

SESSION 6 NOTES

How Can God Be Full of Love and Wrath at the Same Time? How Can God Send Good People to Hell?

Opening Thought

“But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when His righteous judgment will be revealed. God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done.’ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, He will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” (Romans 2:5-8)

“At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time Your people—everyone whose name is found written in the Book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” (Daniel 12:1-2)

The Objection

People can accept the idea of a loving and forgiving God—but cannot accept a God who would knowingly send people to hell. Hell seems incompatible with the idea of a loving God.

Video Notes — <http://youtu.be/q5eUSXUeYWU>

Questions for Discussion

1. **One of the video participants said, “I am at ease with taking the burdens of my own sins, I don’t need somebody else to relieve that for me. I don’t need to think about an afterlife, because I’m scared to live this life. There is a famous quote that says, ‘People who live a full life aren’t scared to die.’ And for me, I’m living a full life and I’m not scared to take the brunt of my sins, I’m not scared to do what I need to do to live this life.” Do people you know feel like this? What is your reaction to this statement?**

But, what if the Bible is true (about the extent of your sin, the penalty of your sin, and the certainty of judgment) and you die?

2. **How would you help someone to reconcile the fact that the Bible seems to be making two contradictory statements: that God is a God of love and a God of wrath?**

Thinking about our own relationships shows that these two aspects—love and wrath—are not incompatible. There is actually a correlation between how deeply we love someone and the extent to which we might get angry with them. The greater our love for someone, the greater our potential for anger at what is destructive in their lives.

- Example: brother or close friend battling with some self-destructive behavior/addiction which was ruining his life: you would not sit by indifferently—you would be angry with him, you would confront him, you would not be afraid to offend him by passing judgment on his behavior.
- Example: one of the video participants said, “I as a parent...I’m often full of love and wrath. It’s not contradictory—being full of love and full of wrath is not at all contradictory—it happens all the time, sometimes at the same time.”

A. W. Pink defines God’s wrath this way, “The wrath of God is His eternal detestation of all unrighteousness. It is the displeasure and indignation of Divine equity against evil. It is the holiness of God stirred into activity against sin. ... God is angry against sin because it is rebelling against his authority, a wrong done to His inviolable sovereignty. ... Not that God’s anger is a malignant and malicious retaliation, inflicting injury for the sake of it, or in return for injury received. No; what God will vindicate His dominion as Governor of the universe, He will not be vindictive” (*The Attributes of God* [Swengel, PA: Reiner, 1968], 76).

The video host defined wrath as “settled opposition and hatred of that which is destroying what we love.” In God’s case, His wrath flows from His love for His creation. He is angry at injustice, greed, self-centeredness, and evil because they are destructive to His creation (not only in that sin is overtly harmful, but also in that it covertly takes away from His glory which is our highest good). God will not tolerate anything or anyone responsible for destroying the creation and the people He loves.

3. **One of the video participants said, “Hell and heaven exist now....In any moment when your actions are negative or the influence is coming from, ‘I want to do what I want to do,’ instead of from the larger picture, you are in some sort of hell, because your ego has taken over. Whereas you are in heaven more when you are really compassionate and acting with others.” Do people you know feel this way? Is this true?**

True in a practical sense, but not in a theological sense—sin does produce consequences, which include separation in our relationship with God and others; but that is not “hell” in its literal and theological sense. He is describing the unquestionable law of cause and effect (or reaping and sowing) in which sin generally brings harm and good generally brings blessing.

4. **The Bible has many things to say about heaven and hell. So does the popular press. It is worth distinguishing between the two. Do a quick Bible study to discover what the Bible says about heaven and hell, and summarize what you have learned from the verses you found.**

We first need to recognize that when it comes to both Satan and hell, secular sources really have popularized a clearly non-biblical picture. For example, one of the video participants understood the Christian belief in hell to be a place where the anti-god is ruling. Scripture rejects such a notion, teaching instead that Satan is the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4) ruling and prowling this planet (Job 1-2; Ephesians 2:1-3; 1 Peter 5:8). The Bible indicates that hell was actually prepared for him as a place of eternal judgment (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:7-10), and is a place that he does *not* want to go (Matthew 8:29; James 2:19; Revelation 12:12).

Jesus was the most loving man who ever lived, and yet he spoke more about hell than anyone else. He Himself experienced it on the cross, when He was separated from His Father; so, He knows what it is like and does not want anyone to be there.

The Bible describes hell as:

- “punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9)
- “where the fire never goes out,” “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43, 48; **illustration:** Valley of Hinnom as the garbage dump of Jerusalem)
- “outside” and “darkness” (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:17; Jude 13)

- “fiery lake of burning sulphur” and a “lake of fire” (Revelation 19:20; 21:8; 20:10, 14-15)
- “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30)

Hell is a terrible fate, and, according to Jesus, no sacrifice is too great to avoid it—“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out” (Mark 9:43).

Read Luke 16:19-31. According to this story, Jesus teaches us that hell is:

- Terrible and unabated torment/agonies
- Irreversible
- Avoidable through belief in the testimony of Scripture

Furthermore, notice that the individual in hell wanted to do whatever he could to keep his friends and family members from joining him there.

Hell is eternal, but it is not inevitable. Peter wrote, “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”

Isaiah 60 and Revelation 21 are descriptions of eternity. 2 Corinthians 15:35-52 describes the resurrection body.

5. **Some Christians make the argument that nobody goes to hell unless they want to. Is this true? Explain.**

The Bible tells us that hell was not invented for humans. Instead, Jesus Himself said in Matthew 25:41 that the “eternal fire” was “prepared for the devil and his angels.” So, why does the Bible indicate that many people will go there?

Tim Keller writes, “Hell and heaven essentially are our freely chosen identities going on forever. In other words, Christianity believes that people have a soul that lives forever, and therefore, a process that begins in our soul now can go on forever. For example, take self-centeredness. As we know, the more self-centered people get, the more miserable and the more in denial they become. That is to say, they blame everybody else for their problems. And that is part of what self-centered is—You are wise in your own eyes, you can’t take the blame for anything, nothing is ever your fault. Hell is a self-centered ego going on for a billion [plus] years. God, according to Romans 1, lets people have what they most want [i.e., in part, God judges people by giving them their way]—and hell is simply serving yourself, going on forever. Hell is God giving you the life you want, on into eternity. Therefore, in a sense, nobody ever goes to hell in the Christian understanding unless they want to. People go to heaven because they love God and want to submit to him. People go to hell because they want to be away from God, because they do not want somebody telling them how to live their life. They want to live their own lives their way. Hell is separation from God. And, therefore, nobody goes to hell except people who want to go there [in essence, they have chosen the same side as God’s enemy, Satan, and therefore will experience his same eternal punishment (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:7-15)].”

- **Illustration:** someone getting expelled from the university — did the school “kick them out” or did they bring it on themselves?
- **Illustration:** “point of no return” above Niagara Falls beyond which the current will inevitably take you over its punishing brink — there is a point of no return in which the patient grace of God (cf. Acts 17:30; Romans 1:18-32 [“God gave them up”]; 2:4; 3:25-26; 2 Peter 3:9) will run out and His judgment will be leveled.

He continues, “In Ezekiel 18:30 God says, ‘I will judge you, each one according to his ways.’ But the verse goes on with God pleading with his people: ‘Repent! Turn away from all your offenses. ... Why will you die? ... I take no pleasure in the death of anyone. ... Repent and live!’ (Ezekiel 18:30-32). God’s justice is active, not passive, and when we violate it God will judge. But what these verses also show is that God wants people to repent and turn to Him—that He does not want anyone to perish [Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11; 2 Peter 3:9].”

6. One of the video participants said, “I would like to think that I’m acceptable to God if I have good intentions, if I have a will to be good, if I have a will to love, if I try hard to be a better person.” You often hear people say things like, “Surely all good, decent people can find God and go to heaven.” How would you respond?

This sounds open-minded: the premise is that good people find God and bad people do not. But there are two problems with this premise:

- First, it holds out no hope for the bad people, and lots of us know deep down that we have not lived up to even our own moral standards, let alone God’s (cf. Romans 3:10-20, 23; Galatians 3:10, 12; James 2:8-12). We are all bad people in need of “grace” (i.e., unmerited favor). **Illustration:** From *Christianity Explored*, “We aren’t who/what we want to be, let alone what God wants us to be”—all of our lives projected on a big screen for everyone to see.
- Second, it misunderstands Christians’ beliefs, in that it assumes we believe that we are going to heaven because we are good—that’s not true at all!

Christians believe that no one goes to heaven or hell by being compliant with Christian ethics—by being moral and good, or not. The essence of sin is loving anything more than the true God, and by essentially being our own “god”—that is, trusting ultimately in our own wisdom and ability. The fact is, all of us—religious and irreligious, moral and immoral—are trying to control our own lives rather than rely on God. Everyone is doing this and we will not “find God” until we admit this spiritual condition and seek pardon and change through Jesus. Our eternal destiny is dependent *not* on being good but on our response to the grace of God and to Christ’s death on a cross in our place, and on our willingness to admit that we are cut off from God because of the pride and self-centeredness of our hearts (cf. Isaiah 59:1-2; 1 Peter 3:18).

7. The video host asked the participants, “Can you imagine why it would be good to believe in judgment day?” What are some benefits that you can think of?

A better knowledge of God and sin (Habakkuk 1:13; Romans 6:23) — The biblical concept of God’s wrath shows us that sin is worse than we thought, that it is really destructive and not healthy (although it can deceive for a time [Hebrews 11:25]), and that it is in absolute and eternal contrast with the character of God. God’s wrath shows us just how holy (i.e., separate, distinct, set apart, unique, perfect) God is and just how terrible sin is (in that it deserves no less a payment than eternal hellish judgment).

Personal motivation (cf. 2 Peter 11-15) — to live well both to avoid judgment (-) and to earn reward (+)

Promise of vindication when wronged (cf. Psalm 73) — **illustration:** the Croatian and Polish authors referenced by Dr. Keller in the video

Personal accountability when tempted to wrong others (cf. Colossians 4:1)

8. Was there anything from the way the video discussion was conducted in terms of tone, atmosphere, attitude, mannerisms, expressions, and so on, that you might find helpful to adopt, or not, when you run your own discussion about this objection?

In this discussion (and in the previous ones) the video host's responses kept presenting Jesus as the primary differentiator and apologetic for Christianity.

9. When people get rid of the idea of judgment and hell to make God more loving, they end up making him less so. Do you think this is true or not? Discuss.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used the following illustration: If a friend tells you that he has paid a bill for you, you have no idea how to respond, until you know the size of the bill. Until you know how much he paid, you do not know whether to shake his hand or fall down and kiss his feet.

Until you believe in hell, you will never know how much Jesus loves you, how much He values you, and how much He paid for you. Nor will you understand the grandeur, majesty, and holiness of God, until you understand the alternative.

On the cross, Jesus cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). The loss of a relationship hurts greatly, and the deeper the relationship, the more agonizing and devastating is the loss of it. On the cross, when Jesus lost the eternal love of the Father, He experienced an agony, a disintegration, an isolation greater than we would experience in an eternity in hell. That is what we deserve, and He took it upon Himself. Until you understand that (i.e., the wrath of God fully "drunk" by Jesus Christ [Psalm 75:8; Matthew 26:39; John 18:10; Revelation 14:10; <http://bit.ly/1LqtjDG>; <http://bit.ly/1DnfHDo>]), you will never comprehend the extent of His love (Ephesians 2:4; 3:17-19). Jesus Christ was the Judge of the earth, but He came, not to bring judgment, but to bear judgment and hell for us.

So, ironically, when people get rid of the idea of judgment and hell to make God more loving, they make Him less loving.

10. The video host ended the discussion by talking about the resurrection. If someone asked you why you believe that Jesus rose from the dead and why that belief is helpful to you, what would you say?

In his 800-page book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, historian N. T. Wright says that there is no historically possible alternate explanation for the birth of the Christian church than the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There is a tremendous amount of evidence (<http://bit.ly/1rSfGTE>):

- Jesus bore witness to his own coming resurrection.
- The tomb was empty on Easter.
- The disciples were almost immediately transformed from men who were hopeless and fearful after the crucifixion (Luke 24:21, John 20:19) into men who were confident and bold witnesses of the resurrection (Acts 2:24, 3:15, 4:2).
- The apostle Paul's conversion supports the truth of the resurrection.
- The New Testament witnesses do not bear the stamp of dupes or deceivers.

The greatest evidence, however, is that the sheer existence of a thriving, empire-conquering early Christian church supports the truth of the resurrection claim. Consider:

"The Greeks, Romans, and Jews in Jesus' day all had very different worldviews—but the bodily resurrection of Jesus would have been as absolutely inconceivable to all of them as it is for us, just for different reasons. What kind of objective, overwhelming evidence would it take to smash their worldview and bring them to absolute certainty that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead? People today say that it would have to be incredible evidence for them to change their own worldview. Whatever it would take for us, something just as overwhelming must have happened for them.

We know what it was for them because the Gospel writers tell us: at least eleven times Jesus actually appeared, and hundreds of witnesses believed in the risen Christ because they saw Him, heard Him, and touched Him, and thousands more believed because they believed the eyewitness testimony of their friends and neighbors. It overwhelmed them, and it changed their world. We have the same eyewitness testimony available to us" (Keller).

What does this have to do with God's wrath and hell? Keller continues:

"How can you be totally sure when you look at all the horrible stuff that has happened in your life and out in the world that someday God is going to make it all right? How can you not just hope so, but be absolutely sure that in spite of your own failures, God loves you and will never let you go? How can you know that when you face death it is not the end? Only if you know that Jesus rose from the dead and therefore so will you" (Keller).

See, ultimately, judgment day is when God puts everything right again. And Jesus' resurrection was just the first installment of that newness!

Final Thought

"For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the Man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead." (Acts 17:31)

"Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him." (Hebrews 9:27-28)