Sermon Notes

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9/21/25

TThis is Why We Call It Good News – part 2. 1st John 4:13-18

Let's do a fast flyover of Christian thought about the ultimate end of all souls – apokatastasis, and what happened when that doctrine was thrown away in favor of doctrines requiring the vast majority of humans to be thrown into eternal conscious torture.

In the apostolic age, the message was that Christ came to restore all creation and reconcile all people to God. He came to heal the world's brokenness and establish the kingdom of heaven on earth.

That kingdom would have a lot in common with the Jewish communities of faith that were here and primed to receive him with a thousand years of stories, songs, traditions, and scriptures.

These communities would take care of each other and of their neighbors, meaning all other people, regardless of their being or out of the community.

Would there be judgment for sin? Yes! But it would be corrective, not endless torture. The sinful would be refined by fire. BTW, this is also the experience of many who have had Near Death Experiences as laid out in comprehensive studies in the book, "After", by Dr. Bruce Greyson and many others. A period of refining, still surrounded by the presence of God and love.

By the 4th century and far along by the 6th century, the church was taken in as a part of the state. The Roman government did more than legalize the faith; it took it in, reorganized it, forced it to come up with an acceptable set of doctrines, and used military power to back up its decisions. A church more unlike the simple teaching of Jesus would be hard to imagine.

God was no longer "father" as He was in Jewish teaching and in the prayers and teaching of Jesus. He was now a harsh and distant judge.

Salvation was no longer the free gift of God to His children. Instead, it had become an exclusive club that required adherence to state and formal religious laws and forms.

Hell, thanks to Augustine, and approved by Rome, was now eternal conscious torment. God was no longer presented to humankind as a God of love but as a God of wrath that had to be appeased quickly or a monstrous, unimaginably cruel fate awaited you.

It was the perfect tool for religious/state control. Perpetual guilt plus fear of eternal torture equals obedience to the system. More and more requirements and control elements were put into place, such as rigid clergy, laws about sex, required attendance at mass, required responses in worship, required confession to the priest, required candles and prayers, required devotions to a variety of saints, and more.

Fail to follow and be obedient, and you will be certain of wrath and pain for all eternity.

Matthew 11:28-30. Religion was now a burden, an ever-increasing burden. 1st John 4:13-18. You could not have stood this passage on its head and come up with anything as bizarre as the teaching of the state-aligned church by the 6th century. They even excommunicated Gregory of Nyssa, one of the best articulators of apokatastasis – universal salvation (though that was rescinded later and was likely illegally done at the time).

Instead of lifting burdens, the church multiplied them. Teachings, sermons, and homilies were focused on how sinful we are, how worthless we are, and how worthy of condemnation we are.

God was seen as a Father you could never please. Instead of a loving God who restores all to Himself, He became a fiery God of pain and judgment. We were told that God's last act toward His children would be to send most of them into everlasting torment without hope, forever.

Religious leaders were now the only conduits to God. Jesus had made us all brothers and sisters, capable and charged with sharing the faith, spreading the community of faith. 1st Peter 2:9-10.

If you tried to bypass the religious power base, you were hunted down and killed, as were hundreds of thousands up to and into the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648). Waldensians, Albigenses, Paulicians, Vallenses, Bogomils, Nestorians, Montanists, Cathars, and many others were slaughtered in the name of the State Church.

Jesus wept.

The Protestant Reformation did not sweep all of this away and return us to the simple teaching of Jesus. It tried, and it succeeded in some ways. The Catholic Church itself has reformed and changed direction many times, but we are still a long, long way away from the Gospels.

Our distance from the Gospels is tragic, for it is there that we meet the true God as seen in Jesus. John 14:9 – "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Hebrews 1:1-3.

We are told time and again that God is love, and in First Corinthians 13:8, we are assured that "love never fails."

The Gospels are truly "good news," not the "bad news with an impossibly difficult and ritual-heavy possible escape route."

The Gospels draw the wounded, the weak, the sinful. Have a sin in your life that you have just not been able to overcome? Look at the Gospels. Odds are, Jesus met someone like you. What did he do? How did he treat them?

In traditional church teachings, sin is more powerful than grace for, no matter what God's wants and intentions are, sin will win the battle for most souls that have ever been born. They teach hell as if it were more powerful than the cross. They paint salvation as temporary and fleeting, easily lost while hell is eternal – longer lasting than the cross.

We will trace the path of this terrible twisting of Jesus's teaching another day. For now, let me reassure you of the power of God's love and His reach. Or, rather, let me have Paul reassure you. 1st Corinthians 15:12-22 with special emphasis on verses 19 and 22)