



YOUTH STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE

Hell: Is It Real?

Discussing and considering different theological perspectives on hell will help youth learn how to talk about one of the more difficult concepts of their Christian faith.

Goal for the Session

Participants will explore the four most common views of hell and think about their own beliefs about hell.

Introduction

Hell strikes fear into the hearts of many Christians, but for very different reasons. Some have been taught to fear the ongoing fire and torture of hell as they hope for the eternal reward of heaven. Dante's *Inferno* and Puritan preacher Jonathon Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" both create vivid descriptions of this view of hell. In his 1741 sermon Edwards uses language that many today would consider horrifying in order to motivate people to accept Christ. He describes God as dangling humans from a spidery thread over an eternal furnace. We can imagine the fiery preacher full of passion:

"God . . . holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire."¹

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Picture hell

GATHERING

- Show the images and descriptions of hell

OPENING

- Pray
- Reflect

EXPLORING

- Present and summarize Resource Sheet
- Review Participant Handout
- Compare responses

RESPONDING

- Examine case studies

CLOSING

- Consider one thing learned
- Pray

While some people fear this fiery hell, others fear the theology that would lead someone to think that a good God would dangle humans over an endless pit. The modern fear is that the traditional idea of hell is so off-putting, disagreeable, and incongruous with the nature of God that it actually serves to keep people away from God and Christ. While many believe in the need for justice, eternal punishment is difficult to reconcile with the idea that God is good all the time.

For many, hell isn't something we should teach and preach. When someone questions us about what we think of hell, we panic. We stutter and stammer out answers that leave both parties unsatisfied. This happens because oftentimes we haven't been given a biblical or theological framework in which to think about hell. While the traditional image of hell as eternal punishment is the most widely known, it is not the only way to think about the concept. This study provides four theological frameworks for thinking about hell and the biblical support each uses. The views are the traditional view, conditional view, Christian universalism, and universalism. The graphic organizers on the resource page will help you and the participants visualize the different ways of thinking about hell.

The Traditional View

The traditional view of hell is the one that most of us are familiar with. In it humans possess immortality; our soul or resurrected body is eternal. The traditional Reformed view is that God predestines people to heaven or hell. That is, how each person spends eternity is God's choice, and not much we do can influence it. Others believe people can avoid hell by accepting Christ in this life. Once we die, our eternal destination is unchangeable.

Traditionally, hell is the equal opposite of heaven. In heaven we likely believe that we experience the peaceful, eternal presence of God. We imagine ourselves as happy and immortal. Hell is the opposite. It is full of torment rather than peace, it lasts forever, and God is far away. We imagine ourselves as miserable for eternity. However, many modern believers think of descriptions of hell as metaphorical rather than literal. The flames of hell may not be literal flames but flames of regret. The punishment isn't physical agony but the pain of living with mistakes for all eternity.

The Conditional View

In the conditional view, immortality or resurrection is granted by God as part of our judgment. It is not inherent in our beings. As in the traditional view, immortality and a place in heaven can be predestined or granted as part of judgment. Those who accept Christ before death are judged favorably and granted eternal life in heaven. For those who are judged unfavorably the punishment is not eternal torment but eternal death. Death is the final, irreversible separation from God. Some who support this view believe there can be punishment for sins before death, but the punishment is finite, not eternal. Others believe that eternal death *is* the punishment.

Christian Universalism

Like traditionalism, Christian universalism says that humans are destined for eternal life somewhere—that somewhere is eventually heaven. Some Reformed thinkers would say that God predestines all for eventual salvation, regardless of the choices in their lives. Others believe that people can choose salvation after death and that the experience of hell is a way of preparing for heaven. The fires of hell can be purifying, burning away the sin to prepare the person for heaven. In this view, Jesus can work even in hell, and salvation is still through Christ. This view is fairly popular because it allows room for punishment for sin while ringing true with the character of a God who seeks to reconcile all things. If all are saved and hell is empty, evil has been removed from the world, and God's purposes have been fulfilled.

General Universalism

Some people of faith believe that hell does not exist. Like the traditional and Christian universalist believers, general universalists believe in eternal life and a God who will reconcile all things. In general universalism all paths can lead to God. Belief in Christ is not a criteria for either heaven or hell. Supporters of both Christian and general universalism use biblical passages that describe the nature of God to support their position rather than specific passages about heaven or hell. They believe that because God so loves the world and its people, he would never submit any person to eternal or purifying punishment but rather offers salvation through forgiveness instead of punishment or retribution. If God's purpose is to defeat evil and reconcile all things, hell cannot exist for eternity. If it does, God is the cosmic loser.

Options

While most of us don't like to dwell on hell, it's important to be able to talk about the different ways hell is presented in the Bible—for our sake and the sake of others. Reconciling hell with our ideas of God can be both challenging and freeing. Hell is uncomfortably biblical. Jesus talks about it, so we can't discount it. But once we recognize that there may be a disconnect between what the Bible says and what we are imagining, hell can become less frightening.

Because the traditional theology of hell can be a stumbling block between people and God, we need to know the different ways the Bible describes God's purposes, salvation, and hell. For the traditionalists among us, that conversation is the same as it's been since before Edwards's sermon. Scare tactics are still seen as acceptable and effective in some circles.

However, for those among us who believe that God intends to reconcile the world and eliminate evil—even hell—the other frameworks for thinking about hell can provide opportunities for thoughtful discussions about the nature of God and the destiny of humanity. A clear understanding of the concept of hell can change the way we talk about God to our friends and neighbors and remove a stumbling block on the path to Christ.

Preparing for the Session

- Read the introduction in the Leader's Guide and reflect on your understanding of hell. Familiarize yourself with the descriptions of hell. Prepare to give a brief summary in activity 5.
- Read the various (and different!) descriptions of hell in the Bible.
- Make copies of the Resource Sheet at the end of this Leader's Guide.
- Decide whether to do the Exploring activity as a whole group or in competitive teams.

Materials Needed

- Paper, pencils, and art supplies
- Copies of the Resource Sheet
- Copies of the Participant Handout

Teaching Tip

This study is based on the assumption that most participants will have strong thoughts and opinions on the idea of hell. It is important that you model respectful

discourse, and you may have to encourage such practices among the youth. This can be done by inviting each person who speaks to acknowledge the previous speaker by saying one of the following:

Thank you (name) for that thought. I believe that . . .
I'm hearing you say (rephrase what the previous speaker said), but I think that . . .

Remind the participants that name-calling, insults, or angry gestures are *not* part of a respectful discussion.

Arriving (5 minutes)

1. Picture Hell

Welcome the participants and provide them with paper, pencils, and art supplies. Ask them to draw or describe what comes to mind when they hear the word "hell." Those who are describing hell should focus on sensory words. What do they see, hear, smell, touch, or taste?

Gathering (5 minutes)

2. Show the Images and Descriptions of Hell

Invite participants to gather and ask volunteers to show and explain their drawings and descriptions of hell.

Ask the youth where their ideas about hell come from. Church? TV shows like *Supernatural*? Books they have read such as Dante's *Inferno*?

Summarize the similarities in the descriptions and point out the differences.

Explain that while hell is traditionally presented as a place of eternal torment, there are other biblical ways of thinking about hell. Introduce the study as an exploration of the different ways Christians think about hell.

Opening (5 minutes)

3. Pray

Say the following prayer or one of your own:

God of love and grace, today we explore a topic that can make some of us uncomfortable—hell. We pray for guidance as we explore the big questions of life, death, salvation, and eternity. Give us wisdom, insight, and compassion as we explore your word and your nature. Amen.

4. Reflect

Briefly discuss the following question as a whole group: Is there anyone in your life who you think is going to hell? Why or why not?

Exploring (15 minutes)

5. Present and Summarize Resource Sheet

Distribute the Resource Sheet with the various positions and descriptions about hell. Using the Resource Sheet and information from the Leader's Guide, explain the different views about hell and its purpose. Allow the youth to absorb the information on the Resource Sheet and then ask the following questions or questions of your own to check for understanding:

- Which view of hell are you most familiar with?
- Which are you most comfortable with?
- Are any of these views of hell wrong? Why or why not?

6. Review the Participant Handout

Distribute the Participant Handout. Explain to the youth that Scripture supports each of the views of hell presented on the Resource Sheet. Invite the youth to look up the Scriptures on the Participant Handout and match them with the views of hell they seem to support. If your numbers are small this can be done as an individual or whole group exercise, choosing one or two passages from each category. If you have a larger group, the participants may form pairs or small groups and work together. You can make it a game by placing a time limit on the exercise and offering prizes. Note that some verses can support more than one view of hell. Below is a guide to which view of hell each passage may support.

Matthew 8:11–12	Punishment in outer darkness	<i>Conditional or Traditional</i>
Matthew 10:28	Finite death	<i>Conditional</i>
Matthew 25:31–46	Eternal fire and punishment	<i>Traditional</i>
Luke 16:22–26	Eternal fire	<i>Traditional</i>
John 3:16–17	Saved from finite death	<i>Christian Universalism</i>
John 12:32	Redemption	<i>Christian or General Universalism</i>
Romans 2:6–12	Finite punishment	<i>Conditional</i>

Colossians 1:19–20	Redemption	<i>Christian or General Universalism</i>
1 Peter 1:6–7	Purifying fire	<i>Christian Universalism</i>
Revelation 14:9–11	Eternal fire and punishment	<i>Traditional</i>
Revelation 20:13–14	Finite punishment	<i>Conditional</i>

7. Compare Responses

When finished, invite youth to share their responses. Stimulate discussion with the following questions or some of your own:

- Does the Bible describe hell in the way you originally pictured it?
- Is there only one description of what happens after death, or are there different ones?
- Can Jesus go to hell to rescue sinners? Does he?
- If God plans to “reconcile all things,” does sending people to hell mean God has failed? Put in another way, if hell exists, has God conquered evil?
- Does hell need to be eternal like heaven? Why or why not?
- Is it just or right for people to suffer eternally for their sins in this world?
- Should Christians want people to be condemned to hell?
- Which way of thinking about hell best fits your beliefs?

Responding (10 minutes)

8. Examine Case Studies

Read some or all of the following case studies aloud and invite discussion. Encourage students to think about what they have learned about God's nature through the exploration of hell, and ask them to support their answers with Scripture when possible.

Case Study 1: Aabid was raised as a Muslim. He believes that Jesus was a very important prophet, but he doesn't believe Jesus is the son of God. Aabid has worshiped, prayed, and cared for others his whole life. He dies. What happens to Aabid?

Case Study 2: Kelly believes in God. She prays often and works for a nonprofit organization that provides shelter for the homeless, but she doesn't attend church. She believes that all paths can lead to God and that hell doesn't exist. She knows that some people commit immoral offenses, but she trusts that God will forgive them all rather than punish them. Is she right? Why or why not?

Case Study 3: By some estimates there are 303 million people in southeast Asia, 330 million Bengali people, and others in remote corners of the world who have never heard a word of the gospel and do not know who Jesus is. Some are kind and generous. Others are violent and exploitive. What happens to them when they die?

Case Study 4: Karen never believed in God or eternal life. She was also not kind to her neighbors. She is very surprised to find herself in hell. Her time there has allowed her to reflect on both her beliefs and her behaviors. She is repentant and wishes things could change. What will happen to Karen?

Case Study 5: Steve accepted Christ into his life when he was twelve years old. However, because he suffers from addiction, he hasn't been to church in years. He steals to support his habit, and because of his addiction he is not particularly generous or caring to others. Steve dies. What happens to Steve?

Case Study 6: Dakota is interested in Jesus and the church, but she can't believe in a God that sends people to hell. What would you say if Dakota asked you why a good God needs hell?

Closing

9. Consider One Thing Learned

Invite participants to share one thing that they have learned about the different perspectives on hell. Remind them that it doesn't need to be something they *believe*, but something they have learned.

10. Pray

Pray the following prayer or one of your own:

Eternal God, you tell us that your ways are not our ways. We admit that we sometimes struggle to understand the message and purpose of hell

in the Bible. Guide us as we leave, reminding us to live lives of compassion and justice, trusting in your goodness and loving those around us. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- The TV show *Supernatural* is popular among teens. Show a scene from *Supernatural* that describes hell and discuss how it is the same or different from the ideas of hell presented in the study.
- The movie *Gravity* shows one woman's journey through outer darkness (space) and fire (re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere). In the final scene she comes out of the water as a changed person, perhaps symbolizing the waters of baptism. Watch the movie or parts of the movie and pair the scenes with biblical descriptions of hell. Discuss how the plotline relates to the ideas about hell in the study. Is it redemptive? Is it eternal? Is it punishment or purification?

Relevant Scriptures

Matthew 8:11–12

Matthew 10:28

Matthew 25:31–46

Luke 16:22–26

John 3:16–17

John 12:32

Romans 2:6–12

Colossians 1:19–20

1 Peter 1:6–7

Revelation 14:9–11

Revelation 20:13–14

For More Information

Sharon L. Baker, *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about God's Wrath and Judgment* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

Steve Gregg, *All You Want to Know about Hell: Three Christian Views of God's Final Solution to the Problem of Sin* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

William Crockett et al., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

Endnote

1. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," July 8, 1741, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html>.

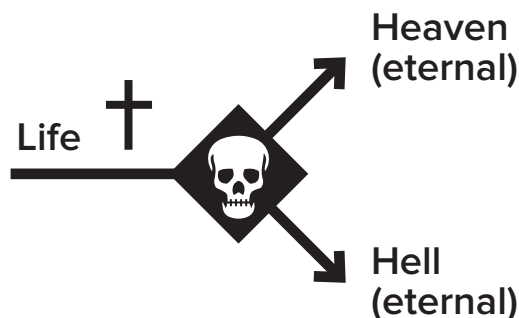
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Resource Sheet

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

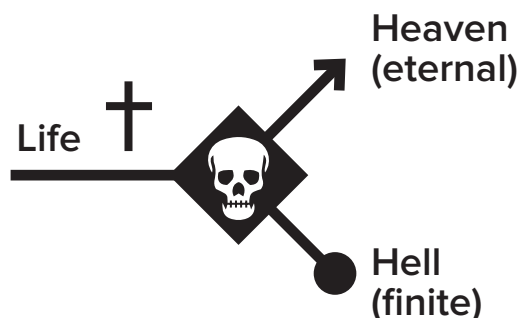
In this view, resurrection is eternal and the resurrected person or soul must go somewhere after death, either heaven or hell, for eternity.

Who goes where? One thought is that God predestines people to either heaven or hell, and nothing they can do will change that course. Another approach says that people who accept Christ as Lord in their lifetime can go to heaven for eternity. If they do not accept Christ (that is, are not “saved”), they will spend eternity in hell. The descriptions of a fiery punishment are taken by some to be literal and others to be symbolic



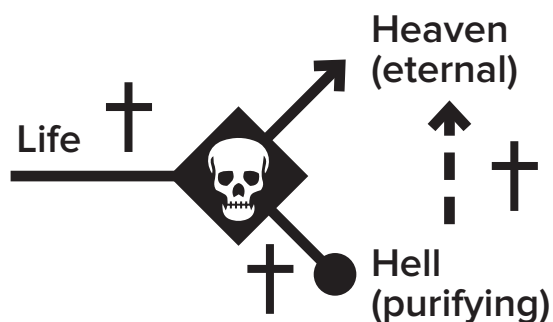
THE CONDITIONAL VIEW

In this view, people either choose to accept Jesus Christ as their savior in their lifetime or not. Their choice has long-term consequences. Those who believe in Christ are resurrected and go to heaven. Those who do not may be punished for a specific amount of time or simply stay dead. It is the death that is eternal, not the punishment.



CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM

In this view, hell is not a place of eternal punishment but a place of purification—and perhaps temporary punishment. The saving work of Christ continues even in hell. In this view, those who remain in hell continue to reject Christ even in death. However, some believe that it's possible that at the end of time all people will accept Christ and hell will be empty.



GENERAL UNIVERSALISM

In this view, all people go to heaven in one way or another. It doesn't matter if they accept Christ or are saved. This usually happens through forgiveness, not punishment or purification. Some people believe it happens through Christ, whether the person knows it or not. Others believe that God will save all people and Christ's participation is not needed.

