

Selected Passages "How Can a Good God Send People to Hell?"

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Date: 12 July 2026

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! Usually it's best not to share about sermon preparation. Y'all just don't want to hear that. Like this time of year, if your AC goes out and you are sweating and melting inside and the repair guy comes and he's out there a few hours and then he comes inside, what you're interested in is just the cold air blowing on you, not to listen to him explain all of the things he had to do to make it blow.

So, I just wanted to do something a little different and let y'all in to be honest with you that this week has been hard, heavy.

In fact, it's been in some ways looming over me for weeks since we started this series and I keep thinking about it, knowing that this sermon was the hardest one for me.

I'm not alone in that. R.C. Sproul once said, hell was the most difficult doctrine in all the Bible.

[1:25] So, knowing that, I've read and studied and listened to others that I respect on this issue. I just had tons of stuff like we could have been here all day.

But really, I had more discouragement than direction on how to be helpful with all of it. I think primarily what I was feeling was the weight of spiritual struggle when you talk about topics like this. I met one of our elders for lunch and he could tell I was discouraged. I admitted that. And he said, well, it is God's word, not yours, that we need to hear, right?

That was maybe obvious to you. It was a super helpful reminder to me. I went back, started from scratch. It could have been a lot longer.

I went back to my church to try to help us hear what God says to us. Even if it doesn't answer all of our questions about this topic, the way we'd like them to get answered, we don't come today to stand in judgment over God's word.

[2:43] We're going to discuss that next week. we come in submission to him to say God you teach us what we need to know in order to live in relationship with you you tell us what to believe not the other way around so we're going to read a lot of different scriptures this morning but first we just pray with me and ask God to speak to help us to hear even hard truths with soft hearts let's pray father you know that that I need your help always and especially this morning I want your word to be clear not confusing and so I ask for your help we do too we need your help all of us who are listening to your word there's so many things about our hearts that would keep us from hearing you clearly we we need you to change us we need you to speak spirit in a way that we can understand bring conviction bring comfort bring confidence in you to our hearts by your word we trust you for that in Jesus name amen how can a good God send people to hell increasingly you can find Christian teachers who deny the reality of hell so I just wanted to start this morning with a sampling of what Jesus has to say about it loving gracious Jesus talks more about hell than he does about heaven in fact he he talks about hell more than any other character in the

Bible or author of scripture talks about it and it's important for our consideration what he actually says there are so many places to look I've picked just one passage from each of the four gospels to look at briefly this morning the first one of those is Matthew 25 Matthew 25 has Jesus wrapping up a parable talking about hell as outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth and then he explains that there's this this day coming when he's going to sit in judgment of all people and separate the sheep and the goats and he speaks to his sheep about about their kingdom and then he turns to the goats and and he says at verse 41 then he'll say to those on his left depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels for I was hungry and you gave

me no food I was thirsty and you gave me no drink I was a stranger and you did not welcome me naked and you did not clothe me sick and in prison and you did not visit me and these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life darkness now fire Jesus saying depart from me just stop and ponder that from could anything be worse than that Jesus says get away from me out of my presence into eternal judgment contrasted with eternal life in Mark chapter 9 Jesus graphically calls people to repent from their sins so that they won't go to hell which he calls unquenchable fire where their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched

Jesus often speaks of hell as Gehenna you may see that word in some of your translations it's this constantly burning garbage heap image of judgment but it's even worse than what we might imagine because the worm never dies meaning spiritual death and decay of a soul choosing self over God is ongoing it's unending let me acknowledge here that some of the language Jesus uses is clearly figurative language you can't have literal complete darkness and literal constant fire in the same physical location right but don't let figurative language lead you to ignore the painful reality of hell figurative language is anywhere especially in the Bible it doesn't exaggerate something whether it's a good thing or a bad thing it always paints an image that if anything falls short of the real glory or the real horror hell is utter torment constantly burning evil and grief constantly in the dark absence of God's loving presence with only self focus constantly an awful place when you focus on yourself not for good but but constantly awful no light at the end of the tunnel no hope

Luke 16 is a parable that Jesus tells although apparently with real characters since we get a name of the poor man Lazarus Lazarus Lazarus Lazarus dies and goes to heaven while his rich neighbor dies and goes to hell and from Hades the rich man cries out in anguish for a drop of water for his burning tongue but Abraham says no that's not possible and neither can anyone cross this great chasm after death the place of eternity whether it's comfort or torment is settled the rich man doesn't argue instead he pleads that his family be warned of the awful horror of hell finally in John 5 Jesus speaks of a judgment day to come emphasizing that a resurrection to life and a resurrection to judgment happen for everyone according to how you lived your life in summary

Jesus is not unclear that hell it's not even primarily a geographical place in its description but it's a place or condition apart from the new heavens and the new earth as an eternal existence of glory and joy to an eternal existence of fiery suffering and pain horrible darkness absence of God's loving presence that Satan the demons and people who love self-rule not God's ways endure and cannot change they live in constant rebellion against God against God now that's really hard it gets harder the more you think about it kids I just want to say to you this morning if hell sounds really scary you're listening right it is for all of us

[11:14] I want you to know if you're feeling a little bit of that I'm going to tell you in a few minutes how to make sure that you never ever go there okay it's scary but not dangerous to you that's that's what I want to help you understand I hope we can all understand this morning why this is something that we struggle to come to terms with as you listen you realize we can't fully explain this we don't even want to think about it often if Jesus didn't tell us about it we wouldn't believe it would we?

why would a good God want that? why would a good all loving all powerful God allow something like that to exist?

it's so awful that's the first of two underlying questions in our main question that I want to let God's word speak to it's really a question of God's character isn't it?

how could a good God do how can we best understand the character of a good God? God is love right?

then make hell make sense pastor are you kidding me? at one level you can't make hell make sense it is nonsensical separation from the one that we were made for we were made not to be separated from him remember how God introduces himself to his people all the way back in Exodus 34 the Lord the Lord a God merciful and gracious slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness keeping steadfast love for thousands forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin but who will by no means clear the guilty visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation listen God leads with his heart of mercy and grace and steadfast love for sure don't miss that but that doesn't keep him from also being at the very same time just convicting the guilty punishing sin it's a part of who he is right alongside his love both are aspects of a good

[14:02] God one God and in that sense I think our hearts do resonate with the idea of hell and that justice is finally served all of us probably there's somebody some people even in history we

think of as really evil and that sometimes they've done real evil and kind of gotten away with it in this life and it seems they will finally get their just desserts God must set things right that's who he is with so much rebellion against the king of the universe something must be done in fact in Romans chapter 3 we see this same just and loving nature of God when Paul explains why Jesus had to die and pay the penalty for our sins he says it was to show God's righteousness will not the judge of all the earth do right he's got to he's got to show that because see

God had shown patience in not immediately punishing sins but God needed to be just and the justifier of those who trusted Jesus see that the loving gracious God forgiving sin and the just righteous God giving sin it's due punishment that's the same God he's both of those things see God being good does not mean merely warm and fuzzy sweet and sappy all the time no in fact think with me of the best view we get of God's character what's that Jesus coming in the flesh to give us a perfect image of an invisible God and sometimes loving Jesus is a whip brandishing tables flipping Jesus in the temple right just look at Matthew 23 just one example of his just piercing words toward hypocritical religious leaders is it unloving to talk about the reality of hell

Matthew 23 woe to you scribes and Pharisees hypocrites you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces for you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in woe to you scribes and Pharisees hypocrites for you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte and when he becomes a proselyte you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves yikes Jesus by the way goes on to do this five more times to issue scathing woes and actually right at the same time that he's doing this it's right at the end of this interaction that we see him looking more classically loving like what we're used to remember his tears over those who are not receiving him it's verse 37 Jerusalem Jerusalem the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings but you were not willing you see he's completely good all the time but one moment looking like tender tears one moment looking like fiery rebuke don't forget the Bible is a

God centered story about his glory glory beyond our full comprehension right that should not be limited by our incomplete finite sense of what goodness should be like or act like our understanding of hell from the Bible may not be what we would think of a good God doing but we need to submit our preferences as always to his providence it's hard I'm not saying just deal with it considering hell should bring us to tears all the time see perhaps the more emotionally or personally difficult issue beneath this question how can a good God send people to hell is the actual people being sent there people we know and love and grieve for with tears it ought to overwhelm us to the point of tears to consider someone we would sit by at a swim meet we would sit by in class that we would sit by God forbid even in church going to hell friends cry pray pray pray and share with them let me say this right away we never know conclusively and completely about someone else's eternal destiny we're not those people the Bible says there are ways that we can understand some that there is great reason for confidence in brothers and sisters whose hope is clearly in Christ but if you are grieving for someone you love the fact that you are praying for them that you are pointing them to Jesus however you are able that is significant grounds for hope especially in light of the unfathomable love of the God you're praying to that goes beyond our comprehension we can't explain it all

[20:14] I'm going to take this coat off and I think that's going to help me be able to keep the microphone on my ear this time I hope there's a lot of hope for you in that at the same time I understand that even the fact of anyone being sent to hell bothers many of us except for perhaps those most famously evil people in the history of the world and we don't know any of them personally it can seem like arbitrary overkill right God just vengefully and eternally choosing to punish people but actually the Bible tells us God wants everyone everywhere to repent and be saved so why doesn't he make it happen you're

God just just do it many theologians have fallen back here to the teaching that people choose hell rather than God sending them there and this is after all one aspect of the biblical account Romans 1 speaks repeatedly of God giving people over giving people up to their sin their willful choice of their own way of life in fact life on their own is what they want rather than life with him at verse 24 God gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie they worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator author C.S.

Lewis famously says either a man says to God thy will be done or eventually God says to the man thy will be done as he turns him over to life apart from God I'm actually going to push back on that train of thought in a minute but it does show us one truth really helpfully I think it helps us with the seriousness of what we tend to think of as kind of small sins you know the ones you do Lewis points out the many ways that many of us actually choose self rule over God's rule all the time you're not unfamiliar with this choice he says a focus on self and an ignoring of God just exactly like hell he writes in mere Christianity hell begins with a grumbling mood always complaining always blaming others but you're still distinct from it you may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it but there may come a day when you can no longer then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine it is not a question of

God sending us to hell in each of us there is something growing which will be hell unless it is nipped in the bud you see what he's saying unless someone turns my heart your heart from myself back to my creator we will eventually Romans 1 be handed over to our own selfish choices which we know all too well how to make no God just hell grumbling and complaining turns into hell greed and self reliance becomes hell that is convicting isn't it have you thought lately about your selfishness your sin deserving hell like that leading even church going you right to fiery destruction apart from the intervention of

Jesus apart from your turning to Jesus now where I want to be careful with this line of thinking is that many do this they emphasize our sinful choice of hell and often use it to get God off the hook to pretend that he is powerless against our choices I heard a preacher say this week God never sends anyone to hell they send themselves I want to be fair to C.S.

[25 : 21] Lewis he recognizes the danger that he's implying this but let's not deal with him the more important thing is that's not the way the Bible speaks about hell Matthew 13 is one of a dozen examples that we could look at but Jesus just talking about himself the son of man will send his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers and throw them into the fiery furnace in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth God casts people into hell even removing from his kingdom unrepentant sinners while the Bible says God's not the author of evil we dare not pretend that he's too weak to challenge our free wills now that sounds very modern day American but not very biblical shocking God clearly sends people to hell read

Revelation 20 if you're unclear on that but I want to look at one more important passage for us to hear in this regard as we wrestle with this aspect of this question Romans 9 Romans 9 is famously difficult to grasp okay but there's some really important things we can notice the first is that Paul has tears in fact he says great sorrow and unceasing anguish for those apart from Christ you see how that keeps happening but then Paul says well if God is the sovereign one if God's will is stronger than ours then how could he justly punish anyone wouldn't it really be his fault rather than theirs if they sin if they don't repent if they go to hell that's actually God's fault and for those of us who love the sovereignty of God that's an understandable line of thinking right but he brings it up so that the Bible can reject it he said don't blame your sin on

God does the pot turn around to the potter and say why did you make me like this God can send you to hell justly you shouldn't turn around and blame him for it when I talk this way some of you are thinking about the concept of double predestination I'd like to deal with that during our discussion hold me to it that's a better conversation I think so just set that aside for a second if it's distracting you and look at the rest of the passage with me for just one more minute look at in verse 22 Paul frames a hypothetical question very unusual not something he does regularly he throws a hypothetical out there what if God desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy which he has prepared beforehand for glory in other words what if in a world where God's glory is central and primary

God exalted his glory through showing his power his patience and his mercy by some people receiving the punishment of their sins in hell and others the forgiveness of their sins in heaven what if now why the hypothetical I'm not certain but I think what I think is going on is Paul is framing this with unique wording because he is giving us truth but maybe not giving us the whole picture right here perhaps because we can't process the whole picture right we can't be in the mind of God and for Paul's sake even this part of the story that he can explain to us is enough to make his point see if you're a person wanting to blame God this is one of perhaps many things God might be doing that

would be his call not yours

Paul says I'm giving you one example not explaining the entire mind and will of God to you especially about someone that he lovingly creates and eventually condemns to hell that is so hard to comprehend I think Paul's saying you can't you won't understand it all but what if even this one possibility was true wouldn't that be enough to answer your objection and instead to move you to the praise of his glorious grace in saving anyone from the horrors of hell by his glorious mercy he keeps going on if you read the rest of the chapter he's making those who are not his people his sons he's taking those who are not loved and making them his beloved so praise him for that that's a start at the Bible's answers to two tough underlying questions please know this in no way am I shutting you down if you are hurting right now

[31:06] I'm not saying so take this and it's all good please let's let's talk more afterwards but I want all of us to hear before we come to this table one more thing about hell that's the most hopeful for those of us who on our own are sinners deserving of God's just punishment so Jesus says hard truth like that about hell but he also brings real comfort and hope and we need that what does Jesus who knows the truth about hell as well as anybody what does he do for us he endures hell doesn't he he endures hell on the cross for us hell we said is marked by unquenchable fire that makes you long for a drop of water and Jesus on the cross says I thirst quoting from a psalm describing the tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth

Matthew tells us in the middle of the day when Jesus is hanging on the cross there is darkness over the whole land for three hours darkness as Jesus receives the just wrath of God poured out upon our sins and he feels the absence of the loving presence of his father right what else better describes hell my God my God why have you forsaken me it's factors like this that lead me and others to say Jesus experiences hell which remember is more a condition or an experience than just a geographical place he experiences it on the cross he's demonstrating that that costly love that takes our place so that we don't and never will bear our sins to hell how can a good loving God send people to hell that is a hard question that we wrestle with here's another how can a good God a perfect

God endure hell only if he goes in the place of people who deserve it because of the great love with which he loves us kids I promised I would tell you one more thing the way that you make sure that you never go to hell is that you trust Jesus has gone there for you you trust him you believe in him you thank him for dying for your sins no matter how many they are no matter how bad they are Jesus dies for all of them and every single one of those sins deserves hell but Jesus has gone there for you and you just trust him see and what happens is hell is still a terrible place but it's not for you you don't go there if you trust

Jesus it's not a place for you anymore it's like this like lions can be scary and dangerous right if you run into a lion that can be scary and dangerous but what if what if someone catches the lion and puts it in a cage and then you can look at the lion is it still a little bit scary but behind that cage it's not dangerous to you is it it will never hurt you you will never be in danger from what you would have been before that's what Jesus has done for you in enduring hell in your place so that you never will friend that hope is not merely for kids I want us to hear the awful truth about hell and the awesome hope of Jesus it says good as hell is bad I love the way Rachel Denhollander said it in her statement to

Larry Nassar you may recall the gymnastics trainer convicted of abusing her 250 or more other girls she said the Bible you carry speaks of a final judgment where all of God's wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done the guilt will be crushing and that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found and it will be there for you grace and hope and mercy where none should be found for me for you that's actually what's on display at this table this morning this is what Jesus wants you to see the unavoidable justice of God that punishes sin with horrible death and the immeasurable grace of God that gives undeserving sinners glorious life [37:11] Jesus told his disciples what he was doing that night that he was betrayed to this death he took bread and he broke it and he gave it to his disciples as I'm ministering in his name give this bread to you and he said take and eat this is my body given for you do this in remembrance of me and then in the same way after supper he took the cup and said this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins drink from it all of you for as often as you eat this bread and you drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes and you do it saying he

took the death the eternal death the horrible death that I deserve so that I never will friends if that is if that's your hope in other words if you struggle to comprehend how God is good and gracious and just all at the same time but you know that you need

Jesus and you trust him to have died in your place then join the club join your brothers and sisters who are right there with you in that struggle at his table where he wants to assure you of his love for you now and forever if you don't trust Jesus to save you from your sins God I want to please please to consider the good news of Jesus because there is bad news about hell it is an awful place and I don't want anyone ever to go there don't come and eat this bread and this wine they won't save you from that but Jesus will fully and forever his body and blood given for you you can sit where you are during this sacrament you can come up and observe with us you can say pastor elder pray for me please pray with me you you can grab somebody sitting next to you and say will you please tell me more about

Jesus we would love any of those things we just want you to know him and life with him forever let me pray and we'll come and celebrate Jesus as awful as it is to talk about some of these things how sweet your good news will taste to our lips would you make it so that we might trust you afresh that we might find hope nowhere else that we might give you thanks for the blood of Jesus that washes away our sins do that even now with these very common elements we ask in your name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org to