



Facing the Reasonable Questions of a Skeptical Culture

HELL

As a Christian, how can you believe and worship a God that allows innocent people to undergo eternal torment? This is a question asked by many. The doctrine of hell can be hard to comprehend. C. S. Lewis wrote concerning hell, "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power." In many ways, I agree with him. No one, Christians included, should like the idea of hell. We can get our minds around the idea of Hitler, Stalin, Genghis Khan or any other evil world leader suffering for their evil actions. We would all agree they are getting what they deserve. But it's hard to imagine the seemingly "innocent" going through the same wrath.

Our associations with the idea of hell vary greatly. Some can't imagine a loving God allowing such a horrible reality to exist. For them, they strongly assert, "My God would never create unjust suffering." They can't believe hell is a real place. Others take the exact opposite view. They spend an inordinate amount of time pointing "sinners" toward the horrors of hell to scare them into repentance and submission. Every sermon and evangelistic moment is a "fire and brimstone" speech. They exploit the terrors of hell for their benefit. Still more seem to have forgotten about the whole doctrine. It's never mentioned. When directly asked, they acknowledge hell's existence. But they don't want to ruin anyone's day by bringing up the topic. The suffering is just too difficult to comprehend. It's easier to

block out the idea of hell from their minds.

Hell is undoubtedly a challenging topic. Regardless of our view, it's unmistakably seen in Scripture. We must grapple with the details and perspectives. The late R.C. Sproul reminds us of an important truth, "There is no biblical concept more grim or terror-invoking than the idea of hell. It is so unpopular with us that few would give credence to it at all except that it comes to us from the teaching of Christ Himself." I understand hell has fallen out of favor with many. But if we do away with it altogether, we miss out on several necessary realities of God's justice and love.

The Bible describes hell as a place of outer darkness (Matt. 22:13), a lake of fire (Rev. 19:20), a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Lk. 13:28), eternal separation from the blessings of God (2 Thess. 1:9), and a place of torment where the worm doesn't turn or die (Mk. 9:48). Almost all of these descriptions come directly from the mouth of Jesus. During his years of ministry, Jesus spent much time talking about the coming judgment and justice of God.

We can also see the apostle Paul struggling with sorrow as he considered hell. Thinking of his fellow kinsmen who have not believed in Jesus, Paul writes, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the

flesh" (Rom. 9:2-3). Paul understood what was at stake. He realized what the justice of God required. It's clear that the doctrine of hell was on his mind when ministering and serving the church.

The reality of hell causing the greatest offense concerns the duration. It's easier for the human mind to justify a reasonable amount of judgment. In our justice system, every crime carries a justifiable minimum and maximum penalty standard. Even with the greatest offense, we assume there is a limit on the justice. But hell does not work that way. Hell is for eternity. People can endure the greatest agony if they know it will ultimately stop. In hell there is no such hope. The Bible teaches that the punishment is eternal. Read Matthew 25:31-46 and consider the description offered. Jesus could not have painted a more graphic and bleak story.

Jesus does not let the reality of hell go unnoticed because it is only through the justice of God that we can understand the grace of God. When we come to understand hell and its most accurate and most brutal realities, then we can best see our need for Christ's finished work on the cross. A clear understanding of hell leaves us reaching for the beautiful truth of the Gospel. Grace is only grace when it is in contrast to the justice of God.

In closing, consider the words of Dr. Grudem.

"The reason it is hard for us to think of the doctrine of hell is because God has put in our hearts a portion of his own love for people created in his image, even his love for sinners who rebel against him. As long as we are in this life, and as long as we see and think about others who need to hear the Gospel and trust in Christ for salvation, it should cause us great distress and agony of spirit to think about eternal punishment. Yet we must also realize that whatever God in his wisdom has ordained and taught in Scripture is right. Therefore, we must be careful that we not hate this doctrine or rebel against it, but rather we should seek, insofar as we are able, to come to the point where we can acknowledge that eternal punishment is good and right, because in God there is no unrighteousness at all."

Discussion Questions

What can happen in our Christian life when we overemphasize the doctrine of hell? What can happen when we underemphasize the doctrine of hell?

What role should the doctrine of hell play in our evangelistic presentations?

How can our faith in Christ be strengthened when we consider the realities of hell? (1 John 4:16-17)

REFORMED SPIRITUALITY

WEDNESDAY NIGHT ADULT BIBLE STUDY | TAUGHT BY JON MOFFITT

This course will seek to orient the Christian life within a reformed perspective by rethinking the evangelical construct of spiritual disciplines and learning to live within the freedom of faith in Christ. Over the five weeks of this course, we hope to reshape our approach to the Christian life by replacing the dread of our typical experience with the delight of the Gospel.

October 3 What is Reformed Spirituality: *Defining terms, form and function*

October 10 The Historic Decline of Reformed Spirituality: *The influence of the Counter-Reformation & Roman Catholic Theology*

October 17 Reformed Spirituality and Sanctification: *Our works or God's?*

October 24 Means of Grace: *Transitioning from an inward to an outward perspective*

November 7 The Church and Reformed Spirituality: *Reclaiming the importance of a corporate spiritual reality*