

QUESTION #2: “HOW CAN A GOD OF LOVE SEND SOMEONE TO HELL?” (Revelation 20:11-15)

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INTRODUCTION

Last week, we looked at the question, “Is once saved always saved?” And we found that yes, when someone has genuinely surrendered their life to Jesus Christ, because it is God in his strength sealing Christians for himself through the power of the Holy Spirit, absolutely, once saved is always saved.

Now before we get to this week’s question, we need to keep in mind that one of the motivations behind asking questions like this is that, just like the Pharisees and Sadducees and teachers of the law that challenged Jesus when he was here, they are looking for a stumble, for something about Jesus Christ to be untrue, fake or illegitimate because, if that can be found, then Jesus Christ is just another religious fanatic, as are the followers who claim him, and the one asking the question is off the hook. That is always the world’s perspective — to find somehow that Jesus Christ is NOT who he claims to be. Keep that in mind as we continue.

In an episode of the TV series “M*A*S*H called “The General’s Practitioner,” broadcast during that show’s fifth season, there is an interesting exchange between the doctors one day as they are in the operating room tending to both soldiers and civilians who have been wounded. As the doctors are tending to their patients, Major Burns quotes the phrase, “War is hell,” attributed to Civil War Union General William T. Sherman, to which Hawkeye Pierce responded: “War isn’t hell. War is war and hell is hell and, of the two, war is a lot worse.” Father Mulcahey, the chaplain for that unit who was in the OR at the time, of course perked up his ears at the possible theological discussion and asked, “How do you figure that, Hawkeye?” Hawkeye responded, “Easy, Father. Tell me: Who goes to hell?” Father Mulcahey correctly responded, “Sinners, I believe.” Hawkeye then said, “Exactly.” And then he said: “There are no innocent bystanders in hell.” Quite a profound statement from an alleged agnostic.

Well, that was one TV character’s picture of hell — no innocent bystanders. Is that right? Exactly how does someone wind up in hell? And what part does God play in that? That’s what we’re looking at today, through the filter of this question: “How can a God of love send someone to hell?”

TEXT: Revelation 20:11-15

Hell itself is actually one-half of the endgame of history — the outcome at the very end of time for all those who have rejected the love and forgiveness of God as offered through his Son, Jesus Christ. This is how John described it in the book of Revelation:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire — Revelation 20:11-15.

Now let's look at our question again: "How can a God of love send someone to hell?" It's an interesting thought because, first of all, anyone presenting that question is by that question acknowledging some real important truths:

- 1) That question acknowledges the existence of God.
- 2) That question acknowledges something the Bible clearly teaches: ***God is love — I John 4:8b.***
- 3) That question acknowledges the reality of hell.

But we need to go a little deeper, because this question at the same time is also presenting some grossly false assumptions:

- 1) Saying that God is a God of love suggests that there are no other aspects of his character; in other words, he is ONLY a God of love.
- 2) Saying that God SENDS somebody to hell suggests that this is God's doing, that there is no responsibility on the part of the person.

So let's look at all these pieces — starting with the actual truths that this question contains:

First of all — YES, there is a God; he does exist: ***Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God — Moses, Psalm 90:2.*** As one of the psalmists later pointed out: ***In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end — Psalm 102:25-27.*** And maybe one of the clearest statements of his existence is found in the first four words of the entire Bible: ***In the beginning God — Genesis 1:1a.*** The Bible never questions the existence of God. The existence of God is very literally where the Bible starts — the foundation upon which all else in Scripture begins.

Second — YES, God is love. Not only is love something he shows with his words and his actions, but it is the very essence of who he is. It is as eternal as he is. As Jeremiah noted God himself saying: ***"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness" — God speaking, Jeremiah 31:3b.*** And as Psalm 136 famously celebrates: ***Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever — Psalm 136:1.***

Third — YES, hell is real. Both the OT and the NT affirm this truth. The OT prophet Jeremiah received these words from God himself: ***"[M]y wrath will flare up and burn like fire because of the evil you have done — burn with no one to quench it" — God speaking, Jeremiah 4:4b.*** At the end of the Olivet Discourse, in the NT book of Matthew, when Jesus was telling his disciples about the end times, he concluded by telling them that nonbelievers ***"will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" — Jesus Christ, Matthew 25:45.*** As Paul wrote in his second letter to the church of the Thessalonians: ***[Jesus] will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might — Paul, II Thessalonians 1:8-9.***

Now the word that Christ used to describe the reality of hell was, in the Greek, *gehenna*. The history of that word is horrific. It comes from a place called *Ben Hinnom* — a valley outside of Jerusalem where some of Israel's worst atrocities were committed. As the nation of God's chosen people departed farther and farther from worshiping God, they fell into many forms of false religion, including a Moabite god called Molech. In pursuing that belief system, they conducted

human sacrifice, and even child sacrifice — and the valley of Ben Hinnom was the primary place where these sacrifices took place. It had such an appalling reputation that Jeremiah came to call that place the “Valley of Slaughter.” By the time of Christ, that same area had become the site of Jerusalem’s garbage dump; not only garbage was thrown there, but also the carcasses of dead animals and criminals as well (meaning that Christ himself, if not provided a place for his burial by Joseph of Arimathea, may have himself been thrown there). That perpetual garbage provided nourishment for the worms that made that place their meals, and it was also known as the place where the fires that burned all that rubbish never went out. Very well did Jesus say when linking that place to the site of “eternal punishment” in hell that it was the place **“where *the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is never quenched*”** — ***Jesus Christ, Mark 9:48 (quoting Isaiah 66:24)***. Jesus used that real place to describe hell as an equally real place.

And now, on to the false assumptions:

First, that God is only a loving God. God has many, many attributes — an attribute being something that is true about God, something that he has revealed about himself — that make up his being. Among them, for example, are a few of which we have maybe heard before:

- 1) His divine omniscience — God is all-knowing.
- 2) His omnipotence — God is all-powerful.
- 3) His omnipresence — God is all-present (Psalm 139).

Two additional attributes that most directly impact any conversations about God and how he responds to mankind are, first, holiness, and then, justice.

Holiness is, to put it simply, the way God is. That is not a standard he is conforming to because he is that standard. He is an absolute holy purity that is completely unable to be anything other than what he is. Put another way, God is holy with an absolute holiness that knows no degrees. And because he is holy, everything about him is holy. When God created the universe, he made holiness — his holiness — the moral condition necessary and required for the health of that universe. In fact, the Anglo-Saxon word *halig*, from which we get our English word “holy,” means “well, whole.” In other words, in God’s eyes, whatever is holy is healthy. By the same token, whatever is unholy, whatever is evil, is sickness. So, whatever is contrary to that holiness — what we call “sin” — earns his wrath. In other words, to preserve his creation, God must destroy whatever would threaten that creation. Every judgment of God since the beginning of time has ultimately been a holy act of preservation on his part. So, what that tells us is that the holiness of God, the wrath of God, and the health of his creation are all inseparably united. So, when we talk about God’s wrath, it means his complete and total intolerance of anything that degrades and destroys. And sin degrades and destroys.

The Bible makes both God’s holiness and his attitude toward anything not holy crystal clear. As David said in Psalm 5: ***[Y]ou are not a God who is pleased with wickedness; with you, evil people are not welcome*** — ***David, Psalm 5:4***. And the minor OT prophet Habakkuk affirmed that picture, telling us: ***Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing*** — ***Habakkuk 1:13a***.

That brings us to the second relevant attribute of God: “justice.” Justice is God’s response to anything contrary to his holiness. This is not God conforming himself to another standard but rather him acting like himself in a given situation. Now while we may be completely unable to wrap our heads around the holiness of God, justice is an attribute that we can quickly and easily confirm with ourselves. Every time we hear any little kid say, “That’s not fair,” we are admitting

that we all carry inside us an innate sense of justice, which is an acknowledgement that we are all made in God's image — that is, with character traits similar to the attributes of God. [STANLEY CUP PLAYOFF CONTROVERSY]. Now while sin has completely corrupted God's pure image in us, there is still a shadow of who and how he is; that is that still, small voice inside of us that we call "conscience." Paul said it like this to the church at Rome: *[T]he requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them — Paul, Romans 2:15.* And one of those "requirements of the law" is the sense of justice, the sense of fair play. That essentially is what justice is — the application of equity, or fairness, to moral situations.

So, in view of God's holiness, here is God's justice: Psalm 89 says: *Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you — Psalm 89:14.* In other words, the righteousness of God and the justice of God are foundations for the majesty of God. And Isaiah affirmed: *[T]he Lord is a God of justice — Isaiah 30:18a.* It is a part of who he is. And therefore, the judgments that God makes are based on that same sense of righteousness and justice. As the believers in heaven shout as recorded by the apostle John: *"Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments" — Revelation 19:1b-2a.*

APPLICATION

So now let's bring all this home to us with the second false assumption: It is God who sends people to hell. Is that right? What does Scripture tell us?

1) We're sinners —

- a) By our birth: *Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me — David, Psalm 51:5.*
- b) By our life: *[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God — Paul, Romans 3:23.* And this goes far beyond our outward actions: *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account — Hebrews 4:13.* That includes things we would love to have hidden: *"[T]he mouth speaks what the heart is full of. . . . I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:34b, 36-37.* And even more than that: Not just murder, but even thoughts of anger. Not just adultery, but even thoughts of lust.

2) We're trapped in our sins —

- a) Our own good works accomplish nothing: *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we will shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away — Isaiah 64:6.*
- b) Our own good intentions accomplish nothing: *[W]hoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it — James 2:10* because *"[We] know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified" — Paul, Galatians 2:16.*
- c) Our own good opinions accomplish nothing: *A person may think their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart — Proverbs 21:2. . . . "What people value highly is detestable in God's sight" — Jesus Christ, Luke 16:15b.*

3) Therefore, we're helpless to ever even begin to match God's measure of holiness — ***“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” — Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:48.***

Be perfect? That's impossible. Exactly! That was Paul's conclusion in Romans 7: ***What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? — Paul, Romans 7:24.*** That is precisely what God declaring his holiness is meant to have us do — cry to him for mercy because his holiness is a standard that, on our own, we will never, ever meet because we realize the hopelessness of our sinfulness before him — which brings us to one other attribute of God, the one attribute that this question gets right: God's love.

Nobody saw better or clearer than God what our situation was, how genuinely hopeless and impossible it was. So, since we couldn't do anything to make ourselves holy, he offered a solution: He would offer his holiness to us in the person, life, death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ. And nowhere does God show his amazing love than in his son. When Jesus was talking with Nicodemus, he didn't just say that God loved the world; he 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” — Jesus Christ, John 3:16.*** God's solution to sin is a measure of his unimaginable love. In fact, it was considering God's “no greater love” through his Son that caused the apostle John to exclaim: ***See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! — I John 3:1.*** That is not a universal application; in other words, the entire world is automatically saved because of Christ's death on the cross — but it is a universal offer.

God offered us a trade — his perfectly holy Son for our imperfect, unholy lives. His life for ours. If our lives were surrendered to him, he would seal us in his Son's perfection. We would then be seen by God himself as absolutely matching his holiness. He extends the gift. We surrender to it. As a result, as John wrote, if we do sin — which we will — ***we have an advocate with the Father — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One — I John 2:1.*** Our lives surrendered to God's Son are maintained in his purity, so God continues to see his children as matching his holiness. And by surrendering our lives to Christ, not only do we claim an eternity in his presence in heaven, but we simultaneously are rescued from the only other optional conclusion there is for anybody's life: hell.

C.S. Lewis suggested that, at the end of human history, there will only be two groups of people. One group will be those people who have said to God, “Thy will be done,” meaning that they have placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ to wash them clean from the stain of their sins; those people will live forever with God in heaven. The second group will be those people to whom God will say to them, “Thy will be done.” These are those who have consciously made the choice to reject God's incredibly loving offer of salvation; for those, they will spend eternity in hell because they chose to live apart from God.

You see, while God is absolutely loving, he is also absolutely committed to human freedom, the right to choose our eternal destination. So, while Paul noted that God ***wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth — Paul, I Timothy 2:4,*** while Peter wrote that the Lord ***is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance — II Peter 3:9b,*** it is also against his loving nature to force, to coerce, anybody to love him in return. And let's be real: What more could he do than what he has already done for the world to find new life in him?

CONCLUSION

I got a confession to make: This has been a difficult message to do — not because the texts are difficult but because what this all means for my life in Christ.

So, to answer the question, “How could a God of love send someone to hell,” the answer is: No, God doesn’t send anybody to hell. People go to hell because people choose to go to hell. People go to hell because people want nothing to do with God.

Our lives can change that conversation. We are supposed to be ambassadors of “good news.” Are we? There’s a town, a region, a state, a nation, a world, that still needs to hear and understand the truth about Jesus Christ. That’s what we’re here for. That’s ALL we’re here for. Let’s pray!