

# Does A Loving God Really Send People to Hell?

The question is usually framed like this: “**How can a loving God send someone to hell?**” Romans 1:18–20 lays the foundation for the answer: “**The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse**” (emphasis added).

The question of how a loving God could consign anyone to eternal punishment represents one of Christianity’s most profound theological challenges. This apparent paradox has troubled believers and skeptics alike for millennia, striking at the very heart of our understanding of divine justice, mercy, and love. Yet rather than representing an insurmountable contradiction, the doctrine of hell, when properly understood through the lens of Scripture and centuries of theological reflection, actually reveals the profound depths of God’s perfect love and justice working in harmony.

The Gospel Coalition: [Jesus talked about hell more than any other person in the Bible.](#)

## **Reality of Hell**

*A friend once challenged me to show her where Jesus talks about hell in the Gospels. Even a cursory read-through shows Jesus talked about it plenty. In fact, Jesus talked about hell more than any other person in the Bible. In Luke 16, he describes a great chasm over which “**none may cross from there to us.**” In Matthew 25, Jesus tells of a time when people will be separated into two groups, one entering into his presence, the other banished to “**eternal fire.**”*

*Jesus doesn’t only reference hell, he describes it in great detail. He says it is a place of eternal torment (Luke 16:23), of unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43), where the worm does not die (Mark 9:48), where people will gnash their teeth in anguish and regret (Matt. 13:42), and from which there is no return, even to warn loved ones (Luke 16:19–31). He calls hell a place of “**outer darkness**” (Matt. 25:30), comparing it to “**Gehenna**” (Matt. 10:28), which was a trash dump outside the walls of Jerusalem where rubbish was burned and maggots abounded. Jesus talks about hell more than he talks about heaven, and describes it more vividly. There’s no denying that Jesus knew, believed, and warned about the absolute reality of hell.*

## The Foundation of the Question

The tension arises from two seemingly incompatible truths that Scripture presents with equal force. On one hand, we are told that **“God is love”** (1 John 4:8), that He **“desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”** (1 Timothy 2:4), and that He is **“patient toward you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance”** (2 Peter 3:9). As we see above, Jesus Christ himself—the very embodiment of divine love—spoke more frequently about hell than about heaven, warning of a place where **“the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched”** (Mark 9:48) and describing the eternal separation awaiting those who reject God’s offer of salvation.

This apparent contradiction dissolves when we recognize that perfect love necessarily includes perfect justice. As the great theologian **Thomas Aquinas observed**, God’s attributes are not competing forces within the divine nature but are perfectly unified aspects of His singular perfection. Divine love without justice would be mere sentimentality, while justice without love would be mere cruelty. The God revealed in Scripture is neither sentimental nor cruel, but rather perfectly holy in all His attributes.

## Understanding Divine Justice and Love

If we find God’s punishment of hell too harsh, we might not understand how evil sin truly is. Sin represents not merely a violation of divine law, but a fundamental rejection of the very source of all goodness, beauty, and truth. Augustine of Hippo, whose theological insights shaped Christian understanding for over fifteen centuries, argued that sin is fundamentally a turning away from God toward created things—an inversion of the proper order of love that places the finite above the infinite.

When we grasp the infinite nature of the One against whom we sin, the gravity of rebellion becomes apparent. C.S. Lewis captured this truth powerfully: **“We must never make the problem of pain worse than it is by vague talk about the ‘unimaginable sum of human misery.’ Most misery is quite imaginable... But whatever misery God permits must be for some good end.”** The existence of hell demonstrates not God’s lack of love, but rather the infinite value He places on human freedom and moral responsibility.

Augustine believed in the existence of a physical Hell as a punishment for sin, but argued that those who choose to accept the salvation of Jesus Christ will go to Heaven. This emphasizes a crucial point: hell is not God’s preferred destination for humanity, but rather the inevitable consequence of persistent rejection of His grace. As the apostle Paul explains, **“The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 6:23).

# The Reality of Human Freedom

Central to understanding hell's compatibility with divine love is recognizing the profound gift of human freedom. God created human beings as moral agents capable of genuine choice—including the choice to reject Him. If God is love itself, and I tell him I do not want anything to do with him in this life, he will allow me to do as I choose and go to a place without love (hell).

This perspective reveals hell not as a place God eagerly sends people, but as the ultimate respect for human autonomy. Lewis famously wrote in **“The Great Divorce”** that **“the gates of hell are locked on the inside.”** Those who find themselves in hell have, through a lifetime of choices, consistently chosen self over God, pride over humility, darkness over light. Hell becomes, in this understanding, the final honoring of their persistent choice.

Thomas Aquinas developed this theme further, explaining that the damned in hell continue to choose evil even in their punishment. Those who will be thrust into hell will not cease from evil-doing, because their fundamental orientation toward self rather than God remains unchanged. Hell is not merely punishment imposed from without, but the natural consequence of a heart that has definitively rejected the source of all joy, peace, and fulfillment.

## Hell as Separation from God

Several Eastern Orthodox theologians describe hell as separation from God, in the sense of being out of fellowship or loving communion. This understanding, while maintaining the reality of divine judgment, emphasizes that hell's primary torment is not external torture but the absence of the divine presence that alone can satisfy the human heart.

Augustine described this separation in his **“Confessions”**: **“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”** If this is true—if human beings are created for communion with God—then eternal separation from Him represents the deepest possible suffering: the permanent frustration of our deepest longing and highest purpose.

This separation is chosen, not imposed. Throughout earthly life, God's grace is offered freely to all. His love pursues us relentlessly, as described in Francis Thompson's poem **“The Hound of Heaven”**: **“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days... Still with unhurrying chase, And unperturbèd pace, Deliberate speed, majestic instancy, They beat—and a Voice beat More instant than the Feet—'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'”**

## The Testimony of Scripture

Christians are bound by the teaching of Jesus. It is our Lord Jesus who, above all, forces us to affirm the dreadful truth that those who stand alone before God as sinners on the day of judgment will face condemnation into a state of eternal punishment called hell. We cannot soften or explain away Christ's clear teachings about eternal judgment without undermining His credibility as a teacher and His authority as Lord.

Jesus spoke of hell with deep sorrow, not vindictive pleasure. When He wept over Jerusalem, crying ***"How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"*** (Matthew 23:37), we see the heart of God broken over human rebellion. The doctrine of hell emerges not from divine callousness but from divine grief over humanity's persistent rejection of love.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus ([Luke 16:19-31](#)) illustrates this truth powerfully. The rich man's torment stems not from arbitrary punishment but from the consequences of a lifetime spent in self-indulgence while ignoring the needs of others. Even in hell, he shows no repentance, only self-concern. His punishment reveals the justice of God, while his impenitence demonstrates the reality of human freedom to choose evil even in the face of consequences.

## The Problem of Proportionality

Critics often argue that eternal punishment is disproportionate to finite sins committed in temporal life. However, this objection misunderstands both the nature of sin and the nature of eternity. Sin is not merely breaking a rule but rejecting the infinite God, and the gravity of an offense is measured not only by the action itself but by the one against whom it is committed.

Moreover, Aquinas taught that the souls in hell continue in their rebellion throughout eternity. The condemnation continues for eternity because the sin does, too. Hell is eternal, not because God is vindictive, but because the sinner's rejection of God persists eternally. This explains why theology speaks of the ***"deserved judgement"*** of the damned—not that they cannot repent, but that they will not.

## Divine Mercy and Justice United

According to the Augustinian vision, those condemned to hell are recipients of divine justice but are not recipients of divine mercy. This might suggest that God's attributes are in competition, but the fuller picture reveals their perfect harmony. God's mercy is offered to all during earthly life through the redemptive work of Christ. Those who persistently reject this

mercy receive justice instead—not because God is unmerciful, but because they have refused mercy.

The Cross of Christ demonstrates this unity perfectly. There, divine justice and mercy meet in perfect harmony. Justice demands payment for sin; mercy provides the payment through God's own sacrifice. As the hymn writer put it: ***“Mercy and truth together met, And righteousness and peace kissed each other.”***

Hell is the place where an all-loving and all-powerful God will ultimately defeat and punish evil. The loving nature of God requires justice if it is to be meaningful. A God who ignored evil or failed to bring justice would not be loving toward evil's victims. The mother whose child is murdered, the innocent who suffer under tyranny, the weak who are oppressed by the strong—all cry out for justice. Hell represents God's final answer to this cry.

## The Evangelistic Implication

Understanding hell properly should never lead to callousness or triumphalism, but to urgent evangelism motivated by love. If hell is real, and if people we know and love are in danger of eternal separation from God, then sharing the Gospel becomes not merely a religious duty but an act of profound compassion. The doctrine of hell, properly understood, breaks our hearts for the lost and drives us to our knees in intercessory prayer.

Paul expressed this burden when he wrote, ***“I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh”*** (Romans 9:2-3). This is the proper Christian response to the doctrine of hell—not cold theological satisfaction, but broken-hearted love for those who remain outside God's grace.

## Modern Theological Perspectives

Contemporary Christian thinkers continue to wrestle with these profound questions while remaining faithful to Scripture and historic Christian teaching. Modern theologians emphasize mercy and existential choice, reflecting a shift towards understanding Hell as a chosen condition due to the rejection of divine love. This emphasis on choice does not minimize hell's reality but places it within the proper context of human freedom and divine love.

Some theologians explore the possibility of **annihilationism**—the view that the wicked are ultimately destroyed rather than eternally punished. While this view attempts to address concerns about proportionality, it struggles with the biblical language of eternal punishment and fails to account for passages that clearly speak of conscious, ongoing existence in hell. Others propose **universalism**—the belief that all will ultimately be saved. While emotionally appealing, this view requires significant reinterpretation of clear biblical texts and undermines

the urgency of the Gospel message. If all are ultimately saved regardless of their response to Christ, the Great Commission loses its urgency, and Christ's warnings about judgment become meaningless.

## The Pastoral Challenge

Pastors and Christian teachers face the delicate task of proclaiming the reality of hell while maintaining the prominence of God's love and grace. This requires:

- **Balanced emphasis:** Hell should be taught within the context of the Gospel, not as the primary focus of Christian proclamation
- **Compassionate presentation:** The doctrine should be shared with tears, not triumph
- **Christological foundation:** Hell's reality is established by Christ's own teaching, not human speculation
- **Evangelistic motivation:** The doctrine should drive us to evangelism and prayer, not judgment and condemnation

## Conclusion

The question “*Does a loving God really send people to hell?*” finds its answer not in philosophical speculation but in the revealed character of God as displayed supremely in Jesus Christ. **The same Jesus who spoke of hell also died on the cross to save people from it. The God who is perfectly just is also perfectly merciful, offering redemption freely to all who will receive it.**

Hell exists not because God lacks love, but because He possesses perfect love—a love that includes justice, respects human freedom, and provides genuine choice. **Those who find themselves in hell will be there not because God failed to love them, but because they persistently rejected His love.** Those who find themselves in heaven will be there not because they deserved it, but because they accepted God's unmerited grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of hell, properly understood, magnifies rather than diminishes the love of God. It shows the lengths to which divine love will go to provide salvation (the Cross), the patience divine love displays in offering redemption (God's longsuffering), and the respect divine love has for human dignity (honoring our choices, even when they lead to destruction).

As we contemplate these profound truths, we are called not to cold theological speculation but to grateful worship, urgent evangelism, and compassionate ministry to a world that desperately needs to hear the good news that, though hell is real, heaven is freely offered through faith in Jesus Christ. The God who could send people to hell is the same God who sent His Son to save them from it. This is the heart of the Gospel: not that we might escape hell, but that we might know God and experience the eternal joy for which we were created.

**In the end, the question is not whether a loving God sends people to hell, but whether we will accept His loving provision to save us from the hell we deserve. The choice, as always, remains ours.**