



Hell: The Conversation

Machele and I had dinner with a couple on Friday and our conversation eventually steered toward Christianity. The big issue revolved around the implications of those who do not believe the Christian message. Inevitably, they did not think God would pronounce hell on those who were good people, whether religious or not. So is this couple right in their assertions? Moreover, how are we to engage others rationally on what the Bible teaches about hell?

One thing is true when it comes to Jesus. He spent a lot of time addressing the hell issue. Yes, he was a great moral teacher, and a faith healer, and someone who had no problem showing compassion to others—but he also talked about hell....a lot! Jesus, spoke about hell more than all the biblical writers combined.

Below, we will read about one of these instances. Here, we get a bird's eye view of life in hell.

19 "There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.

6 The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'

25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'

27 And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' 29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'

30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.' "

It is obvious from this text, that hell is not a place you want to make reservation for when you die. It is also not a very pleasant conversation to have with someone. Yet, as unpleasant as it seems, there are features about hell, which Jesus mentions, that we should take to heart and be willing to share if pressed. The first one is obvious, but must be mentioned in light of the many recent controversies pertaining to the nature of hell

1. Hell is a real place.

The idea of hell is so repulsive that many conclude that hell does not exist, it is a made up belief, invented by the early Catholic Church, and used as a scare tactic to keep the people in line. In more recent evangelical circles, Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, recently wrote a book called, *Love Wins*, to argue that hell is not a real place, but rather a state of being that causes hardship in one's lifetime. In the end, he concludes, that everyone will go to heaven because *Love Wins*.

However, this is not what Jesus is describing in the text. He is talking about a real destination that is a physical location after a person passes away in life. He goes on to illustrate that hell consists of anguish and a permanent separation from God. In other biblical passages, Jesus mentions hell as a place associated with eternal fire and even outer darkness.

Matthew 18:8-9

And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire

Matthew 22: 13-14

Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 "For many are called, but few are chosen."

Now a growing number of scholars agree that Jesus is using metaphors to describe the intensity that is used throughout Scripture to conjure up an image associated with hell. However, whether these images are literal or figurative, the more important issue is the reality of the separation from God. In the book of James, the apostle teaches that everything that is good comes from God, every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). Without God, hell is a place that lacks the good things in life. Imagine living in a place where, eternally speaking, there is nothing good, no love, no peace, no comfort, no charity, etc., etc. Such is the life of a real person in a real place that is really bad.

Several years ago, I did a memorial service for a good friend whose dad passed away and was not a Christian. While performing the eulogy, although I tried my best to comfort the people, in good conscience, I offered no hope that my friend's dad was in heaven. Eventually, during the sharing time, one or two friends tried their best to communicate their belief this man was in heaven, although they were not that convincing. I know why they did it of course; they wanted to bring comfort and assurance to the people.

However, ultimately, their attempts were misleading, despite the good intentions. Heaven is not an idea or a concept whose sole purpose is to bring comfort. No, like hell, it is a real place that real people will go to once they die. In the end, Jesus wants us to know this so we can make the best travel reservations.

2. Hell is not what God wants for us, it is something we choose

John 3:17-18

Many times non-Christians give God a bad rap here, and it is not fair if they are honest. If hell is true, many reason, then God is wrathful, not loving. He does not really care for people. However, as the passage below mentions, God is in the rescuing business. He sent Jesus on a 911 mission to rescue us from being condemned.

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.

1 Timothy 2:3-6

³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

Both these passages teach that at the very heart of God is the desire that all of humanity be saved. However, God does not force us to choose Him; He allows us to make our own decisions about Jesus, which is why he concludes that ultimately people condemn themselves by rejecting Jesus.

God has gone out of His way so that we all can be reconciled to Him. Unfortunately, many people simply do not want anything to do with Jesus, or as some refer to it, "religion." In hell, people get what they want. That is, no Christians, no Jesus, no religion, and no God. I realize this is a harsh conversation, but we must help others own up to the responsibility here. It is not God's fault, it is the individual's choice.

Notice some character traits of the rich man in hell. He comes across as a man who wants nothing to do with religion.

- a. There is no repentance. Not once does he show remorse for his actions. Not toward Abraham (i.e. God, the Father), nor toward Lazarus.
- b. He still has a sense of entitlement. He wants Lazarus to be his servant. His thinking is the same as it was when he was alive on earth. His focus is on his needs and finding a way to remedy them.
- c. He does not ask to leave Hades, only for Lazarus to come to him. I suspect it is because he really does not want to have anything to do with Jesus in the other section, which includes God, Jesus, and those "self-righteous" Christians.
- d. He indirectly finds fault with God's plan of salvation. He says the Bible is not enough to keep his family from avoiding hell. God needs to more, come up with a better plan. He proposes that Lazarus go to his father's house, allowing them to see someone come back from the dead. It is the same in our culture today. Religious Pluralists, for example, find God plan for salvation in Scripture too narrow, too exclusive, and deficient.

We have to be fair. God has always been in the rescue business. He has done everything He can to save us, with one exception. He does not force you to love or believe in Jesus. In the end, as a parent, you can only hope your children will recognize from all your sacrifice that you love them deeply. Ultimately, it is up to them to love you back.

OBJECTIONS

a. What about those who have not heard of Christ?

We have to think through this issue on two levels, the first one being what theologians refer to as general revelation. General revelation teaches us that God has revealed Himself through His creation. In other words, there is no excuse for not believing in God based on the sun, the mountains, the stars, the trees, and the water, along with everything else in creation.

Romans 1:18-20

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ 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. So they are without excuse.

God's signature is present all around us. Ultimately, there are educational consultants in our public school system and college campuses that work very hard trying to convince us that all of creation can be explained without God through the natural sciences. Therefore, on the first level, Scripture teaches that men and women are without excuse, everyone from the academic elite to the tribal member that lives in a far away region in a third world country. At the fundamental level, those who deny God are what Paul refers to as suppressors of the truth.

So before we consider the case of the remote person, we must ask this question; Do they believe in God based on their surroundings? If they do not, then they are without excuse based on what has been clearly seen by everyone. If they acknowledge God, the second level focuses on what they do know about Jesus. Here of course, is where this topic can get complicated. Nevertheless, the Scriptures deal with this issue as well. Below is a parable by Jesus, which focuses on punishment in the end times.

Luke 12:47-48

⁴⁷ And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

Here, Jesus teaches, there are degrees of punishment administered by God based on how much information you know. What the nature of the lighter punishment is I do not know. Nevertheless, I trust that given His wisdom, His knowledge, His ability to know the secrets of the heart, God will judge rightly. What this means practically is that we should just let God do His job. I would not want His job—but thankfully He is the most competent to render such a true decision.

Sadly, many use this argument as the basis for rejecting Christianity. In other words, this objection is like a trump card that is used to argue for someone they really do not care about.....and then.....get back to doing the things they enjoy doing most, which mostly involves ignoring God. Yet in retrospect, the reason most people ignore Jesus is not because of ignorance, but rather because he is not important enough to occupy their hearts and minds.

In the end, one should never reject Christianity because of *the remote tribal member argument* because ultimately the Bible teaches we are responsible for our decisions. Suppose, you read about a person who is starving in a third world country, would you refuse to eat because you deem this is unfair? The answer is obvious, of course, you would not, you may think it is unfair but ultimately you would eat because you are

responsible for your survival. In the same way, we cannot allow an argument we deem as unfair dictate our own responsibility to choose Jesus. We must feed ourselves and do what we can to help others.

During the last mission conference, a missionary shared how God used them to help convert a native tribe to come to Christ. During the course of his lecture, he explained that prior to their arrival; the tribal leader had a vision from God about Jesus and the Christian message. When the missionary finally arrived, the tribal leader recognized that this man was supposed to fill in the blanks about the life and ministry of Jesus in his vision. Ultimately, what we learn from this experience is that God is big enough to convert someone who lives in the remote regions of the world. As mentioned earlier, God's desire is that everyone will be saved and He went out of his way to demonstrate this reality by sending His son to die for humanity's sin, including that distant tribal member. Inevitably, we need to let God do His job; He is the most qualified to render a perfectly righteous and truthful judgment. In the end, God knows the secrets of our heart.

b. What about those who worship different religions?

If you have studied the Bible, you would conclude that such a scenario is not a new development. There have been competing religions since the days of Cain, whom God kicked out of Eden to be an endless wanderer in life because he killed his brother. Inevitably, the reality of other religions proclaiming their god is one of the primary reasons why God instituted the Ten Commandments with Moses at Mount Sinai.

Deuteronomy 5:6-10

⁶ "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ⁷ "You shall have no other gods before me. ⁸ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁹ You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ¹⁰ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

At the core of competing religions is the idea that their god is better than Yahweh, the God of the Bible. Likewise today, competing religions express the same message, often marginalizing or flat out rejecting Jesus as Savior. For example, Islam accepts that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, he was born of a virgin, he performed miracles, but it denies that Jesus died for the sins of humanity or that he is the Son of God. On the other hand, Judaism acknowledges the existence Jesus, yet rejects him as being the Messiah that will establish his kingdom on earth. Finally, Buddhism acknowledges the life of Jesus, but insists one must still go through a series of reincarnations before they can ultimately be enlightened enough to verify that their religion turned out to be right. Consequently, other religions cannot all be right because they are illogically inconsistent when it comes to the important stuff, namely salvation.

Furthermore, the argument that all religions lead to heaven is never really considered from God's perspective. If Jesus, is truly His son, then emotionally this cost God something. Looking at this from another perspective, imagine having your child sacrificed for the good of humanity, only to find out that he or she has been rejected. How would you respond as a father or mother? Would you have compassion and come up with an alternative plan? If your honest, you would never accept people into your home that have rejected your child as the way to make the world a better place. In the end, such a sacrifice cost you something emotionally. We need to start asking questions involving religious pluralism not from our perspective, but from God's.

c. How could a loving God punish someone for eternity for a finite sin?

In my opinion, this is the toughest question because it affects us the most in terms of the idea of a punishment needing to fit the crime. At first glance, there appears to be a great chasm here based on the crime and the magnitude of the sentence. Such a punishment appears to be the equivalent of someone receiving the death penalty because he or she was caught chewing gum in class. One reason this appears to be the case is because sin is marginalized by folks in our culture. It does not seem to be such a big deal. Seldom do we ever consider that from God's perspective it is just that, a big deal.

Yet despite the human perspective of sin, God knew that sin had to be punished for the sake of divine justice. Therefore, he sent His son to do what we could not, that is, to live a perfect and pleasing life to God. In the end, the reality of hell only heightens the love of Jesus because he willingly died for your sins and took upon himself the punishment from God that was meant for you. In a sense, Jesus experienced hell because of his great love for you. God sent His son to die for you because he SO loved the world. In other words, he loved you exceptionally.

Show me a father who allows his kids to ignore him, let them do what they want to do, and reject his instructions on how to have the best possible life and I will argue such a parent is not a loving one. Yet, show me a father who rescues his rebellious children from death, by ransoming his life, and I will conclude that such a father has a love that goes beyond our comprehension. In the end, you must ask what God is the most loving. One that gave up everything important to Himself for your survival or one that let you do whatever you wanted. It does not take a genius to conclude which God is the most loving.