

IS THERE REALLY A HELL?

The Bible is a hopeful book. It tells the story of how God created this world, and how he made humans in a special way – *in his own image*. This means we were designed to be in relationship with him and to represent his interests on this beautiful planet. By loving him and loving one another and loving his creation, we would reach our full potential and be the people that God made us to be. Regrettably, though, we've made a mess of that plan.

But the Bible portrays God as gracious, merciful, and persistent. After working in and through the lives of men, women, and even nations, God came to earth as a person – Jesus Christ – to forgive our wrongdoings, be our example, and pave the way for all who would follow him into the life and existence we were created to enjoy. This is good news indeed. Of course, one may choose not to follow Christ, which creates the terrible possibility that some humans may fail to reach the goal for which they were made. And that brings us to the sticky and uncomfortable topic of hell. Is it true that there are eternal consequences for rejecting God's grace?

Let's look at the origin of the concept of hell in the Bible. Beginning in the days of Josiah's reform in Judah (Josiah was king of Judah around 640 BC), a perpetual fire burned in a ravine just south of Jerusalem. The ravine had once been a center of idol worship and human sacrifice. King Josiah turned the defiled place into a public trash heap where the refuse of the city was dumped. The waste became a breeding ground for worms. Later, the bodies of dead animals and criminals were tossed into the flaming debris to rot and burn. The stench of the burning filth hung continuously above the valley known as Gehenna.

It is the word "Gehenna" which Jesus uses as the most descriptive picture of what we call hell. Actually, eleven of the twelve uses of the word "Gehenna" in the New Testament were spoken by him. When he taught, Jesus used this imagery of horrible loss to describe the consequences of living a self-absorbed life. Those who persist in their own prideful ways and reject God's forgiveness and purpose for their lives are destined for self-destruction. "They will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (Matthew 25:46, TNIV)

This hardly seems fair from our finite viewpoint. We all agree that justice is a good thing and people should face the consequences of their decisions. But isn't hell a bit overboard? Why would God allow people to experience such a terrible thing? For starters, we should notice that the term "Gehenna" and many of the images from the New Testament are obviously metaphors. (For example, it doesn't make sense for Jesus to describe hell both as the nighttime darkness *and* a lake of fire if these images are to be taken strictly literally.) But the message is clear. Choosing to live your life apart from God is a destitute existence. It's not what God designed us for from the beginning. It goes against what it means to be a human made in the image of God. That's

why theologian N.T. Wright suggests: “Those who persistently refuse to follow Jesus, the true Image of God, will by their own choice become less and less like him, that is, less and less truly human. . . Some, perhaps many, of God’s human creatures do choose, and will choose to dehumanize themselves completely.” Whether or not this is an accurate description of hell, we should be uncomfortable with the idea of anyone facing such a future – separated from the love and purposes God intended them to experience.

Nevertheless, God has given us that choice. In order to honor our freedom, God does not require that we receive the forgiveness he lovingly extends to us. He genuinely respects our ability to make our own decisions. If we refuse a relationship with him, he grants our desire. But for those who love him and long to be connected to their Creator, he gives life everlasting. Maybe this is why C.S. Lewis said, “There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘All right, then, have it your way.’”

The important thing to recognize is that we are not the only ones unsettled by the thought of hell. God doesn’t want anyone to experience life or eternity apart from him. Addressing a rebellious Israel through the prophet Ezekiel, God says: “Therefore, house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!” (Ezekiel 18:30-32, TNIV) God has given us that choice.

And God has made a way. He donned human flesh and hung on a cross, offering forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God to all who trust him. Jesus experienced the consequences of our sin so that we wouldn’t have to. And he rose from the grave to conquer death and offer us life. As the familiar verse says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16, TNIV)