



## Free Leader's Guide

by Stephen M. Miller

For Bible study groups that like to talk, here's a leader's guide for half a dozen sessions you can use with the book *Who's Who and Where's Where in the Bible*.

You'll find in this guide discussion-prompting questions and answers for sessions about three people and three places:

- Samson, Jesus, Paul
- Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Hell

But first, three tips for teaching.

**Tip 1. If you're leading the session, lecture as little as possible.**

Lecture is boring. Notice people napping during the sermon? People like dialogue more than monologue—unless the monologue rivets your jeans to the chair. So ask lots of good questions, and fill in the information gaps as part of the discussion.

**Tip 2. Don't embarrass anyone.**

It locks jaws and freezes discussion.

Embarrassment happens most often when leaders ask questions that have only one right answer. Like, "What country did Samson's wife come from?" It's embarrassing to get it wrong. She was a Philistine, by the way, from Philistia along the coast of what is now Israel. So ask questions that have people drawing from their life experiences—opinions, ideas, and reactions. Questions that aren't so threatening.

### **Tip 3. Don't beat people up for not reading the book.**

If your Bible study group is like the ones I've been in, most folks don't read the book before coming to class. Although *Who's Who and Where's Where in the Bible* could be the exception because it's so exceptionally well written. (My proofreader suggested that since I wrote *Who's Who and Where's Where in the Bible*, I should make sure you know I'm saying this with my tongue stuck to my cheek.)

Many entries in the book will be at least vaguely familiar to most people. So try pooling the group's brain resources. For example, ask, "What do we know about Samson?" Most folks who haven't read *Who's Who and Where's Where in the Bible* will know at least something about him. And those lucky ones who read the book will have lots of interesting things to say—so you don't have to lecture. Just fill in the gaps, in short bursts.

I'm hoping that after you see how I came up with discussion questions and activities, you'll be able to do it for other entries you'd like to discuss. But if you can't, let me know and I'll try to add more sessions to this leader's guide. Just click the Contact link and send me a note with the people and places you'd like me to add.

### **SAMSON**, pages 326-330

#### **Question**

What would you guess the average Christian thinks Samson was like?

*Possible response:* Strong, handsome, heroic, and with incredible faith in God.

#### **Read**

Read aloud the three-paragraph introduction about Samson, page 326. It may jar a few in the group who thought highly of Samson.

#### **Handout**

Consider preparing handouts for the group members. Divide the handout into the following three categories. Ask the group to identify highlights of Samson's life story in each section. You, as leader, can fill in the gaps with any material from the Samson entry that seems especially interesting or important to you. The point here is to help the group become familiar with the story.

- A Miracle Baby, Judges 13
- A Philistine Wedding, Judges 14-15
- Delilah, the Fatal Attraction, Judges 16

#### **Question**

Samson was supposed to live as a Nazarite—which involved observing special rules: no drinking wine, cutting hair, or going near a corpse—even a dead relative. So Samson was to live at a level above the average Jew. Normally, Jews took the Nazarite vow for only a short time—a bit like fasting that some

Christians do today. What do you think was the reason God set Samson apart like this?

*Possible response:* Perhaps it was to show that he had a unique role in Jewish history. But given the fact that it seems he broke every Nazarite law, perhaps it shows that God can fulfill his plan regardless of our failures. Wine flowed freely at Samson's wedding. He set himself up for a haircut. And he ate honey from the carcass of a lion.

### **Question**

There's a cycle of violence and retaliation in Samson's story. Where are some spots in his story we see that happening?

*Possible response:* His wedding guests threaten his bride to win a bet of clothing, and Samson pays off the bet by killing other Philistines and stealing their clothes. Samson then sets the Philistine countryside on fire—crops included—and the Philistines set his bride and her father on fire.

### **Question**

Where have we seen cycles of violence in our own day?

*Possible response:* Israelis and Arabs are famous for heavy-handed retaliation. A Palestinian suicide bomber hits a crowded bus stop, and the Israeli army evacuates the home of the bomber's family and then blows it up. We sometimes see less violent retaliation at our jobs and in our families.

### **Question**

What breaks the cycle? And when have you seen it broken?

*Possible response:* Leaders who want peace more than revenge will break the cycle. The American civil rights movement gradually and painfully won rights for minorities by shunning violent retaliation and by protesting peacefully. Long-term family disputes often fade when one person apologizes—even when that person wasn't in the wrong. Apologies are that powerful.

### **Short talk**

In your own words, tell about the process Delilah went through to find the secret of Samson's strength. Cover all four attempts mentioned on page 329.

### **Question**

After all this, why do you think Samson would tell her the truth and then take a nap with his head on her lap—and expect to wake up with anything other than a buzz haircut?

*Possible response:* Nagging works. Or perhaps Samson didn't really take seriously the Nazirite vow. Maybe he thought he would remain strong even with cut hair.

### **Handout**

On a sheet of paper, have the group start listing Samson's character flaws and strengths, with behaviors to support it. Give them a couple of minutes, and then

invite them to call them out. Another option is to skip the writing, and just do this as a spoken activity.

*Possible response:*

#### Flaws

- Selfish (his marriage to a Philistine dishonored his parents and Jewish traditions)
- Proud (he stormed off from his honeymoon after learning his bride told the wedding guests the secret of his riddle)
- Deceitful (gave honey to his parents without telling them it wasn't kosher, since he took it from a lion's carcass)
- Weakness for immoral women (relationships with a prostitute and Delilah)
- Vengeful (with his dying breath he prayed for revenge on the Philistines, page 330)

#### Strengths

- Capable of being considerate (to save neighboring Jews from Philistine invaders, he turned himself in)

#### Question

With so many flaws and so few strengths, why do you think his story is in the Bible at all?

*Possible response:* Paraphrase the material at the end of the Samson entry, "Samson's legacy."

#### Question

What is that to us?

*Possible response:* God's in charge. Sometimes we think we've blown it by doing something stupid. Or we think someone has blown it for us. But God has the ability to take the worst we can dish up, and turn it into a gourmet meal.

### **JESUS**, pages 199-206

#### Question

We have four gospels about Jesus. Because of that, we know a lot about his teachings and miracles, but relatively little about him. What do we know about Jesus the man?

*Possible response:* He had a family (see "Jesus' Family," page 200). He apparently worked as a carpenter most of his life, until he began his ministry—perhaps in his mid-thirties (page 202). He knew the Jewish Bible—the Christian Old Testament—well enough to quote it.

#### Question

The Gospel writers tried different ways to convince Jewish readers that Jesus was the Messiah that prophets in earlier centuries said God would send. Do you remember how the Gospel writers tried to do that?

*Possible response:* Telling of his virgin birth. Reporting how he fulfilled prophecy (see "Prophets Predicting Jesus," page 201). Reporting his miracles,

including his resurrection. Reporting his genealogy. Note that Matthew traces Jesus' family all the way back to Abraham, father of the Jews, but that Matthew includes four women who didn't seem to be Jews—perhaps to show that God loves non-Jews, too (page 200).

### **Question**

Why couldn't most Jews accept that Jesus was who he said he was—Messiah and God's Son? The Jews were such a hard sell that Christianity quickly evolved into a non-Jewish religion. (To clarify what "Messiah" meant to the Jews, consider reading or paraphrasing "Christ, the Title," page 203.)

*Possible response:* The most basic Jewish teaching about God is that he's the one and only: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" (Deuteronomy 6:4, *New King James Version*). Jesus' explanation—"The Father and I are one" (John 10:30)—couldn't overcome more than a millennium of tradition, no matter how many miracles he did. In addition, Jesus was crucified. Many Jews saw this as a sign that he was cursed of God: "Anyone hanging on a tree is cursed of God" (Deuteronomy 21:23).

### **Handout**

Create a handout with the following four sayings of Jesus, but don't include the notes in parentheses—they're just for you, the leader. Invite group members to point out sayings that reveal something important about Jesus, and what they think each saying reveals. Feel free to add other sayings of Jesus that you like.

1. The first reported words of Jesus: "Why did you need to search? You should have known that I would be in my Father's house" (Luke 2:49). (This is what twelve-year-old Jesus told his mother when she found him at the Jerusalem temple. This shows that Jesus was already in touch with his purpose in life, page 202.)

2. "The Kingdom of God is near! Turn from your sins and believe this Good News!" (Mark 1:15). (Jesus talked a lot about the Kingdom of God, which doesn't mean simply heaven, but all of God's realm—life on earth today, too. He wanted to welcome people into this wonderful place; it was his main emphasis. The spiritual life was that important to him, page 204.)

3. "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do" (Matthew 9:12). (Jesus said this to Jewish scholars criticizing him for hanging out with scum. This shows he didn't let the flawed perceptions of others—even of respected religious leaders—talk him out of doing what he knew was right. He didn't need their approval because he knew he had his Father's approval, page 205.)

4. "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). (Jesus said this to Pilate, when asked if he was king of the Jews. This shows Jesus wasn't interested in changing the political structure of the world. He was interested in changing individuals. He paid the unfair taxes and worked within the oppressive political structures of his time, helping and changing people all the while, page 205.)

### **Read**

Read aloud the excerpt from a Roman history book written by Josephus (see SEE fuss), page 204. Writing a few years after Jesus died, Josephus described him as “good” and “virtuous.”

### **Question**

What one thing about Jesus—his character, teachings, or actions—do you most appreciate?

*Possible response:* Some might say his willingness to forgive. Adultery was one of the most socially deplorable sins of his time, especially when committed by women—perhaps on a scale with sexual child abuse today. Yet Jesus forgave a woman caught in adultery, when others wanted to execute her. He also preferred common folks to the high and mighty; many of his disciples were fishermen instead of scholars. He had deep compassion for people in pain, so healing became a hallmark of his ministry. He also told stories such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan to encourage us to help people in need (Luke 10:30-37). In addition, he reached out to people who wouldn't have had the courage to reach out to him—like hated tax collectors. He even chose one of them as a disciple: Matthew.

### **Closing verse**

Protestant reformer Martin Luther said the four Gospels about Jesus could be summed up in a single sentence. In fact, all of the more than 180,000 words of the New Testament can be summed up in that sentence. Read it in closing: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

### **PAUL**, pages 296-302

#### **Question**

Beside Jesus, no other human being is more responsible for starting Christianity than Paul. Yet if we had lived as a Christian in those days, Paul would not have been on our list of potential missionaries. What facts about Paul do you think would have kept him off our list?

*Possible response:* He was the enemy; he hunted Christians to put them on trial for heresy. He participated in the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. “His speeches are really bad!” (2 Corinthians 10:10). He got in arguments even with his colleagues: Peter (Galatians 2:11-16) and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41).

#### **Short talk**

If the only known description of Paul is correct, Paul was ugly, too. Read “What Did Paul Look Like?” page 298.

#### **Question**

So why do you think Jesus went so dramatically out of his way to recruit Paul—miraculously stopping him while Paul was on the road to arrest Christians in Damascus? What did Jesus see in Paul that others didn't?

*Possible response:* Jesus didn't need a great public speaker as much as a "relentless doer—someone who could stand up to intolerant Jewish traditionalists. He chose an intolerant Jewish traditionalist" (page 296). Jesus needed someone who would take authentic godly religion to the next level—breaking through more than a thousand years of Jewish tradition. Jews considered themselves the one and only people of the one and only God. But God decided it was time to remind them of why he chose them: "I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). Through Paul, that's exactly what happened.

### **Short talk**

In your own words, present Paul's pedigree, drawing from "Fiery Pharisee," page 296-297.

### **Question**

How would you compare Paul and his brand of Pharisees with religious groups today? What comes closest?

*Possible response:* Muslim extremists, who use violence to force people to live according to their interpretation of Muslim sacred scripture, the Koran. Jewish extremists who throw stones at archaeologists digging at sites once considered sacred, such as an ancient burial ground. Christians who kill physicians who perform abortions.

### **Question**

What do you remember are some of the things Paul accomplished?

*Possible responses:* During about three decades of ministry, he made at least three missionary expeditions, traveling some 10,000 miles, planting churches all over the Roman Empire in countries such as Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Italy. He wrote nearly half the books in the New Testament; his name appears on thirteen of the twenty-seven (see "How Much of the New Testament Did Paul Write?" page 300).

### **Read**

Let's think about what kinds of things Paul had to suffer while doing this work.

Have someone read aloud this Bible passage:

"Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not. I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food. Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of how the churches are getting along" (2 Corinthians 11:24-28).

### **Question**

Paul talks about a mysterious and humbling affliction he called a thorn in his side. He said God gave it to him “to keep me from getting puffed up” (2 Corinthians 12:7). Bible experts don’t know what the problem was, but have lots of guesses. Have you heard any of these theories, or do you have a guess about what the problem might have been?

*Possible response:* See “What Was Paul’s Thorn in the Side?” page 299. Guesses include malaria, epilepsy, a vision problem, and even the troublesome Corinthian church.

### **Handout**

Copy the following excerpts from Paul’s letters onto handouts and invite the group members to select one they think Christians today need to pay more attention to.

1. “Don’t just pretend that you love others. . . . Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other” (Romans 10:9-10).
2. “When God’s children are in need, be the one to help them out” (Romans 12:13).
3. “Pay your taxes” (Romans 13:6).
4. “Stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so there won’t be divisions in the church” (1 Corinthians 1:10).
5. “Lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Be humble and gentle” (Ephesians 4:1-2).
6. “Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love” (Ephesians 4:2).
7. “You are to live clean, innocent lives as children of God in a dark world full of crooked and perverse people. Let your lives shine brightly before them” (Philippians 2:15).

### **Short talk**

In your own words, report what Bible experts say about Paul’s death. Draw from the closing section of the Paul entry, “In Search of Paul’s Death,” pages 301-302.

### **Prayer**

Close the session with prayer, thanking God for his ability to work through the most unlikely people to accomplish the most uncommon results. Tell him that we sometimes feel as unlikely as Paul ever was, but that we want to stay open to God using us in any way he wants.

### **BETHLEHEM, pages 55-57**

#### **Read and react**

Tell the group you’re going to read a few sentences to them, and you’d like them to react. Read the first two paragraphs of the Bethlehem entry, page 55, about priests getting into a fistfight at the altar marking the birthplace of the Prince of Peace.

By the way, the fight took place several years before the photo of the priests on page 56 was taken. These aren't necessarily the same priests. So don't look for any black eyes. For a photo of the spot where the fight erupted, turn to page 164.

*Possible response:* There are turf wars even in the church, but it seems like irony over the edge and off the wall for worship leaders to duke it out for the privilege of worshipping the Prince of Peace.

### **Question**

Before we jump too quickly to judge Bethlehem's punching priests, we might want to consider irony closer to home. Without naming people or pointing to situations that might be a bit too sensitive for some of us, describe some scenes you've witnessed from years past when Christians—in an attempt to express their faith—behaved in a way that was out of line with the faith they profess.

*Possible response:* Bombing abortion clinics, carrying picket signs such as "God hates fags," yelling in church board meetings when we don't get our way, and getting into a rough-and-tumble at the church picnic. We're all human, and we've all done incredibly stupid things at times.

### **Question**

What are some famous Bible events that took place in Bethlehem, and what do you know about those stories?

*Possible response:* Ruth married Boaz there, David grew up there, and Jesus was born there. As the group members tell a bit about these stories, fill in the gaps from notes on pages 55-56.

### **Read**

Ask someone to read aloud these verses. "You, O Bethlehem . . . are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past. . . . He will be highly honored all around the world. And he will be the source of our peace" (Micah 5:2-5).

### **Question**

Jews before the time of Jesus read this prophecy about Bethlehem and said it referred to the coming messiah who would save Israel and restore the nation. That's why King Herod's scholars pointed the wise men to Bethlehem when they arrived in Jerusalem asking about the newborn king. Bethlehem was always a tiny village. Even today it's just a small town of about 27,000. Why would God arrange for his Son to be born in such a place?

*Possible response:* Throughout the Bible, God shows special concern for the little guy—the poor, the isolated, and the lonely. This was a perfect birthplace for the one who would bring hope to these very people.

### **Question**

What do we know about the Church of the Nativity?

*Possible response:* It's the oldest church in the world and one of the top tourist spots in the Holy Land. It was the place where Palestinian gunmen holed up for five weeks in 2002 (page 55). And in Roman times it was the site of a Roman shrine to a god known for his resurrection each spring: Adonis. Fill in group comments with information from "The cave stable" and "Church of the Nativity" sections in the Bethlehem entry, pages 56-57.

### **Question**

When some Christians go into the Church of the Nativity, they kneel and kiss the silver star marking the traditional birthplace of Jesus. Some other Christians say this looks too much like idolatry—worshiping a place instead of a person. What do you think?

*Possible response:* People want to get as close to Jesus as they can. And for many pilgrims who go to the Holy Land so they can walk where Jesus walked, it's a deeply moving experience. Touching the star, getting baptized in the Jordan River, taking communion at the Garden Tomb all seem to help Jesus come to life in a way like never before. He touches the senses, in addition to the spirit.

### **Closing prayer**

Read again the passage from Micah 5:2-5, emphasizing the final words: "And he will be the source of our peace." Pray for peace in troubled nations and in troubled individual lives. Thank God that he has provided us with a source of peace so deep and lasting that no matter what the circumstance—even if we're walking in death's shadow—we can experience peace that comes from knowing all is well between us and God.

## **JERUSALEM, pages 192-198**

### **Question**

Let's compare notes. What do we know about Jerusalem? And if any of you have been there, what does it look like?

*Possible response:* It's built on hills and valleys. It's the Jewish capital. Palestinians want it for their capital, and sometimes attack Jews there. It's a sacred city for people of three religions: Jews, Christians, and Muslims. King David built his capital there, and King Solomon built the temple there. It's where Jesus was crucified and where he ascended to heaven. Muslim tradition says Mohammed, too, ascended to heaven from Jerusalem.

### **Short talk**

Paraphrase the introduction of the entry, up to "In Bible times." Read Isaiah's prophecy that Jerusalem will someday overflow with "peace and prosperity" (Isaiah 66:12), and Jeremiah's report that while hoping for healing all they get is terror (Jeremiah 14:19).

### **Handout**

Photocopy or scan and print copies of page 196, "Jerusalem's Violent History," and distribute them to group members who don't have a copy of the book.

**Question**

What do you know about any of these violent events?

*Possible response:* Some may know a bit about David capturing the city and the Babylonians and later the Romans destroying it. As the class pools their insights, fill in gaps of information with material you found especially interesting. You might find it surprising how Jerusalem grew throughout the centuries, from 11 acres when David captured it, to 30,000 acres today. Or you might find it interesting that after a failed Jewish uprising in AD 134, the Romans banned Jews from Jerusalem.

**Question**

Jews, Christians, and Muslims have fought over this city off and on for 3,000 years. Let's consider why it's such a coveted place. What major events took place there, and what holy sites are there?

*Possible response:* See the list of Bible events and holy sites on page 193, along with comments from page 193-198. Mention only the ones that seem most important to you. The Western Wall is especially sacred to Jews, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to Christians, and the Dome of the Rock to Muslims.

**Question**

It seems odd that a place so sacred to so many is the site of so much violence. What violence have you heard about in Jerusalem?

*Possible response:* Most will know of bus and restaurant bombings. You could tell the author's story about getting stoned while driving an Israeli-tagged car into a Palestinian neighborhood of Jerusalem (page 7). No one was hurt, but the author's windshield needed replaced. And while he and those with him drove the car to the police station, people in the Palestinian neighborhood laughed and cheered as the damaged car drove by. It gave the author a clue about how deep the hatred runs, and how violence fuels the hatred.

**Read**

Ask someone to read this psalm aloud. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May all who love this city prosper. O Jerusalem, may there be peace within your walls and prosperity in your palaces. For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, 'Peace be with you.' For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek what is best for you, O Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:6-9).

**Question**

How can peace ever be possible? How can Jerusalem become a city of peace?

*Possible response:* There has been peace in Jerusalem before—extended peace. It happens when people agree to get along and share sacred spaces. It's hard to cultivate a spirit of sharing and unity when lines are drawn by race and religion. But it's impossible to resist the spirit of sharing when we embrace the

Bible's most important law for getting along with one another: "Do for others what you would like them to do for you" (Matthew 7:12).

### **Pray**

The Bible asks us to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem." Consider closing the session by doing just that.

**HELL**, pages 144-146

### **Question**

Folks in the older generation sometimes complain that they don't hear as many sermons or Bible study sessions about hell as they did a generation ago. Do you think they're right? If so, why do you think we've shifted away from talking about hell?

*Possible response:* For one thing, talking about hell is about as negative as you can get. We like being positive and upbeat, so rather than talk about punishment for sin, we focus on God's grace and the forgiveness of sin.

Also, there's a lot of confusion about what to make of hell because the Bible describes it in a variety of ways: fire, darkness. So perhaps many preachers and teachers aren't sure what to say about hell.

### **Short talk**

One reason people might be reluctant to talk about hell is because it can be tough to interpret what the Bible means by "hell." In your own words, present the information in the opening paragraphs of the entry—stopping at the section "Hell: figurative or real?" This is the section that reveals that most references to hell in the Bible refer to Gehenna, a valley just outside of Jerusalem.

### **Read**

Copy the following seven Bible verses onto a handout that you duplicate and distribute to the group members. Ask them to read the verses aloud.

1. If you curse someone, you are in danger of hell (Matthew 5:22).
2. If your hand—even if it is your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell (Matthew 5:30).
3. You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose the easy way (Matthew 7:13).
4. Don't be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).
5. How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. . . . Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell? (Matthew 23:29, 33).
6. Your gold and silver have become worthless. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh in hell (James 5:3).

7. God did not spare even the angels when they sinned; he threw them into hell, in gloomy caves and darkness until the judgment day (2 Peter 2:4).

### **Question**

Jesus spoke about hell more than anyone else in the Bible. How does it affect your understanding of hell to know that whenever Jesus used the word that's translated *hell* in English, he was saying the word *Gehenna* in his own language—the name of the valley just outside of Jerusalem?

*Possible response:* For many Christians, this won't change their understanding at all. That's because the word came to symbolize something completely separate from the valley—just as Sodom and Gomorrah represent sin, and just as September 11 is connected with terrorism.

### **Short talk**

Paraphrase the closing section of the entry about hell, beginning with "Hell: figurative or real?" In your own words, explain the four theories about hell. It would be helpful to copy the short descriptions from the book and make them available in handouts to group members who don't have a copy of the book.

### **Question**

Which theory do you think has the widest appeal among Christians?

*Possible response:* Most Christians today probably lean toward the first two theories: that hell is a real place where people suffer in flames forever, or that it's a fireless place where people are forever separated from God.

### **Question**

Which theory troubles you most?

*Possible response:* Many will be troubled by the last theory—that God would keep sinners alive forever, not to punish them, but to allow reconciliation eventually. On the flip side, though, many can't understand how a loving God could condemn anyone to eternal torture.

### **Question**

When you think about these four theories, what arguments—for or against—come to mind regarding any of them?

*Possible response:*

**Theory 1**, hell is a real place of everlasting fire.

*For:* Jesus described it that way.

*Against:* God's punishment in the Bible is to correct destructive behavior. But eternal torture seems to have no such purpose, and seems out of character for a loving God. It makes sense that a holy God can't live with sin, but why torture the sinner forever?

**Theory 2**, hell is separation from God.

*For:* The Bible descriptions of "fire" seem symbolic, evidenced by seemingly conflicting images of "darkness" and "fire," even though fire burns away darkness.

*Against:* How would it be any different than now, with sinners on earth separated from God?

**Theory 3**, sinners are annihilated, and it's the destruction instead of suffering that lasts forever.

*For:* "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 3:23), not eternal torture. Also, Jesus said God can "destroy the soul" in hell (Matthew 10:28).

*Against:* Those thrown into the lake of fire are "tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10).

**Theory 4**, God keeps sinners alive in the afterlife not to punish them, but to continue reaching out to them—until they come to their spiritual senses.

*For:* If rebel souls still exist, even in hell, then God hasn't been able "to reconcile to himself all things" (Colossians 1:19).

*Against:* The Bible speaks only of suffering and punishment for sinners in the afterlife, and says nothing of a second chance. Also, what would have been the point of Jesus' death?

### **Question**

What would you say to someone worried about a dead loved one who had rejected Jesus?

*Possible response:* We shouldn't get into the business of declaring the eternal destiny of anyone. That's God's job. Our job is to trust the God who will wipe away all tears (Revelation 7:17).

### **Closing statement**

We might not be able to agree on what hell will be like. Perhaps the Bible descriptions are attempts to symbolically describe the indescribable—a spiritual dimension to physics-bound humans. Or maybe hell is literally alive with fire.

But most of us can agree on this much. Wherever hell is, God won't be there. And we don't want to be there either.

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