

Would God Send People To Hell? • John 3:36

Eighty-two percent of Americans say that they believe in an afterlife that includes both a heaven and a hell. However, when the question is narrowed down to become personal destiny, forty-six percent of Americans say that they are confident that they will spend forever in heaven, while only four percent of Americans say that they expect to go to hell. So there's a large majority of our country who says that they believe in hell but don't expect that they will actually go there.

Hell has become a frequent part of our everyday American vocabulary, although often the very people who use it the most are those who understand the least of what the word means. If the topic of the existence of hell and who goes there and what it's all about is brought up, there are many who will say that they cannot believe what the Bible says and become a Christian because it is impossible for them to accept that a good God would send people to hell. It is an objection that makes sense. What kind of God would take pleasure in the eternal suffering of human beings? Why would God not automatically just use his power and bring everybody to heaven? Or at the very least, why doesn't God annihilate hell and everybody that's in it to put an end to their suffering? Besides, even the idea of heaven seems tarnished by the thought that the perfection and happiness there must be lessened by the realization of millions of others suffering in hell.

Frankly, hell is a most unpleasant subject and because of that it is a topic upon which you will rarely ever hear a sermon or a serious discussion. It is sometimes something of an embarrassment to theologians. Generally we would prefer to emphasize that which is positive rather than that which is negative. However, if Christians are to be open and honest, then no topic is off limits, no matter how hard it is. We need to tackle the topic of hell and whether God would send people there.

The place to begin is with what the Bible itself says. I will read to you a series of quotes from the New Testament. The first is from John 3:36. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

John 5: 28-29 says, "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

Jesus, for all of his talk about love and goodness and forgiveness and heaven, is the same Jesus who talked about people going to hell.

Matthew 5: 22 is where Jesus spoke about the "danger of the fire of hell."

In Matthew 10:28 Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Mark 9:43 is where Jesus warned of the consequence of hell "where the fire never goes out."

In Luke 16:23-24 Jesus tells the story about a rich man who died, was buried and went to hell where he was in "torment" and pleaded for someone to come and to "dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."

II Peter 2:4 tells us that "God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them into hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment."

Jude 13 refers to the "blackest darkness that has been reserved forever."

At the end of the Bible, in Revelation 20:11-15, John reports a preview of the future:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. 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. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

There are a lot of conclusions that can be drawn

from these and other lines from the Old Testament and the New. In a short list of three, the conclusions are pretty straightforward. The first conclusion is that the Bible clearly

teaches that hell exists. Jesus, for all of his talk about love and goodness and forgiveness and heaven, is the same Jesus who talked about people going to hell. There should be no doubt that the Bible teaches that hell exists or that Jesus believed in the existence of hell.

The second conclusion is that we really don't know

a lot of details. The language of the Bible communicates that hell is a terrible and a miserable place for evil people, but we don't really know exactly what it is like. The words that are used to describe hell in the Bible are metaphors. They are comparisons to our everyday vocabulary and experience. The Bible uses symbolic rather than literal descriptions.

For example, Matthew 5:22 refers to the "fire of hell," but Jude 13 speaks of the "blackest darkness" of hell. We would say that in our experience where there is fire, there is light, and where there is black as darkness, there is no light. Both are figures of speech to describe something that is awful. The point of the Bible is not that we imagine literal darkness, a bottomless pit or a lake of fire. The point of the Bible is that hell is more awful than the combination of the worst of words that we have in our vocabulary.

A third conclusion is that hell, in its definition and in its essence, is separation from God. Hell is a bad place. Hell is awful. Our word "hell" comes from a Hebrew word *Gehenna*. It has an interesting history. *Gehenna* actually is a place in the valley of Hinnom just south of the city of Jerusalem. In very ancient times before the Hebrew people took over Jerusalem and Palestine it was the location of the altar to the god Molech where pagan people sacrificed their own children. That was a most abominable practice to Jews. Perhaps that was in part why in later centuries *Gehenna* or the valley of Hinnom was where Jerusalem's garbage was dumped and burned. The constant flames and smoke made it an ugly, uninviting, smelly, terrible place. For the Hebrew people it was about as far distant as they could imagine from the temple in Jerusalem, but even farther distant from God.

No one was suggesting that bad people were literally put in that particular garbage dump, but rather it was understood that after death eternity was to be spent by sinners in a place that was as bad and godless as any place could possibly be. And they called that place *Gehenna*.

But the existence of hell may not be the most important concern. Our primary concern probably is and probably should be — who goes to hell and how they get there.

Certainly God does not want us humans to go to hell. There is never a hint within the Bible that God takes any pleasure in that kind of destiny for any person. Rather, the picture that is painted in the Bible is of a God who not only hates sin but a God who hates

hell. In fact explicitly in II Peter 3:9 we are told that God does not want anyone to perish but that he wants everyone to repent and to go to heaven.

God initially created us all to be his friends and to be his followers, and God's love for us is repeatedly declared within the Bible. We are described as his children. We are to call him our Father. Like any good Father, he desires the very best for those who are his sons and daughters and certainly does not want anything bad to happen to any of his children.

But while that is true, it is also true that there are aspects of God which require there to be a hell. God is a holy God. He has nothing to do with sin; he is distant from it. If we were to

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compare it to our human experience, we would say that God is allergic to sin — he just can't be around it. Therefore, there must be an alternative to heaven for those who insist on holding on to their sin. Initially hell was to be the destination of Satan and the other defectors from heaven who did not want to follow God. Hell is the opposite of heaven — the alternative destination.

When God created us to be his friends and his followers, he also created us to make human choices. He did not design us to be robots who are programmed to love him and to be controlled in every detail by his prior design. God gave us the choice to love him or to hate him, to be good or evil. That choice necessitates hell. Otherwise God would have to impose his will upon us all. He would have to make us go to heaven, make us love him, make us not make bad choices.

Never let it be thought that God wants anyone in hell. In fact it is the exact opposite of God's intent and design and God's very best for us. He does not want anyone in hell and that is precisely the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In order to avoid hell, he sent his one and only Son. He made the ultimate intervention, paid the ultimate price, gave the ultimate sacrifice.

As we try to put all of this together and understand it, we must be careful where we start with our thinking and where we are headed. It is a mistake to start with hell and then surmise what God is like. It is far better to begin with the clear character of God as presented in the Bible. For the Bible is quite explicit that God is good. He is kind. He is loving, but he is just. Whatever he does, it will be right because that's who God is.

To the extent that we have difficulty synthesizing God and hell, our fallback must always be to God and

who he is and the way he is, understanding and committing to him even if the picture is not fully clear.

When these pieces of the puzzle are put together, it leads us to the conclusion that hell is essentially a human choice. Not a human choice in that someone sits down and says, "Well, I suppose I've got to choose between heaven and hell and I would rather suffer in torment than go to heaven and be forever in bliss." Of course not. In fact, heaven and hell are really not the central elements of the choice at all. The central elements are whether we choose God and good or whether we choose sin and evil. It is out of these primary choices that the consequences then flow. The central issue is not heaven and hell. The central issue is the choice of God or sin.

Romans 1:20-32 talks about God giving people over to sin.

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only

continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Repeated throughout this whole long section is this explanation that "God gave them over." Another way of saying it is that God let people go the way they insisted on going. God allows people to make their choices even if he hates the consequences of those choices.

It happens all the time. Men and women start drinking, gambling, doing drugs or working excessive hours until they alienate their families. The problem gets greater and greater until a husband or a wife and others try to intervene and offer them a choice. "You're going to have to choose between your addictive behavior and your family. You're going to lose everything if you continue down this path." Many chose to continue their bad behavior even at the price of losing spouse, children, house, job and everything. You might wonder why anybody would ever do that. Why would you ever give up that which is good and that which is best for that which is not good and which is the worst? Somehow in our choices we become blinded even to the terrible consequences and continue no matter what.

That is what sin does to our human relationship with God. People go farther and farther down the path until they would rather hold onto the sin and go to hell than give up the sin and turn to God and go to heaven. God allows that bad choice to be made. God "lets them go" or "gives them over" to the direction they have chosen.

Now you may say, "All right, that makes some measure of sense, but what I have trouble with is taking someone who has made awful choices repeatedly through 40, 50 or 90 years of life and then saying that the consequences for that comparatively short series of bad choices has to last forever and ever. Isn't that kind of extreme?"

Have you ever considered the possibility that the permanence of hell may be more the choice of those who are on the inside than of God who is on the outside? That the path that is chosen in this life grows stronger in the next life rather than weaker? It was the great English writer, C. S. Lewis, who observed that the door of hell is locked tightly; but if you look closely, it's locked from the inside not from the outside. In other words, the patterns set on earth continue and grow stronger and stronger after death. The choice against God becomes more and more adamant.

If all of this is so, we must say, if we are going to be correct, that it is not so much that God sends people to hell. It would be better to say that people put themselves in hell.

Does that then answer all of the questions? Of course it does not. God is complex and the issues of eternity are complex. We are dealing with an attempt

to understand things that reach far beyond our usual ability to see and to understand. In September of 1997 it was announced that the Hubbell telescope made it possible to see a star in our own galaxy that had never been discovered before. It is twelve million times the size of our sun. In fact, it is big enough to fill the entire space of the orbit of the earth around our sun. How did we miss something so big for so long? The astronomers answer that the reason is space dust. It has been shrouded from our sight by dust, and now it is only possible through this super powerful Hubbell telescope and its perspective to see what has been there all along.

It's probably even more so with God. God is bigger and brighter and more complicated than even this superstar. But from our human and earthly perspective, there are many things about God and his truth that are clouded in the dust of our lives that block his brightness and his magnitude. We see only partially now and we have to trust for the rest. We may not feel comfortable with that, but that is the choice that we must make. It is not only a Christian principle of faith but an everyday principle for how we understand things in our lives as well. There are and will be unanswered questions.

Is it possible for persons to be saved from hell without Jesus Christ? No, it's not. At least not if you agree with what the Bible says. Is it possible that somehow the blood of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross could save people from hell who may not fully understand all that it means to become a Christian? Yes, there were people in the Old Testament who were given eternal life through Jesus Christ although they predated him and did not know his name. They only had a promise of what God would provide. Yes, there are children who die in infancy or those who are mentally disabled and we would say that the blood of Jesus Christ will cover them. We believe that God will not do anything that is unfair or wrong.

Is it possible that someday God will decide to obliterate hell and annihilate all those that are there? Actually there are some Bible-believing Christians who would say that, although most believe that it is not consistent with a correct understanding of the significant teachings of the Bible.

The truth is that we probably should not linger on what we do not know but on that which we do know. We know that every person who accepts Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord need really never worry about hell again. Jesus Christ guarantees to us an eternal life that is in heaven and that is without a doubt. That is why it is such a strong message for those who are not Chris-

tians to become Christians.

Those who know the gospel's message but have never made a decision about it are, of course, the most accountable of all. How do you answer to a God who gave his Son and say, "I was too busy to decide what to do?" We dare not reject God's offer of forgiveness of sin and eternal life and then somehow expect that God will just open the gates of heaven and welcome us in.

And for those who are Christians, let us take every opportunity to tell others. Remember that we have the very best news and that it really is true. It really does matter that others know it and that they have an opportunity to change their eternal destiny. That is why this church is an outreaching church. That is why we have a strong emphasis on sending missionaries. It's why we are anxious to share the gospel with our families, our friends, with neighbors and with anyone that will listen. We know that the stakes could not be higher and it is truly a matter of life and death — of heaven and hell.

What I find amazing is that the Bible talks so little about hell and talks so much about Jesus, love, salvation and eternal life. The intent appears to be that God's

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expectation is that as soon as people hear the good news they will be so drawn to God through his Son Jesus Christ that they will believe the good news and thereby will have

eternal life. Therefore, the bad news of hell is really kind of irrelevant. That's why it comes down to such a personally important decision.

I think it wise to take just one more minute for private prayer. I want to be sure that every one of us has the unmistakable opportunity to be a Christian. Let's pray and each talk to God. You don't need my words to pray — just share your heart and faith with God. Simply tell him you believe, that you repent of sin and accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

Believe, and you will delight the heart of God!

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