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(page 14)

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**Evangelical Lutheran
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Study guide

By the light of grace

How does the ELCA understand heaven and hell?

By Robert C. Blezard

It's October, and that means the cultural images of heaven and hell (especially hell) will be in full display in our stores, on our homes and in the costumes our children will wear while trick-or-treating. However entertaining they may be, these images don't resemble the heaven or hell described in the Bible. Which raises the issue: What do we believe about heaven and hell, and where did we get such ideas?

Exercise 1: Images of the afterlife

As a study group, taking up one term and then another, make a list of all the images or ideas that come to mind when you think of "heaven" and "hell."

- Where did each image come from?
- Where have folks seen it?
- Is the image found in the Bible?
- Is the image helpful to a discipleship journey? Or is it distracting?

Exercise 2: A laughing matter

"So a Lutheran bishop dies and is escorted by Peter to his heavenly residence, a very nice, spacious four-bedroom house with a landscaped yard and swimming pool. The bishop is pleased, but he notices just down the street an enormous mansion with a gated driveway. "Who lives *there*?" the bishop asks.

Peter replies, "Oh, that's Mack, the New York City cab driver."

The bishop is furious: "I devoted my life to your church, and I get a four-bedroom house, but he drives a cab and gets a mansion?"

"It's simple," Peter says. "People slept through your sermons, but in the back of Mack's cab, they *prayed!*"

This is just one of a treasure trove of jokes about heaven and hell. Tell one another as many jokes about heaven and hell that you can think of. You can find lots more on the internet. Have fun!

What are common images or ideas these jokes convey about the afterlife? How do these ideas square with Scripture? Which jokes are simply the products of fertile comic imagination?



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Study guide: **By the light of grace** *continued*

Exercise 3: Popular imagination

Jokes (see above) are only one genre of popular culture giving us imaginative but unbiblical portrayals about what awaits us in the afterlife. In his article, Timothy J. Wengert mentions Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* as two works that influenced cultural thought about heaven and hell. Here are two examples of popular stories. What do they say about heaven and hell? Are the ideas biblical and faith building, or just entertainment?

A *Christmas Carol*: Charles Dickens' masterpiece raises interesting questions. What is Jacob Marley's "hell"? Why is he condemned? What must Ebenezer Scrooge do to avoid that hell? What's the message it sends about the nature of heaven, hell and salvation? Does it square with Christian and biblical teaching? How has Marley's story affected popular ideas about heaven and hell?

***It's a Wonderful Life*:** In this 1946 Christmas classic, Clarence Odbody plays a soul who departed earth and is working his way through the ranks of angels. He needs to help George Bailey in order to get his "Angel-First Class" wings. What does his presence and predicament say about the afterlife? How has Clarence's story influenced popular ideas about heaven and the angels? Are those ideas biblical?

Share: What books, TV shows or movies have informed your view of heaven and hell? Are those ideas based on Scripture or Christian doctrine?

Exercise 4: A faith view

Certainly our culture encourages us to imagine all sorts of things about heaven, hell and who goes where. But that's different from what our church teaches us and what we understand from Scripture.

- As a person of faith, what do you believe about heaven? Is it a place? If not, what? What do you imagine heaven is like?
- Who gets into heaven? Why? What teachings and Scripture helped you develop that understanding?
- Are you more worried about not going to heaven, or more comforted with the promise of salvation?
- As a person of faith, what do you believe about hell? Is it a place? If not, what? What do you imagine hell is like?
- Who gets sent to hell? Why? How did you come to that understanding?
- Are you more worried about going to hell or more comforted with the promise of God's grace?

Exercise 5: Fear of hell

The sign along the highway asks, "Do you know where you are going to spend eternity? Heaven? Or Hell?" And the word "hell" is engulfed in flames. How do you respond to this?



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- When and where have you seen signs, pamphlets or tracts that contrast heaven and hell and ask you to ponder your eternal fate? Can you describe them? What kind of response did they seek? What did you think, and how did you react?
- Either live or on television, have you heard preaching that warns about the torments of hell? What was said? How was hell and heaven described? What was the preacher's desired outcome? Did you respond as the preacher hoped you might? What did you think?
- Is arousing the fear of hell a good way to bring people to faith and trust of Jesus? Why or why not?
- Would that approach motivate Lutherans? Why or why not? Did it work with you? With whom might it work?
- What might be a better way to bring people to the faith? How do Lutherans strategize to bring people to faith?
- Is the point of Jesus' gospel to scare us to God? Why or why not?
- What might you say to a friend who came to you for advice because she was scared about going to hell?

Role-play exercise: Break into pairs. One person pretends to be a friend who has just heard a preacher or read a tract that made them afraid they were a sinner and doomed for hell. The other person does not get into character, but is simply herself or himself—a faithful Lutheran who wants to comfort the friend with the real story of God's love. When done, talk about the experience.

Exercise 6: Saved by grace

Rather than appeal to a fear of hell as a way to motivate people to deeper faith, Lutheran churches (and others) instead talk about God's love, grace and mercy. Martin Luther's breakthrough insight, that we are saved by grace through faith, came from his study of Romans, which declares: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (3:28). In other words, God's love and grace is abundant and given freely; to gain access to this, all we need is faith.

- Does the message of God's grace and mercy provide comfort or arouse fear?
- How does a message of grace and love invite people into a better life today, while we are still alive, as well as in the afterlife? How does the church support and encourage this better life today?
- Whereas a message of fear motivates people to move *away* from something bad, talk of love and grace invites people to move *toward* something good. Why is this a healthier approach?



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Exercise 7: Hellish visions

In his article, Wengert has laid out how the Bible describes hell in different ways, using different images and even different words that don't give us a complete picture.

- What would explain that lack of clarity and focus? Does the lack of clarity serve to invalidate any specific idea of hell, or does it rather lend some degree of credibility to every idea of hell?
- Would it be proper for a preacher, a tract or a church to take one or two of those bare-bones images and try to craft a complete picture of hell? Why or why not? Isn't that what authors and filmmakers do?
- How much can we "fill in the gaps" from a passing reference to hell in the Bible? How much can human deduction, inference and imagination add meaning and interpretation to any Bible passage without risking distortion?
- Do you agree with the proposition that the Bible doesn't tell us everything we may *want* to know about divine matters, but it tells us what we *need* to know for faith? Why might the Bible intend hell to be one of God's mysteries, beyond human knowing and understanding?
- Based on your faith understanding and reading of Scripture, what are the main concepts God wants us to know about the heavenly afterlife?

Exercise 7: Heavenly vistas

Similarly, the Bible talks of a heavenly afterlife in different ways as well—as a banquet, paradise, a mansion with many rooms, as simply being with Christ. These descriptions don't fit together well enough to form a complete picture.

- Does the lack of clarity serve to invalidate any specific idea of heaven, or does it rather lend some degree of credibility to every idea of heaven?
- Would it be proper for a preacher, a tract or a church to take one or two of those bare-bones images and try to craft a complete picture of heaven? Why or why not? Isn't that what authors and filmmakers do?
- How much can we "fill in the gaps" from a passing reference to heaven in the Bible? How much can human deduction, inference and imagination add meaning and interpretation to any Bible passage without risking distortion?
- Do you agree with the proposition that the Bible doesn't tell us everything we may *want* to know about divine matters, but it tells us what we *need* to know for faith? For what reasons might the Bible intend heaven to be one of God's mysteries, beyond human knowing and understanding?
- Based on your faithful understanding and reading of Scripture, what are the main concepts God wants us to know about the heavenly afterlife?

By the light

of

**How does the ELCA
understand heaven and hell?**

By Timothy J. Wengert

“Jesus was clear that when he is raised up,
he will draw all people to himself. Ever since we
got booted out of the garden, it has been God’s
relentless pursuit to bring his people to God.
I don’t think God’s going to give up on us.”

—Elizabeth Eaton, ELCA presiding bishop

We've all heard it, and perhaps even said it: "Go jump in the lake!" Yet few realize that originally, according to some etymologists, the phrase was really "Go jump in the lake of fire," a euphemism for "Go to hell" that comes from the book of Revelation's descriptions for the final judgment of Satan and his followers (19:20).

Similarly, we've all heard about meeting Peter at the pearly gates, which combines the notion that Jesus gave him the keys to "the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19) with the "gates of pearl" (Revelation 21:21).

These two examples—and there are countless others—warn us from the outset that any talk about heaven and hell (eternal blessing and judgment) must be based not on images that Christians later constructed (especially from sources like Dante's *Inferno* or John Milton's *Paradise Lost*) but rather on careful reading of Scripture and reflection on traditional words and pictures.

Christians today talk about heaven far more than does the Bible, which focuses its comments not on dying and going to heaven but on the resurrection of the dead. Martin Luther noticed this and rarely speculated about life after death, often comparing the individual's experience of death and resurrection to falling asleep and waking up at the sound of the trumpet on the last day (1 Corinthians 15:52).

While the Old Testament says little about an afterlife, there are two well-known texts in the New Testament that address what is best to know about the subject. In Luke 23, Jesus says to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (43). "Paradise" here is a Greek word that refers to the enclosed parks of Persian kings, so the paradise pictured is more of a walk in a beautiful park than as a place "up there." But most important is Jesus' promise: "with me."

Similarly, in Philippians 1, Paul speaks of a desire "to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (23). Again, instead of speculating about life after death, Paul puts the emphasis on being "with Christ." Thus, Jesus' promise to the thief and Paul's yearning remind us of the single most important thing about life after death *and* about the resurrection of the dead: We will be with Christ.

The New Testament also uses the concept of a banquet to describe heaven and final

“Since God is not a place, and the absence of God is also not a place, we can help people focus on their relationship with the triune God and their lives now, rather than focus on fears and the question ‘Where will I go when I die?’ ”

— Roger Willer, ELCA director for theological ethics and ELCA churchwide liaison for faith and science

judgment. This picture, too, is worth a thousand words because the point is not to wonder how there will be food in heaven or how resurrected bodies will eat (1 Corinthians 15:35-49), but rather to make it clear that being in Christ's presence is sheer joy. For the poor and often hungry people of the first century (and today), no picture expresses joy better than a banquet.

“I don’t hear people being concerned about getting to heaven or going to hell—someday. I hear people concerned about how their faith is making a difference in their daily lives and the lives of their neighbors.”

—Tracie Bartholomew, bishop of the New Jersey Synod

Every week, Christians gather around the Lord's table and participate in a “foretaste of the feast to come” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship [ELW], 181). The picture of a banquet rejects individualistic views of Christianity and heaven; there is always a communal aspect to heaven.

John W. Doberstein, a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia in the 1950s, wrote a prayer in his popular *Minister's Prayer Book* describing resurrection as the day “when heart shall find heart, and those sundered on earth shall foregather in heaven,” particularly comforting for those of us who mourn the death of loved ones.

“Neither death nor life will separate us”

What about hell? Here we run into several linguistic problems with the biblical text. In the Greek text of the New Testament, there are two words that we often associate with “hell.” On

the one hand, *Hades*, like the Hebrew *Sheol*, is simply the term for the shadowy, gloomy place of the dead. The Bible doesn't speculate about the condition of such souls in this place. The Apostles' Creed uses the Latin equivalent (*ad inferos*; the netherworld), so the recent, more accurate translation of the creed reads: “He descended to the dead.”

On the other hand, Jesus also uses the word *Gehenna* (a smoking, stinking garbage pit outside Jerusalem) to describe a place of suffering and torment for those whose selfish unbelief separates them from God. These two images come together in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), which uses the word *Hades*.

Lazarus, the poor man, has no one to bury him, so instead, the angels miraculously carry him directly to “Abraham's bosom”—that is, he reclines with Abraham at the final banquet. The rich man, as was normal in Jesus' day, gets buried. But for him, death is not a place of waiting or sleeping, but a place of torment because instead of loving his poor neighbors in this life he feasted in his gated house.

It seems here that Jesus combines the punishment of *Gehenna* and the shadowy place of the dead, so the rich man's tormenting thirst (nothing could be worse in a desert climate than lack of water) is the direct consequence of not caring for a neighbor in need—a clear warning in our day too.

Even the resurrection of Lazarus has no effect on such uncompromising self-centeredness: the love of money is such an opiate that the rich man's brothers will not believe “even if someone rises from the dead” (31).

This story and others like it in the New Testament teach that God, in Christ, is in charge of the blessing of heaven and the judgment of hell—we are not. Moreover, the judgment of hell results from stubborn unbelief—not “fearing, loving, and trusting God above all else” (Luther's Small Catechism, first commandment)—so that in the Gospel of John, punishment for this complete lack of trust occurs already in this life: “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light . . .” (3:18-19).

Because the Bible says so little about this, our human curiosity kicks into high gear, and we want to know more than we can (or should). Indeed, as

soon as we begin prying into God's business and take judgment into our own hands, we miss the point. The point of heaven and the resurrection is this: Nothing can stand between believers and God's gracious love or Christ's comforting presence.

With Paul in Romans 8:38-39, we can say, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life ... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." *That* is what we need to know as we mourn or grieve or face our own mortality.

As Luther put it when he explained the phrase "deliver us from evil" in the Small Catechism, we pray that our heavenly Father at the last, "would take us by grace from this valley of tears to himself in heaven." That's enough. The God who judges and condemns evil lifts all condemnation through Christ's death and resurrection, applied to us in baptism and consummated in the life to come.

The promise of paradise

Two examples from Luther's career show how we may deal with complicated arguments about these matters. The first regards Jesus' descent into hell. Theologians offered different theories about what this meant. One (supported by theologian and reformer John Calvin) contended that this descent was metaphorical and took place in Jesus' suffering on the cross. Others insisted on a literal descent to hell (1 Peter 3:18-20), where Christ preached to the dead (1 Peter 4:6).

Luther found this debate far too speculative and urged his followers not to concern themselves with such things. Nevertheless, he supported the view of the ancient and medieval church that Christ proclaimed his victory over sin, evil and death even in hell. Luther even preached a sermon about this in 1532, translated in Robert Kolb and James Nestingen's *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Fortress, 2001).


When others reopened this debate after Luther's death, some referred back to his sermon and underscored that this teaching was beyond human knowledge and reason. In one of our Lutheran confessions of faith, *The Formula of Concord*—per Epitome IX.4 in the new translation of *The Book of Concord* (Fortress, 2000), for which I served as co-editor with Robert Kolb—these theologians put it this way:

"For it is enough that we know that Christ descended into hell and destroyed hell for all believers and that he redeemed them from the power of death, the devil, and the eternal

19 ►

"For Christians,
the response to
the question of
what we believe
about heaven
and hell must be
centered in Jesus
Christ, who, in
love, gave his life
for the world."

—Winston Persaud, professor of systematic theology,
Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa



“Say neither too much nor too little, so eminent Lutheran theologian Bishop Krister Stendahl challenged us concerning what lies beyond death. Not too much, because we speak of what we cannot know. But not too little, for while we cannot comprehend who we will be, we know something trustworthy of who God is.”

— Kathryn Johnson, ELCA director for ecumenical and interreligious relations

damnation of hellish retribution. How that happened we should save for the next world, where not only this matter but many others, which here we have simply believed and cannot comprehend with our blind reason, will be revealed.”

In the eyes of the world, Jesus’ death, burial and descent to the dead were a complete defeat. But faith confesses that God’s weakness and foolishness bring victory over sin, death, evil, the devil and anything that threatens God’s creation. (Perhaps when we recite this article of the creed, Lutherans could stamp their feet and add a victory cheer.)

In 1525, Luther responded to an attack by the influential scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam by writing *On the Bondage of the Will*. He chided Erasmus for trusting in human abilities rather than in God’s grace and for attempting to solve the problem of evil by defending unfettered “free choice,” when in fact human beings are (to use the words of ELW’s confession of sin) “captive to sin and cannot free themselves.”

Indeed, we are like addicts who claim they’re free to stop using any time they want. In this case, Luther argued, human beings are addicted to claims of having control over their relation to God.

Near the end of his tract, Luther insists that the fact that only God can save us does not imply any unfairness in God toward those who reject God, and he makes the following analogy: By the light of nature, it looks as if this world is completely random because evil often seems to triumph over good. However, by the light of grace, we discover God’s mercy in Christ toward the poor, the sinner and the dying. In the end, God will put an end to evil.

But then a second question arises—namely, why some people reject God and only trust in themselves. The light of grace seems to reveal a deep unfairness in God. Why Jacob and not Esau? Why Peter and not Judas? And, as Paul writes in Romans 9, why me and not my Jewish relatives?

Human reason, Luther argues, cannot solve this conundrum. For this we must wait until the last judgment and the light of glory, when God’s mercy will be vindicated, all evil will be defeated and God will be all in all.


When Karl Barth, one of the 20th century’s most influential theologians, was asked by a student whether there was a hell, the story goes that he answered unequivocally, “Yes,” adding, “but it’s empty.” He wanted to emphasize God’s sovereign

grace, but perhaps he went a bit too far.

We might better say about heaven and hell that, yes, they exist, but that whether they are full or empty is up to God, not us, which is why we both confess in the creed that Jesus (not human beings) will “come to judge the living and the dead,” and sing with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “Goodness is stronger than evil” (ELW, 721).

“The biblical writers seem far less interested in what might happen to us after death and far more interested confessing God’s presence in our lives right now, an abiding presence that will accompany us throughout all of this life and into the one to come.”

—David Lose, a pastor of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, Minneapolis

Meanwhile, leaving the judging where it belongs, in God’s hands, we wait. And yet, at the same time, these remarkable pictures of life after death in the Bible provide exactly the comfort for us that Jesus intended: “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.” On the basis of that promise, we, too, can desire to depart and be with Christ, while at the same time praying with the early church, “*Maranatha—Come, Lord Jesus!*” 

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