Hell, Heaven…and a God of Love part 2

Where Did the Love Go?

1. One of my favorite shows was a long gone show called Mythbusters. It took popular ideas or stories and put them to the test to see if what they said was true or not. For years, we've been doing somewhat the same thing on Monday Mornings for over three years, asking "Who Told You That?" or "Who Told You About?"

2. Two years ago, I did a 6 part series on Monday Mornings about hell. It got thousands of views and still is racking up views today. I long ago lost count of the emails, calls and conversations thanking me for that series. Still, I thought it was time to discuss the massive elephant in the room….Christianity has a hell problem.

3. As we saw last week, there are many passages in the Old and New Testaments that plainly state that God plans to save all people and that Jesus's sacrifice covers all people…but what about all those passages mentioning hell and destruction?

4. The teaching most of us have grown up with goes something like this: God created the world and then sin entered it. Now we are all sinners and our only chance of salvation is Jesus. At this point, we are agreed – emphatically so.

5. Then, different churches have different extensions to our story but it generally goes something like "once you have Jesus, you truly only have Jesus if you worship correctly, understand and agree to the core doctrines our church has gathered and determined are necessary, and stay in fellowship with our church. If you do not, or if you have never come to Christ, you will go to hell where you will burn for eternity without end."

6. Now, imagine yourself a person who has never heard the name of Jesus, much less the Gospel. Then a missionary comes and tells you about a God of love who loved you so much He sent His One and Only Son to die for you so that you could live with Him forever in a glorious, wonderful place called heaven. All good so far. Then, the

missionary warns you that if you do not listen to what he/she says and if you do not make all the changes in your life that he requires, that God of love will send you to a torture pit where you will burn for billions and billions of years…and forever more.

7. This has stopped a lot of mission activity in its tracks and has stopped a lot of conversations Christians have had in their schools, around their dinner tables, at work, and online. How can a God of love, who defines Himself AS love, send 99% of the people who have ever lived, people who God says He made in His image and also says He loves more deeply than any human father ever could, to hell for the crime of being born in a place where the Name of Jesus has not reached or choosing the wrong Christian denomination?

8. What kind of plan is that? As we saw last week, there are many passages in scripture that say that all will be saved but there are also passages which we've all read or heard about that say there is a place of punishment. How do we deal with this?

9. Wait…there's more. Some say that only those who could not possibly have heard of Jesus will get a second chance. Those who have heard and rejected Him or who didn't get the Bible right will be punished. Does that make sense? Would that not stop all evangelism? If you landed on an island of 100 people who had never heard of Jesus, it seems that the worst thing you could do is bring up His Name for it is certain that not all of them would accept Jesus. So, teaching them might save a handful and condemn the rest.

10. Let's trace this river to its source. We will look at every passage that mentions anything about punishment, hell, or destruction and examine the words used and their contexts. That will not be as difficult as you might think because there are fewer of them than you might imagine. In fact, some writers of the NT such as Paul and John never mention any of the four words used to indicate what happens to those who "know not God and obey not His commands."

11. There are three views of hell (four, if you include "no hell"). First, the traditional view that says that after death, all hope is lost and the burning and pain lasts forever. Second, that those who do not belong to Jesus at death cease to be, they are annihilated. As eternal

life is a gift of God, they do not receive the gift and are, therefore, gone forever. Third, that God eventually saves all. The third view includes a time of refining, reforming, and even punishment but more on that later.

12. What might surprise you to hear is that the predominant view of the early church was that everyone would be saved eventually, universal reconciliation. However, there was no unanimity. There were six major centers of Christianity for the first several centuries of the church. Four of them, Alexandria, Caesarea, Antioch and Eastern Syria taught universal reconciliation. One of them, Asia Minor, taught annihilation of the wicked. Only one, Northern Africa, following Tertullian and Augustine, strongly favored the doctrine of endless punishment for eternity.

13. Most Christians don't know the names of the early Church fathers, but you might know some of them. Origen, the first Christian leader to write down a complete, systematic theology for the faith lived and worked around 200AD. He taught universal reconciliation. More about him later.

14. Gregory of Nyssa and Clement of Alexandria also taught universal reconciliation as does much of the Orthodox Church to this day. Diodorus of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom and more than two dozen others of those widely called Church Fathers taught the same.

15. The two oldest creeds of the church, the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, say nothing at all about eternal punishment. The Apostles Creed even has Jesus descending into hell, as scripture says he preached to the souls in prison. But punishment? Not a word. Later creeds were also hugely important and still are in many churches. The Definition of Chalcedon, the Athanasian Creed say nothing about eternal punishment.

16. The great transition from universal reconciliation to nearly universal punishment, a punishment which goes for eternity, came about after Constantine ordered the church leaders to gather before him and set one, never changing set of doctrines and exclude all others. As Rome then gained power, both religious and secular, it

used its power to take control of Alexandria, Asia Minor and the other centers of the faith. The bishop of Rome took upon himself the title Pontifex Maximus and claimed supremacy over all other church leaders and the government backed him up. Force was used to destroy those who disagreed. The Emperor Justinian, in the 6th century, even had heretics gathered together in front of him in Rome and burned alive as a lesson to those who might consider stepping out of line.

17. Because Rome was the center of power, the scripture was translated into Latin and rarely, if ever, was the Greek or Hebrew consulted. Along then comes Augustine, born in what is now Algeria in 354AD. His story is a fascinating one but suffice it to say he was a pagan intellectual and sexually profligate until his conversion. He refused to learn Greek or listen to his teachers.

18. It was Augustine who gave us the word “hell.” He didn’t read Greek so he didn’t know the texts and contexts of the words, so he made hell “eternal,” not understanding what the ancients meant by the word. He also believed that it was good and proper for pagans to be tortured into accepting Jesus and the authority of the church of Rome. He taught that most must be lost in the torture pit of hell so that those of us who were saved could understand what Jesus had done for us…. I know…. I know…

19. The Church in Rome systematically excommunicated its earlier Church Fathers (they have since changed course and restored them) including Origen. Still, throughout history great men and women have stood up to declare that the love of God was great and that God would save us all. George Sarris mentions several of them in his book, “Heaven’s Doors.”

    a. 8th century Clement of Ireland
    b. Saint Isaac of Ninevah (still hallowed by the Eastern Church)
    c. Maximus the Confessor.
    d. 9th century John Scotus Eirgena.
    e. The 11th century Aligenses.
    f. 12th century Abbot Reynold of France.
    g. 13th century Solomon, Bishop of Bassorah.
    h. The 14th century Lollards.

i. In the 15th century, the Men of Understanding (sect), Tualer of Strasbroug and John Wessel and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.
j. Martin Luther believed that people could and would be saved after death. So did the Anabaptists who are the root for many Christian churches today.
k. William Law, who taught the Wesley brothers, founders of Methodism and Andrew Jukes, deacon of the Church of England and one of the most successful missionaries of the 19th century (China), George MacDonald, Benjamin Rush (signer of the Declaration of Independence)…
l. And the Eastern Orthodox Church and…
m. Even the Roman Catholic Church does not rule out universal salvation. Cardinal Dulles wrote in the Catholic Journal, First Things, "The fact that something is highly improbable need not prevent us from hoping and praying that it will happen. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 'In hope, the Church prays for all men to be saved.' At another point the Catechism declares, 'the Church prays that no one should be lost.'"

20. But…what about hell? As you might have anticipated, it is a subject that needs to be tackled head on and with great respect for scripture…but our time is limited so we will leave that to next week. For now.
    a. 1st Timothy 2:3-6
    b. 1st John 2:2; 4:14
    c. 1st Timothy 4:9-11
    d. Romans 5:18
    e. And about 65 other scriptures!