

How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

By David Bisgrove

In this series we've already reflected on topics such as "Injustice and the Church." Now I'd like to take a few moments to look at another fairly common objection. It runs something like this: "I can accept the idea of a loving and forgiving God, but I can't accept some ultimate 'Judgment Day.' I can't accept any God who would knowingly send people to hell, because it's completely incompatible with the idea of a loving God. 'Hell' seems to be a tactic used by the church to keep people loyal and moral through fear."

Does the existence of hell contradict the existence of a loving God? Let's briefly look at this idea of hell and judgment and see if we can come away with a better understanding of what is meant by the concepts.

First, it's important to acknowledge the extent to which our particular cultural context influences the way we understand these kinds of things. Sociologist Robert Bellah's groundbreaking *Habits of the Heart* cites a poll in which 80 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues."¹ Most Americans believe that religion, or spirituality, is *privately held* as well as *individually defined*. They might grant that traditional religious institutions have a beneficial place in life, but people generally see themselves as the ultimate author of their own spiritual destiny.

Within this perspective, it's not surprising that the idea of a God who could become angry at us and pass judgment on us is completely offensive, even ludicrous, while the idea of a God who loves, accepts, and forgives everyone is embraced. The reason is that for the most part we understandably don't see ourselves as deserving divine wrath. We're easy on ourselves relative to others. It's why 900 numbers and psychic hotlines are popular; they tell you what you want to hear.

Our assumptions are influenced by our culture. Consequently, we have to at least examine our assumptions about God and religion to see what role they play in determining how we define things like hell and heaven. In many contemporary as well as ancient cultures, for instance, the idea that we should love our enemies and turn the other cheek is highly offensive to their sensibilities, for instance, but they have no problem at all with the notion of a God who judges us.

¹ Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, First California paperback ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 228.

This tendency means we have to make sure we understand where we're coming from, so we don't privilege or favor our own cultural biases over against others. We always have to keep in mind the way that we've been influenced by the culture around us.

Let's keep going. Underlying this objection is the question of how the Bible can reconcile its teaching about a God of love with its teaching about a God of wrath. If we think about our own relationships, however, we see that these qualities are not incompatible. In fact, there's actually a *correlation* between how deeply we love someone and the extent to which we might get angry at that person. If we had a friend or brother who was engaged in self-destructive behavior – drugs, money, alcohol – and ruining his life, we wouldn't just sit by indifferently. We'd be angry. We'd get in his face. We would not be afraid to offend him by passing judgment on his damaging behavior. The greater your love for someone, the greater your potential for anger at what's destructive in that person's life.

At least in the Christian faith, God's wrath flows from his love for his creation. He is angry at injustice and greed and self-centeredness and evil, because these things are like a cancer that's destroying all that is good. God will not tolerate anything or anyone who is destroying what he's made good. God will not stand passively by and allow that cancer to spread through his world. He will destroy it.

Someone might object, "If God judges like that, what about his followers? No matter how well intentioned they might be, I've seen them pass judgment on others. Are they right to destroy those they deem evil?" In a word, no. People who do so are misreading the Christian faith. While it's true that there are Christians who take these truths about God's judgment and then self-righteously assume they're supposed to become the world's morality police, Jesus himself is quite clear on the subject. Those who follow him are not supposed to judge others.² Here's the crucial distinction: Christians are supposed to *use* judgment (in the sense that they should discern and do what's right, regardless of the cost to them personally), but they're never supposed to *pass* judgment on those who are different, or to use God's law as a club to beat people with.

In fact, I think a strong case can be made that *anticipating* an ultimate day of judgment, where God will make all things right and all things new, actually constrains you from taking things into your own hands. Otherwise when we're coping with slander or a mugging or worse, we're prone to want to be the judge, jury, and executioner all rolled in one, even though philosophically we claim the neutral position that says, "Who's to say what's right or wrong?"

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, a native Croatian, witnessed first hand the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. He observes:

² Matthew 7:1, Luke 6:37, and elsewhere.

[If] God were *not angry* at injustice and deception and *did not* make the final end to violence God would not be worthy of our worship....[In] a world of violence we are faced with an inescapable alternative: either God's violence or human violence....My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many...in the West....[But] it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence...[results from the belief in] God's refusal to judge.³

According to Volf, the conviction that human non-violence results from belief in a non-judging God is something that doesn't develop in the wrenching setting of real wartime atrocities. In fact, a lack of belief in a God of holy vengeance secretly nourishes violence, because people feel they must take matters into their own hands.

Finally, let's take a brief look at the nature of hell itself. A fairly common perception of hell is that God is sitting on his throne, and as people scream out to him for mercy, he grins, says "Too late," and throws them into the fire. That scene represents a misunderstanding of both God and hell.

Just as a flower flourishes in the presence of sunlight and moist soil, the Bible says that humans were created by God to flourish in his presence. If we were ever to lose his presence, *that* would be hell, for we would lose our capability for giving and receiving love and joy. Of course, the entire narrative of the Bible teaches us that the human race is constantly trying to get out from under God's presence. We want to be masters of our own destiny. We want to live independently of him.

What's interesting with respect to hell and fire is that most scholars who study the biblical language referring to hell don't read it as literal fire, but as a metaphor. That is, fire disintegrates physical elements, and hell leads to the disintegration of our souls. Think about it this way. If we were built by God to live in his presence and submit ourselves to his purposes, then any decision we might make, no matter how well intentioned or how it felt at the time, would be self-destructive if it violated God's intent.

Pouring beer instead of gasoline into a car engine will "disintegrate" the engine. Turning away from God, saying we don't need him, and living a self-centered as opposed to a God-centered life will "disintegrate" our souls. There's a sense in which we already know how selfishness and self-centeredness lead to soul disintegration, because really selfish people are simply not very fun to hang around with.

³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 303–304.

The question that hell begs is simply this: “What if when we die we don’t simply end, but our souls extend into eternity?” Hell is the trajectory of the soul that lives a self-absorbed life – on and on and on, forever. It’s God giving us what we ultimately want – *complete freedom from his presence*.

Hell, then, is self-chosen. It is God giving us what we have asked for, which makes it perfectly just. Eventually there will be two kinds of people: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, “Thy will be done.”

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