

TheForum – Straight answers to straight questions

If God is so forgiving why does he send people to hell? Handout

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[0 : 00] Welcome everybody, welcome to the forum where we spend one hour discussing together some of the big questions of life and the Christian response to them. If it's your first time, for those who don't know me, let me introduce myself. My name is Mark Jackson, I am Assistant Minister of Grace Church Dulwich, an Anglican church which meets here at Sunday mornings. And it's one of our personal convictions that the Bible does have meaningful, real answers to the questions that we're asking. And that's why we've started up the forum. So far we've looked at questions on suffering, and that was our first forum, and we looked last time at other religions, and today we're going to be looking at the topic, the question of hell. So when we're quite up front, we want to address these tough questions and see what God has to say about them. Format-wise, we split our time into three parts. So there'll be some speaking from me as we look at what Jesus has to say from the Bible, and then there'll be discussions around tables, three lots of that. And as I say each time, we really want our discussions to be as relaxed and as informal as possible. So please feel free to be as quiet as you like, or you can say whatever you like. The leaders don't mind. We want a discussion, we want a forum. That's why we called it a forum. So please do let rip if need be.

Let's turn now to the question in hand. Today we are looking at, if God is so forgiving, why does he send people to hell? And let me say right up front that I want to apologise if you have ever heard Christians talk about this subject, either in a flippant manner, or as if they don't really care, or as if they're not really thinking of the consequence of what they're saying.

It was said of D.L. Moody, a famous Christian preacher, that he had the right to speak about hell because he clearly did so from a weeping heart, i.e. there is nothing flippant or jokey about hell. I realise that for some this question can be deeply emotive, perhaps for some here deeply offensive. But if hell is real, if hell is as serious as it's made out to be, then surely this question is something we need to talk about openly and honestly.

Well let's see what Jesus has to say about it. Turn with me to page 8 of the blue John's Gospels. These are for you to take away. If you don't have a Gospel, it's part of the Bible in the New Testament.

[3 : 00] John wrote down an account of Jesus' life so that we could know what Jesus said and be certain of what Jesus said, for example, about heaven and hell. So we're on page 8 and I want to read verse 16 of chapter 3.

Page 8, chapter 3, verse 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish.

Perish, and that word perish does mean eternal punishment in hell, should not perish, but have eternal life. That's the verse we're going to look at over the next hour or so.

Three things that I want us to discuss from it. You can see it on the front of the handouts. There are handouts on the table. There should be one each. Three parts. In part one, God's justice and the reality of hell.

In part two, God's love and his rescue from hell. In part three, God's forgiveness and our need to believe. Let's start with part one. And how God's justice, if you turn over the page of the handout, how God's justice demands there be a hell.

[4 : 20] Because one of the main objections to the concept of hell is, well, as we think, you know, loving God, judgment and hell.

You know, how does that work? How do they go together? How can it be that in verse 16, Jesus speaks of God so loving the world, and yet at the same time, in the same breath, he speaks of people perishing in hell for not believing in him.

God of love, God of judgment. How do you reconcile the two? Well, we need to consider the justice of God. Throughout the Bible, God reveals himself as someone who is perfectly just.

The Old Testament speaks of God being the source of what is just and right. God always doing what is just and right. God determining what is just and right.

In the New Testament, God promises one day to bring justice to the whole universe. Let's just think about this for a moment, this idea of justice.

[5 : 30] I'm sure we're all aware of the uproar surrounding Thierry Henry's handball in the Ireland-France qualifying match. And what do we see after us?

The Irish FA demanding justice. They're asking for a replay. They're asking for an extra spot in the World Cup. And it wasn't just the Irish, actually. People across the world were saying, look, justice needs to be done.

We want video technology introduced so that this won't happen again. Anything to stop injustice. Now, football is a somewhat trivial example.

But you only have to think of, let's say, Madeleine McCann's parents. You only have to think of the 58,000 cases of sexual abuse in the UK in 2006.

You only have to think of the victims of internet fraud. You only have to think of the times when we have been wrongly accused, falsely accused. And you'll know how we all long for justice.

[6 : 33] Justice is a good thing. We want fraudsters, sexual offenders brought to justice. We want evil to be punished. And the good news is, the good news of the Bible, the good news of the Christian message, is that justice will happen.

Because God is just. Perfectly just. God will one day perfectly punish all evil in this world. And hell is that punishment.

Hell is the place where God deals with all that is wrong in this world. And in hell it is dealt with forever.

Never to surface again. And in that sense, well, hell is a good thing. Hell is a good thing because justice will be done.

Think about it for a moment. If there were no hell, what would God say to a dictator like Pol Pot? Third of your population murdered for no good reason?

[7 : 48] That's all right. I don't mind. If there were no hell, what would God say to Hitler? Six million Jews? No problem. Don't worry about it.

That would just be ridiculous. What kind of uncaring God would that be? Now we need to see that, you know, God cares about justice in his world.

Deeply so. And his justice demands there be a hell. And as I say, I'll say it again, that is a good thing.

That is a great thing. Because it means God will justly punish every evil act committed in his world. All forms of sexual abuse. All forms of sexual abuse.

Murder. Fraud. All forms of pride. Cruelty. Injustice. No matter how great or small. Every lie. Every proud thought. Every rude word.

[8 : 49] Every unloving act. God will bring justice to the whole world. God will bring justice to the whole world. God will bring justice to the whole world. But this is where things get more personal. Because we've all lied, haven't we?

We've all been proud. Greedy. Unloving. Jesus says, even an insult makes us liable to the hell of fire.

Jesus describes lustful thoughts as committing adultery in our heart. But most serious of all, says Jesus, is the way we've treated God himself.

Jesus says that the pressing moral imperative of the whole universe is to love God with all of our being.

To love the God who made us. To love the God who gives us every breath. To love the God who we owe our entire existence to. Jesus says, and this might be difficult to hear, Jesus says that ignoring God is the most serious crime of all.

[10 : 06] Murder, rape, paedophilia, these are the most heinous, most vilest acts I can imagine. From God's point of view, rejecting him is even worse.

And justice is coming. On us. God's justice. On us. If hell is the place where God deals with all evil forever, well, that includes all human sin and rebellion too.

No matter how small it seems to us. So two things in this first part. God's justice demands there be a hell. That's a good thing.

But God's justice, because of sin, demands we be in hell too. So hell is God's just and rightful punishment for our rebellion against him.

One comeback from that. Eternal punishment. Sounds a bit OTT. So we sin for 70 years, and God consigns us to hell for eternity.

[11:20] Sounds a bit harsh and unfair. Well, the greater the crime, the greater the punishment. If you take out someone on the football pitch, what do you get?

Free kick, yellow card. Take out your boss at work, you might get fired. Take out the queen, you'll get put in jail for treason. Take out God, the infinite and eternal God, and you get an infinite and eternal punishment.

The punishment of hell fits the crime perfectly. God is a God of perfect justice. Well, let's pause there, because I'm sure there is lots to discuss around tables after that.

Let me break into discussions. And we'll move on to part two on the handouts.

So we looked before at God's justice and the reality of hell. Now I'd like us to consider God's love and his rescue from hell. Because as well as being a God of justice, God is also a God of love.

[12:45] Even with this mention of hell. And verse 16 of chapter 3 shows the incredible depth of God's love towards us. It's on page 8 if you've closed the John's Gospels.

Let me read the verse to you again. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Two aspects to see then from this verse about God's love. First, God loves us by giving up his only son.

Love is always costly, isn't it? Time, effort, money. My wife is pregnant at the moment, and people have been warning us that our lives will never be the same again once the baby is born, that loving the baby will mean a lot less time for ourselves, a lot less money, and a lot less sleep.

Genuine love is costly, unconditional love. Love is always giving, isn't it? Giving to someone else, be it time, be it effort, be it money.

[14:02] And the more you give, well, the greater the love. Well, look at how great God's love is for us in verse 16.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. And this phrase in John's Gospel refers to Jesus' death on the cross.

And God giving up his own son for us. Letting Jesus die in our place for our sins, so that we should not perish, but have eternal life.

This is how much God loves us. And just to be clear, this wasn't forced upon Jesus against his will. That would make God out to be a tyrant. Later on in chapter 10, Jesus says that, I lay down my life according to my own accord. So this was not forced upon him.

[15:05] Jesus wanted, lovingly, willingly, to die for us. In fact, the Bible speaks of God the Father, God the Son, Jesus, having had this all planned out before the beginning of time.

God knew that we would rebel against him. God knew that the punishment for our rebellion was sin. God knew what it would take to rescue us.

Being born into this world, dying on a cross, taking the punishment of sin that we all deserved. So when God creates hell, he knows full well that one day, he would taste it himself in giving up his only son.

So Jesus would say, if you want to know that God loves you or not, look at the cross, and see God himself in Jesus, dying for your and my sin.

If you want to know if hell is real, then look at the cross, and see God himself, Jesus, perfect in every way, never sinned, didn't deserve to die, and yet he did, for our sin, dying for the sins of the whole world.

[16:21] So God loves us because he gave up his only son, but also God loves us, well, because he rescues us from hell. We said before how we struggle to reconcile God's love and hell, but actually you only fully appreciate God's love in light of hell, and his rescue of us from it, when we don't deserve it.

John Piper, the American pastor, puts it like this. He says, hell is not only consistent with God's love, but ultimately serves to highlight God's love even more fully.

Let me try and illustrate this, help us to all see this. Imagine for a moment that you are Ellen Nordrigan, wife of Tiger Woods, the famous US golfer.

Up to this point, people have probably thought it was pretty easy to be the wife of Tiger Woods. He's the all-American hero, he's kind, he's charming, he never has a bad word to say about anybody.

He's the role model for America, he's a marketer's dream, there's 850 million apparently in the bank. Pretty easy to love someone like that. But the past week has shown us the other side of Tiger, and he's come forward, confessed his personal sins on his website.

[17 : 40] He's admitted to letting his family down. There are rumours of infidelity. Much harder for Tiger to, sorry, for Ellen to love Tiger now, much harder to stand by him, to forgive him, to love him.

But if she does, this past week will ultimately serve to highlight her love for Tiger even more fully.

And in a similar way, so it is with God and us.

Because we've all let God down. We've all sinned against him. You saw that in the previous point. Actually, we all deserve hell.

That's what we deserve from God. And yet, God has found a way to forgive us. God knows he must punish sin. His justice demands it. But he also wants to rescue us.

His love compels him. And so what does God do? He pays the price himself and takes the punishment for us. This is how much God loves us.

[18 : 48] Hell ultimately serves to highlight God's love even more fully. Well, let's pause again there and turn once more to discussion around our tables.

Let me break into discussions again. And we'll move on to part three of the handouts.

So far then, we've looked at God's justice and the reality of hell, the need for hell. We've also looked at God's love and his marvellous rescue through Jesus from hell.

But that still begs the question, well, why doesn't God let everyone into heaven? He sent Jesus to die for us. If God is so loving, if God is so forgiving, that's the question put to us.

Well, why does he still send people to hell? And the answer comes in the middle of our verse, verse 16 of chapter 3, one last time, on page 8.

[19 : 58] For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

In other words, we need to believe. We need to believe in Jesus and accept his death, his rescue for us.

So God is forgiving, no doubt about that. God's forgiveness is open to everyone. The verse there says, whoever, whoever you are, whatever you've done, God loves you, God gave his son for you, the offer of eternal life and not perishing is there but we need to believe.

You see, God doesn't force his forgiveness upon people. After all, to be forgiven means to acknowledge that we need forgiveness in the first place.

we need to turn to Jesus Christ and say that, I'm sorry for my sin, thank you for dying for me. Accept his death, his forgiveness.

[21 : 23] And that is why Jesus speaks so much about hell. Because eternal life, heaven, it's not automatic. We need to believe.

Did you know that Jesus speaks more about hell in the Bible than anybody else? In the New Testament, there are 14 direct references to hell.

12 of those come from the lips of Jesus Christ. The most kind and the most loving person ever to walk this planet.

I know people often joke about hell. All the interesting people will be there. At least the Christians won't harass me anymore. But Jesus knows that hell is no laughing matter.

Jesus talks about a fire that never goes out. He talks about a place of torment and agony. He talks about a place of darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

[22 : 27] Jesus is constantly warning people about hell. Why? Well, because hell is real.

And hell is serious. And he knows we are in real danger. And we need to believe in him. Now I know talk of hell can sound unloving.

I know Christians over the years have held back maybe from talking about hell for fear of wanting to upset people. But if hell is real surely there is nothing more loving than to speak about it and to warn

people of it.

I mean what kind of friend what kind of God would let us sail through life without ever warning us that we were heading for disaster?

Jesus he speaks so openly and so honestly about hell because he wants to warn us lovingly of the danger we're in.

[23 : 37] He wants us to see our need for forgiveness and he wants to see that he's died for us because sin is serious because hell is real and so that we turn to him and accept his forgiveness and believe in him.

There are then only two outcomes in life. Either we pay for our sins ourselves or we let Jesus pay for our sins on the cross.

There is no middle ground there is no purgatory either we accept God's forgiveness in Jesus and receive this eternal life that he promises or we reject God's forgiveness and pay for our sins in hell. There's the choice and there's just nothing more important in life than this. If God is so forgiving why does he send people to hell?

Well the Christian response is God is forgiving. Incredibly forgiving. He loves us he sent Jesus to die for us the way is open but we need to believe.

[25 : 01] And the question is do you? I know this throws up all sort of questions about friends family members who don't believe those who've died not believing but the most important question right now Jesus says is do you believe?

C.S. Lewis wrote a chapter on hell in one of his books and in the last paragraph he writes this in all discussions of hell we should keep steadily before our eyes the possible damnation not of our enemies or our friends since both of these disturb the reason but ourselves this chapter is not about your wife or your son nor about Nero or Judas Iscariot it is about me and you do you believe?

Let's turn to our discussions one final time let me break into discussions one final time so the aim of this afternoon has been to discuss the Christian response to the question if God is so forgiving why does he send people to hell and we've looked at those words from Jesus in John 3 16 God's justice in the reality of hell God's love his rescue from hell God's forgiveness and our need to believe might be you have further questions in which case do please stay around to chat around tables there's more biscuits I can see tea coffee if any of you would like to speak to me about anything on any issues raised please do we'd love to chat some more let me say something about the fly thank you very much for giving feedback on the questions that you would want looking at next term it seems that that first one on Sunday 10th of January is one that's come up in every table every forum so Sunday 10th of January put it in your diaries isn't the Bible just a bunch of made up stories and it's in that one that we'll really look at the reliability of the Bible and can we trust what it says

I think that's everything thanks for coming thanks for discussing I look forward to seeing you next time