

If 'Hell' Exists, What Does It Mean for God?

I don't like the Christian doctrine of Hell.

I write this with a full awareness that the truth depends absolutely not at all on my personal preferences and sensibilities. What is, *is*, regardless of what I think or how I feel about it.

There are, of course, different interpretations of Hell. But unquestionably the most common is that Hell is an irrevocable state of eternal conscious punishment for the "unrighteous" and—I want to focus especially on this—an *irreversible separation from God*.

I think it's significant that there is so much emphasis on what Hell means for humans, e.g., irreversible separation from God. After all, it stands to reason that, if Hell entails the human's separation from God, it also entails God's separation from that human. So, my question:

If there is a Hell, what does it mean for God?

Leaving aside those Christians who embrace double predestination (that God creates some people to be punished in Hell) alongside limited atonement (that Jesus's sacrifice was not for those people predestined for Hell), a great many Christians believe that God *desires* that all people be saved (and indeed, by some strange logic even those who embrace double predestination and limited atonement might make this claim). The Roman Catholic Church strongly embraces this position. God's plan is for the salvation of all.

But if such is the case, and Hell (understood as irreversible separation from God) is real, if even one person ends up in Hell, then God's desire will go *eternally* unfulfilled. *That*

is, God's plan for salvation is not a complete success. And God must bear this burden forever. It seems to me that, in such a view, if Hell is real then God will be eternally dissatisfied on account of this failure.

Of course, some might respond by arguing that God's satisfaction has nothing to do with humans. This claim strikes me as a rather strange one when it is coupled with claims like "God desires all to be saved" (let alone, "Jesus loves you and died to be with you"). If God isn't affected at all by who does or does not participate in eternal life, evangelistic efforts are strange. We should tell people, "God desires that *everyone*, including *you*, be saved... but you know... what evs." God is like that ironical person nonchalantly inviting people to the party but, to protect pride, says, "Come or don't come. It doesn't matter to me." That could make for an interesting pamphlet, I suppose: "God gave his only Son to die for your sins so that you can share eternal life with Him. But if you're not there, no biggie. God won't even notice."

The point I'm trying to make is this: If there is a Hell and it is an irreversible separation from God, that separation must be as real for God as it is for the "unrighteous". God will be the eternally unfilled, the one whose desires are forever unrealized.

In this case, Hell must be as eternal for God as it is for anyone else.

I like to think of this point by appropriating a quip often (and I think mistakenly) attributed to Blaise Pascal: "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God." Reverse that quote: If God desires that all be saved, then there is a creation-shaped whole in the heart of God that only the creation in its totality can fill. If any part, even a single human being, faces eternal separation from God, then God's heart will be eternally unfulfilled.

Given this claim, I'm left to wonder how, if Hell exists, anything like a "Heaven" of eternal and perfect bliss could. If there is a Hell, there is no "perfect bliss." There's only an acceptance of the failed divine intention—a still meaningful but perhaps ultimately lukewarm embrace of "good enough". A joy eternally mixed with disappointment and sorrow.

Sounds like fun.

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