

10 Hard Questions

“Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”
(1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)

“be ready in season and out of season...”
(2 Timothy 4:2 ESV)

Why Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?

July 12th, 2020

Revelation 20:11-15, Matthew 25:41-46, Luke 16:19-31

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Revelation 20:11-15.

We have dealt with a number of difficult questions thus far in our Ten Questions series, but in my estimation, the question we are going to wrestle through today presents the most challenging of them all. Let’s get right to it. The question we will seek to answer this morning is this: Why Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?

This isn’t just a question for the skeptics, is it? I would suspect that there are many of you sitting in the sanctuary this morning who are still wrestling through this one. Theologian Peter Kreeft once said:

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.¹

The *first* to be abandoned. Did you hear that? This question is like the “gateway drug” into theological liberalism and skepticism. The way that you answer this question reveals your

¹ Peter Kreeft as quoted in Mark Clark, *The Problem of God: Answering a Skeptic’s Challenges to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 125.

convictions about the authority of God's Word. It's easy to believe the Bible when it confirms your preconceived ideas. But what do you do when God's Word says something that you don't want to hear? For most of us, the doctrine of hell is where we most powerfully experience that confrontation. The famous atheist philosopher Bertrand Russel once said:

I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in Everlasting punishment.²

This question has been the stumbling block for many who have considered our faith, and it has also been the back door for many who have left this faith behind.

Before we can even begin to answer this question, I think it would be helpful to define our terms:

The Definition: What is Hell?

We're going to turn to God's Word to answer that question. To that end, would you look with me now to Revelation 20:11-15. This passage describes the final day of judgement, and it portrays the fate of all of those who have not surrendered to Christ in plain, yet horrifying, terms. Hear now God's holy, inspired, living and active Word to us today:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ **And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.** (Revelation 20:11-15 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

There will come a day when God will judge the living and the dead. The books will be opened – that is to say – a record will be read of everything that we have ever thought, spoken and done.

² Bertrand Russell as quoted in Mark Clark, *The Problem of God: Answering a Skeptic's Challenges to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 125.

Judgement will be meted out according to all that we have done. One of the things that we learn in this passage is that God is *fair*. We will be judged for the things that *we have truly done*. And all those whose names are not recorded in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire.

That is hell.

Hell is not a theoretical concept. Hell is for real. And, Jesus says, hell is forever. In Matthew 25, speaking of this day of judgement, Jesus said to the crowd:

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the **eternal fire** prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into **eternal punishment**, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:41-46 ESV)

The fact that there are some who debate whether or not hell will last forever simply reveals how carelessly we handle the Word of God. Jesus couldn’t have spoken more clearly. In fact, he uses the same word to describe eternal punishment as he does to describe eternal life. If eternal life is going to last forever, then so too is eternal punishment. And that, if we are honest with ourselves, is a horrifying thought. Wayne Grudem summarizes the Biblical doctrine of hell when he says:

Hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked.³

Could a loving God send people to hell? Could my heavenly Father throw millions and millions of people into the lake of fire?

The question on its own is hard enough, but the worst part is that this question is rarely ever asked in a merely theoretical sense. Usually, when this question is thrown at you, there will be a name attached to it.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1149.

“Do you mean to tell me that *my SON* is languishing in hell and that he will be there for all eternity because he didn’t worship your God? Would you have me believe that *my FATHER* is experiencing eternal torment? He was a *GOOD MAN*! If God would do that – if God would send *GOOD* people to hell simply because they didn’t stroke His ego and sing His songs while they were alive then He doesn’t deserve my worship! He’s a tyrant and a monster!” If you feel like I am overexaggerating the language of that conversation, then you clearly haven’t had it yet.

Now, having identified the definition, I think it would also be helpful for us to acknowledge the very real temptation that we will face when answering this question:

The Temptation

Because this doctrine is so emotionally charged:

1. We will be tempted to blunt a warning that is meant to be sharp

We’ll want to say things like:

“Well, honestly, I don’t even know if hell is meant to be understood as a *literal* place.” Or, “I don’t think we’re meant to believe that God’s judgement *actually* lasts forever.” Or, “I know God warns us about hell, but I don’t think He would *really* ever send someone there.”

I know that this is a real temptation because I see the books that make these arguments lining the shelves at the Christian bookstores. These books keep coming because *there is a market for them*. Christians will happily spend their hard-earned money on books that present them with an escape hatch to this difficult doctrine. We desperately want to find a soft, easy-to-swallow answer to this question.

But can I tell you something?

Blunting this sharp warning is without a doubt the most unloving thing that you can do. Charles Spurgeon was right when he said:

The more I look into the subject of the world to come, the more I am impressed that all those who would lessen our ideas of the judgement that God will bring upon the wicked are waging war against God, and against virtue and the best interests of men.⁴

Wouldn't you be furious if your doctor knew that you had treatable cancer but didn't tell you because he knew it would make you uncomfortable? The person who attempts to soften the doctrine of hell is like the mom who tells her child that "If you touch the hot stove... you might get tickled by the tickle monster." It is NOT LOVE to blunt a warning that should be sharp.

And that is exactly why Jesus – the most loving, compassionate, merciful person who ever lived – refused to soften this doctrine. In fact, if anything, Jesus *sharpened the edges* when he spoke about hell. Leslie Schmucker notes:

Jesus doesn't only reference hell, he describes it in great detail. He says it is a place of eternal torment (Luke 16:23), of unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43), where the worm does not die (Mark 9:48), where people will gnash their teeth in anguish and regret (Matt. 13:42), and from which there is no return, even to warn loved ones (Luke 16:19–31). He calls hell a place of "outer darkness" (Matt. 25:30), comparing it to "Gehenna" (Matt. 10:28), which was a trash dump outside the walls of Jerusalem where rubbish was burned and maggots abounded. Jesus talks about hell more than he talks about heaven, and describes it more vividly.⁵

According to Jesus, this is a warning that *the world desperately needs to hear!* Therefore, as we answer this question, we must resist the urge to blunt a warning that is meant to be sharp.

The second temptation flows out of the first:

2. We will be tempted to put too much stock in our feelings

When it comes to the doctrine of hell, the primary objection that often arises is that it doesn't *feel* right. But, and I want to say this as gently as I can, do your feelings really have anything to do

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *Sermons on Proverbs*. (Public Domain, printed in 2012), 49.

⁵ Leslie Schmucker, *The Uncomfortable Subject Jesus Addressed More Than Anyone Else*. Posted May 11, 2017. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-uncomfortable-subject-jesus-addressed-more-than-anyone-else/> Accessed July 8, 2020.

with whether or not something is true? “But,” we object, “I don’t *like* this doctrine! I don’t like what the Bible says about this!” Okay. So what? I don’t like COVID, but there you are in your face masks. I don’t like that I sweat so much, but here I am again preaching with a sweat clothe.

We put far too much stock in our feelings, particularly when it comes to the doctrine of hell. Instead of asking, “How does this make me feel?” We should be asking: “What does the text say? What did Jesus say?” C.S. Lewis, wrestling through this very question once said:

There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of our Lord’s own words;⁶

If the clear and unambiguous testimony of Scripture is that God is love and that hell is for real, then our feelings on the issue really don’t matter. And, in fact, our feelings are extremely biased.

They are biased, for example, by our culture. Did you know that there are many cultures in the world that find no offense with the doctrine of hell? In fact, on the contrary, Christians living in countries that have been ravaged by war and decimated by injustice take *great comfort* in God’s coming judgement! They would agree with Wayne Grudem’s assessment:

The fact that there will be a final judgement assures us that ultimately God’s universe is *fair*, for God is in control, and he keeps accurate records and renders just judgment.⁷

Of course, those same cultures struggle to accept other doctrines. Some of them struggle to embrace the doctrine of mercy, while others wrestle with the dignity of women, while still others struggle to believe that there is only one God.

Every different culture produces different feelings because – and this is important for us to recognize – our *feelings* are the result of the soil that we have grown up in. Timothy Keller summarizes this point helpfully:

⁶ C.S. Lewis as quoted in Mark Clark, *The Problem of God: Answering a Skeptic’s Challenges to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 126.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1147.

For the sake of argument, let's imagine that Christianity is not the product of any one culture but it's actually the transcultural truth of God. If that were the case we would expect that it would contradict and offend every human culture at some point, because human cultures are ever-changing and imperfect.⁸

Exactly. So, let's not put too much stock into our feelings. They're real. But they are not authoritative. What I *feel* about this doctrine can teach me a lot about my culture and my own personal desires and assumptions, but it doesn't teach me ANYTHING about whether or not this doctrine is true.

These temptations are real, and we need to resolve not to succumb to them. The doctrine of hell is sharp, but our job is not to blunt it. The doctrine of hell will feel unjust in our culture, but feelings are not authoritative.

So, let's come back now to the question: Why would a loving God send people to hell?

Why Would A Loving God Send People To Hell?

I want to suggest a simple, two-step answer to this incredibly difficult question. Why would a loving God send people to hell?

1. Because sin is more heinous and destructive than we could ever understand

Tied up in our objection is a belief that the punishment doesn't fit the crime. An eternity in hell seems like a disproportionate punishment for 70 years of sin. And, if we're being honest, that would seem to be a reasonable objection, wouldn't it?

In fact, this objection is the reason why I think we need to be careful not to use the popular, stock answers to this question. I have often heard Christians respond, "But doesn't *Hitler* deserve hell?! Would God really be just if he didn't send *mass murderers* and *child abusers* to hell?" But the problem with that approach is that it doesn't really address the question. The skeptic is happy to

⁸ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2008), 75.

admit that Hitler deserves hell. “But of course,” the skeptic says, “I’m not Hitler! So what do *I* deserve?”

Our task is not to convince the skeptic that heinous sins deserve judgment. Everyone knows and agrees with that. No, our task is to explain to the skeptic that ALL sin is heinous and destructive. That’s the part he disagrees with.

One of the evidences of our fallen nature is that we always downplay sin – or at least we downplay our *own* sin. We justify it. We make peace with it. And, as a result, we struggle to understand why God deals with sin so severely.

But sin is like cancer. It festers and grows. And like cancer, sin kills.

For example, let’s consider the sin of lust. What happens to lust if it is left unchecked and unrepented of for a lifetime? A teenage boy begins to look at girls in his class with lust in his heart. This leads to an addiction to pornographic images on his phone. He eventually gets a girlfriend and they show no concern for God’s commandment that sex remain within marriage. They become pregnant, and they decide to abort the child. Eventually they marry but he still maintains his addiction to the images on his phone. After years of frustration, his wife is so hurt by his lustful addictions that she leaves him, taking their three children with her. Meanwhile, his habit, combined with the habits of all of the other lustful men and women in the world has contributed to an insatiable demand for pornography. Lucrative businesses arise to meet this demand and young girls are stolen from their families and sold into a form of slavery that is the equivalent of hell on earth. The man’s children pick up his evil habits. His sons see women as objects, and his daughter never feels stable in her marriage because she wonders when her husband will leave her for a younger, prettier substitute. This man dies at 81, leaving behind a wake of devastation. We’ve only here considered the effect of his lust.

Sin is like a balloon that grows and grows and grows. Now, imagine that sin was allowed to grow for all eternity. What would be the affect of that one man’s little sinful habit if it was allowed to go unchecked forever?

It would be hell.

So it is with all sin. Pride, lust, anger, jealousy, laziness, unforgiveness – any sin that is unrepented of will continue to grow for a lifetime. The Bible teaches us that everything that is wrong with this world is the result of sin.

In our discussions surrounding hell, it seems we often make the assumption that our sin will *stop* at death. We envision men and women repenting of their sins for all eternity while God continues to leave them locked away in hell. But there will be no repenting in hell. Listen, for example, to the parable that Jesus tells of the rich man and Lazarus. We find this parable in Luke 16:

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’” (Luke 16:19-31 ESV)

There’s a lot that we could pull from that parable but notice this: The rich man never repents. He doesn’t apologize for the way that he neglected and domineered over the poor in his lifetime. In fact, he does the *opposite*! Rather than saying, “I’m sorry! Please bring me out!” He says, “I’m uncomfortable! Send Lazarus *in* to serve me!” Commentator I. Howard Marshall observes:

Even in Hades he thinks of Lazarus as there to look after *his* wants, while in his lifetime he had never spared a thought for Lazarus’s wants; he remains totally blind and unrepentant.⁹

⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 637.

Hell will not be filled with repenting victims. Hell will be filled with men and women who chose and who continue to choose their sin, to their own eternal ruin. C.S. Lewis famously said:

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. Without that self-choice it wouldn’t be hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it.¹⁰

Hell is more than just a punishment. Hell is a mercy. God is making a new heaven and a new earth in which we will live with Him forever, but He will NOT allow the cancer of sin into His everlasting kingdom. Becky Pippert says it well:

God’s wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer... which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.¹¹

In our foolishness and blindness, we take sin lightly. God does not. Sin is more heinous and destructive than we could ever understand. Hell is the means by which God will protect His people from the tyranny and the destruction of sin once and for all.

Finally, a loving God sends people to hell:

2. Because God is more holy and righteous than we could ever imagine

Not only is sin devastating to others – which it is – and not only would sin ruin the new heavens and the new earth like a cancer – which it would – but more than any of that, sin is an offense to a God who is holy, holy, holy. To be holy is to be set apart; it is to be *other*. God’s infinite goodness and glory and worth is something that we will never fully comprehend.

And in our sin, we have assaulted this holy God. Sin is rebellion against our perfect King. Sin is to spit in the face of our loving, heavenly Father. And we cannot even begin to grasp how serious an offense that is.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis as quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2008), 82.

¹¹ Becky Pippert as quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2008), 76.

David understood this.

Psalm 51 is a song that David wrote after his horrific sin against Bathsheba. As a result of his sin, Bathsheba's husband Uriah was murdered, and Bathsheba and David's son was slain. But when David fell prostrate before the Lord and confessed his sin, he said something that is truly shocking. He said:

Against you, **you only**, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight, (Psalm 51:4a ESV)

We want to say, "David! That's not true! You sinned against Uriah! You sinned against Bathsheba! You sinned against your son! You sinned against the kingdom that trusted you to rule with justice!" And all of that is true of course. But David understood that there was one wronged party that stood above the rest. There was one wronged party that was infinitely innocent, unfathomably precious, and immeasurably good. David had sinned against the God of the universe, and all else paled in comparison to that reality.

Analogies are always limited, and such is certainly the case here, but I think this might be helpful for some of you. Consider this example: One man steals a candy bar from the local gas station. Another man steals the Queen's crown from Buckingham Palace. Will they receive the same sentence?

Herein lies the problem: One of the reasons why hell is often perceived to be unfair or extreme is because we can't even begin to imagine the holiness and the righteousness of the One that we have sinned against. We treat our rebellion against God as if it is no different than stealing a candy bar from the 711 on the corner.

But we have sinned against an infinitely holy God. And our punishment will fit the crime.

I confess that I hated writing this sermon. I hated spending a week meditating on the doctrine of hell. The day before I had my appendix removed, I was so, incredibly sick. I was too sick to sleep. No medication helped. There was nothing I could do to alleviate the suffering. After one day of

that suffering I felt so incredibly hopeless. I didn't see an end to it. That lasted for 24 hours. When I take seriously what the Bible says about hell, it makes me feel physically sick. In hell, there will be no reprieve – no light at the end of the tunnel. There will only be sin and suffering, forever.

And, because of our sin, hell is what every single one of us deserves.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23 ESV)

For the wages of sin is death, (Romans 6:23a ESV)

I hated preparing for this sermon, but it was good for my soul. When we lose sight of the weight of our sin – when we lose sight of the reality that we have rebelled against a holy God – when we lose sight of the fact that we deserve hell – we stop marveling at grace.

We've been indulging a question that is rooted in pride. "Why would a loving God send people to hell?" we ask in defiance when in reality we should be asking:

Why Would A Holy God Make A Way For A Sinner Like Me To Live With Him Forever?

Why would He send us to hell? Because we deserve it! Because we are rebels! Because, in our sin we have rejected him and gone our own way! The question is emotionally difficult. But it's not complicated.

The really complex question is the alternative, "Why wouldn't He?" We have proven that we can't be trusted. We sin against God and against one another. Rebecca McLaughlin notes:

It has been said that no friendship in the world would last a day if we could see each other's thoughts.¹²

Isn't that true? Your best friend from childhood wouldn't continue to spend time with you if he could hear all of the thoughts that go through your mind throughout the day. Our hearts and minds

¹² Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 212.

are so impure and self-absorbed and destructive, and God sees ALL OF IT! He sees all of it, and it's a wonder that He doesn't throw each and every one of us into hell right now. THAT is the scandal!

As we conclude this morning, I want to go back to a passage that we read just a moment ago. It was in Romans chapter 3 and it said this:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23 ESV)

Well there you have it! We have all willingly disqualified ourselves from the kingdom of God! We have all spat in the face of an infinitely holy and righteous God. We have all introduced the cancer of sin into God's good creation and He has every right to expel us from His presence forever. That would be just.

But that's not where this text ends. We keep reading and we find this:

²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, (Romans 3:24a)

That's amazing! But how could it be? If God is infinitely holy and just, how could he overlook our sin? But of course, He doesn't look over our sin. It is heinous and destructive, and it must be removed. This leads to the most unfair verses in all of Scripture:

and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23-26 ESV)

The word propitiation means "to appease or to satisfy wrath." The wrath of God against our world-destroying, relationship-poisoning, treasonous sin was poured out on Jesus Christ at the cross. Again, Rebecca McLaughlin says it so well:

On the cross, the one perfectly righteous, perfectly loving, perfectly innocent man who ever lived faced the full force of God's judgment, drank it down, and threw away the cup. In biblical shorthand, he went to hell.¹³

There is no place for sin in God's eternal kingdom. It must be put away. It must be damned to hell where it can longer infest God's good creation. The beauty and the glory and the *scandal* of the gospel is that God sent His own Son to take the cancer of our sin into his own body so that it could be condemned once and for all on the cross. C.S. Lewis once said:

In the long run, the answer to all of those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question. What are you asking God to do? To wipe out the past sins of the damned and at all cost to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help. He has done so in Jesus. Are you asking God to forgive him? They do not want to be forgiven. Are you asking God to leave them alone?

Alas, I am afraid that is what he does.¹⁴

If you're listening to this sermon and you are still holding tight to your sin, I want to plead with you to let go of that sin before you go with it into the fires of hell. God has prepared a place for you. He has set out a seat at His table. But you can't take that sin with you. Whether it is on the cross of Christ or in the pit of hell, God has made a plan to root out the cancer of sin once and for all.

Let go of your sin and take hold of Jesus Christ.

Repent.

Believe.

Because sin is more heinous and destructive than you could ever understand. And God is more holy and righteous than you could ever imagine. And hell is forever.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

¹³ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 217.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis as quoted in Mark Clark, *The Problem of God: Answering a Skeptic's Challenges to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 150.