

How Can a Loving God Send Souls to Hell?

By Joel Hayes

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Revelation 20:10-15

10 *And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.*

11 *And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.*

12 *And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.*

13 *And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.*

14 *And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.*

15 *And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.*

From these famous verses in Revelation 20 sprang forth an age-old question – how can a loving God send souls to the Lake of Fire to suffer for all of eternity? How could God possibly do that? If He loves us how can He allow anyone to suffer forever?

There is no getting around these verses, either. They're not theoretical. They're not allegorical. They're not symbolic. The Apostle John shares what he witnessed as facts, as he had been doing throughout the entire book of Revelation, including this chapter, such as when he writes, "I saw an angel" (vs. 1), "and I saw thrones" (vs. 4), "and I saw souls" (vs. 4). John explains, as a witness to the revelation given to him from Jesus Christ while on the isle of Patmos (1:1-2,9), how the end times of this world will play out as facts. For example, at the end of vs. 4 here in chapter 20, he writes, "and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years." That's not symbolism. That's a literal statement of fact. In vs. 5, he writes, "But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This *is* the first resurrection." Again, John is stating facts and he's taking the time to define those facts.

In vs. 6, we're given, "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years..." Not only is this not figurative but the resurrection of vs. 6 was also well-known to Israel as it had long been the subject of prophecy. Job 19:25-26 – "For I know *that* my redeemer liveth, and *that* he shall stand at the latter *day* upon the earth: And *though* after my skin *worms* destroy this *body*, yet in my flesh shall I see God." Psalms 17:15 – "As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness." Isaiah 26:19 - "Thy dead *men* shall live, *together with* my dead *body* shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew *is as* the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead." Daniel 12:2 - "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame *and* everlasting contempt." The Lord also spoke of "the resurrection of the just" in Luke 14:14. He referenced "the resurrection from the dead" and the "children of the resurrection" in Luke 20:35-36. He talked about "the resurrection of life" in John 5:29. Paul spoke of "the resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust" in Acts 24:15, which was the hope of the twelve tribes of Israel, as part of the "all things which are written in the law and in the prophets" that he explained in the previous verse.

In verses 10-15 quoted at the beginning of the article, John clarifies that great day of judgment everyone since the fall of man has always known was coming, and we know from these verses that there is no universal reconciliation. As if God is going to suddenly forget the agonies of His Son on the cross and forget all those who rejected His love and His free gift of salvation! As if God is going to deny His own holy character and change His mind about all the wickedness of the world and let everyone get away with everything! John states a fact here - those who stand before the Great White Throne, whose names are not found in the Book of Life, they will be cast into the Lake of Fire, which is a place of torment day and night forever and ever.

We also know from these verses that there is no annihilation of souls. All the souls of the unsaved referenced in Rev. 20, along with the devil and his angels, shall be tormented day and night forever and ever. Paul wrote that those "who obey not the gospel" "shall be punished with everlasting destruction" (2 Thess. 1:8-9). In Matt. 25:41-46, the Lord explained that, at His Second Coming, He will say to the nations who did not help the Jews during the tribulation, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal."

Just to be clear – the Lake of Fire is different than Hell, which is not where unbelievers wind up for all eternity. In the Bible, Hell is simply a holding place in Sheol deep inside the earth where the unsaved souls await their final judgment at the Great White Throne after the thousand-year reign of Christ (Rev. 20:5). And when they are judged, vs. 14-15 tells us that death, Hell, and all the unsaved souls will be cast into the Lake of Fire. By reading other verses we know that the Lake of Fire is a place of eternal torment (2 Thess. 1:8-9). We know it's a place of outer darkness (Matt. 8:12). We know it's a place where the fire is not quenched and where the worm dieth not (Mark 9:43-48). We know it's the place prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41). We know that Hades or Hell will be cast into it (Rev. 20:14). We know that those who shall be cast into it will lose neither consciousness nor memory (Luke 16:19-31). And we

also know that in the Lake of Fire there will be no holiness, no righteousness, no love, no light, no peace, no joy, and no hope - only misery and suffering forever and ever.

Back to our question – how can a loving God punish a soul forever? I know it can be difficult to wrap one’s mind around the idea of suffering in the Lake of Fire for all eternity. For some, it seems harsh, maybe even unfair, that a soul will suffer forever. I’d suggest that if we ever find ourselves thinking that God’s eternal punishment somehow seems wrong or extreme, we have to remind ourselves that the problem is not with God. The problem is with us not understanding His righteousness. It’s not a matter of God needing to change the way He judges unbelievers to conform to our limited points of view, but rather, we need to come around to HIS perfectly righteous point of view about everything. By telling ourselves that He’s being unfair, all we’re doing is trying to lower HIS holy, righteous standards in order to meet us in the middle, and God is just not going to do that. He’s not going to come to us on our terms. We have to come to Him on His terms. He’s the creator of Heaven and Earth. Everything is His. HE makes the rules and those rules are sprung from His perfect, holy, righteous character.

Isaiah 6:1-7

- 1 In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.*
- 2 Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.*
- 3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.*
- 4 And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.*
- 5 Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.*
- 6 Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar:*
- 7 And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.*

In a vision, Isaiah found himself catapulted into the very presence of the Lord in Heaven. One would think Isaiah would have spoken immediately of his exhilarating joy and gladness to be in the presence of the Lord God of Israel! No. Instead, fear swept over him. He said, “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I *am* a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.” An angel had to bring a live coal to purge him from sin so He could be in the presence of the Lord. God’s holiness is so pure, so brilliant, so powerful, that nothing unclean or an unrighteous person can ever stand in His glorified presence or that person shall surely die (Judges 13:22).

Did you notice in vs. 2 that God's holiness is so magnificent that even the Seraphims, the highest class of angels, had to cover their faces in His presence? In vs. 3, the Seraphims were crying out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory." There's a similar passage in Rev. 4:8 in which "The four beasts rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come." Do you ever read in Scripture about heavenly beings singing three times repeatedly about any other attribute of God? Where do we read of angels crying out "Eternal, eternal, eternal, is the Lord God Almighty;" or, "Merciful, merciful, merciful is the Lord God of Hosts?" No, they always sing of His holiness, which is His pre-eminent, crowning attribute of His divine nature.

The holiness of God is the core of who He is, which makes His words true and all of His actions and judgments perfectly righteous. He has the power to do anything He wants but His power is subservient to His will, which is utterly holy. His holiness is His glory, as His grace is His riches. His holiness is His crown, as His truth is His treasure. Holiness is a glorious perfection of the nature of God. He loves all truth and goodness. He hates all falsity and evil. "The righteous Lord loveth righteousness" (Psa. 11:7) and "hath no pleasure in wickedness" (Psa. 5:4).

What is the holiness of God exactly? It's a perfect and unpolluted freedom from all impurity, sin, and evil. It is the integrity of the divine nature, whereby He delights in righteousness and everything that is agreeable to His holy will. He must by His holy nature stand opposed to everything that's sinful and contrary to His will. It is in, I believe, a study of His holiness where you find the answer to the question, how can a loving God punish a soul forever?

In Ex. 15:11, God is said to be "glorious in holiness." Holiness is called "God's throne." Psa. 47:8 – "God sitteth upon the throne of his holiness." In Isa. 63:15, Heaven is called, "The habitation of his holiness, and of his glory." In Prov. 9:10, the knowledge of God is called "the knowledge of the holy." Heb. 12:10 says that saints "are partakers of His holiness," and because there is no perfection greater than God, He swears oaths by His own holiness – "Once have I sworn by my holiness" (Psa. 89:35).

James 1:13 tells us "God cannot be tempted with evil." Job 34:10,12 – "Far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty, that he should commit iniquity... Yea surely God will not do wickedly, neither will the Almighty pervert judgment." Rom. 9:14 – "Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid." Deut. 32:4 calls Him "A God of truth, and without iniquity." Tit. 1:2 – "In hope of eternal life, which God that cannot lie hath promised." Psa. 145:17 – "The Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works." Twice in Revelation He is called "holy and true."

In 2 Chron. 20:21, the Israelites "appointed singers unto the LORD that should praise the beauty of holiness." His beauty is a holy beauty. His justice is a holy justice. His wisdom is a holy wisdom. His arm of power is a holy arm (Psa. 98:1). His promises are holy promises (Psa. 105:42). "Holy and true" go hand in hand (Rev. 6:10). His name, which signifies all His attributes, is a holy name (Psa. 103:1). His holiness is the guide to all His actions and the source

of all His punishments. Since God cannot but know what is right, so He cannot but do what is just.

God knows not only the workers of wickedness but also the wickedness of their works. Job 11:11 - "For he knoweth vain men: he seeth wickedness also; will he not then consider it?" The very sight of iniquity affects Him deeply. Hab. 1:13 - "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity." God hates the first spark of wickedness in the imagination of man. "And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour; and love no false oath: for all these are things that I hate, saith the LORD" (Zech. 8:17). In Amos 5:21, 22, when Israel was committing idolatry while also making sacrifices to the Lord, He said, "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts." In Isa. 1:14, He said, "Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them." In Jer. 44:4, He said, "Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate." He abhors wickedness so much that His hatred falls upon the unregenerate person who carries it out. "He hates all workers of iniquity" (Psa. 5:5).

The infinite anger and hatred of God against sin is as infinite as His love and grace toward those who place their faith in Him. God, indeed, may be reconciled to the sinner but never to the sin. How can He love any sin that is contrary to His nature without hating His own nature that is contrary to sin? Two contraries cannot be loved at the same time. He cannot approve of sin without denying Himself. The anger of God is absolutely eternal and irreconcilable against sin, and the holiness of God will right itself of the wrongs done to it. He will ultimately put the greatest distance between Himself and the unregenerate, unrighteous souls who rejected Him.

The severe judgments of God against evil have their foundation in the holiness of His nature, which makes His judgments perfectly righteous acts. Daniel said that the throne of His "holiness is a fiery flame" (Dan. 7:9). He does not hate sin by choice but out of necessity because of the immutable holiness of His nature. It is as much a part of His nature to punish wickedness, as it is in His nature to hate it. He would cease to be holy if He ceased to hate unrighteousness, and He would cease to hate unrighteousness if He ceased to punish it.

Consider this. God hated sin so much and He loved us so much, that when the sins of the world were imputed to His Son on the cross, He literally brought a hell upon His own being. If God spared not His own Son when He paid the penalty for our sins on the cross, why should He spare us the eternal consequence of rejecting Him? If God could have hated sin without punishing it, then His Son would have never had to die on a cross! God cannot but be holy, and He cannot but be just, because to be unjust with respect to sin and wickedness is to be unholy.

Romans chapters 1-3 gives us the awful arraignment of humanity. It is not a description of the future damned but of all the at-present-lost. As William R. Newell wrote in his book, Romans Verse-by-Verse, "the first step of wisdom is to listen to the worst God says about us."

In Romans 1:18-32, we learn that every man knows God exists. Every man knows about His eternal power and Godhead. Every man knows that judgment is coming. And every man knows he ought to give his being entirely over to the creator's worship and glory. He ought to be continually thankful for life itself and for all its many blessings. However, men refused both worship and gratitude to God. Newell points out four things that come to light in Romans 1:

- (a)** the absolute character of man's sin;
- (b)** the absoluteness of God's holiness which could not spare the Son of His love, when once sin was laid on him;
- (c)** the absoluteness of God's love and grace toward sinners, in publishing forgiveness and righteousness as a free-gift through Christ, and
- (d)** the revelation from Heaven of Divine wrath against all ungodliness, all unrighteousness.

Rom. 1:18 reveals that the wrath of God is "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness." Men know more truth in themselves than they're willing to accept and to properly respond to that truth. As a result, we learn in verses 23-25 about the beginnings of idolatry, how man "changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things." It is a high insult to God. Having rejected the knowledge of God but unable to escape the consciousness that He exists, men turned to idolatry. They, like Israel, "changed their glory for the likeness of an ox that eateth grass" (Psa. 106:20). The more one reflects upon the infinite glory and majesty of the eternal God, the more hideous the insult for any kind of idolatry.

Additionally, three times in chapter 1 of Romans, Paul writes about how God gave them up (vs. 24,26) and gave them over (vs. 28). As Alford translates it, "Because they reprobated the knowledge of God, God gave them over to a reprobate mind" or as Conybeare renders it, "As they thought fit to cast out the knowledge of God, God gave them over to an outcast mind." They had given God up and thus, God gives them up. In vs. 24, God gave man up to the corruption of body. In vs. 26, God gave man up to corruption of the soul (heart), and in vs. 28, God gave man up to the corruption of the spirit (mind). In other words, God allowed man in his free will to fall into a degenerate state of corruption of his whole body, soul, and spirit.

Who could blame a doctor for deserting the patient who rejects his counsel, who will not follow his prescriptions for deliverance from his illness, but goes his own way to his own destruction? No man would blame that doctor. No man would say that the doctor is the cause of the patient's death. The true cause of the patient's death was his own obstinacy. And so who could dare blame God, who allowed mankind in his free will to go his own way to his own destruction and yet never denied His grace to any that sincerely sought it from Him?

Newell also points out that in Romans 2, we're given seven principles of God's judgment:

- 1.** God's judgment is "according to truth" (verse 2).
- 2.** The wrath is being stored up (verse 5).

3. According to works (verse 6).
4. Without respect of persons (verse 11).
5. According to one's response to truth (verse 13).
6. God will even judge secrets (verse 16).
7. According to reality, not religious profession (verses 17-29).

Consider this. It was God who created everything. It was God who created you in His image and in His likeness. It was God who gave you a free will and gave you the freedom to love Him or reject Him. It was God's breath that gave you an eternal soul. It was God who also gave you a spirit so that you may have a God consciousness. It was by God's grace and love that He gave us this magnificent, abundant Earth and universe. It was God who sought man out after he sinned against Him in the garden. It was God who gave us His Word which is the truth. It was God who revealed Himself to us through His Word. It was God in the prophets, in the person of Jesus Christ, and in the apostles who warned us about our condition and the judgment to come. It was God who revealed to us His standards of holiness and righteousness. It was God who loved us enough to send His Son into the world to pay the penalty on the cross for all of our sins. It is God who still reaches out to all of us even now to be reconciled to Him by His grace through our faith in His Son's shed blood. It was God who, unbeknownst to many who fail to rightly divide the Word, sets us up to be empowered now by His grace, blessed with all spiritual blessings, and made to be eternally secure. It is to God that we owe everything.

When we consider all He has done, that we all owe everything to God, and we consider the idea of rejecting Him *knowingly* and rejecting His free gift, then we reject His Son, we reject the magnitude of what He did to save us from ourselves, and we, therefore, reject almighty God Himself. It is absolutely a righteous judgment for that eternal soul to receive an eternal consequence for rejecting our eternal creator.

If we reject God is it not right that He should reject us? And then consider that our eternal soul has to go somewhere. Why should God give us a happy place to go if we reject Him? As the righteous and holy Judge of this world, why should He not right all the wrongs of mankind? Why should He tell all the saints "vengeance is mine" and "I will repay" if He does not intend to carry out perfect justice? We all too often minimize the significance of rejecting our creator. The sheer magnitude of the decision to reject our own creator and the salvation He offers us through the death of His Son, how can the punishment of eternal separation from God be anything but just? Our justification is not by our imperfect works but by an exact and infinite righteousness, as great as the righteousness of God Himself, which He freely gives us by grace through faith in His Son's death, burial, and resurrection as a payment for all of our sins.

Romans 5:8-10

8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

9 *Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.*

10 *For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.*

11 *And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.*

Our pardon is the fruit of His mercy, our knowledge a stream from His wisdom, our strength an impression of His resurrection power; so our purity is a beam from His holiness. He fills Hell with His severity, Heaven with His glory, and His people with His grace.

- Joel Hayes, FBC Librarian

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