

How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

This is the last week of our Beta series where we are addressing questions or challenges that people have about Christianity. A couple of weeks ago, we talked about the Bible and in part of it, we talked about the fact that there are some things in the Bible that are offensive to many people today. And there's no doubt that there are a few passages that don't seem to pair well with modern belief.

And we said that when we run into something that offends our modern sensibilities, if we're interested in understanding the Bible, then before we throw it out the window, we should consider three things.

The first is that we should consider that *the Bible doesn't teach what we think it teaches*. Second, we should consider that maybe *we don't understand what's it's saying because of our cultural blinders*. And finally, we might even consider that the reason we're offended is because of our own *unexamined assumption that our cultural sensibilities are superior*. The topic we're talking about today, is one of those topics that offends many modern people—it's the topic of *hell*.

The question at the heart of the topic is "*How can a loving God send people to hell?*" Now, the question is actually a little more involved than just that phrasing. For instance, this is only a problem for a religion like Christianity that teaches that God's primary characteristic is love. If that's the case, then at least on the surface, the idea of

hell seems to be inconsistent with the idea of a loving God. If God loves people so much, how could he torture people for all of eternity for living a bad life for 85 years or less?

And yet, the Bible very clearly teaches that God is a God of love and at the same time, it teaches about the reality of hell. Now, we might say, “Well, Jesus is the one who teaches about the *love* of God and it’s the Old Testament and the Apostle Paul that threaten people with hell. The problem is, most of the statements in the Bible were spoken by Jesus. He says things like in Matthew 5, **“If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” (29)**

In Matthew 10, he tells his disciples, **“do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (28)** Those are big threats!

This the same Jesus who said, **“God *loved* the world so much that he gave his one and only Son...” (John 3:16)** So, before we throw the Bible out the window, I want to apply some of these tests to the doctrine of hell and see if we can find hell plausible.

First, let’s start with our cultural sensibilities. Now, it’s tempting to say that we live in a culture that loves unconditional love. Most of us think about it that way. Even secular people—most of whom believe in God—would say that God is love. *“So, people say, we can’t believe in hell because we like the kind of God who affirms everyone in everything*

they do.” We’re the society that invest the slogans, “Love wins,” “Love is love,” and “Love is all you need.”

But we don’t believe it. You see, if you take a close look at our society you’ll find that we also believe very strongly in *justice*. Now, ultimately, what I want you to see is that justice and love aren’t opposites, they go hand in hand. In fact, I would go so far as to say that *love without justice isn’t loving and justice without love, isn’t just.*

The other day, I saw this feature on the news. [Lynching Memorial video] The thought of a black man being lynched for drinking from a white drinking fountain has to be one of the most heart-breaking things we can imagine. What an awful time in our country’s history. And yet for many of those precious people, justice never came—and it won’t—at least not on earth.

Well, I don’t think you can believe in a God of love that doesn’t somehow make things right in the end. Karma doesn’t get everyone and if you know anything about history, you’ll know that justice isn’t always done here on earth. So, if God is there and God is love, then justice must be done *after* this life, which is a pretty good case for something like heaven and hell.

But some people will say, “Well, belief in hell will ultimately lead people to take justice into their own hands.” Belief in hell fuels hatred, violence and disdain for the people we deem bound for hell. That’s the thought, anyway.

Yale Theologian, Miroslav Volf says the opposite is true. Volf grew up as a Croatian in a tense Yugoslavia and knew first-hand the ethnic tensions between the Serbs and Croats that evolved into ethnic cleansing in the early 90's. He says he came to see that "an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth" wasn't workable because both sides can only see the wrongs from their own perspective and always believe the other side's sins are worse than theirs. That inevitably leads to escalating violence.

Volf says only belief in a God of justice will free us from taking vengeance. *"The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God...it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results from the belief in] God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die."*

Earlier, we read Jesus' parable from Matthew 13 of the weeds among the wheat. When the servants saw the weeds, they asked their master if they should pull the weeds. And this was his reply, **"²⁹No...because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn."**

Volf and Jesus are making the same point. The belief that God has the perfect perspective with which to judge allows us not to have to take on that role. In fact, the Bible forbids us from judging *precisely* because one day God *will* judge.

That's why we read in Romans 12, **"¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone...¹⁹Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."**

Even our best justice will be imperfect because our perspective is skewed. But our ability to resist escalating violence and our ability forgive rather than seek revenge *has* to be grounded in the belief that a God of perfect judgment will take of that.

Now, someone might say, *"OK, I get it. I'm at least open to the idea that divine judgement is good and maybe necessary. But I can't accept the idea of God torturing people in hell for eternity because of a short life here on earth."* This is the issue of proportionality—punishment must fit the crime. It's a valid point. So, let's shift gears and consider that *maybe the Bible doesn't say what we think it says.*

First, let me start by saying that proportionality is a Biblical idea. For instance, the book of Exodus contains the Laws given to Moses for the Israelites. These were not just *religious laws* or *personal* guidelines, they were the laws of the nation. One example is Exodus 21, **"²²If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. ²³But if there is serious injury, you are**

to take life for life, ²⁴eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

We look at this and today say this is barbaric. *You mean that if there's a fight and someone loses an eye, they were required to take the perpetrator's eye?* Actually, no. The law wasn't intended to *require* an eye for an eye it was intended to limit the punishment someone could exact.

Like we said, we humans aren't good at judging when we're even. Growing up we even had a saying, *"I don't get even, I get ahead!"* This is what fuels road rage—if someone drives too slow, I want to run them off the road. The human tendency is to escalate, so we need limits and that's what this Law was intended to do.

Now, why do I bring that up? Well, I bring it up to show you that this objection is a Biblical idea. Is it reasonable that God would exact an eternal punishment for temporal sins? If the Bible teaches proportional punishment, how does this work?

When people make this objection, they have in mind the view of hell we call Eternal Conscious Torment, which has been by far the most common view of hell throughout church history. And there are a couple of ways people who hold to this view answer this charge.

The first is to say, "If God is God, he can do whatever he wants. So, if God deems it just to torture people for all of eternity for one short lifetime of sin, who am I to disagree?" Ultimately, that's true. I am not God's judge and it would be arrogant for me

to say that just because I can't think of a good reason God can't have a good reason. But the question is, "Can we think of any reasons why this would be fair?"

Well, one would be to point out that the duration of the punishment is never determined by how long it takes to commit the crime. It's the *severity* that matters. A murder might take two seconds, but the punishment will be *years* in prison. So, we can say that sin against an *eternal* God deserves an *eternal* punishment. Not only that, but people in hell will not be repentant, but defiant, adding to their sin for all of eternity.

Now, that works logically. But for some people it doesn't work emotionally or intuitively. And while emotions and intuition aren't everything, we pay attention to them because they can often tell us when something isn't quite right. And this is the case for many people when it comes to Eternal Conscious Torment. So, how do we respond? Well, let me mention a couple of alternate views that I believe also work.

The first is a view known as "Conditionalism" or "Annihilationism." This view says that hell is real, that it's punishment by God for sin, but the punishment isn't torture for all of eternity, but it's *spiritual death*. Some Conditionalists say that people who reject God will be punished for the appropriate time and then cease to exist, others say that when they die, they just die.

Probably the greatest strength of this position is that there is a lot of Biblical evidence for it. For instance, when Scripture talks about judgment, it uses words like *death* and *destruction*. For instance, the famous verse John 3:16, Jesus says, "¹⁶**For God**

so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not *perish* but have eternal life.” Now, what does the word “perish mean?” Does it mean tortured for all eternity? When you perish, you’re dead. You’re gone.

Romans 6:23 tells us “**the wages of sin is *death*, but the gift of God is eternal *LIFE* through Jesus Christ, our Lord.**” In Matthew 10, Jesus says to his followers, “**Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to *destroy* both soul and body in hell.**” (28) He’s not *torturing* the soul, he’s *destroying* it. This view solves the problem of proportion and it’s thoroughly Biblical.

From the perspective of a Christian, the biggest problem with this view is that while it’s found in church history, the overwhelming view of the church has been Eternal Conscious Torment.

But there’s another possibility that also fits Biblically, even though it’s not explicitly stated. And it’s very compelling for people who struggle with the idea of hell. It’s known as the “Choice Model.” This is the view that C.S. Lewis articulates in “Mere Christianity,” the “Problem of Pain” and his fascinating book called, “The Great Divorce.” The Choice Model says that God doesn’t *send* people to hell kicking and screaming, but people *choose* hell. But of course, you’re probably asking, “Why would anyone *choose* hell?”

Growing up I was always taught the definition of sin as “willingly transgressing a known law of God.” That’s a very neat and clean definition. When I lie, that’s a mark against me. The problem is that sin is never that simple.

In Genesis, chapter 4, we find the story of Cain and Abel—the sons of Adam and Eve. Abel was the younger brother who offered a better sacrifice than Cain, which made Cain want to kill Abel. But before he does, God knows his heart and this is what he says to him, **“⁶Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”**

You see, the Bible doesn't describe sin as a willful choice made in a vacuum. There's no ledger that adds up your good deeds and subtracts your bad deeds and if you end up on the plus side you get to go to heaven and if you end up on the negative side God sends you to hell.

Instead, it talks about sin as a *power* over us. Maybe you can relate to the Apostle Paul in Romans, chapter 7, where he writes, **“¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.”** If you've experienced addiction, you know this. You know you shouldn't do it; and you hate yourself when you; and yet you continue to do it. Why do you do it? Because it has a *power* over you and if you don't get a handle on it, it will escalate and consume you.

Here's how Lewis says it: *“There are a good many things which would not be worth bothering about if I were going to live only seventy years, but which I had better bother about very seriously if I am going to live forever. Perhaps my bad temper or my jealousy*

are gradually getting worse—so gradually that the increase in seventy years will not be very noticeable. But it might be absolute hell in a millions years: in fact, if Christianity is true, Hell is the precisely correct technical term for what it would be.”

Now Scripture does talk about God directly punishing people, but we also see passages like Romans 1, where Paul is talking about wicked people, **“²⁴Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.”**

In that passage, Paul uses the phrase, “God gave them over...” two more times. In other words, God *allows* them to have what they want. They want to worship created things, OK, but understand where that leads. Hell is the ultimate tribute to free will.

Again, here’s C.S. Lewis:

“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. Without that self-choice there could be no hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it.”

So, now, it’s possible that you might say, “OK, so maybe—maybe, I’m coming to accept that hell could be a real thing, so I should start trying harder to be a good person or start to be more religious.” But the Bible doesn’t say that just being more religious or being a good person will keep you out of hell.

The reason is that the core of sin is self-centeredness. Sin happens when you choose to build your life—try to find your worth in—something other than the God who created you. It can start out as something good; your job, your family, a romantic relationship. It might be talent or the fact that you're knowledgeable and well-read. These are all good things, but they were never meant to define us—they're not what make us. Whatever you find your identity in will have the tendency to consume you.

If you find your identity in your job, you're worthless unless you succeed. If you find your identity in your family, you'll be devastated if your kids don't turn out the way you want. In fact, you might become hell for your kids because you'll smother them if they're not living according to your plan.

But the same thing can happen with religion—in fact this is a particular danger with religious people. That's why when Jesus warns people of hell, he's almost always warning religious people. Now, why would he warn religious people about hell? They're the ones doing the right things. But, for many people, rather than building their identity on career success or money, they're building it on their moral goodness.

It's not easy to spot because you look great on the outside, but inside it can be just as destructive because pride in your own moral performance will send you down the path to hell as much as any of these other things and you don't even think you're doing it. In fact, the Bible tells us that there will even be some people who are surprised they're on the road to hell.

We call this self-righteousness and it's ugly because it inevitably leads to comparing yourself to others and the feeling that if I do all the right things then I *deserve* heaven.

"God has to let me into heaven. He owes me! Look at me!" That's the ultimate arrogance.

And it's not Christianity. It's certainly not the teaching of Jesus. But what takes you off the path to hell is a deep sense of gratitude to God. You see, the Apostle's Creed, which is our statement of basic Christian faith says that when Jesus was crucified, "he descended to hell." Well, what's that all about? Well, first of all, it shows us that Jesus loves us so much that he was willing to experience the agony of hell and separation from God for our sake. What the worst person felt because of their sin, Jesus felt.

And second, *he did it to forgive us*. If sin against an eternal God requires an eternal consequence, the forgiveness also requires an eternal solution. Here's how the Theologian John Stott says it, "*The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We...put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God...puts himself where we deserve to be.*"

When we know that and we live our lives as a response of gratitude to Jesus, we identify with him and we no longer have to prove our worth to ourselves, to people or to God. We can simply be the real people we were created to be. We are restored to wholeness and we're taken from the path that leads to disintegration and separation from God—the path to hell—and we're turned around and put back on the right path.