

Basic Gehenna 101

When I was a young kid I lived in a rural area. The local dump was located on a flattened hilltop in a barren area across a lake from our home. Trash was dumped on the flat hilltop, then pushed over the side and burned at night. One night my dad and I were bringing a trailer load of trash from a property he owned out of town. Since the dump was pretty much on the way home, my Dad thought maybe we could unload at night and save ourselves an extra trip. There weren't any gates so we drove right in through a cloud of smoke to get to the dumping area. It was an eerie place as a ring of fire burned around the hill and down in the surrounding ravine. About a half-dozen mangy dogs dug through heaps of garbage, fighting over the better finds. It looked like a Mad Max movie. The place seemed deserted until out of the smoke we were approached by a guy who was probably tending the fires. He was pretty mangy and disheveled himself and when he smiled he exposed what few teeth he had left. He told us the dump was closed, so we had to come back the next morning anyway. By the next morning everything was burned up; the nighttime caretaker and the dogs were gone. All that remained was burned debris and vivid images from the night before.

Jesus spoke of a fiery Gehenna as an illustration of the fate which awaited those who ignored the commandments of God, I'm sure it made a vivid impression on his listeners. The Jews were familiar with Gehenna. It too was the local garbage dump. It was situated in a deep narrow ravine just south of Jerusalem. In the Old Testament it was called Gai Ben-Hinnom, which means "Valley of the son of Hinnom". It has also been referred to as Gai-Hinnom ("Valley of Hinnom"), which sounds a lot like the Greek, "Gehenna." Hinnom means lamentation or weeping in Hebrew. It had a dark history as a place where Jews sacrificed their children, burning them alive to the false gods Moloch and Baal in the southeast section of the valley in an area called Topheth. The word Topheth means "to burn" or "place of burning." Because of these detestable practices the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah said the kingdom of Judah along with its capitol Jerusalem would lose God's protection and face God's wrath and it would *burn and not be extinguished*. [see [Jeremiah 7:20](#)] Jeremiah described the Valley of the son of Hinnom as the place where the dead bodies would be buried in such numbers there would no longer be graves to put them in and they would become food for birds and other animals. [see [Jeremiah 7:30-34](#)] Gehenna represented God's judgment, a place of destruction for those he condemned. In other words, it was God's dumping ground to destroy those who rejected him and lived a life contrary to his principles.