

Esther 7: 1 – 6, 9 – 10, 9: 20 – 22

Psalm 124

James 5: 13 – 20

Mark 9: 38 – 50

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

We often think of Jesus' healing ministry to be unique but there were many who healed throughout both the Galilee and Judea. That the disciples encountered one of these people is not unusual. What is notable is that the person was actually healing in the name of Jesus. The difference between this individual and the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:11 - 20) is that the magicians in Ephesus simply wanted the power to heal for their own profit. Apparently this unnamed healer whom the disciples encountered healed because his faith, although surely unformed and uninformed, was true.

Remember that the conversation in this passage takes place in Capernaum. The excavations in this town revealed a large number of millstones in various stages of construction. Apparently making millstones was a significant industry in Capernaum so that there would have been many around the village. Also, the village sits on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The dramatic words of Jesus in verse 42 would have had special power with both millstones and the lake in easy view.

In verses 43 through 49, the Greek word used for "hell" in the original text is *Gehenna*. (This fact normally appears in a footnote in most Bibles.) Gehenna is known today as the Hinnom Valley. This valley, which runs east - west on the southern end of biblical Jerusalem, first appears in the Bible in the book of Joshua where it served as the boundary between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Solomon, Ahaz, and Manasseh used the valley for idol worship and even sacrificed children to foreign gods. Because of this infamous past, Josiah spread human bones throughout the valley to desecrate it. By the time of Jesus, it had become a place for all things unclean; many first century tombs - some of them quite magnificent - were in the valley, it was the area to where much of Jerusalem's sewage was washed, and the city's garbage dump was there. The dump was constantly burning, making the Hinnom Valley the perfect analogy for the fires of hell.

Some scholars have suggested an alternative meaning to these verses. As Gehenna was, quite literally Jerusalem's garbage dump, they wonder if Jesus may have meant something else by the name. Perhaps he meant that it was better to throw away one's hand, foot, or eye than for the whole person to be thrown away; thrown away into the dump where the fires never stopped burning. It is an interesting thought.

Today the Hinnom Valley is a public park and is a place of pastoral beauty.