

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 31, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 9:20

“But what right have you, a human being, to cross-examine God?” (Jerusalem Bible)

WHY I BELIEVE IN HELL (3)

Martin Luther once made the pungent remark (no doubt with tongue in cheek) that God had created hell to house those who were too inquisitive in questioning His righteous judgments! And St. Paul, in our text, asks, “What right have you, a human being, to cross-examine God?” In posing that question, the Apostle was not saying, “One has no right whatsoever to question God.” Rather, he is speaking to those with an unrepentant, God-defying attitude, who want to play the role of prosecuting attorney, and put God in the dock, and make Him answerable for everything that He does; and by their arrogant questions, try to defame God’s character.

Many people who offer objections to the biblical doctrine of hell do so, not in any presumptuous or arrogant fashion, but simply because they are sorely perplexed, and crave to have their questions answered in such a way that God’s character is not defamed. They love God, but these questions haunt them, and they look for answers.

It is to these questions and objections that we turn our attention this morning.

1. “Hell seems clearly contrary to the love of God. How could a God of love create or even tolerate such a torture chamber?”

The answer is — Of course hell is contrary to the love of God. Just because God loves us, He created us with free will. He wanted us to be able to choose to love Him in return for His great love for us. He wanted us to be free like Himself. His love created our freedom and respects our freedom. It is this free will of ours that chooses hell. As I said in Sermon One, God loves us so much that He will never force you to go to heaven against your will.

God extends His everlasting mercy to us. That is why Christ came to earth to die for our sins. God pleads with us to accept His forgiveness by putting our trust in Christ, and in Christ alone, for our salvation. Forgiveness appeals to the freedom of our will. Forgiveness is freely offered, but it must also be freely accepted, like any gift. If we do not repent and ask for God’s forgiveness, we do not receive it; not because God holds it back, but because we obstinately and deliberately refuse to accept it.

Fisher Humphreys in his book, Thinking About God, tells of a television fiction story in which a bank robber is killed by the police. A man in a white suit, supposedly the robber’s guardian angel, raised him from the dead. The angel said, “I am here to give you whatever you want.” He took the robber to a large store stocked with beautiful furniture, a well-stocked bar, stereo-phonetic music, and beautiful girls. At first the robber enjoyed it, but soon he became bored. Then the robber wanted to go to the pool hall. With his first shot he sank every ball on the table.

Soon he became bored with this too. He told the angel that he wanted to rob a bank. The angel arranged it, and the robbery progressed smoothly. The robber escaped with large bags of money. He repeated the act of robbery several times, but soon he tired of this also. Then the angel asked him what he wanted. The robber could not think of anything. The story closed with a dramatic dialogue:

“Well, Angel, I’d better tell you something. You see, there’s been a mistake. On earth I was a bad guy, see? So, I really belong in hell with the other bad guys. I mean, I don’t really desire to be here in heaven, you understand? So, send me away from heaven.”

The angel replied, “My friend, you have made the mistake. Whatever made you think this is heaven?”

You see, if we insist on having our own way, we are certain to create a hell for ourselves. Three times in the first chapter of Romans (vs. 24, 26, 28) the Apostle Paul repeats the statement, “God let them go ahead into every sort of sin.” (L.B.) Whether we choose God or not is a choice which each of us must make. Again, I would quote from C. S. Lewis in his book, The Problem of Pain. The lost, he says, enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved.”

God encouraged Adam and Eve to eat of all the trees in the Garden, but He warned them against eating from one tree. Their decision determined their destiny, resulting in death and separation from God. St. Paul traced man’s depravity to man’s own choice. The people sought to live without God, and He granted them their wish. Many people today show no interest in knowing and loving God, and in having a saving relationship with Christ. God will allow such people to spend eternity continuing to choose a life apart from Him, because He will not force anyone to live with Him. And an eternity without God is what hell is all about.

2. “Hell seems contrary to God’s justice as well as His love, for the punishment does not seem to fit the crime. How can 80 years of sinning on earth justly merit eternal punishment?”

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that those who raise this question believe that those who die in their sins, and without having accepted Christ as Savior, deserve to spend some time in hell as punishment for their sins. This would amount to the cleansing fires of purgatory, and after this temporary punishment, hell would be emptied, and all would be transferred to heaven. Our questioner would no doubt make the point that the temporary sufferings of this period spent in hell would undoubtedly transform all the wicked into saints! In the torment of their sojourn in the abode of the damned, they would learn to love God; they would come to a sincere hatred for sin; and they would surrender their hearts to Christ unconditionally.

But consider a human parallel. A criminal in prison more often than not does not experience a genuine change of heart through the punishment imposed on him by the court. Rather, in the end he comes out more hardened in sin and eager to continue in a life of crime because of what he has learned from other criminals while in prison.

Therefore, what possibility is there that the wicked, serving out their sentence in hell, can ever come to a change of heart toward God and His holy law? Remember that in hell they are completely cut off from God's presence: The Holy Spirit, Who alone can bring about the new birth and regenerate the sinner's heart, is not present in hell to convict them of their sin.

In the New Testament lesson this morning we read about the typical reaction of fallen man toward divine punishment; and it is an awesome statement: "The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God Who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent or glorify Him... Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done." (Revelation 16:8—11)

If this is the response of the unconverted heart of fallen man while still here on earth, what prospect is there that in the agonies of hell the punishment or suffering will lead to any true repentance or reconciliation with God? None whatever! No matter how long an unbeliever might remain in hell, he will never come to the breaking point so far as his opposition to God is concerned. No amount of suffering will ever change his mind or lead to his purification from an evil heart, because the Holy Spirit is not there to convict him of his sin. What a tragic destiny!

3. "Not only does hell seem to contradict God's love and justice, but also God's power." The argument might be put in the form of a dilemma. Does God will everyone to be saved or not? If not, He is not all-loving; but if He desires all to be saved, and some are not, then His will is thwarted, and He is not all-powerful.

The question then is: Is God omnipotent; is he all-powerful, or is He not? It would seem that if anyone is finally lost in hell, it would deny that God is all-powerful because He can't save everyone.

But in order to reconcile God's omnipotence with hell, we must first be sure that we have a true conception of what omnipotence really means. You see, God's power does not extend to contradicting His own essential nature. For example, God cannot sin. God cannot do meaningless and self-contradictory things.

But someone says, "If all things are possible with God, why didn't God create a world without sin?" The answer is that He did, according to Genesis chapters 1 and 2. The source of evil is not God's power, but man's freedom. "Then why didn't God create a world without human freedom?" someone asks. Because if He had, we could never have been regarded as moral beings. We would simply be puppets whose every action is dictated by the manipulation of the hand inside. A world of puppets would have been a world without hate, but it would also have been a world without love; for love proceeds only from free will.

"But isn't a world with free human beings, but no sin, possible?" it is indeed. God created just such a world. Adam and Eve were created with free will, and they were without sin until they disobeyed God. You see, a world in which it is possible not to sin, is necessarily a world in which it is possible to sin. And if there are human beings at all; that is, creatures with

free will, made in the image of God, it is up to their free choice whether they actually commit sin or not. That was the choice that confronted Adam and Eve.

To put it another way — Even an omnipotent God could not have created a world of human beings with free will and yet no possibility of committing sin, simply because the word “freedom” includes the possibility of sin within its very meaning. God, as I have said, cannot act in contradiction to His essential nature. One such self-contradiction would be to create a world in which there is real free choice; that is, the possibility of freely choosing good and evil, and at the same time no possibility of choosing evil. To ask why God didn’t create such a world is like asking why God didn’t create colorless color or round squares!

So, you see it would be intrinsically impossible to have a world with free human beings and no possibility of hell. Of course, there are three ways in which you might think God could do this:

1. Destroy hell,
2. Annihilate the souls in hell, or
3. Arrange for no hell-bound persons ever to be conceived.

But to destroy hell means to destroy free choice by destroying one of its two options. If there is no hell, no separation from God, then all must choose God, and this is not a free choice. To annihilate the souls in hell would be to destroy something God created to be immortal and indestructible; and this is another self-contradiction for God. And to arrange for only heaven-bound souls to be conceived would be in effect to destroy free choice again: To destroy free choice of evil before it happens rather than after.

Of course, this is not “the best of all possible worlds,” or even a world as good as it might be. But that is not God’s fault. It is ours. What this objection really comes down to is resentment toward God for creating free will at all.

4. “Hell seems so contrary to the mind and morality of Jesus.”

The famous atheist philosopher, Bertrand Russell, argued in his book, Why I am Not a Christian, that any teacher who believed in hell could not be a truly moral teacher. He thought the God of Christianity to be a cosmic hypocrite, preaching forgiveness, but practicing vengeance; preaching kindness, but practicing cruelty; preaching love, but practicing torture.

We reply by saying that what the critic means by “the morality of Jesus” is quite different from the actual morality of the real Jesus. Our Lord Who came from heaven to die for our sins, is the One Who taught both mercy and justice, love and judgment, heaven and hell. To say that anyone who teaches and warns about hell is immoral, is like saying that any mother who warns her children not to play with fire, is immoral. Such thinking is just plain silly.

It is easy to confuse “forgiving” with “condoning.” Condoning sin means pretending it isn’t sin; pretending that “there’s nothing to forgive.” But there is! God is not ignorant or dishonest. Because He knows everything about us doesn’t mean that He will hide His head in the

sand like an ostrich. Because He is ineffably holy, He must deal with sin, and deal justly. His mercy does not destroy His justice; both are elements of His goodness; and both are inescapable.

Although Jesus did not condemn the woman taken in adultery, He did say to her, “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:11) And to the paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda whom He healed, He said, “Stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you.” (John 5:14)

Jesus, on the Cross, paid our debt by enduring the punishment we should have borne. We go free. Still, the debt had to be paid. Justice cannot be ignored, for “the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23)

5. “The effect of believing in hell is the opposite of what the God of the Bible wants from us. God wants faith and hope and love. But if we believe in hell, we naturally feel fear, despair, and hatred.”

But fear is something good and necessary. Many a person is kept from doing wrong, not because of what the Bible says, but because of fear. Thousands upon thousands of homosexuals stopped going to bath houses and stopped engaging in promiscuous sexual activity. Why? Not because they thought their lifestyle was wrong, but because they were afraid of contracting AIDS.

George MacDonald said, “Where there are wild beasts about, it is better to feel afraid than to feel secure.” Dr. Samuel Johnson once said to his biographer Boswell, “Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows that he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” Indeed, it does, because he is afraid of what will face him when the trap door is sprung. Fear is a good emotion if it causes people to fly to Jesus for salvation. Once within the fold of salvation, we begin to experience the love of God which He has for us in Christ — a love that casts out fear.

Proverbs 1:7 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” though it is not the end. Love is the end — the love of God Who mercifully delivers us from hell by providing a Savior for us. And belief in hell does not produce despair and hatred; Hell itself produces despair and hate. If you believe that there are two roads ahead, one of which leads home, and one of which leads over a cliff, you do not despair, especially if the two roads are clearly marked by signs, as are the roads to heaven and hell. Only after the wrong choice is made, and you have fallen over the cliff, does despair take over. Belief in hell should not produce hatred of God, for God did not invent sin. We did. He invented salvation.

6. “If hell exists, no loving soul in heaven can be happy for all eternity.” Suppose your parent or spouse or child goes to hell and you go to heaven. How could you endure that pain forever? If we stop loving them, we are not good; if we keep loving them we are not happy. By way of answer, let me say three things:

a. We should begin with the data we have, and then try to proceed from there to find out what we do not know. We know that there will be no sadness in heaven, though we may not know how God manages this. In Revelation 21:4 (Jerusalem Bible) the Word of God tells us,

“He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone.” We know that for sure, because God says so.

b. Doesn't our Lord Jesus Christ miss and grieve over those whom he warned and pled with, beginning with Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate and many of His friends in Nazareth who did not believe on Him? Would you say then that Jesus is unhappy in heaven? Is not the answer rather in this direction, namely that once we get to heaven all such ties as were not in Christ (including family ties), will lose their meaning? Surely our Lord's words in Matthew 12:46-50 definitely point in that direction:

“While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ He replied to him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”

In whatever way God manages not to be sad, even though people He created and loves are in hell — however He manages to do this — we will learn from Him. Somehow or other, God manages it. God is infinite love and infinite joy, even though some go to hell. It can be done because God does it. And if God does it, He will teach us how to do it.

c. The most practical answer to this objection is this: If you cannot imagine how you can be happy in heaven if a loved one is lost, then pray and work for your dear one's salvation. God may have saved you so that you can do everything you can for your friend's salvation, by way of witness and example — “Lord, You've just got to save John or Mary.” Surely God would not refuse that prayer, for even if its theology may be suspect, its heart is not!

7. “In spite of all the arguments you have put forward, our deepest instincts find hell simply intolerable and incredible.”

But let us remember that our instinctive denial of hell proves nothing, just as our instinctive denial of our own impending death proves nothing. If you went to the doctor feeling fine and were told that you had six weeks to live, your natural reaction would be denial, but denial is not disproof. Instinct is sometimes a way of finding truth, but our instincts are not infallible; nor is our reasoning. In fact, we are driven back to this bedrock truth — God cannot lie. If we cannot trust God's Word, we can trust nothing. Christians do not believe in hell because they want to (what a horrible thought!) but because God has instructed them to believe it.

Why, then, must we believe in and teach hell?

1. For the only good reason to believe or teach anything — because it is true, and we must warn and be fearlessly honest with the unsaved. The prophet Jeremiah suffered a great deal because he preached the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And listen to what he wrote: “prophets and priests alike all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is not peace.” (Jeremiah 8:10-11)

2. Because we have love and compassion for the lost. Many a young person has ventured out on ice that seemed thick enough to bear his weight, only to be drowned when the ice gave way, and he had ignored the warning signs that had been posted at the scene of the tragedy. We want to plead with people to heed the warning signs — “Danger ahead!”

When we preach about hell, we may be mocked and maligned, but remember — our Lord was nailed to a Cross because He told the truth. To be called a nasty name is a small price to pay if even one person comes to know Christ because he doesn't want to spend eternity in hell.

AMEN.