Hell, Heaven…and a God of Love part 3

Where Did Hell Go?

1. In the first part of this series, we looked at a multiplicity of verses that prove that the love of God is infinite and given to every single human being. So is His grace. The Bible even says that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world and that God sent Him to earth because He SO loved the world.

2. In the second week, we looked at the nearly forgotten fact (among Protestants and Catholics in the West) that the early church – or a very large portion of them – believed that God would eventually save everyone. We also revealed a list of those teaching the ancient doctrine of universal reconciliation throughout history; their voices stilled by the majority but still powerful, insistent.

3. That brings us to a rather large question: what about hell? Isn't hell the ultimate destination of the vast majority of humans alive now or who have ever been alive? Isn't it a torture pit that will, for eternity, burn, terrify, and punish all of those not in Christ, for ever and ever?

4. Maybe we should look at hell. The first problem with doing so is…where is it? Okay, maybe we shouldn't start there. Let's start with the word itself. There are four words that are sometimes translated "hell" in our bibles: Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, and Tartarus. If you have a King James Version of the Bible, you will find the word "hell" mentioned 31 times in the Old Testament and 23 in the New Testament for a total of 54 times.

5. If you have a New King James Bible, you will find the word "hell" mentioned only 19 times in the OT and 13 times in the NT for a total of 32. Hmmm.

6. Now, if you have a NIV, ASV, NASV, RSV, NRSV, New Living Translation, New Century Version, New American Bible, Young's Literal Translation or just about any other translation OTHER than the KJV or NKJV you will find the word "hell" exactly zero times in the OT and between 13 and zero times in the NT. What happened? Where did it go?

7. The answer begins with where it all started. One of the earliest and most powerful groups of Christians were located in Alexandria, Egypt. Tertullian, whom we've met before when we discovered that he was the earliest one to voice the doctrine that women were somehow stained and sinful from birth because they descended from Eve and, a couple hundred years later, Augustine.

8. Augustine did not care for Greek and refused to learn it but that didn't stop him from creating a huge set of writings on scripture, faith, doctrine, and church organization. He also translated scripture…using corrupt manuscripts… and did so poorly. When he came across words such as Sheol, Hades, Gehenna and Tartarus, he used a Latin word for a pit of torture and pain that the Greek philosophers said existed somewhere below the earth and in which evil people were punished for their sins. The word was then translated into English as "hell" a word meaning "covered or hidden."

9. In Old and Middle English, to put your hat on would be "helling your head." A roofer was called a heller. It was a generic term for a hidden, covered place, out of sight. Taylors would throw their scrap pieces of material off the bench and out of sight into a bin they called hell.

10. It's just that simple. It isn't the only example of one translator making a change and then that change becoming permanent. It's the same way that King James required that the word "minister" be transliterated "deacon." He insisted that the word for "immerse" be transliterated "baptize." (Transliterate means to take the original word in Greek, or other language, and substitute English letters, creating a new word. So, instead of "minister," the scholars were required to take "diakonos" and make a new English word, "deacon.")

11. When Augustine put the word hell into scripture and his writings, it had a massive impact on the early church. The church in Rome accepted Augustine as a Doctor of the Faith. His words were considered inspired and were accepted in as the doctrine of the Church Universal. All were bound to it.

12. But he didn't just bring in the word; he brought in all the Greek mythic baggage with it. He also didn't know what the word for "ages"

or “times” meant in Hebrew or Greek so he assumed it meant “eternal.” As we shall see in another lesson, he was wrong and we’ve suffered for it ever since. More important, the reputation of God as a God of Love and of Jesus as the Savior of all suffered.

13. Let’s look at the words that some translations still translate “hell” and see what they really mean.

14. “Sheol” appears 65x in the OT. King James translates it as hell 31x, grave 31x and pit 3x. Sheol is really just a general term meaning “where people go when they die.” In the Bible, both righteous and unrighteous go to Sheol. If we are being precise, we can say that the Bible DOES say that the righteous will not be abandoned there, but we have no more information than that. Sheol is, then, the way of all flesh.

15. When Jacob was shown the blood stained coat that belonged to Joseph, his son, he said that he would go down to Sheol in mourning, meaning that he would never stop mourning his son as long as he lived.

16. When Hannah’s prayer for a son is answered, she says “The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.” And what about Proverbs 30:15-16?

17. Job said that he would rather go to Sheol than to live in the misery he was experiencing. (Job 14:13) David said that when he made his bed in Sheol, God would still be with him. (Psalm 139:8)

18. It isn’t just people who go to Sheol. In Numbers, when Korah was dropped into a pit, the scripture said that all of his possessions and all that he owned went to Sheol.

19. Most versions now correct this. An example would be Proverbs 5:5 when it says of the adulterous that her feet go down to death, her steps lead to the grave. The KJV says her steps lead to hell… but that is the wrong word. When Jonah was in the belly of the fish, he considered himself dead and in his grave. When he was released, he said “out of the belly of the grave I cried and you heard my voice.” The KJV says the belly of hell.

20. There is no single instance in the OT of any word or concept or idea that there existed an eternal torture pit for the unrighteous. Not one.

21. In the NT, the word “Hades” is used 10 or 11 times, depending on your translation. The KJV translates it as “hell” every single time. The NIV translates it “hell” only in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. No other modern version translates it as hell even once. Why? Because Hades is the Greek/NT word for Sheol. It means the grave or death and is very often used figuratively, as it was by Jonah. IN Matthew 11:23, Capernaum is foretold to “go down to the depths” or hades.

22. IN Matthew 16:18, the word is hades and is usually not even translated there. It just means that death itself will not be able to resist the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior who has come into the world. Rather than teaching that there is a place of endless punishment, Jesus is saying that his church will destroy the very gates of death, bringing release to those trapped behind them.

23. In Revelation 1:18, the angel declares that Christ holds the keys to hades and death. IN fact, in Revelation 20:13, he shows Jesus releasing those trapped in hades!

24. Perhaps we should look at the passage most often brought up to prove that hades is hell: the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man dies and is torment in the flames. That is certainly awful but let’s notice a few things. First of all, he is said to be in the place of the dead, hades, not hell. And Revelation tells us that hades is not forever. Second, this is a parable. Third, this is a story that is told before Jesus conquers death by the cross and his resurrection during which, Peter says, Jesus went to the spirits in prison.

25. Because of time, we will only look at one more word today: Gehenna. I’ve read and heard it preached that Jesus spoke about hell more than any other NT writer and that is true…except, he didn’t. He used the word Gehenna. “Gehenna” meant the valley of Hinnom. It is mentioned 13x in the OT and always refers to a valley outside of

Jerusalem where idols were worshipped. People actually sacrificed their children to idols there in the most evil and atrocious ways.

26. Because of that, King Josiah turned it into a garbage pit and declared that those who were evil would have their bodies toss into it. They would have no funeral, no burying ground. (2 Kings 23) This was the worst result imaginable (Ecclesiastes 6:3). Jeremiah 7 declares it a sign of the judgment of God on those who refuse to listen to Him. The bodies of animals, waste, garbage and the bodies of evil people were tossed there. Fires were lit to consume them.

27. More next week but, for now, know this: the fires of Gehenna were not eternal. They were there to purify and cleanse, not to torture human souls for eternity.

28. For those who are terrified that we may do away with their hell, let me assure you of this: we will go where the words take us, the words that were given to us as the community of Christ on earth – the scriptures.

29. The Bible does NOT say that the evil among us will not face punishment. It does not say that there are no consequences for sin, for there most certainly are. Those who have not been forgiven by their faith in Christ DO face rehabilitation and refining. How does that work? We are getting there. Patience.

30. In the meantime, turn to Jesus so that none of this need concern you in the least. In him was light and that light was the life of mankind.