






Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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)

What do you think?

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

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Christian Reflection

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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*



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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.

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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.