Can you explain why we find tension in dealing with difficult doctrines in the Bible?
Scripture: Romans 11:33; Deuteronomy 29:29
Code: QA186

Question:

I have to admit that in my heart, sometimes, I'll find myself maybe intellectually wandering off into a domain that just gets me in trouble, almost every time. And I keep trying to figure out, how does God live with himself in the area of eternal damnation, eternal punishment, and eternal torture? And I, quite frankly, I'm not challenging God. I know that I'm the one--that I'm wrong if I come up with some kind of a wrong result. But what makes me have peace is that I know there will be some things that apparently remain in the domain of what I would call, maybe, some "secrets" God has, and I may never understand because He truly is sovereign. Deuteronomy 29:29 helps me out: "Secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and our sons." And then, Romans 11:33, "Oh, the depth of the riches of both the wisdom and knowledge of God!" So, some things are past finding out. Is that where you would put that issue? And, should I quit thinking about it?

John MacArthur:

Well, let me say this, right now: I don't think anybody would have a problem with sovereign election, if it weren't for eternal damnation. I really would have never thought that Sovereign election is a difficult issue. It's everywhere in the Scripture! What makes sovereign election hard to swallow is that there are some people who weren't chosen--and it would be fine if they went out of existence. That's why a John Stott becomes an annihilationist. It's not because of the text; it's because of the emotional struggle with that. And it's good to remind yourself that what makes the doctrine of sovereignty difficult is the doctrine of eternal punishment. That's a good reason to hold to the doctrine of sovereignty--because it's so clear in Scripture--then you have to deal with the doctrine of eternal punishment. What you've just said is no different than every one of us feels, so join the club.

First of all, we have those thoughts. We struggle with those thoughts. I'm comforted on a couple of fronts. One: people who don't want God and don't want Christ now, won't want him then. The second thing is that, clearly, there are degrees of punishment. I mean, that's clear: "How much sorer punishment, shall he be taught worthy, who tramples underfoot the blood of the covenant?" (counts it an unholy thing). Few stripes, many stripes... The terminology regarding hell is very strong--the *gehenna*, "the place of burning, gnashing of teeth"--which I think are the pangs of a fully activated conscience that reminds the damned soul of all of the past sins. I mean, I understand the horrors of that and I don't know that I will ever come to terms with those, emotionally. I don't know that I will

ever--I would worry about myself if I ever was at peace with that, you know what I mean? I mean, I would think that I had crossed a line if that didn't wrench my soul; and I would, at that point, I think, I would be unfit for ministry, because I would have lost my compassion, I would have lost my heart, I would have lost the grief that made Jesus weep. I constantly go back to Jesus weeping! He knew! I even ask the question, "What's He crying about? You decided this." But, it's not that simple.

There's tension in all these great doctrines. He said, "How often I would have gathered you, but you would not..." I think, in a sense, the Bible talks about judgment as being people being caught up in what they've chosen for themselves. So, all I can say is I will never be at peace with that doctrine. Never. And I think one of the joys of heaven will be that will be removed from our knowledge.

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