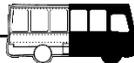


The Great Divorce

Study Guide

**A Bible Study on the
The Great Divorce by C.S. Lewis**



By Alan Vermilye

“If we insist on keeping Hell (or even earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell.” *The Great Divorce*



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A Bible Study on The Great Divorce by C.S. Lewis

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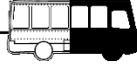
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Version 1

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INTRODUCTION



What is the most desirable place you can think of to take a vacation? Perhaps it is a place that you have been before or someplace you dream of going. How would you respond if, once you arrived, you were invited to stay on this vacation forever? However, in order to stay, you must leave your old life behind. You cannot go back and say goodbye or set your affairs in order. You either must commit at that moment or return to your previous life.

How hard would it be for you to leave behind the life you are now living? It might be an easy decision for some and much more difficult for others.

In *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis, damned spirits are given a vacation or a “holiday” away from Hell to visit Heaven, where they are invited to stay forever. There, they are persuaded by people they formally knew, relatives and friends, to come with them up the mountain to enjoy the bliss of Heaven. But they can only do so by leaving behind what is keeping them in Hell and accepting the love of God.

The answer seems obvious, right? Yet what we’ll find is that it’s not the choice to sin that binds people to Hell but rather the choice not to repent. We must let go, step out into the light, and embrace the better life that God has planned for us. That’s the most confining part about sin—to admit you’re in the wrong.

Lewis tells us not to take this story literally, nor does he suppose that eternity really is the way he presents it in the book. The fact is, Hell is final. Scripture records no opportunities offered after death to enter Heaven. On the title page of your book by Lewis, there is a telling quote from George MacDonald: “No, there is no escape. There is no heaven with a little of hell in it—no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather.”

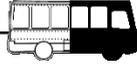
In this story, Lewis quite vividly illustrates for us that we are all soul searching and our efforts either move us toward or away from God. It’s a progression away from our own idea of what we think is best for us toward the humility required to embrace God’s best for

our lives. It can be painful to leave our old life behind, but with each step, it gets a little easier, and any pain will be nothing compared to the joy we will experience in Heaven.

I thoroughly enjoyed putting together this Bible study. As with all my studies, I write them for the small groups that I facilitate at my own church. Not only does it help better refine the study but I also learn from each class member as they share their interpretation of what they read. I'm eternally grateful for their participation and input on the study.

As for my normal disclaimer, I'm not a biblical or Lewis scholar nor do I consider this study guide the most comprehensive work available on the book. However, it has helped me and others in my class come to a better understanding of Lewis's great classic. I hope it does the same for you as well.

BOOK SUMMARY



Although this summary does not include every detail of the book, it does provide an overview of the story. For that reason, if, like a great movie, you do not want the end spoiled, I encourage you to skip this summary and move on to reading the book.

The plot for *The Great Divorce* is actually fairly straightforward. By all accounts, Lewis appears to be the protagonist and narrator guiding us through a series of events beginning with his waiting in a long line for a magical bus ride in a dismally uncomfortable grey town—which is in fact Hell or Purgatory.

His companions in line are argumentative, combative, and generally disagreeable and of differing economic and educational backgrounds. These unpleasant and contentious souls are traveling on refrigerium, or holiday, where they're allowed to visit other places outside of Hell. Most visit Earth, while a few others make this bus trip to the outer banks of Heaven.

As they board and the bus leaves the ground, Lewis begins conversing with others aboard about the grey town—this seedy and empty city that stretches on forever and where time seems to be paused. He learns that evening never advances to night; it's dreary, dull, dirty, and bleak, and it's always raining. It is a place, for all its vastness, that seems insubstantial with very few people milling around.

In addition to the grey town being a somber, desolate place, its quarreling inhabitants are constantly spreading throughout the town so as to be as far away from each other as possible. They cannot find any good with each other that would draw them together. As a result, there is no community, since there is no need to rely on one another. Some, after being there for centuries, have actually moved lightyears away from the bus stop, which prevents them from making the long journey back.

The residents in the grey town get everything they want, but not of great quality, by simply imagining it. They can think structures, homes, and other things into existence, but nothing is able to meet their needs in a substantive way. For example, if one desires a house, it is there, but it will not keep out the rain or danger. For this reason, they venture off to build a new house, and the town continues to spread.

The bus flies for hours through darkness until it approaches a beautiful countryside. As the travelers exit the bus, some become overwhelmed and retreat back to the safety of the bus, while others, braver, huddle together and press forward into the vast, beautiful unknown.

The landscape, including the grass, flowers, mountains, etc., is all beautiful in appearance, but it is also solid and heavy so that the blades of grass are as sharp and hard as diamonds and cause terrible pain just to walk on. Even a single leaf is too heavy to lift. The light and coolness remind Lewis of a summer morning, and the “fresh stillness” and the “singing of a lark” are in stark contrast to what he experienced in the grey town.

Soon they are approached by the resident Spirits of Heaven, who are filled with a great light; they are very grand and seemingly ageless. Some are naked, some are robed, and others have beards, but all are muscular with smooth flesh, and the earth shakes underneath their feet as they are solid, not transparent like the Ghosts from the grey town.

The Spirits are relatives and friends the Ghosts formerly knew on earth. They encourage the Ghosts to abandon the grey town and come with them up the mountain to enjoy the bliss of Heaven. Each Spirit is gentle but also direct in helping the Ghosts recognize their sin and their need for redemption. The Ghosts are assured that as they leave behind their pride, hatred, and unbelief and progress toward the mountain with the Spirits, it will get easier as they will begin to feel more solid.

Unfortunately, the majority of the Ghosts refuse to acknowledge their sin and instead seek to justify themselves. They would rather return to the grey town retaining their own sovereignty than submit themselves to God and agree with His evaluation of them.

After witnessing a variety of conversations between Ghosts and Spirits, Lewis realizes that each Ghost represents a character study of human nature and the struggle with sin. In fact, many of their sins are not what we might consider evil or diabolical, yet they still are unable to enter Heaven. This leaves Lewis confused, miserable, and somewhat fearful.

At last, he is approached by his guiding Spirit, who is none other than author, poet, and Christian minister George MacDonald. MacDonald answers Lewis's most pressing questions regarding the fate of the Ghosts he finds himself with, including, "Do any of them stay? Can they stay? Is any real choice offered to them? How do they come to be here?"

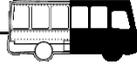
According to MacDonald, while it is possible for a soul to choose to leave Hell and enter Heaven, doing so implies repenting of their sin and embracing ultimate and unceasing joy itself. For those souls who decide to stay, they never would have been in Hell but rather Purgatory. They will soon discover that their worst pain has been used by God for redemptive purposes to prepare them to be with Him in eternity. The converse is also true for those who choose Earth over Heaven; they will miss out on the joys of serving a living God and actually find that Hell is not that much different from the life they led on Earth: joyless, friendless, and uncomfortable.

As to why the Spirits don't travel to the grey town to rescue its ghostly inhabitants, Lewis discovers that both the town and the Ghosts are minuscule to the point of being invisible compared with the immensity of heaven. Even if they wanted to, the Spirits' size and goodness would prevent them from ever entering Hell.

In the end, MacDonald finally confirms to Lewis that he is dreaming. As the sun begins to rise in Lewis's dream, he becomes both surprised and terrified of remaining a Ghost in the advent of full daybreak in Heaven, comparing the experience to having large blocks of light falling on him. At this point, he awakens to books falling on his head.

Through his journey, Lewis is convinced of the goodness and mercy of God as well as his own need and the urgency for redemption.

CHARACTER SUMMARY



LEWIS / PROTAGONIST/ NARRATOR

The story is written in the first person with the narrator never being identified by name, but inferences point to it being C.S. Lewis. His character is both a learned man and drawn to literary giants like George MacDonald, whose writings had an impact on Lewis's life. For this reason, throughout the study guide we will refer to the narrator as Lewis.

In the story, Lewis is primarily an observer of the other Ghosts and their discussions with the Spirit Guides. It is through these discourses that he comes to understand the insidious nature of sin and the grip it has on human nature and our seeming inability to let it go—even when given the opportunity for infinite joy.

THE SPIRIT GUIDES

The Spirit Guides are residents of Heaven who have been glorified after death through their trust and faith in Jesus Christ. Each Spirit approaches a Ghost he or she had a relationship with during their earthly life. They encourage the Ghosts to abandon the grey town and to come up with them to the mountain to enjoy the bliss of Heaven. The Spirits are gentle but also direct in helping the Ghosts recognize their sin and need for redemption. The majority of the Ghosts view the Spirits as being antagonistic and thereby refuse their offer and abandon Heaven, not wanting to confront their sin.

GEORGE MACDONALD

Lewis's guiding spirit is none other than author, poet, and Christian minister George MacDonald, whose works include *Phantastes*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *At the Back of the North Wind*. McDonald's work had a profound influence on Lewis during his earthly life and, in this story, serves as a father figure and mentor type in the afterlife helping Lewis to understand the ways of Heaven.

THE TOUSEL-HAIRED POET

The tousle-haired poet feels unappreciated by most everyone he meets. His distaste for capitalism drives him to communism and eventually to becoming a conscientious objector due to his disdain for war. He has an excessive desire for attention and need for respect from others that leaves him feeling like the victim when he does not receive any. His self-pity is so strong that he ended his life by throwing himself under a train, not desiring to live in a world that was against him.

IKEY (THE INTELLIGENT GHOST)

The Intelligent Ghost is a thriving entrepreneur. He does not believe the problem in the grey town is that people quarrel but rather that they have no needs. His solution is to travel to Heaven and bring back, or steal, “some real commodities,” or saleable goods, that would generate demand. This foolish attempt to profit from Heaven leaves him battered and bruised, unable to lift any solid apples to take back with him.

FAT GHOST (WITH GAITERS)

The Fat Ghost believes the old theology of Hell and judgment are outdated superstitions and what the inhabitants of the town really need is spirituality unencumbered by any materialism and matter. In fact, he is unaware that the grey town he has inhabited is Hell until the Spirit he encounters reveals him as an apostate living in Hell. His sin is of the intellect since he has embraced liberal theology and rejected the resurrection of Christ for success and position within the church.

THE BIG GHOST

This man is astonished and outraged to find Len, the Guiding Spirit he encounters, enjoying life in Heaven. He recognizes Len only as an earthly murderer and cannot understand why Len is here in Heaven and he himself is in the grey town since he believes he was a much better man on Earth. Len does his best to persuade the Big Ghost to acknowledge his faults, but he wants no part of a Heaven that allows murderers to become citizens.

THE HARD-BITTEN GHOST

During his earthly life, this man traveled much of the world, building only a cynical view of what he experiences. He is suspicious, does not trust anyone, and develops conspiracies about most everything, including Heaven and Hell. He says that he knows all about Heaven and that it's the same old lie he's heard all his life.

THE WELL-DRESSED GHOST

During both her earthly life and in the afterlife, this woman's vanity drives her to become completely self-absorbed, if not ashamed, and unable to see anyone but herself. In an attempt to shake her from this preoccupation with self, the attending Spirit calls a herd of unicorns to create some sort of diversion that would draw her mind away from herself and to God.

THE SCIENTIST GHOST

MacDonald tells Lewis of this ghost whose scientific research consumed his life; he eventually died and made it to the outskirts of Heaven. He decided not to continue on to the mountains because there was nothing in Heaven left to prove, no question that he could provide an answer for. He could not overcome his disappointment and simply accept God as "a little child and [enter] into joy."

THE GRUMBLING GHOST

This female ghost has allowed occasional complaining and grumbling to become full-fledged sin that has consumed her life. MacDonald assures Lewis, who thinks she's just a silly old woman who has gotten into a bad habit, that if there's a spark of the woman left, she can be saved.

THE SENSUAL GHOST

This ghost is completely self-consumed with her appearance, believing she can seduce the Spirits with her body and completely unaware that her body is no longer substantial or enticing.

THE FAMOUS ARTIST GHOST

The Artist Ghost was quite famous on Earth and had begun painting as a means to tell about the light, but over time he lost that desire and just painted for painting sake. He now finds himself interested only in painting God's creation but not actually interested in God

Himself. He is encouraged by his Spirit Guide to drink from a fountain that will cause him to forget all of his earthly works and create an appreciation of all work without false modesty or pride.

THE OVERBEARING WIFE GHOST

This ghost is hypocritical, depressing, critical, and self-centered. She is extremely controlling of her husband, Robert, and treats him more like her property, having nagged him to death in their earthly life. Her self-image rests solely on the actions of others—specifically that of her husband.

THE MOTHERLY GHOST

Disappointed to be greeted in Heaven by her brother, Reginald, this Motherly Ghost had made an idol of her love for her son, Michael. Her desire to see her son is stronger than her desire for God and is ultimately what prevents her from growing solid and continuing into Heaven.

THE OILY GHOST AND HIS LIZARD

This Ghost is described as a “dark and oily” smoke with a little red lizard sitting on its shoulder that is constantly touching its tail and whispering in the Ghost’s ear. The lizard is the embodiment of some type of lust. The Ghost thinks he can keep it under control, at least in the polite company of Heaven, but he cannot. The Spirit offers to kill the lizard but says he is only free to do so with the Ghost’s consent.

SARAH SMITH

MacDonald refers to Sarah Smith as “one of the great ones.” She’s beautiful, warm, loving, and seemingly capable of infinite kindness. In the afterlife, Sarah has a large “family” because on Earth, she was kind and gracious to many different people, even people whom she barely knew. On Earth, Sarah and the dwarf, whose name is Frank, were married, and she preceded him in death. Although not famous on Earth, in Heaven, Sarah is a saint. Lewis picks the name Sarah Smith for this very reason—to emphasize her plainness.

FRANK THE DWARF GHOST AND THE TRAGEDIAN

Frank has a “divided nature” split between two figures, the Dwarf and the Tragedian—an old-school, melodramatic actor who specializes in tragic roles. The real Frank is the “Dwarf,” who becomes less and less himself the more he feeds his persona or alter ego, the Tragedian, who projects the dwarf’s need to be pitied and apologized to.

MacDonald elaborates on other types of Ghosts that come near to Heaven but do not stay:

TEACHING GHOSTS

The most common was the type that wanted to tell, teach, or lecture the Celestials on Hell.

TUB-THUMPING GHOSTS

A tub-thumper is a noisy, violent, or ranting public speaker—the radical revolutionaries demanding that the Spirits rise up and free themselves from “happiness,” tear down the mountains, and “seize Heaven for their own.”

PLANNING GHOSTS

These Ghosts encouraged the Spirits to dam the river, kill the animals, and pave the horrible grass with nice smooth asphalt.

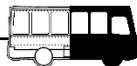
MATERIALIST GHOSTS

These Ghosts informed Spirits that there is no life after death and that everything is a hallucination.

BOGIE GHOST

These Ghosts realize they have deteriorated into mere shadows and have now taken up the traditional ghostly role of scaring whomever they can.

COURSE NOTES AND STUDY FORMAT



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The Great Divorce consists of fourteen chapters and can easily be read in an afternoon. This study guide can be used for individual study or as a group study meeting weekly to discuss each chapter.

STUDYING

Each week you will read select chapters, which are approximately five to eight pages each. Each chapter is fairly short and easily digested with the exception of a few. As you read, make notes in your book and underline or highlight sections that interest you. As you work through each session, make note of any other questions you have in the Notes section at the end of each study. The answers to each question can be found at www.BrownChairBooks.com. However, do not cheat yourself. Work through each session prior to viewing the answers.

GROUP FORMAT

For group formats, the study works well over an eight-week period. The first week is an introduction week to hand out study guides (if purchased by the church), read through the introduction and character sketches, and set a plan and schedule for the remaining seven weeks. You might also have those who have previously read the book share their thoughts and experiences.

This study can certainly be used by Sunday school classes, but recognize that Sunday morning time in many churches is relatively short. Thus, the study lends itself very well to midweek times at the church or in the homes of members. Session length is variable.

Ideally, you should allow at least 90 minutes per session. For longer sessions, take a quick refreshment break in the middle.

As a group leader, your role will be to facilitate the group sessions using the study guide and the answers found at www.BrownChairBooks.com. Recognize that you are the facilitator. You are not the answer person; you are not the authority; you are not the judge to decide if responses are right or wrong. You are simply the person who tries to keep the discussion on track and in the timeframe allowed while keeping everyone involved, heard, and respected.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The following are some suggestions for shaping the learning environment for group sessions that help manage time, participation, and confidentiality.

- Ask the Holy Spirit for help as you prepare for the study. Pray for discernment for each member of the group, including yourself.
- Before each session, familiarize yourself with the questions and answers as it may have been several days since you completed the session. Consider reading the weekly chapters again.
- Be prepared to adjust the session as group members interact and questions arise. Allow for the Holy Spirit to move in and through the material, the group members, and yourself.
- Arrange the meeting space to enhance the learning process. Group members should be seated around a table or in a circle so that they can all see one another. Moveable chairs are best.
- Download the quick Bible reference handout at www.BrownChairBooks.com, and distribute it at the beginning of class to save time looking up Scripture.
- If using Bibles, bring extras for those who forget to bring one or for those who might not have one. (If someone is reading aloud, you might ask the person to identify from which Bible translation he or she is reading.)
- If your teaching style includes recording responses from participants or writing questions or quotations for discussion on a board, you may want access to a whiteboard or an easel.
- Agree on the class schedule and times. In order to maintain continuity, it would be best if your class meets for eight consecutive weeks.

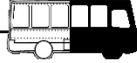
- The suggested session time is 90 minutes. Because each chapter can lead to substantial discussion, you may need to make choices about what you will cover, or you may choose to extend your group sessions to allow more time for discussion.
- Create a climate where it is safe to share. Encourage group members to participate as they feel comfortable. Remember that some will be eager to give answers or offer commentary, while others will need time to process and think.
- If you notice that some participants are hesitant to enter the conversation, ask if they have thoughts to share. Give everyone an opportunity to talk, but keep the conversation moving. Intervene when necessary to prevent a few individuals from dominating the discussion.
- If no one answers at first during a discussion, do not be afraid of silence. Count silently to ten, and then say, “Would anyone like to go first?” If no one responds, provide your own answer and ask for reactions. If you limit your sharing to a surface level, others will follow suit. Keep in mind that if your group is new, cohesion might take a couple of weeks to form. If group members do not share at first, give them time.
- Encourage multiple answers or responses before moving on.
- Ask “Why?” or “Why do you believe that?” or “Can you say more about that?” to draw out greater depth from a response.
- Affirm others’ responses with comments such as “Great” or “Thanks” or “Good insight”—especially if this is the first time someone has spoken during the group session.
- Monitor your own contributions. If you are doing most of the talking, back off so that you do not train the group to listen rather than speak.
- Honor the designated time window. Begin on time. If a session runs longer than expected, get consensus from the group before continuing.
- Involve participants in various aspects of the session, such as offering prayer and reading Scripture.
- Because some questions call for sharing personal experiences, confidentiality is essential. Remind group members at each session of the importance of confidentiality and of not passing along stories that have been shared in the group.

SUGGESTED SESSION OUTLINE

Based on the amount of reading each week, we suggest that you follow the study outline below over an eight-week period, but you are by no means locked in to this format. The key is group interest and involvement, not the calendar.

Date	Time	Session	Chapters
		Week 1	Introduction
		Week 2	Preface, Chapters 1 and 2
		Week 3	Chapters 3 and 4
		Week 4	Chapters 5 and 6
		Week 5	Chapters 7 and 8
		Week 6	Chapter 9
		Week 7	Chapters 10 and 11
		Week 8	Chapters 12, 13, and 14

PREFACE



Summary

In the opening preface of the book, Lewis elaborates on what we all should know—that you cannot have both Heaven and Hell at the same time. It’s either one or the other. This sounds obvious, right? But often we live our lives contrary to that belief by clinging to those worldly vices and values that have no place in the Christian life, much less Heaven. According to Lewis, “Evil can be undone, but it cannot ‘develop’ into good.” The fact is, we must wholly reject evil for Heaven to be fully embraced.

If we insist on keeping Hell (or even Earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell.

Discussion Questions

William Blake wrote *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* between 1790 and 1793. In this book, he tells us that good and evil aren’t really what we think they are. They’re just different kinds of energies, and both are needed to keep the world going. The Bible and other religious texts, he says, have been responsible for a lot of the misinformation we’ve been given. He claims that two types of people exist: the “energetic creators,” or devils from Hell, and the “rational organizers,” or angels from heaven, of which he claims both are necessary to life.

1. Why do you think humanity is constantly searching for opportunities to blur the lines between good and evil? Why is this dangerous ground to tread?

2. What attempts do you see in today's culture of trying to "marry" Heaven and Hell, and how do you think this dysfunctional marriage has changed culture today?

3. Read Isaiah 5:20. What did Isaiah say to warn the nation of Israel that they were in rebellion against God? What specifically were they doing? Do you think God's standards have changed since the time of Isaiah? Why or why not?

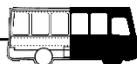
4. Lewis disagreed with Blake. In his view, all good comes from God, nothing good comes from Hell, and there can be no legitimate marriage of the two. Read Matthew 5:29–30. On the journey to Heaven, which "luggage" cannot be carried along and why might we have to leave our "right hand" and "right eye" behind?

5. Explain what Lewis meant by “Evil can be undone, but it cannot ‘develop’ into good.” According to Romans 12:21, how is evil overcome?

6. What does Lewis say will happen if we insist on keeping Hell? If we accept Heaven, what will we not be able to keep? If we accept Heaven, what will we find?

7. Why does Lewis put in his “disclaimer” at the conclusion of the Preface?

CHAPTER 1: THE NATURE OF HELL



Screwtape begins this letter by rebuking Wormwood for letting his patient escape him and become a Christian. However, all is not lost. If he can cause the man to become disillusioned with the church by highlighting the strange habits and hypocrisies of its members, Wormwood still might succeed. Screwtape tells Wormwood to attack the man's spiritual immaturity in an effort to win him back.

Why on earth they insist on coming I can't imagine. They won't like it at all when we get there, and they'd really be much more comfortable at home.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe in detail the mood, atmosphere, images, and depictions of the grey town. Do you find Lewis's depiction of Hell or Purgatory "accurate"?

2. Although the grey town is revealed within the contexts of the story to be the outer limits of Hell, or Purgatory for those who will eventually reach Heaven, the reader is to consider this an imaginative representation of Hell rather than an accurate, biblical representation of the real Hell. Using the following Bible passages, describe the nature of Hell. In your own words, how would you describe Hell to a friend?

- a) Revelation 14:10–11 –
- b) 2 Thessalonians 1:9 –
- c) Revelation 21:8 –
- d) Matthew 25:41 –
- e) Mark 9:44–49 –
- f) Revelation 20:10 –
- g) Matthew 13:41–42 –
- h) Matthew 3:12 –
- i) Daniel 12:2 –
- j) Luke 16:23–24 –

3. The souls that Lewis encounters while waiting for and getting on the bus seem to represent various forms of sin in what used to be called the capital sins or what is commonly referred to as the seven deadly sins. Associate the different personalities he encounters in line and on the bus with the appropriate sin below.

- a) Envy – the desire to have an item, an experience, or feeling that someone else possesses

- b) Gluttony – an excessive, ongoing consumption of food or drink

- c) Greed – an excessive pursuit of material possessions

- d) Lust – an uncontrollable passion or longing, especially for sexual desires

- e) Vanity or Pride – excessive view of one’s self without regard to others

- f) Sloth – excessive laziness or the failure to act and utilize one’s talents

- g) Wrath or Anger – uncontrollable feelings of anger and hate toward another person

4. As people continue to leave the bus line, what principle is Lewis trying to establish regarding a town in which any real life is absent yet there is little desire to move beyond it?

5. The souls complain about the bus driver, saying, “Why can’t he behave naturally?” Read 1 Corinthians 2:14. Why do unbelievers have difficulty relating to or understanding a believer’s joy?

6. The tousle-haired poet cannot imagine why the other souls would insist on coming on the bus and concludes that they would be much more comfortable at home. What parallel is there to our comfort and how we deal with sin? Read 1 John 1:8 and Romans 12:9. How do we break free of that sin comfort zone?

7. What do you think of Lewis's idea that there will be fish and chips and movies and advertising in Hell?