

# THE PROBLEM OF HELL

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The Christian doctrine of hell has long been a stumbling block for people to overcome when accepting Christianity. For surely a good God would not send people to hell, especially those who lead a pretty good life and had no possible opportunity to accept Christianity. Below, I will proceed to resolve this problem by first sharpening the apparent disharmony of the doctrine of hell, then pointing out some misconceptions, and finally by providing a positive Christian defense for the classic doctrine of hell.

## THE PROBLEM

Typically the problem for the doctrine of hell is established as an unlikely consequence given that if the Christian God exists, he would essentially possess the characteristics of love, mercy, goodness, kindness, etc. Thus, based on the fact that God essentially possesses these characteristics maximally, then it is inconsistent for God also to create a place for the purpose of punishing those who chose not to believe in him, especially those who aren't overtly evil and/or had minimal or zero opportunity to accept Christianity. Some proponents of this objection go further to claim that if God creates hell and damns people to it, then God is positively evil.

Another problem for the doctrine of hell comes from certain interpretations in the Bible. For example, in Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus seems to teach that the broad path, which is populated by those bound for hell, has a larger following than the narrow way, which leads to heaven. If this is so, one wonders why a good God would create a world knowing that a lopsided outcome was inevitable? Moreover, 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9 both seem to teach that God desires no one to go to hell. This makes the previous point even stronger--if God foreknew a lopsided ratio of humanity would go to hell, and God does not desire a single person to go to hell, why did he create this world and hell?

## MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HELL

Many of the apparent difficulties with the doctrine of hell disappear when certain misconceptions are clarified. The first one, is a misconception of God's character. While Christians affirm unequivocally God

is essentially good and loving, it must be emphasized that complementary to these attributes is the characteristic of **justice**. A loving being that *ignored* evil or that treated bad acts and good acts equally would not be good. Hence, if God is good, then God is also just--he must treat evil as evil. So, if any creatures merited the existence of hell, then God could remain essentially good and loving by giving them justice, even if that means sending some creatures to hell.

A second misconception has to do with how one is "sent" to hell. Often objectors claim that God randomly picks people to be damned as if on a whim. Additionally, they envision that the one sent to hell is absolutely innocent in the matter and had nothing to do with the outcome. On the contrary, Christians have long held that hell is choice made by the one who arrives there (*e.g.*, in Matt. 7:13-14 Jesus says those who choose the broad path walk to destruction). Essentially, then, God does not send people to hell. Rather, they send themselves.

A final misconception about hell is that it is a place of physical torment and torture. Sometimes this is inferred from the creative writings of Dante (who, by the way, was a master of symbolism too). Bible describes hell in symbols, which is evident by the diverse portrayals given in scripture. For example in Mark 9:43-48, Jesus says hell is a place of unquenchable fire. 2 Peter 2:4 describes hell as a pit of darkness. The book of Revelation refers to hell as a "Lake of Fire" reserved for punishing those who rebel against God (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8). There is no need to try and harmonize hell as a literal pit of darkness that also is composed of fire or to construe hell as some literal lake of fire. Rather, most Christians have understood these descriptions to capture symbolically that hell is final and utter separation from God's saving grace. Some Christians, like C. S. Lewis, take hell to be a real place where sinful people make themselves miserable. Similarly, thinking of heaven as a place of hedonistic pleasures is wrongheaded as well. In fact, those who choose hell would not enjoy the pleasures of heaven since those pleasures essentially flow from a right relationship with God.

## **IN DEFENSE OF HELL**

While the aforementioned clarifications are helpful, more work may be needed to resolve tensions involving the doctrine of hell. First, there is the problem mentioned above about God desiring all people to be saved, yet all people are not saved. If this is so, why doesn't God see to it that everyone is saved? One Christian response explains that God is essentially a loving being who does not wish to coerce people against their wills to have a right relationship with him. If God forced people to love him, that would be tantamount to rape, which is morally unacceptable. So, God may desire all people to be saved, but since he loves them enough to allow them to choose, he respects their free will and allows them to choose hell.

Another problem people raise about hell is that it seems unjust to punish someone irrevocably for an eternity. Christians have at least two basic responses to this objection. First, the nature of sin according to

Christian theology is an infinite transgression against God. No finite quantity can be exacted to cover the deficit established by sin. Hence, the punishment is justly executed infinitely. Second, some Christians hold that those in hell freely and eternally reject God. As Thomas Aquinas states, "There would be no everlasting punishment of the souls of the damned if they were able to change their will for a better will" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 93, 2). In other words, the gates of hell are locked from the inside.

Moreover, at this juncture the Christian understanding of the Gospel can show God is positively good. For God's creation chose to rebel against him, and in the name of justice, God could have simply let the rebels receive their just desserts. Yet, he did not. God loves the world, so he took care of infinite debt of sin the only possible way: by sending his Son (of an essentially infinite innocence) to pay the price of our sin. Additionally, God has given enough evidence of his existence and saving work for people to trust their lives in him. The Bible teaches that God works in the lives of people to draw them to a relationship with him. In other words, God has provided a solution to a problem, which was created by rebellious creatures. Furthermore, God has provided non-coercive ways to make this salvation known.

This leads to the final objection that the existence of hell often raises: what about those who have no opportunity to know and accept God's salvation? There are numerous responses to this that are consistent with historic Christianity, which I will briefly survey. First, no matter how God deals with these people, Christians know God is good, loving, and just, and God will handle these cases in a manner consistent with his character, even if we are unable to comprehend how that is possible. Second, the Bible seems to teach that God has sufficiently revealed himself to all people (John 1:7, 9; Rom. 1:18-2:1), so perhaps all people have some way of responding to God's grace. A third position teaches that God knows perfectly how each person would respond to the gospel and has created the world such that those who would never willfully accept the gospel in any feasible scenario comprise those who live in these circumstances. Many other Christian defenses can be given, but these three show how it is at least possible for Christians to give some semblance of an answer to this thorny question.

## **CONCLUSION**

This brief undertaking has attempted to rebut common misconceptions and arguments against Christianity based on the doctrine of hell. I believe I have provided plausible ways that demonstrate the doctrine of hell is consistent with the Christian understanding of God, scripture, and justice. This does not mean that I delight in pondering the existence of hell or those who choose that destination. It breaks my heart. Nonetheless, I believe hell is consistent with other Christian teachings, and there is no reason to suppose it is immoral or makes God into an evil being.

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## **BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING**

- C. S. Lewis, [The Great Divorce](#). C. S. Lewis gives a parabolic short story to explain his views on heaven and hell. A fascinating and challenging read.
- C. S. Lewis, [The Problem of Pain](#). In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis has a chapter that deals specifically with hell, which is worth reading on this subject.
- Jonathan Kvanvig, [The Problem of Hell](#). This book addresses the problem of hell from the perspective of philosophy. Kvanvig is an excellent philosopher and Christian. Of interest to those with a background in philosophy and especially those who wish to have an understanding of the *justice* of hell.