

# ***How can a loving God send people to Hell?***

*(Suitable for use within a group over approximately one hour, or for an individual's personal Bible reading)*

**Pages 1-10: Understanding the Evidence and Strategy for Answering**

**Page 11: Questions for Discussion**

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## **PAGES 1-10: UNDERSTANDING THE EVIDENCE AND STRATEGY FOR ANSWERING**

### **1. IDENTIFY AND CLARIFY THE ORIGINS OF THE QUESTION**

- a. Existential (Heart)
  - How can God be angry, wrathful, punitive and also loving?
  - Love and anger are mutually exclusive.
  - We know good people who we don't think should be in Hell.
- b. Presuppositions (Worldview, Plausibility Structures)
  - A loving God shouldn't send people to Hell.
  - It is wrong for God to judge – what gives Him the right?
  - People have a right to believe what they want to believe – why should they go to Hell for that?

### **2. EMPATHISE WITH THE QUESTIONER, THE QUESTION, THE OBJECTION**

- a. Find common ground and empathise with their question – “I too wish that ...!”
- b. Show the Bible also contains their question (as it often does)!
- c. Agree that there is something outrageous about God – He is angry, will judge and will ultimately send people to Hell.
- d. Remind them the Bible also ‘feels’ what they feel – see Ezekiel 33:11, ‘I [the LORD] take no pleasure in the death of the wicked’.

### **3. DISMANTLE THEIR PRESUPPOSITIONS**

- a. Show that it works against their position as well – i.e., their question is a 2-edged sword.
- b. Show that their position is as much a faith-based position as yours (Tim Keller).
- c. Show that their position is largely a product of their culture (Western) (Tim Keller).

**Presupposition 1: “God is a God of Love – so he won't send people to Hell”**

#### ***Response 1***

*But how do you know that God is a God of love?*

*This is a very uniquely Christian concept of God.*

Note:

Buddhism → God is impersonal

Islam → God judges, and is merciful, but not loving and personal

Hinduism → gods might be spiteful

What makes people think God is Love? Can they look at life in the world today and say, ‘This proves that the God of the world is a God of love?’ Can they look at history and say, ‘This all shows that the God of history is a God of love?’ Can they look at the religious texts of the world and conclude that God is a God of love? By no means is ‘love’ the dominant, ruling attribute of God as understood in any of the major non-Christian faiths. The source of the idea that God is Love is the Bible itself. And the Bible tells us that the God of love is also a God of judgment who will put all things in the world to rights in the end.<sup>1</sup>

*You can't have it both ways ...*

- Believe that God is a God of love – a God who doesn't want to send people to Hell;
- And then not believe everything else that God says about himself in the Bible .

### **Response 2<sup>2</sup>**

*This is a very Western objection.*

Secular Westerners get upset with the Christian teaching about hell and that God will one day judge. But they find biblical teaching about forgiving enemies appealing.

No other culture has a problem with a God of judgment or the doctrine of hell.

Other cultures have the problem with a God who will forgive and who teaches us to forgive our enemies. For them this makes no sense and offends their deepest instincts about what is right.

Do you think our Western culture is better than other cultures?

Why should Western cultural sensibilities be the final court in which to judge whether Christianity is valid?

If Christianity is not the product of any one culture but is actually the transcultural truth of God then we would expect that it would contradict and offend every human culture at some point, because human cultures are ever-changing and imperfect.

*In the end, we need to let God speak to us on his own terms:*

- God who both judges and forgives.

### **Response 3**

*This is a very Western Objection.*

We want to believe in non-violence.

- Jesus calls on us to “turn the other cheek”.
- Paul tells us to “not repay evil with evil, but with love”.

But how is that possible?

- If your village has been burnt to the ground?
- If your children kidnapped into sex slavery?
- If your women and daughters are raped?

How can you respond to violence with non-violence? And how can you tell people like that not to respond with violence?

- It is easy for us to say in the safety of our suburbs, “they should all get along”.
- It is not so easy when it's you getting bullied by the big boys.
- It is not so easy when it's your daughter who's getting kidnapped and raped.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God. Belief in an age of scepticism* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2009) <sup>82</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Keller, *Reason For God*, <sup>72</sup>

Many (Western) people complain that those who believe in a God of judgment will not approach enemies with a desire to reconcile with them but it will lead to a more brutal society. But it is the lack of belief in a God of vengeance and judgment that nourishes violence. If I don't believe that there is a God who will eventually put all things right, I will take up the sword and be pulled into an endless cycle of vengeance.<sup>3</sup>

But because we know that at the end of the day, there must be a Judge who will one day judge ...

- The people who sell children into sex-slavery;
- The people who burn villages to the ground;
- The people who extort protection money from the little shop owner;

and that He will right all wrongs perfectly do I have the power to refrain from endless retaliation.

Otherwise how can one not repay wrong for wrong ...?

Example:

Clint Eastwood in *Grand Torino* could only break the cycle of violence because he knew that his act of non-violence was going to lead to the arrest and trial of the neighbourhood bullies

For us to love our enemies and respond in peace and non-violence, we need a God who also offers us His love, *but also* promises one day to right wrongs.

The doctrine of God's final judgment then is a necessary undergirding for human practices of love and peace-making.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Response 4**

*We want to believe that Jesus dying for us on a cross was a great act of love.*

*It's the great example of sacrifice and love.*

But how is this an act of love, unless Jesus is taking on "Hell" for us in our place?

Otherwise it would be...

- an unnecessary act
- a foolish act
- a grotesque act

Christianity believes in self-sacrificial love and believes that Jesus' death on the cross is the supreme example of this.

*But how can this be? Unless there really is a Hell that Jesus saves us from by dying for us in our place.*

*You can't have it both ways ...*

- want Jesus to be loving, by dying for us on a cross;
- but not give him anything to save us from.

#### **Response 5**

*Sometimes the loving thing to do is to right wrongs (e.g. stop the bullies). A loving God who is filled with anger at evil inflicted is not a contradiction.*

Anger is not the opposite of love. All loving people are sometimes filled with wrath; not despite of but because of their love. If you love a person and you see someone ruining them – even they themselves perhaps through an addiction – you would not just sit by indifferently but you get angry. Or as a parent we are often full of love and wrath and the same time. The greater our love for someone, the greater our potential for anger at what is destructive in their lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Keller, *Reason For God*, 74-75

<sup>4</sup> Keller, *Reason For God*, 76

The Bible says that God's wrath flows from his love in his creation. He is angry at evil, injustice, greed, and self-centredness because it is destroying its peace and integrity. And God will not tolerate anything or anyone responsible for destroying the creation and the people that he loves. If God were not angry at injustice and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship.<sup>5</sup>

“Let justice roll like rivers” – quoted by Martin Luther King.

“Grant me justice” – the widow to the corrupt judge.

To the bullied, oppressed, marginalised and poor, God promises justice.

→ That is his language of love!

*You can't have it both ways ...*

- A God who loves us enough to intervene and grant justice;
- And a God who doesn't send people to Hell.

## **Presupposition 2: “How can God send people to Hell for what they believe?”**

### **Response**

*One way the Bible explains Hell is that God gives us what we want.*

We all believe that ‘*personal freedom*’ and ‘*personal choice*’ is very important. In fact, secular ethicist Peter Singer denotes these as the ‘*foundation of modern society*’.

An authentic relationship is based a lot on freedom and choice.

And Hell in the end is God giving us what we choose, “hands us over” to our choices (Rom 1:24) (the choice to depart from being in relationship with Him).

As C.S. Lewis writes: “There are only two kinds of people – those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done’ or those to whom God in the end says, ‘Thy will be done’. All that are in Hell choose it.”<sup>6</sup>

The Bible pictures God:

- inviting everyone to Heaven (the Banquet, Matt 22:1-14)
- and everyone gets to choose whether or not they want to go

So this turns everything we believe about Hell on its head:

- Hell is not a place for bad people; and Heaven for good people
- Hell is for people who choose to not to be in a relationship with God and His goodness
- Heaven is for people who choose to be in a relationship with God

*You can't have it both ways ...*

- people having a choice to believe what they want to believe
- God letting everyone into Heaven when they've chosen not to live with Him

Hell is not a place where people are consigned because they were pretty good blokes, but they just didn't believe the right stuff. Hell is not filled with people who have already repented, only God isn't gentle enough or good enough to let them out. It's filled with people who, for all eternity, still want to be the centre of the universe and who persist in their God-defying rebellion.

Keller, Reason For God, ...; Timothy Keller, The Reason For God: Conversations on Faith and Life. Discussion Guide (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2010) <sup>80-81</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Keller, Reason For God, <sup>79</sup>

### **Presupposition 3: “Surely all good, decent people can find God and go to heaven”.<sup>8</sup>**

#### **Response**

*Behind that statement is that good people find God and bad people do not. But there are two problems with the premise.*

1. It holds out no hope for bad people, and lots of us know deep down that we have not lived up to even our own moral standards let alone God’s.
2. It misunderstands Christian’s beliefs. It assumes that Christians believe that they are going to heaven because they are good, and that is not true at all.

No one goes to heaven or hell by being compliant with Christian ethics – by being moral and good, or not. The essence of sin is loving anything more than the true God, and by essentially being our own ‘god’ – that is, trusting ultimately our own wisdom and ability. All of us – religious or irreligious moral and immoral – are trying to control our own lives rather than rely on God.

Our eternal destiny is dependent *not* on being good but on our response to the grace of God and to Christ’s death on a cross in our place, and on our willingness to admit that we are cut off from God because of the pride and self-centeredness of our hearts.

## **4. LEAD TO THE GOSPEL AND BIBLICAL EXPLANATION**

It is true that God desires all men to be saved (2 Pet 3:9), but this requires a choice: a choice to love Him and believe in Him. God can't force anyone to love Him. Forced love is a contradiction in terms. Love must be free: it is a free choice. So in spite of God's desire, some men do not choose to love Him (Matt 23:37). All who go to hell do so because of their free choice (John 3:18; 3:36; 5:39-40; 8:24; 12:48; Luke 10:16). They may not want to go to hell, but they do will it. They make the decision to reject God, even though they don't desire punishment. People don't go to hell because God sends them; they choose it and God respects their freedom.<sup>9</sup> People go to heaven because they love God and want to submit to him. People go to hell because they want to be away from God, because they do not want somebody telling them how to live their life. They want to live their own lives their way. Hell is separation from God. And therefore nobody goes to hell except people who want to go there.<sup>10</sup>

The complaint by people that hell is not compatible with God's love rests on a misunderstanding. It is an error to base man's salvation solely on God's attributes, such as His love or goodness. His love is not mandated by His nature; it is a choice. It is the actions by which God shows His love that are really at issue here. How has God chosen to demonstrate His love? “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).<sup>11</sup>

The God of the Bible is not like the primitive deities who demanded our blood for their wrath to be appeased. Rather, this is a God who becomes human and offers his own lifeblood in order to honour moral justice and merciful love so that some day he can destroy all evil without destroying us. Therefore the cross is not simply a

<sup>7</sup> See Lee Strobel, ‘Objection #6: A Loving God Would Never Torture People In Hell’, in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith. A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Questions to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2000) 269

<sup>8</sup> Keller, *Discussion Guide*, 85

<sup>9</sup> Norman L. Geisler, Ronald M. Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask. A Handbook on Christian Evidences* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2008) 68-69

<sup>10</sup> Keller, *Discussion Guide*,<sup>84</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Geisler/Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask*,<sup>252</sup>

lovely example of sacrificial love. Throwing your life away needlessly is not admirable – it is wrong. Jesus' death was only a good example if it was more than an example, if it was something absolutely necessary to rescue us. And it was. Why did Jesus have to die in order to forgive us? There was a debt to be paid – God himself paid it. There was a penalty to be borne – God himself bore it.<sup>12</sup> Jesus took on “hell” for us in our place. Unless you believe in hell and see what Jesus took for you, you will never know how much he loves you and how much he values you.<sup>13</sup>

Heaven is an offer of love which must be chosen and received.

### ***How can God be both loving and just?***

God's justice demands that sin be punished (Habakkuk 1:13), but his love compels him to save sinners. So by Christ's death for us his justice is satisfied and his love released. For “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). And sin against the eternal God demands eternal death (Rev 20:11-15). So when Christ died for our sins (see Romans 5:8), the Just suffered for the unjust (1 Pet 3:18) that he might bring us to God (2 Corinthians 5:21). Thus, there is no contradiction between absolute justice and unconditional love.<sup>14</sup>

## **5. SOME SUMMARIZING THOUGHTS**

### 1. Do you believe in hell?

Yes, I know, the idea of a God who is angry, and judges, and sends people to Hell is so unloving and barbaric.

BUT what if the reality is that the opposite is true?

Surely if there is no Hell, this would mean an unloving, barbaric God.

In fact, Hell is actually God's language of love to those who have been wronged in this life. It is God's way of saying, “I will right those wrongs”.

### 2. To those of us who believe in the importance of free choice, Hell is God's way of saying, “I'm not going to force myself upon you”.

### 3. To those of us who believe that Jesus was a loving person – demonstrated by the cross, Hell is what Jesus is saving us from.

I.e. Hell is the place where there is no God.

Jesus swaps places with us - He goes to the place where there is no God; so we can now be with God.

## **6. EXTRA QUESTIONS<sup>15</sup> ON “HOW CAN A LOVING GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?”**

### 1. “How can God send children to hell?”

#### ***Presupposition***

God can't be loving if children are subject to hell.

#### ***Response***

- In the afterlife our personalities reflect an adult situation, so we can say for sure that there will be no children in hell.
- And certainly there will be no one in hell who, if they had a chance to grow up to be adults, would have

<sup>12</sup> Keller, *Reason For God*, 192-93

<sup>13</sup> Keller, *Discussion Guide*, 87

<sup>14</sup> Geisler/Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask*, 31

<sup>15</sup> J.P. Moreland, ‘Objection #6: A Loving God Would Never Torture People In Hell’, in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith. A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Questions to Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2000) 248-266

chosen to go to heaven. No one will go to hell simply because all they needed was a little more time and they died prematurely.

- In the Bible children are universally viewed as figures of speech for salvation. In all of the texts where children are used in regard to the afterlife, they are used as pictures of being saved. There is no case where children are ever used as figures of damnation. For example, in Second Samuel, the child that King David conceived in an adulterous relationship with Bathsheba died, and David says in 2 Samuel 12:23: "I will go to him, but he will not return to me." David was expressing the truth that his child will be in heaven and that he would join him someday.

## 2. **"Why does everyone suffer the same in hell?"**

### ***Presupposition***

It is unfair if Adolf Hitler would bear the same eternal punishment as someone who lived a pretty good life by our standards, but who made the decision not to follow God.

### ***Response***

- The Bible teaches that there are different degrees of suffering and punishment. For example in Matthew 11:20-24 Jesus is saying that people will be sentenced in accordance with their deeds. Justice will be adjusted according to each individual. It is significant because it emphasises that God's justice is proportional. There is not exactly the same justice for everyone who refuses the mercy of God.

## 3. **"Why are people punished infinitely for finite crimes?"**

### ***Presupposition***

It is unfair that a finite life of sin warrants infinite punishment. Where is the justice in that? A loving God would make the punishment fit the crime by not making hell last forever.

### ***Response***

- Hell is not eternal conscious torture; it's eternal conscious suffering due to being sentenced away from God.
- We all know that the degree to which a person warrants punishment is not a function of the length of time it took to commit a crime. For example, a murder can take ten seconds to commit. The degree of someone's just punishment then is not a function of how long it took to commit the deed, rather it is a function of how severe the deed itself was.
- Most people, because they don't think about God, would say that the most heinous thing a person can do is hurting another person or harming animals. As horrible as these are, they pale in light of the worst thing a person can do, which is to mock and dishonour and refuse to love the person that we owe absolutely everything to, which is our Creator, God himself. To think that a person could go through their whole life constantly ignoring and mocking him by the way they choose to live without him, saying, "I couldn't care less about your values or your Son's death for me." That's the ultimate sin. And the only punishment worthy of that is the ultimate punishment, which is everlasting separation from God.

## 4. **"Why doesn't God just snuff people out?"**

### ***Presupposition***

If God annihilated people, i.e. snuffed them out of existence, instead of forcing them to be consciously separated from him forever, that would be more humane.

### ***Response***

- Everlasting separation from God is morally superior to annihilation. To keep people from experiencing the conscious separation from God forever would be treating people as a means to an end. What hell does is recognise that people have intrinsic value. If God loves intrinsic value then he has got to be a sustainer of persons, because that means he is a sustainer of intrinsic value. He refuses to snuff out a creature that was made in his own image. So in the final analysis, hell is the only morally legitimate option. God honours people's freedom of choice. In fact, God considers people so intrinsically valuable that he sent his Son to suffer and die so that they can, if they choose, spend eternity in heaven with him.
- Some theologians claim that annihilation is taught in the Bible. But most of the passages used were not intended by the author to speak on the question. The OT has clear passages on hell being everlasting (see Dan 12:2). If we are going to say that people are annihilated in hell, we should say they are annihilated in heaven. In the NT Jesus offers a clear teaching where he is intending to address the question of the eternal state of heaven and hell (Matt 25). Also, the flame language that is often cited is figurative and not a literal burning.

## 5. **“Why doesn't God give people a second chance?”**

### ***Presupposition***

God didn't do everything he could do before people died. If God was really loving, he would give people a second chance after death.

### ***Response***

- God does everything he can to give people a chance and there will be not a single person who just needed a little more time who would have responded to receive Christ. The Bible tells us God is delaying the return of Christ to the earth to give everybody all the time he possibly can so they will come to him (2 Pet 3:9).
- God is fair. He isn't trying to make it difficult for people. It is certainly possible that those who respond to the light from nature that they have received will either have the message of the gospel sent to them, or else it may be that God will judge them based on his knowledge of what they would have done had they had a chance to hear the gospel. The simple fact is God rewards those who seek him (Heb 11:6).
- If people saw the judgment seat of God after death, it would be so coercive that they would no longer have the power of free choice. Any 'decision' they made would not be a real genuine free choice; it would be totally coerced. People who would 'choose' in a second chance would not really be choosing God, his kingdom, or his ways – nor would they be suited for life in his kingdom. They would be making a prudent 'choice' to avoid judgment only.
- God maintains a delicate balance between keeping his existence sufficiently evident so people will know he is there and yet hiding his presence enough so that people who want to choose to ignore him can do it. This way, their choice of destiny is really free.

## 6. **“Isn't reincarnation more rational than hell?”**

### ***Presupposition***

Reincarnation is preferable than the concept of hell for a loving God as it gives people a fresh start (another chance) so that they might repent the next time around and he wouldn't have to send them to hell. It is just: if you do bad things, you pay the price; if you do good, you get a reward. Punishment is in proportion to how bad your karma is, not condemning someone to an infinite hell for a finite amount of sin.

## **Response**

- We need to remember that we don't decide what is true based on what we like or don't like.
- The evidence for reincarnation is weak. For example supposed memories of past lives can be explained better by other means. There can be psychological explanations – people seem to remember certain details, but they are vague or lucky guesses, or there could be demonic explanations for some of this activity. Actually, when you carefully examine the research, you find it fails to support reincarnation.<sup>16</sup>
- There is no reason to believe in reincarnation because there is an expert on this question, and he is Jesus. He is the only person in history who died, rose from the dead, and spoke authoritatively on the question. And Jesus says reincarnation is false, and that there is one death and after that comes the judgment. Jesus taught about the reality of hell. In fact, he discussed the subject more than anyone else in the Bible. It's ironic that many atheists embrace Jesus as having been a great teacher, and yet he's the one who had the most to say about hell.

## **Additional Response<sup>17</sup>**

- Reincarnation does not solve the problem of evil. Rather than solving the problem of unjust suffering, reincarnation simply says that it is just. No one is really innocent because the karma of one's past lives is causing suffering in this life. It seems morally repugnant and terribly unjust to mete out judgment on someone who does not even know what his crime was. If the suffering of each life depends on the sins of a former life, then how did it all begin? You can't 'backpedalling' forever to solve the problem of evil.
- Karma is not a moral prescription. It is a system of retribution only; it has no content that tells us what to do. It is enforcement, but not a moral law; it is a penal system without a legislature. In pantheism, there is no ultimate difference between good and evil, right and wrong. Expediency is the watchword of situational ethics. If something works, do it. Any moral act, even murder and cruelty, might be justified as being expedient. This relativism poses real problems for reincarnation. Relativism is an impossible position to hold in ethics. Unless something is absolutely right, nothing can be actually right; and if nothing is right (or wrong), then karma has no business punishing anyone for it.
- Reincarnation is ultimately antihumanitarian. There is no compassion for the poor, homeless, crippled and starving people. The law of karma has made it so. According to classic Hinduism, if someone were to help those people by easing their suffering, they would be working against the law of karma. People suffer to work off their karma debt, and if you helped them, then they would have to come back again and suffer even more to work off that debt.
- Reincarnation does not guarantee spiritual progress. Sometimes reincarnationists use evolution as a proof that we are constantly becoming better, higher, and more spiritually oriented life forms. The problem is that there is no evidence that such evolution has occurred in the biological or the spiritual realms. Are we progressing toward a new kind of being with higher God-consciousness? A glance at the morning news is sufficient to give an emphatically negative answer. Also, how can we be sure that we would ever make it to the final state? If we messed up so badly this time, what makes us think we will do better next time?

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<sup>16</sup> For further analysis of evidence concerning reincarnation, see: Gary R. Habermas and J.P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998) 237 – 53; and Norman L. Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> Geisler/Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask*, <sup>241-46</sup>

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# ***How can a loving God send people to Hell?***

*(Suitable for use within a group over approximately one hour, or for an individual's personal Bible reading)*

## **PAGE 11: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

Case Scenario: After a long morning of back to back lectures your class is finally given a reprieve – lunch has arrived. You and three class mates make arrangements to eat at the cafe across the road from the hospital. *En route* to the cafe you pass through the student common room and you notice one of your friends, who you are lunching with, viewing a new poster on the student notice board. The sign reads, “Learn Yoga – Learn the art of peace through understanding your body and the possibility of reincarnation”. At lunch, after a pause in conversation, your friend who knows you as a ‘religious person’ asks – seemingly out of the blue, “*Hey, I know Christians say that God loves you but how can you honestly say this if your God sends people to hell?*”

1. Consider the following:
  - a. What would be your initial reaction to your friend?
  - b. Ask yourself, what is the possible origin(s) of your friend's question?
  - c. Are there any follow-up questions you might ask your friend in order to clarify the question origin(s)?
  - d. Identify any possible presuppositions your friend may have in asking the question.
  - e. Think as a group of angles/ways you could challenge these presuppositions. Generate at least one response to each of these presuppositions.
  
2. Discuss in groups the following statements:
  - a. The Bible seems to contradict itself by claiming that God is a God of love and a God of wrath. How would you respond to such a statement?
  - b. Some Christians argue that nobody goes to hell unless they want to. Provide evidence to prove/disprove this statement.
  - c. It has been said, “When people get rid of the idea of judgment and hell to make God seem more loving, they end up making him less so.” Discuss.
  
3. Consider the scenario of a mother in the Congo. Last night her eight year old daughter was kidnapped by armed militia. It is likely she will be sold into prostitution.
  - a. How does an atheistic worldview encourage (or otherwise) this mother (and child) to NOT respond in vengeance and instead promote reconciliation?
  - b. How does a Christian worldview which points to God being a God of justice – a justice which can result in people being separated from Him and all that is good (hell) – encourage to NOT respond in vengeance and instead promote reconciliation?
  - c. How could you use this example in your discussion with your questioning friend?
  
4. Consider how the ability of humans to make real and free choices could lead you to explaining aspects of the gracious Gospel of Jesus to your friend?