

CONFRONTING CHRISTIANITY SERIES

HOW CAN A LOVING GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?

It was a normal day in Hell. The demons were busy tormenting the souls of the damned in pits of fire, the air filled with the stench of sulfur and brimstone, bodies burning in geysers of molten lava, sinners roasting over glowing embers.

It was a normal day in hell until the sky opened up, and a solitary snowball hurtled through the smoky air. It landed on a lake of bubbling lava, but instead of being vaporized in the heat, the molten rock cooled instantaneously to stone. The air turned chilly as the effect spread across the whole lake, freezing the geyser mid-eruption into an unexpectedly beautiful flower of rock. The flames died out. The damned cheered. In mere minutes, the whole place was covered with a sheet of frost, and snow fell in great soft beautiful flakes across all of Hell.

The demons quickly huddled to discuss what should be done. Eventually, the most junior demon was picked, with the prodding of his colleagues' pitchforks, to go to Earth and find out just what the heck has happened.

The remaining demons waited in fear for his return, and eventually the junior demon returned back down to hell.

"I warned you," he said, "I told you it could happen, but you just laughed at me. Well, now it has."

"What has?" they ask.

"The Cleveland Browns have won the Superbowl."

That's just one of many, many jokes about hell. But the topic of hell is no joking matter. Hell is a matter that's somber, dark, and serious.

For many modern people, one of the most baffling and offensive aspects of Christianity is the doctrine of hell. Many people wonder, How could a God who loves, send people to eternal torture? It just doesn't make sense.

In 2005, Wendy Kaminer wrote an article in The Nation magazine, entitled “Rick Warren, America's Pastor.” This was at the time when Rick Warren's popularity was growing. He'd just published the New York Times best selling book, The Purpose Driven Life, and he was increasingly having a role on the national stage. And so Kaminer wrote this article after sitting down with him and exploring his views. And one of the things that she said is that she appreciated him as a person, his demeanor, his heart for other people. But she had a problem with his theology. This is what she wrote. She said, “his faith, like that of others, is inherently divisive. At the end of the day, God is a divider, not a uniter. Non-Christians, however devout, go to hell along with non-believers. What are the prospects of equal citizenship for those of us damned by our refusal to be born again in Christ?” Wendy Kaminer, “*The Nation*,” 2005.

After reading that, I have to wonder, is Kaminer right? Is it true that believing in a doctrine like hell inevitably creates not only division, but is actually dangerous? People today think that the doctrine of hell is one in which God is an angry tyrant, and, people today believe, those who follow Christ also have that same kind of judgmental, US vs. THEM kind of an attitude. So, the thinking of folks today goes, this doctrine of hell is both (1) reprehensible to our modern Western minds, and (2) actually dangerous for a pluralistic society. And so the question for is today is, Is that true? Is that right?

You have to admit that it is confusing when us Christians come along and insist that “God is love.” That’s what John writes for us in the Bible, “**God is love**” *1 John 4:8*. How do we make sense of this?

Today we're talking about this question, “How can a loving God send people to hell?” We are talking about this because this question poses immense barriers for people in our society today to believe in God and specifically believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. How can the two things hold together? How can they possibly be true?

Pastor Tim Keller once shared in a message of his own on this very same topic, where he talked about the kind of confusion and surprise people have when he tells them what he actually believes. This is what he says. He says, “It's always interesting when people ask me, do you actually believe in hell? And I tell them, well, I think that a lot of the Bible's imagery about hell, namely this idea of flames and torment, is largely metaphorical. And they seem to relax. Until I go on to explain that I think it's a metaphor for something infinitely worse. At which point they go, huh?”

What he's saying is that the Bible uses a wide range of images and symbols when talking about hell -- things like flames and torment and darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth. And the reason why the Bible writers use all these different terms is because they are trying to describe a reality that is just very hard to put into words, but something that nevertheless is true. You see, the Bible's understanding of hell is the end result of what happens when human beings build their lives on anything other than God. Let me say that again. The biblical understanding of hell is that it is the end result of what happens when we as human beings build our lives on anything other than God. Hell is when God gives people who want to live without God, their wish. God, grants people their choice of living without Him, only it's not just for this short life on earth, it's forever.

We see this kind of selfish desiring to live without God in the story Jesus tells in today's Gospel reading. The story is from Luke chapter 16 in the Bible. It's about a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. Lazarus is this poor man who is constantly sick, he dies at the gates of a rich man's mansion. And then the rich man also dies.

Here's what Jesus says: ***“The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.*** [Abraham's side is a way of saying he is in heaven because Abraham also went to heaven.] ***The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades,*** [Hades is another name for hell] ***being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 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.' *Luke 16:22-24*

What many Bible scholars have noted is that never once does the rich man actually ask to be rescued from hell. Instead, what the rich man does is he blames God -- he blames God for not giving him enough information. In fact, a little bit later on in the story, he says you need send someone to go and tell my brothers because they also don't have enough information to make their own educated decision. And when Abraham says, well, your brothers, like you, have God Word in the Bible, the rich guy says, "no, no, no, that's, that's not enough." He's blaming God -- basically saying you didn't give me enough information.

Then this guy in hell treats Lazarus as if Lazarus is nothing more than just his slave. The rich man never asks to get out of hell. He never expresses regret, or says, "I want come to heaven." Instead, he orders Abraham around, "You send Lazarus down here to meet my physical needs, to quench my thirst a little bit."

The words that come out of the rich man's mouth are the words of a guy who demands to live life on his own terms. He doesn't ever want God. He never humbles his heart in gratitude to God or trust in God. Instead, in his life here on earth and after his death, he wants comfort according to his own standards. On earth and after in hell, this guy still continues to minimize the value in the life of another person and to blame God for not giving him exactly what he wanted.

This is the picture of hell that Jesus paints in the Bible. That's actually a reality that we ourselves construct. It's a world that we ourselves build.

There's probably no other theologian in the Western world who's thought about this more deeply than CS Lewis. His book [The Great Divorce](#) is a fictional story of a busload of people from hell who take a field trip to the outskirts of heaven. The "divorce" is not referring to marriage divorce, but to the divide between heaven and hell. Jesus has Abraham say in today's Gospel, "***...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.”

Luke 16: 26

One of the most vivid scenes in Lewis' book is when the busload of souls from hell arrive at heaven and these people get off the bus. What happens is people look around at all the glories of heaven and they are each one invited into heaven to stay. But they would have to admit their error – that they tried to live without God. So, instead of humbling themselves to God's way, they run back on the bus and sit back down. They just want to go back to hell. They're not interested in what heaven has to offer. They're not interested living forever *with* God. They want eternity far away from God.

C.S. Lewis says it this way, “The choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words, ‘Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.’ There is always something they insist on keeping, even at the price of misery. There is always something they prefer to joy ... You see it easily enough in a spoiled child that would sooner miss its play and its supper than say it was sorry and be friends.”

Then later C.S. Lewis says this: “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.”

Nothing good can be experienced without God.

Friends, I'm not saying that hell is what we make it to be. Hell is not something silly that we dislike. I hate the taste of black licorice. Hell is not eating black licorice for eternity. (yuck!) It's not the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard forever and ever. No, hell is a real place. Not imaginary. It's very serious. It is the *withOUT* God life forever and ever.

Goodness, kindness, love, joy, contentment – all these come from God. All good blessings come only from God. Without God, there is nothing, absolutely nothing good.

Jesus describes hell into today's Gospel as a place of suffering and torture. It's not that God is childish and gets delight out of punishing people who reject Him. No, the suffering is the inevitable result of choosing to live without God. There is no good when we choose to make ourselves our own god of our own lives. And so, the rich man says, ***"I am in agony in this fire."***

The Bible book of Revelations says, ***"The smoke from their torture will go up forever and ever"*** *Revelation 14:11*. Fire was used in Bible times to purify something defiled – to purify sin. Sin was put onto animals and they were sacrificed in the temple and completely burned on the altar. But in hell, sin cannot be purified and the fire just goes on and on and on.

This phrase about smoke going up is used a number of times in the Old Testament, and the image is of a conquered city that has been burned, and from a distance you see the smoke of that wreckage rising into the sky. Complete destruction of a community where once there were homes and schools and shops and children played, and people fell in love. Neighbors cared for each other, and old people sat outside watching and enjoying it all. But in hell all of that is gone. All of that has been destroyed. In other words: there is no place in hell where people care for one another or celebrate together. God's dream for the human race is relationship – love for one another. Hell is the opposite of that.

I mention this because sometimes people will say things like: "Well, I don't think I would mind hell. All my buddies are going to be there. At least we'll be together." They picture it like a giant bowling alley where it's always Miller Time or something like that. That's not the reality God is sharing with you here! All the things that make relationship, love, caring possible are all gone. There is no humility, no servanthood, no courtesy, no honesty -- these are all gifts of God, and they are completely absent. To reject God is to reject everything that makes relationships possible.

Just as heaven involves images like streets of gold and pearly gates to reflect the perfect community, perfect oneness, perfect intimacy, perfect belonging, so the image of hell is the mirror opposite.

It's the image of a destroyed city. It's the end of all belonging, and all caring.

Imagine being so locked up in your own pride and self-centeredness that you become utterly incapable of relationship -- never knowing the joy of friendship, never knowing the goodness of serving and being served, never knowing a loving heart.

This is not God's desire for anyone. It just breaks God's heart that anyone should endure this. In the story Jesus tells, the rich man calls out to Abraham. Abraham responds, ***"Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things. But now he's comforted here and you are in agony."*** Luke 16:25 Abraham is actually heartbroken over this man's fate. He calls him, "son." That's a very intimate term. He calls him son. There's this intense sense of mourning in the voice of Abraham. God loves all people, and He wants all people to be saved. And it breaks God's heart that anyone, anyone at all, would choose to live apart from God's love for him or her.

One thing that the Bible states is that without the reality of hell, we really have no hope for justice in our world. See, I don't want a God without anger over injustice. I don't want a God who could look at the Holocaust and experience no anger. I don't think I'd want a God who could look at a defenseless person being abused and not get angry. We don't have to take justice in our own hands. It's not your place or mine to be a vigilante and try to get even, try to set things right. Justice is ultimately in God's hands. And that's good. God knows and He judges way better than I ever could. The reality of hell means that in the end, God will punish evil and righteousness will prevail.

This is the state of condemnation, and it is real, and it is permanent, and it will happen to real people. Friends, the very serious truth is: that is what we deserve. The truth of the Bible is that we fairly, rightly **DESERVE** the state of condemnation. We are sinful and we don't qualify to be in the presence of a holy, pure God.

The Bible says: ***"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"*** Romans 3:23
We've all sinned. Each one – broken our relationship with God.

Pushed God out of our lives. And we deserve no relationship with God – God out of our lives, nothing good, no hope – FOREVER!

Yet, the good news – no, the *GREAT* news – is that God is not only a God of wrath, He is more a person of unspeakable, unbelievable amounts of love. God offers heaven to you as a gift because Jesus achieved it FOR you. That Bible says in Romans 3:24: *“... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.**”* Romans 3:23-24

“Freely by His grace” -- the state of blessedness is yours, as a FREE gift. Not earned by you. Not deserved for you. God OFFERS heaven to you -- only because Jesus died on the cross to pay for all your wrongs and sins FOR you.

And FAITH – faith is RECEIVING this gift. Faith is – I give up on my DOING, and instead I trust what Jesus has DONE. Faith is letting what Jesus has DONE be applied to me.

Faith is loving Jesus back. It’s *wanting* a relationship with God more than anything else in life. Faith is humbling myself to simply accept what Jesus has done for me.

Friends, DON’T REJECT Jesus! Don’t reject Jesus’ payment. Don’t reject the love of the Father who gave Jesus for you. Receive heaven by trusting Jesus’ payment for you.

Friends, you can be absolutely sure that you will spend your forever in heaven. You can know with absolute certainty that you will be with your loving God forever and ever. God has promised that for everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ as their forgiver, heaven is their forever future. When you trust what Jesus has done for you, this is your 100% guaranteed gift that is waiting in heaven.

Jesus said it clearly. He said: ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”*** John 3:16-18 You have such a loving God. He not only wants

everyone to avoid hell, but He has personally paid with His life so that no one in the world ever need be there. AMEN.