

# The Big Topics - Part Three: Hell

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Date: 27 January 2019

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[0:00] Good to see you today. And as Ian was saying, we're continuing the series that we're on at the moment, looking at these big topics of the Christian faith, which are at the heart of our understanding of who God is and how we might relate to him.

And just in case you've not been around, the famous five that we have been and will be looking at is sin, the cross, hell, heaven and mission, which means that today we're in number three in the middle there as we come to the topic of hell.

Such a fiery topic, I guess, for us to explore this morning. And I fully understand if, realising that's what we're going to be talking about, you are already regretting coming here today.

Not too late to do a runner, perhaps just pretend you got a phone call or something to cover your embarrassment as you walk out. Never too late to escape, I promise you. In many ways, though, hell is a subject that we're just not keen on talking about.

Either because I think we're not sure what we really think about it, or because the prospect of what we think it might be is so hideous that we can't bear thinking about it.

[1:17] And so one of the ways that we tend to handle it often is to make light of it. Kind of gallows humour, if you like, in which the devil becomes a figure of fun and the fires of hell resemble a volcano disaster movie or something.

I mean, the Simpsons cornered the market in this kind of idea. Classic examples where they depict hell in a comic way, partly for entertainment, but partly as well, I think, as a way of lampooning the view of hell as a place, we might say, of eternal conscious torment.

And actually, I think it's this description of hell as a place of eternal conscious torment, which has traditionally been the way in which hell is understood.

It's eternal in that it lasts forever. Conscious in that anyone in hell is fully aware of it. And this word torment in that whether we take the fires of hell to be literal or symbolic, it's nevertheless a place, it would seem, of torture and punishment.

Indeed, the main, let's call it the traditional Christian belief, is that all who fail to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ will be condemned to eternal conscious torment in hell, with the moment of death being the moment after which there are no more chances to receive God's mercy.

[2:48] And so what I'd like us to do this morning, having set it all up so cheerily, is for us to weigh up, really, this traditional view by exploring whether it's consistent with who we believe God is, and also how it fits with what the Bible teaches.

Now that's a big challenge. It's a big challenge this morning, particularly in the time that we've got available to us. But the good news is I've been trying to crunch this down all week to make it digestible.

And I think I'm basically down to just under two and a half hours now or so. So maybe it's the time to make that phone call and do a runner. We'll see. Now the justification for hell being a place of eternal conscious torment in light of God's character tends to go something like this.

Firstly, because God is holy, anyone who fails in this life to repent of their sins and accept Jesus as Lord will be judged by God to have rejected him and his forgiveness.

But secondly, because God is just, he is obliged to punish those people for their sins. And thirdly, so the understanding goes, because God is infinite, because he's eternal, this punishment will last forever.

[4:22] And so an understanding of God, primarily as the one who is holy, just and infinite, that shapes the understanding of hell as a place of necessary eternal conscious torment or punishment, we might say.

That's the traditional understanding. And yet, what I want to suggest this morning is that there are some pretty big problems with this view.

I mean, let's start, for example, with the philosophy of punishment, which this view promotes, because it's all about understanding punishment as being about this word, retribution, retribution, punishment inflicted as revenge or vengeance for wrongdoing.

The idea of hell as punishment, therefore, is not that people are punished as a form of rehabilitation, teaching them a lesson from which they might learn the error of their ways. And neither is the punishment in hell seen as a deterrent, deterring people from re-offending. No, they're stuck in hell with no release possible.

[ 5 : 34 ] So it's not a deterrent about future behavior. Therefore, punishment in hell, in this understanding, is all about retribution, punishing people because they deserve it.

And yet, talk of what people deserve. It means that the punishment must fit the crime. That's a principle which lies at the heart of justice.

So in our society, a murderer may well get a life sentence, while someone who just nicks a packet of polos from the corner shop, they might get a telling off, they might get a caution at worst.

And we think, whether it's a life sentence of murder or a ticking off, a nicking a packet of polos, we would say, that's just. That's deserved. The punishment, if you like, fits the crime.

However, the punishment of hell as retribution, well, it begs the question, what possible crime or sin is a finite, a limited human being capable of committing that would deserve eternal, conscious torment.

[ 6 : 45 ] Even the most terrible of crimes, do they deserve eternal, infinite punishment? Now, it's been argued, particularly by this guy, who was an 11th century archbishop of Canterbury called Anselm.

He was appointed, I think, by William the Conqueror's son. So we're talking way back in British history. Anselm, though, he says that because God is infinitely great, any sin against him should incur infinite punishment.

That punishment should be everlasting, if you like. You've wronged an eternal God, therefore the punishment for doing that should equally be eternal. And yet the logic of this argument means that all sins, no matter how big or how small, are punished equally.

They're punished eternally, regardless of their seriousness. And I'm not sure any of us would honestly suggest that, say, the sin of gossip deserves the same degree of punishment as the sin of genocide.

We would say they deserve different kind of responses. So that's one main problem, I would say, in that the punishment of eternal hell doesn't fit the crimes that any of us could commit in 60, 70, 80, 90, 100 years of life on earth.

[ 8 : 11 ] But another huge problem with the idea of eternal conscious punishment is the effect that it will have on the joy of those who are in heaven.

For example, let's think about the love we have for those closest to us. Because when we love someone, their suffering, their well-being, can directly affect our own sense of happiness.

And rightly so. Someone we love, if they're in pain, if they're in distress, that causes us pain and distress. We empathise with that. And I'm sure we've all got people in our lives whose suffering impacts on us in that kind of way.

Now, if that's true, suppose we're in heaven, a place where we're meant to experience ultimate supreme happiness and bliss. I think we can only be supremely happy in heaven if we know that those we love are themselves happy and not suffering.

And yet, if we know that those we love are instead experiencing eternal conscious torment, it's going to be pretty impossible for us to be happy and enjoy heaven.

[ 9 : 33 ] You know, their pain, their suffering, will profoundly affect our ability to be truly happy. I mean, let's make it a bit more personal for a moment because I think sometimes putting faces and names to the people that we're thinking about.

It helps to bring the point home. For example, if either or both of my children, Heidi and Bobby, if they were to end up being condemned to eternal conscious punishment in hell, and I am in heaven, I hope with every fibre of my being that I would be pleading with God to let me take their place, to swap my salvation for theirs.

That's what I would want for my children. I love them that much that I would want to trade my salvation for theirs. That would be the loving thing to do. And if that wasn't possible, then I, in heaven, would be pleading with God to at least make their torment stop.

You know, to put them out of their misery, to have mercy on them, we might say. In fact, knowing that my children, my loved ones, would be suffering eternal conscious punishment, that would make heaven, for me, be a pretty unbearable place to be.

Now, we could say, not to worry, because you're going to be so caught up in God's presence that my children, my fellow human beings, they'll become irrelevant. All eyes on God, we might be thinking.

[ 11 : 04 ] But that's not a biblical principle at all. Since we're told here from 1 John, anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister, their family, their children, their friends, their colleagues.

Or perhaps we could argue that in order to protect my happiness in heaven, God could wipe from my mind any memory of my children or my life on earth.

You know, in some senses, we might think, well, ignorance would be bliss in that kind of situation. But really, really, quite apart from that turning God into a brainwasher and a deceiver.

If my memory of the love I had for people in this life was wiped, my recollection in heaven of my earthly life would be so limited that I would be unable to remember those who would love me, those who would maybe brought me to faith, those who would help me to understand God's love for me. See, if the memory of my earthly life was wiped, I'd be unable to recall the gospel, the story of Jesus' life on earth and all that he had done for me since it'd be so tied up with the awareness of why he needed to do that in my earthly life.

[ 12 : 22 ] And if my memory of what Jesus had done for me in this life was wiped, if I had no recollection of earthly existence, then I'd suggest my worship of him in eternity would be severely diminished.

I mean, I'm not even sure I'd know why I was worshipping Jesus if I wasn't sure what he'd done for me. Even the body of the resurrected Jesus showed the scars, the memories of his life.

So to suppose that our memories of this life and the people we love will be wiped in heaven, it just doesn't add up to me. So that's two huge, I would say, philosophical problems with hell as eternal conscious punishment.

The punishment seems grossly out of proportion for the crimes, eternal punishment. But it's also hard to see how those in heaven could be happy if some of their loved ones are condemned and tormented in hell forever.

Now, one way around this, and people are trying to think about this, is to suggest that hell is not actually eternal conscious punishment, but is instead this word, annihilation.

[ 13 : 34 ] Annihilation. That those not in heaven, actually they're not condemned to eternal conscious torment, now instead they're just gone. They cease to exist. They're annihilated. And again, that's a pretty common view and a way to understand and get our heads around hell.

And in some ways, perhaps this does solve the first problem in that, perhaps that, that end of existence punishment, perhaps that does fit some sins. But I would suggest if the loved ones that we've loved, if they cease to exist and are not with us in heaven, it would still leave us severely grieving for eternity the fact that they're not with us.

Now, that's looking at things from a human perspective, some of the implications of hell if it's eternal conscious punishment. Implications which I would say we need to keep hold of because they're pretty difficult implications to overcome.

But leaving those aside for a moment, as I say, that's from a human perspective. Let's look at the implications of hell in light of the statements we can make regarding the nature and the character of God himself.

Because, for me, this should have a decisive impact on who and what we believe. Now, I'm going to go through it. It might take a little bit of following, okay? So if you're going to pay attention for any bit, this is the one.

[ 14 : 54 ] In fact, dig the person in the ribs next to you just to get them to fill your spog, pay attention at this point. All right. So first up, if we're thinking about God, it would seem right to me to conclude that since God is all-powerful, omnipotent, we might say, he could, in theory, cause all people to freely accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

I'll say that again. If God is all-powerful, he could, in theory, do anything he likes, he could, in theory, cause all people to freely accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Now, you might immediately think, well, hang on a minute, human free will, God can't overrule that. How can he possibly cause everyone to accept him as Lord and Saviour? But if we hold that view, we're saying actually our free will is far more powerful than anything God can do.

And then that makes God not all-powerful, makes our free will all-powerful. And that severely diminishes who God is. So, since God is all-powerful, we have to conclude that surely God could find a way to cause all people to freely accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

We might use the example of Saul who became Paul in the New Testament to back this theory up. Acts 9 tells us that Jesus appears to Saul in a vision, an overwhelming, undeniable, can't argue with it, kind of vision.

[16:26] Saul is overwhelmed with the reality of Jesus and he freely gives his life to him. Which means in theory that God could do that for each of us. God could do what he did for Saul to every one of us and we would freely give our lives to him.

So that's one aspect of God's nature. He's all-powerful, can therefore do anything, even causing us to freely accept him as Lord. Secondly though, because God is all-knowing, omniscient we might say, he could know or he would know how to cause all people to accept Jesus without overriding their free will.

For Saul, he knew it was about appearing to him in person. For each of us it might be slightly different but God knows everything. God knows everything. So there's no doubt he would know exactly what would tick our box, what would be needed for each person to freely come to know him. And thirdly though, because God is all-loving, omnibenevolent we might say, he would want to cause all people to freely accept Jesus.

It's what God wants. He wants us to know him. For example, 1 Timothy 2.4 it says, God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

[17:45] God loves us and he longs with all of his being for us to be with him for eternity. So God is all-powerful, God is all-knowing, God is all-loving.

And that logic means to me that fourthly, I think it stands to reason that because God is all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing, he will cause people, all people, to freely accept Jesus since to do otherwise would go against his very nature, go against who he is.

Which means if that's the case, if God will do that, then fifthly, we can conclude that all people will freely accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. If God can do it, if God knows how to do it, if God wants to do it, it will happen.

It's God's will. It will happen. Indeed, if it doesn't happen for some reason, in that God could save all but chooses not to, begs the question, what kind of God are we being called to worship and spend eternity with?

If he had the chance to help us to freely accept him and he doesn't do that, what does that say about God? Now, I appreciate that might be somewhat dense kind of philosophy 101 kind of stuff.

[19:05] Dense flow of logic to take in and we may need more time to work out the implications of what I'm saying. We haven't got that time this morning, I know. But to my mind, if this sinks in, I think it's a pretty persuasive argument for what's known as universalism.

Okay? In that, in time, all people will be saved from hell and take their place with God in heaven because that is God's good and pleasing and perfect will.

And if the idea of God finding a way to welcome all people into heaven seems difficult to take, well, I don't think we have to look far in the Bible to find verses which would appear to back this idea up.

For example, perhaps a famous one is in Philippians where it says this, Therefore God exalted him, Jesus, to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

or how about verse in Romans 5.18 it says this, Just as one trespass, Adams, resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act, Jesus' death and resurrection, resulted in justification and life for all people.

[20:31] Or about 1 Corinthians, it says this, For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. and Colossians, this one here, For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, again Jesus, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

Stream of verses talking about all things. So in some ways, there we have it, every knee will bow, there'll be life for all people, all will be made alive, why?

Because all things will be reconciled. Now we can try and explain that away, we can try and qualify it and other passages like it by saying, well, all doesn't mean all, does it?

But it does, it does. All means all. That everyone will end up worshipping God since that was the plan all along. All means all, without exception, all things, all people, for all time.

And yet we've got a problem therefore, because alongside this message of what we might call universal salvation, the Bible would also seem to clearly teach that hell is an eternal reality for those who do not accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour in this life.

[ 21 : 55 ] And what's more, the eternal nature of hell means that there's no escape, there's no escape from it. However, is that really, is that really what the Bible teaches?

For example, let's take a classic passage which talks of the way in which God separates the righteous from the wicked for all eternity. Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats.

Now, it's a long parable, we haven't got time to do it all today, but the key verses for our purposes really are these, in which the people represented by goats in the story are condemned.

where the king in the story says this, he says, depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Then, these cursed people, they will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life.

Pretty clear cut on first reading, we might think. There's eternal punishment for some, eternal life for others and we can't pretend that eternity in heaven isn't matched by eternity in hell.

[ 23 : 02 ] And yet, there's real debate about this with biblical scholars, people who know far more than I or any of us do, about the Bible and about what the precise meaning of the word which we translate as eternal actually means.

It's the Greek word, this one here, Ionius, Ionius, which can mean eternal, yeah, sometimes, but it can also mean this, the age to come.

So this, Ionius, is where we get our word, eon from, not the electricity provider, but eon, which means for a very long time, you know, for eons and eons and so on.

That's the root of this, a very long time it would seem, an age to come. That's one way to look at it.

Now, I'm not suggesting that that is at all decisive, but I think it does raise doubts about whether Jesus means that punishment is eternal or whether it's a turn of phrase to mean a very long time or punishment in the age which is to come.

But the other interesting thing about this parable is that the word translated as punishment is this word, kolesin in Greek, which means punishment that is corrective, you know, aimed at changing the character of the one who is punished.

[ 24 : 27 ] The thing is though, if hell is forever and there's no hope of escape, let alone any entry into heaven, why would the punishment given out be corrective?

It doesn't make sense. What are people being corrected for? And so all this, I think, leads me to wonder and for us to consider perhaps something quite different for hell.

That far from being an eternal destiny of ongoing retribution, might it not instead be a temporary state in which the purpose is correction and repentance and rehabilitation?

if God really is God of love, why would he allow a place to exist where eternal punishment is meted out for no other reason than revenge?

Rather, might it not be the case that hell is a state in which God allows the painful reality of sin to hit home, a place in which he sort of pulls back and withdraws his protection maybe and allows people to face implications and the full consequences of their sin and perhaps most importantly the pain which their sin has inflicted on others?

[ 25 : 48 ] Might not be a place where empathy becomes all important? Might that not be the corrective kind of punishment that a loving God would inflict in order that it might educate and discipline and bring to repentance those whom he still loves?

See in this way I think we can see the so-called fires of hell not as fires of torture or destruction but as so often in the Bible these fires can be seen as a symbol of purification a purifying fire God's refining fire in order to redeem all people Now I appreciate that oh okay okay maybe if that's the case though we might expect there to be some passages in the Bible which imply that the door to heaven remains open even for those who were initially condemned to hell and encouragingly I think there are just those kinds of passages which help us to do that say in the book of Revelation we're

told that those of those who have been redeemed from the earth this is therefore those who've taken their place with God in heaven we might think it's Christians the church those who've declared Jesus as Lord that's who it is the redeemed from the earth that this group in Revelation is given a symbolic number they're called the 144,000 people a number which comes from multiplying the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament with the 12 apostles in the New Testament 144,000 12,000 times that by a thousand in other words the 144,000 is a huge and symbolic number which is meant to represent all believers from all time you know believers who have now taken their place in heaven done and dusted we might think that's who's in heaven believers and yet Revelation then tells us that these 144,000 the totality of believers actually they're just the first fruits who have been offered to God why is this phrase first fruits significant well it's a term which describes the first crop of the harvest the very first fruits which are picked before the rest of the harvest is brought in might it be therefore that the rest of the harvest which the 144,000 are just the first fruits of might it not be those who will in time join them you know having repented of their ways and turn to God through the corrective experience of hell of realising what life without God is all about and wanting to turn and repent from that now to back this idea up later on Revelation tells us of heaven that this that on no day will its gates ever be shut which implies that the entrance to heaven is always open even after the redeemed believers have gone in indeed later still we're told this it says blessed are those who wash their robes that they might have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city now we've been told earlier in Revelation that the redeemed these 144,000 have already been dressed in white robes you know a symbol of forgiveness and salvation so it would seem that these are additional people whose dirty robes have been cleansed additional people who have repented of their sins and who are now free to take their place with all the others in heaven now if there is scope for all people who have initially been condemned to hell to eventually be redeemed and enter heaven that's not to say it's an easy or a cheap prospect it's not that

God is simply being nice and letting people in yes in Jesus' resurrection the whole of humanity is redeemed but none of this makes acknowledging that or participating in that redemption automatic you know it's still a matter of choice it still needs repentance and faith in response to that grace and it still needs saying I think that for those who have sinned in the most grievous ways and inflicted immense pain on others we can think of world leaders over history who have just decimated whole nations with their sinful behaviour the process of correction in order to bring them to a place of repentance well that will no doubt be a long and deeply unpleasant process and yet for most others I imagine that process of correction will be mercifully short in comparison but when sinners repent when they understand the corrective goodness and unending love of God then as Revelation 22 17 says then the spirit and the bride then God and his church well together they say come come on in you know whoever is thirsty let them come and take the free gift of the water of life so we might conclude is the traditional view of hell as eternal conscious punishment or torment consistent with a loving merciful just

God well no I don't see how it can be and yeah whilst I believe that hell is a reality which we should help people to avoid wherever possible I think the weight of scripture is firmly in the favour of the view that God has made it possible indeed inevitable that through correction through rehabilitation through realisation all people will eventually come to a place of repentance and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord I don't think that's a weak view or a compromising view of sin rather I'd say it's a decisively strong view of God's power and knowledge and love and that means I believe that for each and every person all those who are or have or will be made in the image of God all people will eventually be able to take their place with God in heaven and that's a topic which we're looking at next week and also means it's probably enough for me today for us to digest and think about

[ 32 : 32 ] I understand I may have voiced some controversial or perhaps some untraditional views and I think what I'm asking is let's keep on wrestling this one through do chat about this in house groups do talk to me do debate this let's have a dialogue about this but I firmly say that it's a view which for me is the best way of reflecting God's love God's grace God's justice God's mercy God's liberation and God's victory in the strongest possible terms and this is at the heart of it I would say our view of hell should not shape our view of God rather our view of God should shape our view of hell and I'll leave the last word with James who says in his letter that with God mercy triumphs over judgment and I believe that's a fundamental truth which should give us all eternal hope

Amen Amen