

How can a loving God send people to Hell?

To understand the answer to this question we need to understand the seriousness of sin, and the reality of the sinfulness of every human being. I want to do this by talking about the reality of sin that I've seen in the world, and then by turning to scripture to show how God reacts to this sin. I also think the best way for me to approach this issue is to focus largely on how I deserve to go to Hell. It seems to me that unless I talk about this teaching as something that applies to me, I just don't have the right to talk about something that's so difficult and painful.

I know of people who by every outside standard appear to be ordinary, respectable, and upstanding people who have committed adultery or aborted their children or stolen tremendous amounts of money from their spouses. I know of numerous date rape situations that have been acts committed by students at some of the best universities in the Midwest. (As I write about these things I have specific situations and people in mind, but I have kept things deliberately vague in order to protect the privacy of those who committed these acts or been the victims of them). Awful things have been done by "ordinary" people. There are a lot of these situations I can think of, but things this dramatic are of course somewhat unusual. But I'd also argue they're only the more dramatic examples of the sinfulness that we all share in.

We know about the worst sins of some of the most important people in church history. In the Old Testament we here about King David lusting after a married woman named Bathsheba, engaging in an adulterous affair with her, try to cover up for his

actions, and when his initial efforts failed arranged for her husband to be killed to protect himself.

Before he joined the Catholic Church St. Augustine, who after his conversion probably became the greatest post-biblical theologian in church history, had a long time lover with whom he had an illegitimate child. Fr. John Corapi, a very well known current Catholic speaker, was a former real estate millionaire who became a homeless cocaine addict before returning to the Catholicism he had been raised in. I can safely say my own sins were never as dramatic of those of King David, St. Augustine, or Fr. Corapi. But I can say, and I anyone who seriously and honestly examines their own life can say the same thing, that my struggles with sin were and are serious and real. In the context of this answer I am writing I don't think it's the time or place for me to go too much into the sins I have committed, but I think it is appropriate for me to talk about the sins I might have committed.

Until the end of my junior year of high school I did not take anything having to do with God, the bible, Church, or prayer at all seriously. If the role of Jesus Christ in my life hadn't completely changed that year I would have ended up viewing morality as what was easiest, what benefited me the most, and what I could get away with.

Well, I went to college at Iowa State University, where I ran cross country and track. So I was a student athlete at a public university with 26,000 students. There weren't a lot of limits on the amount of trouble I could have gotten into during my college years. Left to my own devices, apart from a commitment to follow Jesus Christ, I would have had no real reason for not getting into most of the trouble that presented itself to me. If I had gone to Iowa State as the person I naturally am, acting on the impulses I

naturally have things would not have been pretty. (I should point out not that I'm certainly not saying my college years ended up being perfect, or that sin was a problem in college but I'm perfect now.) By nature, following my own instincts, I would have done pretty much every awful thing I saw going on around me, and I would have done them as often as the opportunity presented itself. Any goodness in me wasn't of my own doing, it was because when I was a junior in high school God had begun the process of really changing who I was. If I'd stayed who I was the idea of me spending eternity united to an all-perfect God would have been ridiculous. If I'd done what I was naturally inclined to do, and not what by his grace God has inclined me more and more to do, the idea that I would ever go to Heaven would be laughable. When I look at who I am by nature, the sins I have committed (and will commit), the sins I would have committed had God not started to change me before I got the chance to commit them, and when I look at my years of indifference to God it's clear I don't deserve Heaven. It's clear that I deserve Hell.

By most standards I'm better than a whole lot of people, and by most standards I'm worse than a whole lot of people. The differences in the degrees of our sinfulness matters much less than the reality of our common sinfulness before God. The bible tells us that "all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and that "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). So we have all sinned enough to deserve to be cut off from God, the context of the letter to the Romans makes it clear the death referred to is the eternal death of Hell, and we are offered eternal life only as a gift from Jesus Christ that we could never deserve.

When we realize this, the questions we ask change. Our primary concern goes from being how can a loving God can send anyone to Hell, to asking how can a just and fair God can allow anyone into Heaven.

But he does.

We're not good enough.

We don't deserve it.

But somehow God loves us.

Somehow people are allowed into Heaven.

1 John 4:10 tells us that "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins." (Expiation is a term that refers to the price for sin being paid by having a sacrifice offered).¹ God loved us first. Jesus was sent to die for our sins before we had shown any love for God.

Romans 5:8 says that "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Jesus died for us, while we were sinners fighting against him.

In Luke 23:43 Jesus tells one of the thieves being crucified next to him that "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Someone who had probably spent his entire life trapped in sin and crime is allowed to enter into Heaven at the very last moment when he repents and calls upon Christ's mercy.

¹ <http://www.studydrive.org/dic/hbd/view.cgi?number=T1978>

This is what Jesus did to allow us into Heaven. This is how much he wants us to make it in.

If we end up in Hell, it's our fault. If we end up in Hell it's because we've rejected this.

People who've done all sorts of stuff will make it into Heaven.

Adulterers, murderers, people who've had sex outside of marriage, people who've been active homosexuals, rapists, and ordinary people who've failed to love others as they should and who've hardened their hearts against God.

If we're sorry any sin; quiet sins and dramatic sins, ordinary sins and bizarre sins, public sins and hidden sins, can be forgiven.

Where we go wrong is when we insist that what we did is OK, that we had the right to commit that sin, that we don't need forgiveness.

If we do that then we're in trouble.

What puts us in the greatest danger of Hell is to say that we don't need forgiveness.

People are in Hell because they're refused to admit they're sinners and need God's forgiveness.

So when it comes to the question of Hell the answer is that every single one us needs to seek Christ's forgiveness, mercy, and love.