

How can a loving God send people to hell?

Series: The Case for Faith

Teacher: Bruce Carter

Audio: 20010603.mp3

Video: <https://youtu.be/vJAikuZwkDw>

Date: Sunday, June 10, 2001 - 11:00am

This morning we continue our series called The Case for Faith. And the question today is, "How can a loving God send people to hell?" For skeptics and Christians alike hell causes big problems. Charles Templeton, the one-time pastor and evangelist, who's now an agnostic said to Lee Strobel, "I couldn't hold someone's hand to a fire for a moment. Not an instant! How could a loving God, just because you don't obey him and do what he wants, torture you forever-not allowing you to die, but to continue in that pain for eternity. There's no criminal on earth who would do this!"

Bertrand Russell the famous atheist who wrote the book Why I Am Not A Christian said, "There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that he believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment."

Atheist B. C. Johnson says, "The idea of hell is morally absurd."

Lots of people struggle with the idea of hell and they aren't just atheists and skeptics. Christians struggle too. I mean, after all, who can stand to think that a family member or a friend could spend eternity in flaming torture just because they don't believe in Jesus? That's a horrible thought. For years I couldn't imagine that my father, who didn't become a believer until the age of 76, would burn in hell. I couldn't handle the thought. I'd rather not think about hell or else just believe that it's really not true and that everybody's just going to end up in heaven anyway.

But the problem with that is that Jesus believed in hell. Jesus talked about hell more than anyone else in the New Testament. He introduced the concept in his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, when he said in Matthew 5:22, I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment ... But anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell. Russell was right. Jesus believed in hell.

The Greek word for "hell" is the word Gehenna. It's used twelve times in the New Testament, once by James and eleven times by Jesus. Gehenna was the name of the city dump outside of Jerusalem. It was in the Valley of Hinnom south of the city and in Jesus' day it burned constantly, 24/7, with the garbage that was thrown into it every day through the Dung Gate. It was the place where thousands of dead carcasses were thrown each week from the temple sacrifices. And worms fed off the fat and blood of those carcasses. And the constant flow of refuse kept the worms ever living and the fires never dying. It was the place where the bodies of executed criminals were thrown. Jesus would have been thrown on that smoldering pile if Joseph of Arimathea hadn't stepped forward and rescued his body from the cross. Gehenna was foul. Jesus took the worst place he knew on earth and used it as a description of hell.

In Mark 9:43-49 Jesus says, If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' Everyone will be salted with fire.

Those are chilling words, spoken by the most loving, gracious, compassionate person who ever lived. So what are we to make of hell? How can a loving God torture people in hell forever? Like Templeton said, I couldn't stand the thought of holding the hand of one of my kids over a hot stove for even a second. So how can God stand the thought of throwing people into hell for eternity?

To find answers to these tough questions, Lee Strobel flew to Southern California to interview Dr. J. P. Moreland. Dr. Moreland has a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Missouri, a master's degree in theology from my alma mater, Dallas Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. in philosophy from USC. He teaches at Talbot School of Theology and has written more than a dozen books including *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality*. He's a man who's done a lot of thinking and personal soul-searching about the doctrine of hell.

And the first thing he told Strobel was that if the God of the Bible is real, then he must hate hell and the idea of people going there. And that's exactly what the Bible says. In Ezekiel 33:11 we read, Say to them, "As surely as I live," declares the Sovereign Lord, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" God's desire is that no one suffers in hell. He wants people to turn to him.

Listen to what he says in 2 Peter 3:9, The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. God wants everyone to repent. He doesn't want anyone to perish. God hates the idea of people choosing hell over heaven. And that's why he's waiting patiently to return. He's giving us all more time

to choose him. And some of you here today are glad that he waited just one more year because this was the year you came to know Christ. God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. He's not some sinister cosmic being who can't wait to torture people forever. That's not God.

Strobel shared that Templeton quote with Moreland, and he responded with these three insights into the nature of hell.

First, hell is not a torture chamber. God doesn't torture people in hell. He's not like the bad boy in Toy Story who loved to dismember dolls and blow up toys. God's not like some spoiled child who says, "If I don't get my own way, I'm going to make you pay." Now don't get me wrong, hell is hell. It's a horrible place, which is why Jesus used horrific imagery to describe it.

But the essence of hell is relational. It's separation from God, the most wonderful, beautiful being in the universe, and it's separation from everyone who's come to know and love God.

Jesus described that separation this way in Matthew 25:41,46, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels ... Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. "

Hell is separation from God and isolation from others. Mark Twain had it wrong when he said, "I like heaven for the climate and hell for the companionship." There will be no companionship in hell. It won't be one big party, like some people think. No wine, women and song. No laughing. Just weeping and gnashing of teeth. Constant regret. There will be no community in hell. Hell is solitary confinement. Which is why it's also described in Scripture as a place of utter darkness, separated from the light of God.

C. S. Lewis, the most powerful Christian writer of the 20th century, did a lot of thinking about hell. He wrote a book about it called *The Great Divorce*, the great separation. And in that book he concludes that hell is made up of people who live at an infinite distance from each other. They each make up there own little universe so they can spend eternity worshiping themselves, because that's what they wanted to do in this life.

Moreland puts it this way. He says that in the United States, as in most countries, the most serious crime you can commit is murder. And the punishment for murder is separation from society, either by execution or by life in prison. In God's universe the most serious crime you can commit is murdering him and that happens when we ignore him, mock him and choose to live without him. That happens

when we could care less about his values and his Son's death for us. And the only punishment worthy of that crime is separation from God and his people for all eternity. And that's what hell is, a divine prison sentence.

Second, hell honors God's creation. It honors it in two ways. First, hell honors our free choice. God created us all with free will. Each one of us has the free choice to follow God or not. God doesn't force any of us into his kingdom. He invites us into his kingdom. And the end of the journey for those who choose to follow God is heaven. And the end of the journey for those who choose not to follow God is hell. Hell is the place for people who don't want to go to heaven. Hell is the place for people who have said all their lives, "God I don't want you in my life. I want to be my own God." So God honors their choice and gives them what they want, a world without him, forever. If a person doesn't want to be around God in this life, then God isn't going to force them to be around him in the next life.

Moreland says it would be immoral for God to force us into heaven, because it would go against our freedom to choose and that would be dehumanizing. That would strip us of the dignity of making our own decision and would treat us like a means to an end. It would be unloving for God to force people to accept heaven if they didn't really want God. So when God says, "You make the choice," he's giving us respect and dignity.

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis wrote, "There are only two kinds of people in the end. Those who say to God, 'Thy will be done.' And those to whom God says, 'Thy will be done.' Everyone in hell chooses to be there. Without that self-choice there could be no hell." God doesn't send anyone to hell. Everyone in hell has chosen to be there. In fact, heaven would be hell for someone who doesn't want God in their life.

Hell honors our free choice. Hell honors our intrinsic value. Strobel asked Moreland why God punishes us for eternity? Why doesn't he just snuff us out and put us out of our misery? In Matthew 25 Jesus says, Go away to eternal punishment.

In Daniel 12:2 God says, Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Forever is a long time to be punished.

Eternal punishment is another way that God honors his creation. Every human being is created in the image of God. We all have worth and intrinsic value in God's eyes. So again, it would be immoral for God to just snuff us out and annihilate us.

Hell will forever be a monument to the value of human life and the value of human choice. It's God's divine quarantine where he says two things, "First, I respect your freedom of choice enough not to force you into my heaven and give you what you want. And second, I value the image of God in you so much, I will not annihilate you and snuff out your life." "In the final analysis," Moreland says, "hell is the only morally legitimate option."

Hell is not a torture chamber. Hell honors God's creation. And third, hell honors God. Hell honors God's love, because it gives a person what they want, a place to go where God is not. Hell honors God's justice, because it gives a person what they deserve. One of God's good attributes is his justice. God is perfectly fair. If he wasn't, then he wouldn't be loving.

Timothy McVeigh, who has admitted to killing 168 people in the Oklahoma bombing tragedy, needs to be punished. Justice demands it. And tomorrow he'll die. But we wouldn't think too much of a judge who would let him off the hook. And say, "That's okay, boys will be boys." That wouldn't be fair to those who were killed. And it wouldn't be loving to their families who will grieve the rest of their lives. To be a loving God, God must also be just. And hell is an expression of both God's love and God's justice.

Now in keeping with that, the Bible discusses different degrees of punishment in hell. Not everyone will suffer to the same degree. And God gives two criteria for punishment.

The first is how much light they rejected. How much truth was resisted. In Matthew 11, Jesus denounced the cities in which he performed most of his miracles because they rejected him. And so he said in Matthew 11:21-22, Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.

I've been to Korazin and Bethsaida in Galilee. There's nothing there. Those cities have been destroyed. Jesus says the same thing about Capernaum in verse 23. Their fate will be worse than Sodom and Gomorrah because they rejected a lot of truth. People who have heard the gospel again and again and again and have rejected Christ are in for the worst kind of punishment. That's why church can be a dangerous place. Their suffering will be greater in hell. That's the first criteria.

The second is how they lived their lives. Lifestyle matters. In Revelation 20:11-15 the apostle John writes, Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it ... 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 ... Then

death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire ... All whose names were not found written in the book of life were thrown into the lake of fire.

The scene pictured here is the Great White Throne Judgment. And God is opening two books. The first is often called The Lamb's Book of Life. It's a record of all who have trusted in Christ. And if a person's name isn't found there, they're in big trouble. The second book that's opened reveals the deeds of a person's life. Nothing we do is hidden from God's eyes. And a person who doesn't believe in Christ will have their life evaluated and be judged according to their works. Lifestyle and the amount of light rejected determine the degree of punishment experienced in hell.

What about kids? I'm often asked if there will be children in hell? I don't think so. In 2 Samuel 12:23 David said after losing a child, I will go to him, he will not return to me. David believed he would see his child in the next life and for David that was heaven. In the Bible children are always viewed as figures of speech for salvation. In all of the texts where children are mentioned in regards to the afterlife, they're always seen as pictures of being saved.

Children won't be in hell. Nor will anyone be there who just needed a little more time. If all a person needs is a little more time to come to Christ, then God will give them the time to make that choice. He's patient, not wanting any to perish. God does everything he can to give people a chance and there will not be a single person who will be able to say to God, "If you just let me live another twelve months, I would have followed you." No. There will be no excuses. This lifetime is long enough to make that choice. The Bible doesn't teach reincarnation or a second chance after death or a place of purging for our sins. Hebrews 9:27 says, People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.

I've talked to some people who aren't sure they want to go to heaven because they're afraid they're loved ones are in hell. And they'd rather be with them. If that's the case, they're loved ones would say, "Please trust Christ and go to heaven, you don't want to come here." Jesus told a story about that in Luke 16, called "The Rich Man and Lazarus." And in that story the rich man who was in hell said, I have five brothers. Let Lazarus warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment. The rich man didn't want his family to join him in hell. If you have a loved who didn't trust Christ, one second after they entered eternity they would tell you, "You don't want to come here." Their desire would be for you to trust Christ and go to heaven. And if your loved one is in heaven, of course they'd want you to trust Christ and be there with them.

D. A. Carson is a well known British theologian who summed up hell with these words, "Hell is not a place where people are consigned because they were pretty good blokes, but they just didn't believe the right stuff. They're consigned there, first and foremost, because they defy their maker and want to be at the center of the universe. Hell is not filled with people who have already repented, only God isn't gentle enough or good enough to let them out. It's filled with people who, for all eternity, still want to

be the center of the universe and who persist in their God-defying rebellion. What is God to do? If he says it doesn't matter to him, then God is no longer a God to be admired. He's either amoral or positively creepy. For him to act in any other way in the face of such blatant defiance would be to reduce God himself."

So what impact should all this truth about hell have on us? It should make us uncomfortable. Just like it makes God uncomfortable. And it should cause us to redouble our efforts to seek God and to find him. And if we already know him it should cause us to redouble our efforts to share God's message of mercy and grace to those who need it.