

Is God Mean?

Part 3 - How Can A Good God Send People To Hell?

“For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.” (Ezekiel 18:32 ESV)

The prophet Ezekiel was God’s messenger to the rebellious children of Israel who were in Babylonian captivity. The captivity was God’s punishment for their rejection of Him and violation of their covenant. While many believed that they were being punished for the sins of their forefathers, God’s message through Ezekiel was clear: they were being punished for the sins they committed. Yet, God also revealed that it was not His desire to punish them, but pleaded with them to repent so they could live. God is just, but He is also merciful.

Yet, the critic claims that God is neither just or merciful, but mean and cruel. They have placed the character of God on trial. So far we have examined two of the charges made against Him. The first charge is that God is mean (or not very powerful) because of the vast amount of suffering that exists in the world. The Scriptures clearly teach that suffering is not God’s desire for man, but it is the result of creation’s separation from the Creator, a separation that exists because of sin. The second charge is that God is mean because He has punished people over history, even destroying nations. Again, the Scriptures reveal that God does not desire to kill and destroy, but as Creator, King and Judge He must act righteously and justly. His punishments fit His character. He punishes to repay the sinner, to correct the sinner and to deter others from committing the same sins. Now we come to the third charge in the trial of God’s character: God must be mean if He sends people to Hell.

- Robert Ingersoll: "Infinite punishment is infinite cruelty, endless injustice, immortal meanness. To worship an eternal gaoler hardens, debases, and pollutes even the vilest soul. While there is one sad and breaking heart in the universe, no good being can be perfectly happy."¹
- Charles Templeton: “I couldn’t hold someone’s hand to a fire for a moment. Not an instant! How could a loving God, just because you don’t obey him and do what he wants, torture you forever - not allowing you to die, but to continue in that pain for eternity... There is no criminal who would do this!”²
- Richard Dawkins: “I am persuaded that the phrase ‘child abuse’ is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and priests are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal Hell.”³

The doctrine of Hell is not a pleasant matter. But, does the reality of Hell, eternal punishment, make God mean or unjust? This is a very serious charge, so let us examine the Scriptures to find what they teach about the matter.

What Is Hell?

“They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,” (2 Thessalonians 1:9 ESV)

The concept of Hell, the eternal place of punishment for the wicked, is not fully developed until the New Testament, notably by Jesus. In the Old Testament we read of “Sheol,” the place of the dead but the idea of eternal reward or punishment is not highly developed in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the New Testament the Greek word “Hades” would correspond closely with the Hebrew “Sheol.” The main idea of “Hades” is the abode of the dead, and not necessarily punishment or reward. The word translated as “Hell” in most versions is the Greek word “gehenna.” Understanding the background of this word will help us to understand why the word was used by Jesus and others in the New Testament to describe the place of eternal punishment. The following is taken from the Tyndale Bible Dictionary: “Gehenna is derived by transliteration from the Hebrew of the OT ‘valley of Hinnom’ or the ‘valley of the son of Hinnom,’ a ravine on the south side of Jerusalem. This valley was the center of idolatrous worship in which children were burned by fire as an offering to the heathen god Molech (2 Chr 28:3; 33:6). In the time of Josiah it became a place of abomination, polluted by dead men’s bones and rubbish (2 Kgs 23:10–14) and by the garbage and filth of Jerusalem dumped there. A fire burned continuously in this valley. It thus became a symbol of the unending fires of Hell where the lost are consumed in torment. It was a symbol of judgment to be imposed on the idolatrous and disobedient (Jer 7:31–34; 32:35).”⁴

“Hell” in the King James Version

It is unfortunate that the translators of the KJV translated the words “sheol”, “hades” and “gehenna” as “Hell”. For example, Matthew 16:18 should read, “gates of *Hades*” and not, “gates of *Hell*.”

Next, let us consider how Hell is described in the New Testament. You will note that the word “Hell” is not found in all of these passages, but these passages describe what the final punishment of the wicked will be like.

- It is the place of unquenchable fire, *Mark 9:43*.
- It is where the worm (decay) does not die, *Mark 9:48*.
- It is the fiery furnace where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, *Matthew 13:42*.
- It is where God destroys both body and soul, *Matthew 10:28*.
- It is eternal destruction (not annihilation), *2 Thessalonians 1:9*.
- It is the place prepared for the devil and his angels, *Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:10*.
- It is a place of total darkness, *Matthew 25:30; 2 Peter 2:17*.
- It is the second death, *Revelation 21:8*.

Simply put, Hell is a place of unimaginable pain, suffering and sorrow. It is a truly horrific place, a place that none of us would truly wish on anyone else. So, how can God subject His creation to such horrors? Are the critics wrong in claiming that God is cruel and mean? Or, should we look at Hell in a different way?

Most of us have heard of Hell in terms of fire and worms that constantly feed on those being punished. But, are we to consider Hell in these literal terms; is Hell a place of physical fire and physical worms? Or, were Jesus and the writers of the New Testament trying to convey a concept? Consider, the other end of the spectrum: Heaven. *Revelation 21-22* describes Heaven in very physical terms: streets of gold,

gates of pearl, etc. Is that what Heaven is? No, Heaven is being reunited with God! So, we should not be surprised to find that Hell is the exact opposite of Heaven; Hell is the complete separation from God!

- “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; **depart from me**, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7:21–23 ESV)
- “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, **away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might**,” (2 Thessalonians 1:9 ESV)

Interestingly, the concept of the worst punishment being separation from God is also found throughout the Old Testament Scriptures:

- “For because of the anger of the LORD it came to the point in Jerusalem and Judah that **he cast them out from his presence**.” (2 Kings 24:20 ESV)
- “**Cast me not away from your presence**, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.” (Psalms 51:11 ESV)
- “And **I will cast you out of my sight**, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.” (Jeremiah 7:15 ESV)

To be in Hell is to be completely removed from God for all eternity, and as such it is truly the most horrible state of existence that one could experience. It is complete pain, suffering and anguish. The pain, suffering and anguish are not the result of God torturing the inhabitants of Hell; they are the result of God not being there at all! “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

Is God Just In Sentencing Man To Hell?

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”
(2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV)

In our last lesson we noted the following attributes of God found in Scripture, attributes that define His character:

1. The foundations of God’s throne are “righteousness and justice.” (Psalm 89:14 ESV)
2. God loves righteousness: “For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.” (Psalms 11:7 ESV)
3. God commits no injustice: “The LORD within her is righteous; he does no injustice; every morning he shows forth his justice; each dawn he does not fail; but the unjust knows no shame.” (Zephaniah 3:5 ESV)
4. God judges in righteousness: “But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness.” (Psalms 9:7–8 ESV)

Given the nature of God and His consistency in punishing sinners over history, why would we expect Him to change His nature and character when it comes to eternal judgment? Why would He reward those who have violated His will and have not sought His mercy? As C.S. Lewis once wrote, *“Can you really desire that such a man, remaining what he is (and he must be able to do that if he has free will) should be confirmed, for all eternity, to be perfectly convinced that the laugh is on his side?... The demand that God should forgive such a man while he remains what he is, is based on a confusion between condoning and forgiving. To condone an evil is simply to ignore it, to treat it as if it were good. But forgiveness needs to be accepted as well as offered if it is to be complete: and a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness.”*⁶ Hell is divine justice on those who violate the divine will; it is the just punishment for sin.

However, Hell is not just a matter of God punishing man for his sin. Hell is also what sinful man chooses for himself. Again, if Heaven is to be in the eternal presence of God and Hell is to be cast away from that presence, then the determining factor in our eternal abode is what we choose in this life. If we choose to follow God, to long for His presence in our lives, then Heaven is the reward. But, if we choose to reject God, to say that we do not want His guidance and presence in our lives, then God gives us what we desire. He punishes us with Hell, complete removal from Him! *“Our Lord often speaks of Hell as a sentence inflicted by a tribunal, He also says elsewhere that the judgement consists in the very fact that men prefer darkness to light, and that not He, but His ‘word’, judges men. We are therefore at liberty to think of this bad man’s perdition not as a sentence imposed on him but as the mere fact of being what he is,”* (C.S. Lewis).⁷

God Does Not Desire To Send People To Hell

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the **kingdom prepared for you** from the foundation of the world.’ (Matthew 25:34 ESV)

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the **eternal fire prepared for the devil** and his angels.’ (Matthew 25:41 ESV)

Matthew 25 contains three pictures of divine judgment. In the final picture we read of Jesus coming in judgment, having all the nations gathered before Him. Those who have acted according to the divine will are separated from those who did not. The righteous are on His right hand, the wicked are on His left. The two passages above give Jesus’ pronouncements of their eternal destinies. Note the wording: the righteous inherit the kingdom *prepared for them*. The wicked are cursed and sentenced to eternal fire that is *prepared for the devil and his angels*. God’s desire has always been that man would be reunited with Him, to be in His presence. Heaven was designed for man, Hell was designed for the devil!

Furthermore, we read in the Scriptures of God’s mercy and patience, His designs to save the souls of men whom He loves:

- “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.” (Ezekiel 18:32 ESV)
- “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 ESV)
- “God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:3–4 ESV)
- “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9 ESV)

These are not the actions of a cruel and mean being; they are the actions of a loving Father! Will God eternally punish people who reject Him and follow the ways of the devil? Absolutely! Yet, it is not his desire to punish man, but to save man. But, He will only save those who choose to accept the saving power of His Son. The rest, who reject God, have chosen Hell for themselves. Even as Paul rebuked the unbelieving Jews who rejected the gospel message, “*you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life,*” (Acts 13:46 ESV). Or, as G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “*Hell is God’s great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice.*”⁸

A Final Word

“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.” (C.S. Lewis)⁹

It is my sincere desire that these lessons not only justify the actions of God, but encourage us to appreciate the boundless love that He has for us. Yes, suffering exists, but only because God loves us enough to give us free will. Yes, sinners will be punished, but the just God who punishes is the same merciful God who gave His Son to forgive sinners. He loves us and He desires to have us with Him for all eternity. However, that too is a matter of human choice. What will you choose?

Joshua Creel
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¹ *The Great Infidels*.

² As quoted in *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel. Page 240.

³ Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*. Page 358.

⁴ Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). Tyndale Bible dictionary. Tyndale reference library (592). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ C.S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*. Page 123, 124.

⁷ Ibid, 124.

⁸ As quoted in *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel. Page 235.

⁹ *The Problem of Pain*. Page 130.