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THE PROBLEM OF HELL

According to a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center, only 58% of American adults believe in hell, with another 8% unsure. Considered denominationally, only 63% of Roman Catholics, 59% of Orthodox Christians, 60% of mainline Protestants, and 83% of evangelical Protestants believe in hell. (<http://pewrsr.ch/1cpBNNW>; <http://bit.ly/1NKSPFZ>; <http://bit.ly/1NKSTWc>)

Furthermore, increased numbers of church leaders abandon the traditional understanding of hell. The story is told of a group of soldiers who crowded around their chaplain on an American troopship and asked, “Do you believe in hell?” “I do not,” he replied. “Well, then, will you please resign,” they responded, “for if there is no hell, we do not need you, and if there is a hell, we do not wish to be led astray.” (cf. <http://bit.ly/1NKTJm3>)

Indeed, what is true about hell matters. If it doesn’t exist, then most of our NT-commanded ministry seems irrelevant. If it does exist, then the most unloving thing we could do is to cease speaking of it. Henry Ward Beecher, a Congregationalist minister in Indianapolis and New York City in the 1800s, once wisely mused,

I do not accept the doctrine of eternal punishment because I delight in it. I would cast in doubts, if I could, till I had filled hell up to the brim. I would destroy all faith in it, but that would do me no good; I could not destroy the thing. I cannot alter the stern fact. The exposition of future punishment in God’s Word is not to be regarded as a threat, but as a merciful declaration. If, in the ocean of life, over which we are bound to eternity, there are these rocks and shoals, it is no cruelty to chart them down; it is an eminent and prominent mercy.¹

Such mercy was heard often in the very preaching of our Savior, who, it has been widely noted, spoke more about hell than He did heaven, clearly believing Himself in its literal existence.

THE BIBLICAL DESCRIPTION OF HELL

We first need to recognize that when it comes to both Satan and hell, secular sources really have popularized a clearly non-biblical picture. For example, many people understand the Christian belief in hell to be a place where the anti-god is ruling. Scripture rejects such a notion, teaching instead that Satan is the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4), ruling and prowling this planet, albeit under the accountability of God (Job 1-2; Ephesians 2:1-3; 1 Peter 5:8). God controls hell, as He does all things (Matthew 10:28 [Luke 12:5]; Revelation 1:18).

1. Its intention (Matthew 25:41)

The Bible indicates that hell was actually prepared for the devil as a place of eternal judgment (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:7-10) and is a place that he does not want to go (Matthew 8:29; James 2:19; Revelation 12:12). It was not originally intended for humanity, but many people will find their eternal state there, because of their own choice to rebel against their accountability to God and reject the provision of salvation through Jesus.

2. Its description

The New Testament uses three different words to describe hell:

- **Gehenna** — Usually translated as “hell,” this word is “a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew words *ge hinnom* (“Valley of Hinnom”). This was the valley along the south side of Jerusalem. In OT times it was used for human sacrifices to the pagan god Molech (cf. [2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6] Jer [2:23] 7:31[-32]; 19:[2-]5-6; 32:35), and it came to be used as a place where human excrement and rubbish were disposed of and burned. In the intertestamental period, it came to be used symbolically as the place of divine punishment (cf. [Isaiah 66:24; Daniel 12:2] 1 En. 27:2, 90:26; 4 Ezra 7:36).² This valley, with its undying fires and scavenging insects, served as a vivid illustration of the abhorrent horrors of hell.

- **Hades** — *Hades* parallels the OT idea of *sheol* (i.e., the place of departed souls or “the general concept of the invisible world or abode into which the spirits of men are ushered immediately after death”³; cf. Acts 2:27, 31), often adding the connotation of judgment (cf. Matthew 11:23; Luke 16:23; Revelation 20:13-14). Therefore, it is sometimes translated as “Hades” and other times as “hell.”
- **Tartaros** — (2 Peter 2:4) “Tartarus [was] thought of by the Greeks as a subterranean place lower than Hades where divine punishment was meted out, and so regarded in Israelite apocalyptic as well: Job 41:24; En 20:2; Philo, Exs. 152; Jos., C. Ap. 2, 240; SibOr 2, 302; 4, 186.”⁴

Since man is essentially immortal, physical death is not annihilation (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Scripture teaches that at death, while the body returns to dust (Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 3:20), a believer’s soul goes into the joyful presence of the Lord (Ecclesiastes 3:20; Luke 16:19-31; 13:28; 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:19-26; Hebrews 12:23; Revelation 6:9), while an unbeliever goes immediately to a place of physical torment and punishment, called *hades* or *gehenna* (i.e., hell: Luke 16:19-31). These are intermediary states, where souls exist before the final resurrections. At the end of time, these temporal states will be intensified: eternal bliss for the believer (Revelation 21:1-5) and eternal punishment for the unbeliever in the Lake of Fire, which is the “second death” (Matthew 10:28; Mark 9:43-48; Revelation 14:9-11; 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8).

By studying the New Testament’s use of these terms to describe hell, we discover a frighteningly literal description.

- **Separation** — from the paradise and presence of God (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; Revelation 22:15) and from believers (Luke 13:28)
- **Suffering** (Luke 16:19-31)
 - **Consciousness** — Hell’s inhabitants remember, at least, (1) the folly of having trusted false saviors (e.g., riches) in life, and (2) the permanent forfeiture of spiritual opportunities they were given in life (Luke 16:25, 27-28).

- **Darkness** (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; [Luke 8:31; 2 Peter 2:4, 17; Jude 13—the “abyss,” “chains/pits of gloomy darkness,” and “gloom of utter darkness” may be a distinct part of hell, uniquely reserved for specific demons])
- **Fire** (Matthew 13:42, 50; 18:9; Mark 9:43-48; later, the “Lake of Fire” [Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8])
- **Torment** (Luke 16:23, 24, 28)
- **Sorrow** (Matthew 8:10-12; 13:41-42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30)
- **Judgment** (Matthew 10:28 [Luke 12:5]; 11:23-24 [Luke 10:13-15]; Hebrews 10:26-31 [Isaiah 26:11; Zephaniah 1:18]) — levels of judgment (Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 12:47-48; Revelation 20:12-13; Ezekiel 16:48-61)

Ralph Powell writes, “If the descriptions of hell are figurative or symbolic, the conditions they represent are more intense and real than the figures of speech in which they are expressed.”⁵

Albert Barnes adds, “The image expresses the fact, that the wicked who are lost will be shut out from the light of heaven, and from peace, and joy, and hope; will be confined in gloomy darkness; will weep in hopeless grief; and gnash their teeth in indignation against God, and murmur against his justice. What a striking image of future woe! Go to a damp, dark, solitary, and squalid dungeon; see a miserable and enraged victim; add to his sufferings the idea of eternity; and then remember that this after all is but an image, a faint image, of hell!” (*Barnes’s Notes on the Bible*, Matthew 8:12)

3. **Its duration** — eternal, inescapable, and unalleviated (Mark 9:48 [Isaiah 66:24]; Matthew 25:46, Luke 16:24-26; Hebrews 6:2; Revelation 14:9-11)

4. **Its decision** — If it is thought, “God is not fair to send people to hell,” we might respond:

a. Hell follows [is a result of] human choice (Romans 1:18-2:11).

In a very real sense, “nobody ever goes to hell in the Christian understanding unless they want to. People go to heaven because they love God and want to submit to him. People go to hell because they want to be away from God, because they do not want somebody telling them how to live their life. They want to live their own lives their way. Hell is separation from God. And, therefore, nobody goes to hell except people who want to go there” (TRFG⁶). Romans 1:18-2:11 supports this assertion, detailing that the “wrath of God” is meted out by God’s “giving people up” to their willful, unconfessed, and rebellious sin (1:18-32), which culminates in active judgment (2:1-11). Adds one writer, “If the question be raised, How can a loving God send men to an everlasting Hell? it must be replied that God does not choose this destiny for men; they freely choose it for themselves. God simply concurs in their self-chosen way and reveals the full consequences of their evil choice.”⁷

Illustration: When someone is expelled from a university, people often speak of it in terms of the school “kicking them out.” However, usually, the individual brought such punishment upon himself by violating the university’s mutually agreed-upon code of conduct.

Illustration: Just above Niagara Falls, there is a sign indicating a “point of no return,” beyond which the current will inevitably take you over its punishing brink. Similarly, there is a point of no return in which the patient grace of God (cf. Acts 17:30; Romans 1:18-32; 2:4; 3:25-26; 2 Peter 3:9) will run out and His judgment will be leveled.

b. Hell finalizes human choice (Revelation 22:11).

Ralph Powell writes in the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, “Divine wrath is the necessary reaction of a holy God who hates all that is contrary to his righteous nature. When the only remedy for human sin is rejected and all appeals of a

loving, seeking God for the reconciliation of rebellious sinners are refused, there is no other course of action which God himself can pursue but to leave the sinner to his self-chosen destiny. Punishment for sin is then the inevitable and inescapable response of holiness to that which is morally opposite, and it must continue as long as the sinful condition requiring it continues. There is no indication anywhere in Scripture that lost sinners in hell are capable of repentance and faith. If in this life they did not turn away from sin and receive Christ as Savior with all the favorable circumstances and opportunities afforded them on earth, it is unreasonable to think they will do so in the life to come when none of the encouragements to believe and to forsake sin are present. Punishment cannot come to an end until guilt and sin come to an end. When the sinner ultimately resists and rejects the work of the Holy Spirit whereby he is convicted of sin, there remains no more possibility of repentance or salvation. He has committed an eternal sin (Mk 3:29; Rv 22:11), which deserves eternal punishment.”⁸

C. S. Lewis put it this way:

I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the gates of hell are locked on the inside. (The Problem of Pain, 127)

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, in the end, “Thy will be done.” (The Great Divorce, 66-67)

5. Its solution (Acts 17:31)

Many years ago two Massachusetts state senators wound up in an angry debate, in which one told the other he could “go to hell.” The man thus consigned protested to Governor Coolidge and asked him to intervene in the argument. Coolidge replied, “I’ve looked up the law, Senator, and you don’t have to go there.”

That’s truth—you don’t have to go to hell! The judgment of hell is real, but it is avoidable. Here’s how.

Acts 17:31 — “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.”

Hebrews 9:27-28 — “[Jesus Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him.”

God’s Word teaches that a specific event made hell avoidable generally, and that a specific response renders it so individually.

a. Through the resurrection, we can avoid hell.

(TRFG) In his 800-page book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, historian N. T. Wright says that there is no historically possible alternate explanation for the birth of the Christian church than the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There is a tremendous amount of evidence (<http://bit.ly/1rSfGTE>):

- Jesus bore witness to his own coming resurrection.
- The tomb was empty on Easter.
- The disciples were almost immediately transformed from men who were hopeless and fearful after the crucifixion (Luke 24:21, John 20:19) into men who were confident and bold witnesses of the resurrection (Acts 2:24, 3:15, 4:2).
- The apostle Paul’s conversion supports the truth of the resurrection.
- The New Testament witnesses do not bear the stamp of dupes or deceivers.
- The greatest evidence, however, is the sheer existence of a thriving, empire-conquering early Christian.

What does this have to do with God’s wrath and hell? Tim Keller explains:

How can you be totally sure when you look at all the horrible stuff that has happened in your life and out in the world that someday God is going to make it all right? How can you not just hope so, but be absolutely sure that in spite of your own failures, God loves you and will never let you go? How can you know that when you face death it is not the end? Only if you know that Jesus rose from the dead and therefore so will you.

See, ultimately, judgment day is when God puts everything right again. And Jesus’ resurrection was just the first installment of that newness!

b. Through repentance, we can avoid hell.

“In Ezekiel 18:30 God says, ‘I will judge you, each one according to his ways.’ But the verse goes on with God pleading with his people: ‘Repent! Turn away from all your offenses. ... Why will you die? ... I take no pleasure in the death of anyone. ... Repent and live!’ (Ezekiel 18:30-32). God’s justice is active, not passive, and when we violate it God will judge. But what these verses also show is that God wants people to repent and turn to Him—that He does not want anyone to perish [Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11; 2 Peter 3:8-13]” (TRFG).

People don’t need someone from hell to appear to them to convince them to avoid its horrors. As Abraham told the rich young ruler, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets [and now the totality of divine revelation, including the New Testament/Covenant], neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:27-31). So, friend, here the Word of God and the truth of His gospel...and repent...and live!

THE CONTEMPORARY REJECTION OF HELL

God's Word is clear, consistent, and regular in its theology of judgment and hell, and yet almost half of American adults reject the idea. How is this rejection verbalized and how might we respond to these rejections?

SOCIETAL REJECTION OF HELL

1. Hell (and heaven) exists now.

Someone might say, "Hell and heaven exist now....In any moment when your actions are negative or the influence is coming from, 'I want to do what I want to do,' instead of from the larger picture, you are in some sort of hell, because your ego has taken over. Whereas you are in heaven more when you are really compassionate and acting with others" (TRFG).

While that may be true in a practical sense, we have seen that it is certainly not accurate in a theological sense. Sin does produce consequences, which include separation in our relationship with God and others—but that is not "hell" in its literal and theological sense. This person is mistaking the normative law of cause and effect (or reaping and sowing, Galatians 6:7)—in which sin generally brings harm and good generally brings blessing (Deuteronomy 30)—for the fixed, eternal punishment of those who die in rejection of God.

2. If I live a full life, I don't need to fear sin's consequences.

Some might confidently declare, "I am at ease with taking the burdens of my own sins, I don't need somebody else to relieve that for me. I don't need to think about an afterlife, because I'm scared to live this life. There is a famous quote that says, 'People who live a full life aren't scared to die.' And for me, I'm living a full life and I'm not scared to take the brunt of my sins, I'm not scared to do what I need to do to live this life" (TRFG)

However, if the Bible's teaching is true, this individual doesn't understand the extent of his/her sin (cf. Genesis 6:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 1:18-2:22; 3:23; 8:5-8, 13a), the penalty of his/her sin (Romans 6:23), and the certainty of divine judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

3. God cannot be both full of love and full of wrath.

(TRFG) First, we must appropriately understand what the Bible means by God's *wrath*. A. W. Pink defines God's wrath this way, "The wrath of God is His eternal detestation of all unrighteousness. It is the displeasure and indignation of Divine equity against evil. It is the holiness of God stirred into activity against sin. ... God is angry against sin because it is rebelling against His authority, a wrong done to His inviolable sovereignty ['cosmic treason,' Bridges]. ... Not that God's anger is a malignant and malicious retaliation, inflicting injury for the sake of it, or in return for injury received. No; while God will vindicate His dominion as Governor of the universe, He will not be vindictive" (*The Attributes of God* [Swengel, PA: Reiner, 1968], 76).

Tim Keller defines wrath as "settled opposition and hatred of that which is destroying what [one] loves." In God's case, His wrath flows from His love for His glory and His creation. He is angry at injustice, greed, self-centeredness, and evil because they are destructive—such sin not only overtly harms His creation, but it also covertly takes away from His beautiful glory. God will not tolerate anything or anyone responsible for destroying what He loves—He is an appropriately jealous God (Exodus 34:14; Isaiah 42:8; 48:11)!

(TRFG) Second, thinking about our own relationships shows that these two aspects—love and wrath—are not incompatible. There is actually a correlation between how deeply we love someone and the extent to which we might get angry with him/her. The greater our love for someone, the greater our potential for anger at what is destructive in his/her life.

If you had a brother or close friend battling with some self-destructive behavior/addiction that was ruining his life, you would not sit by indifferently. You would be angry with him; you would confront him; you would not be afraid to offend him by passing judgment on his behavior. The cohabitation of love and anger is also seen in parenting. In a discussion on this topic, one parent admitted, "As a parent...I'm often full of love and wrath. It's not contradictory—being full of love and full of wrath is not at all contradictory—it happens all the time, sometimes at the same time."

4. God wouldn't send good people to hell.

(TRFG) This sounds open-minded: the premise is that good people find God and bad people do not. But there are two problems with this premise:

- First, it holds out no hope for the bad people, and lots of us know deep down that we have not lived up to even our own moral standards, let alone God's (cf. Romans 3:10-20, 23; Galatians 3:10, 12; James 2:8-12). We are all bad people in need of "grace" (i.e., unmerited favor). As the Bible study, *Christianity Explored*, puts it, "We aren't who/what we want to be, let alone what God wants us to be." If our entire life was projected on a big screen for everyone to see, there is much that we would all be ashamed of.
- Second, this premise misunderstands Christians' beliefs, in that it assumes we believe that we are going to heaven because we are good—that's not true at all!

Christians believe that no one goes to heaven or hell by being compliant with Christian ethics—by being moral and good, or not. The essence of sin is loving anything more than the true God (Matthew 22:34-40; "disordered love," Augustine), and by essentially being our own "god"—that is, trusting ultimately in our own wisdom and ability. The fact is all of us—religious and irreligious, moral and immoral—are trying to control our own lives rather than rely on God. Everyone is doing this and we will not "find God" until we admit this spiritual condition and seek pardon and change through Jesus. Our eternal destiny is dependent *not* on being good, but on our response to the grace of God and to Christ's death on a cross in our place and on our willingness to admit that we are cut off from God because of the pride and self-centeredness of our hearts (cf. Isaiah 59:1-2; 1 Peter 3:18).

So, in a sense, the statement is true—but there are no good people, except "in Christ" (Romans 8:1).

5. The infinite punishment of hell doesn't fit the finite crimes of people.⁹

This objection asks, "How can God infinitely punish finite sin?" We can answer this question in three ways.

(1) While the punishing of hell is eternal, Scripture indicates that not all people suffer equally in hell, as the punishment seems to be proportionate to the sins they committed (Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 12:47-48; Revelation 20:12-13; Ezekiel 16:48-61).

(2) The gravity of human sin is not determined by how long one sins, but by the standard of glory and majesty and beauty against which one sins. Once we grasp the infinity of God, we realize the magnitude of even the slightest transgression and rebellion and unbelief and disdain.

We could illustrate it this way: if someone were to slap my wife and get the death penalty, there could be two viable responses to that—someone could say, "Wow, that punishment doesn't fit! Who is that crazy judge?" or "Wow, what's the deal with his wife? She must be of such an amazing magnitude that the death penalty is an appropriate, just response!" To take this illustration further, there would be differing penalties levied against slapping someone's wife and attempting to kill the president of the United States, and that difference in part, is due to nature, dignity, and power of the president's office. In correlation, we're talking about assaulting the infinitely glorious, infinitely holy, and infinitely beautiful God—how do you put a limit on the punishment of somebody who, throughout the course of his/her life, has insulted and rebelled against this glorious God?

With this in mind, it seems evident that we have lost a sense of the gravity, the weight, the horror of even a singular, solitary act of cosmic treason against an infinitely beautiful and holy God. And that is why the concept of hell seems unjust and disproportionate to us. And this is a further reflection of our depravity and rebellion.

(3) The Bible nowhere suggests that there is any repentance in hell—rather, sin continues, and so does the punishment. Suffering in hell is eternal, because sinning in hell is eternal. Those in hell bow the knee and recognize Jesus as Lord (Philippians 2:9-11), but they continue to shake the fist at Him. They are likely aggravated and intensified in their hatred of God and their refusal to embrace Him.

They are not being rehabilitated in hell; rather, they are eternally “in Adam,” eternally “in their sins,” and so while they might feel some sort of regret, they do not repent (cf. Luke 16:19-31—notice that the rich man doesn’t ask to get out of hell, and he continues to abuse Lazarus). In addition to referencing again Ralph Powell’s and C. S. Lewis’ quotes above (p. 3, point 4b), Mark 3:29¹⁰ and Revelation 22:11 (also Revelation 21:8, 27; 22:3, 15 taken together) seem to make this point that man’s unbelief and rebellion is finalized and maintained in hell.

Similar to this question is another, “How can Jesus’ few hours of suffering on the cross take the place of an eternity of punishment in hell?” The answer is that we never measure the nature of Christ’s suffering in quantitative terms (i.e., hours on the cross vs. eternity in hell), but rather in qualitative terms (i.e., His person, the dignity of who He is).

CHRISTIAN REJECTION OF HELL

1. Universalism — No one will go to hell.

This is stated and supported in different ways. Some would misinterpret 1 Peter 3:18-22 and other passages to invest some sort of after-death conversion opportunity. Others will defend this belief in these terms: “Jesus paid for the sins of every person on the cross, so people are no longer responsible for those sins and there is no hell where people will forever be in eternal punishment.”

Rob Bell essentially promotes a universalist idea of hell in his book, *Love Wins*. While this view exists within Christianity, it has been rejected in evangelical circles, for it is not biblically faithful.

2. Annihilationism — After unbelievers have paid for their sins in hell, they will cease to exist.

John Stott is representative of this view when he teaches that after people suffer in hell in proportion to their sinfulness in life, their punishment will end, and then God will annihilate them. While this view is acceptable within evangelical circles, it faces some significant biblical issues:

(1) Revelation 14:9-11 is the most explicit description of eternal conscious punishment in the Bible. Verse 11, in particular, states

that “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.” The first half of that emphasizes the eternal nature of hellish punishment, and the second half eliminates the possibility of any kind of rest that annihilation might provide.

(2) Concerning Jesus’ statement in Matthew 25:46, we must ask: if you deny the “eternal” aspect of the punishment, then don’t you have to question the “eternal” component of the life?

(3) If someone could justly pay the fullness of their debt in hell, why then would God annihilate them and not restore them into fellowship with Himself?

While objections to hell are understandably raised, Bible-believing and Christ-following Christians must align their hearts and minds with God’s on this issue. We must love what God loves and worship Him, for all He does is right and true (cf. Revelation 19:1-3—after God’s judgment on Babylon, “the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven” is heard praising God, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for His judgments are true and just).

THE PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF HELL

On a secondary level, the biblical teaching of hell provides tremendous daily practical benefit. It may be helpful to encourage an objector to hell to consider these benefits as a practice of ethnography (i.e., a department of anthropology that studies people and cultures from the point of view of the subject of the study [TRFG]).

1. It helps us better understand sin’s seriousness.

The biblical concept of God’s wrath shows us that sin is worse than we thought and that it is really destructive and not healthy (James 1:13ff; although it can deceive for a time [Hebrews 11:25]).

2. It helps us better understand God’s character—His holiness and love.

The climax of God’s wrath in a literal hell says something about the holiness of God. He stands in absolute and eternal contrast with sin (Habakkuk 1:13), and His revealed judgment on sin shows us just how holy (i.e., separate, distinct, set apart, unique, perfect, majestic, awesome, one-of-a-kind; also, sinless) God is.

(TRFG) Furthermore, hell tells us a lot about God's love. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used the following illustration: If a friend tells you that he has paid a bill for you, you have no idea how to respond, until you know the size of the bill. Until you know how much he paid, you do not know whether to shake his hand or fall down and kiss his feet. Likewise, until you believe in hell, you will never know how much Jesus loves you, how much He values you, and how much He paid for you.

On the cross, Jesus cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). The loss of a relationship hurts greatly, and the deeper the relationship, the more agonizing and devastating is the loss of it. On the cross, when Jesus lost the eternal love of the Father, He experienced an agony, a disintegration, an isolation greater than we would experience in an eternity in hell. That is what we deserve, and He took it upon Himself. Until you understand that (i.e., the wrath of God fully "drunk" by Jesus Christ [Psalm 75:8; Matthew 26:39; John 18:10; Revelation 14:10; <http://bit.ly/1LqtjDG>; <http://bit.ly/1DnfHDo>]), you will never comprehend the extent of His love (Ephesians 2:4; 3:17-19). Jesus Christ was the Judge of the earth, but He came, not to bring judgment, but to bear judgment and hell for us (John 3:16-21).

So, ironically, when people get rid of the idea of judgment and hell to make God more loving, they make Him less loving. Trevin Wax writes, "The god who is truly scary is not the wrathful God of the Bible, but the god of the judgmentless gospel, who closes his eyes to the evil of this world, shrugs his shoulders, and ignores it in the name of 'love.' What kind of 'love' is this? A god who is never angered at sin and who lets evil go by unpunished is not worthy of worship."¹¹

3. It provides us with motivation and accountability in our Christian walk (2 Peter 3:11-15; Colossians 4:1).

According to 2 Peter 3:11-15, God's judgment motivates us to live well, both to avoid judgment (-) and to earn reward (+). Furthermore, when tempted to wrong others, the idea of an avenging God provides accountability (Colossians 4:1).

4. It offers us the promise of vindication (Psalm 73).

This was David's consolation in Psalm 73 (see "The Problem of Evil" notes). In his book, *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller quotes both Miroslav Volf, a famous Croatian theologian, and Czesław Miłosz, the twentieth-century Polish writer, who both had witnessed terrible oppression and brutality and who both "argue that the doctrine of God's final judgment is a necessary undergirding for human practices of love and peacemaking." Keller writes, "Volf reasons that it is the *lack* of belief in a God of vengeance that 'secretly nourishes violence.' ... Volf says the best resource for [our desire for blood vengeance] is belief in the concept of God's divine justice. If I don't believe that there is a God who will eventually put all things right, I *will* take up the sword and will be sucked into the endless vortex of retaliation. Only if I am sure that there's a God who will right all wrongs and settle all accounts perfectly do I have the power to refrain."¹²

Under this point, we should also take a moment to address the fear of "survivor's guilt." In other words, we might sometime think to ourselves, "How could I enjoy the splendors of heaven and its King, when I know what is going on in hell and when people I know are there? Won't the horrors of hell spoil the wonders of heaven?" To that we might somewhat limitedly, but hopefully comfortingly respond in two ways: (1) Luke 16:27-28 suggests that those in hell would not want to us feel such guilt, but would instead do all they could to hinder us from joining them there. (2) God promises, after the Great White Throne judgment (i.e., the pinnacle of His judgment) and upon the creation of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 20:11-21:3), to ease our sorrow. Revelation 21:4 says, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

5. It sobers and motivates us in evangelism.

Hell should sober us.

Bob Jones III sought to drive home the sobriety of this doctrine by regularly reminding his students in chapel, "The most sobering reality in the world today is that people are dying and going to hell today."

The conversation about hell and God’s judgment should be engaged in a spirit of humility, empathy, and sorrow. Hell is a very unsettling and disturbing reality! We’re talking about an eternity of punishment and condemnation—we can’t even wrap our minds around that! Beware the simplicity and seeming arrogance that says, “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it!” Adopt the appropriate humility that has been produced by post-modern relativism, and don’t be flippant in this doctrinal conversation. In your emotions, language, and desires, align yourself with the spirit of Scripture on this topic (Ezekiel 18:23, 30-32; 33:11; Romans 9:1-3; 2 Peter 3:8-13).

Hell should motivate us.

Illustration: I once watched a chipmunk eating out of a birdfeeder at our home. He was enjoying the free snack, but what was chilling about the scene was that immediately below him was a fellow chipmunk ensnared in a trap we had set. This self-serving and gluttonous chipmunk was oblivious and indifferent to the dire need of the one below him. I wonder if we are all that much different in our ignorance, apathy, and carelessness toward those around us who are “children of hell” (Matthew 23:15, 33).

Back in Luke 16, we discovered from the rich young ruler’s testimony that those in hell would do whatever they could in order to keep those whom they love from joining them there (vv. 27-28). But we also were reminded that they can do nothing—any spiritual opportunities afforded to them in life have been permanently forfeited and they must live with the consequences upon themselves and others.

We, however, *can* do something! Jesus declares in that parable that God’s Word alone (i.e., “Moses and the Prophets,” vv. 29-31) through the ministry of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to convince people “of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment” (John 16:8). Therefore, may be proclaim the truth of God’s rescue plan recorded in part in “Moses and the Prophets” and declared in power in the New Testament, in order to “save others by snatching them out of the fire” (Jude 23).

CONCLUSION

Ralph Powell offers a final exhortation to believers about the ramifications of this doctrine on our purpose as followers of Jesus:

From all that has been said it should be obvious that a variety of nonbiblical views must be ruled out, however attractively they may be presented by their advocates and however popular they may be from time to time. Among these views are the erroneous, but sometimes persuasive, doctrines of universalism, annihilationism, and second probation [e.g., purgatory]. It must always be remembered that the Bible is our rule of faith for the doctrine of hell, however difficult the doctrine may seem for natural reason or for human sentiment. Scripture leaves no doubt about the terrible nature and the eternal duration of hell. Rejection or neglect of this doctrine will have dire effects upon the true health and mission of the church.¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ G. Curtis Jones, *1000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1986), 159. Later in his ministry, Beecher himself began to doubt the existence of hell.

² Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006). Note #32 in Matthew 5:22.

³ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000). This resource offers a very helpful overview of the meaning of “hades” and “gehenna.”

⁴ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 991.

⁵ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 953.

⁶ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Conversations on Faith and Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), video discussion. www.crossimpacttupui.org/the-reason-for-god

⁷ *Ibid.*, 954-955.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 954.

⁹ Much of the material in this point comes from Credo House Ministries, *Theology Unplugged* podcast, “The Doctrine of Hell” (Released Jan 24, 2015), <http://apple.co/1OVJKTf>.

¹⁰ I believe that the “unpardonable sin” refers to an intense and finalized rejection of Christ that goes so far as to directly attribute to the Devil those powerful (Matthew 12:29) and evidential (Matthew 12:28) works of Christ so clearly empowered by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:22-32; Mark 3:20-30). That Jesus calls the sin “unpardonable” is not because His atonement is insufficient to provide cleansing and forgiveness, but because the sinner decidedly lacks the repentance necessary for salvation. The Pharisees did not blaspheme the Holy Spirit ignorantly; rather, this sin was the result and climax of their increased and deliberate rejection (cf. Matthew 12:9-21) of what they knew to be of God (Matthew 12:23; cf. John 11:48). While this “unpardonable sin” may not be able to be committed in its pure form today (i.e., attributing the Spirit-empowered work of Christ to Satan), understanding and recognizing the truth of the Spirit’s testimony of Christ (cf. John 15:26; 16:14-15) and rejecting it anyway demonstrates a complete hardening of heart and guarantees that no forgiveness will ever be extended (contrast 1 Timothy 1:13). Simply speaking, Jesus seems to be demonstrating that there is a “point of no return” for someone who continues to reject the Spirit’s obvious working. In hell, that “point of no return” is further confirmed.

¹¹ Trevin Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels* (Chicago: Moody, 2011), 77.

¹² Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 74-76

¹³ Elwell and Beitzel, 955.