

How to Think Through Our Objections to Hell

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[0 : 00] Hey there, welcome to the Providence podcast. My name is Chris Oswald, senior pastor at Providence Community Church. Welcome, welcome, welcome. So glad that you're here.

Today we're going to follow up on a particular piece of the sermon preached yesterday. So, the subject being 2 Timothy 1, verse 10, in which we are told that Jesus abolished death. Now, it was necessary in that sermon, in order to illustrate the glories of that reality, to talk a little bit about hell. And I typically find, after preaching a sermon on hell, whether folks come to me or not, that this is a source of struggle for, well, I would say probably most Christians at one time or another.

The very idea of hell, the very idea of the justness of hell is a struggle for, I would say, most Christians from time to time. And so I thought we'd talk about that today.

I want to start by referring to something else in the sermon that may seem not to have anything to do with this subject, but we'll get there. I mentioned yesterday that even in writing that Jesus was Savior, Paul was committing an explicitly political act.

[2 : 01] Certainly more so when he would talk about Jesus as Lord. Now, the popular idea of separation of church and state has molded our understanding and made us think that good Christians don't dabble in politics.

And they're certainly not overtly confrontational with politicians. And we think that primarily because of the particular country that we live in, the tradition of separation of church and state, the very idea, although I think it a faulty one of so-called secular society.

We have our minds molded by all these ideas. And so we read the New Testament in that light and assume that, well, we never see Paul explicitly sort of challenge the emperor.

And so that must not be a good idea. That must not be what Christians do. But then you get this added, you know, archaeological and historical data. And you realize that actually pretty much most of the words used to refer to Jesus in the New Testament were used first, first, to describe Caesar Augustus.

And you begin to realize that, wait a minute, this, the government at the time was an explicitly religious government. And even the word gospel that we use today was used, again, first to refer to the coming of Caesar Augustus, the euangelion, the gospel, the good news, the good tidings.

[3 : 33] That was referred first and foremost to Caesar Augustus. And so you begin to realize that your whole conception of a political New Testament just didn't ever exist.

It was a false construct that you created with the data that you had. Even the word parousia, which in the New Testament often refers to the return of Jesus, was a word that was used in the Greek world, in the Roman world, to refer to the presence of the emperor in a city, his arrival in a city. And so the point being, you thought you understood the role of politics and Christianity, and then all of this evidence that you didn't know about comes into being, and you realize that your previous understanding has been totally disrupted by this new data.

It's something like, you realize what you thought was a full-baked opinion turned out to be a half-baked opinion, and the only way that you come to that understanding is when new information reveals that your previous understanding was wrong.

Now, I bring that up because yesterday we talked about hell. And again, I would say that at some point or another, most Christians really do struggle with the reality of hell.

[4 : 48] I know I certainly have, specifically with the justness of hell. And again, I just wanted to address that issue. And I brought up the political thing because I wanted to show you an example of how people thought they had one understanding fairly clear, only to arrive at a new understanding when new data presents itself.

And that has to do with one of the quotes I read from J.I. Packer that might have passed by rather quickly as it was only one sentence. In his discussion of hell, he says, What he's saying is that to understand hell, we need a depth of insight into the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. And to really get it, to think that it's right, we need a depth of insight into the holiness of God and sinfulness of man, a depth of insight most of us do not have.

We need more information than we currently have if we're struggling with hell. We're struggling with the reality of hell. Now, it's possible to grow in your understanding of the holiness of God, and it's possible as a result of growing in your understanding of the holiness of God to begin to further grasp the horrors of the sinfulness of man.

But in reality, even if you gained a little insight year after year into these subjects, you know, you'd still only be scratching the surface. The truth is, is that only when we are face to face with Jesus Christ will we really understand the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man.

[6 : 40] And when we get that insight, well, hell will seem perfectly and completely just. But until then, we kind of have to, there's a sense in which we kind of have to use our knowledge of our ignorance to fill in the gap.

There are things we just don't have, insights we just don't have. And when we get those insights, when we're standing face to face with the Lord, when we get those insights, we'll understand. But until then, we really need to use our ignorance to fill in some of those gaps. And when we object to some doctrine or to some difficult idea that is clearly proclaimed in Scripture, what are we going to do?

Well, I would suggest one of the things to do is to understand that we're doing the best we can with the information we have, but we don't have all the information.

So that would be one thing I would say. And I would maybe want to say that slightly differently, but I'm saying this in real time on the podcast. But a basic idea is that we've all been in situations where we are sure we understand a situation and then new data presents itself and our previous understanding looks kind of childish.

[8 : 00] Well, friends, don't you think that that's going to happen to us a great deal when we stand before the Lord? So when I struggle with hell and the justness of it using my human senses, what am I going to do about that?

Well, one of the things I do is to lean not on my understanding, to understand that in many respects, I simply don't have the depth of insight I need into the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. So that's one thing I would share with someone that's struggling either with the doctrine of hell or just the idea of the problem of evil. I would just encourage you to remember that there have been plenty of times you've been sure about something only to be proven wrong later because you didn't know what you didn't know.

And in the case of the divine, one of the great services God does to us is he does let us know, hey, there's a lot you don't know.

And a lot I can't tell you because you simply lack the hardware to understand it. And so in those moments, I think if we're going to doubt anyone, we ought to doubt ourselves.

[9 : 12] The second thing I would say is something I've said before on this podcast, and that's just this idea that I've referred to in a previous podcast of a plane having a ceiling and a floor.

I think we know about this a little bit if we're top gun fans that you fly below the deck and it's this idea that sure, the plane can go below, say, a thousand feet, but it's really not safe to do that. Not to do that very long. Very few people understand that there's also a ceiling. Every plane is engineered to hit a certain altitude and then really simply by the basis of its own aerodynamics can't go any further than that or much further than that.

It simply can't climb. The air is too thin. It just can't get up any higher. Well, that's a good thing to remember when we're trying to solve these, you know, these divine and cosmic problems like the reality of hell.

It's a good thing to remember that, you know, you might just not be engineered at this stage in your humanity to fly up to the altitude necessary to see what God sees.

[10 : 21] I would remind folks that, you know, there really is sort of a safe flying limit for the human mind. And I would encourage you to, you know, not because I'm trying to hide anything or not because there's some kind of divine conspiracy, but simply because we are created with a particular hardware set up by God.

We have the best brains of all the creatures in the world, but we don't have an unlimited brain. We don't have an all-powerful brain. We really can't think of everything that we need to think of. And so I would just encourage folks to think through, well, if I'm struggling with something, I guess I'm kind of making the same point twice, just in a different direction. I would just remind them of what God says, as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways above your ways. There's a third thing I would share, and it has to do with something that goes all the way back to Plato called the Euthyphro Dilemma. And I think this is a very instructive and underlooked idea when helping someone deal with what you might refer to as the problem of evil. There's a way that the human mind tends to think about God, and I'll summarize it this way. Is God good because he measures up to some universal standard outside of himself?
[11 : 53] Are we in a situation where there's us, there's God, and then there's a third thing, a list of morals like love and justice, etc.?

Are we in a system where God judges us by how well we measure up to this third thing, and we judge God by how well he measures up to this third thing?
Is there a third thing? Is there a third cosmic tablet of morality by which God judges us, and we are free to judge God?

Well, when I am judging God for not being loving, that's what I'm doing. I'm assuming there's a third force in the universe, a list of virtues that not only rules over my behavior, not only rules over and measures my behavior, but rules over and measures God's behavior.

But if that's the way the reality really is, then we should skip worshiping God, and we should just go straight to this third thing, and we should worship it and conform ourselves to it.

[13 : 15] And friends, this is really what we're doing when we struggle with the problem of evil or the problem of hell. We're surreptitiously, perhaps even unawares to our own consciousness, creating a God in the image of our own morality, and then demanding that the great Yahweh, the great I Am, join us in worshiping this third thing.

It's like, God, I conform to this third standard of morality, and you must as well. This is what love is. This is what justice is. This is what so on. I know that because somehow, you know, I just know that.

And God, you have to also conform to this standard. But that's, of course, not how reality works. There's some of my favorite commercials or insurance commercials, and I remember some old lady insurance commercial.

I just love the saying. I've thought about this so much in counseling and pastoring that one old lady always says to the other, that's not how this works. That's not how any of this works. The truth is, is that to the extent that we have an understanding of right and wrong or love and hate or justice and injustice, to the extent that we even have a proper understanding of those things, those are simply coming from the very nature of God.

God isn't responsible for measuring up to some external standard of love. God is love. And whatever we think we know about love either came from God or it came from a false God.

[14 : 53] Can I say that again? Whatever we think we know about love is either from the nature of God or from some false God that we picked up along the way.

So anyway, there's three things I would think about if you're struggling with this. It's certainly extremely understandable from a human perspective why you would.

It's probably not really understandable from the divine perspective. What I mean by that is, is that it feels almost inevitable as a human being to struggle with this problem.

But I bet you, even in this, we will see one day how that was really, was really a function of our smallness, function of our creatureliness, that we struggled with this at all.

But I'm coming to you if you're struggling with this from a place of understanding, because I certainly have. I think that that's a product of my creatureliness and my sinfulness, my tendency to create false gods, you know, lots of stuff.

[16 : 05] My lack of information, my lack of insight into divine holiness and human sinfulness. But I sure can empathize with you on this. I sure can understand why, if you are struggling with this, that you are.

But I would tell you that it seems to me that there are at least three things to consider that would be a humble, sort of more likely to be right approach to handling this.

The first one, there's probably just a bunch of information I don't have. Number two, this whole idea of a safe cruising altitude. I can only think my way out of so many things.

I can only climb so high with my thoughts. I have, as a human being, I have the best brain in creation, but it's not the ultimate brain.

I still have many cognitive limits, perceptual limits to understanding things. And third, this idea, just as a reminder, that when we're judging God for not living up to some standard, what we've really done there is create another God and ask Yahweh to bow down to him.

[17:20] We don't measure God against our own morality. We certainly don't measure God against the world's morality. Whatever moral code comes to us from some other place than God, it's false.

Instead, we confess that God is morality. Not simply because he's deemed that this or that is right or this or that is wrong, but because he is love.

He is justice. He is mercy. And so on and so forth. So I hope that's helpful to you. I hope this doesn't come off. Sometimes I get into, you know, kind of apologetics mode.

I don't want to sound firmer than I feel in this podcast. I don't mean to belittle you if you're struggling with this, but I do want to remind you of how little you are.

All right. Peace, my friends. Be well. Have a wonderful week. Bye.

[18:57] The Army Blues.

We'll be right back.