

## WOULD A GOOD GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?

### I. THE OBJECTION STATED: LOVE AND HELL CANNOT COEXIST

We do not have to look far in Scripture to see God the judgment of God. Nahum 1.2 notes that the Lord is “Avenging and Wrathful.” When we get to the New Testament we see Jesus Himself saying, “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13.42).” Thus, many skeptics respond, “I believe in a loving God, and a loving God would not punish people for simply ‘being human,’ or for the sins and mistakes they make. After all, there are good and sincere people of every religion and of no religion, so why would God send them to hell for not believing in Jesus?”

### II. IMPROPER USES OF GOD’S ANGER

Many skeptics are turned off by “Christianity” when they perceive that some Christians are actually *glad* that people are going to hell. Images come to mind of extremist picket signs that read, “God hates fags,” or “Thank God for AIDS.” This attitude which, sadly, is held by some extremists professing to be Christians, is patently *non-Christian* and has nothing to do with the *true* Christian Gospel or the *true* Christian way. Even God himself takes *no pleasure* in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23). In contrast to the “angry Christian” image, true Christianity teaches that Christians are to view sin *as a need* as well as an offense—and even a cause for compassion toward the one who sins. God alone is the judge (see John 8:1-11). In this the skeptic can be affirmed—there is no excuse for a Christian to be a “jerk for Jesus.” C.S. Lewis: “In all discussions of hell we should keep steadily before our eyes the possible damnation, not of our enemies nor our friends...but of ourselves.

### III. WHAT IS HELL?

**A. Christianity’s Hell Requires an Expanded Definition of Sin.** Let’s take a brief look at this in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. In this parable we have a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. Though Lazarus lay at his gate begging for food and wildly sick, the rich man will not even feed him the crumbs from his table. Commentators have always noted that this is the only parable Jesus ever tells where a character has a name. You would think that if Lazarus has a name, then certainly the rich man would, but he doesn’t. This is intentional to make a point. Now this man was most certainly not an atheist but probably believed in the God of the Bible and prayed to the God of the Bible, but there he is in hell without a name. Notice what Abraham says to him in v. 25, “remember that you in your lifetime received your good things.” He *had* his good things. Status and wealth was the basis for his identity, and now that they’re gone, there’s no him left. He was a rich man or nothing. In other words, the definition of sin is not simply breaking God’s law (else Jesus would not have criticized the Pharisees); it is the higher problem behind breaking God’s law, i.e. enslaving yourself to another ‘god.’ So, sin is building your life around someone or something else besides God. You look at something and say if I have that, then I have importance and value but without that, I’m nothing. Make anything more fundamental to your significance and security than the knowledge and love of God, then you really worship something else. This is clear from Jeremiah 2:13: “My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.” What God is saying is that in the end all other cisterns will be shown to be empty, holding no water to put out the flame in your heart.

**B. Christianity’s Hell Displays Our Heart.** What does all this mean for our belief in hell? It means that if you are building your life around anything else besides God, be it parents, kids, spouse, power, control, money, sex; if you are making a good thing the ultimate thing, then you worship

that thing. That is spiritual addiction or spiritual slavery. When all is said and done your addiction to that thing, like the rich man in the parable, will go on forever. Notice how delusional the rich man is in the parable. He's still giving orders for Lazarus to come and comfort him, orders to send someone to his brothers, implying that he didn't get enough information from God, etc. Also notice that he does not ask to get out of hell, he just wants to get Lazarus in. In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis describes a busload of people from hell who come to the outskirts of heaven. There they are urged to leave behind the sins that have trapped them in hell. The descriptions Lewis makes of people in hell are so striking because we recognize the denial and self-delusion of substance addictions. When addicted to alcohol, we are miserable, but we blame others and pity ourselves; we do not take responsibility for our behavior nor see the roots of our problem. Lewis writes, "Hell ... begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps even criticizing it.... You can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine." C.S. Lewis: "It's not a question of God sending us to Hell. In each of us there is something growing up which will of itself *be Hell* unless it is nipped in the bud. The matter is serious: let us put ourselves in His hands at once—this very day, this hour." "Jesus says that "judgment consists in the very fact that men prefer darkness to light (John 3.19)...We can therefore think of hell, not as a sentence imposed on him but as the mere fact of being what he is. The characteristic of lost souls is their rejection of everything that is not simply themselves...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.'"

- C. Christianity's Hell is a Chosen Identity.** Lewis again: "What are you asking God to do? To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does." Tim Keller: "Hell is a freely chosen identity based on something besides God going on forever." Thus, the picture we have of God throwing people into a pit and watching them climb to the sides only to thump them in again, laughing all the while, is not accurate.
- D. Christianity's Hell is Serious.** This doctrine requires us to take our spiritual slavery/addiction seriously and to ask ourselves the question, "Do we have an identity that is based upon God alone, do we have a core identity that is there beneath the love of career, spouse, children, etc?"

#### IV. WHY DO WE NEED HELL?

- A. To Promote Peace with the World.** This sounds silly, b/c many people think that if you believe in God's judgment, that you will disdain or oppress other classes of people. Many think that those that believe in judgment would impose violence or hatred on others. Remember what we said above that hell is not imposed in violence. In fact, notice how Abraham addressed the man in hell, 'child,' (v. 25) not evil sinner. Ezekiel 18.23 confirms this: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God and rather not that he should turn from his way and live?" Hear the words of Miroslav Volf regarding how the doctrine of God's judgment is necessary for peace in the world. Volf was a Croatian who had 1<sup>st</sup> hand experience with the terrible violence in the Balkans. He looked into the cycle of violence there and concluded: "The cycle of retaliation is not fueled by belief in a God of judgment but by a lack of a belief in a God of judgment. If God were not angry at injustice, that God would not be worthy of worship. The only means of prohibiting all recourse of violence by ourselves is to insist that judgment is legitimate only when it comes from God. My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many, but it takes the quiet of a suburban home to believe that human non-violence results from a belief in God's refusal to judge. In a land soaked with the blood of the innocent it will invariably die with other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind." In other words, if you've talked to some

people who have had their homes burned and their families killed and raped, how will you keep them from picking up the sword and getting sucked into the cycle of violence in retaliation? Will you say that violence doesn't solve anything? Not only will such moralizing not touch their hearts, it shows no concern for justice. Anyone scorned like this knows that justice must be done. Volf says the only resource he knows powerful enough to both satisfy the human heart for justice and quell the violence is a belief in God who will put everything right. If don't think there is a God who will make everything right, you will get sucked into the cycle of violence. If you don't believe that the doctrine of God's judgment that is not a powerful resource for living at peace on earth, then you've had a sheltered life.

**B. To Give Comfort in Suffering.** We need to know that God is angry. All we hear today is sappy sentimentalism about God. The fact that God is love somehow comes to mean that He's the 'nice guy in the sky' who sits back in a big recliner and puts a big rubber stamp of approval and affirmation on everything that happens. But since when is love, sitting back and doing nothing while loved ones are destroyed, when has love ever meant approval of injustice, when does love mean letting oppression rule, when does love mean not caring about the downward spiral of the ones you love. So, you're darn right that God is angry. He better be angry when His children are victimized, when His creation is ruined, when families are abandoned, when diseases take lives, and when relationships are destroyed. People ask, 'What kind of loving God is filled with wrath?' But any loving person is often filled with wrath. In *Hope Has Its Reasons*, Becky Pippert writes, 'Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance as we might toward strangers? Far from it...Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference.' Pippert then quotes E. H. Gifford, 'Human love here offers a true analogy: the more a father loves his son, the more he hates in him the drunkard, the liar, the traitor.' She concludes: 'If I, a flawed narcissistic sinful woman, can feel this much pain and anger over someone's condition, how much more a morally perfect God who made them? God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer of sin which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.' " Christianity gives us a God who not only weeps over suffering (John 11.35) but is also angered by it and willing to do something about it (John 11.33)

**C. To Show the Depths of God's Love.** Keller: "Unless we come to grips with this terrible doctrine, we will never even begin to understand the depths of what Jesus did for us on the cross. His body was being destroyed in the worst possible way, but that was a flea bite compared to what was happening to his soul. When he cried out that his God had forsaken him, he was experiencing hell itself...If a mild acquaintance denounces you and rejects you—that hurts. If a good friend does the same—the hurt's far worse. However, if your spouse walks out on you, saying, 'I never want to see you again,' that is far more devastating still. The longer, deeper, and more intimate the relationship, the more torturous is any separation...But the Son's relationship with the Father was beginning-less and infinitely greater than the most intimate and passionate human relationship. When Jesus was cut off from God, he went into the deepest pit and most powerful furnace, beyond all imagining. And he did it voluntarily, for us." Here's the point: The measure of how much you love someone is determined solely by how much of yourself you are willing to give up, to sacrifice, to ensure his or her welfare. What does this say about the love of God as it relates to his anger? It says that he loves us with a "love supreme" (to borrow a phrase from Jazz artist John Coltrane), such that *he would rather die than punish us*. He would rather eat the wrath and fury himself than see us pay for all of our wrongdoings and sins. Once you understand this, you are humbled to the dust, and even learn to *delight* in a God who is angry at all sin, which violates his peace. Only Christianity gives us a God who makes peace with those who have declared war on him (Romans 5:8). You do not know how much Jesus loves you unless you know how much He's suffered for you.