

11 February 2018

### **The Problem(s) with God: Why Would a Loving God Need a Hell, Anyway?**

Isaiah 14:3-4, 9-11; Rev. 20:11-15

As we deal with the theological questions regarding hell, we only have a few scriptures to look at, and they're all over the board. Take this prophecy against the king of Babylon, found in Isaiah 14. We will read verses 3-4 and 9-11:

*<sup>3</sup>When the Lord has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, <sup>4</sup>you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: How the oppressor has ceased! How his insolence has ceased! . . .*

*<sup>9</sup> Sheol beneath is stirred up  
to meet you when you come;  
it rouses the shades to greet you,  
all who were leaders of the earth;  
it raises from their thrones  
all who were kings of the nations.*

*<sup>10</sup> All of them will speak  
and say to you:  
'You too have become as weak as we are!  
You have become like us!'*

*<sup>11</sup> Your pomp is brought down to Sheol,  
and the sound of your harps;  
maggots are the bed beneath you,  
and worms are your covering.*

Or take this one from Revelation 20, a more familiar picture. We read verses 11-15:

*<sup>11</sup> Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup>And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. <sup>13</sup>And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup>Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; <sup>15</sup>and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Sarah was a bright young woman at the last church I served. I was there long enough to see her grow from a shy little girl to a moody adolescent Goth with black eyeliner and wardrobe to an intense and focused college student, but she was always thoughtful and articulate. One Sunday after worship, she asked if she could talk to me in my office. Yes, of course. We sat down, and

she said, “I’m not sure I believe this whole ‘hell’ business. Where does that come from, anyway?” I replied, “Tell me what you don’t believe. What are the teachings that bother you?” and over the next half hour we distilled her doubts to basically two problems. First, there was the standard picture of hell as a place of eternal agony in sulphurous flames. Sarah had a problem believing that a loving God would design a place of such torture for anyone. The second problem had to do with the whole “forever” business. It seemed strange to Sarah that God would decide people’s eternal fate once and for all based on a few short years of life on earth. She just couldn’t imagine God telling souls, “I’m sorry, the filing deadline for repentance has passed, and no late applications will be accepted.” Maybe some of you have shared some of Sarah’s questions. Or, perhaps, you haven’t before but you are now. Either way, let’s think together.

We should start with what the Bible says, but it’s not as much help as you might have expected. Remember a few sermons ago, I described scripture as a mingling of cultural presuppositions from the time of the human author with gleams of divine inspiration that break through. Well, few topics illustrate this better than that of hell, because as the biblical culture changes, so does the image of hell in the Bible. In the Old Testament, there is no hell. There’s just one afterlife for all people: a place of darkness, gloom, and boredom called Sheol. You heard about it in the reading from Isaiah 14, where it is pictured as the great equalizer – there, even the great king of Babylon lies on the same bed of maggots as everyone else. Scripture even gives us the location of Sheol. In the Book of Numbers, when two Israelites rebel against Moses the earth opens up and they “fall alive into Sheol.” So it’s underground. So far as I know, independent geological surveys have not confirmed this location. By New Testament times, though, in a different culture, there were different afterlives for good and evil people. Jesus makes several references to hell, generally in parables. Sometimes he depicts it as a place of fire and thirst, and sometimes he calls it “the outer darkness.” Paul, who talks a lot about resurrection, surprisingly says nothing at all about hell. But Revelation makes up for it. The second passage we read earlier is typical for that book, all about people being judged according to their works, and many being thrown into eternal torment in a lake of fire.

So, at least in terms of the details, the Bible’s not much help. The Old Testament description is different from the ones in the New Testament, and those aren’t consistent with each other. Moreover, in the New Testament, hell only appears in Jesus’ imaginative stories or in symbolic texts like Revelation, so we need to be careful about taking those descriptions literally. Especially the ones in Revelation. Let me illustrate. Here’s how Revelation describes heaven: a cubic city descending from the sky that has gates made of pearls and contains a tree of life that grows on both sides of a river and has streets of gold – transparent gold, no less, which raises the question, “Huh?” It seems obvious that the author has piled up images of everything considered beautiful or precious or symmetrical on earth, and that we aren’t *supposed* to take it as a literal description. That being so, why would we take the fire and brimstone and lake of fire pictures of hell literally? It’s poetic imagery, not an actual description, all right?

So that helps with Sarah’s first question – her problem with the torturous afterlife described in such loving detail by Revelation and Dante and Hieronymus Bosch and generations of fear-mongering evangelists. But what about her second question – about the finality of hell?

Would God really throw someone in hell, whatever it's like, then throw away the key? Would a loving God throw anyone in hell at all?

Now there's a long tradition in Christian theology of saying, "No! God would never do anything so mean! In the end, everyone is going to heaven." This perspective is called Universalism, and it would be very comforting, wouldn't it? Not just for ourselves but for our old reprobate Uncle Jake, whom we love but who gave up any interest in religion thirty years ago. Speaking for myself here, though, Universalism doesn't work for me. As I've said before, the central revelation of our Bible is found in Jesus, and while Jesus may use a variety of contradictory images to describe hell, he's pretty consistent about there being one. And I have another problem with Scot-Free Universalism. A couple of weeks ago, when dealing with the problem of evil, I strongly affirmed my belief in free will. We were made with the freedom to choose either to do good or evil, because God created us to learn and grow. For that reason, I rejected the Calvinistic determinism of claiming that everything that happened was the preordained will of God. If God has everything planned out ahead of time, then free will is a joke, or a lie. Well, that applies to Universalism, too. If everyone goes to heaven regardless of their choices, that also invalidates free will. Universalism is just as deterministic as Calvinism – sort of a Calvinism for nice people. No, I think we do get to choose good or evil, heaven or hell. And I believe some people choose hell.

One of my favorite C. S. Lewis books is *The Great Divorce*, an imaginative depiction of heaven and hell. Lewis pictures hell as a vast, sprawling city, always at twilight, and always expanding outward as its residents, who live alone, move away from their irritating neighbors. It is above all a place without community. But periodically, a bus makes the journey from hell to heaven, bringing anyone who wishes up for a visit. There, they are met by friends and family who have come to encourage them to stay. It's their choice. Heaven is waiting to receive them. But here's the fascinating thing in the book: most of the day-trippers refuse. You have to read the individual conversations of the book to appreciate its brilliance, but basically, here's why people choose hell over heaven. Once they arrive in heaven, they find it is a place of pure community, where people put others' needs before their own, find joy in others' happiness, are incapable of holding grudges or comparing themselves to others or boasting. And the visitors from hell don't buy it. They figure it has to be a trick, because *they* know that everyone has an angle. They aren't going to be sucked in by all this so-called love. "What are you *really* after? You want something from me, don't you? Well, forget it. You're not getting anything from me. What's mine is mine." They pile back on the bus for the return trip, because they can't imagine being happy in a place that isn't about them.

See what I mean? That rings *so* true. Yes, Lewis's picture of heaven and hell is a work of fiction and shouldn't be read literally any more than Revelation, but the idea behind it is absolutely consistent with the nature of God, revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't torture anyone or take pleasure in vengeance, but he *did* let people make their own choices. If they rejected him, he let them go their own way.

So here's what I told Sarah. That stuff that you don't believe – the literal flames and the irrevocable judgment – I don't believe that either. I believe that God is merciful and

compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. But I also believe that God has given us the freedom to choose our own way – and our own fate. Our choices today and throughout this life determine what sort of heaven – or hell – we are capable of experiencing. If we spend this life growing in love and caring for and forgiving others, we are also increasing our capacity to be loved and cared for and forgiven. And if we spend this life looking out for number one, we may be permitted to continue doing that indefinitely. And that’s what hell is like.

In Christopher Marlowe’s play, *Doctor Faustus*, the title character makes a deal with the demon Mephistopheles. Faustus, a scientist, trades his eternal soul for knowledge. He then embarks on a single-minded pursuit of that knowledge, shoving everyone else out of his way in his quest. And he acquires the knowledge he sought. But as he nears death, predictably, he has second thoughts. He pleads with Mephistopheles, “I don’t want to go to hell. Is there no way out?” And Mephistopheles replies, “Why this *is* hell, nor are you out of it.”

Yes, I believe in hell, as I believe in heaven. And I believe that as we make our way through this life, this “vale of soul-making,” as we choose whether to live lives of love and mercy and forgiveness, we are piecemeal choosing our heaven. Or not.