

## HOW HOT IS HELL?

The recent "hot" topic (pun intended) has been the weather, as it always is this time of year. Many are experiencing what seems to be an endless string of 100 degree days or more! Heat is often associated with Hell, the place of eternal punishment for the wicked as described in the Bible. How much detail do we have about this place? Is it really a place of fire, heat and eternal punishment? Why was fire chosen to represent what it would be like in this place? Why not cold, or relentless pain or some other means of torment?

The Bible gives us the following information about this place. Hell as a place of punishment translates *Gehenna*, the Greek form of the Hebrew word that means "the vale of Hinnom"-- a valley just south of Jerusalem. In this valley the Canaanites worshiped Baal and the fire-god Molech by sacrificing their children in a fire that burned continuously. Even Ahaz and Manasseh, kings of Judah, were guilty of this terrible, idolatrous practice (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6).

The prophet Jeremiah predicted that God would visit such destruction upon Jerusalem that this valley would be known as the "*Valley of Slaughter*" (Jeremiah 7:31-34; 19:2,6). In his religious reforms, King Josiah put an end to this practice of pagan worship. He defiled the valley in order to make it unfit even for pagan worship (2 Kings 23:10).

In the time of Jesus the Valley of Hinnom was used as the garbage dump of Jerusalem. Into it were thrown all the filth and garbage of the city, including the dead bodies of animals and executed criminals. To consume all this, fires burned constantly. Maggots worked in the filth. When the wind blew from that direction over the city, its awfulness was quite evident. At night wild dogs howled and gnashed their teeth as they fought over the garbage.

Jesus used this awful scene as a symbol of hell. In effect he said, "*Do you want to know what hell is like? Look at the valley of Gehenna.*" So Hell may be described as God's "cosmic garbage dump." All that is unfit for heaven will be thrown into hell. The word *Gehenna* occurs 12 times in the New Testament. Each time it is translated as "hell." With the exception of James 3:6, it is used only by Jesus (see: Matt. 5:22,29-30; 10:28; 23:15,33; Mark 9:43, 45,47; Luke 12:5). In Matthew 5:22; 18:9; and Mark 9:47, it is coupled with the word "fire" and translated "hell fire."

Revelation 21:8 tells who will be there: "*...the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.*"

In Mark 9:46 and 48, hell is described as a place where *"the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."* Repeatedly Jesus spoke of outer darkness and a furnace of fire, where there will be wailing, weeping, and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). Obviously this picture is drawn from the valley of Gehenna.

The Book of Revelation describes hell as *"a lake of fire burning with brimstone"* (Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8). Into hell will be thrown the beast and the false prophet (Revelation 19:20). At the end of the age the devil Himself will be thrown into it, along with death and Hades and all whose names are not in the Book of Life. *"And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever"* (Revelation 20:10b).

So in answer to our question in the title: *"How Hot is Hell?"* We must realize that when symbolic language is used, the reality is always greater than the symbol. The Bible exhausts human language in describing heaven and hell. When God wanted to describe Heaven to humans as being the most wonderful place ever, he used things that are special to humans, things such as Gold, silver, precious stones, no pain, no death, no tears, etc. When He wanted to describe Hell as being the most horrible place imaginable He used things that are frightening to humans such as white-hot flames of fire, darkness, maggots, wailing and weeping! Heaven is far more glorious, and Hell far more terrible, than language can express!

One elderly preacher used to say: *"If you could build the hottest fire possible on earth with embers of white and flames of blue and take a person from the coldest part of Hell and drop him in that fire, he would freeze to death!"*

So if we have been a little uncomfortable with several days of 100 degree plus temperatures, imagine how awful it would be to live in the *"lake that burns with fire and brimstone"* throughout eternity!

The thought of this adds a deep sadness to the words of Jesus when He said: *"Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it"* (Matthew 7:13).