

A Hellish Question

Q: Why doesn't God just destroy those who reject Him instead of sending them to hell for eternity? Isn't God being cruel by punishing otherwise generally good people just because they didn't believe in Him?

Em

Dear Em

Thank you for writing. I always find it interesting and difficult to answer questions that deal with God's judgment. Have you read The Revelation of Jesus Christ given to the Apostle John? This is the only book in the Bible that promises a blessing for both reading and hearing it. Incidentally, it is not a calendar. In my opinion the book was not given to us as a way to predict when Jesus will return. Even though it's a very difficult book to understand, if you haven't read it lately you should do so. You will probably have even more questions after reading it. You won't be alone as you ponder it's mysteries. A countless number of commentaries have been written about it over the years. My favorite teacher is the late Dr. Ray Stedman. You can find his work on [Revelation](#) in the Peninsula Bible Church online publications--(just click on the link).

If I understand your question correctly, you are not asking if there is a hell, but rather you are asking why death isn't judgment enough, why does there have to be a "hell"? I have observed that most people, believers and nonbelievers alike, struggle with understanding why God, who says He is love, would cause anyone to be cast into a "lake of fire." Perhaps you have even asked God the same question that I have: "Lord, why don't you just un-exist your enemies instead of sending them to a cruel-sounding hell?" I have a semi-comforting answer. There are a lot of things counted and numbered in the Revelation, but there is no fixed number of people going to hell mentioned in the book. Therefore, we can pray that the number will be small and we can ask God to use us, through the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to reduce that unknown number. If all we do is complain about the existence of hell and never make ourselves available to God to do something about the people who are going there, we don't really care all that much about it, do we?

The popular mythology of our culture has provided us with a lot of misinformation and mistaken assumptions about the state of humanity and God's judgment. We err in how we imagine the scene. It's common for people to think that when we die, each of us will appear before God on His throne and in the blink of an eye, because time is suspended, God will run an instant replay of our lives and individually judge each person or former person on the basis of their good and bad behavior. Because we have heard that He is a loving God, we figure that He cuts everybody a lot of slack and manages to find a couple of fairly good things about each of us. He forgives the bad stuff and welcomes everyone into Heaven except for Hitler and a few other really bad guys. We find it easier to believe that there may be a hell or some other kind of punishment for history's big time villains.

The belief that there is a final judgment and destruction is not limited to the philosophies of western civilization, it's part of almost all the world's religions. This is because the creation itself teaches a powerful and undeniable message. It is obvious that the world is moving toward some kind of an end. My morning hot cup of coffee always gets colder unless I reheat it. Indeed everything around me seems to be caught in the same flow of energy loss. New cars grow old, their tires wear out, the road under them needs repair, the Earth's elements continue to decay and even the Sun will someday expend all of its energy. And more to the point, each of us, along with all other living things, are growing old and dying. Because death is so evident, mankind has always wondered about life after death.

For instance, some of the religious paintings of a group of long dead Tibetan monks depict a scary looking figure with a set of balance scales weighing the deeds of the dead. On the scale are black and white stones. The white ones represent the good deeds and the black ones the evil deeds. Behind the being with the scale are two paths: one goes to a kind of heaven and the other to destruction. The path to paradise is open to those who have more white stones than black ones. Obviously Christians aren't the only people who believe that how we live has something to do with a final judgment, nor are we the only religion with a burning hell. These ancient Tibetan scroll paintings show the black rock folks being pushed into a fiery cauldron. They also reveal a belief that there are lot more people going the way of the black stone path than there are on the white rock road.

We are not as contemplative as our ancestors were, so to most modern people life is like that old joke about the guy who fell down the elevator shaft of a very tall building. About half way down a friend shouted, "How's it going?" and as he fell past he replied, "So far so good!". We are all so busy getting on with getting ours, we think we're still alive. We don't realize that we just haven't hit bottom yet. From time to time the certainty of death intrudes into our conscious thoughts along with the evidence that the Earth under our feet is doing a slow burn. For a moment we pause and wonder about it all, give a so-far so-good shrug of our shoulders and press on. However, in the end, I would be willing to bet that the number one subject on a dying man's mind is how to escape death and what ever follows.

I think the best way to approach part of your question is to get a clearer picture of that terrible day. The Bible teaches that we are all born on our way to death and destruction. This means we are already judged. You could just as easily have asked, "why do people die?" Most critics of judgment overlook the fact that we were born under what the ancient world called the curse of death. In other words, death is what God's judgment is. The whole human race, past, present, and future is already on the way to hell. How to escape death is really the issue, not what we believe about the end, hell, or our mistaken ideas of how that final judgment scene might look. If there is no escape available it hardly matters that we think an endless hell is cruel. The only thing that matters is that this very day might be my last. Read what Solomon said, "For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die!" (Eccl 2:16). Things change. Because believers and non-believers face the same apparent end, the question has now become, "What is death?"

Christians believe that death is the evidence that all of fallen humanity is sinful and unable to live a righteous life. Sin is in the world because death is in the world. Death is in the world because sin causes it. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned..." (Rom 5:12). Paul is referring to the sin and death of the first human and all of his descendants. Adam sinned and he and all of creation, both in the sky above and on Earth, died. The whole cosmos started falling down that elevator shaft. So-far, not-so-good.

Your question left out the fact that we were all born damned. Whether or not one believes that there is a God, judgment, angels, devils or hell doesn't have much to do with it. Death is actually the evidence of our problem. Death is the proof that we are in need of salvation. Good behavior will not save us. One can not avoid death by being good. Believing that there is a God won't save anyone. Paul goes on to explain in same the letter to the Roman Church, "For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ." (Rom 5:17)

Those who face hell do so because they rejected the salvation offered through Jesus Christ. God is not cruel. He offers us a most amazingly merciful deal while we are still alive and falling. Jesus died on the cross for our sins, as most of us have heard. Somehow the rest of the offer isn't as commonly known. This is the part of the deal that astounds me the most. He offers all humanity, on an individual basis, the free gift of His own righteousness. In a judgment scene from the Revelation John wrote, "And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds." (Rev 20:12)

For me this is the most important part of Jesus' offer: He is willing to write in the Book of Life after my name, in the place where good deeds are recorded, something like this: "Ted Wise: born of a virgin, filled with the

Holy Spirit, lived thirty three years without sin, he healed the sick, raised the dead and loved humanity enough to die for everyone...". Jesus will give anyone who will accept Him as Lord the free gift of His righteousness, His right standing with God. Frankly that's just too good of a deal to pass up. Particularly if one is balking over something they don't know anything about. Like what life is like after death, or because one's limited sense of justice can't seem to accommodate the idea that God has a penalty for sin. God says that all of humanity is equally sinful and evil. Just because one lacks the nerve or opportunity to do big time villainy doesn't make one innocent. God can not possibly be cruel and offer such a wonderful escape from the curse of sin and death. I believe that those who will perish in that final judgment were all offered the same grace-filled gift that Jesus presented to me. Maybe they turned Him down?

There is one more thing I would like to point out about God's judgment and that has to do with who Jesus says won't make the cut. From the first recorded acts of worship by Cain and Abel, down through time until the last day, there will be those who believe that their own sincere effort to live righteously will count for something when the Book of Life is opened. They believe that because they have denied themselves many earthly pleasures, and have spent their lives devoted to keeping the commandments, they have earned a place in heaven. It's easy to understand how they might feel that way. Anyone who worked hard all of their life doing what they believed to be God's work might well expect a reward for their effort. It's only natural, but it's not supernatural. It's actually a pagan type of belief like the idea represented by the white rocks in those old Tibetan paintings.

Here is what Jesus says about this kind of person, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'" (Mat 7:21-23) How can this be? How can they be lawless?

They are lawless because they failed to see that the law demanded perfect obedience, not merely sincere obedience. By attempting to lower the law to their own standard they became lawless. Jesus is the only one who has ever fulfilled the commandments. And in that big book, He has written that I have done it too. I hope you know that He is willing to write all that good stuff after your name as well. Not only is the offer too good to pass up, but you will still have the freedom to say to Him, "Hey Father, this hell stuff still looks weird to me". He loves to answer our questions. The Apostle James wrote, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." (James 1:5).

Love

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"He must increase, but I must decrease..." --John the Baptist

PS. Regarding the message that God's creation declares, Lambert Dolphin has done an amazing amount of research on this subject and some great reading can be found at his site:

(<http://www.best.com/~dolphin/index.html>). This link from his index leads to an article titled, "Thermodynamics of Living Systems" (<http://www.ldolphin.org/mystery/chapt7.html>).

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