

The Trouble with Christianity: Hell Small Group Discussion Guide

Opening Questions (encourage everyone to answer):

- What is a caricature? (Leaders, in case you need help: a picture, description, or imitation of a person in which certain striking characteristics are *exaggerated* in order to create a comic or grotesque effect.)
- If an artist were to sketch a caricature of you, which features do you think they would exaggerate?
- If our popular understanding of hell is more a “caricature” than it is biblical fact, which characteristics in the Bible’s depiction of it have been exaggerated, or blown out of proportion?
- Why does the doctrine of hell pose a hurdle for many people, when it comes to embracing the Christian faith?

On Sunday, we considered four areas that we need to re-think with regard to hell.¹ They are below, along with passages to read and questions for discussion.

1. We need a new narrative about hell (a new framework or storyline)

- Many of us operate with the following storyline: *“Right now I live on earth. One day I will die. When I die, I will stand before God and God will either send me up to heaven if I’ve done the right things, or down to hell if I haven’t.”*
 - Does this describe your thinking about hell? At what point does it differ?
 - Based on what you know of the Big Story of the Bible, what are the problems with this narrative?
- One of the reasons that we understand hell wrong is because we misunderstand the relationship between heaven and earth. Read the following passages (together as a group, or divide up and report back). What do they tell us about the relationship between heaven and earth?
 - Genesis 1:1, 31
 - Genesis 2:8
 - Matthew 6:10
 - Colossians 1:20
 - Revelation 21:1-5
- Consider this “new” **narrative**: *God’s mission is not to get us out of earth and into heaven or hell, but rather to reconcile heaven and earth from the destructive power of sin, death, and hell.*
 - Does this storyline make more sense of what you read in Scripture? Why or why not?
 - How do you feel about this idea?

2. We need a new understanding of hell’s origins

- Instead of thinking of hell as an underground torture chamber, where God uses flames to punish people who haven’t lived up to his expectations, Pastor Josh encouraged us to think of hell as the destructive power of sin, which has invaded God’s good creation (we’ll talk about hell the place in the next point).
- When you think of “hell on earth”—or examples of sin’s destructive power on full display in the here and now—what examples come to mind?
- Read the following passages. What do you see here about our sin, its destructiveness, and hell?
 - Isaiah 9:18
 - Matthew 5:21-22
 - Matthew 5:27-30
 - James 3:5-6

¹ This approach owes greatly to the work of Joshua Ryan Butler’s book, *The Skeletons in God’s Closet*.

- The new understanding of hell's **origins**: *We are the ones, not God, who unleash the destructive power of hell in the world.*
 - Do you agree or disagree?
 - Do you see “sparks” of sin in your own heart, which given the right circumstances, could become all out fires?

3. We need a new understanding of hell's purpose

- Our “caricature” of hell assumes that God created it with the purpose of torturing his enemies for eternity. But an examination of the language of hell in the New Testament transforms our view.
- When Jesus talks about the end result of sin's destruction (contexts where we see the English word “hell” in our Bibles), he almost always uses the term “Gehenna” to describe the place where all of that destructive poison (and those who perpetrate it) will go.
- In the following verses (in addition to the previous references to Matthew 5), the original language used the “Gehenna,” where the English reads “hell.” Read a few of them.
 - Matthew 18:9
 - Matthew 23:15, 33
 - Mark 9:43-45
 - James 3:6
- What three characteristics were true of the Valley of Gehenna, which Jesus' original listeners would have understood? (Leaders, see if people can remember from Sunday's sermon, then show the answers in the verses.).
 - 2 Chronicles 28:1-3
 - Jeremiah 7:31
 - Jeremiah 32:35
 - The three characteristics: Gehenna (known as Ben Hinnom in the Old Testament) was 1) The place where the worst practices of idol worship took place; 2) The place where the worst injustice took place, namely child sacrifice, and 3) The place where Jerusalem's garbage was dumped and burned in Jesus' day.
- With this understanding in mind, why would Jesus use the Valley of Gehenna to refer to the place where sin's destructive poison (and its perpetrators) will ultimately go, when he brings his kingdom to the renewed earth?
- Read Isaiah 65:17-25 and Revelation 22:1-5, and 14-15.
 - In these verses we see a picture of the flourishing between God, people, and creation, which will be true when Jesus returns.
 - What purpose does “Gehenna” serve in that new creation, with respect to the eternal flourishing that God intends to give us? (Leaders: hell is that place to which God will banish all the destructiveness of sin, and those who insist on clinging to it rather than receiving the cleansing that Jesus offers).
- Joshua Ryan Butler says, “Hell is not a chamber God locks from the outside against our repentant will, but a closet we latch from the inside through our unrepentant will.” What does he mean?
- Discuss this new understanding, with respect to all that we've read and all that we hope for: *Hell's purpose is protection, not torture.*

4. We need a new view of what hell shows us about God.

- Read Mark 15:33-34, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 13:12, and Isaiah 53:11.
- Based on these verses, and all that we have read, do you agree that what Jesus experienced on the cross was hell?
- How is it true that *Hell shows us a heart-level understanding of God's love?*
- What effect could this new perspective on hell, and God's love, have on your present life?

Pray: Spend some time praising God for his mercy. Share your other needs and pray for one another.