

Opening Words

A loving God would never send people to Hell, would he? Today, we are going to tackle this tough question for today's Christian.

229 12 TQ A Loving God Would Never Send People to Hell

C.S. Lewis said that the doctrine of hell is “one of the chief grounds on which Christianity is attacked as barbarous and the goodness of God impugned.”

“How can a good and loving God send people to Hell for torture?”

Have you ever heard anyone say such things? Lee Strobel traveled to Los Angeles, California and there he met with Dr. J.P. Moreland and talked with him about this question. Dr. Moreland has a broad educational background – he has degrees in chemistry, theology, and philosophy where he earned his doctorate from the university of Southern California. He has written more than a dozen books and is currently the Distinguished Professor of Theology at Talbot Theological Seminary.

As Strobel and Moreland talked about the doctrine of Hell, one thing that Moreland did from the start was to share that while the doctrine of Hell may be emotionally difficult, that doesn't prove or disprove it and while we may dislike it, that doesn't answer the question if Hell is the right place for certain people to go ... forever.

Surprisingly, we find in the Bible that God does not like the death of anyone and we must not think of God as some giant, sadistic ogre who delights in torturing people. Listen to these words from Ezekiel 33:11, “As I live!” declares the Lord God, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?”

Another false idea about Hell that Moreland corrected was Hell as some sort of torture chamber. But the Bible nowhere says this. God is not torturing people forever like some prison guard who likes to kick or hurt prisoners of war. God is just and God judges, but it is always with a sense of righteousness. He is not a spoiled brat who insists on having his way, and who, when things don't go his way, gets angry and says, “OK, you have to go to hell because you don't do things my way.” We must remember that his rules are not arbitrary. They are based on his holy character.

We must also remember that God gives us freedom. Hell is not God's choice for us but it is our choice for us, and if we insist on rejecting him, he has no choice but to allow us our choice!

What is Hell? Hell is banishment from the most beautiful person in the universe, banishment from God. Hell is banishment from what matters most. Hell is banishment from all that is beautiful and worthwhile and it is banishment from others. It is separation. Hell is a place and an experience of shame, anguish, and regret. It is the end of a chosen path where we distance ourselves from God.

There is a passage in the Bible that inadvertently gives us a picture of Hell. I say “inadvertently” because the passage is talking about the glories of heaven but in so doing it provides a picture of the anguish of Hell. The apostle John was caught up into heaven, and he saw its glories. He saw the Beautiful One sitting upon the throne of God. He saw incomprehensibly exotic creatures worshipping before God. He saw elders with beautiful crowns submitting their crowns to God and worshipping. We can be sure he was overcome with emotion as he saw the glories of heaven and the worship taking place before the throne of God.

Then, a strong angel stepped out and said, “Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?” The book represented God’s purpose for mankind and the fulfillment of God’s saving plans. For God’s people to experience the beauty and joys of heaven required someone to break the seals, to open the book, and to carry out what was written. The angel asked the question and all watched and waited and no one stepped forward to open the book. No one in heaven, on earth, or under the earth was worthy to open the book, and when the realization of this hit John, he began to weep greatly.

Why did he weep? He wept because he realized that the beauty, the majesty, the glory, the joy, the love, the fulfillment of what he had just seen would be forever out of his reach. That is a picture of Hell, and is it any wonder that one of the descriptions of Hell is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The Bible presents other images of Hell. It pictures it as a place of fire. Many ask, “Is the fire real?” In the Bible fire represents the holy character of God. It speaks of God as a consuming fire and it says that he will come with flaming fire. But, Moreland said, almost humorously, if this topic allows any humor, we must not think of God as a cosmic Bunsen burner. The fire represents his holy character and in the same way the pictures of Hell as a place of fire may be symbolic. However, one thing we do know for sure – while the fire may be symbolic – the suffering is not symbolic. Whatever the fires of Hell represent, they represent something real.

The Bible talks about Hell being a place of darkness. Think of living in darkness. It’s hard enough in winter when the nights are long, and those who live on the extremities of the earth can attest to battles with depression during the long winter months. What if you were in darkness forever? The Bible also speaks of Hell as a place where the consuming worm does not die. This imagery was taken from the area outside Jerusalem where the carcasses of animals were consumed by worms. It was an ugly, disgusting place.

“Why doesn’t God force people to go to heaven,” many ask? “If this place is so awful. If this place is anything close to the way the Bible describes it, why doesn’t God take people out of Hell and force them to go to heaven?” Well, it wouldn’t be heaven then, for them, or for us. They would not be there of their free will. They would be unwilling and just as they did not want God in their lives during earth they would not want God in eternity. It would not be heaven for them. It would be miserable, it would be Hell for they would not take delight in the things of God and would not take delight in the people of God.

Some may say, “still, God could give people another chance at loving him, couldn’t he?” But that would be saying that God isn’t giving people enough time to make the right decision. The Bible

already says that God is not willing for any to perish. God is very patient toward people. God wants everyone to come to repentance. People have enough time, plenty of time now to make that choice.

We have seen in a previous tough question that God has revealed himself through creation. Listen again to Romans 1:20. “Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” Listen to these words from Romans 2:14-15, “When Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.” We see in this passage that God is at work in the consciences of people and in their hearts. Finally, listen to Acts 17:26-27, “He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.”

No, it's not more time that people need, it's better choices they need to make in the plenty of time God gives them. People need to make choices toward God and not away from God. Sadly, the longer people are separated from God, the harder it is to choose him. It's just like having a bad habit; the longer you wait to change your bad habit, the harder it is to break.

Let me quickly mention one more objective – isn't Hell too severe a punishment for breaking some rules that God sets up? But we must remember, it's not about breaking a few arbitrary rules that God arbitrarily set up one day. God's laws are based on his holy character. His laws are an extension of himself. The worst law to break is what is called the greatest commandment which is to love God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds, all our strength. The worst thing a person can do is to ignore the loving and gracious hand of God.

I shared with you earlier an inadvertent picture of Hell. Again, I call it that because the passage is describing the worship of heaven. But it gives us a glimpse of Hell for when the angel asks who is worthy to break open the scroll and to carry out God's saving plan on earth, no one could do it! John wept greatly at the horror, the anguish, and the agony of seeing the eternal joys in God's presence and knowing that it would be forever out of his grasp.

Thankfully the story doesn't end there. As John is grieving and weeping an angel comes to him and says, “John, stop weeping. Look, someone can open the book, after all. And when John looks up he sees Jesus, the lamb of God, the sacrifice for our sins approaching the holy throne of God. God extends the scroll from his hand and Jesus takes the scroll.

Friends, Jesus has opened the door to eternal life. Through him we can escape the agonies, the shame, the regret, the darkness, the suffering of Hell. Let him be your Savior today and forever!