



KEANU REEVES  
**CONSTANTINE**

**LEADER'S GUIDE**

Discussion Guide and Bible Study

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Leaders' Guide developed by:

**Reel Spirituality**

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Special thanks to Warner Bros. and Grace Hill Media for helping make this study guide possible.

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Dear Friends of Reel Spirituality:

Film has become our culture's primary storytelling medium. Ask a group of people how many have seen *Schindler's List* or *Beauty and the Beast* and almost everyone will raise their hands. Such movies not only entertain, they educate, helping us see what we might otherwise miss. Of course, there are movies that are poorly done and others that survive on adrenalin alone. But many more help us explore life and its meaning through their honest portrayals and engaging narratives. Movies invite conversation and even communion. After watching a movie together with others, many find the film serving as one more "person" in the group, a guest who has sought truth and shared vulnerably. Having sought life at some more central region, movies encourage a similar searching, openness and vulnerability from their viewers.

To help you in this movie conversation, we at Fuller Seminary's Reel Spirituality Institute are publishing online study guides of selected, soon-to-be-released films. We trust you will find these guides helpful in your personal reflections, informal conversations, and ministry settings.

*Constantine*, the film that is the subject of this particular study guide, is not for everyone. Rooted in the comic book and horror film genres, the film leverages images of heaven, hell, angels, and demons very viscerally. We encourage you to discern for yourself whether this film would generate meaningful dialogue in your community. Certainly, not everything in *Constantine* is theologically sound; yet, the film engages longstanding spiritual themes that are grounded in the Christian tradition. You may find its treatment of heaven/hell, salvation/damnation, and the nature of God helpful in discovering what the Scriptures and others have to say about these themes.

Happy Viewing,

Rob Johnston and Barry Taylor  
Codirectors, Reel Spirituality: An Institute for Moving Images



## INTRODUCTION

John Constantine (Keanu Reeves) is a man fighting for his own salvation, an antihero who will only help you if it serves his best interest. Constantine has been “gifted” with special sight, the ability to see the angelic and demonic powers that are vying for control of the “City of Angels.” As demonic activity increases in Los Angeles, Constantine becomes aware that it is related to Angela (Rachel Weisz), a cynical police detective investigating her sister’s suicide. When Constantine awakens a dormant power in Angela, they both must work against those who want to establish a literal hell on earth.

It’s rare for present-day films to evoke such literal images of heaven and hell. While the movie is designed to entertain the audience by scaring them, it also offers the filmgoer much to think about when the fear subsides. The church ought to be prepared to interact with a film whose original source material (*Hellblazer*) is drawn—however loosely—from a Christian apocalyptic cosmology. What sort of view does *Constantine* depict of heaven and hell, of angels and demons? What must be done for salvation? What are the “rules” for earning eternal blessing or curse? Does *Constantine* draw a favorable image of God? And how would the Christian view compare? If our culture is going to be dialoguing with these visceral images of heaven and hell, the church should be ready and willing to engage these tough questions, willing to interact with characters in the midst of good and evil with the choice to either believe or perish. Perhaps we, too, can find ourselves reflected by in a hero with selfish motivations or a detective who wants to deny the paranormal.

Our sections are organized to allow a wide range of discussion, with different points of trajectory for your groups. The themes deal with heaven and hell (the angelic and the demonic), our conceptions of salvation/damnation and the resulting issues surrounding God’s nature and actions in the world for each section, the movie’s handling of the theme is compared to scripture’s.

Feel free to follow one or all of the lines of discussion, depending on the resonance in your group with the various themes we’ve chosen to address.





## HEAVEN AND HELL/ANGELS AND DEMONS: Visions, the Afterlife and Apocalyptic Encounters

*What if I told you God and the devil had a bet for the souls of all mankind?*  
– John Constantine

No matter what your views on heaven and hell or angels and demons, *Constantine* forces your imagination to places of spiritual reflection that are uncomfortable, frightening, and often confusing. The imagery and subplots of the film are based squarely in the Christian tradition—our tradition—yet they often can seem beyond our own reality. Taking the time to engage with images, concepts, and even theology that is possibly new to us could help us understand our own scriptures, traditions, and even personal spiritual encounters in ways we haven't done before.

*Heaven and hell are right here, behind every wall, every window—  
the world behind the world. And we're smack in the middle.*  
– John Constantine

For John Constantine, Hell (and conversely, Heaven) are realities; yet, they do not play out on some distant canvas. They are rooted squarely on earth.

1. How did you react to seeing Los Angeles (the “City of Angels”) as both a heavenly city and a hellish prison?
  - a. Have you ever felt like you have experienced “hell on earth” like the imagery in the movie?
  - b. Have you ever felt like you were “in heaven” as it was pictured in the movie (a place of being with God)?
  - c. What were these times like? How do they differ from the film’s portrayal? What spiritual reflections, if any, can you draw out from these experiences?
2. How real were the images of angels and demons to you? Have you ever felt spiritual encounters as the characters do? What can be said of these encounters—how do they fit into what you believe you know about God?
3. How do you feel about Balthazar? About Gabriel? Do they square with what you might have imagined them to be from Scripture?



## KNOWING OR BELIEVING?

Questions of one's eternal destiny are front-loaded into *Constantine*. But what does one do to deserve an afterlife of torment or blessing? How do one's actions determine one's lot in the life to come?

The film's reluctant hero fights to save his own soul. Marked for a return to hell by a suicide attempt in his youth, John Constantine hopes to earn a place in heaven by fighting against the devil's minions. When he goes to speak with the angel Gabriel about a life "extension" (he's dying from lung cancer), he doesn't understand why his good deeds have gone unnoticed. Gabriel's response is that getting to heaven requires the same things it always has: faith and self-sacrifice. What Constantine doesn't seem to understand is why his dedication to a life of fighting demons doesn't amount to self-sacrifice and his burden of "sight" is not an equivalent to faith. Just because Constantine knows of heaven and hell, sees angels and demons, and fights the evil powers, it doesn't secure his place in heaven. He wants to know why.

1. Is Constantine's "lone gunman" life a sacrificial one? Why or why not?  
What about the final favor he asks of the devil? Was it selfishly motivated?
2. Do the "rules" seem fair to you?
  - a. Why is it that Angela's sister's suicide earned her a place in hell despite her righteous intentions?
  - b. Does the concept of going to hell on a technicality disturb you?
3. If not one's actions but one's faith and sacrificial intent determine ultimate destiny, why does God, at the end of the film, abandon Gabriel?  
Were Gabriel's actions justified? Did Gabriel lack faith?

There are numerous parallels between the film's view of believing vs. knowing and the Christian tradition's treatment of the subject. While the film deals largely with the Roman Catholic perspective, in all probability your own church has much to say about getting into heaven, or what it takes to inherit eternal life in heaven or hell. Most evangelical churches believe that the only thing you can do to go to heaven is believe the right thing (faith), but numerous other churches argue that even your choice to believe is predetermined by God. Some churches teach that certain sins (e.g. suicide) prevent you from going to heaven, while others believe that God shows everyone mercy and allows universal entry into God's kingdom.

Read Ephesians 2:8–9; James 2:14–17; Romans 8:29–30

1. What are some of your initial thoughts on eternal salvation in light of the film?
  - a. Where do those beliefs come from? Did you inherit them?

- b. How would you compare your thoughts on salvation with the film's perspective? Where do you think the film goes astray?
2. The angel Gabriel acknowledges that Constantine sees and knows much, but does not believe. Is there a difference between seeing and believing? Can they coexist? Does doubt challenge or strengthen your faith in God? Why or why not?
3. What do you think of those who commit suicide?



Different teachings on what one needs to know or believe for salvation have the effect of coloring one's perspective on the nature of God. Constantine wants to avoid hell at all costs but has difficulty with the rules of a God who sent him to hell in his youth. His terrifying visions of angels and demons, which the angel Gabriel deemed a "gift from God," are what drove him to take his own life.

*God is a kid with a magnifying glass.*  
– John Constantine

God seems capricious, bound to unfair and impractical rules. Angels and demons seem committed to agendas that are shortsighted and selfish at best, and damning at worst. The lives of those within the world are chips in a twisted poker game between good and evil powers. Viewers can't help but side with Constantine against the daunting evils *and* the unreliable deities.

1. Was the movie as a whole able to retain a positive or negative view of God? Or was it ambivalent?
  - a. Does John Constantine ever experience a moment of faith?
  - b. Does his negative view of God ever take a turn for the better?
  - c. How much of this negative perspective on the divine comes from his own violation of rules that he could never fully respect?
2. How has your view of God been influenced by your view of salvation?
3. Are you ever unsure of your eternal destiny? What about God's nature requires that some go to heaven and others go to hell?
4. Do God's actions ever seem unfair to you?

- a. Does God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son seem an inappropriate action?
- b. Can you think of other places in scripture that you had a hard time understanding or digesting?

Read Job 1:6–12

1. How does God's wager with Satan factor into what you believe to be true about God?
2. Can you compare the wager between Satan and God in Job with their supposed wager in the movie? Is one portrayal of God more favorable?



*When I was a kid, I could see things.  
Things humans aren't meant to see.  
– John Constantine*

Constantine was sentenced to death because he “took a life,” namely, his own, in a suicide attempt as a boy. Catholic theology is clear that suicide is not permissible by God's standards. He commits suicide because the horrors of the spiritual dimensions he is “gifted” with seeing are too much for him to handle. Because of his act, he is sentenced in the story to life apart from God.

Gabriel reassures Constantine that it is impossible to reverse the decision of God, to break the rules, and Constantine seems to genuinely believe that he is fated for God's judgment. Yet Constantine finds favor with God—a curse reversal—when he gives his already-judged life for the life of Angela, also a “gifted” individual. God changed his mind about Constantine, reversing the sentence of judgment, redeeming his life and calling Constantine to God's own self.

1. How do you feel about God's decision to change his own mind and forgive Constantine even after judgment has come?

2. Can redemption be seen as God changing his mind about someone?
  - a. Read Genesis 18:16–33 out loud together. Are there any elements in this passage that suggest that God’s mind was changed by Abram?
  - b. Read Jeremiah 26:19. How would John Constantine read these verses? What does it say about God’s character and what is possible with God?
  
3. How do you feel about Lucifer’s actions at the end of the film when he removed Constantine’s cancer, forcing him to live again (with potential for good or evil)?

## CONCLUSION

John Constantine is a troubled soul. At times, his story resonates with the biblical figure of Job: tormented by God by rules that seem, to Job, to be unfair. Additionally, it might not be hard to see our own struggles in John Constantine’s whenever we hope for redemption in everyday life.

Rare is the film that captures the raw material of books like Revelation and Daniel (what we have termed “Christian apocalyptic cosmology”), specifically Christian themes of redemption and judgment, and basic notions of the afterlife. We don’t need to agree with all of the specifics to be able to have a dialogue with the film; getting bogged down in the details might make us miss the possibilities for Spirit-infused dialogue that *Constantine* evokes.



How does the film *Constantine* speak to you?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Constantine* the film

View the trailer: [www.imdb.com/title/tt0360486/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0360486/)

Official movie website: [www.constantinemovie.com](http://www.constantinemovie.com)

Information on the *Hellblazer* comics

[www.dccomics.com/features/hellblazer/](http://www.dccomics.com/features/hellblazer/)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellblazer>

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