

The Doctrine of Hell

January 21, 2014 by J. D. Greear

This is the first of a five-part series on the doctrine of hell.

Concerning hell, C. S. Lewis once wrote, “*There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power.*”^[1] In many ways, I agree with him. No one, Christians included, should *like* the idea of hell. For years I’ve felt that if you were to give me a Bible, a divine eraser, and ten minutes, I would take hell out of the Bible.

Those of us who believe in hell aren’t sadists who enjoy the idea of eternal suffering. In fact, the thought of people I know who are outside of Christ spending eternity in hell is heart-breaking. As a young Christian, when I began to learn about hell and its implications, I almost lost my faith. It was that disturbing.

Hell is a difficult reality, but it is something that the Bible teaches, and we can’t fully understand God and his world unless we grapple with it.

1. Hell is what hell is because God is who God is.

People speak glibly about “seeing God,” as if seeing God face-to-face would be a warm-fuzzy experience. But the Bible explains that God’s holiness and perfection are so complete that if anyone were to see Him, *they would die* (Exod 33:20). Even the slightest sin in His presence leads to immediate annihilation. When Isaiah, the prophet of God, saw God upon His throne, he fell upon his face, terrified and sure that he was about to die (Isaiah 6:5).

I know in recent days the doctrine of hell has fallen greatly out of favor. But it’s there for a reason. God tells us about hell to demonstrate to us the magnitude of His holiness. Hell is what hell is because the holiness of God is what it is. Hell is not one degree hotter than our sin demands that it be. ***Hell should make our mouths stand agape at the righteous and just holiness of God. It should make us tremble before His majesty and grandeur.***

Ironically, in doing away with hell, you do away with the very resources that some need to believe. When a person goes through rape or child abuse, they need to know that there is a God of such holiness and beauty that His reign can tolerate none of that.

2. Jesus spoke about hell more than anyone else in Scripture.

Some people try to avoid the idea of hell by saying, “*Well, hell, that was the Old Testament God, back when he was in His junior high years and all cranky. But when God matured in the New Testament with Jesus—meek and mild Jesus—he was all about love and compassion.*”

The problem with this is that when you start reading the gospels, you find that Jesus speaks about hell more than anyone else. In fact, if you count up the verses, Jesus spoke more about hell than he did about heaven. One of the most famous skeptics in history, Bertrand Russell, said in his book, *What I’m not a Christian*, that Jesus’ teaching on hell was “the one profound defect in Christ’s character.” If we want to avoid the idea of hell, we can’t ignore the problem by just focusing on “meek and mild Jesus.”

3. The reality of hell shows us the extent of God's love in saving us.

Why did Jesus speak about hell more than anyone else in the Bible? Because he wanted us to see what he was going to endure on the cross on our behalf. On the cross, Jesus' punishment was scarcely describable: this bloodied, disfigured remnant of a man was given a recycled, used cross, likely covered in the blood, feces, and urine of the other men who had used it previously. Hanging there in immense pain, he slowly suffocated to death.

The worst part was the separation from the Father that Jesus felt, a separation that was hell itself. "My God, My God," he cried out, "Why have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:46)? ***In all of this, Jesus was taking the hell of our sin into His body.***

People often feel that hell is some great blemish on God's love. The Bible presents it as the opposite. Hell magnifies for us the love of God by showing us how far God went, and how much he went through, to save us.

4. People are eternal.

C. S. Lewis once noted that hell is a necessary conclusion from the Christian belief that human beings were created to live forever. As he put it,

"Christianity asserts that every individual human being is going to live for ever, and this must be either true or false. Now there are a good many things which would not be worth bothering about if I were going to live only seventy years, but which I had better bother about very seriously if I am going to live for ever. Perhaps my bad temper or my jealousy are gradually getting worse—so gradually that the increase in seventy years will not be very noticeable. But it might be absolute hell in a million years: in fact, if Christianity is true, Hell is the precisely correct technical term for what it would be."^[2]

Elsewhere Lewis said:

*"Hell . . . begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticizing it. . . . Ye 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, nor even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine."*^[3]

5. In one sense, God doesn't send anyone to hell; we send ourselves.

Hell is the culmination of telling God to "get out." You keep telling God to leave you alone, and finally God says "OK." That's why the Bible describes it as darkness: God is light; His absence is darkness. Now, right now on earth we experience light, things like love, friendship, and the beauty of creation. These are all *remnants* of the light of God's presence. But when you tell God you don't want Him as the Lord and Center of your lives, eventually you get your wish, and with God go all of His gifts.

We have two options: live with God, or live without God. If you say, "I don't want God's authority. I would rather live for myself," that's what hell is. C. S. Lewis put it this way:

"In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: 'What are you asking God to do?' . . . To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He

does. . . . *In the end, there are only two kinds of people— those who say to God “thy will be done” and those to whom God says in the end ‘thy will be done.’*”[\[4\]](#)

6. In another sense, God does send people to hell; and all his ways are true and righteous altogether.

We may be tempted to rage at God and to correct him. But how can we find fault with God? As Paul says in Romans, who are we—as mere lumps of clay—to answer back to the divine Potter?

We need to realize that we are *not* more merciful than God. Isaiah reminds us that all who are currently “incensed against God” will come before him in the last day and be *ashamed*, not vindicated (Isaiah 45:24), because they will then realize just how perfect God’s ways are. Every time God is compared with a human counterpart in Scripture, God is the more merciful of the pair. Every single time.

When we look back on our lives from eternity, what will amaze us is not the severity of his justice, but the magnanimity of his mercy.

7. It’s not enough for God to take us out of hell; he must take hell out of us.

Some people see a problem in using hell as a way of coercing people to submit to Christianity. It’s as if God is saying, “*Serve me or else!*” And that seems manipulative. It may surprise you, but *God agrees*.

If people are converted to God simply because they are scared, or because God has done some great, miraculous sign (cf. Luke 16:31), they might submit, but it wouldn’t change their heart attitude toward God. If you accept Jesus just to “get out of hell,” then you’d hate being in heaven, because heaven is only enjoyable for those who love and trust God. If you don’t love the Father, then living in the Father’s house feels like slavery. It would be like forcing you to be married to someone you didn’t want to marry. ***The only way you’ll enjoy heaven is when you learn to love and trust God again.***

Only an experience of the love of God can rearrange the fundamental structure of your heart to create a love and trust of God. It’s not enough for God to take us out of hell; he must take hell out of us.

The Doctrine of Hell: Apologetic Problems

January 23, 2014 by J. D. Greear

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This is the second in a five-part series on the doctrine of hell. Click here for [part one](#).

For many people, the doctrine of hell presents an apologetic problem for Christians. Skeptics say that believing in hell is “*morally reprehensible*” and that the doctrine of hell makes God a “*barbaric, moral monster, the worst being ever to exist.*”

The objections are serious—and loudly proclaimed by most of our society. We need to have a ready answer. Below are some of the most common apologetic objections that I’ve encountered.

1. Objection: God is too loving to send someone to hell.

Eliminating hell actually makes for a very narrow view of the love of God. Imagine that a child molester came to our church and I said to him, “*Bro, we love and accept you. Please work in our kids ministry!*” That isn’t loving, or if it is, it’s loving in a very narrow and unhealthy way.

How we feel about child molesters is, in a small way, how God feels about our sin. Good works in an overall posture of rebellion are disgusting to him, just like it would be for us to watch a child molester tip a bellhop on his way to molest *our children*. We simply do not understand “the sinfulness of sin,” as the Puritans used to say. For sinful humans to enter into God’s presence would be like a tissue paper touching the surface of the sun.

If God let us into heaven as we are, we’d turn heaven into the mess the world is in. All the injustice in the world is a result of our sin. We love the wrong. We reject God’s authority, which amounts to cosmic treason. We are idolaters who put ourselves in the center, not God.

Sin is like a cancer, eating out the insides of the human race. No patient wants a doctor who is *tolerant* of their cancer; we want a doctor who *hates* it. Neither can God lovingly accept us in our sinful condition. He loves us too much to allow things that will destroy us to thrive. But he also loves his glory too much to allow us to trample on it. *In our celebration of God’s love, we must never forget the thunderbolt of his glory.*

2. Objection: Hell is too extreme of a punishment for the crime.

I’ve heard people object a lot, “The idea of hell is unjust. A finite sin, followed by infinite punishment? That’s simply not fair.” What we often fail to comprehend is that our sin was against an infinite God, and justice required an infinite punishment. Hell is a very clear statement to us about the greatness and majesty of God. A lot of theologians think they’re doing God a favor by lessening hell, but what they’re doing is diminishing the greatness of God.

We think hell is severe because we don’t think trampling on the glory of God is that big of a deal. We think the big deal in the universe is *us*. I know this is horribly offensive to us as humans who think the universe is all about us. It isn’t. This whole Creation is a theatre to the only true, good, all-powerful One, God. He is the big deal in the universe and everything works to his glory. Hell itself is a permanent monument to the greatness of his name.

3. Objection: I’m basically a decent person.

One of the reasons I think we often react so strongly against the idea that God allows some people to go to hell is that we don’t really believe we ourselves are worthy of hell. The more we are persuaded of our own righteousness, the more the question of God’s justice troubles us.

I have found, however, that the more I sense the noose of God’s judgment rightly around my own neck, the more that I am amazed at the greatness of God’s mercy rather than the severity

of his justice. *The cross is God's verdict on the sinfulness of humanity.* Only when I first see myself as absolutely worthy of hell, then I am ready to understand the magnanimity of God's grace.

Only when we see ourselves as worthy of hell can we see how glorious the cross is, which was the clearest picture of God's majestic greatness and love reaching down to the depths of our depraved wickedness. You can't really appreciate the cross until you accept hell. ***Most Christians don't weep at the cross because they don't really feel God's verdict of condemnation on their souls.***

4. In the end, God's wisdom is far above our own.

If God is real, he is infinite in both power and wisdom. Think about how great God's power is above ours. He spoke the worlds into existence, and he created the nebulae and the planets and the stars and the complexities of the atom—all of this with just a word! In one strand of DNA there is encoded enough information to fill up 500 sets of the Encyclopedia Britannica. You and I have problems getting our DVD player to work right with our cable box!

Now, if God's wisdom is also infinite, that means his wisdom is as high above yours as his power is above yours. Does it not make sense that a lot of stuff about him may not make sense to you?

One of the reasons people in our culture have trouble believing in God is because we talk about him with so little a sense of wonder and awe at his majesty. Charles Misner, one of Einstein's students, once wrote about Einstein's lack of interest in religion:

"The design of the universe is very magnificent and should not be taken for granted. In fact, I believe that is why Einstein had so little use for organized religions, although he struck me as basically a very religious man. Einstein must have looked at what the preacher said about God and felt that they were blaspheming! He had seen more majesty than he had ever imagined in the creation of the universe and felt the God they were talking about couldn't have been the real thing. My guess is that he simply felt that the churches he had run across did not have proper respect for the Author of the Universe."

The point here is not that the answers to the hard questions do not exist, or that we should not seek them. They do and we should. But a lot of our apologetic questions might disappear if we ever reckoned with how large God is. ***There comes a point where the mouth must stop and the knee must bow.***

The Doctrine of Hell: Religious Exclusivity

January 28, 2014 by J. D. Greear

This is the third in a five-part series on the doctrine of hell.

Closely related to the doctrine of hell is the idea of religious exclusivity: as Christians, we believe that the only way to be saved is through conscious faith in Jesus. This is, of course, a terribly unpopular position, and one I hear objections to almost daily. Here are my attempts to answer some of those objections.

1. "Religion is a matter of personal preference."

Immanuel Kant, the father of modern philosophy, said that religions are *subjectively* helpful but not *objectively* true. Many people today see things this way. Our religious decisions are just preferences, and can't be judged 'right' or 'wrong.' It's like, Pepsi or Coke? Waffle House or IHOP?

The problem with this is that Christianity is based on the historical claim that Jesus rose from the dead. Whether or not that actually happened makes all the difference in the world. If Jesus rose from the dead, religion is no longer about personal preference, about which beliefs make you feel warm and fuzzy at night. Either a *real* power brought Jesus out of the grave or it did not.

If Jesus rose from the dead, then he lays out the runway for salvation. So the question is, "Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead?" If so, are you willing to let Him make the rules about salvation?

2. "This doesn't sound very tolerant."

There was a time when "tolerance" was a useful term. It meant that I was free to believe firmly in something, you were free to believe in something contrary, and we could voice our differences without threat of violence. It was understood that you could only be tolerant of someone when you admitted from the outset that you disagreed.

The situation has changed now. Today tolerance is used to prevent anyone from making absolute claims of any kind. Instead of merely acknowledging the existence of differing viewpoints, contemporary tolerance attempts to say that every viewpoint is inherently valuable and that none is better than the other. The irony in this, [as many have pointed out](#), is that this view of tolerance is inherently intolerant, much more restricting than if we simply stated our beliefs plainly and acknowledged the differences between them.

In light of this, I prefer the term *liberty* to *tolerance*. By liberty, I mean that I believe in people's right to disagree with me—the more traditional use of the word "tolerance." I would give my life to preserve that right, and I never want to see people coerced into "believing" what I believe. But we want liberty *for all*, and that includes the liberty to communicate the message we believe is given by God.

You've probably heard the analogy comparing religions to an elephant. Several blind men come upon an elephant, and they try to describe what they encounter. The one touching the trunk says, "It is like a snake." The one touching the ears says, "It is like a large fan." The one touching the leg says, "It is like a tree." The point is that religion is like this, too: none of us sees the whole picture, so when we hear a differing opinion, we shouldn't be so arrogant as to say that it is wrong. Everyone just sees part of the picture.

There's a huge problem with this analogy, though: ***who sees the whole elephant?*** The person telling the story! That's how he knows we're all wrong. In fact, he's doing the very thing he won't let us do! He's standing above us with a complete view of truth while telling us we aren't allowed to make claims about truth.

Christians acknowledge that they couldn't figure out the truth for themselves. In a sense, we *are* all like the blind men trying to understand the elephant. But Christians claim that the one who sees the whole picture came down and revealed it to us. It's as if the elephant spoke!

All we could do is believe it. How do you boast about something that was revealed to you because you weren't smart enough to figure it out?

Some Christians might be jerks about it, and they shouldn't be. But believing that Jesus is who he said he was isn't arrogant. It's actually quite humble, since we're laying aside our preferences for a revealed truth.

3. “This sounds like hateful fundamentalism.”

There are a lot of people who wear the name “Christian” that are hateful and arrogant. But no one who truly understands salvation would act this way, because those who have been saved from hell would have such a deep sense of gratitude for what God has saved them from. Lives touched by the gospel are characterized by humility. They make Christ known not through angry sermons but by loving and serving others, showing the love and generosity of the cross.

At the same time, Jesus talked more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. He talked about it because he loved us, because it was a reality that he wanted to save us from. I know the idea of hell is terrible to think about—but if hell is real, and we know a way of escaping it, *how cruel would it be to not say anything?*

4. “What about those who have never heard?”

Perhaps the most troubling issue regarding hell and the exclusivity of Christ has to do with those who have never heard the gospel. This is such a major issue that I am setting aside an entire other post to deal specifically with this point. Stay tuned.

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