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How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

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This article is a slightly adapted version of a chapter in Bill's recently published book *Seven Pressing Questions: Addressing Critical Challenges to Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: NextStep Resources, 2015).

“I just don't get it. You Christians talk an awful lot about the love of God, and then you tell me that if I don't believe in Jesus I will go to hell, a place of eternal torment? What kind of God are you talking about? He seems to be a moral monster. Why can't you just stick to the message of Jesus, who accepted everybody—tax collectors and prostitutes—and who said, 'Don't judge, lest you be judged'? What's the deal?”

Why Believe in Hell?

The doctrine of hell—what are we to make of it? Even among Christians the subject of hell is a thorny one—and rightly so. It's not something we should take lightly, or talk about too easily; this is serious stuff. Frankly, I wish I didn't have to address this topic, a topic that can so quickly offend our moral sensibilities. So why do Christians insist on talking about hell? Why has the doctrine of the eternal punishment of those who stand before God apart from Christ been a part of the understanding of almost all Bible-believing Christians throughout church history? The simple answer is that Christians are bound by the teaching of Jesus.

Jesus' Teaching on Hell

It is our Lord Jesus who, above all, forces us to affirm the dreadful truth that those who stand alone before God as sinners on the day of judgment will face condemnation into a state of eternal punishment called hell.¹

To the religious hypocrites, Jesus declared, “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matt. 23:33). Those rejected as subjects of the kingdom, Jesus said, “will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12²).

Stressing the seriousness of sin, Jesus urged, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out” (Mark 9:43; cf. Matt. 18:8). It's a place where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched,” He said (Mark 9:48). On that day of judgment, Jesus says that those who failed to respond to Him through His humble brothers “will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matt. 25:46).

Though it is often ridiculed as a primitive remnant of a medieval age, this doctrine of the eternal punishment of sinners is rooted firmly in the teaching of Jesus Himself. He spoke of hell more than He spoke of heaven. In fact, Jesus, who more than anyone reveals the love of God to the world, spoke more about hell than any other person in the Bible. As followers of Jesus Christ, we cannot be faithful to our Lord and not speak of this stark reality.



The Apostles' Teaching on Hell

The apostolic witness of the New Testament echoes Jesus' weighty words on this topic. Paul speaks of a time of "wrath and anger" awaiting those who reject the truth (Rom. 2:8). He declares that those who do not obey the gospel "will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:9). Jude presents the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah "as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 1:7).

Finally, the Book of Revelation speaks in these harrowing tones:

If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. (Rev. 14:9–11)

The Use of Figurative Language for Hell

Certainly, in speaking of hell the Bible uses figurative language. Jesus commonly used language referent to a place called Gehenna.³ Gehenna was the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where human sacrifice was once offered (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6), which became the place where the city's garbage was burned—a place where "the worms that eat them do not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). Fire is an image depicting physical pain and suffering. It displays the sense of God's righteous anger, His wrath, poured out against all who opposes His goodness.

Then Jesus also used the image of darkness, "outer darkness," depicting hell as a banishment from God's presence—a place of alienation from God, a place of utter loneliness. The foolish bridesmaids are shut outside the door (Matt. 25:10–12); the wicked servant is assigned a place with the hypocrites (Matt. 24:51); those improperly dressed for the wedding banquet are thrown outside into the darkness (Matt. 22:13).

In some of the most dreaded words of the Bible, Jesus says to some who assumed they would be welcomed by Him, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matt. 7:23). Nothing is left but loneliness and despair, for hell is a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth," full of the hopeless remorse of self-condemnation. And then hell is spoken of as a place of death and destruction—a place devoid of the life-giving presence of God, and a place of ruin and corruption.

John in the Book of Revelation refers to the lake of fire as "the second death" (Rev. 20:14; 21:8; cf. 2:11; 20:6). Destruction is where the wide road leads (Matt. 7:13); it is what happens to the house built on sand (Luke 6:49); it is what is prepared for the objects of God's wrath (Rom. 9:22); and it is the destiny of the enemies of the cross

of Christ (Phil. 3:19). Like a car that is “totaled” in an accident, those in hell will continue to exist, but they will be destroyed, ruined, as human beings created in the image of God; they will no longer function as they were created to function.

Yes, this is figurative language, but these images were chosen to convey a certain reality. And it is a horrific reality—a reality of wrath, of alienation, of corruption. It is a reality that Jesus warns us about in the strongest possible terms, and it is a reality, I would add, that Jesus Himself gave His own life to save us from. As one writer on this subject has put it, “Jesus Christ is the person who is responsible for the doctrine of Eternal Perdition. He is the Being with whom all opponents of this theological tenet are in conflict.”⁴ So why are people so repulsed by this clear teaching of Jesus? I find that there are three underlying objections.

Objection 1: The Notion of Judgment Is Offensive

First, many people are offended simply by the basic notion of judgment. Why should people have to stand before God as their Judge? Why should there be a separation of the righteous and the wicked? Can't God just accept everybody? Isn't that what love requires?

Here I think we encounter a basic misunderstanding of who God is and what His being God entails. For the Bible declares that God is not only loving; He is also good—absolutely holy and good. And a God who is good must not only love, He must also hate; He must hate that which is evil—that which is contrary to His goodness.

God created this world to display His own glory and goodness—and isn't it right that He should hate all that would destroy that creation? Shouldn't God hate the sexual abuse of children? Shouldn't God hate the terrorist bombs that kill hundreds of innocent people? Shouldn't God hate the wickedness that lurks in the depths of the human heart? If He didn't, He could hardly be called good. In fact, if God didn't hate those things, and if that hatred was not ultimately manifest in His judgment of those things, then would it really make sense even to talk about good and evil in any objective and ultimate sense at all?

The Necessity of Judgment

The judgment of God is necessary for the existence of a real moral order in the universe. It provides the ultimate sanction that underlies all moral demands, without which law breakers would go unpunished.

In contrast to the moral relativism of our age, the judgment of God provides the absolute objective standard to which all other moral judgments must conform. We may object to the idea of some final judgment, but, far from degrading us, God's judgment actually gives great dignity to our lives. God doesn't judge dogs. Unlike the way he treats all other earthly creatures, God treats us as responsible moral agents, conferring value to our choices by bringing them before His bar of judgment. If we are not held accountable for our actions, why not eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die? But because we will be judged by God, our choices have eternal consequences. They matter.

Finally, the judgment of God is necessary if divine goodness is to be victorious over evil. Because God will judge the world, His will will be done on earth as it is in heaven; justice will prevail; and the good will be seen to be good, finally and fully, by all. A world without the judgment of God is a world that ultimately lacks any ultimate meaning.

I think most people get this basic idea. When you pin them down, they recognize that there ought to be some difference in the ultimate fate of Adolph Hitler and that of, say, Mother Teresa. “Yea, maybe there should be a judgment,” they might say, “but it should be reserved,” for the really bad people out there—the terrorists, the murderers, those who abuse children. That's who belongs in hell. Why don't Christians see it that way?”

Objection 2: The Basis of the Verdict Is Unfair

The notion of judgment in Christianity may be understandable, but it's the basis of the verdict that many object to. What does Jesus have to do with it? And here we encounter what Bill Hybels calls the Aunt Edna objection:⁵

Aunt Edna is the quintessential nice person—she pays her taxes, bakes cookies for the grandkids, and is kind to stray cats. But she’s just not into the God thing. Does she deserve to go to hell?

In fact, any number of times and in various ways, God revealed Himself to Aunt Edna—whether through hearing the stories of Christmas and Easter, through the experience of awe seeing a radiant sunset or a majestic mountain range, or through the whisper of her own conscience. But each time Aunt Edna turned away from that whisper of God calling her to acknowledge Him, to thank Him, to worship Him. Each time she said no to God. “I will not allow You to be God in my life. I will rule my own life,” she said. Aunt Edna just wants God to leave her alone, and being left alone by God is what the Bible calls “hell.”

What Can Be Worse than Deicide?

You could say Aunt Edna has wished that God didn’t exist—not the real God, the God who necessarily deserves our supreme love and obedience and worship. In a sense, as far as her life goes, she’s shut Him out; she’s killed Him. We might even say that Aunt Edna has committed “deicide”—the murder of God.



Let’s be very clear about the basis of the verdict on the day of judgment. Aunt Edna would not be condemned by God for not believing in Jesus. She would be condemned for rejecting God. This is the tragedy of the human condition; we want to be our own god. And the wonder of it is, God allows us to do that. You could say that hell is simply the final and ultimate result of that process. As C.S. Lewis put it: sin is a human being saying to God throughout life, “Go away and leave me alone.” Hell is God’s answer, “You may have your wish.”⁶ In that sense, hell is the ultimate testament to human freedom.

Not that people choose to go to hell; they simply choose the road that leads them there—that wide road that leads to destruction. And little by little their hearts become hardened to the love of God and their ears become deaf to the voice of God, and they refuse to humble themselves before the grace of God. In the end, they

refuse to receive the rescue that is found in the gospel of God.

C.S. Lewis points to the fact that when people choose the road to hell in this life, they begin to take on the qualities that will be confirmed, intensified, and made permanent when they reach their destination. “It is not a question of God ‘sending us’ to hell,” Lewis says. “In each of us there is something growing, which will BE Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.”⁷ Hell may be understood as a culmination of the effects of sin and the confirmation of God’s opposition to it. It is both the inexorable result of human choice and the active and deliberate judgment of God. There can be no fairer verdict than that.

Objection 3: The Punishment Is Grossly Excessive

The verdict may be fair, but is the punishment really just—this everlasting condemnation? Isn’t what the Bible describes rather excessive? To “be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched”—shouldn’t that be considered “cruel and unusual”?

First, I would say it does seem a bit presumptuous on our part to prescribe to God just how He ought to execute His justice. Reverence alone ought to engender some reticence to make such judgments. But still, we might

well ask, how can our finite and temporal sin merit an eternal consequence? Could it be because the One we sin against is of infinite and immeasurable holiness and goodness?

The Rebellion Persists

But why does it have to go on forever? Wouldn't a thousand years be enough? But that's a misunderstanding of what hell is about. Hell is not full of people with humble and repentant hearts who long to worship God in heaven. Consider what we find in the Book of Revelation. There the wrath of God is being poured out on humanity, and we read, "People gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done" (Rev. 16:10–11).

That's what hell is like: in hell the sinner's hardened heart will become harder still. Just as in heaven, where the transforming power of the gospel culminates in hearts that never again desire to choose evil, in hell, the corrupting power of sin culminates in hearts that never again desire to do good or to worship the God of all goodness. Hell goes on forever because sinners never stop sinning. The rebellion against God's righteous rule never ceases.

But doesn't the continued existence of hell detract from the ultimate victory of God? How can people rejoice in God's presence in that heavenly city described in Revelation 22, knowing that outside that city are the wicked (Rev. 22:15)—suffering, it says, in "the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (Rev. 21:8)? On the one hand, the prospect of anyone suffering the agonies of hell ought to terrify us. Jesus warned of it in the strongest possible terms. And He was grieved as He thought of the fate of many in the coming judgment. He wept over the city of Jerusalem, which seemed dead set against Him. As we read in Ezekiel 33:11, the Lord takes "no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live." And in 1 Timothy 2:4—the Lord "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

And the apostle Paul grieved as he thought of the possible fate of his own countrymen who rejected the gospel of God's grace: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (Rom. 9:2–4). It is that anguish of heart that ought to move us, as it did Paul, to pray and to work so that those without Christ may know of Him and turn to Him and find rescue from the awful captivity of sin in their lives.

But at the same time, I refuse to believe that my own horror at the thought of God's eternal wrath being poured out on sinners somehow means that there can be no heaven if there is a hell.⁹ It seems to me that the coexistence of heaven and hell is not a problem for God. Why is that? How could hell possibly fit into the grand purpose and design of God for His universe?

Why Should There Be a Hell?

Here we come up against one of the great mysteries of our faith. Why any creature God created should ever turn away from Him is the great conundrum of the cosmos. And the Bible gives us no answer to that question, perhaps because in the good world God created evil is ultimately irrational and therefore inexplicable. I can't say why God couldn't have made a world in which He knew every person would live in perfect faith and obedience before Him. Therefore, I can't say why there is a hell. But I can suggest what hell does—that is, what it tells us about God.

Hell Demonstrates God's Holiness

Three things come to mind: First, hell demonstrates God's holiness. However we conceive of the love of God, we must recognize that it is always a holy love. It's only our meager understanding of the utter purity of God's



holiness, and of His absolute abhorrence of all evil, that makes it difficult for us to conceive of the appropriateness of hell as God's response to it. Our thoughts of God are too shallow, too tame, and domesticated. We have made God too much in our own image, rather than allowing Him to shape our thinking.

Consequently, we don't understand the sinfulness of sin. Instead of thinking, "Sin is not so bad; how extreme of God to punish it in hell," we should think, "What must sin be like, if it results in sinners justly going to hell?" Hell shows us just how holy God is—such is His revulsion of our sin.

Hell Vindicates God's Justice

Second, we can say that hell vindicates God's justice. The existence of hell testifies forever that in God's universe, righteousness rules. Let there be no mistake; evil will get its due. When God says the wages of sin is death, He means it. When God punishes sin, He will be seen to be just in all His ways. God will be glorified even in the display of His wrath.⁹

Hell Magnifies God's Grace

And finally, and perhaps paradoxically, the existence of hell magnifies God's grace. If I came up to you and said, "I just paid your bill," you'd be grateful, I'm sure. But the degree of your gratitude would rise dramatically if you discovered that it wasn't your bill for lunch that I paid, but it was the entire principal of your house mortgage! In a sense, this is what hell says to us. It is the measure of God's grace; this is the length He went to save us. Hell is the bill He has paid.

When Jesus died on the cross, when He cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46), He was experiencing something of the God-forsakenness of hell itself for sinners. This is what He endured on your behalf. Consider this sinless man, who was Himself God—one who lived in a perfect relationship of faith and love with His Father in heaven. That separation from His Father on the cross, that loss of relationship—bearing the wrath that our sin deserves—that was far greater than any suffering we could imagine. But such is the love of God for us; it is as deep as the depths of hell itself.

If you say, "The God I believe in would never send anyone to hell," then you will never know the true depth of the love of the God who reveals Himself in the Bible—the God of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the God who in love bore hell itself for us. His is not a sentimental love, but a holy love—a love described by Isaac Watts as being "so amazing, so divine," that it "demands my soul, my life, my all."

A Different Question

How could a loving God send people to hell? That's a question we will all wrestle with to some extent. But the question we should ask is this: how could a holy God allow me into His heaven? That's the question that points us to the grace of God in the cross of Christ. In Jesus Christ, God rescues us from that broad road that leads to destruction—eternal destruction, and in Him God puts us on that narrow path that leads to life—eternal life.



A man can't be taken to hell, or sent to hell: you can only get there on your own steam.

C.S. Lewis

Notes:

1. Various terms are used in the Bible to convey this reality with slightly different shades of meaning—e.g., Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, the lake of fire, and the Abyss.
2. Scripture quotations are from the New International Version. Cf. also Matt.13:42, 50; 22:13; 25:30.
3. Matt. 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 23:15, 33.
4. W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (1888), 2.680. Cited in J.I. Packer, “The Problem of Eternal Punishment,” *Crux* 26 no. 3 (1990), 19.
5. The following illustration comes from a sermon preached by John Ortberg in which he attributed the illustration to Hybels: “Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?” (preached at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, CA, April 3, 2005).
6. “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it.” *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 72.
7. Cited in Timothy Keller, *Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 81— from several sources in Lewis.
8. C.S. Lewis refers to this as “The demand of the loveless and the self-imprisoned that they should be allowed to blackmail the universe: that till they consent to be happy (on their own terms) no one else shall taste joy: that theirs should be the final power; that Hell should be able to veto Heaven.” (*Great Divorce*, 120).
9. Cf. Rev. 6:9–11; also, e.g., Ps. 58:10–11; 59:13.



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