

A Loving God and Hell

Sunday 27 October 2013 PM – Colin Hughes

Possibly one of the most common questions asked by Christians is something along the lines, “What happens to the poor innocent native in Africa who has never heard of Christ?”

Before we begin to explore this challenging question it must be said that the answers to a question like this are often very difficult to accept and at the very least they should make us feel uncomfortable. There are many different views found even within the Christian faith, so I will begin by saying that any answers I attempt to provide will be based on what the Bible says and nothing more. That is, the Bible speaks very clearly on certain points, but remains silent on others. And in general, I will be attempting to provide answers from the perspective of the Evangelical and Reformed traditions. So with that said we shall begin...

On the surface, at least, the question appears to be coming from a genuine concern for eternal fate of those who are born in parts of the world where people never have heard the gospel message. But there is a far more subtle question being asked behind the original question: How can a supposedly loving God can send anyone to hell?

The firm foundation on which we build any answers to our question must be rooted in the non-negotiable truth that God is just. The Scriptures are rich with declarations that God is a righteous judge. One particular example which is pertinent to our question is found in chapter 18 of Genesis. God has declared that the sins found in the two cities of Sodom and Gomorrah have become so grave that He has determined to destroy the cities and its inhabitants. Abraham is deeply concerned and standing before God he says,

- 23: *“Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?*
24: *Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?*
25: *Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”*
26: *And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”*
27: *And Abraham answered and said, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.*
28: *Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And He said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.”*

In the passage we read that Abraham is dissatisfied with this compromise and he continues to push for lower and lower numbers, until God finally says, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” (verse 32)

Immediately after this conversation we read in chapter 19 that God sends two angels to Sodom, presumably to find the ten righteous people. Upon arrival they meet with Lot at the city gate and Lot asks the two angels to come to his home so that they may spend the night with him. The angels said that they would prefer to spend the night in the town square, but

Lot insists and they are persuaded to go to his home. After they had eaten a meal, but before they had lay down to rest, men of the city surrounded the house and demanded that Lot should send out the two angels so that they might perform unspeakable acts with them. Lot begged the men of the city not to do this wicked thing and instead he offered his two daughters. They became enraged that Lot, who was a temporary resident himself in their city, should be trying to negotiate with them and they threatened now to do even worse things to him. Before they could drag Lot into the street the angels pulled him inside the house and struck the men outside the door with blindness. The angels told Lot that the city was going to be destroyed and they asked him if there was anyone else in the city who belonged to him. So Lot went out and tried to persuade his sons-in-law to be, who were to marry his daughters, to gather immediately to escape the city and its imminent destruction, but they laughed and thought him to be a fool. In the morning the angels urged Lot by saying,

15: *“Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city.”*

16: *But he lingered. So the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and set him outside the city.*

After this we read that God destroyed the entire city and all of its inhabitants.

There are many lessons to be learned from this text. For example, there will be some people, like Lot’s sons-in-law to be, who after receiving a clear message of warning will still disbelieve and even make fun. But their refusal to heed to the warning cost them their very lives, for along with the rest of the city they were destroyed. And yet even though Lot himself lingered, God in His mercy forcibly took Lot, his wife, and two daughters to the safety limits of the city before allowing the city to be destroyed. Was Lot any more deserving? Of course not, but God in His mercy chose to save those four people.

In fact, after being placed a safe distance from the city the angels told Lot and his family to flee to the hills and commanded that they must not look back. However, we read in verse 26: “But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.” And then not long after finding a cave in the hills to settle in we read how the two daughters, concerned now that their offspring might not be preserved because their husband’s to-be had been destroyed, made their father drunk with wine and went into his bed. Having each slept with him they became pregnant. Whether it be the desperation of the daughters or the drunkenness of the father, all three were without excuse and they were entirely accountable for their own despicable actions. The twist to this act of sin is that the son of the eldest daughter was called Moab, who became the father of the Moabite people, and the son of the younger was called Ben-ammi, who became the father of the Ammonites. Both tribes would become thorns in the side of the people of Israel many years later. However, the point we are considering here is that even the four people who God chose to save within no time failed to live up to even the most basic standards of obedience and faithfulness. Why God chooses to save any of us is surely a great mystery and we should be constantly reminded to thank God for His grace and mercy to rescue such undeserving people as ourselves.

However, the lesson we learn from this passage which is most relevant to our question, is the patience that God shows as He condescends to indulge Abraham's plea to spare the cities for the sake of the supposed innocent, righteous men who lived there. But the irony is that Abraham begins his plea with, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" If God had announced His judgement on Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham really believed that God would only do what was just then why would he need to negotiate at all? It was almost as if he was saying to God, "Are you sure you've thought this through?" The reality is that his apparent well-meaning concern for the innocent population of the cities was in fact a veiled challenge against God's justice and His ability to judge fairly.

And we too must be careful in what we are really saying when we ask the question, "What happens to the poor innocent native in Africa who has never heard of Christ?" First and foremost we must always keep in mind that God is a righteous judge and will only do what is just. Every single person is guaranteed to receive nothing but the most perfect justice from God.

So with a careful respect for the manner in which we ask the question, what does happen after death to the innocent native in Africa? The answer is remarkably simple and may surprise us. It is the very same thing that happens to the innocent native in South America, Australia, France, Moreton... nothing! The innocent native goes straight to heaven. He suffers no loss for never having heard about Christ. He doesn't need to hear about Christ. Why? Because Christ was not sent into the world to minister to innocent people. They have nothing to fear from the judgement or wrath of God. Innocent people do not require a Saviour. Only guilty people need redemption. The innocent native has nothing to worry about. He can get to heaven on the virtue of his innocence.

However, we have made a faulty assumption in our question. The real question is, are there any innocent natives anywhere in the world? If the Scriptures teaches one truth clearly it is that we all participate in the problem of sin.

But isn't it true that some people in the remotest parts of the world have never even heard of Christ or the law of God? Plus the Bible teaches, "For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression." (Romans 4:15)

However, when we talk about transgressing the laws of God we are not talking about the Old Testament laws or the ten commandments which were given to God's people and written down in the Scriptures. We are talking about the law which God has written on the hearts and minds of men.

Paul writes, "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them." (Romans 2:14-15)

It is clear that no one is pure. No one is innocent with respect to the law of God: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We have a saying in our society: No one is perfect. Yet what does God require? He requires holiness and perfect

obedience. If we transgress we become debtors with a debt which we cannot repay. James writes, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it." (James 2:10)

But what happens to that person who has never heard of Jesus? Surely God cannot condemn someone who has never heard of Christ or has never had the opportunity to hear about Christ? God is just. We can indeed be assured that He will never say, "I am going to punish you for rejecting my Son of whom you have never heard."

Many will breathe a sigh of relief at this, but once again we have made a faulty assumption. The unspoken assumption is that the only ultimate crime for which God will punish men is the rejection of Christ. If that were the only reason that God sends people to hell then the greatest disservice you could ever do to someone is to disturb their ignorance and tell them about Christ. You are exposing them to the wrath of God, which they would not have to worry about if they could continue in their ignorance. But the fundamental point which the Bible teaches is that Christ enters a world which has already been judged guilty of sin. Christ said, "For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:13) The basis of that sin is not the rejection of Christ of whom they have never heard, but the rejection of the Father of whom they have heard.

The New Testament teaches unambiguously that God reveals Himself to all people. Every human being receives a revelation of the existence and the character of the one true God.

We call this the general, or natural, revelation of God. It is that which is evident in nature and by what is written in the hearts and minds of every human being. This is in contrast to the special revelation of God which can only be known through the Holy Scriptures.

If there is one thing that we learn from the study of cultures and comparative religions it is that man is incurably religious. However, the Bible tells us that all men in their natural fallen state abuse that revelation and fail in their obligation to obey their creator by rejecting Him.

Reading: Romans 1:18-32

18a: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*

Against what is God pouring out His wrath? Against innocence? Against righteousness?

If that were true then we could understand those who protest and make objections against a tyrannical and unjust God, but that is not the case. He is pouring out His wrath against ungodliness and unrighteousness. But note that Paul is not saying that God is directing His anger towards those two separate sins, rather it is the root of those sins. For he goes on to say,

18b: *who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*

That is, it is the sin of suppressing the truth that leads to ungodliness and unrighteousness. But what truth is being suppressed and why does this cause God to be wrathful?

It is the truth about His own nature, His own being, His own character, which He has graciously chosen to reveal to all men. Paul continues,

19: *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.*

He is stating clearly that the truth about God is evident to all people. It is within them. God Himself has laid it on their hearts and minds. It is not as if God has hidden his existence so that only the wisest and most determined will find Him. Everybody gets it.

20a: *For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.*

Paul is not saying that it is only to be revealed to a certain generation at a certain time in history, nor is he saying that we need to endlessly search hidden locations in order to deduce that there must be a creator God. He is saying that God's eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived in the things which have been made ever since creation. Additionally, God has placed in His image bearers an inherent knowledge of His being and His nature. Paul concludes this section of the passage with the chilling indictment:

20b: *So they are without excuse.*

In Roman Catholic theology they make a useful distinction between two types of ignorance: vincible and invincible. An example will help to understand the difference.

Let us suppose that a visitor from another country came to Moreton and drove his car through red lights. If a police officer pulled him over the visitor could hardly argue his innocence by claiming that because there are no traffic lights in his country he had no idea that it was a requirement of the law to stop when they showed red. Although it may be true that there are no traffic lights in his country it is still his responsibility to be aware of the laws of the country he is visiting and his excuse would not mitigate his guilt. His behaviour is described as vincible ignorance because the law was not hidden from him and it was reasonable for him to know it.

On the other hand, let us suppose that the local council secretly met and passed a special by-law which prohibited people from stopping at red lights. If our visitor, having faithfully learned the common laws of the land, obediently stops at a red light, would a police officer be justified in charging him for a breach of the law? Of course not. In this context his "illegal" actions are a result of invincible ignorance because it was simply not reasonable or possible for him to know the law in this respect.

In the same way, humans can be invincibly ignorant when it comes to the laws of God for which they could not possibly know without having received special revelation. Against such

laws they will not be judged. However, when it comes to general revelation, standing before God and trying to argue, "But I had no way of knowing that You existed," is vincible ignorance. In this respect Paul states that they are without excuse.

So what about remote cultures who have never heard about Christianity but have their own religions? Surely their sincere attempt to understand God in their own way without having knowledge of the Bible and its teaching will please God and avert His wrath? For example, if they are raised in a culture which worships totem poles, animals, or the moon then how can they be judged for their sincere attempt to understand and know God through the general revelation in creation? Surely their ignorance is invincible?

However, Paul explains that it is precisely that point which condemns them.

- 21: *For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*
- 22: *Claiming to be wise, they became fools,*
- 23: *and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*

Simply put, ignorance in this respect is vincible, as God has revealed enough of Himself to all men for them to know better. They are without excuse. In fact, allowing other cultures to continue in their misguided and distorted view of the one true God is allowing them to continue in pure idolatry. To be zealous in the worship of idols is to be zealous in the insulting of the glory and dignity of God. If God has clearly revealed His glory and that glory is replaced by the worship of creatures and idols then it is not pleasing to God, but insulting. Consequently this stark condemnation should motivate us with a greater sense of urgency to evangelise and to reach as many people as possible to save them from the inevitable judgement of God that awaits.

But when it comes to evangelism we often hear objections such as, "You believe what you believe and I'll believe what I believe, just don't try to force your religion down my throat!" What they are saying is that everyone should be entitled to do their own "thing". Yet their stance is entirely contradictory, because if evangelism is your "thing" then how can they deny you that freedom? You are just trying to do your "thing". Of course, what they are really saying is that their "thing", which prohibits anyone from talking freely about their own faith, takes priority over your "thing", which allows you to freely evangelise. They are simply exposing the extent to which sin has fashioned a selfish, irrational, and biased view of people's freedom and rights.

Of course, I am not suggesting that in our attempt to win the hearts and minds of unbelievers we begin with an opening argument like that, but statements like this from unbelievers does at least help us appreciate that we are never going to receive an invitation to evangelise. We are battling against minds which are as stubborn as they are incapable of seeing the plain truth in front of them. Yet unless their minds and hearts are changed by the power of the Holy Spirit then it is this hostility which will quite literally be the death of them.

Many Christians have trouble accepting that God will judge all men and that He is even a wrathful God. The opening verse to this passage in Romans says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven". And even though we read verses like, "For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law" (Romans 2:12) you will often hear well-meaning Christians say something like, "I don't believe in a God of wrath. My God is a God of love."

But where do they get that from? Do they discern it by looking around the world at all the sweetness and light? Maybe it is found in the senseless killings they hear about in the news on an almost daily basis, or on the cancer wards, or from the Jewish holocaust during World War II? No, if you want to know about the love of God, the mercy of God, the compassion of God then you need to go to sacred Scripture, which breathes on every page the message about the love of God. But it is that same source of knowledge which tells us that God is wrathful and is concerned with justice. If we pick and choose we change the biblical God and are guilty ourselves of suppressing the truth about God.

We have a God who is fiercely uncompromising in His holiness. Sin is part of every one of us and if the world was purged of sin then none of us would remain. We read earlier about how Lot, who despite being surrounded by extreme sin and receiving explicit warnings from the angels to remove himself immediately from these people, hesitated to act. And so it is with us. In fact, it is only by the grace of God that He chooses to intervene with unwilling and rebellious people and rescue us from our wretched state of fallenness. In Romans chapter 5, Paul writes, "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (verse 8), and earlier in chapter 3 he writes:

- 10b: *"None is righteous, no, not one;*
11: *no one understands; no one seeks for God.*
12: *All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."*

It seems now that we are finally getting to the heart of the problem that most of us have with the apparent contradiction between the idea of a loving God and hell.

The Scriptures could not be any clearer in asserting that there is no way to God except through the redeeming works of Christ. For unless Jesus is a liar then there is no other way to interpret His own words: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6). And in the Acts of the Apostles Luke quotes from Peter's sermon as he writes, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

But what about those who have never had an opportunity to hear the gospel message? Is it absolutely necessary to have heard about or know the message of the cross? Or is it possible that because of what Jesus did everyone is automatically saved?

That again would seem to run contrary to what Scripture teaches. In Romans chapter 9 Paul writes,

- 9: *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
10: *For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*
11: *For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."*
12: *For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.*
13: *For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

And in chapter 3 of the Gospel according to John he writes,

- 16: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*
17: *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*
18: *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

The Bible could not be any clearer in teaching that the only way in which we can be saved is through the redeeming works of Christ. However, you may recall at the start I said that whereas the bible is clear in some points it is silent in others. It is precisely what happens after death where we are unable to speak with the same degree of certainty.

For example, what about infants who die or people whose mental capability is limited? The Bible does not provide universal answers, but in Second book of Samuel we read how the child which Uriah's wife bore to David became sick. Even though David fasted and earnestly petitioned God in prayer for seven days the child died. When news came to him of the child's death he ended his fast and ate. His servants could not understand his actions: whilst the child was alive he refused to eat and wept bitterly, but when the child died he arose and ate food. David replied, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." (chapter 12: 22-23).

In particular we note that David says, "I shall go to him." There is little doubt that David was a mighty man of God and after his death he was heaven bound. David was in no doubt that one day he would see his child again in heaven.

Clearly none of us can speak with any authority in this matter, but in my mind if someone is incapable of grasping the gospel message, either through immaturity or incapacity of mind, then I doubt very much that they are capable of expressing such a strong and final rejection of the one God which would lead to them being judged as being deserving of hell.

Another example of where we cannot speak with complete authority is when someone stands before the judgement seat of God. Could they then call on the name of Jesus or is it too late? The Bible is clear in teaching that unless God changes our hearts we will never

naturally incline ourselves towards a holy God; in fact, we do everything in our power to flee from His perfect holiness. So except in a desperate attempt to escape the fires of hell it seems unlikely that someone will spontaneously change the entire disposition of their rebellious heart towards the holiness of God. However, God in His grace may excuse anyone He chooses who stand before Him, based on the merits of His Son's sacrifice. And so in this respect we must tread very lightly when trying to assert anything with certainty about how God will judge. I would like to believe that some people do get another chance, but given the lack of certainty in this matter I do not want to live my life resting on the possibility of a second chance only to discover that I was wrong. The eternal fate of others is far too serious to be left to second guessing.

I would like to finish with a passage I quoted in part earlier, which is taken from the tenth chapter of Romans.

For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

Romans 10:10-15

No one can discover the life-saving message of the gospel by themselves, and so unless we preach it then no one will hear it. It may not be received as the good news it really is, but that should never deter us from our God given responsibility of trying. For truly, "how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

Amen