



■ On October 24, 2003, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article called “Next Stop, the Pearly Gates or Hell?” It reported a survey conducted by the Barna Research Group. The September 2003 survey polled people from every state but Hawaii and Alaska to discover their beliefs about heaven and hell. The poll found that 76 percent of Americans believe in a heaven and that 71 percent believe in a hell.¹ The results were a bit surprising: according to the poll, almost as many Americans said they believe in hell as in heaven. But more telling was the fact that, although more than seven out of ten Americans believe in some sort of hell, fewer than one out of a hundred think they have a good chance of going there!

These findings are similar to those described in a 1991 cover story of *U.S. News & World Report*. Its 1990 poll found that 60 percent of Americans said they believed in some sort of hell, but that only 4 percent considered themselves to have a good chance of going there.²

What are we to make of this? Polls are difficult to analyze, but if these are accurate, more Americans believed in hell in 2003 than in 1990. Yet fewer of them believed that they themselves might go to hell. Evidently, most Americans conclude that God will punish at least some sinners, but few include themselves in that group. Maybe the idea is that hell

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exists only for extremely evil people—such as Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, serial killers, and serial rapists.

These ideas are echoed in a question we have often been asked: would a loving God really send good people to hell? Maybe you have been asked that question. It troubles non-Christians as well as Christians, even pastors, missionaries, elders, deacons, and teachers. Pastor and author Tim Keller considers it one of the major questions that contemporary Christians face when they share the gospel.³

Would a loving God really send good people to hell? What does the Bible teach? It is important to remember that the Bible is the Word of God and is therefore true (2 Tim. 3:14–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21). Indeed, the Bible speaks truth, even when it says things we may not like. It is crucial that we hold to this. Otherwise, we may believe whatever we want to believe, rather than that which is actually true. For example, we may both want the St. Louis Cardinals to win the World Series every year, but the truth of the matter is that they win only occasionally (though more than most!). What we want to believe must come to terms with what is. And Christians throughout the centuries have known that whatever the Bible teaches on a subject is true, whether they like its particular teachings or not. We must deliberately and consistently submit our thoughts, wills, and emotions to the clear teaching of Scripture.

WOULD A LOVING GOD REALLY SEND GOOD PEOPLE TO HELL?

With that in mind, what does the Bible teach regarding this crucial question? It says a lot, as Paul's letter to the Romans demonstrates. From the outset of the letter, Paul asserts that he is "not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the

power of God for salvation” (1:16). It is the only way anyone—Jew or Gentile alike—is saved. All need the gospel.⁴

Paul then points out why. Romans 1:18–32 makes clear that through his creation, God shows himself to be the powerful Creator, the One alone deserving worship from all, including those without the Bible. But people do not worship God as they should. Instead we all reject him. We “suppress” or resist the truth and trade in God for idols. Though we are made by God and for him (see also Col. 1:16), we make life all about ourselves. This is idolatry, a sort of cosmic treason. What does God do about this? He judges us guilty and sets his wrath upon us.

In Romans 2 and 3, Paul continues to show that all are guilty before God. Moral people are guilty because they fail to live up to the standards that they place on others (2:1–11). Even religious people, such as the Jews, are guilty. They have the law but break it and show themselves to be sinners before God (2:12–3:8). Paul sums up his argument: all, both Jews and Gentiles, are under sin (3:9). There are no exceptions. He quotes a litany of Old Testament passages to show that no one is righteous, no one understands, no one seeks for God, everyone has turned aside, no one does good, no one fears God (3:10–18).

The apostle then concludes that, based on performance, no human being can stand before God as righteous. Rather, all are sinners who refuse to love, worship, and obey God as he deserves. Indeed, sin infects our minds—we do not think correctly about God. Sin infects our desires—we do not want what we know we should want, and we want what we know we should not want. Sin infects our choices—we choose wrongly because we want something else more than God. Human sin is universal and total.

Elsewhere, Paul stresses that we are all “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3). We are in

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Adam's fall, united in his sin and guilt (Rom. 5:12–21). And we all also stumble in many ways. In other words, we are sinful by nature and choice and are under God's just judgment.

Many in our culture suppose that at the final judgment God will use measuring scales. If our good deeds outweigh our bad ones, then we will make it into heaven. If others' bad deeds outweigh their good ones, they will go to hell. But in Romans Paul paints a different picture. He teaches that we are *all* guilty (3:9–20, 23), and that our guilt is enormous and increasing (2:5). And there is nothing we can do to remove this guilt (3:19–20).

Thankfully, Paul does not end here, but reveals that although we cannot be justified by our own deeds, we can be declared right with God on account of Jesus' saving work (3:21–31). His work, centered here in his substitutionary death on the cross, displays God's love and justice. It shows that God loves us, even while we were sinners (see also 5:6–11). And it shows that God is just, requiring that the penalty of our sin and guilt be paid (3:24–26). But instead of our paying the penalty, Jesus voluntarily takes it upon himself. All who have faith in Jesus will be declared right with God because their sin has been transferred to Christ's spiritual bank account (3:21–5:11). All others will suffer the consequence of their sin and guilt, which is hell.

It is important to note here that the question Paul struggles to answer is not the modern one: "Would a loving God really send good people to hell?" Instead, Paul addresses this: "How could a just and holy God ever declare guilty sinners to be righteous in his sight?" The contours of Paul's answer are that we are all sinners and therefore all guilty, and our just punishment is hell. Most importantly, only Jesus' saving work—his death and resurrection—can atone for sins. And not only is Christ the only way to be forgiven of our

Would a Loving God Really Send Good People to Hell? ■

guilt, but only faith in Christ can bring that forgiveness. Paul develops these ideas in Romans 4–5. We are ungodly sinners and enemies of God (5:6–10), and only Christ and faith in him make us right before God (5:9–10, 18–19; 4:1–25).

Paul is not the only one to emphasize these truths. John 3:36 states, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). In Acts 4:12, Peter and John proclaim, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Peter confesses, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

So would a loving God really send good people to hell? We can now say that this is a loaded question! It is distorted in three ways. First, God is defined only in terms of love. Certainly, God is more loving than any of us can comprehend (Eph. 3:14–19). God is not less than loving; he is more than loving. He is also holy, just, and good. His wrath toward sin is just and is a proper display of his holiness and goodness. A good and just judge punishes the guilty (Rom. 1:18–3:10).

The second distortion is that people are described as “good” in the question. Paul makes it clear that “no one” is righteous, good, or reverent toward God (Rom. 3:9–20), “not even one” (3:12). Rather, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23).

Third, the question also distorts the portrait of God by portraying him as the one sending people to hell, as if he happily does so. But Paul puts the blame squarely on our shoulders. We are rebels who deserve the punishment of our sins, which is hell. Sinners have only themselves to blame.

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“Would a loving God really send good people to hell?” is the wrong question, and it leads people to wrong answers. The right question, the one that Paul answers in Romans, is, “How can a loving and just God declare the guilty to be right with him?” Or: “How can those who deserve hell go to heaven?” Because of Adam’s sin and our own many sins, God could justly send us all to hell. Astonishingly, because of his grace alone, God loves us so much that he sent Jesus to die in our place and rise again to save us. And Jesus loves us so much that he did this willingly. And the Holy Spirit loves us so much that he opens our hearts to the gospel. And all those who trust the Lord Jesus as Savior will be declared right with God and their sins will be forgiven. And if you have not done so, we urge you to despair of saving yourself and to put your confidence in Christ, whose death and resurrection alone rescue the lost. All others will pay the penalty of their sins in hell.

Now that we have seen how hell fits into the larger gospel message, we can look more particularly at what the Bible teaches about the fate of the lost.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT HELL?

The Bible teaches much about hell, but five truths predominate.

Hell Is Punishment

Hell is a place where people suffer the just penalty for their moral crimes. Punishment is the Bible’s primary picture of hell. That hell is punishment is clearly communicated by every New Testament author: Matthew (5:20–30; 24–25); Mark (9:42–48); Luke (16:19–31); Paul (2 Thess. 1:5–10); the