Hell, Heaven…and a God of Love" part one

"The New is Better Than You Think". Psalm 22:28-30

1. A few weeks ago, I was back up in the State of Ohio teaching a day long class on Death and Dying to those who want to become Nursing or Assisted Living Home administrators. You might think it odd to have to teach a class on something that comes naturally to all of us and has since time began but…

2. Death is intensely personal. All of us, no matter what faith we have or even if we have no faith, wonder what is going to happen next. Sincere, faith-filled Christians have confessed their doubts and fears in their last days. I always assure them that that is normal and that God never holds such things against us.

3. We have a fascination with the afterlife because we dread death, looking at it as the ending of all endings. Any assurance that we will be conscious and happy after death gets our attention. But then, just as we begin to hear the Gospel, the Good News, something else happens…we start hearing about hell.

4. In some ways, we want there to be a hell for the bad people, those who have hurt others, ruined lives, destroyed the peace of an entire nation or continent. But none of us want there to be a hell for us, even if we boastfully say we are going there (because that's where our friends are or because we are going to take it over…silly, human boasts).

5. I always struggled with the concept of our faith in Christ being Good News because it always seemed I could never catch up with the requirements for heaven. The rules seemed endless and we were told time and time again that "only a few will find it."

6. And then there was hell. We were told that everyone who did not go to our church was going there, though we denied it when asked and replied with a weak "we are not the judge. God is, but this is what He requires of us" non-denial denial.

7. Think about that for a moment. Does the Bible teach that death is the last chance we get? Does the Bible say that God's love only reaches

a tiny percentage of the people He made in His own image and likeness? Would a God of love, who defines Himself AS love, be content with a plan that only had 1% effect?

8. Think of the pharmaceutical commercials that clog our television and streaming feeds. After telling you the benefits of their medications, they will read off a list of side effects, some of them very serious and deadly. They are telling us that the majority of people will benefit from the drug but some will be damaged by it. Would they launch a drug with a 99% fail rate and rejoice with a 1% success rate? Would they describe their pushing that medication as an act of love?

9. These things always troubled me so I decided to have a look at what the earliest Christians believed, what the Bible really said, and what God has shown us of Himself in scripture and nature. The result is this series of lessons. We will have to take it slowly, one step at a time as we did with the eleven part series we just did on how we read and use scripture.

10. Let's start with this: the Good News is better than anything you could have imagined. The Bible is soaked with this information but we often skip right past it thinking that the love of God is limited to this life, limited to just those who do the right things the right way for the right reason, or limited to just the elect, just the tiny minority chosen by God for salvation before their births.

11. What does the Bible say about the love and grace of God? Let's fill our minds with this.

    a. 1st John 4:8: Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. [God does not love, He IS love. Love is not what motivates God in some instances and then not at others]

    b. 1st Cor. 13:3-4-8: Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. [rewrite, in your own handwriting, 1st Cor. 13 and substitute "God" for "love." See what happens when you do]

c. Matthew 5:43-45: You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” [If you want to look like God, like one of His children, you must love your enemies]

d. Acts 17:27-29: God is not far from any of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, “we are His offspring.” Therefore, since we are God’s offspring we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human design and skill. [The people of Athens were already children of God. They didn’t know they were loved, that they had a loving Father]

e. Genesis 12:3: [spoken by God to Abraham] …all peoples of the earth will be blessed through you. [The people of God are a conduit of grace, not a dead end or cul-de-sac. God’s grace does not end with us]

f. John 12:32: And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. [the very: draw is an intentional act with effort, such as the apostles pulling in the net full of fish or Peter drawing his sword]

g. Luke 15:4-7: Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” [Not a single sheep is expendable. The lost sheep was “apollumi” or “destroyed” until it was brought back to the fold. It was destroyed when it was lost and undestroyed when it was returned. The parables of the lost son and the lost coin use the same terminology. Being “destroyed” or the lostness or deadness of apollumi is not permanent when God is in the picture. And He is always in the picture.]

h. 1st Timothy 2:3-4: God our savior…desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

i. 2 Peter 3:9: The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

j. Romans 5:18: Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. [What happened to mankind through Adam was inclusive – ALL were harmed. What happened to mankind through Christ was also inclusive – life for ALL]

k. 2 Corinthians 5:14: For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. [Nobody had to have faith in Adam or even to have ever heard his name or story to have been affected by his sin. The same with Christ – His love reaches all]

l. 1st John 2:2: He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

m. 1st Timothy 2:5-6: For there is on God and mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all people.

n. 2 Corinthians 5:19: God was reconciling the world unto Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. [At this point you may be wondering "what about justice? What about hell?" Patience, we will get to every single passage that deals with that in detail]

o. 1st Corinthians 15:28: When all things are subjected to him, then the Son will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

p. Ephesians 1:9-10: He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to His good pleasure that He set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth. [ALL things]

q. Psalm 22:28-30: All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before Him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and He rules over the nations. All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before Him – those who cannot keep themselves alive.

r. Romans 14:11: As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to the Lord.

s. Colossians 1:16-20: for in Him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through Him and for Him. He Himself is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might come to have first place in everything. For in Him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him God was pleased to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross. [Peace is not made by our perfection but by His will and grace]

t. 1st John 3:8: The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.

u. Acts 3:21: heaven must receive Him until the times comes for God to restore everything, as He promised long ago through His holy prophets.

12. Our Sovereign God has made it clear: He will save us through Christ and restore all things, and all people, to Himself. But…what about hell? What about judgment?

13. We will look at every passage that is translated hell, or was in older versions before better understanding of the passages moved translators to make more accurate translations. People get very upset when they think that you might be taking away the hell they want their enemies and the bad guys to go to! So…patience. We have just started on this journey. I promise you, Good News waits for you.