

34. We now resume our study of James 3:6 which so far reads as follows:
- James 3:6a** The tongue is a fire, from the cosmic systems of arrogance and hatred; the tongue is placed in the structure of our anatomy as that which contaminates the entire body ... (EXT)
35. The verse ends with two more ramifications by the sinful use of the tongue: it "... sets on fire the course of our life, and it is set on fire by hell." This is not a good situation report.
36. We start out by observing the phrase that the tongue "sets on fire" but which is actually one word, the present active participle of the verb, **φλογίζω** (*phlogízō*): "to set on fire, to ignite, incite, or inflame."
37. James's illustration uses the unbridled tongue to illustrate the negative impact the spoken word can cause when communicating harmful, hurtful, and often private information.
38. The best word to describe this sinful act in light of the illustration is "ignite." The spoken word transfers privately held information and makes it public with the end result that others now have privy to the knowledge and some make it their privilege to pass it along to others.
39. Principle: the unbridled tongue ignites a flame that sets in motion an idea that engulfs an entire forest taking with it a person's reputation by leading many to add fuel to the fire. The best English translation is, "ignite."
40. What is said to be ignited is "the entire course of our life." The word "course" is the noun, **τροχός** (*trochós*), and so translated by all major versions of the Bible.
41. **Τροχός** is a hapax legomenon in the New Testament. It originates from Classical Greek whose original translation defines it as, "a circular race, a place for running a race-course."¹
42. The word is used to describe a person's life from birth to death. Here are two examples of synonyms that depict this idea:
- 2 Timothy 4:7** I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course [**δρόμος** (*drómos*)], I have kept the faith.
43. Paul defines *drómos* as, "running a race in a stadium; metaphorically meaning one's life." (See also Acts 20:24.)

¹ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, "τροχός," in *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. Henry Stuart Jones (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1829.



Ephesians 2:2 ... you formerly walked according to the course [αἰών (*aiōn*)], of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

44. *Aiōn* is defined in two major ways: (1) forever or eternity and (2) sidereal time, either past, present or future. In Ephesians, Paul is referring to the lifestyle of a person's past experiences as an unbeliever.
45. These examples are efforts to precisely convey in English a metaphorical idea that is hard to nail down. Here is an excellent analysis that resolves the difficult-to-translate the Greek text that reads in the NASB, "sets on fire the course of our life":

Probably no translation will convey the precise impact the phrase had on the original hearers and readers. Most commentators agree that it refers to all of human existence on the broadest scale—past, present, and future. This expression by itself is probably best understood as describing the whole circle of inner passions. The image of the wheel as a symbol for life's cyclic circumstances was widely recognized in the pagan, Jewish, and Christian world. [The Venerable] Bede took it to mean the round of human life with its temporal changes. The wheel's being set on fire means that this wrong use of the tongue engenders jealousy, and faction, and every vile deed throughout the whole of one's life.²

46. The issue remains that the tongue is the primary subject in the verse. The verse's denouement is James's use of another difficult to translate phrase, "and is set on fire by hell." Again, fire is used to illustrate the devastating impact it causes. There is an idiom from the 1800s that captures the idea:

Spread like wildfire. Disseminate or circulate very quickly, as in *The rumor about their divorce spread like wildfire*. The noun *wildfire* means "a raging, rapidly spreading conflagration."³

² William Varner, *James*, gen. ed. H. Wayne House (Bellingham, WA., 2014), 350–51.

³ Christine Ammer, *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 605–606.



47. James's idiom is, "set on fire by hell." The Greek word for "hell" is the noun, **Γέεννα (Géhenna)**. There is a difference between the locations to be visited by the departed.
48. There are places of residence for those who die as unbelievers: (1) prior to the destruction of the universe (2 Peter 3:10–13), all unbelievers are incarcerated in the **βάσανος (Básanos)** or Torments compartment of **ᾗδης (Haídēs)** while (2) following the destruction of the universe all unbelievers are incarcerated in *Géhenna* or the Lake of Fire.
49. It is the latter term that is indicated by the word *Géhenna*. Here is a good synopsis of what James meant by his use of the word:

Not only does the tongue corrupt the whole person; it also "sets on fire," wreaks havoc, throughout one's life. But where does this enormously destructive potential come from? From hell, says James. "Hell" translates the Greek, Géhenna, which is a translation of two Hebrew words that mean "Valley of Hinnom." This valley, just outside Jerusalem, gained an evil reputation in the Old Testament and intertestamental period. Pagan child sacrifices were carried out there, and trash was often burned in it. Jesus used the word to refer to the place of ultimate condemnation. James again betrays his connection to Jesus, since only in the teachings of Jesus do we find this word elsewhere in the New Testament (11 times). The power of Satan himself, the chief denizen of hell, gives to the tongue its great destructive potential.

James does not elaborate the ways in which the destructive power of the tongue can make itself felt. But he undoubtedly would have thought of those sins of speech that are enumerated in Proverbs: thoughtless "chattering" (10:8 cf. 12:18; 29:20); lying (12:19); arrogant boasting (18:12); gossiping (10:18). Think what enormous, sometimes irreversible, harm can be caused to people by unsubstantiated, often false, rumors. Such a rumor can be harder to stop than any forest fire (v. 5).



We know from bitter experience that the childhood taunt, “Sticks and stone may break my bones, but words will never haunt me,” reverses the truth of the matter. Far easier to heal are the wounds caused by sticks and stones than the damage caused by words.⁴

50. Solomon observed in Ecclesiastes 1:9 that whatever anyone experiences during the course of his life is typical of what everyone else encounters in theirs:

Ecclesiastes 1:9 That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun.

51. The phrase, “course of our life,” refers to the physical life of any individual. You live your life, everyone else lives theirs. Each person’s life is a journey whose exigencies occur due to several factors.
52. The factors which are common to all include the starting point of unbelief and their souls vacuous of divine viewpoint. They enjoy the Law of Liberty: freedom to make choices within the culture in which they live.
53. These choices are influenced by any number of factors, but which are common to human existence. However, the choices made are done independently by the person and known to God in the divine decree.
54. Every person is responsible for his own decisions while God is inflexible regarding His divine righteousness. Thus, a person’s life is guided by his own volitional choices, but the results of those choices vary.
55. God’s righteousness approves of choices made under establishment viewpoint and biblical guidance while disapproving the opposites.
56. Although the ramifications for each person are particular to the individual, they are common to man. In James’s dissertation on the tongue, he illustrates the problems associated with its misuse by the phrase “contaminates the entire body.”
57. The next result is cited in the phrase, “it ignites on fire the course of life.” The noun “course” is the word **τροχός (trochós)** which refers to a track event.
58. Paul uses the synonym, **δρόμος (drómos)**, to refer to the same thing in 2 Timothy 4:7 above.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 159–160.



59. How a person runs his race is absolutely dependent upon the information that is resident in his soul's stream of consciousness. Poor decisions from an inventory of cosmic concepts is illustrated by James with the phrase, "is set on fire by *Géhenna*."
60. Since *Géhenna* refers to the Lake of Fire, which is located in the Third Heaven, how does it ignite a fire in this person's life? 'Tis a conundrum. But the secret lies in the tongue's impact on this entire process.
61. The final impact on the tongue concludes the verse which I introduce with apologies to Johnny Cash:

"My Tongue of Fire"

**My tongue's a burning thing
It makes a fiery ring
Bound by wild desire
My tongue's a thing of fire.**

**Yes, my tongue's a burning ring of fire
I went down, down, down
And the flames went higher
And it burns, burns, burns
My tongue of fire, my tongue of fire.**

1. *Géhenna* refers to the Valley of Hinnom situated below the southern walls of Jerusalem. Here is a brief synopsis:

The valley of the sons of Hinnom was near the walls of Jerusalem, The Valley Gate opened into it. The boundary between Judah and Benjamin ran along it (Joshua 15:8; 18:16). It was the scene of idolatrous practices in the days of Ahaz (2 Chronicles 28:3) and of Manasseh, who "made his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom (33:6). Into this valley dead bodies were probably cast to be consumed by the dogs, and fires were here kept burning to consume the rubbish of the city. Such associations led to the Ge-Himmon (New Testament "Gehenna") becoming the "type of Hell." (p. 1493)

