

THE CASE FOR  
Heaven  
[AND HELL]

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*A Journalist Investigates  
Evidence for Life After Death*

STUDY GUIDE | FIVE SESSIONS

LEE  
STROBEL

WITH BILL BUTTERWORTH



HarperChristian  
Resources

*The Case for Heaven [and Hell] Study Guide*

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

HarperChristian Resources, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

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# How to Use This Guide

**N**eed some answers to questions about the afterlife, heaven, and hell? Then you are in the right place. *The Case for Heaven [and Hell]* is designed to be experienced in a group setting (such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or any small group gathering) and also as an individual study.

Each session begins with a brief opening reflection and several icebreaker-type questions to get you and your group thinking about the topic. You will then watch a video with Lee Strobel, which can be accessed via the streaming code found on the inside front cover. If you are doing the study with a group, you will then engage in some directed discussion. You will close each session with a time of personal reflection and prayer.

Each person in the group should have his or her own study guide, which includes video teaching notes, Bible study and group discussion questions, and between-sessions personal studies to help you reflect on and apply the material to your life during the week. You are also encouraged to have a copy of *The Case for Heaven* book, as reading it alongside the curriculum will provide you with deeper insights and make the journey more meaningful.

To get the most out of your group experience, keep the following points in mind. First, the real growth in this study will happen

during your small-group time. This is where you will process the content of Lee's message, ask questions, and learn from others as you hear what God is doing in their lives. For this reason, it is important for you to be fully committed to the group and attend each session so you can build trust and rapport with the other members. If you choose to only "go through the motions," or if you refrain from participating, there is a lesser chance you will find what you're looking for during this study.

Second, remember the goal of your small group is to serve as a place where people can share, learn about God, and build intimacy and friendship. For this reason, seek to make your group a "safe place." This means being honest about your thoughts and feelings and listening carefully to everyone else's opinion. Third, resist the temptation to "fix" someone's problem or correct his or her theology, as that's not the purpose of your small-group time. Also, keep everything your group shares confidential. This will foster a rewarding sense of community in your group and create a place where people can heal, be challenged, and grow spiritually.

In between your group times, you can maximize the impact of the course by checking out the personal study guide activities. This individual study will help you personally reflect and actively respond to the lesson. For each session, you may wish to complete the personal study in one sitting or spread it over a few days (for example, working on it a half-hour per day on four different days that week). Note that if you are unable to finish (or even start!) your between-sessions personal study, you should still attend the group study video session. You are still wanted and welcome at the group even if you don't have your "homework" done.

Keep in mind this study is an opportunity for you to train in a new way of seeing what heaven, hell, and the afterlife are all about. The videos, discussions, and activities are simply meant

to kick-start your imagination, so you are open not only to what God wants you to hear but also to how to apply that message to your life.

Sound good? Well . . . then let's get started!





SESSION 1

# Can We Really Know There Is a Heaven?

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*Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*

Hebrews 9:27–28

## Welcome

*“Good people go to heaven. Bad people go to hell.”*

This is the theology one of my friends grew up with. “It never really bothered me,” he told me, “until they added the tagline, ‘By the way, you’re a *bad person*.’ With that information as a backdrop, you can see why heaven was always a frustrating and confusing topic for me.

“I used to dream about heaven every night,” he continued. “Part of that was because my mother used to scold me for the way I was lying in bed. I would have my head on a pillow with another pillow over my head to block out any sights or sounds. ‘Oh no, no, no!’ she would warn dramatically. ‘If you sleep like that, you could suffocate and *die* overnight!’

“So, of course, I would dream that I would die and immediately go stand before the Lord in front of the Pearly Gates. God would say hello and then explain how it all works.

“‘We’ve got a giant scale up here,’ he would tell me, pointing to one of those old-fashioned scales, complete with two platters. ‘Some angels are going to put all your good works on one side and all your bad works on the other side. It’s very simple, really. If your good works outweigh your bad works, *you’re in*. But if your bad works outweigh your good works . . . well, the elevator is that way.’ I wasn’t real hopeful about how this was going to play out.

“‘Bring in the good works,’ I would hear the Lord announce. A rather anemic-looking angel soon appeared to bring my good

works to the scale. I swallowed hard as I realized the good works had barely caused the scale to move.

“‘Now bring in the bad works,’ God said. His command was followed by the appearance of an angel who looked like a professional weightlifter, exclaiming at full voice, ‘Okay, back ’er up, fellows!’ as a tractor trailer began to unload tons of bad works. God pointed to the elevator. And that ended my glimpse of heaven.”

What’s your story? What were your earliest ideas of heaven? Or perhaps you were brought up to believe there was no heaven, because there was no afterlife. Once your days were over on this earth, you simply ceased to exist—or you came back as an armadillo or a golden retriever. We’ve all grown up with a variety of beliefs when it comes to heaven and hell.

## Consider

Pair up with another group member, preferably someone you don’t know that well, and briefly talk about the following questions:

- Do you remember the first time you really thought about heaven and an afterlife? What were your beliefs at that time?
- What are your current beliefs about heaven and an afterlife? How has your thinking changed over the years?

## Watch

Play the video segment for session one (see the streaming video access provided on the inside front cover). As you watch, use the

following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

It's human nature for those who don't believe in God or an afterlife to want to be remembered by what they achieved while on this earth.

One of the most famous examples is the story of Herostratus, who in 356 BC burned down the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus. He stated the reason was because he wanted to be famous.

The bottom line is that if you don't have faith in God, you will likely find yourself with a desperate desire to cling to life in some way.

Another way that people try to achieve immortality without God is to figure out how to live longer in order to cheat death.

The answer to our dilemma can only be found in the Bible. In Hebrews 2:15, we find that Jesus came to rescue those who are "held in slavery by their fear of death."

Jesus uses the imagery of a home to convey the love, security, and comfort of the world where we will live after this one—what the Bible calls the new heavens and the new earth.

In Hebrews 10:23 we read, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” God is ready, willing, and able to fulfill his promises to us.

God doesn’t want us living in a state of anxiety over what will happen to us at the end of our lives. We can be confident about what will come next—and that it is going to be good.

## Discuss

Once the video has concluded, it’s time to break up into small groups for a time of discussion. Ideally, the group should be no less than four people and no more than six. Don’t be shy—grab your chair and circle up! Find someone in your group that will become your partner over the next few weeks. If you’re married and your spouse is in the group, you have the option of choosing him or her or you may opt for someone completely different. If not your spouse, it’s best to for women to choose another woman and men

to choose another man. Get your new partner's cell phone number and email—you two are going to be connecting during the week!

1. How old were you when you first came face to face with your mortality? What prompted you to wonder about what happens when your heart stops beating?
2. What are some of the events in your life (such as the death of a loved one) that have caused you to wonder about the afterlife? What questions did you have?
3. What are some of the ways that you have seen people try to leave a “mark” on this world so they will not be forgotten after they die?
4. What are some of the fears that you have heard people express about death?
5. **Read aloud John 3:16, John 5:24, Romans 6:23, and Galatians 6:8.** What do these verses say about the hope we can have that there is life after death?

6. Share with the group one or two questions you are hoping to be answered by your participation in this group. What did you find helpful as you watched the first video?

## Respond

Briefly review the outline for the session one teaching and any notes you took. In the space below, write down your most significant takeaway from this session.

## Pray

Conclude your group discussion time with a few minutes for prayer. Nothing will bring your group together quicker than knowing you have brothers and sisters who care enough about the issues you raise to bring them before the Lord for his answers and direction.





## SESSION 1

# Between-Sessions Personal Study

Following each week's group time, you will be given the opportunity to reflect on the content you've covered by engaging in between-sessions personal studies. Before you begin this week, you may want to review the introduction and chapters 1–2 in *The Case for Heaven*. The time you invest in engaging in these personal studies will be well spent, so let God use it to draw you closer to him and give you hope concerning the afterlife. At your next meeting, share with your group any key points or insights that stood out to you as you spent this time with the Lord.

## Study

Quite a few Scriptures were quoted in this session, so let's dig a little deeper into each of them. The seven verses from this session are printed on the next page. Using the chart on page 11, summarize in a phrase or sentence the main teaching of each verse, and then use the far-right column to write out an answer to

the question: *What does it mean to me?* It's okay if you still have more questions about these verses. That's why we're in this study together!

People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

He too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Hebrews 2:14–15).

“My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:2)

However, as it is written: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”—the things God has prepared for those who love him (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful (Hebrews 10:23).

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

Passage	What It Says	What It Means to Me
Hebrews 9:27		
Ecclesiastes 3:11		
Hebrews 2:15		
John 14:2		
1 Corinthians 2:9		
Hebrews 10:23		
1 John 5:13		



## Act

Take some time this week to think about how the material you are covering in this study can make a difference in the way that you lead your life. In the New Testament book of James, the author implores us to “not merely listen to the word” but also “do what it says” (1:22). The real test of what is important to us is how well we integrate it into our lives.

1. Based on what we’ve studied and discussed so far, finish the following sentences:

When it comes to life after death, I believe . . .

Regarding a place called heaven, I believe . . .

2. As you think about your family and friends, what do they believe concerning the afterlife? Do they believe like you or differently than you? Explain.

3. Consider some people in your life who have fears or doubts about the afterlife. What can you share with them this week to give them the hope you have found in Christ?
  
4. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). Why is it important to “always be prepared” when it comes to sharing your faith? What do you need to do to be better prepared?

## Connect

Make contact with your new partner either through text or, better yet, a phone call. Check in to see how the person is doing. Is he or she enjoying the study? Are there any frustrations or confusions the person wants to verbalize? How do these truths about heaven and the afterlife make a difference in the way that person is living his or her life? Is there anything you can do to be of help to them between now and the next time the entire group gets together? Talk to your partner about the answers to the previous questions—big

truths you've come away with as a result of the study and how the time together has made a change in your life.

## Reflect

### ***Interview with Dr. Sharon Dirckx***

Each session will conclude with a portion of an interview from *The Case for Heaven*. The first interview is with Dr. Sharon Dirckx, a senior tutor at Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics. She lectures internationally on science, theology, mind and soul issues, and other topics. She also appears regularly on British radio programs, sometimes debating secular thinkers.

"As a neuroscientist, I've measured the electrical activity of people's brains, but I can't measure their experience in the same way. I can't measure what's in their minds. I can't measure what it's actually like to be *you*. Why not? Because the brain alone is not enough to explain the mind."

To illustrate further, Dirckx described a thought experiment.<sup>1</sup> What if Mary were a scientist who had detailed knowledge of the physics and chemistry of vision? She knew all about the intricate structure of the eye, how it functions, and how it sends electrical signals to the brain through the optic nerve, where they're converted into images. But what if she was blind—and then one day suddenly she was able to see?

"At the moment of receiving her sight, does Mary learn anything new about vision?" Dirckx asked.

My eyes widened. "Of course!"

"That means physical facts alone cannot explain the first-person experience of consciousness. No amount of knowledge

about the physical working of the eye and brain would get Mary closer to the experience of what it's like to actually see."

"What's your conclusion?"

"That consciousness simply cannot be synonymous with brain activity."

"You're saying that although they work together, they're not the same thing. Consciousness—the mind, the soul—are beyond the physical workings of the brain."

"Correct. Philosophers such as Leibniz make an important point: If two things are identical, there would be no discernible difference between them.<sup>2</sup> That means if consciousness were identical with brain activity, everything true of consciousness would be true of the brain as well. But consciousness and brain activity couldn't be more different. So consciousness cannot be reduced to the purely physical processes of the brain."

She pointed toward me and smiled. "You, Lee, are more than just your brain."

That did seem clear-cut—but there have been objections. "The atheist Daniel Dennett gets around this by saying that consciousness is illusory," I said.

She replied simply. "Illusion still presupposes consciousness."

"Could you explain that?"

"Illusion happens when we misinterpret an experience or perceive it wrongly, but the experience itself is still valid and real. So that's a problem with what he's saying. Honestly, I think his view is absurd. By the way, it backfires. If what he claims is true, then his very argument can't be trusted."

"Why not?"

"Because it's just an illusion."

Neuroscientist Adrian Owen spent more than two decades studying patients with brain trauma. In 2006, the prestigious

journal *Science* published his groundbreaking research showing that some patients considered vegetative with severe brain injuries were actually conscious.

Said Owen, "We have discovered that 15 to 20 percent of people in the vegetative state, who are assumed to have no more awareness than a head of broccoli, are in fact fully conscious, even though they never respond to any form of external stimulation."<sup>3</sup>

"What does that tell you?" I asked Dirckx.

"It's additional evidence that human beings are highly complex, and the condition of our brains is only part of the story," she said. "Consciousness goes beyond our physical brain and nervous system. It can't just be boiled down to brain activity. *We are more than our brains.*"

That triggered thoughts about experiments in the 1950s by Wilder Penfield, the father of modern neurosurgery, who stimulated the brains of epilepsy patients, creating all kinds of involuntary sensations and movements. But no matter how much he tried, he couldn't evoke abstract reasoning or consciousness itself.

"There is no place . . . where electrical stimulation will cause a patient to believe or to decide," Wilder said.<sup>4</sup> For him, this evidence for a nonphysical mind distinct from the brain convinced him to abandon physicalism.<sup>5</sup>

But could the brain, as it evolved in complexity, have somehow generated the conscious mind? I asked Dirckx about this view, which is popular among many scientists.

"If we're dealing with a closed system of nonconscious neurons, how did these come to generate conscious minds?" she replied, letting the challenge hang in the air for a few moments. "This has been the big hurdle. Nobody can give a



coherent explanation for it in a materialist world. And if all that's needed is a physical brain to create the mind, why aren't animals conscious to the same degree as we are? The discontinuity between primates and people isn't one of *degree*; it's one of *kind*. Complexity, all by itself, wouldn't be enough to get us across that chasm. Of course, there are Christians who take an emergent view, but for them, the system is not closed. If God exists, extraordinary things are possible. Then that chasm can be crossed."

—*From chapter 2 of The Case for Heaven*

**For Next Week:** Before your group's next session, read chapters 3–4 in *The Case for Heaven*.