

# THE GREAT DIVORCE

## STUDY GUIDE FOR

### TEENS

**A Bible Study for Teenagers on the  
C.S. Lewis Book *The Great Divorce***



**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*



**The Great Divorce Study Guide for Teens**  
**A Bible Study for Teenagers**  
**on the C.S. Lewis Book**  
**The Great Divorce**

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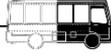
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Version 1

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# Introduction



I recently read a story about a man who has visited Disneyland every day since 2012. Now, more than five years later he has gone through the turnstiles 2,000 days in a row! I love Disney theme parks too, but that’s commitment!

What about you? Could you visit the “happiest place on Earth” 2,000 days straight? What would you have to sacrifice in your life to do so?

In *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis, damned spirits from Hell take a celestial bus ride to visit Heaven. Once there, they are invited by people they formerly knew—relatives and friends—to stay forever.

Sounds like the opportunity of a lifetime, right? I mean, who wants to go back to a dark and dingy Hell when you’re in the ultimate Disney Park ever! So, what’s the catch?

It’s really quite simple. You must honestly admit that you’re wrong (repent of your sins) and then choose to do right (follow Jesus). Sounds easy enough, but is it really?

That’s the hardest part about sin—to admit you’re wrong. It can often be very hard to let go of what is dragging you down and instead embrace a better life that God has planned for you.

This story is not to be taken literally. Scripture records no bus-riding opportunities offering free passes into Heaven

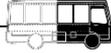
after death. The fact is, Hell is final. On the title page, you will find the following quote: “No, there is no escape. There is no heaven with a little of hell in it—no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather.”

Everyone you meet in life is soul searching and their efforts either move them toward or away from God. As hard as it is to leave your old life of sin behind, it does get a little easier with each step. But you have to take that first step.

This is a fun book to read but also a bit challenging at times. Hang in there, take your time, and write notes in your book and in this study book. Most importantly, try to participate in a group discussion with others your age and with an adult leader.

I believe at the end of reading the book and completing this study, you will have a renewed passion for following Christ as well as getting rid of those things in your life that are dragging you down.

# 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.*

In *The Great Divorce*, by all accounts, Lewis is the narrator guiding us through a series of events beginning with his waiting in a long line for a magical bus ride in a dimly lit, grey town—which is in fact Hell or Purgatory.

Those waiting with him in the bus line are argumentative, combative, and generally disagreeable and of differing economic and educational backgrounds. These unpleasant and contentious souls take vacations to visit other places outside of Hell. Most visit Earth, while a few others will make this bus trip to the outer banks of Heaven.

As they board and the bus leaves the ground, Lewis begins talking 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 in the grey town 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 empty, with very few people wandering around.

In addition, there are no communities since the residents of the grey town are constantly spreading throughout the town because they cannot stand to be with each other. 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 basic needs. 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 new houses, 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.

Soon the Ghosts 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 and return to the grey town, retaining their own independence rather than submitting themselves to God.

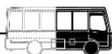
After witnessing a variety of conversations between Ghosts and Spirits, Lewis realizes that each Ghost represents a character study of human nature and the struggle with sin. In fact, many of their sins are not what we might consider evil or diabolical, yet they still are unable to enter Heaven. This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

At last, he is approached by his guiding Spirit—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?”

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 as day breaks in Heaven. 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 implied as 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 deceptive 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

therefore 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*. MacDonald'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 experienced. 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.

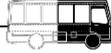
### **MATERIALIST GHOSTS**

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 over the course of a few days.

For best use with the study, each week for eight weeks you will read select chapters from the book, 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](http://www.BrownChairBooks.com). However, do not cheat yourself. Work through each session prior to viewing the answers.

## **GROUP FORMAT**

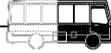
For group formats, the study works well over an eight-week period. The first week is an introduction week to hand out study guides (if purchased by the church), read through the introduction and character sketches, and set a plan and schedule for the remaining seven weeks.

## **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.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Session</b>	<b>Chapters</b>
		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	Chapters 9 and 10
		Week 7	Chapter 11
		Week 8	Chapters 12, 13, and 14

# Preface



Have you ever heard the figure of speech, “You can’t have your cake and eat it too?” The idea is how difficult it can be to enjoy two things that are usually not possible to have together. For example, “Zach works every night and weekend to pay for his new car that he never has any time to enjoy.”

The same can be said about your life when following Christ, as in, “You can’t hold on to your sin and live a Christ-like life too.” It’s either one or the other. The fact is, we must completely reject our sin before the life that God has planned for us can be fully embraced.

*A life is either all spiritual or not spiritual at all. No man can serve two masters. Your life is shaped by the end you live for.*

*You are made in the image of what you desire.*

**Thomas Merton, Author and Theologian**

1. If we allow our lives to be consumed with bad thoughts and immoral actions, what will eventually happen to our understanding of what is truly right and wrong?

2. Lewis says that there is good and there is evil and that there can be no “legitimate marriage” between the two. What “good” responses might a teenager use to justify the following “bad” behaviors?

a) Cheating is okay as long as \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

b) Premarital sex is okay as long as \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

c) Drugs and alcohol are okay as long as \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

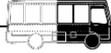
d) Bullying someone is okay as long as \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. True or false: God has changed His standards throughout history to accommodate each person, place, and time.

4. Have you ever known someone who believed they could keep doing whatever they wanted while at the same time claiming to be a Christian? How did it work out for them?

5. Read Matthew 5:29–30. On our own personal journey to Heaven, why might it be necessary that we leave our “right hand” and “right eye” behind?

# Chapter 1: Next Bus out of Hell



I think if I had a chance to catch the first bus out of Hell, I would be jumping for joy and would be the first person in line! Wouldn't you? We find the exact opposite in this chapter though. In fact, the people in line are argumentative, mean, and generally disagreeable to the point where some even leave the line believing there is a better option.

Perhaps we're really no better. Think about that sin or temptation that God wants you to leave behind, yet for some reason, you just can't seem to let it go. Why is that? Mainly our hesitancy is due to fear. We simply do not trust that God has something better for us.

*It is not death that a man should fear,  
but he should fear never beginning to live.*

**Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor**

1. Describe in detail the mood, atmosphere, images, and depictions of the grey town.

2. The grey town is an imaginative representation of Hell rather than an accurate, biblical representation of the real Hell. If you were to poll your friends, how might they describe Hell?

- a) They would say Hell does not exist.
- b) It's a place of eternal fire and torture.
- c) They would not know.
- d) Other\_\_\_\_\_

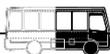
3. Using the following Bible passages, describe the nature of Hell. In your own words, how would you describe Hell to a friend?

- a) Revelation 14:10-11 –
- b) 2 Thessalonians 1:9 –
- c) Matthew 25:41 –
- d) Revelation 20:10 –

4. The messy-haired poet believes he is worthy to take this bus ride to Heaven but the others on the bus are not. How might your friends respond to your criticism of their sin while they see you ignoring your own? What might be a better approach?

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

## Chapter 2: Jabber Jaws



Let's face it. Some of us like to talk more than others. There are others who are quieter and require less conversation. Which are you? Do you like to be in constant communication with others, or do you value your alone time?

This is where Lewis finds himself on his bus ride to Heaven. He wants to visually take in all that he is seeing, yet he cannot escape the conversation of others. It's in this setting that he learns a little more about the grey town, his fellow passengers, and their reasons for wanting to go to Heaven.

*It was impossible to get a conversation going; everyone was talking too much.*

**Yogi Berra, Baseball Player**

1. Have you ever known someone who tends to see themselves as the victim of almost every bad situation they find themselves in? Describe the characteristics of someone with a “victim mentality.”

2. Describe the messy-haired poet and what led to his death. What do you think he expects to find or receive once he gets to Heaven?

3. What more do we learn about the grey town from the Intelligent Ghost? What connection does the man draw to the length of time people have been in the grey town and their chances of making it to the bus stop?

4. Using a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your need for community (the fellowship of others with whom you share common attitudes, interests, and goals) in your life? Why would you choose that rating? Do you think advances in technology (i.e., phones, social media, etc.) have helped or hurt the ability to create a close community?

5. Read Matthew 19:16–22. According to the Intelligent Ghost, the residents of Hell build “unreal” houses that do not keep out the rain or danger. Just like the residents of Hell, what did the rich young ruler believe provided him a “feeling of safety”? What “feelings of safety” might a teenager substitute for Jesus today?