

HELL: THE HORRIBLE CHOICE

By
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The Importance of Understanding the Doctrine of Hell

Why study the doctrine of hell? Most Christians try to avoid the subject. However, this is an important doctrine for Christians to understand especially as we share our faith in a postmodern culture that disdains this teaching. Dr. Peter Kreeft and Ron Tacelli write:

Of all the doctrines in Christianity, hell is probably the most difficult to defend, the most burdensome to believe and the first to be abandoned. The critic's case against it seems very strong, and the believer's duty to believe it seems unbearable.... Heaven is far more important than hell, we know much more about it, and it is meant to occupy our mind much more centrally. But in a battle an army must rush to defend that part of the line which is most attacked or which seems the weakest. Though other doctrines are more important than this one, this one is not unimportant or dispensable.¹

Several critics of Christianity who grew up in the church eventually abandoned the faith. Many of them cite the teaching on hell as a key factor. Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote in his work, *Why I am not a Christian*:

I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture: and the Christ of the Gospels, if you could take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.²

Charles Darwin grew up and was baptized in the Church of England. Despite his rejection of Christianity, he was buried in Westminster Abbey. Darwin pointed to the doctrine of hell as one of the significant reasons for his abandonment of the faith. He stated in his autobiography:

I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not

¹ Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 282.

² Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1957), 17 – 18.

believe, and this would include my father, brother and almost all my friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.³

I am sure that many of us have friends who find the Bible's teaching on hell to be offensive and use this doctrine to paint the God of the Bible as a cruel and vindictive Being. However, most unbelievers' attacks of this doctrine are built on a false understanding of hell. Christians also have difficulty defending the justice of hell with the love of God because we lack a proper understanding of what the Bible teaches. In this series, I will present the biblical teaching on hell so that we can present a sound response when challenged.

Descriptions of Hell

There are several ways hell is described in the Bible. In Matthew 8:12 it is described as a place of eternal outer darkness. Mark 9:43-48 describes hell as a perpetually burning dump. In Luke 16:28, Jesus described hell as a place of anguish and regret. 1 Peter 3:19 describes hell as a prison. Jude 12 and 13 liken hell to a waterless cloud and a wandering star. A cloud ought to provide hope of water, but a waterless cloud only provides a false hope. A star in the sky guides travelers and gives them a direction; a wandering star serves no purpose. Revelation 20:1-3 describes hell as a bottomless pit.

Where is hell located? Heaven, or God's dwelling, is often described as being above while hell is described as being down below. Philippians 2:10 describes it as being below the earth. Matthew 8:12 and 22:13 describe it as a place of outer darkness. It is outside heaven where the people of God dwell. Revelation 22:15 describes hell as being outside the gates of the heavenly city. These descriptions do not have to be understood as speaking merely in a spatial sense. They can also be understood in a relational context in which hell is a place away from God's intimate presence.

Is hell everlasting? Psalm 90:1 teaches that God will endure forever. God cannot tolerate evil, and it must therefore be separated from Him forever. Also, heaven is everlasting. Since heaven is eternal, and the souls of men and women are eternal, hell is also eternal. The unredeemed will be quarantined forever from heaven and the intimate presence of God. Daniel 12:2 states, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Revelation 20:10 - 15 states that the punishment will be "forever and ever." These verses teach that hell is neither a place of temporal punishment nor annihilation. Rather, hell is a place of conscious existence where those without Christ will dwell forever.

The Nature of Hell

³ Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, with original omissions restored. Edited by Nora Darwin Barlow (N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1993), 87.

How can a loving God torture people in hell for eternity? This is the dilemma often presented by skeptics as a reason to reject Christianity. This question, however, is based on an incorrect view of hell and, as a result, creates a false picture of God. Answering this challenge requires the proper understanding of the nature of hell.

Hell is primarily a place of eternal separation from God. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 states that those without God "... will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power." To be separated from God is to be separated from all that is good. A person in hell is separated from all the joy, love, and meaning for which he was created. Instead of knowing God as a loving father, he will know God as judge (Romans 2: 5-8). That is the primary attribute of God an unbeliever will know for eternity.

Many, including Christians, believe that God tortures people in hell. However, it is significant that in the New Testament, hell is not described as a place of torture but rather a place of torment (Luke 16:23-28, Revelation 14:11). *Torture* is inflicted against one's will; in contrast, *torment* is self-inflicted by one's own will. Torment comes from the mental and physical anguish of knowing we used our freedom for evil and chose wrongly. The anguish results from the sorrow and shame of the judgment of being forever away from God and all that is meaningful and joyful. Everyone in hell will comprehend that the pain they are suffering is self-induced. It is not a place where people are forced against their will to undergo agonizing pain even though unbelievers often use this image to portray God as a cruel and vindictive Being. In fact, the flames of hell are generated by the unbelief of the individual who has rejected God. The true torment of hell is that the individual who chooses not to love God now must live with the sorrow of being aware of all that was lost.

One of the most severe punishments leveled on a criminal is the sentence of solitary confinement. One of the reasons this is a feared sentence is that the guilty person is left to sit alone in their cell as they live with the regret and sorrow of their crime. There is no one to comfort or minister to them. Pain comes from within the person as they wrestle alone with their thoughts, emotions, and guilt. It must be a horrible to dwell alone in the awareness that what could have been is now lost forever as a result of one's own choosing.

Such is the anguish of hell. The pain comes from the regret of all that was lost. A person experiences separation from God, the ultimate good. This is why hell is such a horrible place and a horrible choice.

Why Hell is Necessary and Just

Is hell necessary? How is this doctrine consistent with a God of love? These are questions I encounter when I speak on the fate of unbelievers. The necessity and justice of hell can be appreciated when we better understand the nature of God and the nature of man.

First of all, hell is necessary because God's justice requires it. Our culture focuses primarily on God's nature of love, mercy, and grace. However, God is also just and holy, and these two attributes must be kept in balance. Justice demands retribution, the distribution of rewards and punishments in a fair way. God's holiness demands that He separate himself entirely from sin and evil (Habakkuk 1:13). However, evil is not

always punished in this earthly realm. The author of Psalm 73 struggles with the dilemma of the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked. Joseph Stalin was responsible for the death of millions in the Soviet Union, but he died peacefully in his sleep, never having been punished for his deeds. Since evil often goes unpunished in this lifetime, it must be dealt with at a future time to fulfill God's justice and holiness.

A second reason hell is necessary is that God's love requires it. Love does not force itself on an individual but instead respects the possible rejection of love. Those who do not wish to love God must be allowed *not* to do so. Forcing oneself upon another is to dishonor the dignity and right of that individual. Those who do not want to be with God in this lifetime will not be forced to be with Him for all eternity. It is important to understand that heaven is where God dwells and as the Lord of all creation, He is the heart and focus of heaven. His glory fills the entire realm, and inhabitants of heaven will be in His immediate and intimate presence for eternity. One cannot be in heaven and *not* know the presence of God. Therefore, those who do not want to be with God in this lifetime will not be forced to be in His presence for all eternity. Instead, God will honor their desires and let them dwell apart from Him ... in hell. Love honors the right of the other person to reject love.

Third, God's sovereignty requires hell. If there is no hell, there would be no final victory over evil. If there were no ultimate separation of good from evil, good would not ultimately triumph, and God would not be in ultimate control. God declares He will have victory over evil (1 Corinthians 15:24-28 and Revelation 20-22). God will defeat evil by eternally quarantining it from that which is good.

The biblical teaching on hell fulfills the justice, holiness, and sovereignty of God and remains consistent with His character of love.

Why Is Hell Necessary and Just: Part II

Hell is also necessary because of the nature of man. Human depravity requires hell. The only just punishment for sin against the eternal God is eternal punishment. God is absolutely perfect, and mankind is sinful.

Romans 3:23 states that all are guilty of sin and fall far short of God's perfect standard. Sinful, unrepentant man cannot stand before a holy and perfect God. In order for God to maintain His perfection and the perfection of heaven, sin must be accounted for. For those who have received the gift of God's grace, sin has been cleansed by the payment of Christ's life. Those who have rejected Christ remain guilty of sin. Heaven cannot be a perfect paradise if sin is present. Therefore, man's sin requires separation from God.

We must also remember that in God there is a perfect balance of justice and mercy. The mercy of God is not an emotion that overwhelms His justice. That kind of mercy would make him weak, inconsistent with His nature, and thus unfit to be a righteous judge. The penalty of sin must be dealt with in a just manner. Those without Christ have not been cleansed from sin. Heaven is a place where sin no longer exists. God cannot allow sin into the kingdom of heaven and, therefore, those who remain in sin cannot enter.

I remember walking through an orphanage in the Philippines. We toured the rooms where infants were cared for. In one area, some infants were quarantined from the rest. I looked at the sad faces of the infants who could not be approached and instead had to remain isolated behind a glass window because they were carrying a contagious and infectious disease. As much as I wanted to enter the room and care for one of these infants, I could not do so until their sickness was taken care of; otherwise, they would have contaminated the entire orphanage. Such is the nature of sin. As much as God wants to reach out to us and invite us into His presence, those who have rejected Christ's sacrifice remain in sin and cannot enter into the presence of a holy and perfect heaven. Sin and evil must be quarantined outside of heaven.

Second, human dignity requires hell. God created us as free moral creatures, and He will not force people into His presence if they do not want to be there. If one chooses not to be with God in his lifetime, God will respect that decision. In Matthew 23:37-39, Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel because they rejected their savior and were thus not willing to accept the love of God. Verse 37 reads, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." Christ as Lord of creation could have forced His will on His creatures but instead respected their decision even though doing so broke His heart.

My grandfather suffered a stroke as the result of high blood pressure, cholesterol, and a few other ailments. While in the hospital, the doctors recommended a diet and treatment program. However, he found the diet and treatment not to his liking. The doctor explained the treatment and ramifications if my grandfather did not change his lifestyle. My grandfather chose not to follow the doctor's prescription. Even though the doctor knew the serious consequences that would follow, he respected my grandfather's wish and allowed him to return home. In the same way, although God knows the consequences of our choice, He respects our dignity and honors our decision.

Romans 1 states that all have had an opportunity to respond to God's invitation and are therefore without excuse. Human beings are created in God's image and are creatures of incredible value. God is not a vindictive Creator who annihilates beings of value because they have rejected His love. Instead He respects their decision, honors their dignity, and allows them to dwell eternally apart from Him as they had previously chosen while on earth.

God's attributes of justice, love, and sovereignty along with the nature and dignity of man require that there be a hell.

How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

I was recently enjoying a discussion with an atheist named Gus. After I answered most of his objections, he paused for a moment of contemplation. He then leaned over the table and said, "I find it hard to believe in a God of love who says, 'Love me, or I will throw you into the fire!'"

This statement represents a common misunderstanding. God does not send anyone to hell; people *choose* to go there. I explained that God is a loving God, and His earnest desire is that all turn from sin and receive His gift of eternal life. 2 Peter 3:9

states, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” God desires all to be saved and has made the way possible by sending His Son to die in our place. His invitation to eternal life is given to all people.

Since God’s desire is that all be saved, and since He has made this possible for all people, God cannot bear the blame for people going to hell. People go to hell because they knowingly choose to reject His love. C.S. Lewis said, “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.’ ”⁴

God’s love also keeps Him from imposing His will on individuals. If a person does not want to be with God in this lifetime, He will not force that person to be with Him for all eternity. In other words, the door of hell is locked from the inside by the one who did not choose God while on earth.

After a brief moment, Gus asked, “Do people really have a choice since the Bible states that we are all born sinners and cannot help but sin?” I acknowledged that we are born in sin (Psalm 51) and have a bent to sin. However, our sin nature does not force us to sin. We are sinners, and it is inevitable that we will disobey God. However, since every act of disobedience to God involves a choice we make, we can avoid sinning and often do so even though we can choose to sin. In a similar way, although we are on path to destruction, we can decide to get off that path and choose life.

Some wonder if predestination negates a person’s ability to choose eternal life with God. There are various views on this doctrine but none negate our responsibility to repent. God holds us accountable for our decisions, and this responsibility implies the ability to respond. Although we, as finite beings, may not fully comprehend this doctrine, we are not excused from the choice we must all make regarding Christ.

Objections to Hell

Objection 1: Hell is overkill

While I was in Asia, I met a young man named Lee. Over tea we enjoyed a delightful discussion about what happens after death. After I shared the gospel with Lee, he paused and asked a very insightful question. He looked at me with concern and asked, “Isn’t sending a person to eternal damnation for temporal sins overkill? Why condemn a person eternally for a sin they did in their lifetime? Does the punishment fit the crime?”

The answer is that the length or duration of the criminal act is not the issue but rather it is the nature of the crime that determines the sentence. Minor crimes require lighter sentences while more serious crimes require harsher sentences. A murder taking place within only a few seconds may receive a lifetime sentence; meanwhile a bank robbery taking weeks to plan and execute may receive a shorter sentence. In other words, the severity of the crime is not related to the length of time it took to commit, but rather the nature of the crime itself. Another factor is that the heinous nature of any crime is measured by the worth or dignity of the person it is committed against. The higher the

⁴C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan), 69.

perceived worth, dignity, and innocence of the victim, the more severe the penalty. For example, a death of a child who is caught in the crossfire of rival criminals is more tragic and punished more severely than the death of a drug dealer shot in a drug deal gone awry. Sin against an infinite and eternal God is infinitely evil and worthy of infinite punishment.

Objection 2: Why not rehabilitate those in hell?

Another objection often raised is, “Why punish people in hell? Why not redeem them?” God does not try to reform people in hell. He instead waits during our lifetime for us to repent and turn to Him. Therefore, hell is reserved for the unrepentant and unreformable; it is not for anyone who can be reformed. If those in hell did not want to be with God during their earthly lives, He will not force them to be with Him for eternity. God cannot force free creatures to be reformed because forced reformation would be worse than punishment. Humans are not objects to be manipulated; they have free will which is to be respected. People are punished for wicked choices because they are free and could have chosen differently (Romans 1:18). The actions of those in hell, **weeping and gnashing of teeth**, are not the actions of a repentant heart. If an earthly lifetime in the grace of God could not turn one to Him, we should not expect being in hell away from God’s grace would yield a different result.

When I was a young pastor, one of my college students came to me deeply troubled because she was sexually involved with a much older man. My answer to her was quite simple: End the relationship because it is neither healthy nor safe and is leading you down a very destructive path. However, she rejected my advice and continued to see this older man. I finally spoke with both parties and ordered the older man to leave her alone. However, she continued to go out with this man. I knew what was best and cared for her welfare, and she knew what was right. However, I could not force her to make the right choice, nor could I force her to receive the help she needed. As painful as it was for me to witness, I had to respect her decision as an adult to continue the relationship.

Love does not force another to reform if the other party does not wish to do so. God exhorts us to turn from sin and receive His gift, but He will not force us to change and accept His renewing work if we do not want to.

Objection 3: How can we be happy in heaven knowing a loved one is in hell?

This is one of the most difficult questions I am asked. In addressing this question we must first understand that God’s love is infinitely greater than ours, and yet He is joyful in heaven even though he knows many are in hell. He is infinitely more loving, caring, and knowledgeable than we will ever be, yet His joy is not diminished. Although we may not fully understand how this is possible for God, we will learn from Him as we see things through His perspective and share in His joy.

Second, we would not be joyful in heaven if we knew others were unjustly kept out. However, those in hell did not *want* to be in heaven. We know this because they did not choose to Christ while on earth. To illustrate, we can enjoy eating while others are starving *if* they initially rejected our offers to share our food. God’s free gift of eternal life was offered to all people, and those who rejected it did so by their own will. They

did not want to be with God on earth; thus, the worst thing that could happen is to force them to be with God for eternity. Remember that unbelievers who want to be away from God in their lifetime would not want to be with Him for all eternity. Forcing someone to be with God for eternity would be hell for them.

Third, we will see things from a different perspective. We will be eternal and know fully. From this perspective, we will understand why things are the way they are. My understanding of justice when I was a child has changed dramatically now that I am an adult. In the same way, our perspective from an eternal and glorified state will be different from that which we now understand in our limited present state.

Fourth, if we believe that we could not be joyful in heaven while others are in hell, our joy is essentially in someone else's control. C.S. Lewis stated:

What some people say on earth is that final loss of one soul gives the lie to all the joy of those who are saved. 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 not one else shall taste joy: that theirs should be the final power: that hell should be able to veto heaven [is invalid].⁵

Our joy rests on the will of God not on the decisions made by others.

Finally, since the Bible teaches that Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6, Acts 4:12), we must pray for the salvation of our loved ones. Knowing that we all face an eternal destiny should motivate us to share the good news of Jesus Christ with those we love and care about.

Conclusion

Hell balances the love of God with the justice of God. The cross demonstrates the greatness of God's love. God entered into creation as a man and suffered the humiliation of death upon the cross. Jesus Christ left heaven to endure and share in the suffering and pain brought about by those He created. He chose to enter into our suffering and die for our sin, and the cross both demonstrated His love and fulfilled His justice. Those who reject this gift in this lifetime make the horrible choice to be separated from God for all eternity. The true tragedy is that all who go to hell could have avoided going there had they not made the horrible choice to live eternally apart from God's presence and holiness.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, (New York: Macmillan 1946), 124.

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