

A Theodicy of Hell

OUTLINE

God's judgement through the lens of restrained justice
God's judgement through the lens of saving grace

INTRODUCTION

Today I would like to do a theodicy of God, well, a theodicy of hell in particular. For those unfamiliar with the word 'theodicy' it comes from the combination of two Greek words 'theo'=God and 'dikaio's=righteousness. It means to vindicate/justify God. Not in the saving sense like us where we have an alien righteousness credited to us. No God is righteous and a theodicy is a defense of God's righteousness against false accusations. Any time something bad happens and the usual question is asked, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' When a Christian attempts to make an answer; that is a 'theodicy'.

Today I want to do a theodicy of hell. In particular I want to do a theodicy of hell for the believer. An unbeliever may be helped by what I speak about today but I will be presenting a number of ideas that the believer will have a familiarity with. You see it is not only the unbeliever but the believer who struggles with the doctrine of Hell. We are familiar with the unbeliever who would say something like 'How could a God of love send anyone to Hell?' Christians often find themselves asking the same questions. After all, the same cultural and social ideas that lead the unbeliever into disbelieving the idea of Hell are influencing the believer who lives in this world as well. Some Christians try to defend God by denying the doctrine of hell; or making the evil on earth hell; making hell merely a metaphor for a blander separation from God; making hell temporary; or by teaching annihilation. Many have allowed their emotional reaction to the inconceivable reality of hell to drive them to deny the clear teaching of God's word in some way. This is not what we are going to do today.

We affirm with Christ that there is something worse than the death of the body, but the death of the body and soul in hell, Matt. 10:28, 'And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.' Christ, who reveals the things of the Father to us reveals that Hell is an 'unquenchable fire', Mark 9:43; where the fire is not quenched and the worm does not die, 9:45. 'As William Shedd says, "Had Christ intended to teach that future punishment is remedial and temporary, he would have compared it to a dying worm, and not to an undying worm; to a fire that is quenched, and not to an unquenchable fire."¹ We affirm with Christ that Hell is not an unconscious but an eternal conscious torment, Matt. 25:46, 'And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.' The day of judgement will not be tolerable but intolerable, Matt 11:23. It will be a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, Matt. 13:42. There is no rest day or night, and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, Rev. 14:10-11. He describes it as 'outer darkness'; Jude also describes final judgement upon false shepherds this way, v13, 'for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.' God's final judgement is not a torture chamber for His amusement but the final act of justice upon sin where God who has been patient gives all sin, all injustice its full reward.

¹ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/5-myths-about-hell/>

These descriptions made firm by the fact they are revealed by the inspired word of God overwhelm us, and that is part of the point. God does not hide what sin will receive; He does not hide what every person will face if they do not repent of sin and seek forgiveness in Christ. Our ability to imagine the realities of hell are more than we can handle, our imagination that struggles to consider the eternal life of the New Creation, struggles even more when it comes to the eternal conscious torment of the lake of fire. Add to this that some of our loved ones are headed there—who is there makes it hard to want to believe it; add to this that there are many people who are going there—how many will be there make us want to not believe it; add to this that our own culture mocks it and makes light of it, and throws it in our face as proof of God's non-existence—this modelled unbelief and incredulity, even aggression makes us want to not believe it; add to this our own knowledge of God as one who loves sinners and is willing to give His Son to save us—our experience of God as a Savior seems to jar with God as judge making many not want to believe it; add to this that many have publicly turned away from the doctrine or tried to reinterpret it from within Christianity, seeming to undermine our confidence in the traditional belief. Many things stack up to make the idea of final judgement and eternal suffering very difficult.

I cannot say everything that needs to be said when it comes to defending the doctrine of hell. This is a very important topic that is not spoken about enough in pulpits today. Rather today I want to try and help us reconcile ourselves to the biblical teaching of hell from a slightly different direction. The basic idea I want to propose is this: because of God's restraining grace, where we only ever get to see God's diluted judgements due to His patience against sin, we can easily find the teachings on God's final and undiluted justice difficult to swallow. In other words, because of God's goodness towards sinners, and His patience in not pouring out His full wrath against sin, we are unfamiliar with God's justice against sin and so we underestimate sin, think too little of God's justice, and this results in us shying away from the doctrine of eternal conscious torment. Or put another way, due to benefitting from God's present restraint in giving sin its full desserts; living in the extended period of patience where God pours out His good gifts, and offers salvation to rebels, it is too easy for us to forget that all of history is driving towards a final judgement day where all restraint will be removed and sin will finally get all of what it deserves. We are in a false sense of normality, where in fact we are in an abnormal period due to God's grace. My goal today is to remind us of this truth and help us see that hell is not overkill but the delayed punishment we should have received in the first place. We will consider this from two perspectives. Firstly, we want to think about all the judgements we do see in the Bible, apart from the cross and the final judgement, as restrained justice and mixed with grace. Secondly, we will look through the lens of God's saving grace in Christ getting our clearest look at sin getting what it deserves as Christ Himself has to pay for it.

God's judgement through the lens of restrained justice

Hell will always seem unfair because sin never seems that serious. Due to sin not receiving its full desserts, we question the legitimacy of hell and the justice of God. Ironically God's goodness in not dealing with sin as it deserves yet is the occasion by which we accuse God. If we go back to the beginning in the garden of Eden we can see this restraint at work. Right now we have many complaints and difficulties in life. We experience the relentless pursuit of death stalking us at every moment knowing that it will inevitably have us. Our loved ones are

taken from us in death, and we will finally succumb to the separation of soul and body, the return of Christ being the only time we will escape this reality. We experience bodies that are in an environment that is hostile with bacteria, and viruses, genetic illnesses, those conditions related to ageing as our beauty and our health are incrementally but certainly taken from us. But even this health is an illusion for we are all born with underlying conditions, and some are even severely afflicted and have to live with disabilities. Add to this all the evil human beings do to each other as every form of crime and sin in all of its iterations is the regular daily way we treat each other. Add to this the demonic world with its constant temptation and evil and hatred as it connives to manipulate us deeper into sin and judgement. Add to this the natural disasters that impact us. Many take opportunity by this to complain that God cannot be a good God for allowing this or for creating an environment so filled with harm and pain. But any who use these things to doubt the goodness of God is blind.

When Adam and Eve, created good and inclined towards the good, having all of God's gifts chose to violate God's will and disobey God, they experienced the promised justice of God. God promised that the day that you eat of it you shall die, and where we would expect God to call for judgement day and judge them then and there. This is not what we see. We see a justice mixed with mercy. To be able to live and not die immediately, to live and experience pain and sickness and old age, this is all a mercy because God did not give sin all that it deserved but chose instead to make a way of salvation. Not only do we have a life filled with beauty and goodness and family and marriage and love and creativity and technology and job satisfaction and flavors and colors and so much more; God made a promise of a Savior who would undo all the works of satan; reverse the effects of the curse; obey where Adam failed; and fulfil all of God's intentions for man better than Adam could, bringing more good from the evil than if it had not happened. We now sit here complaining that life is hard not thinking about the fact that we should not even exist. If God had poured out all of His justice upon Adam and Eve, we would have a legal precedent in history that we could point to, that would normalize what sin deserves. But instead of God showing His hand of justice He deals a hand of justice mixed with mercy, a hand that has a promised Ace of grace that will finally undo and overcome, so that we will not merely overcome but be more than conquerors through the good He will bring from the evil. If God had not been merciful we would be able to see sin as it comes into existence suffer the justice it deserves. God's holiness would be put on display; the horror of sin would be put on display. But instead God is gracious, God is merciful, God keeps the world turning and makes a plan to save us. This creates a false sense of normality, this withholds a full revelation of the seriousness of sin and the glory of God's holiness, and we are now sustained as sinners who dare to complain of our painful existence and a hell that seems unfair. The irony is that our doubt exists because we exist by the goodness of God. Him not applying justice leads us to doubt His justice.

This does not mean that He has left Himself without a witness. Our consciences witness to our sins; they hunger and cry out for a full reckoning against all the sin we see. In fact the idea of a final day of justice is found all over the world in all of history. God has given us the witness of His word, there He progressively reveals the Day of the Lord, giving more and more detail as He reveals the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked; the angels who will be present; the devil and his demons who will be punished; the nature of the punishment; the extent of the suffering. Jesus who is God in the flesh spoke more about hell than any other person in the Bible. God has given a witness to His judgements

through the birth pangs of sufferings that wrack creation; the natural disasters that remind us that this is a world that can be shaken causing us to long for the creation that cannot be shaken. Every death is a reminder of the death we all deserve. If we have eyes to see the truth of God's justice is everywhere. The trouble is we are so deep in our present experience of this world that hell seems too unbelievable and unreal. We need then to pay attention to the Word of God which tells us what we need to know about these matters.

God has given us a number of eschatological intrusions that, inbreakings of judgement day in a little way, that act like a megaphone of God. The flood is a reality check as God reacting to the ubiquitous sinfulness of man acts to judge. Gen. 6:5-7, 'The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." Through the language of human regret God communicates His desire to wipe out sinful humanity in judgement. This description of man's pervasive sin and God's sweeping justice is still restrained. For man is not as bad as he will one day be in hell; and God's justice in the Flood is not final but results in another restart. It is not a picture of God flying off the handle and giving in to some sort of sinful human vent of rage. No, it is a restrained, held back, partial glimpse of what sin will one day get on judgement day.

Think of the judgement upon Sodom and Gomorrah, the angels who visited Lot said to him, Gen. 19:13, 'For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord, and the Lord has sent us to destroy it.' What strikes us about this judgement is the terrible nature of the sins involved and the fire and brimstone which become proverbial that are poured out. The judgement seems shocking and extreme, but notice that there has been a building up of outcries against these terrible cities, a multiplication for their sins. And let us not forget Abraham's intercession asking the Lord to spare the city for the sake of the righteous, Gen. 18:32, 'Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." Many mock the Bible for its so called excess against such sins, but in all of this God is restraining His justice, not giving us a full sense of what sin deserves, just a glimpse.

This scenario can be multiplied as we look at God's judgement upon Egypt. And again as we witness Israel taking the promised land. There we see the armies of Israel acting like an early type of the final day of judgement where Jesus leading His saints are prefigured in Joshua leading Israel in an act of wiping all sinners, all idolatry from the face of the land as God will one day wipe the earth clean of all sin. The Judges triumphs against their enemies; Saul; and David. These are all mini Battles of Armageddon. More markers are found in the prophets as God denounces the sins of the great cities of the ancient world as Babylon and Nineveh and Tyre and others are denounced for their sins. Their destruction in history a stark reminder of a sovereign God of justice who is active to judge sin, at least in a partial way, and all of this pointing to a great and final day of the Lord. All of these faint judgements feel like disruptions and faded history that seem incongruous with the present life we live which is filled with luxury and ease and peace and good things. God's good gifts have hardened our hearts and dulled us to the sinfulness of sin and the justice it deserves.

God's judgement through the lens of saving grace

The greatest witness we have to the justice of God and the fairness of Hell in history is the crucifixion of the God-man on behalf of sinners. Turn to Matthew 26:36-46. The Puritans used to say that Hell is the lesser light by which we see the justice of God; and the crucifixion of Christ is the greater light. This is in part because the punishment of hell is ongoing and is not satisfied; but the punishment for our sins in Christ is completed and fully satisfied, proven by Christ's resurrection from the dead. As we come to Gethsemane we get to watch Christ having as it were His first look into hell. In verse 36 we see that there is not much to indicate the great burden Christ is bearing. He makes some of his disciples sit down and takes his inner circle of three, Peter, James and John further into the garden with Him. Alone with the three, we catch a glimpse of His emotional state, v37, 'And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled.' This was no ordinary sorrow and trouble, here is the Son of God, and He turns to friends to aid him in prayer, verse 38, 'Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me."' We begin to see the depth of His sorrow. He who could silence storms is so overwhelmed that He seeks aid.

V39, 'And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."' What drove Christ to such sorrow and what is being asked in this prayer? We see Christ is overwhelmed and does not want to drink that cup that comes from the Father's hand, because it is the undiluted cup of God's wrath.

Christ must willingly offer Himself to be the one who will become the most hated in the sight of the One He has eternally loved.

He must accept the portion of being forsaken by the One He has only known the most intimate of fellowship with.

He must submit to becoming our sin, having the guilt of our sin imputed to Him, so that His own delight in holiness will be repulsed in Himself.

As a man would stand before God dressed in his sin on judgement and know all of God's righteous indignation towards him. This is what Jesus had to accept, but His portion would be worse than any other sinner on judgement day, for the holiness of His nature, and the intimacy of the Father's love and the delight of His approval, something an unbeliever had never known would also be lost. Also God was no longer restraining His justice.

Christ's desire to avoid the cup was not an act of cowardice. Church history is full of valiant Christians facing down death, Christians who knew they would be badly treated and tortured embracing the pain with gladness. Is Jesus weaker than they are that He cannot face a brutal death? Never! His burden was greater than theirs; His was greater than any will bear.

His unwillingness to drink the cup is not on account of any sinfulness in Him but on account of His holiness. Jesus more than any other knows holiness, for He is holy. He delights in holiness and seeks it in His creation. As God He hates sin more than any other for He loves holiness more than any other. God cannot look upon sin and approve of it, God cannot be tempted, and yet here on account of the Son becoming man the Divine Son has to choose to be seen as a sinner, to have the guilt of our sin imputed to Him, to have all of God's perfect hatred against sin turned on Himself. His holiness draws back in horror. We are taught

by this the real reaction we should have to ourselves as sinners, and a better understanding of what God's reaction to us is.

His unwillingness to drink is not on account of sinful weakness but creaturely weakness. No human being can stand in the presence of a Holy God and choose to embrace the furnace of God's wrath. Our humanity cannot before the majesty of His glory, a flower cannot grow on the sun and nor can we stand in the day of His wrath. Our God is a consuming fire. There is none that can stand before Him. There is none who can choose to jump into the furnace of God's wrath.

When we have to stand before Him and feel the omniscient gaze peeling back our camouflage and excuses, when in the naked light of His gaze all we truly are is laid bare, and as we have it impressed upon our minds the reality of God as being the reality from which all reality flows, there is nothing more real than Him, and that He will punish, He who is infinitely holy and gives punishment against sin according to the measure of His infinite holiness. There are no words, we cannot argue, we cannot look, we cannot hide, we cannot bear it. Our humanity is not strong enough, there are not enough resources in our creatureliness to bear that gaze. Yet this is the fire that Jesus must choose to embrace. This is the cup that He must willingly drink. No human soul can do it, and yet He must. And so He is praying; striving; agonizing; and wrestling the squirming humanity of His nature into submission. The bloody sweat, the need for the ministry of angels, the need to pray more than once, the cries and tears, all were a part of this process.

Here we see God's justice against sin unveiled. To pay for sin a God-man must die. Every other judgement before this one was not God making payment for sin, but merely giving a dim reminder of the fate that all sin must one day face. God is not a monster He is just. God is patient in not giving sin what it deserves throughout all of human history. He is gracious for providing a Savior we did not deserve, giving His beloved Son to face His wrath that we might not have to. He is generous as He pays the full price at His own expense. Hell is as long as God is holy; Hell is as long as sin endures; Hell is what Christ suffered on the cross so that you don't have to. God offers a way of salvation to all who will believe. We have nothing as sinners that we can bring to God to buy our way out of our predicament. Our sins must be punished and the punishment is more than we can bear. But God in His love sent His Son to pay for our sins that through faith in Him we can have our sins forgiven and more than that be adopted into His family. I hope this theodicy of Hell has helped you to see how good and gracious and patient and generous God has been. How all of our lives are filled with grace. I hope you can see that God is not only just and not cruel but gracious and loving too. As we grapple with the most difficult questions we can face we are taken back to the cross and see again the most glorious grace of God in Christ. we have discovered that what we fear to think about in the awefulness of hell has helped us to see the heights of the glory of God.