

The Reason for God 5 – God, love and hell – 2.7.10 – SN

From Timothy Keller's [*The Reason for God*](#).

Basic question: How can a loving God send people to hell.

Larry Hagman interview re: his near-death experience – “There is absolutely nothing to fear on the other side”. Susan Sarandon, when asked what she expects God to say to her when she dies: “I expect her to say, ‘Did you have fun?’”

Do Christians even believe? Ministers know that, no matter how messed up someone’s life was, they’re expected to preach them into heaven. Hell is always for someone we don’t like.

Here’s how the shared understanding of the world has changed.

1. **This guy (slide) is a person from England or France or Italy or Israel or Egypt before the 1600s.** He believes (no matter his religion) that there is a created order out there, above and around him that contains truth, right and wrong, morality, justice. You can’t change it. You have to adjust yourself to it.
2. **And this guy is from our generation.** He may believe in God and might even be a Christian, but he’s been taught in thousands of ways that things like truth, right and wrong, and morality lie within – they are matters of the heart for him to decide for himself.

Hell isn’t such a strange concept for the first guy. He believes that you will pay a price for violating the standards of the created order. Justice is a real thing, and it eventually catches up with you. But the second guy wonders how he could be punished for violating a standard he had no say in creating. He’s the one who wonders how a loving God could send people to hell.

This question (How could a loving God send people to hell?) is a real obstacle to faith for people around us, and yet it is very much a culturally-conditioned question. I suspect that if you’re witnessing to strict Muslims, this isn’t a question they wrestle with. Their question is: “What kind of God lets people into heaven who don’t deserve it?” We’re scandalized by hell. They’re scandalized by grace.

IMPORTANT POINT: If our faith is the actual Truth of God that transcends every culture, then every culture is going to find something that offends them, challenges how they were raised or what they were taught in school. For the strict Muslim, it’s the idea of being saved by grace through faith as a gift of God, not by works so that no one may boast. For us or those around us, it’s this idea of judgment, of the Shepherd separating the people as one separates sheep from goats.

Before we leave this slide, I want to say that, thankfully, no one (except a sociopath) completely lives as if right and wrong is completely internal, completely a matter of personal choice. Everybody knows that some things are flat-out wrong, and at some point they will get in your face and tell you so. This is actually good news, a starting point for talking about God, and evidence of the stamp of the Creator, as we have seen in these lessons.

Some of the questions about God...

1. A God of judgment can’t be a God of love.

**Psalm 145 - ¹⁷ The LORD is righteous in all his ways
and loving toward all he has made....**

²⁰ **The LORD watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.**

If you drive by the city park and see some teenagers drinking from a bottle of whiskey, what will you do? If you don't know them you might call the police or you might drive on. You don't like this, but it isn't your problem. But if one of them happens to be your son, what would you do? Judgment and wrath will fall swiftly! Why? Love. You care what happens to him, how he turns out. Now that doesn't explain hell, but it shows that love and anger aren't exclusive.

What if a crime is committed against someone you love? The awful carjacking case that keeps coming up. When you are in the place of those parents, you start to understand the need for justice and you realize that God wouldn't be much of a god without justice. In fact, you might start to have a problem with the idea of grace.

One worry that non-religious people have is that, if you believe in a God of wrath and justice, you might feel justified in doing some of the vengeance yourself. It's a fair criticism, and the 9/11 attacks bear that out. But it isn't the only way.

[Miroslav Volf](#) is a well-known Christian theologian. He is from Croatia, so he has seen the persistent violence there. And he is a pacifist. People ask him: "Don't you care about justice?" He does, and he says the only way to be a pacifist is to believe that there is a God who will mete out perfect justice, and he takes quite literally the passage that says: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay!" He thinks that people take it into their own hands because they don't trust God. He also says that it takes the quiet comfort of a suburban home to arrive at a belief in a God of love but not justice. He means that you can only believe in such a wimpy god if you have been sheltered from real evil.

2. A loving God would not allow hell.

Justice and punishment is one thing. Eternal torment is another. "I can't believe in a God who stashes the bad people away in a fiery pit where they have to roast forever and cannot repent."

To that objection, we often say: "God doesn't send people to hell. People choose it for themselves". That's actually a good answer, and I don't think we realize how true it is.

Let's read **Luke 16:19-31**

Keller points out some things. First, there is Lazarus – a common proper name. Then there is a rich man, who has no name. Is that because he has surrendered his soul to his riches to such an extent that they are one and the same? BTW, have you ever heard him called Dives? That's Latin for rich!

Their roles are reversed. Lazarus was in misery, and now the rich man is. Lazarus had nothing, he was at the bottom, and now he has everything and he is up in paradise. But the rich man doesn't notice the reversal. He treats Lazarus as his water boy. And he takes no responsibility for his predicament. Instead, he blame-shifts and makes excuses that in a subtle way call God's justice into question. "Moses and the Prophets aren't enough! God didn't warn me but maybe he'll at least correct that with my family."

And there is no repentance. I'm sure the rich man would like to be let out, but he is no different in eternity than he was in life, only worse.

If a little selfishness is allowed to grow and grow for years, what happens? It takes over. It infects more areas of my life. What if I am an eternal soul, and that selfishness grows for eternity? I will become so completely selfish that I would never bow down to God and repent. C. S. Lewis illustrated

this powerfully in his fable *The Great Divorce* which showed people from hell getting a chance to go to heaven. In the end, they all hated heaven because they had to have everything their own way, and they were no longer able to humble themselves and accept God's truth.

That doesn't diminish the torment. But it shows that hell is the ultimate result of having your own way. The alternative would be for God to let rebels into heaven so they can bring their torment with them and turn heaven into hell too.

If you know someone who is almost completely selfish and completely miserable, you don't say: "God, let them be selfish and really enjoy life too!" I think it makes the same kind of nonsense to say that God should let those into heaven who choose themselves over him.

We believe that eternal life begins now. So too can eternal torment.

Finally this: If someone says that they don't accept hell because God is love, it's a fair question to ask them: What makes you think that God is Love?

Keller was raised in a Christian home, but went through a journey of skepticism during which he examined other religions. To his surprise, he didn't find a god of love in many other texts. Buddhists don't believe in a personal god, and love is personal. Muslims told him it was disrespectful to speak of having a personal relationship with God, and love is personal.

He says: *"Today many of the skeptics I talk to say, as I once did, they can't believe in the God of the Bible, who punishes and judges people, because they "believe in a God of Love." I now ask, what makes them think God is Love? Can they look at life in the world today and say, "This proves that the God of the world is a God of love"? Can they look at history and say, "This all shows that the God of history is a God of love"? Can they look at the religious texts of the world and conclude that God is a God of love? By no means is that the dominant, ruling attribute of God as understood in any of the major faiths. I must conclude that the source of the idea that God is Love is the Bible itself. And the Bible tells us that the God of love is also a God of judgment who will put all things in the world to rights in the end.*

"The belief in a God of pure love—who accepts everyone and judges no one—is a powerful act of faith. Not only is there no evidence for it in the natural order, but there is almost no historical, religious textual support for it outside of Christianity. The more one looks at it, the less justified it appears."

[Timothy Keller, [The Reason for God](#)]

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