

THE VALLEY OF HELL

Dr. George O. Wood

The sermon announced in the bulletin today, the title, was drawn up before I left and I planned on continuing to preach from the gospel of Luke when I returned. However I had an experience this week that was so strong. As I reflected and prayed about it, I decided to put that message aside until next week, if the Lord willing, and give this message instead.

Just reading a brief word from the gospel from Luke 12:5. Jesus says, “I will show you who to fear. Fear him who after the killing of the body has power to throw you into hell [or into Gehenna].”

I want to speak this morning on the subject of “The Valley of Hell.” On Monday I walked through the Valley of Hell. Gehenna it is called in the Old Testament. It derives all the way back to the book of Judges where the Valley of Hinnom lying on the western side of old Jerusalem became the dividing place, a boundary, between the tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin. Hinnom had some practices occur in it, later in Israel’s history during the time of the divided kingdom when Ahaz and Manasseh who were the father and son respectively of Hezekiah offered their own sons, future kings of Israel, in sacrifice to the god Molech – the sacrifice of fire.

In the New Testament this valley is known to us as Gehenna in the Greek. Meaning Valley of Hinnom. Jesus uses the word for “hell” eleven times meaning Gehenna. There are other words for hell. But this one in particular, Gehenna, which is used in the passage I just read, means the Valley of Hinnom. It is used in one other case in the New Testament in the book of James where it describes the tongue that is set on fire by hell – that is the person who has uncontrollable speech. Jesus used this Valley of Ge-Hinnom or Gehenna as a fitting symbol or representation of hell.

Actually Jerusalem is naturally defensible by three valleys – two of which are major. All the times that Jerusalem has fallen in past history, which are many, it has fallen by invasions from the north because there is no natural valley to protect the city on its north.

But on the western side of the old city of Jerusalem there is the Valley of Hinnom beginning in the approximate area of the Jopha gate and running on down in a southerly direction until it turns southeast to hook into Kidron Valley, which runs along the eastern side of old Jerusalem. The Kidron valley dividing the temple area from Gethsemane and the Mount of Olives. The Kidron in turn runs south all the way to the Dead Sea but it hooks into the Valley of Hinnom at a point south of David’s old city.

In between those two valleys is a small valley largely covered over with the debris of years which currently is not really important in the defense of the two.

In biblical days Jerusalem was a very small place. The city of David had probably less than ten acres until Solomon expanded the city to include the Temple Mound, Mount Moriah.

Jesus, taking the geography of Jerusalem and having a thorough knowledge of what happened historically in the Valley of Hinnom or Gahanna, uses it as a symbol of hell. This week on

THE VALLEY OF HELL

Monday, while I was on a walking tour of the first temple Jerusalem, which is the Jerusalem in time of David and Solomon, reviewing the archeological sites that had been unearthed from that time, we walked through the Valley of Hinnom. Although I have been Jerusalem four times I had not walked through the Valley of Hinnom before. Our guide had a continual irreverent habit of referring to the about fifteen of us on the tour as saying “How does it feel? You’re walking the Valley of Hell.” Every time he said that I reflected upon the information he was giving us about what had happened in this valley as well as adding to it my own knowledge of information that the scripture provides as to what occurred in this valley.

From a consideration of those things, both the guide’s remarks and the scripture, I came to the conclusion that Jesus had five good reasons for identifying this valley as a symbol of hell. When we talk about hell we must avoid the error that hell is simply something that is reserved for the eternal state. For hell is much like the concept of God’s kingdom. The kingdom of God is both the future reign of Christ and the present reign of Christ. In the future reign of Christ the kingdom of God is over all. And all will bow the knee and confess that he is Lord. But presently the kingdom of God is within you. And the kingdom of God is in the now. And it embraces all those who have put their faith in the Lord Jesus and accepted his rule as Lord in your life.

The same way with hell. Hell is both future and it is present. For one doesn’t suddenly wind up in the latter days in hell. One in his own life is walking through hell to ultimately wind up in hell. Even as one now is walking in the kingdom of God if you are to be in the kingdom of God in the future. Theologians would call this the existential and the eschatological definitions. Existential in that the kingdom of God and hell is now. Eschatological referring to the future meaning that it is also then. It’s both – now and then. When we look at the Valley of Hell we see how it applies in Jesus’ thinking to these dimensions of thought – hell as both present in human experience now represented in what happened in that valley. And hell as future when those without the Lord who have not feared him in life are placed.

The five usages for hell are as follows.

First, the Valley of Hinnom was a place where temples were built to pagan gods. The practice has its roots in the days of Solomon. Solomon himself built no temples in the Valley of Hinnom but he did do something, which ultimately cultivated the development of temples there. For in order to consolidate his kingdom, he married many foreign wives. His father David had been a warrior and a conqueror. He had not ruled his territories by means of his diplomatic prowess but in light of his military skill. Solomon was the opposite. He fights no major battles. He extends Israel as it was never extended either before him or after him by means of diplomacy. One of the lynch pins of his policy was that he extended his territories through intermarrying himself through various daughters of kings in various areas. He ultimately had 700 wives and 300 concubines whom he housed on a hill that is still called today the Hill of Evil Counsel, which by the way during the British mandate (the British mandate did not have a knowledge of history at that time) placed their headquarters on the Hill of Evil Counsel. And the UN later followed them and their headquarters is on the Hill of Evil Counsel. And that of course is a joke in Israel.

Solomon introduced the worship of the god Molech, the detestable god of the Ammonites. He introduced the worship of Chemosh, the god of the Moabites. And other gods. What he was doing was cementing his alliances so that other kings would not want to risk coming in on Solomon’s territory if their daughters were held, in effect, captive in Solomon’s territory.

THE VALLEY OF HELL

What Solomon's plan of administration results in is that he became a two-sided person. On the one hand he is attempting to please God by building on Mount Moriah the temple and fortifying and extending the city of his father Jerusalem. But on the other hand he chose to solidify his political position by entering into alliances cemented by weddings. He shows therefore the character of the person who serves God with a split personality. Partly trying to please God and partly trying to go it his own way. The effect of this policy in Solomon's life is not seen so much in his own lifetime but there are two devastating effects that happen long range because of his compromises.

The first devastating effect is that upon his death his kingdom is severed in two. Ten tribes go north and two tribes become Judah. The second effect is not seen until 250-300 years later when Ahaz and Manasseh the father and son of Hezekiah offer their own sons, the future kings of Israel, in sacrifice of fire to the god Molech in the Valley of Hinnom.

What Solomon's actions suggest to us is that the long-range result of compromise may not be seen within our own lifetime. The long-range result of compromise may not be seen even in the year we made the compromise. But ultimately sin will reveal itself as sin. And it will produce a seed that is bitter. And Solomon's attempt to compromise by introducing foreign gods meant that within a couple hundred years those temples to the foreign gods were located in a valley where his own descendants were being offered by fire.

The effect therefore in our attachment to the things that are not of God likewise may not be seen this year or even within our generation. It may take several generations to show up. But show up it will.

As I strode the Valley of Hinnom Monday I thought what contemporary analogy do we have for Christians in the west, for this congregation. We are not physically building pagan temples. Is it possible that there are other ways we let pagan influences into our home which in our generation do not seem to have a great debilitating effect upon us but will have in generations to come. One of the things that immediately came to me was the easy access through video cassettes and through cable networks of the stream of R and X-rated material that is flooding into the homes of even Christians in our day. Who would not think twice about going to a place where those materials are shown but who would welcome it into their home in the dead of night. That kind of a thing is ultimately going to produce its impact upon the life of the family and upon the generations that are to come.

There are perhaps many other illustrations that can be given over what compromises produce. But when you look at Jesus' ministry you will never find Jesus teaching in the Valley of Hinnom. He does not teach in the valley of compromise. In the valley of gods that are alien to him, of spirits that do not do his will. He teaches instead on the slopes of the Kidron, on Mt. Olivet. Or on the temple mound to the west of the Kidron. There is where his teaching takes place. You will not find Jesus in Hinnom, the place of compromise, the place where we select our way and do it our way rather than God's way.

The second meaning for the Valley of Hell in history is that it became a place of child sacrifice.

One blanches at the vivid scenery that comes to mind as you walk Hinnom to realize that here on the sides of Hinnom there were once metal gods of Chemosh who held out their brazen metal

THE VALLEY OF HELL

arms, warmed red hot by the fires belching out of their stomach, onto which the children of Israel and the kings of Israel handed over their own sons to be burned in the fire.

The scene is awesome to our ears and foreign to our western mentality that people would do that to their own children. It suggests a people who had two kinds of instincts. One an unnatural view of God that sees him as a threatening, mean and angry God who needs to be appeased. Unfortunately there are many believers who have not yet experienced in your own life the God of love and the God of Calvary who so loves the world.

If God is angry and cannot be reconciled to us then we will do a second kind of reaction and that is offer someone else up to save our own skin. Here we are right back to western thinking. Because while we do not offer our children in child sacrifice we nevertheless in our society make choices which place materialism above people, which place things above family, which place ego above concern for someone else. We live in the era of ourselves being number one. No one else is as important as I in the ego centered philosophy of our day. The spirit of this philosophy is it matters not who is hurt as long as I am protected, as long as I have my skin. The theological essence of abortion is rooted in this concept that the sacrifice of a living one is more important for the salvation for our own self interest so we ourselves have in our society a form of sacrifice. But it extends beyond this issue to the whole issue of the neglect of children, the verbal and physical abuse of children, the lack of love and support and praise within the family. The putting job and occupation and career ahead of people and family and the body of Christ until we wind up with these truncated values, these split values that do not produce in us the mind of Christ.

Hell therefore becomes a place where we sacrifice others and not ourselves. It is a place where the family is torn apart and it is a place where relationships are torn apart. That description of hell holds for now and it holds for the age to come.

A third use of the Valley of Hell is it served as a burial place for foreigners.

This is in real contrast to the historical situation of burial in Jerusalem. To the Near Eastern people it is important to contemplate where you are going to be buried. If you visit Jerusalem today you will see on the slopes on the Kidron both the western slope and the eastern slope thousands and thousands and thousands of tombs. All around the eastern slope of Olivet where Jesus gave his teaching on the future and walked from Bethany in the triumphal entry, all over Olivet there are Jewish tombs. On the western side, on the southern side, on the eastern side of Olivet it is ringed with tombs. One only has to pick up the Jerusalem Post English edition everyday to see that there are some important prominent person within the Jewish community rabbi or leader who has been buried at night on Olivet.

Why Olivet? Because in Joel 3 it describes the fact that there will come a day when God will judge the nations. And his judgement will begin in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, which is simply another name for the Valley of Kidron. So those who are buried on Olivet say, We're going to get in first on the action. If Messiah is going to come first there, we will be the first to rise before the rest of the stream of mankind and we want to be buried there.

On the other hand the Muslims are buried on the western side of the Kidron. All along the vast hill area beneath the eastern gate which has been blocked for centuries. The reason why it was blocked was the Muslims knew that in Muslim tradition the great Imam, in Jewish tradition the Messiah and in Christian tradition Jesus would some day according to each of those traditions

THE VALLEY OF HELL

come and enter in triumph to Jerusalem through that gate. So they blocked it up. So only the true Imam could come through. And so that no pretending Jewish Messiah could come through the gate, they placed a cemetery at its foot because no Jewish Messiah would allow himself to be defiled by contact with the dead. It's a very neat artifice.

You will not find Muslims or Jews buried in Hinnom either then or today. It was a burial place of foreigners. Why is this important? It's important because it results from the lifestyle of someone living in the land who knows and has heard of the fact that God spoke to his people through Abraham, through Moses, through the prophets and finally last of all through Jesus. And elects after hearing all of that message to yet reject it and say let my death not be the death of the righteous. Let me even in my death be separated from the community of God. Let my rest be different from theirs. So that the person buried in Hinnom is assuming the philosophy of life that says Death cancels all plans. That's it.

There are many living within our society today who have that same attitude toward life and toward death. Who isolate themselves from God's people now and who at the end of time will be isolated as well.

The fourth use of the Valley of Hinnom and this derives from Jesus' day is that it served as the town dump. It was where garbage was placed. Jesus refers to Gehenna as a place where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. Because worms/maggots breed in garbage. And because continually in the vast dump of Jerusalem it was on fire to incinerate it to ashes. You can poke along if you want pottery shards from biblical times. Go through Hinnom and you can find all the pottery shards you want free. Just scoop them up. It was a dump. People cast their broken pottery.

What is Jesus then doing by naming this valley as a symbol of the eternal state? He is saying that what starts out as dedicated to foreign gods and continues with child sacrifice and goes to be a burial place for foreigners naturally winds up as a useless place, a town dump. From Jesus' point of view the dump represented the one place in Jerusalem where there was no future.

And there is no view when you get deep into Hinnom. As you are walking south into Hinnom and you get to the area where it begins to fork southeast toward the Kidron you look up and on your left is the vast hill and you cannot see what is on top of that hill. Actually on top and over the hill is the temple mount, the church of the holy sepulcher, meaning the place where God was worshipped in the Old Testament and the place of Calvary in the New Testament. But you have no view from Hinnom. You cannot see that. Whereas when you're in the Kidron you can look up and you can see the temple on one side or you can see the Mount of Olives on the other.

Jesus is using Gehenna to symbolize the fact that hell both now and then is a place where there is no view, no future, no hope. One is cut off from the means that give us hope and salvation. That's what Hinnom is all about. So a place with no view.

An indeed people who find themselves in Hinnom the deep dump of drug addiction, of pornography, of self absorption, of ego-centered living, find that they have lost the great view of life. They have lost the view of a temple where a sacrifice speaks of a coming of the Lamb of God. They have lost the view of Calvary where Christ lay down his life for our sins. They've lost the view of Golgotha where Jesus next to Golgotha was risen from the dead. In hell there is no view, no perspective because it is a deep chasm.

THE VALLEY OF HELL

Finally the Valley of Hinnom is a place where betrayal leads. I'd not realized this about Hinnom until I walked it on Monday. As we came to the end of Hinnom just before it connects up with the Kidron I saw a sign. It said in the Aramaic, Field of Blood. It is the sight where the high priest with Judas' 30 pieces of silver purchased the potter's field. It was the end of Judas' betrayal. How fitting from an historical point of view, the last thing that Hinnom is put to is that it becomes the place, which the betrayer buys. Jesus has given us an invitation, Come and follow me. We elect in our own life whether we will make him Lord and be true to that call. Or whether we will betray him. It brings new meaning to the early church's phrase in Acts 1:25 that "Judas after betraying Jesus turned aside to go to his own place."

His place. At the end of Hinnom.

The Valley of Hell is not meant to be a place where we should dwell. Not meant to be a place in which we should stay by betraying the Lord or one another or ourselves. The implications of the uses of the Valley of Hell lead to five affirmative statements. One is that we must make the choice to serve the Lord only. That in Hinnom there are pagan temples. We must in our own life choose which God we will serve whether we with our whole heart will serve the Lord. Hinnom is the place, which reminds us that our service and love toward family and others comes ahead of our own self-interest. Not what I wish to do nor where I wish to go. But thy way O Lord. It is a laying aside of the self-centered life and a putting on of a life that is centered in surrender and in the cross and in sacrifice. We are called with Jesus to follow him in his steps and give ourselves up for him and for one another.

Hinnom is thirdly a place where we are reminded to live with the knowledge that there is life beyond the grave. Those who elect to live in Hinnom die in Hinnom. But God's grace can pluck us out of the burial place of foreigners and make us no longer strangers and aliens isolated from the covenants and the promises. But joint heir with God in Christ. Paul says he who is a Jew is one who has the faith of Abraham. And that faith in the Lord constitutes belonging to him.

Hinnom suggests to us fourthly to be in both places in our life where God's work is visible. To stay close to the scriptures and to open them and let them feed our heart. To stay close to the church and in it in servicing. To stay close in prayer. To stay close to the things which feed our spiritual life. And not get locked away from Calvary. Not get locked away from God's work and his people.

And finally hell reminds us to keep true to the Lord. That those who are not true betray him. And ultimately others and ultimately themselves. But the Lord says to us in the words of the gospel song to I think breathe this prayer upon our own lips. Keep me true, Lord Jesus. Keep me true. There's a race that I must run. There are victories to be won. Give me power every hour. To be true.

Father, we thank you today for your word, which brings light along our path and helps us to distinguish between the valleys of life in which we walk. Whether we are existing in a valley that is filled with compromise and self-centeredness and the sacrifice of relationship for our own ends, the valley that separates ourselves from you. Or whether we're walking close to you. Following you, listening to you. Lord, as we come to that other glorious Valley of Kidron we see you coming down the slopes of Olivet as king. We see you on Olivet laying out the future. We see you on Moriah in the temple being our sin bearer. We

THE VALLEY OF HELL

see you praying in Gethsemane. We see you on Olivet returning to the Father and coming again in all your glory. None of these things we see from hell. We would see Jesus. Let that be the prayer of our heart. That we would be on the side of the city that beholds the face of the great king. Jesus our Lord. Amen.