

2023
OCTOBER



How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

by Bill Kynes, Ph.D.

*Senior Fellow for Pastoral Theology
at the C.S. Lewis Institute*

The notion that a loving God would send people to hell stands as a stumbling block to many. So why has this doctrine of the eternal punishment been a part of Christian teaching throughout church history? Because followers of Jesus are bound by the teaching of their Master.

Jesus's Teaching on Hell

It is Jesus who forces us to affirm the doctrine of hell. To the religious hypocrites, Jesus declared, "You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matt. 23:33, NIV). Those rejected as subjects of the kingdom, Jesus said, "will be thrown into the outer darkness," where "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12, ESV).

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, NIV 1984). He warned of a wide road that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13). 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, NIV).

Certainly, in speaking of hell, Jesus uses figurative language, but these images were chosen to convey a horrific reality. Fire is an image depicting God's righteous anger poured out against all who opposes His goodness. The image of "outer darkness" depicts hell as a banishment from God's presence—a place of utter loneliness (Matt. 25:10–12; 24:51; 22:13). And hell is spoken of as a place of death and destruction, devoid of the life-giving presence of God, a place of ruin and corruption.

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. In fact, Jesus, who more than anyone reveals the love of God, spoke more about hell than He did about heaven.

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Why Is There a Hell?

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 is 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 tame and domesticated.

Second, hell vindicates justice. The existence of hell testifies forever that in God’s universe righteousness rules, and evil will get its due. 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 (cf. Rev. 6:9–11; also Ps. 58:10–11; 59:13).

Third, the reality of hell is the ultimate testament to human freedom. As C.S. Lewis put it: sin is a human being saying to God throughout their life, “Go away and leave me alone.” Hell is God’s answer: “You may have your wish.” Lewis wrote, “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).

Not that people choose to go to hell; they simply choose the road that leads them there—that wide road that leads to destruction. In turning away from God in subtle ways, little by little their hearts become hardened to the love of God, their ears become deaf to the voice of God, and they refuse to humble themselves before the grace of God. In the end, they reject the rescue that is found in the gospel of God. Hell may be understood as a culmination of the effects of a person’s sin and the confirmation of God’s never-ending 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.

And finally, and perhaps paradoxically, the existence of hell magnifies God’s grace. When Jesus was dying on the cross and cried, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” he was experiencing something of the God-forsakenness of hell itself for sinners. 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 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, hell is the bill God has paid. It is the measure of God’s grace.

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 who in love bore hell itself for us.

A Different Question

How could a loving God send people to hell? That’s a question we will all wrestle with at some point. 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, and He puts us on that narrow path that leads to life—eternal life.