



## What About Hell?

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Is the doctrine of hell a hindrance or a help in witnessing? Many evangelicals are ashamed of this biblical doctrine, viewing it as a blemish to be covered up by the cosmetic of divine love. The doctrine of hell often evokes images of 'hell-fire and brimstone' preachers venting their vehemence with lurid descriptions of burning, worm-eaten bodies crying out for impossible relief. The very word 'hell' is often replaced by friendlier phrases such as 'separation from God.' Although this description of hell is accurate, it lacks punch for those who know little of God's goodness, holiness, and hatred of sin. To them, separation from God may seem like freedom from a domineering spouse or parent. Why fear that?

Christians face a daunting dilemma when it comes to hell. Often, our first impulse is to soften or avoid the doctrine. However, this dishonours God's word. Jesus forcefully warned his hearers of the eternal punishment that awaited those who refused to serve him (Matthew 13:40-42; 25:46). A person who has been rescued from this fate through Jesus Christ cannot in good conscience downplay his or her redemption. This would be like someone whose life was saved by a uniquely skilled brain surgeon saying merely that 'the doctor helped me' when, in reality, the surgeon delivered that person as no one else could have done. If, on the other hand, Christians openly affirm their belief in hell, they risk repelling the unbelievers they want to reach. If hell puts people off, how will they be saved from it? Is there a solution to this dilemma?

There is no solution in hollowing out biblical doctrines to suit modern tastes. Paul is our example when he declared to the Thessalonians,

'we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts' (1 Thessalonians 2:4-5, NRSV). Our only aim must be to adhere to God's truth. The gospel message always has and always will offend human pride (1 Corinthians 1:18). The teaching that our sin deserves eternal punishment will never serve as a quick psychological pick-me-up for those with a low self-esteem. Nevertheless, if we clearly explain and compassionately expound the truth about hell, we may be surprised at how people respond to it in faith.

The doctrine of hell does not stand alone as a kind of an ancient Christian horror story. The logic of hell is inseparable from three other interrelated biblical truths: human sin, God's holiness, and the cross of Christ.

In a relativistic culture, the very concept of sin must be elucidated and defended vigorously. If morality is relative to each person, then there is no higher moral standard to meet or to break. But, as C. S. Lewis powerfully argues in *Mere Christianity* and *The Abolition of Man*, the idea of an objective moral law is inescapable. When we are snubbed or exploited, we call out for justice. When we encounter people of grit and grace we praise them as moral examples. Our conscience is more than mere instinct or social conditioning. Yet because there is often a great gap between our ideals and our actions, we suffer guilt and regret. Despite our denials and excuses, our abused consciences dog us throughout our days.

While much of modern psychology assures us that guilt can be gutted through humanistic methods, the gospel faces the problem head-on. Guilt is real because we have violated the standards of goodness. We have put self above God. Left to ourselves, we can do nothing to undo our wrongs. Forgiving ourselves is never sufficient because we are in no position to exonerate the guilty party — any more than a murderer can grant himself a stay of execution.

Christianity explains the global stain of human guilt by placing it in a theological framework that not only sharpens its sting, but makes relief possible. Sin is a moral condition that offends the holiness of God and removes us from his

approval. When Isaiah received a vision of God as 'holy, holy, holy,' — the Hebrew way of expressing ultimate holiness — he cried out that he was ruined because he was a sinner in the midst of a sinful people (Isaiah 6:1-5). Only after God atoned for his sin and took away his guilt was Isaiah ready for his prophetic work (vs. 6-8). Likewise, King David understood the reality of sin when he confessed that he had sinned against God by committing adultery and arranging for Bathsheba's husband to be killed (Psalm 51:4). Although David had wronged a throng of people, the root of his error was disobedience to God's holy law. Jesus taught that the tax collector who humbly cried out 'God have mercy on me, a sinner' went home justified before God because — unlike the prideful Pharisee — he admitted his sin against God (Luke 18:13-14).

Although polls tell us that over ninety percent of Americans believe in God, most people do not connect God's holiness with their uneasy conscience. Because God is infinitely holy, any moral wrongdoing — in thought, word, or deed — offends his unchanging character. If God is the Creator of the cosmos and the supreme source and standard of morality, how could he grade on the curve? If we fail to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39), we have no hope of pleasing God on account of our merit. We have broken the Lawgiver's law. 'Sin is lawlessness' (1 John 3:4). Law breakers deserve punishment. But is not hell too extreme?

The great American theologian Jonathan Edwards took this up in his essay, 'The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners.' Edwards argues that because God is 'a Being of infinite greatness, majesty, and glory' he is therefore 'infinitely honorable' and worthy of our absolute obedience. 'Sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations, must be a crime infinitely heinous, and deserving of infinite punishment.' Edwards's much maligned but solidly biblical sermon, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,' presses home the point that a sinner without Christ has no grounds for confidence and every reason to fear hell. God, who is angry with sin, could justifiably send the unrepentant sinner to hell at any moment. Jesus himself warned, 'Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can

destroy both body and soul in hell' (Matthew 10:28). The book of Hebrews echoes this message: 'It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Hebrews 10:31).

To fathom fully the horror of sin and the holiness of God we must kneel before the cross of Christ. Although Jesus is the supreme moral example because of his perfect obedience to his heavenly Father, this does not exhaust his work on behalf of our salvation. The Scriptures command us to be like Christ, but this is never presented as the basis of our salvation. Christ's sinless perfection is impossible for us to attain; 'for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). Because Jesus flawlessly obeyed God's moral law in our place, he is uniquely qualified to be our Savior. On the cross, Christ offered himself to God the Father as a spotless sacrifice for our sin. He accepted the cross in love because it was required to save those who would otherwise perish (John 3:16-18).

— The magnitude of sin against God was so severe that only the death of the sinless Son of God could atone for it. We see the reality of hell when the crucified Christ calls out to his Father, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). The Son's perfect fellowship with the Father — a love enjoyed from eternity past — was broken when Christ bore the penalty for our sins. Paul explains, 'God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:21). We can avoid being forsaken by God (in hell) and inherit heaven only through faith in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8).

In the cross of Christ the sinfulness of sin, the holiness of God, and the actuality of hell are all writ large with the blood of the Lamb. Only through Christ taking on our hell through his death could sinners be reconciled to a holy God. Once this is understood, hell takes on a clarity not otherwise perceived. Apart from the cross, there is no hope of forgiveness or reconciliation with God. Hell is the only alternative.

Only by understanding the logic of hell can we grasp the immensity of God's love. God's love took his son to the hell of the cross for our sake. This is a costly love, a bloody love, that has no parallel in any of the world's religions. Although some

other religions (particularly Islam) threaten hell, none offer the sure deliverance from it that Christianity offers through the sacrificial love of God himself.

In this rich theological context, we can courageously incorporate the doctrine of hell at the heart of our evangelistic enterprise. Jesus asked what a person's life would be worth if he were to gain the whole world but forfeit his very soul (Matthew 16:26). Hell is the loss of the soul, a reality so terrible that Scripture uses a variety of ways to describe it. The graphic and horrible reports of hell given in Scripture — such as the abyss (Revelation 9:1-11), the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14), the blackest darkness (Jude 13), the gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30) — disclose the stark reality of eternal separation from a just and loving God.

We can apply these truths in several ways. First, we should encourage biblical preaching and teaching on hell set in its proper theological setting and presented with much prayer and compassion. As Francis Schaeffer said, the doctrine of hell must be taught 'with tears.' I recently preached a sermon that spoke of Jesus' many warnings about hell. No one in the audience left or jeered. After the service a young woman came forward to accept Christ! Similarly, when I gave a campus lecture on the New Age view of Christ, I emphasized that the biblical Christ came to save people from hell. This did not repulse people, even though it was a very secular campus. Students pondered what was said and many stayed to ask questions after the lecture.

Second, our everyday witness must involve a warning as well as a welcome. We welcome people to find eternal life in Christ, but we must also warn them of the eternal death that awaits those who reject the gospel. Pascal said, 'Between heaven and hell is only this life, which is the most fragile thing in the world.' Given the biblical warnings about hell, the non-Christian ends up betting his or her eternity that Christianity is a lie. We should challenge people to investigate intently the claims of Christianity, considering all there is to gain and all there is to lose.

Third, we must beseech God to alert both our non-Christian friends and the church at large to the reality of hell. Without this doctrine firmly in place,

Christians will lose their evangelistic edge. And without a proper fear of God's holiness, no one will come to Christ for his gift of forgiveness and eternal life.