

A day at the Falls...



This past summer as my family was driving through upstate New York, we decided to stop at Niagara Falls. The view is simply breathtaking.

From the rail above the Niagara River you can see three giant waterfalls. The volume of water that flows over the Falls is difficult to take in. In a minute there are 600,000 gallons of water flowing over the waterfalls on the Canadian side and 150,000 gallons on the American. The air is filled with spray. The roar and noise is deafening. You try to imagine how many gallons of water have flowed over these Falls in the last hundred years. It is truly beyond comprehension.

But as I stood there overlooking the waterfall, my mind was drawn in a different direction. Instead of thinking about the astounding beauty of nature, I began thinking about the horror of hell. Humanity is like a river that starts small, and grows as it threads its way through life. But, like the Niagara river, at the end, there is only one place to go. Over the Falls.

I began to compute. Last year over 55 million people



died in the world. That's over 150,000 a day, 6,300 a hour, 105 a minute. Nearly two people every second breathe their last in this world. How many of them are not Christians? If we take a very generous estimate and say that half of them are believers in Jesus, then that would mean, according to traditional Christian teaching, that about 75,000 people each day find themselves facing an eternity not in heaven, but in "the other place".

Asking the right questions

There I stood, looking at the unceasing torrent pouring into the boiling chaos below, and my heart was shredded. I thought about the sheer volume of people that die, passing over the threshold of life and ending up, if Christian teaching is correct, in hell. And I admit to you that I struggled with it. My struggle was rational and humanitarian before it was biblical.

Rational, because it just doesn't seem to make sense. I looked around at the happy crowds eating ice cream and having fun. What could they have done to deserve such a fate? How could it be that so many would have to endure such an eternity?

Humanitarian, because, why would God create such wonderful, warm, gifted and delightful human beings, only to throw them away on the scrap heap of eternity?

And once the questions started, they didn't stop. How could this many people go to hell every single day? But more deeply, I asked myself, "How is it possible that God could be honored by this?" I know that God is good, loving, and merciful. I believe this with

everything that I am—unwaveringly so. But as the mist from the Falls landed on my arm and I leaned on the railing, I couldn't help but struggle through the questions. "How does this serve to show God's goodness, love and mercy?"

Have you ever struggled with questions like these? I'm sure you have. Believe me, you're not alone. Along with many others who have thought carefully and seriously about the Bible's teaching on hell, you've most certainly asked some hard questions. That moment of bewilderment at Niagara was not the first time I've thought this through. And I don't think it will be the last. The idea of hell, as it is presented to us in the Bible, confronts us with a sobering disruption. Like a noisy alarm being set off within our souls, when the subject is raised, our minds begin racing and our hearts are gripped. The gravity of the matter won't allow us to simply put it aside.

Is it true that the Bible teaches that those who reject Christ will spend eternity enduring the conscious torment of hell as a judgment upon their sin? These are questions we would rather avoid, but as feeling human beings, it is important that we face them.

And let me make it absolutely clear: *these are also good and appropriate questions to ask*. Wind back the clock twenty years to when I was not yet a Christian and talk to me about hell, and I likely would have laughed in your face. We shouldn't be surprised when people are hostile to the big ideas of the gospel—either angry or mocking. If they are open to listening and thinking,



they will need to work through their concerns about the gospel message, and this will take time, patience, and honesty. Questions about hell are not off-limits. As Christians we are to be equipped both to know and provide a reasonable explanation of God's word:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

1 Peter 3 v 15

Peter imagines a situation where someone asks you: "Why do you think you will go to heaven when you die?" He is keen that we do not sit there silent or spluttering and incomprehensible. So, before we can give a reasonable defense of our hope to others, we must be able to answer the questions we are asking. Questions about what will happen when we die, about the judgment we face, and about the existence and nature of hell are key questions that must be answered. And behind all these questions are the bigger "bedrock" questions about God's character. How can he be a God of love, and yet judge? How can he be kind and forgiving, and yet speak about an eternity of hell-fire?

The right resource

I mentioned that my questions were rational and humanitarian before they were biblical. This does not mean my questions were invalid, but they were just incomplete. Because before we begin to answer these questions, we must see what the Bible actually says. I suspect

that many of us have a view of judgment and hell that is more informed by medieval paintings, jokey cartoon depictions, or half-remembered terrifying sermons from fire-brand preachers, than by Scripture. The Bible, after all, is our only reliable source of knowledge about God, and the way he reveals truth to people.

Several years ago, popular speaker, author, and pastor Rob Bell ignited a massive controversy within the Christian world with his book *Love Wins*. The book begins by asking many of the same types of questions that I ask in this introduction. Buckling under the sobering weight of humanitarian and rational objections, Bell offers another solution. He favors a position similar to what has historically been called “universalism”—that, in the end, *everyone* will be saved. Hell will be empty. In this book we will arrive at a different conclusion. But this is not because I have forsaken humanitarian or rational concerns. Quite the contrary. When we read the Bible, we find that most of the teaching about hell comes from the mouth of Jesus—the most loving and compassionate and wisest man who ever lived.

As Christians, our primary authoritative source for answers to questions like these *must* be the Bible in general, and the teaching of Jesus in particular. As human beings we are finite; we have limited knowledge and experience. Therefore, not knowing about hell by experience (thankfully) or through exhaustive knowledge, we require a source that has the knowledge. For centuries Christians have turned to the Scriptures for such answers. We do this because we believe that in the Scriptures, God has provided everything we need to



know in order to faithfully follow him. This doctrine, known as “the sufficiency of Scripture,” teaches that we have what we need in order to answer the questions we need answers to. And as we will see, the subject of hell is not something that God has been cryptic or unclear about. He has laid out this matter with repetition and clarity. This encourages us both to study and to confidently rest in what God’s word says, rather than adding to it, subtracting from it, or completely ignoring it.

I do not fault Bell and others for their questions—I ask them too. However, I do take issue with how the questions are answered. When we dial down the teaching of Scripture, because it does not fit our culture or feelings, or when it seems to make no sense, then we cease to think as Christians.

The right tone

The consideration of hell will make demands on our willingness to be faithful to God and his word. But we must be faithful not only in matters of doctrine but also to the corresponding tone with which the Bible explains and communicates these truths.

You may well have, regrettably, encountered a degree of flippancy regarding the subject of hell. On the one hand, there are those who do not regard the Bible as God’s word. They reject the concept of hell as ridiculous and laughable, and consider those who believe in it to be ignorant and outdated. It is laughed off with jokes and sneers, like the line that came back at me when I was pleading with an unbelieving friend: “Why wouldn’t I want to go to hell? All my friends will be there.”

At the other extreme, there are professing Christians who, sadly, seem to *enjoy* pronouncing words of condemnation and eternal ruin upon those who are outside the faith. With some sort of warped sense of joy, they treat with contempt those who are heading to eternal darkness. It makes me cringe. I hope it does the same to you.

By contrast, there is an appropriate way to speak about this. Upon learning that his friend had preached on hell the previous day, one pastor asked, “Did you preach it with tears?” This seems like a fitting question to calibrate our hearts. If we approach this subject with seriousness, and tears in our eyes, then we are following our Lord. He knew that God’s judgment would soon fall on Jerusalem, because the people of the city had rejected him. Was his reaction indifference? *No*. Did he rejoice that they were getting their just desserts? *No*.

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes.”

Luke 19 v 41-42

Those who seek to follow Jesus should emulate both his compassion for others and his concern for the glory of God.

Answering the questions

Let’s face it: hell is a topic that most of us don’t feel very comfortable talking (or reading) about. Thinking



about eternal suffering is unsettling—and rightly so. I believe this to be deliberate on God’s part. But this does not mean that we shouldn’t talk about it. Consider the work of a cancer doctor who spends significant years researching, writing, and discussing what she can know about the disease. Why does she do this? Because she cares about people—and because cancer is a real, serious threat to life. To neglect her study is to neglect the very purpose of her job—to care for others.

So as we consider hell together—both its certainty and severity—who would object to intentionally setting aside a little time to consider how to better understand it and help people avoid it?

As I have been researching and reading about this uncomfortable subject, I’ve spoken with many different people about it—both Christian and not. It’s been interesting to hear their fears, struggles, and questions. One friend who has been a Christian for several decades shared how this teaching causes him more unrest than anything else in the Bible. A woman with young children told me how difficult she finds it to explain to her kids. An older saint who is, humanly speaking, closer to death than many, talked about his persistent doubts on the subject.

Another friend who is a relatively new Christian shared how his understanding of hell had led to a deep concern for his unbelieving family and friends. In his conversations with them, he is drawn to talking openly and asking questions about the exclusivity of Christ and the reality of hell. In a talk with a non-Christian friend, he wanted to get right down to business, as he

said, about what the Bible actually teaches about hell. In my admittedly small sample, I've observed a trend of both curiosity and concern about hell. We will all benefit from taking the time to look our questions in the eye, and give ourselves an opportunity for further review and discussion.

Where are we going?

My goal in writing is not to provide an exhaustive treatment on what the Bible says about judgment, hell, and life beyond the grave. Instead, I want to provide you with an accessible and serviceable overview of the Bible's teaching on this subject. I want you to understand better what the Bible says about these weighty and important issues, and to be more equipped to answer questions.

But also, if you are a Christian, I hope to grow a sense of worshipful gratitude in you through a greater understanding of what the Lord endured to rescue you from hell. We are asking and answering the most common big question, "Is hell for real?", but in each chapter we will ask and answer several underlying questions.

- In chapter one we'll consider whether hell is a real place, or simply just a picture or metaphor for something else.
- In chapter two we explore what hell is like according to Jesus and the other Bible writers.
- In chapter three we will think through the reason for hell: "Is hell really necessary?"



- Then, we will see how the main theme of the Bible's teaching is focussed—not on hell itself, but on how to *avoid* hell.

At the end, I've tried to answer objections and frequently asked questions about this most difficult of doctrines.

Amid the deafening noise of the waterfalls, my heart and mind simmered with questions. Would you join me at the observation deck? Let's bring our questions, concerns and worries to the only place where they will find a resolution.