it’s not a hook and line. The whole lake is dragged. Every fish will be up on the beach. Every person will come and stand before a holy God in the day of judgment, even you. Second, there will be a separation process. The fish are sorted out and people will be sorted out. Every person will end up in one of two places.

Third, the saved will be assigned a place for eternity in heaven, a place of marvels beyond our imagination. But the unsaved – the unbelievers – will be assigned a place in hell for eternity, where they will receive condemnation for their offenses against a holy God and for their rejection of his gracious offer of salvation and forgiveness extended through Jesus Christ, his Son.

When Jesus finished his discourse, he looked at his disciples and said, “Have you understood all these things?” And they all said, “Yes.”

Even if you weren’t going to rely on Scripture, most of us would reach the conclusion that any sense of justice we share demands that there be a hell. An interview showed a woman whose daughter had been brutally raped and killed. The rapist and murderer was blatantly unrepentant. He even laughed at the mother of the daughter he had murdered. After the trial, the mother told reporters she didn’t want the death penalty for him because she wanted the knowledge that every hour of every day for the rest of his life, he would pay for the crime. For her, justice demanded a lifetime of incarceration and retribution. She wasn’t going to let him get off with quick annihilation.
In a moral economy governed by a holy, completely righteous God, offenses against that perfectly holy God will be paid. Justice demands it.

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**Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles**

**Teaching Point One: Hell involves emotional anguish.**

What is hell really like? A guy waves goodbye to his friends and says, “See you in hell.” And they all laugh. He’s not worried about hell. There are a lot of people who banter capriciously that hell is a great place with no rules, no religious people, no restraints. “It’s a place where all my friends will be,” they say. “We can party and get wasted.” It’s pictured as an eternal *Animal House*. These notions are the product of wishful thinking.

**[Q]** Share some examples of how people today picture hell.

**Optional Activity:**

**Purpose:** To help us see how our society pictures hell.

**Activity:** Break into groups of three or four. Pass out magazines that include a lot of ads or photographs. Ask each group to find two or three pictures that depict how some people in our society might picture hell.

But the most authoritative truth source concerning the afterlife is the Bible, and it uses some frightening language and pictures to communicate what hell is like. It is not pictured at all like a fraternity party. The Bible speaks of four different types of suffering in hell.

First, it talks about people suffering emotional anguish. The word *gehenna* is often used in Scripture interchangeably with hell. This word refers to a deep valley that was outside the city of Jerusalem in Jesus’ day. All of the garbage from the city was thrown into that valley and burned there. It was a dump that smoldered 24 hours a day, year after year. When the Bible teaches that unbelievers will be assigned a place in hell, it uses the word *gehenna*.

People will wake up in hell and realize that they have been deemed trash for eternity. But it doesn't have to be that way. If people would just look, they would see how God values them. A lot of people gain a new life by realizing what God thinks of them. The Bible says people in hell suffer an emotional anguish made up in part of the realization that God has deemed them irredeemable. They’ve been trashed. Can you imagine the emotional anguish of that?
Another form of emotional anguish derives from a phrase Jesus used in Matthew 13: “In hell, there will be gnashing of teeth.” Have you ever heard the sound—arrrgh! When you get frustrated and wish you hadn't made those mistakes, there's always the next time. Most of us can convert frustration into anticipation that it will be different next time. We don't gnash our teeth for long, but just make up our minds to do it differently next time.

The Bible teaches that when people wake up in hell, part of the emotional anguish will be expressed by a continual, eternal gnashing of the teeth, when people go, “I blew it, I blew it, I blew it!” And it just doesn't stop. “I knew better. Jesus was the Son of God. I had an opportunity to know the Maker of the Universe. I rejected him. Arrrgh!” The anguish is almost unbearable: “How could I have been so stupid!” And what's awful is that there's no next time. There is no anticipation of doing it differently next time around. There's just eternal gnashing of teeth.

Read Matthew 10:28–33.

[Q] What does this passage tell you about God's love and care for you?
[Q] What does it tell you about the consequences of turning your back on God?
[Q] Describe what you think the emotional anguish of hell will be like.

Teaching Point Two: Hell involves physical anguish.

Then there's the physical anguish. Just as those who are resurrected to an eternity with the Lord receive new bodies for the purpose of giving God glory, those who are resurrected to an eternity in hell receive new bodies, but for the purpose of eternal retribution.

“What kind of physical anguish?” you ask.

In Luke 16 and other places throughout Scripture, we find phraseology that pertains to fire and flames, a furnace that causes relentless, suffocating, tormenting heat to the extent that the rich man queries Lazarus about the possibility of receiving the treasured relief that a single drop of water would bring. The rich man doesn't ask for a barrel of water or a jar or a thermos or a cup or a gulp. He says just a drop or two would be precious beyond description. And the Bible says that that type of unrelieved physical anguish will go on day and night forever.

Sometimes when we experience physical pain, we can discipline ourselves. Those of you who are runners know what that's like. Sometimes you get the crippling pain of a side ache and through mental discipline you keep running. You breathe a little differently, use mental discipline, and you hang in there because you know it will go away. It doesn't go away in hell. It intensifies, but it doesn't go away.
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[Q] What do the contrasts in this passage tell you about the difference between our lives on earth and our lives afterwards?

[Q] What does this passage reflect besides physical anguish?

Teaching Point Three: Hell involves relational anguish.

Many people have the idea that there will be good fellowship in games, fraternity parties, and orgies in hell. That’s a lie. There’s no fellowship in hell. There’s no community or sense of companionship. There are no relationships in hell. Hell will be filled with people so personally demolished by emotional pain and physical agony that there will be no energy or interest in brotherhood, companionship, or fellowship. Every individual will be so completely entrenched in his or her own anguish that bearing one another’s burdens will be a distant memory at best.

Solitary suffering forever is the picture of hell we get from Scripture. Probably the only relational thought that will come to mind is the same one that came to the rich man’s mind. He pleads for someone to warn his loved ones. “Do anything,” he cries, “to keep them from this fate.” Solitary suffering interrupted only by the terror that someone you love might be headed down the same track is the extent of relationships in hell. Don’t plan any parties. No one will show.

Read 2 Peter 2:4–9.

[Q] Who did God protect and who did he judge according to this passage?

[Q] How does this passage demonstrate the isolation in hell?

Teaching Point Four: Hell involves spiritual anguish.

Spiritual anguish is the worst part of all. The most ungodly, insensitive of all sinners still benefits from living in an age where God’s grace shines on the just and the unjust. The worst criminals still look out, even through prison bars, at a blue sky and green grass. In this age God is still restraining evil and is still working miracles in lives. He’s monitoring the flow of history. God is holding back the floodtides of evil and terror that Satan would love to inflict on this world.

But in hell, God doesn’t intervene any more. He chooses to be conspicuous by his absence. And his absence unleashes a reign of spiritual terror that words cannot describe. The Scripture writers resort to word pictures.

“Utter darkness” is one; it refers to absolute chaos and confusion, hopelessness, and infinite ages of futility. The morning never comes, the light never goes on, and there’s never a breakthrough.
There are just infinite ages of hopelessness, futility, confusion, and chaos in a state totally separate from God.

Another Scripture writer calls it “the bottomless pit.” That conjures up dreamlike feelings of falling, falling, falling. We’ve all had dreams like that; when you wake your heart beats hard because you were falling. Picture hanging over a precipice: God is hanging on to you and you’re hanging on to him. And then you decide you don’t need him any more, so you let go. But the moment you let go you know you made a mistake. You’re falling, and every moment you fall farther and farther away from the only source of help, truth, and love, and you can’t get back up, and you fall farther and faster and farther and faster into spiritual oblivion, and you know you’re going the wrong direction and you’d give anything to go back but you can’t, and you fall and you fall and you fall and you fall. How long? Forever. And all the while you’re falling, you’re saying, “I’m farther, now I’m farther, now I’m even farther from the only source of hope, truth, and love.”

In hell there is never the bliss of annihilation. You’d give anything for annihilation, but it’s unavailable, only the conscious continuation of emotional anguish, physical anguish, relational anguish, and spiritual anguish forever.

We end up in hell if we reject the person and work of Jesus.

Read John 5:19–23.

[Q] What does this passage tell us about the importance of Jesus Christ to our eternal future?

[Q] Describe what you think spiritual anguish would be like in hell.

**Teaching Point Five: There is only one way to stay out of hell.**

Some of you are saying, “My goodness. What awful crime must a person commit to warrant going to hell? A place that horrifying must take an awful lot of sinning.”

We’ll reduce hundreds of pages of Scripture to a sentence: You want to end up in hell? The ultimate crime that will get you there is to reject the person and work of Jesus Christ. Reject Jesus. Ignore him. Walk away from his saving grace and his love, and you will seal your fate in hell forever. That’s what the writer said in Hebrews 10:29: “How do you ever expect to survive if you have trampled underfoot the Son of God, the blood of Jesus Christ?”

Here’s the picture: We’re all over here on this side of the stage and we’ll take a little journey together. On the other side of the stage is the afterlife. We’re all heading together toward the
afterlife. We’re all aging, we’re all going down the road of life. What the Bible tells you, you can bear out in personal experience—that all along the way we stumble and fall and commit sins. We violate the standard of holiness that God has asked us to keep. Now some of us don’t think sin is serious, and probably that’s because we don’t realize who it is we’re violating. The Bible says sin is nothing short of cosmic treason.

Parents, you know what it’s like to ask your children to do some good thing and to have them turn around and say, “I’m just not going to do it!” And you look down at them and you say, “Pardon me, little one?” What’s that tiny little clenched fist doing? You grab that little fist and say, “Hey, settle down. What’s this defiance?”

God says to uphold the standard of truthfulness, but we tell a lie. What are we doing when we tell a lie? We’re committing cosmic treason. We’re saying, “God, I understand that you have insisted that we tell the truth, but I am going to defy you and shake my puny little fist at you and say, ‘I’m going to tell a lie anyway. So watch me lie.’” God says, “Don’t steal. Don’t be unfaithful to your spouse.” And all along this journey what do we do? We say, “I don’t care what you say. I’m going to do it my way.” It’s cosmic treason. So here’s the whole community going along the road of life, and we’re committing treason right and left. We don’t call it that, but that’s what’s going on.

We’re getting closer and closer to the afterlife, the Day of Judgment. By God’s grace we have run smack into a pulpit, a Christian, a Bible study, a missionary, pastor, teacher, church, whatever. We hear that there is a solution for sin, that payment was made that can cover all our sin and reroute us to eternal life in heaven instead of continuing with the masses straight toward the afterlife in hell. And so as we bump into the Cross, the person, and the work of Jesus Christ, it’s decision time.

The Bible says the Holy Spirit is calling us, trying to get us to kneel down and repent and receive Jesus Christ. And yet there’s something in us that wants to keep that back stiff and say, “I’m not going to repent; I’m not going to bow. I don’t need this.” So the Holy Spirit’s urging us to do the right thing, and other Christians are cheering us on, saying, “Do the right thing! We did the right thing.” And a certain group of people fall to their knees and say, “I know I committed cosmic treason, and I know if I stay on that path I’m headed for hell. Justice demands it. But now I’m going to ask Jesus Christ to forgive my sins, to blot out all my cosmic treason, and to not only redirect this life but to redirect my eternity.” Those people are born again. Those people are Christians. It’s a miracle. Those people are rerouted in this life and for all of eternity.

But the mass of humanity cruises along committing cosmic treason, comes up to the person and work of Christ, bumps into it, and says, “I know I should follow, I know I should repent, but not me.” And they take a big step around the Cross. They rejoin all the rest of the mass of
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Humanity. They didn’t bow at the Cross. They walk over the cliff to a Christless eternity. That’s why it grinds when people accuse God of arbitrarily casting people into hell. God doesn’t cast people into hell. People take the big left turn. They walk around the Cross they bumped into. And every day they make a conscious decision: “I’m not going to bow. I’m going to cruise right around the Cross and keep doing my thing.”

When you end up in hell, don’t blame God. He pleaded with you. He did what it took. The Holy Spirit was moving. The whole Christian community was encouraging you to do the right thing. You made your choice in this life, and your choice will be borne out in the next life. You wanted to live apart from God in this life; you’ll live apart from God in eternity. It’s just that you have no idea how awful it will be, and when you get there, there’ll be no second chance. It’s forever.

Read John 16:7–11.

[Q] Has the Holy Spirit ever convicted you of sin, righteousness, or judgment? If so, tell us what that was like.

[Q] Why would God make our eternal future hinge on how we respond to Jesus Christ? Why would God make only one way into heaven?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

There are three implications.

The first implication is for those of you who are unbelievers, who are moving with the mass of humanity and coming to the point of decision. Drop to your knees. You need a Savior. You’re cruising toward a Christless grave. You’re going to be in the afterlife a whole lot longer than in this life.

Fall to your knees and admit your cosmic treason and ask Jesus Christ to be your own Savior. Trust him for forgiveness and trust him for love. You’ll receive a love you never before knew was possible. It will be a very personal, inspiring, cleansing, edifying kind of love relationship that you’ll develop with the Lord if you’ll open your heart to him. He’ll redirect this life and he’ll redirect your eternity. Trust him. Try it!

There’s also an implication for people who are already believers in Jesus: Rejoice over what you have been spared from, that awful description of hell you just sat through so patiently. You won’t endure that. Praise God for what he has taken off the list of possibilities for your
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Life. You're done with that. Sealed. You'll never go there. Thank God for that. In your lowest moments here on earth, thank God and worship him for sparing you from hell. Be reminded of the stakes that surround our mission as we are called to give a witness to the truth of Christ. We're not just offering salvation to people like we would offer them a ham sandwich. “Hey, would you like a ham ... Oh, you don't want ... That's okay.” There are consequences. What we are doing is serious business. May we never get calloused or cold or forgetful about the realities of heaven and hell.

And finally there's an implication for our responsibility as Christians. The mass of humanity all over the world are moving toward the afterlife, and God has ordained the Church all over the world to be a beacon, an information center, and a rescue operation to get the word out about eternity, about heaven and hell, and most importantly about Jesus Christ. We're a body of people that God has anointed and empowered to proclaim to our world that people will spend more time in eternity than they do here.

Sometimes we lose perspective, don't we? Sometimes we wonder why we serve, why we teach classes, why we invite people to church, why we reach out to our neighbors—it's because eternal life and eternal death hang in the balance.

How important is what we're doing here? More important than anything else you're doing anywhere, because God has ordained you to play a part in being a lighthouse, a beacon, and a rescue operation for the whole mass of humanity.

Sometimes the truth hurts. Sometimes the truth jabs you. This is one of those days. The Bible says the truth sets you free. Yes, it's true: Hell is there, but the Cross is here.

**Action Point:** If you have not trusted Christ to save you from hell, what is holding you back? Discuss it with the group. If you have trusted Christ to save you from hell, who do you know that has not? How can you begin to talk with him or her about these things? Ask the group to pray for such an opportunity.

—Study by Bill Hybels, with JoHannah Reardon
What the Bible Really Says About Hell

What Does the Bible Say About Hell?

Participant’s Guide

Hell is a spiritual reality that can be countered only by the Cross of Christ.

Do you really believe in a hell as well as a heaven? 
Or have you done your best not to think about it much?
Most of us don’t like thinking about hell; we don’t like the fact that some of our loved ones are headed that way based on the decisions they’re making every day. But you cannot read your Bible without being confronted by the fact that Jesus believed in a hell and warned us about it, because he knew most people would try desperately to block the reality of hell from their thoughts.

Scripture: Matthew 13:47–51

Based On: The sermon “A Look at Hell,” by Bill Hybels, PreachingToday.com
Part 1 Identify the Issue

In a moral economy governed by a holy, completely righteous God, offenses against that perfectly holy God will be paid. Justice demands it.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Hell involves emotional anguish.

Teaching Point Two: Hell involves physical anguish.

Teaching Point Three: Hell involves relational anguish.

Teaching Point Four: Hell involves spiritual anguish.

Teaching Point Five: There is only one way to stay out of hell.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

How important is what we’re doing here? More important than anything else you’re doing anywhere, because God has ordained you to play a part in being a lighthouse, a beacon, and a rescue operation for the whole mass of humanity.

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What Is Beyond Death’s Door?

Hell is the real, final destiny of those who reject God’s love.

A Time magazine poll revealed that 63 percent of Americans believe hell is real. The same poll revealed that less than 1 percent of Americans believe they would end up there. This study looks at biblical answers to the following questions: Is hell real? What is hell like? Why is hell necessary?

Scripture: Revelation 20:11–15

Based On: “Beyond Death’s Door,” Series Builder by Timothy Peck, Preaching Today Sermons
Part 1 Identify the Issue

**Note to Leader:** Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide, included at the end of this study.

In our post-modern culture, hell has become an obsolete belief.

“Crime is rising because the fear of hell is declining,” or so said Britain’s Secretary of State for Education and Science John Patten in 1992. The British newspapers deemed the argument so preposterous that they gave it a lot of ink. Patten argued that Britain needed a renewed fear of damnation and hope of redemption to return to civility.

The secretary’s essay not only drew sharp reaction in the press, it also sparked a considerable debate over the moral foundations of modern society. One critical editorial gives the flavor of the prevailing opinion. Entitled “Hell: who needs it?” it concluded with this parting shot: “We may well need to renew our sense of the bad and the good, but the renewal will not be prompted by thoughts of a dreadful eternity elsewhere, even if we imagine Mr. Patten to be there with us, sharing it!”

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once cautioned, “It is unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell.” He’s right … we should realize that there is much more about heaven and hell that we don’t know than what we do know. But there are some things we can know: whether it’s real, what it’s like, and why it’s necessary.

**[Q]** Do you believe in hell? If so, how would you describe it?

**[Q]** Do you know anyone who thought they were going to hell? Why did they think so?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

**Teaching Point One:** Hell is a real place.

God told Daniel about a place of eternal contempt and shame. Read Daniel 12:2. However, Jesus was the person who mentioned hell most often. Read one of those statements in Matthew 10:28. A commitment to Jesus and the Bible mandates a belief in the existence of hell.

Read John’s account of hell as a lake of fire in Revelation 20:11–15.
[Q] What would a place of eternal contempt and shame be like as described in Daniel? Why would that be so awful?

[Q] According to Jesus’ words in Matthew 10:28, we should fear hell more than physical death. Why?

[Q] Why is hell called the second death in Revelation 20:14?

**Teaching Point Two: Jesus should be our primary resource for the specifics of hell.**

Historically, Christians have been divided on what hell is really like. Writings such as *Dante’s Inferno* or Jonathan Edwards’s famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” have shaped our thinking. However, Jesus should be our primary resource on the topic of hell.

Hell is primarily a place of judgment for Satan and his demons. Read Matthew 25:41, 46.

Jesus described hell as a burning garbage dump. The word Jesus uses for *hell* was not *Hades*, but *Gehenna*, which was a literal place in his day. Gehenna referred to the valley of Hinnom, which the Jews used as a garbage dump and kept constantly burning.

Hell is also described as a place of eternal darkness. Read Matthew 22:13 and Jude 13. Hell is an eternal place of conscious isolation and misery.

[Q] Why do people have to share a place of judgment with Satan and his demons? What does that tell you about people who reject Christ, even if they seem like nice people?

[Q] Why do you think Jesus used a burning garbage dump as an analogy of hell? What does that tell you about it as a place?

[Q] What does the fact that hell is a place of isolation and misery tell you about it?

[Q] What is wrong with each of the statements below according to the Scriptures we just read:

1) I’d rather go to hell with my buddies than to heaven with a bunch of strangers.
2) I like the dark better than the daytime, so hell sounds okay.
3) I don’t really like being around people, so isolation sounds pretty good.
What the Bible Really Says About Hell

What Is Beyond Death’s Door?

Leader’s Guide

Teaching Point Three: God has promised that he will judge evil.

If God is real, there must be a place of judgment for those who freely turn away from him. God is good and cannot tolerate evil. He has placed that same sense in our hearts, which is why we long for justice and fairness in our world. Read Revelation 6:9–11.

[Q] Describe how you feel when someone is unjust toward you or someone else. Why is this so frustrating?

[Q] What would heaven be like if evil people could reside there?

[Q] When will true justice occur according to this passage in Revelation?

[Q] In what way are even nice people evil if they reject Jesus Christ?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: To help us think about the horrors of hell.

Activity: Pass around an empty bowl or bucket to represent the emptiness of hell. It would be better if this was unattractive or beat up. As each person takes it, ask him or her to mention what he or she would hate most about hell.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Hell is real, hell is eternal, and hell is a choice.

A friend encouraged author Neil Cole to tour the Rodin museum while in France. Reflecting on Rodin’s most famous work, Cole writes:

Rodin was a French impressionist sculptor. Though many do not recognize his name, most are familiar with his work. He created The Thinker. What you may not realize is that The Thinker was really a study he had done to sit on the top of his greatest masterpiece—The Gates of Hell. For years we have been wondering what it is that The Thinker is thinking about. No, he’s not wondering about where he left his clothes the night before. What The Thinker is contemplating is an eternity of judgment separated from God.

Cole’s friend began to describe The Gates of Hell, which depicts innumerable beings writhing in agony on their way to judgment. As the vision of the work gripped Cole’s friend, she said, “Oh, I could just stare at The Gates of Hell forever.”
It was quiet for a moment as the significance of her words became clear. Cole writes, “All I could think of to say at that moment was, ‘Oh, I hope not.’” [Neil Cole, Cultivating a Life for God (ChurchSmart Resources, 1999), p. 120]

Jesus died on the cross to keep us from hell and bring us to himself; it is up to us to respond.

**Action Points (to think through on your own this week):**

- **What is the only thing that will keep you out of hell?**
- **Reflecting on what we’ve studied about hell, how does that make you feel concerning Christ’s sacrifice for you?**
- **Is there anyone you need to begin praying for an opportunity to talk to about this subject?**

—Study by Timothy Peck, with JoHannah Reardon
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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Hell is a real place.

Teaching Point Two: Jesus should be our primary resource for the specifics of hell.

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