

I've Got Issues: "If God is so loving, how can God send anyone to hell?"

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Matthew 13:40-42, Luke 16:19-31

Another big issue raised by skeptics of Christianity is the whole idea of hell: *"If God is so loving as you say, how can God send anyone to hell?"* That's a good question – a fair question. It's a tough topic for pastors to deal with. I think of the minister had just given a sermon on hell. As a woman shook his hand at the door after the service, she said, *"Reverend, I never knew what hell was really like until I heard you preach!"*

Clearly, the notion of eternal punishment in hell is a huge stumbling block for many. C.S. Lewis noted that the doctrine of hell is *'one of the chief grounds on which Christianity is attacked as barbarous and the goodness of God is impugned...'* Contemporary atheists like Richard Dawkins cites this vision of reality as further evidence that Christianity is essentially a religion of terror and abuse. Christopher Hitchens, author of the book God is not Great, believes the whole idea of hell is sufficient reason in itself to reject both religion and God.

None of us likes contemplating hell. We all wonder about it – although I have to say that the average person is not particularly preoccupied with hell - or with heaven for that matter; it is not, excuse the pun, on the front burner of everyone's attention these days.

I took a seminary class last week. We were discussing some of the huge changes going in our society today and the impact of those changes on the Christian church and the way we do mission. The professor made an interesting observation: he said that with the advent of antibiotics, people think far less about the afterlife. And it's true when you think about it. Before antibiotics, life was much more uncertain. Life spans were short, death came more abruptly. People who seemed to be healthy one day, would be gone the next. Women frequently died in childbirth; Caesarian births were extremely dangerous because of the onset of sepsis. This reality caused one to think a lot about what awaited one beyond this life. Heaven and hell were vivid realities, especially during the Middle Ages – where the plague carried off thousands upon thousands of souls – indeed, a third of the population of Europe.

Heaven and hell are still vital concerns – don't get me wrong. I am simply saying we are living longer and we tend not to dwell on the afterlife, busy as we are with this life - unless, of course, you find yourself or a loved one at death's door. Since these things have to do with our ultimate destiny, it surely behooves us to think about them more than we do.

So what are we to make of the notion of hell? Let's turn up the heat a little bit.

Let me begin by saying Christians believe that hell exists, and no one in their right mind would want to go there.

The Bible – and Jesus in particular - affirms its reality.

- In his Sermon on the Mount, for instance, Jesus warns against the selfish passions of lust and covetousness: “If your right eye [or right hand] causes you to sin, [get rid of it] 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” (Matt. 5:29-30).
- In his Parable of the Sheep and Goats, Jesus contrasts the fate of those who care for the poor and the powerless with those who don’t: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance.’ Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matt. 25:34,41).
- In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus pictures those who have faithfully invested in his service as going on to “joy.” But of the one who has peevishly hoarded what he has, the Master says: “Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:30).
- In the Parable of the Weeds, Jesus says: “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt. 13:40-42).

And there are many other passages. In other words, the reality of hell was central in the teaching of Jesus, and we can’t just throw those things out because we don’t like to think about it. Christians believe hell exists, and it’s a destination no one would want to book on expedia.com.

If Jesus taught the reality of hell, what did he mean by it? What is hell? Is it a torture chamber where God delights in watching people writhe before the flames in eternal agony? You have all seen the ghoulish and gruesome images of hell in art and literature down through the ages. We see those images in Dante’s *Inferno*. The 18th century Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards used this imagery to good effect in his sermons:

The pit is prepared. The fire is made ready. The furnace is now hot, ready to receive them. The flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit has opened her mouth under them. . . . O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in.

Hell is indeed a scary place to be, and artists have drawn from the images Jesus himself used. But here is a very important thing to keep in mind: when Jesus was talking about hell, he was using vivid figures of speech. The Bible uses all kinds of metaphors to describe hell, and they are contradictory if you take them literally. For example, hell is described as a place of total darkness, but also of fire (which of course, throws off light). It is described as a “pit” but also as a “lake burning with brimstone” - and so on. These figures of speech have one goal in mind – to impress upon us that hell is a very bad place indeed. In fact, “hell” in Greek, is *ghenna*. *Gehenna* was a valley outside of Jerusalem which was used as the city’s major garbage dump. The dump was a place where trash was burned and it was always therefore smoldering. It was the worst place you could think of. It was a place of disintegration and destruction.

We ought not to think of hell as a literal torture chamber. But figures of speech do make a literal point and here is the thing: hell is a place of utter heartbreak and anguish; it is a terrible place for hell is about separation from God, and from all who know and love him. Hell is to be cut off from God and from the source of all joy. Some folks are so lost in their selfishness and sin, that they would rather live apart from God for all eternity. And God, who always honors human freedom, let's them have their way.

Valynn, Stephen and I attended Taproot Theater's recent dramatic production of C.S. Lewis' The Great Divorce. The play and the book upon which it is based is an imaginary tale of a busload of people from hell who have an opportunity to enter heaven. Hell is pictured as a lonely, gray town trapped in twilight, where the houses are built at a huge distance from one another, yet people are continually moving farther away from each other. (Hell, you see, is to live in splendid isolation, cut off from others and from God himself.) When these folks from hell reach the outskirts of heaven and get off the bus, each of them is given an opportunity to enter if they forego whatever precious sin they are hugging to themselves. One by one, each of the ghosts from hell refuses to let go of whatever it is that is so important to them, making denials and excuses and rationalizations. They somehow believe that if they were to worship and glorify God, they would lose their power and their freedom, however they define it. (Ironically, they are actually enslaved by their sin and are anything but free – but they don't get it.) In the end they have it their way. The voyagers to heaven get back on the bus and go back to hell. Amazingly, people actually choose to live in hell. In other words, and this is a key point – God doesn't send anyone to hell; they send themselves there. They choose in essence to worship themselves. They refuse God's love. They refuse to give up whatever goods they are clinging to for the greatest good. They remain self-absorbed eternally – and end up an infinite distance away from God and from everyone else for that matter, isolated in darkness. They miss the purpose for which they were created. They are no longer in a place where they can receive true joy or love. They will never be able to see the face of God.

There was a line in that play (and in the book) that got my attention – *“Hell is the greatest monument to human freedom.”* It is a thought that echoes GK Chesterton, who said, *“Hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice.”* God so honors humanity that he gives them the freedom not to choose him. And so, as C.S. Lewis put it, *“There are only two kinds of people – those who say ‘Thy will be done’ to God or those to whom God in the end says, ‘Thy will be done.’”* *“All that are in Hell choose it,”* says Lewis. *“Without that self-choice it wouldn't be Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it...”*

We can experience hell in this life, of course – not just the next. One of the common images of hell, as I have said, is fire, and fire disintegrates things. Even in this life the fires of hell can eat away at us- the soul begins to disintegrate as we become more and more self-centered. We see it all the time – selfishness and self-absorption leads to bitterness, envy, anxiety... destroying relationships. Marriages dissolve. Friendships break down. Community is spoiled. Self-centered, self-absorbed people have a way of making life hell for everyone else.

Timothy Keller, in his fine book, *The Reason for God*, writes, “*What if when we die we don’t end, but spiritually our life extends on into eternity. Hell, then, is the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever...*”ⁱⁱ

And that is the story of the rich man in the parable that Jesus tells:

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In hell,^a where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

²⁵ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

³⁰ “ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

³¹ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ” ¹

The rich man, who was totally self-absorbed in this life, ignoring the poor man sitting at his gate, winds up in hell, and is just as self-absorbed as ever. Even in hell, he expects Lazarus to be his servant and treats him as his water boy. He does not ask to get out of hell, yet he implies that he was a victim – God never gave him and his family enough information about the afterlife. If he knew more about what hell was like, he just might have changed his tune. So God is to blame. The rich man is totally blind to reality. Commentators have noted that the rich man, unlike Lazarus, is never given a personal name, which seems to suggest that he has built his very identity on his wealth rather than on God, and that has led to his terrible predicament. He is a long way from God.

Keller says that “*hell is simply one’s freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity*”ⁱⁱⁱ and it’s a trajectory that brings disintegration and torment – in this life and the next.

The Bible does say that hell is a place of torment. It’s interesting to note that the gnashing of teeth that the Jesus talks about actually describes not physical pain as most think, but rather spiritual pain (emotional and psychological agony). It denotes a state of anger or the realization of great loss... it’s an expression of rage at realizing that one has made a huge mistake. Self-absorbed, self-centered, highly narcissistic people invariably get angry when they don’t get their way, and that’s the kind of people you find in hell. Hell is the loss of everything – it is the absence of God and the absence of joy. It is to end up

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

in the dung heap. But it was their choice. The punishment of hell is the anguish and torment of realizing that it could have been very different.

You and I have to think about the trajectory of our own lives. Every day we are making thousands of little choices that are shaping our character – choices that are moving us closer to heaven or to hell. By the way we live our lives, you and I are either preparing ourselves for being in God’s presence and enjoying him for eternity, or we are preparing ourselves for an existence where we try to make ourselves the center of the universe and don’t give a darn about God or anyone else.

It’s our choice. Heaven is to be with God. Hell is to be without him. God desires that every human being should join him in heaven.

I do know this: no one who sincerely seeks after God; no one who puts his or her faith and trust in Jesus Christ, need ever fear hell:

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,^f that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ²

ⁱ Lewis, The Great Divorce; 69

ⁱⁱ Keller, The Reason for God, 77

ⁱⁱⁱ Keller, 78

² *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.