

Would a Loving God Send Good People to Hell?

Critical Question #2

Hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice

G.K. Chesterton

The horror of the Christian universe was that it had no door marked Exit

C.S. Lewis

Perhaps there is no teaching found in the Bible more difficult for people to accept today than the teaching about hell. Can there really be an eternal hell? Does God really judge each person after he or she dies and, as a result, condemns some to an eternal hell, while others he rewards with heaven?

What did Jesus believe and teach about hell?

It may surprise many people to know that the person who taught about and warned about hell more than any other figure in the Bible was Jesus.

That's why the British philosopher, mathematician, social reformer, and outspoken agnostic, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), denounced Jesus for teaching about hell and for the untold cruelty it has caused humanity throughout history. In "*Why I Am not a Christian*," Russell writes:

"There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching.... I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in his nature would have put fears

and terrors of that sort into the world. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels ...would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that" (p. 22-23).

Russell is right, of course about one thing. Jesus did believe and warn repeatedly about everlasting punishment. And if, in reality, there is not a hell, then that really would make Jesus perhaps history's most morally repugnant and tortuously manipulative religious figure.

One straightforward example of Jesus' plain teaching on hell is when he referred to himself as "the Son of Man," and gives his disciples a vivid illustration of the end of the age when he will return as everyone's judge:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.' 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.' Then they will go away to eternal

punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 46).

Jesus taught that the reality of hell should cause us to fear God's judgment more than man's: "...I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him" (Luke 12:5). Jesus sternly warned those who did not believe in him when he said: "How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33).

And here's where we have to be honest with ourselves—if we say we like some of Jesus' teachings (i.e., his teachings on love and forgiveness and social reform) but not his other teachings (i.e., his warnings about sin, judgment, and hell), then at the end of the day, we really don't have a Jesus who has any right to tell us about reality beyond what we already believe. Instead, we insist on being able to define for ourselves what God and reality must be like. But can we believe that there's not a hell simply because we don't want one? Reality is reality, whether we like it or not.

C. S. Lewis, the mid-twentieth century British author (perhaps best known for his seven-book series called *The Chronicles of Narnia*), said that when he was an atheist earlier in his life, he was most afraid that Christianity was true and, if so, he writes: "The horror of the Christian universe was

"Immediately after death, which of the following do you think will happen to you?"



Go to hell 1%
 End of existence 4%
 Be reincarnated 5%
 Go to purgatory 15%
 Go directly to heaven . . . 61%

that it had no door marked *Exit*" (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 171). In other words, if Jesus is right, then there really is no way in the universe to avoid his judgment with the potential for eternal hell.

There's no way out of this reality. Not by suicide. Not by trying to disbelieve it way. There's simply no real way out if what Jesus said is true.

What is hell?

According to Jesus, hell will not just simply be annihilation. Hell will be an eternal, conscious torment because there will be, what he called, "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (this is a figurative image of hell used by Jesus 6 times in Matthew to portray the eternal agony of hell: along with the description of hell being "the outer darkness" or "the fiery furnace" (Matthew 8:12; 13:42; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). In the last book of the Bible, it says about those in hell; "...They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev 20:10). Of course, only those who are eternally conscious, rather than annihilated, can be eternally tormented.

A particularly descriptive and therefore a particularly discomfoting verse in the Bible depicts the final judgment of hell this way:

"[God's judgment] will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting

destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

No doubt, this is a very harsh and troubling passage in the Bible about judgment and hell. But it's important to catch what it's really saying, and what it's not saying. It is saying that hell is an eternal punishment for those who do not know God and do not obey Jesus' message in this life. And it says that the punishment will be an "everlasting destruction" by being "shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" forever.

It's *not* saying that hell is some place where God actively torments the wicked forever like a cruel child may torment a helpless insect trapped in a tin can. Instead, hell will be it's own "everlasting destruction" because those in it will be shut out forever from the presence of God.

In other words, hell is its own punishment. Hell is hell because it is the eternal, absolute absence of God. That means everything God *is*, hell is *not*. If God is the source of true joy (as the Bible says in Ps. 16:11), then hell will be the complete and total absence of joy and happiness forever. If God is true love (1 John 4:8), then hell will be the complete and total absence of love forever. If God is true light (John 8:12), then hell will be the complete and total absence of light forever. If God is the source of everything good (James 1:17), then hell is the complete and total absence

of anything good forever. If God is the source of true wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30), then hell is the complete and total absence of wisdom and the eternal state of confusion and insanity forever. That's hell—everlasting destruction upon conscious people who are tormented by being shut out from the presence of God for all eternity.

Is being "good" enough?

And here's where it gets kind of tough for us to understand, because we have to try to answer this question from the point of view of a righteous and holy and infinite God rather than our own distorted point of view. And this is particularly tough because it's our own distorted, myopic point of view that's the basis for a judgment of hell.

The first thing we must understand is that *good* people are not necessarily the same thing as *righteous* people. Righteousness, at least as God sees it, is always a matter of the heart. So while goodness has to do with our obedience to laws and our love for and help for and honesty toward other people, righteousness has to do with our *heart* toward God. It is the heart's *right* disposition toward God. It's being God-centered rather than self-centered. It's a humble spirit toward God. It's an acknowledgment of God's authority in our lives. It trusts in and desires his will for our lives. It's a heart that is satisfied by obedience to God because it's a heart that believes in and rejoices in God's glory.

Notice what the Bible says is God's view of whether or not a person is righteous or unrighteous.

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all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Romans 1:18-21; ESV)

What this Bible passage says is that the wrath of God is against all *unrighteousness*. And it defines unrighteousness as when a person *suppresses the truth* about who God is, and does not honor him as God, nor sees the need to give thanks to him as their Creator because they have a darkened heart toward him. This unrighteousness is the very essence of what the Bible means by *sin*.

This heart condition of sin is universal. The apostle Paul, writing to both a religious and nonreligious audience said, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). In other words, every one fails to meet the moral standard for which we were designed.

Paul also quotes from the Old Testament, “As it is written, ‘There is no one righteous, not even one’” (Romans 3:10). Unlike our experience in school, God does not grade on a curve. It is a “pass/fail” system and we have all

failed! We have all demonstrated in action the self-centeredness of our heart.

See, we must remember that we’re talking, not about finite people simply sinning against other finite people, but about sinning against an infinite, righteous and glorious God. And any sin against an eternally glorious God is eternally evil and so deserves eternal separation from God. That’s what hell is.

So if you answered the question—What is the most heinous thing a person can do with his or her life? Most people will answer that it’s murdering or causing suffering in another person, or many persons. But these things pale in light of the worst thing a person can do with their life, which is to dishonor and offend and bring pain to their infinitely glorious Creator.

Again, C. S. Lewis, who spent a great amount of time thinking about and writing about the issue of hell, writes something insightful for us here when he states:

“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. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened” (*The Great Divorce, chap 9, pp. 72-73*).

What was the purpose of Jesus’ life and death?

If hell were not a reality,

then why did God become human in the person of Jesus Christ and live and suffer and die as he did? Without understanding the reality of hell, we cannot understand the reality of God’s sacrificial love in the life and death of Jesus. Jesus once said; “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

People who reject the idea of hell often say something like, “I believe God is too loving to pour out eternal suffering on anyone for sin”. At the basis of this statement is an inadequate understanding of both God’s love and his wrath.

The statement assumes that love and wrath are mutually exclusive. It reduces love to superficial sentimentalism and wrath to vindictive anger. Neither is a correct picture of God. The depth of God’s love is seen in the context of his wrath, not in its absence. For God to ignore sin is to be neither loving nor just. Love demands freedom. God freely chose to love us and he gives us the freedom to love in return.

Real love is expensive, ultimately sacrificial. The irony is that in our efforts to make God more loving, we have made him less loving. His love, in the end, is offended by nothing and costs him nothing. Those who object to Jesus’ warnings about hell because they think it makes God less loving have unintentionally made the “love” of God shallow and impersonal.

That’s why the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the quintessential picture of both God’s perfect righteousness *and* his sacrificial love. He is not just a wrathful God *or* just a loving God—he’s both.

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By becoming human in the person of Jesus, God laid down his life to take upon himself his own wrath for our sin so that we wouldn’t have to. That’s why the Bible says; “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36).

The insight of C.S. Lewis challenges us with these words; “In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: ‘What are you asking God to do?’ To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does” (*The Problem of Pain, chap 8, para 12, p. 128*).

Hell is when God says to us, “Thy will be done,” and he leaves us alone, forever!

Luke 15:1-32¹ God's Heart for people

[1] By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story. . .

[8] "...imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she'll call her friends and neighbors: 'Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!' Count on it—that's the kind of party God's angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God."

[11] Then he said, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, 'Father, I want right now what's coming to me.'

"So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncocks in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

[17] "That brought him to his senses. He said, 'All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, "Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand."' He got right up and went home to his father.

"When he was still a long way

off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.'

[22] "But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes

and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're

going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.

[25] "All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day's work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, 'Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.'

[28] "The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, 'Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!'

[31] "His father said, 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours— but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!'

Matthew 15:1-20¹ Jesus explains the source of man's problem

[1] After that, Pharisees and relig-

ion scholars came to Jesus all the way from Jerusalem, criticizing, "Why do your disciples play fast and loose with the rules?"

[3] But Jesus put it right back on them. "Why do you use your rules to play fast and loose with God's commands? God clearly says, 'Respect your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone denouncing father or mother should be killed.' But you weasel around that by saying, 'Whoever wants to, can say to father and mother, "What I owed to you I've given to God." ' That can hardly be called respecting a parent. You cancel God's command by your rules. Frauds! Isaiah's prophecy of you hit the bull's-eye:

[8] 'These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn't in it. They act like they're worshiping me, but they don't mean it. They just use me as a cover for teaching whatever suits their fancy.'

[10] He then called the crowd together and said, "Listen, and take this to heart. It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life, but what you vomit up."

[12] Later his disciples came and told him, "Did you know how upset the Pharisees were when they heard what you said?"

[13] Jesus shrugged it off. "Every tree that wasn't planted by my Father in heaven will be pulled up by its roots. [14] Forget them. They are blind men leading blind men. When a blind man leads a blind man, they both end up in the ditch."

[15] Peter said, "I don't get it. Put it in plain language."

[16] Jesus replied, "You too? Are you being willfully stupid? Don't you know that anything that is swallowed works its way through the intestines and is finally defecated. But what comes out of the mouth gets its start in the heart. It's from the heart that we vomit up evil arguments, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, lies, and cussing. That's what pollutes. Eating or not eating certain foods, washing or not washing your hands—that's neither here nor there."

Pharisee: A group of religious leaders who took pride in their ability to keep the Old Testament rules and regulations

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