

8 How can a loving God condemn people to hell?

How can a loving God condemn people to hell? The idea of a loving God taking pleasure in people being tormented in hell is hard to swallow. Yet the Founder of Christianity spoke much of hell. Jesus did so especially when he warned religious leaders against hypocrisy and rich people against indifference to the poor.

Because Christians see Jesus as the Son of God they're bound to his teaching. This includes the reality of people finally excluded from God in a place of desolation.

Some Christians today doubt the existence of hell. They claim Jesus died for the sins of the whole world and so everyone will be saved. So-called universalism denies people the right to respond to the good news. It also denies what Jesus actually teaches.

In Matthew Chapter 25 Jesus speaks of the separation at the end time of 'sheep' and 'goats', of those inheriting God's kingdom as against those departing to destruction. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the poor man, Christ paints a picture of a great gulf fixed between heaven and hell.

Would Jesus have taught this, and spoken so much of the urgent need to choose the right path, by repenting and believing in God, if that were unnecessary?

How though can a loving God revealed in Jesus Christ condemn people to hell? There's a continual emphasis in scripture on two courses for human beings. The way of righteousness leads to heavenly glory. The way of selfishness leads to eternal darkness. Even if wickedness sometimes appears to triumph on earth, the doctrines of heaven and hell affirm God will ultimately have his way - with us or without us.

People determined to go their own way are respected by their creator. His love for them is so pure he won't manipulate them away from hell. Those who see themselves as self-made men and women should be able to worship their perceived creator for ever in that darkness!

Any discussion about hell leads back to the whole purpose of this life in relation to the world to come, especially whether there *is* a world to come and how you best prepare for it.

Cardinal Newman wrote 150 years ago that *life is short, death is certain and the world to come is everlasting*. In Britain today life is not so short thanks to medicine. The certainty of death is edited out of public life except through the pictures of conflict abroad often brought to our television screens.

This although death and taxation are still jokingly referred to as the only certainties in life!

Is there a *greater* certainty than death? Is there someone who has overcome the power of death and has the capacity to offer life without end?

These are questions for Christians to raise when people want to dismiss hell. The soul is eternal. As darkness and light cannot exist together, so the eternal place of the soul that hasn't been cleansed or redeemed by God simply cannot be *with him*. God is holy and can have no fellowship with what is unholy (Revelation 21:27). Uncleansed souls need to be separated from God in their eternal state. This is what we mean by hell.

How about the images Jesus uses of eternal fire, crying and grinding of teeth, a place of continual decay and deepest darkness? They're just images. Hell isn't a *place* like the earth but an eternal *state* outside time and space for those excluded from God's presence. To be in such a state is dreadful but scripture makes plain it's dreadful to God himself, who sent Jesus not to judge the world but to save it.

God our Saviour desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth we read in 1 Timothy 2:3-4

How can a loving God condemn people to hell? God is bound by his nature which is both holy and loving and this nature can't be changed.

Do all Christians escape hell? God promises heaven to believers as a free gift but he also calls them to persevere in faith. Perseverance is therefore part of the recipe for gaining heaven and escaping hell.

God's love is perfect and he desires our love. He also respects the free will of everyone and their choice to turn their back on him in this world and the next.

Heaven is the place of God's ultimate presence and God won't compel unwilling people to be at his side for ever!

Total 769 words - just over 4.5 minutes to read

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