

**Affirming Connections presents**

# WHAT THE HELL?



**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

**whatthehell.ca**



# Welcome!

Our “What The Hell?” video explores the concept of hell and how it has been used, and asks you to see things you might not have seen before. Through personal stories and theological perspectives, the 19 interviewees we featured reflect on their own beliefs surrounding the very charged ideologies around hell. Theologians, scholars, faith leaders, community members, both LGBTQ2S+ and allied, gave us the gift of sharing their experiences and learnings.

Whether you grew up with a very visceral view and belief in hell or not, the tendrils of our collective thinking around the afterlife and punishment are far-reaching both in popular culture and in spiritual communities.

We can learn a lot about our faith from how our ideas of eternity impact the way we make decisions and judgments in our life here on earth.

The questions and resources in this guide will ask you to reflect honestly on your own experiences and beliefs. By doing so, we hope that you’ll have fresh insight about what your faith means to you, and what it means to those around you.

If you are facilitating a group, the questions and resources below are available for you to customize. We recommend that you watch the entire film together as part of your discussion. Some people may have spiritual wounds around the idea of hell and how it has been used in their lives to intimidate or exclude them, so we encourage group leaders to be aware of these sensitivities. In this document we have included resources around commonly used Bible passages and stories, and additional reading that would be useful for a more in-depth study.

While this guide and the video were not created to prove or disprove any particular belief around hell, we are always transparent that we believe that all people, including LGBTQ2SIA+ people, are created, celebrated, and loved by God, and that God’s unconditional love is never ending and available to us all, both in this life and the next.

Thank you for choosing to engage with our work! Visit our website for more information on this and our other projects and resources!

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# Questions

for group discussion

## **What did you grow up believing about hell?**

Do you remember the first time you learned about it?

Was it a physical place? If so, what did it look like?

What characteristics/objects did you associate with hell?

If you grew up part of a religious tradition, what did your faith community believe?

How did your understanding of hell make you feel growing up?

## **Are there any cultural touchstones, Biblical or secular, that informed your spiritual understanding of hell?**

### **Potential talking points:**

The Rapture

The Antichrist

Hell houses

666 – Number of the Beast

Spawn

The Left Behind series

The Omen series

The Exorcist

“Spiritual horror” genre films

Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Constantine (film and comics)

Dante's Divine Comedy (Inferno)

John Milton's Paradise Lost

Hal Lindsey, The Late, Great Planet Earth

Death Note (Anime & Manga)

Family Guy

The Good Place

Futurama

## **What do you think about hell now?**

Is it a physical place? A state of mind?

If your feelings around hell have evolved, what changed for you?

Do you believe that only those who believe in Jesus the Christ will go to heaven, and that anyone else will go to hell? Why or why not?

Can people find themselves in hellish situations in this life? Is it always people's own fault when they find themselves in such situations?

## **How has the fear of hell been used to hold power over people, especially over children, women, Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ2S+, etc?**

Have you personally experienced someone using hell to hold power over you?

Does the fear of hell fit with the understanding that God is love and that God offers grace to us?

## **What would you say to someone who is struggling with the idea of hell?**

If you personally are struggling or have struggled with the idea of hell, what do you wish someone—a mentor, elder or spiritual leader in your community—would say to you? What does your worst-case scenario afterlife look like? What about the best-case scenario? Is there a way we can be comfortable with the mystery?

# What does the Bible actually say about Hell?

The roots of Judeo-Christian exploration of Hell began at the same time as exploration of the idea of Resurrection. Not surprisingly, it also occurred as Jewish culture and religion encountered and was dominated by the introduction of Hellenistic culture and religion. The earliest text would be in the Old Testament, in the Book of Daniel, Chapter 12. In that context, on one level, resurrection and eternal reward or punishment concerned the fate of martyrs and the punishment of oppressors. On another level it also deals with the Nation's identity of God's people and touches on what it means to be God's people in a time of military occupation.

## **Apocalyptic literature**

It is probably not a surprise Apocalyptic literature also rose during this time period. Apocalyptic literature is a complex subject, and a literary form that no longer exists today. One modern example of how apocalyptic literature works is the novel Ready Player One by Ernest Cline, in which symbolic language referencing the popular culture of the day from a huge variety of sources are mashed together to create an epic narrative that reveals something about the day and age in which it was written. The word "Apocalypse" means "to reveal, or Revelation."

The language and imagery has subsequently been interpreted in a literal sense, rather than the symbolic, abstract intent of the original. Because it is symbolic, when removed from its historical context, interpreters either unaware or deliberately ignorant of this can then insert whatever meanings they want. Unfortunately, this has created a huge potential for people in power to subvert the anti-authoritarian language in Revelation to its opposite intent.

## **Book of Revelation**

The Book of Revelation in the New Testament was not meant to be read literally. The process of the author's (John's) revelation was to create metaphors of the oppressive powers from various times and places, thus creating a composite picture of evil.

The metaphor of beasts with horns and other evil details are placed there to describe the empires oppressing Christians at the time of John's writing. These beasts are nameless to help readers place themselves into the text and use these metaphors to describe the forces of evil and oppression in their own context.

### **The Number of the Beast**

The number of the great beast in John's revelation indicates the Roman Emperor Nero. Israel was a longstanding Roman-occupied territory, and John's purpose was to inspire and encourage the churches to be faithful to the messianic king (symbolized as a nonviolent lamb).

### **The Lake of Fire**

The Lake of Fire from The Book of Revelation Chapters 19 and 20 is often used in popular culture as an image of hell, and yet curiously enough it is neither hell, nor the residence of the devil.

The language in Revelation is entirely symbolic, as the lake of fire represents the annihilation of the personifications of evil. However, the Lake of Fire is not hell specifically, as it is shown destroying both Hell and Death in Revelation 20:14.

Unfortunately, this image has been used by those who would abuse people spiritually.

## **Book of Daniel**

In the Old Testament Book of Daniel, Chapter 12:1-3 talks about reward and punishment. Written during the Selucid occupation when Antiochus Epiphanes IV desecrated the Temple and erected an image of Zeus and wrought many other atrocities on the people, Daniel's story is about faithfulness to the God of Israel. In this case, those who will be punished, experiencing eternal shame is the Selucid King and those directed to impose laws and regulations that distance and discourage one's ability to follow the ways of Yahweh (God).

## **Books of Matthew and Luke**

In two books in the New Testament, both Matthew and Luke, John the Baptist says of Jesus who comes after him, that he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Fire has a purifying quality for metals, and the idea of judgement as purification is present in the Bible.

Matthew 25.31-46 speaks about the judgment of all people and nations. This is material that is found only in Matthew and has no corresponding passages in the other gospels. Here is detailed a judgment based on the treatment of those who represent the vulnerable, for the way we treat one another is the way we treat the son of man (humanity).

## **Gnashing of Teeth**

In the Gospel of Matthew (v. 8:12, 22:13, 25:30), we find several references to gnashing of teeth. Gnashing of teeth seems to be unique to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which puts it more firmly into imagery from Greek culture. Gnashing of teeth is more properly gritting or grinding teeth, indicating pain. When accompanied with weeping, which it always is, it likely describes emotional pain.

It has been interpreted in more hellish terms of eternal physical pain. However, there is extraordinarily little within scripture proper to support this kind of view, even if there are parts of Christianity that use this as a descriptor for hell.

## **Day of Judgment**

In the New Testament, the phrase refers to a final day when everyone will give an account of their misdeeds (Matthew 12:36). Sometimes it is described simply as “judgment” or “eternal judgment” (Hebrews. 6:2; 10:27; James 2:13; 2 Peter. 2:9; 3:7; 1 John. 4:17; Jude 6) and expresses a final time when the wicked will be punished and the righteous rewarded. It has come to mean in popular culture a weighing of debits and credits before going to heaven or being sent to hell, but in the Biblical tradition it refers to a final vindication of God’s justice against perpetrators of evil.

## **Spiritual Warfare**

The concept of spiritual warfare draws from the New Testament Book of Ephesians 6:12, and was popularized in Evangelical Christian circles by novelist Frank Peretti, whose works of Christian-inflected supernatural horror paved the way for films like *The Exorcist*.

## **Separation of Sheep and the Goats**

This is another image that has often been abused.

In the Old Testament, when Isaiah laments that humanity has gone wild or sour and ponders what can be done about it, the New Testament gospels present Jesus as the solution. There are Hebrew Scripture references to shepherds and sheep; here the gospel writer Matthew innovates and introduces goats into the pasture. Are the goats those non-Jewish influences that have entered the herd, or are they what becomes of those who fail to take care of the vulnerable in the community's midst?

This judgement is based on the treatment of the outcasts and the disenfranchised. Ironically, in this passage it is those who exclude these vulnerable members of society that end up being cast into the outer darkness.

## **Gehenna**

The term that is usually translated "Hell" in English translations. Gehenna in the New Testament refers to a place of fire and everlasting punishment. Historically it refers to a valley (ge hinnom is Hebrew for "valley of Hinnom") outside of the city of Jerusalem. The fire metaphor relates to the use of the ancient valley as a garbage dump where fires continually burned refuse. In the Jewish Testament (Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) it is also the place where children were sacrificed to false gods (Jeremiah. 7:31; 2 Chronicles. 28:3; 2 Kings 23:10) and where dead bodies or their ashes were thrown. Isaiah. 30:33 describes it as a deep and wide firepit where the breath of God "like a stream of burning sulphur sets it ablaze."



## **Fire**

Consider Zechariah 13:1 - "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity."

And Zechariah 13:9 - "This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.'"

Many believe that the "fire" in Hell is meant to purify, either by eliminating evil people (annihilation) or eliminating the evil in people and then allowing them to go to Heaven (Universal Reconciliation).

In either interpretation, Zechariah 13 makes clear that the fire of God is not simply destructive. It is rather the destruction of sin, not God's creation.

## **Hades**

A term from Greek and Roman mythology that describes the underworld where people go after they die, named after the god of the underworld (Hades). In the mythological accounts, the dead enter the underworld by crossing the river Styx and paying Charon who ferries them across.

## **Sheol**

Sometimes represented in English translations as Hades, an ancient Jewish idea that when the dead died they went neither to heaven nor to hell but lived in a shadowy underworld (e.g. Psalms. 19:14; 55:15; 86:13; 89:48; 139:8; Job 10:21; Isaiah.14:10). It is also sometimes understood as the personification/power of Satan and demonic forces (Job 18:14; Psalms. 18:4-5; Isaiah. 28:5; Jeremiah. 9:21). In the Jewish Testament (Hebrew Bible/Old Testament), it is a place that awaits God's victory over it (Psalms. 90: Isaiah. 25:8; Hosea 13:14).

Sheol means "underworld/grave/death" in Hebrew and "Hades" in Greek. In the King James Bible, the Old Testament term Sheol is translated as "Hell", "the grave" and "the pit." Modern Bible translations typically render Sheol as "the grave," "the pit," or "death."

## **Tartarus**

A place in Greek mythology is a deep abyss of punishment and torture of the wicked. In the New Testament book of 2 Peter. 2:4, he uses the term to describe where the fallen angels were cast and kept chained in darkness until the last judgment.

## **The Rapture**

The word “rapture”:

- Strong’s Greek: 726. harpazó: to seize, catch up, snatch away
- Strong’s Greek: 3880. paralambanó: to receive from

“After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

- 1 Thessalonians 4:17

Paul is addressing the question of whether those who have died in the faith prior to the return of the Lord will be disadvantaged at Christ's return, and he affirms that is not the case: the dead will rise first, then those alive will be caught up. This was Paul's way of helping them to not worry about passing away before the second coming (Parousia).

At this time in history, early Christians believed that the second coming would happen during their lifetime. The second coming for Paul and early Christians would have resembled an official or imperial visit and was a time for great celebration. With any important visit, there is always a meeting (apantesis). This is like sending a delegate to receive the person on their way to town.

The “rapture” is rather a time for the living and the dead to meet Christ for his arrival—not a place where they are swept up into heaven and those unworthy are left.

## **The Antichrist**

Followers of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, claimed that Pope Innocent IV's name, when changed to numerical values, added up to 666, the number of the beast, believing that he was the Antichrist. Throughout history, many speculated that others such as Pope Boniface VIII, Emperor Nero, and Pope Benedict XI to be the Antichrist.

# Additional Reading

## Books

Bruce, Scott G. 2018. The Penguin book of Hell.

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## **Articles**

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Schwartz, Amy E. "Is There Life After Death? Jewish Thinking on the Afterlife." *Moment Magazine*, December 10, 2019. <https://momentmag.com/is-there-life-after-death/>

Wink, Walter. 1997. The myth of redemptive violence. [Billings, Mont.]: [Montana Committee for the Humanities].

[http://old.ekklesia.co.uk/content/cpt/article\\_060823wink.shtml](http://old.ekklesia.co.uk/content/cpt/article_060823wink.shtml)

## **Blogs**

Lukey, Susan. "Adventures in Faith & Family." *High River United Church Minister's Blog*.  
<https://www.highriverunitedchurch.org/minister-blog/categories/listings/adventures-in-faith-family>

## **Podcasts**

McHargue, Mike. "Episode 16 - The End (Eschatology)." *The Liturgists*. October 23, 2019.  
<https://theliturgists.com/podcast/2015/3/20/episode-16-the-end-eschatology>

## **Other**

Interlinear Bible: <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/>

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*\*This document will continue to be updated. If you have a suggestion for further resources, please feel free to email Pam at [pam@affirmingconnections.com](mailto:pam@affirmingconnections.com)*

This guide and the “What The Hell?” video was made possible by a grant from The Chinook Winds Region of the United Church of Canada and ongoing support by St. Andrews Regional Ministries.