

HOW CAN A RIGHTEOUS, HOLY GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HEAVEN?

You have probably heard someone ask the question: "How can a God of love send people to hell?" Very often, the person asking such a question has already decided that there is no such place as "hell," and that it is not possible for a "God of love" to do such a thing as "send people to hell." And, having already become self-convinced of this viewpoint, his mind is not open to exploring what the Bible has to say about the issue. Such a person is unwilling to accept anything that is contrary to his already-held beliefs.

But there is a *much more important* question that needs to be asked. It is of such importance that unless it is *first* asked, other questions cease to have any meaning. The question is: "HOW CAN A RIGHTEOUS AND HOLY GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HEAVEN?" If we do not start with this question, we will fail to view the situation between God and people in the way that God describes it - the way that it really is.

God is not just a "God of love," but he is also holy and righteous. This means that God is, by nature, completely separate from all that is evil and impure. He always does what is right. And nothing evil can exist in his presence.

If we deny God's holiness and righteousness, we deny God. And if, in *our* thinking, these characteristics are incompatible with love, it is because *our* concepts of "love," "holiness," and "righteousness" have become distorted and do not match those concepts as described in the Bible.

Look at the way God himself describes his own nature:

The LORD passed in front of Moses and proclaimed,
"The LORD,
the LORD, the compassionate and kind God,
who is slow to anger
and abounding in kindness and faithfulness,
who shows his love to thousands of generations,
forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin,
yet does not let the guilty go unpunished,
punishing the children for the sins of the parents,
to the third and fourth generation." Exodus 34:6-7

Now how should we respond to such a proclamation? Our proper response would be the same as the response that Moses had:

Moses immediately bowed, with his face touching the ground, and worshiped. Exodus 34:8

But that is *not* our normal reaction. This proclamation (spoken by God) does not match *our* concepts of love and justice. We enjoy the parts that say, "abounding in kindness and faithfulness," and, "who shows his love to thousands of generations." But the part about punishing the guilty (and their children) goes completely against our thinking. We do not like it. In fact, we may even accuse it of being "unjust," "unloving," and "ungodly."

The problem, however, is not the proclamation. On the contrary, *our* concepts of love and justice are distorted. *Our* concepts of right and wrong do not match up with what these verses (and the rest of the Bible) teach. And *our* thinking (not the Bible) needs to change.

It is *not* wrong to ask, "How is it possible that God can punish the guilty (and their children)?" What is wrong is *the way* we ask the question - our attitude and reason for asking. If we ask with the intention of denying what we dislike, this is sin. But if we ask with the desire to better understand our wonderful and awesome God, we are doing a good thing.

Look at the "Ten Commandments," which also teach this same concept. In Exodus 20, we are told:

And God spoke all these words. Exodus 20:1

Furthermore, in Deuteronomy 5, where the Ten Commandments are repeated, Israel was told by Moses:

These are the words the LORD spoke to your entire assembly on the mountain. He spoke with a loud voice from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness. And he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me. Deuteronomy 5:22

These words - the Ten Commandments - are special. These are the very words that God himself spoke - audibly - to the people, to teach them how to live. These are the words that God spoke, to teach people what their attitude should be toward God and toward other people. All other commands, rules and principles found in the Bible have their basis in these words that God spoke.

How did the people respond to this awesome, terrifying event? They were overwhelmed!

"What person has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the fire, as we have, and still remained alive?" Deuteronomy 5:26

Jesus said much about the Ten Commandments. He said that *all* these commands (as well as every other command in the Bible) could be summarized in two commands: One that describes our obligations toward God (seen in the first four of the Ten Commandments), and the other that describes our obligations toward people (seen in the last six of the Ten Commandments). Jesus said:

" 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and most important command. The second most important command is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets are based on these two commands." Matthew 22:37-40

Jesus does not speak against the concept of justice that we find in the Ten Commandments. On the contrary, he points to our supreme obligation to the one who spoke those words: to love him with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind.

Do you "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind?" *How* do you do it? Quite obviously, God expects to have first place in everything.

You must never have any other god except me. Exodus 20:3

You cannot "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind" if you love *anything* more than you love God. You cannot love wealth or possessions more than you love God. You cannot love family or friends more than you love God.

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will devote himself to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth. Matthew 6:24

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than he loves me is unfit for being called my disciple. Anyone who loves his son or daughter more than he loves me is unfit for being called my disciple. Matthew 10:37

You cannot love yourself more than you love God. You cannot trust your own self-sufficiency more than you trust God to provide for your needs.

[A certain man said to himself:] "You have enough goods stored up to last many years. So take life easy! Eat! Drink! Enjoy life!" But God said to him, "You senseless fool! This very night your life will be taken from you! Then who will get all those things you have stored up for yourself?" Such is the person who treasures up possessions for himself, and is not richly generous toward God. Luke 12:19-21

So do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" Or, "What will we drink?" Or, "What will we wear?" People who do not know God focus on these types of things, and surely your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Focus instead on his kingdom and the righteous things he desires. And all these other things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:31-33

Do you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind? Then you will not love the activities that fill your life, more than you love God. You will not boast about your past accomplishments, nor about your future plans. You will not be proud of the good things you have done in the past, *nor will you trust in them as a way to obtain God's favor.*

A person living many years should enjoy them all. ... Follow the inclinations of your heart and the desires of your eyes, But remember that in all these things, God will hold you accountable for what you do. ... Reverently fear God and obey his commands. This is the full duty of everyone, for God will judge everything we do - even what we do in secret, whether it is good or evil. Ecclesiastes 11:8-9; 12:13-14

Now listen, you people who make such claims as, "Today or tomorrow we will go to some city, stay there a year, do business and make money." You don't even know what will happen tomorrow! Your life - it is a mist that appears for a short time, and then is gone. You should be saying, "If the Lord permits, we will live and will do this or that." But instead, you are proud and boastful. All such boasting is evil. James 4:13-16

Jesus used this story to teach some people who had inflated opinions about their own goodness, and who looked down on everyone else:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray. The one was a religious leader, and the other a tax collector. The religious leader stood up and began to pray about himself, 'God, I thank you because I am not like other people: thieves, evildoers, adulterers - not even like this tax collector! Instead, I go without food twice a week, and give away a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance, not considering himself worthy to even look up toward heaven. But overcome with grief, he said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner!'

"I assure you that this tax collector went home with God's approval, not the religious leader! For everyone who considers himself great will be made low, and everyone who considers himself low will be made great." Luke 18:9-14

If anyone else thinks he has reason to trust in his own merit, I [the apostle Paul] can claim more. . . . [a list of his accomplishments, heritage, reputation, etc., follows in verses 5 and 6] But those things I once considered important, I now consider worthless for the sake of Christ. Philippians 3:4,7

God opposes those who think highly of themselves, but he shows kindness to those who lower themselves. James 4:6b

He [God] saved us. It was not because of anything we might have done to gain his approval, but because of his own compassion for us. Titus 3:5a

LORD, my heart is not filled with proud ambitions; my eyes are not lifted up in arrogance: I do not preoccupy myself with heroic exploits and mighty accomplishments. Psalm 131:1

The fact is, we *don't* love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind. I don't. You don't. None of us do.

There is no one on earth who is so righteous that he always does good and never sins. Ecclesiastes 7:20

From ancient times, no one has heard with the ear,
 No one has seen with the eye, any God besides you -
 The God who acts in behalf of those who expectantly wait for him.
You help those who delight in doing what is right,
 And who pay attention to your ways.

But look! You have become angry because we have sinned -
 and we do so constantly.
How can we expect your help?

All of us have become defiled;
 All of our righteous acts have become like bloodstained rags.
All of us are like shriveled, dead leaves,
 And our sins blow us away, like the wind.

No one calls out to you in prayer;
 No one holds on to you for help.
For you have turned away from us,
 And have allowed us to be destroyed by our own sins.

Isaiah 64:4-7

It is written in God's Word:
"There is no one who does what is right, not even one;
 there is no one who understands or who looks to find God.
 They have all turned away.
As a group, they have become totally worthless;
 there is no one who does what is good, not even one."
"There is no reverent fear of God within them."

Romans 3:10-12, 18

All people have sinned and can no longer attain the life that has God's approval. Romans 3:23

We have *not* given our supreme devotion to the God who made us. We have been like the nation Israel, to whom God first gave the Ten Commandments. And we need to confess to God our sin, as Nehemiah did for Israel:

I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his promise and shows his love to those who love him and obey his commands, I beg you to open your eyes and listen closely to the prayer that I, your servant, am praying to you - both day and night - for your servants, the people of Israel. I acknowledge the sins that we, the people of Israel have sinned against you. Both I and my forefathers have sinned. Our actions toward you have become defiled: we have not obeyed the commands, regulations or rules you gave to us through your servant Moses."
Nehemiah 1:5-7

And if this is not bad enough, we add to our sins the sin of idolatry (the second commandment). We might not bow down to a rock, tree, or carved image, as do some people. Yet *everything* that we put in the place of God is an idol. *Everything* that we consider more important than God is an idol. *Everything* that we love more than God is an idol: careers, possessions, family, security, past accomplishments, future plans . . . anything . . . *even religious activities*.

DO WE CARE AT ALL THAT GOD IS JEALOUS?

You must never make yourself an idol - an image or picture representing anything in heaven, on earth or in the sea: You must never give reverence or devotion to them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, tolerating no rivals.

For those who turn against me, I punish the children for the sins of the parents, to the third and fourth generation, but for those who love me and obey my commandments, I show love to thousands of generations. Exodus 20:4-5

Yes, he is a "great and awesome God" who shows love to thousands who love him and obey his commandments (Exodus 20:6).

The LORD is good, a fortress in times of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him. Nahum 1:7

But he is also a jealous God, punishing those who refuse to give him the exclusive devotion he deserves. For those who do *not* love his ways:

The LORD is a jealous and avenging God. The LORD takes vengeance; he is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries, he maintains his wrath against his enemies. Nahum 1:2

Because love is also part of his nature, God does not want this judgment to come upon anyone - though eventually it must come. He desires to show his love to people - even to those who do NOT love him:

He makes his sun rise on both evil and good people, and he sends rain on both righteous and unrighteous people. Matthew 5:45

The LORD is slow to anger. . . Nahum 1:3

The Lord is not sluggish in keeping his promise [to return and judge the world], as some interpret his slowness. He is being patient with you. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but everyone to have an opportunity to turn from their evil ways and thoughts. 2 Peter 3:9

He shows his kindness, tolerance and patience for a specific purpose: to give people an opportunity to change the way they think and act. But for those who refuse to change and serve him, there can only be judgment.

You, a mere human, are quick to judge others, even though you do the same things they do! So do you think you will be able to escape condemnation when it is God's turn to judge?

Do you despise God's rich display of kindness, tolerance and patience toward you? Don't you realize that God, in kindness, is giving you an opportunity to change the way you think and act? Because you stubbornly refuse to change, you are increasing the intensity of anger God will have against you, on the day God's anger is revealed. Romans 2:3-5

God has been kind by *not yet* pouring out his judgment against those who do not love him with all their hearts, with all their souls and with all their minds. Do not show contempt for his kindness. Submit to God. Acknowledge your guilt and plead for mercy. There is nothing else you can do, or ought to do.

The third commandment warns us:

You must never use the name of the LORD your God in a careless manner. Those who carelessly use his name will not go unpunished: the LORD will make sure of it. Exodus 20:7

This refers not only to the use of God's name while we curse and swear, but to *any* misuse of his name. Any time we say something false about God, we violate the third commandment.

If we do not like the description that God gives concerning himself, and we invent our own description of God, we violate the third commandment. If we accept *some* of his attributes (such as "love") and ignore or deny *others* (such as "holiness" and "righteousness"), we have broken the third commandment. If we listen to the teachings of men (or of demons), rather than the Word of God, we break the third commandment. Even if we are deeply involved in religious activities, and regularly talk about

"God" and "Jesus" . . . if we do not accept the description God has given about himself, we have broken the third commandment.

God is not unjust. Even when he says that he punishes the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him (Exodus 20:5 and 7), he is not being unjust. If the children would repent, they would be forgiven. God would have mercy on them and they would join the many thousands to whom God shows love (Exodus 20:6). But normally, the children follow after the sins of the fathers - even intensifying them - until God can no longer hold back judgment.

How can you be so stubborn! How can you be so godless, not willing to obey, or even to listen to God? You are just like your forefathers - always opposing the Holy Spirit! Acts 7:51

Do not be like your forefathers and your relatives, who were unfaithful to the LORD, the God of their forefathers, so that he made them an object of horror, as you now see. Do not be stiff-necked, as your forefathers were. Willingly surrender yourselves to the LORD and come into his holy place, which he has made holy forever. Serve the LORD your God, so that his burning anger may be turned away from you. 2 Chronicles 30:7-8

How happy in heart you can be when people hate you, exclude you, insult you, and reject even your name as evil, because you belong to the Son of Man. When that happens, you can rejoice and be filled with joy, for you have a great reward in heaven! They are treating you the same way their ancestors treated the prophets. . . . How horrible it is when everyone has nice things to say about you! They are treating you the same way their ancestors treated the false prophets. Luke 6:22,23,26

Sin has consequences which cannot be avoided.

Don't deceive yourself: You cannot make a fool out of God. The type of seed a person plants determines what crop he will harvest. Those who plant "seeds" that please their corrupt nature will, from that corrupt nature, harvest destruction. Those who plant "seeds" that please the Spirit will, from the Spirit, harvest eternal life. Galatians 6:7-8

So, rather than accusing God of being unjust, when *our* sin has an effect on our children, we should repent of our sin . . . and start to teach our children how to serve the Lord.

God is *not* unjust in sending people to hell, for only those who *deserve* it will be there. Only those who *earn* it will be there.

The payment earned by sin is death, but the free gift received from God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23

All will see that God's judgment is impartial, for he will pay back each person based on what he has done. To those who patiently continue to do what is good, who look for a life that has God's approval, honor and freedom from death, he will give eternal life. But for those who reject the truth and follow evil, looking to satisfy their own interests, there will be intense anger and wrath. There will be suffering and distress for everyone who does evil - for the Jews first, but also for the non-Jews. But there will be God's approval, honor and peace for everyone who does good - for the Jews first, but also for the non-Jews. For God does not show favoritism. Romans 2:6-11

Then I saw a great white throne, and the one who was sitting on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence; there was no place left for them. I saw the dead, important and unimportant alike, standing before the throne. Books were opened. The book of life was opened. The dead were judged based on what they had done, which was recorded in the books. And everyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. Revelation 20:11-12,15

What God has said *will* happen. We cannot get around it. But we *can* get ready.

We have failed to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind, even though it is the greatest obligation we have in life. We have sinned against him. We deserve the lake

of fire. We cannot earn anything else. Our only hope - if we desire to escape this judgment we have earned for ourselves - is to admit to God that his judgment against us is true and accurate. We must admit that we *are* guilty, and then beg for his mercy.

'God, have mercy on me, a sinner!' Luke 18:13

Be filled with grief! Weep and cry! Change your laughter into weeping and your joy into sorrow! Lower yourselves in the Lord's presence and he will lift you up. James 4:9-10

Remember that God is still just. Someone still has to pay for your sins, even if you don't. That is why God sent a substitute for you.

He was pierced for our rebellion;

He was crushed for our sins.

He received punishment so that we could have peace;

He was struck so that we could have healing.

All of us have wandered away like sheep;

Each of us has turned to follow the way of his own choosing;

But the LORD has placed on him the guilt for sins that were ours.

Isaiah 53:5-6

God showed his love this way: He gave his only Son to die, so that everyone who trusts in his Son will not suffer destruction but will have eternal life. Whoever trusts in the Son has eternal life. Whoever rejects the Son will not even see life; God's wrath is even now on him. John 3:16,36

God proved the greatness of his love by this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

If you freely acknowledge to others that Jesus is Lord, and are convinced that God brought him back to life, you will be saved. Through your confidence in God, you receive God's approval; through your willingness to acknowledge Jesus, you are saved. God says in his Word: "Anyone who trusts him will never be put to shame." [Isaiah 28:16] There is no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. They both have the same Lord, and he is richly generous to everyone who calls out to him in prayer. For his Word says, "Everyone who calls out to the Lord, because of all that he is, will be saved." [Joel 2:32] Romans 10:9-13

Let him change the way you think and the way you act - *all* your life.

Everyone who belongs to Christ is a new creation. The old way of life is gone; the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17

So cast out of your lives every type of moral impurity, and the evil that is so common among you. With a gentle spirit, receive the word that God has planted in your hearts - the word that can save you. But do what the word says. Don't merely listen to it, or you will be deceiving yourselves. James 1:21-22

... the holy Scriptures, which have the power to give you wisdom that leads to salvation, through faith in Christ Jesus. Every Scripture passage comes from the breath of God, and is useful for teaching. They show people what is wrong in their lives and how they must change. They train people to live in a way that has God's approval. In this way, God's people are completely prepared for doing every kind of good work. 2 Timothy 3:15b-17

Originally, you were dead because of your wrongdoing and sins. ... But God's mercy is so rich, and his love for us is so great! For though we were dead because of our wrongdoing, he gave us new life that is united with Christ's life. It is because of his kindness, you have been saved! God raised us to life with Christ. And he gave us a position in the heavenly realms because of our union with Christ Jesus. Because of his kindness, you have been saved through your trust in God. It was not your doing, but it was a gift from God. It was not the result of human effort, so that nobody can boast about it. We are the result of God's work. He created us in Christ Jesus, so that we could do good works. He even prepared those good works beforehand, so that we could do them! Ephesians 2:1,4-6,8-10

Trust him in life and in death.

The LORD is my Shepherd; I will never be in need.
He provides me a resting place in green pastures.
He leads me beside peaceful waters; he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths, because of who he is.

Even if I were to walk through the valley of deathlike darkness,
I would fear no harm, for you are always with me.
Your rod for protection and your staff for support - they reassure me.

You prepare a banquet table for me; my enemies can only watch.
You anoint my head with the oil of blessing; my cup overflows with abundance.
Surely goodness and love will watch over me, all the days of my life.
And I will always remain in the presence of the LORD.

Psalm 23

God can protect you so that you don't fall. With great joy you will be able to stand without fault in his glorious presence. To him, the only God, the one who saves us through Jesus Christ our Lord, belong glory, majesty, power and authority - before all time, now and for all eternity. Amen. Jude 1:24-25

All people will someday acknowledge him as Lord. For those who refuse to do so in this present life, it will mean terror and judgment: being cast out of his presence. But for us who accept his mercy and grace *now* - while he gives us the opportunity - it will be the beginning of eternal joy and life in his presence.

[Jesus Christ . . .] Although he was in very nature God,
he did not cling to his right to be treated as equal with God.
Instead, he made himself nothing.
He chose to take on the very nature of a slave,
and was born as a human being.
Considered by others to be merely human,
he lowered himself even further by being obedient
to the point of death, death on a cross!
Because of this, God has exalted him to the highest place
and given him the name of honor that is greater than any other name,
so that at the name of Jesus, everyone will kneel,
everyone in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth.
And everyone will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glorious praise of God the Father.

Philippians 2:6-11

Great and awesome are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty;
Right and true are your ways,
King of the nations.

Who will not fear you and praise you for who you are?
You alone are holy.
All nations will come and worship before you,
For they have seen the fairness of your judgments.

Revelation 15:3b-4