

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος,
In the beginning was the Word,

καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν,
And the Word was with God,

καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.
And the Word was God

John 1:1

Hell, Heaven & the Gospel of John

8 studies on Hell, Heaven and the Gospel of John

before you begin...

Read the introduction pages at the start of your first study together. That way we will all be on the same page! As you do the studies each week start by reading *the story* together. Then do *the study*. You might choose to read *the fast fact* (if there is one) section at home, because you need to ensure there is time enough to dig into the *interact* section of the study. If people in your group prepare it will make light work of these parts. Make sure there's still plenty of time to *pray* at the end! Sounds like a lot of work doesn't it... don't worry—it's a great thing to be spending our time on!

Here are a few tips to help your small group grow together:

Please, please, please...

Pray... prayer is the place to start for our groups and we should do it even when we are not meeting together. We should pray that under God's strength our group would grow in its love for God and each other. Pray for the relationships within the group and the witness of the group to the church family and to those outside the church

Participate... it's so great when people feel comfortable discussing their faith with other believers. Don't feel like you don't know enough to say something, all input is great for group life and the group is a great place to get your questions answered. Likewise, make sure you allow space for other people to participate in the group, especially quieter members! Sometimes silence feels painful and we feel like we need to fill it—but maybe if the more talkative among us wait—we might have somebody fill that silence for us.

Prioritize... did you know it's really important to meet together with other Christians regularly, listening to God's word, praying together and sharing our lives? Not only is it the sort of thing we want to prioritize to ensure we're standing firm in our faith—but turning up each week is a huge encouragement to others too.

Prepare... This will make the study a more fruitful experience for everyone. You'll know the questions you need answered and you might be able to share some new insight you've had with the group. It doesn't take long—but it can make a big difference to the life of the group.



So that you may believe...

John tells us clearly what he's trying to do at the very end of his gospel:

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31)

What John is saying is that without believing these things... you will not have life. Believing what he has written is the difference between life and death... or... between heaven and hell.

We're going to have a close look at the things that John has written through the lens of the first 18 verses of his gospel (the prologue). But before we do that, we're going to think through the very distinct consequences the Bible sets forward for believing or not. The Bible makes it very clear that hell awaits us if we reject Christ, but if we receive him our eternity is in heaven with God as his children.

So let's have a look at the two paths laid out and what God tells us we must believe to have life in his name.

Something to remember...

Since the first 18 verses of John tell us so much about the entire gospel, why not make it your goal to know them well, even to memorise them off by heart! Here is a copy for you to remember and highlight each week:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. ⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" ¹⁶ From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.



the point

Hell is the eternal conscious punishment of God that lays beyond judgment day for those who refuse to relate to God through Christ.



story

Hell is a difficult topic. C. S. Lewis once wrote: 'There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity.'

What do you think?... About hell that is?

TV has taught us that hell is a place of flames and a bloke with two horns and a pitch fork in a red lycra suit—who seems to be in charge.

There is a lot of discussion among Bible believing Christians over whether or not hell is eternal... or a place of judgment and then annihilation. Most Christians would say *hell* is ultimately the absence of God. I though God was *omnipresent* (everywhere all the time) and *omnipotent* (having power over everything). If that's true of God... how can hell ultimately be a place where he is not?

We need to have a close look at what the Bible says about hell to work this out. I think in the very least we'll conclude it's probably not somewhere we'll want to end up!



study

Read Luke 12:1-5 (and also Hebrews 9:27)

1. What part of our life will be judged by God? Based solely on your inner parts, where do you think you would be thrown after judgment?

Read Mark 9:42-50

2. *A lot of the language in this passage is exaggeration for the point of emphasis (don't cut your hand off). But that doesn't mean it's not trying to strongly communicate something. Which part of your body do you think you would not have to cut off to avoid going to hell?*

3. Put this passages description of hell into your own words.

Read Matthew 7:21-23

4. How do we experience God's goodness in our world today? How does this passage say *many* will experience God's goodness on *that day* (see also 2 Thess 2:9)?

Read John 3:36

5. What will our judgment ultimately be based on according to this verse? What are the only two outcomes?

Read 2 Peter 3:8-13

6. What does God want for everyone in the long term? How does he want us to live now?



Two words are translated hell in the New Testament. This extract from the *New dictionary of Biblical Theology* tells us a little bit about them both:

fast facts

The first word translated hell is, '*Gehenna*' (12 times), comes from 'the valley of Hinnom' near Jerusalem, a notorious site of Israelite idolatry and child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6 etc). This is a place where corpses and ashes were thrown (Jer 31:40), and probably helped illustrate what lay ahead for those who rebel against God

The second word, '*Hades*' (11 times), was the the common greek word for the world of the dead, and was used for 'sheol' in the Septuagint and other Jewish writings.



What picture do people in the world have of hell?

interact

Use your own words to write down what you have learned the Bible says hell is like...

Do you think the existence of hell is just?

What can you be doing in your life to spare people from hell?



What can we pray in response to what we have learned?

prayer

What can we pray for each other?

What can we pray for our community?

What can we pray for our world?

2

heaven



the point

Heaven is eternity with God gathered around his throne and it awaits those who believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.



story

I had a mate who wasn't so sure that he wanted to go to heaven. The images in Revelation 4:6 and 15:2 scared him. As a surfer, he'd always pictured heaven to be the home of the perfect wave, so a sea of glass came as a huge shock!

It's amazing how our images of heaven vary so wildly. You only have to sit through a few funerals and hear a few eulogies to get the picture. Heaven seems to be the place where we all finally get what we want with whom we want it (I suspect that may be closer to hell). Phrases like, 'they'll be sitting up having a cup of tea right now' or 'he'll be up there drinking a few beers and dropping a line as we speak' or 'he's probably up there arranging for the dragons to win the next grand final', suggest that heaven is... really... pretty godless and all about us!

What is heaven like? Let's have a look...



study

Read Revelation 4

1. Try to draw the image that John sees of heaven.
2. What is the focus of everything?
3. What do the two chants (in verses 8 and 11) tell us about the focus of those in heaven?

Read Revelation 7:9-17

4. How does this passage describe the inhabitants of heaven?
5. What qualified these people to be there?
6. What will eternity be like for them?

Read John 3:36

7. How many alternatives to heaven are there? How can we ensure that our eternity is secure?



How does the Bible's image of heaven compare with the image the world has of heaven?

interact

How do you feel about spending an eternity where the focus isn't on you?

How can we act towards others and towards God to be preparing ourselves for what it will be like in heaven?

How can we help others to want to be there?



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prayer

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the point

The Word is God in the flesh come into the world to make God known to us



story

In this series of studies, we're going to dip into John's gospel from a number of different angles. By the time we finish, we'll have looked at some key sections in detail—and hopefully, if you follow the weekly reading plan, you'll have read the whole of John for yourself.

John's gospel is unique. While the other gospel writers have followed a more-or-less straight line in telling the story of Jesus, John wanders about in fascinating ways. Rather than simply putting events in the order they happened, it seems he's gathered his material and arranged it to communicate key ideas. It's a work of art, often puzzling—but with John, there's never a word or comment wasted. Everything is said for a reason.

John 1:1-18 contains all the key themes in John's gospel—it's not only an introduction but it's an overview to what lies ahead. Let's kick off our journey by exploring the *Word*.



study

Read John 1:1-18

1. Who is the *Word* verse 1 and 2 is speaking about? In which later verse does this become clear?
2. List the claims verses 1 to 3 make about the *Word*...
3. How close is the link between Jesus and God? How can you explain this?
4. What problem has Jesus solved according to verse 18?

Reading on...

So what does it actually mean that Jesus is the Word? And how is it that Jesus makes God known? John's gospel goes to great lengths to tell us the answers to these questions. Let's take a closer look.

- a. How does John the Baptist explain the link between the Father and the Son in **3:34**?
- b. What do the Jews understand Jesus to be claiming in **5:17-18**?
- c. What does Jesus say about himself and his Father in...
 - 5:19**
 - 7:16**
 - 8:27-29**
 - 12:44-45, 49-50**
 - 14:6-7, 8-12**



The first verse of John’s gospel is one of the key battlegrounds with Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Here’s a quick intro to the issues. Good English translations of the original greek text read like this: “In the beginning was *the* Word, and *the* Word was with God, and *the* Word was God.”

fast facts

The little words *the* and *a* play a very useful part in the English language. Greek, however, has some different rules. We use *the* to refer to something specific, like *the door*. If it’s one of a bunch of possible doors we say *a door*. We call the word *the* “the definite article”, because it’s referring to something definite and particular and unique.

Here’s the problem. Greek has an equivalent for *the*, but it has no equivalent for *a*. When there’s no *the*, sometimes we translate by putting in *a* or *an*, other times we don’t. John 1:1 is an example of this. The problem arises in the last phrase of the verse—”the Word was God.” As in English, the word GOD has no *the* in front of it. And it makes perfect sense without it. However, because there’s no *the*, it may be possible to read the sentence with an *a*—so it says “the Word was A god.” Instead of making Jesus God’s perfect expression of himself in human flesh, the addition of that little *a* makes him no more than one minor god among many minor gods.

How do we decide the way the verse should be read? First, Greek scholars have got many good arguments for translating the verse exactly as we have it (all kinds of grammatical rules...). The Jehovah’s Witness translation has very little support from any real experts. Second—and more simply, it’s worth noting what the Jews thought Jesus was claiming about himself in John 5:18 and 10:33. They recognized very clearly that he was claiming to be God—and ultimately, they crucified him for it. The words of Thomas in 20:28 (after the resurrection) are the final link—he bows to the risen Christ with the words “my Lord and my God.” And so should we.



According to **8:42-47**, what does a person’s response to Jesus tell you about that person?

interact

EXAMINE YOURSELF! How have you responded to Jesus?

Are you trying to “meet God” or “approach God” in any way other than by trusting Jesus?

- can you think of examples how people do this?

- How can we encourage each other to trust solely in Jesus?



What can we pray in response to what we have learned?

prayer

What can we pray for each other?

What can we pray for our community?

What can we pray for our world?



Between now and next week try to read **John 1 to 5**

Don’t forget to look for the key ideas mentioned at the start of this booklet—and make a note of other ideas that strike you as important



Into the darkness of our world a light has come to bring life to men...



story

If Hollywood has taught us anything, and it has, it's that light is good and darkness is bad.

Think about it for a moment... Star Wars, what colour is Darth Vader? What is the name of his team? Lord of the Rings... what colour is the good wizard?

While Michael Jackson was absolutely spot on... it doesn't matter if you're black or white when it comes to skin colour, there can be little doubt that, excluding our skin colour, people understand darkness and light in a particular way.

It was exactly the same at the time John's gospel was written. And so John uses the imagery strongly to help us understand that there are two distinct sides in our world, the light and the darkness. I wonder which you live in?



study

Read John 1:1-18 again

1. Make a note of the verses that mention light and darkness:
2. Who is the light John is talking about?
3. In what ways do you think Jesus is like the light?
4. What happened when the light came into the world, and why? Have you seen evidence of this today?
5. The word translated as *understood* in v 5 can also mean *overcome* or *extinguish*. Which word do you think best describes the world's reaction to the light of Jesus?
6. What response did John the Baptist say we should have to this light?

Reading on...

Read John 3:19-21.

What two types of people are there in the world?

Why do some people avoid Jesus?

Read about the man born blind in **9:1-12**. What is Jesus teaching by his action here?

Read the explanation of "spiritual blindness" in **9:35-41**. What response do people make to Jesus when they "see the light"?



interact

EXAMINE YOURSELF! What response have you made to *the light*?

Examine your attitude to the world. We have seen that there are only two types of people.

- Is this the way you usually think about people? Why/why not?

- What categories does the world use to divide people into groups?

Think of people you know who are living in darkness.

- What needs to happen for them to come into the light?

- What part do we play in this?



prayer

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Between now and next week try to read **John 6 – 12**

Don't forget to look for the key ideas mentioned at the start of this booklet—and make a note of other ideas that strike you as important

5

born of God



By trusting in Jesus we become part of the family of God and that brings privilege along with responsibility.



story

“God and me are mates” says Paul Hogan confidently in the movie

Crocodile Dundee.

Some people share his easy confidence—if God is there at all, they reason, then he’ll turn a blind eye to my faults, and there’s nothing to worry about. Others aren’t so sure. Maybe they have a more realistic picture of God’s holiness, and their own sinfulness—so they live their lives in fear of God and his anger.

How should we think about the relationship between us and God?

John’s gospel has the answers!



study

Read John 1:1-18 again

1. What verses do you see that speak about the possibility of a new relationship with God?
2. What do you think it means to become a “child of God”?
- What confidences and responsibilities does this bring?
3. According to verse 12, how can a person become a child of God?
4. What do you think it means to be “born of God”?

Reading on...

Read the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus in 3:1-8. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council, and a teacher of Israel—and yet he doesn’t understand what Jesus is talking about.

Who does Nicodemus think Jesus is, and what does he think Jesus has come to do?

How does Jesus respond to his comments?

Being a religious person’s no guarantee of seeing the Kingdom of God! In what ways do we face the same danger as Nicodemus?

How do you think the new “birth” in verse 5-8 is related to the idea of becoming “children of God” that we saw in chapter 1?

The question is, how do we actually become children of God? How are we born from above? Jesus goes on to give some good clues to this in 3:16-18. What is the key to eternal life?



EXAMINE YOURSELF! This is important. By trusting in Jesus, and his death for us, we receive the gift of God’s Spirit, and a whole new start as new people in a new family—the family of God! Have you come to this decisive point in your life? Remember, Nicodemus proves that it’s easy to be respected and religious—but that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re part of the family of God!

SHARE—the story of your own spiritual birth (maybe spend some time writing it out).

REFLECT

- What does this mean for someone who is unsure of where (s)he stands with God?

- What would you say to someone in this situation?

- What sort of lifestyle is appropriate for someone who is part of God’s family?




What can we pray in response to what we have learned?

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What can we pray for our world?



Between now and next week try to read **John 13-17**

Don’t forget to look for the key ideas mentioned at the start of this booklet—and make a note of other ideas that strike you as important



the point

Unfortunately Jesus hasn't been well received, but to those who have received him... we need to be conscious that others need to receive him too.



story

The story of the prodigal son is fairly well known, even outside of Christian circles. The son leaves home, the father and the brother carry on with the work while the son squanders everything. Eventually the son returns hoping his father can forgive him... and he does... but it's not really the case with the older brother. He's not too happy to see the younger brother welcomed home. He's not too happy that the father would squander the good product on a party to welcome him.

The Jews are a bit like this in the gospels. They're not really keen to welcome the Samaritans back into the fold... they're not really keen to receive Jesus as he comes to them with this message. In general, they reject him and his message.

We don't want to be like the Jews in that respect. We want to welcome everyone in to God's family, even though we know it cost him his own Son, and for that matter we want to welcome Jesus into our lives because without him we could never be God's children.



study

Read John 1:1-18... *again!*

1. How does John describe the relationship between Jesus and *the world*? (Note the verses which tell you this).
2. What sort of reception should the world give to someone of this status?
3. What evidence do you see in the world today of the truth of verses 10 and 11?

With the words "he came to *his own*" verse 11 seems to move from the big picture—the whole creation—to Israel, which the bible speaks of as *God's own* people.

Reading on...

How do the Samaritan's respond to Jesus in **John 4:39-42**?

- a. Read **2:18** What is the Jew's first response to Jesus?
- b. Read **7:11-13**. How are things developing?
- c. What was the main objection of the Jews in **10:31-33**?
- d. What motive did some believing Jews have for not speaking up for Jesus in **12:42-43**?
- e. Skim through **chapters 18 & 19**, perhaps just looking at section headings.
 - What is happening here?
 - What choice do the Jewish people make in **18:39-40**?
- g. Look back to **John 3:36**. As people think *they* are making choices about Jesus, what is *really* happening?



Links to the Book of Exodus. As we move through John’s gospel you’ll see lots of connections with the Book of Exodus—which we studied last year. A lecturer of mine at college used to say to not forget that “John sits on the same bookshelf as Exodus!”.

fast facts

John wants us to see Jesus as bringing in a NEW EXODUS—a GREATER RESCUE than God’s salvation of Israel out of Egypt.

Think for a moment about the miraculous signs in the book of Exodus. The first 12 chapters of John’s gospel is often referred to as *the book of signs*. There are 7 signs in all in John, starting with the wedding at Cana... can you name the other 6.

Likewise, Exodus is where God reveals to Moses that he is I AM. In John’s gospel there are also 7 I AM statements, starting with I AM the bread of life in 6:35. See if you can find the other 6.

Perhaps the most significant link though, actually... definitely the most significant link is the rescue of God’s people... this time, just like Exodus, it was through the blood of the lamb.



EXAMINE YOURSELF!

... Not just have you received Jesus, but HOW have you received him?

interact

- Do you publicly associate with him, or are you afraid of what others might think?
- In what ways are we tempted not to associate with Jesus?

Do you sometimes think Jesus’ claims are a little bit too big to be taken seriously?

- How do we water down his claim on our lives?
- In What ways do you need to change in order to give him the place he deserves in your life as your maker and king?



What can we pray in response to what we have learned?

prayer

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Between now and next week try to read **John 18-21**

Why does John say his gospel was written?

