

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
**I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
IN CHRIST JESUS.***

(Philippians 3:13-14 NASB)

#04-1037

Gehenna, Not Hell

April 8, 2010

As reported in issue #04-1035, April 5, 2010, *The Rich Man and Lazarus*, recently, I was driving down a country road when I saw a sign in front of a church building that read: "The party in hell has been cancelled due to the resurrection." This particular church is part of one of the major denominations that is well-known for its doctrine of hell as a place of torture for the lost, so I was not surprised by the reference to hell. What surprised me was the reference to a party in hell.

To begin, the word *hell* is of Saxon origin, being derived from the word *helan*, which has also been spelled *hele*, *helle*, *hell*, and *heile*. In its original form, it simply meant "to cover, conceal, and hide." Thus, the expression "to *hele* over a matter" meant "to cover it." Another Saxon derivation is the word *holl*, which refers to a cavern or to the unseen place of the dead, which, in turn, has led some commentators to state that the word *hell* refers to "hole," which means grave. Further, in my research, I discovered an interesting use of the word *hell* that referred to a lover taking his love into a "hell" (hidden place) to kiss her. Try telling the love of your life that you are going to take her to hell for a kiss!

Most would agree that these words have a rather benign meaning and, most definitely, do not conjure up a picture of literal fire tormenting people forever and ever and ever and ever, as some preachers emphasize. If everyone held to its benign meaning, then the word *hell* would be appropriate when referring to the grave or death, a state of unconsciousness where **the dead know nothing whatsoever** (Ecclesiastes 9:5 CV). However, this is obviously not the view held by most in our day.

It is not uncommon for words to take on new meanings as time progresses, and, without doubt, the word *hell* falls into this group. We see this in our day as so many people, especially Christians, see hell as something more in line with pagan thinking, if not straight out of pagan religions. Thus, the image conjured up in the mind of many when they read the word *hell* in the English translations is one of a grotesque place of fire and worms that torments human flesh endlessly as people scream for water to touch their lips to quench their thirst. But this same view is held by the secular world as well and is used in countless slang expressions and curses. Suffice it to say, according to its current usage, *hell* is never associated with a party, as if it were a pleasant experience, so the expression "the party in hell" makes no sense whatsoever; but then again, neither does the word *hell*.

The word *hell* is usually translated from the words *sheol*, *hades*, *tartarus*, and *gehenna*, which appear in Scripture 31 times, 11 times, 1 time, and 12 times, respectively. The King James Version translates these words into *hell* 54 times. Fortunately, many of the more modern translations have moved away from the word and retained the words *sheol*, *hades*, and *tartarus*, all of which refer to the unseen and not to a place of torture for the "living dead" (an oxymoron, i.e., contradictory terms). Unfortunately, the word *gehenna*, which is associated with judgment unto physical death, is most often translated as *hell*.

Obviously, I cannot explain these words in one issue. The eight chapters of Volume 2 of my book *The Purpose and Plan of the Eons* explain their meaning, as well as the meaning of death, so I refer you to these. Also, please see issue #03-0955, April 22, 2009, *The Gates of Hades (Unseen, Death)*. With this issue, I simply want to highlight the word *gehenna* in order to offer some insight into its meaning and to show that it has nothing to do with torturing the "living dead," that is, ones who are "alive in death" (again, an oxymoron).

First, 11 of the 12 references to *gehenna* are directly attributed to Jesus (Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). For example: **Yet whoever may be saying, 'Stupid!' shall be liable to the Gehenna of fire** (Matthew 5:22 CV). The twelfth citation is found in the book of James (3:6) in reference to the tongue.

Second, *gehenna* referred to a big garbage dump outside the city walls, south of Jerusalem, where refuse, including dead human bodies, especially those of criminals and beggars, were burned day and night and where worms consumed the organic matter, such as human flesh, that was not consumed by fire. It was a place of death, not a place of torment. The dead cannot be tormented, for they are dead! The dead know nothing! It was a literal place of death that all could see and smell as the smoke of its burning went up day and night. Thus, when He spoke of *the gehenna of fire*, Jesus referred to something that most Jews living in Jerusalem would have easily understood in a physical and literal sense.

Third, the Jews, particularly the devout ones, would have also understood the historical significance of this dump, for *gehenna* was synonymous with *the valley of Hinnom*. One of the worst chapters in the history of Israel was played out in *the valley of Ben-Hinnom* or *the valley of the sons of Hinnom* (Joshua 15:8; 18:16; 2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Nehemiah 11:30; Jeremiah 7:31, 32; 19:2, 6; 32:35) that led to severe judgment of God's people.

According to Joshua, the valley ran south of Jerusalem, marking the territories of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The *Dung Gate*, which was on the east side of Jerusalem, had a common sewer that ran to the brook *Kidron* and the valley of *Hinnom*. Within the valley of *Hinnom*, there was a place called *Topheth*, which means "a place that burns" (2 Kings 23:10; Isaiah 30:33; Jeremiah 7:31, 32 (twice), 19:6, 11, 12, 13, 14).

One of the lowest points in the history of Judah occurred at the high place called *Topheth* when God's people committed great acts of idolatry as they offered human sacrifices to the false gods of Baal and Molech (Jeremiah 7:30-31; 32:35). They had fallen away from the Lord by committing gross sin more in line with what would be expected of heathen nations. They were *idolatrous* and *apostate*. Consequently, the Lord spoke through Jeremiah of a pending slaughter of these idolatrous Jews.

(32) "Therefore, behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of the Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth because there is no other place. (33) And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky, and for the beasts of the earth; and no one will frighten them away." (Jeremiah 7:32-33 NASB)

Please take special note of the fact that the Lord referred to their dead bodies as food for the birds and the beasts. This was not a place of torment for so-called *living souls* but a place of dead bodies.

There is much more proof to make the point, but these few points are enough to make it clear that the valley of *Hinnom* signified the death of God's people, not the heathen nations; and when Jesus spoke of *gehenna*, He spoke to Jews, not to gentiles (the nations). In the context of Israel's apostate history, *gehenna* refers to the judgment of death and destruction due to moral corruption of the highest order, in the same vein as the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. They had failed miserably to obey God's law as given to them through Moses.

Consequently, when He walked among the Jews of that day, Jesus put His finger on the pulse of the condition of the Judahites. They were in danger of *the gehenna of fire*, which could be likened to capital punishment (judgment by death), because they had sunk to a low moral state in which they, as ones called of God through the fathers, refused to believe His word, which led them to profanely demand the death of God's Son. In 70 AD, they faced *the gehenna of fire* as Jerusalem was destroyed and many Jews were killed by the Romans. Contrary to the thinking of many Christians, the same destiny awaits the modern-day nation of Israel that has usurped Joseph's birthright and continues to reject Christ.

Gehenna is not the pagan concept of hell, and it is not a party; it is God's judgment of those who profanely turn from Him, and it speaks of physical death, not torture.

However, in spite of how horrific this might sound, it is actually good news. Those who suffer the fate of *gehenna* (i.e., death) will be raised from the dead at the second resurrection to face the lake of fire, a judgment of works, a purifying work that will ultimately lead to their reconciliation and restoration; all to the praise and glory of God. At the consummation of the eons, God the Father will be all in all new.