

THE STORY OF MAN'S DESTINY  
THE STORY ABOUT HELL #3

HELL --- WHERE IS IT? --- WHAT IS IT?

In a booklet written by E.E. Franke, and published in N.Y city (date unknown), the following introduction to the above 2 questions is found. I thought it worthy of reproducing here.

*“Hell --- What monster of iniquity invented thee? What demon of sin thrust thee forth to crush the heart of man with thine infernal fires of torture? What imp of darkness and despair drew the picture of thy hideous dwelling place, to soil the fair name of the God of love? What mind conceived thee to drive men into doubt, infidelity, insanity and self slaughter?*

*Thou enemy of God and man, who hast made the earth a waste wilderness of woe, and hast built the fires of hate in the hearts of thine advocates. Thou, who hast robbed heaven of its praise by those who have contemplated thee.*

*Doomed, doomed, doomed --- to perpetual agony and pain, pleading for mercy, with only the echo of thine own voice to taunt and mock thee, and an accusing conscience to chide thee. No hope, no light, no tender hand to soothe the aching frame. No ear to hear the pleadings and groaning of the soul, and though the eternal ages roll on --- age upon age brings no relief, nothing but an eternity of pain suffering, torture and torment.” (The writer of these words is decrying the idea of such a place of torment).*

The main setting for the lesson before us now takes us to verses such as those found in Mk. 9:42-49; (and also verses found in: Mt. 5:22, 29, 30; Mt. 10:28; Mt. 18:9; Mt. 23:15, 33; Lk. 12:5; and Jas. 3:6). It is verses such as these that the theology of eternal torture employs to confirm and support their doctrine of a literal, eternal fire that God has somewhere provided for sinners to spend all eternity in. After all, it is noted, that these verses are accompanied with such expressions as: “unquenchable fire”, and “where their worm dieth not”. Thus, it is presumed, that there either is a place of fiery, eternal torture, or these words (some would conclude) are misleading, and / or there must be a very good and viable explanation for them otherwise. We think that there is a “very good and viable explanation” for these verses, apart from the theology they are generally used to support. In fact, I would say to you, that the real underlying meaning and purpose of these verses has been hidden beneath the idea that whenever the word “hell” appears in the Bible that it automatically means eternal torture of the wicked. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Because of this, we are going to take a rather unusual approach to our commentary on these verses, focusing on those in Mk. 9:42-49. We are going to consider some very pertinent passages of scripture that are in direct connection with those found in Mk. 9, which are found in the Old Testament. Their relationship together will be obvious when compared. We believe that the 4 gospels give the accurate account of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus while upon this earth. We also believe that his ministry was for the entire world of both Jew and Gentile, but we also know that there are certain passages of scripture at certain times when the Lord was speaking directly to the Jewish people and to the consequences that would come upon them for their disobedience and rejection of him. For example, on one occasion, (Lk. 19: 41-44) as Jesus approached the city of Jerusalem, he wept over it. He went on to speak about things that would happen to this city (and her people) because they did not realize the day of their visitation. Many times Jesus would make very emphatic statements directly to the Jewish people with an application intended directly for them. It is not to say that, on occasions when the Lord did direct his comments to the Jewish people, that we cannot derive an object lesson from it for our own good also. However, the only way to understand what he was implying is to understand his comments in the light of how it applied to the Jewish people. I know of no reason as to why anyone should have any disagreement with this fact. Let me assure you however, that I do not intend to try to use this fact of certain scriptures spoken exclusively to the Jewish people and nation, as a means of explaining away the theory of eternal torture. On the other hand, where it is scripturally verifiable that a passage of scripture has its application specifically to the Jews, we have no choice but to accept and teach the same. Any careful student of the gospels will know that there are passages of scripture where the Lord spoke directly to the Jewish nation for one

reason or another.

We propose, and intend to show, that the scriptures in Mk. 9:42-49 (and others) do in fact have a direct application to the Jewish nation. That does not mean that we cannot draw an object lesson from them for our own admonition, but it does mean that unless we know its intended application and purpose, the object lesson we draw from them will, in all likelihood, be wrong. Let us allow the scriptures to speak to us without confining them to one selected passage, when others have an obvious bearing on them.

The word "hell" is found 23 times in the N.T. It is translated from 3 different words. Twelve times it is translated from the word "gehenna". Eleven of these times are found in Mt., Mk., and Lk., and the other time in Jas. 3:6. Ten times in the N.T., hell is translated from "hades". One time, II Pet. 2:4, it is translated from "tartaros". We are going to focus attention first on those times when our English word hell is a translation from the word "gehenna". (The others will be discussed in another lesson).

This word "gehenna" is a compound word, derived from 2 words originating in the Hebrew language. Those two words are: "gaye" and "Hinnom". The word "gaye" means a valley or gorge. The word "Hinnom" was the name of a Jebusite. The Jebusites occupied the territory of Jerusalem before David took it from them. (These are facts --- known, or should be known, to any serious Bible student). This word "gehenna" (from which we have translated hell), is actually the name of a valley outside the east gate of Jerusalem. It was a valley named, after "Hinnom", a Jebusite. But its reputation does not come from the one for which it is named. It comes instead from the subsequent use made of the valley, located adjacent to the city of Jerusalem. This use, as we shall see, was gruesome and horrifying, and was a sad part of the condemnation and finally the overthrow of the Jewish nation, with the valley itself having a significant part in that ultimate overthrow.

In order to get a clear picture of the use of this term "valley of Hinnom" (translated in the N.T. as hell), and its proper interpretation when so translated, it is necessary to review the history and also the prophecies relating to this valley. As we previously noted, 12 of the 23 times that the word hell appears in the N.T., it is translated from this compound word: "gehenna", valley of Hinnom. Regardless as to what your concept of hell is, an inquiring mind would be driven, it seems, to find out just why the word hell was translated from "valley of Hinnom". What is there about the "valley of Hinnom" that would cause the translators to use the word hell for these two words? Is there something in its history and prophecies that would cause it to be so translated? Further, is there anything about the history and prophecy of the "valley of Hinnom" that should be interpreted to mean that a sinner will go to some place of eternal fire to burn there for all the ages of eternity? What is the Lord Jesus referring to in the gospels when he warns of an "unquenchable fire" and an "undying worm" in the valley of Hinnom? Is he using it to confirm an age old doctrine about the eternal torture of all the wicked of all ages or is he quoting from O.T. prophecies, and speaking of some form of impending judgment upon the Jewish nation? More specifically, is the traditional concept of hell as a place of eternal torture being taught in these verses, or is there another message contained in them for us?

The expression, "valley of the son of Hinnom", is first found in Josh. 15:8. In this passage, Joshua is delineating the boundaries of the tribe of Judah, Josh. 15:1-12. In verse 8 he specifies that the border went up by the valley of the son of Hinnom into the south side of the Jebusite; the same is Jerusalem. This clearly puts the location of this valley adjacent to Jerusalem. Many other scriptures as well as history and dictionaries confirm this location. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, states that this valley was, "near the walls of Jerusalem, by the entry of the gate Harsith"; the valley gate opened into it. Davis Dictionary of the Bible along with all others I have read, also locate this valley outside of the gates of the city of Jerusalem. I do not think that there is any disagreement about this fact.

It is also a fact that there were many other valleys surrounding the city of Jerusalem. So just what is the significance of the valley of Hinnom? For example, why did Jesus, in Mk. 9:43-49, talk about

some being cast into the “valley of Hinnom”, and not into the other valleys also surrounding the city? Keep in mind that Jesus himself made no reference to “hell” or being cast into hell. He spoke only of being cast into the valley of Hinnom!

The real story and history of this valley begins to come out when you read II Chron. 28:3 and 33:6. They read as follows: “Moreover he burnt incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burnt his children in the fire after the abominations of the heathen whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel. And he caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom: also he observed times, and used enchantments, and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit, and with wizards: he wrought much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger”. These verses speak of an absolutely horrible, repugnant and idolatrous practice, nauseating, contemptible and condemned by God, which king Ahaz, King Manasseh and under them the people of God openly carried on. They burned their children in the fire after the abominations of the heathen whom the Lord had cast out. Unthinkable! King Manasseh (see II Chron. 33) was perhaps the most wicked king Judah ever had. For 55 years he turned to every abominable, heathen practice you could imagine. He utterly proliferated Judah, Jerusalem and the temple with every obscene, idolatrous worship that could be conceived. Among them was the heinous, diabolical practice of “causing his children to pass through the fire in the valley of Hinnom”. Even though Josiah, grandson of Manasseh, completely destroyed all of the idolatry in and around Jerusalem, including that in the valley of Hinnom, yet after his reign the people of Judah went right back to the same old heathen practice again. God told Josiah that after his reign, harsh judgments would still come on Judah, Jerusalem and her people because of the wickedness that for years had been perpetrated there.

The prophet Jeremiah began his ministry in the 13th year of the reign of Josiah (about 628 B.C.), and prophesied until the final fall and destruction of Judah and Jerusalem about 586 B.C. The main thrust of his prophecy was an offer of mercy to the people of Judah if they would repent and turn from their idolatry and disobedience to God. They never would. The Babylonian captivity of Judah was the result of their obstinacy and unbelief. With this captivity, the city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and most of the people carried away as captives.

In order to see some relevance in these catastrophic events and our study of “hell”, taken from “gehenna”, we need to turn to some of Jeremiah’s specific prophecies and listen to the judgments he pronounced upon this place and the wickedness it offered sanctuary for, some 600 years before Christ. First, consider an important observation regarding Jeremiah’s message to Judah over a span of about 42 years. His prophecies distinctly declared the coming Babylonian captivity, with many details of it, including the restoration back to Judah after 70 years. It should not be forgotten however, that Jeremiah gave prophecies time and again of the coming of Christ and events related to his coming. A close study of his book will clearly reveal that some things spoken of as immediate judgments upon Judah, also served as a template for judgments upon Israel during and immediately following the days of Christ on earth. These double applications of his prophecy will clarify themselves when they serve that purpose. We are not saying that all of Jeremiah’s prophecy represented immediate events in his time and also simultaneously represented events in the time of Christ. Clearly and demonstrably, that is not the case. But just as surely there are some that this principal does apply to.

At this point it is very important that you stop and read the entire 19th chapter of the book of Jeremiah. After reading it, let me call attention to several things the chapter tells us. First, Jeremiah is told to take a potter’s earthen bottle, and gather some of the ancients of the people and the priests, and go forth to the valley of the son of Hinnom, at the east gate of the city. In verse 3, Jeremiah is to tell the people with him that God was going to bring evil against this place that would cause the ears to tingle of those who see it. Then (Vs4-5), God declares that the reason for these judgments is because they have forsaken me; burned incense in this place to other gods; filled the place with the blood of innocents; built high places to Baal to burn their sons with fire unto Baal. Then God said (V6) that this place would no longer be called Tophet, nor the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter. In V7-8, God describes some of the calamities that will befall this city, along with the desolation that would come. Notice especially V9, where God tells them they would eat the flesh

of their sons and daughters in the siege and overthrow of this place. Then (V10-12), Jeremiah broke the potters earthen bottle, signifying that just as it could not be put back together, neither could this city.

Jeremiah was still on the scene when, in 586 B.C., the Babylonians finally destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple and carried the inhabitants off to Babylon as captives. In connection with Jeremiah 19, it is interesting to note: (1) The people did not have severe enough famine that would cause them to eat their sons and daughters; and (2) their captivity was for 70 years, after which the temple and the city were rebuilt, contrary to the illustration of the broken bottle that could not be made whole again. Thus even though Jeremiah's message of judgment showed impending destruction upon Jerusalem, yet some of the details were not present. This should cause us to search God's word further for the complete fulfillment of every detail prophesied.

Note: Dr. Adam Clarke, in his commentary of Jer. 19, also expresses the view that this chapter is fulfilled more specifically in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D., than by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

Next I would urge you to read the 24th chapter of Mt. Even though there are some strong differences of opinion about some of the things in this chapter, yet there is also a general consensus along some lines of interpretation. Among the things agreed upon is that the chapter outlines the ultimate downfall of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel. This is deemed to have occurred in A.D. 70, when the Romans besieged Jerusalem for about 3 years and finally leveled the place, including the temple also, thus ending the Jewish national life for centuries to come. In the process of the siege of Jerusalem leading up to its final destruction, horrendous famine, starvation, crime, beastliness, murder took place, not just by the Roman soldiers but among the people of Judah themselves. Jeremiah had prophesied the horrible nightmare that would take place as judgments upon an unbelieving people. In his prophecy he mentioned two things that accompanied the famine and destruction going on. They would eat their own children and they would fill the "valley of Hinnom" until there was no place to bury there. Both of these, along with all the other horrible things that went on, were literally fulfilled. Thus, the ancient valley of Hinnom, used in those days as a city dump, where the refuse of the city was burned and destroyed, became a burying place for the bodies of the people in Jerusalem, dying from famine, starvation, sword, and killing one another, until the place was full. What a gruesome symbol for the execution of the long - prophesied judgments upon the people who would not have Christ to rule over them and had him crucified. In 1611, when the King James commission was translating the Bible into the language of the day, they translated the words: "valley of Hinnom", or "gaye - Hinnom", into the word "hell". You could argue at length as to whether or not this was the best choice of a word to use in this translation. If you understand the background and recognize the application of it by Christ and relate it to the events at the overthrow of Jerusalem, then you do no violence to the text or its original intent.

This all means therefore, that when Jesus used the words "valley of Hinnom" in Mk. 9:42-49, etc., that he was both borrowing from the prophecy of Jeremiah which he knew so well and interpreting it to apply to the Jewish people and their impending destruction in that valley. The history describing this destruction (see the record by Josephus) fills volumes with its inevitable approach, siege and utter destruction. The misery, death and destruction are described in heart wrenching detail. A nation once favored of God, a power in the world, became a hissing and a byword; broken like a potters earthen bottle. The words of Jesus found in Mt. 23:37-38 and Lk. 19:41-44, add emphasis to this story of impending doom. There is so much more detail that is available concerning the destruction of the Jewish nation as portrayed by Jeremiah's prophecy (ch. 19) and in many other scriptures, but it is time now to turn to the scriptures we are trying to understand: Mk. 9:43:49.

*"And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off; it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched. Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched. Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to*

*enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt.*

First, in V43, 45, and 47, note: If your hand offend thee, cut it off; if your foot offend thee, cut it off; and if your eye offend thee, pluck it out. These strange expressions form a very basic part of these verses and we cannot just rush past them and ignore their contribution to the message Christ is trying to convey. If your hand, foot or eye, offend you, cut them off; pluck them out. I have heard of a few examples where someone with deranged thinking, advocated the literal severing of these members of your body. But I cannot help but believe that the majority of those who advocate the eternal torture theory would strongly interpret these expressions to be a “figure of speech”. In other words, that Christ was not suggesting that we literally cut off these members, but instead he was using this as a figure of another lesson. Surely no one with any spiritual discernment and any perception of the mind and graces of Christ would accuse him of teaching the literal elimination of body members as a method of overcoming offenses.

This raises the obvious question of just what it was that Christ was suggesting by these expressions of cutting off your hand or foot. Since it is doubtful that anyone would propose the literal severing of a hand or foot or eye, just what application would you ascribe to these expressions? I don’t mean to put words in the mouths of those who advocate eternal torture, but I think they would interpret these statements in a figurative, spiritualized sense. (It is the only alternative to a literal application). Thus, what Jesus is teaching is that if through some means what you do with your hands; where you go with your feet; or what you look upon with your eyes, should tempt you to sin, then mortify those members of the flesh, lest they bring you into condemnation and judgment.

The greater point to be made by this figurative application of this cutting off of hands and feet is that it virtually imposes a figurative application on the rest of the verse. At the very minimum it discounts an application promoting some far off eternal lake of fire where people are tortured for as long as God lives. So let us look at further parts of these verses, to see if we can interpret them in a unified way and not just extract portions of them to use for our theological convenience.

The consequence of not cutting off your hands or feet was to be cast into hell, having two hands and feet. The first problem with this statement (under the torture theory) is that this theory does not teach that “hands and feet”, (eyes, head, body, etc.) are sent to hell at death; only some immortal, invisible soul that does not have body members. The question is therefore, how do they want it: with body parts or with an immortal soul? You can’t have it both ways. That is no doubt why, these portions of verses are simply passed over and not specifically dealt with. If you just ignore the obvious questions which these verses pose to an eternal torture theory, and never address them, you can just go on to what you want it to say. The process seems to be that they simply do not analyze and explain what the expressions of “hands and feet, etc., are saying as if the scriptures are filled with needless refuse just to take up space. If it has the word “hell” in it, then it is simply assumed that there is an eternal fire for the wicked around it, facts to the contrary notwithstanding.

However we now know where the word hell comes from in these verses (valley of Hinnom) and this is that valley we spent so much preliminary work on, where we learned it was the site (and symbol) of the awful destruction foretold to come upon Jerusalem for forsaking God. A destruction that every knowledgeable student of Bible history knows occurred in 70 A.D. This was the time where they buried in Tophet til there was no place to bury; the time when dire famine made them eat their own children. Moreover it was the time when they dumped thousands upon thousands of bodies over the walls into the garbage dump of the valley of Hinnom, where the fires burning trash consumed them as so much more rubbish.

However we still have some further points to examine if we would prove our point that this “hell” represents the destruction of Jewish people in the valley of Hinnom. The verses also speak of a “fire that never shall be quenched”. “Where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched”. To consider this fire, let’s begin with verse 49, which is a part of the text. “For everyone shall be salted

with fire". When I suggest that the "fire" of these verses is figurative, then a collective roar of condemnation and ridicule is hurled at me. The audacity of implying that the fire of Mk. 9:43-49, is figurative and not literal. I simply respond with the question: "What, then, does it mean to be salted with fire"? Do you know of any time when anyone has been literally salted with fire? We not only have a figurative severing of hands, feet and eyes, but now we have a figurative fire. Does anyone dare interpret "salted with fire" in the literal, physical sense?

I truly do believe that this fire is unquenchable. There is not enough water in all the oceans to put it out. But to be unquenchable does not at all suggest that it's duration of burning will be throughout the ages of eternity! It simply means that it will not go out until it has finished its purpose. That purpose was not just the dumping of dead bodies of Jews into the valley of Hinnom. There were many who died in this event which were not dumped in this valley. Indeed, there were many who were not even killed and went on living somewhere. The valley of Hinnom was not just a horrible one-time event that ended when the Roman soldiers finished their carnage. In a much greater sense, the fire of rejection, desolation, being cast out and reduced to a hissing and a by word in the society of the world, was a fire that continued to burn down through the centuries, and still does until this day. That is the (figurative) fire judgments of God upon and unbelieving people.

A classic example of a fire that cannot be quenched and yet does not burn forever is the fire that destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Jude, V7, tells us that they suffered the vengeance of "eternal fire". They surely are not burning today. The eternal nature of the fire was unquenchable, unalterable and forever final. Note also that the fires of Sodom were literal fires, unlike the fires of Mk. 9, which we are considering. Is. 34:8-10, gives us a sense of the fires of Mk. 9. He speaks of fires of judgment, that could not be quenched, that would come upon the land of Zion. Is. 66:24, describes an unquenchable fire as the judgments upon the people who transgressed against God, and they shall be an abhorring to all flesh. In Jer. 17: 27, an unquenchable fire would be kindled in the gates of Jerusalem because of disobedience to God. There is no literal fire burning at the gates of Jerusalem, but a fire of rejection and separation from God has burned there since their rejection of Christ. Many more examples could be cited, all leading to the same conclusion.

Another expression we find in Mk. 9, that we need to consider, is this: "Where their worm dieth not". Recapture the overall picture we have been looking at. It is about cutting off our hand or feet, or being cast into the valley of Hinnom, in an unquenchable fire --- where their worm dieth not. What is this worm? If you look up the Greek from which it was translated, it will tell you it comes from the word smyrna. This, of itself, does not give you much help. If you trace smyrna further, you will find it comes from the meaning of bitter, or bitterness. If you connect bitterness with judgments upon God's people for rejection and idolatry, it makes some sense. Now, really, who ever heard of an undying worm? But a bitterness of soul, a lifelong travail resulting from the rejection of God and thereby the rejection by God, along with all of the other things that attend this rejection, fits the description of a "worm" that does not end. Otherwise --- just what shall we describe it as being. It is absolutely figurative. How else would you think of or describe "their worm". Just like the fire of judgments upon Israel for their rejection of God, so also the worm (bitterness) does not end either. It follows them throughout their life time. Again, it does not suggest something that lives on for as long as God does, but something that follows them for all of their existence, to the grave. Then when you realize that "hell" in these verses comes from "valley of Hinnom", the very place where thousands of Jews met their fate, you have, I believe, an overall picture of the eminent fate awaiting the entire Jewish nation. As you hear Christ speak these words, and you realize how keenly aware he was of the prophecies concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, with not one stone left upon another, in the valley of Hinnom, the garbage dump of the city with its fires burning the refuse; you are compelled to recognize the figurative usage of the fire, worm, and cutting off of hands and feet and eyes, you are inevitably brought to one conclusion: "Hell in Mk. 9, and elsewhere when translated from "valley of Hinnom", is a powerful reinforcement of the impending judgments upon the Jewish nation. It does not describe some "torture chamber" of an eternally burning fire in some distant location, where all the wicked burn for as long as God lives.

To be sure, eternal torture advocates will writhe and denounce this interpretation of these scriptures

with all kinds of anathema. To which I would respond, there is no other way to deal with the facts and figures contained in them. They figuratively portray the judgments on the Hebrew nation and the finality of it, which occurred in AD 70, with the overthrow and destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies. But even beyond that horrible destruction, was the judgment of a rejected people; an overthrown system of religion; a visitation of the outer darkness of separation from the commonwealth of God, and no hope of ever reuniting with him by way of their system of religious laws and animal sacrifices. They had trusted so completely in its validity and believed so strongly in its righteousness, and yet had so absolutely denied and crucified the fulfillment and end of that system through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. From that day until this, the Hebrew people have experienced an “unquenchable fire of rejection and the bitterness of their undying worm. The awful, magot filled garbage incineration of the “valley of Hinnom”, where thousands were thrown, gives vivid, awful testimony of the final, fateful end of a nation which had rejected their only hope of salvation, nailing him to a cross.

Today, as with every Gentile on earth, the Hebrew people have only one hope of redemption. That hope is in turning to Christ, by faith in his atoning work for their salvation and pardon. All of the predictions about a full restoration of the nation of Israel, (even animal sacrifices say some) along with the temple, etc., is a false hope. The chance for the salvation of any Jew is that they turn to the truth of the Bible as proclaimed through the Lord Jesus Christ. Apart from that, their lot is to wander in the blackness of darkness for all of their days.

There are many other verses of scripture using the word hell besides those in Mk. 9. We will turn to those in the next lesson.