

Hell-- Freedom's Greatest Compliment (Part three)
(Rev. Dr. John Bartol)

One of the chief objections about hell is from those who believe that a loving God would never condemn anyone to hell. At first this appears as a powerful objection. However, Christ the greatest teacher of love in human history had more to say about hell than anyone else in the Bible. If we take the teachings of Christ seriously, we must take hell seriously.

Christ made it very clear that he believed in hell, but what did he mean by that awful word? To illustrate hell Christ often pointed to the Valley of Gehenna, the garbage heap for the city of Jerusalem. All the worthless material of the city was dumped there. The only attempt at sanitary protection was by fire, and from the constant feeding the fires never died. And what that garbage heap was to the city of Jerusalem, hell would be to the universe of God.

To the people of Jesus day, Gehenna was the final destination of everything that was worthless and outcast. It was the place of deepest shame and to be there at last was the most horrible thing imaginable.

Jesus saw the outcome of a life lived without God and it made him shudder. He tells that in the final judgment those who reject the gift of eternal life and harden their hearts against God will go to Gehenna or hell. What did he mean? I think he meant that as individuals we can so resist the Holy Spirit and God's plan of salvation that we can actually separate ourselves from God. He meant that sin in its final issue would bring of remorse that would gnaw the soul as a worm gnaws the corrupted flesh. Sin in its final issue would be accompanied by a mental suffering so intense that only the keen edge of fire could portray it.

For me, a serious demonstration of the sinfulness of sin came during the three years I was a Seminary student in Philadelphia. My practical experience for ministry took place in the inner-city at some very rough places. On Sunday evenings a group of us would go to a Rescue Mission in the skid row area near the Delaware River bridge. Men were invited to a free meal with the stipulation that they would stay for the evening service. Many of them were former doctors, lawyers, businessmen with broken bodies, broken promises, many addicted to alcohol and drugs. If space permitted, I could tell stories of some remarkable conversions. I saw people of all ages who because of their broken relationship with God were in the depths of remorse that was indescribable; souls eaten by a gnawing fear, hearts burning with the flame of mental anguish, scourged by the whips of conscience until physical pain would've been a luxury if it could have relieved their minds.

There is nothing so terrible as the pangs of an awakened conscience. Was it not a man separated from God who wrote these words:

*“I sat alone with my conscience, in the place where time had ceased,
and we talked of my former living, in the land where the years increased.
And I felt I should have to answer the questions it put to me,
and to sit alone with my conscience, was judgment enough for me.
For the ghosts of forgotten actions came floating before my sight,
and the things I thought were good things were alive with a terrible might;
And the vision of all my past life was an awful thing to face,
as I sat alone with my conscience in that strange and wondrous place”*