

# MYTH OR FAITH?

Clearing Up Common  
Misconceptions about Christianity

LEADER GUIDE



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## Contents

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY .....	4
<b>SESSION 1</b> ABOUT GOD .....	5
<b>SESSION 2</b> ABOUT SALVATION .....	25
<b>SESSION 3</b> ABOUT THE BIBLE .....	45
<b>SESSION 4</b> ABOUT BELIEF .....	63
<b>SESSION 5</b> ABOUT THE CHURCH .....	81
<b>SESSION 6</b> ABOUT THE SACRAMENTS .....	101
<b>SESSION 7</b> ABOUT WORSHIP AND PRAYER ..	117
<b>SESSION 8</b> ABOUT THE WORLD .....	139

# HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

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Welcome to *Myth or Faith? Clearing Up Common Misconceptions about Christianity*.

In this study, we'll take a closer look at some hot topics that often lead to confusion and disagreement in the church. Together, we'll see how God brings clarity and certainty to His people through His Word, the Bible.

Each session will address three misconceptions about an aspect of the Christian faith, using Scripture to clear up the misconceptions and answer common questions. Your group could complete this study in one of two ways:

1. Have each person read through the session and consider the questions ahead of time, writing down responses, reactions, and further questions. Then gather to discuss as a group, reviewing the Bible passages, talking about the questions, and taking time to pray together.
2. Read through the study as a group during your session time and answer questions together. This may take longer, since some of the group time will be spent on the reading, but it has the advantage of requiring no additional prep work for participants.

However your group approaches it, you as leader will not need to give a lecture on the topic or have every answer. Much of the study involves your whole group clearing up the misconceptions together. However, this leader guide does contain additional information that will help you facilitate discussion, so you will want to review each session ahead of time. Text specific to the leader is encased in brackets like so: *[ Answers for leaders look like this. ]*

Each participant will need a copy of the study guide and a Bible. Session 7 also contains an activity using *Lutheran Service Book* (or whatever hymnals you have access to). A note about Session 8: these topics may be more sensitive for your group, so there are additional readings to help ground your discussion.

Even though this study will look at some challenging topics, we are not left alone. We are so very blessed to have the gift of the Holy Scriptures to lead, guide, and direct us. As the psalmist says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

# ABOUT GOD

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## MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT GOD

- **The doctrine of the Trinity was made up by humans.**
- **Jesus descended into hell to take the eternal punishment we deserve.**
- **The Holy Spirit is a cosmic force or universal wisdom that fills all people.**

### OPENING PRAYER

*Almighty God, praise to You and adoration for the gift of Your Word. In it, You have made Yourself known to us, and through Your Word, we know the full extent of Your love for us in Christ Jesus. Open our hearts and minds through this study of Your Word, that through it, we may know You better and be better equipped to love and serve our neighbor. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

### INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, the family waiting area of a major hospital is not where you want to find yourself. It's where I was one gray and overcast winter afternoon alongside a family friend who was waiting for news about his son. I was there to provide love and support for him and to join him in praying to the Lord on behalf of his son. After I had received the latest updates and checked in on how he and his wife were doing as parents, the family friend turned to spiritual things, saying, "I'm not much of a spiritual person, as you might know. But maybe you could talk to the big man upstairs about this. Not sure He wants to hear much from me, but maybe He'll listen to you. I've never needed Him more than I do right now."

While these were not easy words to hear and process, I was actually so glad he brought it up and that he was so honest with me about what he thought about God and His presence in this situation. His comments, although laden with feelings of guilt and filled with misconceptions about God, served as a nice bridge for me to talk about who God was, His care for my friend’s young son, and His presence in our lives.

In this session, we are going to address some common misconceptions about God, and as you likely are aware, there are many! Unfortunately, people often view God as angry with them, aloof, disconnected from their lives, and unknowable. These misconceptions often exist for people because no one has taken the time to patiently reveal the God of the Bible to them. However, in the Scriptures, we see that God has endeavored to make Himself known to us as a God of power, wisdom, grace, mercy, and so much more. And we see this most clearly in Christ Jesus. As it is written: “For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Colossians 2:9).

Because all we need to know about God has been written in the Bible for us, we’ll address these common misconceptions by using the Holy Scriptures as our anchor. This chapter is not so much what I want you to know about God, or say about God, but what *the Bible* wants you to know about God and says about God! Speaking about all that is recorded in the Bible about the Lord, John writes, “But these are written so 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). Said another way, we have everything we need in the Bible to help us know about God, address these misconceptions, and grow in our faith!

To help us address and process each misconception, I’ll provide some Bible verses that will guide and direct our answers. Remember, all that we discover together will be rooted in the Word of God. Let’s get going!

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## Was the doctrine of the Trinity made up by humans?

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Any study or discussion about who God is must first be rooted in how God describes Himself to us. And all over the Scriptures, God reveals Himself as triune or as a Trinity, meaning one God, three persons. God is one, as we know from the Scriptures. In Deuteronomy 6:4, the Word of God says, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” Yet God has also revealed Himself to humanity in three distinct persons—the Father, the

Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. We'll unpack what makes each person unique through some reflection questions.

So, what is the doctrine of the Trinity?

Interestingly enough, while the words *Trinity* or *triune* do not appear in the Bible, the concept of the Trinity is all over the Holy Scriptures! Like all of orthodox Christianity, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adheres to the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is a fundamental Christian belief that God exists as three distinct persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—while remaining one God.

God as triune is clearly expressed in the three Ecumenical Creeds of the Christian Church—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. These creeds affirm the equality and coeternality of the three persons of the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons who each share the same essence or substance. Additionally, each person of the Trinity has a unique role in the work of salvation, with the Father as the Creator, the Son as the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as the Sanctifier.

Rather than relying on one passage that points to God as triune, the doctrine of the Trinity is derived from the overall teaching of the entirety of the Scriptures. The concept of the Trinity is best understood by examining various passages that collectively reveal the three persons of the Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—each with distinct roles yet beautifully and in great unity sharing the same divine essence. Yet in all of this, remember that the concept of the Trinity is so grand and so divine that our attempts to explain it using mere words or to fully understand it often fall short. God is God, and we are not, and that's a good thing!

- 1. Read Matthew 3:13–17. The Baptism of Jesus provides a vivid manifestation of the trinitarian nature of God. We see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all active in this moment. Where does the Trinity appear in this passage? How is each person of the Trinity active in unique ways?**

*[ Let participants discuss. As necessary, point out that, in this event, we see Jesus taking on the form of a servant, identifying with humanity, and beginning His public ministry. His act of Baptism reveals His solidarity with sinners, even though He Himself is sinless (see vv. 13–15). The Holy Spirit's descent in the form of a dove manifests the Spirit's role in empowering and*

*anointing Jesus for His ministry. It reveals the Spirit’s presence and approval. This aligns with other biblical passages that describe the Holy Spirit as the one who empowers and guides believers. The voice from heaven is identified as God the Father, affirming the identity and mission of Jesus. The Father’s declaration, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (v. 17), indicates the unique relationship between the Father and the Son. It emphasizes the divine approval of Jesus and points to His special status as the Son of God. ]*

In this passage, we witness all three persons of the Trinity present and active: Jesus, the Son, being baptized; the Holy Spirit descending like a dove; and the voice of God the Father affirming and declaring His pleasure. It’s a profound moment where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinctly revealed, illustrating their unity in purpose and mission.

The Baptism of Jesus serves as a powerful trinitarian revelation, highlighting the unique roles of each person within the Godhead. This event is a foundational passage for understanding the trinitarian nature of God in Christian theology.

## **2. Matthew 28:18–20, often referred to as the Great Commission, is another key passage that reveals the trinitarian nature of God. What does this passage reveal about the nature of the Trinity?**

*[ Let participants discuss. If any of the points below are not brought up, point them out to the group.*

- *Formula of Baptism: Jesus instructs His disciples to baptize new believers “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (v. 19). This triadic formula explicitly mentions all three persons of the Trinity in the context of the Christian Sacrament of Baptism.*
- *Distinct Persons: The use of the terms “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” indicates the distinctiveness of each person within the Godhead. While they are distinct, the singular “name” suggests a unity and shared essence.*
- *Unity in Mission: The Great Commission underscores a unity of purpose and mission among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The triune God is actively involved in the mission to make disciples of all nations.*

- *Divine Authority: The authority given to the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indicates the divine authority and commissioning that comes from the triune God.*
- *Promise of Presence: Jesus concludes the Great Commission by assuring His disciples of His ongoing presence: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (v. 20). This presence is not only the personal presence of Jesus but also the presence of the Holy Spirit, continuing the trinitarian theme. ]*

The Great Commission encapsulates the trinitarian nature of God in the Christian understanding. It emphasizes the disciples’ involvement with all three persons of the Trinity—baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—while highlighting the unified mission and divine authority of the triune God. Matthew 28:18–20 serves as a foundational biblical passage that explicitly mentions the triune God in the context of the mission and ministry of the church, emphasizing the relationship and unity among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### 3. So, who are the persons of the Trinity? Numerous passages in the Old and New Testaments reveal the persons of the Trinity. What does each Bible passage below tell us about that person of the Trinity?

- *Isaiah 64:8: [ This passage identifies God as the Father, emphasizing His role as the Creator and the one who shapes and forms His people. ]*
- **Matthew 6:9 (part of the Lord’s Prayer):** *[ In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus instructs His disciples to address God as “Our Father,” highlighting the paternal relationship within the Godhead. ]*
- **John 1:1–14:** *[ This passage speaks of the preexistence and divinity of Jesus Christ. It goes on to describe the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. The Word is identified as Jesus, the Son of God. ]*
- **Colossians 1:15–20:** *[ This passage exalts Christ’s supremacy and role in creation, emphasizing Jesus as the image of the invisible God and the one through whom all things were reconciled to God. ]*

- **Hebrews 1:1–4:** *[ This passage underscores the superiority of Christ over the prophets and angels and emphasizes Jesus as the Son through whom God has spoken to humanity. ]*
- **John 14:15–17:** *[ In these verses, Jesus speaks about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Here, all three persons are mentioned: Jesus (the Son), the Father, and the promise of the Holy Spirit. ]*
- **John 16:7–15:** *[ Jesus further explains the role of the Holy Spirit, referring to Him as the Helper who will guide into all truth. The Spirit’s role includes convicting the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. Again, all three persons of the Trinity are present in these verses. ]*
- **Acts 2:1–4:** *[ This passage describes the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples in the form of tongues of fire. It indicates the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to send the Holy Spirit. The sending of the Spirit to the disciples at Pentecost, shown here, is the keeping of this promise. ]*

Collectively, here is what these passages reveal:

- **The Father:** Identified as the Creator, the one to be hallowed in prayer, and the sender of the Son and the Holy Spirit
- **The Son (Jesus Christ):** Described as the Word, the exact imprint of God’s nature, the image of the invisible God, and the one through whom all things were created and reconciled
- **The Holy Spirit:** Promised by Jesus as the Helper, the Spirit of truth, and the one who convicts the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment

These verses collectively contribute to the biblical foundation for understanding the persons of the Trinity in Christian theology. As we discussed above, all Christian doctrine is solely rooted in what has been made known to us in the Word of God. We do not base any understanding upon the teachings of church history or the revelations that come from a church leader. Rather, the Word of God alone is our guide. These passages clearly make known that God has revealed Himself as triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although some elements and aspects may be difficult or challenging for our minds to fully grasp, it doesn’t change who God is—the Holy Trinity. Based on these

clear teachings of our Lord, we can say with confidence that the doctrine of the Trinity was not made up by humans, but that it is how God reveals Himself to us in His Word.

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## Did Jesus descend into hell to take the eternal punishment we deserve?

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Having looked at the doctrine of the Trinity, we now turn our attention to a common misconception regarding hell. For a whole host of reasons, it is often thought that the descent of Jesus into hell was part of the judgment and wrath that Christ endured on our behalf, an extension, if you will, of what He endured on the cross of Calvary. But is this how we are to understand it? What does the Bible teach about Jesus' descent into hell? Let's take a look together!

1. **What is hell? To answer this question, we again must turn to the Word of God. Both the Old and New Testaments address the existence of hell, so a complete answer requires us to explore relevant biblical passages in both Testaments. What does each passage reveal about hell?**
  - **Job 17:13–16:** *[ The Old Testament provides a number of references to the reality of hell, often focusing on what was referred to as Sheol, a Hebrew word used to describe a place of darkness, depravity, and complete separation from God. This passage speaks of hell, or Sheol, as a place of darkness, death, and dust, a place without hope. ]*
  - **Matthew 25:46:** *[ In the Gospels, Jesus frequently addresses the themes of judgment and the afterlife. Here, Jesus speaks of eternal punishment for the wicked, using the term “eternal punishment.” ]*
  - **Mark 9:43–48:** *[ This passage presents Jesus' vivid imagery of hell, using phrases such as “unquenchable fire” and “worm does not die,” emphasizing the seriousness of the consequences of not repenting for our sins. ]*

- **Luke 16:19–31:** *[ These verses contain the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, illustrating a clear distinction between the eternal destinies of the rich man in Hades and Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom. It’s a place of such torment that even the dip of a finger in water would be a relief. ]*
- **Romans 2:5–8:** *[ The writings of Paul also contribute to the understanding of hell, emphasizing concepts of judgment and wrath. This passage speaks of the day of wrath and the righteous judgment of God as being realities. ]*
- **2 Thessalonians 1:9:** *[ Here Paul mentions eternal destruction for those who do not know God, highlighting the seriousness of separation from God. ]*
- **Revelation 20:10:** *[ The book of Revelation employs powerful language and imagery that similarly informs our understanding of the reality of hell. This passage describes the devil, the beast, and the false prophet being thrown into the lake of fire, making clear that eternal punishment is indeed a reality. ]*

Looking at all of these passages, a common thread about hell is the idea of eternal separation from God. Whether described as a place of fire, outer darkness, or torment, the central aspect is the absence of the divine presence. Additionally, fire is a recurring symbol associated with judgment. The imagery of darkness is also used to convey separation from the light of God’s presence. Hell is a place of divine judgment reserved for those who stand in rejection of God.

## 2. If not in hell, when and how did Jesus bear our punishment?

*[ Let participants answer. If they aren’t sure or get off track, remind them of this simple truth: It is on the cross alone, in Jesus Christ laying down His life for us at Calvary, where He bore Himself the punishment that we deserved. It is this event, not His descent into hell, where He takes our place. ]*

The death of Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate expression of God’s love and the only means by which humanity finds redemption. This is what we call the

substitutionary atonement—the biblically revealed reality that Jesus Christ, as our substitute, bore the punishment for our sins on the cross.

**3.** Substitutionary atonement, a foundational doctrine within Christian theology, asserts that Jesus Christ served as a substitute for humanity, taking upon Himself the punishment that we deserved for our sins. This concept is deeply rooted in biblical passages that depict Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb, the offering that reconciles humanity with God. What does each passage below reveal about substitutionary atonement?

- **Mark 10:45:** *[ Jesus Himself declares that He came “to give His life as a ransom for many.” The idea of a ransom implies a substitutionary payment, with Jesus offering His life on behalf of others. ]*
- **2 Corinthians 5:21:** *[ This concise yet profound statement encapsulates the essence of Christ taking on the sin of humanity to provide righteousness. Unpack the following key elements with your group if they haven’t already discussed them.*
  - *Identification with Sin: The phrase “made Him to be sin” emphasizes the identification of Jesus with the sins of humanity. This doesn’t imply that Jesus was inherently sinful but that He took upon Himself the weight and consequences of our sins.*
  - *Innocence of Christ: “Who knew no sin” underscores the innocence and sinlessness of Jesus. He, as the sinless Lamb of God, willingly bore the sins of others, demonstrating both divine love and justice.*
  - *Imputed Righteousness: The latter part of the verse speaks of believers becoming “the righteousness of God” in Christ. This reflects the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to those who put their faith and trust in Him—a key aspect of substitutionary atonement. ]*

**4. Make no mistake, this substitutionary atonement is necessary! The Bible clearly articulates what the punishment for sin is and God’s solution for it. What does each passage tell us about this?**

- **Genesis 3:6–7:** *[ The Bible articulates that sin, originating in the disobedience of Adam and Eve, led to a rupture in the intimate relationship between humanity and God. This separation extended through subsequent generations as sin, through the fall, became an inherent aspect of human nature. ]*
- **Romans 6:23:** *[ This verse clearly articulates the consequence of sin. This death is not only physical but also spiritual, signifying separation from God, the source of life and goodness. ]*
- **Leviticus 16:11–17:** *[ The recurring theme throughout the Old Testament is the need for atonement to bridge the gap caused by sin. The sacrificial system, particularly the Day of Atonement as seen in this passage, foreshadowed the ultimate atonement that Jesus would bring. ]*
- **Genesis 3:15:** *[ Even in the earliest pages of the Bible, God promises a solution to the problem of sin through a coming Messiah. This passage is often called the “protoevangelium” (the first promise of the Gospel) and foretells that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, providing a glimpse of the redemptive work that Jesus would accomplish. ]*

The New Testament, then, presents Jesus as the fulfillment of these messianic promises. John the Baptist identifies Him as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The Gospels narrate His life, teachings, and the ultimate sacrifice on the cross as the culmination of God’s redemptive plan.

The Bible speaks of God’s righteous wrath against sin. Romans 1:18 asserts that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. This wrath is not arbitrary anger but a just response to the violation of God’s moral order—our sin against God and neighbor.

Jesus Christ is then sent by God as mediator. The role of Jesus as the mediator between God and humanity is emphasized in 1 Timothy 2:5. As the perfect

mediator, Jesus reconciles us to God by bearing the punishment that our sins deserved.

Understanding the depth of Jesus' substitutionary atonement leads to profound gratitude. Christians are called to respond with lives of worship, recognizing the sacrificial love that redeemed them. The awareness of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice motivates believers to pursue holiness. Romans 12:1 calls for presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, responding to the mercy received through Christ. Additionally, the commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:18–20 calls believers to share the Good News of salvation, emphasizing the role of Jesus as the substitute who reconciles humanity with God.

The death of Jesus Christ, viewed through the lens of substitutionary atonement, stands as the pinnacle of God's redemptive plan for humanity. Second Corinthians 5:21 serves as a poignant, clarifying truth of the profound exchange that occurred on the cross, where Jesus bore the punishment for our sins, offering us His righteousness. The theological implications of sin separating us from God, our need for a Savior, and the wrath of God find resolution in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the grand narrative of the Bible, the death of Jesus emerges as the ultimate act of divine love, reconciling a broken relationship and providing hope for all who believe.

This is all accomplished on the cross, not through the cross coupled with a descent into hell.

So, if not to bear our punishment, then why *did* Jesus descend into hell?

The Apostles' Creed, the oldest and most widely accepted creed in the Christian Church, includes the statement "He descended into hell." The same language is used in the Athanasian Creed. The phrase has been a source of some confusion, and it's worth taking some time to unpack how we understand it.

Christian theologians often distinguish between "the state of humiliation" and "the state of exultation" in understanding the person and work of Jesus. The state of humiliation encompasses His incarnation, suffering, and death, while the state of exultation involves His resurrection, ascension, and glorification.

The crucifixion stands as the epitome of Jesus' state of humiliation. The physical and spiritual agony experienced on the cross reflect the taking of the full weight of our sin upon Himself, as we discussed above.

Contrary to being a continuation of His state of humiliation, the descent into hell is seen as an aspect of Jesus' state of exultation. Rather than a continuation of His suffering, it is a proclamation of victory over sin, death, and the powers of darkness.

**5. Read 1 Peter 3:18–19. What does this crucial text tell us about Jesus’ descent into hell? How does it show the descent as part of Jesus’ state of exultation?**

*[ Let participants read and discuss. Point out any of the points below that are not brought up by the group. ]*

- *The passage affirms Christ’s redemptive work, emphasizing His once-for-all sacrifice for our sins.*
- *After His death in the flesh, Jesus is made alive in the spirit, pointing to the transition from the state of humiliation to exultation.*
- *The enigmatic phrase “proclaimed to the spirits in prison” speaks of a postresurrection activity of Jesus—a visit of the resurrected Christ to hell.*
- *The descent into hell is then seen as a victorious declaration over the powers of death and darkness, reflecting the triumph of Christ’s redemptive work.*
- *The descent into hell is intricately connected to the subsequent events of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. The victorious proclamation in hell is a prelude to His triumphal ascent to the right hand of the Father.*
- *The concept of “Christus Victor,” emphasizing Christ as the victorious warrior, resonates with the understanding of Jesus’ descent into hell as a triumphant act that shatters the power of the enemy. ]*

The descent of Jesus into hell, as professed in the Apostles’ and Athanasian Creeds, is a complex element of Christian doctrine. No wonder people have misconceptions! Contrary to being a continuation of His state of humiliation, it is a proclamation of victory over sin, death, and the forces of darkness. The theological significance lies in the assurance that, in Christ, believers share in His triumph and have hope in the face of death. The descent into hell, as part of Jesus’ state of exultation, reaffirms the centrality of His redemptive work and the ultimate victory achieved on behalf of humanity. As Christians reflect on this profound aspect of their faith, it invites contemplation on the richness of Christ’s work and the hope that it imparts to those who believe and trust in Him.