

HOW CAN A GOOD GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?

What a good question. What a loaded question. It's loaded, because it assumes a whole bunch of stuff before it's even answered. It's like asking a man, "When did you stop beating your wife?" No matter how he replies, he's doomed from the outset if he accepts the wording of the question. How can a good God send people to hell? Let's start by deconstructing the question.

1. We send ourselves

Let me begin by saying that God does not send people to hell, as much as they choose to go there. The Bible is emphatic that the God of Christianity hates hell and he hates people going there. 2 Peter 3,9 says, 'God is patient with you. He does not want anyone to perish. Rather, he wants everyone to turn their lives over to him.'

God has done, and continues to do, all that he can to stop anyone going to hell. He's put up a big roadblock on the road of all of our lives, warning, telling, urging us to do a U-turn. God did not have to save us from our collision course with hell, he would have remained perfectly just to punish our guilt for all eternity, but instead, he put his own life on the line to rescue us from our own foolish rebellion against him. The cross is God's roadblock. And it offers an alternate route for all eternity. God does not demand our blood - in Jesus Christ he has offered his own.

2. What is hell?

Let's now explore what we mean by hell and why it exists in the first place. A lot of us may have asked this question, 'Why is there a hell?', and in the same breath, asked, 'Why is there evil and suffering in the world?' But if you take some time to think about those two questions side by side, you'll realise that you can't have it both ways. How can we protest to evil and suffering, if there is not a place that it will ultimately be banished to? Hell is a kind of quarantine for everything that is opposite to God and goodness.

If God represents everything that is good and lovely and pure and beautiful, hell is simply the absence of these things. Today, we live in a world that has aspects of heaven and hell in it. There are, as Philip Yancey says, 'rumours of another world' - beautiful whispers of grace. And we're all well aware, that there is also devastation and pain. But the Bible assures us that light and dark can ultimately not co-exist. There is coming a day when the two will be eternally separated. And those who chose to live without God in this life, will live without him and his grace in the next. Bare in mind that even if right now, you think you're already living without God and doing quite well thank-you very much, the Bible speaks about a temporary 'common grace' that we're all privileged to experience at the present - that's why

people in rebellion towards God can still experience blessings, and beauty and life. But not ultimately.

God is the most generous, loving, wonderful, merciful being in the universe. He has made us with free will and he has made us with a purpose: to relate lovingly to him, finding our identity and centre in him. But if we fail over and over again to live for the purpose for which we were created, then God will have absolutely no choice but to give us what we've asked for all along. Hell is the natural and logical consequence of a life lived in separation from God, without him at the centre.

And if hell is the absence of God's presence, then heaven is a place that's full of the presence and glory of God. We're told that heaven is all about God. So for self-centred people who don't love God, heaven would be a kind of hell! Each day, we're either preparing ourselves to be more heaven-compatible, or we're not.

Hell is not a place where people are consigned because they were 'pretty good people', but simply didn't believe the right stuff. They're there, first and foremost, because they defy their maker and want themselves to be at the centre of the universe. Hell is not filled with people who are now remorseful and repentant, wishing God were gentle enough to let them out. It's filled with people who, for all eternity, still want to be at the centre of the universe and who persist in their God-defying rebellion.

3. Does the punishment fit the crime?

Very few of us would have a problem with justice being served on a guilty criminal. That's possibly because we've been hardwired to instinctively want justice to be done. So why does the concept of hell offend us? Perhaps it's because we feel like the punishment does not fit the crime. As Lee Strobel puts it, we sense that this is 'cosmic overkill' - an eternity of separation from God, all because of finite sins against him.

Why are people punished infinitely for finite crimes? Well, we all know and understand that the degree to which a person warrants punishment is not proportional to the length of time it took to commit the crime. For instance, a murder can take 10 seconds, whilst stealing someone's furniture may take half a day. The degree of someone's crime is not related to how long it took to commit the deed. Rather, it's a matter of how severe the deed was.

So what's the most heinous thing a person can do? Abuse? Rape? Torture? Murder? Most of our answers revolve around a disregard for the sanctity of life. But what about when we attempt to disregard the life-giver? What about ignoring, belittling, distorting, marginalizing and trivialize the very one who gives us air to breathe? When we offend a finite being the consequences are finite, but when we offend an infinite being the consequences are infinite.

What is God to do? If he says it doesn't matter to him, then God is no longer a God that can be admired. For him to act in any other way in the face of such blatant defiance would be to reduce God himself. When one considers that God is infinitely glorious, beautiful, just, holy and therefore worthy of our deepest trust and awe, and yet we so easily distort, ignore and belittle his grace and majesty, then one realizes that the punishment fits the crime.

4. Hell - a testimony to the freedom God gives us.

Overall, the Bible teaches that hell was originally created for the devil and his minions. However, hell will also serve as the final destination for those who have rejected a relationship with God.

We should notice that many of the dreadful images of hell in the New Testament are obviously metaphors of what it's like to be separated from God. It doesn't make sense to describe hell as both 'outer darkness' and a 'lake of fire' if these words are to be taken literally. But the message is clear. Choosing to live your life apart from God is a destitute existence. Whatever hell is like, we should be uncomfortable with the idea of anyone facing such a future - separated from the love God intended them to experience.

Nevertheless, God has given us that choice. In order to honour 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. God would not force you to be reconciled to himself. He honours your freedom of choice. "Hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice" (G.K Chesterton). But for those who respond to his invitation of grace by trusting in Jesus as Saviour, 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. And so he took on 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. 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)