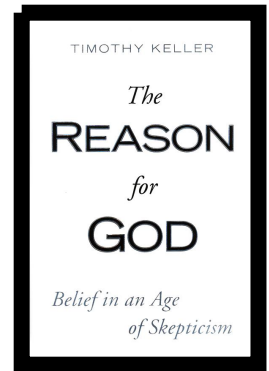




# Faith's Answers to the World's Questions

Lesson 7, 10/26/08



**Disclaimer:** This week, we will not be covering the reading as much (chapters 14 and conclusion). Instead, it will revisit an issue and try to tie up some loose ends in the study.

## DISCUSS—REVIEW AND RAISING THE ISSUES

What has been one of the biggest insights that you have gained from this class?

What is an issue that you think we need to spend more time discussing?

Has there been a “tough question” that you do not think was addressed?

## FROM KEY OF D TO KEY OF O BACK TO THE KEY D

We began in the key of **D (Defense)**, looking at tough questions concerning **Exclusivity** (How can Jesus be the only Way?), **Suffering** (How can a good and powerful God allow suffering?), **Oppression** (Doesn't the church oppress people?), and the **Reliability of the Bible**. The method we used to look at these questions was:

- 1) **clarify the question, (what's it getting at?)**
- 2) **find the underlying beliefs, (how thick is the ice?)**
- 3) **discover the power of the gospel as the true answer (what does the gospel say?)**

Then, we changed keys to **the key of O**, looking at **reasons to believe** in the Christian God. We figured out that we might not be able to prove in the fullest sense the existence of God, but we can make a **convincing/compelling case for belief** (we find support for our belief). It is not just that Christianity is possible, but the **best explanation for what we see in the world**.

So, hopefully we have discovered that we have reasons to believe and these reasons withstand the tough questions of the world; in fact, the tough questions point us back to belief. However, our discussion has been fine and dandy in a Sunday School classroom setting, but what about in the real world?

Today, let's have more of a conversation that you might have with a friend, a family member, a co-worker, or, possibly, even a complete stranger. We will have this discussion concerning chapter 5 and the idea of hell.

## Q7: "HOW CAN A LOVING GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?"

A more sophisticated version of this question:

What is "the purpose of torturing someone eternally? What's the point? Obviously, there's no "lesson" to be learned. This isn't corrective punishment. The person in hell has no hope of ever improving his character or situation. So this is sheer vengeance, pure retribution, unadulterated anger, with no motive other than the pure, divine delight of inflicting horrifying pain on a person!" (Edward Boyd in *Letters from a Skeptic*, 194-195).

In answering this question, one must remember the assumptions and issues that lie behind the question. As we have seen, this question makes sense when it is joined with these assumptions, but when these assumptions are questioned, the coherence of the question changes. Therefore, in answering this question, it is wise to think about the issues that lie at the heart of this question.

*From unpacking assumptions to integrating into a discussion (possible places to go):*

What is hell?

We receive a lot of different images about hell (darkness, fire, pit, lake burning with brimstone, etc.), but we must remember that they are images that are meant to leave an imprint. It is a place of complete separation from God; therefore, it is the place where people do not fulfill their purpose in being created and suffer because they are not living as they were made to be.

What is the purpose of hell in the biblical worldview?

When we think about our outrage over the "evil" of the world, the idea of punishment does not seem as abhorrent to our minds; in fact, we long for "justice" to come. While we might not like the standard involved in punishment, we must at least see the need for punishment and recognize that a loving and good God will bring punishment. Hell is the punishment that we feel should happen in our world.

What is love? Does it preclude punishment?

Does love exclude the possibility (and actually the result) of punishment? Have we not made a false dichotomy? Can love and punishment go together? The Christian view of God is that all his attributes work together; his love leads his punishment. But we can see this in human relations, too, can't we?

Why does God judge personal decisions that I make that do not affect anyone else? It is one thing to punish murderers, but what about something like consensual sex?

This is built upon many cultural assumptions—such as that our private lives do not affect our public lives. However, other cultures would vehemently disagree on this. In addition, it ignores the fact that there might be metaphysical laws that govern the universe, which we may not like but are there. Or in a different realm, our covenant with God involves certain conditions, and these conditions are what we are punished for.

How do people get to hell?

It is often said that the locks on the doors of hell are on the inside (C.S. Lewis); that it is the destiny that people have chosen for themselves. God gives people up the sin that they would rather pursue than Him (Romans 1); sin is an addiction that consumes and destroys people. People have made the decision to be "hell-ish"

rather than “heavenly” people. Therefore, the place of hell actually respects the decisions made by people, as it is the end of their trajectory of choice! In fact, “gnashing their teeth” might point to rebellion, not pain (Acts 7:54).

Doesn't the view of hell demean people and cause you to be violent?

This is a false connection between two ideas. When we believe that God will handle justice and judgment, we do not seek to “take matters into our own hands.” If we do not believe that God will bring punishment, we might be inclined to get violent, but if we trust in Him, we do not have to resort to this.

Why does it have to be eternal?

While it might seem like eternal punishment for a lifetime of sin is “too harsh,” one must remember that it is sin against an infinite God. It resides on a metaphysical plane that we can only imagine. In addition, we must remember that if we truly are beings that live beyond death, then we can expect punishment in the beyond. Perhaps people will go on sinning even in hell!

How can heaven and hell co-exist?

While it might seem that hell would put a damper on the party of hell, this does not have to be the case. If heaven is being present with God, then the presence of God will cause our minds to be so fixed on God, we probably won't even think about hell.

Who goes to hell?

God has made a solution to the hell issue in Jesus Christ. Therefore, he shows great love in making a way so that we do not go to hell. However, when we reject his offer because we like our own life, we do not love the God who loves. Jesus comes to save, but those who do not believe are condemned (John 3:18-21).

## **2 Important Nuances to Remember:**

-This is a *loaded* question!

One of the most respected theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> centuries is John Stott. He is a picture of orthodox Christian theology, with one slight caveat: he does not believe that hell is a place of eternal punishment, but a place of annihilation. From my study of his view on this doctrine, it seems to change around the death of a loved one who was not a Christian. He adjusted his doctrine, it seems, because of how difficult it can be. However, his book *Basic Christianity* is a great exposition of the Christian faith. Even great, faithful minds can have difficulty wrapping their heads around doctrines.

-Ultimately, this is not the biggest question!

The biggest question is not how hell can exist and what exactly it is like, but whether it exists. If it does, even if we do not like it, we must live in reality of it. Does the person with objections and questions understand the truth...and believe it?

## **MORE THAN A FEELING OR A PHILOSOPHY...IT IS “THE LORD OF DANCE” FORMING A “DANCING COMMUNITY”**

Perhaps the main point of the book is that Christianity is intellectually plausible. However, in defining Christianity, one must remember that it is not a philosophy but a relationship with God

and the people He has called. This is a God who created us to have a relationship with us, not because He was bored or lacking (as he “danced” with Himself) but because He wanted to *share* His goodness with us. We lose this with sin, but we can restore it through Christ’s death and resurrection for us. Therefore, we are called to connect to this person through Christ. Jesus’ death was an offer to dance!

As Keller so strongly points out in his last chapter and conclusion, we are called to do this in community. We model the Trinity when we walk together in Christ; we also help to “infect” all people by having them in our community.

This dance is an ongoing, long journey. Tough questions will remain and there will still be struggles. We are called to walk alongside of people through these questions, as God has walked alongside of us. And throughout it, He will walk beside us as well.

## WHAT TO DO WITH THE MATERIAL?

What has been the point of the study? In writing the book, Keller wanted to present to skeptics a case that shows the plausibility of Christianity. For Christians, Keller wanted people to wrestle with their faith and come out stronger. In addition, I would suggest that this should give you ideas to help interact with those outside of the church; to have your words “seasoned with grace” as the apostle Paul said. Hopefully, you have discovered that there is no “cookie-cutter” answers to tough questions, but reflecting on why the person is asking the question and answering in light of that issue.

We have done that with “tough questions” but this can be said to be true of a person’s questions for Christianity in general. On pg. 231 in *Reason for God*, where Keller mentions 3 different things that prevent people from believing:

1. Content Issues—not understanding or agreeing with the message
2. Coherence Issues—issues in Christianity that do not conform to the world
3. Cost issues—things that we do not want to give up to follow Christ

In discussing Christ with people, we need to understand which issue is standing in the way, and talk in light of that. And the goal is not to bring them mental understanding, but into community with the God who made them and the people He has redeemed.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT—DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you explain the doctrine of hell to someone who is not a Christian?
2. When someone asks you a tough question, how are you going to think through how to answer it? Has this study changed how you approach the tough questions?
3. If you were to construct a case for why you believe Christianity is true, what would it look like? Where would you start?