

THE PROBLEM OF GOD AND AN ETERNAL HELL Part 1

by Bob Vincent

I love God. But there are things that my fallen, fallible and finite human nature dislikes about him. The number one thing that troubles me about God is that he allows hell to exist and that he allows sentient creature to go there.

My wife and I have two dogs and a cat — a thirteen year old, arthritic, totally deaf, partially blind, Boston Terrier named Ralphie, a year and a half old Rat Terrier named Hamilton, and a year and half old Siamese cat named Edgar. We really like these three animals and have spent a fair amount of money with the veterinarian keeping them healthy. If they are in pain, we do our best to relieve them.

We care about most animals that way. If an animal were to be seriously injured, I would make a *prima facie* judgment. Could this animal make it to the vet's? Can I make a prognosis that the veterinarian could help him survive? If he were to survive, what would be the quality of his life? If I determine that there is reasonable evidence that he can be saved, I will drop what I am doing and take him into town. If I conclude that he is hopelessly gone, I will fetch my 357 revolver and shoot the poor beast through the skull, thus putting him out of his misery. It would cause me psychological pain to do it — I know that because I've done it before — but I would relieve the suffering because I care about the feelings of an animal: "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel" (Proverbs 12:10).

If one of my animals persistently wandered off into traffic, and I knew about it and did nothing, I believe that I would be responsible for his suffering were he to get hit. Now if I feel that way about dogs, cats, raccoons and squirrels, what about other sentient creatures — what about the one species that was directly created by God and made in his image? Surely I must feel some compassion for the whole of humankind, from Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin to Ted Bundy and the neighborhood exhibitionist. That compassion has been tested, as, for example, some years ago when a man confessed in my office that he had raped a child. But even there, in spite of all that he had done, I felt compassion for him, for he was both victimizer and victim himself, having been gang raped as a new recruit in the United States Army by some of his fellow soldiers.

One of the things that trouble me most about God is that he has allowed this world with its endless cycles of sin and death to go on and on, human beings not only reproducing themselves biologically, but reproducing their patterns of sin generationally. And worse than anything that ever has taken place on our planet is what awaits people after life — eternal separation from God in a place of unending, conscious agony. **God could prevent all this. Why doesn't he?**

Modern man has mastered the art of manipulating the wills of the masses so that they truly desire the ever-changing images of beauty, success and fulfillment that are pitched at them through magazines, newspapers, television and the cinema. Free will is not destroyed, simply massaged, not unlike the way that a man wins the love of a woman — one of the things that caused Solomon to wonder (Proverbs 20:19). Do not successful parents benevolently manipulate the wills of their children so that their little ones desire to do that which pleases the parents? Can God not do the same? Can he not woo the whole human race to Christ without violating our wills? Is he less competent than Hollywood and Madison Avenue?

If God can prevent any sentient being from ending up in hell, why doesn't he do it? "The eternal fire (was) prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41) But what about even Satan himself and his poor minions, the pathetic fallen spirits that were primordially programmed by him? I don't even want the demons to burn in the unrelenting, eternal fires of Gehenna, in that place where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched, where the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, once the inexorable sentence is passed (Mark 9:48; Revelation 14:11).

Even if one rejects classical theism and denies God's omniscience, as Clark Pinnock and others began to do in the 1980's, this still does not get God off at the bar of justice. At any point, seeing that his creation had gotten into such a mess with masses of people raping, murdering and enslaving others, he could have stopped it in some fashion or other. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't I? Would you allow one soul to go to hell? Would you not do everything in your power to manipulate a person so that he would freely choose to comply with whatever conditions were consistent with your own moral character? The Arminian and the Pelagian have no easier task than the Calvinist or the Hyper-Calvinist defending such a being before the court of human justice.

Every man eventually longs to join hands with Satan and all the demons in hell to damn such a God to the very hell he has allowed to exist. But I won't give in to this temptation, nor will any who have come to know his sweet grace. I will not sit in judgment of this high God. He is wholly beyond me. He is the dreadful Sovereign, God the All Terrible, the one from whom heaven and earth must flee away. I will bow my knees and worship him because it is my bounden duty. Nor will I question him. "My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I

have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Psalm 131:1, 2).

I do not question this God, because he is the God who is and there is no other. He can cast me into hell. He creates weal and woe (Isaiah 45:1ff.). It isn't that I don't have all these feelings, but I choose not to indulge them, remembering that I am dust — fallen, fallible and finite in the totality of my being, in the totality of my capacity to reason.

And truly — I take an oath — as God is my witness — as I have lived in this world, wandering in the mad labyrinth of the human mind — my own and others — I have concluded that I deserve no less fate than to burn in hell forever. Over the years I have counseled several hundred people with sexual problems — I have heard the damndest things, the most bizarre things — sadly, I discover in all of this putrefying business — that the seeds of the most unspeakable evil are in me, too. I have come to discover the real problem with the Pharisee's prayer, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men." (Luke 18:11) His real trouble was that he was like other men and didn't know it.

In one of the imprecatory sections of the Law, Deuteronomy 28:53-57, we discover what is in the most gentle and sensitive man and woman — your mother and mine — you and me — they will kill and eat their own children and not share so much as a piece of afterbirth with the rest of the family. The longer I live, the more I study World History, the more I see the hidden side of human nature, the more I confess that man is evil — that I am evil — yet, paradoxically and by grace, I am a saint, too. Whatever else the Bible teaches about God and hell, it teaches that everyone who ends up in hell is suffering the consequences of his own behavior. The longer I live, the more I see this as true.

GOD REJECTS SIN, DISEASE, DEATH AND HELL

I worship a being that I do not in any way fully comprehend. And, as I already indicated, there are aspects of him that I find troubling. If I could re-image God, and my imagination produced a god to my liking, he would probably be very different than the God that is — and by result, there would be no sin, disease, death or hell. But this I cannot do, because the God that is, is the God that is — a tautology, to be sure, but reality, and my imagination and desires cannot change reality. And what my imagination produced would be a false god, an idol, and ultimately, completely demonic.

Yet, the God that is also rejects sin, disease, death and hell. He demonstrates that in the Incarnation. In the face of Jesus of Nazareth, I see the God who rejects the evils that so trouble humanity.

I see that God is both one and three, fully transcendent, yet fully immanent, that the one "who works all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:11) also rejects sin, disease, death and hell by becoming part of his own creation.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God, the second person of the blessed Trinity, without ceasing to be God, becomes a human being. He hungers and thirsts, weeps and wrestles with temptation and fear, becomes impotent against evil and limited in knowledge, experiences the guilt and pain of humanity — his lot, too, is the loneliness, alienation and abandonment that characterize human experience. The damning God becomes the damned, and, in touching his human nature, dies on the cross.

I do not understand this God, his eternal, immutable decree, nor his stooping to my weakness in love. I cannot comprehend how the same God who has elected some to eternal salvation, for reasons known only to himself and not based on anything good or commendable in them, sincerely, earnestly and passionately invites all people to come to him and vests mere mortals, the Church, with the task of proclaiming this good news.

There are simply so many things that the Bible never tells me about God, and so I defer my questions about who he is and why he has done what he has done to another time, a time when I will see him as he is, and when I will fully know, even as I am fully known, but until then I walk by faith, not by sight (1 John 3:2; 1 Corinthians 13:12; 2 Corinthians 5:7).

After walking with him for over thirty-seven years, I have come to know the voice of the good Shepherd (John 10:4, 5). He has demonstrated his love in countless ways over the years in my experience. I have seen him physically heal people, sometimes in a moment of time. Our congregation is filled with people who have come to the Lord Jesus bound in the chains of adultery, drunkenness, homosexuality and violent, hateful bitterness, and they have been set free, their bitterness and bondage gone, their sanity restored. I have seen him heal marriages, set people free from demons and provide for human needs in all kinds of ways, sometimes with huge sums of money, seemingly out of the blue, at just the right time.¹

All of this demonstrates that God — whom I do not fully understand and whose ways sometimes trouble me — is a God of mercy, kindness, love and grace. His own character and disposition to the entire human family is mirrored in his command through Paul: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." (Galatians 6:10) He commands this because he "is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:10).

God's gracious act of redemption in Jesus Christ is both universal and particular — being sufficient for every sin ever committed and making possible the sincere and true offer of salvation to every human being, while at the same time actually procuring the salvation of all those whom the Father has given to the Son, a multitude so great that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language (1 John 2:2; 1 Timothy 2:3-6; John 3:16; 10:11, 15, 16, 26-30; Titus 3:4-7; Revelation 7:9). The Sovereign Elector of Romans 9:10-24 extends his hands in mercy to people who are disobedient and obstinate in Romans 10:21. Based on the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, "The Spirit and the bride (can now) say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Revelation 22:17).

Those who spurn God's gracious offer justly go to hell, for while salvation is based entirely on grace, damnation is based entirely on works. And while no one who is in heaven deserves to be there, everyone who is in hell deserves to be there. One blessed and dreadful day, even Satan himself and every man and woman will bow their knees and acknowledge that God is just in all his ways (Isaiah 45:23-25; Romans 3:4ff.; 14:11; Philippians 2:10, 11).

I find my bitterness and fear go, and my sanity restored, when I, like the Psalmist (whose words I quoted in the earlier post) "do not concern myself with great matters or things too profound for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Psalm 131:1, 2). I don't think that is partitioning my thinking, but it is a choosing not to think too deeply with my fallen, finite and fallible reason.

As I adore this God in worship, I find myself changed. I receive him in the proclamation and the breaking of bread, and I praise him with my life and lips.

NOTES

[1.](#) Over the years, my wife and I have seen God answer our prayers in some very incredible ways. Of those many answers, here is but one. On September 15, 1996, as I put a check in the morning offering for \$110, God quickened me with what had happened to Isaac in Genesis 26:12. By faith — I had never been able to do this before, nor have I ever had the liberty to pray this way since — I prayed for a hundredfold blessing — we were really hurting financially at the time. On November 16, 1996, out of the blue, I received 200 shares of Wachovia Bank stock from a relative on the East Coast. I got on the Internet and discovered that the stock had closed at \$55.00 per share. Do the math; it comes out to the penny. Through God hearing our prayers, we now have a beautiful home of our own and have been able to give away many thousands of dollars. All of this demonstrates that the God whom I do not fully understand is a God of mercy, kindness, love and grace.