Hell, Heaven…and a God of Love part 4

When Does Forever End? 2 Peter 2:4-9

1. Last week, we looked at three words that are often translated “hell” in the KJV – Gehenna, Sheol, and Hades. We will look at Gehenna again, but let’s look at the fourth and last word that is often translated “hell.”

2. Tartarus is generally translated “hell” and that’s a good thing because it is the ONLY word in the Bible that actually means hell, in Greek or in Hebrew. That said, it only shows up once in the Bible and that is in 2 Peter 2:4. Read it carefully and it two things become evident very quickly: it is for fallen angels, not humans, and it is not permanent. It is also not a place of fire, but one of darkness which was exactly what the Greek philosophers hundreds of years before Christ said hades was.

3. To the Greeks, though, hell was a never ending time of shadows, darkness, confusion, and loss with no redemption. Obviously, Peter is referring to something different but is using terms the people would understand. This should remind us of Matthew 24:41 when Jesus referred to a “lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels” and also Revelation 20:14 where the lake of fire is there to destroy “death and hades.”

4. Because we must, because we have been programmed by our past and by well meaning teachers and preachers, we will look at all the passages in which these four words appear but, for now, we have a larger question to ask: when does forever end?

5. When I was a boy, I was told illustrations about how long eternity lasts that terrified me. One said that if the earth was a solid ball of steel and you put an ant on the equator and he started walking around the earth on the equator, by the time that ant had worn a ditch so deep that it split the earth in half, that would not even be a second in eternity.

6. Another said that if a hummingbird only flapped its wings once every thousand years and if it were tasked with taking one grain of sand at

a time from earth to the moon, by the time it had taken the entire world to the moon would not even be a second in eternity. And then…the preachers would give us hell, or the fear of it.

7. How did one go to hell? Quite easily and by so many pathways that the vast majority of all of those created in the image of God would spend forever and ever in the pits of flame and torture for…being born in the wrong place, having been turned from religion by false and abusive Christians, joining the wrong church, being baptized the wrong way, gambling, dancing, using instruments in worship, etc. The list was LONG.

8. Then the preachers would say that Jesus himself told us that “few there be that find it.” That made us wonder about this entire plan and why it wasn’t more effective. It also turned off our friends and those we tried to reach with the Gospel. The Good News didn’t sound good to our friends and, if we were being honest, we had some questions about it ourselves.

9. We have read our Bibles many times and we see that those who are lost are lost forever and that the flames are forever…but have you ever asked how long “forever” was to the writers of and listeners to the early scriptures?

10. Pop quiz: what was the word for a million in Isaiah’s time? In Jesus’s day? Trick question, because they didn’t have a word for it. They might say “thousands and thousands” as their way of saying “infinite” and, if they were particularly passionate, they might go as far as saying “tens of thousands and tens of thousands.” They had no need for a word describing a million because that number (and that much stuff) was not comprehensible to them.

11. Even today, many languages do not go beyond 10 or 30. If you were a rich man, you might say you had 30 cows “in abundance” meaning you had more than that, but there wasn’t a word for the number you had.

12. We have national budget deficits and national debts that run into the tens of trillions and we speak casually about star systems and galaxies that are hundreds of light years away. Try to explain that

to anyone before 1940 and you would get a blank face at best, burned at the stake at worst.

13. To the ancients, “eternal” and “forever” meant something very different than it means to us and we can easily prove it. D. Campbell Morgan (God’s Method With Man) says “There is no word in the whole book of God corresponding with our word eternal, which is commonly used among us, meaning absolutely without end.” BTW, this is not a modern teaching. Morgan wrote that a hundred years ago.

14. Jude 7 says that Sodom’s fiery judgement is eternal, but Ezekiel 16:53-56 says that Sodom’s fortunes will be restored by God after the time of punishment is over. So…eternal meant until the time of punishment was over.

15. Zephaniah 2:9 names several nations or cities including Sodom and the Ammonites and says they will be “a place of weeds and salt pits, a wasteland forever.” Jeremiah agrees early in his book but by chapter 49:6 he says “Yet afterward, I will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites declares the Lord.” Forever didn’t mean what it means to us.

16. In Deuteronomy 23:3, the Moabites and Ammonites were not allowed to enter the temple forever…until the 10th generation. Once again, “forever” meant “until the purpose ends.” Habbakuk 3:6 says that mountains are everlasting until they are shattered. (The NIV changes the word “eternal” to “age old” and they are correct)

17. The Aaronic priesthood was to be an everlasting priesthood (Exodus 40:15) but it is gone and has been for thousands of years. Hebrews 7 makes it plain that that priesthood has been replaced by Christ. In 1st Kings 8:13, God says He will dwell in Solomon’s temple forever, but that temple was destroyed. Where does God dwell now? Scripture tells us that He dwells in us and with us.

18. The words “forever” and “eternal” meant to the ancients “as long as God intends” or “until the purpose is fulfilled.” We see that when the law was given by Moses. In Leviticus 24:8, it was billed as an everlasting covenant but 2nd Corinthians 3:11ff says it was done

away with. Hebrews 8:13 agrees, saying it was an everlasting one until God made a new covenant. See? Jonah says he was in the belly of the whale “forever” until God delivered him (Jonah 2:6).

19. We talked about slavery in scripture a few months ago. Remember that Exodus 21:6 said a servant was to serve his master forever and that meant until he ceased to be. When he died, forever was over and done.

20. One of the passages often brought up by people who just can’t let loose of an everlasting punishment is Matthew 25:46. Let’s read that. At first glance, it looks like they have a solid case. “If hell isn’t eternal then neither is heaven!” Except…no.

21. “Eternal” or “everlasting” here, however it is translated, is an adjective. It is a modifier. By itself, it has no particular meaning. It has to be interpreted by what it is modifying. For example, our brother Dan is a tall man. The Empire State Building is a tall building. Since they are both tall, does that mean that they are the same in their tall-ness?

22. I-70 through Kansas is a long road. An anaconda is a long snake. Does the word “long” mean that they are the same length? Of course not. So the punishment lasts as long as it needs to last and heaven lasts as long as it needs to last. Since heaven is where we will dwell for eternity with God, that will be a very long time indeed.

23. One might even say…eternal.

More next week on what the punishment is about and how hell is described in scripture. For now, be at peace knowing that God’s love is greater than His wrath and God’s justice is ALWAYS played out in love.