

If God Is So Loving, Why Does He Send People to Hell?

A Study in God's Love, Human Freedom & Divine Justice

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2 Peter 3:9, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Romans 5:8, Psalm 85:10-11, Isaiah 30:18, Romans 1:18-20, Acts 17:26-27, Acts 17:26-27

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Introduction: A serious question that requires a Biblical answer.

The question is not to be dismissed, not because the Bible does not answer it, but because it challenges the very truth of who God is. If God is love (*1 John 4:8*), how can a loving God send anyone into an eternity of suffering? How can hell be compatible with a God of grace and mercy?

This question therefore, deserves serious consideration, and answered completely based on God's Word. It cannot be one based purely on emotions or 'feelings' of any kind. There are many sincere people, including grieving parents, and those experiencing, or have experienced, the death of loved ones, who have desperately sought the answer to the question. This is especially true of those, whose loved one's salvation may be in doubt. Believers and teachers of the Word have wrestled with the question posed. This study seeks to examine the key Scriptures, the theological tensions, and indeed, the pastoral realities of this profound question.

There is no contradiction in the Bible between love and his justice. Or search will show this to be true. Love and justice are not at opposite poles, contradicting each other. Both expressions of His divine perfection and holy character. To gain understanding of their relationship will bring important light to shine on this relationship. This is a most important thing for a Christian to have gained, to allow them to be confident in their own faith and help others who are struggling with the issue. I am conscious that honest seekers for truth, and committed Christian believers, approach this question with genuine concern for an answer, There must be a sensitivity in the study, to this search for answers, as we honestly seek them with love and pastoral compassion.

Part 1: Considering the Right Question

Does God 'Send' People to Hell?

The framing of the question really matters. We must challenge the popular image of a harsh judgemental God, simply banishing people against their will into a fiery pit of hell. We need to ask: is that what Scripture actually teaches?

The biblical picture is more nuanced. God does not enthusiastically inflict hell on anyone. It is about what people choose, and God finally, with sorrow, honours their own choice. Hear the words of Peter:

The Lord does not delay concerning His promise, as some reckon slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9 (EMTV)

Then consider how the Bible speaks:

" For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world so that He might condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness more than the light, because their works were evil". John 3:17–19 (EMTV)

It must be noted that condemnation is not a verdict God eagerly gives. It is the state people are found in already through the nature of sin and rebellion. Jesus whole purpose in coming was not to condemn but to save. Those who reject that salvation remain in their condemnation. This is not because God put them there, it is because they preferred darkness to light. To demonstrate this heart of God in the Christ Jesus, consider the woman caught in adultery. She was caught red-handed so to speak. There were witnesses to her sin. They were challenged and they all went away. The account ends:

And standing up and seeing no one but the woman, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."" John 8:10-11 (EMTV)

You see, Jesus has the heart of compassion. He does not condemn but sends her away to make better choices about her life. She goes away with that responsibility – it will be her choice as to how she responds.

“Ah”, but someone might say, “why doesn’t God force people to accept salvation? If He did that everybody would be saved.” Sounds so plausible. However, consider love. Is true genuine love between parties, really love if it is forced on them? God, who is love (**1 John 4:8**), created man in His own image. God has a will. Man was given a will. God’s will, was to freely love. God gave man the freedom to chose to love. God will not force man to choose to love Him and in turn accept the gift of salvation. God will not take away man’s freedom. Therefore, salvation cannot be forced upon

anyone.

What Is Hell?

It is best to be exact about what hell is before asking whether it is compatible with love. The Bible uses several images and words:

- Gehenna (Greek) — the word Jesus most often uses, drawn from the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, a site of ancient idolatrous fire sacrifice. Jesus uses it as a vivid image of ultimate destruction and judgement.
- Hades — the realm of the dead, sometimes used interchangeably with Sheol (Hebrew). In **Revelation 20:14**, Hades itself is 'thrown into the lake of fire' — it is temporary, awaiting final judgement.
- The Lake of Fire (**Revelation 20:14–15**) — the final, permanent state of judgement, described as the 'second death.' This is the ultimate separation from God.

The most challenging definition of hell in Scripture, is not flames but separation. Paul writes:

“These shall pay a penalty: eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might..” in 2 Thessalonians 1:9

The Psalmist declared:

***“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore”
Psalm 16:11 (ESV)***

To be shut out of the presence of God, is to be separated from the source of all goodness, beauty, life, and the perfection of joy everlasting. To go into that permanent separation from Him, is to be separated from everything that makes existence worth living. Yet that will be the eternal state. The absence of God is an earthly choice made permanent.

Part 2: God's Love Is Real — and So Is His Justice

God's Love Is Not a Sentimental Love

One of the most important correctives I want to bring to mind is about the much-abused word, 'love'. What is love? Is a question often posed in modern songs, that is often asked. What must be understood is that love is not an emotion. That 'feeling' experienced is no more than chemicals being released in the body, that causes a change in our biology. Do not get me wrong, I do like the feelings, but that does not mount to love. In so many relationships, the feelings change, and too often the relationship breaks down. One or both of the parties go off in search of getting the feeling back. True love is a decision of the will that does not rely on 'feelings'. The marriages that I have encountered where this is the case, last. The marriage will go through many ups and downs, but the decision of the will to love brings the couple through.

As we turn to God, a similar thing happens. A common view of God's love is along these lines: 'God loves everyone, so in the end everything will be fine for everyone.' This is not what the Bible teaches. Similar emotional beliefs are fine, until life gets tough. Those who are saying they are with God, find these periods difficult, and many fall away. This is because they have not made a committed choice to love God as the Scriptures teach.

"And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." This is the first commandment". Mark 12:30 (EMTV)

The important phrase, I want to highlight is '..all your mind..'. This is where the act of the will is conceived. A true commitment to do what Scripture says here, is to stick with God no matter what.

The Bible's often quoted Scripture about God needs to be read carefully: is not 'God is nice' but 'God is love' (**1 John 4:8**), Love is not God, yet so many pursue love and its feelings, rather than the God who is love, in His very nature, love. We see this very quality in Jesus in the garden. He asked if the cup of suffering, could pass. But, He declared that it would not be His will but His Father's will. An act of His will, that was the greatest act of love. You see, love is holy, has purpose, and costs. The love of God and His Son, is most clearly displayed at the cross, where God bore in himself the full weight of human sin and rebellion:

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, the Messiah died for us. — Romans 5:8 (TLV)

This is not the love based on 'feelings'. It is the decision of a God who loved us. The Scripture that brings this home is the oft quoted, **John 3:16**. Read it carefully, word for word, note the action involved. 'He gave'. This was a divine act of will of a wonderful God who is love. This is an act of love of a holy God who took sin and its consequences for humans, so seriously, that He made that

deliberate decision to send his own Son to deal with it. That act of will, provided the means for people to be saved and not to face judgement. The cross is surely the final proof that God's love is not incompatible with justice — at the cross, they meet. Dwell for a while on this Scripture:

“Psalm 85:9-10 “Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other”. Psalm 85:10-11 (RSV)

God's Justice Is an Expression of His Love

Let me put a case to you. A father has a daughter who is treated terrible by her husband. She comes to him for help. The father knows that the brute of a husband is determined to continue to harm his daughter. What is the loving thing to do? Surely, it is to go to law and demand justice to protect his daughter. You see love and justice are partners. They do not oppose each other. In God's character, both of these qualities are united. Consider this: if God was not of a just character, how could He be fully loving? A God who ignores evil, abuse, oppression, and injustice would not be a good God and Father. In fact, He would be morally indifferent and unloving. Perish the thought. God in His very nature brings love and justice together.

Read this of Isaiah and His confirming this unity:

***“And therefore, will the LORD wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have compassion upon you; for the LORD is a God of justice, happy are all they that wait for Him”.
Isaiah 30:18 (JPS)***

The prophet makes clear, God's justice and His compassion and love are not in tension. Both of them come from the heart of the same holy character of God. The very existence of hell is God's declaration that evil will not go unanswered forever. The oppressor and robber will not triumph eternally. Every victim will be vindicated and receive justice. This shows that the charge of God being unloving is not the truth, in fact, a God who judges and gives justice, is indeed, a God who cares passionately about righteousness.

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you”. Matthew 6:33 (MKJV)

C S Lewis wrote: *“There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.”*

C.S. Lewis, The Great Divorce

The Parable of the Prodigal Son — Love That Does Not Force

Many will challenge the notion that those who choose to follow God lose their free will. However, Jesus uses a parable that is so clear about free will. The parable found in Luke **15:11–32**. In the parable, the younger son demands his inheritance whilst his father lives. Shockingly, he was in reality, wishing his father was dead. In the well-known account, the son goes off and squanders it in reckless living. Note the father does not run after him. Neither, does he frustrate or not revoke the son’s right to make a free choice. He simply watches and waits:

“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him..” — Luke 15:20 (ESV)

Do you notice the father’s response? It is unrestricted by concerns about the condition of the son. He had stood patiently until the son made his own choice. God, who is love, waits. watches. rejoices at the return of people. This is the attitude of God toward every human being. He does not force anyone to come to His embrace. In fact, like the father in the parable, the heavenly Father also has a celebration meal on the return of a lost one.

“Just so, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Luke 15:10 (EMTV)

God will never drag or force anyone to come to His open arms.

The parable ends with a very angry second son. He opposed the fact that love triumphed over judgement. The father’s words end the parable:

“But it was necessary to be merry and to rejoice, because your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.” Luke 15:32 (EMTV)

If there is still a question over love and justice being friends, consider that.

Part 3: Answering the Objections

Objection 1 — Eternal punishment is disproportionate to a finite life

There is of course the objection often raised. “How can years of sin deserve an eternity of punishment? That seems wildly unfair”.

This question fails to recognise the truth about sin. God is not keeping a tally of sins committed and giving justice according to the number of sins. Justice requires us to truly see that sin is not so much about actions. It is a state every human is in whilst unreconciled to God. For the believer, God offers the solution to the Christian who falls into sinful actions:

“If we claim that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we claim that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us”. 1 John 1:8-10 (EMTV)

This again is the love and justice of God meeting beautifully. No, sin is more than actions it is the deliberate choice by an individual that leaves them in a state of rebellion against God. It is the decided will of the person to reject the infinite love and goodness of God. Speaking to Israel, Jesus reflects this attitude that can be applied to those who reject God’s offer of salvation and righteousness in Jesus the Christ.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem who kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” Matthew 23:37 (TLV)

This brings home the eternal consequences for those who, by their own choosing, reject the God of

love and justice.

Objection 2 — What about those who never heard the gospel?

This is one of the most pastorally sensitive questions and needs careful attention to show respect for the question. Therefore, we will let the Scriptures speak.

Romans 1:18–20 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. In unrighteousness they suppress the truth, because what can be known about God is plain to them, for God has shown it to them. His invisible attributes, His eternal power and His divine nature, have been clearly seen ever since the creation of the world, being understood through the things that have been made. So, people are without excuse”. (TLV)

This clearly teaches that all people have access to what is known as general revelation. That is that the knowledge of God through creation is clearly there. Because of this we are all are accountable. The Psalmist well understood this:

Psalm 19:2-4 “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky shows His handiwork. Day to day they speak, night to night they reveal knowledge. There is no speech, no words, where their voice goes unheard”. (ERV)

Romans 2:14–16 “Those who are not Jews don't have the law. But when they naturally do what the law commands without even knowing the law, then they are their own law. This is true even though they don't have the written law. They show that in their hearts they know what is right and wrong, the same as the law commands, and their consciences agree. Sometimes their thoughts tell them that they have done wrong, and this makes them guilty. And sometimes their thoughts tell them that they have done right, and this makes them not guilty”. (ERV)

In this Scripture, Paul addresses the specific question. The honest person will admit that even if they were ignorant of anything to do with God, will know that immediate feeling of guilt and knowing their actions were wrong. Of course, there are those who are so deceived that have no conscience about what they do. Paul again addresses this:

1 Timothy 4:2 “..through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are

seared..”. (ESV)

They are guilty because of the hardness of their hearts.

Paul addressing a Greek audience, says:

Acts 17:26-27 “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us..”. (ESV)

Here again we see love and justice at work together. God holds Himself near to us and there is a time and a place when God will provide opportunities to hear the Gospel. It is the choice of each person as to their response to that Gospel.

These Scriptures make clear that God is the perfect judge. The great Abraham asked in ***Genesis 18:25, 'Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?'*** The answer is an unqualified yes. No one will be unjustly condemned who did not deserve their condemnation. No one who genuinely sought God will be turned away. We can trust His justice precisely because we know His character.

Objection 3 — If God was loving He would eventually save everyone (Universalism)

Universalism, simply stated is the belief that all people who ever lived will ultimately be saved. This is a natural human response. Indeed, it is an appealing position *emotionally*. There are many sincere people who would lean towards this view. However, anyone who looks at the Scriptures honestly will find it difficult to sustain biblically.

Jesus' warnings about hell are stark and unambiguous. Jesus, speaking of those who acted wrongly, states:

Matthew 25:46 “And these shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”. (EMTV)

Jesus is clear that there two destinations and the same adjective is used – eternal. People will go to either one depending on their choices in life.

Revelation 20:10 is horrifyingly clear:

“And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where also the Beast and the False Prophet are. And they shall be tormented day and night forever and ever”. (EMTV)

The clarity of the words cannot be understood as a temporary period. It describes the devil, the beast and the false prophet being 'tormented day and night for ever and ever'.

The very urgency of the gospel as expressed in Hebrews is so clear as well:

Hebrews 2:3 “How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?”.

Urging people to respond to the Gospel would make no sense if all roads lead to the same idyllic destination. Universalism, however compassionate in motivation, removes the purpose for Jesus' own stated mission and indeed, the church's call to evangelism. Finally, we address the case of reading Scripture without bringing other Scriptures to bear on it. It can be said, “Doesn't **1 Timothy 2:4** say God **'wants all people to be saved'**? Then why doesn't he just save everyone?

The Scriptures do make clear God's desire, but note the qualification in that Scripture, people **“must come to the full knowledge of the truth”**. **2 Peter 3:9** also says, that God is **'not wanting anyone to perish.'** God's desire is genuinely universal. However, we need to understand that Scripture distinguishes between God's desire and God's decree. God desires all to be saved, yet he has also decreed that salvation comes through repentance and faith, not by divine override. His love is real; so is human freedom – that is the power to choose. The tragedy of hell is that it is possible to choose to resist what God desires for you.

Part 4: The Cross — Where Love and Justice Kiss

The question 'How can a loving God send people to hell?', could be debated all day long and great philosophical arguments made. However, that will never give a satisfactory answer. The truth is that the answer is found on a hill called calvary. The cross is how God settles the question of

righteousness, sin and judgement and punishment. What had an uncalculatable cost, was offered with out cost to every human being. Think about this. Every human being as has been said above has fallen short of God's standard.

Revelation 21:6 "And He said to me, " I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give from the spring of the water of life freely to him that is thirsty". (EMTV)

The definitive answer to the question is found, not in philosophical argument but at Calvary. The cross is God's answer to the problem of sin and judgement and the offer of love that covers it. It is offered freely, at infinite cost, to every human being. There needs to be a blunt statement made: All human beings are born into sin and a penalty is required - death. If that is rejected then the love and justice of God will never be understood.

" For He has made Him who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him". — 2 Corinthians 5:21 (MKJV)

This is the amazing and wonderous truth. At the cross, God does not simply dismiss sin and pretend it did not happen. His justice demands sin is seen for what it is and the penalty that must be paid. As the Scripture says, the wages of sin is death. Therefore, He the unique Son of God, took upon Himself the totality of sin, ever committed: past, present and future. He paid the full penalty for all human beings in Himself. In Christ, divine love and divine justice meet in the costliest imaginable act. God does not excuse sin — He makes propitiation for it. Offers us that gift of salvation. All we have to do is accept it or reject it. It is a choice.

This shows that hell is not God's desired outcome. In this it is of great sorrow to Him, as we saw in Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. Hell is God accepting and honouring a final human choice. The cross stands as that eternal proof that God did everything possible - everything - to make a way out.

Jesus Himself said:

".. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me". John 14:6 (RSVA)

God's door to eternal life is thrown wide open. The invitation is unlimited. The price has been paid.

"The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let him who hears say, "Come." And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price". — Revelation 22:17 (RSVA)

Hell exists not because God's love is unable to meet the need of fallen human beings. It is because God's love is offered and never forced on anyone. He will not force anyone love Him. He will not drag anyone into His joyful presence if they do not wish to enter. He stands at the door and knocks (**Rev. 3:20**). Those who open it find grace. Those who do not, in the end, come into his presence, to discover that their choice has brought them to a terrible, tragic and permanent future, away from His presence.

This the heart of the Christian Gospel message. God's love is not contradicted by His justice. God's love is the motivation

The Heart of the Gospel

God's love is not a contradiction of his judgement — it is the sole reason He provided a way of escape from it. The gospel is precisely the proclamation that in Christ, the wrath we deserved has been fully borne with satisfaction, and reconciliation with God is now freely available to all who will receive it.

***" For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life".
John 3:16 (MKJV)***

Part 5: Living in Light of These Truths

How Should This Change Us?

Doctrine that does not move us to worship in Spirit and truth and inspired action has not yet been truly understood. If we genuinely believe that God is love, that hell is real, that the cross has made a way: how should we then live?

1. *Deep Gratitude*

So often in life, we meet those who do not know the words – thank you. That should not be the believer. We should be profoundly grateful to the Father. We were not saved because of our goodness or wisdom. We were saved because God, in His mercy, gave us eyes to see and hearts to respond. That is grace — pure and undeserved. **Romans 5:8** should bring us to our knees: ***'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'***

2. *Urgent Compassion for the Lost*

If we are convinced that hell is real and the gospel is the only way of deliverance, then evangelism is not an optional extra for committed Christians — it is the most loving thing any believer can do. Paul captured this urgency in Romans 10:14:

" But before people can pray to the Lord for help, they must believe in him. And before they can believe in the Lord, they must hear about him. And for anyone to hear about the Lord, someone must tell them?"
Romans 10:14 (ERV)

A genuine understanding of these doctrines should make us more compassionate, not more disinterested. We should be more willing to share the good news with gentleness and respect (**1 Pet. 3:15**), not less.

3. *Humble Confidence, Not Arrogance*

We hold these truths of Salvation as stewards; we do not own them. We do not know men's hearts as Jesus did. The final state of every soul is God's business. We know that God is perfectly just and perfectly merciful, and that His judgements will be the right ones. We cannot and must not judge any person. Our task is to proclaim the gospel to all and leave the judging to the One who alone is

qualified to judge.

4. Hope, Not Fear

For the believer, the doctrine of hell is not a source of fear or dread. It is a great security. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (**Romans 8:1**). The same God who is Judge is also Saviour — and those who are hidden in Christ need not fear the judgement. Hell confirms that God takes evil seriously. Heaven confirms that he takes love seriously. And the cross confirms that he takes us seriously.

This then throws us back to answer the question for ourselves. If God Is So Loving, Why Does He Send People to Hell? As a believer or a non-believer, what is your answer and response?

