

HOW CAN A LOVING GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL FOR ETERNITY? WHY NOT WIPE THEM OUT OR SOMETHING? IF JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY, WHAT ABOUT LITTLE KIDS IN AFRICA THAT HAVE NEVER HEARD OF JESUS?

By Paul R. Shockley

www.prshockley.org

A former student of mine asked me to respond to the following objections his father raised with his sister in a conversation she had with him about God. My response has been edited for certain purposes.

Greetings. Thanks so much for the email. It is always great to hear from you!

In response, I offer a brief five-fold response and a conclusion to your questions. If this is not satisfactory, please let me know; I'm always here for you, brutha.

"How could a 'loving' God send people to hell for eternity? Why does he have to send them to hell?-couldn't he just wipe them out or something? If Jesus is the only way, what about little kids in Africa that have never heard of Jesus?"

First, I so appreciate your father's sensitivity to this issue and his loving concern for others, especially about the plight of those in hell and little kids in Africa that have never heard of Jesus. It is testimony to his conscience that some things are right and some things are wrong; some things are just and some things are not; some things are good and some things are evil.

But, interestingly, your father's very objection assumes God's existence. Why? In order to claim that something is unjust, one must know what is just? How can one claim that a line is crooked if one has no conception of what straight line looks like? Likewise, upon what basis can one objectively and honestly say that something is "unjust" if one does not have a conception of what is "just"? So, when your father states this question, "How could a 'loving' God send people to hell for eternity...what about little kids in Africa that have never heard of Jesus," he is implying that God is not merely unloving, but He is unjust. But if there is no God, then how can one argue that something is truly unjust? In fact, if there is no God, then there is no objective standard regarding what is right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, and just vs. unjust. Even acts of sacrifice (e.g., a soldier dying for another) are ultimately meaningless. In fact, all moral categories are ultimately empty, shifty, and vacuous because there is no fixed reference point to judge someone's actions, behaviors, or values. If there is no God, then we are left to our creations of morality. If that is the case, then the objection itself is not weighty, but arbitrary. Thus, if there is no God, life is ultimately valueless and your father's objection has no meaningful traction.

The Bible proclaims that God does exist, that He is infinitely good, and created us in such a way that we reflect His image. This image includes the idea of a God-given conscience... a conscience that feels the angst, the pain when injustice, evil, and wrong-doing occur just as it feels the applause when justice, rightness, and goodness occur (Genesis 1:26-7; Romans 2;14-16). Because of a God-given conscience, inscribed into our hearts, we are able to weep with those who are in pain and rejoice when people experience goodness.

The most reasonable explanation for this conscience is that God exists and He designed us with the capacity to “existentially” feel what is inherently right and what is inherently wrong. Otherwise, if there is no God, then there is ultimately no distinction between what is right from wrong; it is only preference. This preference is arbitrary, instilled by the elite, the powerful, personalities in tradition, media, etc. Right from wrong is ultimately meaningless because it is reduced to a certain group of people oppressing their will upon others.

In sum, the objection your father raises assumes God’s existence because if there is no God, then there is no objective standard by which to judge the actions of another.

Second, returning to the first question, it is not that God sends people to hell. Rather, people willfully refuse God and thus consign themselves to hell. Why? God does not force a person to Himself; He will not violate one’s free will. Rather, He works *with* one’s free will. See, it is unloving to willfully force one to come to Him just as it would be to force someone to love me. On the other hand, He demonstrates His infinite love by offering anyone (the “whosoever” in John 3:16) the gift of eternal life. All they have to do for eternal salvation is to receive the love gift of eternal life in the open arms of faith by believing that Jesus is God, and that He died on the cross for their sins and rose again. When they receive this love gift of salvation, their paths are changed from death to eternal life.

What I’m trying to say is that it would be unloving for God to force one to come to Him. Instead, God has done a very loving thing and that is, He has offered a way to receive eternal life-with no strings attached. They don’t have to give all their money, spend a life-time denying themselves of certain comforts, beating themselves until they bleed, or tell all their sins to their friends or enemies. They don’t have to travel to a certain place, perform certain rituals, or commit themselves to certain deeds. In fact, they don’t even have to attempt to reach a “level” good enough to be saved. To be sure, no one can (Romans 1-3). All they have to do is receive the love of gift eternal life by placing their trust in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for their sins and rose again (John 3:16).

Third, let me to turn the question, “Why does he have to send them to hell?-couldn't he just wipe them out or something?” In short, it would also be unloving for God to obliterate a person out of existence because he or she refused eternal life. Why? Every person is inherently valuable, possessing a right to live. Just as it would be unloving of me to obliterate someone out of existence, it would be unloving of God to force His will upon someone else... saying something like, “Now I’m going to destroy your very existence because you ultimately rejected me!”

We all pay for consequences for our actions. If a person rejects God, then they are welcoming the consequences that it carries ...just as we have to face consequences for the actions we commit. The rejection of eternal life carries infinite consequences because one is rejecting an infinite God. This is nothing new to us because we realize that there is a hierarchy of laws and consequences in our own society. From misdemeanors to capital crimes, each level of offense carries certain consequences. Why would we expect something different here? If you reject an infinite God, you reap infinite consequences. Moreover, it would simply not be just to wipe a person out of existence because they refused to believe in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, what about those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ? First, we need to recognize that no one is without excuse. The Scripture makes it clear in Psalm 139 and Romans 1-2 that there is not one person on this earth who is ignorant of God's existence. Why? There are five witnesses that bear *constant testimony* of His existence to everyone who has ever lived: The (1) *witness of creation* itself; (2) *the witness of design* (harmony, diversity, unity, beauty, intensity of creation; e.g., human body); (3) *the witness of God-ward longings* (why do people across this world tend to worship something; the need to worship something speaks to our inherent God-ward longings); (4) *conscience* (once again, the issue of moral values, duties, and accountability); (5) *consequences* (we reap what we sow and sow what we reap). Thus, no one is ignorant of God's existence.

If they will positively respond to the revelation given to them by these five witnesses, then I'm confident that God will send a missionary to them just as He did with the Gentile Roman soldier, Cornelius and his family, in Acts chapters 10-10. But if they reject the *tremendous* "light" which He has already been given to them as clearly evidenced in creation, design and beauty, longings, conscience, and consequences, then there is no reason to suggest they will embrace the particular message of Jesus Christ. In fact, God is not under any further obligation. We do the same, don't we? If someone refuses to recognize what they know to be true, suppressing what they constantly see, touch, and hear and what they inherently know inside, even to the point of being ridiculously obstinate, are we obligated to give them additional disclosure? To be sure, because these five witnesses bear constant testimony, God doesn't give up on them-while they have air to breathe.

And lastly, what about little kids who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

This is a great question. I'm theologically convinced that if the child has not cognitively grown unto the awareness of general revelation, namely, the on-going testimony of God's existence as revealed by creation, design and beauty, longings, conscience, and consequences, God has provided a special provision for them. We theologically call this "infant salvation." While there are different views among Christians how this actually occurs, one view that finds currency cross-denominationally is the notion that all infants enjoy heavenly bliss because of the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. Like everyone, infants need salvation and salvation is only through Christ. Therefore, even though infants (and others who can't believe, i.e., severely mentally handicapped) cannot exercise faith in Him, He can remove their depravity.

W. H. Griffith Thomas puts it this way:

"The great atoning sacrifice of Calvary included unconscious childhood as well as conscious manhood and womanhood in the wondrous efficacy and blessing;" "...all children are included in the great atoning Sacrifice, and really belong to the Lord Jesus Christ until they deliberately and consciously refuse to Have Him as their personal Savior and King" [*The Catholic Faith: A Manual of Instruction for Members of the Church of England*, rev. ed. (London: Church Book Room Press, 1952), 110; 263].

As earlier stated, the basis for judgment against the unsaved is that they willfully refused Jesus Christ as personal Savior. Moreover, this view finds additional substantiation in Revelation 20:11. In that passage, it is recorded that everyone who has rejected God will one day in the future be judged according to their deeds at the "great white throne"

judgment (Rev. 20:11). However, those who died without ever being able to believe will not be there. Why? They have no works for they have not done either good or evil.

But we might also add that this provision is in keeping with God being infinitely loving; He provides salvation for those who can't believe but not for those who refuse to believe with their last physical breath on earth.

Perhaps the best work written on this topic, a work that is actually written to those who are seeking comfort in view of bearing children who have either died at a young age or who can't believe because of the mental challenges they face, is titled, *Safe in the Arms of Jesus*. It is authored by Robert P. Lightner.

In closing, when we think about God, we have to realize that we are but a microbe in the universe, a speck of dust. Like Pascal once wrote, "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces [the heavens] terrifies me." Thus, I contend that we are not in a position to judge God and His ways; who are we to stand in judgment against Him? It is as if my aquarium fish are judging me and what I do. Who are they to judge me? Rather, God historically revealed in the person of Jesus Christ that God is infinitely perfect, holy, just, good, and sovereign. Therefore, because God came in the flesh, offered Himself to us that we might have eternal life, even if I have a number of "whys?" that may not be answered this side of heaven, I do have good reasons and good evidences to believe that His offer of eternal life is sincere, genuine, and for my betterment. Consider reading *the Gospel of John* found in the New Testament. I believe you too will find that what God offers possesses weighty, explanatory power: The person, deeds, actions, words, and testimony of Jesus Christ is evidentially supported, reasonable, realistic, meaningful, and beautiful. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you-while you have air to breathe.