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Israel, The Law, and the Judgment of Gehenna

by – Charles Rutsch (Carmichael, CA)

Many Bible versions translate the Greek word *Geenna* as “hell” and thereby do their readers a grave disservice by confusing the word with the Hebrew word *Sh’ôl* and the Greek word *Hadēs* which they translate as *hell* also.

The Greek *Geenna* is a transliteration of the Hebrew *Ge Hinnom* which means “Valley of Hinnom.” *Gehenna* is the English transliteration of the Greek *Geenna*. *Gehenna* is a valley outside of Jerusalem and in the Old Testament was called “The Valley of the son of Hinnom.”

The story of *Gehenna* goes back to the days of the prophet Jeremiah. At that time *Gehenna* was a symbol of Judah’s idolatry, and the god *Molech* was worshiped there through the horrible practice of child sacrifice. God said that this was an abomination and it was one of the chief violations of the laws that were given to Israel.

COVENANT BETWEEN ISRAEL AND GOD

Soon after Israel left Egypt, Moses gave Israel the law which they were instructed to observe carefully. These laws constituted a covenant between Israel and God which lay before them either blessing or cursing. If the Israelites were faithful and obeyed, then they would be blessed with great bounty and goodness, victory over their enemies, and possession of the Promised Land. If they did not obey, then they would be cursed with famine, pestilence, disease, defeat at the hand of their enemies and loss of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 28). With these preliminary facts in mind, let’s go to Matthew 18:5-9:

*And whosoever should be receiving one such little child in My name is receiving Me. Yet whoever should be **snaring** one of these little ones who is believing in Me, it is expedient for him that a millstone requiring an ass to turn it may be hanged about his neck, and he should be sunk in the open ocean. Woe to the world because of **snares**! For it is a necessity for **snares** to be coming. Moreover, woe to that man through whom the **snare** is coming! Now, if your hand or your foot is **snaring** you, strike it off and cast it from you. Is it ideal for you to be entering into life maimed or lame, or, having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the **fire eonian**? And if your eye is **snaring** you, wrench it out and cast it from you. Is it ideal for you to be entering into life one-eyed, or, having two eyes, to be cast into the **Gehenna of fire**?*

Notice carefully the use of the words *snare* and *snaring*. If you follow the progression of this passage you will see that it is an individual who is a *snare* and then Jesus switches to figurative language in which a man who is a *snare* is figured by a *foot, hand or eye*. If an Israelite *snared* one of his brethren from believing in Jesus, then it was best for all concerned if that man had a millstone hanged about his neck and be cast into the sea. Such a man was a *snare* to his brothers and should be cut-off from among the people of Israel. This hearkens back to what Moses said about idolaters in Israel. If any Israelite worshiped a false god or tried to *snare* his brothers into worshiping a false god, then that man was to be cut-off from the people and put to death (Deuteronomy 13:5-11; 17:2-7). It would be better for that one man to die than for all of Israel to suf-

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- the proclamation of the riches of God's abundant, exceeding grace (Romans 5:20; 11:6; Ephesians 1:7);
- the affirmation of God's purpose to save all mankind through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (I Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11);
- the "preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began" (Romans 16:25);
- true freedom and liberty apart from law (Galatians 5:1);
- the organic nature of the church, the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12);
- the distinct message and ministry of Paul, the apostle to the nations (Romans 11:13);
- the importance of receiving all whom Christ has received (Romans 14-15);
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- the completeness of the believer in Christ (Colossians 2:10), with:
 - total freedom from sins (Colossians 1:14);
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GEHENNA (continued from front page)

fer the curses of the law because they were snared into worshipping false gods.

OUR LORD'S FIGURATIVE INSTRUCTIONS

No sane person has ever cut off his hand or plucked out his eyes to keep himself from going to *hell*. However, there is a literal truth behind our Lord's figurative instructions. When considering the passage above, think of all of Israel as *the body* and each Israelite as a member of that body. The *snare* (the Israelite trying to keep his brethren from following Jesus) in the body, whether he is an eye, a foot or a hand should be "struck off" lest the entire body of Israel experience the Gehenna of fire. This is the literal truth behind the figure.

The word "snare" is a translation of the Greek word *skandalon* from which we get our English word *scandal*. Here is a brief survey of how the word is used in the New Testament. Notice especially the first example in which we are told that, when Christ returns, all of the people who are snares and those who are doing lawlessness will be taken out of His kingdom:

The Son of Mankind shall be dispatching His messengers, and they shall be culling out of His kingdom all the snares and those doing lawlessness (Matthew 13:41).

Now I am entreating you, brethren, to be noting those who are making dissensions and snares beside the teaching which you learned, and avoid them, for such for our Lord Christ are not slaving, but for their own bowels, and through compliments and adulation are deluding the hearts of the innocent (Romans 16:17).

Now, being turned, He said to Peter, "Go away behind Me, Satan! A snare are you to Me, for you are not disposed to that which is of God, but that which is of men (Matthew 16:23).

According as it is written: Lo! I am laying in Zion a Stumbling Stone and a Snare Rock, and the one believing on Him shall not be disgraced (Romans 9:33).

By no means, then, should we still be judging one another, but rather decide this, not to place a stumbling block for a brother, or a snare (Ro-

mans 14:13).

Yet we are heralding Christ crucified, to Jews, indeed, a snare, yet to the nations stupidity (I Corinthians 1:23).

Now I, brethren, if I am still heralding circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? Consequently the snare of the cross of Christ has been nullified. Would that those who are raising you to insurrection struck themselves off also! (Galatians 5:11-12).

But I have a few things against you, that you have there those holding the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a snare before the sons of Israel, to be eating idol sacrifices, and to commit prostitution (Revelation 2:14).

THE JUDGMENT OF GEHENNA

But how should we understand Gehenna, its judgments and fires? Consider the following verses from Matthew 23:

Now woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are locking the kingdom of the heavens in front of men. For you are not entering, neither are you letting those entering to enter ... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are going about the sea and the dry land to make one proselyte, and whenever he may be becoming one, you are making him more than double a son of Gehenna than you are ... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are building the sepulchers of the prophets and adorning the tombs of the just, and you are saying, "If we were in the days of our fathers, we would not be participants with them in the blood of the prophets." So that you are testifying to yourselves that you are the sons of those who murder the prophets. And you! Fill full the measure of your fathers! Serpents! Progeny of vipers! How may you be fleeing from the judging of Gehenna? Therefore, lo! I am dispatching to you prophets and wise men and scribes. Of them, some you will be killing and crucifying, and of them, some you will be scourging in your synagogues and persecuting from city to city, so that on you should be coming all the just blood shed on the earth, from the blood of just Abel until the blood of Zechariah, son of ►

Berechiah, whom you murder between the temple and the altar. Verily, I am saying to you: All these things will be arriving on this generation. Jerusalem! Jerusalem! who are killing the prophets and pelting with stones those who have been dispatched to her! How many times do I want to assemble your children in the manner a hen is assembling her brood under her wings – and you will not! Lo! left is your house to you desolate (:13, 15, 29-38).

*Yet He, answering, said to them, “Are you not observing all these? Verily, I am saying to you, under no circumstances may a stone here be left on a stone, which shall not be **demolished** (Matthew 24:2).*

THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES WERE SNARES

We must first be clear that these particular words are *not* spoken to mankind in general. They are spoken to the Jewish throng, His disciples (Matthew 23:1), Jerusalem (:37), and those who killed the prophets (:34, 37). The Scribes and Pharisees are particularly singled out as the recipients of His wrath, for they sit on Moses’ seat (Matthew 23:2) and are “*locking the kingdom of the heavens in front of men*” (Matthew 23:13).

The Scribes and Pharisees were *snares*, trying to influence the Jewish people from believing in Jesus Christ. They are the sons of those who persecuted the prophets (:31), and bring to completion the transgressions of their fathers (:32, 35) such that the full consequences of those transgressions would fall upon the generation living in Jesus’ day (:36, 33, 38; 24:2). These consequences were described as the “*judgment of Gehenna*” (:33).

In using this term, the “*judgment of Gehenna*,” Jesus is bringing to mind what happened in Jeremiah’s day when the Babylonians turned Judah into a barren desolation. At that time, the transgressions of the law were epitomized by the sacrifice of children to the god Molech in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and that valley came to also epitomize the curses of the law as it became a vast dumping ground for the unburied corpses of the people of Jerusalem when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem.

The Scribes and Pharisees (and the Jewish People),

then, were the sons of these transgressors, and the sons of those who suffered the consequences of these transgressions. In this sense, they were the “*sons of Gehenna*,” and those who they proselytized were twice as bad as they were: “*double a son of Gehenna*” (Matthew 23:15). Their fathers had experienced the curses of the law in the past, especially as those curses of the law were felt in their full horrific measure in the valley of Gehenna during the Babylonian invasion, and the generation of Jesus’ day experienced the same consequences when the Romans destroyed Israel in 70AD.

VALLEY OF SLAUGHTER

It will be helpful to summarize what went on in the book of Jeremiah and the type of language that was used in order to aid us in our understanding of the judgment of Gehenna. Judah had turned from God and the law of the covenant (Jeremiah 1:16; 11:3) to the worship of other gods. Most egregious was the worship of the god Molech with child sacrifice (Jeremiah 7:31; 32:34-35). This abomination was focused in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom (Gehenna) (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:2-11).

Jeremiah called for repentance, a turning away from these transgressions of the law and a turning to the true and living God. If the people did not repent, then the curses of the covenant would fall upon them (Jeremiah 4:4; 11:3-8). These curses involved the invasion of Babylon and the desolation of Judah and Jerusalem. This invasion was spoken of figuratively as a fire that would desolate all of Judah. It would be a fire that would be “*not quenched*” (Jeremiah 4:4; 7:20; 17:27), burning man, beast, tree, field, fruit and the high places of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:20; 17:27).

Even if the people of Judah cried out for deliverance, God would not hear them and save them from these evils (Jeremiah 11:11,14). This evil would be unstoppable, “*unquenchable*” while in progress, and would run its course until completed. The Valley of the Son of Hinnom would become known as the “*Valley of Slaughter*” (Jeremiah 7:32; 19:6) for there the bodies of the slain would be cast until there was no longer any place to bury and their carcasses would become food for the fowl of the heavens, and the beasts of the field (Jeremiah 7:33; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20; Deuteronomy 28:26). The land of Judah would be an “*eonian waste*” which would last for 70 years (Jeremiah 25:9-11).

THE TREES REPRESENT THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND THE FRUIT REPRESENTS THEIR WORKS

With these facts in mind, let's continue our study in the New Testament:

Now, perceiving many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Progeny of vipers! Who intimates to you to be fleeing from the **impending indignation**? Produce, then, fruit worthy of repentance. And you should not be presuming to be saying among yourselves, 'For a father we have Abraham,' for I am saying to you that able is God, out of these stones to rouse children to Abraham. "Yet already the ax is lying at the root of the trees. Every tree, then, which is not producing ideal fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. For I, indeed, am baptizing you in water for repentance, yet He Who is coming after me is stronger than I, Whose sandals I am not competent to bear. He will be baptizing you in holy spirit and fire, Whose winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will be scouring His threshing floor, and will be gathering His grain into His barn, yet the chaff will He be burning up with **unextinguished fire** (Matthew 3:7).

In this passage the trees represent the Jewish people and the fruit represents their works. The "unextinguished fire" represents the "impending indignation" (Matthew 3:7) as it was poured out upon Israel in 70 AD, and/or as it will be poured out again during the time of the tribulation when the Lord returns and is similar in character to the *unquenched fires* when Babylon desolated the land of Judah.

Under the administration of law to which Israel was subject, snares and transgressors are liable to the curses and judgments of the law while repentance and "fruit worthy of repentance" is necessary to avoid these curses whether individually, or especially, collectively as a nation.

*And whosoever should be **snaring** one of these little ones who are believing in Me, ideal is it for him rather if a millstone requiring an ass to turn it were lying about his neck and he were cast into the sea. And if your hand should ever be **snaring** you, strike it off. It is ideal for you to be entering into life maimed, rather than, having two hands,*

*to come away into **Gehenna**, into the **unextinguished fire** where their **worm is not deceasing and the fire is not going out**. And if your foot should be **snaring** you, strike it off. For it is ideal for you to be entering into life maimed or lame, rather than, having two feet, to be cast into **Gehenna**, into the **unextinguished fire**, where their **worm is not deceasing and the fire is not going out**. And if your eye should be **snaring** you, cast it out. It is ideal for you to be entering into the kingdom of God one-eyed, rather than, having two eyes, to be cast into the **Gehenna of fire**, where their **worm is not deceasing and the fire is not going out**. For everyone will be salted with fire, and every sacrifice will be salted with salt (Mark 9:42-49).*

This passage has many similarities with the Matthew 18:5-9 passage. Note how the person who is a *snare* in :42 should be cut-off from the people and cast into the sea. Jesus then says that it is better for them to cut-off the part of their body that is *snaring* them, lest their entire body – *the entire body of the nation of Israel* – be cast into "unextinguished fire," the "Gehenna of fire," where their "worm is not deceasing and the fire is not going out" and this experience is set in contrast to "entering into the kingdom of God." The *unextinguished fire* recalls to mind the fire that is not quenched (Jeremiah 4:4; 7:20; 17:27) that burned all of the land of Judah when the Babylonians made it into a desolation. *The Romans did the same thing in 70 AD*. No matter how the Jews would cry out to God, they would not be heard (Jeremiah 11:14), and the fires of destruction would perform their evil work without being quenched.

CORPSES BEING FOOD FOR THE DOGS

The phrase, "their worm is not deceasing" brings to mind Jeremiah's pronouncements that their carcasses would be food for the fowl of the air and the beasts of the field (Jeremiah 7:33; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20; Deuteronomy 28:26). The Greek word for *deceasing* is not the usual word for dying. It's the word *teleutao* which means (1) to finish, bring to an end, close, (2) to have an end or close, come to an end. With respect to a person's death *teleutao* is viewed as the result of life's completion. The idea seems to be that there will be no end to the worms that will feed upon their corpses. To the Jew, who buried their dead immediately, and corpses were unclean, this would have been an abhorrent thought and brings to mind the curses of the law. ►

When God was particularly displeased with someone the judgment pronounced upon them might include their corpses being food for the dogs, or for the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. The reason why Jesus mentions worms (maggots) and not beasts and fowl as does Jeremiah, might be because it relates to the millennial kingdom as well, and during that time,

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock....They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord (Isaiah 65:25).

The only flesh eating creature might be maggots within the immediate area of Jerusalem during that time.

Here is a passage in Isaiah that speaks of the millennial kingdom:

*And it comes, according to the monthly quota in its month, and according to the sabbath quota in its sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before Me in Jerusalem," says Yahweh. And they fare forth and see the **corpses** of the mortals, the **transgressors against Me**, for their **worm shall not die**, and their **fire shall not be quenched**, and they become a repulsion to all flesh (Isaiah 66:23).*

CHILDREN WILL NO LONGER BE PUNISHED FOR THE SINS OF THEIR FATHERS

Notice that these are *corpses* and not living people that are objects of repulsion to all flesh. These people are *transgressors* (:24), they have violated the law such that they will be punished with death and will miss out on the blessings of the millennial kingdom. Please recall Matthew 13:41 which spoke of snares and transgressors taken out of the kingdom when Christ returns. Jeremiah says that when the new covenant goes into effect that children will no longer be punished for the sins of their fathers, but each will be put to death for their own sins (Jeremiah 31:29-30).

These transgressors will probably be people like Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11), and in judging them, Peter gives just a little picture of what it will be like in the kingdom when the 12 disciples sit on 12 thrones and rule/judge the 12 tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28, Luke 22:30). If this event had happened in the kingdom, no doubt Ananias and Sap-

phira would have been cast outside of Jerusalem into Gehenna without the dignity of a burial and their rotting corpses would have served as a warning of how the law will be applied to transgressors. In that day, transgressors will be swiftly cut-off from the land of Israel, which is something that ideally should have been done throughout Israel's long history. It's better for one transgressor to be cut-off and suffer the judgment of Gehenna than for the sin to spread throughout the entire nation and lead to the entire nation to suffering the judgment of Gehenna.

Matthew 5 addresses kingdom law, and a picture of how transgressors will be dealt with at that time is given:

*You hear that it was declared to the ancients, "You shall not murder." Yet whoever should be murdering shall be liable to the judging. Yet I am saying to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to the judging. Yet whoever may be saying to his brother, "Raka!" shall be liable to the Sanhedrin. Yet whoever may be saying, "Stupid!" shall be **liable to the Gehenna of fire** (:21).*

This is how justice will be dealt out in the future during the millennial kingdom when the Lord rules with an iron rod. At that time, one who is angry with his brother will be liable to judging.

Someone who takes his anger a step further and says "Raka" to his brother shall be dragged in front of the Sanhedrin for judgment. Moreover, someone who takes his anger an additional further step and says "Stupid" to his brother shall be liable to the Gehenna of fire, which is to say they will be killed and cut-off from Israel.

Such strict standards have never been put in practice in the past, but they will be put in practice in the future. The fire of Gehenna is not necessarily literal, but is a metaphor for destruction. The destruction in view could be the destruction of one transgressor or the desolation of the entire nation by invading armies as the case may be throughout the history of Israel. The fires of Gehenna can even represent any aspect of the curses of the law such as plague, drought and anti-Semitism.

Consider how James, in writing to the twelve tribes in the dispersion, uses the word Gehenna:

*Thus the tongue, also, is a little member and is grandiloquent. Lo! What amount of **fire** is kindling what amount of material! And the tongue is a **fire**, a world of injustice. The tongue is constituted among our members that which is **spotting the whole body**, and setting the **wheel of our lineage aflame**, and is set **aflame by Gehenna** (James 3:5).*

TEACHERS WILL BE SUBJECT TO GREATER JUDGMENT

Who does James have in mind when he speaks of “the wheel of **our lineage**”? Well, the lineage of the Jews of course, for that is to whom he addressed his epistle (1:1). Gehenna is a poignant picture of God’s wrath that has burned against the Jews whenever they violated the covenant of law that was given to them at Mount Sinai. Notice also how James pictures the tongue as one member that spots the whole body. James says that teachers will be subject to greater Judgment (3:1). The tongue of one man can lead astray (snare) the whole people of Israel (the whole body) such that they become subject to the flames of Gehenna (curses of the law), as it has occurred repeatedly in the past. In fact, even now, they suffer from the flames of persecution as they sojourn in foreign lands where they have been driven for their national sins.

Let’s address two more passages where Gehenna is used:

*Now I am saying to you, My friends, be not afraid of those who are killing the body and after this do not have anything more excessive that they can do. Now I shall be intimating to you of Whom you may be afraid: Be afraid of Him Who, **after killing**, has authority to be casting into **Gehenna**. Yea, I am saying to you, of this One be afraid! (Luke 12:4).*

And do not fear those who are killing the body, yet are not able to kill the soul. Yet be fearing Him, rather, Who is able to destroy the soul as well as the body in Gehenna (Matthew 10:28).

GEHENNA IS NOT WHERE THE LIVING ARE FOREVER TORMENTED

First of all, notice that it is “*after killing*” (Luke 12:5) that any are cast into Gehenna. The destruction of the body in Gehenna is not where the living are forever tormented, but rather where the full force of the curses of the law are demonstrated, where corpses of transgressors are thrown to rot and decay, and to be food for animal life in the full view of other people. Now we must ask ourselves, in what sense is the *soul* destroyed in Gehenna? Consider the following passages and observe how the destruction of the soul is addressed:

*He who is fond of father or mother above Me is not worthy of Me. And he who is fond of son or daughter above Me is not worthy of Me. And he who is not taking his cross and following after Me is not worthy of Me. He who is finding his soul will be destroying it, and he who **destroys his soul on My account** will be finding it (Matthew 10:37).*

*Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone is wanting to come after Me, let him renounce himself and pick up his cross and follow Me. For **who-soever may be wanting to save his soul shall be destroying it**. Yet whoever should be destroying his soul on My account shall be finding it” (Matthew 16:24).*

For what will a man be benefited, if he should ever be gaining the whole world, yet be forfeiting his soul? Or what will a man be giving in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Mankind is about to be coming in the glory of His Father, with His messengers, and then He will be paying each in accord with his practice (Mark 8:34-38; Luke 17:32-33).

He who is fond of his soul is destroying it, and he who is hating his soul in this world, shall be guarding it for life eonian. “If anyone should be serving Me, let him be following Me, and where I am, there My servant also shall be. And if anyone should be serving Me, the Father shall be honoring him” (John 12:25).

The “*soul*” speaks of consciousness, sensation, emotion, etc. Those who seek to save their soul, are those who seek to live for their own pleasure in this life, ►

or who seek to preserve it rather than being a martyr for Christ. Those who hate their soul in this life and *destroy* their soul in this life, either by denying themselves the pleasures of the flesh or who go all the way and lay down their soul in death for the cause of Christ, will be guarding their soul for life eonian. They will rule and reign with Christ in the eons to come and their soul will enjoy the pleasures and joys of the coming kingdom. Those who are presently fond of their soul, will miss out on the joys and pleasures of the coming kingdom for they will be in death.

VIEWED IN THE CONTEXT OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY

The judgment of Gehenna should be viewed in the context of Israel's history both past and future. It should especially be viewed in the context of the yoke of the law which promised curses and death for transgressors. If the whole nation was in transgression then the whole nation was subject to the curses. If one person was in transgression, especially if that transgression was idolatry, then that person was to be cut off from the nation and killed so that the whole nation did not become snared into transgression. Peter, in quoting Moses, said that any Israelite who did not listen to Jesus was to be cut-off from among the people of Israel (Acts 3:23). Certainly, it would have been ideal for Israel throughout history if those who snared their fellow Israelites into idolatry, and if those who snared

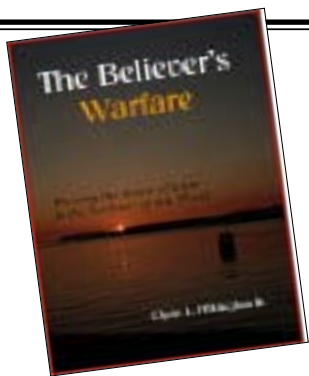
their fellow Israelites from believing in Jesus had been cut-off from the nation so that the entire nation did not have to endure the judgment of Gehenna.

In the future, when Christ rules with a rod of iron, the nation as a whole will be blessed under Christ's Reign, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which will enable the nation to keep the law and the entire nation will no longer be subject to the judgment of Gehenna. However, there will be selected individuals in Israel like Ananias and Sapphira who will transgress the law from time to time and their judgment will serve as a warning to others.

Wherever you have law in effect, you have the curses of the law (Galatians 3:10) which are sure to follow, and even though the whole nation of Israel will not experience those curses during the millennium, individual snares and transgressors will experience those curses in the "*judgment of Gehenna*."

WE ARE NOT UNDER LAW

As members of the body of Christ, we can be thankful that we are not under law (and the curses of the law) but under grace, and in faith can reckon ourselves as being already dead (and freed from law) and living to God in Christ Jesus.



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