Heaven and Hell

A Three-Part Discipleship Study

Biblical Teaching in Its Ancient Jewish Context

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Designed for mature adult Bible study and discipleship settings. Each session is structured for approximately 60–75 minutes and may be expanded through discussion.

Purpose of the Study

Questions about Heaven and Hell often begin with what happens immediately after death. Scripture, however, places those questions inside a larger story: creation, death, Sheol, resurrection, judgment, the victory of Christ, and finally the new heavens and new earth. This study follows that biblical movement while using Jewish and Second Temple literature as historical context rather than as an authority alongside Scripture.

The aim is not merely to catalogue terms. It is to distinguish the intermediate state from the final state, to hear the language of Jesus in its Jewish setting, and to recover the New Testament emphasis on bodily resurrection and life with God in the renewed creation.

Guiding Principle

Scripture remains primary. Extra-biblical and Second Temple texts are used to show ideas circulating in the Jewish world surrounding the New Testament. They illuminate vocabulary, expectations, and interpretive possibilities; they do not establish Christian doctrine.

Course at a Glance

Session	Focus	Primary Biblical Emphasis
1	Death, Sheol, Hades, and the Intermediate State	Death is real but not final; the believer is with Christ while awaiting resurrection.
2	Hell, Gehenna, Judgment, and the Fate of the Wicked	Jesus takes judgment seriously; final judgment belongs to God and culminates in the defeat of evil and Death.
3	Heaven, Resurrection, and the World to Come	Christian Hope culminates in bodily resurrection and the new creation, not permanent disembodied existence.

Session One — Death, Sheol, Hades, and the Intermediate State

Central question: What happens after death, and how does Scripture describe the condition between death and resurrection?

Teaching Objectives

- Distinguish biblical language for death, Sheol, Hades, Paradise, and resurrection.
- Trace the movement from the comparatively shadowed Old Testament picture of Sheol toward clearer resurrection hope.
- Recognize how Second Temple Jewish writings reflect developing reflection on postmortem judgment and the fate of the righteous and wicked.
- Distinguish the intermediate state from the believer's final resurrection hope.

1. Begin with the Biblical Problem: Death

The biblical story does not treat death as humanity's natural fulfillment. Death enters the human story as an enemy associated with sin and separation from the life God gives. The Bible therefore does not solve the problem of death merely by promising that an immaterial part of us survives. Its climactic answer is resurrection.

> **Genesis 3:19** — *Humanity returns to the dust from which it was taken.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 15:26** — *Paul identifies Death as the last enemy to be abolished.*

Teaching emphasis: This distinction matters for the entire course. The question is not only, "Where does a person go when he dies?" but, "What will God finally do about Death?"

2. Sheol in the Old Testament

The Hebrew term Sheol commonly designates the realm of the dead. In many Old Testament passages it is portrayed as the destination of the dead without the fully developed distinctions between final reward and final punishment familiar from later Christian discussion. Its imagery is often one of descent, darkness, silence, weakness, and separation from ordinary earthly life.

- Genesis 37:35
- Job 14:10–14
- Psalm 6:5
- Psalm 88:3–12
- Ecclesiastes 9:10

Yet the Old Testament does not leave Israel without Hope. Confidence grows that the God who rules life and death can redeem His people even from death, and later texts speak with increasing clarity of resurrection.

> **Psalm 49:15** — *The psalmist expresses confidence that God will redeem him from the power of Sheol.*
>
> **Daniel 12:2** — *Daniel anticipates an awakening of the dead, with sharply different destinies.*

3. Resurrection Hope Becomes Explicit

Daniel 12:1–3 is especially important because resurrection and judgment appear together. The dead awaken; some enter everlasting life, while others face disgrace. The solution to death is no longer described only as rescue from present danger or continuation through descendants. God raises the dead.

This expectation provides an important bridge into the New Testament. By the first century, resurrection was a major Jewish question, though Jewish groups did not agree about it. The New Testament itself reflects that disagreement when Pharisees and Sadducees dispute resurrection (Acts 23:6–8).

4. Second Temple Windows

Jewish literature from the centuries surrounding the New Testament shows that reflection on death, judgment, and resurrection was diverse rather than uniform. These texts are valuable precisely because they show the intellectual and religious world in which New Testament language was heard.

1 Enoch

Parts of 1 Enoch portray the dead awaiting judgment in differentiated conditions. The imagery is not identical to later Christian formulations, but it demonstrates that some Jewish writers were imagining an intermediate condition in which the righteous and wicked could experience different prospects while awaiting final judgment.

2 Maccabees

2 Maccabees 7 gives unusually vivid testimony to resurrection hope. Martyrs facing death confess confidence that the King of the universe will raise those who die faithful to His covenant. The passage connects bodily suffering, faithfulness, divine justice, and future resurrection.

4 Ezra and 2 Baruch

These late first-century Jewish apocalyptic works reflect intense concern with death, judgment, the age to come, resurrection, and the justice of God. They should not be read back into every first-century Jewish community, but they demonstrate the breadth of Jewish reflection surrounding the New Testament era.

5. Hades, Paradise, and the New Testament Intermediate State

The Greek term Hades frequently functions as the New Testament counterpart to Sheol, but the New Testament also contains language suggesting conscious existence after death while resurrection remains future.

> **Luke 23:43** — *Jesus promises the repentant criminal that he will be with Him in Paradise.*
>
> **Philippians 1:23** — *Paul desires to depart and be with Christ, which he describes as very much better.*
>
> **2 Corinthians 5:8** — *Paul speaks of being absent from the body and at home with the Lord.*

These texts support genuine fellowship with Christ after death, but none requires us to identify that condition as the final Christian destiny. Paul's great resurrection argument in 1 Corinthians 15 still points forward to the raising and transformation of the body.

6. Luke 16:19–31 — Handle with Care

The rich man and Lazarus is indispensable to this discussion, but it should not be forced into a technical map of the unseen world. Jesus employs recognizable postmortem reversal and judgment imagery to make a moral and theological point: earthly status does not determine divine approval, judgment is real, and the testimony already given in Moses and the Prophets is sufficient to demand repentance.

The narrative demonstrates conscious postmortem existence within the story, but its primary purpose is not to provide a geography of Hades.

Session One Summary

At death, the believer's Hope is not extinction. The New Testament speaks of being with Christ, yet resurrection remains future. The intermediate state is therefore blessed but incomplete. Christian Hope waits for the day when Death itself is defeated and the body is raised.

Discussion Questions

1. How does distinguishing the intermediate state from the final state change the way Christians speak about "going to Heaven"?
2. What features of Old Testament Sheol language surprise you?
3. Why is Daniel 12:1–3 such an important turning point?
4. What can Second Temple literature legitimately contribute to biblical interpretation—and what can it not do?
5. How do Philippians 1 and 1 Corinthians 15 fit together?

Suggested 60–75 Minute Schedule

- 5 min — Introduction and framing the question
- 15 min — Sheol and the Old Testament
- 10 min — Daniel and resurrection hope
- 15 min — Second Temple Jewish background
- 15 min — New Testament intermediate-state texts
- 10–15 min — Discussion and synthesis

Session Two — Hell, Gehenna, Judgment, and the Fate of the Wicked

Central question: What did Jesus and the New Testament mean when they spoke of judgment, Gehenna, Hades, destruction, punishment, and the final fate of evil?

Teaching Objectives

- Distinguish Hades from Gehenna and the lake of fire rather than collapsing every term into the English word "hell."
- Place Jesus' judgment language within Israel's Scriptures and the Jewish world of the first century.
- Recognize the major biblical images used for final judgment.
- Treat disagreements about the nature of final punishment fairly while preserving the seriousness and finality of divine judgment.

1. Judgment Is a Biblical Theme Before It Is a Doctrine of Hell

The Bible's teaching on final judgment grows from a larger conviction: the Creator is morally righteous and will not permit evil to reign forever. Judgment is therefore connected to God's holiness, justice, kingship, and restoration of creation.

- Genesis 18:25
- Psalm 96:10–13
- Isaiah 66:22–24
- Daniel 7:9–14
- Daniel 12:2

This prevents Hell from becoming an isolated doctrine. Final judgment belongs to the biblical promise that God will put the world right.

2. Gehenna: From Place Name to Judgment Image

Gehenna derives from the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, a location associated in the Old Testament with abhorrent practices and prophetic judgment (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:30–33; 19:1–13). By the time of the New Testament, the term could function as an image of eschatological punishment.

Jesus uses Gehenna language with deliberate severity. His warnings are ethical and eschatological: sin matters, divine judgment is real, and no earthly loss compares with final loss before God.

- Matthew 5:22, 29–30
- Matthew 10:28
- Matthew 18:8–9
- Mark 9:43–48

3. Hades Is Not Simply a Synonym for Gehenna

English translations have sometimes obscured distinctions by rendering several different biblical words as "hell." Hades ordinarily refers to the realm of the dead; Gehenna functions in Jesus' teaching as an image of eschatological judgment. Revelation 20 makes the distinction especially clear when Death and

Hades themselves are thrown into the lake of fire. Hades therefore cannot simply be identical with the final lake of fire.

> **Revelation 20:13–14** — *Death and Hades surrender the dead and are themselves subjected to final judgment.*

4. Second Temple Judgment Imagery

Jewish apocalyptic literature often intensifies the prophetic expectation that God will judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous. 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and related writings employ varied images of punishment, separation, fire, darkness, resurrection, and judgment. The diversity matters: there was no single universally standardized Jewish chart of the afterlife.

This background helps explain why Jesus could speak in powerful judgment images that His hearers recognized without requiring us to assume that every image was a literal description of the mechanics of final punishment.

5. Jesus' Teaching

Matthew 10:28

Jesus warns against fearing human persecutors more than God, who alone possesses ultimate authority over human destiny. The text deliberately relativizes earthly death in light of divine judgment.

Matthew 25:31–46

The Son of Man separates the nations as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The passage places final destiny under the authority of the enthroned Son of Man and describes the outcomes as eternal punishment and eternal life.

Mark 9:43–48

Jesus combines Gehenna with language drawn from Isaiah 66:24. The shocking bodily imagery is designed to communicate urgency: no cherished sin is worth retaining at the cost of final judgment.

6. Revelation and the Final Defeat of Evil

Revelation 20:11–15 depicts the great white throne judgment. The dead are judged, Death and Hades are defeated, and the lake of fire is called the second death. The scene leads immediately toward Revelation 21, where death, mourning, crying, and pain are gone.

The theological movement is important: final judgment is not the Bible's last picture. Judgment clears the way for a creation in which evil and Death no longer corrupt God's world.

7. Major Christian Interpretations

Christians who affirm biblical authority have disagreed over how the judgment texts relate to the precise nature and duration of final punishment. A mature study should acknowledge the principal interpretations without pretending that the disagreements are insignificant.

Eternal Conscious Punishment

This view understands texts such as Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 14:9–11 as teaching continuing conscious punishment of the wicked.

Conditional Immortality / Annihilation

This view emphasizes biblical language of death, destruction, perishing, and the "second death," arguing that the wicked finally cease to live rather than endure conscious punishment without end.

Universal Reconciliation

This view holds that divine judgment ultimately results in the reconciliation of all persons. It has appeared in portions of Christian history but faces substantial challenges from texts that present judgment as final and sharply distinguish eternal life from condemnation.

Teaching posture: Students should understand the debate, but the unmistakable common denominator of the judgment texts must not be diluted—God judges evil, human response to God matters, and Scripture never treats final judgment casually.

Session Two Summary

Jesus' warnings about judgment are not rhetorical decorations. They belong to His proclamation of God's kingdom. Yet biblical terms must be allowed to retain their distinctions: Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, and the lake of fire are related to the subject of death and judgment but are not interchangeable labels.

Discussion Questions

6. Why does it matter that Gehenna and Hades are not identical terms?
7. How does the Old Testament background of the Valley of Hinnom illuminate Jesus' use of Gehenna?
8. What is gained by reading Revelation 20 together with Revelation 21?
9. Which biblical texts are most important in the debate over the nature of final punishment?
10. How can Christians teach final judgment with both seriousness and humility?

Suggested 60–75 Minute Schedule

- 5 min — Review and framing
- 10 min — Judgment in Israel's Scriptures
- 15 min — Gehenna, Hades, and terminology
- 10 min — Second Temple judgment imagery
- 15 min — Jesus' principal judgment texts
- 10 min — Revelation 20–21
- 10–15 min — Interpretive views and discussion

Session Three — Heaven, Resurrection, and the World to Come

Central question: Is the Christian's ultimate destiny "Heaven," or does Scripture point beyond the intermediate state to resurrection and the new creation?

Teaching Objectives

- Recover bodily resurrection as the center of New Testament future Hope.
- Distinguish present Heaven / being with Christ from the final new heavens and new earth.
- Understand Jesus' resurrection as the firstfruits and guarantee of the believer's resurrection.
- End the study where Scripture ends: God dwelling with His people in a creation from which Death has been removed.

1. The New Testament Hope Is Resurrection

Modern Christian speech often summarizes salvation after death as "going to Heaven." That phrase can express a genuine truth about being with Christ, but it can also unintentionally stop the biblical story too early. The apostles repeatedly direct believers toward resurrection.

> **John 11:25** — *Jesus identifies Himself as the resurrection and the life.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 15:20** — *Christ is raised as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

Firstfruits is agricultural language. The first portion of the harvest guarantees that more is coming. Christ's resurrection is therefore not merely proof that life after death exists; it is the beginning of the resurrection harvest.

2. Jesus and Bodily Resurrection

The Gospel resurrection narratives insist on both continuity and transformation. The risen Jesus is the same Jesus who was crucified, yet He now lives beyond the dominion of Death. Christian resurrection hope is grounded in His resurrection rather than in a generic conviction that souls are immortal.

- Luke 24:36–43
- John 20:24–29
- Romans 6:8–9
- Philippians 3:20–21

3. 1 Corinthians 15 — The Great Resurrection Chapter

Paul addresses Christians who were apparently willing to affirm Christ's resurrection while questioning the future resurrection of believers. His response is uncompromising: remove resurrection and the Christian proclamation collapses.

Paul describes the resurrection body through contrasts: perishable / imperishable, dishonor / glory, weakness / power, natural / spiritual. "Spiritual body" does not mean nonphysical. Paul's contrast concerns a body animated and transformed by the Spirit rather than a body still subject to the present mortal order.

> **1 Corinthians 15:52–54** — *The dead are raised imperishable, the living are changed, and mortality puts on immortality.*

The chapter culminates in victory over Death. Resurrection is therefore not an appendix to salvation; it is the completion of God's victory over the enemy introduced into the human story.

4. The Dead in Christ and the Coming of the Lord

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 Paul comforts grieving believers not by telling them to forget the body because their loved ones are already in Heaven, but by directing them to Christ's return and the resurrection of the dead in Christ. The passage does not deny present fellowship with Christ; it reveals where Christian consolation ultimately points.

The dead in Christ rise. Living believers are gathered with them. The result is permanent communion: "so we shall always be with the Lord."

5. Heaven Comes Down

Revelation 21 contains one of the most important corrections to popular Christian imagination. The final scene is not humanity permanently escaping earth for Heaven. John sees a new heaven and a new earth, and the holy city, new Jerusalem, descends from Heaven from God.

> **Revelation 21:3** — *The climactic announcement is that the dwelling place of God is with humanity.*

The direction of movement is theological: God dwells with His people. The curse is overcome, Death is gone, and creation becomes the place of unhindered communion with God.

6. New Creation and the Biblical Story

The Bible begins with God, humanity, and creation in ordered fellowship and ends with God, redeemed humanity, and renewed creation in permanent fellowship. Revelation 21–22 deliberately echoes Genesis: river, tree of life, divine presence, vocation, and the removal of the curse.

The Christian future is therefore both personal and cosmic. God saves persons, raises bodies, judges evil, defeats Death, and renews creation.

7. "They Shall See His Face"

> **Revelation 22:4** — *God's servants see His face.*

This is the destination toward which the biblical story moves. The deepest Christian Hope is not merely reunion with loved ones, escape from suffering, or even endless existence. It is unhindered communion with God through Christ. Everything lost through sin and Death is finally subordinated to this greater reality: God with His people.

This also gives proper proportion to every earlier discussion of Heaven and Hell. The final Christian answer to death is not simply survival. It is Christ. The final answer to separation is not merely a location. It is the presence of God. The final answer to mortality is resurrection.

Session Three Summary

The believer who dies is with Christ, but that is not the end of the story. Christ returns. The dead are raised. The living are transformed. Judgment occurs. Death is abolished. Creation is renewed. God dwells with His people. Christian Hope therefore looks through death toward resurrection and through resurrection toward everlasting communion with God.

Discussion Questions

11. Why can the phrase “going to Heaven” be both true and incomplete?
12. What does Paul mean by calling Christ the “firstfruits” of resurrection?
13. How does 1 Thessalonians 4 redirect Christian grief?
14. What is significant about new Jerusalem descending from Heaven in Revelation 21?
15. How would emphasizing resurrection and new creation change the way Christians speak about funerals, aging, suffering, and Hope?

Suggested 60–75 Minute Schedule

- 5 min — Review and opening question
- 10 min — Jesus and resurrection
- 20 min — 1 Corinthians 15
- 10 min — 1 Thessalonians 4
- 15 min — Revelation 21–22 and new creation
- 10–15 min — Discussion and synthesis

Teacher's Companion

Key Distinctions to Keep Clear

- Sheol: Old Testament term for the realm of the dead; its usage is broader than later ideas of final punishment.
- Hades: Greek term associated with the realm of the dead; Revelation 20 portrays it as temporary and ultimately defeated.
- Gehenna: Judgment term used prominently by Jesus, rooted in the Valley of Hinnom and its prophetic associations.
- Paradise / being with Christ: language relevant to the blessed intermediate state.
- Resurrection: God's raising and transformation of the dead; central to the final Christian Hope.
- New heavens and new earth: the renewed creation in which God permanently dwells with His people.

Second Temple Sources for Further Classroom Use

The following sources may be introduced selectively. Dates are approximate because composition and textual development are debated.

Source	Approximate Period	Classroom Relevance
Daniel 12:1–3	2nd century B.C. setting of final form	Explicit resurrection and divergent destinies.
1 Enoch (selected sections)	3rd–1st centuries B.C.	Postmortem differentiation, judgment, apocalyptic vindication.
2 Maccabees 7	late 2nd century B.C.	Martyrdom and bodily resurrection hope.
Wisdom of Solomon 3–5	late 1st century B.C.–early 1st century A.D.	Destiny of the righteous and divine judgment.
4 Ezra	late 1st century A.D.	Death, judgment, resurrection, and the age to come.
2 Baruch	late 1st–early 2nd century A.D.	Resurrection, transformation, judgment, and restoration.

Interpretive Cautions

- Do not speak of "the Jewish view" of the afterlife as though Second Temple Judaism were uniform.
- Do not use later rabbinic texts as automatic proof of what all Jews believed in the time of Jesus.
- Do not flatten Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, and the lake of fire into a single undifferentiated concept.
- Do not allow extra-biblical texts to determine doctrine; use them to illuminate historical possibilities and vocabulary.
- Do not let debate over the mechanics of final punishment obscure the Bible's clear insistence on judgment, resurrection, and accountability before God.
- Do not stop Christian Hope at the intermediate state. Keep the class moving toward resurrection and new creation.

Selected Biblical Reading List

- Old Testament: Genesis 2–3; Psalm 16; Psalm 49; Psalm 73; Isaiah 25:6–9; Isaiah 26:19; Isaiah 65:17–25; Isaiah 66:22–24; Daniel 7; Daniel 12:1–3.
- Gospels: Matthew 5:21–30; 10:26–33; 22:23–33; 25:31–46; Mark 9:42–48; Luke 16:19–31; 20:27–40; 23:39–43; John 5:19–29; 11:17–27.
- Epistles: Romans 8:18–25; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 5:1–10; Philippians 1:20–24; 3:20–21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18.
- Revelation: Revelation 20:11–15; 21:1–27; 22:1–5.

Closing Synthesis

Heaven and Hell are not isolated destinations detached from the rest of biblical theology. They belong to the larger drama of creation, rebellion, redemption, resurrection, judgment, and restoration. Scripture acknowledges a meaningful state between death and resurrection, but it consistently drives Christian Hope forward. Jesus Christ has entered Death and emerged victorious. Because He lives, those who belong to Him will be raised. Evil will be judged. Death itself will be abolished. The dwelling of God will be with humanity.

The Bible therefore ends not with souls escaping creation, but with redeemed humanity living before the face of God in a renewed creation. “They shall see His face” (Revelation 22:4).