

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

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The Hinnom Valley and Jesus' Teaching on Final Punishment

To the south of the ancient city of Jerusalem a valley curved to the west that was first identified in Scripture as "the valley of the Son of Hinnom" (Joshua 15:8; 18:16). It is first mentioned as a landmark setting the boundaries of the territories of Judah and Benjamin. As time went on this valley would be associated with some of the most horrible acts of wickedness and serve as a figure and a name for eternal punishment itself.

Child Sacrifice in Topheth

In the days of kings of Judah the Hinnom Valley was the site of pagan idolatry where children were burned in sacrifice to idols (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 32:35). During the reign of Josiah he put this practice to an end when "he defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire to Molech" (2 Kings 23:10, NKJV). Part of this defilement probably involved spreading the burned bones of pagan priests there (2 Chronicles 34:1-7). From this point on the Hinnom Valley became an unclean place which Jeremiah 31:40 calls "the valley of the dead bodies and of the ashes." The name Topheth (or Tophet) was frequently associated with the valley (Jeremiah 7:31-32; 19:6, 11-14). This name signified either a place of pagan worship that was in the valley (Jeremiah 7:31), or an alternative name for the valley itself (Jeremiah 19:6). The Hebrew word Topheth means "place of burning" (Brown, Drivers, and Briggs' Lexicon of the Hebrew Old Testament). This association with uncleanness and burning eventually led to a connection between this place of sin and God's final punishment. Isaiah declared, "For Tophet was established of old, yes, for the king it is prepared. He has made it deep and large; its pyre is fire with much wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, kindles it" (Isaiah 30:33). Jeremiah uses a similar sense in prophesying the time when God's punishment would lead it to be called the "Valley of Slaughter" (Jeremiah 7:32; 19:6).

"The Gehenna of Fire"

From the Old to the New Testament the Hinnom Valley came to stand even more as a figure of final punishment in unquenchable fire. When Jesus spoke of eternal punishment, He used the term gehenna as the name of this place (Matthew 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). Gehenna is the Greek transliteration of the name for the Hinnom Valley. The prefix ge- means "valley" and henna means "of Hinnom." The New Testament teaches this as a place that one will be "cast into" (Matthew 5:29-30; 18:9; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). There both body and soul will be destroyed (Matthew 10:28) not in the sense of annihilation but destruction of any desirable state (cf. Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22). It is literally "the gehenna of fire" (Matthew 5:22; 18:9; Mark 9:47), a place of "unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43, 45). The wicked are "sons of gehenna" (Matthew 23:15) who will receive the "condemnation of gehenna" (Matthew 23:33). James, in speaking of the danger of the tongue described it as "set on fire by hell (gehenna)" (James 3:6).

The Name and the Valley

The name gehenna is not only a reference to the place of final punishment but a figure drawn from the valley outside the gates of Jerusalem. In modern times the Hinnom Valley holds the ruins of ancient tombs and some of it is filled with run-down older homes. It is clear that in New Testament times this was a place of fire, ashes, uncleanness, and (at times) dead bodies. It sat outside the gate known as "the dung gate" (Nehemiah 3:13-14; 12:31). The Old City gate fortified by Suleiman in 1538 that stands near the same location still bears this name. Commentators have probably gone too far in painting a picture of the valley as a virtual burning "landfill." While that picture cannot be documented, it is clear that this was a place of fire and refuse.

The Jewish teachers that wrote after the New Testament spoke of gehenna in much the same way that is seen in the New Testament. They used it for the name of the place of final punishment, but also for the valley outside of Jerusalem itself. While rabbinical writers held some fanciful beliefs about gehenna, they claimed that (even in their time) there were two palm trees in the Hinnom Valley and that smoke continually rose up from between them (Erubim 19a). Archaeologists Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron have discovered (and documented from other excavations) in the area outside of the first century walls a layer of debris from 6-10 meters thick in the area where the Kidron and the Hinnom come together ("The Jerusalem City-Dump in the Late Second Temple Period" ZDPV 119 (2003) 12-18). The association between an actual place and the state of eternal punishment in fire only makes sense if the two bore some similarities. In our time, if we compared something to Death Valley (located in eastern California) we would

hardly understand this as a figure of paradise. Jesus' use of this valley as a reference to final punishment offers a clear inference confirming that in His own day the Hinnom Valley was a place of filth and fire. This is what allowed it in the first century and beyond to serve as a suitable figure of eternal punishment in fire.

- Kyle Pope, in Faithful Sayings, 12/10/2023

HARVEST

In Genesis 8:22, after Noah emerged from the ark with his family, in the things that the Lord said to Himself we notice: "While the earth remains, Seedtime and harvest, And cold and heat, And summer and winter, And day and night Shall not cease." (Maybe the global warming doomsday predictors should study this, provided they can find the Bibles they discarded.) We note the cycle of farming stated here: "seedtime and harvest."

The farmer plows the soil and plants his seed in hope that he will realize a reward in the harvest of his crops. His plowing and planting come to fruition in a yield that blesses his life and others with the reward of his labor. Such in-gatherings of grain, vegetables and fruit provide the security that life can continue, and the heart is filled with gladness.

In Isaiah 9:3, we have: "You shall multiply the nation, You shall increase their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence As with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil." In Psalm 4:7, we have: "You have put gladness in my heart, More than when their grain and new wine abound."

Most references to the harvest in the Bible are positive, but there are some references to post-harvest threshing, winnowing and treading that are not. They are pictures of judgment.

Maybe the most important use of the harvest by inspired writers was to provide a picture God's judgment against evil. Concerning God's judgment against wicked behavior, Joel 3:13 says, "Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, tread, for the wine press is full; The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great." Heathen nations had oppressed His people; destruction will befall them as a result.

In the new covenant, spiritual Israel is gathered by the Lord. Those who refuse to hearken to God will be harvested also. Matthew 13:30 says, "... in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (cf. Revelation 14:17-20).

Concerning God's gathering of His people to reward them with salvation, the disciples were told, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest." (Matthew 9:37-38; cf. Luke 10:2; John 4:35). Consequently, following His resurrection, the specially chosen apostles of Christ were commissioned to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16). God gave these "ambassadors of Christ" the "ministry of reconciliation", wherein heaven's "appeal" through them enabled obedient believers to "be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). These were to be the redeemed that the Lord would gather unto Himself at the grand harvest. The harvest of souls that have obeyed the gospel directives belong to the Lord. They are gathered unto Him.

Again, the Lord used an agricultural comparison to illustrate the nature of His kingdom. In Mark 4:26-29, Jesus gave this parable:

"The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows-- how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The farmer is powerless to create the seed, create the ideal soil, or make the seed sprout and grow. He does have the power to harvest the crop in due time. Servants of the Lord benefit from the example of the farmer: they plant and they water, but it is "God who causes the growth." (1 Corinthians 3:7).

Whenever the seed of the kingdom is sown among men, it falls upon various kinds of hearts (See Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23; cf. Luke 8:4-8, 11-15). That sowing sets in motion a divinely appointed process whereby the outcome purposed by the Lord comes to fruition (cf. Isaiah 55:11), illustrated by planting seed and harvesting crops. The nature of the outcome is realized in the harvest.

For those who believe and obey the kingdom message, theirs is an inexhaustible abundance of blessings (John 4:35-38; Ephesians 1:3), both here and hereafter. Such is the ideal harvest!

- Gary Smalley

- * "If one first gives himself to the Lord, all other giving is pleasant!"
 - * "Having part time religion is like having part time work, it won't support you!"
 - * "Find your place in the sun; you won't burn!"
 - * "God gives food for every bird, but He does not throw it into its nest!"
 - * "If you can't stand the heat-- better make plans to avoid it!"
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What Must I Do To Be Saved?

HEAR THE GOSPEL

(Romans 10:14-17; John 20:30-31; Romans 1:15-17)

BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

(Acts 8:37; John 8:24; Hebrews 11:6)

REPENT OF PAST SINS

(Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; Acts 17:30)

CONFESS CHRIST

(Romans 10:9-10; Acts 8:37)

BE BAPTIZED

(Romans 6:3-4; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Acts 8:36-39; 1 Peter 3:21)

LIVE A FAITHFUL LIFE

(Revelation 2:10; 2 Peter 1:5-11; John 15:1-8; Hebrews 10:23-25)