



THE CONFLUENCE OF GOD'S JUSTICE AND MERCY

Many people, including a growing number of Christians, are having great difficulty in reconciling a loving God with an eternal hell. Nowadays, hell is rarely preached in some churches. It has become the "H" word – unmentionable in decent company. Even a few theologians have theorized that fire and brimstone in hell will not be literal. In their teaching, hell's unquenchable conflagration has been quietly extinguished.

Is hell really necessary? Does it have a place in today's preaching of the gospel of grace? How do we portray a loving God who consigns people to eternal suffering? These are tough questions, to be sure. But more importantly, what does the Bible say about hell?

While most Bible scholars agree that Dante's *Inferno* was a product of the Church's Medieval theology, there is no doubt that hell is a biblical concept. Jesus Christ Himself spoke about hell more than anyone else in the Bible. From His teachings, we learn that (a) hell is real place (**Matt. 8:12**); (b) there is eternal fire in hell (**Mark 9:43**); (c) the wicked will suffer eternal punishment in hell (**Matt. 25:46**); and (d) hell was made for Satan and evil angels (**Matt. 25:41**).

When we think about it, Christians can't really neglect or eliminate the teaching about hell because our Lord Jesus clearly taught it. But to be honest with you, if I had a choice – to pick and choose from the Bible what I would believe – I would not believe that a loving God has such a place as an everlasting hell. However, if I am committed to following and trusting Jesus Christ, I cannot really repudiate hell without repudiating Him.

I believe that our greatest issue with hell is, what seems to us, its unfairness. We are accustomed to a justice system that is not only punitive but also redemptive. The United States Supreme Court has held that our nation's constitution prohibits "cruel and unusual" punishment. Our penal system protects those convicted of crimes from unjust and disproportionate punishment.

To most Americans the concept of endless torture by fire is not only uncivilized but inhumane, to say the least. To burn forever, even for a lifetime of sins, seems to be a disproportionate penalty for the offense committed. It might appear to many that God is overreacting to sin. So, the question that persists in our minds is this:

How can we explain the existence of a never-ending hell in the universe of a just and loving God?

Trying to answer this question takes us to uncharted territory. Job discovered how woefully ignorant and lost he was when he tried to understand human suffering that seems to be undeserved. When we venture into the mysterious and unknown, we must be guided by clear biblical light. The Bible clearly teaches that God is love (**1 John 4:8**) and that He is just and righteous in all His ways (**Rev. 19:2**). This should be enough for us, if we believe it, to trust God's goodness and wisdom in having a place like hell. It should also be enough for us to do everything we can to avoid going to that place.

I say this because it is really impossible for unholy and imperfect humans to fully understand, let alone explain, the ways of an infinitely holy God. Nevertheless, we should not avoid teaching about hell. It is a real place and it is the default destination of many people – including our family members, neighbors and friends.

God's love is multi-faceted and its attributes are revealed in countless, mysterious ways. Love is the reason why God made free creatures. But freedom gave His creatures the potential for choosing the opposite of love and life without God. However, man's wrong choice uncovered His love's mercy in His immeasurable grace toward sinners. And someday, His love's justice will be unveiled in hell by His perfect and holy wrath toward sin.

The existence of eternal hell will forever remind the inhabitants of the universe, especially the saved, that (a) sin is truly evil and God hates it totally for all time; (b) God punishes evil and triumphs over it; and (c) God's grace is so vast that through Jesus Christ He is able to save sinners who deserve the same punishment.

God's love is an immense, vast river that flows forever and ever. Sin and rebellion tried to dam its mighty current but only exposed God's amazing and unending grace when on the cross of the Christ justice and mercy kissed to seal the timeless death of sin. And at the end of our earth's age, the confluence of God's justice and mercy will be immortalized in hell. The triumph of God's marvelous love will end sin once and for all eternity. And throughout the ceaseless ages to come, all of God's creation will keep on singing "Glory Hallelujah! His love endures forever!"