



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
PO Box 97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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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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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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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.

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.