

# Hell: That Hideous Hostel

## By Lewis Winkler

### The Unbearable Doctrine of Hell

“Hell,” say Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland on pages 156 and 157 of *Immortality, The Other Side of Death*, “is one of those back-room topics. . . . We do not want to talk about hell much less dwell on it. We would rather the topic never came up. . . . Today, hell is not a topic for polite conversations and it rarely surfaces anywhere else, including sermons. We are afraid of it, embarrassed by it.”

On page 282 of *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli put it this way: “Of all the doctrines in Christianity, hell is probably the most difficult to defend, the most burdensome to believe and the first to be abandoned. The critic’s case against it seems very strong, and the believer’s duty to believe it seems unbearable.”

Is there any good way to make sense of the idea that a good God would allow people to suffer torment in a place called hell for all eternity? Isn’t the very notion of it wholly repulsive to our most innate moral sensibilities? Can’t we just agree with Randy Travis that, “we will all be angels someday” and purport that there is no hell, but only a heaven?

But even if there was a place like hell, wouldn’t it be better to punish people for a finite period of time in a place like purgatory as a redemptive measure and then restore them to fellowship with God in heaven (the perspective of “universalism”)? Or perhaps God could simply annihilate all those who refuse to believe (the position of “annihilationism”). After all, isn’t *no existence* far better than *eternal existence* in torment?

These are daunting and difficult questions to answer. Few people have dared to try and fewer, it seems, have fully succeeded in giving a compelling case for the doctrine of Christianity known as hell. But be that as it may, an answer to these questions and others concerning hell is both possible and reasonable, even if we may not like the conclusions they lead us to.

### Sometimes the truth offends.

And sadly, our sinfulness sometimes does make the truth offensive to us. Thus, we try to twist, pervert, or even deny it in our quest for emotional satisfaction. But truth is not dependent upon how we feel about or react to it. Sometimes we literally hate what is true. But such aversions do not change or minimize reality in any way. A woman may despise or deny the fact that her husband has been unfaithful, but that does not undermine the reality of his adultery. So keep in mind that we must have courage to believe what is true, no matter how we feel about it.

Having said that, there are really two basic ways in which we might approach this question of hell. We can argue by way of the Bible’s authority or we can also argue for the rationality of the doctrine of hell in light of some additional truths we know about God and humanity. I will seek to briefly do both.

### The Bible and the Doctrine of Hell

Biblically, the doctrine of hell’s reality is as clearly established as any central tenet of

Christianity. Attempts to reinterpret the passages that seem to clearly teach the reality of hell and eternal punishment for those who die without Christ (passages like Daniel 12:2, Matthew 25:46 and II Thessalonians 1:6-9, to name only a few) are frequently (if not universally) strained and unconvincing. As a result, nearly all who reject the doctrine of hell do so not upon purely biblical grounds, but upon other considerations (often emotional in nature) in conjunction with certain other scriptural truths.

For example, personal experience suggests that the majority of people on planet earth are fairly nice, moral people, at least as we see them from the outside. Sure, there are plenty of jerks and truly evil people in the world, but these appear to be exceptions to the rule rather than the norm. After all, societies survive only when people generally control themselves and agree to work toward some common goals that benefit the majority of people involved.

Thus, while we and others do bad things from time to time, we are, for the most part, pretty moral creatures. And if this is the case, punishing the moral man for an eternity simply because he rejected Christ seems consummately strange in light of those who live morally disgraceful lives and then receive Christ just prior to death. We need not look far or hard to find good examples of such people.

In addition to these pragmatic considerations, many find the biblical notions of God's love and mercy incompatible with such hellish notions as eternal punishments for finite sins and the inflicting of horrendous pain for no (apparently) good reason.

#### **Maybe the Bible is wrong.**

These are very serious indictments. And they suggest several possibilities. Perhaps the Bible is *wrong* concerning these teachings. Maybe Jesus and Paul were misquoted. Maybe they never actually spoke the things that are said about hell. Perhaps those teachings were put in their mouths by subsequent editors and religious zealots. Or maybe Jesus and Paul were just *mistaken* when they taught about hell. *They* thought hell was real but *we* enlightened ones know better.

These are positions held by many Bible scholars today who teach that the Bible is sometimes wrong not only in its historical and scientific details (a highly debatable contention), but also in many of its doctrinal teachings about Jesus' resurrection, ethical norms, etc. But knowing that there are excellent reasons to reject such a position concerning the authority of the Bible (see such works as Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, Volumes 1 and 2), this solution to the problem seems rather inadvisable and unnecessary as well.

#### **Maybe our interpretations are wrong.**

Perhaps we could assert that our more traditional and straightforward *interpretations* of the relevant scriptures are wrong. Thus, the majority of theologians throughout the centuries have *misunderstood* what the scriptures were really trying to say about hell and eternal punishment. The passages, so the argument goes, might be better understood to be speaking of temporally limited punishment or perhaps the wholesale destruction of the wicked after a finite period of time.

As noted above, most, if not all, of these attempts at reinterpreting the relevant passages in

question appear to be consummate failures. And while theological church history is by no means without its erroneous interpretations (many examples jump immediately to mind), the force of the scriptural passages themselves seem to necessitate either a retreat into admission of biblical error, or a journey toward a better understanding of the possible reasons for such a (presumably) hideous doctrine as eternal punishment for all who reject Jesus Christ.

### **What are we really like?**

I will begin such an exploration by reflecting on the nature of humanity first. I contend that we as human beings, for all of our strengths and glories, are clearly not as good (or strong) as we think we are. Our standards of goodness without reference to biblical norms are almost always measured by our own corrupt understandings of right and wrong. But since we really are sinful, our own uncorrected judgments concerning right and wrong seem to be rather precarious bases for judging moral atrocity. Our sinfulness skews and distorts our ability to clearly judge moral matters as God does.

You see, most people, Christians included, see their sin and the sin of others as far less serious than God does. Most people, Christians included, see sin as far less offensive to God than He does. And, as far as I can see, herein lies a great deal of the problem. We see God as far *less* holy than He really is, and we see ourselves and others as far *more* holy than we really are.

Thus, I think we would be far better off trying to find a more stable foundation for what is good and what is evil, for what punishments are just and what are unjust. And that foundation is God Himself and His moral character as it is revealed to us in His word, the Bible.

### **What is God really like?**

God, the holy and righteous and just God, takes sin *very* seriously; so seriously that He sent Jesus Christ into the world to die in our place and take the penalty for sin. And His word makes it clear that He will tolerate no imperfections (James 2:10; I Peter 1:14-19). A perfect justice requires that sin must be punished, but since we are all imperfect and have all fallen short of God's righteous standard (Romans 3:23), we *all* deserve to be punished (Romans 6:23a). This impossibly high standard of perfection levels the playing field when considering who *deserves* to go to heaven. No one does! That God saves *anyone at all* is an act of undeserved kindness on His part. Our offense that God would allow people to go to hell is better expressed as amazement that He would allow anyone to be with Him in heaven.

And that is the critical reason why Jesus Christ is so centrally important in the discussion. He is the only one who was perfect and never did anything wrong (Hebrews 4:15). Thus, He is the only one who can take away sin and impart to us the perfection that God requires in order to get into heaven (II Corinthians 5:21). We miss the point if we think that going to heaven has *anything at all* to do with what kind of moral life we lived upon this earth. It has *nothing* to do with that and *everything* to do with our relationship with Jesus Christ. The grace of God is expressed not in His being impressed with our moral lives. It is expressed in His being impressed by the righteousness of Jesus freely and undeservedly given to us, sinners saved only by the mercy of God (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Some other things can and should be said about hell at this point. These center less around

aspects of guilt and punishment and are more concerned with the notion of human beings having free will because they are created in the image of God.

### **God has made us free.**

It must be recognized that part of God's image in human beings is the freedom to love or reject Him. If this is the case, then there will be people who willingly choose to love and serve God. But at the same time, there will unfortunately be others who choose to love and serve themselves. At the end of life, the natural result of such choices will be either an eternity of progressively falling further and further in love with God or further and further in love with oneself.

Why not just make everyone go to heaven? Then the dignity of an individual's freedom is transgressed, and God's call to live well would be a mockery. All would end up in the same place and all would *have* to wind up loving and serving God whether they chose to or not. As well, why should we assume that people who reject God would really *want* to be in heaven? If heaven is a place of eternal, praise, worship and service to the almighty God, why do we automatically think that everyone would actually want to go there? It would not be entirely unlike making me sit through an Italian opera for all of eternity, or (similarly) making my wife sit through interminable football games, world without end, amen.

Naturally, some objections could be and still are raised against these aforementioned ideas. Because of space limitations, I can only attempt deal with a very few of them below.

### **Temporal Sin and Eternal Punishment**

As one example of a possible objection, it could be argued that a sin committed in finite time should not be punished for an infinite time. Three things can be said in response. First, if sin is an offense to an eternally holy God (and there are good reason to believe that *all* sin is ultimately an offense against a morally perfect God--Psalm 51:4), then that offense is an eternal one!

In reference to this, Alan Gomes said in the summer 1991 *Christian Research Journal*, that "[This] objection assumes that the heinousness of a crime is directly related to the time it takes to commit it. But such a connection is nonexistent. Some crimes, such as murder, may take only a moment to commit, whereas it may take a thief hours to load up a moving van with someone's possessions. Yet, murder is a far more serious crime than theft. Second, the nature of the *object* against which the sin is committed, as well as the nature of the sin itself, must be taken into account when determining the degree of heinousness."

A second reflection is this: if God cannot allow sin into His presence, then why do we marvel at the idea of a place where sin is forever separated from Himself? After all, what kind of place would heaven be if sin was allowed to remain there? I suspect it would be a place an awful lot like this earth, and who wants to live in a place like *that* for all eternity?

But a third thing that can be noted is that even if the offenses committed against God in this life are finite, how do we know that the one punished in hell will not continue to sin and curse God, thus incurring further penalties against himself? After all, it could easily be imagined that a criminal would enter prison for a relatively small offense and wind up staying far longer for

additional and on-going offenses while in jail.

### **Unrepentance in Hell**

If God respects human freedom, and people retain their personal freedom in hell, then why must we assume that those who are in hell do not continue to freely hate and reject God more and more? After all, we have at least one example of this notion by looking at the devil himself and all his diabolic host. As long as they have existed (since the beginning of creation it would seem), they have only moved further and further away from a worship and honor of God. Why won't those who freely reject God in this life not continue to do so in the next? I see nothing in either human experience or the Bible that compels me to conclude otherwise.

In fact, we do have examples of this sort of unrepentant hardness of heart not only in people we personally know in this life (I can think of several right away), but also in biblical revelation. Revelation 9:20-21 and 16:11 note that although God poured out wrath upon the nations for their unbelief and did obvious miracles to show His power, the people were *still* unwilling to repent of their evil but rather *continued* to hate and blaspheme God more and more. Must we somehow assume that their attitude will be any different in hell than it was on earth? I don't think so, especially since we all recognize the power of habit-forming practices. If it becomes a habit to love and serve myself in this life, why assume my passage into the afterlife will not continue to perpetuate what I've already begun to concretize?

It is this possibility that universalism (the idea that all will eventually be saved) either denies or ignores. It is entirely possible that even in hell, unbelieving people will continue to refuse to repent and continue to sin against a holy God.

Here, it could be fairly objected that deathbed conversions (and perhaps the death of young children) do not fit this model of habit-forming practices continued on into the next life. How is it that a person can live like the devil for 70 years, trust Christ just before dying and then spend an eternity serving and praising God without sin in heaven?

Several responses are in order. First, it can be argued that the grace of God transforms the desires and propensities of the person at the point of their conversion so that when they die, they will now *want* to follow God and serve Him in heaven. They will of course be "beginners," so to speak, in heaven, whereas most others will be fairly well practiced by the time of their death, but they will nonetheless all be oriented in the right direction.

Naturally, it might be asked, then why doesn't God do this to everyone upon death? Why not give everyone a heart that is inclined toward God? But this would again ignore the fact that although God's grace brings a person to repentance and faith in Christ, and although God's grace puts a new heart into the convert, a heart now wishing to serve God, the person still freely chooses to accept this grace and act upon it. Those who refuse it, even when facing death (and many sadly do), will not receive a heart inclined to serve God, but will merely continue to cultivate a heart inclined toward self-service.

Thus, freedom remains a critical factor in conversion. To quote philosopher Eugene Fontinell on page 217 of *Self, God and Immortality*, "There is a profound difference between a human

freedom whose exercise *must* lead to union with God and one that allows for the possibility of eternal separation from God. . . . A world in which there can only be winners is a less serious [valuable/meaningful] world than one in which the possibility of the deepest loss is real.”

Why try to live a holy life here on earth if you can “live it up” and come to Christ at the very end of life? First, you have no guarantee that you will know the time of your death. You may not have the chance to repent before you die. Second, if you refuse to submit to Jesus Christ now, how can you be so sure that you will do it later in life, especially since habit-forming patterns can either drive a person toward God or away from Him. How far is too far? Third, “living it up” apart from Christ is hardly a life worth living. When Jesus says that He came that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10), surely He was speaking about more than just the life to come. And from personal experience and the experiences of others I can vigorously attest to the fact that a life lived for Jesus is a grand adventure and the only life worth living!

This last argument is also appropriate for those people who claim to know Christ, but do not want to live their lives for Him. They do not understand what joys and excitement they are missing if they think that living a life committed to Christ is a dull and unrewarding one! But such people should also keep in mind that people who claim to know Christ but show little or no heart to be like Him, may in fact not be believers at all, being deluded or consciously false teachers (that is, “wolves in sheep’s clothing”). James 2:14-20 and the book of I John make this possibility frighteningly clear.

#### **Shouldn’t God just annihilate the damned?**

It might also be argued that a far greater mercy of God would be to simply destroy or completely annihilate people who will not repent in hell. This idea of “annihilationism” argues in one of two ways. It can say that finite sin deserves a finite sentence. And when that sentence is carried out, the sinner should be destroyed and cease to exist. Here, the universalist could say that such a person should not be destroyed at that point, but should be restored into fellowship with God. This is a similar view to Catholicism’s doctrine of purgatory for unperfected believers.

But again, this ignores the problems noted above, namely that it is possible that the sinner continues to sin even in hell. Thus, there will *never* come a time when sin will be completely atoned for. In addition, if the punishment is redemptive, as Catholics argue is the case in purgatory, doesn’t this ignore the central teaching of the Bible that no one can pay for his or her own debt-load of sin (Psalm 49:7-8)? Doesn’t this negate the critical need for Jesus Christ to pay a debt that He did not owe, to cancel a debt that we could not pay? It seems to. If we really could be redeemed by some other means than faith in Jesus Christ it appears that His death was wholly in vain, a brutal mockery and a horrendous waste of time, pain and effort on God’s part.

#### **Isn’t non-existence better than painful existence?**

But the annihilationists are clear. To them it is far better not to exist than to spend an eternity being punished for sin. And on the face of it, this argument has some draw to it. But there are problems here as well. What if this assumption is flawed? What if it really is actually *better* (ontologically) to exist in reality than to not exist, no matter what state of existence a being finds itself? That is to say, what if a painful existence is better than no existence at all?

But that argument might be weak since it could be applied to all that God created. And the Bible seems to teach that God is going to destroy this heaven and earth and create a new a perfect one someday (Revelation 21:1). But what this suggests is that in reference to humanity, there are certain unique considerations. That is, human beings, unlike the rest of God's creation, are created in the image of God.

If this is the case, then it could be that persons made in the image of God are worth so much that their total destruction is an affront to their intrinsic value as persons. Thus, it is possible that what annihilationism ignores is the inestimable worth God has placed upon human persons made in His image. Thus, once a person has been created, they are of such high value that they should never be utterly destroyed through extinction.

By way of example, we could say that the really enduring part of a human being, the spirit, is inherently indestructible due to its close association with the eternal God who is Spirit. But we need not be so Greek as all that. We could say biblically that when God creates a person in His image, part of the imprint of that image (spirit *and* resurrection body) renders to that person an everlasting existence to both his body and his soul. After all, the Bible does seem to teach that all persons, condemned and rescued alike, will be resurrected in some sort of body (see I Corinthians 15:12-58 and Revelation 20 and 21. Also compare this idea with Matthew 10:28).

### **Is God a cosmic sadist?**

A few other perspectives might be helpful to mention before I close. First, the ideas of torment, regret and pain in hell do not imply that God is some sort of cosmic sadist who joyously inflicts unimaginable tortures upon poor souls bound up in hell. While there is a debate as to the nature of the suffering present in hell, the Bible seems to describe it primarily in terms of banishment from relationship with God and His people. Such phrases as "cast out," (Matthew 8:12) "depart from," (Matthew 25:41) and "away from the presence of the Lord" (II Thessalonians 1:9) are some examples. That is, hell will be a place away from God's presence, a terrible prospect in and of itself.

But this is not to ignore or undermine the imagery that the Bible seems to give concerning direct infliction of punishment (as in Luke 12:47-48). This seems to also be an element of hell's reality. But what we can say is that much (but perhaps not all) of the punishment for sin will simply be the resulting regret and misery at the prospect of spending an eternity apart from experiencing the love of God and His people.

But just because some directly painful consequences will be experienced does not mean that God delights in punishing His creatures. On the contrary, it appears that the demands of a perfect justice *require* it. God must punish because He is perfectly just and justice requires some form of retributive punishment. If the person refuses the offer of Jesus to take that penalty upon Himself, then the punishment is that person's to endure. And just because a parent may punish a child because it is necessary does not mean that the parent must be happy about it. The scriptures clearly say that God takes no pleasure in the death of the unrighteous (Ezekiel 33:11). Thus, while God will punish those who reject Him, He takes no pleasure in that. It grieves Him, but His character still requires justice to be served.

But even in reflecting upon this punishment, the Bible is equally clear that the punishment will be fair and just. That is, it will come in varying degrees. Because God is fair and just (Romans 2:11), not everyone will suffer equally, for while the *quantity* (time spent there) of hell is ultimately the same for all, the *quality* is not. Some will suffer more than others according to the degree and amount of evil they committed in this life (Luke 12:47-48).

**Hell should motivate us to action!**

In conclusion, then, while we can take the Bible as our authority concerning the question of hell and eternal punishment, there are more arguments to support such a doctrine than simply saying, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." And such arguments beyond the truth of scripture can be used by God to help at least some to overcome barriers of unbelief who do not initially believe in the Bible.

However, I think the inescapable fact remains that hell is a real threat and danger to all who do not know Christ. As Christians, we should not be embarrassed by or afraid of this reality. It should help motivate us to action--to take the message of forgiveness and rescue from hell through Jesus Christ to all who will listen. This, after all, is the point of the whole discussion in the first place. Do we really care enough about those who do not know Jesus to tell them of His love and the only way to avoid an eternity apart from Him? I hope and I pray that we do. Indeed, I hope and I pray that *I* do!