**Hell, Heaven…and a God of Love. Ezekiel 20:39-44**

1. We've laid some foundations, defined some terms. Now, we need to look at every single passage that is used to prove that God is going to send the majority of people to an eternal, never ending, pit of torture and flame.

2. Matthew 5:21-22. In the Sermon on the Mount, it becomes clear very early that God is after more than just external obedience. He is looking for changed hearts and minds that are then reflected in changed behavior. That is why here, and in 5:28-30 as well as in parallel passages in Mark and Luke, he warns us against sins of the heart that will take us to Gehenna.

3. He warns the people in this passage that anger can result in being judged by the lower courts, contempt will be judged by the Sanhedrin or high court, and hatred will be judged by the entire community and the perpetrator will be shamed, their body thrown away like garbage on the fires of Gehenna.

4. This is not a discussion about eternal torment, but the shame associated with hatred of others. In verses 28-30, he warns about using our bodies for sexual or lustful means. That, too, can result in our bodies being tossed into the garbage pit where, according to the parallel passage in Mark, "the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." Does THAT passage indicate an unquenchable fire?

5. No. It refers to a fire that doesn't die out until it does what it was designed and purposed to do. The use of terms such as inextinguishable fire were used frequently at this time in history. Eusebius said that certain martyrs were burned in inextinguishable fires even though those fires lasted no more than an hour. They were put out or quenched after they served their purpose.

6. Jesus indicates this in Matthew 5:26 when he says "you will not get out until you have paid the last penny." The punishments in Matthew 5 and parallel passages are limited and end when the purpose of the punishment ends or the last penny is paid.

7. In Matthew 10:28 and Luke 12:5, Jesus says “do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul in Gehenna.” Is Jesus threatening us with the loss of our very existence? Maybe, but probably not. If annihilation is a possibility (when God’s refining fire does not turn the lost to Him and they finally reject Him), then he might be referring to that. But, notice a few verses later…

8. Matthew 10:39 – the word translated “life” here is the same word used to translate “soul” in verse 28. The word “soul” is often translated mind, heart, or life in other passages. In the fires of Gehenna, Jesus is saying that God can bring an end not only to our physical lives but also our reputations, goals, desires. Jesus goes further to explain that they are valued by God (worth more than many sparrows). He is not threatening annihilation but the ending of our good reputation on earth. How many die and then the truth comes out about them?

9. Matthew 23:15 – By now, you should already figure it out that Jesus isn’t threatening to send someone to a torture pit (and how could he do it twice as much?) but, rather, warning them that what they teach and do leads to the garbage heap and dishonor. The same in Matthew 23:33.

10. James 3:6 – Gehenna was a place of corruption and our tongues often reveal the corruption of our hearts.

11. 2 Peter 2:4 – Peter here is quoting from the Book of Enoch, a very popular book in his day which is in the Apocrypha and regarded as valuable but not inspired. It is rather like quoting CS Lewis or a popular movie today in a sermon. Tartarus was, in Greek mythology, was a prison pit in the deepest place in Hades, the waiting place of the dead. Peter uses it as a verb, rather like saying he “Angola-ed them” or he “Super Maxxed them.” And notice that being imprisoned there is not forever; it is “until the judgement.”

12. We have now looked at every passage and every word used to describe what happens to the evil in the afterlife. We have also looked at the words we translate “eternal” and “everlasting” and shown that they didn’t mean the same thing to the people of that day

and time. You would be forgiven for wondering, then, where is the judgment of God and where is justice. You would be within your rights to ask how we explain those verses – not “explain away” but “explain by reading in context.”

13. In Genesis 18:25, Abraham, speaking of Sodom, asks “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Here, he was asking God to spare the city. He and God worked out what that would look like, which is an amazing thing when you think about it.

14. Yes, God will do what is right. Yes, God is loving. Yes, God is just. Do justice and love war against each other in God’s heart? In the universe? I would say “no.” But is the traditional view of hell a picture of justice? Justice demands that the punishment fit the crime. It is one thing to require an eye for an eye (a system that was designed to limit punishment). It is quite another to hang a 14 year old for stealing a loaf of bread.

15. Is it just to torture someone endlessly, for eternity, for things they did over a 70 or 80 year period on earth? Is God a despot that has no love for those who have sinned? Is that what we saw in Jesus on the cross as he forgave the ones who were IN THE PROCESS of sinning against him and God?

16. Leviticus 24:15-16. The penalty for blasphemy was death…not torture and certainly not torture forever. Is the one put to death now annihilated, no longer existing in any realm or are they in a waiting area for endless torture? Is the action of a moment deserving of an eternity in the flames? Some will say it is not up to us to question God but they’ve not read their Hebrew scriptures. Plus, it is right and proper to see if we understand what God has said and done and how He defines Who and What He is.

17. Therefore, we are not questioning God; we are questioning our view of Him based on what we have been taught about some words.

18. Jesus paid the penalty not just for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world. The Bible tells me so. Romans 5:20 indicates that God’s grace will not be destroyed or defeated by Satan’s desires and work. The very gates of hades cannot stand against Jesus, as he told

his apostles. Even at our worst, when we deserve the worst, He deals with us according to Who He is, not according to who we are or what we have done. Ezekiel 20:42-44.

19. Psalm 107:10-15, 17-20. His love reaches out even when we stand judged and imprisoned because of our sins. Isaiah 4:4, God will cleanse the cities from their sins.

20. Lamentations 3:31-33. And then Zephaniah 3:8,9. In Malachi, we are told that God's judgment is a "refining fire" that purifies us. So, yes, there is judgment. Yes, there is something dark and terrible and painful waiting for those who have not come to Jesus…but it is also merciful and loving.

21. Remember the refrain of Psalm 136 that rings out again and again: His love endures forever.

22. But…but…what about Hitler and the bad guys? We talk more about that next week.