

DOUBTING GOD: SPRING 2011 SERIES

WEEK 5—WOULD A LOVING GOD REALLY SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?

GREENTREE COMMUNITY CHURCH

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I. THE DOUBT DEFINED — An all-loving, omnipotent God seems incompatible with the idea of Hell. How can this really be?

- A. **The Approach Matters.** Is your goal to win an argument? Is your goal, deep down, to be right? Or is your goal to *win the person*? **Extreme care, TNT-care, in your tone and posture will only further serve your hearer.** Why not ask God for such a heart? Remember a gospel-oriented approach will require “being merciful to those who doubt” (Jude 22) and realizing that not *all* doubts are rooted in sin. This *particular* topic – if it is true – has *serious* ramifications for those who aren’t Christians. After all, it is (seeing & savoring) the “Lord’s *kindness* that leads to repentance” (Rom. 2:4).
- B. **Why the approach matters so much!** If we, when speaking about this matter, *model* capriciousness, callousness, and coldness, in our disposition and tone, we will only further alienate the hearer by presenting the very thing they find so disheartening. If Hell is as real as the Bible says it is, we must speak about it with tenderhearted heaviness.
- C. **The heart of the matter.** It would seem, the judgment of God expressed in eternal punishment rails against his love. Furthermore, if God is so all-powerful it seems like his ‘all-lovingness’ would drive Him to action to save people from Hell. The idea of Hell seems to compromise his Love or his power.

II. I BELIEVE IN A GOD OF LOVE. NOT A GOD OF WRATH/JUDGMENT

- A. **How can a God of Love have anything to do with wrath?** On the surface, this appears to be a great rejoinder: Love and wrath cannot coincide. By very definition, Love and Wrath are opposites. But this comes from a very limited definition of what Love is. Some might say, “Love and Anger are opposites.” But that’s not true. If you’ve ever really loved something or someone, when it’s well-being is threatened what rises to the surface in you? It’s anger! But why? Is it coming up because you *don’t* love the thing? No. In fact it is the opposite—the anger is *fueled by* the love you have for the person.

Tim Keller: “Wrath really means settled opposition and hatred of that which is destroying what we love.”¹

- B. **Where does their notion of a God of Love come from?** One thing that historians have pointed out is that the idea that “God is a god of love” isn’t found in the early pagan religions. The gods didn’t get involved physically, much less emotionally, with their subjects. To do so would be to compromise their god-ness. And in Eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, New Age Religions, etc.) the God-idea is *not* personal. He/she/it does not have personality. And ‘love’ is an aspect of personality. A force can’t love. The Jedi Force just is; it isn’t good or bad. So, where does this notion of a god of love enter into the consciousness of modern man? Plain and simple, it comes in ‘seed form’ in Judaism and ‘in full bloom’ in Christianity.

III. CAN’T GOD JUST OVERLOOK SIN? – Some have mentioned that such would be desirable. After all, can’t God just let everyone into heaven, regardless of sin?

- A. **On the surface this looks like an incredibly appealing ‘way of things.’** If God really is all-powerful, then can’t he just overlook sin and let everyone into heaven?

¹ This comes from Keller’s *Reason for God* DVD. Session 6.

B. An Illustration. Suppose you had child and one day he came home and had a bruise around his eye. You asked him where he got it and he said that while he was talking to his teacher another boy came up and socked him in plain view. You later inquire, “Well, did the teacher do anything?” Your son tells you, “Well, no. He said that it would be cruel to punish someone for what they’ve done. And besides, who is he to decide what is *really* right and wrong. And, dad/mom, he urged me and everyone else to think the same way.” How would you respond to such idiocy? Would you overlook the offense?

C. ‘I believe in a God of love.’ This brings us back to, in my opinion, the main problem with saying that God is a god of love...while neglecting other attributes of his being. Folks might say, “I can’t believe in a God that actually punishes sin. Your god is cruel if he does so. Therefore, I believe in a god that loving.”

IV. THE WANING OF AN EXTERNAL, MORAL AUTHORITY – Western culture has not eschewed moral authority altogether. The arbiter of it has just become the individual.

C.S. Lewis. “The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite the kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.”²

Jonathan Edwards. “For though it would be righteous in God forever to cast you off, and destroy you, yet it will be just in God to save you, in and through Christ who has made complete satisfaction for all sin. Rom 3:25-26, ‘whom 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. It 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.’”³

V. THE BREATHTAKING LOVE OF HELL

A. The Loss of the Doctrine. The refrain of many today (as I’ve noted many times today) is, “I believe in a God of Love.” But one Pastor always asks this question as a rejoinder. “What did it *cost* your God to love you?” And this usually baffles even the best of us. What is real love, anyway? Is it mere sap and sentimentality? Is it a gushy feeling akin to teenage whims? No. Real love is always costly. It always requires some sort of sacrifice. Trust me, to love you cost somebody something. And I don’t mean financially. In the gospel alone, you find the richest of loves.

B. A question: for you and those you love. What do you want from God in this matter? Do you wish God to wipe your slate clean and let you start over? He already did in Jesus. But better. Now no record is kept. Do you want him to not punish you for the wrongs you’ve admittedly done and that *rightly* deserve judgment? Okay, there is total-shelter in Jesus. Do you think it is unfair for God to punish sin through eternal separation if he himself would never be subject to it? But he was. Jesus suffered the Cosmic Silence from the Father on the cross. The doctrine of Hell is *truly* repulsive. But never more so than when Jesus himself was repulsed by the Father for you. Let’s pray.

² C.S. Lewis, The Collected Works of C.S. Lewis (Inspirational Press: Edison, NJ 1996) 464.

³ Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 19 (Yale 2001) 374.