

# 13 Death - Gehenna

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“Gehenna” in the New Testament conjures up two pictures in the minds of many:

- the place of eternal hellfire for the wicked, and
- the place of purgatory, where hellfire is endured for a time until admission to heaven.

Look in Mark 9:43 (and verses 45 and 47). In each case the Greek word translated ‘hell’ is Gehenna, and clearly we need to understand what it is talking about because it sounds as though it is referring to a place of eternal torment, and some people think that it is.

Long before the time of Christ, particularly in India and Persia, the idea existed of suffering by fire after death. It was familiar to Egyptian and later to the Greek and Roman minds. After Alexander the Great, Greek influences spread into Palestine and the Jews began to speculate about Gehenna and the underworld. It was gradually developed by the ‘Christian’ church, and at approximately 600 AD Gregory the Great formally expressed the doctrine of purgatory, where it was thought that men and women were said to undergo penal and purifying suffering after death before going on to heaven. Unbaptised adults were said to suffer the same fires of torment without hope or release - ‘hellfire’. Through the Middle Ages the fear of purgatory took firm hold of the popular mind.

*Taken from “Roman Catholicism”, by Loraine Boettner. Chapter 10*

Gehenna is the Greek form of the Hebrew ‘Ge Hinnom’, ‘the valley of Hinnom’. It is a valley just outside Jerusalem. Look in Joshua 15:8 and 18:16, and you will see the first two places where the place is referred to in the Bible.

Find the valley of Hinnom on a map, and then look at the following references to see some of the things that happened there:

- 2 Chronicles 28:3, in the reign of Ahaz, around 730 BC;
- 2 Chronicles 33:6, in the reign of Manasseh, around 660 BC;
- 2 Kings 23:10, in the reign of Josiah, around 630 BC - it is understood that he devoted the valley to the disposal of the city’s rubbish and sewage.



Jeremiah 7:31-33; Summarise what Jeremiah said about the place. What new name did he give to the valley?

“It became the receptacle of rubbish in general, and received the carcasses of men and beasts. To consume the rubbish and prevent pestilence, fires were kept perpetually burning in it. In the days of Jesus it was the highest mark of ignominy that the council of the Jews could inflict, to order a man to be buried in Gehenna.”

*The Jewish historian Josephus. “Wars of the Jews”, Book 6*

Jeremiah calls it “the valley of the dead bodies and of the ashes”, Jeremiah 31:40. His words were literally fulfilled in AD 70 when the Roman commander Titus surrounded Jerusalem, as Josephus says:

“Neither did any other city ever suffer such miseries, ... every day five hundred Jews ... were crucified before the wall of the city. (i.e. where the valley of Gehenna was.) ..their multitude was so great, that room was wanting for the crosses.” Later, “they had the great multitude of dead bodies cast down from the walls into the valleys beneath.” Through one gate alone, “115,880 dead bodies were carried out ... and cast out of the city.” “No fewer than 600,000 were thrown out at the gates.”

*Josephus. “Wars of the Jews”, Book 6*

This was the judgement on the Jews because they had rejected Jesus as their Messiah and “filled up the measure of their sins.” A dreadful literal fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prophecy.

Because the translators assumed that this valley of Gehenna meant ‘hellfire’, they translated the word as ‘hell’ without justification. The NIV is the same as the AV in this respect. They ought rather to have indicated that Jesus was referring to a specific place on earth, and let readers ponder the implied associations for themselves.

Note how Isaiah in around 700 BC had prophesied the destruction of Assyria in the days of king Hezekiah (compare Isaiah 37:33-38). The people of Israel must have had to dispose of the bodies and it seems likely that in order to avoid polluting their water supplies they will have used the valleys of Hinnom and perhaps Kidron for this purpose.



*The valley of Hinnom today, looking east.  
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Now go back to Mark chapter 9, read verses 42-50, and notice all the unusual expressions that occur, like ‘a millstone hanged about his neck’. Would you expect any of them to be taken absolutely literally?

Then read the passage again, and find out how differently it reads when you realise that it is referring to a real place. You could read ‘the rubbish tip’ instead of ‘hell’.