

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership
Leader's Guide

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE LESSON 10: HEAVEN AND HELL

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Discipleship Essentials module titled Christian Doctrine. This series of lessons examines doctrines which are foundational to our faith, with an emphasis on how incorrect doctrine can negatively impact true faith. Doctrine is the set of beliefs that determine how we practise our faith. It is critical that Christians understand correct doctrine about the nature of God and salvation, especially if they are engaged in teaching and discipling. This module examines scriptures related to a number of core doctrines of the Christian Church, and also some of the areas of confusion and error associated with each doctrine.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for these lessons is Christians who are maturing in their faith and desiring to serve God sincerely. The lessons will also benefit church leaders who wish to encourage people in their Christian service, and identify spiritual gifts in those they are discipling.

The Leader's Guide is intended to help you as a leader in your preparation. These lesson outlines may be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials found online at www.discipleshipessentials.org.

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CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

LESSON 10: HEAVEN AND HELL

PURPOSE

This lesson looks at the doctrine of the afterlife as it is presented in the Bible, and the importance of correct beliefs in this regard.

LEADER'S NOTE

It is sometimes uncomfortable to talk about heaven and hell, but the Bible actually has a great deal to say about them. The Christian should not deny that there will be punishment and rewards in the afterlife. It is important to understand the nature and character of God (His holiness, righteousness and justice) in order to understand eternal judgment. Jesus spoke about hell more than anyone else did in the Bible, not to frighten or shame us, but to help us take seriously that which is to come. Keep God's glory and His nature central in these lessons, and help participants grasp the truth of the doctrines as they are presented in the Bible. Be aware that death and the afterlife could be an emotional topic for many.

INTRODUCTION

Select two or three of the following questions to ask the group.

- ❖ What do you imagine life in heaven to be like? Describe your feelings about living in the presence of God.
- ❖ Is it difficult to understand how God could be good and send someone to hell?
- ❖ Consider God's characteristics, including His love, grace, holiness, His wrath against sin, etc. Which characteristics make it easy for you to worship Him? Which ones make it more difficult?
- ❖ Do you think avoiding hell is good motivation for people to come to faith in Jesus Christ? Or does hell turn people off from even talking about God? Have you ever shared the realities of hell with someone in order to convince them to repent and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins? How did it go?

STUDY

Instruct the group on the following points.



TEACH

- ❖ **Considering Eternity:** As human beings, we sometimes forget that we are finite, and live as though we will do so forever. Unless we face the reality of death through war, illness, or the death of loved ones, we become consumed with the details of living our life. It is good to remember that our bodies are temporary. However, the way we live our lives has eternal consequences.
 - **Finite, Yet Eternal:** We are finite creatures; we have a beginning and an end to our days here on earth. Yet each individual created in the image of God has a soul that will live beyond the physical realities of this world. Our relationship with God will determine our eternal future.
 - **Souls With Temporary Bodies:** Because we are well acquainted with our physical body, it is sometimes easier to think of ourselves as a physical body that possesses a soul. However, the Christian view is that we are a soul that has come to temporarily live in our body. Will we someday receive a new one (2 Corinthians 5:1).
 - **Spirit, Soul, Heart, Mind and Body:** We sometimes refer to different aspects of ourselves in conversational language. We might feel something in our heart, or analyze something with our mind, do something with our body, or be moved in our soul. Because the Bible uses all of these words, we may wonder what part of us will survive death. We can use the word 'soul' to describe the immaterial part of ourselves (our intellect, memories and personality). This soul is what will live on after our death.
 - **The doctrine of heaven and hell can be stated this way: At physical death the soul departs from the body. The soul of the redeemed enters into eternal fellowship with the Lord and awaits resurrection of their body to eternal glory in the presence of God. The soul of the unrepentant enters into eternal separation from God, and awaits the resurrection of their body to judgement and condemnation.**
- ❖ **The Character Of God:** When discussing the afterlife it is important that we have a clear picture of why God must punish sin and reward righteousness. Our world today has a high view of humankind and a low view of God. On the day of judgement, God's eternal perspective will give us a very humble view of ourselves, and we will see how we have failed Him during our lifetime. We will recognize that all of us deserve His wrath because God is holy and we are not.
 - **God is holy:** Of all the descriptors used for God, "holy" is used more than any other. In both Isaiah's and John's visions of God's throne, the inhabitants of heaven call out, "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty*" (Isaiah 6:3, Revelation 4:8). God is without sin and cannot tolerate it. God calls His people to be holy because He is holy (Leviticus 11:44, 1 Peter 1:16). Holiness means to be set apart from the world unto the Lord through faith in Christ. Jesus took our sin on Himself and gives us His holiness. We stand faultless before God, not because we are sinless, but because we are forgiven.
 - **God is just:** God will punish evil and reward good. We may wonder why God has delayed His response to evil in the world, but He will assert justice completely in His time. God hates anything that destroys His beloved creation; therefore, God hates sin.



We hate anything that would harm our spouse whom we love. We hate cancer that is killing a family member. Love does not allow us to be neutral. Neither can God think lightly about what harms His creation.

- **God is merciful:** Just as God must execute judgement over rebellion, He has also chosen to be merciful to those who love Him and grant them what they do not deserve – the reward of heaven. We cannot be perfect, holy or righteous enough to earn our way to heaven. There is sin in all of us, and we deserve God's punishment. God chooses to be merciful and offer salvation to those who will repent of their sin and follow Jesus.

- ❖ **The Bible's Revelation Of The Afterlife:** The Bible's picture of what happens after death is revealed in what can be called "progressive revelation." That is, the Bible's testimony taken as a whole (from Genesis to Revelation), reveals aspects of the afterlife. As Scripture was written, these truths of God were revealed to humanity over time, not all at once. Paul wrote to the Church in Rome that God has revealed some things that were previously a mystery (Romans 16:25-26). It may appear as though the Biblical descriptions of the afterlife changed. But God actually revealed more about the afterlife through Jesus in order to clarify what was previously understood.
 - **Pictures in the Old Testament:** God's faithful followers in the Old Testament understood that after death, the soul departed from the body and went to a place called *Sheol*, which means the grave, the place of the dead.
 - Sheol was understood to be a place where people were rejoined with their ancestors (Genesis 25:8,49:33).
 - Sheol was pictured to be a place beneath the earth (Job 17:16, 1 Samuel 2:6).
 - Sheol was seen as a place where both righteous and wicked went, though there may be some separation or different experience for the righteous and the wicked (Job 24:19, Psalm 9:17, Psalm 16:10, Psalm 18:5).

 - **Pictures in the New Testament:** Jesus taught about the afterlife throughout His ministry, and God also spoke through the Apostles to give us a clearer picture. The words used in the New Testament are:
 - **Gehenna:** In some versions of the Bible, it is translated *hell*, based on the Hebrew word referring to the Valley of Hinnom. This was a physical place on the southwest of the city of Jerusalem, where in past times pagan nations practised human sacrifice by burning. In the days of Jesus it functioned as a place of burning waste (garbage). Gehenna/hell was a symbol of a place of punishment for sin, extreme torment and separation from God (Matthew 5:29, Mark 9:48, Matthew 10:28).

 - **Lake of Fire:** This is a place of punishment where Satan, his angels and those who oppose God will be thrown after the judgment (Revelation 20:10-15, Revelation 21:8).



- o **Hades:** This is a Greek word used by the writers of the New Testament to describe Sheol. It is a holding place for the souls of the wicked until judgement (Luke 16:19-31). Note that in this passage, Lazarus was with Abraham in the presence of God, but the rich man was in Hades, a place separated from them.
- o **Paradise:** This is a word referring to the place where those who are redeemed by God go immediately after death. It is also translated heaven, where Jesus is, and the place where Elijah was brought when he died. Jesus told the believing criminal on the cross that he would go there when he died (Luke 23:43, Revelations 2:7).
- o **Heaven:** Heaven is described as the home of God, the place from which Jesus came, the home of angels, the place of our citizenship, and our reward from God (John 6:38, 1 Peter 1:4, Philippians 3:20).
- **The Order of Events:** There are many events of the end times that Christians have debated for centuries. For this study, we will not go into great detail about everything mentioned in Revelation. However, the following points, though possibly viewed differently by some, are generally upheld as Bible-based:
 - o **Death:** At death, the soul and the body are separated. The body goes to the grave, and the soul enters a place of waiting (hades or paradise). If we belong to Christ, we will be with Him in paradise, which is most commonly considered to be heaven.
 - o **The Tribulation:** The Bible is clear that a great tribulation will happen before Christ returns to set up His kingdom of peace. It will be dominated by the dictatorship of the evil Antichrist (Matthew 24:15-30). Christians have long debated whether the Church will be resurrected and meet Jesus in the air *before or during* the seven year tribulation.
 - o **The Resurrection and Rapture of Christians:** When Jesus returns to reign on the earth, He will bring with Him all believers in their glorified resurrected bodies (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).
 - o **The Millennium:** Revelation 20 indicates that Christ will reign for a thousand years during which Satan will be taken out of the world. It will be a reign of total peace (Revelation 20:1-10). The length, timing and nature of the Millennium is debated by different groups of believers.
 - o **Final Judgement:** At the end of time, unbelievers will be resurrected and judged by Jesus, and believers will receive rewards for what they have done (Matthew 25:31-46).



- o **Eternal Destinations:** Those who have not passed from death to life ([John 3:24](#)) are thrown into the Lake of Fire. Those who are in Christ will live with Him eternally in the New Heaven and New Earth ([Revelation 21:1-4](#)).
- ❖ **Heaven and Hell:** From this order of events we get an idea of what happens to a soul after death. All souls go to a place of waiting. After the resurrection, they are judged and sent to either the place of reward in the presence of God, or the place of punishment and separation from Him. For simplicity, we will refer to those two destinations as heaven and hell.
 - **Heaven:** Jesus is now preparing a place for us and will recreate the heavens and the earth. This will be our new home, where we will live in our resurrected bodies ([1 Corinthians 2:9](#), [John 14:3](#), [Isaiah 65:17](#), [2 Peter 3:13](#), [Philippians 3:20-21](#), [Revelation 21:1](#)).

TASK:

Select four participants. Have each read one of the following passages. Then answer the questions together as a group:

[Isaiah 65:17-25](#)

[Revelation 7:9-17](#)

[Revelation 21](#)

[Revelation 22:1-5](#)

What will heaven be like physically?

What will our relationship with God be like?

What will our relationship with others be like?

What will we be doing in heaven?

Are the descriptions of heaven focused on our pleasures or God's glory?

TEACH:

Heaven is full of God's glory. While God is everywhere, His glory is on display there. In the new creation, heaven and earth will join and God's glory will be seen by us. Here is a brief summary of what we know about this Heaven:

- o **We will have fellowship with God** ([Revelation 21:3](#), [Job 19:25-27](#)).
- o **We will have fellowship with people from all nations** ([Revelation 7:9-10](#)).
- o **We will experience joy and celebration** ([Revelation 21:4](#), [Matthew 25:21](#)).
- o **We will be free from pain, death and sorrow** ([Revelation 21:4](#)).
- o **We will be in a place of great beauty** ([Revelation 21:10-12](#)).
- o **We will have rest, but also actively serve God** ([2 Timothy 2:12](#), [Revelation 14:13](#), [Revelation 22:3](#)).
- **Hell:** Hell is eternal separation from God. The Biblical picture of hell is graphic. It is a place where sinners suffer and are punished. But we also see images of God being worshipped for His judgment of sinners ([Revelation 19:1-3](#)). It is difficult to comprehend this, but on that day we will see God and His judgment from a heavenly perspective.



- o **God has a right to judge:** Jesus talked about Hell in great detail, and warned us that there are consequences for sin and rebellion against God. God, who is just, could sentence all people to hell, but He displays mercy by saving everyone who by faith accepts Christ as their Saviour. We must be careful to not question God's justice. He is the judge of both the righteous and the wicked (Ecclesiastes 3:7, 2 Timothy 4:1).
 - o **Unrepentant people end up in hell:** Hell is not a place where people can repent and turn to God. At the judgement, they will acknowledge Jesus but it will be too late to be saved. Hell is a place where God's grace is no longer available. The unrepentant will be cut off from God and everything that is good (Philippians 2:9-11, Luke 13:28, Psalm 81:12, Psalm 16:2).
 - o **Hell is agony and torment:** Hell is described as a place of agony, torment, darkness and terror. It is not a place of rest or peace, but where ultimate justice will be carried out. Sinners will pay for their rebellion against a holy God (Luke 16:22-28, Matthew 8:11-12, Matthew 13:42, Revelation 20:11-15).
 - o **The Duration of Hell:** Finally, there are two prevalent opinions in Christianity about the duration of this torment. Some believe the Bible teaches that hell is eternal torment (Matthew 25:46). Others believe that it is torment that totally destroys both soul and body which are, therefore, annihilated forever (Matthew 10:28). These are things we do not know for sure, but we must conclude that sin will be punished, and God takes sin very seriously.
- ❖ **Our Response to these Doctrines:** What are we to do with the knowledge of heaven and hell? It is difficult to picture the future and these realities. The descriptions were never meant to give us an exhaustive explanation of all the details, but rather to provide enough information so that we will trust God and have hope for our future. Additionally, these doctrines should cause us to respond in these ways:
- **Forgive:** Our sins have been covered by Jesus Christ. So making others suffer for their sin in this lifetime insults the work of Jesus. Extending love and forgiveness because of what Jesus has done for us is our only choice. The sins of humankind have been paid for, or will be paid for, either by believing Jesus, or if not, paying for them ourselves in hell (Colossians 3:13, 1 John 2:2, Romans 2:12-16).
 - **Take sin seriously:** When we see someone continuing in sin, we should bring it to their attention and help them to overcome it. We want to encourage one another through total commitment to Christ (Philippians 3:12-21, 1 Peter 1:13-21, James 5:20).
 - **Remember that the pleasures of sin are temporary:** Keeping in mind our eternal home and the rewards of following Jesus, we should compare the pleasures of sin to the eternal pleasures of heaven. When tempted, we must remember that sin is destructive. Those who overcome sin are promised a future with Jesus (Hebrews 11:25, Colossians 1:28).



- **Proclaim the Gospel:** Our silence about the realities of judgement to those around us is a demonstration of a lack of love. In fact, failing to share the Gospel is to be indifferent as to where they spend eternity (Mark 16:15, Romans 1:16).

❖ **Errors in Doctrine of Heaven and Hell:**

- **Error #1 — Belief that everyone goes to heaven:** In some worldviews, people believe they are going to heaven because they are good people. Since they are not as bad as the worst murderers or evil criminals, they therefore deserve reward rather than punishment. They are convinced that it is unfair for all of humanity to be punished because of the choice of one man – Adam. The truth is that all of us earn our place in hell. But repentant sinners can receive heaven as a gift of God's grace because of the work of one man – Christ. The Bible does not leave any room for the idea that everyone who tries to be good is rewarded with heaven.
- **Error #2 — Belief in purgatory:** This is the belief that all people go for a time to a place of purgatory, where they suffer temporarily in order to purify themselves enough to enter heaven. This is also a place where people who did not receive forgiveness for their sins in their lifetime can choose to trust and follow Jesus. The word purgatory is mentioned in some ancient books that are outside the canon of scripture, but not in any book of the divinely inspired Bible. This belief supposes salvation by works, or that we must pay a price in addition to the price Jesus paid for our sin.
- **Error #3 — Belief in nothing after death:** There are those who believe that after physical death we simply cease to exist, and the mention of soul, spirit and eternal life are figurative, or connected to the legacy we leave here on earth. This idea comes from human philosophy. People reason that because they experienced nothing prior to their birth, they will experience nothing after death. People who believe this may not believe in a soul or spirit of a person. This is contrary to the Bible's teaching that we are more than just a body, and that there are eternal consequences to how we live our lives.
- **Error #4 — Belief that at the time of death we become one with God:** It is false to say that we are absorbed into the person of God. For Christians in the age to come, our whole person will be renewed and recreated, and we will live in an eternal state in a physical place. Heaven is not merely a spiritual existence or a state of mind, but will be a new world in which we will be in fellowship with others and with God.
- **Error #5 — Belief that we can pronounce who goes to heaven or hell:** The Bible was written to show us the way to eternal life, and to give those who believe in the name of Jesus assurance of their *own* salvation. No one can judge where others will spend eternity. What we do know is that God will judge every person. Only those whose names are written in the book of life will be given everlasting life. We cannot know whose names are written there. People are able to make confessions of faith on their death bed, and people who acted like Christians may not have had true faith. Many people, including infants, die without knowledge of God. It is not our place to be the



judge. We can only have assurance of our own salvation and pray for the salvation of others.

- ❖ **Conclusion:** We often think that God will rescue us out of our present trouble and take us to a better place. This will be true only for Christians when they die. That better place is heaven. The alternative is to reject God's free gift of eternal life and spurn the love of Jesus. The final destination of unbelievers is hell. The choice is ours. As difficult as these doctrines are, we know that Jesus will judge everyone based on their acceptance or rejection of Him. Let us trust God and be assured that His plans for us are very good.

DISCUSSION

- ❖ There have been many books written by people who claim to have visited heaven and returned to their bodies. The description of heaven in these accounts is usually filled with imagery, such as possessing wings, halos or angelic features. How do these accounts compare to the Bible? Could you visit heaven without having had a life-changing encounter with God on earth? Do you believe these accounts to be true or fiction?
- ❖ How does the vision of hell and heaven in the Bible spur us on to renewed passion for evangelism? Who do you want to see rescued from hell and brought from death to life?
- ❖ Why is sin still a serious thing for Christians? If we have been forgiven, why should we be concerned about keeping our lives pure? How does our belief in heaven and hell impact the way we live? Where do you see the errors of doctrine about heaven and hell in popular opinion? How can you guard against passing these false doctrines on to others?

PRAYER

Close the lesson in prayer. Pray that your participants will understand doctrine well so that they will have assurance of their salvation. Pray that they would renew their passion for evangelism, long for the joy of heaven, and prepare themselves for eternity. Pray that they will not become attached to the things of this world which are only temporary.