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Do the Fires of Hell Come From God? (Part II)

Acts 3:23: (NASB) *And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.*



Several weeks ago, we began to talk about the destiny of sinners as described in the Bible. In Part I of our series, we looked at the biblical phrase *weeping and gnashing of teeth* - to whom it applied and when. We found out that it really has nothing at all to do with any kind of eternal punishment. Today in Part II, we will look at an even more pointed biblical phrase: hellfire. Where does it come from, how is it used and is it referring to eternal torment and torture?

There are two entirely different Greek words in the New Testament that must be examined relating to the teaching of eternal punishment. We will look at them one at a time and focus first on how Jesus used them, then we will focus on their wider biblical usage. Our objective will be to see how Jesus was maintaining the true meanings of the words. The first word for review is the Greek word *Gehenna*, which is most often translated "hellfire." The second word, *Hades*, will be featured in Part III of our series.

Here are the first two uses - we have three important questions to ask with each verse we look at: **Who is being spoken to? What have they done or could potentially do? What is the consequence of the thoughts, words or actions in question?**

Matthew 5:21-22: (NASB) *...and whoever says, Raca (you fool), shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell <1067>.* (Gehenna)

Jesus said by being verbally abusive to your brother, it is as if you murder his reputation. This goes beyond *Thou shalt not kill* in **Exodus 20:13**. John said the same: **1 John 3:14-15**: The phrase *Raca* or *you fool* is indicative of someone who hates his brother and is a Syriac word, expressive of great contempt. This is a high standard beyond literal murder.

Who is being spoken to? This is from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is speaking to his disciples, teaching them they are accountable for their words.

What have they done or could potentially do? Jesus is in the midst of elevating the principles of the Law and showing his followers how serious their words are in relation to their opportunity for eternal life. **Matthew 5:27-30**: This is very colorful picture language! It sounds like Jesus is talking about self-mutilation! Why would Jesus, the Great Healer, tell us to rip out our eyeballs?

Jesus is showing his followers how serious their secret thoughts and actions are in relation to their opportunity for eternal life. He explained there is a consequence if such thoughts are allowed. Thoughts can cause us to sin. **Psalms 19:13-14**

What is the consequence of the thoughts, words or actions in question? Gehenna!

Gehenna: Strongs #1067 *geena* (gheh'-en-nah); of Hebrew origin valley of (the son of) Hinnom; *ge-henna* (or *Ge-Hinnom*), a valley of Jerusalem

So *Gehenna* is the Valley of Hinnom - how does that help us? What happened there?

(Source: Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary) In the time of Jesus the Valley of Hinnom was used as the garbage dump of Jerusalem. Into it were thrown all the filth and garbage of the city, including the dead bodies of animals and executed criminals. To consume all this, fires burned constantly. Maggots worked in the filth. When the wind blew from that direction over the city, its awfulness was quite evident. At night wild dogs howled and gnashed their teeth as they fought over the garbage.

So, *Gehenna* was a garbage dump where refuse was continually burned. Is Jesus saying that if you speak slanderously of your brother or if you lust in your heart or act sinfully, your penalty is to be burned at the local dump? Was there something about this *particular* dump that made it worthy to be a specific example used by Jesus over and over again?

Jeremiah 19:2-6: Israel - God's chosen people (!) - at this particular time of Jeremiah, they worshipped idols, Baal particularly, and sacrificed their children in fire. They threw their children - alive - into the fire. God never fathomed such a heartless action! It is such a dark evil that had no sense of the value of life.

(Source: John Gill's Exposition of the Bible) *That this place shall no more be called Tophet: as it had been, from the beating of drums in it, that the cries and shrieks of infants burnt in the fire might not be*



heard by their parents: *Nor the valley of the son of Hinnom: which was its name in the times of Joshua, and long before it was called Tophet; but now it should have neither names.*

Because this place was the scene of such hideous behavior in the name of a false god, He would have nothing to do with it.

In our day, the drums beat very loudly to distract us from the moral degradation of our society around us.

So, the prophecy in Jeremiah was to show the deep and abiding results of sin. This valley had been the scene of child sacrifices to idols and God's judgment was sure - He would label this location as one of godless death, for that was how Israel had used it. When the people of Jesus' day heard the word *Gehenna*, they would have all known about that location. It is like telling someone today to "Google it!" We would know what you mean but those in Jesus' day would not.

(Source: Biblical commentary Jamieson, Fausset and Brown) *Valley of Slaughter: It should be the scene of slaughter, no longer of children, but of men; not of "innocents" (Jeremiah 19:4), but of those who richly deserved their fate. The city could not be assailed without first occupying the valley of Hinnom, in which was the only fountain: hence arose the violent battle there.*

To attack Jerusalem, one would come through this valley. The bloodiest battles outside of the city would take place there resulting in dead soldiers. It was literally a place of great slaughter - not only of children but of fighting men.

Jeremiah 19:7: Gehenna encompassed all that we have just discussed, as it first became a place of heinous idolatry with the live burning of children and then a place of death, defeat and dishonor - a place of FINAL and COMPLETE DESTRUCTION.

Mark 9:42-48: *Who is being spoken to?* Jesus is again speaking to his disciples. (Heads up! This means he is talking to us, so we need to pay attention...) He is *not* speaking to the "everybody else;" just his disciples.

What have they done or could potentially do? ⁴³*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell <1067>...*

Now we know why he used the word *Gehenna <1067>*, for at that very moment there was "unquenchable fire" in the garbage dump! His audience would know what he meant by using that metaphor. By his holding a child, (see Matthew 18:2 and Mark 9:37) they would know the history of that place and get the point he was trying to make.

What is the consequence of the thoughts, words or actions in question? What you do can bring you to the consequence of Gehenna! ⁴⁵*If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell <1067>...*

Joshua 23:6-8: The principle of this is for us to cling to the way of the Lord. Don't go wandering off contrary to His word and principles. How important this is! It is a matter of spiritual life and death for us to follow in His way and not our own.

Where you go can bring you to the consequence of Gehenna! ⁴⁷*If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell <1067>...*

Why does Jesus want us to enter the kingdom crippled and not whole and complete? MORE ON THAT SOON...

What you do can bring you to the consequence of Gehenna! But what is the consequence of Gehenna? Let's look at the worms in Verse 48. The "new" factor of undying worms in verse 48 actually sheds some light on this. (Actually, it's not so new...) Isaiah 66:24: This shows total destruction and dishonor.

This imagery of Gehenna is built upon a solid basis of Old Testament history - not on any imagined picture of anything related to torture, for the only torture in Gehenna was done as an *abhorrence* to God. The whole reason to focus on this valley was to see it as a symbol of disgrace and total defeat! IT IS A SYMBOL OF FINAL AND UTTER DESTRUCTION!



The fire of Gehenna was a picture of total destruction, disgrace and dishonor in the Jewish culture at that time. The spiritual application is that if we do not do what we should as followers of Jesus, we could be subject to that same disgrace and annihilation.

More of Jesus' teachings using the imagery of Gehenna: Matthew 10:28: (KJV) *And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to **destroy** <622> both soul and body in **hell** <1067>.*

One of the great theological debates is whether or not hell is a place where one lives on forever, either in eternal torment or eternal separation from God. Here Jesus used the word *destroy* in conjunction with *Gehenna*. Luke 12:4-5

Who is being spoken to? Jesus AGAIN speaks to his disciples, this time it is about courage. He teaches them not to fear the temporary consequences of death that men can inflict. They are going to go out and preach and will inevitably face opposition and even hostility. Jesus is giving them a lesson on living in an eternal perspective rather than a one human lifetime perspective. They were not to be afraid!

What is the consequence of the thoughts, words or actions in question? The consequence is a simple comparison between having your life taken by men and ending a temporary life or having your life taken by God and ending it eternally in FINAL DESTRUCTION! Revelation refers to this as the *second death*, from which there is no second resurrection.

Does the New Testament follow the Old in teaching about destruction? Matthew 10:28 uses a particular word in describing the consequence of Gehenna - *destroy* - what does this particular word mean?

Destroy: Strongs #622 *apollumi* (ap-ol'-loo-mee); to destroy fully (reflexively, to perish, or lose), literally or figuratively

If we look at other ways it is used, we can more easily figure out its meaning.

Some uses: Matthew 2:13: Obviously the meaning here is that of destruction, as Herod wanted to kill the children to end the possibility of a Messiah, not torment them alive. Matthew 5:29: Though picture language, the obvious meaning is again total destruction. Jesus is not telling people to literally pull out their eyeballs. When we want to figure out how Jesus approached a subject, we look at the pattern of his teaching. We look at his words, how he used them and how they fit into the overall picture. He used familiar illustrations to that time period. He used phrases like *fishers of men* to his fishermen Apostles and *sowing the seed of the Gospel* to those from an agricultural society. When referencing complete destruction, Jesus used Gehenna as an example, as this would be the place that best symbolized annihilation to his audience. Matthew 22:7: This is the parable of the marriage feast. Jesus' meaning is again the destruction of life. Matthew 26:52: This word <622> is all about dying - not torture!

All of these examples are exactly in line with the Old Testament perspective on destruction: Psalms 68:1-2: Another metaphor: Where does the wax go on a burning candle? It vanishes away. The wicked perish, just like wax melts before a fire.

Jesus DID use Gehenna as a stark and serious warning against the religious leaders of his time: Matthew 23:13-15: Jesus at this point is holding an innocent child (see Matthew 18:2 and Mark 9:37). That is pretty powerful because in talking about the responsibility to not stumble others and to respect their spiritual lives, he used the illustration of Gehenna where children had been brutally killed by fire. The live child is right there in front of them who Jesus is protecting physically and spiritually.

Who is being spoken to? Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees, giving them a lesson of responsibility and a lesson of influence and outlining the potential consequences of the misuse of these qualities. The Pharisees were spiritually accountable for their actions.

Jesus continues this hard lesson, as it is the Pharisees' last chance to accept him: Matthew 23:29-33: Throughout Jesus' ministry, we can see how his reaction towards the Pharisees had to change. He started out very gentle, answering questions with questions. He challenged their way of thinking. But by now, they had enough time to recognize him as their Messiah and to see his teachings were correct. He had to be forceful with them - how could they avoid total and irrevocable destruction with their actions and attitudes?



Consider religion today, specifically those in positions of teaching and oversight. The warning is also for them to not fall into those same traps. They must fulfill their spiritual responsibility given according to Scripture.

What have they done or could potentially do? At every turn, the Pharisees sought to discredit and disallow Jesus’ ministry. They saw him as a problem rather than a prophet and as a rival rather than a Redeemer. As a result, they led the people away towards sin instead of leading them towards their Savior.

What is the consequence of the thoughts, words or actions in question? The potential consequence of such godless actions would be Gehenna - a final and disgraceful destruction. (Notice Jesus never says that there is no way out for them, he just says that was their current trajectory - The Day of Judgment is all about the opportunity to change!)

The Apostle Paul was a persecutor of the church when he was known as Saul. We see what his trajectory was as Saul. He was very brutal to the Christians. **We have a contrast between Saul’s attitude and what Paul became:** Philippians 3:7-8: He took all the riches of his life and was willing to become “lame” and “crippled,” so to speak, to cut off and totally divorce himself from his past perceptions and actions. His contact with Jesus through a vision changed the path of his life. *Pluck out your eyes* - it changed what he saw; *cut off your hand* - it changed what he did; *cut off your foot* - the direction of his life was altered completely. The Apostle Paul is a perfect example of “walking into the kingdom lame.” In order to leave behind the wrong things, we have to cut them out of our lives. What a lesson!

One last teaching of Jesus where he uses Gehenna - sound familiar? Matthew 18:7-9:

We have now discussed every single instance when Jesus used the word Gehenna.

Observations of Jesus’ teachings regarding Gehenna:

- The imagery was meant to show what Gehenna was already known to symbolize - total and disgraceful destruction of those who were completely out of harmony with God.
- Jesus used this imagery primarily with his disciples as a potential and eternal consequence.
- Jesus used this imagery with other dramatic imagery (like cutting off hands, etc.) to show the seriousness of sin, just like the Apostle Paul illustrated how he cut things out of his life to get in line with Christ.
- Jesus used this imagery to warn the Pharisees, as they had knowledge and responsibility. They were spiritually accountable at that time, as they were in charge of the nation when Messiah arrived.
- Jesus never used this imagery to describe the average sinner’s path - only those who should have known better.

James 3:2-6: James uses Gehenna as an example of how our words can be destructive. The course of life can be spiritual and faithful or can turn to a completely destructive path. The context here again is to believers. Nowhere in Scripture is the word Gehenna used to describe the path of the vast majority of mankind. It is only to followers and those who were spiritually responsible at that time. If Jesus were trying to warn us of a burning fire of everlasting hell, surely he would have alerted the “everybody else” that they were destined for such an end. Some of us have more responsibility now. The application of judgment is now for some and later for others.

We ran out of space in this summary! For MUCH more on this topic, please subscribe to CQ Rewind Full Edition!

***So, do the fires of hell come from God?
For Jonathan and Rick (and Joy!) and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!***