

Series: Questions People Ask

Title: “How Can A Loving God Send People to Hell?”

Text(s): 2 Peter 2:1-10; Matthew 7:13, 14

Key Word:

Proposition: Every person should yield love’s caution because of consequences of their choices.

For the past couple of weeks we have been addressing some questions that people ask. These questions are not new to the modern era. In fact, we human beings have been wrestling with these issues for centuries. Whether it is in the university classroom or in a local barber shop, in various religious institutions, Larry King Live, or over the backyard fence, people wonder about these faith issues. Besides the issue of suffering in our world, I think that one of the most uncomfortable issues for people to talk about is the issue of hell. Images of old time “fire and brimstone” preachers have often deterred pastors from addressing this issue from the pulpit. They are afraid of frightening people. Perhaps they are reluctant to address this issue because they have not come to terms with it themselves. Or perhaps they personally believe that God would not allow anyone to be separated from Him forever. Nevertheless, it is an issue that must be addressed from the pulpit because people are asking the question, “How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?”

Some folks have a difficult time believing that a loving God would send people to eternal misery and torture. They understand that a just God would sentence people like Adolph Hitler, Jeffery Daumer, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Ben Laden, or one’s ex-spouse to such an awful place, but only for just a short time so that they can receive another chance.

Yes, this issue stirs up all kinds of anxiety. We tremble at the mere mention of the word. I ran across the story of two American tourists in Italy who were visiting an active volcano that discharges molten lava today. They walked up to rim of this volcano, seeing the mass of churning, burning lava. One of them said, “That looks like hell.” The guide said, “My goodness, you Americans have been everywhere.”

I believe that it is important to talk about hell not just because people are asking about it, but also because the Bible addresses it. As a United Methodist Pastor, I am called to preach the whole counsel of God, whether it makes me or the congregation comfortable or not. We want as many people as possible to be saved not just a few. C.S. Lewis wrote, *There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than hell, if it lay in my power...I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, ‘All will be saved.’*” But do we dare? Do we dare keep silent lest someone miss the joy of heaven?

Do we dare when the Bible clearly teaches about hell? In the book of Daniel it is written, *“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”* (Daniel 12:2) Paul wrote, *“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 2:7, 8) Even Jesus taught about hell. In fact, thirteen percent of the teachings of Jesus are about judgment and hell. More than half of his parables relate to God’s eternal judgment of sinners. Of the twelve times that the word for “hell”

appeared in the New Testament, it was only one time in which Jesus was not the speaker. For example Jesus said, *“If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”* (Matthew 5:29) *“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* (Matthew 10:28) Jesus explained the parable of the weeds with this explanation, *“The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* (Matthew 13:41, 42) Out of love the Lord cautions those he loves. He calls for His followers to fear his holy judgment.

Let’s take a deeper look by asking: **What is hell and what is it not?** First of all, hell is not an eternal torture chamber. God is not like some spoiled child who says, “Look if you are not willing to obey my rules, then I’m going to sentence you for it. If you don’t do it my way, then you will pay.”

God on the other hand, is very gracious, loving, wonderful, and attractive. He has made us with free will and he has made us for a purpose: to relate with Him and others in love. We are not accidents, nor random mistakes, nor puppets. And **if we fail repeatedly to live within His purpose**, a purpose that allows us the opportunity for abundant and eternal life, then God will have no choice but to give us what we’re asking for, which is life without Him. That is hell, life separate from the living, loving, all-

powerful, all-knowing, Holy God. God loves with tenderness, but He is also just, moral, and pure.

E. Stanley Jones wrote about a fictional person who lived out a fantasy life. All he had to do was think of it and (poof!) it happened. And so this man in a moment of time stuck his hands in his pocket and leaned back and imagined a mansion and (poof!), he had a fifteen-bedroom mansion three stories, with soft-footed servants to wait upon his every need.

A place like that needs several fine cars, so he again closed his eyes, and he imagined a driveway full of the finest cars money can buy, Infiniti's, Hummers, Rolls Royce's, Ferrari's, and Jaguars. He drove them where he wished, or sat in the back seat as the chauffeur drove him wherever he wished.

There's no other place to travel so he returned home and wished for a spectacular meal and (poof!) there's a meal in front of him in all its rich aroma and beauty—which he ate alone. But there's still something needed more than that.

Finally, he grew bored and unchallenged, and he whispered to one of the attendants, "I want to get out of this. I want to create something, I want to earn something, accomplish something, I even want to suffer some things again. I'd rather be in hell than be here." The servant quietly said, "Where do you think you are!"

Hell is relational in nature. Hell is separation or banishment from the most beautiful being in the world—God himself. It is being excluded from anything that matters, from all that matters, from all value, not only from God but also from those

who have come to know and love Him. Hell is judgment for having broken God's standards. The sentence is being separated from God.

When the Scriptures describe hell as a place of flames and a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, the authors were using a figure of speech. In addition to the image of flames the Scripture describe hell as a place of outer darkness. How can a place be both a place of utter darkness and a place of eternal flames at the same time? Fire always produces light, bright light. In Scripture fire is always an image for judgment. When Christ returns he will come in judgment. Hell is the place of eternal judgment.

The gnashing of teeth image refers to an expression of rage at realizing that one has made a huge mistake. It is also the state of anger when one realizes a great loss. When they don't get their way self-absorbed, self-centered folks can 'gnash their teeth' in anger. Basically, hell is the place of utter heartbreak. It is a loss of everything.

Ex-West Virginia football coach Rich Rodriguez is experiencing an earthly "gnashing of teeth" by the stir that his departure has created in his home state. The university is conducting an investigation of some missing documents and also suing Rodriguez in an attempt to collect on a \$4 million buyout clause in his contract. He is enduring attempts at a smear campaign with inaccuracies, falsehoods, and innuendos. The Mountaineer fan's anger has spilled over into name-calling, harassment, threats, and vandalism. I suspect Rich would say that his life right now is a living hell. The Good News is that it will pass. Time will heal the wounds of such a divorce. However,

such life experience is only a foretaste, an appetizer, of the eternal hell of rejecting Christ as Savior and Lord.

Why hell? Because, if there is no hell, then God would not be just. There must be consequences for sin, otherwise heaven would not care if people raped and pillaged and murderer. Without hell, God would ignore victims of sin and would refuse to listen to prayers for relief. Without hell, God would not love, for love always hates that which is evil.

If there is no hell, then God would be a liar and the Scriptures are nothing but a best selling novel. The Bible is very clear some will be saved; some will be lost to eternal separation from God. The presence of hell serves as a great deterrent. When I was a kid my dad's workshop served as the place of discipline. That is where I received my spankings. I knew that when Dad said in a particular tone, "Go to the workshop," I was in serious trouble. Both my dad and mom loved me. I knew they loved me. And most of time their love was enough. I refrained from many bad things because of their love. Yet, there were times when the temptation was so strong or my rebellion so intense, that the thought of their love would not deter me. But the thought of their disappointing anger did. When love failed to compel me to do what was good and right, fear always corrected me. Whatever we sow, we will reap. Jerry Walls, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary wrote, "If there is no God, no heaven, no hell, there simply is no persuasive reason to be moral." Hell is there to remind us of the consequences of our rejection of God's grace and ways revealed in Jesus Christ.

Who sends whom to hell? God never sends a person to hell. God only respects their choice, even if it pains him. He feels uncomfortable about it. He doesn't like hell. The Lord said, "*As surely as I live, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.*" (Ezekiel 33:11) God was forced to make hell because angels & people chose to rebel against him and turn against His best for them. Hell is His high regard for our dignity. He has never forced anyone to choose Him. Sinners choose hell because of their rebellion in seeking their way rather than God's way. I like what G.K. Chesterton wrote, "Hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice." **It's a person's free choice and not a Divine mandate by an arbitrary God.** He gives us an entire lifetime to turn away from sin and death and to choose life in Him. But why wait until tomorrow, when we can have the joy of being an heir of heaven.

Some wonder if God so loves, why wouldn't he give people a **Second chance** after death to make a decision to follow Him and go to heaven? That is a good and fair question. It assumes, though that God did not do enough before people died. Yet, God does everything he possibly can to reveal the way to life. He reveals His way through creation, our consciousness and circumstances. He reveals the way to life through Christ Jesus His Son. In Him God lived and loved among us. He died on a cross where He suffered his own hell, separation from His Father. Hell's misery was deep, but His love went deeper. The simple fact is that God favors those who respond to Him, who seek after Him. He invites us to choose the narrow way that leads to life. He never

coerces. God always reveals enough of Himself so that we will know that He is there and that He wants a relationship with us. He provides all kinds of second chances to choose Him. This way, human choice is truly free.

For some Hell is a stumbling block. In starting a relationship with someone, we can run into a few stumbling blocks. We may not understand everything about this person, we may not always agree or feel comfortable about every view they hold. But there comes a time in that relationship where we have to ask, do I trust this person enough to want a friendship? The same is true with Jesus. Can and will we trust Him? I am convinced He can be trusted. More than anything else God wants you to Choose Him by trusting in the narrow way that leads to life. Out of love He warns us of the dangers of the broad way. Will you choose the way to life? Will you risk telling others about Him so that they can choose the way that leads to life?