

034: What Did Jesus Say About Hell? (based on Sermon #29 in the Life of Christ Series)

Have you ever heard a preacher say, “Jesus spoke more about Hell than He did about Heaven?”

- That statement is simply not true!
- The truth is that Jesus *never* talked about Hell — at least Hell as most evangelicals understand it, an unending place of torment.
- Granted, the King James Version of the Bible has Jesus using the word *Hell* fifteen times.
- The New King James has Him using it eleven times.
- Why the difference, and how can I make the claim that Jesus *never* talked about Hell?
- I will answer those questions in this study.

Jesus made some astounding statements in the Sermon on the Mount:

- I will read a few verses:
- Matt. 5:21-22 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”
- Matt. 5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.
- Matt. 5:30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

- Jesus warns in these verses that radical amputation is better than being cast into Hell. What does this mean?

We have established in previous studies that Jesus is not speaking to the lost about the prospect of becoming saved (regenerated).

- He is speaking to those who are saved about the prospect of becoming disciples in increasing measure.
- Indeed, His objective is to teach how believers qualify to inherit the kingdom of the heavens, the ruling realm of the Messianic kingdom.
- We know Jesus is talking to believers because ...
- 1. In Matt. 5:1-2 He is teaching His disciples; these men are already believers in an Old Testament sense.
- By extension this applies to us as well.
- We are disciples of disciples, going all the way back to the disciples of Jesus.
- Therefore, we are disciples of Christ Himself, so this teaching applies to us as well as to them.

2. In 5:3-12 He teaches how disciples should live if they would inherit the kingdom.

- Notice this random sampling of verses from the Beatitudes:
- Matt. 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Matt. 5:5 Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
- Matt. 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- These verses cannot be directed at unbelievers, because no one is saved by doing these things.
- To suggest that lost people can be saved by keeping the Beatitudes is to suggest that salvation is by works.

- We know the Bible teaches otherwise.

3. In 5:13-16 Jesus refers to disciples as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.”

- That description is certainly not true of unbelievers.
- 4. In 5:17-20 Jesus teaches His disciples that if they would qualify to enter (i.e., “inherit”) the kingdom, their righteous behavior must surpass that of the Pharisees — not merely outwardly conforming, but obeying inwardly as well, from the heart.
- If we are suggesting that Jesus is speaking to unbelievers about how to be saved then, once again, we have the problem of salvation by works.
- Yet, we know that initial salvation is by faith alone.
- Thus, we must conclude that this passage is instruction for believers in our Lord Jesus Christ about matters of sanctification and discipleship.
- Is Jesus, therefore, saying that some believers will go to Hell?

This passage has led some to conclude:

- a) that persistently sinning believers could lose their salvation and go to Hell (the Arminian view), or
- b) that one who lives like this was never saved in the first place (the Calvinist view), or
- c) that persistently sinning believers will spend a period of time (perhaps even the entire Millennium) in a hell-like place (the view of some kingdom teachers).
- But are any of these options valid?
- No, not given what we know about the Sermon on the Mount and the overall teaching of Scripture.
- That being the case, there must be another interpretation, and I hope to unravel that in this study.

Notice the word *hell* used in all three of the verses quoted earlier (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30).

- We have already established that Jesus is speaking with believers about matters of discipleship.
- That being the case, how does “Hell” factor into their future destiny?
- In order to correctly interpret this, it is important to first understand the two Greek words used by Jesus, translated *Hell* (in the King James Version).
- The Greek words are most important, because I am not convinced that either of them refers to what we think of as Hell.
- In my opinion, the English Bible translators should have simply transliterated these Greek words, using their actual place names rather than “interpreting” as *Hell*.

The first of the two words is Hades

- The Greek word *Hades* is used ten times in the New Testament.
- It was the realm of the dead in Greek mythology, associated with the Greek god of the the same name.
- To the Jews, *Hades* was the equivalent of *Sheol*, the Hebrew word used in the Old Testament for the grave.
- We know this because, in his sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2), Peter quotes from Ps. 16, where the psalmist refers to *Sheol*.
- But Peter uses the Greek word *Hades* in translation, referring to the same place.
- *Sheol* in the Old Testament was never a reference to Hell or a place of torment — though many English Bibles, including the KJV, did not hesitate to translate it *hell* on several occasions — nor did it include a realm called Paradise or Abraham’s bosom.

It was simply the grave, the place where the dead sleep while awaiting resurrection and judgment.

- According to scholar Philip Johnston:
- “Sheol means the underworld, the realm of the dead ... associated with worms, maggots and dust ...The term was frequently translated as ‘hell’ in the Authorized or King James Version. However, the Hebrew Bible never indicates any form of punishment after death, so this translation is inappropriate.”
- Regarding *Sheol*, the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* adds:
- “It means really the unseen world, the state or abode of the dead ... In its darkness, stillness, powerlessness, lack of knowledge and inactivity, it is a true abode of death; hence, is regarded by the living with shrinking, horror and dismay (Ps 39:13; Isa 38:17–19), though to the weary and troubled it may present the aspect of a welcome rest or sleep (Job 3:17–22; 14:12 f).”

So when Peter uses the Greek word *Hades*, he is merely using it as the Greek equivalent word for *Sheol* — the place of the dead as he understood it from the Hebrew.

- Peter is *not* referring to the Greek mythological concept of conscious souls either being tormented or enjoying Paradise.
- Interestingly, the apostle Paul used the word *Hades* only once, and John used it four times in the book of Revelation.
- In all five of those instances, *Hades* is coupled with *Death*, clearly illustrating the partnership of death and the grave that will ultimately be defeated by Jesus (through resurrection).
- Paul triumphantly proclaimed, “O *Death*, where is your sting? O *Hades*, where is your victory?” (1 Cor. 15:55).

- That brings us to the second Greek word translated *hell* in most English Bibles, including the King James and New King James Versions: Gehenna

Gehenna is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew term *Ge-Hinnom*, meaning Valley of Hinnom.

- Unlike Hades — the grave, which cannot be seen — Gehenna was a visible place outside the walls of Jerusalem that was known to the Jews.
- Gehenna is used twelve times in the New Testament, and the Hebrew equivalent is used thirteen times in the Old Testament.
- *Never* in the Old Testament does it refer to Hell and, as we shall see, neither does it in the New Testament.
- Other than one brief usage in the book of James — James 3:6, “The tongue is set on fire by Gehenna” — the word is used exclusively by Jesus in the Gospels.
- Thus, it is always used with a Jewish audience, never with Gentiles. (James is writing to Jewish believers).
- The word is used only with Jewish audiences, because only the Jews would have known about Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, seeing that it was a geographic location.
- We can easily conclude that Gehenna was used by Jesus and his half-brother James to refer to a temporary, earthly place of judgment, not a place of endless torment.

Before exploring the contexts where Jesus referred to Gehenna, it is important to understand the Old Testament history of the Valley of Hinnom.

- The Valley was located just outside the walls of Jerusalem and was sometimes called Tophet, because

Tophet was an area in the Valley where some heinous activities took place, giving it a shameful reputation.

- 2 Chron. 28:3 He (Ahaz) burned incense in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and burned his children in the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel.
- Ahaz, king of Judah, actually offered his children as a sacrifice to Molech in the Valley of Hinnom! His grandson Manasseh did the same.
- 2 Chron. 33:6 He (Manasseh) caused his sons to pass through the fire in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom; he practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft and sorcery, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger.

How horrible and despicable!

- Thankfully, Manasseh's grandson, good king Josiah, defiled the shrine of Tophet or Gehenna, so that it could never again be used for idolatry or the sacrificing of children.
- 2 Kings 23:10 He (Josiah) 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.
- God ultimately cursed the valley and designated it a mass grave where the slain inhabitants of Jerusalem would be buried.
- Jer. 7:30-32 "For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight," says the LORD ... "They have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart. Therefore behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "when it will no more be called Tophet, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter;

for they will bury in Tophet until there is no room." (See also Jer. 19:2-14).

By cursing the Valley of Hinnom in this manner, is God condemning the nation to unending Hell?

- No, He is pronouncing temporal judgment on the nation for her sins.
- This is the point in history when the valley changed its status from a place of idolatry to a place of shame, where refuse was thrown, including excrement, and offal, and even the bodies of criminals, those whom they wanted to desecrate and treat shamefully.
- When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, bodies of Jews were thrown in the newly-dubbed Valley of Slaughter.
- The same happened in AD 70, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.

The prophecy was fulfilled time after time again.

- Consequently, throughout Jewish history, up to the time of Christ, the Valley of Hinnom was known to the Jews as a garbage dump, identified as a place of humiliation and shame because of its awful history.
- Fires continually burned in Gehenna, slowly consuming the refuse, and thereby helping to control the overwhelming stench.
- The book of Isaiah mentions that Gehenna will also be a place of burning in the Millennium.
- Those who transgress against the Messianic king will receive the death penalty and be cast into Gehenna, which will be used as a temporal judgment.
- Isa. 66:23-24 It shall come to pass that from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me," says the LORD.

“And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched.”

The sight of Gehenna will serve as a warning and deterrent to those considering rebellion against Messiah.

- Incidentally, a dump such as this attracts flies and fly larvae, known as maggots (“worms”).
- The worm population never dies.
- The garbage is their perpetual breeding ground.
- Furthermore, the fires never go out.
- They are essential to burning up the gases produced by the natural process of bacterial decomposition.
- In the parallel text to Matt. 5, found in Mark 9, Jesus quotes Isa. 66:24 repeatedly.
- Mark 9:43-44 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell (Gehenna), into the fire that shall never be quenched—*where “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”*
- Mark 9:45-46 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell (Gehenna), into the fire that shall never be quenched—*where “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”*
- Mark 9:47-48 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell (Gehenna) fire—*where “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”*

Is Jesus using Gehenna as a metaphor for Hell, the lake of fire, the place of so-called unending punishment?

- No, rather, He is using Gehenna as a metaphor for the punishment (negative reward) of Israelites — and, by application, church-age believers — who persist in sinning.
- Instead of “entering into life” — a term that refers to millennial inheritance, as we saw in the previous study — those who do not live righteously will be ashamed, for they will not be rewarded.
- Again, Jesus is speaking metaphorically.
- He is not literally suggesting that sinning Israelites or church-age believers cut off a hand or foot or pluck out an eye to keep from sinning, lest they go to Hell.
- He is urging us to do whatever is necessary to live righteously so we can inherit a place of ruling in the coming kingdom rather than being consigned to Gehenna-like shame, which is the earthly realm of the kingdom, described in the Gospels as “outer darkness,” literally, “the darkness outside” (another metaphor).

The earthly realm of the kingdom will be relatively dark in contrast with the bright New Jerusalem, which has no natural light, for Jesus is its inherent light source.

- Those believers relegated outside the New Jerusalem will feel naked and ashamed, for they will not be in the presence of Jesus and will not have clothing of light (glorification).
- Unfaithful Jews will apparently be excluded from the promised land in the Millennium.
- They will have to live amongst the nations, which will be quite a stigma of shame.
- Gehenna is not referring to hell at all, despite the poor translation choices of Bible translators (including the KJV).

- By inserting the word *hell* for the Greek word *Gehenna* (which they should have transliterated), the Bible translators actually *interpreted* Scripture according to their theological beliefs.
- That is a serious violation of the rules of literal Bible translation.
- In so doing, they reshaped the thinking of generations of Christians thereafter.
- What a tragedy!

It is vital to remember, when interpreting passages such as the Sermon on the Mount, that Jesus is talking to believers, not to unbelievers.

- In fact, they are called “disciples,” those believers who have chosen to pay the high price of following Jesus. When that is kept in mind, these passages come alive and have tremendous practical applications.
- How are we to interpret these difficult passages about “radical amputation?”
- Matt. 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’
- 22 But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”

Notice the terms *raca* and *you fool*.

- They are terms of contempt and derision.
- Jesus warns that if you say, “Raca,” — which means “empty one” or “worthless person” — you will be judged by the council (the Sanhedrin).

- If you say, “You fool!” — which is the Greek word *moros*, from which we get our English word *moron* (the idea of calling someone dull or stupid (to be derogatory) — then you will go to Hell (Gehenna).
- It’s certainly not nice to call people these awful names contemptuously, but is Jesus really teaching that by using such language you will go to Hell?
- If *Hell* is here referring to the lake of fire, then Jesus is essentially saying this:
- “If you, in a burst of anger, call someone empty and worthless, you will face judgment by the Sanhedrin (that’s the council).
- But if you, in a burst of anger, call someone a moron, a stupid blockhead, you will face judgment in the lake of fire.”

Huh? That logic doesn’t register with me.

- Is the one term of contempt (*raca*) more contemptuous than the other (*moros*)? No!
- What makes more sense is if Jesus is referring to the same judgment in both cases for breaking God’s law.
- In other words, if you use derogatory terms when speaking to your brethren, you will be judged by the council, the Sanhedrin.
- If they deem it serious enough, you will face capital punishment, and your body will be thrown into the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna), a place of shame and regret.
- Jesus is using Gehenna as a metaphor for the shameful judgment that will come upon the Jews for living lawlessly and not repenting (which culminated in destruction by Rome in the year AD 70).

He is also using Gehenna as a metaphor for the shame a Christian will face at the Judgment Seat if they can't get victory over the sin of anger and hatred.

- Those who use contemptuous speech or have contemptuous thoughts in their heart toward another person are guilty of breaking God's law — *Exod. 20:13 You shall not murder.*
- That is, they are essentially spiritual murderers.
- Lawbreakers — according to Matt. 5:19 — will be *least* in the kingdom.
- As we learned in the previous study, that means they will not reign with Jesus in the New Jerusalem.
- Indeed, at the Judgment Seat their anger, hatred, and lack of love will be exposed, their works will burn up, and they will be ashamed — weeping and gnashing their teeth throughout the Millennium — consciously regretting their choices that led to a shameful verdict.

Another use of Hell/Gehenna is found in Matt 5:29-30:

- Matt. 5:27-30
- 27 You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not commit adultery."
- 28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
- 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.
- 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

The same principle applies as in the earlier verses.

- Those who lust in their heart and mind are guilty of breaking God's law — *Exod. 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.*
- That is, they are essentially spiritual adulterers.
- The prevailing attitude of many of Jesus' listeners was that mere conformity to the *letter* of the law was all God required.
- Jesus took the matter further, emphasizing conformity to the *spirit* of the law.
- Remember: Jesus is speaking to believers warning, "If you want to inherit the kingdom, then stop your sinning at any cost."
- You might have to practice radical amputation." The writer to the Hebrews put it this way:
- Heb. 12:1-2a Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus.

The phrase "causes you to sin" in these verses is the Greek word *skandalizo*, which means "to scandalize."

- It is the idea of "entrapping, causing to be tripped up or enticing to sin."
- Here's the idea: If your eye or hand cause you to stumble, take radical measures to control it!
- A commentator explains it this way: "If thy tablet offend thee, sell it. If thy smart phone offend thee, get thee a 'dumb' phone. If thy computer offend thee, secure it. If thy TV offend thee, cancel your service. If thy magazines offend thee, burn them. If thy e-books offend thee, delete them. If thy music offend thee, destroy it. If a website offends thee, block it."

- Whatever you must do to keep from stumbling and being enticed, do it, so that you can inherit the kingdom.
- Otherwise, at the Judgment Seat, the fire will try your works and reveal your secrets and — like the effect of Gehenna — you will be exposed and ashamed, sent to the darkness outside.
- In the parallel text (Mark 9:43-48, quoted earlier), it seems Jesus likens Gehenna fire to the Judgment Seat fire:

Mark 9:49 For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.

- To understand the metaphor, two facts are essential:
- Fact #1: In Matt. 5:16 Jesus refers to believers as “the salt of the earth.”
- Fact #2: Salt was to be added to the Old Testament grain offerings — *Lev. 2:13 Every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt..*
- What is the Application?
- As a believer, you are a *living* sacrifice (Rom. 12:1).
- One day the quality of your sacrificial offering will be judged.
- Your soul will be seasoned with salt — the “salt” of *fire* — and the fire will either reveal the beauty of your works (as gold, silver, precious stones) — or it will consume your works (as wood, hay, stubble).
- Thus, Jesus is reminding of the judgment to come and the need to prepare.

How is Gehenna Used in Other Contexts?

- Matt. 10:28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

- The context of Matt. 10 is not the Sermon on the Mount, but Jesus is once again talking with His disciples.
- That is clear in the context.
- He is now ratcheting up the pressure on these men, to help them prepare for coming judgment.
- As has already been demonstrated, Gehenna was a form of temporal, *physical* punishment.
- But at the Judgment Seat, Jesus will also judge the *soul* of believers.
- Indeed, that is the very purpose for the Judgment Seat!
- Thus, Jesus encourages His disciples to live righteously and not to fear man, for man can merely punish the body, whereas God recompenses both body and soul.

As mentioned earlier, Gehenna is also a metaphor for national judgment upon Israel for disobedience.

- From our historical perspective, that judgment came in AD 70, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple.
- But at the time of Christ’s ministry, the judgment was yet future and not known to the Jewish people.
- That is why He warned them of impending judgment for their disobedience if they did not repent.
- Because the Pharisees were the spiritual teachers of Israel, Jesus rebuked them harshly for leading the people astray.
- Matt. 23:13 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.
- Matt. 23:15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

- Matt. 23:33 Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?

What is Jesus saying?

- He is condemning them by essentially saying, “Pharisees, you are making Gehenna converts (i.e., *lawbreakers*), people of shame and reproach, worthy of judgment.
- You will be subject to Gehenna judgment! You will be *least* in the kingdom; your converts will be least also (5:19-20).”
- Tragically, these Pharisees and others like them who were living disobediently, did not take heed, and were later killed by the Romans and their bodies were dumped into the Valley of Hinnom.
- The prophecy was fulfilled. Israel was judged physically and temporally.

They will be judged spiritually by Jesus when they are resurrected.

- Commentator Joseph Dillow points out that the equating of Gehenna with unending conscious torment was first introduced a couple of centuries after Christ, in the Pseudepigrapha and the Mishnah, and later crept into the Talmud and other writings.
- He says, “No Jewish sources prior to the time of Christ associate Gehenna with eternal damnation.”
- The error made its way into the thinking of Jewish theologians in the Dark Ages, and, unfortunately, crept into Roman Catholicism and later the Reformation.
- Even English Scripture translations, starting with the King James Version of 1611, translated Gehenna as Hell, as the translators chose to look through the lens of their Reformation theology rather than literal translation.

- Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (published in 1667) also referred to Gehenna as Hell.
- The error has remained, largely unchallenged, ever since the Reformation!

Are we going to allow errors that crept into the church centuries after the time of Christ determine the meaning of Gehenna for us?

- Or should we define Gehenna based on the Old Testament and what would have been in the minds of Jesus and first century Jews?
- The answer should be obvious.
- I have heard it said that Jesus spoke more about Hell than He did about Heaven, but I am compelled to set the record straight.
- Jesus used the word *Gehenna* eleven times, and those references have nothing to do with Hell.
- He used the word *Hades* four times, and Hades is the equivalent of Sheol, which means “the grave.”
- In contrast, He used the word “heaven” one hundred fifteen times, many of those in reference to the kingdom of heaven.
- I would submit that the heart of the Savior is to prepare us for the heavenly ruling realm of His kingdom.
- Are you preparing for the kingdom?
- I challenge you to THINK ON THESE THINGS!