

## **How Can Anyone Believe What the Bible Teaches About Hell?**

Dr. Tim Keller tells the story of a young man who started coming to his church. The man had an Ivy League MBA and was very successful in the financial world, but he had little understanding of Christianity. He said he was ready to embrace the gospel, but there was a final obstacle. "I cannot reconcile the idea of hell with a loving God—even if He is holy too."

That young man expressed one of the main objections some people make to the Christian message. How can anyone believe what the Bible teaches about hell? That's the question we're looking at today.

Our purpose is not to answer the question, "What does the Bible teach about hell?" Maybe we will do that one day. We could look in depth at all the Greek and Hebrew words, such as *Sheol*, *Hades*, and *Gehenna*. But for this message our question and purpose are different, and because of that we will come at it from a different angle. The question we're asking is this: *How Can Anyone Believe What the Bible Teaches About Hell?* We can't remove everyone's objections by getting rid of whatever they find objectionable about the Christian faith, but we can try to give a different perspective.

There are a number of things we probably need to say to people today about that question. The first is simply this:

### **We Can Believe the Teaching About Hell Because of Who It Is Who Taught It**

I study and think and read about these kinds of issues, but at the end of the day I believe what I believe because of Jesus and His teaching. When we read a story like the one in Luke 16 in which verse 23 says a man was in hell and in torment, it's important to remember this is a story Jesus told. The reality of hell was an important part of His teaching.

In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says, "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."

Jesus said, "The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born" (Mark 14:21).

Jesus said, "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'" (Mark 9:47-48.)

The concept of hell has never been an easy thing to accept. In the very early days of the church, around the year 392, a famous preacher named John Chrysostom, speaking of hell, said, "Yes, I know a chill comes over you on hearing these things. But what am I to do? Ordained as we have been to the ministry of the word, we must cause our hearers discomfort when it is necessary for them to hear (Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the First Epistles to the Corinthians*, 9, 1).

The English author Dorothy Sayers wrote:

There seems to be a kind of conspiracy, especially among middle-aged writers of vaguely liberal tendency, to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of Hell comes from. One finds frequent references to the "cruel and abominable mediaeval doctrine of hell" . . . . The doctrine of hell is not "mediaeval . . . . it is Christ's deliberate judgment on sin . . . . We cannot repudiate Hell without altogether repudiating Christ (Dorothy Sayers, *A Matter of Eternity*, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973], p. 86).

That's why we can believe in hell, and we should believe in hell. We can look at Jesus. We can look at the uniqueness of Jesus. We can look at the prophecies that were fulfilled in His life, the miracles that He performed, His death as a sacrifice for our sins, His resurrection from the dead, and the depth of love in His life. In light of that, when we see that He taught that hell exists, we believe it because we believe in *Him*.

### **We Can Believe What the Bible Teaches About Hell Because What It Teaches Makes Sense**

When someone says, "I struggle to believe because of the problem of hell," there are a lot of things we could say. We could look at what the Bible says about the holiness of God and the horror of sin.

We could look at the justice of God's judgments. All of that is important. But there is something else that isn't talked about as much or understood as well. It is the fact that hell is God's giving people what they have chosen for themselves. You may think, *What? How is that possible?*

In Luke 16:26 Abraham speaks with the rich man in hell and says, "Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."

What this great "chasm" represents is a final, irreparable, and irreconcilable separation from God. Hell *is* punishment, but the nature of the punishment is that God lets you go. It's your saying to God, "Leave me alone!" and God's finally saying to you, "OK, but there will be a chasm between us that can never again be crossed." There is justice in hell, not cruelty.

The Bible's teaching on the subject of hell makes sense in at least three ways.

### **It Makes Sense That There Is a Place for Those Who Want God to Leave Them Alone; That's What Hell Is**

John Piper has written a little book titled *God Is the Gospel*. In it he says the gospel is not just a gift that God gives, but God Himself! He gives us His presence in blessing. The opposite of that grace is the withdrawal of His presence. He says what believers hope for is to be with Christ face to face. He quotes 2 Thessalonians 1:9 and says this is what those who do not believe will lose. "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence [literally: the face] of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (*God Is the Gospel*, p. 70).

The Bible says that when Satan and his fallen angels first rebelled, God prepared a place of separation and banishment for them. That place is hell. God sends people there when they do not come to Him because it is the only place for them.

*How is God giving you what you want and leaving you alone hell?*

James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." Everything good is from God. But suppose someone says, "I don't believe in God," or, "I don't want anything to do with God."

Tim Keller uses the illustration of an imaginary person born and raised in a cave. Because the cave is underground, the temperature of the cave remains around 50°. Someone tells him about the sun, but he refuses to believe in the sun. He's never seen the sun and doesn't acknowledge it. But even though he doesn't believe in the sun, he is blessed by the sun. If the sun went out, what would the temperature in the cave be? Not 50° but minus zero. The sun, which he does not even acknowledge, is the only thing that makes his life livable and bearable.

So someone says, "I don't believe in God, and I don't see any reason why I need Him." But all the time he is saying that, everything that makes life livable and enjoyable comes from the very God he refuses to honor. Even the good that people find in themselves and in which they take pride is ultimately from God. The very things that we abuse in our sins are all from God.

If God and His goodness were completely withdrawn, we would be left with only the deepening darkness and despair of our hearts without even a hint or hope of any satisfaction. Instead we would experience only the sense of His displeasure and the absence of His blessing. Take lust, anger, depravity, delusion, and bitterness and give them nothing to feed on but themselves, let them rage in your soul, and what happens? They consume you.

Theologians call the grace with which the whole world is blessed "God's common grace." We may deny Him and resist Him, and God goes on blessing us with His common grace. But if we do not receive His saving grace, if we do not at some point repent and turn to Christ, and there comes a time when, as it were, we say to God, "Leave me alone!" God will say, "OK."

J.I. Packer writes about this in his classic book *Knowing God*. He has an extended section on the wrath of God in which he says, "The essence of God's action in wrath is to *give men what they choose*, in all its implications: nothing more, and equally nothing less (p. 153).

*It makes sense that there is a place for people who want God to leave them alone. That place is hell.*

## **It Makes Sense That God's Leaving You Alone Would Result in Your Falling Apart; That's What Hell Is**

*The book of Romans shows us how God's wrath works.* Romans 1:18 reads: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." Paul is talking about God's wrath, but what form does it take? In the verses that follow, he says they should have known better and in fact did know better, because God has revealed Himself in creation. But people have refused to glorify or acknowledge God.

When Paul gets to verse 24, he picks up again on the theme of God's wrath, and a little phrase of four chilling words begins to appear repeatedly. "Therefore *God gave them over* in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another." In verse 26 the phrase appears again: "*God gave them over* to shameful lusts." It appears again in verse 28: "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."

In the Bible, God's wrath is sometimes seen as an active thing in which He pours out punishment on guilty people in an active way. But God's wrath here is not seen in His bringing some instrument of punishment into your life but in His giving you over to the junk in your heart. The result is spiritual ruin.

*Another thing that stands out in the story Jesus tells in Luke 16 is how messed up this rich man is even in hell.* He doesn't get it. He says "Abraham, send Lazarus to run an errand for me. Send Lazarus to bring water. Send Lazarus with a message for my brothers." He still thinks he can order Lazarus around. He still expects service.

There's a place in Milton's *Paradise Lost* where the author has Lucifer saying, "I'd rather rule in hell than serve in heaven." That's the attitude of the rich man. He's blinded by his pride and out of touch with reality. He doesn't ask for forgiveness, he asks for comfort. He doesn't ask to get out, he asks for Lazarus to be sent in. In verses 27-28 he says, "Send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." He is strongly suggesting that he didn't get enough information or he wouldn't be there and that someone ought to see to it that people are warned adequately.

One aspect of hell is that one is given over to his sinfulness, selfishness, jealousy, pride, anger, and bitterness. It consumes the soul and ruins the person. You go on blaming others and complaining that no one understands you, unhappy about your condition but still unwilling to repent. Hell *is* punishment, but the nature of the punishment is that God leaves you alone. He lets you go.

C.S. Lewis again has an interesting take on this:

Christianity asserts we are all going to go on forever . . . . Now there are a good many things which would not be worth bothering about if I am not going to live forever. Perhaps my bad temper or my jealousy are gradually getting worse, so gradually that the increase in my lifetime will not be very noticeable-- but it might be absolute hell in a million years . . . . In each of us, there is something growing, which will BE Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

What Lewis is saying doesn't capture everything that needs to be said about hell, but it is a perspective that is often missed and needs to be understood.

- *It makes sense that there is a place for people who want God to leave them alone: that's what hell is.*
- *It makes sense that God's leaving you alone would result in your falling apart: that's what hell is.*
- *And there is something else that makes sense about the biblical teaching of hell:*

### **It Makes Sense That the Horror of Damnation Is Hard to Understand, So God Gives Powerful Imagery to Warn Us; Hell Is the Awful Reality Behind the Imagery**

Scholars such as R.C. Sproul and J.I. Packer have written that the descriptions of hell in the Bible are metaphors and analogies. John MacArthur writes, "The fire in hell isn't like the fire we use to burn something. God uses the word fire to describe hell as a place of torment" (John MacArthur, in the sermon "Hell-- the Furnace of Fire").

There are indications in this story from Luke 16 that we are not to think of the story in an overly literal or physical way. In 16:24 the rich

man says, "Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."

- 1. First of all, it's hard to imagine someone literally engulfed in a fire and being able to carry on this kind of a back and forth conversation that goes on for several verses.
- 2. Then think about what he says. "Send Lazarus to dip the *tip of his finger* in water." Would whatever doesn't evaporate by the time Lazarus gets to him with his wet fingertip literally ease his hellish agony? The literal physical sense doesn't make sense. But the imagery makes the point.
- 3. Something else tells us this is not literal. The Bible teaches that when people die they are no longer in physical bodies. They are spiritual beings without physical bodies until the final resurrection takes place at the second coming of Christ. So how can you have spiritual beings suffering the physical effects of physical fire?
- 4. Another problem with taking this in a literal way is the fact that when you compare all the images of hell, the images don't fit together in a literal way. In several places Jesus and other writers in Scripture talk about hell as a place of absolute outer darkness. The apostle Peter describes hell as *blackest darkness*. You can't have flames of fire and black darkness in the same place at the same time. We're supposed to understand that.

John Calvin said this:

Many persons, I am aware, have entered into ingenious debates about the eternal fire . . . but we must conclude from many passages of Scripture that it is a metaphorical expression. . . . let us satisfy ourselves that these forms of speech denote, in a manner suited to our feeble capacity, a dreadful torment which no man can now comprehend and no language can express" (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew Mark and Luke*, pp. 1 -200)

We shouldn't be surprised that the Bible uses powerful images to convey important truths. We do it. We use physical images to describe emotional pain. "I should have known you were going to burn me, but I can't believe you stabbed me in the back, cut me to the bone, and broke my heart." We do the same with suffering. "He screamed his head off and cried his eyes out." Here's the difference: we sometimes use language like that to exaggerate the hurt. But the imagery of hell

works the other way. Powerful imagery is chosen because our tendency is to underestimate the seriousness of hell.

Tim Keller says people ask him what he believes about hell and he often says, "Well, one thing I can say is that the images of hell in the Bible are probably metaphorical; they are images and pictures that shouldn't be taken too literally." He says people go "Whew" and sigh in relief, but then he adds, "I think what the images are picturing is something far, far, far worse."

The reason we can believe in hell is because Jesus taught it. And though the teaching is hard to accept, it makes sense that there would be a place for people who want God to leave them alone. It makes sense that in that place people would be forever falling apart, and the reality of that damnation would be so hard to grasp that God would use powerful imagery to warn us of its reality.

C.S. Lewis makes an interesting observation:

In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: "What are you asking God to do?" To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does (*The Problem of Pain*, p. 116).

Only when we take the reality of hell and its eternal and intense suffering seriously do we understand the greatness of God's love. The darkest moment in the story of the crucifixion is when Jesus on the cross cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" His physical pain, as great as it was, was eclipsed by an even more intense sense of inner spiritual agony and God forsakenness that none of us can fully understand. What was happening is that He was suffering the agonies of hell for the redemption of our souls.

British preacher David Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "Imagine a friend comes to see me and says, 'Hey, I was at your house the other day and a bill came due and you weren't there so I paid it.'"

Lloyd-Jones says, "How should I respond?" The answer he gives is, "I have no idea how to respond until I know how big that bill was. Was it just postage due? Or was it the IRS finally finding me and

wanting ten years of back taxes and penalties with interest? What if it was an enormous debt?" Lloyd-Jones says, "Until I know how much he paid I don't know whether to shake his hand or fall down to the ground and kiss his feet" (quoted by Keller in the sermon "Hell: Is God Just an Angry Judge?")

What did Jesus experience on the cross? Hell. Unless you believe in hell, you will never know how great His love is. The same Christ who descended into hell on the cross rose again from the dead. He offers Himself to you today as living Lord and Savior. His love is more redemptive, important, gracious, and eternal than your wildest dreams.

We don't earn salvation. We receive it when we come to Him as Lord and trust in Him as Savior. The more we think about that, believe it, and take it to heart, the more powerfully it changes us from within.