

CHAPTER 7

WHY DOES ANYONE HAVE TO GO TO HELL?

*what about sickness and death?
...and how about healing and life!*

7. WHY DOES ANYONE HAVE TO GO TO HELL?

Before reading this chapter, how would you answer the question, Why does anyone have to go to hell?

Hell is awful to think about

Hell is a terribly difficult subject. It is difficult to imagine, difficult to understand, and difficult to believe. The enormity of hell and its implications for us make it a subject we do not want to think about, let alone discuss. We should think about it though. We owe it to ourselves to confront hell, before it is too late and it confronts us. Some would rather leave this subject alone, so as a last resort they can use the excuse of ignorance. But ignorance will not keep anyone from going to hell. Ignorance does not help at all.

Hosea 4:6 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge... (NKJV)

Hell raises all sorts of questions. Even if we cannot answer them, we still need to be convinced of its reality.

Hell is not often taught in churches

Matthew 25:41 Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels...' (NKJV)

Hell is rarely talked about in churches as it portrays God in such a negative way. Our relationship with God would be pretty awful if it had to begin with a threat from Him to grievously torment us if we did not love Him. It is right therefore to concentrate on His amazing love and mercy towards us which we can see demonstrated by His Son dying for us. Love, not dread, is the basis of our relationship with God.

In recent years though, Christian teaching has emphasised the love of God to such an extent that is now hard to imagine Him ever being angry with us. God is seldom shown to be holy or righteous. This makes the idea of hell almost impossible to comprehend. How can a loving God condemn someone to such an awful place (Luke 12:4–5)? Today, many Christians cannot adequately explain hell, and, as a result, many simply do not believe it exists.¹

Hell is not often proclaimed to the world

Hell is seldom preached outside the churches either. When the gospel is shared, an emphasis is made on Jesus Christ and how He can benefit us as we live out our lives. Less emphasis is made on our current predicament—estranged from God and destined to eternal damnation. The gospel gets presented as a solution, but the problem it solves is overlooked.

Many people therefore, in churches and out of churches, rarely get to hear about hell and rarely get challenged to understand it. When the subject is eventually raised it comes across as a shock or surprise and they find it difficult to handle.

Believing hell exists

Very, very few people truly believe in hell. It is one thing to be aware that hell is taught in the Bible and to accept it as fact, but it is quite another thing to truly believe it. If we really believed in hell, it would have such a profound impact on our lives that all our priorities would change overnight.

Some things are very difficult indeed for us to believe. God acknowledges this in the following account in Habakkuk:

Habakkuk 1:5–6 ‘Look at the nations and watch— and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own...’ (NIV)

Habakkuk grieved over the unrighteousness in Israel and prayed for God to intervene. In response, God said He was going to bring the Babylonian (or Chaldean) nation to fight against Israel to punish them for their wickedness. God knew the Israelites would struggle to believe Him because of the enormity of what He was saying. In a similar way, hell and eternal punishment are difficult subjects to believe.

If we struggle with the idea of hell, we owe it to ourselves and those around us to read carefully what the Bible says about it. In order to believe hard teachings, we need to think deeply on them and try to understand them. As we read about hell and think upon it, God can impress the truth of it in our hearts (Romans 10:17). Eventually we will start to believe that hell is real.

What hell is like

The Bible does not give long and drawn out graphic accounts on the horrors of hell, but it does say enough to give us a good idea of what it is like. It says that hell is a furnace of fire (Matthew 13:42) and an unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12; Mark 9:46). It is a place where there is wailing (Matthew 13:42), sorrow (2Samuel 22:6), and weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). Hell is cryptically described as a place where their worm does not die (Mark 9:44; Isaiah 66:24). It is a place of outer darkness (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) and where people are separated from God and those who love Him (Luke 16:26). It is a place of torment day and night for ever and ever (Revelation 20:10) and where the wrath of God abides (John 3:36).

Who goes to hell?

God originally created the everlasting fire for the devil and his angels, presumably because they sinned first (Matthew 25:41). However, we see that humans will also go to hell. God divides the nations into what He calls sheep and goats (Matthew 25:32); the goats go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:46).

The scriptures indicate that most people will go to hell, and only a few will go to heaven.

Matthew 22:14 “For many are called, but few are chosen.”
(NKJV)

Matthew 7:13–14 “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it...” (NKJV)

This fact is reinforced by the many people who say they know God but will end up going to hell (Matthew 7:21–23).

Ordinary people will go to hell

Many people feel they are not bad enough to deserve hell. A popular belief is that if you do good, you will go to heaven, and if you do bad, you will go to hell. Because of this belief, people think of hell as reserved for very wicked people and not for themselves. The flaw in their thinking is when they make that judgment, they do so using their own standard of righteousness rather than God’s. In truth, all of us are destined for hell unless we call upon the name of Jesus Christ to save us.

Romans 10:9...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (NKJV)

We can learn a little bit about the type of person who goes to hell from a parable Jesus gave about a rich man and a beggar (Luke 16:19–31). In this account, a rich man lived and ate well, but he did not care for a poor man begging by his gate. When they died, the rich man was carried to a place of torment and the beggar to a place of rest. When the rich man realised his fate, he asked whether someone could warn his brothers about hell. He did not want them to suffer the same torment he was experiencing. His reaction is what we would expect from an ordinary person.

Why does anyone have to go to hell?

The fact that most people will eventually end up going to hell, begs the question as to whether God could have created the world in a

better way. The answer to this is that if there was a better way, then surely God would have taken it. For some reason therefore, hell is a necessary part of God's creation.

Hell is necessary

In order to understand why hell is necessary, we need to look at the nature of God. God is perfectly holy and righteous.

1 Samuel 2:2 No one is holy like the Lord... (NKJV)

Deuteronomy 32:4...A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He. (NKJV)

Because God is so holy, nothing remotely impure or sinful can come anywhere near Him.

Psalm 5:4–5 For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness; with you, evil people are not welcome. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong (NIV)

Our problem is that God sees us as utterly depraved.

Psalm 51:5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. (ESV)

Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (KJV)

How can anyone go to heaven?

Instead of asking why people go to hell, a better question would be to ask how we can ever possibly stand in the presence of God. A righteous man with his sins forgiven can only just about come into God's presence (Daniel 10:1–19; Isaiah 6:5–7; Matthew 17:1–6). It is infinitely worse for a man who dies without having his sins forgiven (1 Peter 4:18).

Although all things are possible with God (Mark 10:27), He has certain 'limitations' which arise out of His nature. He cannot

stop being God, for example. He cannot lie (Titus 1:2) because He is righteous (Daniel 9:14). We can also say that if His nature requires Him to do something, He is obliged to do it (see for example Numbers 23:19).

Because He made the world and everything in it, God has the right to destroy anything that rebels against Him. However, because He is holy, not only has He the right to destroy but also the imperative—He must destroy. If He permitted unrighteousness to remain unpunished, He would no longer be holy—an idea which is simply unthinkable. He has to deal fully with sin.

God does not want anyone to go to hell

The fact that God created hell does not mean that he wants people to go there. He takes no pleasure at all when people die in their sins and perish.

Ezekiel 18:30–32 “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord God. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!” (NKJV)

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (NIV)

On the contrary, He fervently wants everyone to be saved.

1 Timothy 2:4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (ESV)

(See also Matthew 18:14).

His desire for us to be saved is exceedingly strong. Jesus mourned when the people of Jerusalem rejected Him.

Matthew 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (NKJV)

Why does God punish so severely?

What relationship is there between the punishment of the lost and their sin? From a human perspective, eternal torment seems to be a completely inappropriate response to any type of sin whatsoever. Why is God so severe?

When considering hard questions, it is helpful to remember that whatever God does is right, so there must be a reason why he punishes so severely. If He could punish less severely, He would surely do so.

Because God is infinitely holy, His anger to sin will be infinite as well. The punishment God metes out to sinners must reflect His anger of sin—anything less and He would be tolerating sin.

Hell is eternal

One thing which would make hell a lot easier to accept is if the lost were eventually annihilated. At least we would get some satisfaction that their torment would end. Annihilation, with some punishment beforehand, would presumably satisfy God's need for justice, and also it would be a more humane solution. However, it is not this way as we see that their torment lasts forever.

Revelation 14:11 And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night... (NKJV)

The reason why God cannot annihilate sinners is because He has created man in His image. Although our body dies, we have a spirit, which is in the image of God, and so our spirit can never die.

Genesis 1:27 So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him... (NKJV)

Everyone, saved or lost, will be resurrected from the dead (Acts 24:15). Because of this, the only possible outcome is for the lost to suffer eternal punishment.

How can a loving God be so cruel?

It is hard to imagine God being cruel, yet those who experience His judgments may well see Him that way.

Lamentations 2:21 ‘Young and old lie together in the dust of the streets; my young men and young women have fallen by the sword. You have slain them in the day of your anger; you have slaughtered them without pity...’ (NIV)

We cannot call God cruel though. Cruelty has an element of injustice to it as it speaks of a desire to see people suffer. God takes no pleasure when the wicked die (Ezekiel 33:11). Instead, the Bible shows us that God is loving and merciful.

1 John 4:7–8 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. (NKJV)

(See also Psalm 108:4.)

God is amazingly merciful

His love is so great that He sent His Son to die for us (1 John 4:9–11; John 3:16). Because God is infinite, His love and mercy are infinite. However God is also infinitely holy and righteous (Isaiah 6:3).

At first sight it is difficult to imagine God having two attributes which appear to clash—holiness and mercy. However both these attributes are perfect and complete. They complement each other and one does not dominate the other.

God expresses His holiness by demanding a full punishment of every sin, ever made. He expresses His mercy by providing a way to forgive us and by giving us time to repent. His mercy cannot in any way lessen His final judgment of sin otherwise He would no longer be holy.

Those who experience God's wrath do not have any grounds for calling Him cruel. Because they will not experience His mercy, they cannot see Him as a loving and merciful God. Instead, they will see Him as a righteous and holy God, but not a cruel one.

We can avoid going to hell

We do not have to go to hell. God has an intense desire to save us, and He hates it when people die in their sins and go to hell. He wants to save people and not to destroy them.

Luke 9:56 For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them... (NKJV)

Galatians 1:3–4 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father (NKJV)

It is up to us to choose life. God cannot change His nature to accommodate our sin. Instead, He has provided a way whereby we can be saved, and He leaves it up to us to choose it. We have to change our nature rather than making God change His.

John 5:40 But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. (NKJV)

Questions to consider

1. How can we tell whether we are not talking enough about hell or dwelling on it too much?
 2. How important is it that Christians should believe in the existence of hell?
 3. How important is it that non-Christians should be made aware of the existence of hell?
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References:

1 Christian Research for the Evangelical Alliance, 21st Century Evangelicals: A snapshot of the beliefs and habits of evangelical Christians in the UK, 2011, p90

The survey for the Evangelical Alliance found that only 37% of evangelicals strongly agree that hell is a place where the condemned will suffer eternal conscious pain. They commented that ‘it’s the issue where there is the greatest uncertainty’.

Over 17,000 people completed questionnaires for this survey. They were chosen from those people attending Christian festivals popular among Evangelical Christians and from thirty-five Evangelical Alliance member churches.