

Sermon Notes



Speaker: Patrick Mead

9/28/25

This Is Why They Call It The Good News -- part 3

Romans 8:31-39

We've had some really good news over the last two weeks, but you would be justified in wondering, "If this was the teaching of the early church, how did we get to where we are? How did we go from universal redemption to nearly universal condemnation?" That's fine; skepticism is not a bad thing if it leads to further examination.

We've looked at some scriptures already, but let's look at three as we begin today. Acts 3:17-21 and Colossians 1:19,20. Then look at 1st Corinthians 15:21-28.

The image of God shown by this teaching and by the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels is one of "Abba, Father." He rescues His lost children (as in the story of the Loving Father and the Prodigal Son).

In the early church, there was a consensus about apokatastasis. For over 250 years, the men we now call the Church Fathers taught that the love and purpose of God would not be frustrated but that all, even if through fire, would be refined and restored. Major voices whose names you may know were Origen, Didymus the Blind, Gregory of Nyssa, and Clement of Alexandria.

They viewed judgment after death as purgative fire meant to heal the soul and bring it to repentance. Their worship and ethics were rooted in gratitude and love, not terror and warnings about the horrors of hell. The result? The church grew even in times of horrible persecution.

In fact, they grew to the point where the Roman authorities decided it was time to change tactics. They had suppressed it and persecuted it. They had even ignored it, yet it continued to grow in number and influence. As the Romans always did, they decided that, if they could not defeat it, they needed to absorb it and control it.

Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 AD. Those church leaders who were willing to come under the control of Rome were given power and wealth beyond anything any church leader had had before. The Council of Nicaea was called in 325 AD. Again, not all leaders came to it, but those who did had the power of Roman armies and taxes to force their followers to pledge allegiance to their conclusions. Even at this time, they did not discuss matters concerning judgment after death but, instead, focused on the person and position of Christ.

(Remember: no one would have the books we call the Bible for well over a thousand years unless they were very rich and powerful. And no one who defied Rome could be rich and powerful!)

After Nicaea, church leaders no longer focused on the simple teaching of Jesus. They had the power to wield civil and church authority. The doctrines decided by the councils in Rome were forced upon the people, ensuring the unity, control, and peace that Rome required.

Then there arose a man with a great mind and a very checkered past. Augustine lived from 354-430 AD. He didn't care for Greek and was open about his refusal to learn it in his youth and his disinterest in it as an adult. He gained tremendous power and influence in North Africa. A contemporary of Augustine said of him, "He established anew the ancient Faith."

Augustine worked from Latin translations of the Greek text, and those translations had issues. He was not the kind to research the words, especially since they were in Greek, so he substituted the word "infernus" for Sheol, Gehenna, and Hades. When the Bible was translated out of Latin and into English, they took the word, and that is how we got the word "hell."

Augustine knew the word "infernus" well because it was the word used for the eternal blackness and pain that Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and others had postulated as mankind's final destination.

Augustine believed that some were predestined for salvation, but the rest of us would end up in eternal conscious misery and torment.

God was no longer presented as a God of love and restoration but, rather, a God of selective mercy. This bred fear in hearers' minds and tightened the control of the church/state over the populace.

One hundred years later, it got worse. The Roman Emperor, Justinian, decided that the church should be united in all things. All teachers and leaders would have to bow to his decisions about what was orthodox. Because of the influence of Augustine, he issued an edict in 543 AD condemning Origen and declaring universal salvation a heresy. Note: This was a political despot in charge of the church, and the leaders of the church went along with it.

That wasn't enough for Justinian. He gathered the leaders for the 5th Ecumenical Council in 553 AD. One of their tasks was to condemn any teachings of Origen and to make eternal conscious torment the official teaching of the church. All other views were suppressed. (There was a real divide between East and West churches. Apokatastasis continued to be taught in the East)

For the next thousand years, hell was used as a control mechanism and, for too many, it still is. Paintings and frescoes from those years were full of fire and brimstone, burning pagans, and suffering souls at the mercy of demons. The people were taught that the only way to receive grace was to receive the sacraments (baptism, Eucharist, etc.), and those could only be received if you were in good graces with the church.

When the Protestant Reformation burst upon the scene in the 1500s, they kept the concept of hell as eternal conscious torment. As one theologian said, they were presented with three options: heaven, purgatory, and hell. They threw out the wrong one.

John Calvin, the father of Calvinist doctrine, taught that you were likely damned before birth and there was nothing you could do about it. He also taught that one of the pleasures of heaven was being able to see the sinners in torment!

That takes us to modern evangelicalism, which is no improvement to the medieval Catholic Church. Fear and judgment are hallmarks of the teaching. Warnings about hellfire and pleadings to act now to save themselves are common. Mission work is not about spreading the good news of Jesus and the establishment of the kingdom of God right here and now. Instead, it is about rescuing souls from hell and telling the suffering that it will be better bye and bye in the next world.

This has resulted in Christianity presenting the worst possible version of the gospel to the point where it is no longer looked upon as good news by most hearers – even in the church. God's character has been distorted from Loving Father to Cosmic Executioner. It makes sin and hell more powerful than the cross and the love of God.

It keeps people obedient but spiritually stunted, working to keep from going to hell rather than growing in Christian faith and disciplines so as to establish the kingdom of heaven where they are.

It drives away the broken and wounded and makes seekers look elsewhere.

But God is still love and Christ has still redeemed the world. The end result of the universe is unity with God and Christ.

We stand on the original Good News. Peace on earth, goodwill toward humankind. God is the Creator and Father of all. Jesus Christ came to restore all things, not to destroy most things. Judgement is real, but its purpose is purification and healing, not endless cruelty. The end of the story is not hell but reconciliation – God in all. 1st Cor. 15:28.