

Doctrine of Eschatology and the Afterlife Applied Engaging Hell

Book: *The Great Divorce*, by C.S. Lewis

I. Framing the Discussion: *The Great Divorce*

C.S. Lewis' work isn't a theological treatise on heaven or hell, but more of a Christian apologetic using the concept of our eternal destiny as a way to frame the conversation with an unbeliever. We will run into trouble if we try to extract finer doctrinal points about the afterlife never intended by Lewis. His work can be classified as theological fantasy, fitting nicely into the tradition of Dante, Bunyan, and George MacDonald.

By allowing residents of hell (purgatory?) to interact with residents of heaven, we have some of the most pastoral and practical applications. These illustrations, however, are less focused on heaven and hell and more on sin and salvation...belief and unbelief.

But, what *The Great Divorce* says about sin and salvation in turn does shed helpful light on the topic of the afterlife. Part of the appeal of Lewis' book is that he makes heaven and hell congruent with earthly faith and not bazaar cartoony places that seem completely unrelated to how Christ calls us to live now.

Which vignettes stand out to you as the most helpful?

Out of Place in Heaven

Baldly proclaiming hell as an eternal punishment for humans is at best a hard truth to swallow. It becomes more palatable when considering the absolute worst of human wickedness.

But, Lewis' novel gives a compelling account of how vile all sin is and how logical hell is as a consequence. We are able to clearly follow how manipulative, selfish, snobbish, and stubborn people are out of place in the biblical conception of heaven.

What is crucial in his apologetic, however, is that these sins apply to all: Christians and non-Christians. Why then are Christians better suited for heaven? Ultimately, they give up that life in repentance and faith and claim Christ as Lord.

Example: Murderer and the Moralist

In Chapter 4 we witness a conversation between a Spirit, who was a murderer that repented and was saved, and a Ghost who cannot understand why he is damned and the other is not. He says he did his best all his life ("I've gone straight all my life") and "never asked for anything that wasn't mine by rights" (p.34), and says that all he is asking for now is his rights as well.

“You weren’t a decent man and you didn’t do your best. We none of us were and we none of us did. Lord bless you, it doesn’t matter” p. 35

Hard Questions from an Atheist:

- Why does God hold us to a standard he knows we cannot meet?
- Is a person deserving of punishment who always strived to do right?
- How can justice be done when the guilty are not punished?
- Can a thirty-second profession of faith really achieve what a virtuous lifetime cannot?

II. What condemns someone to Hell?

Polls taken in the US show that more than 70 percent of Americans say they believe in the existence of some form of a hell after death. Yet fewer than 6 percent estimate they personally have a real chance of going there.

Those who still believe in a hell seem to think the bar is extraordinarily high to be sent there, resulting in very few deserving of it. Scripture teaches the exact opposite

So, what condemns someone to hell? It is NOT primarily a failure to believe in Jesus. This misconception leads to all sorts of bad theology. Under this view people are right to raise very serious questions about God’s goodness.

*What are some of the implications if hell is for those who fail to believe in Jesus?

We were designed to glorify God and enjoy him forever. His existence and our responsibility are clear from all of creation (General Revelation). We may suppress this truth, but we are never ignorant of it.

Romans 1:18-25

[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Psalm 19:1 *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

So Scripture can affirm all (you, me, Peter, Paul, Moses, etc.) are deserving of hell:

Romans 3:10-12 ESV

[10] as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; [11] no one understands; no one seeks for God. [12] All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

"It is important to note here 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 guilty, and our just punishment is hell. Most importantly, only Jesus' saving work—his death and resurrection—can atone for sins." Mogan and Peterson, "What is Hell?" 8

Even if we can frame it the right way and justify the concept of hell, many are still left with the feeling that it is an act of God that is not good.

III. Is Hell Good News?

Divine eternal punishment is a dark and sobering thought. Christians who affirm its reality must be cautioned against celebrating it. All too often a desire to others punished comes from our own jealousy, fear, or guilt rather than longing to see God glorified.

Yet, it has become so repugnant to many moderns that some Christians have shied away from the subject completely. Christians who want to promote a God of Love have chosen to remain agnostic (at best) regarding eternal consequences to sin.

One way to avoid any tension between God's love and justice has been the **doctrine of universalism**, or the belief that all will be saved.

J.I. Packer, while not advocating universalism, understands the appeal: *"No evangelical, I think, need hesitate to admit that in his heart of hearts he would like universalism to be true. Who can take pleasure in the thought of people being eternally lost? If you want to see folks damned, there is something wrong with you."*

More and more evangelicals have gone beyond Packer's sorrow over hell to a stronger advocacy for universalism. One very popular modern expression of this is *Love Wins*, Rob Bell's 2011 *New York Times Best Seller*.

As Francis Chan observes:

*"In his book Love Wins, [Rob] Bell...presents this position in such favorable terms that it would be hard to say that he is not advocating it. He even says the traditional view of a literal hell that features eternal torment is not "good news" at all. To use Bell's phrase, "The good news is better than that." He implies **the view that all people will eventually be saved is actually much better news**. So while he never says that this is*

the correct view, Bell certainly presents this view as the good view and the traditional view of hell as the bad view.” Chan, Francis, Erasing Hell (p. 40). (emphasis added)

Is Bell right? Is hell incompatible with good news? We need to be careful not to confuse what is right and good with exclusively modern and Western sentiments.

Universalism is relatively new desire in orthodox Christians. In a helpful historical survey, Richard Buckham writes:

“Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated...Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation...Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation.” Buckham, “Universalism: a historical survey”

It is also not universally desired among all Christians. Tim Keller in *A Reason for God*, argues that being offended at a God of judgment is actually culturally bigoted. He points out that our problem with hell might be more of a cultural bias than a universally accepted morality.

*“In traditional societies the teaching about ‘turning the other cheek’ makes absolutely no sense. It offends people’s deepest instincts about what is right. For them the doctrine of a God of judgment, however, is no problem at all...Why...should Western cultural sensibilities be the final court in which to judge whether Christianity is valid?” Keller *The Reason for God*, 72*

At the end of the day, we must not fall into the false dichotomy of God’s love and God’s justice. Too quickly we put God on trial by accusing him by his own attributes.

David Wells notes:

“Of course the Bible tells us that God is love, but the Christians of modernity seem to think that this constitutes an adequate theology in itself, that God is fundamentally if not exclusively love...We have turned to a God that we can use rather than to a God we must obey; we have turned to a God who will fulfill our needs rather than to a God before whom we must surrender our rights to ourselves...And so we transform the God of mercy into a God who is at our mercy.”

Is hell good news? Isolated from a biblical worldview I don’t see how we can boast that it is good news, but it is an essential component to wonderfully good news. To get to that good news, we must understand more clearly what it is.

III. What is Hell?

A. Hell is Punishment

This is probably the aspect of sin that is hardest for us to embrace. Yet, it is one of the clearest from Scripture. In fact, every single New Testament author not only mentions hell, but describes it as punishment.

Matthew 5:20-26; Mark 9:42-48; Luke 16:19-31; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Hebrews 10:27-31; James 5:1-5; 2 Peter 2:4-17; Jude 1:13-23; Revelation 20:10-15

[5] This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—[6] since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, [7] and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels [8] in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. [9] They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, [10] when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

We must not forget the goodness of justice

“...there must be such a thing as judgment. Judgment—the sovereign declaration that this is good and to be upheld and vindicated, and that is evil and to be condemned—is the only alternative to chaos. There are some things, quite a lot of them in fact, that one must not tolerate lest one merely collude with wickedness.”

N.T. Wright *Surprised by Hope*, 178

*What happens when punishment in the afterlife is missing?

“If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence—that God would not be worthy of worship...The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God...My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many...in the West...[But] it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results from the belief in] God’s refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die...[with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.”
Volf *Exclusion and Embrace* quoted in Keller

“Can our passion for justice be honored in a way that does not nurture our desire for blood vengeance? Volf says the best resource for this is belief in the concept of God’s divine justice.” Keller 75

Without divine punishment, the stakes are raised for meting out justice in this life. Earthly vengeance takes on a whole new priority and we have less trust in the ability of civil institutions to carry our penalties (see every action movie ever made).

But it is also the basis of true forgiveness. We can forgive knowing that God has fully dealt with all sin, either on the cross or at judgment.

B. Who Sends Someone to Hell?

We just saw how scripture explains hell as God's active punishment. But in a very real sense the answer to the above question is "you send yourself."

"We want to choose and go our own way (Isaiah 53:6.) This is no idle 'wandering from the path.' As Jeremiah puts it, 'No one repents . . . each pursues his own course like a horse charging into battle. (8:6)' (We want to get away from God-but, as we have seen, this is the very thing that is most destructive to us. Cain is warned not to sin because sin is slavery. (Genesis 4:7; John 8:34.) It destroys your ability to choose, love, enjoy. Sin also brings blindness-the more you reject the truth about God the more incapable you are of perceiving any truth about yourself or the world (Isaiah 29:9-10; Romans 1:21.)" Keller, "Importance of Hell"

"If the thing you most want is to worship God in the beauty of his holiness, then that is what you will get (Ps 96:9-13.) If the thing you most want is to be your own master, then the holiness of God will become an agony, and the presence of God a terror you will flee forever (Rev 6:16; cf. Is 6:1-6.)" Keller "Importance of Hell"

C.S. Lewis: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it" (*The Great Divorce*, p.72).

God is said "to pass by" the reprobate and "to give them up" to their own desires.

WCF 3

7. The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.

What does "to pass by" mean?

Reprobation brings God's sorrow: *"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live"* (Ezek. 33:11).

In the context of punishing sin Paul in Romans 1:24-28 says "therefore God gave them up" three times.

C. Banishment/Absence of God

"Depart from me" Matthew 7:21-23

Being outside or excluded from the kingdom or in outer darkness (Matthew 8:12; 13:41-42, 49-50)

If sin is the separation from God, hell is the eternal extrapolation of that separation. No one who loves God would be separated from him; no one who hates God would choose eternity with him.

“Only in him do we all speak and move and have our being (Acts 17:28.) In that sense, then, it is impossible to depart from the Lord; even hell cannot exist unless God upholds it. But the Bible says sin excludes us from God's 'face' (Isaiah 59:2.) All the life, joy, love, strength, and meaning we have looked for and longed for is found in his face (Psalm 16:11)-that is, in his favor, presence, fellowship, and pleasure.” Keller, “Importance of Hell”

D. Destruction/ Dehumanizing

[13] “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. [14] For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Matthew 7:13-14

Douglass Moo: Destruction and its related words in the New Testament “refer to the situation of a person or object that has lost the essence of its nature or function.” Destroy and destruction can refer to barren land (Ezekiel 6:14; 14:16), to ointment that is poured out wastefully (Matt. 26:8; Mark 14:4), to wineskins with holes that no longer function (Matt. 9:17), to a lost coin (Luke 15:9) or even to the entire world that “perished” in the flood (2 Peter 3:6). Moo concludes, “In none of these cases do the objects cease to exist; they cease to be useful or to exist in their original, intended state.”

If this is accurate, then hell is not really a pit of fire that constantly tortures someone, nor is it simply ceasing to exist. It is the forfeiture of the gift of being the image of God and all the goodness that comes with it. Indeed the horror of God withdrawing his presence and image is far greater than any worldly torture.

N.T. Wright helpfully explains how this is the outworking of our idolatry:

“When human beings give their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God...Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it (their preferences, their practices, their past histories) and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sexual objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns.”

E. Place of Suffering

“unquenchable fire” Matthew 3:12

worse than being drowned at sea Mark 9:42

worse than any earthly suffering (Matthew 5:29-20)

Weeping and gnashing of teeth Matthew 8:12

The suffering here seems to be holistic: physical and emotional.

F. Eternal

“Their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched” Isa 66:22, 24

“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Daniel 12:2

“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Matthew 25:46

IV. Is Hell Good News?

A. We can praise God for his goodness and justice. We know that evil is real and that we are the cause and we can rejoice that God is doing something about it.

B. It reminds us of the common grace blessing of life itself. This may not be heaven, but being in the image of God is a sacred calling. We are experiencing divine blessing by just being human.

C. It shows us the depths of God’s redemptive love in Jesus in two ways.

- 1) It demonstrates how truly far from heaven we are on our own merit.
- 2) It shows us the lengths to which Christ suffered to redeem us.

V. Motivation to Share the Gospel

Hell can wrongly be preached in such a way that tries to motivate people to change their lives out of fear and self-interest. Yet, its reality should motivate us to proclaim the shalom God is offering to the world.

C.H. Spurgeon: “If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. And if they perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one person go there unwarned and unprayed for.” In pamphlet 33

Jonathan Edwards: “Some talk of it as an unreasonable thing to fright persons to heaven, but I think it is a reasonable thing to endeavor to fright persons away from hell. They stand upon its brink and are just ready to fall into it, and are senseless of their danger. Is it not a reasonable thing to fright a person out of a house on fire?”