

# Hell and the gospel

## Part 4 – How can a “God of LOVE” be a “God of HELL” too?

God is love, so why hell? How do love and hell go together? And how can we preach the gospel, which is supposed to be a message of good news, when we’ve got hell to explain too? And hell is anything BUT “good news,” surely?

If we ignore hell, though, we’re not being true to the Bible, because it talks bluntly of hell, and of several types of hell too. But if we preach the typical view of hell, that God gets so angry he makes people pay in agony for eternity for what they’ve done - as many Christians say he will - someone is bound to ask, “But where’s the **God of love** in that picture?” On the other hand, if we preach that God is so merciful that he doesn’t make people pay dearly for what they’ve done, people are bound to ask, “But where is the **God of justice?**”

So now what do we do? Do we go with the God of wrath and justice, or the God of love and mercy? And for Christians through the centuries this has been a major fork in the road, because which fork do you take? Do you go with the God of wrath and preach that God’s only going to save those who repent and believe in Christ and the rest go to hell and everlasting torment, or do you go with the God of mercy and preach that God’s going to save everybody, regardless of their beliefs or behaviour?

But neither of those choices is good news, because if we go with “all mercy and no hell,” then bad people get away with murder, but if we go with “all hell and no mercy,” then bad people are punished way beyond what their crime deserves, because what crime in this life deserves a punishment that goes on forever? So either bad people don’t get **enough** punishment, or they get way **too much**. Worse still is the picture we present of God himself, because if we make him too kind and merciful with bad people we make him look weak and unfair, but if we emphasize his burning anger and terrible threats too much we make him look cruel and ruthless. It’s a real dilemma for us.

But what if there’s love in hell too? Is that possible? It’s not so hard accepting hell as a product of God’s justice, but can hell be a product of God’s **love**, as well? Can hell be both justice and love, working in harmony together? But how can you find anything loving in the frightening visions of hell pictured in Scripture, or in the agony that God intentionally puts people through?

Well, let’s look into **why** God created hell, and see if that helps.

In Scripture there are several purposes for hell, each with its own **type** of hell too - like Hades, Gehenna, the Lake of Fire, and other terms like “everlasting destruction” and “the punishment of eternal fire.” But no matter what hell Scripture is talking about, it is not God’s purpose in any of them to threaten people into becoming Christians, or to punish people forever who don’t become Christians - because, **I John 4:18**, “**There is no fear in love.**” God’s love is supposed to **remove** fear, not create it, and when we understand God’s “**PERFECT love**” - especially in how he loves us even when we’re his enemies (Romans 5:8,10) - it “**drives out fear**” all together. Fear, therefore, plays no part in our gospel message, even when talking about hell.

That’s also “**because fear has to do with punishment**” (same verse), hell being the perfect example, because for centuries hell has been used as a threat of some awful, grisly, eternal punishment from God that has filled people’s minds with fear.

The result is all kinds of religious folks living in dread of “Judgment Day,” because that’s the time God “makes people pay in hell” for what they’ve done. But that isn’t God’s focus on Judgment Day at all. He wants us to have “**confidence on the day of judgment,**” **verse 17**. How? By “**LOVE (being) made complete in us.**” God wants us entering Judgment Day overwhelmed by his love, not by fear, “**because in this world we are like him.**” When God fills us with his love, we become like him, so that more and more we view everything through eyes of love like he does. So when looking at hell and Judgment Day we see only God’s LOVE behind them, too.

And the last thing we want to do as Christians is make someone “**a slave again to fear,**” **Romans 8:15**, because Christ died to remove our fear, **Hebrews 2:14-15**. He died “**so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and FREE those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.**” Fear is the devil’s tool of choice. He uses fear of death and hell to create a twisted view of God so people reject him. Anyone, therefore, who uses or promotes that kind of fear is simply doing the devil’s work for him.

As Christians we can’t promote fear of punishment anyway because Jesus took every bit of the punishment we deserve on himself. He absorbed all of it, for every human being for all time. Fear of death, hell and punishment, therefore, play no part in the gospel message. We preach only the good news that we see in the cross, that God is love.

But where is love in Hades, one of the names for “hell”?

Well, Hades exists because humans die - but - because God is love we don’t die forever, nor do we disappear back into the nothingness we came from after we die. Instead we go to Hades, God’s great holding tank, where all dead people go, good and bad. Hades is the place where all human life is preserved.

Old Testament and New Testament, Hades is the same, because the same quote about Hades is used in both. It's a quote by King David in **Acts 2:26-27** (taken word for word from Psalm 16:9-10): "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because **you will not abandon me to the grave** (The KJV uses "hell" for "grave," from "Hades" in Greek), **nor will you let your Holy One see decay.**"

So even David knew he was going to Hades, the place where all dead people go, including the "Holy One." But David also knew that neither he nor the Holy One would be left in Hades forever. Jesus, the Holy One, would be resurrected out of Hades (verses 30-35), and to prove that his death would release **others** from Hades as well, "The tombs broke open," **Matthew 27:52-53**, "and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people." Hades, therefore, is God's great holding tank for the dead, out of which he can lift people any time he wishes, into living, conscious human beings again.

So that's two pieces of good news about the Hades version of hell. First of all, that the dead don't just disappear - which is good news for those with relatives who never knew or believed the gospel - and secondly, that the dead can be brought back to life, because God has provided a place for everyone who dies, with the chance to live again. We see that in **Revelation 20:13**, when "death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them" - meaning **everyone** comes back to life again - after which, **verse 14**, "death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire." Hades is destroyed because the dead have all been taken out of it. It's no longer needed, because God's loving purpose for it has been fulfilled.

Well, Hades seems pretty harmless, but what about Gehenna? What possible loving purpose could God have in burning people up forever in a garbage dump?

Unlike Hades, Gehenna is a literal place on this earth, an L-shaped valley where garbage was burnt on the west and south sides of Jerusalem, known variously as the Kidron Valley, the Valley of Hinnom, or Topheth. The Gehenna version of hell, therefore, is directly linked to the Jews and Jerusalem and the awful things they got up to.

It was the Jewish King Ahaz, for instance, in **2 Chronicles 28:3**, who "burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his sons in the fire," an awful practice that was still going on in Judah in **Jeremiah 7:31**, resulting in God using that same valley of Gehenna to predict "the days," **verse 32**, "when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury their dead in Topheth until there is no more room." What the Jews were doing to their children would now be done to them. A clear association began, therefore, between the garbage dump fires of Gehenna and God's judgment on the Jews - which Jesus ALSO used in describing what was coming to the Jews and Jerusalem of **his** day too.

Gehenna, therefore, is nothing like Hades. The garbage-consuming fires of Gehenna were used by God as a massive wake-up call to his people of the hell that was coming to them in their own lifetimes for their blatant worship of false gods, and the terrible things they were doing in that worship to their children.

He used the “Gehenna wake-up call” again in **Jeremiah 19:11-12**, when he told Judah, “I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter’s jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will **bury their dead in Topheth** (Gehenna) until there is no more room. This is what I will do to this place, and to those who live here. **I will make this city like Topheth.**” God uses the Gehenna wake-up call again in **Jeremiah 32**, to warn those in Jerusalem that the Babylonians under king Nebuchadnezzar, **verse 28**, “will come in and set it on fire,” **verse 29**, and “burn it down” - like a pile of Gehenna-hell garbage. And in 587 BC that’s exactly what happened.

Jump ahead to **Matthew 23:33-36** and we find JESUS issuing his own warning of Gehenna-like hell to the Jews of HIS day too, for murdering the prophets he sent to warn them, and how “all this (hell) will come upon this generation” - on the Jews living right then. In **Matthew 24:16**, he speaks again to “those who are in Judea,” the Jews of that day, and again, in **verse 34**, that “this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” And true to his word, only 40-some years later, Jerusalem and its temple were again totally consumed by fire like piles of Gehenna-garbage, this time by the Romans in 70 AD.

And where is the good news of God’s love in this picture? It’s that God always gives fair warning to his people. He explains the problem, tells them what’s going to happen if they continue in their problem, and when they can’t stop the problem, he stops it for them. Are they then dumped in the garbage fires of Gehenna forever? No, **Jeremiah 32:37**, because AFTER the Jews have been taken into captivity in Babylon, God ALSO promises to “gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety.” With the warning comes a promise of restoration - and it’s an “everlasting covenant” of restoration too, **verse 40**. The nation will be totally healed of its disease, forever.

Gehenna, therefore - just like Hades - is a temporary hell. And it’s hell for a good purpose too, designed to stop the rot messing up God’s beloved people, get rid of it, cleanse the nation, and start afresh. It also serves as a “wake-up call” offering people a chance to escape the horrors too, just as Jesus said in **Matthew 24:13**, that “he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” Stay faithful to Christ and they would survive the horrors of Gehenna, no matter how horrible they were.

Unlike Hades, though, Gehenna won’t be destroyed. Instead, **Jeremiah 31:40**, “the Kidron Valley will be holy to the Lord. The city (Jerusalem) will never again be uprooted or destroyed.” The good news is, that even Gehenna itself will be cleansed and restored.

But where is God's love in the Lake of Fire, or "the fiery lake of burning sulfur," **Revelation 21:8**? - because it sounds terrible.

And it is terrible. It harks back to Sodom and Gomorrah and the first time God totally destroyed an area by raining down burning sulfur, leaving nothing but a smouldering lake of fire (Genesis 19:23-28). But it's just that kind of terrible hell that God inflicts on people when he's really angry - on **Israel** (Deuteronomy 29:22-23, 27), on **Judea and Jerusalem** (Isaiah 1:7-10), on **Edom** (Isaiah 34:8-10 and Jeremiah 49:17-18), on **Gog and Magog** (Ezekiel 38:22), and on the beast power of **Antiochus Epiphanes** (Daniel 7:9, 11).

In **Psalm 11:6**, a fiery lake of burning sulfur awaits ALL wicked people, and in **Revelation 20:15** anyone "not found in the book of life was thrown into the Lake of Fire" too, like the list of people mentioned in **Revelation 21:8** - "the cowardly, the unbelieving, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters, and all liars - their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur." This would also include, **Revelation 14:9**, "anyone who worships the beast and his image," upon whom a terrible fate awaits, **verse 10**, because "He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image."

Clearly, the Lake of Fire is God's top choice for the worst kind of calamity he inflicts on wicked people. It's ugly, brutal, all-consuming and permanent. And unlike Gehenna there is NO escape on offer and - also unlike Gehenna - the Lake of Fire is aimed at **every** wicked person, not just the Jews and Jerusalem.

But where is hope and good news, and the assurance of God's love in this picture? It's in **Ezekiel 16:53** in the one word "**HOWEVER**." So, yes, God's judgment on the wicked is fatal, witnessed again and again in the utter ruin of Sodom and Gomorrah being inflicted on other nations and individuals through history - "**HOWEVER**," God says, "**I will restore the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters ... and your fortunes along with them,**" AND, **verse 55**, "**Sodom with her daughters ... will return to what they were before; and you and your daughters will return to what you were before.**"

So here we've got the original Lake of Fire, the city of Sodom, which was supposed to be a smouldering ruin forever as a witness and "example of what is going to happen to the ungodly," **2 Peter 2:6**, and "an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire," **Jude 7**, being RESTORED and returned to what it was before. Remarkably, miraculously, from the ashes of eternal annihilation - AND even after a promise from God of punishment by eternal fire - Sodom is restored.

Sodom also exists, therefore, as an eternal witness to the power of God's love. In a contest between his wrath and his love, Sodom tells us it's his love that wins in the end.

So when we read in **2 Thessalonians 1:8-9** about Jesus coming “from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels,” to “punish those who do not know God, and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus,” and “They will be **punished with everlasting destruction** and shut out from the presence of the Lord,” is that the end of them forever?

Or is it simply the end of what they were? Because we’ve learnt from what happened to Sodom that “everlasting destruction” and “eternal fire” mean ONLY the utter annihilation of WHAT WAS. The area of Sodom and Gomorrah is still a desolate, smoking ruin, serving as a visible witness that what happened to Sodom can - and will - happen to anyone who dares take the terrible risk of resisting and opposing God. God’s anger can explode any second, with horrific consequences on individuals, cities, nations or entire empires. He blasts them into oblivion. Anyone can travel to the Dead Sea and see with their own eyes what the Lake of Fire does. It is God’s total assurance that justice against evil will be done.

But the “everlasting destruction” on Sodom doesn’t mean annihilation forever **into the future**, because God restores Sodom. Not only, then, does Sodom bear witness to God’s justice, it also bears witness to God’s amazing compassion and mercy, because **what he promised he would destroy forever, he also promised he would restore**. So along with the assurance of his justice comes the assurance of his love as well, because after justice is done, God promises something new and wonderful rising from the ashes.

What we see in the Lake of Fire, then, is that justice and mercy CAN work hand-in-hand together. First justice and then mercy, but often spoken of together in the same prophecy (like **Jeremiah 32:36-41**), so that those who face the horrors of hell can still have hope. Yes, they must expect justice, but in the end it’s God’s mercy that wins the day, and no matter how angry God is in the moment it’s his LOVE that gets the last word. And isn’t that the assurance we all need, that evil will be eradicated forever because of God’s justice, but we ourselves won’t be eradicated forever because of God’s love? Well, that’s exactly the gospel we preach, the good news of God’s unfailing justice along with his unlimited love and patience, the proof of which is the Lake of Fire!

So, yes there is hell. Yes there is torment. Yes there is “no rest day or night” for those who oppose God, because God is a God of justice who uses suffering to wake us up to our stupid, stubborn, hurtful, self-destructing attitudes. But never does he throw people into subterranean fire dungeons to scream in agony forever. Instead, the suffering lasts only as long as it’s needed, as a wake-up call, a witness, a purging, a purifying, an end to evil, or an attitude-changer. And God always offers hope of redemption and restoration, even of hell itself, because **if hell lasts forever then evil wins**.

Is there hope for everyone, then? .... (continues in Part 5)