

How Can A Loving God Send People To Hell?  
Apologetics Sunday School, 2/1/15  
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Welcome to Week 5 of Apologetics! In the past two weeks we've talked about the problem of evil and the problem of suffering. If you've been tracking well with those discussions, today might be a cinch. But this is a very tough topic: "How Can A Loving God Send People To Hell?"

And, essentially, if your goal in a conversation with a non-Christian who doesn't believe in hell at all is to move them to completely believing in the existence and justification of hell, there's very little chance you'll accomplish that. I think we have to lower our goals. I think you can:

- 1) give a plausible, intelligent explanation that at least allows people to respect your position/entertain the possibility that it's true; at least understand the Bible's teaching and clear up misunderstandings
- 2) convince Christians that have already accepted tons of other parts of the Christian faith (most importantly that the Scriptures are real) that hell, as presented in the Bible, is a reality

A non-Christian's view of hell:

"...the idea that the end result of rejecting God's love will be a slow-roasting eternal torture session with Jesus at the controls, is almost asinine. This is not the Jesus we find in the New Testament."  
-Benjamin L. Corey, TIME magazine

A liberal Christian's view of hell:

Rob Bell, a former pastor in Michigan who had a huge church and spoke at all the conferences until he came out as a quasi-universalist in a book called *Love Wins*. He said, "The preaching or teaching of hell is 'misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world so desperately needs to hear.'"<sup>1</sup>

Another problem: For those who do believe in hell: For every 1 American who believes they are going to Hell, 120 believe they are going to heaven (Barna poll in early 2000's).

First thing you have to do is figure out which of the 5 basic ideas about hell a person has:

- 1 – There is no afterlife at all
- 2 – There is a heaven/reward, but there's no hell/punishment
- 3 – Hell is temporary, "love wins", and everyone gets to heaven (or similar idea of purgatory)
- 4 – Hell only has the small percentage of really bad people (that I've determine are bad)
- 5 – Hell has the people that God says deserve it

You cannot deny that the Bible presents a heaven and a hell. And it's not the Old Testament that talks about hell, it's Jesus! John 14:2-3 (preparing room), Matt 22:29-32 (no marriage in heaven), Matt. 10:28 (fear God who send to hell), Matt. 13:41-43 (better to lose eye than go to hell), Matt. 25:31-46 (Sheep & Goats), Luke 16:19-31 (Rich man & Lazarus), Matt. 7:13-14 (narrow is gate) are all Jesus' teachings.

But we need to always make sure that people don't think that the doctrine of hell makes us happy that there will be people suffering for eternity. We are grieved that people are going to hell. But

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010) p. viii.

we're also grieved by lots of terrible, ugly things in this world, but since we know they are reality, we don't deny them. I wish I could deny cancer, but it's true so I believe it. Hell is no different. Remember that we're always sensitive to people's pain in this area. Everyone knows someone who died who didn't believe in Jesus. They don't want to think of them as suffering in hell. And furthermore, admit up front that you deserve hell just as much as everyone else. Don't let people think that you believe they deserve hell but you deserve heaven.

What are the assumptions behind the question: How Can A Loving God Send People To Hell?

- 1) If God is loving, that is either His only attribute or His most important one. Counter this assumption with some questions: But do you think God is also interested in the concept of justice? Is He a righteous and holy God? How do those square with His characteristic of being loving? Can He be both loving and just, or are those absolutely in conflict? (BTW, there is no other religious text outside of the Bible that says that God created the world out of love and delight. Creation was cosmic conflict, the God of Buddhism and Islam is not a personal God, unfit for a relationship. When someone says, 'God is love' they can only get that from Christianity! -Tim Keller, *Reason for God*)
- 2) God sends people to Hell against their will
- 3) People can never do enough to deserve hell
- 4) We are free to believe in any kind of God we wish; we can fashion Him how it makes sense to us. "I could never believe in a God who..."

Tim Keller: "Modern people think that hell works like this: God gives us time, but if we haven't made the right choices by the end of our lives, He casts our souls into hell for all eternity. As the poor souls fall through space, they cry out for mercy, but God says, "Too late! You had your chance! Now you will suffer!" This caricature misunderstands the very nature of evil. The Biblical picture is that sin separates us from the presence of God, which is the source of all joy and indeed of all love, wisdom, or good things of any sort... If we were to lose his presence totally, that would be hell – the loss of our capability for giving or receiving love or joy.... Hell, is the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever."<sup>2</sup>

God gives people what they want! (Romans 1 – "God gave them up")

C.S. Lewis: "Hell is the greatest monument to human freedom... There are only 2 types of people: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "Thy will be done."

That is the Great Divorce. That's why it's wrong to think of people in hell suffering saying, "please God, I'm sorry, let me out, have mercy." People in hell will continue to justify, seek their own way, and continue in their sin. They will not repent. It's kind of like a drunk who is in the gutter killing himself for his addiction, you say, "leave him alone." He is tormented, but it's a torment of his own choosing. If hell is locked, it is locked from the inside (also C.S. Lewis).

If there's no hell, what did Christ's death accomplish?

"If there is no wrath by God on sin, and there is no such thing as hell, not only does that actually make what happened to Jesus inexplicable... it trivializes what he's done... if you get rid of a God who has wrath and hell, you've got a god who loves us in general, but that's not as loving as the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus Christ, who loves us with a costly love. Look what it cost. Look what he did. Look what he was taking. You get rid of wrath and hell, he's not taking anything close to this. And therefore, what you've done is you've turned his incredible act of love into just something very trivial, very small."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), pp. 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Keller's sermon "The Dark Garden" preached April 2, 2000.

If there is no hell, if there truly is nothing at stake for denying the gospel, then all of the Great Commission, all of the Bible reading in the world, all the trying to live for God's glory is essentially pointless. You should stop coming to church, eat, drink, and be merry. Stop wasting your time!

"Jesus saves!" "From what?" "Ah, nothing. But he's cool."

"Repent! Or nothing of great consequence will happen to you."

All the talk of redemption, grace, salvation, rescue means NOTHING!

The Gospel is not a solution if there's no problem!

The concept of fairness: "It's not fair for God to send some people to hell!"

Actually what's not "fair" is God pulling some people out of their trajectory to hell.

If you want fairness, which is justice, then as soon as someone sinned, they would die and be sent to hell. But God's grace keeps them alive and gives them a chance to repent, even while they continue to sin and store up wrath. If you have the choice between justice and grace, always choose grace.

Hell makes people more compassionate here on earth! When there is a threat of punishment/"accounts are settled"/"things are made right" in the afterlife, two things happen:

- 1) People have an incentive not to hurt/kill/sin against others
- 2) People who have been sinned against don't take out vengeance on others. The cry for justice doesn't need to be satisfied.

Saying there's no hell makes it sound nice and forgiving, but it has the opposite effect here on earth.

Unsatisfying arguments/explanations about heaven and hell:

- 1) Eternity is in our heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11); it's true, but easily denied by an unbeliever.
- 2) Some people have gone to heaven and come back; yeah, but just this past month a kid in a wheelchair admitted he said it just to get attention.
- 3) Pascal's Wager: "Humans all bet with their lives either that God exists or not. Given the possibility that God actually does exist and assuming an infinite gain or loss associated with belief or unbelief in said God (as represented by an eternity in heaven or hell), a rational person should live as though God exists and seek to believe in God. If God does not actually exist, such a person will have only a finite loss (some pleasures, luxury, etc.)." (Wikipedia)  
But the wager will never get someone to faith in Christ, and it will never be true faith. It will be "fire insurance" or a false declaration of God's existence.
- 4) Isn't this world terrible? Shouldn't that mean there's a better world? Neither premise has to be accepted, especially by a young person enamored with the world.

(Francis Chan, chapter 6 of "Erasing Hell")

At some point you have to acknowledge that if you were God, you wouldn't have acted like He acted:

- you wouldn't have flooded the whole world and killed all but 8 people
- you wouldn't have commanded Moses to kill 3,000 Israelites for bowing down to a golden calf
- you wouldn't have commanded the Israelites to kill every single Canaanite
- you wouldn't have allowed Job to have everything taken away from him without an explanation
- you also wouldn't have allowed yourself to be beaten, whipped, and killed by your enemies because of your sacrificial love for your people!

Isaiah 55:8-9 – "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

You either allow God to be the Potter and to be God, or you reject Him and claim your own way.

A final, closing illustration from a wonderful book by Thor Ramsey (*The Most Encouraging Book on Hell Ever*):

“Imagine you are the subject of a King whose rule you have denied. In fact, you tried to have him killed and even declared yourself King... You are hiding out in the forest in fear for your life. You know you have wronged this King. If caught, you know you will be executed. And you know you deserve it. What you don’t realize is that the King knows exactly where you are and could have you taken out at any moment... One day when you’re out hunting you come across a messenger from the King. He tells you, “I have amazing good news. The King has made a way to forgive you completely without harming the justice of his great name.”<sup>4</sup>

From the first moment of your rebellion, you deserved death; but you think hiding is working because you’re not dead yet. Hell is staying in the forest and not trusting the forgiveness of the King. We all deserve hell, but God in His grace offers us heaven if we will trust Him and put our faith in His Son, who solved our sin problem on the cross.

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<sup>4</sup> Thor Ramsey, *The Most Encouraging Book on Hell Ever* (Adelphi, MD: Cruciform, 2014), p. 44.