

Is God a Monster?

Scripture: Exodus 34:6–7; Isaiah 3:11

Code: B110518

Nearly fifty years ago, the British agnostic Bertrand Russell penned these words: “There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment” (Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*).

Philosopher John Hick echoed those sentiments when he called hell “a perversion of the Christian gospel.” He believed the doctrine of hell attributed to God “an unappeasable vindictiveness and insatiable cruelty.”

We expect statements like that from fallen, unregenerate minds. But what do we do when we hear similar things from prominent, professing evangelical writers? “How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God . . .” (Clark H. Pinnock, “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent”).

It’s become popular today for *professing* evangelicals to join the ranks of Pinnock, atheists, and agnostics in protesting the doctrine of hell. They are preaching sermons, writing articles, and publishing books, and some are wandering into the comment threads of Christian blogs. Here’s a small sampling from *Grace To You’s* blog in our recent series on hell:

- “What kind of God torments people for all eternity?”
- “. . . Satan loves the false doctrine of eternal torment”
- “[eternal torment is] cruel and unusual punishment”
- “[eternal torment] makes God out to be a cruel tyrant,” “absolutely cruel and malevolent”
- “How can you in your right minds even consider this to be justice?”

If the doctrine of hell as eternal, conscious torment hadn’t been the position of the Christian church for two millennia, it might be easy to think we’re seriously out of step—a bunch of mindless minions who worship a monster-god! But when you examine the biblical evidence, *without an agenda*, you’ll find we sound a lot like Jesus and the apostles.

So, how could someone who claims to be faithful to Scripture ridicule the idea of eternal punishment? What is at the heart of their rejection of a never-ending hell? It’s simple, really—they minimize the seriousness of human sin and guilt, and they distort the perfection of divine justice. That’s the crime of Protestant Liberalism and every false religion.

Minimizing the Sinfulness of Sin

To one degree or another, we’re all guilty of minimizing sin. I remember the first time I read the

account of Lot's wife. God turned her into a pillar of salt as she was leaving Sodom. Her crime? A backward glance (Genesis 19:26). Reading that story as an unbeliever provoked me to ask the question: "Was that *really* an offense worthy of death—turning your neck to take one final look at your home?" As I explored more of the Bible, other accounts of God's judgment appeared equally capricious and severe *to me*.

- Nadab and Abihu deviated from the priestly procedures. God consumed them with fire (Leviticus 10:1-2).
- One man gathered wood on the Sabbath. God commanded Moses to stone him (Numbers 15:35).
- Achan took a few forbidden items from the spoils of Jericho. God commanded Joshua to stone and then burn Achan along with his entire family (Joshua 7:24-25).
- Uzzah kept the ark of God from falling into the mud by reaching out his hand and taking hold of it. God immediately struck him dead (2 Samuel 6:6-7).
- Ananias and Sapphira lied to the apostles. God killed them both in front of the entire church. (Acts 5:1-10).

We often struggle to understand how something *seemingly* so trivial could enact such a severe judgment. Our flesh wants to cry out in protest, "That's not fair!" But responses like that reveal our failure to grasp the *depth* of sin. We see only actions—a devoted father gathering firewood to keep his family warm; a zealous Israelite anxious to keep the Ark of God off the ground—but God sees things differently, more clearly, than we do. He sees our sin as insurrection, rebellion against His holiness (Exodus 31:14; Numbers 4:15). What's more, He sees the hidden motives and intentions at the core of our actions (Matthew 5:28; Hebrews 4:12).

One of the most basic tenets of justice is that the punishment must fit the crime. So, if the ultimate punishment for those who die without Christ is hell, then what is the crime? What do men do to merit the eternal sentence of hell? Put plainly, they sin.

You may think that's a small thing, but the way John MacArthur explains sin, it puts it in its proper perspective. Essentially, sin is "an act of treason against the Sovereign lawgiver and judge of the universe." The Bible describes our sin as "rebellion," "ungodliness," "lawlessness," "wickedness," and an "abomination" (Leviticus 26:27; Isaiah 32:6; 1 John 3:4; Ezekiel 18:27; Proverbs 15:9). Sinners then, are traitors, refusing to love, thank, serve, and obey the God who gave them life, breath, and every good thing.

Sinners spurn God's love, despise His sovereignty, mock His justice, and view His commands with contempt. They are thieves and murderers, stealing God's glory and assaulting His holiness. In fact, as Martin Luther once remarked, if sinners had their way, they would dethrone and *murder* God, which is exactly what they did at Calvary (Acts 2:23). Viewed through the lens of Scripture, sin appears exceedingly sinful (Romans 7:13).

I find it ironic that those who protest the idea of eternal, conscious torment deride the doctrine with words like, "cruel," "morally revolting," "monstrous," and "repugnant." Why don't they employ the same terms of outrage to describe sin? Simple: they fail to see as God sees. God finds our sin "cruel," "morally revolting," "monstrous," and "repugnant," and He's absolutely right. If we can't see our sin as God sees it, it stands to reason that we don't see the just judgment of hell like He sees it

either. We're just going to have to trust Him.

Divine Justice

People who reject the doctrine of eternal hell also stumble over the justice of God. It seems unjust of God to cast someone into a lake of eternal fire for thirty years of sin. Is sin really *that* bad?

Yes, it is. In fact, you readily accept that there are escalating levels in the seriousness of offenses. For example, if you punch your neighbor, he may punch you back, slash your tires, or even report you to the police. If you assault your boss, he'll fire you. If you strike a policeman, you're in danger of getting tased, pepper-sprayed (or worse), and you're definitely going to jail. Take it up a notch: if you even *attempt* to assault the President of the United States, you're going to prison for a long, long time. And if you try those shenanigans with any other head of state, you'll probably be executed.

Clearly, we live by an established principle—the seriousness of a crime is measured not only by its inherent nature, but also by the one offended. Furthermore, we readily accept the escalation of punishment, based on the status and position of the one offended. If that makes sense on a human level, why are we tempted to ignore the status and position of God? If we live by that principle on a horizontal level, why not on a vertical level?

Our sins have offended an infinitely glorious and holy Being, and punishment must correspond to that offense. God will by no means acquit the wicked (Exodus 34:6-7). He will give the unbeliever exactly what he deserves. Isaiah said “Woe to the wicked! It will go badly with him, for what he deserves will be done to him” (Isaiah 3:11). God warned the children of Israel: “If you do not obey Me, but act with hostility against Me, then I will act with wrathful hostility against you, and I, even I, will punish you seven times for your sins” (Leviticus 26:27-28).

The righteous Judge of all the earth will one day rise up and call every creature into account (Genesis 18:25; Hebrews 9:27; 1 Peter 4:5). He will open the books and mete out a just sentence for every sinful thought, word, and deed (Romans 2:5; Revelation 20:13).

We've all assaulted God (Romans 3:23), and we all deserve hell. Reject Christ, and hell is exactly what you'll get. God will rise up in judgment and cast all unbelievers into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14), and all creation will praise His justice. To accuse God of injustice for sentencing sinners to hell is the *height* of arrogance and audacity.

Yes, God's judgment is unbearable, but it is never unjust (Genesis 4:13). And that is why “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

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