

Gehenna: Part One

Now we are heading toward the end of the story we find ourselves in. There are still some matters to consider, some large matters, but the end is near. It's a marvelous story that begins with God creating, with God creating us in his image, with God creating around us a garden of earthly delights and walking with us in the cool of the day. It's a story of catastrophe and deliverance, of flawed heroes and complicated villains, of magnificent victories and tragic defeats, of humanity wrestling with God, of God calling us to bless the nations, of desires run amuck and sacred romance, and then of God coming to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and launching a revolution of justice, peace and compassion. It's the story of forgiveness as the breath of God and of discovering God's Spirit within us. In short, it is the story of a God who is love.

And it's a marvelous story, except that as it's usually told it ends very, very badly with millions, perhaps billions, of people suffering excruciating torment forever in Hell. And of course how a story ends matters! In fact, it is how a story ends that determines whether it is a good story or a bad story. So when Jesus in Mark 9:42-50, says, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out," it's a bit disconcerting. But he goes on. "If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. 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 than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" And all of that is, to say the least, disconcerting. If you think about this text a bit, with its cutting off hands and feet and plucking out eyes, you will probably see it to be symbolic and hyperbolic. You will see that Jesus is again being very Eastern here, overstating his point dramatically to catch our attention.

But still if we wisely desist from cutting off hands and feet, and plucking out eyes, we still take Hell very, very literally, as a place where the worm never dies and the fire never goes out. We see it as Jonathan Edwards did in his classic sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," with its image of sinners dangling by a thread over the fires of Hell. And so we have this notion of a "loving" God who consigns millions, in fact, billions of people, to excruciating torment in Hell, unimaginable pain, blistering, peeling, broiling, baking in the fires of Hell, being consumed by maggots, forever and ever and ever—not just for a minute or so (though that would seem eternal), not just for ten minutes, or an hour, or a day, or a week, or a year, or ten years, but excruciating pain, torture beyond belief, forever and ever and ever—and then we are asked to trust this God. And so the story ends. Badly. Very badly. And if somehow you find solace in being in Heaven while the multitudes suffer in Hell, like living in the penthouse, knowing others, many others, are being tortured in the basement—really? Really? Somehow that makes the ending O.K.?

Could it be that there is something very, very wrong with the traditional church teaching on Hell? Could it be the fundamental mistake in the development of Christian thought

over the centuries? Could it be that this horrible and horrifying picture of God is the primary reason so many people today don't trust God? They can't. It defies everything they know about love. It, in fact, makes nonsense of love. Could this picture of God be the reason in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, under thinkers like Hume, Voltaire and Nietzsche, western civilization turned and stayed secular? Could this way of understanding God—an angry God with a hair-trigger temper—be the reason the historical church majors in minors all the time and divides over and over and over again over the smallest points of doctrine and practice? Or more darkly still, could it be that holocausts men perpetrate on one another owe something to the thought that the church's story, as it's traditionally told, ends in cosmic holocaust, so that some who believe in such a God find it easier to act that way themselves? And could it be that this picture of God keeps even us from completely letting go and trusting God?

All of this brings us to an understanding of Gehenna, the Greek word for Hell in Scripture. Wherever the English reads "Hell," a word originating in Old English from Old Norse, the Greek has "Gehenna." It shows up twelve times in the New Testament, three of those in the short text just referenced. Except for James 3:6 all the references are in Matthew, Mark and Luke as sayings of Jesus (Matthew 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). And there are other texts that speak of judgment, wrath, destruction, Tartarus, fire and the lake of fire and sulfur, most dramatically in the apocalyptic visions of John in Revelation. But the specific references to Hell or Gehenna are twelve in number. To repeat, three are in the one text previously referenced.

Gehenna, everyone should know but few do, refers to a specific geographic place. It's the name of the desolate Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem. It was the city garbage dump. For centuries it had been the garbage dump. In it huge piles of trash always smoldered. Centuries before, human sacrifices had been performed there. Children had been burned to death there in worship of Molech and Baal. Children of kings of Judah had met their fiery ends there that way (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). It was a dreadful, smoky, smelly, haunted place. Loathsome worms—maggots—bred in the mounds of filth. In the two centuries before Jesus, Gehenna had become the apocalyptic stock-in-trade for the destiny of the wicked. And Jesus picks up on this—it was a place often referenced by certain kinds of Pharisees—and says, Yes, the fate of the wicked is, in fact, like that! But it is you who are sons of Gehenna (Matthew 23:15) and it is you who will not escape ending up there (Matthew 23:33). And it is in this context that Jesus speaks of Gehenna.

Meanwhile, we are told in Scripture that God is love (1 John 4:7-16), and surely we could conclude that God fits Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8—that God is patient, not easily angered, always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. God's love never fails.

Or does it?

—Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.