

Why would a loving God create a place like Hell?

1. Warm up: On Sunday we talked about how the Greek name for Hell was derived from a trash dump near Jerusalem that had once been the site of child sacrifices. What's the most "Hellish" place on earth you've ever seen?
2. On Sunday we wrapped up our sermon series about "The Dark Side of Spiritual Life" by exploring the subject of Hell. In traditional Christian theology, Hell is a place that God created to torture people who reject God for all eternity. For many of us, that seems profoundly contrary to what we'd expect from a God of love.
 - a. Has there ever been a time in your life when you were genuinely afraid of going to Hell? If so, when? Why were you so afraid? And how did that affect you? On the other hand, if you've never been afraid of Hell, tell us why.
 - b. Why do you think so many churches have clung to the maximalist view of Hell and placed so much emphasis on it in their preaching and teaching? In your view, is that a good thing or bad thing?
 - c. On Sunday, Jeff shared a story from Pastor Brian McLaren's novel "The Last Word" about a young woman named Jess who wrestles with doubts about God caused by the traditional doctrine of Hell. Read the quotes from Jess on p. 3, then share your thoughts about what she says. How do her words make you feel? Do you think her questions are valid? Why or why not?
 - d. A wise person once said, "Great doubt, great awakening. Little doubt, little awakening. No doubt, no awakening." What do you think that means? As thoughtful followers of Jesus, what should be our attitude toward doubt?
3. On Sunday, Jeff walked us through three key questions about Hell and shared his perspective, as a point of comparison with our own thinking. **Question #1 – Why would a loving God create a place like Hell? Does there have to be a Hell?** Jeff said that love compelled God to create place like Hell for at least two reasons.
 - a. First, like Geppetto in the story of Pinocchio, God loved us enough to want to give us the gift of being real. To be real, you have to have free will. Free will means being able to make real choices with real consequences, including being able to choose where we want to live when we leave earth. Many of us want to live in the Kingdom of Heaven where God's values (love, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, self-control, etc.) prevail. But many others would rather go their own way and do their own thing. Therefore, it was incumbent on God to create an alternative destination for those who don't wish to embrace God's values. Evaluate that argument. Do you agree that love demands free will and free will demands an alternative after-life destination where God doesn't rule? Why or why not?

- b. But free will isn't the only reason why God had to create an alternative destination for those who reject God's values. A second compelling reason is love for those who *do* want to live in a place where God's values reign. Jeff asked us to imagine what would become of Heaven if God let everyone in, including violent, selfish, hateful, rapacious people – like the man who killed his wife with a poisonous snake, or the “good ol’ boys” who killed the beloved dog of a Lesbian couple, or the Middle East dictator who put enemies in wood coffins and had holes drilled through them. Could Heaven be Heaven if God welcomed in people who reject God's values? Why or why not?
- 4. Question #2 – If it was necessary to create an alternative destination for people who reject God, why would God choose to make it a place of torture? Doesn't that turn God into the equivalent of that Middle Eastern dictator who tortured his enemies?**
- a. Suppose God did create Hell to be a place of torture. Can you think of any good reason why a God of love would do such a thing? In other words, is it possible to be a God of love if you create a place to torture people?
 - b. Jeff argued that God didn't create Hell to be a place of torture. He reminded us that the primary New Testament Greek word for Hell, *Gehenna*, was derived from an actual place on the face of the earth, the Valley of Hinnom, located outside Jerusalem. In Old Testament times, the Valley of Hinnom became a notorious place for child sacrifices. By New Testament times, it had become a Jerusalem garbage dump, where people would burn their trash. It was literally a place where “the fire is not quenched and the worms die not.” What does this history of the word for Hell teach us about Hell itself?
 - c. Jeff pointed out that God created the Valley of Hinnom to be a beautiful place, but over time bad people turned it into a living Hell. If Hell itself is like the Valley of Hinnom, that would suggest that God created Hell to be a beautiful place, but the people who choose to go there have turned it into a horrific place. Your thoughts?
- 5. Question #5 – If Hell is a horrific place (because of what the people there make it), why would a God of love leave people there *for all of eternity* without offering them any second chances? Jeff suggested that God doesn't abandon people in Hell, and pointed us to I Peter 3:18 – 4:6, as printed on pp. 3-4. Let's read that passage again together.**
- a. What's described in this passage is what theologians have traditionally called “the Harrowing of Hell,” the idea that Jesus descended into Hell after his crucifixion to offer all who were there the chance to repent and “live in the Spirit.” I Peter 4:6. Apparently many accepted Jesus' offer. Ephesians 4:8. This is concrete precedent, Jeff said, that God never gives up on even people in Hell. If Jesus did it once, why wouldn't he do it again and again through the ages, Jeff said. Do you buy that? Is this consistent with what you know of Jesus? Why or why not?

- b. Psalm 100:5 says, “God’s mercy is everlasting.” Lamentations 3:22 says, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God’s mercies never end. They are new every morning.” I John 4:8 says, “God is love.” I Corinthians 13:8 says, “Love never ends.” Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever?” Can verses like these be squared with the idea that God abandons people in Hell forever? Why or why not?
- c. Philippians 2:10 says that a time is coming when, “At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow – in heaven, on earth, and under the earth – and confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God.” Does this verse mean that eventually, over the eons of time, all people (even those who went to Hell) will come to Jesus? Is that a fair interpretation? Why or why not?
- d. Can you think of any good reason why God would leave people in Hell even after they genuinely repent?
- e. Has your view of Hell evolved any based on tonight’s conversation? If so, how?

Excerpts from Brain McLaren’s novel, “The Last Word, and the Word After That”

Jess says to her father, whose a pastor: “Dad, I think I’m losing my faith. Here’s the problem. If Christianity is true, [many of] the people I love . . . will burn in hell forever. But if Christianity is not true, then life doesn’t seem to have much meaning or hope. I wish I could find a better option. . . . I keep asking myself, what’s the point of God even making the world if so much goes to waste? And do you think God planned to have some people tortured forever from the very beginning? Or was Hell a kind of unexpected Plan B that God couldn’t quite anticipate and is now stuck with?”

In a heated argument with a friend who defends the traditional teaching that people in Hell are doomed and tormented for eternity, Jess goes off and says, “If that’s what the Bible teaches, then I don’t believe the Bible anymore, and if God is going to send all my friends to Hell, then he can send me right along with them, because I love them, and I’d rather be loyal to them than save my own skin. [Because] I could never be happy in a party upstairs in [heaven] knowing that so many people were being tortured in the basement.”

I Peter 3:18 - 4:6

¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during

the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him. Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), ²so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God. ³You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. ⁴They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. ⁵But they will have to give an account to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the Spirit as God does.