

How Can a Good God send anyone to Hell?

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[0 : 00] Welcome to the fourth in our big questions series.

This is another really difficult one. Maybe many of you, maybe all of us have wrestled with this at some point. How can a good God judge anyone?

How can a good God send anyone to hell? What I want us to do before thinking about that question is to hear one of the many places where Jesus teaches about heaven and hell.

We're going to listen to a parable that we find in Luke chapter 16, beginning at verse 19. So this is Jesus teaching.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.

[1 : 06] Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.

In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I am in agony in this fire.

But Abraham replied, Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things while Lazarus received bad things. But now he is comforted here and you are in agony.

And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.

He answered, Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them so that they will not also come to this place of torment.

[2 : 11] Abraham replied, They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them. No, Father Abraham, he said, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent. He said to them, If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead.

I think this is most likely the hardest question that we have to tackle. As Christians, one of those questions that we face, perhaps most often the challenges we face most often, some of the reasons why it's so difficult.

First of all, there's an emotional response that we have to it, isn't there? It's unpleasant to think about, to talk about, judgment and hell.

And that can very easily trump the question, Is it morally right? We go with our gut and it's hard to think beyond that. Another challenge that presents itself is views of tolerance that we have in society.

So many people reckon that we are free to decide our own moral values. So that the idea of objective values coming from God are very unpopular in some places.

[3 : 38] The idea of a God who would judge sincerely held beliefs is confusing to people. The idea of a final judgment, a judgment day doesn't make sense to many.

It's one of these places where Christianity challenges our culture here on the topic of tolerance. I think from a Christian point of view, we fear being labelled as judgmental, that we might seem to be proud, arrogant in some way.

Nobody wants to be considered judgmental and so we can easily shy away and struggle to know how to deal with the question. We also have the obstacle of popular views of God and in particular, that view that says, well, I believe in a God of love, a God without justice, a God who is loving.

And so there's no room there for justice, certainly no room for hell. We need to understand, of course, that that is a modern invention.

There are no religious texts. There are no religious cultures at any point in history that simply had a God of love full stop. That is in itself a leap of faith, but nevertheless, it does make it difficult when we come to the question of hell and judgment.

[5 : 07] But what I hope we can do is take an honest look at a hard subject to think about what the Bible teaches and especially to think about what Jesus has to say.

But let's begin with the question, how could a loving God judge anyone? I want to follow three distinct lines of thought at this stage.

First, to recognise that we are free moral agents. At issue is the question, is God right?

Does he have the right to hold us morally responsible? Now, somebody like Sam Harris would argue no.

He believes in a thing called scientific determinism and would argue that we cannot control our neurological processes and therefore we cannot be held responsible for our behaviours.

[6 : 20] Here's a quote from Sam Harris. The idea that we, as conscious beings, are deeply responsible for the character of our mental lives and subsequent behaviour is simply impossible to map onto reality.

Our question is, does that make the best sense of reality? if we say that nobody is accountable for their actions, it will, in a moment, destroy our justice system.

It will also stop us from praising what we see as heroic or noble on the other hand. So we cannot condemn someone as guilty because it's just their brain processes and sort of automatic responses and behaviour, nor can we praise great acts of courage or of self-sacrifice.

To go down that route that says we're not free moral agents is to strip away our moral fabric, to strip away a significant part of our dignity as human beings and instinctively in our understanding that there is right and wrong, there's beauty and ugliness, we are people who recognise justice, we recognise that people are making choices and so it makes best sense of the evidence to say that we are free moral agents.

The second line of thought at this stage is to recognise, although it seems initially a paradox that love and justice can coexist.

[8 : 21] For many the idea of a God who has wrath or anger against sin seems sub-God, it's beneath God.

the question is posed, well can't we just remove judgement to have only love? But others have noticed a problem.

The opposite of love is apathy or indifference. So a God who didn't care about evil a God who was not concerned with injustice would not be more loving, rather it would be a God not worthy of our worship.

To make things personal for a moment, suppose you were to see a friend or a family member be mocked or abused.

what feelings would we have? Well surely there would be a sense of anger at wrongdoing, there would be a desire for justice.

[9 : 40] And the more love that we have for a person, the greater that sense of justice would be. Think about how we respond to the horrible things we hear about in the news, whether that's trafficking or dictators or racism.

We respond as moral agents. We feel that certain things are wrong and the more we love, the more we feel that.

Now bearing in mind, as the Bible tells us, people are God's image bearers. If we feel and recognise and respond with a desire for justice, we cannot deny that to God.

When he sees evil and injustice, we cannot expect him to just turn a blind eye to them. He is too loving for them.

We need to recognise that our feelings of anger and injustice are just a drop in the ocean compared to God's.

[10 : 53] God is righteously angry against the horror of sin that is destroying and ripping apart the beauty and the peace of his creation.

Before we move on, a few years ago I came across the writings of Miroslav Wolf. He is a theologian who grew up and lived through the Balkan wars of the 90s.

And for Wolf, he understood that only a genuine belief in the final judgment of God was able to stop the cycle of killing and revenge.

That it leaving vengeance in God's hands allowed people the freedom to forgive and to move on.

So love and justice can co-exist. And the third line of thinking I want us to pursue for a couple of minutes is that the punishment that's described in the Bible does fit the crime.

[12 : 15] one significant struggle that we have in the question of how could God judge anyone is that we have made sin a small thing.

It seems like no big deal. And coupled to that we have lost sight of the perfect holiness of God.

That he is morally perfect, his glory is far above us. And when we lose sight of the seriousness of sin and the holiness of God, we imagine God can simply sweep sin under the rug.

He can let everyone into heaven. We can follow the logic, well, God forgives everyone, that's his job. God is unchanging in his character.

And the ugliness of sin, if God was simply to ignore it and sweep it under the rug, it would mean God being untrue to himself. God is unchanging in his character.

[13 : 26] He cannot act in ways that are unjust or unholy. And so for our whole understanding of this question, we need to recover the view that God is perfectly holy.

And we need to reckon with sin being directed against this holy God. And it's no small thing, rather, as R.C.

Sproul put it, it's an act of cosmic treason. Our sin is an infinite offence against the infinitely holy and glorious God, and as such, it deserves infinite punishment.

A picture to help us. If you were to go behind my back and to plot against me for some reason, I would find that sad, obviously, but at the end of the day, it would be no big deal.

But if we do the same to the Queen, well, that could become an act of treason. And that could land you in the Tower of London.

[14 : 45] We need to think about who we're dealing with, who we sin against. So where have we got to so far? We have considered that we are morally responsible for our actions and our decisions, and that includes how we respond to God and especially how we respond to Jesus as Saviour.

We show in everyday life that to love is to care about justice. And we've seen that God is no different. In fact, God is the perfect example of that.

And we've also considered that we're dealing with an absolutely holy and perfect God, also rejecting and rebelling against him is very serious. And those three realities, they underpin the teaching of the Bible, the teaching of Jesus on judgment, on heaven and hell.

So let's turn there next. And what I want us to do is to think about heaven and hell in terms of relationship to Jesus. Now typically, heaven and hell, we think about them as places, and maybe those places, if we go to one or the other, it depends on our actions, but it's better, I think more helpful for us, to see that those places are tied up to our relationship to Jesus, the response we make to him.

And as we begin to think about the subject, let's just remember Jesus regarded by many Christians and non-Christians as the most loving person who ever lived.

[16 : 19] This is the Jesus who wept over the city of Jerusalem knowing that they had chosen to reject him. This is the Jesus who prayed, Father, forgive them of his enemies who are nailing him to a cross.

It's this Jesus who taught more about heaven and hell and the judgment of God than anybody else in the whole Bible. And so we need to recognise that its foundation as truth is not hateful.

Rather, in the hands of Jesus, in the teaching of Jesus, there is a loving invitation to receive him and receive the joy of heaven and there is a loving warning to receive Jesus and avoid the danger and the punishment of hell.

In the teaching of Jesus, in his parables, he used lots of different pictures, heaven is pictured as homecoming, it's pictured as wedding, it's pictured as a great feast.

All of those pictures speaking to us of joy and life and celebration and all about relationship. And Jesus emphasised relationship to himself and to God as Father.

[17 : 40] And in those same parables and teachings, hell is the opposite, hell is the shut door, hell is the outer darkness, hell is the agony and the wailing.

And the point that I want us to really to take away and to consider is what we're not doing is choosing heaven or hell fundamentally.

what we're choosing today, what you and I are choosing today is am I accepting or rejecting Jesus? He offers me forgiveness, he offers me life, he offers me heaven, he offers to save me from hell, do I accept or do I reject him?

And I want to see this in the parable that we read at the beginning, Luke chapter 16, the story of the rich man and Lazarus that Jesus told. We see two extremes in their life as Jesus paints a picture for us.

This rich man lives in extreme luxury whereas Lazarus lives in extreme poverty just outside his gate with dogs licking his sores and desperate to get even the crumbs from the rich man's table.

[19 : 02] But then the story moves on and we see two extremes in eternity. They both die and Lazarus finds himself in Abraham's bosom, a place of comfort and security.

Abraham, the father of faith, Abraham who received covenant promises from God. Here is a picture of Lazarus enjoying blessing in God's place among God's people, knowing peace with God and joy of life made perfect but the rich man, the contrast is stark.

We are told he is in torment. He says that he is in agony. We are told that he is in the fire.

Now it's important to recognise that some of the imagery of hell is just that. It's a picture fire here. Here is a picture but we need to understand it's a picture that speaks to a certain reality.

It represents the horror of what it means to receive punishment and to face eternal separation. In our story, reality sets in and we recognise that hell is real, hell is eternal, and there is this great chasm.

[20 : 34] So there is a point of no return, there is no crossing. And out of this misery and torment, the rich man responds by wanting to sound a warning to his family.

and so the rich man asks Abraham in the parable to send Lazarus to his brothers and the response is they have the word of God that that should be enough for them.

They have Moses and the prophets. the rich man comes back and says, no, if somebody comes and appears from the dead, then they'll repent, then they'll believe, and the climax of the story, if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, if they don't listen to the word of God, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.

in Jesus teaching. There are people who have the Bible and don't listen to its warnings and invitations. There's some who won't believe even in the face of resurrection.

What's Jesus driving at here? Well, in one sense, here is another way of Jesus to make the point that the whole Bible is about him, about the fact that God in his grace has responded to human sin and misery by promising a saviour, that saviour who is God's own son, who comes out of sheer mercy and grace to be Messiah, saviour, to become the sacrifice for sin at the cross and the one who calls us to faith in him and to repentance, to turning away from sin.

[22 : 37] It also is pointing forward to the reality that Jesus would conquer hell by his resurrection, that faith in Jesus is the only way to enjoy heaven and not hell, but sadly, some people won't believe even a risen saviour.

The Bible teaches that we are made for friendship with God and sin is what separates and what severs that relationship. To lose God's presence is tragedy.

To lose God's presence eternally is hell. So Jesus, in his life, in his teaching, he issues a loving invitation, an offer that doesn't last forever, and he speaks of the reality of hell to give urgency to the decision that we all have to make.

Now, of course, many people in Jesus' day, they rejected him, they chose another path, many people today. Well, I have better offers on the table than the one to follow Jesus. I have more freedom to enjoy than what Jesus offers and next week we'll think about the whole question of freedom.

I have time on my side, maybe at some other point I'll consider Jesus, but we need to recognise what we do with his invitation determines our eternal destiny.

[24 : 12] So moving from heaven and hell and our relationship to Jesus, I want us lastly to think about heaven and hell and what it says about the love of Jesus.

God and perhaps that in itself seems surprising to put together. I want to turn our usual question on its head so that instead of asking how could a good and loving God send anyone to hell, I want to ask how could a good and loving and just God allow anyone into heaven?

Take just a moment of honest reflection and you know as well as I do that we have guilty secrets, that we hide things from others. we're very careful in the image that we project.

We sometimes in our church use the Christianity Explored course to help people to investigate the Christian faith and it has a powerful illustration there where Rico Teiss, the presenter, asked the question if there was a big screen showing of all the thoughts running through our heads that was available for the world to see.

How would we feel about that? It sounds awful doesn't it? We would feel so exposed and ashamed. One of the ways the Bible functions is it functions as a search light.

[25 : 43] The light of its perfection exposes our failures. It lays bare the darkness of our thoughts and words and actions and motives when we really listen to it but yet remarkably that search light isn't there to condemn us as criminals it's intended to find us so that we might be brought home that against the dark backdrop of our sin and the consequence of that which is separation from God and hell the light of Jesus the love of Jesus shines to bring hope and grace and to see this we need to see what the cross of Jesus is all about.

So the night before Jesus died he was in the garden of Gethsemane and he prayed Father if it is possible take this cup from me yet not my will but yours be done.

Now what is this cup that he was asking to be removed if possible? Well we discover that image in the Old Testament a picture of God's holy anger against sin being poured out for his enemies to drink.

That anger of God that would come against nations for idolatry for child sacrifice for exploiting the poor for rejection of him and his word and when we look at the cross we need to see Jesus drinking down God's righteous anger at sin my sin to see that Jesus in love will face hell will cry my God my God why have you forsaken me to give me heaven.

Now the question then arises well how does this not make God and the cross unjust if Jesus is righteous and innocent as we believe then how can this be just and we need to see that this isn't the father punishing the son and the son is passive and receiving the anger of an angry father Jesus we need to understand is God he is not a passive victim he is both the judge and the condemned on the cross he gives his life as a sacrifice but on the last day Jesus will return as judge and so the wrath of God against sin is the wrath of Jesus and there is mystery there but we affirm it to be true and we also need to see that Jesus cannot be separated from his people he is the head and his people the church is the body so he represents his people and we are united to him he becomes one of us that he might bear the punishment and face hell for us and united with him as it goes for Jesus so it goes for us he dies to sin so that we can die to sin and live a righteous life with God and for

[29 : 14] God so when we look at the cross we see both a demonstration of God's righteous anger at sin as Jesus the sin bearer faces it but we also see the cross as the loving response of God to rescue sinners and invite us to heaven which is the relationship with God and the love that that brings so the choice we all face as we come to a close is this knowing that we have all sins that we have failed to love God and to love others perfectly knowing that the just punishment for that is separation from God and hell for all eternity the choice is simple will I face hell by myself or will I trust Jesus and his love and will I hide myself in him the scandal at the heart of Christianity is that anyone who believes will be saved because of

God's free grace to us in Jesus and Jesus loving invitation is open to all so philosopher JP Moreland is right when he says I believe that hell is morally justifiable but I don't feel comfortable about it because it's sad the proper thing to do is admit that hell is real and allow our feelings of discomfort to motivate us to action whether that's turning to Jesus as saviour or sharing the good news of Jesus with urgency to others let's pray briefly Lord God as we have considered one of the hardest topics for us to think about emotionally we do thank you that we can look through the

Bible and we can listen to the teaching of Jesus thank you that we see in Jesus someone who is loving and not hateful we see in Jesus someone who would give his own life who would face hell so that all who would trust in him by faith need not face judgment we pray that you would help us to honestly wrestle with the feelings that we have but also to think about what the Bible teaches that you would give us that sense of urgency that you would help us to see our eternal destiny hinges on how we respond to the loving invitation and the loving warning of Jesus we ask that you would help us and guide us amen to you