



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### 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)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:  
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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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## 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](http://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](http://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.