

# Reasons to Believe

## Apologetics 101

### Small Group Discussion:

- ⇒ Read the following poem by John Godfrey Saxe about the blind men and the elephant and discuss what you think is the point of this fable:

1) *It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.*

2) *The First approach'd the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
"God bless me! but the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!"*

3) *The Second, feeling of the tusk,  
Cried, "Ho! what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a spear!"*

4) *The Third approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!"*

5) *The Fourth reached out his eager hand,  
And felt about the knee.  
"What most this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain," quoth he  
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!"*

6) *The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,  
Said: "E'en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most;  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a fan!"*

7) *The Sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Then, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!"*

8) *And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!*

9) *So oft in theologic wars,  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
And prate about an Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!*

- ⇒ What does it seem to get right? How does it miss the point?

## Six Questions to Wrestle With:

1) Why Jesus \_\_\_\_\_?

↳ This is the only \_\_\_\_\_ Jesus gave us:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” John 14:1–7

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is “‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’” (Psalm 118:22)

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:8–12

↳ This issue is not the \_\_\_\_\_ of the claim, but if it is \_\_\_\_\_

↳ Truth by nature is \_\_\_\_\_, and any truth claim is \_\_\_\_\_

It is no more narrow to claim that one religion is right than to claim that one way to think about religions (namely that all religions are equal) is right. We are all exclusive in our beliefs about religion, but in different ways.

Timothy Keller – *The Reason for God*

2) What about other \_\_\_\_\_?

↳ Religions are not the \_\_\_\_\_ : each has its own \_\_\_\_\_

↳ When these claims \_\_\_\_\_ either one is \_\_\_\_\_  
or both are \_\_\_\_\_

↳ Is there any other way that deals with our \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_?

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul – Romans 6: 23

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Hebrews 9:27–28

↳ If there are other ways, the Jesus' sacrifice was \_\_\_\_\_ :

- And he cannot even be an \_\_\_\_\_

3) What about \_\_\_\_\_?

↳ Most people believe they are \_\_\_\_\_

↳ The problem is not our \_\_\_\_\_, but our \_\_\_\_\_

- How far can you jump?

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.  
Paul – Romans 3:23–24

If all Jesus Christ did was give us the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule, he would have actually increased our frustration. Few of us can consistently keep these. Our problem has never been *not knowing what we should do*. Our problem, rather, has been *lacking the power*, the ability, to do what we know is helpful, moral, good, just, honest and kind.

Jesus Christ not only taught the Golden Rule; he came to help us keep it. This is essentially the major distinction between Christianity and other religions. He offers us his power to live as we should, gives us forgiveness as a free gift. He gives us his “new” life, his own righteousness. We can start over again. He does something for us that we cannot do for ourselves.

Paul Little – *Know Why You Believe*

4) What about someone who has never \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_?

↳ The innocent person who dies without hearing of Jesus goes to \_\_\_\_\_

↳ No one is condemned because of wrong \_\_\_\_\_,  
but because of wrong \_\_\_\_\_

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.  
Paul – Colossians 1:21–23

↳ God has not \_\_\_\_\_ Himself

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. Paul – Romans 1:18–20

↳ We are the ones who are \_\_\_\_\_ from God  
and God is the One who is \_\_\_\_\_ us

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Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frighteningly unfair that this new life should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him. But in the meantime, if you are worried about the people outside, the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself. Christians are Christ's body, the organism through which He works. Every addition to that body enables Him to do more. If you want to help those outside you must add your own little cell to the body of Christ who alone can help them. Cutting off a man's finger would be an odd way of getting him to do more work.  
C.S. Lewis – *Mere Christianity*

5) What about someone who is really \_\_\_\_\_?

↳ Sincerity does not determine \_\_\_\_\_

↳ If it is not joined with truth, it can be \_\_\_\_\_

6) What if I \_\_\_\_\_ God my own \_\_\_\_\_?

↳ What matters is what \_\_\_\_\_ wants

↳ True worship is a matter of \_\_\_\_\_, not \_\_\_\_\_

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

John 4:19–24

## An Important Implication for the Christ Follower:

- ☞ We do not follow Jesus because we always \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_,  
we follow Jesus because we \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him."

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."  
John 6:53–69

**HOMEWORK:**

➡ Read Handout: "The Reason For God" Chapter 5 by Timothy Keller

➡ Read Chapter 10 in "Know Why You Believe" by Paul Little



**Week 7**  
**Homework Reading Assignment**  
**for Reasons to Believe Essentials**

**Chapter 5**  
**of the book "The Reason for God -**  
***Belief in an Age of Skepticism*"**  
**by Timothy Keller**

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FIVE

HOW CAN A LOVING GOD SEND  
PEOPLE TO HELL?

"I doubt the existence of a judgmental God who requires blood to pacify his wrath," said a frowning Hartmut, a graduate student from Germany. "Someone had to die before the Christian God would pardon us. But why can't he just forgive? And then there's all those places in the Old Testament where God commands that people be slaughtered."

"All that is troubling, I agree," responded Josis, who worked for an art gallery in Soho. "But I have even more of a problem with the doctrine of hell. The only God that is believable to me is a God of love. The Bible's God is no more than a primitive deity who must be appeased with pain and suffering."

IN 2005, Rick Warren, mega-church pastor and author of the bestselling book *The Purpose Driven Life*, spoke to leading journalists at a forum sponsored by the Pew Foundation. Some present were troubled by the civil implications of one particular Christian belief, namely that God consigns some people to eternal punishment. One speaker said to Warren:

*How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?*

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*Maybe you can hold in your mind the contradiction, which is that Wendy [a non-Christian reporter present] is a full American citizen deserving of every protection that the most senior member of your church deserves. But when she dies, she's going to go to hell because she is not saved. The question is, do you think your followers—or the people who come to church, the people who read your books, the people you are talking to all over the world—are sophisticated enough to hold this contradiction in their minds? . . . 1*

Warren responded that his church saw no contradiction between these things, but many of the journalists were unconvinced. They suggested that any Christian who thinks that there are people bound for hell must perceive such people as unequal in dignity and worth. In this, they reflected the deep misgivings of many today about the Christian concept of a God who judges people and sends them to hell. That belief, they contend, leads to exclusion, abuse, division, and even violence.

In our culture, divine judgment is one of Christianity's most offensive doctrines. As a minister and preacher I often find myself speaking on Biblical texts that teach the wrath of God, the final judgment, and the doctrine of hell. For many years I always held a question-and-answer session immediately after each service. There I was regularly grilled by New Yorkers about these teachings. I found their deep distress over this aspect of historic Christian faith perfectly understandable. Although this objection to hell and judgment may seem to be more of a feeling of revulsion than a doubt, we still can find a number of very specific beliefs hidden inside it. Let's look at each one in turn.

## A God of Judgment Simply Can't Exist

Robert Bellah's influential work *Habits of the Heart* speaks of the "expressive individualism" that dominates American culture. In his book Bellah notes that 80 percent of Americans agree with the statement "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church or synagogue."<sup>2</sup> He concludes that the most fundamental belief in American culture is that moral truth is relative to individual consciousness. Our culture, therefore, has no problem with a God of love who supports us no matter how we live. It does, however, object strongly to the idea of a God who punishes people for their sincerely held beliefs, even if they are mistaken. This objection, however, has a cultural history to it.

In C. S. Lewis's classic *The Abolition of Man*, he outlines what he considers to be a major difference between the ancient and the modern views of reality. Lewis attacks our smug belief that ancient people believed in magic and later modern science came along and supplanted it. As an expert in the medieval age and how it gave way to modernity, Lewis knew that there had been very little magic in the Middle Ages, that the high noon of magic was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at the very time that modern science was developing. The same cause, he contended, gave rise to them both.

*The serious magical endeavor and the serious scientific endeavor are twins: one was sickly and died, the other was strong and thrived. But they are twins. They were born of the same impulse.<sup>3</sup>*

Lewis describes that impulse—a new approach to moral and spiritual reality.

*There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the "wisdom" of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to connect the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice of this technique, are ready to do things hitherto regarded as disgusting and impious. . . .<sup>4</sup>*

In ancient times it was understood that there was a transcendent moral order outside the self, built in to the fabric of the universe. If you violated that metaphysical order there were consequences just as severe as if you violated physical reality by placing your hand in a fire. The path of wisdom was to learn to live in conformity with this unyielding reality. That wisdom rested largely in developing qualities of character, such as humility, compassion, courage, discretion, and loyalty.

Modernity reversed this. Ultimate reality was seen not so much as a supernatural order but as the natural world, and that was malleable. Instead of trying to shape our desires to fit reality, we now seek to control and shape reality to fit our desires. The ancients looked at an anxious person and prescribed spiritual character change. Modernity talks instead about stress-management techniques.

Lewis knew that readers might think he was against the scientific method as such, but he protested that he was not. He wanted us to realize, however, that the modernity was born in "dreams of power." Writing during World War II, Lewis was standing in the midst of some of the bitterest fruit of the modern spirit. Lewis's friend J. R. R. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* about

the consequences of seeking power and control rather than wisdom and glad enjoyment of the "givenness" of God's creation.<sup>5</sup>

The spirit of modernity, then, gave us the responsibility to determine right or wrong. Our new confidence that we can control the physical environment has spilled over so we now think we can reshape the metaphysical realm as well. It seems to our minds unfair, therefore, that we should determine that it is all right to have sex outside of marriage and later discover that there is a God who is going to punish us for that. We believe so deeply in our personal rights in this realm that the very idea of a divine Judgment Day seems impossible. However, as Lewis shows us, this belief is tied to a quest for control and power that has had terrible consequences in recent world history. Not all the human race today has accepted modernity's view of things. Why should we act as if it is inescapable?

In one of my after-service discussions a woman told me that the very idea of a judging God was offensive. I said, "Why aren't you offended by the idea of a forgiving God?" She looked puzzled. I continued, "I respectfully urge you to consider your cultural location when you find the Christian teaching about hell offensive." I went on to point out that secular Westerners get upset by the Christian doctrines of hell, but they find Biblical teaching about turning the other cheek and forgiving enemies appealing. I then asked her to consider how someone from a very different culture sees Christianity. In traditional societies the teaching about "turning the other cheek" makes absolutely no sense. It offends people's deepest instincts about what is right. For them the doctrine of a God of judgment, however, is no problem at all. That society is repulsed by aspects of Christianity that Western people enjoy, and are attracted by the aspects that secular Westerners can't stand.

Why, I concluded, should Western cultural sensibilities be the

final court in which to judge whether Christianity is valid? I asked the woman gently whether she thought her culture superior to non-Western ones. She immediately answered "no." "Well then," I asked, "why should your culture's objections to Christianity trump theirs?"

For the sake of argument, let's imagine that Christianity is not the product of any one culture but is actually the transcendental truth of God. If that were the case we would expect that it would contradict and offend every human culture at some point, because human cultures are ever-changing and imperfect. If Christianity were the truth it would have to be offending and correcting your thinking at some place. Maybe this is the place, the Christian doctrine of divine judgment.

### A God of Judgment Can't Be a God of Love

In Christianity God is both a God of love and of justice. Many people struggle with this. They believe that a loving God can't be a judging God. Like most other Christian ministers in our society, I have been asked literally thousands of times, "How can a God of love be also a God filled with wrath and anger? If he is loving and perfect, he should forgive and accept everyone. He shouldn't get angry?"

I always start my response by pointing out that all loving persons are sometimes filled with wrath, not just despite of but because of their love. If you love a person and you see someone ruining them—even they themselves—you get angry. As Becky Pipper puts it in her book *Hope Has Its Reasons*:

*Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign*

*tolerance as we might toward strangers? Far from it. . . . Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference. . . . God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer. . . which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.<sup>6</sup>*

The Bible says that God's wrath flows from his love and delight in his creation. He is angry at evil and injustice because it is destroying its peace and integrity.

The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made. . . .

The Lord watches over those who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

(Psalms 145:17-20)

It is at this point that many people complain that those who believe in a God of judgment will not approach enemies with a desire to reconcile with them. If you believe in a God who smites evildoers, you may think it perfectly justified to do some of the smiting yourself. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croatian who has seen the violence in the Balkans, does not see the doctrine of God's judgment that way. He writes:

*If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence—that God would not be worthy of worship. . . . The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God. . . . My thesis is that the practice of*

*non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many. . . in the West. . . . [But] it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results from the belief in] God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. . . [with] other pleasant capitivites of the liberal mind.<sup>7</sup>*

In this fascinating passage Volf reasons that it is the lack of belief in a God of vengeance that “secretly nourishes violence.”<sup>8</sup> The human impulse to make perpetrators of violence pay for their crimes is almost an overwhelming one. It cannot possibly be overcome with platitudes like “Now don’t you see that violence won’t solve anything?” If you have seen your home burned down and your relatives killed and raped, such talk is laughable—and it shows no real concern for justice. Yet victims of violence are drawn to go far beyond justice into the vengeance that says, “You put out one of my eyes, so I will put out both of yours.” They are pulled inexorably into an endless cycle of vengeance, of strikes and counterstrikes nurtured and justified by the memory of terrible wrongs.

Can our passion for justice be honored in a way that does not nurture our desire for blood vengeance? Volf says the best resource for this is belief in the concept of God’s divine justice. If I don’t believe that there is a God who will eventually put all things right, I will take up the sword and will be sucked into the endless vortex of retaliation. Only if I am sure that there’s a God who will right all wrongs and settle all accounts perfectly do I have the power to refrain.

Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet, wrote the remarkable essay “The Discreet Charms of Nihilism.” In it

he remembers how Marx had called religion “the opiate of the people” because the promise of an afterlife (Marx said) led the poor and the working class to put up with unjust social conditions. But, Milosz continued:

*And now we are witnessing a transformation. A true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death—the huge solace of thinking that our betrayals, greed, cowardice, murders are not going to be judged. . . . [but] all religions recognize that our deeds are imperishable?*

Many people complain that belief in a God of judgment will lead to a more brutal society. Milosz had personally seen, in both Nazism and Communism, that a loss of belief in a God of judgment can lead to brutality. If we are free to shape life and morals any way we choose without ultimate accountability, it can lead to violence. Volf and Milosz argue that the doctrine of God’s final judgment is a necessary undergirding for human practices of love and peacemaking.

### A Loving God Would Not Allow Hell

“Ah,” you may say, “fighting evil and injustice in the world is one thing, but sending people to hell is another. The Bible speaks of eternal punishment. How does that fit in with the love of God? I cannot reconcile even the *idea* of hell with a loving God.” How do we address this understandable recoiling?

Modern people inevitably think that hell works like this: God gives us time, but if we haven’t made the right choices by the end of our lives, he casts our souls into hell for all eternity. As the poor souls fall through space, they cry out for mercy, but God

says “Too late! You had your chance! Now you will suffer!” This caricature misunderstands the very nature of evil. The Biblical picture is that sin separates us from the presence of God, which is the source of all joy and indeed of all love, wisdom, or good things of any sort. Since we were originally created for God’s immediate presence, only before his face will we thrive, flourish, and achieve our highest potential. If we were to lose his presence totally, that would be hell—the loss of our capability for giving or receiving love or joy.

A common image of hell in the Bible is that of fire.<sup>10</sup> Fire disintegrates. Even in this life we can see the kind of soul disintegration that self-centeredness creates. We know how selfishness and self-absorption leads to piercing bitterness, nauseating envy, paralyzing anxiety, paranoid thoughts, and the mental denials and distortions that accompany them. Now ask the question: “What if when we die we don’t end, but spiritually our life extends on into eternity?” Hell, then, is the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever.

Jesus’s parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Luke 16 supports the view of hell we are presenting here. Lazarus is a poor man who begs at the gate of a cruel rich man. They both die and Lazarus goes to heaven while the rich man goes to hell. There he looks up and sees Lazarus in heaven “in Abraham’s bosom”:

So he called to him, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.” But Abraham replied, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between

us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us." He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:24-31).

What is astonishing is that though their statuses have now been reversed, the rich man seems to be blind to what has happened. He still expects Lazarus to be his servant and treats him as his water boy. He does not ask to get out of hell, yet strongly implies that God never gave him and his family enough information about the afterlife. Commentators have noted the astonishing amount of denial, blame-shifting, and spiritual blindness in this soul in hell. They have also noted that the rich man, unlike Lazarus, is never given a personal name. He is only called a "Rich Man," strongly hinting that since he had built his identity on his wealth rather than on God, once he lost his wealth he lost any sense of a self.

In short, hell is simply one's freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity. We see this process "writ small" in additions to drugs, alcohol, gambling, and pornography. First, there is disintegration, because as time goes on you need more and more of the addictive substance to get an equal kick, which leads to less and less satisfaction. Second, there is the isola-

tion, as increasingly you blame others and circumstances in order to justify your behavior. "No one understands! Everyone is against me!" is muttered in greater and greater self-pity and self-absorption. When we build our lives on anything but God, that thing—though a good thing—becomes an enslaving addiction, something we *have* to have to be happy. Personal disintegration happens on a broader scale. In eternity, this disintegration goes on forever. There is increasing isolation, denial, delusion, and self-absorption. When you lose all humility you are out of touch with reality. No one ever asks to leave hell. The very idea of heaven seems to them a sham.

In his fantasy *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis describes a busload of people from hell who come to the outskirts of heaven. There they are urged to leave behind the sins that have trapped them in hell—but they refuse. Lewis's descriptions of these people are striking because we recognize in them the self-delusion and self-absorption that are "writ small" in our own addictions.<sup>11</sup>

*Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others . . . but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God "sending us" to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.<sup>12</sup>*

The people in hell are miserable, but Lewis shows us why. We see raging like unchecked flames their pride, their paranoia, their self-pity, their certainty that everyone else is wrong, that everyone

else is an idiot! All their humility is gone, and thus so is their sanity. They are utterly, finally locked in a prison of their own self-centeredness, and their pride progressively expands into a bigger and bigger mushroom cloud. They continue to go to pieces forever, blaming everyone but themselves. Hell is that, writ large.

That is why it is a travesty to picture God casting people into a pit who are crying "I'm sorry! Let me out!" The people on the bus from hell in Lewis's parable would rather have their "freedom," as they define it, than salvation. Their delusion is that, if they glorified God, they would somehow lose power and freedom, but in a supreme and tragic irony, their choice has ruined their own potential for greatness. Hell is, as Lewis says, "the greatest monument to human freedom." As Romans 1:24 says, God "gave them up to . . . their desires." All God does in the end with people is give them what they most want, including freedom from himself. What could be more fair than that? Lewis writes:

*There are only two kinds of people—those who say "Thy will be done" to God or those to whom God in the end says, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell choose it. Without that self-choice it wouldn't be Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it.<sup>13</sup>*

## Hell and the Equality of People

Let's return to the doubtful journalists at the Pew Forum with Rick Warren. They were concerned that any Christian who believes that some people are bound for hell must necessarily perceive such people to be unequal, less deserving of civil rights. This concern misunderstands what the Bible teaches about the nature of salvation and damnation.

As C. S. Lewis points out, the journey to hell is a process, which can begin with something as apparently innocuous as a grumbling mood. No one can look out at a congregation on a Sunday morning, a crowd at Yankee Stadium, or the audience at the Metropolitan Opera, and be sure of who is ultimately going to arrive in heaven or hell. Today's outspoken believer may be tomorrow's apostate, and today's outspoken unbeliever may be tomorrow's convert. We must not make settled, final decisions about anyone's spiritual state or fate.

After speaking about the Christian faith to a gathering in a Manhattan town house, I was approached by two women who had heard my presentation. They both told me that believing in eternal judgment made me a very narrow person. I asked them, "You think I'm wrong about these religious questions, and I think you are wrong. Why doesn't that make you as narrow as me?" One woman retorted, "That's different. You think we are eternally lost! We don't think you are. That makes you more narrow than us." I didn't agree, and here is what I proposed to them.

Both the Christian and the secular person believe that self-centeredness and cruelty have very harmful consequences. Because Christians believe souls don't die, they also believe that moral and spiritual errors affect the soul forever. Liberal, secular persons also believe that there are terrible moral and spiritual errors, like exploitation and oppression. But since they don't believe in an afterlife, they don't think the consequences of wrongdoing go on into eternity. Because Christians think wrongdoing has infinitely more long-term consequences than secular people do, does that mean they are somehow narrower?

Imagine two people arguing over the nature of a cookie. Jack thinks the cookie is poison, and Jill thinks it is not. Jack thinks



Jill's mistaken view of the cookie will send her to the hospital or worse. Jill thinks Jack's mistaken view of the cookie will keep him from having a fine dessert. Is Jack more narrow-minded than Jill just because he thinks the consequences of her mistake are more dire? I don't believe anyone would think so. Christians, therefore, aren't more narrow because they think wrong thinking and behavior have eternal effects.

### "I Believe in a God of Love"

During my college years and my early twenties I, like so many others, questioned the Christian faith I was raised in. There were subjective reasons for my doubts. Christianity just didn't seem real to me experientially. I had not developed a prayer life and had never experienced God personally. There were also intellectual problems I was having with Christianity, all of which I am addressing elsewhere in this book. There was one, however, I will talk about here.

I was troubled by those Christians who stressed hellfire and damnation. Like so many of my generation I believed that, if there was a core to all religions, it was a loving God. I wanted to believe in a God of love who accepted people regardless of their beliefs and practices. I began to take courses in the other major religions of the world—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, and Judaism. I have profited to this day from those studies. However, my explorations in other faiths proved me wrong on this particular point about the centrality of a loving God.

I found no other religious text outside of the Bible that said God created the world out of love and delight. Most ancient pagan religions believed the world was created through struggles

and violent battles between opposing gods and supernatural forces. I turned to look more closely at Buddhism, the religion I liked best at the time. However, despite its great emphasis on selflessness and detached service to others, Buddhism did not believe in a personal God at all, and love is the action of a person.

Later on, after I became a minister, I was a speaker and panelist for several years in a monthly discussion program in Philadelphia between a Christian church and a mosque. Each month a speaker from the church and a speaker from the mosque would give a Biblical and Qur'anic perspective on a topic. When we covered the topic of God's love, it was striking how different our conceptions were. I was told repeatedly by Muslim speakers that God was indeed loving in the sense of being merciful and kind to us. But when Christians spoke of the Lord as our spouse, of knowing God intimately and personally, and of having powerful effusions of his love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, our Muslim friends balked. They told us that it was disrespectful, in their view, to speak of anyone knowing God personally.

Today many of the skeptics I talk to say, as I once did, they can't believe in the God of the Bible, who punishes and judges people, because they "believe in a God of Love." I now ask, what makes them 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 that the dominant, ruling attribute of God as understood in any of the major faiths. I must conclude that 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.

The belief in a God of pure love—who accepts everyone and judges no one—is a powerful act of faith. Not only is there no evidence for it in the natural order, but there is almost no historical, religious textual support for it outside of Christianity. The more one looks at it, the less justified it appears.