

# Questioning Christianity

## ***“How can a loving God send people to hell?”***

**John 3:16**

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on November 22, 2015

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bibles to John chapter 3.
- British Columbians are the least religious people in Canada. This does not mean however that we are a Province of atheists or even agnostics. According to pollsters only 14% of British Columbians are atheists. So although we are the least religious people in Canada, the vast majority of British Columbians do believe in God.<sup>1</sup>
  - If you ask people to describe what God is like most people will say God is loving and by this they mean that God is tolerant and accepts all people.
    - It therefore is very jarring to people when Christianity speaks about a loving God and the existence of hell. How could a loving God possibly send people to hell?
- This morning I am *not* going to try and convince you to like hell or to think it is a nice thing. I don't think Bible ever asks for that.
  - I do however want to explore with you how the Bible talks about both a God of love and the existence of hell.
- Now where should we go in the Bible to see this? It may surprise you to hear that the majority of the Bible's teaching on hell does not come from the Old Testament or from the writings of Paul or Peter. The majority of the Bible's teaching on hell comes from Jesus himself.
  - This is quite shocking for Jesus is widely considered to be the most loving person who ever lived. Our culture upholds people like Mother Theresa and Ghandi as some of the greatest examples of loving people. And yet both Mother Theresa and Ghandi emphatically stated that Jesus was far more loving than they were.
    - Ghandi was not a Christian but he wrote of Jesus's perfect love: ***“A man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.”***<sup>2</sup>
- The fact that Jesus, the most loving person who ever lived, is the one who speaks most about hell should give us pause to consider if perhaps we have misunderstood the whole subject. This morning I want to zoom in on just one sentence that Jesus spoke. It is found in what is perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible - John 3:16.
  - Here in this one verse the most loving person who ever lived speaks both about the love of God and about the existence of hell. But, as we will see, it is love that is emphasized most.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Todd, *Cascadia the Elusive Utopia: Exploring the Spirit of the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>2</sup> M.K. Ghandi, *Ghandi and Communal Problems* (Mumbai: Centre for Study Of Society and Secularism), chapter 25. [http://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/Gandhi\\_communalproblems.pdf](http://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/Gandhi_communalproblems.pdf)

- This morning we are going to see that when Jesus addresses the subject of hell he reveals many different ways in which God is loving.
- Let's read John 3:16.
  - **READ 16** – *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

### A LOVE THAT IS TRUTHFUL

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, when addressing the subject of hell, the most loving person who ever lived reveals a love that is truthful.
  - To truly love people means you tell them the truth even when it is painful. It is better to hear hard truth than to later find out you were lied to. Out of deep love for us, Jesus speaks some hard truth to us.
- The hard truth is in that little word “perish.” According to Jesus, to “perish” does not mean you cease to exist when you die. To perish means to exist eternally in a place Jesus called, “hell.” Jesus described hell with many disturbing descriptions but its worst feature is being eternally rejected by God.
  - Hell, therefore, is not a place where people party and enjoy themselves. To the contrary. All good things like laughter, music, food, drink, art, and sports are gifts that come from having God's face turned toward us in blessing. In hell God's face is turned away and therefore all the blessings that come with him are removed.
    - There is no enjoyment, peace, or happiness. It is no wonder that when Dante wrote *Inferno* he envisioned a sign chiseled above Hell's gate that reads, *“Abandon all hope, you who enter here.”*
- Out of love Jesus does not hide the truth from us or lie to us. He speaks plainly.

### A LOVE THAT IS FAIR

- *“Good grief,”* someone says, *“this is exactly why I find Christianity so offensive. It may be loving to speak the truth but how can God be loving and send people to hell?”*
  - Before you tune out or walk out, let's turn to the second point.
- In the second place, we see that **(SHOW SLIDE)** when addressing the subject of hell, the most loving person who ever lived reveals a love that is fair.
  - Here we see Jesus showing us two ways in which hell is fair.

### HELL IS THE LOGICAL OUTCOME OF HUMAN FREEDOM

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, Jesus shows us that hell is the logical outcome of human freedom.
  - Focus in with me on just one word in John 3:16. It is the word *“world”* - *“For God so loved the world.”* In John's gospel the word *“world”* means *“humanity in rebellion against God”* or *“humanity rejecting God.”*
- You see the Bible teaches that God created the first human beings, Adam and Eve, not as robots to mechanically obey his every command but as free beings who could love him. In the book and movie *The Stepford Wives* a group of men have perfect marriages because they have perfect wives who do whatever they

say. The only problem is the wives are robots. The story shows that this is not true love at all.

- In the same way God created Adam and Eve to love him but they chose to use their freedom to rebel against God, to reject him, and to live for themselves. All of humanity has followed in their steps.
  - Notice also that Jesus connects the word “world” and the word “perish.” It is all of humanity that is perishing because, as morally responsible beings, we have all rejected our Creator.
    - In other words, if people reject God in this life then, in one sense, God will give them what they want, namely, an eternity without him.
- Why would anyone who rejects God want heaven when heaven is God? Heaven will be eternal adoration of God but if you don’t adore God here on earth why would you want to adore him for eternity? Heaven will be eternal submission to God but if you don’t like idea of obeying God on earth why would you want to do this for eternity? In heaven God’s people will savour him forever like we savour honey. But if you think God tastes more like brussel sprouts, and you don’t like brussel sprouts, and you have avoided them all your life, why would you want to savour God for all eternity?
  - You see, in a sense, hell is simply the logical end of our choices about God. If people don’t want God in this life then God will give them what they want for all eternity.

## HELL IS THE LOGICAL OUTCOME OF GOD’S JUSTICE

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, hell is the logical outcome of God’s justice.
  - People say, *“I believe in a God of love not a God of judgement.”* Really? I would respectfully ask you to consider that a God who does not judge is not a loving God at all.
- Listen to J.I. Packer: *“The truth is that part of God’s moral perfection is his perfection in judgment. Would a God who did not care about the difference between right and wrong be a good and admirable Being? Would a God who put no distinction between the beasts of history, the Hitlers and Stalins (if we dare use names), and His own saints, be morally praiseworthy and morally perfect? Moral indifference would be an imperfection in God, not a perfection. But not to judge the world would be to show moral indifference. The final proof that God is a perfect moral Being, not indifferent to questions of right and wrong, is the fact that he has committed himself to judge the world.”*<sup>3</sup>
  - Here’s the thing: we say we believe in a God who never judges but in reality we are always demanding that God judge when we say, *“Why don’t you do something about all the evil in the world? Why don’t you stop ISIS? Why don’t you do something about kids being abused and governments killing their people?”*
    - When we talk like this we are saying, *“I want a just God who takes good and evil seriously and does something about it.”*

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<sup>3</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 130.

- But friends, don't you see, that is exactly what the existence of hell reveals. It reveals a God who takes good and evil seriously. It reveals a God who will not allow people to get away with evil forever. It reveals a God who will ensure that justice is done.
  - The only people who speak about a loving God who never judges anyone are people living comfortable pampered lives that are untouched by the atrocities of the world.
    - When your government systematically kills your extended family (like in North Korea), or your own neighbours cut down your children with machetes (like in Rwanda), you cry out for justice.
  - The only people who speak about an all-tolerant God who never judges are those who have not yet been personally touched by injustice.
    - When your car is stolen, or your house broken into, or your sister date-raped, or your spouse cheats on you and then takes everything in the divorce, you cry out for justice.
- Hell reveals that we live in a universe that is ruled by a God who, thankfully, cares about justice.
  - But right when we start to cheer that this is good news, we suddenly find our applause fading and then turning to protest. For notice that it is not just the Hitlers and Stalins of the world who are perishing. It is everyone.
    - Again, the hard truth is in that connection between the word "world" and "perish." All of humanity is perishing because all of humanity has rebelled against our Creator. We have committed cosmic treason against our King. To be truly loving God must also be just but to be just means he must deal with our treasonous ways. Just as any just judge punishes criminals, so for God to be just, he must punish us. Well, this may be fair but it is difficult for us to receive. That is why we must move quickly to the third point.

## A LOVE THAT WARNS

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Third, when addressing the subject of hell, the most loving person who ever lived reveals a love that warns.
  - When we find Jesus' truth too hard to bear we must realize that all of his words about it are meant to show us how to escape it. Jesus is not a fire and brimstone preacher thundering down on us how we are all going to burn.
- To the contrary, the entire tone and the content of Jesus' words are given to warn us of our danger. Just as it is loving to speak the truth and not lie, it is also loving to warn someone who is in imminent danger even if it might shock them.
  - Some years ago a dense fog shrouded a major highway a few miles south of London. At 6:15am, a semi-truck carrying huge rolls of paper was involved in a major accident, colliding with dozens of cars and killing ten people.
    - A police car arrived on the scene and two policemen ran back up the highway to stop oncoming traffic. They waved their arms and

shouted as loud as they could but most drivers took no notice and raced on to the inevitable disaster ahead of them.

- The policemen picked up traffic cones and flung them at the car's windshields in a desperate attempt to warn drivers of the danger.
  - One policeman told how tears streamed down his face as car after car went by and he waited for the sickening sound of impact as they hit the growing mass of wreckage.
- Friends, rather than leave us to perish God has set his love on us. One way he loved us was to send Jesus to warn us of the imminent danger we are speeding toward. You see, John 3:16 is the traffic cone Jesus throws at the windshield of your life. Out of deep love for you he waves his arms and shouts, ***“you will perish if you keep speeding on in your rebellion.”***
  - So in Jesus' words we see a love that is truthful, a love that is fair, and a love that warns.

## A LOVE THAT RESCUES

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Fourth, when addressing the subject of hell, the most loving person who ever lived reveals a love that rescues.
  - It is loving to warn someone in danger. But if you have the ability to help them then love also requires you to act. To not act when you have the ability to do so is not loving at all. Again, the love of God begins to shine even brighter for God did not just warn us. He acted.
    - **READ 16** - ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.”***
- Out of love, God gave a gift to a world that rejected Him that we might not perish. God gave His one and only Son, His most precious Son, His beloved Son.
  - Remember God is a Trinity, a tri-unity. There is only one God but He exists in three distinct persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- But here is the critical question: why would God give us His Son? Why did God the Son become a man? **READ 16b** - ***“that whoever believes in him shall not perish.”*** **READ 17** - ***For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.***
  - Oh what love! He did not come to condemn us, though we deserved it. No, Jesus came to save, to rescue, people who are perishing. He did this by voluntarily dying on the cross. On the cross Jesus voluntarily took upon himself all the judgement that is due to us. He faced hell for us. He was rejected by God, the face of God was turned away from him, and he was punished in our place.
    - So justice is satisfied. Sin has been punished. The loving God has rescued us.

## STANDING ON HIS SHOULDERS

- Dr. Bryan Chapell gives an example from his hometown of a love that rescues. It happened when two brothers decided to play in the sand banks by the river.

Because the town depends on the river for commerce, dredges regularly clear its channels of sand and dump the sand in great mounds along the river's edge. Nothing is more fun for children than playing in these mountainous sand piles – and few things are more dangerous.

- You see the dredges dump the sand in piles on the shore while it is still wet. As a result, the outside of the pile dries providing a rigid crust but inside large empty voids form as the water runs out of the pile. If a child climbs on a mound of sand that has such a hidden void, the crust will easily collapse into the void. Then of course the sand from higher up on the mound will rush in to fill the void, trapping the child.
- This is exactly what happened to the two brothers as they raced up one of the larger mounds. When the boys did not return home at dinnertime, family and neighbors organized a search. When they found the younger brother only his head and shoulders protruded from the mound. He was unconscious from the pressure of sand on his body.
  - The searchers began digging frantically. When they had cleared the sand to his waist, he began to regain consciousness. ***“Where is your brother?”*** the rescuers shouted. ***“I’m standing on his shoulders,”*** replied the child.
    - With the sacrifice of his own life the older brother had lifted the younger to safety and rescued him.
- Oh friends this is the meaning of Christianity. This is the love of God. As rebels, we were perishing under the sand of God’s judgement. God would have been perfectly just to let us perish. But out of love for us, God sent Jesus to rescue us.
  - Jesus our true elder brother went to the cross and there he placed us on his shoulders as the sand of the judgement that was due to us came down all around Him taking his life.
    - This is a love that rescues.

## A LOVE THAT IS ETERNAL

- But we must go further. Jesus will not allow the existence of hell to dominate the discussion. If we want to talk about hell then Jesus requires us to talk about the love God has shown in rescuing us from hell and furthermore, to talk about the love of God in giving hell-deserving sinners eternal life in heaven.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE)** So in the fifth place, when addressing the subject of hell, the most loving person who ever lived reveals a love that is eternal.
    - **READ 16** - ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”***
- So God’s love does not just rescue us from perishing. He rescues us *from* eternal perishing *for* eternal life. Life is what all of us are searching for.
  - Every self-help book, every seminar on improving your life, the millions we spend on vacations and entertainment are aimed at this one thing - to find that deep happiness and joy that is the fullness of life.
    - But after trying so many things we end up singing with U2, ***“I still haven’t found what I am looking for.”*** And even when we do get tastes of this fullness of life, when our joy is as full as it can get,

we still agree with the poet Wallace Stevens who says, ***“even in contentment I feel the need of some imperishable bliss.”***

- Many of you have read C.S. Lewis’ books *The Chronicles of Narnia* or at least seen the movies *Prince Caspian* or *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. For seven books children from this world enter the world of Narnia and experience amazing adventures. At the end of all these adventures they die in a train crash but Aslan takes them to a new world greater than Earth or Narnia. Lewis concludes the whole series with these words:
  - ***“And this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All of their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”***<sup>4</sup>
- Jesus says, ***“You can’t talk about hell unless you also talk about how I have done everything necessary to rescue you and give you an eternity of imperishable bliss.”***
  - This is a love that is truthful, a love that is fair, a love that warns, a love that rescues, and a love that is eternal.

## **A LOVE THAT IS FREE**

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Finally, when addressing the subject of hell, the most loving person who ever lived reveals a love that is free.
  - If all this is true – if hell and heaven are real and it is possible to escape the one and enjoy the other, we must ask, ***“What do I have to do to get it? What do I have to pay?”*** To our shock we find that God’s rescue and eternal love are free.
    - More accurately, it is free for us but it certainly was not free for God. Our rescue and eternal joy cost God everything. But he freely gives it to us. Notice two things about this love that is free.
- First, it is free not just for a few people but for all. **READ 16** - ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** Oh what love there is found in that one word ***“whoever.”*** This offer is open to all.
  - You cannot say, ***“I am so bad that God cannot accept me.”*** ***“Whoever!”*** You cannot say, ***“I am too young or old.”*** ***“Whoever!”***
- But secondly and most astonishingly God’s loving offer is free in the sense that you do not have to earn it.
  - Notice what John 3:16 does not put a price on this priceless gift of eternal life. This is what makes Christianity unique among the spiritual paths and religions of the world.
    - All other paths say, ***“You have a problem and here is what you have to do to fix it.”*** Christianity says, ***“You cannot do anything***

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<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Final Battle*, 184.

*to stop yourself from perishing. But what you cannot do for yourself, God has done for you. He has done it all in giving Jesus to you and all you have to do is receive the Rescuer and you will not perish. It is free.”*

## **CONCLUSION**

- After all of this how can we ever accuse God of being unloving? He has spoken the truth about hell to us. He has lovingly warned us. He has done everything that is necessary for us be rescued from hell. He promises us an imperishable bliss. And to top it all off, he gives it for free.
  - *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*